Race, labour process and transition: the sociology of work in South Africa

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Race, labour process and transition: the sociology of work in South Africa

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In this paper the enduring research themes which shape the sociology of work in South Africa, as well as new themes of recent scholarship in the sociology of work, are identified. The institutional context through which teaching and research into work is conducted is then described. It is suggested that a tension exists between an emphasis by management on efficiency in the workplace, with the growing political demand for greater equity in the workplace to redress the legacy of apartheid. In this context the sociological study of work is emerging as an arena of sharp intellectual and ideological contestation over the impact of globalisation on the world of work.

From Mayo to Marx

The sociological study of work emerged as a specialised field within general sociology in South African universities in the late sixties. This was a logical development as South Africa was becoming a modern industrial economy. The concerns of management and the views of Elton Mayo’s Human Relations School dictated much of the syllabus, focussing on factors affecting productivity such as high labour turnover, morale and monotony in industry (Jubber 1979). The emergence of strong shopfloor-based unions in the seventies among black workers led to a growing interest in universities in sociological research into the workplace (Webster 1981:95-102). This included anthropological research on informal work groups as well as a growing interest in the history of labour among a group of activist-scholars sympathetic to the emerging trade unions (Alverson 1975; Gordon 1978; Webster 1978). The result was something of a bifurcation between the traditional industrial sociology of work taught largely in the pro-apartheid Afrikaans-speaking universities, and the presentation of courses on the ‘labour process’ in anti-apartheid English-speaking universities.

‘The subjects studied by these two groups, the theoretical frameworks within which the discipline was taught, and the methodological approaches employed, were all subject to this political dividing line. The separation extended as far as two separate sociological associations, separate sociological congresses, and even different academic journals in which sociologists could publish their research’ (van der Merwe, 1995).

The labour process approach was strongly influenced by Harry Braverman’s attempt to restate Marx’s theory of the labour process (Braverman 1974). Fuelled by the growth of militant industrial unions, the labour process approach...
rapidly overtook the traditional industrial sociological perspective in the growing number of industrial sociology programmes that emerged in the late seventies and early eighties in South African universities (Lever: 1982). The labour process approach, with its notion of the inherently antagonistic character of capitalist production relations and its stress on coercion in the workplace, captured the despotic nature of the apartheid workplace and generated widespread interest in the labour process among industrial sociologists. This approach was reinforced by the emergence of a neo-Marxist class paradigm among a group of exiled and expatriate scholars. These ‘revisionist’ scholars attempted to show, through the use of class analysis, that apartheid aided capitalist development by providing employers with cheap, rightless black labour (Bozzoli & Delius, 1990).

As resistance to apartheid deepened during the eighties, the workplace became a contested terrain and studies of the workplace were overtaken by studies on the relationship between the trade union movement and national liberation (Adler and Webster, 1995). The achievement of democracy and exposure of the South African workplace to global competition in the nineties revitalised the sociological study of work. It has led to debates between sociologists on whether, and how, a more flexible system of production can be introduced in South Africa. It has also opened up opportunities for a widening range of research activities and has generated new research partnerships between the universities and various outside stakeholders.

It is argued in this paper that a new research programme emerged in industrial sociology in South Africa in the seventies and eighties that had at its core Marx’s theory of the capitalist labour process. This programme generated a number of substantial studies of the labour process that were to transform the sociological study of work in South Africa. New concepts such as racial despotism and racial fordism were developed to understand the nature of work relations in South Africa. Researchers drew on new currents in Marxist theory, such as regulation theory in an attempt to understand the South African workplace. The question raised by this research is whether to abandon the theory or try to protect the theory by build auxiliary hypotheses (Burawoy, 1990).

By and large South African industrial sociologists have responded to this challenge by avoiding theoretical debates and have concentrated instead on concrete studies of the workplace and the struggles that have taken place within it. The result is a rich body of empirical and ethnographic detail on one hand and, more recently, a range of policy oriented interventions on the restructuring of work and the new corporatist style institutions on the other hand. Where this will lead to, theoretically, is not yet clear; what is clear is that the workplace has re-emerged as a crucial area of research and policy debate.

