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Rooyard: A Sociological Survey of an Urban Native Slum Yard. By Ellen Hellmann. Capetown: Oxford University Press for the Rhodes-Livingston Institute, 1948. Pp. 125.

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During the moral turn of the social sciences around 2000, South Africa and its regime of apartheid became a test case. From quiet offices worldwide, scholars poured forth analyses filled with history, politics, apologetics, anachronism, utopianism, and racism in varying proportions and to varying ends. Magnanimity was rare. Our moralizing has since acquired more rigor and more humility. By adopting a disciplined framework for normative inquiry, sociology has moved beyond its surreptitious and uncritical politics without losing the capacity to make well-founded moral judgments. A fundamental rule of that framework is that our moral judgments must be contextual; we can expect of actors only what is possible within a reasonable zone of moral relevance around their time and place.

With that rule in mind, we turn here to a work from South Africa during its trying time. Ellen Hellman was born in Johannesburg in 1908, the child of recent Jewish immigrants from southern Germany. At the University of Witwatersrand, Hellmann studied social anthropology under Winifred Hoernlé, herself a student of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown in Capetown. After receiving an anthropology doctorate in 1940 with a dissertation entitled "Problems of Bantu Youth," Hellmann worked with the Joint Council of Europeans and Bantu. For most of her career, she was a core member of the South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR), of which she was president in the mid-1950s and whose Research Committee she chaired in the 1960s and 1970s. She also lectured at the Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work (for Africans) until the government forced its closing in 1960.

Active in politics, Hellman was in the Progressive Party from 1959 to 1971 and a member of the Black Sash, a woman's protest group that was eventually outlawed by the government. She also appeared before important government commissions—the most famous and fateful being the multiyear Tomlinson Commission on Native Reserves, which produced a 17-volume report in 1955. By the end of Hellmann's life, however, the emerging Black Consciousness movement and the radicalization of the African National Congress redefined her as almost a conservative. Some of her erstwhile allies thought that SAIRR had sold out to the capitalists who funded it. Her testimony before the controversial Cillie Commission, which investigated the Soweto Uprising of 1976, was her last major public appearance. She died in 1982.

All that lay ahead of the young woman of 25 who "in March 1933 . . .

*Another review from 2051 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

descended on Rooiyard, armed with a large box of penny-line chocolates and a note book" (p. 1). As this opening suggests, the book has both freshness and naïveté. It has ambition as well; a year's fieldwork and 125 pages of print were a lot of work for a master's degree. Yet only after Hellman had left academia was the book published. In 1948, her former classmate Max Gluckman, by then a leading anthropologist, persuaded her to publish the 1934 thesis in its original form. (Hellmann and Gluckman both felt that updating the manuscript would mar its precise and detailed description of a moment in time.) It was the first serious ethnographic study of the social life of newly urbanized Africans.

Rooiyard is the study of a privately owned slum property in New Doornfontein, close to the center of Johannesburg. The yard consisted of 107 "rooms" arranged in five long rows, four of them enclosing a long trapezoid, the other constituting a linear island in the middle of the enclosed space. The rooms were roughly 11 feet square. In these tiny spaces lived 235 adults and 141 children, each room typically housing a couple and their children. Most men worked as domestic servants and laborers outside the yard, while the women raised the children and brewed (illegal) native beer.

Physical conditions in Rooiyard were primitive. Family possessions and cooking implements filled the open spaces. Refuse overflowed in the unemptied central bins. Two water taps and six latrines (often broken) served the 376 residents. But the rooms seemed to Hellmann surprisingly well kept, and their furnishings as modern as finances permitted. There was little survival of the material culture of the kraal.

