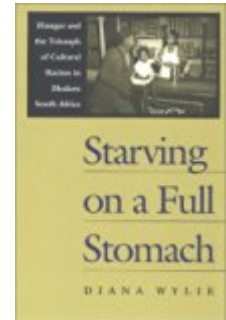


Diana Wylie. *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa.* Reconsiderations in Southern African History Series. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xiv + 319 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2047-4.



Reviewed by Howard Phillips

Published on H-SAfrica (August, 2002)

Food for Thought

Food, as anyone who has heard of Maslow's schema knows, lies at the very basis of humanity's hierarchy of needs. From this it follows that an examination of the provision of food in a society has the potential to illuminate bedrock features of that society. Determinedly pursuing this insight in respect of South Africa from 1910-1960, Diana Wylie of Boston University has written a book which focuses tellingly on one key element of this broad topic, viz. how did the South African state, its biomedical advisers and doctors in the field respond to the recurrent food crises (principally among rural black Africans) which form a little-noticed backdrop to twentieth-century South African history, and on what ideas did these responses rest?

In answering these questions, Wylie interrogates the rich administrative records of the South African state and a few private medical institutions like Holy Cross Hospital in Pondoland and the Valley Trust Health Centre in Kwazulu-Natal to reveal very starkly the haughty perceptions about "the other" and their "unscientific" produc-

tion and consumption of food which underpinned the responses of South Africa's increasingly dominant white rulers from 1910 onwards. For her, this cultural arrogance culminated in the "hubris of high Modernism," apartheid. She argues convincingly that this novel gastronomical lens allows important features of the period to show up in fresh ways. Indeed, she believes (with all the passion of a pioneer) that this perspective "allowed me to gain new insights into colonialism and racism that were far more intimate than research on wages or political parties usually affords" (p. xii). Given the multi-faceted nature of colonialism and racism and the fundamental role of food provision in any society, this is not unexpected.

Through this lens, therefore, interwar famines in the Transkei become illuminating opportunities to track the hardening shift in official attitudes to Africans' hunger, from a paternalist "noblesse oblige" to a less sympathetic "they must not be spoiled" stance. Wylie's thorough combing of the official archives pays off very well in this respect, for her text is peppered with officials'

crass explanations of Africans' hunger, stretching from fatherly chiding that "it is partly their own lack of foresight" (p. 59) to the damning "the causes are overstocking combined with ignorance in regard to how to live" (p. 127). With a similarly revealing effect, she interrogates official, post-Depression concerns about South Africa's labour supply, too, to lay bare prevailing ideas about malnutrition as a source of "race deterioration" among Africans, and hence as a threat to their ability to meet the labour needs of the burgeoning national economy. Not surprisingly, her examination of these superficial, time-bound explanations by doctors and medical scientists of deficiency diseases like scurvy and kwashiorkor leads her to conclude wryly that "Nutritional data often reveal more about the researchers and their social context than they reveal about the hungry themselves" (p. 11). From this judgment none of the great names of South African nutritional research is exempt. The reputations of men like Fox, Brock and Stott look far less enduring after such treatment. In her opinion, their explanations helped (often unwittingly) to strengthen white policymakers and administrators in their belief that Africans, with their "obsolete" cultural attitudes like a fixation on cattle, were primarily responsible for their own hunger. Such blaming of the victim she sees as feeding directly into apartheid's high-handed schemes of social engineering.

At times Wylie's own fixation on the intellectual roots of segregation and apartheid is a little procrustean and one-dimensional--African responses to these food policies are only briefly mentioned and, as Van Onselen's *The Seed is Mine* makes very clear, they were not just passive. Moreover, her heavy reliance on what happened in Pondoland to monitor how these policies were implemented makes one wonder about the validity of generalizing on the basis of what happened on and in the ground in one very remote rural area. Nonetheless, the end result is a book which adds an important dimension to our understanding of the making of the ideologies of segregation

and apartheid. That she has been able to do this so effectively through an examination of food policies merely underscores the obvious (but hitherto largely neglected by historians of South Africa) centrality of food to the health and well-being of individuals and communities. If food alone is not sufficient for human existence, it certainly is absolutely necessary. Other historians will do well to follow Wylie's lead in exploring this fact and its implications in South African history. When they do, they will find in her book plenty of food for thought.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Howard Phillips. Review of Wylie, Diana. *Starving on a Full Stomach: Hunger and the Triumph of Cultural Racism in Modern South Africa*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6606>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.