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Restructuring, Flexibility, and the Politics of Workplace Subjectivity
A Worker Inquiry in the South African Car Industry

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1. Introduction

Recent shifts and changes in forms of industrial conflict and worker struggle in post-apartheid South Africa constitute a challenge for assumptions common in various theoretical perspectives about the development of worker behaviors, attitudes and class consciousness. Many episodes of industrial action have developed as unpredictable events, or unintended consequences of broader social, economic and productive changes in the "new", democratic South Africa. As a result, management and unions alike have often been unprepared to manage worker resistance though existing organizational and ideological apparatuses.

Some authors emphasize in particular how the legitimation gained during the 1990s by the union organizations in South Africa as key players in political transition, industrial policy making, macroeconomic debate, and collective bargaining at a central level is still matched by the permanence of what was called the "apartheid workplace regime" (Von Holdt, 1995) in the factories. This is apparent in widespread authoritarian styles of management, abusive and discriminatory practices by middle level supervisors, permanence of substantial wage differentials, lack of recognition of the skills of the African workforce and racially-biased grading systems. After a massive nationwide strike in 1994, and recent prolonged episodes of industrial action in major companies (Toyota, Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz,) the automobile industry has been one of the sectors most sensitive to these changes and contradictions (Bohmke and Desai, 1996.) Moreover, worker resistance has been heightened in this sector by dynamics of capitalist restructuring and reorganization of work and production dictated by the need to compete against international competitors in a phase of state-led liberalization of the internal market.

This paper will discuss forms of collective worker responses to changes at the point of production in the South African automobile industry. My aim is, first, to link the analysis of expressions of industrial antagonism to changes in productive structures

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[1] Thanks to my MA thesis supervisor, Glenn Adler, and to Carole Biewener, Fred Curtis and Blair Sandler from *Rethinking Marxism*.

and processes in their organizational, economic and ideological dimensions. Second, to explore the nature of conflict as an "event" in its specific sphere, not mechanistically reducible to macro-structural determinants, in order to grasp the ways in which industrial change provides opportunities and constraints for the people involved to define or modify the meanings of workplace antagonism. Third, to understand the ways in which antagonism is related to different forms of worker identification responsive to intra- and extra-workplace determinants in the definition of strategies of acceptance, adaptation and resistance to the changing environment.

A growing literature on worker subjectivity has decisively influenced international debates on the labor process in the last two decades. This paper shares with most of that literature the assumption that the subjectivity of the workers on the shopfloor is an active and constitutive force of change in workplace social relations and organizational paradigms. Explaining processes of industrial restructuring requires a specific attention to the role played by workers' perceptions, expectations and responses.

I define worker subjectivity as a process through which, according to a set of norms and assumptions in a given situation, collective social actors elaborate their experiences to articulate responses to an external environment. Therefore worker subjectivity is not a static attribute of an immanent proletarian subject endowed with an agency geared towards some historic emancipatory mission. Conversely, capitalist power is not only a cause for estrangement and alienation of dominated subjectivities. Power, as discursive expropriation and imposition of meanings over its subjects, opens "wounds" that become integral parts of subjective identities and, as Stedman-Jones (1983) and Spivak (1992) explained, these "wounds" contradict any myth of origins and immanence of subject and agency. At the same time, they allow that connection between individual experiences and sociality that in Maffesoli's (1989: 16) words marks the passage from the self-biographical "subjective" to the "intersubjective." Daily communications between individual workers on shared shopfloor problems are at the same time part of everyone's subjectivity and a material foundation of collective intersubjective relations in response to capital's initiatives.

I will focus on the case of South African car manufacturing, also utilizing field research findings from a specific plant: SAMCOR (South African Motor Corporation) in Silverton, Pretoria. I conducted my research from March to September 1996, relying on intensive semi-structured interviews with 30 employees and union shop-stewards who produce passenger vehicles, and with corporate managerial staff as well

as union officials and organizers for the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA.) I could visit the plant during the whole period of the inquiry, with the chance to talk to employees in bodyshop, paintshop and final assembly. My interviews focused on workers' perceptions in three broad and related areas: organization of production (technology, layout of operations, tasks,) organization of work (teamwork, just-in-time, participation schemes) and restructuring (supervisory authority, line speed, outsourcing, workloads.)

The representiveness of my findings does not merely depend on the possibility of generalizing worker responses with methods of statistical inference. It is rather given by the patterns of recurrence and coherence of major themes emerging from the answers to my interviews. This coherence shows that restructuring is not a neutral concept belonging to the field of managerial prerogatives. It is rather inseparable from the social construction of meanings that workers attach to industrial change and that they utilize to articulate responses along a continuum between acceptance and resistance that ultimately influence the direction of restructuring itself.

2. The Eye and the Mirror. Worker Subjectivity, Labor Process, and Resistance

2.1 Flexible Structures, Flexible Subjects

The study of relationships between changes in workplace organization and worker responses greatly contributed to the development of industrial sociology as a specific field of research. Contending perspectives and paradigms have often shared a view of production under capitalism as an area of disarticulation of individual lives and meanings and of new articulations around the specific organizational, spatial and temporal requirements of factory life.

A view of the labor process as implying a fundamental estrangement of the worker from the social environment of production substantiated various contrasting theoretical interpretations (Littler, 1990; Hodson, 1991; Miller and Rose, 1995.) From one side, various currents tried to address the question of estrangement by theorizing reforms to re-create the workplace as a reconciled public space. Their concern was with job satisfaction, enrichment, humanization and the "quality of the working life." From another side, orthodox Marxist approaches privileged a notion of class consciousness as organically linked to its organized expressions. The factory was theorized at the same time as an area of denial and suppression of workers' identities, and of development of new antagonist class-based collective identity and

consciousness aimed at the abolition of capitalist structures of ownership and control. The teleology implicit in this view led to a categorization of forms of consciousness as "false" and "true" and to the association of the former with the everyday acceptance of workplace capitalist domination and the latter with the culminating moments of anti-capitalist organization and struggle (Lukacs 1971.) Even notions which overcame these binary oppositions and recognized the dynamic and processual nature of class consciousness shared a teleological view of conflict in its organized expressions as representing the highest and final stage of worker subjectivity formation (Mann, 1973.)

Marxist views of class consciousness have greatly influenced the labor process debate ever since the publication of Harry Braverman's (1974) pioneering analysis. This helped to conceptualize the workplace as a terrain of conflict over the control of production, far from narrowing its definition to a terrain where worker attitudes were adjusted and accommodated inside capitalist imperatives. Marxist perspectives on the labor process, however, generally neglected an explanation of the nature of production in relation to worker identities, responses and expectations as forces able to modify the structure of production itself, through the autonomous definition of new arenas for confrontation over power and control (Thompson, 1989.) They have largely missed an explanation of class consciousness as one of the possible outcomes of everyday material and discursive social practices, rather than as inherent to those practices. On the other hand, mainstream ideologies of industrial restructuring have been increasingly valorizing the human side in production, promoting worker flexibility, participation and commitment (Sayer, 1986.) However, both the Marxist critique and the mainstream ideology share an important flaw: they lead to a separation of the subjects from their consciousness. Worker consciousness is reified by both in a-historical sets of prescriptions (Marshall, 1983,) namely the "true" working class consciousness as conveyed by socialist parties and unions from one side, and the promotion of worker consent based on increasing responsibility and initiative on the other.

