

REVIEW

MY LIFE STRUGGLE

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by

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A LESSON FOR INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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The appearance of Tom's book has a number of significant implications for social scientific practice in South Africa, which cannot be ignored by serious minded social scientists. Perhaps the two most significant aspects about the book are the following:

1. It challenges the monopoly of writing about black workers by academics and other intellectuals and perhaps, in that way transforms the whole practice of writing into a contested terrain. Tom, himself, sees his book as a direct challenge to this monopoly.

Intellectuals and academics have, for far too long, been writing about us. But now the time has come for us, the working class, to take a stand and write our own stories about our experiences in life (Preface) (emphasis added);

and emphasizes the point again at the end of the book

Don't give your struggle to intellectuals, academic and other organisations who do not have workers' interests at heart, who want to further their aims at the expense of the workers. (p.68)

2. It also demystifies the practice of writing in general. Tom's text convincingly demonstrates that writing is not the exclusive domain of a "gifted" and "enlightened" few. Over and above this it shows that feelings, attitudes and experience can be communicated effectively without using any jargon or the mystified technical, supposedly scientific, style of writing.

* Johannesburg: Ravan Press (in association with the Federation of South African Trade Unions), 1985

However, the aim of this, rather unusual, book review is to draw some implications for that section of the social science community known as industrial psychologists. Within the context of Tom's text, the question that is being posed is: what can industrial psychologists learn from it, particularly in relation to industrial psychological research on black workers. Before drawing implications for industrial psychologists it would perhaps be proper to give an outline of what is in the text. The one fact which cannot be denied about Tom's text is that the majority of workers in South Africa are a product of the social dynamics so brilliantly captured in the book. It is in this way, that Tom reveals the black working class life experiences through his own "life script".

My grandmother used to brew homemade corn beer (Mqombothi) to make some income to buy tea, sugar and meat. My mother's salary was for rent, mealie meal, and clothing. Sometimes my grandmother would get arrested for brewing beer because it was illegal, and we borrowed money from neighbours and relatives to pay her fine when I was eight years old my brother and I used to draw water from the communal tap for a blacksmith. He gave us 2d for four gallons of water. With this money I could buy some school exercise books (p.2)

Workers from nearby factory compounds could get arrested for entering Topville (Tom's township) illegally because they had to have special passes to allow them to visit locations. When they came in they had to report to the location superintendent's office to get a stamp. If they ignored this requirement they got arrested. Police raids took place day and night. Sometimes we would wake up and see members of the S.A. Police and Municipal police, black and white, going from house to house searching for beer, passes, taxes, stolen goods, permits, and illegal residents. (p.6)

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The text takes us through Tom's childhood experiences and some of the frustrations, insecurity and involuntary sacrifices made by children in African townships, sometimes to provide for the comfort and happiness of children in the wealthier white suburbs.

After my father's death my mother struggled as a domestic worker earning £2 per month, to give us the best she could I lived with my granny in Top Location because my mother slept at her place of work. (p.1)

From these early childhood experiences Tom reveals how these uncertainties and frustrations continued throughout his life. These frustrations included: leaving school early,

At school I repeated Stds Two and Three before passing Std Three and leaving school for good (p.4)

and surviving through gang fights and brutal killings and some of the worst kind of violence bred by unemployment, scarce resources and artificially created "ethnic" groups. Survival from township hazards meant the beginning of another struggle: that of looking for a job. After changing a number of jobs as a gardener, working at a café and bakery, he finally got what promised to be a stable job at African Cables. Like many other factory workers, stable employment also carries with it "stable" frustrations and problems, and the beginning of long and sometimes bitter struggles against management and employers.

I started working at African Cables on 16 December 1956 as a labourer. In 1985 workers complained about the night shift because we were not being paid shift allowance. It was being paid only to white workers one Monday evening workers decided that "Tonight we are not going to come back when we go on lunch at midnight we want (the general manager) to come and explain to us why he is not giving us a shift allowance when our white colleagues are getting it". (p.14)

Over and above the factory struggles, other broader political struggles are taking place in African residential areas. These struggles are vividly captured by Tom in his eye witness account of the Sharpeville massacre.

