

https://dspace.org/

A CONTRADICTORY CLASS LOCATION? AN EXPLORATION OF THE POSITION AND ROLES OF THE AFRICAN CORPORATE MIDDLE CLASS IN SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACES AND COMMUNITIES

Modisha, Geoffrey

2007-02-21T13:11:34Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/2063

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Chapter 3
Workplace Studies: Black Managers' Class Location and Roles in a Post-apartheid Workplace Regime

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 shows that it is necessary to take into consideration the racial character of class in South Africa. In an attempt to tackle this issue, workplace studies in South Africa are characterised by different approaches reflecting contestations under the apartheid regime. The aim of this chapter is to unpack these views so as to draw analytical boundaries for this report's research questions.

3.2 Workplace studies in South Africa

The first serious attempt to study racial issues in the workplace emerged with the work of liberal scholars connected to capital in the 1970s (Nzimande, 1991). Influenced by a need to facilitate black advancement in the workplace, these scholars were also faced with the task of alleviating the effects of the economic crisis of the 1970s. Black advancement was implemented to address the skills shortage caused by workplace transformation of the 1960s and to prevent the spread of the Durban strikes in the early 1970s (Nzimande, 1991).

Other than bread and butter issues, one of the major causes of the Durban strikes was identified as the lack of opportunities for black people in the workplace (Nzimande, 1991). Through black advancement programmes, most liberal scholars strove not only to train and advance Africans in the workplace, but also to improve black-white relations within the work environment (Nzimande, 1991). The major theoretical influences for the implementation of black advancement

programmes were theories of motivation applied by organisational and industrial psychologists in South Africa.

The most prominent in theories of work motivation were McClelland's socially acquired needs theory. According to this theory, "people's behaviour is influenced by a set of needs that have been acquired or learnt from their environment" (Fisher, Katz, Miller and Thatcher, 2003: 85). It further postulates that one's upbringing and social environment can facilitate one of the three needs that will influence one's behaviour in future. These are identified as the need for achievement (n.Ach), the need for power (n.Pow), and the need for affiliation (n.Aff).

In attempting to implement this theory in South Africa, most industrial psychologists were at pains to demonstrate that the cultural background of Africans tended to emphasise a need for affiliation more than a need for achievement (Nzimande, 1991). As such, the black advancement programmes developed at the time were partly meant to stimulate the development of a need for achievement for Africans so as to facilitate smooth entry into the corporate environment.

This scholarship was followed by the emergence of a more holistic approach in the name of diversity management in the wake of affirmative action and black economic empowerment (BEE) in the post-1994 period. In an attempt to map out the focus of these studies, Human (2005: 5-11) shows that the importance of diversity management can be seen in terms of external and internal factors. For the former, Human (2005: 5-6) argues that diversity management should be implemented for legislation purposes, to give a good impression to customers, and to improve services to diverse customers in the modern commercial market.

For internal purposes, Human (2005: 8-11) argues that the overall objective is to improve the commitment of diverse employees and thus to increase productivity in the workplace. She identifies two groups to be targeted in this regard – the

dominant group and the non-dominant group. The dominant group is defined as a group which is regarded as well-established in the corporate culture (usually white males), and the non-dominant group includes the under-represented groups such as black people, women, people with disabilities, local populations employed in multinational companies, and groups managed by expatriates in other countries (Human, 2005: 3). The commitment of employees is facilitated by improving three variables regarded as crucial for performance. These are motivation and development; increasing the level of self-confidence and managers' belief in their subordinates (Human, 2005: 9).

Because of its orientation towards profit making, for the purposes of this report this scholarship can be critiqued based on two points. Firstly, its focus is largely on internal organisation process with little attention to external (i.e. social and political) factors influencing individuals (see also Nzimande, 1991). Secondly, it can be charged for over-relying on theoretical models that are meant for intervention to assumed problems. Indeed, its ahistorical nature renders it problematic in its view of workplace transition.

