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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The return of the labour process: race, skill and technology in South African labour studies

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From its beginnings, the sociology of work in South Africa has been preoccupied with three enduring themes: skill/deskilling, racism in the workplace, and Fordism/racial Fordism. With the advent of democracy in the 1990s there was a shift away from studying the labour process. We argue in this article that there has been a return to taking seriously the ways new forms of work in this postcolonial context pose new questions to the global study of work. A central preoccupation in the study of work has been the racialised reinscription of post-apartheid workplace orders, now in the context of new dynamics of externalisation and casualisation of employment. Another important theme is the shift away from studies of the formal sector workplace and toward the broader implications of the precarianisation and informalisation of labour. This focus coincided with the growth of new social movements by mostly unemployed (black) township residents around state services provision. This includes studies on working-class politics more broadly, with attention focusing on questions of organising and mobilising. More recently this interest in precarious labour has grown into studies of the gig economy, returning to earlier themes of technology and skill, as well as new forms of waged labour and wagelessness. We argue for the ongoing salience of labour process studies for understanding the specific issues of the securing and obscuring of value, and through the articulations of 'racial capitalism' offered by the long tradition of labour studies in South Africa.

Key words South Africa • labour process theory • race • class • precariousness

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From its beginnings, the sociology of work in South Africa has been preoccupied with three enduring themes within labour process theory: skill/deskilling, racism in the workplace, and Fordism/racial Fordism. We trace these debates and how they were transformed in the post-apartheid period. With the advent of democracy in the 1990s research shifted away from studying the labour process. Studies on the role of trade unions in the transition to democracy overtook workplace studies. The exposure of the South African workplace to global competition in the 1990s shifted

the focus of research onto questions of global competitiveness, work restructuring, workplace equity and job creation. It led to debates on whether, and how, a more 'flexible' system of production could be introduced in the South African workplace. A central preoccupation in the study of work became the racialised reinscription of post-apartheid workplace orders, now in the context of new dynamics of externalisation and casualisation of employment.

Another important theme became the move from studies of the formal economy workplace toward the broader implications of the precarianisation and informalisation of labour. This focus coincided with the growth of new social movements by mostly unemployed (black) township and rural residents around state services provision. These connected with examinations of household survival and questions of social reproduction. Concerns around work, we suggest, shifted to a wider set of debates on working-class politics more broadly, with attention focusing on questions of class re-formation, growing inequality and exclusion, as well as new opportunities for organising and mobilising. In the first period leading up to the transition to democracy, then, the workplace drove social transformation. In a post-apartheid South Africa, politics reflected new working-class relations to the state and wider issues, also related to changes to work and trade union capacity, which in turn influenced the scholarship produced.

Finally, we argue that there has been an important return to the labour process now, synthesising these earlier debates, where wage labour continues to be a site for the production of value and generation of labour politics but is also imbricated with questions of social reproduction and an integrative view of working-class politics. The interest in precarious labour has grown into studies of the gig economy, returning to earlier themes of technology and skill, as well as to the interconnections of waged labour and wagelessness. South African labour scholars bring together the strong tradition of studying worker politics with precarianised labour market realities for most living here. New studies examine how labour processes produce articulations of gender, race, class, nation, sexuality and generation shifting social and political relations and political futures.

Viewing the long tradition of the study of work and labour in South Africa, then, allows us to suggest how concerns around work reorganisation and control have been and continue to be integrated with issues of collective identity and politics in ways that foreground an analysis of the changing dynamics of capitalist relations in space and time. If Thompson and Vincent (2010) challenge us to use labour process theory to theorise changes to the capitalist political economy from the locus of the labour relation, then we suggest that South African labour studies have much to offer wider labour process debates. These strands come together conceptually through a notion of racial capitalism, which we return to in the conclusion.

Enduring themes: old and new forms of control of work

Fuelled by the emergence of mass strikes in the 1970s and the growth of militant industrial unions among the recently proletarianised black working class, the study of work took a radical turn when South African sociologists fell under the spell of Harry Braverman's classic study (Braverman, 1974; see also Sitas, 1983). The rapid growth of labour process studies transformed the study of work in South Africa. The labour process approach quickly overtook the traditional industrial sociological

perspective in the growing number of industrial sociology programmes that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in South African universities (Webster, 2002: 178). The labour process approach, with its notion of the inherently antagonistic character of capitalist production relations and its stress on coercion in the workplace, captured the despotic nature of the apartheid workplace and generated widespread interest in the labour process among industrial sociologists.