In this paper the enduring research themes which shape the sociology of work in South Africa, as well as the new themes of recent scholarship in the sociology of work, are identified. The institutional context through which teaching and research into work is conducted is then described. The paper does not cover the substantial body of research on the origins and nature of the labour movement - what could be described as trade union studies - but concentrates instead more narrowly on the sociology of work. In the conclusion, it is suggested that the sociological study of work is emerging as an arena of sharp intellectual and ideological contestation over the impact of globalisation on the world of work.

**Enduring themes: old and new forms of control at work**

Deskilling, racism in the workplace and the nature of Fordism in South Africa emerged as the three main areas of debate in South African studies on the sociology of work.

**Skill, deskilling and skill enhancement**

The first theme began as a debate on the degree to which skills had been transformed and eroded through capitalist development and whether this could be described as a ‘degradation of labour’. Research led to a critique of Braverman’s deskilling thesis, focussing on worker resistance, the subjective experience of work and tacit skills.
Researchers concluded that labour process theory was too restrictive and that a new approach to skill formation, one which recognised the need for constant skill acquisition, career progression and the importance of informal knowledge, needed to be developed (Webster & Leger, 1992).

These studies suggested that capitalist development had not created a single mass of homogeneous labour, but a complex, internally differentiated labour market, containing an uneven variety of formal and informal skills.

Early research was largely historical and showed how craft workers resisted the process of deskilling and retained considerable control over the supply of labour (Lewis 1984; Webster 1985; Ewart 1990). Such resistance was quite successful in retaining levels of skill, with the key role being played by the craft union through the mechanism of social exclusion. In particular, by methods of labour market closure, limiting recruitment to an occupation to whites only, and demanding lengthy training, craft workers were able to protect established interests. The result was the survival of a higher number of ‘craft’ jobs than the deskilling thesis would appear to indicate. By acting defensively to protect their skills through the job colour bar, craft workers consolidated their position as a white labour aristocracy at an early stage in the history of industrialisation in South Africa (Johnstone 1976; Katz 1976; Davies 1979).

The new bargaining power conferred on ‘unskilled’ and semiskilled workers when mechanization replaced craft skill, emerged as a research interest in the 80s. In general terms, mechanization undermines the marketplace bargaining power (as embodied in the skills of craft workers) while simultaneously enhancing labour’s workplace bargaining power by making capital vulnerable to workers’ direct action at the point of production. This, as has been argued elsewhere, provided the conditions for the rapid growth of militant shop floor industrial unionism in the United States in the thirties, after the Second World War in Europe and in semi-industrialized countries such as Brazil, South Korea and South Africa in the seventies and eighties (Edwards 1979; Arrighi and Silver 1984).

Research into this link between the transformation of work under monopoly capitalism and the rapid growth of militant shop floor industrial unions was to dominate research into the sociology of work in South Africa throughout the eighties (Lewis 1985; Webster 1985; Innes 1983; Southall 1985; Maree 1985; Sitas 1984; Adler 1994). It also led to comparisons with militant labour movements in other semi-industrialized countries, such as Brazil, where countries had undergone a similar pattern of rapid transformation of the labour process, a despotic system of labour control, a lack of a social infrastructure in the community, and restricted access to political power (Seidman 1994).

In trying to find answers to why workers were joining the new industrial unions in large numbers, industrial sociologists were drawn beyond the workplace to an examination of working class cultural formations. Sitas called these cultural formations, defensive combinations, as it was these informal social networks that were to provide the basis for collective mobilisation of migrant workers (Sitas, 1984). This new direction brought the subjective experience of work into industrial sociology generating a number of studies which analysed culture and working life as well as the relationship of unions to the new social movements (Bonnin, 1987).

While evidence of worker resistance to deskilling qualified Braverman’s thesis, it did not challenge his central assumption that ‘skill’ has been removed from modern work. Research among black underground miners by Leger showed that even so-called unskilled workers exercise a range of tacit skills, tricks of the trade that are essential to production but receive no formal acknowledgement (Leger 1992). This detailed examination of underground mining found that formal training played a minor role in imparting tacit skills which are largely learnt from ‘unskilled’ black miners. The term ‘unskilled’ grossly underrates the working knowledge required and the skills exercised in these occupations. ‘There is no such thing as unskilled work
and... the term is humiliating to the workers so labelled' (Leger 1992:13). Leger concluded that the absolute divorce of conception from execution as Taylorism proposed is an impossibility and Taylorism cannot successfully reduce workers to robots.

