

Cape of storms: Surveying and rethinking popular resistance in the eighteenth-century Cape colony

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Abstract

In this article I provide a broad overview of resistance at the Cape under the Dutch East India Company (VOC) undertaken by the multiracial and multiethnic popular classes (low-ranking Company servants including soldiers and sailors, slaves and indigenous Khoesan labourers). I identify and examine some of the main forms of protest including: desertion and the creation of maroon communities; arson; threats against and assault of masters; and collective insurgency comprising rebellions, mutiny and strikes. Questioning established approaches in the literature which emphasise social divisions amongst the popular classes – including along racial and ethnic lines – as well as the limits and weakness of popular protest, this article demonstrates that the popular classes at the Cape developed a rich and varied tradition of “direct action”. The discussion reveals that this was often overt and collective, and sometimes drew sections of the Cape’s popular classes together across divisions. It was also informed by alternative conceptions of morality and justice.

Keywords: Dutch East India Company; Servants; Slaves; Khoesan; Sailors; Soldiers; Popular classes; Cape of Good Hope; Direct action; Desertion; Arson; Insurgency.

Introduction

This article provides an overview of popular resistance in the eighteenth-century Cape Colony under the rule of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* – hereafter the VOC). In so doing, I question the stress in the related literature on the social fragmentation of the multiracial and multiethnic popular classes, and the tendency to structure discussion of resistances around discreet narratives of specific (implicitly or explicitly racial or ethnic) “population” groups with fairly neat distinctions posited between the lives and struggles of Company servants, slaves, and Khoesan labourers. I also question the notion that at this time popular

protest was always limited, being predominantly individualist and primarily defensive.

The article shows that the popular classes developed a rich, varied tradition of “direct action” that included desertion and the creation of maroon communities, arson, threats against and attacks on masters, and collective insurgency. In many instances these modes of resistance were overt and confrontational; collective in nature; embedded within social networks; socially inclusive of different sections of the popular classes; and were informed by very clear moral codes or a sense of popular justice. In short, these class struggles were able, at times, to transcend racial and other divisions in the popular classes, and to express alternative conceptions of morality and justice.

This overview is based on a review of secondary literature as well as a re-examination of the archives that historians have based their discussions of resistance on, including travel accounts and criminal court records. Some of this data has been quantified to determine trends, but it is the fragmented stories of individuals that appear in the records that are privileged. Although these may seem anecdotal, they provide insight into the lives and experiences of slaves, Khoesan labourers and low-ranking Company men. It is these personal stories that shed light on the social composition of particular episodes of resistance, social networks, motivations, and popular conceptions of justice.

It should be noted, upfront, that this overview is preliminary and its aims modest. The objectives are to understand popular protest in new ways and to encourage new approaches by destabilising the categories and binaries that have previously informed analysis. Finer investigation of specific episodes of resistance is required for a deeper understanding of the way in which identities and solidarities were constructed at particular junctures, and this falls beyond the scope of this article.

The popular classes

First, the social and political character of the Cape’s underclasses (or the less derogatory “popular classes”) needs to be considered. Serving as a junction between Africa, Europe, and Asia, the Cape was colonised by the VOC in 1652 to function as a refreshment station for its fleets sailing between Europe and the East Indies. As the colony grew and diversified, three regionally based, yet interdependent, economic sectors, each with a distinct labour

system, emerged.¹ Although slavery remained the most prominent form of labour in the Cape, it was not the only form of bondage or dependency, and it articulated with other “unfree” labour systems. Unfree labour, through servitude or slavery, was central to the Cape, although free wage labour also existed. Economic sectors consisted of, firstly, the urban-centred port economy dominated by the Company, which relied on the labour of low-ranking Company servants (especially sailors and soldiers), recruited from various parts of Europe, as well slaves from Africa and Asia. This sector also included retail and small-scale manufacturing run by free-burghers (citizens, released from VOC contracts) and “free blacks” (the freed descendents of freed slaves and convicts) who drew on the labour of slaves and the poor.² It is important to note at this stage that not all free-burghers were employers or farm-owners, or European; the category refers to people freed of Company servitude, and some free-burghers, at least, ended up in wage labour.

The second sector consisted of the production of wheat and wine in the more fertile hinterland on farms owned by free-burghers, who were obligated to sell their produce to the Company at fixed prices.³ It is this sector that depended primarily on slave labour and employed the majority of slaves in the colony, although indigenous Khoesan were also hired during peak production periods. Finally, a stock-farming sector emerged on the colonial borderlands.⁴ Most stock farmers were modest in terms of wealth and most relied on Khoesan labour using various clientalist arrangements or force.⁵

Very crudely then, the popular classes consisted of urban and rural slaves, of labourers, most notably Khoesan, and of low-ranking Company servants. By the late eighteenth century the number of Company servants stationed at the Cape had grown to between 3,000–4,000.⁶ While Company-owned slaves never increased beyond 1,000, the number of privately-owned slaves neared

1 R Elphick & H Giliomee, “The origins and entrenchment of European dominance at the Cape, 1652-c. 1840”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African society 1652- 1840* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), p. 534.

2 For more detail on the urban economy see N Worden, E van Heyningen and V Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The making of a city: An illustrated history* (Cape Town, David Philips, 2004).

3 The most comprehensive studies of slavery and this sector include N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985) and R Shell, *Children of bondage: A social history of the slave society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand Press, 2001).

4 L Guelke, “Freehold farmers and frontier settlers, 1657-1780”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African...* pp. 66-108.

5 M Legassick, “The northern frontier to c. 1840: The rise and decline of the Griqua People”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African society...*, pp. 358-420, 367. Khoesan children were often captured during commando raids and “apprenticed” to free-burgher farmers.

6 N Worden, E van Heyningen and V Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The making of a city...*, p. 49.

9,000 at this time, the overwhelming majority being rural.⁷ No systematic records were kept of Khoesan labourers until the 1800s, but it is estimated that approximately 23,000 Khoesan were still living (with a large sector presumably working) within the Colony by the 1780s.⁸ No aggregate figures are readily available for other groups of free wage labor, which included some of the free blacks and free whites.

One of the key assumptions of this article is that we can legitimately speak of something called the “popular classes” not just as an economic fact, but as a distinct social and political entity. This contradicts what Nigel Worden describes as the tendency within the historiography to write “single category” history (the history of specific “population groups,” often implicitly racial or ethnic, such as “the slaves”, “the Khoesan”, and “the freeburghers”).⁹ Although historians have recently started to contest this trend, they seek to destabilise these categories by looking at fissures “within” categories and have started to pay more attention to those groups that do not fit into, or fall between, these categories.¹⁰ The effect is to emphasise fragmentation rather than consider connections across categories – which this analysis stresses.

