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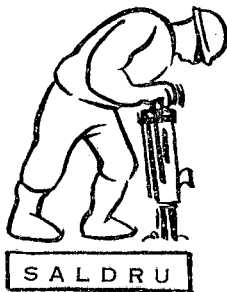
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Neo-Feudalism, an Exercise in Reciprocity

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NEO-FEUDALISM, AN EXERCISE IN RECIPROCITY.

E.K. Moorcroft.

Although feudalism is today considered an anachronistic, even reactionary system, a form of it, which for want of a better name I have called Neo-Feudalism, still constitutes the structural framework for employer - employee relationships over much of rural South Africa.

An attempt will be made in this paper to relate certain traditional social institutions to neo-feudalism in order to illustrate how these institutions appear to have been associated in its entrenchment. It will also be shown how, at best, this system can operate successfully in terms of labour stability and apparent labour contentment. At its worst, however, it provides a vehicle for relatively severe labour exploitation.

In the light of the ever-increasing restrictive legislation militating against the free movement of rural labour, together with the restlessness manifest amongst many farm labourers, the system is deserving of closer attention.

Extent of Practice.

Although aspects of neo-feudalism can be found throughout the Republic, the system appears to be most widely practised in that part of the Eastern Cape where Xhosa-speaking Africans form the bulk of the labour force, and where extensive stock-rearing is the predominant agricultural pursuit.

Employees, together with their families, are resident on farms in this area, and are employed on a full-time basis. The degree of labour stability varies from excellent to very poor, and is apparently directly related to conditions of service.

Characteristics of the Neo-Feudal System.

The most obvious characteristic of the system is the paternalistic relationship which exists between ^Memployer and employee. Not only is the labourer wholly dependant on his employer financially, but the employer often exerts influence on his social, cultural and educational life.

Financial Dependence.

A nominal monthly cash wage is paid. This usually varies from between R5 - R20. Consequently much depends on wages paid in kind. These payments consist mainly of food, and here there is a large variation between different farms.

On some farms, an adequate monthly ration of say 50 Kgs. Maize meal, 50 Kgs. Whole Maize and half a sheep or goat is given, together with a daily ration of anything up to 5 litres of fresh milk. On others, the sole standard ration is a 20 litre paraffin container of maize per week. Sometimes a little skimmed milk is given as well. No meat is provided, although employers will sometimes allow their labourers to consume animals which have died on the farm.

Often a small area of arable land is made available to each family. Here fresh fruit, vegetables and tobacco may be grown.

One of the most valuable payments in kind however, consists of grazing rights. Where these exist, each employee may usually run from between 1 - 5 head of cattle or 10 - 20 goats on the farm. This can mean an annual cash income of anything between R60 - R400. Besides being of financial importance, the ownership of cattle is also important from a social and cultural point of view.

Housing is invariably free, and varies between well constructed brick and iron cottages to wattle-and-daub hovels.

A clothing ration is sometimes given, and this too can vary between a regular decent outfit of working clothes to an occasional hand-out of the farmers own second-hand apparel.

There is therefore considerable variation between the best and the worst Payments in kind.

Social and Cultural Influence.

As an example of the influence of the farmer on the social life of his employees, one could cite the strict check which, on some farms, is kept on the composition of the families under employ. Unmarried mothers, for instance, are often not allowed to stay on the farm, and aged relatives must first satisfy the farmer of their inability to work before being permitted to settle. In the worst cases, employees, on being pensioned, are not allowed to stay.

Certain cultural institutions also, are often directly affected by the farmer's attitude. Where the ownership of cattle is not allowed, for instance, the traditional lobola payments become well-nigh impossible.

Some farmers, however, are sympathetic towards social and cultural problems engendered by social change, and assist their staff in overcoming these wherever reasonably possible.

Educational Facilities.

State assistance is available to farmers for the erection of primary grade schools on their farms. Teachers are employed by the farmer, but are paid by the State. Pupils who wish to proceed beyond the primary grades, must invariably be sent away to town. By no means all farm children receive even this primary education, and much depends on the initiative of the individual farmer or community for the provision of educational facilities.

