From Race and Ethnicity to 'Individuality' and 'Skill' as forms of constraint:

Containerization and the foreclosure of radical unionism in Durban Harbour

Bernard Dubbeld

Universities of Stellenbosch & Chicago

This is a draft. Please do not cite without permission.

> Only now are we beginning to guess what forms—and they will
> be determinate for our epoch—lie hidden in machines.
>
> Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project.*

Introduction

The 1980s are broadly characterized as a moment in South Africa where political trade unionism reaches its zenith. From that standpoint, the growth of trade unionism following the 1973 strikes in Durban became a platform upon which workers claimed rights against the Apartheid government's racial organization of labor, and the frequent strikes of the 1980s attested to the political agency of the African working class in playing a vital part in the struggle to overcome Apartheid. From a traditional Marxist perspective, the 1990s then appear as a moment of the fragmentation of the working class and an undercutting of radicalism, whether understood as product of an "elite transition" or as the result of the redistribution of power and the internationalization of the economy.[1]

But are we allowing our desire to see the 1980s as a period of successful struggle against Apartheid or our wishes to see agentive battles won by ordinary people to blind us from further investigation (viz. Foucault)? Are we content to simply accept the 1990s and the contemporary period as a discrete break from the 1980s? Through a focus on the particular site of the Durban harbor and the organization of stevedores during the 1980s, I wish to depart from this (naturalized) narration: at least in this site, the 1980s were a time of impotence and ultimate defeat in the attempt to politicize trade unions and attest to the

---

[1] Patrick Bond. *Elite Transition*. University of Natal, 1999. Edward Webster & Karl von Holdt (eds). *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*. UKZN, 2005.

foreclosure of radical trade unionism. Indeed, I will argue in this paper that this case suggests that in order to understand the 1980s sufficiently we need to focus much more closely on the transformation of the social formation, understand its timing, and reconsider its implications for our understandings of political agency, at least insofar as they relate to the "successes" of trade union politics. In short, I hope in this paper to trace the emergence of a categorical logic that expresses the social form conventionally understood as globalization, that on the one hand proves incompatible with Apartheid and provides rights for workers, but on the other provides the basis for the exclusion of people from regular work (i.e. the creation of contingent labor) and increasingly undermines their ability to exercise any substantive rights (the constraining of political unionism). 'Individuality', as a concept, appears as a massive achievement in struggle to overcome Apartheid, is also the legitimating mechanism for mass social exclusion. To adequately grasp the dual character of this social form, we have to consider the changing terms of labor and recognize technological transformation as bound up in a more global change, and not assume the exteriority of agency or political struggle.

I thus hope to make two related arguments in this paper. Firstly, that to understand contemporary difficulties of trade unionism we have to look back at the 1980s as a moment in which new terms of social division emerged under which labor became divided into categories of "skilled" and "casual", rather than in the Apartheid terms of "race" and "ethnicity". Secondly, in understanding categories such as individuality and skill as entailed by the transformation of work, we have to view these categories critically, rather than as a simple victory of 'natural' human rights over Apartheid. These two arguments point towards an analysis of the structuring of the South African economy after 1973.

Broadly speaking, the post-1973 period has been understood as a starting point for globalization/neo-liberalism/post-fordism, although beyond ideas that the world is somehow more integrated, that there are more commodities available, and there is a change in the structure of industrial relations, there is little in the way of a coherent understanding of the structuring implications of these transformations and the formal enframings of politics and subjectivity. From my perspective, an adequate analysis of this transformation must ask *how* particular categories entailed by this social form become naturalized as a rational ordering principle of business, and by extension, how these particular categories begin to

encompass everyday life in the contemporary world.[2] In other words, the important question for me is how, on the one hand, this social form emerged, and how, on the other, this form demands a particular kind of subject and frames choice, foreclosing other possibilities. It is important, then, to see how a particular model of capitalism, emphasizing individuality, flexibility, formal rights, diversity of skills and rational actors, comes into being and is taken for granted, as well as how the advocating of these positions are bound up in a global form rather than mere victories against an oppressive Apartheid social order. A lens through which this emergence can be understood in South Africa, I hope to demonstrate in this paper, is a technological artefact of this social transformation: the shipping container.

Containers and Dock work

The shipping container, of course, appears a trivial thing. A standardized box of twenty or forty feet, the container transports commodities across oceans in larger quantities than before, and makes the distribution of those commodities more efficient, by linking road and rail transportation to the sea relatively seamlessly, rendering the mass warehousing of commodities and the labor of loading and unloading cargo increasingly obsolete. Beyond understanding the emergence of the container as a mere efficiency, however, what are the effects of this object, that itself stores objects?

Containers, unsurprisingly, were an innovation of the shipyard. Shipyards, as Harry Braverman once pointed out, were "probably the most complete product of two centuries of industrial revolution", and have frequently pitted technological innovation against an existing order of work.[3] Specifically the container was developed in the 1950s by a US trucker, Malcolm MacLean, who in frustration at the long turn-around times at the docks, developed the container as a linkage between road and sea cargo. This standardized box promised a

---

[2] Marx's notion of "real subsumption" is interesting here, insofar as he focuses on the way that the autonomy of subjects becomes fully "interpellated" by the market forms of value, transforming social practice and desire. It is not so simple as to claim that real subsumption has increased in contemporary times. Rather the logic is one of proliferation: to turn more and more of the world into sites that can be rendered equivalent, that is, in terms of exchange-value, and to fine tune subject's understanding of equivalence. See *Capital, Vol. 1*. Ch. 14. esp pp. 465-472.

