

**Lis Lange.** *White, Poor and Angry: White Working Class Families in Johannesburg.* Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003. x + 186 pp. \$89.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-0915-5.



**Reviewed by** Wessel Visser

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This study is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of academic books and essays on the white working class of South Africa published by various renowned scholars.[1] Indeed, in the preface, Lis Lange acknowledges the profound influence of Charles van Onselen on her work. Divided into seven chapters, the book examines four related topics: the formation of working class families, working class accommodation, the constitution of social networks in working-class neighborhoods, and the political and ideological aspects of white workers' unemployment.

Chapter 1 expounds the theoretical, analytical, and methodological framework for her study. Lange suggests that the development of white workers' identity and sense of community in Johannesburg between 1890 and 1922 is not a precondition for the existence of a class but a process, the constitutive elements of which need to be identified, explained, and put in relation with each other.

In similar fashion to van Onselen's study, Lange in chapter 2 reconstructs the typical occupations, as well as the circumstances of the specif-

ic employment of Afrikaner and English working-class men on the Witwatersrand at the end of the nineteenth century. By using baptism and marriage records of the Anglican parishes in the Johannesburg suburbs of Belgravia and Fordsburg, she analyzes the family structures, domestic lives, and housing mobility patterns of typical Witwatersrand working-class families. As a result of the racial division of the labor market, unskilled white workers found difficulty in competing with black workers, especially in periods when the Rand's economy fluctuated. Lange also explains Milner's less successful white working-class immigration policy (in particular concerning females) to the Transvaal in the reconstruction period after the South African War to balance the "racial unevenness" among the white population in an effort to avert an Afrikanerization of the British working-class males in South Africa.

Chapter 3 investigates the political economy of housing. The line of the gold reef had isolated the well-to-do areas north of Johannesburg from the mines and their satellite working-class neighborhoods in the south. Therefore an electric tram

system was viewed as a possible solution to the housing problem in the city, freeing workers from the need to live close to their workplace.

Using statistics, Lange also analyzes the occupations of the inhabitants of the various working-class neighborhoods of Johannesburg, such as Marshalltown, Ferreirastown, Fordsburg, Vrededorp, Brickfields, and Jeppetown. According to Lange, the political economy of housing in early Johannesburg was shaped by the fact that most of the land surrounding the Johannesburg town center was the property of township companies, in many of which mining capital had a stake. Therefore, the post-war housing problems of the city were economically, socially, and politically constituted. The post-war British administration saw the scarcity of working-class accommodation in Johannesburg as a problem that affected the nature of state power and its relationship with potentially conflicting interests in the colony, such as mining-related estate companies. Milner's plans to make the Transvaal predominantly British through the "right kind" of working men were being undermined, *inter alia*, by successive economic crises and the scarcity of affordable accommodation that inflated rents. The reconstruction administration's approach towards white working-class housing was based on their belief in the fairness of the market left to itself. The lack of state intervention to alleviate the housing problems of the poor was due to the fact that citizenship, and by implication loyalty to the Empire, was the reconstruction administration's recipe for the homogenization of the Transvaal colony.

Chapter 4 analyzes Johannesburg's urban problems between 1907 and 1922 to show that economic and social developments during this period changed the ruling class's perception of the city and the approach of the government and political parties to the housing of the white working class. According to Lange, the urban reform initiatives of the 1910s, particularly in terms of racial segregation, were conceived as a means of con-

taining white indigency in the city and in this sense the poor white problem is central to any explanation of the rise of segregation in South Africa. For instance, various committees of investigation ascribed liquor selling, prostitution, and crime in Johannesburg to the "unhealthy combination of races" in the multi-racial slum areas of the city. The committees concluded that the living conditions found in the city, such as insalubrious neighborhoods, racial mixing, and general moral degradation, were responsible for much of the poor white problem. In order to prevent any further development of these "evils" the relocation of the black population to racially segregated areas of the city was recommended. Thus Lange construes that social control of the working classes was parallel to movements that took the guise of sanitation and urban renewal that appeared in most Western cities. Public health legislation and town planning regulations were early mechanisms of racial segregation to alleviate the poor white problem and to foster a respectable white working class. It also served to secure the racial division of urban spaces at a time when regulations on African urban settlements were still incomplete and ineffective.

Using E. P. Thompson's study of the English working class as her premise, Lange, in chapter 5, explores the development of a sense of community among white workers in Johannesburg.[2] According to Lange, family, domestic life, and its physical and social extension, the neighborhood, were essential elements in forging white working-class identity in Johannesburg. She investigates social conditions such as the health situation, diseases, accommodation, the cost of living, illicit liquor dealing, and prostitution as a means of supplementing working-class income, as well as female menial work and crime. Lange finds that poor Afrikaners and unemployed British men and women alike practiced illicit liquor dealing. The fluctuations in the Rand economy, as well as its structural problems, affected white workers in different ways according to their skills, income,

and the composition of their families. When bad times hit, men and women developed survival strategies that generated alternatives to unemployment, mostly on the fringes of criminality, and which also defied the colonial racial hierarchy.

