‘Ontological Gap’ or Political Calculation? A Critique of the Tradition–Modernity Dichotomy in Mordechai Tamarkin’s *Volk and Flock*

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Volk and Flock: Ecology, Identity and Politics among Cape Afrikaners in the Late Nineteenth Century. Mordechai Tamarkin. Pretoria: UNISA Press, 2009. ISBN: 9781868884513.

This review essay interrogates the theoretical underpinning of Mordechai Tamarkin’s recent volume on the anti-Scab Act movement in the Cape Colony during the 1890s. Tamarkin views the opponents of the Scab Act of 1894 as victims of modernity. Since the Act’s opponents were mainly Afrikaans-speaking trek farmers, he casts what could have been persuasively analysed as a class conflict between mutton and wool farmers as an ethnic conflict. As a result, his text focuses on isolating aspects of a supposed trek farmer ethnic character. A number of ‘traditional’ characteristics are ascribed to trek farmers that supposedly contrast with the hegemonic progressive worldview. On closer analysis, these characteristics are ill defined and cannot be sufficiently historicised. It is argued here that Tamarkin essentially took the trek farmers’ assertions of the Scab Act’s expected impact at face value. The result is a theoretically unsophisticated analysis of Afrikaner intra-ethnic conflict mainly affecting the Afrikaner Bond. Real historiographical gaps in the environmental and economic history of the Cape Colony are not addressed.

While wool farmers perceived scab (a parasitic skin disease) as the primary threat to their profit margins, mutton farmers and trek farmers saw a general Cape Colony-wide Scab Act as the primary threat to their economic survival. The stage was set for conflict: the Scab Act of 1894 generated several hundred pages of parliamentary committee reports, was vigorously debated in Parliament, dominated newspaper letter columns and sparked a political crisis within the Afrikaner Bond. In addition, the administration of the Scab Act of 1894 consumed a major portion of the Cape Colony’s budget for veterinary services between 1895 and 1910. Historians are therefore presented with a unique archival record recounting the words of ordinary farmers on a range of socio-economic issues relating to the Cape’s pastoral sector. The Act itself necessitated the creation of a dedicated bureaucratic body, the office of the Chief Inspector of Sheep (CIS), to oversee its administration. The CIS’s archive and annual reports not only chart the difficulties experienced in combating scab, but provide valuable statistical information on the Cape Colony’s holdings of sheep and goats. Scab and the crisis surrounding the

1894 Scab Act therefore generated sources that provide not only information on scab, but insight into everyday farm life, the ethnic and class concerns of Cape sheep farmers, and the Cape's pastoral economy.

It is therefore curious that recent revisionist historians working on the colony's environmental history have given short shrift to this disease. Mordechai Tamarkin's *Volk and Flock* addresses a significant vacuum in the Cape's historiography. Unfortunately, this book suffers from serious theoretical and factual shortcomings that reduce its value. Tamarkin chooses to use the crisis created by the 1894 Scab Act within the Afrikaner Bond as his point of departure. He therefore focuses on the development of Afrikaner ethnicity and not on scab or the Act per se. As result, he does not offer readers a detailed description of sheep scab or the disease's history in South Africa. He does not provide information on the Cape's wool and mutton markets that would allow readers to assess the economic impact of scab and the Act. References to previous Scab Acts are scattered in the text, but he does not provide a coherent historical context for the Scab Act of 1894. There is therefore still no source that provides a narrative exposition of the Cape's anti-scab legislation and its success or failure.

Tamarkin's main argument is as follows. Due to the Dutch-speaking farmers' isolation from the modern world (read capitalist economy, modern education, enlightenment values and effective administration), the VOC's lack of interest in investing in physical and bureaucratic infrastructure at Cape, and the harsh environmental conditions of the frontier, the farmers developed an ontology and moral economy at variance with scientific rationality and capitalist individualism (i.e. the progressive ethos). British occupation brought about what Tamarkin describes as 'three revolutions': better administration that could provide physical and socio-political infrastructure, exposure to the aggressive global free-market economy, and modern scientific education. Dutch settlers were therefore confronted with 'modernity' in the nineteenth century. This created intra-ethnic conflict within Cape Dutch society with trek farmers forming a sub-ethnicity within the Dutch-speaking group. Most of his book is devoted to demarcating this group as a distinct entity.

