

Review

Karl von Holdt (2003) *Transition from Below: forging trade unionism and workplace change in South Africa*. Scottsville: University of Natal Press.

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I thumbed through Von Holdt's *Transition from Below* with feelings of envy and sadness – envy because in 1979 I had toyed with the idea of doing my PhD work on Witbank, Highveld Steel, KwaGuqa and the hostels; sadness because the area brought back memories of a number of people, crucial to my intellectual and creative development, who have passed away.¹ A further cause for envy was that Von Holdt's study could span the period from the initial steps of trade union organisation in the area, the early 1980s, the resistance and insurrection that followed and the transition to democracy. That he does so with commitment, care and analytical rigour makes this book a great contribution to the field of industrial sociology in the country.

By focusing on what he terms the 'micro-institutional level' of analysis, he attempts to demonstrate that South Africa's transition is not only a combination of a 'political transition to democracy and an economic transition towards a liberalised economy' but it also entails a 'third dimension': 'a process of internal decolonisation and reconstruction of society' or a 'contested transformation of post-colonial reconstruction' (2003:3). A core concept that explicates his approach and which constitutes the object of this 'contested transformation' is the 'apartheid workplace regime' (2003:5-8). Such a regime of domination at work constitutes, in turn, 'a national pattern of workplace practices' (2003:11).

Alongside the above conceptualisation of the workplace, there lies an understanding of the trade union as a central institution but also as a social movement: 'union structure includes the formal institutional girders ... but

also values and meanings, discourses and repertoires of action' (2003:9). The dramatic transformations occur in the KwaGuqa township and the hostels servicing Highveld Steel, the largest private steel producer in the country. They are driven by the dynamics of trade union organisation, initiated by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA), and are taken to an unprecedented crescendo of politicisation through the campaigns of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

The second chapter is particularly crucial as the concept of the 'apartheid workplace regime' is given flesh and blood in the context of the steelworks: its racial division of labour, its racial segregation of facilities, the racial structure of power in the workplace, the role of the black 'baas-boys', but, also, the 'differentiation of black migrant and urban workers', and traces how each one is beginning to be challenged by the emerging unionisation in the factory and the area.

The third chapter explores the arrival of the trade union and the consolidation of its struggles, the winning of trade union recognition and the role of migrant and urban labourers in an emerging challenge that 'ushered in a period of unstable and fiercely contested transition' (2003: 71). The first consequence of these processes was not only a challenge to 'baasskap' and conditions of work, but also a process of untold hardship between the union shop stewards and a militant strike committee which used violence to establish control and discipline in the workers' struggles. This led to deep divisions and a loss of NUMSA's legitimacy among a sizeable section of the workforce by the late 1980s (2003:83).

The fourth chapter illuminates the relationship between social movement unionism, popular alliances and 'ungovernability' in the community. The rolling out of stayaways and resistance brought tensions between unions and community organisations, and between hostel-based migrant workers and residents. The complexity of the tensions was enormous because many of the shop stewards were also 'increasingly active in the community' (2003:107).

The fifth chapter explores how the interlacing of manifold struggles spilled over into the factory, and between 1986 and 1987 a 'chaotic' challenge and counter-challenge was under way with the 'lockout strike' of 1987, which ended with the 'union (securing) a relatively orderly surrender', but in the workplace 'it was smashed completely, there were no longer meetings, there was nothing... the militant spirit of Highveld Steel had been broken' (2003:137-141).

The sixth chapter focuses on the ‘contestation and violence among black workers’ and how the ‘social structure of NUMSA took the form of a complex amalgam of popular and class identities’ oscillating between solidarity and ‘internal fracture’ (2003:147) and contending notions of ‘order’, especially between migrant workers and the rest, leading to a split by 1989.

The new strategy of reconstruction gets its turn in chapter eight. It was ‘designed to shape and contest processes of working-class incorporation in post-colonial South Africa’ (2003:205), which opens into an interesting discussion in chapter nine of the managerial strategy of ‘authoritarian restoration’ (2003:240-2), workplace resistance and a managerial breakthrough based on a ‘co-operative’ platform despite the trade union. This in turn led to ‘contending workplace strategies’ (2003:257) and a further ‘fragmentation and erosion of worker solidarity’ (2003:269).

As Von Holdt’s mission is to elucidate a ‘transition from below’ the narrative is not without drama – how the union was spawned inside hostel rooms; how first-generation migrants were at the heart of this ‘challenge’; how the crucial narrators of the experience faced vital strategic choices; how, finally, the unintended consequences of their action led to unity and fragmentation; how the union despaired about the shop floor and vice versa; how spontaneity led to violence and invention; how, in short, ordinary black workers made history and contested its outcomes.