Elsewhere I have argued that these “single category” histories are problematic not simply because they efface social fragmentation and difference within specific “population” groups, as others have noted, but also because they obscure significant social “connections” that transcended race, ethnicity, nation, labour type and spatial distance within the colony and beyond.¹¹ I have shown that, through family, fellowship, and the construction of alternative social networks and communities, the multiracial popular classes were able to create meaningful social connections that lay the foundation for a broad, class-based sense of belonging. This provided the basis for mutual aid and political solidarity. In this article, I start to explore the character of this political solidarity.

7 J Armstrong & N Worden, “The slaves, 1652 –1834”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African society...*, p. 123.

8 N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa...*, p. 11.

9 N Worden, “Introduction”, N Worden (ed.), *Contingent lives: Social identity and material culture in the VOC world* (Historical Studies Department, University of Cape Town and Royal Netherlands Embassy, Cape Town and Pretoria, 2007), p. x.

10 N Worden (ed.), *Contingent lives...*, pp. viii- xii.

11 N Ulrich, “Popular community in 18th century Southern Africa: Family, fellowship, alternative networks, and mutual aid at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1795”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 40(6), 2014, pp. 1139-1157.

Historiographies of resistance

“Single category” histories have given rise to separate historiographies of resistance for slaves, Khoesan, and low-ranking Company servants. Although distinct, these historiographies tend to emphasise social and political fragmentation, including racial divisions, and the limits of popular resistance. There may have been incidents in which individual masters treated labourers with fatherly care. However, paternalism did not define master-labour-state relations in the VOC-Cape: physical violence served as the main legitimising component of labour relations.¹² Any overt challenge to the authority of masters or the colonial officials was met with violent repression. More often than not, dissidents were put to death with their corpses being desecrated, and their being denied a proper burial. The use of the law to evoke protection also yielded few favourable results.¹³

With slavery being the most prominent form of bonded labour in the colony, slave resistance has received most attention. With the context noted above in mind, historians have argued that slave resistance in the VOC-Cape was widespread, but claim that this resistance was mostly “passive”, “informal”, or “everyday” resistance. This consisted of foot-dragging, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, deception, desertion, and subtle sabotage – all designed to avoid direct confrontation and generally carried out by individuals. Its basic character precluded a thorough ideological rupture with the master class. For instance, Robert Ross argues that slaves knew that open collective rebellion would result in death, and that the only feasible method of escaping the rigors of slavery was through individual action.¹⁴ Similarly, Nigel Worden insists that escape by individual slaves through desertion was the main form of resistance, and he characterises any open challenges as the spontaneous acts of desperate individuals.¹⁵

Such arguments echo those of James Scott, who claims that for most subordinate classes throughout history, and especially in colonial contexts, open, organised, collective political activity has proven dangerous, if not

12 M Legassick makes this point about slavery in the Cape. M Legassick, ‘Slavery came first’, SAROB, 43 (1996), (available at http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/sarb/X0026_Legassick.html, as accessed 26 May 2010).

13 W Dooling, “‘The good opinion of others’: Law, slavery and community in the Cape colony, c.1760-1830”, N Worden & C Crais (eds.), *Breaking the chains: Slavery and its legacy in the nineteenth-century Cape colony* (Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1994), pp. 25-44.

14 R Ross, *Cape of torments: Slavery and resistance in South Africa* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 5.

15 N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa...*, pp. 119-137.

suicidal.¹⁶ He recognises that slave rebellions and peasant uprisings are brave, but argues that they are generally foredoomed to fail and should be viewed as little more than brief, violent explosions that occur when everyday resistance fails.

Scott's work is part of an established literature on resistance by European commoners and peasants, as well as workers in the Global South which is, in part, informed by Marxist assumptions.¹⁷ Apart from being dated, these approaches entrench sharp distinctions between urban and rural, as well as between pre-capitalist and modern protest, reinforcing the notion that only a select section of the popular classes – the modern industrial proletariat – can bring about profound social change. Here collective protest is often simply equated with formal organisation and the link between covert protest, individual protest, and informal protest is often taken as automatic. As a result, a range of protests is obscured. Little room is left, for example, for revolts or mutinies that are spontaneous, or for individual acts of open defiance.

Most notably, rebels' own views of the potential of their protests are often not adequately considered. For example, in spite of the dire consequences of rebellion, the men and women who took part in collective and overt forms of protest in the VOC-Cape were not necessarily driven to it by desperation and emotion. On the contrary, they rebelled precisely because they believed fundamental change was possible and that rebellion had to take a decisive form. Their efforts should not be interpreted as foolhardy simply because they operated in difficult and dangerous conditions, or failed altogether. And, most importantly, their actions do not fit the neat binaries of individual and collective resistance nor the teleology that only the industrial proletariat can make real changes, which structure the literature.

The "single category" construction of early Cape colonial history around distinct racial or ethnic categories, often those of twentieth-century South Africa read back into the past, is best illustrated by the first accounts of Khoesan resistance under VOC rule. Believing that there was a sharp racial or ethnic difference between the Cape's pastoral "Khoi" (now referred to as

16 J Scott, *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance* (New Haven/New York, Yale University Press, 1995), p. xv.

17 E Hobsbawm & G Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London, Pimlico, 1969), E Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels: Studies in archaic forms of social movement in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1971); EP Thompson, "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century", *Past and Present*, 50, 1971, pp. 76-136; R Cohen, "Resistance and hidden forms of consciousness amongst African workers", *Review of African Political Economy*, 7(19), 1980, pp. 8-22.

Khoe) and the hunter-gathering San, and that this difference proved significant in terms of shaping indigenous responses to colonial conquest, historians such as George McCall Theal (described as the “father” of South African historiography) argued that while “Khoi” were subdued and acculturated out of existence by 1713, the more “primitive” San continued to harass colonial authorities through constant raids on farmsteads and theft.¹⁸

Historians such as Shula Marks and Richard Elphick have long contested this view.¹⁹ Emphasising the linkages between Khoe and San, they argue that resistance to colonial expansion and poor labour conditions was fierce and continued after VOC rule (culminating in the “Servant Rebellion” of 1799-1803). In addition to two wars between Khoesan and the Company at the end of the seventeenth century, two main areas of ongoing resistance can be identified. First, independent Khoesan bands living on the colonial borderlands were known to offer sanctuary to fugitives from the colony (and surrounding Xhosa communities outside of the colony), and as Khoesan were increasingly drawn into the colony as a servile class, they deserted their masters in response to poor labour conditions. In the second instance, Khoesan bands on the colonial borderlands resisted colonial expansion by raiding colonial homesteads for cattle, arms and ammunition. Even though Elphick sees such raids as a long established pattern of the “ecological cycle”, he agrees with Marks that such raids had clear political motives in that they aimed to expel the VOC from the Cape.

