

SECOND CARNEGIE INQUIRY INTO POVERTY
AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

The reproduction of labour power
and the struggle for survival in

Soweto

by

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The Reproduction of Labour Power and the Struggle for Survival in Soweto

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The events of the children's uprising in Soweto in 1976 shocked a complacent South African public. On that fateful day of June 16th, twenty thousand young schoolchildren marched in anger against yet one more item of oppression, the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. The march was met with brutal retaliation by the police. The confrontation quickly escalated, and spread to other centres. Calls for boycotts and stayaways were made and soon, what began as a youth revolt, had involved whole communities. The lesson lay in the spontaneity and depth of the response: a malaise had stricken the country, and people wished to purge it. After a decade of sustained growth and quiescent politics in black communities in the 1960s, a depression followed, with escalating unemployment. School leavers, armed with inadequate Bantu Education skills and qualifications, found themselves unemployable in a burgeoning monopoly capital economy.

This paper addresses the question of how workingclass communities in Soweto, faced with much the same material conditions as those schoolchildren in 1976, subject to the same forms of oppression and exploitation, manage to creatively employ strategies for survival, against such formidable odds. Many of the deep-lying causes of which June 16th was a symptom, are still very much in place, still structuring political and economic life; not much has changed. Indeed, conditions in 1984 may well be worse, as we are still in the depths of a recession, and unemployment has certainly risen steadily over the last four years. Therefore the narrative which follows, tells of how ordinary people, faced with awesome odds, eke out an existence in conditions of poverty and unemployment.

Some primary information is necessary: Soweto is a compact, marshalled city, covering 88sq.km., with nearly 113 000 houses and ten hostels (the latter housing roughly 70 000 people). There is an enormous shortage of houses, with over 25 000 families on the waiting list. Many families live in overcrowded conditions, with houses designed to contain nuclear families often sheltering two or three. There has been a mushrooming of illegal and unofficial houses, in the form of backyard shacks, in which about 23 000 families are estimated to be living; some of the more destitute are even reduced to living in car hulks in a scrapyard. Government officials acknowledge the existence of 1 019 135 people in Soweto; unofficial, and more accurate assessments put the figure at between 1,6 million and 2 million. A Bureau for Market Research in 1977 showed there to be an average of 10 persons per house, with a population

density of 100 per hectare (compared with 23 in Johannesburg). The Bureau for Market Research estimates that about 450 000 people in Soweto are economically active (i.e. in some form of formal wage employment), and commute to work in Johannesburg each day. But this raises a serious problem, for if we accept the conservative population figure of 1,6 million and assume that half of them would be potential workers, it means there is a shortfall of jobs of about 400 000.

This huge disparity between 'formal' wage opportunities and the potential labour force raises serious issues, the most pressing being, how do those not engaged in regular wage employment survive? The State provides only meagre unemployment relief benefits, and has no effective system of social welfare to provide for those who are unemployed in the long term, or who have never been employed before, so neither appear in government statistics, nor can claim benefits. The mass of these unemployed people clearly cannot accept this state of affairs and, as any Soweto dweller or researcher can report, most of them are, in fact, economically active. The difficulty is that many of their activities are either legally proscribed, or at least not recorded by government agencies; the result is the same, for they do not appear in official records and are therefore 'statistically invisible'. A number of analysts have called these income-gathering activities the 'informal sector', and they include such pursuits as small-scale distribution (market operatives, street hawkers and petty traders) services (watch repairs, cycle and car repairs), small entrepreneurship, and other activities such as renting out lodgings, prostitution and crime.

To examine the roots of this problem, one must first comprehend the issue of unemployment, the causes of which lie deep in the social formation. The present statistics are appalling enough: It's estimated that in 1977 the unemployed and underemployed in S.A. stood at 2,3m a startling 22% of the Black labour force, and estimates from the conservative University of Pretoria, show that 14,000 have joined the ranks of the unemployed every month since then. Like every other calculation in this field, it is incredibly difficult to get clarity, especially when relying on government statistics - as Maree (1978: 19) cogently points out.