It will thus be seen that conditions of service can vary considerably within the system. Even in cases where a relatively insignificant cash wage is paid, generous perquisites in the form of food, grazing rights, decent housing and adequate preliminary schooling, can do much to raise the standard of living. On the other hand, a farmer who does not provide adequate payments in kind, but who uses a token form of the system and thereby attempts to justify the low cash wage paid, is also not unnaturally the farmer who finds himself with severe labour problems. Organized Agriculture is constantly being approached by such farmers with requests for more effective measures in order to prohibit the migration of labour to urban areas. In the newly formed Bantu Administration Boards the machinery for such measures appears to have been provided. It would appear obvious, however, that in such a case, efforts are being made to stem the effects, and not the cause of labour unrest.

The Relationship between Employer and Employee.

It must be borne in mind that the relationship existing between a farmer and his staff is a highly personal one. In terms of contact between those responsible for formulating labour policy and those responsible for implementing it, it is seldom paralleled in commerce or industry. This is a fact which is seldom fully appreciated, neither is its significance understood. The farmer is normally in everyday shoulder-to-shoulder contact with his staff. Under these conditions, and particularly in view of the status attached to his position in the system, his attitude and personality come to play an important role.

That a relationship deeper than that of employer-employee often exists under these conditions is not difficult to perceive. As 'Provider-of-all' ^{THE EMPLOYER'S} ~~his~~ status as 'Lord of the Manor' or 'Father of his people' is greatly enhanced. The degree of respect in which he is held is often directly proportional to his reputation for generosity and strength of character.

There appears to be little doubt but that certain traditional Xhosa institutions have been readily incorporated into such a system. It could perhaps be argued that neo-feudalism has in fact evolved as a result of them.

This paper seeks in part to investigate the extent to which these institutions have been adopted and adapted, and the significance of their role in upholding the system.

It is well known that in traditional Xhosa society the chief has great powers and status. As head of his tribal lineage, he is also leader of the political, religious, judicial, economic and military systems. He is truly 'Father of his people'. It is widely accepted that his word is law and his power omnipotent. This, however, is only half the picture. There are very definite controls on the exercise of his power. These are based on reciprocal obligations between him and his subjects. He is expected to be worthy of his exalted status. In all his dealings with his people, allegiance and loyalty are largely the reward of his generosity and sense of justice. Non-conforming subjects are summarily dealt with, but in like fashion, a harsh or despotic chief will soon lose the allegiance of his people or be deposed. It is significant that uprisings take the form of rebellions against personalities rather than revolutions against the system.

The well-being of the people depends upon the strength of the chief. This status system ramifies throughout the entire social system right down to the head of the 'umzi' or family.

Although allegiance is usually coupled with kinship, it is also possible for entirely unrelated individuals or groups to come under the aegis of a powerful man. Economic considerations often play a role in bringing this about. The institution of 'ukubuza' permits a poor or needy man to approach a wealthy man with a request for aid. In return for aid, usually in the form of cattle which are loaned on a usufructory basis, the poor man binds himself to his benefactor in a quasi-political relationship, and hails him as 'inkosi' - chief.

Given this tradition of symbiotic reciprocity between a chief and his people, between rich and poor, even between a father and his children ('induku ^Aayinomzi' - a knout has no home) it can be appreciated that the transition into employment along neo-feudal lines is easily transacted.

When the employer sets himself up as 'father of his people' he is usually unconsciously following a rural tradition. In response to fair and just treatment, coupled with generosity, the worthy employer comes to expect (and usually receives) a high degree of loyalty from his staff. This loyalty has led to instances of third and even fourth generation employees being linked to established farms.

Conversely, an employer with a niggardly or 'unchieftan-like' reputation will be constantly beset by labour problems. That his employees are rebelling against him, his personality and his exploitation of the system rather than against the system itself, is suggested by the fact that these same employees will often readily bind themselves in service under the same system on a neighbouring farm with every outward manifestation of content.

