

Commuter-Worker and the Continuation of Labour Stay-Aways in post-Apartheid South Africa

Mpho Mmadi

Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria

Mpho.mmadi@up.ac.za

Abstract

A large body of academic literature germane to service delivery protests has documented area specific cases of protests and their targets. In the main, the focus of these studies has been the failures of the ruling ANC as elected leaders divert public funds aimed at improving the lives of townships and informal settlement dwellers. The emerging overall picture points to failure, at the political level to deliver on key promises, urgent among these being the issue of high levels of unemployment. This has seen a marked increase in violent service delivery protests that at times morphed into xenophobic attacks and destruction of public property. Missing from the analysis however, is the impacts of service delivery protests on the South African commuter-worker. The article contends that, by bringing the commuter-worker to the centre of analysis, we should be able to better appreciate the devastation of the service delivery protests beyond its locus of execution. The commuter-worker is a product of apartheid travel geography and at times a key participant in community mass demonstrations. Drawing on notion of precarious society, I will show how service delivery protests and failure to deliver services produces precarity in other spheres of the commuter-worker's life.

Keywords: Commuter-worker; precarious society; stay-aways; apartheid spatial planning; travel geographies.

Introduction

The 1990s heralded seismic changes at the political level in South Africa. Politics of opposition and confrontation made way for negotiations and compromises, culminating in the adoption of an inclusive and progress Bill of Rights of 1996. Labour was a key catalyst in this process, this

largely because the dominant political party, the African National Congress (ANC) was operating from outside the country. The Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU) was the leading force winning concessions for labour and later on a partner in the tripartite alliance with ANC and South African Communist party (SACP). The advent of democracy produced relative peace with apartheid era type of community mobilisation fading into the back, save for legislatively enshrined industrial actions. This period of relative peace was short-lived however, as the start of the second decade of democratic rule produced a marked increase in service delivery protests. These have ranged from peaceful, violent and at times morphed into xenophobic attacks with foreign nationals accused of taking locals' jobs and monopolising the business space in townships.

A large body of academic literature germane to service delivery protests has documented area specific cases of protests and their targets (Alexander 2010; Booysen 2007; Nleya 2011; Von Holdt, Langa, Molapo, Mogapi, Ngubeni, Dlamini and Kirten 2011). In the main, the focus of these studies has been the failures of the ruling ANC. Corruption is the common denominator as elected leaders divert public funds aimed at improving the lives of townships and informal settlement dwellers. At times, these protests come about because of factional battles in the ruling party. The emerging overall picture points to failure, at the political level to deliver on key promises, urgent among these being the issue of high levels of unemployment. Von Holdt (2011, 20-22) notes that South Africa is undergoing a process of class formations. The ascent into power by the ANC has facilitated elite formation, this because a small group of powerful individuals with access to political power has emerged. According to Von Holdt, (2011: 20)

“... the combination of political power with control over considerable resources makes a transaction between political status and commercial profit relatively easy. Salaries from high-level jobs in the local town council, the power to distribute both high- and low-level council jobs, as well as the opportunities for business with council, and the patronage networks that link the two, are key mechanisms in the formation of the elite, especially in small towns with limited employment opportunities”.

This elite formation process is, simultaneously producing high levels of inequalities within black communities with emerging political elites and underemployed and at times unemployable, uneducated underclass. The former, feeds on the local state as a regime of accumulation, leading to corrupt and criminal activities that informs resultant community protests. The aforementioned class formation process, converge, in the formal townships in

particular, around the local state and local business. The former constitutes the main site of accumulation owing to its ability to distribute patronage linked to state contracts, housing and employment opportunities. The latter and arguably less lucrative relates to local business such as township traders and the minibus taxi industry. The two sites of regime accumulation can easily be linked with access to political power and its ability to control resources. Von Holdt shows how some local leaders proclaimed hustling for business by entering people's offices to demand something as part of their share of the country's wealth. (2011: 20).