The first key theme to emerge out of this period began as a debate on the degree to which skills had been transformed and eroded through capitalist development and whether this could be described as a 'degradation of labour'. Research led to a critique of Braverman's deskilling thesis, and the ways in which white craft workers used their privileged positions in the labour market to resist deskilling creating a racially segmented labour market. An 'upward floating colour bar' emerged, where black workers were promoted to supervisory positions but did not have real authority as white workers were simultaneously promoted above them (Lewis, 1984; Webster, 1985; Johnstone, 1976; Davies, 1979).

While evidence of worker resistance to de-skilling qualified Braverman's thesis, it did not challenge his central assumption that 'skills' had been removed from modern work. However two directions of South African research led the debate beyond Braverman's thesis. First, Leger's (1992) research among black underground mineworkers showed that even so-called 'unskilled' workers exercised a range of tacit skills, tricks of the trade essential to production, but received no formal acknowledgement. This detailed examination of underground mining found that formal training played a minor role in imparting tacit skills, which were largely passed between 'unskilled' black miners. Leger concluded that the term unskilled grossly underrated the working knowledge required and the skills exercised in these occupations.

Another area of research interest that took the debate beyond Braverman was the new bargaining power conferred on semi-skilled workers when mechanisation replaced craft skill. It was argued that mechanisation undermined the market-based bargaining power (as embodied in the skills of craft workers) while simultaneously enhancing labour's workplace bargaining power by making capital vulnerable to workers' direct action at the point of production. This, Webster argued, provided the conditions for the rapid growth in the 1970s of militant shop-floor based industrial unionism among black metal workers in the engineering industries in South Africa's main industrial areas (Webster, 1985).

The second enduring theme began as a debate over the system of labour control in the workplace, a system characterised in South Africa by coercion and racism. Initially the concept of colonial or racial despotism emerged as a way of capturing the notion that in apartheid South Africa, work was characterised by coercion rather than consent, and by the domination of one racial group by another. Racial despotism required an analysis of the role of the state in reproducing capitalist relations (Burawoy, 1985; and see Wolpe, 1972). This distinct form of control, then, exercised over the job inside the firm was facilitated by the intervention of the state into the form of control inside the firm and the form of control exercised over black workers outside the firm (Webster, 1985: 202).

Burawoy's comparative framework, and particularly his work on Zambia, offered an elegant model of how despotism within workplaces is differentially explained through state legal and political coercion and defining systems of reproduction of wage labour. Burawoy's close relationship with South African labour scholar-activists in the 1970s

contributed to his argument that it was not the firm-specific labour process – which could look very similar across contexts – but the wider 'politics of production' that had to be understood to explain factory regimes. The different combinations of institutional factors 'obscuring and securing of labour value' (Burawoy, 1985: 4) thus in turn suggested differences in collective mobilisation of workers, such that where 'colonial despotism' explained labour control, worker organisation more often also confronted broader state relations.

Von Holdt (2003: 27) took the debate a step further through the introduction of the idea of a distinct apartheid workplace regime which 'had deep historical roots in the evolutions of the labour regime, work practices and racial structures of power within settler colonialism, and was underpinned by the educational and labour market policies of apartheid' ensuring that 'the broader political and social exclusions of blacks was mirrored by workplace exclusion and oppression'. The oppression experienced in the workplace drove trade union and worker politics as part of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle, but also endured in the post-apartheid period, to further complicate what might have been more easily understood as a now-democratic regime of consent.

While debates over the racial division of labour led to new perspectives on workplace industrial relations, a third area of debate emerged around the nature of Fordism in South Africa. It was argued that the kind of Fordist mode of regulation that emerged after 1945 in South Africa was not aimed at mass production for the whole population. Instead black workers were excluded from mass consumption 'norms' that applied to white workers and, at a later stage, began to apply to Indian and coloured groups. In addition, white workers monopolised the skilled and supervisory positions in the workplace. Engaging regulation theory at the time, Gelb (1987) described this Fordist caricature as 'racial Fordism'.