Moreover, if new perspectives on industrial restructuring emphasize the importance of the subjective side of production, of worker attitudes, consent, initiative, flexibility, this also carries a substantial amount of omissions. In particular, the emphasis on the role of subjectivity in production generally emphasizes ruptures with pre-existing organizational models allegedly marked by hierarchy, authoritarianism, routine, lack of initiative and commitment (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990; Kenney and Florida, 1993; Alvesson and Deetz, 1996.) Worker flexibility, multiskilling and commitment

have then been theorized as conducive to that "positive working environment" (Hoffmann and Kaplinsky, 1988: 53) that would allow the elimination of the rigidities of Fordist mass production and a rapid adaptation to shifting consumer tastes. This view obscures the ways in which the activation of worker subjectivity can be embedded in and compatible with the persistence of traditional patterns of organization and authority that contradict the expectations of the same subjective side they try to activate (Holloway, 1987; Clarke, 1990.)

The literature on flexibility emphasizes the development of multiple workplace skills, of a holistic worker view of the labor process in contrast with Taylorist fragmentation of operations, of worker adaptation to changing product cycles and shorter set-up times, of greater cooperation as a consequence of delegation of authority, and of worker capacity for self-inspection in production flows with decreasing supervision and inventories. From a managerial point of view the quest for flexibility implies that strategy has to face uncertainty in allocating resources to cope with rapidly changing demand (Streeck, 1987; Sethi and Sethi, 1990.) In some authors this indicates a shift in the nature of work from the execution of segmented, prescribed tasks to the activation of communication and social cooperation in the workplace (Kenney and Florida, 1993.) Harnessing workers' social knowledge of the production process opens up new possibilities for restructuring, as Marx had already realized:

> *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process (Marx, 1973: 706, own emphasis.)

However, the extent to which the development of a "general intellect" in the workplace based on worker knowledge, communication and cooperative practices is prefiguring a demise of Fordist models of organization, or even of mass production itself, is still part of an intense debate. "General intellect" as a directly productive force does not necessarily imply a parallel change in workplace social relations promoting worker empowerment and autonomy. In particular, a general trend for flexibility is identified to differentiate a "core" multiskilled, relatively autonomous

workforce from a "periphery" of lowly skilled, subordinated and unstable labor. On this basis Anna Pollert (1988) points to the neglect by the proponents of flexibility of continuities in traditional forms of managerial control and labour market segmentation. In her view, the identification of a new autonomous and responsible labouring subject is then a purely ideological exercise. Hirst and Zeitlin (1991) clearly differentiate flexibility from the notion of "post-Fordism." The distinction resides precisely in the ambiguous, potentially contradictory meaning of flexibility. Its nature as reliant on subjective expectations, responses and strategic choices defines new forms of identity and conflict in a problematic relationship with pre-existing forms of organization and authority.

The combination of continuity and change in industrial restructuring makes the need for a new analysis of worker responses all the more urgent. Moreover, the advocacy of worker flexibility and rapid adaptation implicit in the discourse of "lean production" makes managerial authority increasingly vulnerable to uncertainties involved in processes and practices of articulation of worker responses. In fact, employers' search for flexibility tends to emphasize workers' active subjectivity as a fundamental precondition for the process of valorization. This requires, in Stewart Clegg's (1994) view, that degrees of authority and independence are delegated to the workers. But at the same time, strict boundaries must be placed on the discretion allowed to them. These limits, together with the fragmentation of the labor process and intra-workplace competition, function to prevent delegated authority from becoming an independent power. From one side, flexibility contains then a tension based on an uneasy compromise between worker initiative and managerial authority, which continuously recreates the conditions for workers' rising expectations for control. From the other side, the conflict that these expectations may generate challenges the viability of identities conveyed by corporate ideology. This tension is therefore implied in changes in the nature of work in the age of flexibility whereby, to use Hardt and Negri's (1994) formulation, the laboring subject is "at the same time a product and productive" and the labor process is simultaneously "subjection and subjectivation."

Flexibility seems to require a growing interaction between management and the employees in the appropriation by the former of capacities and knowledge of the latter, while at the same time maintaining the higher possible degree of managerial control over the range of possible worker behaviors. But this also implies organizational susceptibility to subjective claims and responses from the shopfloor, which can jeopardize prospects to "plan" flexibility. The relationship between flexibility in manufacture and subjectivity in the workplace is ultimately a recursive

one. It is therefore not deterministically subject to a unilinear cause-effect mechanism. Each element of this couple dynamically influences, and is influenced by, the other. Whether worker subjectivity ultimately inhibits or enhances the introduction of flexible production methods is largely unpredictable to planners in work and production organization and to union organizers. The subordination of the worker does not simply obliterate identities, it instead shapes new identities according to the changing needs of the labor process. However, worker identity is also a matter of everyday contestation and a problem for managerial control (Knights, 1990.)

Flexibility cannot then be regarded as a mere productive and organizational strategy to harness workers' subjectivity for the attainment of increased productivity. As a factor stimulating a redefinition of worker subjectivity, with its ideological promise of increased worker control over production, flexibility can also make the persistence of hierarchies and inequalities associated with an authoritarian workplace regime more evident and unbearable. In this way, a strategy designed to promote workers' involvement in productive efficiency can have effects which ultimately oppose its stated aims. Analyses of industrial restructuring in South Africa have shown the selective and uneven nature of the introduction of flexibility in manufacturing. The introduction of new technology and innovative forms of production organization are therefore mainly regarded as aimed to increase the intensity of work and to diversify workers' tasks without a parallel enhancement of skills (Ewert, 1992; Maller and Dwolatzky, 1993; Kraak, 1996.) On the other hand, the development of decentralized, cooperative systems of management (teamwork, quality circles, "green areas,"[2] continuous improvement techniques) is negatively affected by the permanence of traditional racist, authoritarian or paternalist managerial practices (Nattrass, 1991; Duncan and Payne, 1993.) As a result, workers are generally suspicious or hostile towards schemes of participation or cooperation, regarded as attempts to sidestep, co-opt or undermine the unions' representative structures in the workplace. These feelings are heightened by the traditionally strong workplace orientation of many South African unions, workers' images of the shop steward as representative of an aspiration to increased control over production, and a strong attachment to union internal democracy as part of their broader view of political and economic democracy in a liberated South Africa (Buhlungu, 1996.) Before turning from these observations to my case study, it seems then appropriate to conclude this theoretical discussion by linking my concept of subjectivity to issues raised by studies of worker resistance.

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2.2 Worker Resistance as Process and Contingence

If, as I mentioned, the relationship between flexibility and worker subjectivity is marked by the ambiguity and the ambivalence of the former, and the unpredictability of responses by the latter, this has important consequences for the notion of worker resistance. In particular, the chances for a successful flexibilization of work come to depend on workplace situational and localized processes of contestation. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (1989: 12) noticed, working class consciousness cannot be assumed as "transcendental to the field of events" and separated from the discursive articulation of images of liberation arising in the history of specific working class formations. In Chakrabarty's view, a focus on the autonomy of specific working class discourses of emancipation does not necessarily imply a reversion to cultural relativism or exceptionalism. A non-totalizing, non-monolithic notion of class can be maintained as an explanatory horizon for worker resistance. Class is here however defined as comprising a plurality of discursive and material practices defining common meanings, identifications and attempts at making sense of industrial change. The element of commonality is given by the fact that these practices identify capitalist organization of production and managerial authority as the sources of deprivation of control over their social cooperation, communication and activity.

Therefore, rather than an unproblematic theory of contingency of worker behavior and action, the challenge of flexibility implies at the same time general constraints to the organization of production and their embeddedness in localized and independent social and discursive practices. Class-based discourses are then thinkable as possible non-teleological outcomes of practices of workplace antagonism. Class as a form of worker subjectivity is not mechanically derived from a given situation in the material world (Sabel, 1982.) It is the result of a contest over signification and discourse to the extent the power of capital inside social relations of production is identified as hampering the potentialities of worker social cooperation and communication. This is by no means the only possible outcome of processes of subjectivity construction. In fact, class can be assumed as one form of what Amariglio and Ruccio (1994: 29) call "ideological and discursive constitution of the subject," as

only one of many subjectivities enacted by subjects in a capitalist social formation, none of them more "correct" than any of the others in capturing the (partial or otherwise) "truth" of that perceived reality.

