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At the Pompidou

Jeremy Harding

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‘The South African labour market,’ Charles van Onselen writes in *New Nineveh*, ‘has always been dominated by ... mining, agriculture and domestic service.’ Van Onselen’s two-volume history of ‘everyday life in the Witwatersrand’, a long ridge on the Highveld, explores the period from the mid-1880s when the discovery of gold propelled South Africa through a European-style industrial revolution compressed into twenty years. David Goldblatt (b.1930) began taking photographs in the gold-mining areas in his teens. Many of them, and the ones that followed, tell the story of South Africa’s labouring classes, predominantly black, in a world shaped by race laws and extractive industry. Others record the varying circumstances of Afrikaners, rich or poor, with or without pretensions to a ‘European’ lifestyle in the era of apartheid. This tremendous body of work is now on view at the Pompidou Centre (until 13 May). The show also includes more recent studies under the heading ‘structures of domination and democracy’: anything from wooden garbage-collectors’ carts and bleak miners’ hostels to churches and public monuments, built during and after apartheid.



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Goldblatt was born in the mining town of Randfontein in the Witwatersrand to left-wing Lithuanian Jewish parents; his mother was a typist and his father kept a men’s outfitting store. They lived in a landscape sculpted by mining and populated by miners. He remembers looking on with other children ‘as a team of twenty men moving as one,



Jeremy Harding is a contributing editor at the *LRB* and the author of *Mother Country*, a memoir, among other books.

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swung a steel railway line off the ground, into the air, caught it on their shoulders and then walked it, chanting, to its place'. By the time he turned to photography for a living in the 1960s, Johannesburg, the gold rush capital, had more than two million inhabitants; at least a quarter of a million black labourers and perhaps thirty thousand whites were employed in the mines, and South Africa was producing nearly half the world's gold. On the Rand, however, the industry had peaked.

On his early forays with a camera in the 1940s, Goldblatt had photographed miners, mine dumps and infrastructure to haunting effect. Even as the mines on the Rand were running down, he continued photographing workers on the job. Several of the photographs in the show, taken between 1945 and 1972, record feats of strength and endurance: a team of mine workers hauling on a rope at the minehead; a group of shaft-sinkers huddling on the platform of a cylindrical cutting rig as it is lowered, dislodging rock from the freshly cut side wall. But he was also fascinated by encroaching ruin. In 1966 he shot an apocalyptic view of a tailings dump glowing in the sunlight. (Tailings are the useless matter separated from valuable ore.) The dump, a man-made hill of waste, resembles a volcano hours after an eruption, with incandescent lava flowing evenly down one flank. In the foreground is the archaeological evidence of a rush to unimaginable riches: a huge, disused mill-chase in brick and sandstone blocks. In the middle ground is a tailings wheel, the size of a Ferris wheel, that once turned at all hours, dredging off waste as indigenous miners and migrants from elsewhere in southern Africa burrowed and died for ore.

In 1968, as more profitable mines were opening west and south of the Rand, a selection of Goldblatt's photos appeared in *Optima* magazine with an essay by Nadine Gordimer, 'A Time and Tailings'. Born in a mining town about 75 kilometres east of Randfontein, Gordimer described the mines as 'the black man's baptism by darkness and dust into Western civilisation'. Goldblatt's ambivalent tribute to a dying heartland and Gordimer's essay later appeared together as a book. In her updated essay she explained that the wage differential between white and black miners – twelve to one in 1911 – 'had increased to more than twenty to one by 1969'. She was revising her figures at a time when trade union membership for mine workers was still restricted to whites.

Goldblatt is an unerring portrait photographer, but he is also a master of absence, able to materialise the invisible subject by photographing the tools and spaces associated with labour, even when there is no worker in sight: a pile of miners' shovels or a black maidservant's quarters in a prosperous northern suburb, monastically tidy, with a flattened cardboard box for a mat and a copy of a newspaper announcing that the Apollo 11 mission is on its way back from the Moon. These powerful compositions, in which Goldblatt's subjects are invoked without appearing in the frame, are among the rare instances in which he catches people with their guard down. Most of his subjects are willing participants, invited to look the camera in the eye, or at least take note of its presence.

Two or three striking exceptions can be found in his studies of *Some Afrikaners*, made mostly in the 1960s. 'In my father's clothing shop in Randfontein,' he writes, 'I served many Afrikaners ... austere, upright, unaffected people ... Most, I surmised, were supporters of the National Party and its policy of apartheid. I had great difficulty in getting my head and heart around these contradictions.' The portraits here are led by the heart but charged with the knowledge that Afrikaners struggled for centuries to master the land, locked in conflict with rival communities, and went on to lose their armed struggle against British imperialism, at immense cost. A close-up portrait (1964) of an elderly man, Oom at Geel, who was born in the 1880s and fought the British in the South African War, captures the craggy defiance of the Boers. The triumph of the National Party in 1948 was the logical consequence of those hardships, but other photographs – especially of subjects in non-negotiated poses – suggest that apartheid was a botched paradise for poorer Afrikaner families, whether they were in a spartan kitchen trying to keep their tempers over lunch or relaxing among the jumbled remains of a picnic.

