

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

The Urban African Worker and the Crisis of Apartheid

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4gc29722>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 17(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Demissie, Fassil

Publication Date

1989

DOI

10.5070/F7173016863

Copyright Information

Copyright 1989 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

The Urban African Worker and the Crisis of Apartheid

By
Fassil Demissie

Doug Hindson, *Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat in South Africa*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1987.

Since the 19th century, an industrial revolution has transformed the economic, social and spatial landscape of South Africa. This dramatic transformation has in turn been cemented by an ideological apparatus which later came to be known as apartheid. The systematic application of apartheid in all aspects of social life became the country's main political feature after the Purified National Party came to power in 1948. Since then, the National Party has systematically enforced color bar legislation to safeguard the privileged position of the white working class, tightened application of influx control to curtail the movement of African work-seekers from the rural to urban areas, and reenforced the migrant labor system to prevent the permanent settlement of Africans in the European "prescribed areas" and the forced removal of the so-called "surplus people" to the improvised "bantustans" as a means to systematically deprive them of their South African citizenship. In addition, the state has been engaged in a wide variety of social control and repressive institutions to diffuse the political demands of the African people.

Unlike the preceding decades when successive South African governments practiced racial segregation, the South African state under the National Party's policy of apartheid introduced two major changes in the nature of racial segregation. First, apartheid expanded and refined the system of racial domination both in the work-place and at place of residence, and so to reinforce the various repressive laws introduced, the state created a number of institutions to administer the system of apartheid both in urban and rural areas. Second, apartheid transformed the "reserves" which came into being in 1914 with the territorial segregation of the country into "homelands" or "bantustans," subordinated to capital and the state. The transformation of "reserves" into "homelands" or "bantustans" reflected the gradual shift in the strategic orientation of the state to respond to African political demands by granting the "homelands" bogus "independence" and self-government within apartheid South Africa.

The magnitude of this transformation imposed by the systematic application of apartheid has been a subject of considerable debate among liberal and radical scholars. Liberal scholars maintain with considerable diversity and sophistication that racial segregation is a temporary and transient phenomenon. This view was reenforced by the expansion of

the South African economy, especially after the 1940s, which brought a measure of faith in the capacity of the capitalist economy (or industrialization) to dissolve the racial structures of the country. This euphoric hope in the subsequent dissolution of racial segregation proved to be short-sighted as the state introduced an arsenal of draconian security measures and savage repression which effectively diminished democratic opposition to apartheid and forced the leading popular nationalist organizations such as the African National Congress and Pan African Congress to go underground or into political exile.

Over the past decade and a half, a sustained radical criticism of the liberal school has emerged from a variety of radical perspectives on the political economy of South Africa. By and large, radical scholars have argued that capital accumulation, the migrant labor system and apartheid are at the core of racial domination in South Africa. Many radical scholars have suggested that the racial policy of the state is designed to facilitate capital accumulation and, as Johnson has suggested, the "true rationale of apartheid policies is thus to maximize economic development both for the sake of white prosperity and for the material protection of white supremacy" (Johnson 1970:125-6). Doug Hindson's *Pass Controls and the Urban African Proletariat in South Africa* is part of this radical tradition and constitutes an important advance in our understanding of the political economy of urban South Africa and the social forces which continue to shape present directions. Both liberal and radical works have attempted to analyze the various legal instruments of the state designed to restrict African urbanization during both the segregation and apartheid eras. Since 1910 when the South African state was reconstituted, successive governments have instituted and defined the limits of African urbanization. Pass laws have been the central legal instrument utilized by the state to control the movement, residence and terms of employment of African workers in urban centers. While the centrality of the pass laws to apartheid is recognized both by liberal and radical scholars, its role in the proletarianization and the reproduction of the African labor force has remained largely obscured. Hindson's book redefines the whole problematic of pass laws and argues that pass laws have been the central feature of racial domination as of well as the reinforcement of the dominant social relations of production at different historical conjectures.

Pass laws originated with the establishment of the settler colony in South Africa. Hindson suggests that with the repeal of the Cadedon Code in 1828 in South Africa, pass laws were employed to forge the transition of African workers from labor-servile to market-allocated labor. The development of diamond mines at Kimberley and gold mines at the Rand in the 1870s and 1880s sharply accelerated and profoundly changed the nature and scope of the labor market. Pass laws came to be

used in combination with critical social control institutions (like the "closed" compounds at Kimberley and the "open" compounds at the Rand) to exercise direct and indirect control over the African workers while maintaining the developing migrant labor system. In addition, pass laws were widely employed to appease rural white farmers by restricting through legislation the movements of agricultural labor to the mines and to promote labor mobility within the agrarian sector. The establishment of the racial state in South Africa in 1910 crystallized the institutional boundaries of segregation and accelerated the assault on African labor and their institutions. A major extension of this development was the exclusion of direct African participation in the state, and the application of territorial segregation which emerged with the establishment of the racial state. A mere 13% of the land in the country (dry and fertile) was designated as "native reserves" where Africans could, in racist *lingua franca*, "emerge from barbarism to civilization" under the "trusteeship" of the Department of Native Affairs -- a state agency which has been given the resources and power to enforce racial domination in South Africa.

A major thrust of the state urban policy was to confine African labor in the "native reserves" and to use the pass laws to allow Africans to go to the cities (in the words of the Stallard Commission) to "minister to the needs of the white population." Although different strategies existed at the time to regulate the flow of African urbanization and the conditions for urban labor reproduction, Hindson maintains that these differing strategies were more or less incorporated in the 1923 Urban Native Areas Act which severely limited African urbanization.