Conceptualizing class as an outcome of social and discursive resistant practices ultimately contributes to maintaining the epistemological rigor and consistency of the concept of class while at the same time leaving it open to a more contingent level of explanation. When the relations between subjective position and the objective nature of capitalist production become apparent to workers, this takes place in diversified dynamics of solidarity shaped by locale, history and culture (Burawoy, 1985; Fantasia, 1988; Yarrow, 1992.)

In Charles Sabel's (1982) model, the changing division of labor as a consequence of technological innovation and competition creates, through the differential reproduction of skills and the permanence of archaic forms of control, different workers' "world views." These can be shared at the level of work groups, as an objective demarcation of capitalist control of the labor process (Weir, 1988; Zetka, 1992.) But they can also be "split" even inside a single individual between his vision of the job (his "career at work") and its broader social and political expectations. From this point of view, worker acceptance and resistance are primarily referred to a social construction of normative regulatory ideas applied to workplace life.

In South African analyses of urban proletarian life and culture (Stewart, 1981; Sitas, 1983; Bonnin, 1987; Adler, 1994; Moodie, 1994; Hemson, 1995) this notion of "regulatory ideas" can be seen as encompassing worker views about fair employment relationships, wage levels compatible with the subsistence of the household, notions of human dignity and limits to the exercise of power. These can change in relation to various factors, which may include changes in the organization of the factory social relations, interactions with external actors, the level of workers' political organization, the nature of institutional regulations, and various determinants external to the workplace. Among these latter we may have the differential appeal of traditions of resistance, communitarian and family values, ethnicity, language, religion, and the persistence of non-capitalist forms of accumulation. A non-determinist narrative of collective solidarity and action should then grasp the subjective experience of contradictions between the quest for stability in these broader spheres of social relations, and the instability in individual workers' lives generated by industrial change (Post, 1978: 148; Nash, 1979.)

In this perspective, collective action and conflict cannot be simply seen as a culminating moment of worker consciousness of exploitation. Its explanation requires what in totally different contexts (Kerkvliet, 1977; Humphrey, 1982) has been defined as *violation*. In this case it is the violation on the part of management of explicit and

implicit rules of employment relations which might provide the laboring subject with a meaning for daily activity in relation to the multiple internal and external determinants concurring in shaping his/her subjectivity. In other words subjectivity at work is changed in response to new models of regimentation to industrial space, time and authority, which violate what might have been pre-existing foundations of subjectivity.

Again, imagining class as the *a-priori* repository of conflict due to its position in the division of labor is of little help in the explanation of the processes through which conflict is developed and articulated. More useful is then to recognize the plurality of social relations and determinants of subjectivity, how violation in each of these spheres can produce diversified antagonisms (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985,) and then the possible conditions through which a class-based discourse may practically emerge as hegemonic. The convergence of a plurality of cultural processes and identifications to define collective action is then premised on the diversity of social practices that, through the daily experience of workplace confrontation, make the oppressive nature of social relations visible (Fantasia, 1988.) Worker subjectivity is a prism whose faces not always clearly reflect a fully-fledged class discursive universe, but whose combination is nonetheless able to shed light on the nature of power and conflict in the workplace.

Violation is not only alienation of subjectivity. Once re-elaborated by the subject, it becomes part of it. As James Scott (1990: 106-107) noticed, the subaltern's acceptance of dominant values may pose a particularly insidious threat to them. In fact, acceptance implies sacrifices and expectations for the sake of a promise which is contained in those values, but which is usually betrayed given inequalities of power. I would add that reactions to betrayal are all the more threatening in so far as their previous concealment behind dominant values can make them totally sudden and unpredictable. This allows also investigation of how the potential for worker resistance is contained in formal practices of acceptance. It is to be noticed from this point of view that the ambiguity of the concept of worker resistance has been at the core of a revision of labor process theory. Michael Burawoy (1979) argued that everyday practices at work, in so far as they try to reassert a space of security and meaning for workers outside capital's command but without challenging managerial authority, favor the imperatives of production to "obscure and secure" the extraction of surplus. Recent Foucauldian analyses of the labor process stressed the ambiguous nature of workers' search for security and stability on the shopfloor as a product of the internalization of managers' disciplining practices and normalizing judgements. If

worker identity and subjectivity are in this view self-defeating, it is also admitted that under certain circumstances they can modify the exercise of power in raising worker expectations of autonomy, involvement and initiative (Knights and Willmott, 1989; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Sakolsky, 1992; Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994.) These contributions show that power in organizations is ambivalent as a force simultaneously repressing and producing identities. However, their notion of a laboring subject produced entirely by the disciplinary gaze of the factory is not wholly satisfactory. In particular, they seem to neglect processes of subjectivity formation outside the workplace. These latter may actually redefine power/knowledge relations in the factory by developing worker expectations and norms which are not the result of daily interactions with management but which invest it, provoking localized inversions of power relations, and radical contestation of the company discourse and ideology.

This seems to be particularly the case in South Africa: here broad social processes of subjectivation can raise expectations for wages compatible with the family's living standards, the maintenance of morality and respectability, or the restoration of past injustices. Debbie Bonnin's (1994) and Ari Sitas' (1987) contributions on the nature of workers' "cultural formations" emphasize how the collective elaboration of worker experiences of migration, urbanization, proletarianization and industrial work in a racially dominated universe imply simultaneously both the promise of modernity and its betrayal. These analyses show how the capacity of the unions to hegemonize the workers' culture through a class-based discourse is not separable from the role played by the shop stewards as "grassroots intellectuals", or symbolic brokers and organizational vehicles for a plurality of proletarian languages and images. These latter are regarded as both related and unrelated to production, combining workplace and community narratives, "traditional" and "modern" stylistic patterns, the sense of dislocation and destruction of pre-capitalist backgrounds as a tool and a genealogy of struggle to be used in the factories. Resulting class identifications are ultimately deeply permeated by communitarian ethos and values. The synthesis of resistant worker "cultural formations" in the factories and in the segregated hostels or in the townships, the representation of the factory as a natural extension of a racial-capitalist order, the formation of a "public class knowledge" nurtured in a strongly democratic sense of organized militancy, are all here regarded as major factors influencing new and hybrid class languages reproduced and transmitted by the unions. Finally, if the combination of capitalism and apartheid violated for the black proletariat the promise of industrial work and modernization, workers' perceptions of what could be an acceptable balance of forces in production are interrelated to their aspiration for a

democratic society free from racial domination (Buhlungu, 1996.) The motifs of workplace and community resistance are here strictly interlinked, and the idea of a moral economy at work lays the moral bases of protest. The communitarian ethos of the workers' residential location can moreover "laterally" reinforce the autonomous nature of subjectivity in the workplace by defining an opposition between collective values based on dignity and human rights and a capitalist labor process dominated by the individualist forces of greed and profit (Adesina, 1989.) Before turning to an examination of internal and external influences on worker subjectivity in my case study, it is however important to stress the peculiar structure of South African car manufacturing as a further source of opportunities and constraints.

