SOCIO ECONOMIC CONDITIONS
AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE
IN SOUTH AFRICA: A
BRIEF EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS

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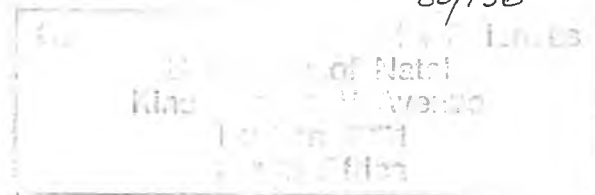
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1.   Theories of political violence seldom stress socio-economic
deprivation in an absolute sense as an important pre-condition for
political violence.   Instead they tend to identify social forces
which, if anything, would tend to be weakened by a condition of
severe poverty and under-nutrition.

        The theories of Ted Gurr, for example, at least those of
some years ago, stress the importance not of discontent arising from
a state of absolute deprivation, but rather of the frustration of
expectations — relative deprivation.   Relative deprivation is the
discrepancy between people's perceptions of the goods and conditions
to which they are rightfully entitled, and their perception of the
goods and conditions they think they are capable of achieving and
keeping[1].   Relative deprivation can be stimulated, *inter alia* by
new wants, successes which comparable groups are achieving and past
improvements and/or recent setbacks.   Hence we see the importance
of comparisons between groups and over time.

        Gurr's paradigm includes essential conditions at an ideological
and structural level; the presence of a justificatory ideology of
violence, a perception of partical benefits in violence, the possession
by dissidents of resources with which to reward violence, and the
capacity of dissident groups to mobilise and organise for violence.

        Another writer, Muller[2], places even greater emphasis on
ideological and attitudinal factors: normative justifications for
violence, facilitative social norms or ideologies in the environment
and perceived utilities of violence.   He too, however, places some
importance on perceptions of relative deprivation stimulated by rank
disequilibrium and political dissatisfaction.   Like Gurr, he sees
these normative and perceptual factors as necessary but not sufficient
conditions.   He adds to them, the factors of availability for
dissident behaviour (e.g. unemployment), the strength of radical

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1.   Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*, Princeton: Princeton University
     Press, 1970.

2.   Edward N. Muller, *Agressive Political Participation*, Princeton:
     Princeton Unervisity Press, 1979.

organisation, the strength, scope and consistency of regime controls, the quality of government administration and the strength of sanctions against violence generally.

Obviously, then, one cannot assume that propensities to political violence will show a simple association with a depth of poverty and deprivation. Studies of riots in the United States have shown that it is not the most disadvantaged members of black communities that riot[1].

The importance of the factor of mobilisation has been stressed in recent years. Political violence must also be understood not as a form of social deviance or "pathology", but as a coherent strategy in cases where the state is unresponsive to or itself violently represses the claims of disadvantaged groups in society. This has come to be known as the resource mobilisation approach to the understanding of political violence[2].

In the basis of existing evidence and literature, therefore, it would seem that the political instability of a violent kind cannot be traced to mono-causal factors like poverty.

1. See a review in L. Schlemmer, *Negro Ghetto Riots and South African Cities*, Topical Talks Series, Johannesburg: S.A. Institute of Race Relations, 1968, and M. Bryan, "The Social Psychology of Riot Participation" in Marritt and Leggon, *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, Vol. I, Greenwich: J.A.I. Press, 1979; J.A. Geschwender, "Civil Rights Protest and Riots", *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 49, 1968, pp.474-484; and C. McPhail, "Civil Disorder Participation: A Critical Examination of Recent Research", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 36, 1971, pp.1055-1073.

2. See review by Nicola Lloyd, "Ethnic Conflict in a Divided Society: The disunited Kingdom", Paper presented at the European Consortium for Political Research, Freiburg, Germany, 20-25 March, 1983.

2.   In South Africa oversimple perceptions of the likelihood of political violence are frequent in popular political debate.   It is commonly assumed that the preconditions for stability will increase if socio-economic conditions improve.   Undoubtedly there is some truth in this, but the explanations are inevitably oversimple.   One has to carefully consider the evidence which exists.

In 1981, large scale surveys among blacks were undertaken by this author as part of the research programme of the Buthelezi Commission[1).   Included in the surveys were a number of items which in both direct and indirect ways were aimed at assessing the strength of attitudes conducive to political violence and militancy.

These attitudes are not to be taken as indexes of behaviour. They reflect no more than dispositions towards certain kinds of behaviour.   As such they are no basis for predictions of action. They do, however, afford an opportunity to study relationships between predispositions to political violence and social circumstances. Selected results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

(Readers are referred to the report of the Buthtlezi Commission for full technical details of the questions asked, the samples and other procedures.)

