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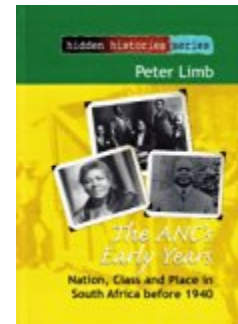
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter Limb. *The ANC's Early Years: Nation, Class and Place in South Africa before 1940*. Hidden Histories Series. Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010. xvi + 586 pp. \$48.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86888-529-9.

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The Early ANC and African Labor, 1920-50

This long awaited study of the African National Congress's (ANC) early years, published in Unisa Press's Hidden Histories series, seeks to serve as a significant corrective to an established bias in writing about "the oldest and most durable of African nationalist movements" (p. xi). Commentators, complains Peter Limb, generally tend to see a watershed in the history of the ANC in the late 1940s to early 1950s, projecting the party as having undergone a profound transmogrification from an essentially elitist organization into a mass movement. Similarly, while the close relationship between the ANC and the black labor movement during the post-1945 period has long been recognized, their relationship before 1940 has rarely been subjected to detailed analysis. Historians have often tended to see the early history of the ANC as simply having been one of moderation and distance from workers. In his remarkably detailed text, which ranges across the first three decades of the ANC's history and across the then four provinces of the Union of South Africa, Limb demonstrates that "ANC-worker relations were neither as one-dimensional nor as distant as many assume" (p. 2). Rather, when conditions favored interaction, "some" ANC members gravitated toward the labor movement and "some" politicized workers enjoyed close relations with the ANC.

Limb contends that there were always contradictions and ambiguities, and that the limited extent of black education and middle-class formation in South Africa in the early twentieth century meant that black workers

and ANC leaders (notably the national ones) were often strangers to one another. "Nonetheless," Limb claims, "some workers looked to Congress as a political voice, and Congress often sought to articulate the nascent demands of black workers." Still, the ANC very often did this indirectly, "in the sense that Congress saw black workers primarily as *Africans*, as part of its natural national constituency, and not necessarily as *workers*" (p. 3, emphasis in original). Limb proceeds to argue his case by examining the early ANC's attitudes to workers and their conditions, and challenging what he views as dominant interpretations that tend to reduce a rich history to "that of a few *petit bourgeois* men in 'top hats.'" He does not claim to provide an "exhaustive coverage" of all ANC members or branches (although the length of the book and the extent of the detail will tend at times to exhaust all but his most dedicated readers), but he seeks to revise ANC historiography by revisiting central leaders of the early twentieth century and by rediscovering long-forgotten activists (p. 4).

Limb classifies historians of the ANC as being either "insiders" (from within the movement) or "outsiders," the latter stretching across liberal, radical, and conservative perspectives, yet argues that all such approaches have shared the tendency to identify the leadership of the ANC as having been largely drawn from the middle class or *petit bourgeoisie*. Certainly, within the insider tradition, he identifies a predisposition toward hagiography which seeks to minimize class divisions within the ANC for rea-

sons of political unity. His particular contribution, however, is to stress how early ANC observers, activists, and writers continuously spoke for and on behalf of African workers to the authorities. Even so, leaders were mainly middle class. From this perspective, for instance, Francis Meli's unofficial history of the ANC argues that any suggestion of a dichotomy between the leaders and the mass was "artificial." Meli posits very close connections between class and African nationalism, yet nonetheless accepts that even though they were progressive for their time, ANC leaders were "definitely not working class." [1] Similarly, Jack and Ray Simons, whose classic study *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* provides a critical appraisal of the ANC's politics and its connections with labor, still portray the ANC as a "radical liberation movement," whose leaders were both "intellectuals and trade unionists." However, in the Simons' view, while the founders of the ANC might be characterized as "radical liberals," the ANC was never a "workers' movement" that ever envisaged anything so far-reaching as the socialization of the land, mines, factories, and banks. [2] Again, ANC insiders like Govan Mbeki (*Learning from Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki* [1991] and *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa: A Short History* [1992]) and John Pampalis (*Foundations of the New South Africa* [1991]), who have written ANC history after 1990, similarly portray the early ANC as led by the petit bourgeoisie, even while the former, in particular, stresses that the movement was representative of all classes. In sum, Limb proposes that even while there are differences in the extent to which these writers portray the ANC as having close ties with workers, they remain ambiguous about continuity of class influences in ANC history. Thus while wanting to highlight the broad, multi-class appeal of the ANC and stressing how after 1948 the ANC's elitism and moderation shifted to a more mass-based and radical political orientation, they nonetheless "tend to perpetuate the idea of a 'middle-class' Congress" (p. 22).