The concept of 'racial Fordism' generated a lively debate on the nature of the division of labour in South Africa, some suggesting that a transition had begun away from the racial nature of Fordism. Crankshaw (1997) demonstrated that with the increase in the number of black skilled, supervisory, technical, semi-professional and white-collar workers, inequalities between white and black in the workplace were declining. Indeed, Crankshaw suggested that inequality in South Africa was increasingly being driven by class rather than racial divisions.

This imputed shift away from racial Fordism, however, was not, other researchers concluded, leading towards a post-Fordist workplace. New forms of flexible production were being introduced in a piecemeal, ad hoc way. As Kraak argued, 'a hybrid typology of labour processes is emerging comprising existing racial Fordist, jobbing and familial labour processes coexisting alongside recently emerged neo-Fordist applications of the new technologies and managerial techniques' (Kraak, 1996: 53)

The detailed analyisis of transitional and post-apartheid changes to workplace orders continued with this theme, to investigate not only how work was being reorganised but what the implications were for racial segmentation, skills divisions and increasing participation of workers and unions in the transition to democracy (Adler and Webster, 1995). Whether the apartheid workplace was being superseded or entrenched was addressed in a collection of essays covering the automobile industry, the engineering industry, retail, a state hospital, footwear sweatshops and the wine farming industry (Webster and Von Holdt, 2005). These studies revealed a growing

differentiation within the world of work between stable formal-sector work, casualised and outsourced work, and informal work where people were struggling to 'make a living' on the margins of the formal economy. The majority of workplaces were marked by the persistence and reconfiguration of the apartheid legacy. The growth of casualisation was generating deepening poverty and inequality among great numbers of households. It would be these themes that would focus attention in the late 1990s and 2000s within the context of a changing post-apartheid political economy.

Labour markets and precariousness

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s there was a shift in focus of South African labour sociology away from direct labour process studies and toward labour market changes. This is evident in the edited volume by Webster and Von Holdt (2005), which in a sense represents a transitional collection. As discussed earlier, it includes texts analysing changes within the labour process of sectors which were restructuring in the immediate post-apartheid period, and it also includes what would become influential chapters discussing broader labour market changes, such as subcontracting (Theron, 2005). Indeed, from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, new research from South African labour sociologists focused on documenting the changes with casualisation, externalisation and informalisation of employment. In general, these labour market changes were understood to relate to changing forms of work organisation. For instance, in an early piece, Kenny and Webster (1998) identified increases in the use of formally temporary contracts allowing short-term and flexible working hours shifts, but in practice applied to workers for long durations, and the outsourcing of permanent employment to labour brokers, as a process of 'eroding the core'. We argued these could be viewed as new forms of labour control in democratic South Africa where in principle labour rights now extended to all employees. As a means of evading this new labour dispensation in the workplace, employers began to find mechanisms of adapting labour use decisions, which had the effect of exacerbating the vulnerability of some workers in relation to employer power, and further dividing the labour force, in turn, affecting the capacity of trade unions to counter such measures.

Debate at this time considered the 'flexibility' of firms as South African companies re-entered the global economy and capital positioned itself within rubrics of competitiveness (Horwitz and Franklin, 1996). The discourse of 'flexibility' had emotive power for both democratic policymakers and employers wanting to shrug off the associations with the past, those deeply entrenched rigidities of the apartheid-era workplace. In South Africa these discussions were posed within the imperatives of a new democracy where black workers were for the first time full citizens, and where their unions had been a central part of the liberation struggle. Such strategies were actively debated in popular and business presses (see Bezuidenhout and Kenny, 1998; Kenny and Webster, 1998). Thus the turn toward changing labour markets began very much within debates around the reorganisation of work occurring with the opening of South Africa's economy, capital expansion, merger and acquisition, as well as capital flight and downsizing. These changes were taking place in the context of democratisation, where labour law and industrial relations codified new mechanisms outlining participation by workers and trade unions in workplace decision-making (Adler and Webster, 1995; von Holdt, 2003).