However calculated, these are bleak figures. What Simkins, Clarke, Maree and others all agree upon is that South Africa has plunged deep into an unemployment crisis, for not only are we subject to the usual capitalist cycle of boom and recession which alternately draws in or expels workers, in what has been called

cyclical unemployment, but we are also subject to structural unemployment - unemployment which, despite cyclical fluctuations, is on an ever ascending gradient. Simkins argues that unemployment stood at 1,2m. in 1960 (18,3% of the labour force) and rose to 22,4% in 1977. Even in the period of uninterrupted boom, from 1960 to 1969, the rate of un- and underemployment stood at a steady 19% (while the economy grew at 5,9% p.a.)

The causes of this malaise are to be found in the structure of the economy, which has historical antecedents. The process was set in motion with the mobilization of labour supplies in South Africa - processes of proletarianization were activated in the 19th century (cf. Bundy 1972), the logic of which is still working itself out, so that more and more people still flow from rural to urban areas, as the last pretence of a rural, pre-capitalist economy crumbles away. But capital accumulation not only requires a labour force, it also needs a reserve army of unemployed to act as a disciplinary force upon the employed, keeping them in a position of insecurity, and keeping down wages; it also needs an Industrial Reserve Army to be held in reserve in order to be available to develop new areas in which capital may wish to invest.

But our unemployment crisis in South Africa seems to be predicated primarily on the logic of capital accumulation and development. Here, as elsewhere, due to the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, and the concomitant ceaseless search for greater productivity, there is a trend toward mechanization in industry. Capital intensity means the employment of relatively fewer workers, and more and more workers are being replaced by machinery (Maree claims that 90% of S.A. technology is imported. Agriculture seems to be particularly badly hit where, for example, there has been an 800% increase in the number of tractors since 1945. Maree points to industrial decentralisation as blocking urban job creation, and the industrial colour bar as being further causes of structural unemployment - the latter now almost defunct, but replaced by the more sophisticated Wiehahn and Riekert recommendations which permit closed shop unions and tighten up influx control.

So we arrive at a position where, given the enormous mass of unemployed people, given the fact that it is largely structurally determined and therefore is unlikely to decline, and given the refusal of the government to provide social security for Blacks, we have to pose the question: How do all those unemployed and underemployed people survive? The state, of course, would argue that Blacks have access to alternative sources of income, notably from rural agricultural activities. However, a large number of Soweto dwellers are

permanently urbanised, and the rural (homeland) economies have long been unable to support or even subsidise migrant earnings.

Furthermore, employers in Johannesburg do not distinguish among their labourers as to whether they are migrant or not, all are paid the same wages. Employers don't calculate a 'just wage', based on a calculation of a subsidy from a pre-capitalist sector; they pay wages determined by class struggle, and the balance of forces have been on their side thus far. What is the case, is that wages are generally forced so low that families have to seek to supplement their appalling level; the 'informal sector' offers opportunities to do this.

The relationship between unemployment and the so-called 'informal sector' is a direct one. This mass of potential workers, many of whom will never find employment again in the sectors of monopoly, and perhaps even competitive capital, form a kind of marginalized labour force.

This marginalized group of workers is forced to engage in 'marginal' or 'informal' income gathering activities; the 'marginal pole' of the economy as it has been described by Quijano (1974) acts as a soak-pit which absorbs the surplus labour power of those who never gain 'formal' wage employment or who are thrown out of work by the increasing capitalization of industry. I shall shortly set out some of the theoretical problems regarding the so-called 'informal sector'; empirically however, there are clearly a number of activities which have the appearance of informality, and which offer a modicum of subsistence to its practitioners.

It is more appropriate therefore, not to speak of unemployment, but rather to refer to underemployment, since it's rare that any person could survive for any length of time without regular employment and no State-provided unemployment benefits. The unemployed therefore, quickly seek strategies for survival in this situation, which can range from relying on family, friends or members of reciprocity-based voluntary associations, which are a short-term means of survival, but the longer term stratagem must be aimed at a stable source of income, and 'informal sector' activities are the most accessible. The unemployed thus are frequently engaged in economic activities, but they often are less remunerative than 'formal' wage employment, people are frequently employed at levels below the skills they have to offer, or are employed only sporadically. It is this phenomenon which is best described as underemployment; in better circumstances, these people would be using their education and skills to the

full, but failing that they would be totally unemployed.