In Table 1, we note that both in the Witwatersrand and Natal samples, the verbally expressed predisposition to militancy rises steadily with increasing education.   The least educated are the least radical.   In terms of occupation it is the unskilled category which is consistently less radical than the highest status group, the non manual group.

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1.   G.D.L. Schreiner (Chairman) *The Buthelezi Commission*, Durban: H. & H. Publishers, 1982, Vol. I.

TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTIONS OF RESULTS ON ATTITUDES SUGGESTIVE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE OR ACTIVE DISSENT, ACCORDING TO SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS

CATEGORIES OF RESPONDENTS AND SAMPLE SIZES	(Witwaters-rand) 1. N	(Natal/ KwaZulu) 2. N	*Disagreement with statement: *"People should be careful in politics and avoid trouble"* 1. %	2. %	**After description of racially unequal country like South Africa, choice of the strategy option: *"Only bloodshed/ violence will help"* 1. %	2. %	***ANC spontaneously chosen as organisation *"important in peoples' lives"* 1. %	2. %	****Self rating as *"angry and impatient"* with life in South Africa today 1. %	2. %
Up to Std 2	120	142	28	25	8	20	12	5	48	29
Std 3-6	130	190	48	35	25	18	26	8	52	38
Std 7-9	239	354	60	42	35	16	45	24	54	43
Std 10+	113	189	73	56	49	34	60	57	71	65
Degree	10	35	90	82	70	35	40	50	80	64
Unemployed	182	287	54	38	33	19	35	18	53	40
Unskilled	42	81	39	26	12	16	24	7	47	32
Semi-skilled	51	131	54	43	23	30	32	27	57	49
Non Manual	202	338	63	51	41	21	47	36	62	54
Under R149 pm	312	468	46	36	25	20	29	16	49	38
R150 pm+	300	442	62	50	36	22	46	36	63	54
Cities	–	357	–	51	–	37	–	35	–	45
Small towns	–	153	–	45	–	25	–	29	–	56
Rural tribal areas	–	248	–	40	–	16	–	25	–	44
Squatters	–	152	–	41	–	23	–	17	–	42
Members of voluntary organisations (excluding Inkatha)	162	352	62	53	40	22	48	38	62	52

* Would you agree with what is said or not?   *"It is best for African people to be careful in politics and not get into trouble"*

** *"There are countries in the world where people of one group are ruled by another group.   They do not have jobs or education as good as the people who rule them.   What should people who want to change things do?"*

*** *"Which black organisations or parties do people like you think will be important in their lives?"*

**** *"Here are pictures of how African people like you can feel about life for Africans in South Africa today".* Pictures described with the following statements repeated: *"Very happy, just happy, not happy yet not unhappy, unhappy, angry and impatient".*

The unemployed tend consistently to show higher levels of verbal militancy but this group also includes a substantial proportion of better-educated school-leavers;   hence it is not necessarily the unemployment as such which raises the level of militancy.

The lower income category is consistently less militant than the higher income category.   In Natal, where a socio-geographic break-down was possible, the people in the shack areas ("squatters"), who are generally in the poorest socio-economic circumstances, are also the least militant.

TABLE 2

EXTREME GENERAL DISCONTENT ACCORDING TO DETAILED LEVEL OF PERSONAL INCOME

| Monthly earnings | Proportion *"Angry and Impatient"** | | | |
	Witwatersrand		Natal/KwaZulu	
Unemployed excluded		%		%
R 1-79	(n 58)	47	(n 131)	27
80-149	(n 107)	42	(n 156)	45
150-199	(n 79)	56	(n 122)	62
200-249	(n 61)	59	(n 109)	43
250-299	(n 50)	52	(n 74)	64
300-399	(n 53)	74	(n 78)	50
400-499	(n 33)	73	(n 43)	53
500 or more	(n 24)	83	(n 42)	55

In Table 2, where very detailed breakdowns according to personal income are given, the poorest are also the least "angry and impatient".   In the results for the Witwatersrand, the higher income levels above R300 per month are associated with marked expressed discontent, while in Natal-KwaZulu the pattern fluctuates with the notable feature that the very poorest category (those earning less than R80 p.m.) are the least discontented with life in South Africa.

The Witwate.srand results suggest a fairly radicalised middle class, which is less evident in Durban and Natal.   More of the middle class in KwaZulu are, of course, civil servants.