Conclusions:

The significance of neo-feudalism appears to be not so much in its positive as in its negative aspects. Although it has been contended in this paper that the reciprocal aspects of the traditional politico-economic system provide a pattern for allegiance or loyalty in labour relations, this contention is seldom advanced by the protagonists of the system. Rather it is argued that a relatively large cash wage only encourages wasteful spending on liquor or other non-essentials, and that the family will not spend sufficient on good wholesome food as provided in a regular ration. Further, it is sometimes held that by having his own cattle and garden, the labourer feels that he has a stake in the farm, is consequently more interested in his work, and less inclined to move.

While there may be some merit in these arguments, it would appear that they are all too often advanced as mere rationalizations by employers who know that by providing nominal perquisites, they can short-change their employees on the cash wage, and hence actual wage paid.

With regard to loyalty, there seems to be no reason why the same loyalty that is engendered by generous side-payments should not be stimulated by a generous cash wage only. Under such terms of employment, a basis for a fair cash wage for farm workers could be determined and applied. No such basis exists at present.

As long as neo-feudalism survives, there will be a tendency for employers to adopt a patronizing attitude towards their staff, expecting more gratitude and loyalty than is perhaps their due. Furthermore, and most important of all, unscrupulous employers will be tempted to continue to apply and abuse the system in order to suit their own ends, and true reciprocation will remain an unpracticed concept.

Appendix.

Incidence of Neo-feudalism.

It would appear that no research has been done with regard to determining either the incidence or the extent of the system. In the platteland areas of the Eastern Cape, an estimate of between 95 - 98% would probably be close to the mark. In the entire Adelaide/Bedford area, with a farming population of over 100, only one farmer is known to work on a cash wage only system.

Case Studies.

A brief comparative case study involving two farmers employing unskilled labour engaged in the same type of operation follows:

(1) Number of labourers employed

Farmer A .. 22
Farmer B .. 5

(2) Type of farming operation

Farmer A .. Extensive stock rearing
Farmer B .. Extensive stock rearing

(3) Distance apart : 12 kilometres

(4) Food and Housing

| | <u>Farmer A.</u> | <u>Farmer B.</u> |
|--|------------------|------------------|
| (a) Monthly food ration | | |
| Farmer A - 50 Kgs Maize Meal @ R6.00 | | |
| 40 Kgs Whole Maize @ R4.00 | | |
| 3 Sheep @ R7.00 | | |
| 150 litres whole milk @ R32.00 | 49.00 | |
| Farmer B - 80 Kgs Whole Maize @ R8.00 | | |
| 30 litres milk @ R6.00 | | 14.00 |
| (ii) Farmer A - Permanent weatherproof cottage | 7.00 | |
| Farmer B - Wattle and daub | | 3.00 |
| Sub-total | R56.00 | R17.00 |

(5) Annual Clothing hand-out.

| | <u>Farmer A</u> | <u>Farmer B.</u> |
|--|-----------------|------------------|
| Farmer A - Overall, Shirt, trousers, jacket, boots, wellingtons @R48.00 ÷ 12 | 4.00 | |
| Farmer B - Overalls only R6 (+ 12) | | .50 |

(6) Grazing rights.

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Farmer A - 5 head @ R1.50 per month | 7.50 | |
| Farmer B - 1 head @ R1.50 per month | | 1.50 |
| Sub-total B | 11.50 | 2.00 |
| + Sub-total A | 56.00 | 17.00 |
| | <u>R67.50</u> | <u>R19.00</u> |

The importance of generous payments in kind within the system become very apparant when regarded in this way, and even more so when the potential income from the grazing rights is considered. Taken at R6.00 per beast per month the totals become - Farmer A R30.00 Farmer B R6.00.

Further sundry items which can be regarded as payments in kind include firewood, garden, occasional transport etc. and are calculated at R10 per family per month.

The sum totals of monthly payments in kind then become : Farmer A R107.00
Farmer B R35.00

We can now introduce the monthly salary which, although crucial for B is relatively insignificant for A.

Sub-total C; A = R15.00 B = R8.00

Sum total A + B + C Farmer A = R122.00, B = R43.00

Stability of labour (Heads of households only)

Period 1/1/75 - 1/1/76

Percentage turnover: Farmer A Nil (0 - 22)
Farmer B 60% (3 - 5)