

'no eyes, no interest, no frame of reference': Rosa Luxemburg, southern African historiography, and pre-capitalist modes of production.

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## I Introduction

In a rousing and provocative treatment of South Africa in the historical section of *The Accumulation of Capital*<sup>1</sup> Rosa Luxemburg applied aspects of her theoretical arguments on the necessary structural links between capitalist and non-capitalist systems, to the contemporary imperialist world. She described the destructive impact of mining capital on Boer small-commodity producers, who had themselves 'built their peasant economy like parasites on the backs of Negroes...'<sup>2</sup>. These writings, together with Rosa Luxemburg's earlier studies of the impact of capitalist forms of production on non-capitalist societies, and the imperatives which structure their interaction,<sup>3</sup> are especially interesting to those of us who have studied the dynamics of the impact of capitalism on pre-capitalist societies, and tried to apply these studies to the writing of historical narratives. In addition to this, the recent application by radical commentators of the idea of primitive accumulation to contemporary manifestations of imperialism<sup>4</sup> allows Luxemburg's work to reach across the century that has passed since she used her remarkable talents so courageously to analyse, and change, her world. In this paper I examine some of her ideas and their application, in the context of the historiography of the relation between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production in South Africa, and suggest some of the reasons why we should revive this important debate and extend it beyond the walls of an increasingly confined academy.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, New York and London: Monthly Review, 1968 (from the translation by Agnes Schwarzchild published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> *Accumulation*, 411.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* (eds. Peter Hudis and Keven. B. Anderson) Monthly Review Press, 2004, Part One: Political Economy, Imperialism, and Non-Western Societies.

<sup>4</sup> I had hoped in this paper to consider the debate around the persistence of 'primitive accumulation' as discussed by David Harvey on p. 74 of 'The "New" Imperialism: Accumulation by Dispossession', *The New Imperial Challenge*, London: Merlin Press, 2003. This has not been possible.

## 2 The Dissolution of Primitive Communism

Chapter 2 of *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* is made up of a section of her projected *Introduction to Political Economy*, which had its origins in lectures given at Social Democratic Party School in Berlin in 1908. It is entitled 'The Dissolution of Primitive Communism: From the Ancient Germans and the Incas to India, Russia, and Southern Africa....' Let me say at the start that Luxemburg's examples and arguments were limited by the source material available to her and by contemporary scholarship. Some of the positions she took can now be seen to be of their times, and have been overtaken and are no longer tenable. But this does not apply to her starting point – the necessary interaction of non-capitalist systems with capitalist ones and the significance of this relationship to the structural demands of capitalist accumulation – or to her protest at the social, economic and moral consequences of those who suffered as result of this relationship. The stance that she took, theoretical, historical, and practical, was rare in her times, and remains sufficiently unusual in our times, to make her work theoretically pertinent and historically significant.

Luxemburg begins with a description of 'the mark community that has been researched thoroughly in terms of its internal structures, the German one'.<sup>5</sup> Clans were made up of peoples living in households to which were allocated a particular tract of arable land. Historical research suggested this system itself had evolved from an earlier one where land had been cultivated collectively, but this had been replaced by the annual allocation of agricultural land to the male in charge of the household. Mark members elected the head of the mark community and he was bound by its decisions. Resources – water and forests and grazing – were held in common; land not occupied and worked was lost, and there was a range of communal labour obligations, including resource and livestock management.

In time the annual allocation of arable land became less frequent, moving in time towards a system of inheritance. But although there were great variations over space and in time, Luxemburg argued that the essential features of this form of pre-capitalist organisation could still be discerned. Initially, the collective, communal elements were predominant. Land was distributed and re-distributed on a regular basis, political leaders were chosen for limited period, all practices which worked against the emergence of elites. But just as these communal elements sprang from conditions in which the mark emerged, so also did elements which moved away from communalism. Thus the length of the land allocation period was increased, evolving eventually into the inheritance of rights to agricultural land. The democratically elected mark leadership became a hereditary post. The low level of development of productive forces, meant that aggression in lean times created the need for military specialisation and this worked against communalism.

