

## Review

## LABOUR AND THE TRANSITION: A SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY

A review of David Ginsburg, Eddie Webster, Roger Southall, Geoff Wood, Sakhela Buhlungu, Johann Maree, Janet Cherry, Richard Haines and Gilton Klerck, (1995), *Taking Democracy Seriously. Worker Expectations and Parliamentary Democracy in South Africa*, Indicator Press, Durban.

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Sociology in South Africa has long prioritised the labour movement in its research activities. This timely publication comes out of this strong tradition and marks a certain 'coming of age' in my view. *Taking Democracy Seriously* (TDS) consists of a readable report on a survey conducted with 643 COSATU members across the country. The main issue, for the researchers, is whether the 'movementist' nature of the South African labour movement would prevent its 'incorporation', through corporatist mechanisms, by the new democratic regime.

The context of TDS is set by the international debate on democratisation. The Latin American experience, as theorised and generalised by Adam Przeworski, is the main reference point. The main assumption challenged by some authors is that successful transitions from authoritarianism to democracy require negotiations and pacts between state reformers and 'moderates' in the opposition movement. They argue that 'The South African case holds open the possibility of a less conservative outcome than transition theory would suggest' (1995:9).

This is, indeed, the case, but it was also in Latin America in the 1980s. The point, surely, is that the outcome of all transition processes is open and depends entirely on the political struggles which ensue. What may be more particular to South Africa is the feeling that the elected majority party does not have a 'free hand' to govern simply as it sees fit. There is, clearly, as TDS points out, the fact of a mobilised and politicised labour movement here which constrains the 'free hand'. There is also, however, a strong capitalist class, intact state apparatus and dynamic conservative political force opposing that influence.

The findings of *TDS* are presented clearly and the authors seem aware of the limitations of their own data. The study finds, amongst other things, that:

- 76 percent of respondents claimed to have attended at least one union meeting within the previous month;
- 75 percent of respondents knew nothing about the RDP;
- 50 percent thought workers could not rely on political parties to protect their interests;
- 95 percent thought workers will always need trade unions to protect their interests;
- 83 percent had not been to a union meeting where a report-back on the National Economic Forum was given;
- 40 percent would vote for another party in the next election if the present government fails to deliver benefits;
- 75 percent thought the alliance should fight the 1999 elections.

What comes across from this survey is a labour movement which is itself in transition. There is a distinct element of routinisation in democratic practices and an incipient bureaucratisation under way. Yet this is a labour movement with considerable impact on national government. Even the snippets cited above show the contradictory nature of workers' consciousness.

The authors of *TDS* do not hide behind a technocratic mask and are not afraid of interpreting their findings. They suggest clearly that there is now 'a "democratic rupture" between trade union leaders drawn into corporatist type structures, and rank and file trade union members' (1995:9). This was always on the cards given, amongst other factors, the strong influence of 'outsiders' (like some of the authors of *TDS*) on the labour movement. Now this layer has largely moved into government and left the movement somewhat bereft of leadership. This labour movement has made it an article of faith that representatives (union or political) act on 'mandates' and are recallable. This, as *TDS* points out, 'is highly problematic for any form of parliamentary system, and no less for South Africa' (1995:45). Yet they also argue, simplistically in my view, that a radical scenario would involve the government being forced to adopt 'redistributive policies' (1995:9). The underlying argument of *Taking Democracy Seriously* is that 'transition theory' has a formalistic or minimalist view of democracy restricted to free elections and parliamentary sovereignty.

To criticise a study which is not only valuable but nearly unique might seem churlish but the authors of *TDS* would expect critique and debate. While it is good to see methods being used by radical sociologists without apology, it is not

enough to say that 'their limits' can be obtained from the authors if so desired (1995:11). There might also be a problem in the easy dismissal of the effects of under-representation of National Union of Mineworkers' members in the survey (1995:32) given the importance of the NUM. However, the most substantial limitations, in my view, in what is a most useful study, lies in its political analysis. Its critique of transition theory is frankly off the mark, relevant to only one particular version, and serves only to set up a 'straw-person' to knock down. Nor are the references to Latin America, for example Brazil's Workers' Party particularly well informed. Nor can one justify the continuous reference to the British model of union democracy given the advances in Third World labour studies. My feeling is that the political analysis of *TDS* is, itself, in transition, and we shall soon see a more rounded, balanced and viable version of radical democracy, in South Africa.

Sociology in South Africa, judging from this report, has come of age. There is no posing as self-appointed guardians of the labour movements' principles. There is a growing awareness of the craft of sociology, once upon a time dismissed as 'bourgeois'. Yet this report comes from the elite - in every way - of the sociological profession. Unfortunately, this level of professionalism, commitment and responsibility is not universal. Indeed, 'taking democracy seriously' is not something blindingly obvious in most Sociology Departments in South Africa.

Perhaps it is now time for those who are leading the transformation of sociology in South Africa to look inwards. Events of the last year show a considerable gap between the democratic theory displayed in this book and the practice of authoritarianism, intolerance, sexism and chauvinism in some quarters. The silence of the sociological profession in this context does not argue well for its international image. A small token of the problem at hand - not to be interpreted as a cheap essentialist shot - is that of the nine authors of *TDS* only one is not white and only one is non-male - and she is not a sociologist but a political scientist.