by BILL GUEST

PROVOCATIVE SCHOLARSHIP

The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labor on the South African Gold Fields, 1902 - 1939 by David Yudelman. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983. (Distributed by David Philip.)

The history of South African goldmining and the evolving relationship between that industry and successive governments since the 1880's has already been related, in substantial detail, from several differing perspectives. In particular, the reconstruction era following the disruption of the Anglo-Boer war, the emergence of a militant and better organized white work force which gave vent to its discontent in the Rand 'revolt' of 1922, and the implications of the Pact election victory in 1924 have all been subjected to close analysis. So too have the origins and nature of the South African state itself. The significance of David Yudelman's contribution to this already well-documented period lies pre-eminently in his vigorous, though not entirely successful, development of an interpretation which is independent of those offered by his predecessors.

In avoiding easy identification with any prevailing school of thought, Yudelman's book is in no danger of being disregarded. He examines the struggle between labour and capital through several eventful stages in the history of South African goldmining in order to substantiate the contention that 'contrary to the widely accepted view of South Africa's past, organized (white) labour was decisively subordinated and co-opted by an alliance of state and capital in the early part of the twentieth century, and that, partly as a result, a symbiotic relationship of state and capital was cemented, which has endured to the present.'

Yudelman's thesis is bound to add further controversy to what is an already hotly-debated field. For example, his emphasis on the essential continuity of history challenges the climactic significance which other scholars have attached to certain events within the period under consideration and questions the uniqueness of South African racism by viewing it in a broader historical and international context. Similarly, his attempt to distance the 'state' from 'capital' by implying that the former pursues (or can pursue) interests of its own which are quite independent of the latter raises questions about the nature of both, and of their inter-relationship, which are understandably not fully exhausted in this book. Not least, the illuminating analogy which he draws between the crisis generated in the 1920's by an aggressive white work force and that posed in the 1980's by the black work force will be welcomed by many as a tangible demonstration of the dynamic interplay between past and present but dismissed by others as grossly exaggerated.

One need not be entirely convinced by Yudelman's argument to recognize this book as a work of meticulous scholarship. Carefully researched and drawing partly on valuable new primary evidence, it offers much by way of useful empirical information as well as at the level of methodology and theoretical analysis. It is written with a fluency which makes for remarkably easy reading considering some of the fairly complex issues which it encompasses. The title of this work is misleading in so far as one might reasonably expect any account of 'the emergence of modern South Africa' to cast a much wider net than is evident here. Nevertheless, David Yudelman has made a significant contribution to a debate which is still central to South African history and politics. □

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