In chapter 6, Lange explores the construction of the discourse on poor whites between 1890 and 1922, particularly in relation to the poor white population of Johannesburg and its suburbs. She argues that until 1920, the constitution of poor whiteism as a moral and ideological issue obscured the ruling class's capacity to perceive poor whites as a serious threat to the political stability of the state. The chapter deals with three related topics: the socio-economic conditions of the emergence of the discourse on poor whites, the development of the discourse on poor whites, and the tension experienced by the state at the policy level in its attempt to find solutions to the poor white problem. Having analyzed the reports of various commissions of inquiry into the phenomenon of indigency, Lange comes to the conclusion that the urban industrial unrest in 1907, 1913, 1914, and 1922, as well as the rural unrest in the Rebellion of 1914, can also be perceived as a form of social and political revolt by poor whites. This is also reflected in the title of this study, *White, Poor and Angry*.

Lange concludes by stating that during the thirty-two years that constitute the focus of her study, the making of the white working class in Johannesburg was a continuous and sometimes contradictory process punctuated by economic crises related to the mining industry, the costly and bloody South African War, and major political changes. These events had both direct and indirect consequences on the lives of Johannesburg's white workers and contributed to evoking their anger against the circumstances which aggravated their socio-economic conditions. The economic, social, political, and ideological processes that took place between 1890 and 1922 in-

fluenced the lives of Johannesburg's white workers, creating an embryonic sense of community and identity among some of these men and their families.

I have one point of criticism. In the concluding chapter, Lange correctly asserts that the Afrikaner workers' identity was neither monolithic nor imbued with the Afrikaner nationalism of the 1930s onwards (p. 166). She is also correct in claiming that the fact that some British and Afrikaner workers intermarried, and in certain cases had their children baptized in the Anglican Church, suggests that ethnicity and religion cannot be read off each other in a linear way (p. 168). However, what is missing in this assumption is the fact that Lange apparently only used statistics from English-speaking Anglican parishes to construct her argument. Apart from Fourie's study on Afrikaners in Johannesburg, Lange consulted no other Afrikaans literature on Afrikaners.[3] In the foreword of his structuralist analysis of the Afrikaners' socio-economic position in the 1930s and 1940s, O'Meara emphasizes that scholars studying Afrikaner history should take cognizance of what Afrikaners wrote about themselves![4] For instance, Lange did not take the church minutes of the meetings of the Johannesburg congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) into account, as did Fourie, to establish the extent of a more culturally Afrikaner-inclined working-class community and family life.

In his memoirs, the Reverend William Nicol, a DRC minister, clearly describes how Afrikaner congregations and schools were established among the poor Afrikaner working-class communities of the Witwatersrand in the post-South African War period, albeit this was a slow and at times agonizing process.[5] Therefore it is also significant that the Afrikaner cultural organization, the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB), was established in English-dominated Johannesburg. Stemming from a poor Afrikaner working-class background, many of its members rose to prominence in this

elitist organization as a result of cooperative efforts between the DRC and the AB to culturally uplift their kin from the ranks of poverty and illiteracy. Thus there is a danger that Lange's portrayal of the emergence of the South African working class in Johannesburg, as far as Afrikaners are concerned, might create the impression among readers that in essence the Afrikaner workers on the Rand assumed a British-orientated working-class character (see, for example, pp. 20, 24-25, 31, 113). Contrary to Lange's argument that there was a growing class-solidarity among Afrikaner and English workers between 1906 and 1922, the prolonged process of the Afrikanerization of the Mine Workers' Union, of whom Afrikaners by 1916 comprised the majority, rather suggests the growth of a distinct Afrikaner working-class consciousness and a sense of cultural difference from English-speaking workers.[7] Therefore a more nuanced approach towards Afrikaner class-formation seems lacking in this study.

A few minor typographical and typing errors appear (pp. 31, 39, and 83). The founding date of the South African Labour Party is erroneously indicated as 1910, while according to Ticktin it was actually 1909.[7]

Nevertheless, *White, Poor and Angry* makes an important contribution to narratives on white working-class urbanization, especially as far as the Afrikaner poor are concerned. As Lange herself suggests, much more comprehensive research is still needed on how Afrikaner ethnicity and cultural identity were experienced by ordinary people in their daily lives in an urban setting, as well as on the behavioral patterns of the Afrikaner working class in an urban environment.

#### Notes

[1]. See for example, H. J. and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969); F. A. Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Social Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1976); E. Katz, *A Trade*

*Union Aristocracy: A History of White Workers in the Transvaal and the General Strike of 1913* (Johannesburg: African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1976); R. H. Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa: A Historical Materialist Analysis of Class Formation and Class Relations* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1979); C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, vol. 1, *New Babylon*, and vol. 2, *New Nineveh* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983); D. Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital and the Incorporation of Organized Labour on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983); S. Marks and S. Trapido, eds., *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London: Longman, 1987); B. Bozzoli, ed., *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); and R. Morrell, ed., *White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in South Africa, 1880-1940* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992).

[2]. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966).

[3]. See E. L. P. Stals, ed., *Afrikaners in die Goudstad* (Cape Town: HAUM, 1978-1986), Deel I, 1886-1924, and Deel II, 1924-1961.

[4]. *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1932-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[5]. *Met Toga en Troffel. Die Lewe van 'n Stadspredikant* (Cape Town, 1958).

[6]. See, for example, W. P. Visser, "Urbanization and Afrikaner Class Formation: The Mine Workers' Union and the Search for a Cultural Identity," in African Urban Spaces Conference Proceedings, March 28-30, 2003, University of Texas at Austin (Rochester Press, forthcoming).

[7]. See D. Ticktin, "The Origins of the South African Labour Party, 1888-1910" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cape Town, 1973).

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