I don't know what caused the police to shoot
.... we heard only one sound People fell on their
backs, sides and stomachs. People were lying all over
..... Fortunately for me they could not shoot on the
side where I was standing People were running in
all directions in the townships. Some couldn't believe
that people had been shot, they thought they heard fire
crackers. Only when they saw the blood and dead people,
did they see that the police meant business. (p.29)

The book further takes us through Tom's experiences with unions in the 1950's particularly the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and how worker organizations were crushed by the State during that period. He further describes what he learned from SACTU, and how that perhaps helped him to gain a better insight into dealing with problems at work thereby laying a foundation for his participation in union activity when unions re-emerged in the 70's.

It is the last three chapters that I find most interesting and informative, particularly Tom's role in the formation of FOSATU and ultimately working for MAWU as an organizer. These sections show Tom's development and capacity to learn from union experiences and how he did not sway from his commitment to the working class struggle in spite of various setbacks in the fight for union recognition and worker unity.

The last chapter looks at the day (The Third day of September) of the stayaway in the Vaal Triangle and through this Chapter Tom reveals the continuity and striking similarities between the community struggles of the 60's and those of the 80's:

The police came in their hippos and those big trucks
with wire outside, and with their sneeze machine. They
dispersed the crowd with rubber bullets and teargas
... we ran away. The children also ran, in different
directions Everybody was at home. There was nobody
who was at work that day, on the third day of September
(pp. 63-65)

In concluding the review, I would like to say that, perhaps, Tom could have given us more of the shop-floor experiences and struggles, which I hope subsequent books of this kind will pay more attention to. This would have provided a more thorough appreciation of the 'injury of class' in the capitalist division of labour.

Within the context of Tom's text, four areas have been identified as the most problematic in industrial psychological research on black workers:

- (1) work and politics
- (2) culture and black workers
- (3) need for achievement vs need for affiliation
- (4) scientific practice in industrial psychology

WORK AND POLITICS

Despite the pain and agony of going through research studies carried out by mainstream industrial psychology, what also comes out clearly is an unforgivable incompetence of relating work and political experiences of workers. This inability manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, industrial psychologists ignore politics in many of their 'scientific' discourses on workers and concentrate only on productivity, culture, work values, world-view, etc. (1)

Secondly, where industrial psychologists recognize the influence of politics on worker experiences, they treat work and politics as independent spheres, with workers oscillating between the two (2).

Tom's experiences present a completely different picture to the one that has been constructed by mainstream industrial psychology. It comes across very clearly that workers' experiences are an inseparable unity of the work and political environments.

In 1959 while still at African cables we were arrested at the shops in Peacehaven. We didn't have a canteen at African Cables and at lunchtime we would go to the shop. We were loaded into kwela-kwelas (police vans) and taken to the police station. We had been arrested for loitering. The next day the Company offered to pay our fines of £2 each. But we protested. 'We refuse to pay a fine we don't know what we've done!' Management phoned the station commander. We told them not to deduct the £2 from our wages (p.19).

Many lessons can be learnt by industrial psychologists from these experiences of South African workers. Firstly, how can we ignore such political 'interferences' in workers' lives even when at work. Secondly, the very action by management of 'forcing' workers to pay a fine legitimizes the arrest of workers. Let alone the arrogance of wanting to deduct money from workers' pay pockets without their permission. In fact what Tom's book does, and quite successfully too, is to expose the ideological foundations of mainstream industrial psychology.

Ignoring workers' political experiences justifies capital's refusal to take responsibility for the action of a state which primarily acts to protect business interests. It also justifies capital's lack of concern about what happens to workers' lives after work, thereby reducing the costs of reproducing labour. What is also sad about the political explanations of worker behaviour by industrial psychologists is that events have overtaken them such that they should be seriously re-looking at the relevance of their 'scientific' tools. The Lusaka talks (1985) between Gavin Relly (together with other top South African businessmen) and the ANC should be an embarrassment to industrial psychologists who have always claimed to be the advisers of management on human/industrial relations issues. It looks like the Lusaka talks signals the bosses' impatience with 'sophisticated' explanations which divert the attention away from the real issues likely to affect business interests in South Africa. While psychologists like Nasser (3) are pre-occupying themselves with workers' 'ignorance' of the so-called free-enterprise system, the masters they have faithfully served for so long have realized that the problem is not as simple as all that.