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<sup>5</sup> *Reader*, 71

Despite such changes, and the wide variations under different conditions, Luxemburg believed that the basic features of the mark could be discerned in many epochs and all parts of the world. Her starting point was based on contemporary understandings of the Ancient Germans. But Inca society demonstrated the possibility of the co-existence of two forms of mark, dominant and dominated, in a single formation. Her Indian example was derived from the 'Asiatic mode', where village structures and production persisted as conquerors imposed their different forms of state exploitation. Luxemburg writes vividly of the cruelty in the remnants Russian village commune after the emancipation of the serfs and the consequences of exploitation through taxation.

The southern African example is drawn from the writings of the Portuguese traveller Gamitto and his description of societies on the borders of present day Zambia and the DRC as they were in 1830-1. He concentrates on the Mwata Kazembe – a patriarchal conquering dynasty from the Lunda which established itself over the matriarchal cultivators and fishers in the Lualanda valley where it enters Lake Mweru. The lengthy extract she reproduces is a typical nineteenth century traveller's account of barbaric and savage despotism: a ruler dressed in exotic cloth and jewels, a court decorated with animal skins and human skulls, and a people bearing the marks of despotism on their mutilated bodies.

The account is important as a historical source, but obviously very limited and Luxemburg's critical comment is interesting. Although she doesn't develop the idea she is intensely aware of the limitations of the observer, trapped by his bourgeois Eurocentrism:

This is a picture of a society that has moved a long way from the original foundations of every primitive community, from equality and democracy. It should not, however, be a foregone conclusion that under this kind of political despotism, the relations of the mark community, the communal ownership of the land and soil, and communally organized labor, ceased to exist. As for the Portuguese, who are able to record exactly the superficial rubbish such as costume and courtesans, when it comes to things that run counter to the European system of private ownership, they have, just as all Europeans, no eyes, no interest, no frame of reference.<sup>6</sup>

In another example of the of cultural blindness she refers to an English traveller's account<sup>7</sup> of the grotesque behaviour of an African chief as

In fact a much less absurd and insanely comical phenomenon than the rule of a person 'by the grace of God' over sixty-seven million members of a people who produced the likes of Kant, Helmholtz, and Goethe. And yet even the worst enemy of this ruler could not call him a magician.<sup>8</sup>

'Primitive communist society,' she continues,

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<sup>6</sup> *Reader*, 108

<sup>7</sup> V. L. Cameron, *Across Africa*, London, Daldy, Isbister & Co., 1877, II ,22.

<sup>8</sup> *Reader*, 103

through its own internal development, leads to the formation of inequality and despotism. It has not yet disappeared; on the contrary, it can persist for many thousands of years under these tribal conditions. Such societies, however, sooner or later succumb to a foreign occupation and then undergo a more or less wide-ranging social reorganization.

The Arab influence on the east coast of Africa, slavery, its role in the development of despotism in the interior, the European age of discovery with its intensification of trade in human beings, all brought further radical change to primitive communalism. But no matter how radical, this was only change – it was European capitalism that terminated ‘primitive social relations’.

The European conquerors are the first who are not merely after subjugation and economic exploitation, but the means of production itself, by ripping the land from underneath the feet of the native population. In this way, European capitalism deprives the primitive social order of its foundation. What emerges is something worse than all oppression and exploitation, total anarchy and a specifically European phenomenon, the uncertainty of social existence. .... Before the advance of capitalism, the primitive social order, which outlasted all previous historical phases, capitulates. Its last remnants are eradicated from the earth and its elements – labor power and means of production – are absorbed by capitalism. The early communist society thus fell everywhere – primarily because it was made obsolete by economic progress – in order to make room for prospects for development.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 The Accumulation of Capital

Luxemburg’s best known theoretical work *The Accumulation of Capital. A Contribution to an Explanation of Imperialism*, published in German in 1913<sup>10</sup> begins with a lengthy and taxing criticism of Marx’s theory of expanded reproduction, which underpins Luxemburg’s theory of imperialism. The argument about the structural contradictions in Marx’s exposition on the nature of expanded reproduction is lengthy, technical and has been criticised, but the conclusion is that capitalism is structurally unable to absorb the surplus value it creates and this leads to excess product and consequent crises of accumulation. From this theoretical position she develops her more accessible historical one: that

Whatever the theoretical aspects, the accumulation of capital, as an historical process, depends in every respect upon non-capitalist social strata and forms of social organization.<sup>11</sup>

Capitalist systems of production and reproduction originated in, developed from, and have always utilised non-capitalist systems as sources of labour, materials for production and as markets to absorb surplus value. The nature of this

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<sup>9</sup> *Reader*, 110.