3. Modern Times? South African Automobile Manufacturing and the Global Challenge of Flexibility

The history of restructuring in the South African automobile industry is a clear indication of how flexibility is a problematic concept, not dependent on the implementation of abstract models, and actually shaped and conditioned by the subjectivity of the workers whose consent it tries to elicit. The end of international isolation in the post-apartheid era required posed for local automobile producers the challenge of industrial policies oriented to the insertion in highly competitive world markets. The industry is made vulnerable by its technological and financial dependence on foreign capital, so that "national production" remains subordinated to multinational companies' strategies of integration and internationalization of assembly, manufacturing and component supply. Moreover, the liberalization of imports confronts the industry with aggressive competitors from both the traditional world "cores" of the industry and from Newly Industrialized Countries which have already managed the transition to high value-added export promotion (Law, 1991.) A legacy of protectionism from past import substitution industrialization and programmes of domestication of international corporations had, moreover, facilitated the proliferation in South Africa of a number of producers and makes for a restricted, predominantly "white" internal market (Black, 1994.)

Conversely, the internationalization of the industry did not reduce substantially the fragmentation of production, as policy-makers who linked liberalization with "rationalization" had desired. In fact, the possibility for expanded economies of scale was counterbalanced by the competition between major companies to control a mature and diversified South African market. As a result, the South African automobile industry as developed in the last thirty years is characterized by a very small volume

production of a high number of models in multiple platform configurations[3]. In 1993 seven manufacturers[4] produced fewer than 200,000 units in 11 makes and 34 models (Black, 1994: 52-65.) In 1991 the average production per model was 6,000 units, compared to 30,000 for Brazil, 40,000 for Australia, 120,000 for Japan and nearly 200,000 for Europe and United States (Black, 1994: 71.) The attainment of minimum efficient scale in this scenario was highly problematic: at present, NUMSA estimates that models produced in South Africa could be imported at a cost 20-30% less if it were not for the remaining market protection[5].

Rather than the virtues of the Japanese model, it is the particular mode of insertion of South African automobile manufacturing in world markets, its relationship with transnational capital and its need to survive that determine the industry's search for flexibility. In fact, operating in such a fragmented market requires the production process to adapt to extremely rapid shifts between different models, and this implies shortening retooling times for machinery, streamlining supplies, reducing set-up times and promoting multiskilled, adaptable and flexible workers. However, if flexibility is the only way to survive in a restricted and overcrowded market, it is also, as I will show in the next section, a main area of vulnerability of managerial strategy and a fundamental terrain of worker subjectivation.

4. The MBSA Strike: Towards a New Paradigm?

The impact of internationalization and globalization on social relations of production and worker subjectivity reveals the contradictory nature of the ideology and practice of flexibility in South African car manufacturing. The discourse of flexibility demands from workers a new culture of commitment to quality and to the competitive success of the firm, the capacity to identify defects, to self-improve, to activate multiple machines in simultaneous sequences. But conflict between workers and managers continues to be influenced by the exploitative nature of class relations, the

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[3] A "green area" is a demarcated section, usually painted green, in a department of a plant where managers and workers hold consultative meetings to discuss problems in production, suggestions and possible solutions. In South Africa "green areas" are used particularly by Nissan. Here meetings last 15 minutes, four of which are reserved for employees' inputs.

2 A platform is the combination of body, engine and gearbox.

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3 SAMCOR (Ford, Mazda and Mitsubishi), Nissan (Nissan and Fiat), Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, BMW, Delta (Opel and Isuzu) and Toyota.

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4 Chris Lloyd, NUMSA, Interview with the Author, 15.8.1995.

authoritarian nature of the workplace regime, a sense of inadequacy of monetary income, and practices of cultural and even linguistic exclusion[6]. This source of conflict is heightened by the fact that African autoworkers had to develop a significant degree of flexibility and multiple skills already as a consequence of multi-platform production, rather than as a result of conscious management strategies to promote flexibility. But these informal, "tacit skills" (Adler, 1993) are still largely unrecognized and unrewarded. Regardless of NUMSA's successful effort in negotiating a simplification and a homogenization of grades, the lack recognition for workers' skills is still among the most pressing concerns for workers on the shopfloor.

This is only an example of how the new industrial order desired by South African auto manufacturers can overlap with the legacies and the update of past violations. As Sabera Surtee (1990) recognized, management's commitment to quality and its need to leave a wider scope for worker knowledge of the production process while at the same time trying to fragment and compartmentalize it can provide spaces for resistance and "de-alienation" supported by "communal networks". These spaces can be more or less colonized by the union, with consequences in terms of conflict, if confronted with the permanence of elements of old-style workplace despotism. Alleged exceptions such as the introduction of "Just-in-Time" at Toyota, or the development of "green areas" at Nissan, are regarded more as the ideological and technological update of hierarchical forms of control that severely constrain worker independence and responsibility, rather than as cases of a successful "Japanization" of the South African automobile industry. Organizational innovation is still more a response to union militancy and government trade regulations, than to new developments in South African managerial culture (Duncan and Payne, 1993; Duncan, 1992.) As a result top-down organizational restructuring and communication shape a managerial discourse heavily biased against the unions and suspicious towards workers depicted with a large use of racial stereotypes. It is not a contradiction, then, that a manager at Toyota could credit the success of Just-in-Time in his plant to the fact that the work ethic of Zulu workers in Durban resembled the Japanese one (Duncan, 1992,) while a manager at the same company could say at the same time that

> Blacks like repetitive tasks. They want to do the same thing over and over. Even if you show them a faster and easier way of doing a job, they want to stick to the old way ... The blacks just think it's a big joke ... They are supposed to call for more parts when they have less than

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5 Chris Lloyd, NUMSA, Interview with the Author, 15.8.1995.

> ten in their bin. But not *these* guys. They wait for them to run out altogether, *then* they raise the alarm. It's against the rules, but you can't stop them. They just call a shop-steward, stop the line, and then you have a big hassle on your hands (quoted in Nattrass, 1991: 3,4.)

This example on the introduction of teamwork is equally illuminating:

> One manufacturer said last year that they were operating more than 100 teams. However, when we asked workers and shop stewards, we found that nearly none of them actually knew that they're in a team.[7]

As an experienced NUMSA organizer summarized the state of restructuring in South African car industry:

> In that area, quite frankly, my personal opinion is that the union is weak. It talks about a move from mass production to work teams and flexible specialization, I don't know what the fuck that means. It talks about these concepts, but in the real world of manufacturing environment they're meaningless, they are figments of imagination, because you have a vehicle coming down of the line and you've got parts that you have to fit, and that's it[8].

The promotion of flexibility and worker commitment inside such constraints demonstrates an inherently contradictory nature of restructuring of work organization that is not necessarily, as such, a South African peculiarity. However this seems to have in the South African case a peculiar impact on worker culture, discourse and practice. It is not surprising, then, if industrial conflict in this sector has increased strongly in the past seven years, when the contradictions of industrial restructuring impacted on the process of political democratization and the expectations this raised among black workers.

Increasing conflict is exemplified by the 1990 strike at Mercedes-Benz South Africa (MBSA) in East London. On 16 August, workers from F and A Sites started *toyi-*

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6 Chris Lloyd, NUMSA, Interview with the Author, 15.8.1995.

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7 Gavin Hartford, NUMSA, interview with the Author, 30.8.1995.

toying[9] demanding that NUMSA's organization in the plant withdraw from the newly established National Bargaining Forum for the automobile industry and the initiation of a new round of plant negotiations over wages. An occupation and sleep-in brought the factory to a total standstill. Opposition rapidly grew towards NUMSA's national and regional leadership, and against leading shop stewards in the plant. Interventions from NUMSA, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the African National Congress (ANC) to end the strike were not successful. The strike eventually ended after nine weeks with the violent eviction of the occupiers by the police and the dismissal of more than 500 workers, sanctioned by an agreement between NUMSA and Mercedes-Benz (Von Holdt, 1990.) The strike was the culmination of three years of conflict and took place at a time when the company was embarking on a reformist approach aimed at eliciting union cooperation to the restructuring of managerial practices[10]. Before 1987, MBSA was considered a poorly organized factory with a quiescent workforce. That strike emphasized links between workplace and community struggle demanding the redress of a historical inadequacy of wage levels. Structural constraints and opportunities were not sufficient to explain that episode. This would rather require, instead, a more careful and autonomous level of analysis of the ways in which subjectivity is constructed on the cutting edge dividing production and reproduction, the workplace and the social fabric.