A major change in the nature and scope of the pass laws emerged from the state's policy of stimulating manufacturing in the 1930s. Local manufacturing grew rapidly from the mid-1930s with considerable support from the United Party government, which itself came to power in 1934 with considerable support from local industrialists. The number of Africans working in manufacturing grew in step with the growth of investment especially by foreign capital. Wages paid in the manufacturing sector were much higher than the mining and agricultural sectors despite the fact that urban African workers paid part of their subsistence -- food, transport and rent -- out of their wages. The differential wages paid by the manufacturing sector attracted African urbanization creating the condition for an elaborate pass system which could effectively allocate between the mining, agriculture and manufacturing sectors. Hindson shows how the new instruments of labor allocation emerged in response to the threat of labor shortages which the manufacturing sector posed to the mining and agricultural sectors. With the irreversible growth in the urbanized African population, the state streamlined the use of new instruments to control the growing African urban population.

The period of the 1950s and 1960s brought significant changes in the South African economy. With the unprecedented growth of the economy as Hindson shows, the pass system was restructured to secure the reproduction of the differentiated labor power. The decline of the African subsistence economy on one hand and the cost of securing the reproduction of the urban proletariat became problematic to the state. In the absence of a coherent institutional response, urban struggle over housing, rents and transport in the burgeoning cities dramatized the bankruptcy of the apartheid state. Hindson suggests that by the end of the 1960s, the state urban policy was incapable of securing the material bases for the reproduction of industrial capital. Part of the reason stems from the fiscal and political problems associated with the administration of living in urban areas. The SOWETO uprising of 1976 highlighted these problems.

In the final chapter of Hindson's book, the post-SOWETO period and the state's urban initiatives are discussed against the background of regional, international and domestic crises. These crises impelled the apartheid state to move in two directions. On the one hand, the state's repressive apparatus was strengthened; both the military and police acquired expanded powers and resources. On the other hand, efforts were made to increase economic and educational opportunities for Africans as well as to incorporate elements of the urban workers into an evolving political structure dominated by existing institutions of racial domination. These efforts were also made with much fanfare to curtail international criticism of apartheid.

A major component of the state's urban reform came from the Rieker Report, which attempted to accord legal recognition to the urban Africans within the framework of territorial apartheid. As Hindson argues, the Rieker Report reinforced the relatively privileged status of stabilized urban population but also extended and refined the pass laws in a number of critical directions. The net effect was the intensification of the division between urban and rural Africans, giving rise to what Hindson calls the "insiders" and "outsiders." Hindson therefore argues that the repeated attempt to implement the Rieker recommendations between 1979-1984 floundered on the "structural contradiction underlying territorial apartheid."

In 1979 a new regional strategy of "spatial ordering" emerged, which greatly modified the previous urban administrative and regional structures. The new structures encompass nine development regions--the boundaries which cut across bantustan borders. The new development regions transcend the previous geographical division between white South Africa and the bantustans and correspond to changes in the geographical patterns of capital location and labor settlement. Hindson suggests the creation of development regions as well as the corresponding administrative structures may provide the

basis for a federal or confederal order which at present appears to be the cornerstone of the spatial restructuring of South Africa. Development regions encompass metropolitan areas, black townships as well as adjacent white areas, and are administered by the Regional Service Council. Unlike in the past, fiscal instruments rather than pass laws will be used to regulate the movement and settlement of urban populations. The effort to combine regional spatial ordering, which is complemented by other urban and fiscal reforms such as the attempt at privation of houses, the liberalization of the market and deregulation amounts to what Hindson calls a "strategic shift in urbanization policy." But Hindson suggests that such attempts are incapable of providing fundamental solutions to South African urban crisis. He argues that "whatever form this urbanization takes there is no doubt that in the face of mounting opposition to the state, it can only be implemented with increased repression."

Hindson's work represents a major departure from previous works on the urban political economy of South Africa. The strength of the book lies in its coherent analysis of the pass system at different historical periods in the development of capitalism in South Africa. Yet the book suffers from weaknesses in a number of critical areas. A major difficulty with his work arises from its failure to locate the pass system in its institutional context. For example, Hindson's references to the Department of Native Affairs (DNA), which has been responsible for enforcing the institutions of racial domination, are negligible. However, the DNA (renamed several times) had the authority to regulate most of the various institutions of racial domination. In the reserves, the DNA was a local state instrument with power in regulating all economic and political life. It appointed and dismissed local chiefs, controlled access to land, undertook the administration of justice, declared pass areas and intervened in the reproduction of the subsistence economy. In urban areas, the DNA was responsible for township administration through local authorities and for the regulation of the labor market as well as for the enforcement of the pass laws on the national scale. In view of the critical institutional role of DNA as the central organ of racial domination, Hindson does not discuss its significance in the context of pass laws. In addition, his discussion of pass laws is focused at an angle such that critical events such as the anti-pass campaigns, the 1965 women's march to Pretoria, the social history of the squatter movements and the destruction of Sophiatown in the 1940s and Crossroads in the 1970s are not woven into the texture of his analysis. This omission may be due in part to the theoretical emphasis on structures and the relegation of the political struggles of African workers to the super-structure. The social and political life of urban Africans cannot be understood on its own terms, nor by an exclusively structural account of the pass system. The relationship between pass

laws and the political struggle of the African people has made the boundaries of pass laws permeable; more important, the African urban proletariat, with its distinctive character, in spite of or because of pass laws, has emerged to become a major political force in shaping the urban political economy of South Africa.