Tamarkin explicitly denies the appropriateness of applying a class analysis to the anti-Scab Act movement. He uses livestock holdings as a rough analogue to determine sheep farmers' class position. After tallying the livestock holdings of farmers who testified before the 1892/4 Scab Commission and not finding a significant correlation between livestock holdings and support or opposition against the Scab Act, he concludes that class was not an important factor. Since the farmers did not say whether they owned land or not, he cannot correlate opposition against the Act with property ownership. It is not clear why being a trek farmer in one of the colony's north-western districts (the group who most resolutely opposed the Act according to Tamarkin) was not a class designation since trek farmer opposition against the Scab Act was motivated by shared trek farmer economic concerns.

Although Tamarkin maintains that trek farmer sub-ethnicity was environmentally determined, he neglects to state where the farmers lived whose testimonies before the Scab Commission and whose letters to the press are his main source on constructing the parameters of this identity. Tamarkin makes much of the fact that farmers had to trek in certain districts due to drought or high elevation, but his book

contains no maps indicating elevation or rainfall to provide a geographical context for this trek farmer sub-ethnic group. Readers are simply told trekking occurred in the north-west. While this designation may be familiar to South African historians who also should have a general understanding of the region's environment, non-South Africans may find the book inaccessible.

The book is divided into three chapters. The first chapter discusses trek farmer ethnic character. Trek farmers are presented as possessing an experienced-based epistemology supported by religious fundamentalism. In addition, Tamarkin argues that they had a moral economy at variance with the market economy. The second chapter introduces the progressive ethos. A tradition–modernity dichotomy is employed to explain intra-Afrikaner strife. The third chapter gives a broad narrative account of the anti-Scab Act movement, situated within the politics of the Afrikaner Bond.

Any discussion of the opposition against the Scab Act must explain why the scientific view of scab was rejected by trek farmers. Nineteenth-century progressives had no trouble in doing so: trek farmers were simply ignorant and could be weaned from their retrogressive ideas through government education programmes. For Tamarkin this explanation, essentially amounting to the self-evident fact that trek farmers were not scientifically educated, is not sufficient. Taking at face value the farmers' assertion that their opposition was based on 'experience', he argues that farmers had an experienced-based epistemology. (He thus proposes the existence of a distinct trek farmer 'ontology'. He continually uses the word 'ontology' instead of 'epistemology' without offering any clear explanation for this usage. In addition, he uses 'ontology' to mean either world-view or body of knowledge – again, this is neither clear nor consistent. He also uses 'cosmology' in one instance to refer to the trek farmer world-view, making the continued references to 'ontology' even more confusing.) This experiential epistemology placed them on a 'different cognitive planet'[1] from English-speaking farmers and Dutch-speaking progressives.

Trek farmers, we are told, were not willing to engage in abstract reasoning beyond the boundaries of their personal experience. However, if the opponents of the Act consistently evaluated information according to such an experienced-based epistemology, there was a host of things individual farmers should rightly have been sceptical about. Few, if any, of the opponents of the Act visited the Australian continent and so they had no 'experience' of it, but these farmers were not sceptical about its existence. Although books, newspapers and travellers' accounts were sufficient proof for the existence of Australia, these same sources were not sufficient to convince trek farmers that scab was eradicated there. In addition, these farmers had no personal experience of farming under the constraints of a scab act, but were nonetheless insistent that anti-scab measures could not be enforced in the north-west. Again, their beliefs here were not guided by experience.