Narratives of the strike/sit-in are, from this point of view, impressive. More than 500 workers deliberately faced mass dismissal, openly defying national agreements in the absence of support from NUMSA officials and leading shop-stewards in their demand for plant level wage bargaining. Autonomy of discourse played in that case a decisive role. The deployment of a whole symbolic apparatus marked the suspension of established rules, the interruption of factory routine and the reversal of existing authorities. That allowed the strike to take a self-sustaining momentum, facilitating the emergence in the struggle of a sense of collective solidarity based on sharing rituals and practices of conscious subversion. The cultural repertoire of the strikers was diverse, involving a very wide display of symbols of the anti-apartheid struggle:

> The workers elected marshals who were stationed at each of the company's points of access and exit who regulated who entered the

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8 The *toyi-toyi* is a kind of dance usually performed in South Africa during marches and collective actions. It is in particular part of organized labor's symbolic repertoire of resistance against apartheid .

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9 C.Kopke to L.Kettledas, 21.8.1990, Gavin Hartford Papers, MBSA File.

> company premises and who did not ... The marshals were dressed in quasi-military uniforms. Material used in the production of vehicles was cut to provide a dashiki, caftan or jellaba which the marshals wore over their own clothes. They donned Arab-style headgear, like a kaffyieh. They armed themselves with mock AK-47 rifles and bazookas. They moved about in groups, in military-style formations, at times taking to the ground in anti-ambush motion ... The company's flags were pulled down the flag pole, and they were replaced by the flags of the ANC and of the SACP ... They also carried a large coffin which had various inscriptions during the course of the occupation, signifying the demise of the person or the institution represented. Mr. Les Kettledas' [NUMSA's national organizer, Author's note] name appeared, as did those of Nonyukela [NUMSA's Border regional secretary, Author's note], Fikizolo and Tom [NUMSA's MBSA shop stewards, Author's note], but principally the coffin displayed a model of a bargaining table, which represented the National Bargaining Forum ... The workers had a life-size model of a man, previously used in first-aid training, which was ritually abused and assaulted during the course of the demonstrations.[11]

This description reminds those of *charivaris* or of other rituals of inversion of established roles and caricatured appropriation of symbols of authority (Bachtin, 1976.) It testifies the emergence of processes of resistance whereby not only existing power relations are suspended. In fact, a new kind of rationality oriented towards the maintenance of the cohesiveness of the insurgent group takes the place of ordinary rationality as expressed, for example, in calculations over the relative benefits of a strike action compared to the possible advantages of a compromise. This extreme example underlines how patterns of worker subjectivity construction can be autonomous from determinants directly related to structural conditions and institutionalized actors. These observations illuminate some themes of my analysis of processes of subjectivity construction at SAMCOR, to which I will turn in a further section of my paper.

5. SAMCOR Blues

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10 Independent Mediation Service of South Africa, *Arbitration Award: Mercedes-Benz of South Africa (Pty) Ltd. v NUMSA*, No. ARB1080 Albertyn, 17.3.1991, pp.29-30.

5.1 The Elephant and the Dancer: SAMCOR's Discourse of Flexibility

SAMCOR is considered the most technologically advanced car manufacturer in South Africa. It was the first company to introduce, in 1987, robots on the body-building line, in overhead handling, transfer and spot-welding, before extending their use to undercoat application in the paintshop (Duncan and Payne, 1993: 16.) The integration of the company in international production decisively influenced its organizational choices. In fact, a complex history of production on licence for various multinational corporations (at present SAMCOR products are sold under the brand names of Ford, Mazda and Mitsubishi) is partially responsible for this development. In fact, SAMCOR's management had to adapt to a highly diversified output in response to the integrated strategies of foreign companies. This is at the origins of a product range that presently consists of eleven models over more than one-hundred and thirty variants. In a sector where it is rare to find companies manufacturing more than two models at a time, SAMCOR's executives can legitimately claim to be running the most complex car manufacturer in the world.

This uniqueness is reflected in the degree of robotization, automation of the lines, and computerization of quality control. In fact, technology in this company was upgraded with the specific aim to facilitate a rapid adaptation of machinery and men to changes in product configurations depending on short-term demand fluctuations. As one manager put it, SAMCOR aims to be "like a ballet dancer, not like an elephant trashing through the bush." A remarkable performance from this point of view is that the times for tooling changeovers in the bodyshop are shorter than the cycle-time of a single car: 1.8 minutes compared to 3 minutes, less than at the ultra-modern FIAT/Sata Melfi plant in Italy[12].

Conversely, SAMCOR's attention to worker participation in work organization is quite limited. Teamwork is considered as integrating traditional supervisory tasks in a Fordist line-based organization of operations, with little worker responsibility. Teamleaders could define their role as a "link in a chain of instructions," more than as representing semi-autonomous work groups in visible and distinct phases of production, as the literature on "lean production" would recommend. The strong integration of the teamleaders in the company hierarchy makes of teamwork, in the

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11 Information on FIAT/Sata provided by Laura Fiocco, University of Calabria.

words of a NUMSA organizer, no more than "a disguised form of supervision."[13] Quality control is substantially centralized and, in the case of the final assembly, totally computerized. A manager explained the necessity for automation as a way to shelter the attainment of quality from the "inconsistencies of the human thought." In this way, while a greater commitment is required from workers to improve quality, worker initiative is limited by a separated and objectified managerial knowledge embodied in computer programs. A recent company document which stressed the need to "emulate Japanese manufacturing philosophies" by adopting the "Mazda production system" shows indeed a remarkably Taylorist attention for work rates and motion studies, while very little is devoted to worker participation, team concepts and delegation of authority[14]. At the same time when the company tries to elicit cooperation and orientation to quality among the workers, it cannot allow their initiative and responsibility to infringe the limitations embedded in the technological framework. Teamworking and worker cooperation need then to be legitimized in other ways, and paternalism is largely used by SAMCOR's management to fill this gap. As a production engineer explained:

> Safety and morale: that's what a worker wants: he doesn't really care about the quality of the car, that's all bullshit. No worker in the world really cares about the quality. That's not a first need. You need food, you need drink, you need shelter: that's what really drives the human being. And you need recognition for doing a good job.

An industrial relations officer added:

> Teamwork is about respecting each other's dignity, it appeals to individuals to respect other people ... "An injury to one is an injury to all," the old revolutionary buzzword; "*Amandla*!," power to the people: that's all teamwork stuff. But, turning it around: "an injury to one is an injury to all," so: if you take off a Monday, you are injuring the man who's here, and by injuring him you are injuring the whole company. "*Amandla*!," power to the people: yes, you are empowered to do

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12 Chris Lloyd, interview with the Author, 15.8.1995.

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13 SAMCOR, *Study of Mazda Production System. Direct Labor Value Formation* (Pretoria: SAMCOR).

various things, to participate in the planning and decision making on how to do the job better, on how not to waste the company's money.