<sup>10</sup> According to *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader* the original 1913 German edition had this subtitle. It does not appear however on the title page of the 1968 Monthly Review translated edition.

<sup>11</sup> This is from the *Reader*, 60, but is a succinct version of the ideas expressed in Chapter XXVII of *Accumulation*.

relationship depended on the nature of the non-capitalist economy. To the natural economy, in whatever form it appeared, there is only one form of response – its exploitation leading to its destruction. There are no features which capitalist production can utilize in a natural economy: in order to gain possession of its means of production – the land – and its labour – and as a market for its goods, the natural economy has to be terminated. This happened in the era of primitive accumulation as feudal forms were undermined and transformed. And it was happening at the time Luxemburg was writing by means of ‘modern colonial policy’. There was no question, in the age of imperialism, of waiting for market forces to bring about the changes capital required.

Each new colonial expansion is accompanied, as a matter of course, by a relentless battle of capital against the social and economic ties of the natives, who are also forcibly robbed of their means of production and labour power. .... Force is the only solution open to capital; the accumulation of capital, seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only at its genesis, but further on down to the present day. From the point of view of the primitive societies involved, it is a matter of life or death; for them there can be no other attitude than opposition and fight to the finish – complete exhaustion and extinction. Hence permanent occupation of the colonies by the military,<sup>12</sup> native risings and punitive expeditions are the order of the day for any colonial regime.

The violent search for such systems amongst competing capitalist nations leads not only to militarism and dangerous international rivalry, but eventually to the destruction of the non-capitalist systems, and therefore, logically, the capitalist system itself which needs the non-capitalist system in order to survive.

Luxemburg’s concentration on the impact of imperialism on the conquered, rather than on the conquerors, and her progress from the theoretical, to the historical, to the rhetorical, a century ago, is memorable and significant. And although firm in her broad generalisation – the necessary termination of non-capitalist modes by capitalist ones – it is interesting to see in the specific case studies of colonial conquest, her ability to look at their variations and specificities. She uses the French in Algeria – an eighty-year struggle over the appropriation of land. As her example of the opening of closed economies by European capital she takes the example of the Opium wars. For the destruction of self-sufficient rural industry and the small farmer she looks to the United States and the onslaught of large-scale mechanization and big capital.

She then turns to South Africa and finds certain parallels with north America – the Boers the South African can be compared to the American small farmer, but in this case pitted against, not the capital intensive, highly mechanized, agricultural producers, but British tendency for expansion:

Both competitors had precisely the same aim: to subject expel or destroy the coloured peoples, to appropriate their land and press them into service by the abolition of their social organizations. Only their methods were fundamentally different.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Accumulation*, 370-1.

<sup>13</sup> *Accumulation*, 412

After the mineral revolution, mining capital and the Boer farmer came in to conflict over African land and labour until, but by the end of the nineteenth century,

Mining capital had come to the end of its tether. The BSAC built railroads, put down the Kaffirs, organised revolts of the uitlanders and finally provoked the Boer War. The bell had tolled for peasant economy. In the United States, the economic revolution had begun with a war, in South Africa war put the period to this chapter. Yet in both instances, the outcome was the same: capital triumphed over the small peasant economy which had in its turn come into being on the ruins of natural economy, represented by the natives' primitive organizations. The domination of capital was a foregone conclusion, and it was just as hopeless for the Boer Republics to resist as it had been for the American farmer. Capital officially took over the reins in the new South African Union which replaced the small peasant republics by a great modern state, as envisaged by Cecil Rhodes' imperialist program. The new conflict between capital and labor had superseded the old one between British and Dutch. One million white exploiters of both nations sealed their touching fraternal alliance within the Union with the civil and political disfranchisement of colored workers. .... And this noble work, culminating under the imperial policy of the Conservatives in open oppression, was actually to be finished by the Liberal Party itself, amid frenzied applause from the 'liberal cretins of Europe' who with sentimental pride took as proof of the still continuing creative vigor and greatness of English liberalism the fact that Britain had granted complete self-government and freedom to a handful of whites in South Africa.<sup>14</sup>

Certainly there are misunderstandings in the text, the terms and definitions are at times archaic – many historians would complain about the contours of her argument – but for this historian these would be quibbles. Given the context in which was written, and the limitations of her source material,<sup>15</sup> the fundamental structure of the argument remains, after a century, remarkable, robust and provocative.