Furthermore, by grouping all minority groups (blacks, women and people with disabilities) under the elusive concept of non-dominant group, this approach runs the risk of not understanding the challenges faced by each group in the workplace. This becomes more problematic when one considers the fact that these people occupy different positions in the workplace. For instance, it is problematic to assume that a black person in a managerial or supervisory position has similar experiences as the black person on the shop floor.

Perhaps better conceptual tools to look at workplace transition can be found in the discipline of industrial sociology. Sociology of work and industrial sociology in South Africa emerged in the late 1960s as a result of two important factors (Webster, 2002). Firstly, it was a result of modern industrial economy influenced by monopoly capitalism in the 1960s. Secondly, it emerged in response to the concerns of management and the views of Elton Mayo's human relations school

of thought. This school of thought established that there are informal social groups in the workplace other than the relations of production. Thus, it believed that if managed appropriately, these informal social groups could be productive in the workplace (Webster, 2002).

This was to be fuelled by the emergence of an independent labour movement facilitated by the spread of Durban strikes in 1973. As a result, there are two competing camps in the discipline (Webster, 2002). The first one is traditional industrial sociology and the second one is the pro-labour studies connected to labour movements in the country. The former camp was concerned with the effects of institutional mechanisms on individuals and their reactions to these mechanisms (Van Aardt, 2002). This approach was influenced to a large degree by Weber's notion of rational bureaucracy and Goffman's interactionist approach to organisations.

In his observation of modern society, Weber (in Gerth and Mills, 1948) believes that bureaucracy can be regarded as the most functional and effective creation of modern society. Most importantly, it destroys affective (emotional) and traditional action established in traditional society and emphasises rational action based on calculation, record keeping and professionalism characteristic of modern society (Berman, 1982). The troubling thing for Weber was that this is accompanied by the destruction of the human element in all institutions of society, to the extent that humans become machines in "an iron cage" of bureaucracy (Berman, 1982).

This view was challenged not only by the human relations school's findings about informal social groups, but also by Goffman's interactionist approach. In his study of total institutions, Goffman (1961) established that there are five different mode of adaptation to organisations – situational withdrawal, intransigent line, colonisation, conversion and playing it cool. *Situational withdrawal* means that an individual withdraws attention to almost every activity of an organisation and limits interaction with others. *Intransigent line* means that a person radically

refuses to co-operate and shows hostility towards the organisation. *Colonisation* means that a person believes that being within an organisation is better than being outside and prefers to do everything possible to please the authorities, although not convinced that the organisation is worth obedience. *Conversion* means that the person adopts the goals and objectives of the organisations and does what is necessary to realise them. Finally, the *playing it cool* mode of adaptation means that an individual tries by all means to get out of trouble by doing everything necessary, although he/she does not identify with the policies of the organisation. In other words, this is a person who is a fierce critique of the organisation, yet does everything required for the realisation of organisational goals.

Although these behavioural patterns were established in total institutions (mental hospitals, prisons, orphanages, army barracks, and so forth) (Goffman, 1960), it is argued that institutions such as private sector companies, parastatals and government organisations often display elements of total institutions (Van Aardt, 2002). Hence, one can expect to find one or more of these responses from individuals within these organisations.

As would be expected, the approach based on these theories was criticised because it neglects broader macro-sociological issues of structure. For instance, it was charged with ignoring racial issues in the South African context (Webster, 2002).

Perhaps, a better view of South African workplaces was advanced by the second camp of industrial sociology, which was influenced by Harry Braverman's work on the labour process. In his use of the Marxist notion of the inherently antagonistic nature of capitalist production and its emphasis on coercion in the workplace, Braverman's (1974) work deals with the deskilling character of workplace transformation ushered by the mechanisation of production. This served as the basis of an attempt to capture the despotic nature of the apartheid workplace in South Africa (Webster, 2002).