These analytical points, however, mask what is a personal tragedy for many black inhabitants of Johannesburg and Soweto. Every day, large crowds of unemployed workseekers gather outside the West Rand Administration Board offices in Albert Street, and swarm around any car which slows its progress, in the hope it may be someone offering work. At weekends, hundreds of people stand on roadsides seeking casual labour; some are unemployed, others seek to supplement inadequate wages. The general demeanour is one of defeat, as they stand, hands raised in supplication, as they literally beg for work, as cars speed past, creating the impression of bewildered people who have been left behind by the rapid changes of a capitalist economy.

In the short term, conditions appear unlikely to improve. A Johannesburg businessman released research findings which showed, inter alia, that more than 50 per cent of unemployed blacks were under 30 years of age; of unemployed blacks, 51 per cent had been seeking work for at least 6 months; more than half of the unemployed had little or no education; and almost 25% of unemployed blacks have never worked before (Watson: 1982). The recession has also undoubtedly exacerbated the problems of structural unemployment. Mr. Ralph Parrot, Chairman of Manpower International was quoted as saying, "Nationally, the demand for workers has dropped by 25 per cent and is now lower than it has been since the last quarter of 1979". (The Star 2/4/82).

The Social Organization of Poverty

'...if the capitalist system does not provide adequately for old age pensions, sick leave and unemployment compensations, they have to rely on another, comprehensive socio-economic organization to fulfil these vital needs... in the absence of a precapitalist mode of production... once permanent settlement is allowed in the capitalist sector, these functions are fulfilled by urban mutual-aid associations'

Meillassoux (1972)

I do not wish to resuscitate any form of 'the culture of poverty' here; the mutual-aid associations referred to above are forms of social organisation which can be seen as forms of resistance, defensive and offensive strategies for embattled people in a hostile social formation. Town dwellers organise around themselves networks of people on whom they can rely: self-help groups or social security networks, phrased in an urban idiom, and aimed at the goal of survival. Let us turn our attention to a handful of them, by way of illustration. There are many more than those enumerated below, but

these will suffice to illuminate the issues.

At the core of any social network are those whom one can trust implicitly, those who will give assistance willingly, immediately, and without counting the cost. They are, of course, one's kinfolk, with whom the idiom of reciprocity is paramount and who share in the crises and pleasures of one's life. Research evidence shows that in major calamities, like losing one's job, or a death in the family, it is kin who rally to support first, and whose support lasts longest. Kin are also the people who help find employment, accommodation, and who bribe or bail one out of the clutches of the law. They are, in short, indispensable.

The migrant coming to town is faced with a further dilemma: frequently his kin are dispersed and few in number, yet a network of sympathetic individuals is ready-made in the form of his amakhaya, or home-people. Drawn from a locality in a rural area, the bonds of territoriality are remarkably strong when called upon to take the pressure of a calamitous event in the life of one of its number. Amakhaya groups also have other uses as well, for, like kin, they aid people in finding employment and lodging, and generally act as a conservative force in keeping the migrant's allegiance firmly set on his rural ties. The makgotla is a broader, but equally conservative, response to the apparent lack of social control in deep Soweto. It is a sort of do-it-yourself form of justice, with appeal to migrants.

South Africa, like most Third World countries, pays its workers extremely low wages, which have to be carefully conserved and stretched. The poor respond in typical fashion; they create systems of redistribution, which help meagre incomes extend to the limits of their elasticity. These patterns of redistribution percolate through social networks to finally find their way into the pockets of those who are unable to find wage employment; it is above all a social form of redistribution, operating amongst friends, neighbours, workmates, acquaintances and friends of friends. The most common forms of this blend of economic redistribution with social commitment are the stokvels and mohodisano. Both are forms of rotating credit association, where members pool a portion of their weekly or monthly earnings, taking it in turn to scoop the pool.