In elaborating the concept of tacit skills, Leger argued that the labour process is always a dual process of conflict and cooperation, in which management never gains absolute control over production. It follows that it is not the case that a deskilled fragmented workforce is needed by capital to maintain control. The road to productivity enhancement can lead also through skills enhancement and cooperative relations with trade unions (Adler, 1993: 45- 49, 58-60). Research on the impact of the new microelectronic technology on metal workers and clerical workers found that deskilling was not taking place (Kraak: 1987: Glenn, 1992). In fact the opposite occurred: clerical staff found their jobs more stimulating and exciting rather than routinised (Glenn, 1992).

Indeed many companies, under the influence of Japanese style Green areas, have begun to tap into workers' tacit skills (Maller, 1992:137). Access to tacit knowledge, Kraak argues, is vital for the continuous innovations required in the global information economy.

'The fundamental challenge of the informational economy is to create a dynamic synergy between formalised knowledge as practised by scientists in the universities on the one hand, and tacit knowledge as practised by professional and skilled workers in the workplace, on the other. It is in the interaction of these two great knowledge forms... (where) new commercial applications best occur' (Kraak 1997:59).

Race and work
The second enduring theme began as a debate over the system of labour control in the workplace, a system characterised in South Africa by coercion and racism. Two quite different concepts emerged - racial despotism and racial fordism - to analyse the South African workplace. They are based on quite different intellectual approaches and have taken the debate in two different directions - the first in the direction of workplace industrial relations, the second in the direction of post-fordism. However, both approaches are preoccupied with the possibilities of transition towards a more orderly, equitable, participatory and productive workplaces.

The concept of racial despotism captures the notion that in apartheid South Africa, work was characterised by coercion rather than consent, and by the domination of one racial group by another (Burawoy, 1985). At the core of this system of total control was the compound where large numbers of black workers were housed separately from the rest of society but often located within the premises of the workplace. It has been argued that the compound was one of the most effective forms of labour control ever invented (Rex, 1973).

Formally, everyday power in the compound was exercised by the white compound manager assisted by black indunas - management appointed supervisors. In the workplace, control was exercised by white foreman who were assisted by black 'boss-boys'. Although this system of control was to decline in the sixties with the emergence of modern personnel departments and, later, the rise of shop stewards in the workplace, crucial features of this system persist in the modern workplace (Nzimande, 1991: 166-199). African personnel practitioners are reluctant partners of capitalism because racial discrimination has produced a situation where members of the African middle classes share many of the humiliating conditions with black workers (Nzimande, 1986:49-58). 7

Initial research focussed on the transition from a despotic form of management to an industrial relations system based on trade union rights and collective bargaining (Webster, 1985). The growing rate of unionisation of black workers and the realisation that the capitalist system was at risk in the long term because of its association with
apartheid, prompted management to introduce participatory schemes in the workplace.

The results of research on these schemes were that employers preferred Japanese-style task oriented forms of participation such as Green Areas and Quality Circles (Maller, 1992).

Research has shown that workers are generally suspicious of management-initiated participation schemes (Buhlungu, 1997; Barchiesi, 1997). The one exception that emerged from Maller's study was the Volkswagen assembly plant which held the potential of a new 'kind of workplace democracy' (Maller, 1994:249). Maller concluded that the union was pioneering a new form of unionism that fused appositional relations with participative relations in joint union-management forums (Maller, 1994:253). 8

In the early nineties a number of companies established similar joint forums with unions, within which information-sharing, consultation and, in some ad hoc cases, joint decision-making occurred (Webster, 1996). The result was that industrial relations was no longer confined to collective bargaining but became integrated into human resources management, corporate strategy and even production issues (Webster, 1997:165). These forums were given statutory form in 1996 when an institutionalised form of worker representation, supported by a defined set of powers, was introduced in the new Labour Relations Act.

To date only eight of these structures - called workplace forums - have been established (Sociology of Work Unit, 1997).

