

THE FENCE OF OPPORTUNITY:  
BLACK REACTIONS AND INFLUX  
CONTROL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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**DEVELOPMENT STUDIES UNIT.**

Influx control is the dominant means by which the social geography of South Africa is maintained. As a form of legislation it is even more important than the Group Areas Act in maintaining the character of white society in a country numerically dominated by blacks. Fundamentally it is a social and political "fence" between privilege and Western lifestyle and the Third World within the country.

It would be quite understandable, then, if this particular legislation were to be singled out by black people as the major infringement on their rights and as the main cause of their frustrations. Yet attitudes do not always align themselves with the objective legal realities of a situation. Two factors should perhaps alert us to the possibility that many black people may accommodate the realities of the Influx Control laws.

Firstly, there is the fact that these laws are of such long-standing and are so totally pervasive in the lives of black people that they have become blunted or at least accustomed to their effects. Secondly, so much of government legislation over the last thirty years has created a separation of spheres of living between black and white that there may indeed have grown a certain measure of acceptance of the notion that the worlds of whites and those of blacks are distinct. The oft-used analogy in government rhetoric pointing to the existence of separate nations and separate territories for different peoples may have gained a grudging unconscious acceptance among people whose daily priorities take their minds off logical political analyses.

Then again it is also possible that the degree to which the black homeland policy has prevented the alienation of black property and established a framework for the development of black occupied land, no matter how limited in effect, in at least a small portion of the country, has induced a measure of support for the separation of social spheres among those black people who are landholders in the homelands and among certain other black groups whose interests are served by the establishment of public institutions in the black areas.

Against this background of possibilities it is of interest to assess a range of recent findings from studies of black attitudes. Social attitudes are always complex and nuanced, but the pattern emerging should at least enable an answer to be given to the basic question posed by the possibilities raised in the introductory comments. Do black attitudes to Influx Control reflect alienation and resentment at structural discrimination or do they show a perception of more limited political content and perhaps even a degree of compromise with reality and some acceptance of the limited and marginal benefits of the system?

The studies to which will be referred to in this essay are all intensive investigations using trained black interviewers conducting anonymous personal interviews on the basis of pre-prepared schedules among carefully-selected samples in the black townships, hostels or in certain typical black rural areas. The studies have been conducted by the author and colleagues in the Centre for Applied Social Sciences at the University of Natal, sometimes in collaboration with the market research firm IMSA (Pty) Ltd., which has a professional full-time team of trained interviewers of considerable experience. More specific details of each study will be given in footnotes at the appropriate places.

#### PERCEPTIONS OF INFLUX CONTROL IN RELATION TO OTHER ISSUES

In various ways, black people's reactions to a range of aspects of their lives were canvassed in the surveys. One question, from the research conducted in 1981 for the Buthelezi Commission,<sup>1)</sup> for example, was as follows: *"If the government were to ask people like you about improving the lives of Africans today, what should it do first, and after that? (etc.)"*... Ten options were presented. The results were as follows:

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1) The sample in the study for the Buthelezi Commission was composed as follows: Natal/KwaZulu, 900, Witwatersrand Townships 504, Witwatersrand Migrant workers 100.

TABLE 1: PROPORTIONS OF BLACK SUBJECTS DESIRING VARIOUS REFORMS AND POLICY CHANGES, BY REGION AND MIGRANT WORKER STATUS

	PROPORTIONS DESIRING CHANGE		
	Witwatersrand Townships	All Natal/ KwaZulu	Transvaal Migrants
	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>%</u>
Equal education	67	72	59
Wage reform	65	69	89
Abolition of Pass Laws	59	44	79
Combat inflation	25	30	28
Release of leaders	39	29	15
Franchise for blacks	22	33	6
(Lower order items omitted.)			

In another (much earlier) item in the same study, black subjects were asked which two things they would wish the government to change; this time being allowed to answer spontaneously.

Some 33 percent of Witwatersrand respondents mentioned the pass laws, and 21 percent among people in Natal and KwaZulu. Among Migrant Workers, however, the proportion mentioning the pass laws was 60 percent, and among people with less than Std. 2 education it was 50 percent. It is clear that Influx Control creates its greatest frustrations among the less-well-educated workers. These are the people who generally are least likely to have security of tenure in the developed urban areas.