Among commentators coming from outside ANC ranks, Limb sees a similar tendency to identify the ANC as essentially middle class. Peter Walshe (*The Rise Of African Nationalism in South Africa: The African National Congress, 1912-1952* [1970]), whom he acknowledges as still providing the most detailed history of pre-1952 ANC structures and politics, charts diverse class and ideological currents coursing through the ANC. Yet Limb also stresses that it drew "the great proportion of its members from the new 'middle class,'" and while he appreciates the varying involvement of the ANC with labor, he

sees it as "a political movement largely promoted from above, but with working class influence noticeable and growing more pronounced by the 1950s" (p. 22). Limb then goes on to cite a formidable array of distinguished authors (Tom Karis, Gail Gerhart, Paul Rich, Shula Marks, Helen Bradford, Stanley Trapido, Dan O'Meara, Luli Callinicos, Baruch Hirson, and Tom Lodge), who albeit with varying nuance and emphasis, have argued that the leaders of the ANC of the 1930s and 1940s were largely middle class, were socially distant from the workers, feared being plunged into working-class ranks, and had limited support outside their own charmed circles, to such an extent, in Lodge's words, that the ANC represented "a nascent African bourgeoisie" (p. 37). Even so, these scholars all tend to identify the ANC of the 1940s as having undergone qualitative changes that rendered it capable of transformation into a movement able to mobilize the masses. Their view is shared by Alan Cobley, who argues that groups of privileged Africans enjoyed "a virtual monopoly of formal activity" that extended across the activities of all the various organizational challengers to ANC hegemony (notably the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union and the All Africa Convention) during the interwar period. Members of this black petit bourgeoisie, Cobley writes, "were involved at all levels of political activity and in groups and organisations which espoused a bewildering variety of political ideas" (notably Garveyism, communism, and democratic socialism). Nonetheless, confronted by the massive discriminations and oppressions of South African society, they had looked to the mobilization of mass black support. "By the 1950s it had become increasingly clear to many members of the black petty bourgeoisie that there was little alternative to this kind of practical 'radicalism.'" [3]

It is against this background that Limb challenges "the simple axiom that the ANC before the turn to mass action in 1949 was 'middle class'" (p. 27). Limb seeks to correct tendencies of an exaggeration of pre-1940 ANC timidity and aloofness from workers and the adoption by many writers of a mechanistic argument about wartime changes stimulating working-class expansion and political ferment and the ANC's later move to mass mobilization. Suffice it to say here that he does this convincingly, in the sense that he offers a blow by blow account of involvement of ANC leaders, at different levels of the organization, from national down to local, with workers directly or with their cause and their complaints. The depth to which he has dug through the archives, rescuing activists of the past (women as well as men) from complete obscurity, and rendering them visible to historians

is, frankly, remarkable (even if the author is a renowned bibliophile!).

Limb accepts that the ANC switched back and forth during the 1920s-40s period between middle of the road, constitutionalist, and more strident approaches, and that such moderation was largely the product of the class composition of its leaders. He argues, however, that the ANC was perpetually pushed toward a latent supra-class unity with organized workers because of the basic contradiction between white rule and black national oppression. If the thesis is scarcely new, his enormously detailed exploration of what he deems to be virtually inescapable linkages between middle-class leaders of the ANC and labor at the local level (however limited and intermittent their functioning) demands a rethinking of the predominance of “top-down” history. With this evidence, Limb makes the case that the gradual development of a distinct African political culture with a constituency including workers and propertied strata was crucial in embedding the ANC in the gaze and memory of African society. For all its much documented failings and weaknesses, the ANC outlasted and outperformed its various rivals as a necessary preparation for the qualitative changes that occurred during the 1950s.