[3] For instance: William. H. Sewell, Jr. "Historical Duration and temporal complexity: the strange career of Marseille's Dockworkers. 1814-1870" in *Logics of History* (Chicago, 2005); Hugo Van Driel & Johan Schot. "Radical Innovation as a Multilevel Process: Introducing Floating Grain Elevators in the Port of Rotterdam" in *Technology and Culture* (46, 2005) and Joseph Blum. "Degradation without deskilling: Twenty Five Years in the San Francisco Shipyards" in Michael Burawoy (ed) *Global Ethnography*. (California, 2000).

solution. From the late 1960s, the use of containers rapidly proliferated in ports across the globe, revolutionizing shipping with East Asian ports and trade routes becoming major competitors to more established North Atlantic transportation hubs. In addition, the container changed the physical geography of harbors themselves, requiring investment in dredging, new berths for ships, and new cranes. Ports unable to accommodate these changes were abandoned, and new ports built. From the perspective of a business historian, Frank Broeze, the container actually "saved shipping" through its efficient transformation.[4]

There were, unsurprisingly, quite dramatic effects on workers: the immediate worlds of work to which these laborers belonged were confronted by the constant threat of retrenchment. Containerized transportation did not require large numbers of physically powerful men, instead needing only limited numbers of workers to operate sophisticated cranes and computers. Most of the remaining workers were retrenched or kept on a casual basis to operate in older ships. Commenting on this, Allan Sekula recently called the container "the very coffin of remote labor power, bearing the hidden evidence of exploitation to the far reaches of the world".[5]

But beyond the numbers of workers required, there were definite changes in the terms of work itself, as well as the management-union relationship. Stevedores had to be comprehensively retrained if they were to remain in their positions, and union power to define the terms of working conditions was significantly undermined since, without training, their members could not be assured of work. This was a fractal iteration of the same 'choice' that faced ports: radically change their physical geography or face obsolescence.

The point is that this ordinary object as it proliferated in the world, became talked about as a technological and efficient solution, and its implication was radically constraining of choice, and requires that subjects become skilled in very particular way. Borrowing from Marx's analysis in *Capital*, the container is thus to be understood as an artefact of a social formation that enframes the horizon in which choices can occur. The question then is, what are the implications of this emergence of this object in the late 1970s in South Africa? How, given the local dynamics of work, capital, and Apartheid, does this technological innovation introduce new kinds of determination in the social field, and constrain political subjectivity?

---

[4] Frank Broeze. "Containerization and the Globalization of Liner Shipping".
[5] Allan Sekula. "Freeway to China" in *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*.

The Apartheid Workplace: Implementing Race and Ethnicity in Durban Harbor

Almost four decades of scholarship has attempted to define what precisely Apartheid was, what material and intellectual conditions it depended upon, how it differed from the previous colonial and segregationist periods in South Africa, and the extent to which it was decisive in the everyday lives of people in the country. One of key matters, it seems to me, is the extent to which the government could sustain, politically and materially, a key contradiction between the commitment to the rural "autonomy" of designated African ethnic groups and the commitment to control and regulate the presence of African people in the city, and more specifically, to reengineer an older, racially defined, order of cheap migrant labor to control precisely the numbers of workers needed in the city, eliminating the "excessive" presence of Africans in the city.[6] In other words, the Apartheid government attempted to create and ossify categories of race and ethnicity, and tried to harden this system and entrench white privilege through a system that allocated limited amounts of money through race and prestige and political power through ethnic allegiance. In maintaining a distinction between race and ethnicity, and nevertheless depending upon their interrelation economically and politically, the contradictions of Apartheid were never far from the surface. And the maintenance of those contradictions was often through explicit state violence, suggesting that its ability to naturalize the belief in race and ethnicity failed, the widespread persistence of race and ethnic categories in contemporary South Africa notwithstanding. Of interest to me in this paper is how, in the early Apartheid period, between 1945 and the mid 1970s, the government and business interests seem to congeal, despite the analytical contradictions, and how, after the mid 1970s, these interests diverge, a divergence that we cannot accept as simply a product of business' embrace of "human rights".[7] The organization of work in Durban harbor illustrates this divergence well, and as I will argue later, gives us insight into the constraints on political unionism in contemporary South Africa.

---

[6] John Comaroff theorizes this contradiction in a related way. See his "Reflections on the Colonial State" in *Social Dynamics*. 1998.

[7] This, I believe, must be situated within a broader global understanding of the postwar period of state attempts at intervention and regulation, including the welfare infrastructures in Western Europe and "socialist" attempts in the East Europe the Soviet Union, and China. See Moishe Postone (2004). "Critique and Historical Transformation" in *Historical Materialism*. 12: 3. pp. 54-55.

With that prefacing, how do we understand the specific shape of the contradictory currents of Apartheid as they manifested in the port of Durban? During the 1940s and early 1950s, like much of urban South Africa, Durban and the port in particular was characterized by prominent displays of African claims for space in the city, organized through a range of political organizations, including trade unions. The early Apartheid state, working through the Durban city council, sought to force the registration of all Africans in the city according to type of employment, an instrument designed to facilitate the eventual removal of any African in the city without "proper" work in the city.[8] The idea, of course, was a variation on a much older South African, British colonial and even Victorian formula: remove undesirables from the city, restrict everybody to their racially defined place, and social order will follow.[9] The key difference with the Apartheid administration, as we shall see, lay in different and more developed notion of what a racially defined 'place' meant.

The employers of stevedores, however, had a somewhat different sensibility. For them, employing casuals made a lot of sense given an irregular demand for labor. A centralized system of labor entailed a financial risk. The more standard approach to hiring African dockworkers, which persisted in other ports in South Africa, was described by a Stevedoring Employer who worked in Port Elizabeth before Durban:

> I can remember going down at six one winter's morning, surrounded by guys in big coats smelling of wood smoke because they had been sleeping around the fire. And that morning there weren't many ships. In those days you had six or seven hundred men coming to work in Port Elizabeth, and you would only have employment for half of them… And it was a big joke among the [white] foreman when there was surplus labor. They would throw two or three tickets into the crowd to see the guys fight at six in the morning to be employed.[10]

So why did the administration of workers in Durban follow a different trajectory? On the one hand, the large numbers of stevedores were probably organized better than at any other

[8] Archival Document… [Check and add specific dates]
[9] See for instance. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, Fred Cooper. *The Struggle for the City* and *On the African Waterfront*, Charles Van Onselen. *New Babylon, New Nineveh*. Luise White. *The Comforts of Home*. Maylam and Edwards. *The People's city*. etc.
[10] Interview: Captain Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

time in the history of the port. Through the 1950s, numerous strikes in the harbor frustrated employees and no doubt caught the attention of Apartheid authorities zealously attempting to prove the disorderly "nature" of an unregulated urban 'African' population.[11] On the other hand, Durban had become the largest harbor in the country, and quite literally an important flagship for the city, and for trade in the country as a whole. If the Apartheid engineering of urban labor according to race and ethnicity was to be put into practice, the Durban docks were a perfect place of execution.

