Jury report 2012

Thesis: Lahla Ngubu – The Continuities and Discontinuities of a Black South African Middle Class

Author: Nkululeko Mabandla

`This is a beautifully conceived and written historical thesis on an agrarian black middle class in one particular area of the Transkei', wrote one jury member in her opening comments. 'Beautiful!' is how another member of the jury concluded her comments. The jury reads carefully and critically all the theses that pass through their hands in the course of evaluating the many applications for the Africa Thesis Award. They then debate with passion their pleas for assessment and positioning of the applicants. In this year's last round none of that was necessary since all jury members were of the same glowing opinion on the thesis of Nkululeko Mabandla.

This is not to say that there were no other very worthwhile theses. The numbers two and three of this year's Africa Thesis Award also certainly deserve to be recommended with appreciation for their academic merit. Number two is the thesis of Judith Zoetelief, entitled 'Dragons in the Savannah, A Case Study of new Chinese migrants in Tamale, Ghana'. A thesis of high societal relevance. Thesis number three is written by Catherina Wilson, and is entitled 'The Congolese Yankee Language and Identity among Youth in Kisangani', a highly original piece of work. But as in every competition there can be only one winner, so let us take you back to the thesis of Nkululeko Mabandla.

The thesis, entitled 'Lahla Ngubu – The continuities and discontinuities of a black South African middle class', describes in much historical detail the formation of a landed middle class in Mthatha (or Umtata), the former Transkei, going as far back as three generations. The first generation is traced back to 1870, based on Sean Redding's 1987 PhD study. The thesis shows convincingly how land and property were crucial elements in the formation and reproduction of this middle class. This is a refreshingly new perspective on the middle class since many more conventional studies argue that a middle class in the Transkei emerged from families involved in the administration of the Bantustans and through education made it in the city. As this thesis is based on very sound empirical material, both through interviews and primary archival research, it substantiates very strongly its argument for the crucial importance of land for this middle class.

What is furthermore interesting to note in this context is that the general perception of what a middle class should look like is influenced by a focus on consumption patterns as indicators of class status in conventional studies. This leads for instance to the almost iconic portrayal of the new black middle class in South Africa in the popular press, as Nkululeko quotes Caroll (2004), as 'young and driving a BMW'. Here consumption is based on disposable income, but not on owning any means of production. This type of middle class is actually difficult to distinguish from what Marxists usually labelled as the 'proletariat': people with no ownership of the means of production and always subordinate to capital owning employers; a kind of proletarisation of the middle class. Taken together these two tendencies have led to a situation where studies on middle class formation and reproduction almost automatically focus on the *urban* middle class, based on their occupation in industry or government, and their *consumption patterns*. This has sometimes prevented academics from also looking at the *rural* middle class and their *property ownership*. Apart from this academic relevance, the thesis also relates to current policy discussions on land reform and land redistribution.

The jury wants to note that the thesis could perhaps have elaborated more on the particular political involvement and choices of this middle class. The jury wondered after reading the thesis how this middle class related, for instance, to the ANC and the PAC? This seems a particularly relevant question since, as Nkululeko himself mentions on page 38 of his thesis, economic and political powers did not necessarily overlap.

Solid empirical research, sound theoretical conceptualisation and a good analysis do not yet necessarily make a good piece of academic work; good academic work does not automatically 'produce' an exceptional thesis. It only turns into a winner if excellent analysis and research are also brought to us with matching writing skills. Nkululeko Mabandla offers these in abundance. All jury members, despite the fact that they have to read tens of theses in the course of the Africa Thesis Award procedure, were not only objectively convinced by Nkululeko's research, argument and analysis, but also subjectively seduced by his superior writing skills. We all agreed - Nkululeko Mabandla is the winner of the Africa Thesis Award 2012!