In the case of indigenous peoples, historians recognise linkages between Khoe and San and even the overlaps between *droster* (“deserter”) gangs (maroon-type groups including runaway African and Asian slaves and a few European sailors and soldiers) and Khoesan bands. However this examination of social connection is limited, in that these scholars fail to systematically examine Khoesan resistance in relation to, or Khoesan participation in, the protest of other marginal groups. Thus our view of popular resistance remains fragmented.

A more recent trend has been to locate the early colonial Cape within broader regional frames, or in its global context, rather than treat it in isolation. In paying more attention to transnational connections and mobility, historians

18 GM Theal in S Marks, “Khoisan resistance to the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”, *Journal of African History*, 3(1), 1972, pp. 55-80.

19 S Marks, “Khoisan resistance to the Dutch...”, *Journal of African History*, 3(1), 1972, pp. 55-80; R Elphick, “The Khoisan to 1828”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African society...*, pp. 3-65.

have started to look more systematically at transient groups such as Company sailors and soldiers. Even so, the focus continues to fall on disconnection and difference. For instance, Nigel Worden emphasises the role that tensions related to nation (German versus Dutch) and occupation (sailor versus soldier) played in mutinies onboard VOC vessels.²⁰

This sustained focus on social difference as the basis for social and political fracture may be contrasted to that of a growing school of labour historians that questions the primacy of racial, ethnic and national divisions and mobilisations in shaping political identities and movements in the eighteenth-century world, highlighting instead the hidden history of class-based cooperation across these divisions in shaping popular protest and radicalism. Most notably, P Linebaugh and M Rediker's *Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (2000) questions the portrayal of the Atlantic's "motley proletariat" (broadly defined) as unaware of a common class experience or identity, as lacking a constructive political imagination, and as capable of serious revolt that could profoundly change social relations. They show that, as labourers and the poor in Europe, Africa and the Americas were incorporated, often forcefully, into the emerging capitalist system from 1600 onwards, they questioned and challenged the authority of masters, ministers and magistrates, private property and forced labour. In spite of severe repression, protest spread, giving way to global cycles of revolt and a distinct radicalism based on an egalitarian, universal, inclusive vision of humanity. In this way, they argue, the transatlantic "proletariat" played a pivotal role in the conflicts that gripped the Atlantic and were a revolutionary force for change that shaped movements like abolitionism, decolonisation and democratisation.

More recent studies show that such protest was by no means confined to the Atlantic. The editors of *Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution* note that between the 1760s and the 1840s "most sectors of the maritime industries – not just warships, but convict vessels, slave ships, and merchantmen, sailing in the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans as well as the Caribbean, Andaman, and South China Seas – all experienced far higher levels of unrest than is usually recognized".²¹ The essays in this collection demonstrate that sea-borne voyages served as "spaces for incubation and as vectors for diffusion of

20 N Worden, "Below the line the devil reigns: Death and dissent aboard a VOC vessel", *South African Historical Journal*, 61(4), 2009, pp. 702 -730.

21 C Anderson, N Frykman, L Heerma van Vos, & M Rediker, *Mutiny and maritime radicalism in the Age of Revolution: A global survey* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 4.

political radicalism”, and that the popular resistance that was so characteristic of the period “can best be viewed as a geographically connected process”, with the maritime world playing a key part in enabling multiple eruptions of popular revolt and its global character and connections. As my essay on the 1797 British Naval mutinies in Table Bay and Simons Bay in that collection demonstrates, for example, the Cape Colony experienced significant maritime protest at this time.²²

However, as this article shows, even though protest may have started to take on new forms during the “Age of Revolutions”, it is important to note that mutiny and, indeed, other forms of overt, often collective popular revolt, were by no means novel to the colony; they were part of a more complex tradition of popular political action throughout the eighteenth-century.

Direct action

To recognise the varied traditions of resistance and to make room for more nuanced forms of resistance in the VOC-Cape, this article uses the relatively open-ended notion of “direct action” as a conceptual frame.²³ Briefly, “direct action” refers to the immediate and deliberate actions of labouring and poor people against their exploiters and oppressors. It encompasses all resistance that is immediate, deliberate, and rebellious, that is, against exploitation and oppression. It includes resistance that is undertaken to enact radical change, to secure reforms, or exact revenge. Direct action always aims to undermine the power of employers or masters and authorities and can have a significant symbolic effect, drawing attention to the limits of upper-class control, whilst highlighting the reach and power of working people and the poor. Direct action as envisaged here includes “all” forms of direct resistance – whether hidden or overt, individual or collective, planned or spontaneous, or small or large in scale – that is located within popular, class struggle.²⁴ It does not include those actions that while perhaps precipitated by suffering, are not resistance as such, such as criminality against other parts of the popular classes.

22 N Ulrich, “International radicalism, local solidarities: The 1797 British naval mutinies in Cape waters”, C Anderson et al, *Mutiny and maritime radicalism...*, pp. 61-86.

23 The terms ‘direct initiative’ or ‘direct action’ were coined by Ferdinand Pelloutier and Emile Pouget, leading activists in the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederation Generale du Travail* (CGT), the main French union centre in the 1890s and early 1900s. It was developed by other like-minded unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, the ‘Wobblies’). See S Salerno, *Direct action and sabotage: Three classic IWW pamphlets from the 1910* (Chicago, CH Kerr, 1997), pp. 1-18.

24 R Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism* (Original published in 1938) (London, Pluto Press, 1989), pp. 113, 119, 120.

Direct action, as a concept, recognises that popular resistance is messy, taking on a variety of different, intermeshing forms, not easily characterised into neat binaries of “everyday” versus “formal,” “individual” versus “collective”, or “pre-modern” versus “modern proletarian”. One of the most useful aspects of using direct action as a conceptual frame is that it does not assume that history moves along a continuum towards a predetermined outcome, or assume that only a very specific section of the popular classes – industrial waged workers – can be truly transformative.²⁵ It is only by rejecting this teleology that the revolutionary possibilities presented by different societies at different times can be properly appreciated, and that continuities in popular agency, and between the modern working class and its various plebeian forebears, can be realised. Within this framework we do not have to assume that popular resistance in the eighteenth-century Cape was somehow, by its very nature, defensive, reactionary, individualist, or ineffective. Rather, we can examine political traditions through a new lens and explore previously unconsidered possibilities.