It was within the larger political context of democratic transition that labour studies highlighted the significance of shifts toward what was then called 'non-standard' or 'flexible' employment. Studies documented the precise nature of such processes and the effects in terms of fragmentation of the labour force across sectors of the economy. These changes occurred in the context not of the shift from forms of labour protection and inclusion under a welfare state, as in parts of the global North, but rather within long histories of colonial despotism, where 'contract labour' was in fact definitive of black workers' experiences and necessary to capitalist accumulation in South Africa. Scholars focused on the difficulties posed for unions and on declining conditions of work as well as how these shifts revealed changes to race–class relations within a relatively historically unified black working class at precisely the point when the black majority was enfranchised (Standing et al, 1996; Hemson, 1996; Kraak, 1996; Rees, 1997; Kenny and Webster, 1998; Kenny and Bezuidenhout, 1999; Valodia, 2001; Bramble and Barchiesi, 2003; Klerck and Naidoo, 2003; Theron, 2005; Kenny, 2007; Barchiesi, 2011; Kenny, 2018). From the perspective of those who studied the workplace, post-apartheid economic conditions looked worse for many (black) working-class people and indeed South Africa's inequality levels showed grave increases (see Webster and Francis, 2019).

More broadly, debates extended to the nature of changes to race–class relations, with Seekings and Nattrass (2005) arguing against an analysis which emphasised labour market restructuring as a contributing factor in increasing poverty and inequality. Instead, this very influential portrait of changing class stratification in post-apartheid South Africa showed statistically that there was a greater (change in) differentiation in the post-apartheid period among black South Africans (as class mobility happened with developmental interventions) than between black and white South Africans. Furthermore, the extent of the decline in conditions of work of those in manual and semi-skilled jobs was exaggerated by those studying work. The real problem for South Africa was rising unemployment hastened by over-regulation and skills deficits. In fact, those working were benefiting from being employed as well as from expanded state welfare directed at incorporating previously excluded black South Africans. Such debates on class formation contributed to directing debate away from the specific changes occurring in workplaces and firms and toward a broader analysis of the labour market and class structure as a whole (and see Alexander et al, 2013).[1]

Second, overshadowing issues of workplace restructuring in the early 2000s was the political emergence of 'new social movements'. These included movements around state services provisioning of electricity and water, HIV and AIDS, housing and land redistribution. Together these movements broadly pushed against the increasing commodification of public goods. Thus the movements and their attendant scholars linked such broader concerns of mostly unemployed community residents to state macroeconomic (neoliberal) policies such as privatisation or corporatisation of state owned enterprises, the marketisation of services, such as water and electricity, the cost-recovery logic of municipalities, and de facto market-driven land reform policy and practice (see Ballard et al, 2006; McDonald, 2008; Dawson and Beinart, 2010). These were critiques made by movements of the political landscape as well as the then Mbeki-led African National Congress (ANC). While the labour movement attempted to facilitate alliances with social movements (Webster and Buhlungu, 2004), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was often critiqued as being

vanguardist and despite lip service to 'political' or social movement unionism, mostly focused concern on formal sector workers (Ngwane, 2012; Paret, 2013).

The social movement scholarship at the time was influenced by the Seattle WTO protests in 1999 and networking that grew out of this (for instance with activists and scholars meeting at the Porto Alegre Social Forum in 2001) and was connected into arguments around 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003), which shifted attention from the site of exploitation to enduring processes of dispossession within capitalism, particularly so in a postcolonial context (McDonald and Pape, 2002; Naidoo and Veriava, 2005), as well as the wider Polanyian turn toward market relations and commodification (Webster et al, 2008). As one example, the new political subject of this period became 'the Poors' (Desai, 2002), intentionally shifting focus away from 'the worker' in 'his' bounded place of waged labour (and see Naidoo, 2007). From another angle, then, scholars analysed changes to working-class and poor communities, including within the context of broader processes of casualisation and informalisation of labour in combination with the increasing imposition of commodified costs via state policy consolidation under neoliberalism. This moment was defined by several important protests, including at Wits University in 2001 when a conference on Urban Futures brought the issues of municipal cost restructuring being debated in the city of Johannesburg together with university restructuring which pushed the outsourcing of cleaning, maintenance and service staff (van der Walt et al, 2003; Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006). This conference provided the spark to the launch of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), a collective of community based organisations mobilising around issues deriving from the privatisation of state services (Buhlungu, 2004; Naidoo and Veriava, 2005; McDonald, 2008; Dawson, 2010). Social movements' protests marked the broader political landscape connecting ongoing racialised poverty and inequality to state disciplinary power with few or at best lowly job options for many (see Dawson, 2010; Barchiesi, 2011). Thus an upsurge of protests also linked the broader labour market changes around externalisation of employment to issues of the commodification of reproductive life in the context of democratic transition where the majority of South Africans expected to see changes marking more equitable inclusion.