Out of this emerged three main themes defining the research project of this tradition of industrial sociology (Webster, 2002). The first theme focused on deskilling and skills enhancement in South African workplaces. Influenced by Frederick Taylor's principle of separation of conception and execution, this theme yielded a critique to Braverman's thesis of de-skilling of workers (Webster, 2002). In place of this came an emphasis of the importance of tacit skills in the workplace. It was found that although it is justified to say that mechanisation of production is accompanied by de-skilling, workers still possess skills hidden from the scientific studies of management, deriving from their experience of working in dangerous situations (Leger, 1992).

The second theme engaged with the nature of Fordism[10] in South Africa. This resulted in the formulation of a concept of racial Fordism to describe the South African mode of production. This is defined as Fordism that excluded black people not only in the workplace but also in mass consumption (Webster, 2002). In other words, white people monopolised managerial and supervisory positions in the workplace and economic power in the market. In line with the ideals of white supremacy, white people also monopolised power and social status within the class structure of society (Luhabe, 2002; Nzimande, 1991).

The third theme dealt with race and work, and was concerned with social relations in the capitalist system of racial Fordism (Webster, 2002). This research agenda gave birth to the conception of racial despotism. In other words, the workplace environment under the apartheid regime was characterised by coercion rather than consent, and by domination of one racial group by another. Central to this, argues Webster (2002), was the compound system, meant to impose total control over black workers under separate conditions from the rest of society.

The findings of this research agenda were influenced to a larger degree by Michael Burawoy's conception of the workplace in Zambian Copperbelt mines as

[10] This is a capitalist mode of accumulation influenced by Henry Ford's ideas of mass production and mass consumption implemented through assembly line production techniques (Marshall, 1998)

the workplace regime. According to Burawoy (1985), workplace regime refers to the workplace social relations emerging out of the struggle between management and workers for control over the labour process. In what one may regard as an evolution of the concept, Bezuidenhout (2004: 30) defines workplace regime as:

> formal structures set up to govern collective and individual relationships between workers and managers, including contracts of employment, job grading systems, the organisation of training, work hours, collective bargaining arrangements, as well as how work is organised. It also refers to how regimes of control are experienced by workers and managers alike – that is there is a certain element of subjectivity that defines the contours of control and resistance.

For Burawoy (1985), despite an attempt to remove the colonial despotism characterised Zambian workplaces after independence, some of the elements of the colonial workplace regime were reincarnated. For instance, the racial colour bar was replaced by the upward floating colour bar, whereby new positions are created above the ones occupied by black personnel. These positions are endowed with authority to control the ones below (Burawoy, 1985)

Adapting the concept to the South African context, Von Holdt (2003) argues that South African workplaces were characterised by an apartheid workplace regime under the apartheid system. He shows that apartheid workplace regime traces its roots "in the evolution of labour regimes, work practices and the racial structures of power … [and it is] … underpinned by the educational and labour market policies of apartheid" (Von Holdt, in Webster and Von Holdt, 2005: 18). In short, the racial structure of South African society was mirrored by the social relations in the workplace. This was marked by four separate but interrelated elements – the racial division of labour, migrant labour, the racial segregation of facilities, and the racial structure of power in the workplace (Von Holdt, in Webster and Von Holdt, 2005). In what may be regarded as a continuation of this research, Bezuidenhout (2004) argues that a fifth element is that South African workplaces should be viewed as bifurcated locations because the ones in the rural areas are not treated similarly to the ones in the urban areas.

In an attempt to trace the emergence of studies around the African middle class, this section establishes that the emergence of independent labour movement in the

1970s facilitated the development of two traditions of industrial sociology differing in approach to workplace studies. The first camp, dubbed traditional industrial sociology, was influenced to a larger extent by theories of Max Weber, Elton Mayo and Goffman, and deals with organisational structure rather than broader issues of class and race. The second camp, influenced by neo-Marxist scholarship, directly engages issues of race and class, both in the workplace and in society at large.