Tamarkin later retreats from his representation of the Dutch-speaking farmers as having a unique epistemology: apparently they did not apply experience as an arbiter of knowledge in a doctrinal fashion, but were 'open to new inputs and new

1 M. Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 16.

ideas as long as they suited their prosperity and survival'.[2] Their rejection of the scientific explanation of scab is therefore revealed as pragmatic: their continual refusal to admit that scab could be cured was necessary to combat the Scab Act.

'Experience' is contrasted with science. While the trek farmers' explanation for scab was heterogeneous, the scientific diagnosis and prognosis of scab were simple and straightforward: the disease was caused by an insect and was cured by killing the insect. This view supposedly had little resonance with the farmers' assertion that the disease was connected with the condition of the sheep and the pasture. Tamarkin therefore represents science as decontextualised technical knowledge that can be universally applied and the Scab Act as an environmentally insensitive, ill-framed government intervention.

Veterinary science, however, is not the result of pure reason, but of real-life investigation into diseases and is practised through the physical examination of animals, often in situ. The Chief Veterinary Surgeon, Duncan Hutcheon, took the effects of drought and malnutrition into account and his explanation for the disease is therefore environmentally nuanced.[3] Incidentally, he also often used the words 'in my experience' in his articles on scab in the *Agricultural Journal*. Should we then conclude that he too simply operated from an experienced-based epistemology?

It can, however, be argued that the Scab Act of 1894 was context-insensitive. The Act, with the restrictions it placed on certain types of trekking, was perceived by its opponents as a one-type-fits-all solution devised in the Eastern Cape, but to be imposed on ecologically unsuitable regions. Tamarkin lists a series of sound economic and ecological objections to the implementation of anti-scab legislation in the north-west: farmers did not have sufficient water to dip their sheep, could not afford manufactured dips and needed the freedom to change pasture with their sheep unrestrained from quarantine measures or they would potentially suffer massive livestock losses.

The reason for the progressives' lack of sympathy with trek farmers' economic needs is not discussed by Tamarkin, but this reviewer wants to suggest that this lack of sympathy derives from progressives' abhorrence of trek farming as a system of pasture management. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century evidence for pasture degradation was primarily derived from the massive losses suffered by farmers during drought. Progressive commentators therefore developed Malthusian fears for the future of Cape livestock farming.[4] Farmers lost great numbers of stock to malnutrition annually. Losing half of one's livestock during a drought became an accepted risk of sheep farming.[5] Above and beyond progressive fears about long-term pasture damage, these massive losses were seen as wasteful and preventable.[6] Trek farmers' efforts to preserve their right to trek therefore fell on death ears. In contrast, Tamarkin presents these same livestock losses as evidence that trek farm-

2 Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 29.

3 D. Hutcheon, 'Scab: Its Nature, Cause, Symptoms and Treatment', *Agricultural Journal of the Cape of Good Hope*, 32(4), 1908, 432-448. Note that Tamarkin actually refers readers to this account although he does not discuss it any detail. He considers it to be representative of nineteenth-century veterinary science on scab.

4 T.D. Hall, 'South African Pastures: Retrospective and Prospective', *South African Journal of Science*, 31, Nov. 1934, 61-67.

5 Cape Parliamentary Papers, G. 11 – 1909: *Report of the Scab Acts and their Administration in the North-Western District of the Cape Colony*, 1.

6 Hall, 'South African Pastures', 77.

ers had adapted to the demands of dry-land pastoralism and adapted to the risks involved. The inability of farmers to secure access to dry-season reserve pasture, however, does not seem like a successful adaptive strategy.