At one level, Von Holdt debunks the notion that proletarian instinct is inherently radical or revolutionary, only to be betrayed by ‘organisational sell-outs’. Also, what comes under scrutiny is that the revolutionary insurrection was betrayed by petit-bourgeois elements. He shows how complex, fragmented and fragmenting the process was, and how, like in KwaZulu-Natal where violence reached unprecedented scales, the vectors of resistance pulled in contradictory ways. At another remove, by focusing on one locale of struggle, he is also able to provide a panoramic view of a broader national terrain of conflicting energies in the transformation.

There are, though, certain theoretical formulations underpinning Van Holdt’s analysis that cannot go unchallenged: the concept of the ‘apartheid workplace regime’ is an important reminder that racial domination was, as a modality of rule, an indispensable prop for capital accumulation. However definitive it was on the Witwatersrand (although the mines would be another exception), it did not constitute a general ‘national pattern’. Our research in KwaZulu-Natal speaks of a ‘colonial managerialism’ but, at the

same time, of patterns of indirect rule based on an ethnic understanding of Zuluness and the role of the *izinduna*, which was not just about white ‘baasskap’. (Remember, the royal house was central in the misunderstanding that precipitated the Durban strikes.) Furthermore, the racial paternalism of a variety of labour tenancies on the land, and in the Cape’s wine-farms, do not quite fit the ‘apartheid workplace regime’ model. That racism was implicated there is no doubt, but its modalities were different in different contexts, shaping different responses everywhere. One of the major achievements of the trade union movement was to find a common democratic strand that challenged the system to its core.

Secondly, the usage of the concept of ‘social movement unionism’ reads like a Weberian ‘ideal-type’: if social movements are sustained upsurges of people and/or collective ensembles that challenge the given order of societies, there needs to be a discussion of the links between a ‘type’ of organisation and its practices. Let us suppose that a trade union is internally democratic, open to relationships beyond the shop floor, etc. This might be a facilitating instance for social movement mobilisation or a transparent and non-bureaucratic accommodation to the social order. It may even be the coordinating instance for ethnic or religious mobilisation. But I fail to see how Von Holdt or I could go about organising a social movement-type union; we can try to organise a democratic union with accountable shop-steward structures, open to linkages with communities, yet whether this becomes a social movement is a moot point. The ‘social structure’, in Von Holdt’s terms, of the union may correspond with an ‘upsurge’, its democratic and participatory styles may allow for an upsurge’s sustainability, but I am troubled (using the concept is such a wonderful ‘short-cut’) by what the organisational form refers to! Unless, of course, in a *post hoc* way, we come to say that once a social movement emerges then it must have originated from a specific ‘social movement unionism-related’ organising practice.

What emerges clearly in Von Holdt’s admirable analysis is the crisis in representation and union democracy once criss-crossing mobilisations occurred in those ‘ungovernable’ times of the insurrection. The break-up of democratic representation and worker solidarity at Highveld Steel is remarkably described. This occurred in hundreds of shop floors all over the country during those years, pitting migrants against urbans, Inkatha supporters against UDF supporters, conservatives and radicals, casuals versus permanents, and so on. Von Holdt might disagree and insist on the adequacy of the concept of ‘social movement unionism’ because it provides

a contrast to a shift in union politics to ‘strategic unionism’. Yet to do so convincingly, I feel, he needs to refine his explication and identify, in the ‘institutional girders’ of unionism, the characteristics that add up to its obvious ‘social movement’ characterisation.

Nevertheless, the book provides a compelling account of the ‘triple-transition’ in South Africa’s workplaces and vindicates the kind of qualitative and committed sociology that is so absent these days in our remarkable ‘laboratory’ of social change.

Note

1. All this was preliminary work for the metalworks research initiated by Eddie Webser and Phil Bonner through Wits University’s African Studies Institute. I was the project’s first full-time researcher. What survived of my encounters with Witbank, the steel mill at Highveld, the township and the hostel (with anthropologists Jim Keenan and the late David Webster) is a performance narrative, *Trees of Tongue*, about the emerging pressures of 1979-81, which the late Ingoapele Modingoane (the poet firebrand) and the late Ramolao Makhene (perhaps South Africa’s best-ever actor) were going to work on after the Food and Canning Workers’ national support campaign. Pressures to work on the East Rand with MAWU and worker theatre with migrant foundry workers had us abandon Witbank as a priority for either research or creative work.