In the main, the focus of these studies is the relationship between community protests and violence often marked by destruction of public property, ANC factional battles, high unemployment and inequality, xenophobic (Afrophobia) and unemployed youths. Missing from the analysis however, is the impacts of service delivery protests on the South African commuter-worker. The article contends that, by bringing the commuter-worker to the centre of analysis, we should be able to better appreciate the devastation of the service delivery protests beyond its locus of execution. The commuter-worker is a product of apartheid travel geography and at times a key participant in community mass demonstrations. By drawing on Von Holdt (2011) notion of precarious society, I will show how service delivery protests and failure to deliver services produces precarity in other spheres of the commuter-worker's life. The next section pays attention to the notion of precarious society and shows how the concept relates to the South African commuter-worker.

I provide six characteristics of the South African commuter-workers in order to embed commuter-workers within communities and society in transition. This is not to suggest that commuting is a unique South African phenomenon. As a matter of fact, commuting is a constant feature of the industrialised world. To be sure, Kerr (2017) points out that the United States of America and Hungary are some of the countries with the longest commute times in the world. Where an emphasis is placed on commuting in the South Africa context, this is done, amongst others, to draw attention to the fact that commuting and its related costs is an outcome of a deliberate process that fashioned out a unique race-based commuter differentiation. Kerr (2017: 321) finds that “[w]hite South Africans spent less time commuting than black South Africans, 54 min per day, but still spent more time commuting on average than commuters in the United States and all 23 EU countries”. I expand on these travel geographies below, and discusses the extent to which, they influence the daily travel experiences of South African commuters. I demonstrate that, daily travel in South Africa is an outcome of a deliberate process designed to turn Africans into commuters. The article concludes by arguing that service

delivery protests affect commuter-workers negatively on a daily basis. Drawing on the experiences of train commuters in Mamelodi East, Tshwane, and the 2006 security guards strike, I suggest that transportation disruptions have consequences beyond the townships and informal settlements.

Precariousness and the South African Travel Geographies

The notion of precarious society is useful in making sense of what is currently happening in many of South Africa's poor townships and informal settlements. The townships and informal settlements, as microcosm of the broader South African society are exhibiting the contradictory nature of South Africa's transition. To quote Von Holdt (2011, 18):

... [T]ransition to democracy has unleashed profound and violent forces of class formation that are shaping much of social life at the a local level in townships and informal settlements, generating dislocation, contestation over status and hierarchy, fundamental instability in the ANC, undermining and weakening the local state, and producing a 'precarious society' characterised by embedded cycles of violence.

Located within these violent and precarious societies is workers as a subgroup of those affected by the daily township and informal settlement instability. The vulnerability of this subgroup can be accounted for by the apartheid spatial engineering that produced commuter-workers. For commuter-workers, the residential embedded precariousness, arguably produce forms of workplace precariousness and for this reason, the process comes full cycle. Commuter-workers, as a subgroup of analysis are characterised in the following. 1) Commuter-workers travel to work by bus, taxi and or train. 2) Reside in one of South Africa's townships and or informal settlements. 3) Can be easily politicised because they are located in the struggles over social order. They too, have specific demands around clean water, electricity etc. 4) Their experiences of daily commuting is intricately linked with and is a result of apartheid spatial planning. 5) Often are unable to access workplaces and the labour market in general during times of protests or total shutdowns. 6) Commuter-workers spent a considerable amount of their meagre wages on commuting to and from work daily. However, it is worth noting that the extent to which commuter-workers are affected by the resultant precarity is mediated through the nature of employment (permanent, part-time, casual etc.) and the skill set one possess. The changing nature of work, characterised by casualization, outsourcing and informatiolisation presents a different set of precariousness. For commuter-workers, these are exacerbated by transport disruptions, shutdowns and stay-aways. Cosatu's withdrawal from community

protests action has left residences, who are both commuters and workers without a direct voice and link with the ANC. Shutdowns and disruptions are a few strategies aimed at drawing attention to the local state. Paret (2015: 57) argues that Cosatu's distancing from community struggles can be accounted for by its formal relationship with ruling party. More recently, it has been suggested that perhaps, Cosatu is no longer a working-class movement. And by extension is unlikely to bother with working-class service delivery challenges. Without a doubt, this signify a rapture (Bezuidenhout, Bischoff and Nthejane, 2017: 57-60). Whatever the case, this is likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and hardships in the longer run. This situation is aggravated by the fact that those lucky enough to be in formal standard employment relations (SER), their earnings are distributed across extended family networks and relatives. Bischoff and Tame (2017, 82) problematizes the notion of labour aristocracy in respect of COSATU members and contend that, workers in SER are part of vast redistributive networks such that whatever earnings they receive, a majority remains relatively poor (see also, Forslund and Reddy 2015, 84-7). The above entrenches the nature of the commuter-worker's precariousness (Von Holdt 2011, 19).