There are also many more supporters of Inkatha in the Durban Middle Class. Inkatha has defined fairly clearly a policy of peaceful or constructive opposition to white rule.[1]

In another nation-wide survey among migrant contract workers, conducted in 1982, some of the same items referred to in Tables 1 and 2 were repeated and other indexes of militant attitudes included. This offered an opportunity to consider the relationship between attitudinal predispositions to militancy and income levels among a large group whose homes are in rural areas. Results from this study appear in Table 3.

TABLE 3.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WEEKLY WAGE LEVELS AMONG MIGRANT WORKERS AND INDEXES OF MILITANT DISPOSITION (n 458 1982)

Weekly wage	Sample size	*"Angry and Impatient"* Life in general	Pass Laws	*"If ANC were to come secretly – most/many would help it"*	If leaders called for work stoppage – *"all would stay away"*
		%	%	%	%
under R20	20	50	55	20	30
R20-30	74	36	46	22	24
R31-40	122	40	55	38	47
R41-50	111	30	61	36	39
R51-60	58	21	48	31	43
R61-70	32	34	41	34	50
R71-80	17	35	47	47	53
R80+	22	36	50	36	27
Can send sufficient money home	124	21	42	27	36
Cannot send sufficient home	457	37	60	36	43
Happy with conditions in home area	127	18	34	27	29
Angry about conditions in home area	177	53	77	38	47

1) See L. Schlemmer, "The Stirring Giant: Observations on the Inkatha and other Black Political Movements in South Africa", in Robert M. Price and Carl G. Rosberg (eds), *The Apartheid Regime: Political Power and Racial Domination.* Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1980. pp. 99-126.

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Here the patterns which emerge are somewhat different.
The very poorly paid migrants are less inclined to suggest
support for the ANC than the better-paid and are as little
inclined to suggest support for the general strike as the very
well-paid (the greatest militancy is in the middle income groups).
The poorly paid are no more inclined to be angry about the "pass
laws" than the more affluent.   However, in terms of general
frustration ("Angry and impatient about life in general") the
very low wage earners are more discontented than the middle-income
groups.

There is a suggestion, then, that severe financial
constraints are associated with heightened attitudinal militancy
among migrant workers.   This relationship is supported by the fact
that those who feel they are not able to send sufficient money
home are more "militant" than those who feel that they can,
although the relationship is not very powerful.

A more powerful relationship seems to pertain between
militant attitudes and a high degree of discontent with perceived
conditions in their rural home areas.   Anger at conditions in
home areas is associated with one of the highest readings on
militant rejection of influx control laws obtained in the whole
survey (77%).   These laws, of course, block the escape from
rival poverty of many migrant contract workers.

3. BROAD CONCLUSIONS

The empirical results obtained in the 1981 surveys,
predominantly among urban dwellers, support the relative deprivation
thesis in very broad terms.   It is the better-paid and better-
educated people whose expectations are raised who are most likely
to express attitudes suggestive of a predisposition to militancy.

Among contract migrants from rural homeland areas, however,
the position is more complex.   While the more poorly paid migrants are

8.

less "political" in their discontent (lower support for political movements or strategies than others) they evince greater generalised discontent than the better-paid people.   There also appears to be a relationship between attitudes of militancy and the conditions for people in the rural labour-sending areas.

Generally speaking, poverty seems to be associated with low political consciousness among blacks in urban/peri-urban areas.   Among contract migrants from rural areas, however, the frustrations of very low wages and poor conditions do appear to manifest in generalised discontent and in a sharp rejection of specific constraints in their situation.

These patterns of course pertain to black people under conditions of little or no mobilisation and organisation.   If one inspects the results in Table 1 for members of voluntary organisations (virtually all non-political) one notices that higher levels of attitudinal militancy exist than in the rest of the populations studied.   In part this is due to the higher socio-economic status of members of voluntary organisations and to the greater politicisation which goes with higher education.   In the Witwatersrand sample, however, the socio-economic advantage of members of organisations over non-members is negligible, and the conclusion holds that membership of organisations is associated with more politically muscular attitudes.   The relatively greater militancy of poorer migrants, albeit of a non-ideological kind, perhaps reflects their greater social cohesion in the homeland tribal organisation.   Urban poor are more atomised and demoralised, as are most squatters.   In the latter case one must bear in mind that certain squatter areas, like Crossroads in the Cape, have developed social cohesion and may be more militant than the Natal squatters.

If poorer people were to become more organised into voluntary associations, they might very well develop new patterns of attitudes in response to greater confidence and a sense of collective solidarity, even in the urban areas where the very poor are least radical at the moment.

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