To return to Tamarkin's argument: after distinguishing 'experience' from 'science' on theoretical grounds, he attempts to demarcate the Dutch-speaking farmers' 'traditional' knowledge from the 'scientific' knowledge of the progressives through enumeration. Here, however, he commits a number of factual errors by ascribing things to the farmers' 'pre-scientific' view that come from the 'scientific' view – so he states that the farmers argued that dipping harms sheep because it washes out the yoke. This, however, was an argument originally propagated by Hutcheon in 1886 when he travelled the countryside to educate sheep farmers about scab.[7]

Tamarkin also claims that scientists prescribed the use of manufactured chemical dips while the farmers preferred 'traditional' remedies that included tobacco extract. In fact, Hutcheon and the Agricultural Department never prescribed manufactured dip – they prescribed the use of sulphur and lime, tobacco extract or sulphur and caustic soda rather that the use of patented dips that often contained arsenic and carbolic acid which could poison sheep. These dips had a longer-lasting residual effect than the manufactured dips and were safer to use, but needed to be prepared according to an exact and lengthy process which required the ingredients to be boiled. Farmers therefore preferred using patented dip since it was easier and did not consume scarce wood fuel.[8]

The use of tobacco extract as general insecticide was widespread and dipping in tobacco extract was commonly used to cure scab in Australia. It was therefore neither a local nor a 'traditional' remedy.[9] Other 'traditions' mentioned by Tamarkin like shearing sheep bi-annually or even more often, together with hand dressing with mixtures of fat, herbs and minerals, were 'traditional' in the sense that these were age-old European remedies for scab commonly used since the Medieval period.[10]

Tamarkin makes much of the fact that farmers presented the disease as punishment sent from God from which they sought repentance rather than new legislation. This religiously inspired objection to the Act is used to support his argument that trek farmers possessed a distinct 'ontology' and provides one more instance of trek farmers' 'traditionalism'. The farmers' willingness to make use of religious arguments becomes, like their unwillingness to accept that scab was caused by an insect, another symptom of the difference between them and English or Dutch-speaking progressives, which was caused by their isolation from modernity in the interior.

In chapter two, Tamarkin has to explain why farmers who supported the Scab Act also appealed to the authority of the Bible. Now Tamarkin describes the Bible as 'a double-edged sword'[11] that can be used to justify a variety of positions. Biblical analogies are therefore opportunistically selected. If this is so, how then can the

7 Cape Parliamentary Papers, G.14 – 1887: *Report by the Colonial Veterinary Surgeon for the Year 1886*, 21.
8 *Debates in the House of Assembly*, 21 July 1899, 44-46.
9 H.R. Seddon, 'Eradication of Sheep Scab from New South Wales', *Australian Veterinary Journal*, 40, 1964, 420.
10 M.J. Stephenson, 'Wool Yields in the Medieval Economy', *Economic History Review*, New Series, 41(3), 1988, 381, 383.
11 Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 117.

biblical references of the Act's opponents be presented by Tamarkin as not only sincere but as formative of their 'ontology'?

The fact that other farmers living in the same ecological circumstances as the Act's opponents did not perceive the Act as paving the way towards their ruin and that many farmers had no trouble with dipping needs to be explained. Tamarkin does so by reviving the distinction between 'experience' and science: 'Experience as the arbiter of scientific knowledge could lead to different ontological avenues because, unlike scientific experiments, pragmatic experience is not exercised under controlled conditions.'[12] Different experiences of scab therefore led farmers to draw different conclusions regarding the desirability of a scab act.

This explanation is, however, not sufficient. Tamarkin seems to slip into a form of extreme relativism that needs to be acknowledged and preferably defended. He describes one group of farmers as influenced by ecological reality while the other group was influenced by modernity and progress. But how could the progressives have farmed successfully if they ignored their environment and the constraints it placed on them? If the progressives managed to transcend the difficulties of their environment, why could the Act's opponents not do so too? Again, the terms 'ontological gap' and 'ethno-moral gap' are used to explain the differences not only between English-speaking and Afrikaner farmers, but among Afrikaner sheep farmers as well. Readers are left with two realities or 'ontologies' without being offered a way to resolve the conflict between the two.

Tamarkin does try to make the conflict about morality and identity more than about economic rationality, but this does not really help. One group argued that the Scab Act would ruin their chances of survival, that instituting such an Act was therefore immoral and that the Afrikaner supporters of the Act were not really Afrikaners. The other group argued that the Act was needed to save the Colony's wool sector and that those who opposed the Act were acting against the common good and were therefore immoral. The economic argument therefore determined the moral and ethnic argument, but Tamarkin does not discuss the sheep farming economy in any detail except to offer vague, historically decontextualised pronouncements on ecological disasters and pressures.