In a rich ethnographic study of the changing lives and struggles of black workers on South Africa’s gold mines, Moodie argues that relations between management and migrant workers constituted a kind of order, governed by both formal contracts and unwritten 'imiteto' or 'implicit contracts' between managers and workers, and among workers, which he calls a 'moral economy' (Moodie, 1994). The arrival of the union in the eighties challenged managerial despotism as the union sought a transition from the old despotic order to a new, negotiated order. However, a new order is not established; both management and traditional migrants contest this. Thus 'this period of transition which still continues today, has been chaotic' (Moodie, 1994: 110).

The contested nature of the transition from racial despotism in the workplace is the theme of von Holdt's detailed case-study of the trade union struggles in the eighties and nineties in Steelco (von Holdt, forthcoming; von Holdt, 1996). This contest, von Holdt argues, leads to ungovernability 'because the parties are seeking to defend or establish radically incompatible social structures' (von Holdt, 1997: 20). In the eighties black workers responded to white racism by creating unions that were committed to 'militant abstentionism': a refusal to identify with any of the goals of the enterprise or the concerns of management. This 'culture of resistance' merged with the insurrectionary political climate at the time creating conditions of 'ungovernability' in the workplace.

In spite of a concerted effort by the union in 1990 to shift away from 'social movement unionism' to strategic unionism, the tradition of 'ungovernability' at Steelco re-emerges in 1994. However, militant actions appear now to be directed against the union and the shop stewards as much as against management (von Holdt, forthcoming). Von Holdt explains the persistence of ungovernability to the fact that the workplace culture has barely changed.

'While politically speaking apartheid is no more, in the workplace its legacy continues in low pay, racist differentials, authoritarian management and racism' (Von Holdt, forthcoming).

Racial fordism to neo-fordism

While debates over the concept of racial despotism led to new perspectives on workplace industrial relations, a third area of debate emerged around the nature of fordism in South Africa. 9 The debate began when it was argued that a kind of fordist mode of regulation emerged after 1945 that was not aimed at mass production of goods for the whole population. Instead Blacks were excluded from the mass consumption 'norms' which applied to whites and, at a later stage, began to apply to Indian and coloured groups. In addition, whites monopolised the skilled and
supervisory positions in the workplace. Gelb described this fordist caricature as 'racial fordistism' (Gelb 1987).

The concept of 'racial fordistism' generated a lively debate on the nature of work in South Africa (Maller and Dwolatsky, 1993; Bethlehem, 1994). Some even questioned the usefulness of the concept of 'fordism' given the low volume nature of South African production. ‘An assembly line in metropolitan plants', Adler writes, ‘may be producing as many vehicles in an hour as a South African line produces in a day’ (Adler, 1993:43-44). However the most common question raised was whether a transition from racial-fordism to post-fordism is taking place in South Africa.

Current research suggests that there is a transition away from racial fordism in as much as the number of black skilled, supervisory, technical, semiprofessional and white collar workers is increasing and black-white inequality in the workplace is decreasing (Crankshaw 1996). Indeed, Crankshaw suggests that inequality in South Africa will be driven increasingly by class, rather than racial divisions. However, this shift away from racial fordism is not, researchers conclude, a transition towards post-fordism. New forms of flexible production are being introduced in a piecemeal, ad hoc way. These shifts mount to a shift in the direction of neo-fordism rather than post-fordism (Ewert, 1992; Kraak, 1996; Duncan and Payne; 1993). The most useful contribution to this debate has been Kraak’s conclusion that,

‘a hybrid typology of labour processes is emerging comprising existing racial Fordist, jobbing and familial labour processes coexisting alongside recently emerged neo-fordist applications of the new technologies and managerial techniques’ (Kraak: 1996:53).

While the concept of racial fordism was introduced to analyse the nature of the economic crisis, in 1990 this research effort shifted to ‘develop an industrial policy that could address the poor performance of South African manufacturing’ (Joffe et al, 1995:xi). In their final report, the authors introduce the concept of Intelligent Production, which embraces three interlinked post-fordist principles: constant skill acquisition; reorganising work along team lines; and cooperation and democracy in the workplace (Joffe et al, 1995:87, 205; Rosenthal and Joffe, 1995).

