

## Book Notes

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*Labour and Gold in Fiji*, 'Atu Emberson-Bain. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994. xxiv, 270 pp., tables, maps, photographic essay

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*Labour and Gold in Fiji* is an illuminating examination of the impact of colonial capital upon indigenous labour in a small-island setting. Third world labour and the social and economic dislocations that accompany transnational capital's exploitation of third world economies have both received significant attention in the literature. Yet the debilitating effect of monopoly mining capital on small island states has not, to date, attracted the attention it so richly deserves. To that extent, Emberson-Bain's comprehensive social history of the evolution of monopoly gold capital in Fiji is ground breaking. The combined depth and breadth of the study are commendable given the very difficult and constrained environment in which much of Emberson-Bain's research took place.

While the book concentrates on the central theme of indigenous labour and gold capital in a mining town within a particular setting, it also throws new light on a number of parallel themes that advance our understanding of the colonial and post-colonial political economy more generally. Among these, the colonial state's connivance with mining capital in systematically undermining its own land policy while simultaneously employing its mining policies to alienate indigenous peoples from their most basic resource has profound contemporary significance. Indeed, contrived land alienation in the interest of colonial capital, around the turn of the century,

is the source of many land disputes in Fiji in the contemporary era, the Nasomo claim at Vatukoula for a share of the proceeds of the 'rock of gold' being only one of them.

At another level, this book highlights the specific political process through which industrial monopolies emerged in colonial settings. The emergence of a powerful monopoly in such a strategic sector as goldmining, on the back of favourable and centralised mining and administrative policies, advances an interesting account of the 'political' organisation of colonial capitalist production in Fiji.

*Labour and Gold in Fiji* outlines the unique ways in which indigenous labour was mobilised by a 'protective colonial state' via agents acting within an indigenous hierarchy. Combined with a racialised labour mobilisation, the unique ways of disciplining and regulating labour through not only 'chiefs' but also through a host of corporatist industrial relations legislation exemplify the diverse ways in which state, capital and labour relations are situated in such colonial settings. An account of this kind further illuminates the powerful continuities in such relations between the colonial and post-colonial era. The relevance of *Labour and Gold in Fiji* to understanding aspects of the wider process of underdevelopment in the third world more generally is very obvious.

Emberson-Bain's account of the social history of life in a mining town—depicting it as characterised not only by a heavily exploited indigenous workforce but a social setting that resembled the most excessive and offensive elements of South African apartheid—is a damning exposé of the workings of the colonial state that publicly postured as the guarantor of indigenous Fijian interests. Her account documents a disturbing array of problems, which remain unaddressed: health and safety violations leading to deaths, an unacceptable housing situation, serious health concerns, and persistent economic and social deprivations and attendant fall-outs associated with a marginalised and unorganised working class. In the 1990s, this catalogue is a powerful indictment of even the post-1987 government, which ostensibly has come to power on account of its commitment to protecting and enhancing the rights and interests of indigenous Fijians.

The depressing narratives aside, this social and labour history also celebrates the remarkable resilience and courage of an industrial working class staking its legitimate claims in the face of open company hostility to any form of worker organisation, restrictive industrial relations laws and the difficulties of industrial struggle in an ethnically stratified workforce. In spite of such difficulties, Emberson-Bain argues that the perseverance and commitment of labour to changing the material and social circumstances in which it finds itself has been a persistent one. Major industrial conflicts in the post-1987 era suggest more generally that the contours that define state/society relations in a racist political set-up go deeper than race. *Labour and Gold in Fiji* thus rescues 'labour' as an active agent of change.

If the book has any serious shortcoming, it would really lie in the fact that its epilogue ('Of mining and military might') is rather too abridged an account of the turbulent issues confronting gold mining in the contemporary period (as Emberson-Bain herself would no doubt agree). Such a 'deficiency' is probably explained by the fact that the initial cut-off point for the study was 1970, but events between then and the publication date seemed to require—even demand—some comment. The military coups of 1987, which ended an alternative experiment in multiracial politics, in some ways may represent a break in post-colonial politics: in the longer term they may be interpretable as the post-independence chiefly oligarchy giving way to political leadership by a younger elite willing to stake a more independent claim to political power, and willing to engage more diverse patronage arrangements with national and international capital. In this interestingly altered matrix of post-colonial power relations, monopoly gold capital, in its relations with a reconstituted state, marks a sobering continuity in power relations in the transition from colonial to post-independence to the contemporary power relations in Fijian society. The fact that this thorough historical study was outstripped by the rapid turn of events does not, though, detract from the value of the book.