

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 1
Introduction

The growth of the African middle class in many post-liberation regimes is often considered to be one of the reasons for the inability of post-colonial societies to overcome the social ills left by the colonial regime. In other words, while the implementation of policies meant to facilitate participation of those disadvantaged by oppressive regimes represents a major break with the past in that it diffuses the racial inequalities left by the colonial regime, it is also the source of constraints for the transformation project embarked upon by many post-liberation regimes.

A central aim of this study is to problematise this view by using the notion of a contradictory class location to explore the complexities of post-colonial social mobility in the workplace and communities in South Africa. To be more specific, this research attempts to understand the relationship between class, power and social status as they unfold with the growth of the black middle class facilitated by the implementation of policies related to Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) in South African workplaces.[1] Focusing on the position and role of African managers as part of the growing black middle class in South Africa, this research seeks to shed light on how black managers perceive the emerging social relations against the backdrop of the constitutional values of a non-racial and non-sexist society after the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994.

More specifically, the objectives of this research are as follows. The first objective is to investigate the significance of the growth of African managers in the workplace and their communities. The studies conducted around workplace transformation indicate that the growth of black managers in the workplace is

[1] This conception is borrowed from Weber's conceptualisation of social stratification as based on class, power and prestige (Gerth and Mills, 1948).

accompanied by little changes in the workplace. By employing the concept of a contradictory class location, this study aims to look at the experiences of African managers both in the workplace and in their communities. It questions not only the impact of these experiences on African managers' agency as individuals, but also whether there is a clear-cut role they can play to deracialise the workplace and uplift poor African communities

Secondly, this study attempts to employ sociological concepts in looking at the effects of race-based policies in South Africa. It is argued that while the reading of the history of colonisation and apartheid proves that race was the cornerstone of the social relations in South African society, there seems to be a lack of sufficient studies focusing on the impact of racism within classes in the literature related to the sociology of work and industrial sociology. Influenced by modernist discourse of Marxism, the tradition of industrial sociology and sociology of work that looks at racial relations in the workplace took as its core what may be regarded as labour studies. While there is a consideration of race as an important factor determining social relations in South African society, it is argued that there is a lack of sufficient sociological tools to understand post-1994 social relations in South Africa.

It follows from this that this study aims to make a sociologically embedded contribution to debates around BBBEE in South Africa. Although its limitations are linked to the fact that it focuses only on African managers, this research indicates the urgency to initiate scholarly debate on this important issue in industrial sociology and sociology of work in South Africa.

In dealing with the first objective, it is shown that one cannot conclude that the implementation of BBBEE is accompanied by social changes required for a well-balanced society reflecting values of equality. While it is fair to classify black managers as part of the middle class by virtue of the positions and salaries they get from their workplaces, the consolidation of this position is hampered by their perceived lower social status both in the workplace and their communities. It is

furthermore shown that while their positions afford them power to influence decisions concerning their projects and their subordinates in the workplace, it becomes different when one considers their participation and ability to move to the next level on the corporation ladder.

These findings do not necessarily contradict the fact that there is the emergence of a post-colonial workplace regime in South Africa (Burawoy, 1985; Von Holdt, 2003; Bezuidenhout, 2005). Indeed, they consolidate the fact that the current environment presents black managers with a challenge of negotiating not only their position, but also their roles in a democratic South Africa. This situation goes beyond the conception of a contradictory class location based on capitalist social relations, as it finds its origin in the history of colonial and apartheid regimes in the country.

Furthermore, the findings expand our sociological lens to the world of work by establishing two phenomena signifying the contested nature of workplace transformation. Firstly, it is shown that black managers' views of their own positions differ from how they are seen by shop-floor workers. This is because of the fact that their positions in the workplace are accompanied by a certain extent of power – that is, an influence on their projects and their subordinates. Secondly, one can identify different forms of an upward floating colour bar coming with the new workplace regime.