Although this history of scholarship provides a rich insight into workplace transition, there is little attention to study of the African corporate middle class as a class. This, of course, is in exclusion of neo-Marxist scholars who had separate purposes in their engagement with questions of class and race. Other than Nzimande's (1991) study (discussed above), this scholarship discusses the issue of class on an abstract level (see also Nolutshungu, 1982). However, that relatively little attention has been paid to black managers can be attributed to the fact that this class has always been in a minority under the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Nonetheless, it is argued that both these schools of thought are complementary in looking at the role and position of the African corporate middle class. For instance, while the concept of the workplace regime can help us look at the workplace environment or situation of the African corporate middle class, Goffman's modes of adaptation can tell us how this group responds to the situation.

In the next section, the discussion focuses on the approach adopted in this research. In particular, it looks at how the Weberian conception of social stratification and the concept of workplace regime are used to understand micro-social mechanisms that influence the contradictory class location of the African corporate middle class.

3.3 Beyond the apartheid workplace regime: black managers in the new South Africa

So far, it has been established that the aim of this study is to understand the contradictory class location of black managers, both in their workplaces and in their communities. The concept of the middle class denotes "people who do not own their own means of production, who sell their labour power on a labour market, and yet do not seem part of the working class" (Wright,1997: 19). In terms of class location, therefore, the middle class occupies a contradictory class location since they are neither capitalists nor members of the working class. In other words, in the Marxist reading, their interests are not well articulated in the relations of production in a capitalist society such as South Africa (Wright, 1997). Their class status is intertwined with their relatively independent position and the fact that they earn higher wages than the working class.

To use financial indicators, the *Financial Mail's* Living Standard Measure (LSM) classifies people earning between R6 455 and R11 566 per month as belonging to the middle class. In his research entitled *Lost in Transformation? South Africa's Emerging African Middle Class*, Schlemmer (2005) argues that middle-class households earn over R12 000 a month. While this gives us an indication of the salary scale of the middle class, the concern of this study is with social relations underpinned by BBBEE-related policies as seen through the concepts of power and social status.

The concept of power is used in this research to mean an ability to exercise control over one's subordinates and to influence decision making within the organisation through participation. As it is shown above, concomitant to this is social status, which, as Weber argues, is associated with a style of life, as it is determined by a specific positive or negative social estimation of *honour* (Gerth and Mills, 1948). In other words, being in a management position should grant one both power and social status equal to everyone within an organisation.

Perhaps the relationship of class, status and power in the workplace can be better understood in terms of achieved and ascribed status (Peck, 1996). In the context of this research, achieved status means the possession of certain qualifications and skills which, in return, gives one a related position in the labour market. Thus articulating these qualifications and skills would yield related class and social position. Class, status and power, of course, might also be linked by the income one derives from one's profession or possession of qualifications.

Meanwhile, ascribed status refers to the fact that characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity and so forth, give one certain class and power in the labour market (Peck, 1996). However, one's status can often be seen clearly in the social realm. It is for this reason that this research goes beyond the workplace to look at the family history of black managers and explore their experiences in different communities.

The reading of the history of South African society demonstrates that ascribed status preceded achieved status as a selection criterion for job allocations in South African workplaces (Bezuidenhout *et al*., 2005). For instance, formal job reservation policies promoted employment of white people in managerial positions, while black people were concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations. Although black advancement was facilitated evenly in some industries such as commerce and finance, the impact of these policies were felt in workplaces across the country (Crankshaw, 1994; Luhabe, 2002). This was also the case in society at large because of the ideology of separate development (Crankshaw, 1994; Luhabe, 2002).