After her initial description, Hellmann gives a painstaking analysis of Rooiyard's economic life, with detailed budgets and employment surveys. Pride of place goes to a detailed analysis of women's income, and in particular of the beer trade that was its main source. (Hellmann actually had little access to the men, both because of her own gender and because most of them were not in the yard during the day, when she did her research.) Rooiyard women generally brewed a sprouted wheat beer of about 4% alcohol that took a minimum of 24 hours to produce, but the danger of police interference led some women to make faster-brewed cane, bread, or sugar-based beers. A woman was expected to produce beer for her own husband, as in the kraal, but her further (and paying) customers included her husband's friends as well as male servants employed in the white neighborhoods nearby. The beer business involved many calculated risks, as Hellmann points out:

Arrest is simply "bad luck." Detention in prison is often chosen when there is an alternative of imprisonment or fine, as many women, even when they possessed the money to pay a fine, preferred to save their money and serve a term of imprisonment. If prison food were better, it is very possible that a greater number of women would choose this alternative! Childless women and women whose children are in the country are not greatly perturbed by the prospect of imprisonment. It is to the mothers with children in Rooiyard

that arrest without the option of a fine or shortage of money to pay a fine comes as a real disaster (p. 47).

Women also undertook washing, mending, and illegal grocery and liquor sales, as well as an unknown but considerable amount of prostitution. Hellmann tells us that the women concealed each others' prostitution but sometimes betrayed rival beer producers to the police, who routinely raided the yard and destroyed any beer-in-process that they could find. (Beer was usually concealed underground.) Hellmann's careful figures allow one to calculate that the street value of this destroyed beer was about £2,000 annually, at a time when the average monthly wage of urban African workers was about £4. Destroyed beer, that is, was worth the annual income of about 40 laborers or slightly above one-third of Rooiyard's male workers.

From economic life, Hellmann turns to the life course of the individual. Most striking here is the steady back-and-forth between city and countryside. Many women delivered their children "at home," in the country, because it was cheaper, or healthier, or required by tribal custom. Many children spent much or all of their time with kin in the country. Even in the city, rural rules about seclusion and pollution were often maintained. And puberty brought explicit tribal rituals, with some sending their daughters to the country for initiation and some improvising initiation rituals in Rooiyard itself. This geographic binding of old and new was repeated a hundredfold in the mixture of old and new social and cultural practices, as Hellman saw in the case of marriage patterns. Of 100 couples Hellmann studied, only a fifth were not married. The 80% who were married generally had undertaken not one but several forms of marriage. Nearly all had the "native customary union" (because their families had exchanged the proper bridewealth.) But most had something more as well: a religious or civil marriage or both. Fully a third of Rooiyard's couples were married three ways: by traditional practice (since half the couples were intertribal these cannot be called "tribal" practices), by some Christian church (which were many, and hence we cannot say by "the" church), and by the state. The cultural content of these "marriages" itself varied widely. Bridewealth was sometimes cattle, sometimes cash. Church affiliations were sometimes changed, sometimes lapsed. ("How could they, the women asked, attend church when they had to sell beer? 'Here beer is our church,' they explained again and again"; p. 101.)

Hellmann's remarks about infancy and adolescence perhaps reveal more about newly fashionable psychoanalytic theories than about her subjects. She cannot but wonder at the "gentleness and gradualness of the Bantu child's training as compared with the severity in the bodily discipline of the European child" (p. 63), a difference from which she tentatively derives enduring personality differences. But in the end she is simply puzzled that "the Bantu seems to face a cruel and unfavorable reality more happily and with greater confidence than the European slum-dweller" (p. 64). Again echoing Freudian themes, her discussion of ado-

lescents mainly concerns their extensive sexual activity. But the section ends with the somewhat innocent remark—echoing plaintive progressives throughout Europe and North America—that “the greatest handicap from which maturing young boys and girls living in Rooiyard suffer is the lack of healthy recreational activities” (p. 79). Indeed, Hellmann notes that if girls walk back late from the center of town, they are vulnerable to “an attack by Amalaita groups,” the urban street gangs of the time. But this too captures a historical moment. After 2000, revisionist historiography would reinterpret these gangs as having been a positive and even political response to urbanization and proletarianization. One wonders what the girls thought about that in 1933.

Hellmann closes with chapters on religion and cultural contact. While most Rooiyard residents have some Christian background, those backgrounds are very diverse. (One notes the ominous fact that only one Rooiyarder has any connection with the Dutch Reformed [Afrikaner] Church.) But formal religion is largely disavowed: “When we come to town we find white people doing sins and our hearts tell us that the ministers told us lies. And so we leave the church. The white man’s church is good for the white man but his *amadlozi* don’t look after the natives” (p. 102). Hellmann finds, however, that not only Christian experiences but also the traditional religions have been uprooted, with the result that the Rooiyarders generally turn to magic to handle their everyday difficulties.