Two smaller samples <sup>2)</sup> in earlier studies were asked to rate, in points out of 10, the desirability of a variety of possible reforms. Table 2 gives the results.

1) The samples were Durban Zulus, 150 (1979), Witwatersrand Pedis, 75 (1979).

TABLE 2: RATINGS IN POINTS OUT OF TEN OF THE DESIRABILITY OF POSSIBLE REFORMS OR OPPORTUNITIES

	AVERAGE RATING	
	Durban Zulus	Witwatersrand Pedis
Better education for self	9,7	8,8
Higher earnings	9,7	9,4
No more Pass Laws	9,1	9,2
A vote with whites	8,7	6,4
Owning a car	8,4	6,8
Land/more land in country	7,9	8,4
(Lower order items omitted.)		

In these two small studies it was once again the case that the less-well-educated people experienced pass law frustrations most keenly.

All the results presented thus far show that pass law frustrations are among the three most salient concerns in the lives of rank and file black people. Particularly those with fewer resources and more tenuous urban rights keenly feel the effects of this system.

However, among relatively well-educated blacks, the pass laws also acquire a singular significance. In a special study among black "middle class" men in Soweto in 1978 (sample 150) with an average education of round the Std.10/Matric level, the following question was posed: *"Which of the following causes you most frustration and hardship?"* The following results emerged:

Influx Control laws	48%
Low incomes	25%
Job reservation	19%
Housing problems	4%
Labour rights	4%
Transport problems	-



- Freedom to seek work anywhere	56%
- Better education	51%
- Skills training	35%
- Strong and powerful leader	20%
- The franchise (vote with whites)	18%
- A strong Trade Union	17%
- Active work in a political organisation	3%

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It is remarkable that among these (largely unionised) workers, when such a range of attractive and suggestive possibilities are presented, the lifting or modification of Influx Control to allow for job mobility should feature above all other issues.

Finally we refer to an interesting comparison obtained in a study among a nation-wide sample of 676 Migrant Contract Workers in 1982. In this study employees were asked to indicate degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with life as a whole and with specific areas of living. They were asked to respond to six pictures of smiling or scowling faces, each associated with statements read out to them: *"very happy"*, *"just happy"*, *"neither happy nor unhappy"*, *"unhappy"*, and *"angry and impatient"*. The following results are relevant:

Proportions of migrant workers *"angry and impatient"* with:

<i>"life as a whole"</i>	33%
<i>"job conditions"</i>	31%
<i>"Pass Laws"</i>	52%

The difference in 20 percent gives some idea of the intensity of frustrations of the effects of Influx Control among those most directly affected, the Migrant Workers on yearly renewable contracts to work as single men in the cities.

## BLACK UNDERSTANDING OF INFLUX CONTROL

From the previous section it is quite clear that the Influx Control legislation is among the top three issues of salience for blacks, virtually irrespective of social group. The legislation itself is complex, however, and the broad sentiments indicated by the results quoted do not necessarily indicate what perceptions exist of the functions of the legislation.

In the study among black workers in Durban, and here we must once again bear in mind that a majority of nearly seven out of ten was unionised, only 18 percent described the function or intention of Influx Control as that of political control or a means to place blacks at a disadvantage. Eighty-two percent described the purpose of Influx Control in rather practical or bureaucratic terms; i.e., as a way of channelling labour, as a means of recording the identity of people, as a means of controlling access to limited resources such as housing.

The question was not posed to refer to the consequences of Influx Control. Had it been, our earlier results would suggest a majority of negative or critical responses. The black workers appear, then, to give the system the benefit of the doubt. The motives of the legislators are seen as practical or bureaucratic without the intention to create hardship. Given the intensity of the frustrations, this is a remarkably forgiving reaction.

These employees were a cross-section, and less than one-half were migrant workers. In the nation-wide study among 676 Migrant Workers referred to earlier, 31 percent (as opposed to the 18 percent among Durban factory workers) described the purpose of pass laws in negative or critical terms. However, among all migrants, even those who gave neutral descriptions of the pass laws, only 25 percent indicated that they felt the laws and regulations had not hindered them in achieving their aspirations. Some 44 percent saw

the laws as actually preventing them from obtaining better work, 24 percent felt constantly exposed to arrest and 17 percent felt limited in their freedom of movement generally.