We can now turn to a brief examination of key modes of protest in the VOC- Cape – desertion and “maroon” communities, arson, threats against and attacks of masters, and collective insurgency – by considering the extent to which such protest was overt and confrontational; collective in nature; embedded within social networks; socially inclusive of different sections of the popular classes; and informed by clear moral codes.

“To draw others to their party”: Desertion and maroon communities

In 1746 nine slaves from a variety of owners gathered in one of Cape Town’s taverns to finalise their plans for escape.²⁶ They wanted to travel to more distant, independent, indigenous African communities in the interior. To prepare for their escape they stole supplies, including a sail and a mast from a free-burgher’s farm, and raided the Company gardens for fresh fruit and vegetables. Unfortunately their plan was foiled when the boat they stole proved un-seaworthy. They tried to walk the rest of the way along the

²⁵ L van der Walt and M Schmidt, *Black flame: The revolutionary class politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* (Oakland, AK Press, 2009), p. 95; D Miller, *Anarchism* (London, JM Dent & Sons, 1984), p. 79.

²⁶ Western Cape Provincial Archive [WCPA], Criminal Justice [CJ] Criminele Process Stukken, 1746, Deel 2, ff. 464-67, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery: Selected documents concerning slaves from the criminal records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 2005), p. 257.

shoreline, but were sighted, and captured. This case is illustrative of important points. As noted above, desertion is often viewed in the literature as a form of “escape”, and as an individual’s desperate, if often ineffective, attempt to avoid punishment.²⁷ Yet, it was through desertion, more than any other form of protest, that the popular classes were able to change their conditions, reject their servitude, and pursue alternative lives of relative autonomy in social orders of their own choice or own making.

In addition, desertion was often a planned and collective act and rooted in larger social networks.²⁸ Collective desertion was common. Most deserters ran away together in small groups, however, there were also instances when people ran away together in relatively large groups. For instance, the “sententiën” refer to a case in 1709 involving a group of 39 runaways.²⁹ However, even individuals who ran away on their own relied on the support of other slaves and servants to survive. Runaways adopted various strategies once they had escaped. Many deserters stayed close to or within the colony – becoming part of “droster” gangs. Hanglip or Hangklip and Table Mountain, the latter situated directly adjacent to the VOC’s fortress in Cape Town, remained a popular spot for runaways into the nineteenth century.³⁰ Desertion may not have been an overt, or direct challenge, but “droster” gangs served significant symbolic functions; they provided a model of alternative, dissident forms of belonging and demonstrated the limits of Company power.

“Droster” gangs were enabled by broader social networks and solidarities.³¹ The composition of “droster” gangs, which remained relatively small, was fluid; groups were reformed when members split up to go their own way or captured, or when new deserters joined. Such gangs, known to move between Hanglip and Table Mountain, were connected and members also often maintained linkages with slaves and servants in the colony, still living under their masters’ authority. Moreover, gangs overlapped with, or became part of, other fugitive or independent communities, including Khoesan communities on the colony’s borderland (see more on this below).

27 JC Armstrong & N Worden, “Slaves”, R Elphick & H Giliomee, *The shaping of South African society...*, pp. 156-162.

28 Mason also makes this point. J Mason, *Social death and resurrection: Slavery and emancipation in South Africa* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, etc., 2003), pp. 165-175.

29 WCPA CJ 782, 32, F Heese, *Reg en onreg: Kaapse regspraak in die agtiende eeu*, C-Reeks: Navorsingspublikasies, 6, (Bellville, Insituut vir Historiese Navorsing, Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland, 1994), p. 172.

30 R Ross, *Cape of torments...*, pp. 54-72.

31 For a more detailed discussion of the nature and composition of “droster” gangs see N Ulrich, *Counter power and colonial rule in the eighteenth century Cape of Good Hope: Belongings and resistance of the labouring poor* (Ph.D, University of the Witwatersrand, 2012), pp. 133-137.

Place of origin could be used to mobilise desertion. This is most clearly demonstrated by the 1760 case involving the “droster” gang that murdered Michiel Smuts and his family, who lived on the foot of Table Mountain.³² Court testimony points to a slave, named September, who was respected by other slaves and “acted as a doctor amongst the slaves of the Bugis [East Asian] nation”.³³ September was apparently visited by Bugis slaves from other farms to get assistance with regards to health and healing. Other groups were much more inclusive and consisted of men and women from different races, ethnicities, and labour types. For instance, in 1712 two European convicts and a slave were prosecuted for theft and desertion³⁴ and, in the same year, Joudan Tappa (known as ‘Paap’), who resided on the Groot Constantia farm, led a group of 23 deserters.³⁵ Tappa, a political exile from Batavia, was no doubt already regarded as a political dissident. His company of “drosters” included convicts as well as runaway Company and privately-owned slaves, who were also from different places of origin. This suggests pre-existing social connections that reached beyond specific workplaces.

Some runaways attempted to leave the Cape and travel to distant lands where they believed they could secure a better life. Some tried to reach African communities in the interior. Many Malagasy slaves apparently believed that they could return home by travelling overland.³⁶ Europe, South America, and even Turkey were also seen as possible destinations, and many slaves, sailors, and soldiers believed that desertion via ship across the sea offered the best opportunities for escape and redemption.

There are also a number of cases in the criminal records showing that slaves deserted via the VOC’s shipping system, something that would be extremely difficult to accomplish without close linkages existing between slaves and sailors. In 1750, Jan van de Caab fled on the ship “Hof d’Uno” to the Netherlands.³⁷ He made his way to Zeeland where he apparently married. He returned to the Cape in 1751 as a sailor under the pseudonym Jan Harmensz Grutter of St. Helena, but he was caught.

32 G Groenewald & N Worden, *Trials of Slavery...*, p. 355 (summary of case: 1760 Achilles van de West Cust); M Cairns, “The Smuts Family Murders”, *CARBO*, 2:3 (1980), pp. 13-16.

33 WCPA CJ 789, 1756 -70, ff 268 -93 translated in N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of Slavery...*, p. 371.

34 WCPA CJ 782, HF Heese, *Reg en onreg: Kaapse regspraak in die agtiende eeu*, C-Reeks: Navorsingspublikasies, 6 (Instituut vir Historiese Navorsing, Universiteit van Wes-Kaapland, Bellville, 1994), p. 178.

35 WCPA CJ 782, 53, Heese, *Reg en onreg...*, p. 224; M Paulse, “Escape from Constantia”, UWC, South African Contemporary Society and Humanities Seminar, Article No. 21, 2004 (African Studies Library, University of Cape Town).

