Owen Crankshaw, Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid

Lucien van der Walt

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CRANKSHAW, OWEN, *Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid.* Routledge, London [etc.] 1997. ix, 214 pp. 45.00.

Owen Crankshaw's Race, Class and the Changing Division of Labour under Apartheid examines the changing labor process and racial division of labor under apartheid, focusing on the period between 1965 and 1990. Interspersed with detailed quantitative data is an insightful analysis of changes in the apartheid economy in this period, and on the implications of such changes for our understanding of the relationship between apartheid and capitalism.

The author contends that, despite apartheid's formal commitment to white supremacy in the labor market, there was a steady movement of "black" South Africans (Africans, Coloreds and Indians) into semiprofessional, routine white-collar, artisanal and semiskilled work from the 1960s onwards. At the same time, however, unskilled and menial labor – subject to relatively low wages and high unemployment – remained the preserve of Africans, who constituted eighty-seven per cent of unskilled manual laborers and seventy-nine per cent of menial service workers in 1990 (pp. 149–151). Crankshaw suggests that the result was a highly stratified African population, indicating that "class", rather than race, could become the primary determinant of inequality in the "new South Africa.

I will examine some of these findings in more detail below. It is useful first to situate Crankshaw's study within debates on the relationship between race and class in South African studies. At the height of the sanctions campaign against apartheid South Africa, some scholars were arguing that increased capitalist investment – rather than disinvestment – would undermine apartheid, According to this argument, the capitalist development would undermine apartheid by economically and socially integrating South African society. This view was rooted in the "liberal" interpretation of South African history, which held that apartheid policies – racially-based job reservation, indenture laws, a migrant labor system in which African men left their families in the "homelands" while working in the cities, and controls over the movement of Africans through pass laws – were the economically irrational result of the ingrained prejudices of Afrikaner nationalists or of the white working class. These policies undermined economic

growth by creating skill shortages, low worker productivity, and high job turnover. The liberal scholars had faith that capitalism would overcome apartheid by breaking down the racial division of labor, raising unskilled wages, and advancing Africans into skilled jobs. This view was attacked from the late 1960s by an emerging "radical" school of South African studies. Part of a vibrant upsurge of historical materialist scholarship on South Africa, the radical scholars challenged the liberals, arguing that apartheid-style policies were functional to capitalist development, providing the "super-exploited" and coerced African labor force that made the crucial mining and agricultural sectors profitable. Apartheid-style policies held African wages down, and undermined working-class organization by coercing African workers and dividing them from the mainly white skilled workers. According to such accounts, the once militant white working class was coopted into the "racial capitalist" status quo as a junior partner from the 1920s, through job reservation, union rights, and racially-biased social services.

The real driving force behind apartheid-style policies was, argued the radicals, big capital, which had fought for these policies since South Africa's "industrial revolution began in the 1870s with the discovery of vast diamond and gold deposits. Indeed, it was at this point – and not in 1948 with the election of the National Party – that modern apartheid emerged. Apartheid was thus entrenched by capitalist development. This coherent historical materialist analysis of racial discrimination contrasts favorably with the psychological models that mark much of the current international literature on racism such as some "whiteness" studies.

In retrospect, the "liberal-radical debate" was flawed in several ways. The exponents tended to argue past each other, the liberals focusing on manufacturing industry, the radicals on mining and agriculture. The start of a severe economic crisis in South Africa in the early 1970s – following an unprecedented boom in the 1960s – posed further problems. A number of radicals conceded that apartheid had undermined the by now dominant manufacturing sector by limiting domestic demand amongst Africans and creating a skills shortage through job reservation and unequal schooling. The relationship between apartheid and capitalism was thus now seen as historically contingent, rather than as necessary. The liberal scholars seemed partly vindicated, and could also point to some evidence of rising average real African wages and African advancement up the occupational ladder – yet not to increased social integration or markedly less racial inequality. The radicals argued that this was because a "floating" color bar reproduced the racial division of labor: African upward mobility followed on the heels of the movement of whites into even higher strata.

The debate was marred by a lack of empirical research to support each position, the liberals relying on a-historical economic models and both sides on less than comprehensive data. It is here that the real merit of Crankshaw's work lies. Painstakingly reanalyzing government data on the occupational structure, he is able to test the arguments of both schools. Using labor process theory to understand the relationship between capitalist development and changes in the division of labor, Cranhhaw allocated 600 occupations into eleven categories: top management, middle management, supervisors and foremen, professionals, semiprofessionals, routine white-collar workers, routine security workers, menial service workers, artisans and apprentices, machine operatives and semiskilled workers, and unskilled manual laborers.

Overall, Crankshaw found a substantial African advance into routine white-collar and semiprofessional jobs from the mid-1960s onwards, and into the skilled trades in the 1980s. Africans made up fifteen per cent of routine white-collar workers in 1965, but thirty-one per cent in 1990, twenty-four per cent of all employees in semiprofessional jobs in 1965 but forty-one per cent in

1990, and two per cent of artisans in 1979 but nineteen per cent of artisans in 1990 (p. 17). The number of Africans employed as foremen or supervisors also increased from thirteen per cent in 1965 to thirty per cent in 1989 (p. 17). In manufacturing, the proportion of African semiskilled machine operative labor rose from sixty-five to eighty-six per cent between 1965 and 1990 (pp. 39–42). There was also a rapid increase in the number of Africans employed in semiprofessional occupations, particularly as nurses or teachers in the segregated stare apparatus: their numbers rose from 51,023 in 1965 to jz7,ooo in 1990, or 41.1 per cent of all semiprofessionals (p. 144).

