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Black tax’ in South Africa: tracing its roots in colonial and apartheid history.

Socikwa, Nosibabalwe

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ABSTRACT

‘Black Tax’ in South Africa: Tracing its roots in colonial and apartheid history.

This research project tackles the widespread phenomenon of so-called ‘Black Tax’ in contemporary South Africa. It does so through a critical conceptual lens that tries to offer a way of analysing it that also constitutes a critique of post-apartheid South Africa. Summarizing the existing literature on ‘Black Tax’ – an admittedly small but growing literature – the research report identified the studies already conducted as well as the overall debate within which ‘Black Tax’ is framed, i.e., as Ubuntu versus as burden. However, this research wants to side-step that debate by providing a more structural analysis of where and how ‘Black Tax’ emerges as a social phenomenon that is so defining of the experiences of young Black South Africans today. Therefore, this research report reflects a conceptual project. The main arguments being analysed here are that: (1) contemporary ‘Black Tax’ is conditioned by a context of Black immiseration and poverty that is a result of apartheid and colonial histories; (2) contemporary ‘Black Tax’ functions in a similar way to labour migrants’ remittances under apartheid, i.e., as kinship and the wage became tied together in the apartheid cheap labour system.

The structure of this argument lays out the broadest outlines of two analyses which look at “Black tax” in different spheres of South African life, that is to think differently about ‘Black Tax’ than a more conventional sociology research project might. Rather than looking at the experiences of ‘Black Tax’ for young Black professionals, I instead provide an analysis of the colonial and apartheid histories of dispossession of land, labour, and wealth. Using the existing scholarship on the historical constraints on the livelihoods of Black South Africans, this research reviews histories of dispossession of land and labour, and the limits placed on the possibilities of Black wealth creation and accumulation. It also looks at histories of land, labour and livelihoods that incorporated Africans into a cheap labour system and led to post-apartheid forms of impoverishment and incapacitation of possibilities for sustaining livelihoods. This involves looking at colonialism and apartheid as interventions into African kinship relations, specifically leveraging kinship as the extension of the wage and of support for familial livelihoods through remittances.

In pursuing this conceptual project, I do not suggest that the contemporary practice of ‘Black Tax’ is not shaped by post-apartheid entrenchments of the racialised political economy of Black unemployment. Nor am I suggesting that Black poverty is not attributable to the post-apartheid casualisation of permanent employment, or new demands and expectations arising from new forms of racialised consumption and consumerism in post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, I consider those worthwhile areas of study for other researchers. My main aim is not to evaluate Black Tax as either a burden or as Ubuntu, but rather to provide a sociological understanding of the historical context that has made so-called Black Tax a widespread experience for young Black South Africans today.