

gan, *Fascism in Europe, 1919–1945*, New York 2003.

- 4 See, for an excellent example, H. Garzia, M. Yusta, X. Tabet, Ch. Climaco (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism. History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to the Present*, New York, Oxford 2016.
- 5 R. O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, London 2004, p. 218.

Ralph Callebert: *On Durban's Docks: Zulu Workers, Rural Households, Global Labor*, Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2017, 256 S.

Reviewed by
Jonathan Hyslop, Hamilton

Recent years have seen a shift of historical scholarship on South Africa, in the direction of transnational perspectives. This new work has had a salutary effect on a historiography previously characterized by a considerable degree of national exceptionalism and even, at worst, parochialism. It has also highlighted, for the first time, the maritime dimension of modern South African history, with considerable attention given to port cities and their linkages across the world. Yet in its more simplistic manifestations, the new work has tended toward an over-optimistic celebration of 'cosmopolitanism' and 'global mobility'. Simultaneously, we have seen something of a decline in the strong tradition of South African labour history. While there has been much attention to global cultural flows and the travels of radical anti-coloni-

al politicians, working class life and struggles have become somewhat neglected.

Ralph Callebert's *On Durban's Docks* is an important corrective to all of these trends. It is an account of the harbour workers of South Africa's most important port during the Twentieth Century (with a focus on the 1930s to 1950s). The study is in the best traditions of labour history and of modern African social history, drawing on an extensive programme of oral history interviews and on deep archival work. While recognizing the benefits of a more global understanding of South Africa, Callebert fundamentally questions the centrality this has been given, and the implicit optimism that has come with it. He stresses the relative disconnection of Durban's dockworkers from the wider world, and simultaneously he shows the depth of their exploitation. At a deeper conceptual level, this approach is linked by Callebert to a questioning of accounts of globality which are steeped in a universalist view of the diffusion of wage labour and economic rationalism. He charges such approaches with a failure to grasp the specificity of the African context.

Callebert sees dockworkers as constrained by segregationist laws and by linguistic barriers in their interactions with passing ships.¹ Poverty meant that they consumed little of what was imported through Durban. He shows how workers' self-definition was bound up, not with their position as workers, so much as with their aspirations to be heads of rural households and to accumulate cattle. They seldom desired to settle in the cities, and to this extent, the migrant labour system was not simply a product of state coercion. Their footholds in the countryside represented a zone in

which they could escape from the racial domination of the city. There, the workers could establish themselves as patriarchs, marrying through the acquisition of cattle as bride price (*ukulobola*), and remaining in touch with the ancestral spirits (*amadlozi*). The homestead was their primary cultural and emotional reference point. For Callebert, this means that generic accounts of 'proletarianization' and 'urbanization' are inherently unsatisfactory.

Callebert shows that migrancy did change social patterns, but not only in the ways that are usually imagined. Rural women became more central to the management of households, in the absence of their menfolk. Men did not only rely on waged work, but rather combined it with other economic strategies in the city, in order to accelerate their path toward the satisfaction of returning to the land. Many started small side businesses in Durban, and many traded in goods pilfered in the harbour. Callebert here challenges any idea of the dockworkers as 'pure' proletarians – the crucial thing, for him, is the interface between rural and urban economies, and between wage labour, small scale trade and homestead farming.

This leads the to a much broader point, and it is here that the wider interest of Callebert's work lies. He makes an extensive critique of simple notions of economic man. While the cattle which migrants sought to accumulate had economic value, their primary significance was as a source of cultural meaning. Here, Callebert links his work to the insights of Karl Polanyi. His research supports Polanyi's objections to the idea of a universal, profit-seeking economic rationality. Rather, Polanyi points to the ways in which economic

behaviour is embedded in social political and religious life. Dockworkers engaged in small trade not because of any innate entrepreneurial impulse, but as a way of pursuing their vision of a meaningful life in the places from which they had come. Thus, Callebert challenges what he characterizes as 'eurocentric' conceptions of economic behavior, whether Smithian or Marxist.

As a locally-focussed social history, Callebert's book is exemplary. His descriptions of the economic strategies of the dockworkers, of their living and working conditions in the city and their linkages to their rural homes, of the petty 'crimes' which helped them to survive, and of the cooperative economic initiatives in which workers were involved are superb. His section on labour politics is valuable for its emphasis on the role of nationalism in militancy, and for not shying away from the difficult issue of the deep antagonism between the dockworkers and Durban's Indian community. The anti-Indian feeling was horrifically manifested in massive violence against Indians in a massive 1949 riot, in which dockers played a central part. This clash becomes more comprehensible in the light of Callebert's demonstration of how important small trade was to the dockworkers as a source of their livelihoods. Indians, as a dominant force in retail, were competitors.

The assertion of a Polanyian position in the book is of great value. While there has been some interest in Polanyi in South Africa, he tends mainly to have been invoked by leftist social scientists making a critique of 'neo-liberalism'. Thus, he simply stands as a critic of market economics. The much deeper Polanyian argument that societies

are held together by non-economic factors, tends to be ignored by these scholars, who simply want to use him to attack free market economics, in the name of a more egalitarian economic model. They do not take on board the extent to which Polanyi's thinking would also challenge their own tendency to undervalue the cultural and religious dimensions of the social world. A real engagement with the fundamentals of Polyanian thought, as advocated by Callebert, is long overdue in South Africa. Having said that though, Callebert's critique of South African Marxist scholarship may be a little overstated. He charges this tradition with exaggerating their differences with liberals over the centrality of class as opposed to race, with not considering the cultural level of analysis and with engaging in a functionalist type of analysis of the relation between racist policies and capitalism. Yet while some of this is indeed true of the 1970s 'structuralist' Marxist writing on South Africa (Legassick, Wolpe, the 'Poulantzians') and in some of the South African left industrial sociology literature focusing on 'labour process' theory in the 1980s, Callebert paints with too broad a brush here. The whole Marxist-influenced social history movement since the 1970s, for instance in the work the Johannesburg History Workshop, strongly emphasized the need to deal with issues of culture and to avoid functionalism, and radical industrial sociology also became, over time, much more nuanced in dealing with issues of race. And in an era of populism in South Africa, in which a smokescreen of African nationalist racial rhetoric obscures the growing gap between the condition of the working poor and the wealth of the new African and old white elites, there is

surely nothing wrong with paying at least some renewed attention to the question of class.

Nevertheless, this is a stellar contribution to labour and social history, which not only is essential reading for Southern Africanists, but should be of significant interest to a much wider world of historical and social science scholarship.

Note:

- 1 A problem in the book is a somewhat loose use of the term 'apartheid'. I would say that it is important to recognize a distinction between the somewhat loosely organized and often customary segregationism of pre-1948 period, and the intensely regulated and bureaucratized apartheid policy introduced by the National Party regime in 1948.

Elleke Boehmer / Rouven Kunstmann / Priyasha Mukhopadhyay / Asha Rogers (eds.): *The Global Histories of Books. Methods and Practices (New Directions in Book History series)*, Berlin / Basingstoke: Springer International Publishing / Palgrave Macmillan 2017, 334 p.

Reviewed by
Cécile Cottenet, Marseille

This collection of essays, edited by scholars whose expertise evinces a global outlook, is the result of two workshops organized at the University of Oxford in 2014, and the University of Melbourne in 2015. In the wake of recent scholarship aiming at