36 N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa...*, pp. 132-133.

37 WCPA CJ 33, Criminele Regtsrolle, 1751, ff. 3-3, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 287.

The bleeding of labour from the Colony through desertion also points to constant restlessness amongst the popular classes. Perhaps believing that deserters were by nature scoundrels, the courts did not pay much attention to the reasons given for desertion; it is often difficult to gauge deserters' motives or, more specifically, their conceptions of justice from the court records. Even so, it would appear that harsh punishment and maltreatment were two recurring grievances, providing potent motivations for desertion. While some owners treated their slaves relatively well, many slaves, especially those who were privately-owned, were underfed, poorly clothed, overworked, harshly punished and abused by their masters.

Khoesan servants and Company sailors and soldiers were not treated much better than slaves, and regularly deserted. The traveller Carl Peter Thunberg noted that:³⁸

...sailors and soldiers, are in many respects treated worse and with less compassion, than the very slaves themselves. With respect to the latter, the owner not only takes care that they are clothed and fed, but likewise, when they are sick that they are well nursed and have proper medical attendance. The former go as they can, viz. with naked torsos or dressed in tattered clothes, which, perhaps, after all, do not fit them; and when one of them dies, it is a common saying, that the Company gets another for nine guilders.

Nigel Penn has documented, for example, a spate of desertions by VOC sailors stationed at the Cape and Rio de Lagoa (present day Delagoa Bay in Mozambique, occupied by the VOC from 1724 to 1730) in the late 1720s. In one instance in 1728 one third of the Rio de Lagoa garrison – 62 out of 186 men – planned to ransack the Company store and march overland to the Portuguese station at Inhambane.³⁹ The Rio de la Goa plot came fast on the heels of news that a group of 13 VOC soldiers had successfully reached Inhambane. Stories of success circulated widely through popular networks – a significant point – and further motivated those who were fed up with their lot. Similarly in 1751 a group of 13 slaves agreed to band together and run away when they heard that “there had recently been a group [of] slaves who had also taken flight and who had recently arrived safely at a free village of blacks or even in Madagascar”.⁴⁰

38 P Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope, 1777-1775*, edited by VS Forbes and revised translation by J and I Runder (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1986), pp. 152-153.

39 N Penn, “Great escapes: Deserting soldiers during Nood’s Cape Governorship, 1727-1729”, N Worden, *Contingent lives...*, pp. 559 -588; N Penn, “Great escapes...”, N Worden *Contingent lives...*, pp. 573, 574.

40 WCPA CJ 788, Sententiën, 1750 – 1755, ff. 58-67, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 295.

Desertion was messy, in that it was usually linked to other disorderly acts which could be more overt in nature; such as attacks on farm owners, theft, raids on farms, arson and mutinies or rebellions. Unsurprisingly, “drosters” were considered a dangerous threat to the colony, and “droster” gangs, a type of maroon community, especially so. The traveller Sparrman’s discussion of his stay with a bailiff (farm manager) on his journey to Paarl in the interior clearly illustrates that deserters were regarded as a public threat. Sparrman and the bailiff bolted the door and hung “five loaded pieces” over their heads when they retired for the evening, because they feared the “runaway and rebel slaves” who continually wandered about “in order to plunder houses for victuals and fire-arms, or else to draw others to their party”.⁴¹

Due to the dangers associated with desertion, commandos were allowed to execute runaways on the spot. In the sentencing of a deserter in 1737, the court declared: “If the master of the house would find an unknown black “jongen” [boy/slave] at night in his house, he could, and totally in accordance with the law, stab to death or shoot the same”.⁴² Company militia mobilised to capture groups of armed runaways also often shot and killed such runaways, especially when they resisted arrest.

Desertion in the Cape was endemic. Since neither the Company nor the other masters were especially interested in improving living and working conditions and instead resorted to harsh punishments to discipline labourers, desertion was often the only remedy for an unbearable existence. Rather than simply a form of escape, desertion and “droster” gangs can be viewed as direct action. Desertion was widely practiced, often collective, and widely supported by the popular classes; “droster” gangs and popular networks often straddled the divisions between slave, servant, sailor and soldier; they were socially inclusive and had a significant symbolic effect in that they represented the possibility of a better life and demonstrated the limits of upper class power and hegemony.

41 A Sparrman, *A voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, around the world and to the country of the Hottentots and the Caffers from the year 1772 -1776*, edited by VS Forbes and translated by J & I Rudner, I (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, Reprint Series, Cape Town, 2007), p. 102.

42 WCPA, CJ 341 Criminele Process Stukken, 1737, ff. 394 -96, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 147.

“To burn down his master’s house”: Arson

On the 12 March 1736, a fire started on the southern edge of Cape Town. With a large number of buildings with dry thatched roofs and a strong southeast wind, five houses were quickly engulfed in flames and burned to the ground.⁴³ The authorities immediately suspected arson and the culprits were identified as Leander van Boegis and his gang of “drosters”. There had already been a few other arson attempts and the 1736 fire caused a panic among masters and colonial authorities alike. A number of commandos were ordered to round up all runaways and there was a marked increase in the number of desertion cases brought before the court.

As the incident above indicates, arson could be undertaken by a collective, but in most of the court cases it is individuals who were prosecuted for arson. However, arson can still be considered to be a form of direct action. Fire could utterly ruin a town or a farming district, and arson was a directed, and often overt, protest against intolerable punishments and actions. It served as a powerful symbol of the devastation that accompanied popular disorder and dissidence and caused a great deal of anxiety amongst the master class.

Thus, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries numerous ordinances were passed that warned against the danger of fire, and significantly, also outlined the horrific punishments awaiting convicted arsonists. Meeting fire with fire, arsonists were often burned alive as a punishment. Travel writer Peter Kolben provides the following description:⁴⁴

A slave at the Cape, in my time there, attempted more than once to burn down his master’s house. For this, being seized, he was sentenced to be roasted alive: and the execution was performed in the following manner. A stout post being fix’d upright in the ground, he was fastened to it by a chain... Then was kindled a large fire round about him, just beyond the stretch of the chain. The flames rose high; the heat was vehement. He ran for some time to and again about the post; but gave not one cry. Being half roasted he sunk down.

