THE POLITICS OF INDUSTRIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A report on a one-day conference/workshop (3 September 1986)

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The political history of South Africa is full of many years of difficult struggles, major democratic setbacks, and occasionally some significant victories against the apartheid state and capital. It would be difficult in view of this to single out one year which was 'worse' than any of the others. However, in the event of any prizes for the hall of horrors which is our political history, 1986 should feature very prominent.

1986 saw the 'removal' of the state of emergency, only to have it reinstated with more vigour and commitment in June, just prior to what the state saw as a major potential popular mobilisation around the 10th anniversary of the 16 June student uprising of 1976. The farce of democracy was carried even further in December when wide-ranging press clamps were introduced. The state is not well, and during 1986 used a massive security force deployment in the townships and black communities in an attempt to contain any further deterioration of its ailing legitimacy.

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The state's legitimacy has been threatened and challenged in most areas which it administers: education; housing; security; welfare; health; industrial relations.

The extent and nature of the crisis facing the state and the ruling class in South Africa is both deep and structural. This is not meant to imply that the state is weak and is about to collapse. On the contrary, this state has an enormous and powerful repressive apparatus at its disposal, which 1986 saw only a glimmer of its 'effectiveness'. The state will continue to use its mechanisms of coercion to maintain control in an attempt to (re-) establish its legitimacy. It has gone about this in a way which has dealt severe blows to many progressive organisations, to the extent that many organisations with the possible exception of some of the trade unions are hardly able to function at the moment. Hundreds of activists and unionists have been detained; meetings have been prohibited; organisations have been restricted; vigilantes have harrassed and killed activists and unionists; information has been restricted; and the list goes on.

The brutality of the state's actions in 'containing' popular political opposition to its policies and practices has had contradictory effects. There has been a retreat in certain areas and also a pessimism about the nature of democratic struggle, but there has also been an increasing resolve to establish a democratic order in South Africa no matter how high the sacrifices. And what in some senses has been particularly significant about the challenges to the state and the actions

especially of the seurity forces, has been the politicisation of organisations and groupings who previously have tried to keep out of the political arena. 1986 seemed to have been the year when even relatively conservative groupings and individuals felt compelled to respond, in some way, to what has been a dramatic and tragic year of political repression, violence and counter-violence. Innocence, if it ever was much around, was dealt a final blow in South Africa last year.

This is the context in which the one day conference-workshop organised by the Natal Industrial Psychology Group (affiliated to the PASA Institute of Industrial Psychology) has to be assessed.

The programme of the one day conference-workshop entitled, 'Perspectives on psychology: Its role in South Africa today and tomorrow' held at the Elangeni Hotel (") in Durban on 3 September 1986, put the concerns of the conference as '...designed to contextualise Psychology more clearly within the realities of the current South African situation. Perspectives and options for the future will be explored'. Clearly, on the face of it, a very conjunctural analysis was being called for. The purpose of this report is to assess the political articulation of industrial psychologists vis-a-vis the current social crisis in South Africa. Before doing this it is useful to give a brief description of the structure of the day's proceedings.

The morning or conference part comprised of five papers that were read with time for discussion after each presentation. The order of presentations was as follows:

1. An overview of the current status of psychology in South Africa - Professor Deo Strumpfer (UCT).

2. Psychology: The servant of apartheid - Dr Ari Sitas (UND).

3. Psychology and the social sciences: The way ahead - Bonginkosi Nzimande (Univ. of Zululand).

4. Psychology.....Community, labour and the organisational setting - Rod le Roux (Industry).

5. Psychology...Alternative models and practices: A case-study - Lloyd Vogelman (OASSSA, Transvaal).

The afternoon or workshop session comprised of two small working groups whose aims were to '...identify, extend and confirm the major themes which emerged from the morning's presentations and discussion. And to make specific recommendations for translating these themes into a working praxis for South African psychology tomorrow'.