Numerous meetings between government officials and employers followed between 1956 and 1959.[12] What eventually seems to have broken the employers reluctance to implement a system regulated in terms of broader Apartheid policy was a massive strike in February 1959.[13] After violently ending the strike [check dates], employers and government officials developed an institution to regulate all dock work in Durban. This institution was called the Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company, and began operating in at the end of March 1959.[14]

The Labour Supply Company was designed to centralize control African stevedores in Durban, managing and disciplining the practices of recruitment, housing, and the labor process. At the locus of this administrative architecture were older African men, called Izinduna (a term borrowed from mine work in Johannesburg, and summoning a "tradition" of pre-colonial Zulu authority) and supposedly able to create a more orderly environment for African workers by virtue of understanding their "culture" and language. Some Izinduna, particularly those responsible for the labor process, had worked on the docks prior to the Labour Supply Company. Many other Izinduna had not. Liaising with leaders of KwaZulu Bantustan, Izinduna recruited workers on nine-month contracts from remote areas in Zululand.[15] Once in Durban, workers were housed in a centralized compound in Southampton St, in the point area near the harbor. The compounds housed between twelve and twenty people per room, and with a double work shift, workers would sometimes rotate

---

[11] CITE the strike records. Corroboration from Hemson. JSAS 1977.

[12] CITE the meeting records.

[13] CITE these strike records.

[14] SAB BAO 3075 vol. C39/1171/1."Memorandum of Agreement entered into between African Associated Stevedoring, Consolidated Stevedoring, Brock and Company, Storm and Company, Jack Storm and Peter Kemp (trustee). 1 April 1959.

[15] Meaning, quite simply, areas in KwaZulu where traditional African administrators had substantial influence. Two of the most notable areas of this influence were Nongoma and Mhlabathini, in Northern Kwazulu.

the same bed. [16] In these compounds, Izinduna became more like prefects, dining at a special table and punishing any "misbehavior".[17] At work, Izinduna led tightly controlled work gangs called "Stevedoring Labour Units" comprised of between eight and twelve members. The role of the Izinduna was to direct the process of work, to train new workers, and it was they who were ultimately responsible to management for the successful completion of each task. White foremen were also present during each stevedoring operation, but they played virtually no part in the specifics of the labor process.

How successful was this Apartheid reordering of work according to the control of Africans in urban areas and in terms of their "Zulu culture"? Within a year of the formation of the Labour Supply Company, over eighty percent of the stevedoring labor force were migrants.[18]. Very rarely, according to Company officials, were there any problems with the labor process or compound system. Indeed, for employers, the operation of the Labour Supply Company was an overwhelming success. Record turnover of cargo loads was experienced, with an industrial calm in the ports that contrasted dramatically with the two preceding decades. The countrywide economic boom contributed so significantly to the stevedoring industry, such was the demand to clear ships of cargo as quickly as possible, that more than half of workers' average wages derived from overtime pay.[19] Despite an initial limiting of the labor pool after 1959, the numbers of stevedores increased with increased productivity, peaking at 2923 stevedores in 1964 and stabilizing at 2700 in 1966.[20] For government officials, the Labour Supply Company was an overwhelming success. Attributing this success to the concentration of workers in a single compound under the rule of Izinduna and to the "distinct social organization of the Bantu that values the clan or family unit above that of the individual", government officials proclaimed that they had

---

[16] D.M. Ross-Watt. *Housing for Bantu Stevedores.*(B. Arch Thesis, University of Natal, 1970) p. 20. Interview: July Ntshangase. (Tina Sideris, 1982), Interview. Les Owen. 4 June 2001.

[17] Interview. Siza Makhaya. (Personnel Officer, Labor Supply Company, 1973-1987) 11 July 2001, and David Hemson *Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers.* p. 546

[18] SAB BAO 2401 31/3/36. Report by Kemp and Dreyer (Manager and Assistant Manager of the Labor Supply Company) "History and functions of the Labor Supply Company", October 1965.

[19] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 526.

[20] SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.

found the "model Apartheid institution", which should be replicated in other ports and workplaces across the country. [21]

      Several stevedoring workers, on the other hand, described the system as considerably more arbitrary, and at times more malleable and negotiable. In mediating the relationship between African workers and White management, Izinduna constructed micro social arrangements of trust and obligation that were fraught with unequal power relations, but very different from the supposedly static "Zulu tradition". [22] Furthermore, in describing the intense dangers and physicality of dockwork, both workers and izinduna spoke of the solidarities these forged in work gangs. [23] These solidarities were did not only serve to protect workers from danger: they also facilitated various types of "shortcuts" in the labor process that helped to reduce work time, among other things. [24] Moreover, potential conflicts were softened by the overwhelming racial divisions in South African society. While Izinduna were expected to supervise and co-ordinate the operations from within the belly of the ship, white foremen would remain outside the ship, reading the newspaper. Stevedores sometimes spoke of the role of Izinduna as teachers in the techniques of stevedoring work. A dockworker, Ndebele noted that the positions of authority on a ship were more porous than the company imagined, having stood in for Izinduna on many occasions when the latter were absent.[25] Ngcobo and Ngema became Izinduna after starting as ordinary rank and file stevedores during the period of the Labor Supply Company, and spoke about the contradictory conditions under which they found themselves. As an induna, Ngema emphasized his role in training workers and the relationships of fear and trust existing simultaneously between themselves and workers.[26]

---

[21] SAB BAO 3075 C39/1171/1. Durban Stevedoring Labour Supply Company. "Stevedoring Labour Units", and SAB BAO 2401 31/3/336. Letter from P. Kemp to P. van Rensburg, Dept of Bantu Administration and Development.

[22] These interviews were conducted by Tina Sideris in 1982 and 1983 on behalf of the South African Institute of Race relations. Despite their richness, many of these interviews are unfortunately not as coherent as the archival documents. The other interviews in this paper were conducted by the author between 2000 and 2002.