A range of difficulties in introducing this new work paradigm in South Africa have been identified (Lloyd, 1994; Kraak, 1996:53-63). ‘However the real danger of the new South African industrial paradigm’ writes Kraak, ‘is that it will lead to increasing social class differentiation, pitting privileged core workers against increasingly deprived peripheral workers’ (Kraak, 1996:70). The negative effect that labour market flexibility could have on workers has emerged as a major theme in recent scholarship in the sociology of work.

New themes of recent scholarship in the sociology of work

Three new themes of recent scholarship in the sociology of work have emerged in the nineties - labour market flexibility, the ‘new’ economic sociology and organisational sociology.

Research on the labour market suggests that South African firms are moving in the same direction as their counterparts elsewhere in the world in turning towards greater use of flexi workers, through casual labour, contract labour, subcontracting to smaller firms, home workers and other ‘outworkers’, and agency workers (Standing, Sender and Weeks, 1996:337). However, the precise nature of this trend is a matter of fierce scholarly and public debate. The findings of the first large-scale research of labour market flexibility practices in enterprises, the South African Enterprise Labour Flexibility Survey, showed that the actual number of employees engaged in atypical employment are relatively low (Crankshaw and Macun, 1997). But detailed case-studies confirm that atypical employment is growing (Klerk, 1994; Horwitz, 1995; Theron, 1996; Bezuidenhout, 1996; Mhone, 1996; Rees, 1997; Bezuidenhout and Kenny, 1998; Kenny and Webster, 1998). One result is longer working hours with attendant health problems, increased risk of injury, limited engagement with family members,
and heavy burdens for women who have to organise child care during long absences from home (NALEDI, 1997). Research on which workers are confronted by ‘flexibilisation’ of their jobs, and how households cope with the implications of these changes, has recently been embarked upon (Kenny, 1997). The organisational forms emerging to represent the poor and the unemployed in the city of Durban has been identified in a recent study by Sitas (1998).

The second new theme is on social institutions and economic performance, which draws on the new economic sociology or socioeconomics. Research on this theme arises from a concern with how economic enterprises in South Africa can enhance their performance to ensure their survival and growth in the face of increasing international competition, while at the same time ensuring meaningful worker participation. The transition to democracy has led to new forms of interest mediation between capital and labour at all levels of society (workplace forums), to sector level institutional arrangements, and at the societal level, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) and the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). Through the process of ‘bargained liberalisation’ these institutional innovations have the potential, it is argued, to resolve the contradiction between democratisation and economic reform (Adler and Webster, 1997).

The creation of new institutions is a protracted process and it is too early to draw any clear-cut conclusions on whether these social institutions are having an impact on economic performance. Institutional history moves slowly and the workplace remains one of low trust. ‘Racial identities’, it has been argued, ‘have served to strengthen lateral trust among workers, whilst lowering the potential for vertical trust. Ongoing forms of racism and racial discrimination in the workplace can only serve to reinforce this low trust dynamic’ (Macun, 1997:28).

The third area of new research is the emergence of new perspectives on organisational sociology. In spite of intense interest in organisational transformation in South Africa, Organisational Development (OD) has in the past followed the mainstream literature (van Aardt, 1995). The critical perspectives that have influenced the discipline elsewhere since the seventies made little impact on South African researchers. However, recently this has begun to change with an interest in critical organisational sociology and on the impact of African culture on the workplace (Lessem and Nussbaum, 1996). Importantly, this research does not reproduce the ‘cultural racism’ of earlier research that used the concept of black culture as a way of explaining black workers’ alleged inadequacies - their high absenteeism, their lack of motivation and their low productivity (Fullagar, 1983). Instead these researchers see African culture, and the concept of ubuntu (African humanism), as a positive resource for transformation (Lessem and Nussbaum, 1996:13).

The theme of organisational change is explored in detail in a study of human resource managers and workplace innovation in Kwazulu-Natal (Sitas et al, 1995).

**Institutional factors shaping the study of work**

It has been argued in this chapter that a new approach to industrial sociology emerged in the seventies. This new radical industrial sociology emerged as the most popular working group in the Association of South African Sociologists (ASSA) conferences throughout the eighties. Its focus on the labour movement linked it to the ongoing struggles in the workplace and in society making the annual conferences of ASSA popular events where academics and academic-activists would meet to engage in what was seen as a shared intellectual and political project.