This clarifies the role of paternalism and the meaning of worker commitment and participation in SAMCOR's corporate ideology. The use of terminology is not innocent here: worker slogans and "revolutionary buzzwords" are appropriated by management and turned against workers' demand for independence and control based on their input (since they "are not interested in quality"). The outcome is a discourse where the recognition of worker initiative and cooperation is narrowed so as "not to waste the company's money." As Buhlungu (1996: 62-68) noticed, the rhetorical advocacy by management of workers' needs for empowerment and recognition is a way to win grassroots allegiance in contrast to real change negotiated with representative worker organizations. Such a device for control is all the more powerful if combined with the capacity of management to convince workers that the only way to achieve their goals is a loyal identification with company-designed top-down structures. The contradiction between high levels of technological innovation and the persistence of traditional patterns of authority inside SAMCOR's ideology of flexibility makes NUMSA's Chris Lloyd reject the notion of "lean production", preferring instead that of "hi-tech Taylorism."[15]

5.2 Unionization and Resistance

Union organization at SAMCOR has a troubled history. African independent unionism arrived in the company (then named Sigma) in the late 1970s. During the 1980s technological innovation and intensification of work have indicated a growing managerial preoccupation with rolling back the power of the unions, in a factory already affected by endemic absenteeism and sabotage[16]. The weakening of the union presence however left space to informal resistance. A manager complained, soon after the introduction of the first robots, that the technology just introduced "made it easy for employees to damage parts." When asked in which particular sections of the plant

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14 Interview with the Author, 15.8.1995.

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15 *Minutes of the Productivity Index Steering Committee Meeting Held in the Manufacturing Conference Room*, 28.11.1984, Taffy Adler Papers (TAP) C13.1.6.1, NAAWU/Sigma: Productivity Scheme Minutes 1984; Amcar, *Fixed Direct Manpower Due to Facility Restrictions*, Memorandum File RAC/sis, Coleman to Thom, 27.11.1984, TAP C.13.1.6, NAAWU/SAMCOR: Productivity Scheme Minutes 1985-86 CPSA AH2065, Dept. of Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

this was likely to happen, his answer was "virtually everywhere."[17] At the culmination of this phase of restructuring, SAMCOR was established as such in 1985 from the merger of Amcar, an Anglo-American subsidiary based in the Silverton plant, with Ford, which maintained a minority share after it had disinvested from its Eastern Cape facilities following pressures from the American anti-Apartheid movement (Adler, 1990; Bradley and Sarakinsky, 1985.) As part of the disinvestment deal, 24% of SAMCOR's shares were to be administered by a Trustee Fund on behalf of SAMCOR workers, but without NUMSA's participation. A harsh, at times violent intra-union conflict over the destination of the 24% Fund followed, on whether to pay dividends in cash to workers or to devote them to social expenditure and community upgrading, as in NUMSA policy. Today, at SAMCOR, "24%" is a synonym for troubles, divisions and conflict between workers and shop-stewards.

Intra-organizational tensions and conflictual dynamics are resented by the shop stewards with a sense of frustration and lack of understanding:

> There are times when I have to upgrade myself, look for greener pastures, because in times you feel frustrated, when you are fighting these wars people continue attacking you even if you are not wrong; you are constantly being attacked for no apparent reason. In this game you are not to be liked by anyone, and these who don't like you will go for you. If you are a shop-steward, when people take the wrong decision, go out for strike on a wrong reason and you try to correct them, they will start shouting at you, calling you with names... It's a normal life for a shop steward. Immediately after becoming shop stewards they start to realize: "Shit, this is not what I wanted". During the last strike there have been shop stewards visited at night and threatened with guns. I was threatened with a gun in 1992.

At SAMCOR since 1980, when the company was still owned by Chrysler, this shop-steward represents a paradigmatic example of the specificity of the company's employment policies and of the peculiarities of workers in the auto sector, which can be relevant in explaining their militancy. Hired as a quality inspector in grade 3 (defined as semi-skilled,) he entered the union after the experience of the school

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16 SAMCOR, *PI Steering Committee Meeting*, 6.2.1986, TAP C.13.2.1.1, CPSA AH 2065, Dept. of Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

revolts of 1976, when MAWU[18] sent organizers to the plant, following the example of his brother, organizer for CCAWUSA[19]. But now, the confidence and the defiant mood of the origins are giving way to disillusionment. Restructuring is fragmenting workers' identification with the union on everyday issues such as overtime schedules and retrenchment plans, redefining their militancy and resistance. Moreover, the combined effect of restructuring and increases in workloads, added to his shop-steward duties, are disrupting his social life, bringing even his marriage to the brink of breakdown.

The combination of a mainly technological road to restructuring of work and production, and union weakness and internal divisions, regardless of its numerical strength, shows from one side all the difficulties for NUMSA in forging a common identity on the shopfloor. From another side it shows a highly differentiated pattern of localized processes of identification, occupational attitudes, worker responses and militancy. In particular, if SAMCOR workers' internalization of the company discourse of quality and competitiveness reflects a fracture opened in their class cultural substratum, it nonetheless does not prove a new corporate-oriented identity. This allows other and different non-integrated meanings of restructuring to emerge.

5.3 Grabbing Fast. The Social Construction of Quality at SAMCOR

SAMCOR workers generally recognize that restructuring leads to unfair increases in workloads, line speed and overtime. This sense of violation is heightened by the realization that market liberalization is encouraging the company to outsource phases of production, contracting them out to outside companies which bring their workers inside the plant. This threatens the stability of the union membership and at the same time, combined with work intensification, increases workers' insecurity and anxiety over their job:

> You see what's happening with the idea they came out with, lean production: they're losing headcount, they are retrenching people, everyday. When you lose headcount the company doesn't reduce the line speed. People are complaining everyday, minute by minute, that the line is moving fast, that they cannot cope.

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17 Metal and Allied Workers' Union, one of the unions which merged in 1987 to form NUMSA.

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18 Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa.

Thus, from one side the unilateral nature of the introduction of new technology is a frequent complaint, since it determines faster line-speed, heavier workloads and a further threat to employment:

> You have to sweat hard against the robot. If you don't sweat hard, the robot will take your job.

On the other hand, outsourcing, as a further non-negotiated practice, is portrayed as the hallmark of the company's ingratitude for worker commitment. Rumors run through the plant on what will be the next section to be outsourced, or how many jobs are going to be lost either through retrenchment or through retirement packages imposed on workers as the alternative to relocation in more fatiguing and less rewarding jobs. Communication among workers about outsourcing serves the double purpose containing the sense of collective anxiety and defining informal organizational networks to put pressure on the union to make it adopt a more radical stance on the issue.

At a more immediate level, workers resort to the discourse of quality to defend their position and a certain degree of job control against authoritarian uses of innovation. In fact, increasing line-speed due to new technology is depicted by them as detrimental to the quality of the final product, given that it does not allow workers to properly check the process:

> Hours per unit are reduced, people are retrenched, the speed of machines is pushed harder, jobs are shifted to people behind. These people are harder and faster, not smarter. They call it lean production. But if you are working in these conditions how can you expect to contribute to what is done in the department?

Therefore, resistance to arbitrary change may not take in the first instance the form of overt conflict. Other roads, such as the appropriation of managerial quality-based ideologies, are open to articulate worker demands and strengthen their claims. These strategies are nonetheless potentially disruptive for capitalist factory command, since they provide sources of contestation over the meaning of the company's discourse that undermine management's quest for consent and identification with the firm. Workers' flexible adoption of quality imperatives as defined by managerial ideologies can be either expressive of identity or purely instrumental. In any case, it seems confirmed

that the company discourse motivates the laboring subject to read it as the promise of increased control over the job. Conversely, this identity seems to be wounded when examples of unfairness appear which, undermining workers' sense of control, break the promise.