Furthermore, as many as 74 percent of the migrants felt that it had become more difficult than previously for rural men to obtain work permits. This, obviously, will have been influenced to a considerable extent by the increase in unemployment in that year.

Generally, then, it would seem as if there is a somewhat divided consciousness on Influx Control among blacks. They perceive the system as part of the endless bureaucracy which controls their lives, without necessarily a specific understanding of its political basis. They most probably see it simply as part of the separation of white and black communities which is so long-standing and pervasive as to be beyond thinking of changing. At the same time, however, they feel the consequences very intensely both in terms of material interests and as a massive slight to dignity and status. The divided consciousness suggests that the issue of Influx Control is not yet fully "politicised", as it were. There is a great deal of shared frustration but much less of a common perception of the system which creates the frustration.

#### THE RURAL-URBAN CHOICE

Perhaps the greatest confusion among commentators on the Migrant labour situation exists as regards the rural or urban preferences of migrants. Some people assume that without the fences of Influx Control there would be a massive increase in permanent migration to the cities. Others, usually for ideological reasons, argue that homeland-based blacks have fundamental and enduring ties to their tribal communities and that the only authentic integration for blacks is to be found in the social and political structures of the homelands. As a corollary it is assumed that most migrants would not seek permanent urbanisation if it meant estrangement from their base communities.

In a special investigation among 150 rural blacks in KwaZulu, conducted for the Buthelezi Commission in 1981, the question was posed: *"A man far away in the country works in Durban. He visits home once a month. Would a man like that wish to bring his wife and children to live with him in the town?"* Only some 33 percent of the rural people interviewed felt that he would like to take his family to town. Among those without land to plough and cattle, however, the proportion rose to 50 percent. The dominant reason given for the urban choice was a concern with fatherly duty to guide and socialise children.

These were rurally-based people, however, and the position among migrants could be different. In a study among 200 Pondo migrants interviewed in the Transkei in 1981, however, only 12 percent indicated that they desired rights to work and live in the cities permanently. This 12 percent was reduced by more than half when the suggestion was made (hypothetically) that the security of tenure in the rural area and rights to land might be affected.

Among the married men, 74 percent felt that they saw their families sufficiently often, although they were troubled by the fact that they were not present to attend to family problems and agricultural problems.

In response to a different question, some 83 percent were adamant that they did not wish their wives and children to come to live in town with them. Eighty-one percent of the married men rejected even the possibility of temporary residence in town for their wives. Overwhelmingly, the perception was that the security of their rural tenure and agriculture would be threatened if the spouse were to migrate to the city. Furthermore, the corrosive influence of city life on the morals and manners of wives and children was deplored.

A key issue, judging from the results above, is the commitment to the land allocated under the tribal system or acquired in some other way. In the study among 150 rural people, conducted

for the Buthelezi Commission in 1981 referred to above, the rural people were asked: "Would you consider parting with your land if:

- "you could get a good monthly pension when old." — 93% said NO
- "you obtained a house in town which no one could take away." — 88% said NO

When these rural respondents were asked what resources in town could make it worthwhile for them to leave their land, 70 percent were adamant that nothing would persuade them to relinquish their rural resources.

The inducements which inclined the remaining 30 percent to consider the urban option, in order of priority, were:

- a very good, well-paid job,
- a business in town
- a great deal of wealth, or
- a large beautiful house.

These are large inducements, and the results tend to reinforce the impression of a commitment to a rural base.

Results very similar to these were obtained in an earlier (1976) study among some 600 migrants in Durban not referred to in this essay.<sup>1)</sup> These trends, however, are massively confirmed by the most recent study among 676 migrant workers (referred to earlier) undertaken in 1982 by the Centre for Applied Social Sciences.

This nation-wide study had a sample design which deliberately over-represented certain marginal categories of migrants who would be most inclined to wish to urbanise, such as people who lived "illegally" in white areas or as informal lodgers in townships or people living in hostels but who expressed a desire to escape from hostel life.

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1) See Valerie Møller and Lawrence Schlemmer, *Migrant Workers and the Fundamental Dilemma: Urban Commitment or Rural Return?* Report for Chamber of Mines of South Africa, Durban: Centre for Applied Social Sciences.

The intention in the study was to identify and interview a sufficient number of "marginal" migrants so as to have an adequate sampling base to examine the attitudes and preferences of urbanising people. Yet even with this constructed bias, a strong rural orientation in the sample as a whole prevailed.