It is also I believe still capable of further development and this is what I want to attempt in the rest of this essay, taking a few of the fundamental ideas and examining them critically, in the light of some other radical interpretations of South African history.

#### 4 'hybrid forms'

The pervasive theme of Luxemburg's historical analysis is the contradiction within capital which demands at all stages of its historical development access to the means of production and the labour power of non-capitalist modes of production. Capitalism must interact with non-capitalist modes at all stages of its history. In 1970 Harold Wolpe wrote an a significant article, much of it in

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<sup>14</sup> *Accumulation*, 415-6

<sup>15</sup> Limited, but not unintelligent or uninteresting to this day. For James Bryce's *Impressions of South Africa*, see below. C.P. Lucas was an important figure in the Colonial Office for many years and used the most recent official sources in his *A Historical Geography of the British Colonies* ii, v. (Geography of South and East Africa) Oxford 1904.

response to an earlier article by Martin Legassick, which theorised the nature of capitalist development in South Africa and linked this with the shift in South African history from the policy of segregation to that of apartheid. Influenced by the Marxist structuralism of the time Wolpe made use of the concept of the 'articulation of modes of production'. The South African capitalist mode of production worked in articulation with African pre-capitalist modes, through the migrant labour system. The wars of conquest of the nineteenth century never completely alienated the indigenous people from their land. Some African iron-using farming peoples were driven back beyond the frontier, but a significant proportion of others were incorporated within colonial boundaries where they retained access to the land as the means of production. This African occupied land was now characterised as native 'reserve' or some such term, where 'communal land rights' were dispensed by 'traditional or chiefly authority', applying 'customary law'.

Necessity became a virtue after the mining revolution and the conquest of the Boer republics, when the migrant labour system was developed by the mining industry and the South African state. Male African labour moved to the industrialised areas to work on contract for limited periods. When not working, or no longer able to work, they were sustained by the agricultural labour of their families in the rural areas. In this way capital was able to create a disciplined ultra-exploited labour force, the rate of profit sustained by the fact that the wage did not have to carry the costs of reproduction. But it was impossible for this to continue indefinitely. From the start the system had depended upon the fact that there was never sufficient land for a viable non-capitalist system to operate indefinitely, and as the twentieth century progressed so the process of articulation became less and less viable. After the second world war, state intervention became necessary in order to sustain the cheap racialised labour system. The articulation of two modes of production was replaced by a capitalist one which sought to dominate, control, and effectively exploit labour by means of a system of racial discrimination at all levels, according to the tenets of the ideology of apartheid.<sup>16</sup>

Despite its detractors at the time, and its more recent sidelining as an example of a now redundant structural Marxism, Wolpe's ideas were influential and remain a challenging attempt to explain historical events outside the dominant racial paradigm. They are also in harmony with Luxemburg's ideas on the continual, necessary, interaction of the capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production.

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<sup>16</sup> Harold Wolpe, 'Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa: from segregation to apartheid', in the useful collection of republished papers in *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (eds W Beinart and S Dubow), London and New York, Routledge, 1995.

Although of course Luxemburg was not able to theorise the link between pre- and capitalist modes in South Africa as a developed system,<sup>17</sup> there is evidence that suggests that the empirical experience of aspects of what was to be characterised as articulation, did capture her attention. She called it 'a hybrid form':

Obtaining the necessary labour power from non-capitalist societies, the so-called 'labour problem,' is ever more important for capital in the colonies. All possible methods of 'gentle compulsion' are applied to solving this problem, to transfer labor from former social systems to the command of capital. This endeavor leads to the most peculiar combinations between the modern wage system and primitive authority in the colonial countries.<sup>18</sup>

To substantiate 'the fact that capitalist production cannot manage without labour power from other social organizations' she quotes at length (in a footnote) from the account that the English Liberal, academic, and historian, James Bryce, wrote of his visit to South Africa in 1895.<sup>19</sup> It is significant that what caught her attention was Bryce's description of the De Beers closed compound at Kimberley, and the manner in which the enormous variety of African workers from all over southern and central Africa, – 'a living ethnological collection such as can be examined nowhere else in South Africa' is Bryce's description' – were confined and controlled by this particular form of capitalist production. She also notes the essential dynamic of labour migrancy, a vivid example of capital interacting with pre-capitalist system – the wages earned on the mines were invested in bridewealth and non-capitalist production at home.<sup>20</sup> Luxemburg was therefore able to identify the salient manifestations of the essence of the labour process which in its different forms defined and determined the outline of South African history in the twentieth century. And in so doing she became one of the distinguished community of Marxist scholars who have done so much to enlighten South African historiography by removing it from the domination of the dualism of the liberal empiricists with 'no eyes, no interest, and no frame of reference'.

