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Introduction to

"The childhood of industrial experience"

Grahame Hayes

University of Natal

Durban

The industrial sphere is a domain which is fraught with many politically vexed questions. And in the urgency to understand and resolve the many dimensions of industrial life, the struggles at the point of production achieve prominence with little attention been given to the less immediate determinants of industrial experience. It is not to judge the focus on the politics of production, but rather to open up the underbelly of industrial experience that the cultural and psychological dimensions of workers' experiences and consciousness need to be studied as well.

It is this more complete analysis of industrial experience, both historical and contemporary, which concerns Ari Sitas in his doctoral thesis: "African worker responses on the East Rand to changes in the Metal Industry, 1960-1980s", submitted in 1983 to the University of the Witwatersrand. In general, this thesis is an historical materialist analysis of work and social relations in the metal industry. The method of inquiry into African metalworkers' experience of their work has been to build up an "experiential mosaic" by allowing the workers to speak for themselves in detailed interviews over a long period of association with the author; and by the more formal reliance on the work of oral historians Paul Thompson (1984) and E.P. Thompson (1981). The rigour with which Dr Sitas is able to integrate the "experiential mosaic" of African metalworkers with the sociology and politics of production in the East Rand Metalworks is most impressive and insightful.

The article below, "The childhood of industrial experience", (a modified section of chapter six of Sitas' thesis) is concerned to account for the conflicting and complementary experiences which have contributed to the militancy, alienation, and quiescence of African metalworkers. In this article Sitas traces the effects of Soweto 1976 and the politics of schooling on the socialisation of this generation of metalworkers of the 1980s. The significance of this time (Soweto 1976) is paramount in trying to understand this generation of workers' consciousness, from whatever perspective, sociological and/or psychological.

At the beginning of chapter six entitled: "From slavery to the 'Black Flood': Black workers, mass production and cultural formation in South Africa's metalworks" Dr Sitas gives a history of the "class of '76" parents' generation (especially their fathers), and their political and workplace (metalworks) struggles during the 1960s. It is in the interstices of the productive relations that Sitas seeks the contradictory reality which makes up African metalworkers' industrial experience. In the words of psychology, he gives content and meaning to the social psychology of industrial working class life. He does this in a way which commits us to some very interesting and important analytic and empirical possibilities in trying to develop an historical materialist analysis of the realm of industrial psychology. Unless scientific practice has become a rubber stamp for ideology, we are forced to rethink and challenge a psychology, and especially an industrial psychology which in South Africa and elsewhere has genuflected towards the paunch of the establishment and reeled away from the underbelly of ordinary people's experience, industrial and other. The materialist possibilities for a social psychology of industrial experience are elaborated in Sitas' usage of two notions in the analysis of African metalworkers' industrial experience. These two notions are, "moral economy", and "cultural formation", which he gets from the work of E.P. Thompson (1981) and Raymond Williams (1981). In this regard I quote from his thesis,

"The determination of the manner of expenditure of labour power, forms the sine qua non of a cultural formation in the interstices of the formal organisation of the factory; working class production norms in the East Rand's metal industries, together with the norms of mutuality in the community form what will be called here the moral economy of African metalworkers." (Sitas, 1983, p.297).

The opening up of this domain of industrial experience - the childhood of industrial experience - through the rigour and sensitivity of his study gives hope and encouragement for a social science of work as opposed to the potentially narrow and competing sociologies and psychologies of work. It is as a contribution to the social science of work and working life that Sitas' article, and his doctoral thesis (to be published in 1986 by Ravan Press, Johannesburg) should be of interest to all those concerned to understand the "human face" of working class industrial experience in South Africa today.

References

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