[23] Ngcobo speaks of working directly with asbestos and problems it caused his lungs. Ntshangase claimed that "Carrying bags used to kill us here, when dealing with manure it was tough- it burnt, scalding the flesh from our hands… even the gloves they gave us, are torn apart the day after you have used them". Interviews Ntshangase, Ngcobo, op. Cit

[24] Interview: Mr Khanye. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

[25] Interview: Mr Ndebele. (by Tina Sideris) 23 June 1983.

[26] Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982. My thanks go to the late Thami Sibiya for translating this interview.

It seems to me that while we might conceptualize these relationships in terms of Karl von Holdt's recent formulation, the "Apartheid Workplace Regime", where ideas of "baaskaap" run through a centralized system of the control of African workers, we should be careful to locate this in a historically specific moment, prior to the late 1970s, and also recognize that the workplace regime was far more arbitrary and precarious than Apartheid administrators believed.[27] But we also cannot pretend that this system of labor control had no effects whatsoever. It fundamentally recast what it meant to be an African worker in Durban, in terms of the kinds of solidarities and obligations that emerged, frequently to specific rural sites. These "hidden transcripts" did not, of course, undermine governments' or employers' belief that they had found a "cultural" *logic* for the exploitation of workers that could be both stable and profitable.

What did disturb this logic was a strike in 1969. The first weekend of April saw 2000 workers go on strike over wages. Economic boom in the port during the mid 1960s had seen stevedores earning significant amounts from overtime pay. After 1966, a slight downturn in the harbor economy saw workers doing far less overtime work, and consequently earning significantly less. The government board of wage determination met in late 1968, and decided that there was to be no increase in the basic pay of stevedores, and that overtime work should be taxed.[28] Although it is not entirely clear how this information was made known to stevedores (certain NUSAS and UND students were involved), the decisions of the wage determination board proved important enough for stevedores to risk their jobs by striking.

Management of the Labour Supply Company invited police to their meeting with striking workers, and demanded that strikers return to work. They then dismissed more than 1000 workers, with Kemp publicly claiming that there was ample manpower to call on.[29] A dockworker recalled how, during the time of the strike, scabs were hired and protected by armed police to ensure work continued in ports.[30] Following the strike, the Labour Supply Company decided that its logic that indeed been correct, and that is necessary to tinker a little with its implementation: summoning a notion of a coherent Zulu nation that would be adequately controlled by Izinduna, the Labor Supply Company altered its recruitment

---

[27] Karl Von Holdt. *Transition from Below.* (UKZN, 2003).
[28] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and migrant workers". p. 518-520.
[29] *The Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1969. "Half of Durban's Dockworkers sent home".
[30] Interview: Mr Absalom Ngema, (by Tina Sideris) 17 November 1982

pattern, with a marked increase in the numbers of workers from Nongoma and Mhlabathini ("Zulu strongholds" during Apartheid) and substantially reduced the recruitment of non-Zulu workers.[31]

For Hemson, this strike, and the one that followed in 1972 (over wages, working conditions and safety in particular) illustrated the re-emergence of a class consciousness latent since the late 1950s. While I have no evidence to counter this claim in this particular period, there was a rising public consciousness in the white press that the harbor had become both more volatile and more inefficient.[32] In this arena, it was widely felt that there was problem that needed to solved, and that the early Apartheid method of organizing African workers from above was failing. And, as I will argue in the next section, employers became increasingly pressurized to break their contract with the government and change the character of this "Apartheid workplace regime".

New managerial dreams and abstract imperatives: units, containers, 'new workers'

From 1969 onwards, the port was beset with delays.[33] By late 1972, following the October strike, this situation was consistently debated in the white press, who urged rapid "mechanization" as the solution to all problems.[34] As popular icons around the world began declaring, of different, although contemporaneous, global events: "the dream is over" or "whatever happened to the postwar dream?", a section of the local Durban business community and international shipping lines seriously considered the problem of what to do with dock labor in the city.

The intermediate solution was to revert to recruiting casual labor independently to work alongside stevedores employed by the Labor Supply Company. This caused serious consternation among state officials, and stevedoring employers were summoned to meetings of the local Bantu Administration Board and Regional Labor Office to answer for their heresy. The main concern of government officials was not how efficient the Labor Supply

---

[31] David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 581.

[32] *The Natal Mercury*, 4 November 1972. " 'Mercury' probes dock workers' complaints". Accidents increased dramatically between 1967 and 1970. David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 534. Izinduna working on ships did not actively participate in the 1972, but gave tacit support to the striking workers. David Hemson. "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers". p. 649.

[33] *The Natal Mercury*, 23 January 1970, 20 May 1971, 29 November 1971, 24 October 1972.

[34] *Natal Mercury*. 23 Jan 1970. "Mechanization the Answer to Port Delays".

Company was, but rather that the employment of casual workers on the docks threatened the entire basis of the migrant labor system.[35] The response from the private companies was predictable: that they could not operate profitably within the limits of the legal restraints. The vague agreement emerging from these meetings was that casuals could be temporarily employed as long as they were registered with the government. Some employer or state official might just have read the then-recently published Harold Wolpe article, since the long term "solution" proposed was the establishment of "reserve armies" of African workers (!) in Bantustans.[36]

But such solutions, in addition to what we learn from the traditional Marxists about their oppressive character and their relation to the early Apartheid state, were rapidly becoming anarchonistic. Forms of mechanization had emerged relatively slowly in Durban between 1940 and 1970. The most significant was the standardization of cargo in unit loads, which could be moved around relatively easily. By the late 1960s, palletization, entailing the construction of moving platforms that could be transported easily by forklift trucks, had become standard in Durban. Gangs of stevedores were able to incorporate these relatively gradual changes into their labor process. But containerized shipping was the most elaborated and sophisticated version of unitization, and threatened to radically alter the labor process, was rapidly became standardized in ports across the globe by the early 1970s.