### **5 people as the aim of production**

Having said this I want to end with a critique of two, related, concepts and descriptions used by Luxemburg and Wolpe – the manner in which they describe the productive system which preceded commodity producing societies. When Luxemburg refers to the most fundamental form of human social organisation, where private property, the division of labour, hierarchical structures and

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<sup>17</sup> I have not yet been able to reconcile her view that colonial expansion 'ripped' the land from beneath the conquered, and the evidence she presents of a slower, less obvious process of domination – the methods of 'gentle compulsion' creating 'hybrid forms'. Further investigation of these apparently contradictory position would need to take into account the debate on primitive accumulation referred to in n.4 above.

<sup>18</sup> *Accumulation*, 363.

<sup>19</sup> James Bryce, *Impressions of South Africa*, 248-51, London: Macmillan, 1898

<sup>20</sup> *Accumulation*, 364 n.



commodity production are least developed, she tends to use the phrase 'natural economy'. It is however a concept which can no longer be considered tenable, if for no other reason than the achievements of anthropology and feminist theory. Wolpe of course was not tempted by the idea of a natural economy, but his descriptions of the South African pre-capitalist mode is nonetheless undeveloped: land is held in common, and kinship organises labour and the distribution of the product; it is characterised as 'redistributive'. This is not only limited but misleading and it was Belinda Bozzoli who mounted perhaps the most effective critique – using a feminist perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Although not feeling it necessary to draw directly on Wolpe's use of 'articulation of modes' – my study of Zulu history in particular persuaded me that there were significant aspects of the structure of African farming societies – that is of the pre-capitalist modes of production which were articulated with the capitalist mode and changed by it – which should be brought into the debate. In brief, I argued that so long as it was understood that they referred to a non-capitalist context a number of conventional Marxist categories could be usefully applied to pre-capitalist African modes of production.<sup>22</sup> These were societies organised around the production and accumulation, not of material goods as commodities, but of labour power as a commodity, as people. The productive process was controlled and organised by men, but realised by the agriculturally productive, and the reproductive, capacity of women. Reproductive, that is fertile, women had value against cattle and when they passed from their fathers, to their husbands in marriage, and once they were proved to be fertile and productive, cattle passed from husbands to fathers. Production and reproduction took place in aggregations of the largely self-sufficient, polygamous patriarchal homesteads which made up the pre-capitalist state. Political status and social power depended on the number of cattle/people/labour power a male homestead-head possessed and controlled. The largest homesteads were those of the head of state who also had authority over all the homesteads which made up the polity. He was also in nominal control of the land but was obliged to allow the use of that land to those men who gave him their allegiance. In return these men were required to give a tribute and labour to the head of the state – most intensely when they were young and unmarried, ie before they, at a much lower level of course, assumed control of homestead production and the accumulation of labour themselves. This particular social feature was common in southern Africa, but developed to an extreme by the Zulu heads of state who organised all young men into age-sets which laboured for the king and served in the state army. This 'military system' gave the king immense control over all aspects of production because it was only when he gave a particular age-set permission to marry – that the men could set up productive units (homesteads) of their own, and initiate the process of production, reproduction and accumulation upon which the system was based.

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<sup>21</sup> Belinda Bozzoli 'Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies', in *Segregation and Apartheid*.

<sup>22</sup> Jeff Guy, 'Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies', *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945*, (ed. Cheryl Walker), Cape Town: David Philip, 1990,

The essential point to be made is that these were not societies based on commodity production – or at least commodities as goods, although of course simple commodity exchange between largely self sufficient homesteads was a feature of economic life. These were societies based on the reproduction of people and their equivalents realised largely in cattle – or more concisely on the accumulation of labour power by men. They were, to paraphrase Marx, societies ‘in which man was the aim of production, not production the aim of man.’<sup>23</sup>

There are two linked points I want to draw from this. First about terminology. This was certainly not a natural economy. Men had a right to arable land, and had to allocate portions of this to their wives. Agricultural produce was retained not only within the homestead, but within the different houses which made up the homestead. The crucial role played by reproductive capacity gave women, I believe, considerable social power, the nature of which has still be understood. But political authority, based on patriarchy, descent, and age was fierce and exercised at all levels in the social formation.

