

BOOK REVIEW

Luke Sinwell with Siphwe Mbatha. *The Spirit of Marikana: The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. 208 pp. Postscript. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper. \$29.00. ISBN: 978-0745336534.

The name “Marikana” evokes an incident that resulted in the deaths of thirty-nine mine workers within the South African mining industry. The dispensability of a miner’s life was underscored by the events that took place at Marikana on August 16, 2012, where striking mine workers were slain or injured by security guards and South African Police. *The Spirit of Marikana: The Rise of Insurgent Trade Unionism in South Africa*, by Luke Sinwell with Siphwe Mbatha, provides us not only with an insight into the experience of being a miner in South Africa, using the case of Marikana as example, but also with knowledge of what the miners are doing to ameliorate the unbearable exploitation and oppression of their condition. Thus, typical of a bottom-up analysis of the agency of the often-overlooked history-makers, the authors provide the reader with a thick descriptive analysis of how the mine workers at Marikana mobilized their thinking capacities to project an insurgent politics within a highly prescriptive environment. With an artisanal accuracy on the events, chronology, figures, and characters that made insurgent politics possible within one of South Africa’s largest platinum mining sectors, *The Spirit of Marikana* stands as a rare concise history of trade unionism in South Africa.

In many instances, analyses of both the conditions and politics of mine workers in South Africa tend to focus on macro-events and macro-politics, thereby missing a critical understanding of how, on a daily basis, miners exercise their agency against the conditions under which they labor. In this way such analyses are prone to portraying mine workers as mere dupes of the structure—a development that leads to dehumanizing discourses about a group of people that is already suffering dehumanization by being subjected to exploitation. It is therefore worthwhile to highlight that *The Spirit of Marikana* reveals the often-sidelined human-ness of the miner as a subject who thinks by unmasking his/her consciousness. However, *The Spirit of Marikana*, like many other books whose main objective is to unmask the agency of the oppressed subject, suffers from being more descriptive than explanatory, especially on the subject of what makes the Marikana condition and its politics possible. Without a clear articulation of the broader

structural issues, it is difficult to judge whether the insurgent politics of mine workers is truly revolutionary in terms of producing a visibly diachronic effect on the very structure of oppression. Thus, the reader can be left with the questions: To what extent is the insurgent politics of the mine workers transformative of the condition under which they operate? And to what extent is it synchronic in terms of reproducing the same structure? Such questions are pertinent because the idea of agency cannot be fully accounted for simply in terms of documenting the activities that one does to address his/her situation, but also in terms of the effectiveness of those activities with regard to changing the structure of oppression. However, to fully account for the effectiveness of the agential activities, there is a need to account for the structure as well, since different structures require different efforts to change them. Thus, for instance, a prescriptive structure would require the observer to be sympathetic to an agency that fails to transform, it as it is highly resistant to change, while one cannot equally accord agency to a subject that fails to change a performative structure that is susceptible and vulnerable to transformation. While the authors of *The Spirit of Marikana* did not venture into the business of explaining the genesis of the Marikana situation, particularly within the project of modernity, the book remains a must-read for those who seek to understand the unfolding of the drama at Marikana. This book can serve as a primary source for further scholarly analyses and interpretations of what it means to be a mine worker in South Africa.

Robert Maseko

University of South Africa

Pretoria, South Africa

robmaseko@gmail.com

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For more reading on this subject, see:

Bakonzi, Agayo. 1982. "The Archives of the Gold Mines of Kilo-Moto." *History in Africa* 9: 355–58. doi:10.2307/3171617.

Mundy, Jacob. 2013. "'Wanton and Senseless' Revisited: The Study of Warfare in Civil Conflicts and the Historiography of the Algerian Massacres." *African Studies Review* 56 (3): 25–55. doi:10.1017/asr.2013.78.