CULTURE AND AFRICAN WORKERS

Tom's book can be regarded as having dealt a severe, if not a death, blow to the cultural imperialism which has bedevilled mainstream industrial psychology for so many years. Africans have been described as victims of an African traditional cultural paradigm which emphasizes group orientation as against the individualism of the West, conformity rather than autonomy; respect for seniority based on age rather than on expertise and knowledge; and belong to extended rather than nuclear families (4)

..... 'ubuntu' pervades the African social structure and socialization process and because of its importance as a mechanism of survival for large sections of the Black South African population, it is likely to be needed for some time to come(5).

A close reading of Tom's book does not in anyway suggest primacy of traditional African culture as influencing Tom's life experiences. Instead, it comes out very convincingly that working class life experiences derive primarily from what perhaps can be called the 'culture of resistance'.

Whites' liquor was strictly illegal for blacks during those years. Home-brewing was a health hazard. People hid beer behind toilets where people urinated because they knew that the police would never think of looking in such a place (p.8)

In 1960 before that terrible day of 21 March some workers resigned from work because they were preparing for that day Everywhere people wore stickers on their jackets saying 'Away with Passes' Even people sitting in the shebeens had those stickers. Workers also wore them inside the factory On the weekend before the 21, we had parties-stokvels-drinking and having campaign workers there supplying us with those stickers and telling us about a meeting to be held (p.24)

The socialization processes and mechanisms for survival described by Tom are radically different from those presented by Coldwell and Moerdyk. Are factors like 'strategies of dodging the police' 'passes' high unemployment' 'shebeens' and 'matchbox houses' part of the 'ubuntu' and traditional African culture as Coldwell and Moerdyk claim? Or are they part of the cultural environment created by apartheid and capitalism? These are the questions that psychologists like Coldwell and Moerdyk will have to answer if they want us to take them seriously. Why do they ignore all these cultural formations and instead give us their own imaginary, and perhaps ideological, creations of an all-pervasive, unchanging traditional African culture? The message that Tom has for mainstream industrial psychology is clear: All industrial psychologists,

like these two, owe Tom and other workers an explanation of where they got these conceptions from, or even better, an apology! Tom's book also gives us a better insight into the real nature of South Africa's so-called 'western' culture that is daily dangled in front of us as a set of superior or God-sent values.

Unless Blacks accept Western cultural paradigms more fully, it seems likely that there will remain in them a certain amount of holding back from, lack of involvement in, and general rejection of Western bureaucratic organizations (6)

Surely one of the best ways of evaluating or judging whether a culture is superior and civilized or inferior and backward is through an examination of the actions and behaviour of its adherents. Tom's work give us a very clear picture of what this 'western' culture can offer to the majority of the citizens: pass raids, bannings, shootings, unstable employment, forced removals, union bashing, overcrowded trains and buses, etc.

During the war Sharpeville was built and named after the mayor of Vereeniging they started demolishing the houses in Top Location and taking those people to Sharpeville It was not a forced removal at first. In Top Location they were jumping from place to place taking only those people who wanted to move. But when they saw that Sharpeville was growing they forced the people to go there. (emphasis added) (p.21)

In his account of the events on that fateful day in 1960, Tom further gives us a taste of what 'western' culture can offer.

The police came between the two groups. We told them that we didn't want to fight, we only wanted to talk. But the police beat us up, chasing people who ran in all directions, (emphasis added) (p.25)

If this is not the 'western' culture that many industrial psychologists have presented to us as superior, what else could it be then? Why blame workers for rejecting this peculiar type

of 'western' culture found in Africa? Tom's book can therefore be seen as a confirmation of the real aim behind cultural explanations: to divert attention away from the realities of apartheid and exploitation, and also put the blame on workers for problems created by apartheid.

NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT vs NEED FOR AFFILIATION

Blacks have been described by industrial psychology and other allied disciplines as having a high need for affiliation as opposed to the western culture's need for achievement. It is not very clear though what is meant by these concepts, because they are very vague. However, some of the attempted explanations give the impression that blacks prefer to do things collectively.

The cultural inheritance of most South African blacks is such that they display affiliation needs rather than achievement needs. They are used to doing things by group consensus, acting slowly and non-individualistically (7)

These observations display a high degree of intellectual naïveté in mainstream industrial psychology. This is a gross failure to, at least, appreciate the fundamental contradiction of capitalism: that capitalism creates collectivities at the point of production who later become a threat to its very existence by raising workers' consciousness as a group suffering the same plight. This state of affairs is further aggravated by the oppression of blacks in general. Tom's experiences as a worker show that workers' day-to-day struggles on the shop-floor and in their residential areas have taught them that the prerequisite to challenging the power of capital and the state is collective action and unity.