This emphasis on worker control seems justified in the light of what is considered unfair by SAMCOR employees: wage levels not compatible with the subsistence of the family, lack of recognition of skills, and supervisors' interference with worker knowledge of the job. From the first point of view, a general dissatisfaction is expressed on wage levels, regardless of the degree of worker identification with company imperatives. This is manifest even in the form of overt contestation of plant union leadership during report-back meetings on a three-year industry agreement in 1995 generally acknowledged by observers as a worker advance unparalleled in other sectors. Cases of rejection of the agreement showed in the words of shop stewards a very clear and rational calculation by workers of family needs, of the need to support unemployed relatives or send remittances to areas of origins. Extra-workplace determinants such as a stable family life in a permanently urbanized context, diversifying consumption patterns and educational requirements for children or wives, seem to be overarching considerations in radicalizing worker demands over wages.

On the other hand, lack of skill recognition contributes to complex, even contradictory, workers' orientations to quality. It seems that this issue is more resented among workers with a higher understanding of the opportunities contained in restructuring and a clearer strategic approach to career choice. A grade 2 assembler of components on the trim line with previous job experience as a retail salesman characterizes this case:

> I want to know the whole plant, the whole job of the plant, but my main job I want to do is motor mechanic. That's the career I want to follow.

Here the elaboration of past work experiences, especially in the evaluation of communications skills required, and a sense of pride in mental and physical abilities combine in defining a substantially positive attitude towards the job, coupled with a construction of the meaning of quality for purposes expressive of identity:

> According to myself, nothing is impossible for me. I can't say my job is difficult ... If you do that job everyday, you become used to that job.

> I'm a fast man always, if the line speed is going up I think I can cope with it ... I have been a clerk, I don't think this is the only job I can do. I am a fastest man. I grab fast so if each of the department take me to the job I think I'll make it because it takes me few hours to know the job.

But this is substantially at odds with an objective situation where promises are not maintained. The lack of skill recognition is here coupled with the sense of unfairness in seeing people perceived as incompetent and unexperienced, usually white newly hired employees, being more easily promoted:

> People with lesser knowledge are on top of you. If there was enough democracy in this company we wouldn't have to struggle all over ... You have a Standard 9, with five years experience; then it comes a white unable to read and write, and in one week he becomes a supervisor, and he tells you what to do.

Yet, dissatisfaction is not sufficient here to define a visible militant attitude. Going on strike is considered by many as a last resort, while individualized strategies based on promotion and skill upgrading are often preferred and turned into a militant semantics:

> By struggle I'm not saying I'm going on strike. I'm saying I'm going to struggle; it might be through that post of motor mechanic. It's all part of the same struggle.

Even when jobs performed correspond to skills possessed, external interferences are perceived as unfairly affecting workers' meanings of their activity, regardless of the classification of a particular job. A final assembly worker in grade 2 developed a strong sense of disillusionment and violation when he found his occupation as an assembler to be of a level lower than his real qualification as a repairman. And this even if he is employed both as an assembler and a repairman, at an assembler's wage rate. He describes this practice of multitasking at the lowest possible wage rate as normal at SAMCOR. At ISCOR[20], at his previous occupation, things were different: promotions in particular were regarded as more transparent. But he left ISCOR to avoid being transferred to another facility. He accepted the job at SAMCOR to stay

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19 Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa.

with his family, knowing that conditions were worse than at ISCOR. This facilitated a quite instrumental attitude towards the new company, and a totally different strategy compared to that previously discussed:

> When I came I thought maybe the company will develop me, but now I only want to start my own business.

However, given his perception of unemployment levels, and a sense of lack of alternatives, maybe also a poor level of socialization outside work ("I don't have friends,") his immediate strategy privileges negotiation and cooperation with management "to keep the company going." Restructuring and intensification of work are then accepted with a sense of fatalism: this worker's double job as a repairman and as an assembler does not usually allow him to comply with its repair schedule. He is therefore forced to set unfinished cars aside and to work on them overtime. Heavier workloads and faster line speed are nonetheless accepted because: "the market is our boss."

However the relationship with the company is in this case suffered and conflictual:

> It's a problem. It's like having a wife who is irresponsible, but you love that woman and she's the mother of your kids.

The symptoms of this "irresponsibility" are located particularly in middle management's interference in personalized meanings attached to the job. This can take the form of a foreman's disregard for the way the job is done, or of indifference when real problems arise. Another worker expressed this set of feelings as follows:

> If I'm working I don't want anyone to watch how I'm working. If I'm doing my job, I'm doing my job. The foreman is there not to do a watchdog, to police me ... The production guys: always the foreman is after them, watching them. If I go to the toilet the foreman watches for time ... And they refuse people to go out to attend problems; they treat us like slaves.

To this is added resentment over the functioning of teamwork. Teamleaders are not elected, but appointed by management. A general opinion is that they are not selected according to their competence and the social esteem of their peers. They are instead

considered as simply "the mouthpiece of managers," chosen by favor, "the same as *indunas*[21]."

In the end, managerial arbitrariness seems to undermine the promise of worker-management cooperation needed to "keep the company going." The ensuing disappointment, with or without the associated perception of a lack of opportunities to start an independent business, can lead even seemingly compliant workers to adopt an overt language of resistance. In many accounts, once attempts to convince the supervisor of the unfairness of his behavior have been exhausted, workers start to disregard their job, to arrive late, to refuse overtime. Then they form what someone calls "anti-foreman groups" on a work-to-rule basis: "they agree that if he asks for everything, just shit him up."

Even workers substantially satisfied with their job cannot therefore be assumed to be automatically compliant. It seems that satisfaction is generally linked to a subjective identification of the proper times and ways to do the job which define an invented pseudo-craftsmanship, an ethic and a sense of initiative even in cases of low-skill and monotonous jobs. In this case, workers can become quite susceptible to managerial interferences and violations. This is the opinion of a self-defined unskilled "seal applier" in the paintshop:

> I like the job, very much! I enjoy the job because I experience problems, I've got a say. I can say it's becoming working faster. They set the line speed for that job as they see you perform well and they increase a little bit, if you still perform well they increase a little bit, a little bit. After a month they feel that guy is alright for the job and you yourself can feel now you're alright. And you start enjoying the job.

In this case, a clearer perception exists, compared to workers in more skilled occupations but whose skills are not recognized, of the fact that the worker is expected to be responsible towards quality, that he must inspect himself not relying on the supervisor. The invention of quality entirely substitutes for any language of struggle. But it does not wipe away understandings of conflict and confrontation. Indeed, here supervisory interventions on the job which are regarded as interfering

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20 Induna was the word used to identify the African assistant of the white production supervisor, charged with the transmission of instructions to the shopfloor and the monitoring of operations. The word is associated, in the discourse of South African unionism, with ideas of sell-out.

with workers' construction of quality are more resented than in more skilled tasks. In particular, supervisors are regarded as privileging quantity over quality, trying to arbitrarily modify the production pace, thus violating implicit assumptions about the "right speed" for a good quality operation, on which much of the moral economy of the job relies:

> When I check the quality of the panel, sometimes I do fight because I think it must not go to the line. I can inspect what the guys are producing and reject the whole stock already built because the weld is not holding. It's a problem because if the quality is not good the production foreman is going to fight with you because I'll be hampering or disturbing the production process which is designed on what he needs, say five cars. He's going to fight with you. That is why lean production is not favorable, because you cannot interfere with the production volume. The foreman has a target and he does not care about quality. But if the quality controller rejects a car, then there is conflict ... The workers are concerned about quality; what causes the problem is that they want us to produce more. They are not giving time to check on what we are doing.

Supervisory interferences are all the more unacceptable to the extent they are presented as "final and binding" and because they are functional to raise the foreman's production bonus. Thus, they carry a mark of immorality, besides that of despotism and incompetence. This kind of self-interest is regarded by workers as a particularly hated outrage to a common commitment to quality:

> OK, maybe I can spend twenty minutes on each combi, doing my job properly and checking the quality and attending the next one. But if they come and say: "Kom! Kom! Let that car pass away!" You start being confused, the quality is going to be poor and at the end of the day you won't make twenty ... But if you think it's unfair the only way you can fight is through the quality.

