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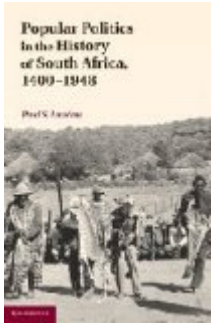
Paul S. Landau. *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa, 1400-1948.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xvi + 300 pp. $90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-19603-1.



Reviewed by Edward Cavanagh

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Commissioned by Charles V. Reed (Elizabeth City State University)

Paul S. Landau takes the southern highveld of South Africa, and concerns himself with a period that spans over five centuries, moving between "the precolonial," "the colonial," and "modernity," and focusing primarily on religion, tribalism, and language. This dense revisionist history covers a lot of ground, and comes with a number of new arguments about the emergence of South African political culture. Happily, a fair bit of original research, much of its archival, provides a strong foundation to these arguments. This book will not be regarded as a general survey history in the traditional sense, but it should be recommended to students, if for nothing else than its innovative approach to presenting South African history: Landau uses case studies to identify a number of continuities over a vast period of time most commendably. However, the book's rich and often heavy prose, its intimidating amount of new words (and no glossary), its extended passages of linguistic analysis, and its detailed narratives which have little room for context, will make the book most appealing to scholars and graduates working in the field, none of whom, it is fair to say, will fail to take something from it.

Its main arguments are embedded into six chapters, which Landau is careful not to force down his reader's throat (that is, until his inclusion in the closing pages of the book of a blunt five-page section which valuably summarizes his findings). The book begins by diving deep into the contested political arena of the highveld at the start of the nineteenth century, featuring missionaries, Griqua, BaSotho, and BaTswana. Landau's strategy in this chapter is, quite simply, to convince the reader of the complexity of political discourse in these years, as it was infused with religious ideas and tribalism amid a series of alliances and increasing mobilization. Having convinced his reader of this without difficulty, in the rest of the book he shows what caused it and how it lingered into the twentieth century. Rewinding to the days of Great Zimbabwe (and following a tradition of anthropological speculation about that site in its wider environment), Landau suggests that big changes were taking place in major

African chiefdoms as they expanded and interrelated from "at least 1400 on" (p. 72). He is least convincing in this section, if only because archaeology says nothing about political discourse, and we all know that early ethnography is not a science; but this is not really his fault, and indeed if he had omitted this "precolonial" bit from the book it would have been more strange.

The book then strengthens. Landau scours missionary publications and London Missionary Society documents for notes in which indigenous language (mostly SeSotho and SeTswana) is recorded and grappled with, and he does so in order to make an interesting argument about the function of naming and the dynamism of religion (even going so far as to suggest that "religion" as a body of behavior and a concept in South Africa was created in this moment). Perhaps the approach here is not so much Comaroffian as it is post-Comaroffian (if I may be permitted such a neologism); in any case, the argument does not emulate *Of Revelation and Revolution*, it complements it, and in parts, is just as exciting as that major work.[1]

Tribalism, of a type which is recognizable today, was also invented in this period, Landau argues by presenting a history of Moroka's reign in the larger context of Sotho-Griqua-Boer expansionism; this is contrasted with the period that follows, 1880-1928, from which emerge the "mixed people"--the Barolong Samuelites and the Griqua of A. A. S. Le Fleur. Christianity, in these early moments of mobilization and struggle, was infused with new ideas and given new applications by Africans, developments confused white administrators could only sit back and watch. The "natives" were becoming ungovernable. The "Coloureds" could be treated differently. How could this be rationalized? "Rather than grasp the politics before them," Landau writes, "the South African state preferred to think of tribes, and to treat them as unpredictable, swayed by misapprehensions, at sea in the hurly burly of 'modernity'" (p. 213). And this propensity to think of tribes, and, generally, the necessity to distinguish between Coloured and Native, to decide which indigenous groups were important and which were not, Landau shows, originated in the work of ethnographers and anthropologists, an argument that supports my own observations on the Griqua people and Coloureddom generally.[2] Accordingly, Landau avoids receiving and reapplying the findings of Isaac Schapera and his contemporaries, as other scholars have sometimes done. While Landau does not attack Schapera personally, he does have a stab at his "signifiers" (p. 238), which is refreshing, though ultimately the reader is left to make up his or her own mind about Schapera's role in the broader trend of naming and labeling. It is nice to see this anthropological literature placed into critical context, and the author is to be commended for tying his conclusions together here.

Underlying each of the book's nuanced arguments is the idea that highveld polities, in all their complexity and diversity, barely correlate with the "tribal" titles that were attached to them, labels that remain "political" today. Words used to differentiate "tribal" affiliations were simply that--words--which may have conveyed political realities (albeit problematically), but always seemed to miscommunicate matters relating to culture, tradition, and "the religious sphere." Moreover, they were titles that too often glossed over the hybridization of lived experience. And many of these misinterpretations, Landau points out, continue to pervade historical and anthropological scholarship (and, though he doesn't suggest as much, popular discourse as well). Thus, "[o]nce we stop thinking in terms of 'peoples', who had 'beliefs,'" he argues, "the highveld's political tradition, in its real situation in history, comes better into focus" (p. 248). He's being modest here. What also comes into focus are the many parallels between the prehistoric and the historic, the past

and the present, and believe it or not, the black, the brown, and the white of South Africa.

Needless to say, I find this the most important finding of the book. Although it has been a long time in the making. Martin Legassick, back in 1988, in what was quite clearly a reiteration of a number of revisionist lines of enquiry proposed by himself and others in the 1970s, claimed that all "attempts to differentiate Bantu-speakers from Khoisan, Khoikhoi and 'San', Sotho from Nguni, and, within each, subtribes from subtribes" were flawed. But, enamored of a Marxist theoretical framework, Legassick in these years believed that only "the social relations of production" united and differentiated communities.[3] With hindsight, Legassick's reductionism seems overly simplistic; surely the picture is more complicated than that. Paul S. Landau (albeit with minimal reference to Khoekhoe and San) shows just how complicated that picture was. Irrespective of this revelation of complexity (which, funnily, more and more historians seem driven to reveal these days), his main points, reduced to their simplest form--namely, that religion was imposed from outsiders and turned into political discourse by converts, that tribal names and ethnic labels are historically problematic--are really not all that objectionable, and are, in fact, probably universal in the history of settler colonialism. For this reason, one suspects ***Popular Politics in the History of South Africa*** will find its way into many footnotes, and this work deserves the wide readership it will receive.

Notes

[1]. Jean and John Comaroff, ***Of Revelation and Revolution,*** vol. 1, ***Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*** (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); John L. and Jean Comaroff, ***Of Revelation and Revolution,*** vol. 2, ***The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[2]. Edward Cavanagh, ***The Griqua Past and the Limits of South African History, 1902-1994*** (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), 48-50, 69-72.

[3]. Martin Legassick, "The Northern Frontier to c. 1840: The Rise and Decline of the Griqua People," in ***The Shaping of South African Society 1652–1840***, ed. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 365.

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