It is your duty as a trade union member to organize other workers into trade unions because you alone won't have power to challenge capitalism or exploitation. It is only when we are united that we can achieve our goal (p.68)

If this is the kind of affiliation industrial psychologists are referring to, I am prepared to concede that workers (as constitu-

ting the majority of the black population) have a very high need for affiliation! If this is not what they mean they, once more, owe Tom and other workers a further explanation. But, on the other hand, to state that black workers do not have a high need for achievement is also naive. It is undoubtedly obvious from Tom's experiences that it is through this 'affiliation' that workers want to improve themselves and bring justice, equality and, perhaps, sanity into South African society - which is a display of the highest need for achievement!

Perhaps it would do mainstream industrial psychology a little bit of good if they start 'listening' seriously to the messages in Tom's book, and stop their fruitless exercises of manipulating vague and meaningless concepts like need for affiliation and need for achievement. It is experiences like those described by Tom that, in the first instance, determine worker behaviour and not these concepts. Whether African culture is also traditionally communalistic is an irrelevant question in understanding black workers at this point in time. If this question, on its own, needs answering, it requires a different kind of an analysis, and for that matter an historical analysis.

SCIENTIFIC PRACTICE IN INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY

One simple, but important, way of evaluating the accuracy of scientific research is to test its findings against reality. This review has hopefully, demonstrated that research findings and explanations of black workers by industrial psychologists are poles apart with Tom's experiences. Industrial psychologists, as well as other social scientists, will have to ask themselves why have their findings been so misleading and inaccurate? Of course some social scientists have chosen to ignore the workers voice and went ahead with their studies, even if their results contradict what the workers have said through their representatives (mainly unions) e.g. Schlemmer chose to ignore Fosatu's statement on disinvestment and decided to carry on and publish the results of his supposedly scientific survey. (8) In a way this displays scientific arrogance whereby some social scientists think that surveys can replace the more democratic process of consultation and discussion within worker organizations. In such instances one is tempted to ask the question: whose interests are

these research studies and surveys on black workers serving?

There are two most important messages for scientific practice in industrial psychology which emanate from Tom's book:

First, if industrial psychologists want to carry out truly scientific work about workers, they have to do such studies with the workers and not on them. Otherwise they will continue to produce inaccurate and highly questionable results.

If they don't do this they will have to, either, openly declare on whose behalf are they carrying out such studies on workers or to keep quiet, forever - BATHULE BAZE BAFE. The sooner they do so, the better. Secondly, Tom's work emphasizes, once more, a need for an alternative paradigm in industrial psychology.

In conclusion, Tom's book has certainly redefined the terrain on which black workers will have to be understood, in that any study on workers will have to engage with this book or at least the issues raised in it.

NOTES:

- (1) See Coldwell and Moerdyk, 1981; Moerdyk, 1983; and Godsell, 1983.
- (2) For detailed arguments on this issue see Nzimande, 1985
- (3) Nasser, 1984. In a study of how corporate employees comprehend business and free enterprise, whose findings, he believes, holds the key to achieving higher productivity and stability in South Africa, Nasser makes the following conclusions and proposals 'It would appear that a great deal of ignorance about business and Free Enterprise exists among corporate employees in South Africa. Such ignorance is particularly predominant amongst the less educated, unskilled and semi-skilled workers Companies must, therefore, take stock of this situation and attempt to move towards the creation of greater commitment to, and involvement in, their structures by their non-managerial work-forces a sense of urgency will ensure the type of corporate

climate which makes for high levels of commitment to corporate objectives and will consequently ensure the continued survival and growth of a genuine Free Enterprise Southern Africa' (p.26) (emphasis added)

- (4) See Moerdyk, op cit p.7
- (5) Coldwell and Moerdyk op cit p.75
- (6) ibid
- (7) Reese, 1981; and he is also strongly supported by Moerdyk, op cit, on this idea.
- (8) University Forum: 'A. Erwin - L. Schlemmer debate on disinvestment' University of Natal, Durban 28 August 1985.

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