In those cases where colonial forces were unable or unwilling to smash pre-capitalist societies, the impact of capital fractured these social structures along the fault lines created by patriarchy, age and gender. In those cases when land was conquered as private property various forms of tenancy were set up by which the land owner gave the homestead-head access to land, in return for the labour or the produce – of his wives and children. When the colonial state set aside tracts of land for African occupation, co-operation was sought from a willing member of the patriarchal hierarchy who was set up as a chief. In the mid-nineteenth century, Natal was organised on this basis. Agreements were reached between colonial officials and selected African men, usually but not always from the existing political hierarchy, who were given a degree of political and legislative autonomy and access to land in order to attract followers. I have described the system elsewhere as an ‘accommodation of patriarchs’. Fifty years later a similar system was set up in Zululand – once the British army had destroyed the powerful, centralised hierarchy.

In these colonial systems the household depended on the domestic labour of women and girls, herding by boys, and agricultural labour of women. Surplus was extracted by a system of taxation linked directly to the productive capacity of the homestead. Called the hut tax it was based in fact on female labour. Additional and increasingly necessary income was earned as wages in the settler economy by young men and returned to the homestead patriarch. In time the young man would be rewarded when the father divided the homestead amongst his sons, who would set up homesteads of their own, using the bridewealth devolved on them by their father.

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<sup>23</sup> *Karl Marx: Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations* (translated by Jack Cohen and edited by E.J.Hobsbawm), New York: International Publishers, 1965, 84.

The features shared by the pre-colonial and the colonial system are clear: patriarchal authority, the gendered division of labour, agricultural production to sustain the homestead, the unmarried sons of the homestead working for the dominant state, with the hut tax as a novel but economically logical feature. It was characterised as an African system adapted to the demands of colonial rule. This at least was how it was defended ideologically, as 'the Shepstone system, or 'indirect rule'. It was a system of the articulation of modes of production as Wolpe has it, or for Luxemburg another example of the necessity for capitalism to develop in association with non-capitalist productive systems, in this case one of the 'peculiar combinations between the modern wage system and primitive authority in the colonial countries'.

For Luxemburg, writing about a wide range of social formations, at the height of the imperialist era and just before the catastrophe of the first world war, this continued and destructive interaction of the capitalist and non-capitalist system was a necessary consequence of their economic structures. Wolpe, writing in the late twentieth on just one social formation was able to analyse the South African example not just a 'system', but as a process, a contradictory, a dynamic and self-destructive one. In South Africa there had never been enough land for the general reproduction of the pre-capitalist mode, wages earned in capitalist sector were never generally sufficient, young men did necessarily return to their fathers' homesteads, and some women refused the role of rural reproducers, and the authority of the chiefs was often ignored. Such trends intensified with the consequences of capitalist production, and the late nineteenth-century mining revolution with its demands for enormous quantities cheap labour, and increasing pressure on land and rentals. Wolpe suggests that the pre-capitalist mode, defended by the segregationist ideology but undermined and weakened by poverty and exploitation, lasted perhaps to the 1930s, to be replaced by a system of direct labour oppression, ideologically justified by apartheid which attempted to revive collapsed labour reserves now characterised as the reclaimed legacy of an autonomous African past.

But if we are to identify more precisely the passing of the pre-capitalist mode we have to answer another set of questions more clearly: what factors define the pre-capitalist mode? These need to be decided before we can speculate on when they ceased to exist.

At one level it might be argued that this evidence is widely available in the sources. It exists in the numerous documents in which African patriarchs protest at the changes colonialism has wrought on their lives – at the shortage or the loss of land, at the erosion of their authority, at the decimation of their herds, at the loss of their sons who have not returned from the mines, at the disobedience of their daughters. Statements on these themes are ubiquitous, and can to a degree be confirmed by statistical evidence. But while such evidence is indicative, it is not in my opinion decisive: it is too subjective, too specific, insufficiently precise. Time and again we read of the disappearance of the

traditional homestead, even the homestead system of production, only to find it reappearing in the records, to be destroyed against one two or three generations later. The 19<sup>th</sup> century commissions are filled with the complaints of fathers that their sons and daughters have disappeared or are disobedient, turning their backs on the homestead and their obligations to their kin – as are this week's television reports and newspapers.