Within the labour movement, the largest federation of trade unions, COSATU, contested privatisation, labour broking and increasing casualisation of work (Ngwane, 2012). Much of these efforts were fought within its political alliance with the ruling ANC and thus with the limitations which that entailed (Buhlungu, 2010). Unions and workers waged increasingly defensive struggles at the workplace, battling employer restructuring (Von Holdt, 2003). While social movements led by the unemployed confronted the state directly around the burdens of social reproduction, workers and their unions fought their battles not always on the street but often also understanding the implications of worsening conditions of labour for worker power and for household precariousness (Kenny, 2001; Kenny, 2007). The political economic conditions, then, compelled an analysis which connected workplace changes to class and community (Webster et al, 2008). These were fundamentally questions of the reproduction of capitalist relations in South Africa, which themselves were tied into long standing debate around the articulations of race and class and the political implications of such shifts (Kenny, 2007; Kenny, 2018).

These directions led onward with an increasing focus on 'precarious forms of work', including new research on informalisation combined with new organising strategies.

By the late 1990s, South African labour scholars had come into deeper connection with the global sociological community through the International Sociological Association. The Labour Movements research committee (RC44) of the International Sociological Association became an important setting for debates and cross-fertilisation around informal and precarious labour organising (Webster and O'Brien, 2020). The focus thus shifted again, from labour market changes to new forms of organising in the context of such changes. US debates on revitalisation of the labour movement returned to South African traditions of social movement unionism and influenced South African scholars grappling with the political implications of an institutionalised trade union movement struggling to find a new modus operandi (von Holdt, 2002; Buhlungu, 2010). In South Africa, extended studies of precarious and informal labour examined conditions and looked to these cases for new organising insights (Horn, 2005; Motala, 2008; Bonner and Spooner, 2011; Kenny, 2011; Webster, 2011). The informal economy was framed within labour market issues, as a source of inequality through access to the market and a need for recognition and less on how work itself was organised (Webster et al, 2017). The Polanyian turn within sociology meshed with these developments, and scholars turned toward understanding market relations for explaining exclusion and inequality (Burawoy, 2013).

In 2007 in a dramatic move, the ANC conference in Polokwane elected Jacob Zuma (with the support of COSATU) over Mbeki to serve as party president (and thus, eventually, state president). Zuma was meant to offer the left a more developmentalist and popular agenda. Large public sector strikes in 2007 and 2010 indicated the impatience of organised labour with government (Ceruti, 2011). Public servants' demanded improvements to wages and conditions and (racial) 'transformation' and showed that tensions continued to surface. Furthermore, as the labour market became more casualised, the base of COSATU membership was shifting toward the public service (Bezuidenhout and Tshoaedi, 2017).

As the unions struggled, labour scholars turned their attention to issues raised by the broader social context. Wagelessness and informal work became an increasing focus of scholarship (Valodia, 2001; Lund, 2002). The shift toward precarious labour entailed a new focus on reproductive labour, which returned scholars to feminist debates about the household (Bezuidenhout and Fakier, 2006; Fakier and Cock, 2009; Mosoetsa, 2011; Benya, 2015; Scully, 2016; and see Cock, 1980). This work also responded to the broader context of social movements, and made strong arguments about the significance of politics located outside the workplace in households and through mostly (black) women's unpaid and undervalued labour.