In Durban, older ships continued to dock in conjunction with the newer automated container system. But the organization of work itself changed. With the completion of the container terminal in 1977, the Labor Supply Company folded completely, From 13 Stevedoring Companies in 1970, there was an eventual merger into two by 1980, Rennies Grindrods Cotts and South African Stevedoring Service Company (SASSCO). Rennies and Grindrods remained as separate companies as they ran other operations in addition to stevedoring, but their stevedoring operations were merged.[37] In 1982, SASSCO and Rennies Grindrods Cotts merged into one company called South African Stevedores, and effectively became the only stevedoring company in Durban.

---

[35] Durban Archives Repository (DAR). PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. "Labour Problems: Point and Harbour Areas". Meeting held on 20 November 1974.

[36] DAR. PNAB Sub Committee on Labour and Transport 2/3/7/1. SB Bourquin. "Chief Directors Memorandum: Establishment of teams of Casual workers in the Neighbouring Bantu Homelands". 28 February 1975. Wolpe of course had published his famous "Capitalism and Cheap Labor power in South Africa" in 1972.

[37] Mike Morris. The GWU and the Stevedoring Industry. *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, 3, 1986. p. 94.

This kind of corporate consolidation saw a streamlining of the control of dockwork, with South African Stevedores running most of the stevedoring in Durban, at a ratio of approximately 6 to 1 to other companies.[38] This consolidation was not just about immediate profitability, however. The operations manager, Gordon Stockley, who worked through the enitre period, retiring in 1994, was emphatic that the technological changes and the conditions for business necessitated a change in the character of labor itself.[39] Beginning his tenure as operations manager in Durban in 1978, he expressed a humanizing vision of reordering working conditions at the port entirely. His vision, broadly, was to train workers with new skills, to create a corporate loyalty, and to encourage trade unions. Most ambitiously, he hoped to break the idea of the "large, unskilled single African man" by creating a living environment where workers could stay with their families in the port and ride bicycles to work. Stockley hired a liberal labor relations manager, Les Owen, and commissioned a study with an industrial relations expert, Lawrence Schlemmer, in order to discover what conditions workers themselves desired. It is notable that the results of the study suggested that workers wished to remain in the compounds provided that these were made somewhat more habitable.

Stockley acknowledged that these dreams, to create self-sufficient and highly individualized dockworkers, would only be possible if they could be made profitable. Moreover, it was not simply an immediate question of profitability or a simple transition. Many managers labeled Stockley and Owen as radicals, and, in the late 1970s, it was not yet clear that new methods of working would be profitable.[40] While the most ambitious of Stockley's visions was never implemented, he did succeed in changing how promotion happened, in encouraging trade unionism and fostering good relations with those unions, in

---

[38] Interview Captain Dudley. SASSCO/SAS Regional Manager, Durban, 1977-1983. 15 August 2001.

[39] The following is mostly based on an extended interview conducted with Capt Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001. Supplementary information provided by interviews with Doug Dudley. (Regional manager, SASSCO/ South African Stevedores, 1977-1983), Interviewed on 20 August 2001; and Les Owen (Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO/South African Stevedores, 1979-1984). Interviewed on 5 June 2001; Lawrence Schlemmer (et al) *Future Dwelling Preferences of Hostel Dwelling Migrants: A study of the housing needs of stevedores in the Durban metropolitan area.* (executive summary). Thanks to Les Owen for making the latter document available to me.

[40] Interview. Hugh Wyatt. Sep 6, 2001. Wyatt began as a foreman in 1974, and was in middle management in the early 1980s.

running training schools for workers, and in general, in building company loyalty among workers.[41]

Without questioning the remarkable intentions of Stockley (he was a white manager in Apartheid South Africa!), his ideas did not emerge in a vacuum. These kinds of corporate identification, retraining, multi-skilling, and so forth, are a key dimension of the contemporary Post-Apartheid Workplace.[42] Moreover, as recent studies of management at the Engen Oil Refining and at Volkswagen in Port Elizabeth have shown, Stockley was a leading figure among others who tried to create efficient working conditions in a context where an older "Apartheid Workplace Regime" was increasingly becoming economically unsustainable.[43] Although he was more forthright than others about breaking with an older-style political machinery, his task was principally "to get the job done" in a manner that held long term prospects, rather than directly about challenging the politics of late Apartheid South Africa. It is in these traces that we start to see how the "Apartheid Workplace Regime" is disturbed well before an immediately political solution (characteristic of the late 1980s) confronts the government, and that, indeed, it is instructive to investigate these imperatives in order to grasp the dimensions of work in Post-Apartheid South Africa.

With the privilege of hindsight, it is possible to understand how the more successful of the progressive strategies of South African Stevedores were not merely contingent upon the hard work and ideas of Stockley, Owen and other management, but also structurally embedded within a changing determination of labor itself. Stockley's endeavor to encourage trade unions in the docks, however, had a more ambiguous fate than most of his strategies, and it is to these that we now turn.

---

[41] Priority to SAS, promotions were based on age seniority rather than skill or duration of work on the docks. Interviews: Siza Makhaya, Personnel officer, SASSCO and SAS, 1978-1986, Themba Dube, SASSCO and SAS 1980- .

[42] See Phakathi and Masondo's articles in Von Holdt and Webster (eds). *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*.(UKZN, 2005). Bernard Dubbeld. "The Meanings of Work and Workplaces after Apartheid: Review of *Beyond the Apartheid Workplace*". *Journal of Southern African Studies.*

[43] See Stephen Sparks. "The politics of Expertise", paper presented at the SHOT conference, Ithala, July 13-16, 2006; Chris Bolsmann "Trade Union Internationalism and Solidarity in the Auto Industry: Fighting Apartheid and Engaging with Globalization". paper presented at "Rethinking Worlds of Labour", University of the Witwatersrand, July 29-31, 2006.

Unionization and concrete uncertainty

If abstract imperatives start to become visible in the docks, altering what kinds of work and workers are necessary for productive stevedoring, where does this leave the stevedores themselves, over whom so much bureaucratic energy has been expended? In particular, how might the minute power relations, between city and countryside, between men of different ages, accorded different kinds of authority in the docks, relate to these new imperatives, and to the energy that radical trade unionists were about the spend on them? The two questions confronting radical (and often white) trade unionists were "who were these workers?" and "how to we convince them to join our union?" In the docks, a third line of inquiry soon loomed as importantly as the first two: "what kinds of organizationally strategies are appropriate when, instead of particular conditions of work (such as low wages or intransigent managers) being major concerns, work itself is under threat?" An examination of the most successful trade union in the Durban harbor, the General Workers Union, suggests a troubled engagement with the first question, a fairly successful response to the second question, and set of creative answers to the third.