This new approach to industrial sociology grew in close dialogue with the new industrial unions that emerged in the struggle against apartheid. Research into work became, in a sense, a form of resistance and research was funded largely by overseas agencies and linked to the agenda of the anti-apartheid movement (Webster, 1997). Funding agencies included the Frederick Ebert Stiftung, a German funding agency linked to the social democratic party, the IDRC in Canada, the
Albert Einstein Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the International Labour Organization in Geneva.

As a shift in managerial strategy began to take place in the early nineties and greater cooperation in the workplace was stressed by business, labour and the new government funding became more readily available inside the country both from government and the private sector. The emphasis on tripartite cooperation led to renewed interest in productivity and the sponsoring of a study on the workplace by the tripartite body NEDLAC (National Economic Development and Labour Council).

Called the Workplace Change Initiative, this project aims to demonstrate how workplace change can be achieved in order to enhance competitiveness. It hopes to achieve this objective through encouraging enterprises and sectors to enter workplace agreements which guide the parties at a plant level on the process of transforming the workplace. Significantly, the project is managed by Labour Market Alternatives (LMA), a consultancy run largely by graduates of the new industrial sociology. A similar initiative was the sponsoring of a study on the labour market by the International Labour Organisation.

The national survey on Enterprise Flexibility was conducted by the only research unit specialising in the sociology of work in the country, the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of Witwatersrand.

In the past limited funding for studies in the sociology of work was available from the central state funding body, the Human Science Research Council (HSRC). However, until the early nineties the HSRC functioned largely as the research arm of the apartheid government. In 1993, the HSRC began a process of transformation and realignment. In 1996, the HSRC decided to focus its external funding on a single research theme, People and Work. It identified employment creation, productivity enhancement and workplace transformation as the key areas for this research programme (HSRC External Project Scheme, 1997-1998). The need to increase productivity in the context of heightened international competition has now become a national research priority and relatively generous funding for policy orientated research on the workplace is available. Significantly, one of the main beneficiaries of this new funding strategy by the HSRC was the trade union linked research unit NALEDI, the National, Labour and Economic Development Institute. They have received funding for a research project on Co-determination and Tripartism from this fund.

In the early seventies, much of the new sociological study of work was either historical or subordinated to Marxian political economy. With the re-emergence of the labour movement in the seventies and eighties the sociology of work became closely linked to trade union studies and industrial relations. The close links the labour movement developed with politics also made political science a cognate discipline for the sociology of work. The impact of violence and ethnic mobilisation on the workplace has led industrial sociologists in KwaZulu-Natal to explore issues around the construction of identity (Bonnin, 1997; Mare, 1992). More recently, economics has become central as a discipline for the sociological study of work.

The most interesting interdisciplinary innovation has been the Centre for Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies at the University of the Natal in 1989. At the core of the innovation was the merging of Industrial Psychology and Industrial Sociology around the study of the world of work. The Centre has generated a rich graduate programme with a high proportion of studies on industrial training, organisational culture, participation and affirmative action. (See Table 1)

However, it needs to be stressed that there is a small community of sociologists in South Africa, numbering less than two hundred and fifty many of whom do not have doctorates (SASA, 1997). Under these circumstances the possibility of specialising in the sociology of work is limited. Furthermore, the material conditions in teaching sociology have worsened: a rapid growth in student numbers has been accompanied by a significant decline in university resources. There are more than 29,000 sociology students. in South
Table 1 MA and Ph.D dissertations, Centre for Industrial, Organisational and Labour Studies, 1988 - 1998

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Trade Unions, Politics and Resistance</td>
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<td>Industrial Training</td>
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<td>Organisational Culture and Policies</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Participation and Industrial Democracy</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Affirmative Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality of Working Life (Stress)</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>Retrenchment</td>
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Acknowledgement: Nerita Maharaj

Africa's twenty five universities - a ratio of 1 staff member to every 116 students (SASA, 1997).

No specialised journal for the sociology of work exists in South Africa. Most studies are published in local social science journals such as Transformation, Social Dynamics, the South African Sociological Review (now South Africa in Transition), the African Sociological Review, the Industrial Relations Journal of South Africa, and the South African Journal of Labour Relations. The one journal devoted to labour studies - the South African Labour Bulletin - is linked to the labour movement and, while it publishes excellent articles that record and analyse struggles in the workplace, it is not an academic journal.