The stokvel also has a very clear celebratory and recreational aspect for, when the money is pooled, the person whose turn it is to collect the kitty also throws a party, at which food and alcohol are bought by participants at inflated prices. Thus, the person holding the stokvel (most commonly a woman, as she has

cooking and beer brewing skills) not only gets a large lump sum of money, but will also make a profit on the party. An example of one such group has 30 members, each contributing R10 per month, which means one waits the length period of two and a half years to reap the benefits of membership, but when one does, one gets a clear R300, plus about R50 from the party. This relatively large sum of money can then be spent on an item which one might not normally aspire to, like a refrigerator, or more pertinently, can be redistributed again to kin and others who have pressing social needs. It is not uncommon for people to throw a 'party' alone, where it is understood that food and beverages will be sold for profit. This is often practiced by single women (especially divorcees and widows) as a means of earning a sporadic income.

A number of urban social groupings are explicitly created as a means of coping with crisis in a society denied social welfare. They are known by evocative names, such as masibambane (hold hands) or matsidisho (river in flood) and comprise a set of people who make regular financial contributions to a fund, which is used to tide one of their members over a calamity, and they also provide, both practically and ideologically, a sense of commitment and security. The most pervasive and effective of this form of defensive self-help organization is the funeral association (cf. Kramer 1975). There is in Soweto an ideal that one should die well, with dignity, and to be buried well is a major component of the belief, so that the self-respect so systematically denied on a day-to-day basis can, in final irony, be achieved in the grave. But the cost of dying is not cheap. A recent funeral in Soweto cost the widow R240 for a coffin, R120 to hire two buses and R150 for food and beverages for the mourners. The sum of R510 is far beyond the reach of a household whose monthly income was R80. If it were not for the funeral society to which her husband had belonged, which provided R400, the widow would have presided over a pauper's burial. Members of a funeral association meet regularly, contribute to a fund monthly, and are willing helpers in predicaments other than death as well.

Finally, the most visible and audible of the mutual-aid associations are the small separatist churches (usually Zionist) that abound in Soweto. There are known to be well over 2000 of them, with an average membership of 30. With an obvious emphasis on spiritual, communal and social rather than material aspects, these small groups (much the same in number as stokvels and funeral societies) provide their members with a sense of belonging and respect through their colourful and distinctive uniforms and the abundance of status positions within each small church. The spiritual comfort tends to be a negative one, in the sense that the tendency is to preach a message of 'suffer now - and your

reward shall be in the kingdom of heaven'. But these religious groups perform other important functions for, if many Soweto dwellers are poor, separatist church members tend to be poorer. A recent study in Kwa Mashu showed that by most indices of poverty, Zionist church members were worse-off - they had lower incomes on average, there were a preponderance of single women, their children had a higher infant mortality rate, etc., (Kiernan 1977). In short, spiritual aspects aside, it appears that these churches represent the last network of survival for many urban black people.

All the forms of social organization mentioned above help construct a latticework of overlapping ties; they are means of spreading the risk in an environment characterized by scarcity, and they also help build a platform from which the more successful can launch themselves into moderately remunerative enterprises.

The 'informal sector' as strategy for survival

We've all come into contact with the informal sector at one time or another: from the person who sells one an apple from her box in Rissik Street, to the man who knocks on your front door, selling home-made baskets and brooms, the women who make indigenous jewellery or clothing, or the person who helps you redistribute your wealth by dipping his hand into your pocket in a busy street or a football match. For many people in Soweto, the so-called informal sector is the sole source of income, for others, it is a supplement for low wages. It is common to find that, in one family, there is one wage earner, and as many as two or three who participate in informal income gathering activities. In Kenya, 28-33% of all employment is in the informal sector; preliminary indications from our survey in Soweto indicate that it is similar here.