This brings us to the second main characteristic of trek farmer life: according to Tamarkin, trek farmers possessed a moral economy (or ethno-morality) at variance with economic rationality. His argument goes as follows. Due to the harsh ecological conditions on the frontier, trek farmers adopted transhumance as a vital survival strategy. Trekking bound largely individualistic farmers together in a fragile social network. Landowners knew a drought might force them to trek so they accommodated trekkers on their property in times of plenty with the expectation of being similarly accommodated. Their economy therefore developed to emphasize survival of the whole farming community, not just individual farmers. They believed that the Act was going to prohibit trekking, or at least make it very difficult, and so ruin the poor who eked out a meagre living as landless trek farmers and also destroy wealthier farmers who needed to trek in times of drought. The Act was therefore immoral because it would destroy their way of life, a way of life (Ta-

12 Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 106-7.

markin stresses) that developed out of economic and environmental necessity and that was subsequently imbued with moral importance and cultural meaning. It will be argued here, however, that Tamarkin does not present his readers with sufficient evidence to accept that such a moral economy existed.

Tamarkin's arguments have a superficial coherence because he plays down the trek farmer's economic activities. He does not consider that many of the trek farmers' troubles could have been overcome if they had had access to sufficient capital to fence their property and sink boreholes. Rather, ecological reality is taken as the most important economic factor influencing the farmers' survival. As he seems to completely accept the ecological marginality of the Act's opponents, he sweeps problems in marketing scabby wool and scabby mutton sheep under the carpet: the trek farmers' cherished way of life, which 'had evolved over many generations in a long process of adjustment to ecological challenges and to prevailing economic and social conditions',[13] was not concerned with efficacy or maximising profit. But why should the sheep farmer's moral economy not extend to their starting wool and meat marketing co-operatives to give them a better bargaining position and help them to take advantage of economies of scale? Farmers had to negotiate a highly competitive international wool market and a domestic meat market dominated by imported frozen meat if they wanted to make a living. The 'ontological gap' that made trek farmers ignore these macro-economic factors was perhaps only evidence of stupidity, as suggested by the Act's supporters.

By presenting the chief threats to the trek farmer community as being the imposition of the 'revolutions' (global capitalism and inappropriate science) on a pre-modern, ecologically and economically marginal community, Tamarkin ignores an insight of his main source on sheep farming society, P.J. van der Merwe's works on trek farming. In *Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap*, Van der Merwe presents transhumance as a valid, even highly successful, economic strategy in the South African environment while the open frontier still functioned to depress land prices. After the frontier closed, investment in agricultural improvement became necessary since individual farmers could no longer utilise 'empty' frontier land as reserve pasture. Landowners became more protective of their property rights, generating disputes over water-rights and farm boundaries. Property prices would also increase, forcing people who did not buy land previously and could not afford the new higher purchase prices to move beyond the frontier in search of cheap or free land. This process pushed the frontier outwards until the limits of colonial expansion were reached.[14]

It cannot be argued that trek farmers were insulated from market forces during the period of VOC rule. Trek farmers were not self-sufficient and had to interact with the market to acquire, for instance, wagons, firearms, clothing, worked metal and tobacco. There is therefore no evidence for the existence of a trek farmer moral economy that withstood market pressures during a purported 'pre-capitalist' period

13 Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 56.

14 P.J. van der Merwe, *Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap* (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1945), 44-71.

at the Cape.[15] Such a system also did not exist towards the end of the nineteenth century, as evidenced by rural enclosure and the increased pace of urbanisation after 1880. The rural poor were not accommodated in their communities, but were expelled to urban centres, giving rise to poor whiteism.