We need a more precise indicator of the termination of the pre-capitalist mode than the assumed destruction of the homestead and the alleged behaviour of its inmates. And I want to suggest that this might be found when the production in the homestead was no longer directed to the production and accumulation of labour power, but the production and accumulation of material commodities.

To take a hypothetical example although I do have a historical personality in mind. Consider a Zulu chief, a wealthy man at the time of the kingdom's independence, with a number of very large homesteads, dozens of wives, and considerable herds of cattle, and followers numbered in thousands. His homesteads lay on a well-known trading route and all his life he has been involved in trade, exchanging his livestock for a range of commodities, including guns, and he became deeply involved in the colonial economy through his contacts with hunters, travellers and traders. But despite the apparent changes, in his productive activities and transactions, in the goods in his homesteads, he organised his chieftdom around the accumulation and production of labour power – the women in his homesteads and the herds attached to his homesteads, the young men serving in state army until given permission to establish their own homesteads.

After the 1879 conquest this chief retained his land, and actively supported the colonial regime. He and his people paid the hut tax out of surpluses acquired from trading and the wages of the young men now going in increasing numbers to the mines. Money was used increasingly in their different transactions, and the goods brought back from the urban centres began to change diet and dress, fundamental patterns of behaviour. Even bridewealth began to be paid in cash or goods. Nonetheless, despite these changes to apparently significant features of social and economic life, the objectives of both rulers and ruled, remained centred on the establishment of new homesteads on marriage, the exchange of goods between men for the productive and reproductive capacities of women. The pre-capitalist mode prevailed.

The chief was a traditionalist, but a life time's close dealing with traders had made him a good judge of men. A local store-keeper persuaded him, in this time of catastrophic livestock pandemics, to sell an increased portion of his animals, rather than invest it as bridewealth, in his own homesteads, or in the homesteads of his sons. It was good advice, and the chief's savings-bank and loan book, meant that he retained his wealth when rinderpest and then east coast fever decimated the herds of Zulu cattle at the turn of the century. He continued to

build homesteads, establishing in them young women he married through the payment of bridewealth in cattle, cash or in goods. He expected the same from the husbands and father's of the men who married his daughters. At one level the dynamic of the pre-capitalist mode continued: patriarchal authority, the gendered division of labour, payment of bridewealth in order to establish the homestead. But other aspects were changing. Increasing population exacerbated the shortage of land: an increasing number of his followers had insufficient land on which to maintain themselves and their families: generalised poverty increased as viable homesteads took on responsibilities for destitute kin: it was difficult to retain control of the wages of the young men working as migrants on the mines or the young women who fled rural poverty for city life. All these factors suggested that the pre-capitalist system was under severe strain and was changing. Nonetheless patriarchal authority, polygamy, the payment of bridewealth, kinship obligations, with associated customs and traditions remained and were practiced and defended vigorously by the chief.

But he was, in fact, no longer working within a pre-capitalist mode. The bulk of the income on which he depended was earned from the interest on the loans taken by the traders who bought his cattle, the savings in the bank book kept by the storekeeper, the sale of the agricultural produce of his wives, and the wages (decreasing in value) of his children. Even his people, while they still owned some cattle, and used them as bridewealth, were dependent on wages (low) and the sale of agricultural produce (limited). Despite the continued existence of social and cultural practices from the pre-capitalist era, the defining pre-capitalist circuit of women and cattle realised as labour power had been broken and inverted: people were no longer the aim of production: people produced commodities.

## 6. In Conclusion

I have revisited aspects of South African historical theorising, not only to give some idea of the remarkable and largely ignored contribution of Rosa Luxemburg, but also to make some comments on historical chronology. Neither Luxemburg nor Wolpe are clear on just what constitutes the pre-capitalist mode. For Luxemburg it includes the natural economy, primitive communism and simple commodity production, and the dissolution, but not the termination, of such systems under the impact of capital. Wolpe is vague on this question: the termination of the pre-capitalist mode is associated with declining rural reserve production and the termination of redistribution, some time in the 1930s. I suggest above that, to decide when the pre-capitalist mode came to an end, little assistance is to be obtained from indicators of poverty, collapsing rural production, or the disappearance of customs and practices considered to be traditional, any more than the converse suggests the opposite. Instead one has to look for evidence within the circuit of production to discover whether labour power, or commodities, are being accumulated.