In 2012, 34 striking mineworkers were killed by police in what became known as the Marikana Massacre. This was the culmination of a long strike organised at Lonmin from workers' committees that linked to a new union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) that drew membership from the COSATU affiliated National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Because workers were not represented by NUM (which tried to convince them to return to their shafts) management refused to negotiate. Tensions increased, workers occupied a small hilltop and, then, police opened fire with live ammunition, killing 34 mineworkers that day. The miners' demands were for R12500, seen to be an outrageous figure for a sector purportedly paying workers R6000 to R8000, and this call for '12–5' became a rallying cry for other workers, signifying a return to demands for a living wage, to cover the escalating costs of household reproduction in the context of declining

employment by household members (Benya, 2015; Chinguno, 2013; Sinwell and Mbatha, 2016). Protests spread to farm workers in the Western Cape which turned violent at times with frustrated workers resorting to tactics such as burning vineyards and blocking roads (Wilderman, 2017).

The Marikana massacre also propelled a process of political realignment in South Africa. The decision of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the largest trade union in the country, to withdraw its support from the ANC, began a process of rupture in the labour movement. In 2014 NUMSA was expelled from COSATU, followed in 2015 by the expulsion of the long standing general-secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, who went on to form a new federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) (Luckett and Munshi, 2017). But Marikana also returned scholars' attention to the centrality of the extraction of value at the point of production for understanding politics, which had become starkly evident.

By the turn of the decade South Africa's organised labour movement had become fragmented, yet trade unions and workers nevertheless represent an enduring political formation in South Africa, now in multiple forms compared to the immediate post-apartheid period (Kenny, 2020).

The return to labour process studies

We identify a return to labour process studies (or at least to re-centring the world of work) in recent research in South Africa. Some of this research, in fact, has continued from earlier research, for instance, that on the organisation of work on the mines (Van Onselen, 1976; Moodie and Ndatshe, 1994; Stewart, 2016; Stewart and Nite, 2017).

Changing forms of employee participation (Masondo et al, 2015; Bischoff et al, 2018) and representation has continued as a research focus, especially in the context of health and safety representation on the mines where representatives became accountable for transgressions of workers described as 'responsibilisation' (Coulson, 2018; Coulson et al, 2019). Of particular interest has been research on attempts to draw underground gold mine workers into self-directed work teams as part of a strategy to mine deeper underground (Phakathi, 2018). Drawing on Leger's earlier research on tacit knowledge among mine workers, Phakathi was able to show how workers improvised (*planisa* in fanagalo, or 'make a plan') in order to overcome blockages and managerial inefficiencies underground.

We also note a new focus by a next generation of scholarship on the organisation of work. There are four areas of new research that we highlight. The first is a focus on technology, which includes burgeoning studies of platform work, linking with issues of skill and deskilling in the longer history of these processes in South Africa. The second is a focus emerging out of the longer study of precarious forms of work which argues for the now-dominance of these workers in workplaces and thus identifies an important shift in their strategic and structural power. We group a third category of scholarship as that which explores the reproduction and transformation of politics and subjectivity (race, class, gender, nation, sexuality and generation) explained partly by the organisation of work – in other words the labour process is identified as a site for the production of wider social relations, explaining collective responses at work but also beyond the workplace, in the context of shifts in South Africa's political economy. Finally, we find tentative signs of a reemergent interest in

social and labour history that asks questions about the longer trajectory of capitalist relations in Southern Africa and has the potential to influence wider theorising of the significance of work and labour processes.

Scholarship on technology which connects to the enduring theme of skill and deskilling focuses on capacities of unions to negotiate changes to technology within work restructuring (Hlatshwayo, 2015; Mashilo, 2019). Particularly in the metal and engineering sector, increasing automation and capital intensity has defined labour process changes as firms have restructured globally (Chigbu and Nekhwevha, 2020). Hlatshwayo and Buhlungu (2017) argue that the earlier Polanyian turn has created an over-optimistic reading of counter-movements in South Africa, and return attention to the point of production. They link trade union traditions in South Africa with an incapacity of unions to negotiate in technical production matters, including critically, the introduction of new technologies. They focus on bringing together organising histories, themselves constituted out of earlier periods of work organisation in the metal sector along racial divisions of labour, with later labour process changes to explain why unions have been unable to stop retrenchments of their members, although NUMSA shows signs of having a more proactive approach to new digital technologies.