Farming of a marginal kind – often near subsistence levels – was the lot of some of Goldblatt's Afrikaners, but it was almost impossible for blacks to keep a stake in their traditional lands once the large-scale evictions that had driven so many of them off were formalised by the Natives Land Act of 1913. In 1980 Goldblatt accompanied two researchers from the African Studies Institute at Wits to a farmstead in Bophuthatswana, one of the artificial 'homelands', or Bantustans, created under apartheid to concentrate black populations. Goldblatt's companions were recording the memories of Kas Maine, a black farmer born in 1894 who had spent most of his adult life as a sharecropper on white-owned land, with more than one unscrupulous landlord, until in the 1970s he and his wife, with their cattle and maize seeds, wound up living on a meagre patch of land in a miserable Bantustan.

Kas Maine emerges in the photos as a stubborn figure who refused to give in to exploitation and dispossession, sleeping under a flimsy tin roof, surrounded by old farming machinery in constant need of repair and driving his cattle out to pasture. His destiny, late in life, was to become a key source for histories of peasant farming in the Transvaal, including van Onselen's *The Seed Is Mine: The Life of Kas Maine* (reviewed by R. W. Johnson in the *LRB* of 12 December 2006). In a caption for a shot of Maine

by R.W. Johnson in the LRB of 12 December 1997). In a caption for a shot of Maine and his wife sitting outside their shack, Goldblatt writes: 'She complained that he would not build her a house although he could afford to do so.' Maine was a patriarch, presiding over a domain of bare earth and corrugated metal.



Afrikaners family at lunch, 1962

Goldblatt was less forgiving of the white burghers of Boksburg, a small town east of Johannesburg, than he was of the hardier types included in *Some Afrikaners*. He also preferred the impromptu comings and goings of the big city to the mannered ways of a provincial backwater shaped, as he writes of Boksburg, 'by white dreams and proprieties', with its ballroom dancing, net curtains, ruched pelmets and monthly meetings of the Women's Zionist League. 'Blacks were not of this town,' he says. 'They served it, traded with it, received charity from it, and were ruled, rewarded and punished by its precepts.' We find a few of them standing with puzzled condescension among the audience at the semi-final of Boksburg's Miss Lovely Legs competition in 1980, as four young women in swimming costumes linger on the runway. This contest is for best whites-only legs.

Black South Africans are omnipresent in *The Transported of KwaNdebele*, a series of photographs that follow people on the move to and from work. Forbidden to stay in parts of South Africa where there were jobs, they commuted from KwaNdebele – another jobless, semi-carceral Bantustan – and back again, daily. 'To do this,' Goldblatt writes, 'some travelled up to eight hours per day, starting at 02.45 and getting home at 22.00.' A sequence of three chiaroscuro exposures made on a bus, between 7 and 9 p.m., shows people returning from work, slumped on metal seats and eventually succumbing to the fitful sleep that presages a few hours on a bed before the cycle is repeated.

The exhibition winds down with Goldblatt's reflections on the wave of university protests in South Africa in 2015 and 2016, from 'Rhodes must fall' to 'Fees must fall'. A subtle photographer despite the starkness of the world he depicted during the apartheid years, Goldblatt is not in a mood for nuance here. He is against the defacing or removal of statuary and the burning of images that cause symbolic offence. He records the dethroning of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town by telescopic crane, a patch of cold ash where twenty paintings and two photos were burned by UCT students, and two hooks on bare wooden panelling which held collage tributes to Molly Blackburn, an anti-apartheid activist killed in a car crash, before they too were removed by students and burned. Blackburn was a thorn in apartheid's side. Goldblatt's caption describes her as 'a hero of the struggle against apartheid'.

How much did representations of race have to do with the summary demotion of Molly Blackburn at UCT? Did the burnings stage a renewal of race hostilities, which the multiracial vanguard of the anti-apartheid struggle – the ANC, the Communist Party and militant Christianity – had done so much to dispel? As a personification of Western attitudes and policy decisions, 'white' has begun to look dangerous and unpredictable again: in military intervention in the Middle East (high non-white civilian death tolls, rendition and torture of non-whites); in the strength of anti-immigrant feeling in Europe and the US; in the police murders of African Americans and their disproportionate presence in US jails. None of this was foreseeable when Goldblatt photographed the members of the constitutional assembly in 1996, gathered outside the Senate House in Cape Town after they had adopted the new constitution: a rainbow moment from another age.

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