But why is this a fact of any significance? Why is it important to be able to identify the cessation of the pre-capitalist mode of production? One reason would be that such a discussion could, by looking at the South African example, make a contribution to the debate around the nature of primitive accumulation. However I have not pursued this question in this paper. Instead I want to consider its possible contribution to the urgent contemporary debate and struggle, around the concept of Africa and African. Wolpe stated that one of the aims of his article on the articulation of modes of production was to direct analyses of South Africa away from racial explanations. The assertion of race has returned however with a vengeance. Cultural, political and intellectual life in South Africa today is replete with ideas of Africa and being African. It is used to sell the 'African experience' in its manifold forms, with all the distortions required by the privileged consumer such as the international tourist. It is used to explain, and even justify, socially unacceptable behaviour, sexist behaviour especially. And it is used to gain access to public funds in support of undemocratic political positions on the grounds that they reflect African tradition. Argument time and again comes up against the concept 'African', which too often constitutes a barrier to further debate: it is understood only by those who define themselves as African and therefore beyond external criticism. One purpose in writing this paper has been to suggest that if we can get a clearer theoretical idea of what the essential features were of the pre-capitalist mode of production in southern Africa, which (arguably it is true) does indicate an African concept (spatially), comparatively free of external influence, then we might find a way to move the argument forward by continuing to use economic (more objective), rather than racial or ethnic, categories.

Let me say immediately that the point I am making here is a pragmatic one. I personally do not believe that the search for an African essence is necessary or even achievable. But, as educators, we are not being effective when we use irrelevance against arguments which posit an essential Africaness. The argument can be presented with sincerely felt commitment – but at the same time there are administrators, advertisers, journalists, celebrities, and politicians who promote and defend their activities on the grounds of their being African and in so doing exhibit an often sentimental, sometimes dangerous, racial and sexual chauvinism. Ways need to be found to stay in the debate (ie, not to be excluded on the grounds that we are un- or even anti- African) for many reasons, including the urgent need to counteract the ideology of globalization which, in the name of international liberalization and democracy, provokes and intensifies ethnic, racial and religious intolerance.

I said above that it was important to be able to argue within the realm of economic structures of production – this again is a pragmatic position used in order to clarify, not to suggest that social categories are unimportant. For of course, not only are social categories indispensable, but, in the southern Africa context, pre-capitalist features like chieftainship and patriarchy retain their dynamism to this day, precisely because aspects of the pre-capitalist mode were

not destroyed by capitalism, but retained and brought into articulation with the capitalist mode. But this is not to say they stayed the same. Despite the similarities of their outward features and thus the appearance of continuity (in for example, *ubukhosi*, chieftainship, *ubudoda*, manliness, *lobola*, bridewealth) the system in which they were originally manifested, and played a central structural role, has long been transformed. Pre-capitalist social practices outlasted the pre-capitalist mode of production: they played an important role in the period of articulation: they are active to this day as capitalist accumulation continues to wreak havoc on South Africans.

But while this continuity might be socially and politically central, it is structurally peripheral. It is a *remnant* of an African mode of production, a social system long gone: a mode of production in which value was created by the productive and reproductive power of women, and in which the aim of production was people. It was a system, I want to suggest, epitomised in a word which has achieved wide currency today: *ubuntu* – the importance of reciprocal relations between people, communal concern and responsibility for others, the significance of others for ourselves – a concept, I would suggest, with its origins in the southern African pre-capitalist mode of production whose unique feature was the creation of value through people. It is still used to evoke, if idealistically, an African sense of overriding social responsibility – by for example Desmond Tutu. But it has also been exploited – for example as a marketing tool, the Ubuntu Marketing Philosophy – a development which confirms the argument in this paper about the contradictory nature of history – in this case the continued existence of a humane concept in inhumane conditions. A better understanding, an historical understanding, of *ubuntu* for example, would enable it to be used, with intellectual honesty, in the creation of a better South Africa. But as long as it is used as a racial concept or an ethnic concept, with 'no eyes, no interest, no frame of reference', it must become, like the idea of tradition and custom itself, not an inspiration but a nightmare from the past, weighing on the brains of the living.