Research on service workers, too, such as call centre workers, has documented the specific processes by which a young black workforce faces the relentless stress of surveillant technologies while playing the role of expanding services to previously un-serviced black consumers. The work organisation, then, contributes toward the reproduction of inequalities of service provisioning as well as work stress of the next generation of young women workers (Magoqwana and Matatu, 2012). Research on retail workers shows how marginal training on till technology, including new biometrics, produces both alienated workers and workers very aware of their devaluation: this translates into the reproduction of racialised relations in South African shops through new technologies and to reinvestments in the site of the workplace as a space of collective resistance (Kenny, 2018). Research on the professions has revealed how race has shaped the construction of skill and occupation under apartheid and how these barriers are being dismantled at a slow and uneven rate now (Bonnin and Ruggunan, 2013). The growth of home work, accelerated by COVID-19 and the accessibility of new technologies has brought to the fore the conditions of those who work from home, especially the issue of work–life balance for women workers in this highly gendered form of work (ILO, 2021).

Research on the platform economy has expanded with its use in South Africa. This includes studies of Uber, food delivery workers, as well as other services. These focus on how work is organised via the platform, with particular attention on surveillance as control, and also how workers have circumvented these mechanisms to resist collectively (Du Toit, 2016; Chinguno, 2019; Anwar and Graham, 2019; Webster, 2020; Webster et al, 2021). In a study of food delivery services in Johannesburg Webster and Masikane (2020) argue that the new digital technology is a double-edged sword; on the one hand it is leading to an extension of authoritarian managerial control over workers, increasing their insecurity and deepening levels of inequality. On the other hand, by technologically linking workers they have increased their workplace bargaining power providing them with the ability to develop collective solidarity and even strike action. Effective collective action by precarious workers is unlikely to be achieved through traditional trade union organisation. Instead they

identify the emergence of a variety of organisational models – organic 'spontaneous' organisations, associations, informal cooperatives and networks by platform workers independently of formal trade unions.

Second, the proliferation of precarious forms of work and the early focus on organising strategies and forms of representation of these workers has expanded in recent years. Researchers argue that as a predominant labour force, while vulnerable, these workers have new opportunities for organising because of the increasing reliance on their labour, as with community healthcare workers (Hlatshwayo, 2018) or because of newly identified bargaining power, including how it has been shaped by labour process changes (Dickinson, 2017; Englert and Runciman, 2019; Webster and Englert, 2020). These engagements returned to South Africa studies through debates around labour market and workplace bargaining power, as influenced by Beverly Silver's (2003) *Forces of Labor*, and through the expanded focus on 'power resources' of workers (Schmalz et al, 2018). Such a focus combines workers' power in the market, in their location within the organisation of work, and in the institutional, political and social fields. Thus, these scholars argue that precarious workers by virtue of changes to work monopolise strategic positionings within the labour process, which in turn explains new forms of organising, in these cases outside more traditional union formations, but drawing on the strength of workers' collective experiences beyond the individual employer (Webster and Englert, 2020). In other examples, precarious migrant workers, including many women, who by virtue of their new role as wage earners (even if tentative) gain power within households. They use these new sources of power to expand their role in forms of resistance, relying on networks (Hlatshwayo, 2019).

Third, a range of work turns to broader questions of political identity and changing social relations in the context of post-apartheid South African political economy. This scholarship views experiences in the workplace as formative of articulations of subjectivity and politics. Chinguno's (2013) work documents the strikes that eventuated in the Marikana Massacre in changes to pay grades of rock drill operators. The fragmentation of the labour force along lines of skill, ethnicity, settlement and gender emerging as work processes changed, produced new forms of solidarity and violence, which he argues undermined trade unions' institutional capacity to control the strike. Through participant observation of underground women mineworkers, Benya's (2017) research shows the production of gendered identities through an ethnography of women's labour in specific locations within the labour process, where different situations demanded different forms of embodied labour and gendered identities. Machinya's (2019) study of undocumented Zimbabwean migrant workers in South Africa shows the connections between vulnerability to the temporalities of 'deportability', workers' experiences of forms of precarious labour in construction or domestic labour, and willingness to withstand abuses generated through how this work is organised. Kenny's (2018) long history of retail workers' politics in greater Johannesburg over much of the twentieth century offers a conjunctural analysis of how changes to the labour process and labour market of retail jobs produced in various moments new conditions of collective organisation among workers, reproduced racialised and gendered experiences of subjugation, and paradoxically regenerated the site of the workplace as political terrain in post-apartheid South Africa. Samson's (2019) work shows how national identities and a politics of contested belonging are produced through how the labour of migrant waste reclaimers on Johannesburg's

garbage dump is organised and protected in relation to the city, to groups of reclaimers and to contract firms vying for the market in recycled goods.