The interest that the informal sector has generated among researchers and development planners is remarkable, but understandable, when its positive qualities are examined. Hart emphasised that it was characterised by: ease of entry, reliance on indigenous resources, family ownership of enterprise, labour intensive and adaptive technology, small scale of operation, skills acquired outside the formal school system, and unregulated competitive markets. The 'formal sector' is the opposite of almost all these factors. The attractiveness of the 'informal sector' concept is also that the phenomenon is so visible and accessible - it's to be found on almost every street corner. It also has many apparent benefits, such as producing goods and services cheaply in a community of repressed wages (black street mechanics, watch repairers and home dress-makers do indeed produce articles and services cheaper than are obtainable in the city centre) and helps ward off the worst ravages of unemployment by

opening up further income or job opportunities for the victims.

It is true that many of the activities that have been broadly defined as belonging to the 'informal sector' are essential to the survival of people who would otherwise be unemployed, and to suppress or remove such activities would cause immeasurable suffering. Also, at its sharper end, some of these activities are genuine attempts at resistance to an impersonal economy and an uncaring state, there has been a tendency to confuse issues. As Bromley points out, the formal/informal dichotomy is too crude and simple. For instance, such diverse activities as petty capitalism and entrepreneurship are categorised with door-to-door offal seller, street hawkers, prostitutes and criminals. If one takes illegality as a definitional point, then both the pickpocket at the soccer game and he late André Stander are informal sector operatives. Furthermore, at the stroke of a pen, the illegality could be removed, but it would surely alter very little the form of production that the informal sector operator uses.

Within South Africa, the major agency which has expressed interest in this sector is the Urban Foundation. Intriguingly, the U.F. has embarked on job creation schemes, but by far its largest commitment has been the provision of better housing for blacks. The U.F., in a pamphlet aimed at encouraging businessmen to support their objectives, writes, "There is also a great need for a variety of accommodation, from flats to elite houses, to allow for normal social progression according to status..." It monopoly capital which, in South Africa, is taking an interest in and supports some aspects of the informal sector. Their aims appear to be to stabilize a volatile working class, and to embark upon a policy of embourgeoisement. Bodies such as the U.F. perceive and portray the relationship between the formal and informal sectors as a kind of dual economy, and the relationship between them as essentially a benign one.

It is of interest that the state either ignores or actively harasses informal sector activities, while large-scale private enterprise actively supports it. While the creation of a large industrial reserve army is necessary for capital accumulation, a starving and restless one is not. Soweto 1976 showed the state and capital the level of desperation to which the working class had plunged, especially those who were shortly to be thrown onto the job market, and both have responded, the state at first with open repression, then with the more subtle Riekert and Wiehahn Commissions, while capital created the Urban Foundation.

A major fallacy that must be refuted is the dualism of the formal/informal dichotomy. Many scholars assume that the two sectors, while they interact, are nevertheless independent whereas, as can be seen, the one is created by and under the dominance of the other. Leys (1973) provides a useful insight when he points out that the informal is intimately tied to the formal sector, for smallholders provide cheap foodstuffs, pastoralists cheap beef, petty traders provide cheap communication, etc. In Soweto, old car tyres are turned into shoes that last for five years, at a cost of R2.50, while manufactured, shop-retailed ones cost over R20, and last two years. Bicycle, car and watch repairs all provide cheap services geared to the spending power of an impoverished community.

The dualist view is also alluring to its supporters because it is portrayed as helping the poor while there's no apparent threat to the rich. Informal sector incomes tend to be very low, the reasons being, suggests the I.L.O. because (a) it is servicing a low income community, (b) there is official discouragement, because of officialdom's pejorative view, and (c) there's a lack of demand from the formal sector (Leys 1973). The way to foster development, in this view, is to support the informal sector, as the I.L.O. recommended for Kenya, and the U.F. encourages in South Africa. But, as will shortly be argued, the dualist myth obscures an important truth: that to the formal sector accrues most of the benefits of a viable informal sector. It is not two separate economies, but one and, by a process of unequal exchange, and providing a subsidy for low wages, employers can rely on the 'informal sector' to increase the amount of surplus value extracted from their labourers. Indeed, the lower the incomes in the 'informal sector', the greater the profits in the 'formal'.