In this way, even a notion of quality that might be defined as fetishized and abstracted from any consideration about relations of power and inequality at work does not uphold a vision of the company as united by a substantial commonality of interests. It more likely defines a new terrain of confrontation between opposing cultural and moral understandings of the labor process.

5.4 Challenges for Worker Organization

It is apparent from the examples mentioned that acceptance and compliance are not by themselves conducive to consent. The meanings attached by workers to their jobs are rooted in an autonomy of discursive practices that tends to exceed those attributed by factory authority. Union organization, from this point of view, is not only structurally weak. It also appears not central in the definition of individualized strategies of survival, adaptation and "struggle," also given the multiplicity of meanings that this latter word assumes in this case.

Autonomy in worker discourses of resistance, combined with a legacy of organizational weakness, internal divisions and managerial attempts at isolating the union, face NUMSA with particularly urgent challenges on the shopfloor. The current managerial strategy to win a subordinate worker loyalty based on the implementation of top-down structures for participation is a further threat, even if this union, the second largest industrial union in South Africa, with more than 200,000 members, recruits the overwhelming majority of black workers at SAMCOR.

The following example of a strike in January 1996 illustrates the problems facing NUMSA in the plant. At that time, NUMSA had just negotiated a performance bonus for the attainment of a production target that required overtime:

> In December, just before the shutdown, people become loose, either they don't come to work or come and go for a beer and come back drunk. *It's not because they were dissatisfied with the company, but they simply used to leave their job, moving around, visiting friends in other departments.*

Management announced that as a consequence the employee's performance bonus would be lost. Coming back to work after the Christmas shutdown, workers found that they had been locked out, allegedly for management's fear of possible dissatisfaction and disruptions. A new agreement was reached, providing for the recovery of the lost units through overtime and for the payment of the December bonus. Soon before the overtime started a worker, not a member of NUMSA and part of a faction opposing the "24% board," called his colleagues to refuse overtime. Conflict rapidly escalated, assuming the dimension of a total confrontation between supporters and adversaries of the existing "24% board." When the initiator of the

strike was fired, his followers directed their hostility towards the shop stewards, demanding their resignation, accusing them of having failed to represent their workmate at disciplinary hearings. Eventually 17 other workers, all NUMSA members, were terminated.

In that case, not only was NUMSA delegitimized as an actor to control the development of the events, because it had been associated with an agreement on overtime which violated a shared sense of equity. The union was also affected by divisions internal to its own constituency. A seemingly minor accident therefore provided a catalyst for the convergence of multiple determinants of subjectivity - from the cleavages historically associated with the "24%" issue to managerial arbitrariness in lock-out and rescheduling of working times - in spurring opposition and conflict. As in the case of the Mercedes-Benz strike, the union had then to face a confrontation with its own grassroots.

The simultaneous impact of democracy and globalization in South Africa made union organizations responsible towards a "national economy" that during apartheid was invariably regarded with suspicion and hostility. Now the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), of which NUMSA is part, has an institutionalized role in tripartite structures for economic and social policy making, while COSATU affiliates have to include in their bargaining agendas questions of competitiveness, productivity, cooperation with capital that may not reflect developments at the workplace level. Sakhela Buhlungu (1996: 159-164) noticed that worker loyalty to unions in macro-level processes of negotiation and mobilization can contrast with the relative powerlessness of individuals and groups confronted with everyday inequality in power and control. Many shop stewards at SAMCOR notice a growing distance from the rank-and-file as a consequence of managerial attempts to sidestep the union as an independent actor of negotiations. Some of them expressed the need, as a consequence, to "get closer to the guys." This may mean improving information and relations with the informal channels of communication through which workers articulate their knowledge of the plant, of industrial change, of threats to their jobs.

Recent research (Joffe and Lloyd, 1996) indicated a visible trend in the South African auto sector towards "company unionism" and the decentralization to plant-level bargaining of an increasing number of highly plant-specific issues. In companies where union presence is already weak and problematic, such as SAMCOR or MBSA, this can exacerbate intra-union divisions and reinforce informal networks of resistance and organization. This would, from one side, diversify the range of worker responses

to restructuring, increasing the unpredictability of outcomes for management. But the danger remains that, if collective organization will be weakened by these developments, worker responses may turn out to be self-defeating. On the other hand, the mass support enjoyed by NUMSA, and the results from my interviews, seem to indicate that workers expect their union to be able to counter management-initiated schemes for participation through a meaningful and independent role in negotiating industrial change for skill recognition, redress of wage imbalances, and an end to authoritarianism. The conjunction of changing competitive scenarios, employer-initiated participation schemes, and diversification of worker responses is adversely affecting the union's role as a vehicle for collective solidarity and mobilization. However, if an alternative, comprehensive and antagonist union strategy emerged to cope with this trend, it still would have to deal with the crucial problem of finding languages and organizational tools to relate in an innovative way with the autonomy of discourses and practices of worker subjectivation in the age of flexibility. Conversely, worker strategies will have to elaborate new forms of articulation and self-organization of struggle to avoid a fragmentation of resistance practices that may easily lead them to irrelevance.

6. Not Yet a Conclusion

The introduction of methods of flexible manufacturing in South African automobile industry shows that the implementation of "lean production" cannot be mechanically derived from any "model" but is instead shaped by local contingencies, internal unevenness, contradictions and contestation. These principally revolve around the meanings and the boundaries of worker "involvement" and "commitment" to production that are regarded as crucial in managerial strategies. In particular, the meanings attached by workers to changing productive configurations respond to a multiplicity of determinants of the regulative ideas that articulate their subjectivity, be they linked to the search for security and stability, the maintenance of pride and autonomy on the job, or of wage levels compatible with the survival of the family.

These determinants are influenced by considerations both internal and external to the workplace and they are socialized and collectivized in images of how flexibility in a despotic capitalist workplace shaped by the dynamics of globalization violates the promises for worker control and independence contained in the ideology of flexibility itself. At the same time, it is not only that promise to be violated, but a whole image of a really democratic South Africa, that depends on visions of redress of social injustice not only limited to workplace democratization, but to the elimination of

exclusion and deprivation inherited from apartheid at the level of households and communities.

Violation shapes antagonisms that make the outcome of industrial restructuring substantially unpredictable. However, an understanding of these antagonisms is at odds with transcendental, immanent visions of class, class consciousness and class agency. It would rather require an investigation of the autonomous nature of social and discursive practices on which worker responses are built. However, the absence of a clearly articulated language of class can by no means be assumed as a proof of worker consent or even acceptance. The analysis of social and discursive practices of subjectivation rather illuminates how workplace antagonism can utilize fissures and loopholes in managerial discourse itself. Workers may not consciously articulate an imagery based on the class control of the means of production. But they can nonetheless act along "planes" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) as non-cooperative subjects that express a rejection of restructuring rooted in their own rationality, moral appellations and meanings as sources of legitimation and belief.

Even if collective overt resistance is weakened by the adversity of the current conjuncture, SAMCOR workers do not simply suffer restructuring in a passive way: they rather tend to appropriate the ideology and discourse of restructuring, elaborating meanings that do not necessarily coincide with those of the management. These strategies of refusal are radicalized when workers associate industrial change with anxiety and insecurity generated by their sense of unfairness and betrayal. The indeterminacy of working class behaviors and attitudes can well be regarded as a result of the disarticulation of established class images and languages. However, it may also reveal new points of frailty and instability in the process of capital valorization in the age of flexibility, whereby "every suture creates new wounds." (Negri, 1991.)

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