I shall concentrate this report on the analytic strands which emerged from the formal papers in discussing the relationship between industrial psychology and political developments in this country. I shall do this by making some general comments and criticisms, rather than focussing on the details of each paper (Papers were not given out, and in any case I only managed to get three of the five papers that were presented).

There certainly was agreement amongst all five speakers that we were living in 'troubled times'. The crisis facing South African society was evident to everyone. The details of <u>how</u> to 'contextualise psychology' (from the advertising prgramme), and especially industrial psychology in the current situation seemed to be the central question which only a few of the speakers

managed to address, albeit too briefly.

Deo Strumpfer of UCT presenting the first paper gave (in his own words) a 'middle-of-the-road' presentation of industrial psychology in South Africa. He sketchingly presented a 'history' of industrial psychology revolving around what he called 'two cultural clusters' of English and Afrikaans perspectives. He concluded his rather uncritical survey of industrial psychology by discussing professional psychology, and especially in relation to PASA, who he saw as a dynamic and open association whose conference (October 1986) was going to focus on a more relevant psychology and also of how psychology should respond to the social crisis in South Africa at the moment.

He concluded his talk more critically by saying that there was no such thing as an apolitical psychology, but everyone wanted to practice it! He remarked that there had been calls to develop a psychology in Africa, a psychology of Africa, calls for action but nothing had been done. Industrial and organisational psychology was becoming aware that it could no longer be a servant of management, and needed to go into new fields. Clearly Strumpfer knows where psychology in South Africa has come from, and where it has got to, although he did seem stuck as to where and how it should now proceed. Outside of a few critical remarks he concluded rather nihilistically saying, 'We (as industrial psychologists) stand condemned, we condemn ourselves. I hope the other speakers will deal with this.

Most of the other speakers did deal with this, although their presentations tended to be analytical rather than formative or

prefigurative of industrial psychology in a different social order, with the possible exception of Lloyd Vogelman's paper on OASSSA. Industrial psychology was seen to be implicated, both consciously and unconsciously, in the power relations of apartheid and capitalist society in South Africa. Although Rod le Roux's paper addressed the question of power quite directly, he tended to focus on what he called a pragmatic approach to the problems facing 'labour', 'community', and the 'organisational setting' in a way which underestimated the fundamental conflicts between labour and capital. le Roux's pragmatism runs the risk of trying to 'neutralise' what are essentially irreconciable political and class interests, in a manner which boils down to a set of pleas for understanding, trust, and acceptance of the different values between the 'contestants' in the industrial sphere. While this basic humanism might be commendable in the current context of repression and brutality, it is not something which easily translates into appropriate action at an organisational level. Le Roux's argument might leave the individual industrial psychologist with a better understanding of the power relations and values inherent between what he refers to as 'labour', 'community', and 'organisational setting', but does it really give industrial psychology as a collective an edge on how to transform its practice/s.

Ari Sitas, who spoke about industrial studies/research in general, while focussing on his own discipline - industrial sociology - and to a lesser extent industrial psychology, discussed some of the structural constraints facing industrial practitioners which would put a limit on and at the same time

complicate le Roux's pragmatism and humanism. The thrust of Sitas's argument was to investigate the range of responses that industrial researchers could and had made to the contradictory realities which constitute the objective world of industrial production. The nature of involvement of the state, labour, and management since the early 1970s has certainly changed the character of the industrial sphere, and hence complicated the relation of social science research to industry. This changing nature of the industrial terrain, and especially in a more politicised direction, has lead to a bit of a crisis for social studies of industrial life.

According to Sitas management needs a super-technocrat. A person who is able to understand and deal with the complexities of industrial relations; a person who at a technical level can ensure productive stability and capacity; and a humanist to 'smooth over' the social relations of production. The implications of all this is that management do not really need industrial psychologists at all. According to Sitas there are a number of objective factors working against industrial psychologists in their attempts to intervene in and with industrial organisations. A management that needs a super-technocrat to control production and a capitalist society that sees people as functions and not as individuals, leaves the industrial psychologist little space in which to recover the 'collapse of the individual'.