By drawing linkages between the interconnected nature of workplace and community, this article is an attempt to deepen and broaden the nature of precarious society as identified by Von Holdt. That is to say, the precarious nature of the South African society is intertwined with those of the marketplace and in the process produces a relationship of mutual inter-dependence. This refers to the fact that as the precarious underclass intensifies stay-aways and shutdowns, the commuter-worker faces greater danger of losing their employment as a result of which they are likely to re-join the subalterns in blocking the roads and burning down public properties (Von Holdt, 2011: 18). It is clear therefore, that addressing this level of vulnerability requires more than just the provision of employment opportunities and services. This requires fundamentally, a process geared towards undoing the apartheid spatial geography. The distance required to reach workplaces make it near impossible for commuter-workers to navigate out of townships and informal settlements during periods of protest. Below, I pay attention to the South African travel geographies and demonstrate that travel time to work, compound the conditions of instability as experienced by the commuter-worker. Therefore, the instability is experienced at both ends by the commuter-worker.

Travel geographies

From the 1950s, the then apartheid state embarked upon an aggressive process of forced removals. This process was based on racial and ethnic division of the country. Non-whites were removed from city-centres and designated to reside in townships. Generally, these were close enough to places of employment but away from city centres reserved for occupation by whites only. This was an important period in the making of the South African working class for one particular reason. It ensured that African workers had to commute daily into city centres and it is in this context that transportation system became central to the daily lives of African workers. Those removed from city centres of Johannesburg to Soweto, Cape Town to Cape Flats, out of Durban to Chatsworth, Phoenix and KwaMashu, Pretoria to Mamelodi, and the like became the typical commuter migrants of apartheid South Africa. In addition, the country was divided into seven ethnic specific geographic areas called Bantustans (Sparks 1990, 138). For example, Ndebele people were designated to reside in KwaNdebele. In this way, the Ndebele people and all other South African ethnic groups were considered non-citizens in white South Africa. They became what Allister Sparks refers to as ‘foreign natives’ (Sparks 1990, 136). According to Sparks (1990, 136), this was “an attempt to turn all blacks into de jure as well as de facto foreigners by denationalising them”. This spatial engineering gave rise to the so-called ‘*international*’ *commuting labour force* (Browett 1982, 22). This term describes the daily travels of those located in former Bantustans close enough to white South Africa for labour to commute to work on a daily basis. Murray crisply expresses this process as the “commuteri(s)ation of the black labour force” (Goldblatt 1986, 34; Murray 1987, 314). This ‘commuterisation’ process finds expression in the significance of buses, trains and minibus taxis for mobility. Both the daily township-to-city commuting workforce and the ‘international’ commuters were the product of the apartheid government’s policy of spatial separation and racial segregation. Buses and minibus taxis emerged in this context as an outcome of state led spatial planning described above. With the above in mind, it can be suggested that, the manner in which South African workers and communities in general relate to the abovementioned modes of transport is mediated through the struggles against the apartheid state. Transport has a long history of struggle in the South African context. Stadler makes a similar observation in respect of bus boycotts in Alexandra in the 1940s (Stadler 1979, 13). For township commuters, the transport geography gave rise to a distinct travel experience that in turn produced a highly politicised commuter-worker precarity. By this I mean, transportation boycotts and blocking of access roads has a long history as a means to voice dissatisfaction

with the state. Thus, as one author has observed, “resonances from the apartheid period are striking” (Alexander 2010, 37). Drawing on two cases, one of the Mamelodi train commuters and the 2016 security strike. Below I discuss the implications of transport related disruptions for the commuter-worker.