Such spectacularly gruesome punishment was not only retributive, but also served as a warning to others. Robert Shell argues that the fear of fire and the threat of arson left a distinct imprint on local architecture.⁴⁵ For instance, the Company forbade the construction of urban houses with low eaves, which authorities believed were easily ignited by malicious slaves and Khoesan. In

43 R Ross, *Cape of Torments...*, p. 54.

44 R Shell, *Children of bondage...*, p. 365.

45 R Shell, *Children of bondage...*, p. 265.

the early eighteenth century the Company further encouraged “arson-proof” flat roofs on homes and other buildings.⁴⁶

The arson cases brought before the court shed important light on the moral codes and popular notions of injustice. In 1717 Aaron van Bengalen told the court that he set his owner’s house alight because he had grown tired of the beatings administered by his owner’s stepson.⁴⁷ In 1724 Andries van Ceijlon, who deserted after a vicious beating for stealing brandy and wine, returned one night and set fire to his master’s cellar.⁴⁸ He told the court he committed such crimes out of “sadness, because he never had to endure so much punishment, and also that he sought his death and wanted to be removed from the world”. Separation from family and loved ones also played a role and Fortuijn van Bengalen resorted to arson in 1742 after the master of his lover, Christijn, treated him badly and interfered with their relationship.

Just like the gruesome punishment meted out to arsonists, the deliberate setting of fires by the popular classes had a symbolic importance, as it indicated clearly that the popular classes rejected physical punishment and social control. The devastation and destruction of deliberate fire setting posed a real threat to the security of the colony and was even etched onto Cape architecture. Arson reminded masters and colonial authorities that there were limits to degradation.

“I will get you”: Threats and attacks

Baatjoe van Mandhaar was prosecuted for threatening to kill his owner and for resisting arrest in 1757.⁴⁹ After having being ill for a couple of days (which the court interpreted as malingering), Baatjoe barricaded himself into the attic of his master’s house and, speaking in Portuguese, threatened to kill his owner. The “geweldig” (provost), who was called by the neighbours to assist, ordered Baatjoe down from the attic. Baatjoe responded, “I am a Mandhaar, you come up to me”.⁵⁰ Baatjoe then resisted capture, “frantically throwing

46 R Shell, *Children of bondage...*, p. 286.

47 WCPA CJ 784 Sententiën, 1717-1725, ff. 7-11 and CJ 321 Criminele Process Stukken, 1717, document 8, N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, pp. 53-56.

48 WCPA CJ 784 Sententiën, 1717-1725, ff 225-30, N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 100.

49 N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, summary of WCPA CJ 789, Sententiën, 1756-1760, ff 80-91, Baatjoe van Mandhaar, 337, N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, pp. 340-344.

50 WCPA CJ 789, Sententiën, 1756-1760, ff 80-91, Baatjoe van Mandhaar, N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 342.

bottles, stones and everything that he could find at the people who came towards the attic". When he was eventually subdued, he declared that he would rather be punished by the courts than by his master.

Such attacks and the murder of masters were direct and overt subversions of the social order. It was not only slaves that participated in such acts. For instance, in 1704 a soldier, Gerrit De Kemp was tried for murdering an official.⁵¹ In 1746 Hartebees, a Khoesan servant was prosecuted for murdering the farmer for whom he worked.⁵² Women servants also resorted to such measures. In 1746 two Khoesan women, Eva and Maria, appeared in court for their involvement in an attack on a "knecht" (supervisor).⁵³ The "knecht", Simon Ingolt, was apparently attacked when he attempted to beat Maria, and her slave "husband" came to her rescue. In 1750 the slave Amarantia van Mozambique hired the convict, Lantiep van Java, to murder her master, and in 1799 two Khoesan women, Mietje and Sara, attempted to poison their masters.⁵⁴

Sometimes attacks on overseers and masters were collective in nature and carried out by groups. Sparrman noted the case of a group of slaves who chopped off their owner's head with an axe.⁵⁵ Attacks, including group attacks, continued into the early nineteenth century: Henry Lichtenstein, a traveller, referred to at least three separate cases at the time. These included the murder of a free-burgher family by a group of Khoesan servants and slaves in the Matjesfontien area.⁵⁶

As in the case Baatjoe van Mandhaar, such attacks were not only physical, but often included insults, threats and other forms of overt disrespect. The courts took pains to record such verbal outbursts, not just the violence; perhaps this was to demonstrate that the culprit was insolent from the start. Nevertheless, these recordings are extremely interesting to the historian, in that they shed light on popular conceptions of justice and indicate that the working poor did not necessarily respect their masters, nor accept the system in which they found themselves.

51 WCPA CJ, 781, 29, HF Heese, *Reg en onreg...*, p. 9.

52 WCPA CJ 789, 22, HF Heese, *Reg en onreg...*, p. 207.

53 WCPA CJ 787, 22, HF Heese, *Reg en onreg...*, pp. 196, 232

54 WCPA CJ 788, 2, *Reg en onreg...*, p. 164; WCPA CJ 798, 4, HF Heese, *Reg en onreg...*, pp. 236, 254.

55 A Sparrman, *A voyage to the Cape of Good Hope...*, II, p. 255.

56 H Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa, in the years 1803,1804,1805,1806*, I & II, translated by Anne Plumtre, I (British and Foreign Public Library, 1815), pp. 12-5, for other cases see Vol. 2, pp. 196, 237.

For instance, the slave Frans van Madagascar was enraged because he believed that he had been punished too severely by the “mandoor” (a slave overseer) for being too drunk to work.⁵⁷ Frans did not react immediately, but patiently waited for the “mandoor” outside the women slaves’ quarters later that night, and beat him. The “mandoor” died of his injuries. Even if slaves accepted that beatings were part of bondage, they developed their own understandings of “fair” treatment, and acted when these understandings were violated. Frans may have thought that his drunkenness was sanctioned, if not encouraged, since alcohol was often supplied to slaves before they started their day.

Cupido van Mallabaar, brought to trial in 1739, could no longer bear the loneliness of being the only slave in the household and of struggling to adapt to his new cultural context.⁵⁸ Not sure of how to proceed, he vacillated between taking his own life, or that of his mistress and her young child. He told his mistress that he was not used to wearing the clothes that he had been given, and complained that he had been alone for two years. After eventually attempting to stab his mistress, he declared: “It would be better if I murder you, your husband and your child, and that I flay you open like flecked fish, and then do me as well”.⁵⁹

In 1761, a slave named Hermanus objected to his leisure-time being violated and, with the assistance of his fellows, challenged the authority of the farm “knecht”. Hermanus was displeased that he, together with the servants, were called to work on a Sunday. At first he claimed that there were animals in the wheat fields that prevented them from working. Then, when the “knecht”, a soldier on leave named Johan Spring, chased the buck away, Hermanus complained that the plough’s wheel was broken. After the wheel was fixed, the rope of the plough broke – twice – and Hermanus then declared, “All the work which is done on a Sunday, is of the devil, and is accursed”.⁶⁰ A quarrel ensued, and Hermanus attacked Spring and shouted, “[y]ou mother-fucking sailor, I will get you”.⁶¹ This insult drew attention to Spring’s low status (akin to that of other servants), thus questioning his ability to oversee the work of

57 WCPA CJ 792 Sententiën, 1768-1771, ff. 36-42, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, pp. 430-431.

58 WCPA CJ 786 Sententiën, 1736-1743, ff.263-70, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, pp. 165-168.

59 WCPA CJ 786, Sententiën, 1736 – 1745, ff. 236-70, 1739, Cupido van Mallabaar, N Worden and G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 167.