It was this issue of the collapse of the individual as a socio-historic feature of industrial capitalism, and the simultaneous

'championing' of a humanism by industrial psychology trying to reclaim the individual as the site of their practice, that Blade Nzimande addressed in the first part of his paper. He tended to cast the problem of individuality and sociality too abstractly and hence set-up a predominantly epistemological solution to what is also a major substantive issue. The decline in the power that ordinary individuals have over determining their lives, working or other, is a very practical issue which raises important organisational and political questions for the underclasses, and hence it is a pity that Nzimande's paper stressed the theoretical aspects of this problem.

In the second part of his paper, which sat a little uncomfortably with the first part, he detailed five challenges to psychology, and especially industrial psychology. These challenges were: a need to go back to theory; a focus on issues rather than techniques; a problematising of capitalism; a need to understand apartheid; and a fresh look at professional training and practice. While some of these issues were dealt with by the other speakers, the one which was avoided and glossed over by most speakers was the whole question of capitalism. If industrial psychologists, or other psychologists for that matter, are going to try to understand their 'roles' in a society, and particularly in a society in a state of crisis, then it is important to analyse the nature of the society and its social relations that they are trying to articulate with. This question cannot be 'left alone' by social scientists, because it is then that we unwittingly become the 'servants of power', the 'servants of apartheid', the 'servants of anybody' who wants our

'services'. Social scientists need to address the question of the nature of the society in which their practices are located and 'needed', so as to be aware of whose side they are on, because it is an ideological contortion that we are on nobody's side, we are neutral.

The most clear statement of a 'taking sides' psychological practice came from OASSSA in Lloyd Vogelman's paper (This paper is reproduced elsewhere in this number). OASSSA's commitment based on a critique of health practices under apartheid and capitalism is to provide a service to predominantly working class groups who are usually deprived of adequate social and health care. It is also OASSSA's commitment to research and understand the bases of these social, economic, and political 'deprivations', and the effect that they have on the psychological health of members of the working class. In understanding the class character of South African society OASSSA has been able to coherently respond to the social and psychological needs of oppressed and working class communities in developing a 'new' practice of psychology. This is not to say that OASSSA's formulation is complete or even satisfactory, as the organisation is continually being self-critical. OASSSA has at least taken the first step towards developing a transformative practice for psychology in contributing to a just and democratic society.

while all the papers were engagingly discussed after each presentation, the one that drew the most, and the most intense discussion was the OASSSA paper by Lloyd Vogelman. It seems that the reason for this was related to how it indirectly reflected on the state of industrial psychology which was the focus of the conference after all. OASSSA had identified the social interests in society and had clearly chosen where it located itself - it is partisan in other words - and as a result of this 'choice' had been able to develop a specific range of practices. The commitment of OASSSA was the source of irritation to some members of the conference still locked into the value-neutral ground of a positivist industrial psychology. OASSSA's commitment was also the source of excitement for some members of the conference as it offered them a potential way-out of the dilemmas currently facing industrial psychology.

It is difficult to assess what the one-day conference achieved with regard to informing future industrial psychological practices. Putting five fairly diverse and detailed papers into a morning session did not really facilitate detailed discussion and criticism. Sadly it seemed that in a Foucauldian sense the conference stood out as a 'spectacle of denial'. Industrial psychology did not want to be associated with the repression and violence currently part of South African society, but did not know how to develop practices which would negate these structural contradictions of reform in so far as they affected the practice of industrial psychology. Until industrial psychology can develop a collective and organisational response to the

contradictory locations it finds itself in in the capitalist social formation that South Africa is, it will find its attempts at self-criticism and social protest disconnected from the practices of transformation in this country. Its liberalism and humanism will remain a 'spectacle of denial', and not a challenge to this repressive and brutal capitalist order.