Finally, a piecemeal and perhaps tentative emergence of new interest in social and labour history, including in new histories of forced labour, which seek to examine race and labour dynamics in relation to forms of work and life in Southern Africa holds the potential to connect with labour studies in South Africa in ways that should expand thinking on the nature of racial capitalism in the colonial and post-colonial periods. The long tradition of labour studies in South Africa has indeed integrated closely with social histories of labour, work, class and community (Callinicos, 1980; Bozzoli and Nkotsoe, 1991). New work, while disparate, suggests the reexamination of important lacunae, such as the historical and multiple forms of coerced labour in Southern Africa and in global connection (Ulrich, 2013; Hyslop, 2017), inter-African migration and collective organisation, such as in the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) (Johnstone et al, forthcoming; Dee, 2020), South African white working-class histories examining working experiences, organisations and contraditions of incorporation under apartheid (Kenny, 2018; Money and van Zyl-Hermann, 2020), and reexamination of 1970s' and 1980s' trade union traditions (Forrest, 2011; Byrne et al, 2017; Stewart, 2020; Moodie, 2020).

We have suggested in the third section of this article that there has been in recent years a return to the study of work. Digitalisation has brought back debates on the future of work and the labour process (see the Future of Work Research Project, Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, 2020). Some fear that labour-saving digital technologies will lead to mass unemployment and/or will exacerbate the decades-long process of informalisation in the world of work. Others hope that the so-called 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' will increase productivity, promote rapid growth and create new sources of work – which in turn may give rise to new sources of collective worker power. Studies move out from the workplace to suggest the enduring relationship of the site of exploitation to politics and articulated identities within a changing South Africa. Finally, new historical work continues to entangle contemporary considerations of changing capitalist relations with its local, regional and transnational historical forms of labour, coercion and consent.

Conclusion

We have shown how the focus of the sociology of work has shifted over the last two decades. In the post-apartheid period, initially, labour process theory declined as an interest, as formal wage labour has in the economy, and students became more interested in informal labour, unemployment and community protests. The massacre at Marakana brought workplace struggles to centre stage again. The growth of precarious labour led to studies of the gig economy, returning to earlier themes of technology and skill, as well as race and gender. Indeed, the articulation of the race–class–gender dynamic is central to labour process theory in South Africa, both during apartheid and to the way in which work is conceptualised in a postcolonial context.

In short, we argue that there has been a return to taking seriously the ways new forms of work in South Africa pose new questions to the global study of work – refusing an orientation to a factory-bounded locus of the workplace as well as an orientation of the labour process to firm dynamics alone. This requires, Thompson and Vincent (2010) suggest, greater theoretical precision to extend the significance

of the study of work to capitalist political economies and vice versa. South African labour studies has offered numerous examples of such efforts.

The trajectory of South African labour studies presented here highlights how value production, the myriad forms of the organisation of work, including through a range of forms of coerced labour, state and capital relations, forms of collective subjectivities, particularly of race, class and gender and collective organisation in local histories and in global connection have been brought together. The broad concept for understanding how the circuit of capital works through its spatial specificity and articulated relations is 'racial capitalism', showing how forms of racialised labour control are bound into and constitute capital accumulation (Wolpe, 1972; Legassick and Hemson, 1976; Hall, 1980; Burawoy, 1985). Thus, South Africa offers a view of the co-constitution of racial, class and, indeed, gender relations (material and meaningful) in and through capitalist social reproduction that continues to produce both new labour processes (and value), new forms of struggle of workers and their organisations, and the very conditions and processes of accumulation itself.

Note

[1] Nattrass and Seekings (2019: 162) have taken their argument a step further to argue that in a labour surplus economy, labour protections as advocated by 'decent work fundamentalists' undermine job creation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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