Hellmann sets aside much of the common wisdom of her time about tribes and tribalism. Countering the usual belief, she notes no tribal domination of particular occupations. She documents extensive intertribal contact and indeed intertribal marriage. She emphasizes the effect of white oppression and persecution (her words) in creating a common “Bantu” consciousness. “Native culture . . . is adopting elements of European culture, incorporating them into Native culture, and often modifying them so as to create a new composite culture” (p. 115).

Yet on the other hand, she tells us “[The native] feels his unity with the Bantu people as a whole; but he has not emancipated himself from the feeling of tribal superiority which has caused each tribe in turn to call itself ‘The People.’” And Hellmann notes also the intertribal fights and the mutual hostility of the various medicine men. More profoundly, she clearly knew that the tribes themselves were often historical re-creations and that this process of making and unmaking dated from time immemorial. One might speculate about pristine tribal culture in the Trobriands, but not in South Africa, where the 19th-century’s tribal conflicts, interminglings, and migrations (collectively called the *mfecane*) were well known.

The book closes with yet another migration, for Rooiyard was forced to close just as Hellmann finished her work. The residents scattered. An elite of about 15% went to the black freehold townships (places antedating the Native Land Act, where Africans could own property; with apartheid in the 1950s, all of these would be closed). About a quarter went to “the

locations,” fenced segregated rental spaces west of the city, which, although perhaps slightly more appetizing than Rooiyard, were so far outside the town as to be economically unviable. About 20% of the families split, the man typically remaining in the city while the woman and children returned to the kraal, while another 15% went back to the country as whole families. The remaining quarter moved either to other yards, to rented rooms, or to other cities.

Like many comparable works, *Rooiyard* survives because it makes a social setting come alive. It presents us not only its own interpretations but also enough of the facts to allow us to see around those interpretations. It is particularly strong on women’s activities, on the everyday experience of oppression, and on the complex economics of life at the margins of subsistence. In this, the book stands at the intersection of several important traditions. One such is the “slum analysis” tradition that began with Charles Booth, continued through the settlement and survey movements, and finally arrived—in depoliticized form—in the emerging discipline of metropolitan sociology. Another relevant tradition—which the book’s research helped begin—is the new urban anthropology subsequently developed throughout southern Africa, a line of work that eventually helped create urban anthropology in the metropolis. *Rooiyard* also stands in the important lineage of studies of migrant proletarian labor by scholars like W. I. Thomas and Chen Da.

But Hellmann’s work is perhaps even more intriguing because it provides an entry into the particularly complex evolution of social science in South Africa, a society moving against the liberal trend of the Western metropolis after the Second World War. Hellmann was not the only sociologist/anthropologist working in South Africa in these years. Other scholars (as well as many politicians) had called attention to a “poor white” problem in South Africa in the 1920s and an investigation of that problem directed by metropolitan sociologists had culminated in a massive Carnegie Commission report in 1932. This study resembled similar investigations in the metropolis, but with the very conspicuous difference that it completely ignored the largest local poor population—Africans. In 1934, a national *Volkskongres* considered the issue of poor whites (most of whom were in fact newly urbanized Afrikaners). A prominent figure at that conference was applied-psychologist-turned-sociologist Henrik Verwoerd.

In the next decade Afrikaner sociologists from a variety of political positions sketched the “positive” case for apartheid. (It would be anachronistic to say that they made a case for the particular race policies in place in South Africa after 1955. Rather, they were sketching practical policies that could give substance to what was—at least to them—then a loose and ill-defined concept.) In this task these Afrikaner sociologists were curiously aligned with earlier liberals, who had felt that the impact of urbanization and industrialization on South Africa’s African population had been so catastrophic as to require the creation of separate, economically viable homelands for Africans. They were also aligned, however,