It is theoretically more acceptable to argue that the 'informal sector' as a concept has no explanatory power, but is what Wittgenstein called 'an odd-job word', one which is useful as a general direction finder. Rather one should break down the various activities into areas that can be handled in a manageable form and which will also be theoretically informed. There are small capitalists, whose goal of production is to accumulate and expand; there are petty commodity producers, more concerned with subsistence than pursuit of large profit; there is the sphere of circulation and services; networks of income redistribution, and finally, and very importantly, crime and lumpenproletarian activities. This last category, for want of a better

term, refers to a gamut of activities, ranging from theft for subsistence (there has been an increase in thefts of food from supermarkets abutting onto Soweto), and other attempts at redistribution, such as the delivery driver for a sweet factory who supplements his low pay by loading more boxes of sweets onto his truck than was consigned, and later sells it; through prostitution; to organised crime.

All the above activities, including petty commodity production, are not in a 'dual' relationship to capitalism, they are integral to it. As Banaji (1978) remarks, petty commodity production can only be a form of production (e.g. often using unpaid family labour, with a goal of subsistence rather than accumulation, etc), never a mode of production. Historically, it has always been subordinated to other modes, e.g. feudalism, and tends to be transitional. Thus, to speak of petty commodity production is not to posit a form of dualism. On the contrary, immanent to the concept is the notion of subordination. Followers of important feminist debates will notice a close resemblance between some of the issues raised here and the domestic labour debate. Both relate to the way in which capital benefits from the unpaid labour of many whom they do not directly employ, those who service the working class and assist in lowering the cost of reproduction of labour power (vide, e.g. the CSE Pamphlet No. 2: The Political Economy of Women)

The most important function of all those economic activities that have been called 'informal', and the reason why agencies like the I.L.O and the interests of local monopoly capital in the form of the U.F. take such an interest in them, is that these social and economic activities are of direct benefit to them. Not just in the sense that it helps ensure a stable and docile labour force (and especially reserve army of unemployed, especially women), but rather there are direct economic gains. At their lowest level, these informal activities provide goods and services which capital or the State do not yet find profitable. Further, a system of subcontracting to informal sector operators works to the benefit of larger capitalist forms, as the subcontracted services are usually provided at well below the level that the capitalist could provide himself.

The major benefit the 'informal sector' passes to the capitalist entrepreneurs is its function of lowering the cost of reproduction of labour power. Its true that some commodities in the circuit of petty production

and distribution are more expensive than can be bought in supermarkets, but for the most part, repairs are alone cheaper, savings are made on clothing, footwear and food. Also, since these activities are so closely tied to social groupings and redistributive networks, these activities are clearly forms of provision of social security; a direct saving to employers and State, as the former can pay low wages which employees can be forced to accept, and to the latter, in that social welfare can be fobbed off as being unnecessary.

Petty production and distribution then, is comparable to and should be viewed in conjunction with, rural subsistence (or rather sub-subsistence) cultivation, for both perform the function of social security: self help, kinship cooperation, caring for the sick, the recuperating, the aged and unemployed, place of socialising the young and ensuring the reproduction of the labour force, etc. It provides a redistributive network but this does not generate 'new' income, but merely redistributes that income which filters from formal wage employment. Both rural and urban manifestations therefore service the industrial reserve army, and contribute to the certainty that labour is sold beneath its value. A final point for those who lionise the informal sector as a panacea for unemployment and low wages: most available evidence shows that labour is more ruthlessly exploited by petty producers and small entrepreneurs than elsewhere. A 60 hour week is not uncommon, and remuneration is frequently unconsciously low - a Winterveld coal merchant pays his labour R1 per day for a 12 hour day, seven days a week, largely employing child labour.

.... stunned,
Magaica* lit a lamp
to search for lost illusions,
for his youth and his health which stay buried
deep in the mines of Johannesburg.
Youth and health,
the lost illusions
which will shine like stars
on some Lady's neck in some City's night.

- Noemia de Sousa

* magaica = migrant labourer.

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