But lets begin with the emergence of formal trade unionism on the docks in the late 1970s.[44] The two early unions in the port, the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), organized by Sam Kikine, and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), but neither were able to claim anything near majority membership, a requirement to be recognized as legitimate by employers. By 1980, the latter could claim a mere three hundred stevedores of a possible 2500.[45] However, a union established in Cape Town called the General Workers Union proved to be more successful. This union had considerable success in organizing stevedores in Cape Town, and decided to organize a national union of stevedores.[46] By the beginning of 1981, they had organized stevedores in Port Elizabeth and East London, and sent organizers, led by Mike Morris, a young but already prominent

---

[44] There are, of course, some continuities with the quasi-union structures, such as wage commissions and benefit funds organized predominately by radical students in the early 1970s, but the actual unionists involved, the management structure of the port, and the legal infrastructure of union organization were all different, and we cannot assume that workers in the port, despite many of them holding jobs for a long time, had the same relationship with workers.

[45] Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*, vol. 8, no. 3, December 1982. p. 20.

[46] Mike Morris. "The Stevedoring Industry and the General Workers Union, part 2" in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 5, 1986. p. 101-103.

traditional Marxist intellectual, and 'Rev' Marawu, an experienced union official from Cape Town, to establish a base in Durban.[47]

Unionists did initially face considerable skepticism on the part of workers. After six months of organizing, the General Workers Union had recruited five hundred from a possible two thousand workers.[48] Yet organizers made significant efforts, and by middle of the following year, 1982, the union was recognized as the official representative of stevedores in Durban. By early 1985, Morris claimed the General Workers Union had a 90% membership in the harbor, a greater proportion than any other union in the country.[49] Yet, by the middle of the same year, the organizers of the union left the docks, with the General Workers Union merging into the much broader Transport and General Workers Union, who subsequently lost company recognition as the majority union on the docks.

The General Workers Union's engagement with technological changes, I would argue, proved to be one of its most significant reasons for successes in organizing stevedores in the early 1980s, and definitive in its eventual collapse. Even when they began organizing in 1981, "containerization", to quote Stockley, "already had the industry by the throat". Approximately six hundred workers had lost their jobs between 1978 and 1981, with many more to follow. A major and creative strategy was required of the union if the majority of the workforce was not be casualized or lose out on work completely.

The union approached negotiations with South African Stevedoring Service Company, and later, South African Stevedores, with a dual strategy. On one hand, no worker could be dismissed arbitrarily, without recompense to time worked at the port and proper notice. This was already a significant gain in a workplace which had seen hundreds of African workers over the course of an entire century simply be deemed surplus to requirements, with explanation or compensation. Eventually the Last-In, First-Out system was agreed as a principle in cases where there was no alternative to retrenchment. On the other hand, in order to preserve work, the union negotiated a system that would ensure guaranteed days of work for all those employed, and even if there were no ships actually present in the harbor. In other words, it meant that rather than having one stevedore work

---

[47] Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001. Also see the film *Passing the Message* directed by Cliff Bestall (1984) for an illustration of the initial attempts to organize stevedores in Durban.

[48] Jeremy Baskin. "The GWU and the Durban Dockworkers" in *South Africa Labour Bulletin*. p. 19. Note the change from 2600 in 1978 to 2000 in 1981 reflected the already significant processes of retrenchment.

[49] Mike Morris. "The Stevedoring Industry and the General Workers Union". *SALB*, 1986.

five days and another one day, it ensured that workers were paid for a minimum of three days a week.[50] During 1982, this was increased to three-and-a-half, and then even four days by the end of the year. In addition, cycles of leave from work were more carefully monitored, regulating the numbers of workers actually present in the port at any one time of the year.[51] In addition, the General Workers Union (aiding the company) moved beyond a system of a rank imposed from above according to "traditional" status (Instead, contributing to a system of rank, imposed from above, according to the quality of work, a no less cultural system of prestige, although one naturalized by rational capitalism!).

Stevedoring workers did acknowledge the grave threats to their jobs, and joined the union in significant numbers as it became clear that the General Workers Union had a strategy to at least limit retrenchment to its bare minimum. Yet after being so successful in 1982, the following two years saw the Union really battling with everything they had to prevent casualization. When another, smaller stevedoring company, Keeley's Stevedores, entered the market in 1984, employed casual workers, and undercut the profitably of South African Stevedores, a major wave of retrenchment occurred as an almost inevitable outcome. In February 1985, 600 stevedoring workers were retrenched.[52] Principal organizers of the union, including Mike Morris, left the organization, deeply disillusioned by the experience.[53] The General Workers Union stuttered and had virtually collapsed by the time it merged with the Transport and General Workers Union a year later. The numbers of stevedoring workers had shrunk from 2700 in 1978, to just over 2000 in 1981/1982, to 1200 in 1985. By the dawn of the 1990s, only a few hundred permanent stevedores remained in the port.

One of the striking features of the rapid demise of the union was how disconnected union leadership was from rank-and-file stevedores. Although, ultimately, I think that the structural dynamic of transformation in the port was so powerful that rank-and-file leadership would only have forestalled rather than prevented eventual retrenchment, the character of leadership of the General Workers Union does beg the question of the kinds of shared understandings that emerged between workers and unionists. Yes, the union was successful, for a time, at convincing workers to join their union. And the union also offered

---

[50] Interview: Les Owen, Senior Industrial Relations Manager, SASSCO and SAS 1979-1984, 5 June 2001.
[51] Interview: Yoga Thinnasagren, middle management, SASSCO 1974-1982, SAS 1982-, 6 September 2001.
[52] "600 Durban dock workers to lose their jobs" in *Natal Mercury*, February 18, 1985.
[53] Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.

a highly innovative approach to preventing technological change. But did unions understand the dockworkers? Morris offered me two variations on the culture of stevedores in Durban:

> Dockworkers are both individualists and team workers. They are highly individualistic in the sense that they bugger off and do all sorts of things. If you walk around the docks you find workers walking around doing their own thing, sometimes getting rid of all the stuff that they have stolen. But they are also team workers, they operate in and rely on a gang.[54]

> The *problem* with the majority of guys was that they were *rural* and didn't really *understand* the purpose of a union. There was always confusion between union structures of power and tribal structures. It was highly problematic, and there was always this interesting tension, and it taught me a lot, between dealing with tribal structures and union structures, but there was literally no way around it.[55] (my emphasis)

Both explanations attribute a kind of communal solidarity and perhaps also a "moral economy" to these dockworkers that did not conform to a standard traditional Marxian image of the working class. It seems hasty to reduce the differences in Morris's second observation to his prior comments about the "labor process". We might say, at least, that the problem of understanding was probably mutual. A veteran dockworker, Mr. Ntshangase, shared his experience on his conversion to trade unionism in 1982:

> They said 'Mr. Ntshangase, we are not fighting with you, but we plead with you to join the union.' I left them and told them 'fuck you, I won't join you- you are fooling us'. I went away… I slept, I had a dream and my grandmother from my father's side called me… she said that go and join the union…that it is going to be very useful in future… The following day I returned and joined the

---

[54] Interview: Mike Morris. 28 June 2001.
[55] Interview. Mike Morris, Organizer, General Workers Union, 28 June 2001. Gordon Stockley noted in my interview with him the case of workers refusing secret ballots in the election of shopstewards. He attributes this to the workers wanted to establish a direct connection between those elected and those who supported them. Interview. Gordon Stockley, 25 June 2001.

union… then I fell ill and was diagnosed as diabetic… I went home. I asked for two months and it got worse. When I came back at the beginning of 1982 I discovered that the compound manager [Siza] Makhanya had removed my name because they did not know where I was and they told me there is nothing they can do for me. I went to the union office the next day and showed them my membership card and explained that I went home because I was sick but now I'm told I have been removed here, he [the union official] understood and phoned Makhanya and we went to see him the following day… I went back to work and realized this trade union was a real trade union.[56]

Ntshangase's statement reveals a myriad of intersecting motivations for joining the union: ancestors, kinship, medical problems, and an implicit link to life outside the city. Although he acknowledges, at the end of the passage, this union as a "real trade union", it is certainly not clear that what this meant to him was equivalent to Morris. Or least, if we look at the effects of the departure from the docks of Morrris and other senior organizers, it is not evident that workers such as Ntshangase had sufficient understanding of the type of organization that Morris ran to actually step into the latter's place. In the same interview, Ntshangase made the rural link explicit by claiming that should he be retrenched, he would go home and look after his cattle. Far from holding a coherent class identity, Ntshangase's claimed a powerful connection to a rural area, and urban labor was for him, tied to rural accumulation even in middle of 1980s.

The worlds of those involved in the Durban harbor in the 1980s were confronted with a new organization of the social world, and thus transforming dramatically. Management and port Officials had to accept new mantras based on viable business would mean learning to work with new kinds of colleagues, new machines, and new orders of authority. Leftist trade unionists were confronted with both a senior management not wholly antagonistic towards them and a struggle that aimed to retain workers rather than improve working conditions, as well as with workers whose alleged 'class interests' and desires for radical political transformation were often absent. Workers, too, were confronted by a new threat of the loss of work, and by a new set of divisions that classed them not in terms of race or ethnically, but rather by whether they could be trained or not. In the context of an

---

[56] Interview: Ntshangase. Op. cit.

already politically insecure 1980s, another layer of insecurity was added at their lives, and it is hardly surprising that some sought security by looking back to an image of the past that offered security.

The story of stevedoring work does not, of course, end in 1985 or 1986. Inkatha's Union, the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA), began to organize dockworkers, and by 1988, gained a recognition agreement as the majority union from South African Stevedores. With UWUSA summoning rural traditions prominently at a time when retrenchment was the most immediate concern of most dockworkers, it is hardly surprising that they received some support. Neither UWUSA nor the Transport and General Workers Union had any idea of a coherent strategy to deal with retrenchment. Very quickly, the 1200 permanent stevedores in 1985 became a few hundred in 1989. Those still permanently employed were products of Stockley's drive to create "new workers", and many of them had been recruited with particular skills in the 1980s. The migrant base of permanent dockworkers had come to an abrupt end. For many that remained as casuals in the port, work became especially precarious. An older self-ascriptive label that stevedores wore with pride, Ozinyathi (Buffalos) now become a term that described the most debased work in the harbor, with the word re-authored to now connote, quite literally, "those who move shit". During the 1990s, newer unions on the docks attempted to get a recognition agreement from companies (of which SAS was now one of several, including a couple of internationally based employers), and attempted to follow a strategy similar to that of the General Workers Union: protect the casuals working in the harbor and distribute work according to a guarantee system. These have had periodic success up to the present, although, given a competitive environment and no particular attachment or concern with the casuals, companies have not been able to agree to any long term guarantee system.

A neo-liberal logic, subjectivity, and politics: the dual character of "individuality"

> Theory cannot prolong the moment its critique depended upon… A given alternative is already a piece of heteronomy.
>
> Theodor Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*

In this paper, I have drawn attention to two "moments" in the organization of work in Durban Harbor: the attempt to create and sustain a racial-ethnic form for dockworkers, and the introduction of a new technology that radically re-organized work in the harbor, that, I have argued, set new formal terms and constraints on labor, as well as on the attempts to politicize this arena through radical trade unionism. What I have tried to show here is that the unraveling of a race and ethnic system of categorization for workers was a double-sided liberation, that on the one hand offered stevedores freedom from these classifications, but on the other introduced new terms that divided the workforce according to "skill" and "individuality". Does this case have any bearing on understanding the contemporary South African situation, or is it merely a local tale? Do the categories of 'individuality' and 'skill' that drive a wedge, in the 1980s, between workers that can be highly skilled and that majority rendered marginal, have any bearing outside the Durban Harbor?