It is partly in response to the workplace environment that almost all black managers interviewed for this study had aspirations to be in their own business in a few years to come. Reading from this, one may argue that this is also because of the economic context which seems to legitimise capitalism and entrepreneurship in society. The collusion of this future outlook with the fact that they display consciousness about a need to facilitate the mobility of other black people below them further demonstrate that African managers are in the process of negotiating their position and roles in a democratic South Africa.

An exploration of the positions and roles of black managers in their communities further reflects a contradictory class location of black managers in both the previously white-owned areas and black communities (townships and rural areas). Those who reside in previously white-only areas indicate that they are in the process of negotiating space for their identity, not only with their present environments but also with their previous communities. Meanwhile, there are those who express the pressures they experience as a result of their positions in their communities among those who still reside in black communities. Furthermore, a high level of unemployment among Africans places the African corporate middle class in an ambiguous position about their roles in African communities.

For the second objective, this research shows that one can use some of the tools created over the years by scholars who took up the challenge of explaining the social relations emerging from the capitalist system without undermining the importance of race in South Africa. Indeed, the effects of race relations should be seen not only in terms of the relationships between the working class and management, but within classes, as well. It is for this reason that the concept of workplace regime is used to look at workplace transformation. Coined by Burawoy (1985), the concept of workplace regime is meant to capture social relations in the workplace as underpinned by the discourses and policies of white supremacy. In applying this concept to how the African corporate middle class see workplace transformation, it is established that there are other phenomena that we are not aware of in the workplace.

The following chapters explain this argument by converging three nodal points considered important in this research – the arguments raised in the literature; the historical, economic and democratic context of South Africa; and the input of 21 managers interviewed for this study. By tracing the genealogy of the concept of the middle class and discussing how it has been used in South African intellectual circles in relation to the black middle class, Chapter 2 shows that there is not only a need to study the social significance of the growth of the black middle class, but

also to review the conception of the middle class in South African intellectual discourses. The discussion on the combination of Marxist and Weberian views of class shows that it is better to see black managers in the workplace as a corporate middle class rather than a petty bourgeoisie.

A brief excursion on studies of work (Chapter 3), which are anchored in the disciplines of industrial psychology and industrial sociology and how they deal with the question of black advancement, reveals that there is no comprehensive approach to look at workplace social relations emerging with post-apartheid society in South Africa. Such an approach should directly tackle class issues and take into consideration broad structural issues that influence micro-social phenomena. In an attempt to initiate a debate on the approach one can take to racial relations in the workplace, it is argued that the combination of Marxist and Weberian conceptions of social stratification gives us relatively better tools to understand social relations within classes. While the former view's understanding of class as based on ownership helps us delineate the unit of analysis based on broad macro-social processes of the economy, the latter's understanding of social stratification as based on class, status and power equips us with better conceptual tools to come up with a nuanced picture of the position and role of the African corporate middle class in South African workplaces and communities. Thus, the concept of a contradictory class location (Wright, 1997) is employed to look at the experiences of the African corporate middle class not only in the workplace, but also in their communities.

Chapter 4 shows that the interpretive nature of the approach taken in this study requires qualitative research methodology to extract the data needed to answer the research questions for this study. This is followed by a discussion of the interviewees carried out for this study (Chapter 5). Since the view of social stratification adopted in this study spans the workplace and social realms of society, this discussion reconciles the two by tracing the impact of the family and educational background of black managers on their social mobility.

In Chapter 6 we give a contextual background against which the position and role of black managers should be seen in the workplace. It is shown that the interaction of the transition to new labour market regime and a liberalised economic context not only puts constraints on the implementation of BBBEE, but also serves to legitimise the resistance of some companies to transformation.

In Chapter 7 we look closely at the impact of this environment on black managers. It is in this chapter that it is established that although it is justified to classify African members of the corporate middle class as the middle class, theirs is a different and contradictory class location. There are indications that this stratum of the black middle class is in the process of negotiating their space in the workplace. This is further consolidated by Chapter 8, which discusses the position and roles of the African corporate middle class, identified in terms of those who reside in previously white-only areas and those who stay in black communities, in their community environments. Chapter 9 then discusses some conclusions and suggests some theoretical implications of this study.