Evidently, Tamarkin mined Van der Merwe's work for facts on trek farmer environmental circumstances without giving credence to his economic arguments. *Volk and Flock* also displays no evidence of familiarity with the economic historiography of the eighteenth-century Cape frontier. Tamarkin mentions the closing of the frontier briefly, but underplays it as a causal factor in the growing poverty of the trek farmer community. He does mention drought as a big concern, grouping drought, locust, springbuck and various diseases under the heading of 'environmental crisis', but he does not relate this environmental crisis to overgrazing, thereby ignoring a range of sources in South African historiography that relate the closing of the frontier and resultant overgrazing to the droughts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The real inspiration for Tamarkin's proposed trek farmer moral economy is (he claims) James C. Scott's work on South East Asian peasants. In *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in South East Asia*, Scott argues for the existence of a moral economy consisting of a subsistence ethic amongst pre-modern peasants fostered by communal land ownership and labour obligations. Peasants therefore shared their food resources during famines, ensuring that all starved together.[16] This mutual assistance, Scott argued, caused some observers to see the peasants' moral economy as morally superior to Western capitalist production, and Tamarkin follows suit. The free-market ideologues, according to him, wanted to divorce the economy from 'undue moral considerations'.[17] Although a case can be made that free market ideology disadvantages the poor who cannot compete in it and whose interests are therefore sacrificed for the sake of progress, it is not appropriate to negatively contrast this to a 'traditional' moral economy. Scott held firm that the subsistence ethic he described was not necessarily morally good. This moral economy was enforced through a number of social sanctions. Gossip and envy made more successful peasants vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. During food shortages, wealthier peasants were under threat and their food reserves could simply be seized.[18]

A moral economy is therefore necessarily governed by certain constraints enforced through explicit or implicit social sanctions, but Tamarkin does not provide us with a description of the constraints governing trek farmer society. Rather, he seems to suggest that the trek farmers' moral economy was based on the natural affection existing between family members. The social complexity created by trek farmers' large families, intermarriages and the bonds of patronage existing between landowners and *bywoners* was apparently sufficiently constraining to ensure trek farmer solidarity (a statement disproved by the mass urbanisation of the rural poor).

15 S. Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier, 1760-1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 151, 164-167, 170-171.
16 J.C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 2-4.
17 Tamarkin, *Volk and Flock*, 38.
18 Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*, 5.

While trek farmers were constrained by sentiment and family ties, English-speaking progressives are depicted as accepting the free market as arbiter. According to the progressive ethos, individuals had to succeed or fail on their own. Tamarkin fails, however, to provide evidence that progressives were indifferent to the travails of friends and family members.

The report of the 1892–4 Scab Commission and the various letters to the Dutch press are Tamarkin's main proof for the existence of a trek farmer moral economy. He cannot produce evidence that such a moral economy was explicitly articulated before the 1890s. Tamarkin seeks to get around this by arguing that the anti-Scab Act movement led to the crystallisation of opinions on morality, economics, ethnicity and scab which were previously tacitly accepted. It is more likely, however, that the trek farmer's evocation of an historic Afrikaner 'moral economy' was a strategy designed to pressure the Afrikaner supporters of the Act to join their cause and that it did not reflect trek farmer's lived reality. Such moves are common to intra-ethnic struggles and serve to help a group define its own identity.

Tamarkin does provide historical background for the divisions within Afrikaner Bond. He describes the Bond as a deeply divided organisation trying to represent disparate interests groups, namely grain farmers, wine farmers, sheep farmers and Dutch-speaking urban professionals. The Bond's leadership and wine farmers supported the Scab Act, precipitating a crisis within the organisation. Tamarkin describes this in detail: sheep farmer representatives had reservations about supporting the wine farmers as alcohol abuse amongst poor whites and farm labourers was perceived as a growing social problem. Likewise, the Bond's leadership and the wine farmers were progressively inclined and had ethical reservations about supporting the anti-Scab Act movement. While the sheep farmers were eventually persuaded to support the wine farmers, the wine farmers were not convinced by sheep farmers' economic reservations about the Scab Act. Suspended between their progressive principles and the practical need to retain sheep farmer support for the Bond's political programme, the Bond leadership was paralysed into inaction. Trek farmers perceived this as a betrayal and responded by attempting to take over the leadership of the organisation. But his effort to stress that Cape Dutch society was divided according to economic activity and different attitudes towards progress begs the question as to why these disparate elements were available for ethnic mobilisation by the Afrikaner Bond in the first place. Tamarkin does not describe how Cape Dutch society started to develop a unified ethnic identity and how they were originally mobilised by the Afrikaner Bond.