When articles are published internationally, they tend to be in areas studies (such as the Journal of Southern African Studies). Occasionally South African scholars publish in international journals that specialise in the sociology of work such as Economic and Industrial Democracy; Work, Employment and Society; the International Labour Review; and Labour, Capital and Society.

Conclusion: a workplace in transition

It has been argued in this paper that globalisation is revitalising the sociological study of work in South Africa leading to a renewed interest in the field both in the universities and among policy makers concerned with international competitiveness. Globalisation is also leading to increasing social polarisation in ways not dissimilar to the analysis provided by Marx over a century ago. As a leading South African financial newspaper remarked recently:

'So Marx, critical analyst of completely unregulated capitalist development, is again looking like a better economist than he ever was philosopher, developing ideas for a new utopian social order' (Laufer, 1998).

How employers reconcile the strong demands from South Africa's trade union movement with these global pressures for greater efficiency, is the central challenge facing the South African workplace. These pressures are creating new demands for reliable social research and new policy interventions in the workplace. They are also leading to demands for an interdisciplinary problem-solving approach to the study of work, opening up opportunities for a synergy between university-
based researchers and practitioners and policy researchers. This poses exciting possibilities for curriculum reform, the most important being the establishment of interdisciplinary programmes aimed at understanding and resolving the complex problems of a workplace in a society in transition.

The challenge facing the South African workplace is one of reconciling the global with the local, greater competitiveness with employment equity, greater efficiency with the demand for more and better jobs. Above all, transition challenges South African social scientists to locate their study of work in an understanding of the specifics of the South African situation. This must involve a greater recognition of the informal economy and the variety of livelihoods that exist in Southern Africa. To undertake such a task, sociologists will need to draw on the rich anthropological tradition in South Africa. But for a genuine cross-fertilisation to take place, a network of scholars and practitioners needs to be created.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Bridget Kenny, a researcher at SWOP, for implementing the survey of South African sociologists that provided me with crucial information for this paper.

Notes

1. I have not included in this paper the large number of studies on trade unions. Instead I have concentrated on studies of the workplace, defining work broadly rather than confining it to employment.

2. One commentator concluded a review of South African labour process studies with this comment: ‘One senses in some of the products of South African labour process studies a premature closure to the complexity of research findings induced by an unremitting exposure to Braverman and followers’ (Lever, 1982).

3. This shift in research agenda has led to sharp criticism from the far left who have described this policy research as a slavish following of the agenda of the labour movement and an abandonment of any semblance of critical engagement (Desai, 1997).

4. This new approach to skill formation has been incorporated into the governments’ education policy of ‘life long learning’ and a White Paper. It is expected to become law during the 1998 session of parliament.

5. These results confirm the findings of a number of similar post-Braverman studies that have attempted to rectify this neglect of worker resistance in Braverman’s work. See P.Penn, ‘Skilled manual workers in the labour process, 1856-1864’, in Wood. What is distinctive in the South African context is the racial form taken by resistance by craft workers.

6. The identification of tacit knowledge arose out of research on underground safety where Leger found that black miners had knowledge of a range of precursors to rockfalls and an ability to recognize conditions which are potentially hazardous. Following the terminology of British colliers, he used the term pit sense to describe the tacit skills miners have about rockfall accidents.

7. Nzimande draws on E.O. Wright’s concept of contradictory class location to analyse the predicament of the black manager. It should be noted that this article was written in the eighties under apartheid and before any significant programme of black advancement.

8. In a review of the study, von Holdt argues that there is very little evidence of this ‘new unionism’ at Volkswagen and that productivity has not improved. The study suggests, von Holdt argues, ‘a relatively unstable industrial relations system as well as a degree of instability within union structures. Institutionalisation seems to be limited, there are numerous flashpoints, racism is a prominent grievance, and industrial action has a political dimension’ (Von Holdt, 1996, 7-8).