60 WCPA 1/ STB 3/11 Criminele Verklaringen, 1759-1782, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 390.

61 WCPA 1/ STB 3/11 Criminele Verklaringen, 1759-1782, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 391.

other servants and slaves.

When Spring ordered the other servants, a Khoesan named Cobus and a “Bastaard-Hottentot” named Adriaan, to tie Hermanus down they flatly refused, even after he threatened to shoot them in the legs. Their refusal further eroded Spring’s authority, and, while they justified it by pretending to be scared of Hermanus, there was rather more to the story. Hermanus and his fellows had so successfully undermined a previous “knecht” that he was fired (that was why Spring was hired). This strategy of subversion appears to have come to an end when Hermanus committed suicide before he was taken to the authorities in Stellenbosch for punishment.

Empty promises of reward for loyal service, and most especially, unrealised promises of manumission, also served as powerful triggers for violent attacks. After the death of his master, the slave artisan Jonas van Manado petitioned his master’s wife to award him his freedom. In a letter he respectfully highlighted a decade of faithful service, in which he had not complained to anyone, and with “knees bent,” humbly appealed to his mistress’ mercifulness and compassion to permit him his freedom.⁶² He told his mistress that his “baas” (boss) had always told him, “I will do good to you”. But his petition was refused and Jonas declared “[t]hen I will not do good any longer”.⁶³ That evening Jonas attacked his mistress in her bed and attempted to slit her throat. He was not successful, and was later apprehended. Jonas van Manado must have felt horribly tricked when he learned that his faithful service and endurance was for naught, and that his master had no intention of awarding him his freedom. His reasons for remaining compliant and deferential had been removed; the implicit deal he took to be in place no longer applied.

Slaves, Khoesan labourers, sailors and soldiers who threatened, attacked and insulted their masters or commanders were usually drunk or intoxicated, but their acts were not necessarily mindless or a mere product of intoxication. They questioned the authority of their masters and overseers, and acted when their conceptions of free treatment, companionship, leisure time, solidarity, and fair reward were violated. To avoid the pain and public humiliation of punishments bestowed by the court, many of those who threatened, attacked, or killed their masters also subsequently took their own lives. Rather than

62 WCPA CJ 323 Criminele Process Stukken, 1719, f. 519 [modern pagination], N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 83,

63 WCPA CJ 323 Criminele Process Stukken, 1719, ff. 535-39, N Worden & G Groenewald, *Trials of slavery...*, p. 81.

regard such attacks as irrational and ineffective, I would suggest that for many a life of hardship and servitude was worse than death, and death by one's own hand was preference to the brutal deaths meted out by Company justice.

“A seditious statement”: Collective insurgency

In 1659, a small group of VOC soldiers stationed at the Cape, supported by “a black convict”, “two servants of freemen” and some slaves, plotted to capture a ship, the *Erasmus*, and escape to Angola or Portugal.⁶⁴ The plot was apparently betrayed and the ringleaders rounded up and punished. The *Erasmus* plot was one of the first recorded cases of popular collective insurgency and it was the harbinger of revolts to follow. In the Cape, popular collective insurgency – which implies a direct and combined form of protest – took a number of forms including armed anti-colonial raids, mutinies and maritime desertion via ship (such as the *Erasmus* plot), as well as strikes.

The creation of large Khoesan bands on the colony's borderlands that raided colonial homesteads has already been noted above. It should be reiterated that such raids were common and informed by a clear anti-colonial sentiment. It is also well documented that independent Khoesan bands welcomed deserters, which suggests that such bands were not limited to Khoesan and were more inclusive in character. However, more research is required to establish the social composition of such bands and raids. Khoesan also participated in other collective actions, often with other sections of the popular classes. For instance, Russel Viljoen notes that in the 1780s Khoesan resistance started to take on new forms when the prophet Jan Parel and 400 of his followers (mainly Khoesan, but also including a few slaves and “free blacks” in the Overberg region) combined millenarianism with a “revelation” of revolution.⁶⁵ Parel predicted that the world would end on 25 October 1788 (a year before the French Revolution), ushering in an era of utopian bliss and the end of colonial rule.

The *Erasmus* plot also underlines the point that popular insurrection was not necessarily land-based, and that no account of resistance at the Cape can

⁶⁴ F Valentyn, *Description of the Cape of Good Hope with the matters concerning it, Amsterdam 1726*, II, edited by P Setton, R Raven-Hart, WJ de Kock, EH Raidt and translated by R Raven-Hart (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1791), pp. 163-164; JJ Saar, R Raven-Hart, *Cape Good Hope! 1652-1702! The first 50 Years of Dutch colonisation as seen by callers* (Cape Town, A A Balkema, 1971), pp. 58-67, 64.

⁶⁵ R Viljoen, “‘Revelation of a revolution’: The prophecies of Jan Parel, alias Onse Liewe Heer”, *Kronos*, 21, 1994, pp. 3-15.

ignore the maritime world of which it was apart. This dimension of resistance has been largely ignored by the land-focussed South African historiography, which has largely elided the maritime frontier in the making of the region. A number of mutinies on VOC ships took place near the Cape, while at times mutineers “en route” to the Netherlands or Batavia were tried by the Cape’s Council of Justice. In 1675, the English-speaking sailors of the VOC’s “America” planned to overthrow the officers, kill crewmen who opposed them, commandeer the ship, and sail to freedom in Brazil.⁶⁶ Their plot was betrayed just a few days before the mutiny was to take place. The ringleaders were imprisoned and the ship’s command decided to hand them over to the authorities at the Cape. The mutineers who appeared before the Council indicated that their actions were inspired by hunger, disease, and the alarmingly high rate of death on the ship.

