

LILJA, FREDRIK. *The Golden Fleece of the Cape. Capitalist expansion and labour relations in the periphery of transnational wool production c.1860–1950.* [Studia Historica Upsaliensia, 247.] Uppsala Universitet, Uppsala 2013. 225 pp. \$72.50. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000054

In this pioneering study, which draws on Marxist approaches, Fredrik Lilja examines the labour practices and production methods of wool farming in the Eastern Cape region of South Africa, c.1860–1950, which, he argues, constituted the first links in a transnational commodity chain of wool production. He focuses on the Wellwood farm in Graaff-Reinet as a case study. The aims of the study are to deepen our understanding of expanding capitalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by looking at the global level, and also to examine the capitalist transformation of rural South Africa at the local level.

Merino sheep were introduced in the Cape in 1789, but the wool industry was started in earnest under British rule by the 1820 Settlers (English immigrants brought out in a sponsored scheme) in the Eastern Cape. Lilja notes that while comparatively small internationally, local wool production became increasingly important: by 1851 wool constituted 59 per cent of all Cape exports (p. 31). This would become one of the first major capitalist sectors in the region, predating Natal sugar plantations and Highveld grain production by decades.

Lilja argues that the relationship between Britain, as a capitalist “core”, and the Cape, as a “periphery”, was not equal, but operated to the benefit of the core. However, he stresses the core–periphery relationship was not simply determined by capitalists in Britain. He argues that the Cape farmers, who invested in land and sheep to improve production and maximize profits, were themselves key agents of global capitalist expansion. They benefited from their links to the British core, while the British wool industry also became dependent on the Cape (and other colonies) for wool supplies.

Capitalist relations on Cape wool farms were determined by a rigid racial structure, he argues, with relations of production primarily based on “white” farmers, and “black” and “coloured” labourers (p. 41). He notes that legislation forced “blacks” and “coloureds” off the land and into wage labour, and concentrated land in the hands of “whites”, ensuring that wool farming became “increasingly capitalist” (pp. 106 and 122). However, Lilja argues that the process was prolonged as labourers, and to a certain extent farmers too, resisted full proletarianization. According to Lilja, labour relations on the Cape wool farms were not entirely capitalist: labourers were mostly paid in kind, either through tenancy arrangements (that ensured grazing rights for labourers’ animal stock), or with stock, clothing, and rations. The proletarian cash wage did not dominate. However, for Lilja “capital” entails a “process where the capitalist sphere expanded”, and this “gradually affected relations of production in the Cape as classes of capitalist farmers and labourers emerged in the periphery” (p. 34).

A significant aspect of Lilja’s study is that it highlights the extent to which wool farmers relied on the families of their male labourers in production. This was especially true of children and youth, who were involved in the crucial work of shepherding.

Lilja criticizes the literature for ignoring the links between labour relations and the organization of production in the rise of wool, especially investment in technologies such as fencing and mechanical water supplies to improve production. By the 1870s farmers increasingly made use of fences, dams, and water pumps to facilitate rotational grazing. Yet it was not until the early twentieth century, and especially from the 1930s onwards, that technologies led to a significant reorganization of labour and production. Cash wages and rations became the primary form of remuneration, while grazing rights diminished, and those labouring families without their own stock were exploited more intensely. Many farmers, especially newly established farmers, continued to rely on shepherds, although shepherds became younger and were paid very low wages. On more

capital-intensive farms such as Wellwood, shepherds were replaced by an entirely new occupational category of “camp walkers”, who took care of technology (fences) as opposed to sheep (p. 142).

Drawing on Rosa Luxemburg, Lilja thus concludes that labour relations in Cape wool farming changed constantly, yet gradually, and that capitalist expansion both intensified and eroded pre-capitalist relations.

Lilja’s work sheds light on the way in which the production of a commodity in different parts of the world can be articulated. This study is also a welcome deviation from the current trend towards cultural and micro-history amongst historians of the old Cape. His transnational framework complicates notions of the “national” and questions the standard narrative of Cape/South African exceptionalism, drawing attention to broader historical processes that shaped local society and production. Most importantly, he stresses the (increasingly neglected) role of class in shaping history, and revisits significant debates concerning labour and capitalist transition in South Africa, and more generally. In short, this is an important, challenging, and insightful study.

That said, it has some shortcomings, partly related to the author’s Marxist framing. While showing the importance of understanding the specificities of the local context in a transnational analysis, his conception of “core” and “periphery” as purely economic categories, structured on where and how production takes place, prevents a full explanation of how political factors related to imperialism, conquest, and the state shaped labour relations on Cape farms. For instance, Lilja tells us that legislation discriminated against “blacks” and “coloureds”, but does not adequately explain why such legislation was passed in the first place. Why should global “capitalism” require such racial framings?

Related to this, some of Lilja’s categories are problematic. The tendency in his work to use “farmers” to refer to “white” people and “peasants” to refer to “black” people (p. 24) is unsustainable, eliding class differences within the races, and detracts from his more nuanced discussions of those “whites” who were involved in subsistence/non-capitalist farming as well as from a proper consideration of the role of successful commercial black farmers – a group prevalent in the nineteenth-century Eastern Cape.

In addition, Khoisan and Xhosa labourers have very distinct histories of conquest and incorporation into the political economy of the Cape colony, yet Lilja’s analysis fails to distinguish the experiences of “black” and “coloured” labourers, respectively, or consider if, and if, how, their family structures and relations to farmers and to the state differed – and the effect of this on capitalist labour relations.

Finally, Lilja’s category of “pre-colonial” relations also needs to be questioned. That the family, as opposed to the village or the clan, had become the primary economic unit by the time of the emergence of the commercial farm, indicates that pre-colonial relations of production had already been significantly altered by the time the wool industry started in the mid-nineteenth century. Pre-colonial relations were also dynamic, heterogeneous, and, even before wool production became increasingly capitalist, such relations were constantly reconfigured and changed.

Nevertheless, *The Golden Fleece of the Cape* fills significant gaps in Cape/South African historiography and is one of the only studies that details wool production and sheds light on the labourers involved in that production. It is a valuable work, and should form the standard reference point on the topic.

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