9. This formulation of Fordism is drawn from the French Regulation school (Gelb 1992).

10. Affirmative Action has been an on-going issue in management since the late seventies. For an overview of Affirmative Action see Makhanya, 1995; also Innes and Davies,
1996. Since 1994, it has been one of the priority issues in the Department of Labour’s policy programme. In 1996, a Green Paper on Employment Equity was published. In 1997 a Draft Bill was tabled on Employment Equity. The Bill is likely to become law during 1998. In terms of the proposed law, all enterprises with more than fifty employees will be required to negotiate targets (not quotas) with their employees indicating how they intend to make their workforce representative of the population by a specified period of time. Importantly, ‘representivity’ includes gender and disability.

11. This shift was led by the Industrial Strategy Project, a research project designed to develop a new industrial policy for South Africa. It was influenced by the works of Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (1984), Michael Porter (1990) and Michael Best (1990), not Regulation theory, which no longer seems influential among South African sociologists.

12. Raphael Kaplinsky, one of the co-authors of the Industrial Strategy Project, has reacted to criticism of the negative effects of greater flexibility by stating that their approach favours ‘labour friendly approaches to flexibility’ as opposed to ‘labour unfriendly’ approaches (Kaplinsky, 1994:535). A similar point is made by those who draw a distinction between ‘value-added’ and ‘cost-based’ strategies. See Bezuidenhout (1997) for a critical discussion of this distinction.

13. The new economic sociology emerged as a critique of the narrow focus of neoclassical economics on the market and has sought to introduce social explanations of economic decision-making and behaviour, primarily the institutional frameworks and methods of governance within which economic action takes place within and outside of firms (Granovetter and Swedberg, 1992; Streeck, 1992).

14. Debates on economic and industrial policy have been dominated by economists with very little work being done by the new economic sociologists on the limits of economics in understanding these processes. For an attempt to develop an analytical framework for the sociological analysis of the competing economic ideologies in South Africa over the last decade see Lazar, 1996.

15. The transition to democracy in South Africa generated a widespread use of ‘transition theory’ drawing on the notion of elite pact ing developed by Schmitter, Przeworski, et al to understand the democratisation process in southern and central Europe and Latin America. For a critique of the uncritical transfer of this notion to the South African transition see Adler and Webster, 1995.

16. Only four Ph.D.s in Sociology were awarded at South African Universities in 1996 (SASA, 1997:3).

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Appendix

List of major research centres concerned with the study of work in South Africa

Centre of Industrial and Labour Studies, University of Natal, Durban.
Director - G. Mare.
Mare@mtb.und.ac.za (031)260-2279

Centre for Social and Development Studies (CSDS), University of Natal, Durban.
Director - M. Morris.
MORRISM@mtb.und.ac.za (031)260-2285

Development Policy Research Unit (DPRU) - University of Cape Town, Cape Town, 8001
Old Medical School Building, Hiddingh Campus, 37 Orange Street, Cape Town
Director - D Kaplan
ETISPCPT@UCT.VAX.AC.ZA (021)650-3987

Industrial Democracy Programme, Faculty of Management, University of Witwatersrand, PO Box 98, WITS, 2050.
Director - L Douwes-Dekker.
buwaldad@zeus.mgmp.wits.ac.za (011)488-5591

Industrial Relations Project, Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town. Private Bag, Rondebosch, 7701.
Director - J Maree

MAREE@SOCSI.UCT.AC.ZA (021)650-3501

Industrial Relations Research Unit, University of Port Elizabeth. PO BOX 1600D, PE
Director - M Anstey.
IRAMMA@UPE.AC.ZA (041)504-2111

International Labour Resource and Information Group - ILRIG
PO BOX 213, Salt River, 7924
Ilrig@worknet.apc.org (021) 476???

Labour Market Policy Research Unit: Department of Labour, Private Bag X117, Pretoria. 0001
Dr. G. Mhone (011) 309 4150

National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI), PO BOX 5665, Johannesburg, 2000
Acting - Director - R Naidoo
ravi@naledi.wun.apc.org (011)403-2122\3

Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP), University of the Witwatersrand, Private Bag 3 Wits 2050
Director - E.C. Webster
029edw@muse.arts.wits.ac.za (011)716-2908

Trade Union Research Project (TURP), University of Natal - Durban
Director - David Jarvis
Jarvis@mtb.und.ac.za (031)260-2114