The 1970s and 1980s have been treated entirely discretely from the 1990s and the contemporary period in the literature, and within popular imagination. In the former period, there has been a focus on workers' struggle to overcome racism, and although there has been reflection upon the complexity of struggle, it has been taken for granted that a powerful struggle did emerge against Apartheid, as a product of relationships between activists across the colour line, workers, members of the community, and so forth.[57] In an interesting recent paper, Davie argues that poverty statistics and data about livelihoods was taken up by workers on the docks in the 1972 strike.[58] Left untouched by this literature is the critical investigation of a human rights discourse focusing on individuality, or a notion that the very ideas struggled for could be converted into new forms of social exclusion.

Literature on labor and unionism in the post-Apartheid period reveals that things have not turned out that well for workers or radical unionism. It is generally acknowledged that there is a large social cleavage between the employed and the unemployed, and/or between highly skilled and casual workers. Webster has argued that there is a "crisis of representation" that faces unions, and the growth of a precarious class whom unions find difficult to negotiate on behalf of.[59] In a more theoretically ambitious paper, Barchiesi and

---

[57] Hemson, Legassick, and Ulrich. (2006) "White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' movement" in *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2* [1970-1980].

[58] Davie. (2007) "Strength in Numbers" in *Journal of Southern African Studies.* (33, 2).

[59] Webster (2005) "New forms of work and the representational gap"; Webster (2006) "Trade Unions and the challenge of the informalization of work" in Buhlungu (ed) *Trade Unions and Democracy in South Africa*

Kenny argue that citizenship itself is severely compromised by the growth of an underemployed sector of workers, since the ANC's vision of a participatory, active citizenship depended upon the possibility that people would have mechanisms through which to claim voice. [60] Given that unions have always been the mouthpiece of permanent workers, and have faced real difficulties organizing the underemployed, their argument is an important attempt to understand the constraints on contemporary citizenship.

Between these literatures, then, there is an obvious disjuncture. The prevailing explanation locates the transformation of worker power *after* the Apartheid period, in terms of a global post-fordist arrangements that almost immediately transform a politically powerful and coherent workers into a group divided by skill and employment contract, and only able to practice a very select radicalism. Given this description, it is possible to retain a certain nostalgia for the 1980s as a time of radical, popular, and victorious struggle against Apartheid.

The problem with such an 'analysis' is that fails to properly come to grips with what the *form* of neo-liberalism actually entails, and with its emergence as a set of categories. It sees neo-liberalism as merely an economic arrangement, rather than a social assemblage that serves to naturalize certain categories and frames social life in very particular ways. To recall Marx's analysis of Machinery (Ch 15 of *Capital, Vol. 1*), it repeats the mistake that Mill and other political economists make when they understand the onset of large-scale machinery as merely another tool. Instead, Marx shows that machinery is fundamentally about the transformation of social roles and functions, and about the encompassment of subjects given the "choice" to develop a wide range of skills or face starvation. The question then is whether we view the 1980s as embedded in a large process of categorial changes in which discourses around 'individuality' and 'skill' not only make it possible to overcome Apartheid, but also, surely at an unconscious level for the participants of the struggles, lay the groundwork for new kinds of social division.

The problem of course is that our notions of freedom depend largely on a naturalized notion of 'individuality'. Marx, and critical theory following him, warns us that we cannot take individuality for granted. In the opening pages of *The Grundrisse*, Marx argues

---

[60] Franco Barchiesi & Bridget Kenny. "From Workshop to Wasteland: De-Industrialization and the Fragmentation of the Black Working Class on the East Rand (South Africa), 1990-1999" in Altena & van der Linden (eds.). *Deindustrialization: Social, Cultural, and Political Aspects.* International Review of Social History, 2002.

that our notions of individuality emerge as a product of the most developed forms of social determination, and yet that our social dependencies are veiled, allowing us to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals.[61] In the first volume of *Capital*, this idea is extended to show how individuality on the one hand depends on massive class inequalities, and on the other, is itself constrained by only gaining meaning through the service of capitalism: the autonomy and free choices of individual are forms of appearance, behind which a deep heteronomy lies, and under which 'choices' are radically constrained.

In developing this latter idea, Horkheimer and Adorno propose in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* that the more we are individuated by capitalism, the less possibility for radical difference or autonomous choice exists. In an apparently paradoxical move, mass individuation by society destroys any genuine individuality, to the extent that we come to see the world entirely through quantitative measures, and are unable to apprehend beauty or express genuine differences other than though a logic of equivalences.[62] The subject has become so entirely tied to the social form that privileges the economic as natural, that she cannot see a way beyond it.

If we view neo-liberalism as the radical extension of the logic of capital, in the sense that, through technologies of communication and transport such as the container, more arenas become 'marketable', rendered equivalent, and sold, how do we place subjects and politics in contemporary South Africa? Is Mr. Ntshangase's desperate, compulsive flight back to an apparently stable home a symptom of the profound way that 'individuality' in contemporary South Africa has turned out to be the very basis of social exclusion?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have told a particular story about the transformation of social forms governing the organization of work in the Durban Harbor. I have paid special attention to the introduction of the technology of the container in the late 1970s as introducing a new set of imperatives into the workplace, imperatives that blunted any attempt for radical trade union politics. Paradoxically, this blunting was not through a process of exclusion the trade unions, but rather via an encompassment of some of their founding principles, of

---

[61] Marx (1971) *Grundrisse*. Penguin. pp. 89-91.
[62] Horkheimer and Adorno. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception". pp. 124-127.

individuality and equality, and a transformation of these principles into ideas that could gain profitability in the market.

At the same time, I have argued that it is critical to see this transformation as an instance of a more general process in South Africa, that can only be grasped through a more critical analysis of the relationship between concepts like individuality and a larger structural transformation of the world economy, understood in terms of social forms that demand particular kinds of subjects. In so doing, I have suggested that we cannot let our need to see the 1980s as a period of victorious struggle blind us into making easy arguments about the 1990s a time when revolutionary dreams failed, and that we rather have to understand the 1980s as a period when a new social form emerged in South Africa that was incompatible with Apartheid, but set new abstract terms of social division that characterize the country in contemporary times. Without an adequate analysis of form, and the ways it the objects and subjects of labor have been recreated, it is impossible to grasp the condition against which a future politics of liberation might be established.