At first glance, the figures seem to vindicate the liberal case that economic growth would overcome apartheid policy. The boom of the 1960s boosted demand for routine white-collar work in the tertiary sector (particularly in transport, finance and commerce) and outstripped the supply of appropriately skilled white labor in the 1970s African employment in these categories rose from 89,425 in 1965 to 300,go in 1990 (p. 145). The chronic shortage of skilled white labor that developed in construction, manufacturing and mining in the 1960s was met by the mechanization and the fragmentation of the skilled trades, leading to a rapid expansion of semiskilled African labor. The expansion of semiprofessional employment was itself linked to economic demands for a more educated workforce.

Yet these occupational changes do not seem to have fundamentally changed the racial division of labor. Crankshaw emphasizes that management and the professions remained almost entirely white. In 1965, ninety-eight per cent of management jobs were held by whites, declining only by ten per cent by 1990, whilst the percentage of white professionals had only declined by seventeen per cent from ninety-eight per cent by the same date (p. 18). Whites continued to be disproportionately represented in the higher levels of the job market. In manufacturing, there were 128,723 white frontline supervisors in 1990, 100,267 white semiskilled operatives and 190,100 artisans and apprentices (pp. 147–149).

Job fragmentation tended to compensate for the shortage of skilled white labor, rather than replace existing white labor, and new occupations for artisans opened up in machine maintenance and repair. While opposing job fragmentation, the white trade unions were willing to retreat on the issue in return for government-approved policies that assured their continued dominance of the skilled trades, such as preferential promotion by employers and special government retraining programs. This trade-off reflected the limited power of organized white labor, which made concession after concession on its control of skilled work, thereby further undermining its power. White trade unions in the routine white-collar sectors did not oppose African advancement, whilst the issue of job competition did not arise amongst semiprofessionals who were working in segregated institutions.

This seems to vindicate the radical scholars' notion of a "floating color bar, at least in industry. Yet Crankshaw also argues that the radicals downplayed the extent to which African upward mobility took place: focusing on the limited relative size of the African semiprofessional strata, for example, they failed to note its dramatic absolute growth. The implication – also downplayed by the radicals – was a rise in average real wage gains by Africans, although this was confined to those moving upwards: better pay reflected new occupational levels, rather than a better rate for the job. Nor could the "floating" color bar rise indefinitely: whites' movement into higher posts (combined with raises and bonuses for accepting fragmentation) did initially lead to higher average white incomes but there were only so many such posts. Once whites had become concentrated in the higher strata, their wages began to stagnate and then decline in real

terms from the early 1970s (pp. 98–101). The result was some narrowing of the overall wage gap between African and white earners.

Overall, then, the result of occupational restructuring in South Africa from the 1960s onwards was a dual pattern of inequality: a continuing apartheid wage gap between whites and Africans as a whole, and a growing occupational wage gap amongst Africans.

Crankshaw's superb work is a useful contribution to our understanding of the ongoing changes within South African society, and a critical assessment of both liberal and radical accounts of apartheid and capitalism. The implications of these social changes for South African political and social struggles remain unclear.

Crankshaw suggests that "class" divisions are becoming more salient – pointing to inequality within each race, and social differentiation amongst Africans as expressed in the emergence of homogenous "middle class areas in African townships and movement into white districts – but does not clarify what he means by "class". This interpretation is problematic, because it is striking that much of the African upward mobility identified by Crankshaw took place through the restructuring of blue-collar work – the growth of the semiskilled category and an increase in the number of African artisans – and through the expansion of lower-level white-collar occupations. The only exceptions may be the semiprofessional and supervisory layers, and the professional and managerial strata shown by Crankshaw to be of negligible size.

In other words, the occupational restructuring identified by Crankshaw was concentrated largely on occupations that fall within the broad working class (at least, as defined by writers such as Wright, who Crankshaw dismisses). Hence, whilst Crankshaw's data clearly demonstrates an erosion of much (but not all) of the racial division of labor, it indicates not so much a class stratification amongst Afiicans but a recomposition of the African working class under the impact of capitalist restructuring. It is not insignificant that semiskilled African workers form the core constituency of South Africa's labor movement.

That Crankshaw shies away from class categories as too crude an analytical tool is a pity, because his own conclusions draw on an unstated and problematic notion of class, seemingly centered on "income and occupational divisions" (p. 119) – a mainstream sociological notion of class division at odds with the materialist roots of labor process theory and the sophistication of Crankshaw's analysis.

A transformation of the occupational structure set to have a far greater impact than a restructuring of mainly working-class and middle-class jobs is the rapid emergence of an African bourgeoisie in South Africa in the 1990s. This layer has grown rapidly, expanding (by some estimates) its control of South African stocks from less than one per cent in 1994, to ten per cent four years later. Some have argued that this layer now dominates the ruling African National Congress, and is a key mover for that party's abandonment of its quasi-Keynesian economic policies in mid-1996 for orthodox neoliberal policies, despite the opposition of its trade union allies. A follow-up to Crankshaw's study in ten years time would be most revealing.

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