So dense is the detail, I will not attempt even to sketch his treatment of the different decades. So let us turn to his conclusions. First, because the ANC faced an uncompromising state that never conceded to pressures (and indeed whose repression steadily intensified), the organization’s *raison d’être*—the attainment of political equality and better economic and social conditions for Africans—never changed, and hence its commitment to African workers, as an inherent part of the African people, never substantially wavered. Second, the attitudes of ANC leaders to workers and the nature of ANC organization was influenced by the fluctuations of history, as illustrated, for example, by the vicious crackdowns by the state to silence worker protest and crush mass strikes in 1918-20 and again in 1929-32. After these events, many ANC leaders abandoned any pretense of solidarity with labor in contrast to other periods when the ANC felt more emboldened, and less constrained, in linking up with black workers. Nonetheless, a sense of black identity, which developed into a shared African nationalism, became an increasingly powerful force in helping ANC leaders to recognize that workers were a part of their natural constituency. Third, variations in ANC labor policy or the views of individual ANC leaders contributed to a chronic instability in ANC structures as well as to the ephemeral nature of black unions. “The intensity of repression, low

levels of literacy, persistence of rural traditions and ethnic divisions among workers, and poverty in general ... ensured organizational volatility,” Limb claims (p. 485). It therefore should come as no surprise that ANC-labor relations were inconsistent and ill defined. Fourth, when avenues used by ANC leaders to remind the authorities of mass suffering, such as commissions, the press, and union meetings, malfunctioned or were closed down, the ANC inevitably had less chance of building wide support. Nonetheless, labor issues refused to go away, and even moderates in ANC leadership positions continued to write and lobby about lamentable African working conditions. Thus despite any predilections of the black elite of the 1930s for political moderation, leaders with experience in the ANC continued to keep labor issues before the public. In sum, Limb identifies a remarkable degree of continuity in ANC relations with politically conscious black workers and their organizations. He stresses that the ANC looked to workers as part of its support base, while workers counted on the ANC to keep their problems before the public and the government. Even under the most moderate of its leaders, the ANC spoke about poor black working conditions. “The ANC objectively was a national liberation movement even before it claimed to be,” Limb concludes (p. 488). It was this complicated but intertwined relationship between party and labor that provided the foundation for the radicalizations of the 1950s.

Limb argues that there is still much to be done to unearth the long history of the ANC, and most certainly, his own text is destined to become a major source of reference for students of the movement for many years to come. However, whether his book comes to be valued as having brought about a fundamentally different way of seeing the early ANC, or whether it comes to be regarded as merely demanding a major nuancing of that history, remains to be seen. I can only leave such a profound judgment to historians with a better grasp of the early history than myself. Nonetheless, I concede that Limb’s concluding words quoted above offer a major challenge to analysts of the current period, and that his perspective should be taken as a warning to those who see the ANC of today as presiding over a looming break between the party’s elite and the working class. Limb acknowledges some growing disillusion with the ANC in government since 1994. Nevertheless, he maintains that the extent to which ANC leaders continually return to workers’ problems in their pronouncements indicates that “root ideas of equality, justice and better working conditions, once implanted among the people, prove impossible to uproot

in a society in which Africans were denied genuine labor rights, social mobility and political freedom” (p. 493). Most certainly, his many years in the archives help us to comprehend the continuing ability of the party, which is facing its fifth general election in 2014, to mobilize its mass constituency to defeat all comers at the polls convincingly. However, some will judge that the recent upsurge of protests about failures of service delivery from one end of the country to another, combined with deepening cracks within the Tripartite Alliance and the increasing extent to which the ANC is torn by factionalism, may yet tell another story.

Notes

[1]. Francis Meli, *A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs to Us* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House; Bloomington: University of Indiana Press; London: James Currey, 1988), 45.

[2]. Jack Simons and Ray Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850-1950* (London: Penguin, 1969; London: International Defence and Aid for Southern Africa, 1983), 621-623.

[3]. Alan Cobley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 8, 183.

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