

Winelands, Wealth and Work

by Kees van der Waal

Profits made by landowners through real estate development in the Cape Winelands have social costs for workers on this land despite measures to mitigate the consequences. A group of researchers in social anthropology, history, psychology and planning, based at the University of Stellenbosch or associated with the Solms-Delta farm project has come to this conclusion in a research project they have completed on social transformation in the Stellenbosch wine-farming area.¹ The researchers argue that the financial gains of converting agricultural land into lifestyle benefits were offset by social disruption and costly adaptations experienced by the working class.

The Cape Winelands region is well known for the economic value derived from producing export wines. It is a landscape of exquisite beauty, with towering mountain ranges protected by conservation management and valleys treasured as agricultural land. Heritage is a rich resource here, evidenced by the Cape Dutch architecture of Boschendal and a recorded history going back to the 1680s. The Cape Winelands area is presently strongly associated with elite tourism and a wealthy lifestyle, embedded in viticulture and deciduous fruit production. However, the obvious visual importance of landscape and heritage hide the mundane relations of production experienced by agricultural workers. Relations between workers and owners in the wine industry were extremely exploitative during the slave era and have remained paternalistic to this day. Farm labour unrest in the Western Cape in 2012 attests to the tension generated by extreme inequalities.

The researchers shared an ethnographic approach to their research and investigated how socio-economic relations in the Dwars River Valley have changed over time and what the impact was of the recent transformation in land use. Contradictory processes in the economy and the socio-political system have impacted on the relations of production and the security of workers. Political transformation on a national level has enhanced workers' rights, but economic changes relating to the move from production-oriented capitalism invested in agriculture to neoliberal finance-based capitalism invested in land value have undermined workers' security. The limits to liberation have become clearly visible in many parts of the country, with promises of development and transformation often turning into frustration and disappointment. Recent widespread service protests, labour conflict and politi-

cal upheaval in informal settlements are indications of unfulfilled dreams.

The researchers focused on local-level experience, contestations about resources, adaptations to development interventions, changes in employment opportunities and social relationships, as well as the role of symbols and religion in these processes. They aimed to understand the complex relations between interventions from outside and local responses, and how these relations and associated processes are situated in the national and international context. By tracing events and relationships ethnographically, the research project engaged with power relations and contestations on the local level. The history of the valley, from the time of slavery and dispossession, through colonial viticulture, large-scale land acquisition by Cecil John Rhodes and the emergence of the villages of Pniël, Lanquedoc and Kylemore around the Boschendal estate were traced. Much of the land in the valley was owned by large companies (Anglo American in recent decades) and its real estate value has recently been converted into financial profit by the sale of parts of the Boschendal farms. At the same time, it is shown in this research that many of the workers on the land lost their jobs while they were moved into social housing. Another part of the project explored the Boschendal Sustainable Development Initiative and its promising, though controversial, development prospects as set in contexts of local planning and management as well as the threat posed by the international financial crisis. This development intervention was contrasted by the researchers with the exceptional empowering process of workers' participation in the Solms-Delta farm where changes in land ownership and management driven by philanthropy may dramatically benefit a population that has suffered many generations of dispossession and exploitation.

The concept of 'slow violence', coined by Rob Nixon, was used by Lou-Marie Kruger in her revealing sub-project of the larger study on the psychological effects of poverty in the villages of the valley. Her use of personal narrative brings out the many complex forms of inequality and suffering hidden from the public eye. Other researchers in this project explored the way in which women manage to obtain some income through small-scale entre-

preneurship and how forms of community policing are manifestations of local social processes, including resistance to state policing and forms of vigilantism.

There are three main ideas that emerge from this research project. The first one is the paradox of transformation: with a focus on contradictions in transformations of land ownership and production processes. The most recent change is the financialisation of land, from land used mainly for agricultural production to land with a high value as real estate investment – resulting in a gentrification process with outside property investors moving in and increased inequality in the valley. A prominent event was in 2004 in Lanquedoc where 3000 people were resettled from the Boschendal farms into a social housing scheme. When these people were moved out of the paternalistic relations on the farms they moved into new forms of inequality in the town, namely the neo-paternalism of being home-owners in a municipality. Unfortunately, and more importantly, the transformation of the basis of production from agriculture to rent-taking also had a negative effect on job security and led to the loss of many jobs.

The project attempted to understand two impressive development interventions in the valley: the Boschendal Sustainable Development Initiative and the worker equity share scheme here at Solms-Delta. The Boschendal project is based on the profits from land sales that will be generated by real estate development and from which the communities in the valley will benefit. The Boschendal project is a form of corporate social responsibility with many attractive possibilities, but a part of the population was negatively affected by the changes in the production process and had to move away as they lost their worker homes on the farms or they became unemployed in the process. This led to resistance in the form of protests, occupation of houses and the community hall and eventually a series of court cases.

In contrast, the Solms-Delta approach to development is smaller in scale and is a form of philanthropy that is based on old family money; involves fewer risks and shows more immediate results. Even at Solms-Delta, however, one of the studies in our book shows that the empowerment of the workers is accompanied by neo-paternalistic relationships when it comes to decision-making. These are two very different approaches to development in scale, structure and vulnerability and they have very different outcomes when one looks at them comparatively.

The second main idea that was developed in the research project was a focus on experience from below: the researchers attempted an ethnographic approach with an emphasis on the stories people have to tell. This included:

- The story of the move to Lanquedoc from the farms and the agency that people demonstrate in resisting

arrangements that impact negatively on their security.

- Stories of some women who are able to become small-scale entrepreneurs amidst the expectations of 'ordentlikheid'.
- Stories of other women who suffer in their personal relationships and health-seeking in a context of poverty - these stories were interpreted with the concept of 'slow violence'.
- Stories of the attempts at controlling young people by means of the Community Policing Forum and neighbourhood watches; and
- Narratives that project hope, away from problems in the present into new forms of charismatic Christian faith.

The third main idea emerging from the project is about the movement of the broader political economy towards neo-liberalism. The researchers explain the development interventions and the experiences of the population in the larger contexts of history and the changes taking place in the political economy. This was most successfully done in the final workshop of the project in an important set of reflections that fleshed out the disjuncture between hope generated by the development plans based on expectations of financial profit and the despair of individuals and categories of workers who suffer the harsh consequences of the shift in material relations.

As part of a panel at Stellenbosch University on 20 February 2014, prof. Fiona Ross of University of Cape Town (UCT) Social Anthropology commented that the publication was a 'brave book' as 'it offers a very critical assessment of the practices of the powerful. It does so in two ways:

- by interrogating the ideologies and practices of land-owners, corporate agriculture and modernist planning; and
- by offering careful assessments of everyday life for those most affected by them.'

¹ The research outcomes of this fascinating social science project were published by UKZN Press in an edited volume with the title of the book being *Winelands, Wealth and Work: Transformations in the Dwars River Valley*, Stellenbosch, edited by the author. The project was subsequently presented in the Dwars River Valley and at seminars at Stellenbosch University, the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the University of Basel.

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