

LULI CALLINICOS

A place in the city: The Rand on the eve of apartheid

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Luli Callinicos has earned a well-deserved reputation for excellence in the field of popular history with the first two volumes in the series *A people's history of South Africa*. The quality of both *Gold and workers 1886-1924* (1980) and *Working life 1886-1940: Factories, townships, and popular culture on the Rand* (1987) has been widely recognised by professional historians, teachers of history and their students, as well as members of the wider public interested in South Africa's past; in addition, the latter publication won the prestigious Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. This third volume, which concentrates on life on the Rand during the 1940s, thus has illustrious predecessors, and one wonders whether author and publisher were aware of a

danger that they might not have met the high standards set by the early volumes in the series.

This book is certainly no disappointment. Callinicos's approach to the past is familiar, combining textual and illustrative material to provide a sense of immediacy and intimacy between reader and subject. The photographs in themselves present a unique record of the lives of people on the Rand on the eve of apartheid. Most are previously unpublished, and were clearly selected from rich resources (p. vii). Apart from their vivid evocation of the period, they are an outstanding asset to teachers of the period. Extracts from contemporary newspapers and magazines and excerpts from the speeches of political leaders and oral interviews appear in boxes at the side of the main body of text on every page, all of which further impart the hopes, fears and insights of people who lived during this era of upheaval and rapid social transformation.

To say that the book follows a tried-and-tested pattern is not to dismiss it; there are some important changes from the previous volumes. The first is, of course, the content. Both the earlier books covered much the same ground — though from different perspectives — despite the fact that the *Working life* examined a wider chronological period than *Gold and workers*. *A place in the city* examines the 1940s, looking especially at the reaction of people to economic change, war conditions and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism. The focus on a single decade (and really less, as the story does not extend beyond 1947 and 1948) permits a much more detailed and nuanced portrayal of people's lives than that which emerged in volumes 1 and 2 of the series.

The most significant break from the previous volumes in this series is not the content, but rather a focus on individual lives. If one wishes to quibble about the earlier works, there was a tendency to generalise about worker experience and urban life. The first chapter of *A place in the city* introduces six individuals, whose fortunes are traced in some depth, and who occasionally re-appear as the broader narrative develops in the subsequent chapters. None of them is an invented stereotype — oral and pictorial records have been creatively used to present their life histories — but their varied responses to broadly similar circumstances of landlessness, urbanisation and the emergence of Afrikaner political and economic power does effectively depict the different opportunities and challenges faced on the Rand by working men and women. Martha Masina was the daughter of a labour tenant in the Middleburg district, and became a domestic worker in Johannesburg. Hendrik Hoffman was forced from his father's Orange Free State farm by drought and poverty to become a railway worker. Naboth Mokgatle moved from rural Rustenburg to menial employment in Pretoria and labour union activities during the decade. Katerina le Roux was forced from the platteland to the Rand, where she married, produced seven children and found employment as a garment worker in Germiston. Seketi Molewa came from a remote district of Sekhukhuneland, but was unwillingly drawn into the life of perpetual migrancy to survive. Finally, Ama Naidoo, born to hawker parents in Pretoria's Asiatic Bazaar, who underwent a traditional marriage and devoted herself to the raising of her family and adding to the household income through sewing and supporting lodgers.

While all six people experienced strained circumstances, their background and ethnic origins meant that their lives took very divergent paths as the 1940s unfolded. The period is divided into three broad, though overlapping, themes, each of which merits a chapter. Chapter 2, perhaps the least original — but nonetheless absorbing — of the three, examines urban life and political resistance. Chapters 3 and 4, which respectively explore the workings and aftermath of the war economy and the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, offer outstanding descriptions and analyses of these themes. Not only are the perspectives and insights that they offer into individual and group experience different from so many of the more 'conventional' studies, but the accessible and delicate manner in which the period is investigated offers a model for practitioners of 'history from below'.

Like Callinicos's earlier work, this study is centred on the Rand, although glimpses of conditions in other regions do emerge. The focus on the Rand is naturally perfectly legitimate; what is more misleading, however, is the sub-title, *A people's history of South Africa*. Readers learn a little about rural life in the Transvaal, and have a fleeting impression of the Free State through the early life of Hendrik Hoffman, but the rest of the country is essentially ignored. While not denying the crucial importance of the Rand as the country's urban and industrial heart, the suggestion that this region equates to the country needs to be questioned.

The writing of popular history is not an easy assignment. The worst examples of the craft are simplistic and banal, are sometimes little more than thinly disguised propaganda, and are patronising to their audiences. In short, they do history a disservice. Callinicos's work is always at the other end of the spectrum. She has the enviable ability to convey the complexities and cross-currents of the past in a clear, reader-friendly manner. She distils the essence of new research without reducing it to facile comment, and integrates such material with her own varied findings, insights and resources. The result is the production of books which have great appeal to a wide variety of people.

The next volume of the series, which promises to cover the apartheid years (pp. 130, 139), is eagerly

awaited. While the challenges of relating relatively contemporary history in a popular history format are perhaps more daunting, there are few historians who can match the expertise and sensitivity of Callinicos in confronting the task.

NICHOLAS SOUTHEY
University of South Africa