In their overview of mutinies in the VOC world, Bruijn and Van Eyck van Heslinga note that such mutinies followed two main patterns.⁶⁷ First, demonstrating the combinations of different modes of protest, mutiny was usually linked to mass desertion. Like those on the “America”, mutineers generally sought to violently overthrow the ship’s officers, commandeer the ship, and desert to distant lands where they believed they could build a better life and an independent future.⁶⁸

This was, for instance, the plan of the mainly French sailors on the *Duinenburg* in 1766.⁶⁹ Under the leadership of Jean Baptist Paradijs, who was depicted by the authorities as a blasphemer and devil-worshiper, they planned to kill the officers and desert. The plan was exposed before it could be carried out and more than 20 mutineers were identified and imprisoned. They were handed over to the Council of Justice at the Cape. In their interrogations, some mutineers claimed that they participated only because they had been offered money and riches by Paradijs. But even before the voyage, there were grumblings amongst the crew, and the sailor Paradijs’s ability to dole out rewards was dubious at best. It appears rather that poor treatment and hunger inspired the men to join the plot.

66 ACJ Vermeulen, “Onrust ende wederspanningheyt: Vijf muiterijen in de zeventiende eeuw”, JR Bruijn en ES van Eyck van Heslinga, *Muiterij: Oproeren berechtig op schepen van de VOC* (Haarlem, De Boer Maritiem, 1980), pp. 39-40.

67 JR Bruijn et al, “De Scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie en het verschijnsel muiterij”, JR Bruijn et al, *Muiterij...*, pp. 9-26, 21.

68 JR Bruijn et al, “De scheepvaart van de Oost-Indische Compagnie...”, JR Bruijn et al, *Muiterij...*, p. 22.

69 I van Meurs, “Courage, Francois: Een samenzwering op de ‘Duinenburg’ in 1766”, JR Bruijn et al, *Muiterij...*, pp. 84-96.

It was not only sailors and soldiers who mutinied for the purposes of deserting. In 1751 a small group of mainly Asian convicts and slaves on Robben Island planned to commandeer the provision ship and sail to their homelands.⁷⁰ Marking an upsurge in maritime resistance in 1766, the same year as the *Duinenburg* plot, 140 Malagasy slaves revolted and commandeered the *Meermin*.⁷¹ In 1784 Chinese sailors on the *Java* mutinied, while a conspiracy was also uncovered amongst slaves on the *Slot ter Hoeg*, which was travelling in the same fleet as the *Java*.⁷² Officers on the *Slot ter Hoeg* were particularly concerned that the conspiracy amongst these slaves had spread to Asian sailors. These instances of disorder fuelled upper-class anxieties concerning the Asian crewmen upon which the Company was growing ever more reliant.

The second kind of mutiny that the VOC had to deal with, note Bruijn and Van Eyck van Heslinga, resembled modern strikes during which crews withheld their labour to draw attention to injustice. Corruption, especially with regards to rations, and high rates of mortality proved key areas of concern. It appears that only one such mutiny involved the Cape, and it occurred just before the VOC station was established in 1652. In 1649 the *Spare* veered off course due to stormy and extremely cold weather.⁷³ Believing that they would not make it to the Cape alive, they refused to follow instructions until the ship returned to the Netherlands. The strategy brought temporary relief and the ship briefly stopped at the island Tercera. In line with the Company's standard strategy of repression, mutineers/strikers were then identified, apprehended and severely punished, and the *Spare* continued the voyage to the Cape.

Strikes were not confined to ships. In 1752, skilled Company metal workers at the Cape forge went on strike. Worden notes that the strike emanated from a dispute regarding the theft of spades, but was ultimately over notions of honour and status.⁷⁴ From the Company's point of view, the metal workers had undermined the authority of their superiors and work-place discipline. The strikers were therefore tried by the court for insolence. The three ringleaders

70 K Ward, "The bounds of bondage: Forced migration from Batavia to the Cape of Good Hope during the Dutch East India Company era, c. 1652–1795", PhD, University of Michigan, 2002, pp. 261-269.

71 D Sleigh and P Westra, *De Opstand op het slavenschip Meermin* (Cosee, Amsterdam, 2013); A Alexander, "The mutiny of the Meermin", Honours dissertation, University of Cape Town.

72 K van der Tempel, "Wij hebben amok in ons schip: Aziaten in opstand tijdens drie terugreizen op het einde van de achttiende eeuw", JR Bruijn et al, *Muiterij...*, pp. 123-147; M van Rossum, "Amok!: Mutinies and slaves on Dutch East Indiamen in the 1780s", *International Review of Social History*, 58(21), 2013, pp. 109-130.

73 ACJ Vermeulen, "Onrust ende wederspanning...", JR Bruijn et al, *Muiterij...*, pp. 41-43.

74 The only account of this strike is given by N Worden, "Artisan Conflicts in a colonial context: The Cape Town blacksmith strike of 1752", *Labor History*, 46(2), 2005, pp. 55-184.

were humiliated through a public whipping and reduced to the rank of sailor. The remaining 17 were fined one month's wages.

Collective insurgency – which often included different sections of the popular classes acting together – was often a means to realise immediate change and access a life of freedom. Like arson or the attack of masters, insurrection was a rebellion against authority and control. The collective, relatively dramatic forms of protest discussed above show that it is not true that the popular classes necessarily lacked political imagination or failed to take opportunities of unity, but rather, only that they had not yet built an effective counter power to block or change the Company's standard policy of violent repression.

Conclusion

To fully appreciate the complex political identities and actions of the Cape's popular classes we need to question the categories – especially the “single category” history approach – and the binaries that inform the literature. These categories – themselves problematic and over-simplified conceptions of race and ethnicity read onto the past – obscure important, broad-based social connections, political solidarities and class-based action that operated across race, ethnicity and type of labour. This article thus stresses instances in which protests were inclusive – when men and women, regardless of their race, ethnicity or labour type acted jointly. If we are to pursue different kinds of histories that have been obscured by our apartheid past, surely such social and political belongings encourage more investigation.

Popular protest was messy – and often included a number of defiant acts. For instance, desertion could morph into open rebellion, an attack on a master could lead to desertion, or arson could be a form of hidden sabotage by a dissident group, or an open and deliberate attack on a master by an outraged individual. The assumptions of fragmentation, division and impotence that inform our understandings of the nature and potential of pre-industrial resistance also require re-examination if we are to understand the nuances of popular protest on its own terms.

The popular classes were not complacent and did not accept the structure of Cape colonial society nor the conditions under which they were expected to labour and live. The values of the master class were never hegemonic. Court cases give us a rough indication as to what the popular classes rejected –

such as harsh punishments, being separated from loved ones, or working long hours. It is much more difficult to ascertain the political ideologies of the popular classes. Apart from the fragmented nature and limits of the archive, such political ideas can only be examined if we accept the popular classes in the VOC-Cape as legitimate historical actors, remaking the world from below. What is clear, however, is that solidarity, and alternative conceptions of morality and justice, were a real, and unduly forgotten, part of the story of the making of the popular classes in southern Africa.