The post-apartheid government aims to reverse this situation by substituting BBBEE-related policies for apartheid policies. The most prominent policies in this regard are the labour market policies such as the Employment Equity Act (EEA) and the Skills Development Act (SDA), both promulgated in 1998, which aim to deracialise the workplace through preferential training and employment of

blacks, women and disabled people, while striving for the usage of achieved status as a criterion of employment.[11]

While the statistical data show that there seems to have been progress in deracialising the South African workplaces after the 1994 democratic elections (see Chapter 6 below), despite some fluctuations in growth, little research has been conducted about the impact of these policies on the nature of class, status and power in South African society. Existing studies on the transition of the South African workplace either see the perpetual inequalities between black and white people as an anomaly which will be dealt with as democracy is being consolidated, or see the emergence of black managers as a source of resistance from their white colleagues underpinned by the apartheid-influenced South African business culture (Luhabe, 2002; Gibbons, 2000;Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

On the one hand, there is an emergence of scholarship which looks at the interface between South African managerial culture and the incorporation of black people in the workplace. For instance, Gibbons (2000) looks at the impact of business culture on the social mobility of black managers. He concludes that "black managers have clearly made major class transition in terms of economic status and expectations, and, are fully incorporated within their class in this sense" (Gibbons, 2000: 75). While he rightfully recommends modifications of the business culture,[12] implicit to Gibbon's (2000) findings is that complete

[11] According to the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2003, the aim of BEE is "to promote the achievement of the constitutional right to equality, increase broad-based and effective participation of black people in the economy… increased employment and more equitable income distribution and … economic unity of the nation, protect the common market, and promote equal opportunity and equal access to government services (RSA, 2004: 2). The aim of the Employment Equity Act of 1998 is to promote "equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination … and … redress the disadvantages in employment experienced by [black people, women and people with disabilities], in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce" (DOL, 1998: 6). See also the discussion in Chapter 6.

[12] While the corporate culture can have a major influence on the position and role of black managers, the literature review in this report emphasises an understanding of the contradictory class location and post-apartheid workplace regime. I argue that a better research tool for understanding organisational culture is ethnographic research method. Hence, the concept of

incorporation will automatically change black managers' power and status in the workplace.

This is in contrast to the findings of a longitudinal study conducted by Sitas (2004) on a group of labour movement leaders based in KwaZulu-Natal, who were involved in the struggle against apartheid in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. Classifying them as the "mobile", the "stuck" and the "deteriorating", Sitas (2004) looks at the experiences of these labour movement leaders in a democratic South Africa. Of particular significance for this report is the "mobile cohort", which constitutes 51% of his sample and is described as "the members of the salariat, earning anything between seven and fifteen times than what they were earning before, driving their own cars … and had moved in terms of housing to better areas" (Sitas, 2004: 834).

According to Sitas (2004), the class mobility of these individuals is marked by mixed outcomes. While women seem to enjoy consistent social mobility, the majority of this cohort experience frustrations as they remain stagnant in human relations positions meant to link top management and the shop-floor workers. Their availability in management positions is regarded as a cause for humiliation by "white and middle managers of Indian descent, who see them as 'political' appointments, as incompetent and as skilless" (Sitas, 2004: 835). In addition, they are frustrated by the emergence of a new generation of black university graduates who, unlike them, have all the necessary requirements to climb the corporate ladder to the top management positions and ownership of companies.

As a result, this cohort is forced to seek alliances with shop-floor workers and the labour movement in order to fight new racial battles in the workplace (Sitas, 2004). This, argues Sitas (2004), is indicated by their self-imposed identity as members of the working class and the expression of racist diatribes to their colleagues of other races. Accordingly, he concludes that there are indications of an embryonic black racism in the middle strata of the society (Sitas, 2004). While

---

apartheid workplace regime is used here to capture not only black managers' experiences, but also to examine how they understand the culture of their organisations.

this research helps to illuminate a contradictory class location of black managers in the workplace, its focus is on one strand of black managers, that is, those with a union background.