The historiography of the Afrikaner Bond is largely silent on how the organization mobilised its members and organised on a grassroots level, but a possible explanation is provided by Herman Giliomee. In *The Afrikaners*, Giliomee argues that S.J. du Toit, the founder of the Afrikaner Bond, mobilised support through populist rhetoric. Such rhetoric apparently disappeared from the Bond's official programme of action after the leadership of the organisation was taken over by J.H. Hofmeyr.[19] This populist discourse could have been the reason why the Bond managed to gain trek farmer support as the anti-Scab Act movement shows that the Bond's rank-and-

19 H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003), 220-221.

file did not abandon their populist aspirations. The trek farmers' moral economy is therefore far more likely to have had its roots in S.J. du Toit's anti-capitalist, anti-English discourse than being an organic expression of trek farmer's 'traditional' culture.

Tamarkin explains the tradition–modernity dichotomy, the supposed root of the Afrikaner's intra-ethnic division, through metaphor. Accordingly, modernity is presented as a destination and the road to modernity is presented as a continuum with individual Afrikaners travelling at different speeds away from conservatism and tradition and towards progress and modernity. This uneven spread of modernity explains why not all Afrikaners, not even all Afrikaner stock farmers, were opposed to the Scab Act. This is, however, a description more than an explanation. He needs to explain why modernity spread unevenly. His answer is as follows: some farmers lived in close proximity to English neighbours, so adopted their 'ontology' and progressive ethos. Other farmers were richer and more market-orientated; others opposed the Act not out of conviction that it would not work, or that it would ruin the farmers, but due to a feeling of ethnic solidarity that was imprinted on them through the above-mentioned moral economy – ethnic solidarity made them act against their interests. Modernity also spread due to differences in personality – some people are more curious, more receptive to change, more willing to learn from others. Although this depiction seems adequate to explain the differentiated spread of new information and farming principles, it essentially reduces the Afrikaners, whom Tamarkin describes as a discreet ethnic group, into a collection of individual actors. The idea of a separate trek farmer sub-ethnicity has therefore been exploded by Tamarkin himself.

To be fair, Tamarkin does not aim to give a complex, theoretical account of the interplay between modernity and tradition, and between science and experience. He is also not really interested in ecology per se, but in Afrikaner ethnicity and how it was impacted on by ecology. But this approach is problematic since he seems to accept 'tradition', 'modernity', 'experience' and 'science' as transparent concepts requiring no extra explanation. This causes confusion in his text. Similarly, the influence of ecology on their ethnicity seems to have occurred during the isolated trek farmer stage during the rule of the VOC (essentially following the frontier tradition that was comprehensively deconstructed by Martin Legasick several decades ago),[20] while the impact of their transhumance in an environment of increasing land shortage in the ecologically marginal Karoo and north-western Cape is downplayed.

Tamarkin also seeks to validate the farmers' experiential knowledge, but by accepting the conventional description of their resistance as located on the tradition–modernity continuum, he tacitly accepts the progressive farmers' view of them as anti-progressive. By focusing on trek farmer character instead of their economic circumstances and by presenting them as victims of modernity, Tamarkin essentially confirms the progressives' judgement that trek farmers were not fit for modern life.

20 See M. Legassick, 'The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds, *Economy and Society in Pre-industrial South Africa* (London: Longman, 1980), 44-79.