Commuter-worker and transport disruptions

As already indicated above, the South African commuter-worker is sensitive to a variety of social vibrations. Failure by metro-rail to deliver high quality train services affect commuter-workers, much as disruptions resulting from taxi strikes or community service delivery protests. The recent experience of the South African president, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa poignantly drives this point home. On a campaign trail for the 2019 national elections, the president joined train commuters on a 45 minutes trip that lasted for more than three hours due to delays. For the president, this inconvenience delayed his attendance of an important ANC meeting. For commuter-workers, however, this is a daily experience as the Passenger Rail Agency (PRASA) of South Africa struggles to provide reliable train transport. This multiplicity of obstacles, finds expression in two different but connected ways in which transport system plays a vital role in denying workers access to the workplace. The first case involves train commuters in Mamelodi who were observed on their daily travels (to and from work) as part of the author’s PhD study from 2015 through early 2017 (see Mmadi,2019). The second emanates from literature reviewed, mostly newspaper reportage around the 2016 security guards strike. I seek not to provide an in-depth discussion of the above cases, merely to employ them in demonstrating the challenging travel environment faced on a daily basis by the South African commuter-workers and the extent to which it reproduces and deepen level of precariousness.

The sociology of commuting, is generally a taken for granted daily norm. This is most likely because transport is generally not analysed beyond its functional and mechanical importance. Also, where issues around transport are discussed in the literature on service delivery protests, such deliberations do not venture beyond roads being blockaded (Alexander 2010, 30; Mashamaite 2014, 235; Sinwell 2017, 15) Such exercises are not interested in the experiences of commuting itself. The particular form of travel landscape to emerge in South Africa therefore deserves a closer inspection in respect of how workers relate to the travail of travel in a context of precarious society. As the findings of the National Household Travel Survey (NTHS) (StatSA 2014) will show, there are variations in terms of modes of transportation usage and preferences. Of the 3 modes of public transportation offerings in South Africa, the NTHS

notes that minibus taxis are the preferred mode of transportation at 69% of the national share, followed by buses at 20% and lastly, the trains at 9,9 % (StatsSA, 2014). It is worth mentioning that the low train usage can be accounted for by the unequal development of commuter rail network in South Africa. Notwithstanding problems around reliability and rigidity (Mmadi 2012, 23-4).

This is a key observation, not only in respect of the geographical particularities of South Africa, but also as it relates to the continued exploitation, and wage inequalities that have to some extent worsened under the neoliberal labour regime (Forslund and Reddy 2015, 87, 94). Taxi fares are on average higher than those of trains. The chief reason being, lack of government subsidy for the minibus taxi industry (Mmadi 2012, 24). I focus on the travel statistics around the Gauteng province, as the economic hub of South Africa and because it has the largest concentration of service delivery protests (Alexander 2010, 32). The National Household Travel Survey, Gauteng profile focused on all of the province's district municipalities, namely; Sedibeng; West Rand; Ekurhuleni; City of Johannesburg and City of Tshwane. The significance of the Gauteng province lies, amongst others, in the fact that the bulk of the country's workers reside in this province. This is accentuated by the following statistics that note: about 33, 1% of the 15, 2 million workers in South Africa are located in Gauteng, 16, 0% in KwaZulu-Natal, and 15, 2% in the Western Cape (StatsSA 2014, 98). In as far as the picture we aim to construct is concerned, this section is going to amplify two points in respect of commuter-workers. First, transportation systems in South Africa constitute a critical part as a form of political expression. Accordingly, Sinwell (2017, 15) notes that road blockages is an effective tactic and was used by residence of Thembelihle informal settlement as an attempt to "attract attention from government, since they prevented those in the neighbo[u]ring middle-class Indian suburb of Lenasia from going about their daily business". Second, residential instability has serious implications for workers and infringes upon their right to access workplace and the labour market. These two focal points avail an opportunity to concretise the argument that such actions give rise to a cycle of poverty and entrenches precariousness. For example, teachers and nurse cannot access local schools, clinics and hospitals during service delivery protests, with sever consequences for teaching, learning and health care provisions.