with explicitly racist Afrikaner sociologists like Geoffrey Cronjé, whose popular works helped propel the acceptance of a radical and persecuting apartheid that was far indeed from the “positive” case made by the early liberals and some Afrikaners. (As many have pointed out, when ex-sociologist Verwoerd became prime minister he retained the ideological justification of this “theoretical” apartheid without retaining any of the investments and white sacrifices it prescribed.) The evolution and refining of biological and cultural racism through these various documents teaches us much, both about the polysemy of language and about the dynamics of oppression. A text such as the Tomlinson Commission Report of 1955 could at the time be read as liberal, nationalist, or flagrantly racist. *Rooiyard* stands at the beginning of this long and tortured evolution. It is part of the scholarship behind the liberal analysis of separation as articulated in the bleak Phelps-Stokes lectures of R. F. A. Hoernlé in 1939. Yet, in itself, it gives us little sense of the fateful debate then taking shape throughout South Africa.

But because of a fortunate accident, it does give us an utterly unique insight into the dialectic of dominant and dominated, researcher and researched. Partway through her research, Hellmann introduced an older psychoanalyst friend—Wulf Sachs—to her only important male informant. John Chavafambira was a hereditary healer from Rhodesia who had come to Johannesburg seeking escape from an oppressive family, better opportunities for income, and a chance to mature into an urban medicine man and herbalist. But what he had found was an unhappy intertribal marriage, erratic and alienating work experiences, and the thousand of indignities and oppressions that dominated African life in a society evolving toward extreme racism.

When Chavafambira’s wife became ill, Hellmann sought for her the best medical assistance. Sachs gave that assistance, but also became fascinated with Chavafambira. He psychoanalyzed the Manyika medicine-man-turned-urbanite and wrote up his analysis in the 1937 book *Black Hamlet*, with a follow up in 1947. The main body of Sachs’s text chronicles the wary encounter between these two medicine men, who were taking each other’s measure in the context of a system of overwhelming racial and cultural domination. But in the interstices, we hear much about Hellmann. We hear, for example, the details behind Chavafambira’s decision to support her research: he had been assured by a respected elder that Hellmann was not a police spy, but was simply studying Africans. By contrast, his initial impression of her had been “that rich young woman who comes here in her grand motor car and looks at you as if she didn’t see you properly. They say she is working for the police. . . . She asks questions all the time; silly questions about what we eat, how many children we have, what money we earn, and so on” (*Black Hamlet* p. 123). Sachs’s report of Rooiyard’s reaction to Hellmann goes on:

Soon the white woman was the constant topic of conversation. The residents agreed that she treated them kindly. But why did she question them? . . .

Why did she write down everything they said? . . . Who was she? Why did she come every day to a place such as [Rooiyard]? What was her business? Was she married? Had she children?

. . .
She herself tried to pacify them and was extremely kind to them, but obviously could not give them information about her private life. She tried to explain her aims, but this did not remove mistrust and suspicion. Unfortunately, too, police raids and the visits of health inspectors became more frequent at this time, and both unpleasantnesses were laid at her door. (P. 124)

Hellmann's own text blandly corroborates this report: "I was never really accepted in Rooiyard" (p. 2). We also learn from *Black Hamlet* that Chavafambira's decision to help Hellmann cost him dearly in terms of friendship in the yard. And we get the full story that Hellmann covers with the bald remark that "I made only one night visit" (p. 1). It turns out that Chavafambira rescued Sachs and Hellmann from a surreal and possibly dangerous moment, and we can see in the language of even the measured, thoughtful, antiracist Sachs both the tenseness of the moment and the fears of white South Africa:

A crowd of roughs, inflamed with *skookiaan*, came very close to her, touched her, swore at her in vile language, made sinister suggestions. Some of the women in the yard, now frightened for her safety and the terrible consequences for all of them should anything happen to the white woman, tried to form a protecting ring about her, but they were not strong enough. The roughs pulled them away. At this critical moment John appeared. (P. 143)

When read alongside *Black Hamlet*, then, *Rooiyard* provides a three-dimensional view of white and black, liberal and radical, European and African. It is a window into a time of vertiginous disagreement.

But ultimately *Rooiyard* stands alone for its simple, forthright portrait of a group of slum dwellers making human lives under conditions of poverty, suspicion, and oppression. They are a testimony to human resilience in adversity, and their witness is Hellmann's gift to us.