On the other hand, there are a number of studies looking at the changing workplace regime or workplace transformation[13] and its implications for shop-floor workers in the country. According to these studies, while one can identify changes in South African workplaces, some elements of the apartheid workplace regime are perpetuated in the new South Africa. Of particular importance for this report is the observation that, among others, three elements of the apartheid workplace regime have been reincarnated in the new workplace order in South Africa – the upward floating colour bar, the informal wage colour bar and the re-emergence of white superiority in the workplace (Von Holdt, 2003; Bezuidenhout, 2004; Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

In terms of the upward floating colour bar, these studies assert that while black people are given positions in supervisory and managerial levels, there is a creation of new positions just above them, occupied by white people (Von Holdt, 2003; Bezuidenhout, 2004). These occupational positions are used to undermine the power and authority of black managers occupying positions previously occupied by white staff. Indeed, this is not only seen by the fact that a white person occupying a new position can bypass a black person in a supervisory or managerial position, but also by the fact that black people in managerial positions often are not allowed to make decisions on their own (Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

Secondly, Bezuidenhout (2004) identifies the emergence of the informal wage colour bar in the workplace. In other words, although it may be the result of seniority and competency, different races are given different treatment in terms of remuneration. This makes it difficult to conclude that the workplace is being

[13] See the definition of the concept of workplace regime in section 3.2.

deracialised (Bezuidenhout, 2004). Furthermore, black people occupying managerial positions do not get the same benefits that used to be given to white people in the same positions (Bezuidenhout, 2004; Masondo, in Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

Lastly, the reassertion of white managerial domination is perpetuated by two interrelated phenomena. Firstly, one can identify "petty practices" such as the segregation of facilities in the workplace based on the discourses of seniority (Bezuidenhout, 2004). For instance, in the canteens of some workplaces, managers use enamel plates while workers use plastic ones (Bezuidenhout, 2004). Indeed, the author gives an example of himself being given food on an enamel plate while the (black) shop steward he was with used a plastic plate.

As the new industrial relations system limits the arbitrary exercise of power and delegitimise racial supremacy, new sources are found in the discourse of flexibility and globalisation (Bezuidenhout, 2004). This discourse is used to maintain the dominance of white managers and the reassertion of their despotism in the workplace through the casualisation, externalisation and informalisation of work.[14] This also serves to facilitate ethnicity in the workplace, as migrant labourers are the ones who are mostly affected by informalisation of work (Bezuidenhout, 2004). Since managerial positions are still dominated by white managers, one can safely argue that the new workplace regime is characterised by continuities of the apartheid workplace regime (Bezuidenhout, 2004).

While these studies shed light on the potential that ascribed status, such as race, may have to block transformation in the workplace, it is difficult to make meaningful generalisations about how race-based policies influence the relationship of class, power and status within the middle class. The major limitation of these studies is that they all focus on shop-floor workers' understanding of the changing workplace, without considering the growth of a group of black managers in South African workplaces. Hence, they tell us little

[14] For further discussion of the relationship between the concepts of casualisation, externalisation and informalisation see Theron (2005, in Webster and Von Holdt, 2005).

about black managers' response in the face of these experiences. Furthermore, these studies do not explore how the changing social structure is related to the social categorisation now occupied by black managers in South Africa.

Similar to the study conducted by Sitas (2004), the aim of this research is to unearth these social relations by looking at the position of black managers not only in South African workplaces but also in their communities, as well as to look at how this position influences their agency in society. Following from the above discussion, this research aims to look at black managers' experiences of the new workplace order with reference to BBBEE's ability to achieve its goal of racial and gender representation in the economy of the country. This is done by looking at the role played not only by their family background, but also their acquisition of qualifications in the workplace. Furthermore, one seeks to understand the impact that the inequalities characterising South African society have on black managers as part and parcel of the middle class.

The above discussion paves the way for a discussion of the findings of this research. It shows that the aim of this research is to understand how African managers perceive their position and roles in their different workplaces and in their communities. More specifically, it has shown that it seeks to explore their experiences in these contexts not only in the light of the workplace transformation studies already conducted, but also against the background of constitutional values of equality in the country. Before one can discuss the findings, however, it is important to look at the research methodology used to answer the above-mentioned research questions.