The case of the 2006 security guards strike is particularly pertinent here. The 2006 security guards' strike was organised by South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU). The union demanded an 11% wage increase and the employer only offered 8%. SATAWU rejected the offer and vowed to push ahead with its demands. However, other

smaller unions organising in the industry accepted the employers' offer and returned to work. This presented problems for SATAWU because its position was weakened in relation to the employer (Sunday Tribune 2006, 8). Consequently, SATAWU members adopted violence as a strategy to deal with security guards who observed the employers' call to return to work. It is noteworthy that the abovementioned violence strategy was not targeted and implemented at the point of 'production'. Rather, it was deployed upon public transportation system – the train. Strike violence however, has a long history in South Africa (See Chinguno, 2015; Simpson and Webster, 1991; Webster, 2017) and what is of interest here, is the *site* of the said violence, together with the accompanying protest action. Non-striking security guards were targeted on the trains en-route to and from work. Media reports showed that non-striking security guards were thrown off moving trains (often to their deaths) by striking SATAWU members (of course SATAWU denied that it was their members committing these acts). The extent and seriousness of the problem was such that Metrorail declared it a "national crisis" (Cape Argus 2006, 1; Citizen 2006, 8; Sowetan 2006, 5; Sunday Tribune 2006, 8). The national death figure was reported at 23 people nationally; 18 of these deaths took place in Gauteng province alone (Citizen 2006, 8; Sowetan 2006, 5; Sunday Tribune 2006, 8). In addition to the killings, scores more were paraded naked and or assaulted on the trains. Without a doubt, the security guards' locus of discipline demonstrates the centrality of the train as workers' convergence point. This was a true embodiment of what Chinguno (2015, 265) refers to as "violent solidarity". For a period, therefore, the train was a site of 'strategic-terror' during the year 2006 and thus had detrimental impact upon the commuter-worker.

There above example, does not fall under service delivery protest, neither does it meet the normal characterisation of an industrial action. It represent a form of protest involving unrest and is labour related (Alexander 2010, 27). It is without a doubt located at the nexus between work and community and demonstrates how the precarious nature of the South African society negatively affect the commuter-worker. Of concern in this case, is the level of violence that came to dominate the strike, breadwinners were thrown off moving trains to their deaths. It is not difficult to see how this example fit neatly into Von Holdt's conceptualisation. Furthermore and linked to the above, observations carried out for this study evidently shows that train disruptions such as delayed departures and or arrivals tend to have a ripple effect due to the geography of rail transportation as currently laid out. When residences of Mamelodi East invaded plot 44 in Pienaarspoord next to Pienaarspoord train station in 2016, it was the commuter-workers who had to bear the brunt of additional travel costs after the metro-rail

trains were prevented from operating. Inspired by the Economic Freedom Fighters leader's message to invade unoccupied land, Mamelodi residences placed debris on the rail tracks following clashes with South African Police (Observations, April 2016; Pretoria News, 20 December 2016).

Conclusion

Transport disruptions, are a critical component of stay-aways and shutdowns and have a long history in South Africa. It is an effective form of discontent against state power. However, the frequency of service delivery protests that involves destructions and road blockades, often led by unemployed youths has ensured that transport disruptions travel all the way to the workplace. This, as workers are unable to arrive for work leading to losses in production and other related costs. The fight against corrupt and at times incompetent political elites has severe repercussions for those who rely heavily on public transport to access workplaces and the labour market.

The focus upon commuter-workers as victims of service delivery protests is not to suggest that workers are not involved in such activities. But merely to show that workers are likely to be on losing side of protracted shutdowns and disruptions through loss of employment or earnings and inadvertently extend the nature of township precariousness beyond its geographic milieu. This therefore raises questions not about the precarious nature of society and labour markets but also brings into the discussion the changes associated with the apartheid spatial planning. Black workers continue to commute daily into white South Africa at the great costs and over long distances 25 years into democracy. This has created an interdependence of precarity in which the societal precariousness reproduces that of the labour markets and vice-versa. The commuter-worker remains the victim of the situation.

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