For example, 73 percent described themselves as "*a rural person forced to work in the city*". Only 15 percent indicated a desire to retire in the city. This proportion rises to 35 percent among those who have no expectation of acquiring land of their own in the country areas.

Similarly, only 18 percent saw their real home now as being the "white" urban areas. This proportion, however, rises to 36 percent among those with no expectation of land in the rural areas, and to 39 percent among those with Std. 8 or higher education.

In the main study for the Buthelezi Commission, the sub-sample of migrant workers also produced under 20 percent which considered the "white" urban areas as their real home. This estimate appears fairly stable.

Generally then, we have to conclude that the vast majority of rural blacks and migrant workers in the cities see their sojourn as temporary. Should this be seen as a vindication of the limitations on the movement of wives contained in the Influx Control system?

#### PASS LAWS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The answer to the question posed in the last paragraph is a very definite NO. However, in order to demonstrate why black reactions to rural-urban choice are not a vindication of Influx Control laws we have to examine further data.

Among the migrant workers in the nation-wide sample referred to earlier, despite the fact that over 80 percent had no intention of urbanising permanently or bringing their wives or families to town, over 55 percent indicated that they were "*very unhappy*" living apart from their families. A similar result appears in other studies among

migrants which we have conducted.

Hence, while migrants, within the constraints of their present situation, are determined to preserve their rural resources and rural community location, the conditions of migrancy create emotional deprivation and frustration. One cannot conclude, in other words, that migrant workers are adjusted or reconciled to their situation. It is a situation of deep contradictions. There are also political implications.

In the nation-wide study among migrant workers, as we have already shown, 33 percent of the total group were *"angry and impatient about life"*. Among a subsample of people who saw pass laws as oppressive or exploitative, anger and impatience at life in general rose to 52 percent.

Another form of analysis on these data revealed that the migrants who felt allegiance to the ANC were much more inclined than the total group to feel *"anger and impatience"* about Influx Control (69% versus 52% among the whole sample) and were also much more likely to see the pass laws as preventing them from obtaining better work (57% versus 44% among the total group).

In the "pensions" survey among Durban black workers, the subjects who had a political perception of the pass laws; i.e., who defined them as intended to oppress or control blacks were far more likely than the total group to:

- be unhappy or angry with life in general (41% versus 28% in the total group)
- be unhappy about progress in work (49% versus 31%)
- worry a great deal about work (42% versus 31%)
- be willing to join another pensions strike (64% versus 45%)
- predict another strike (68% versus 31%).

In the study among 150 "middle class" Soweto residents to which we referred earlier on in this paper, those who were *"angry and impatient"* with life in general were more likely to identify pass laws as a cause of frustration than the total group (73% versus 61%). Similarly, in the research for the Buthelezi Commission, both in the Transvaal and in Natal there was an association between generalised political discontent and rejection of the pass laws.

Obviously on the basis of these findings one cannot say that the Influx Control laws cause or create political discontent. One can say, however, that there is a significant and consistent association between life dissatisfaction and a strong rejection of the system of pass laws. This association also extends to work dissatisfaction and even to a relatively militant attitude in labour relations.

The implication is, then, that Influx Control laws are prominent in the mesh of factors which are associated with militancy of sentiments and perhaps even with an activist orientation.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear from these results that Influx Control laws are among the three most salient factors associated with discontent and frustration among black people in general. Among migrant workers the pass laws are the most salient factor. These reactions are particularly due to a perception among black workers that the pass laws impede job-advancement and prevent making the best of work opportunities.

Despite the intensity of frustrations generated by these laws, the most common black perception of them is apolitical at this stage. The pass laws appear to be seen as part of a web of bureaucratic

controls on black lives which are so pervasive that they have become part of the taken-for-granted reality of the situation.

There is, thus, a divided consciousness about them. Majorities among all groups feel and perceive their effects, but not all see the government as intending to create these effects.

There are, however, people who although statistical minorities number hundreds of thousands in absolute terms, see the laws as part of a systematic (and therefore structural) attack upon their interests.

The findings among Migrant Workers show that a minority of less than 20 percent wish to urbanise or to bring their families to the "white" urban areas permanently. They remain committed to their rural resources and communities mainly because they have land, cattle and adequate housing in rural areas. Among migrants who do not have these resources, the commitment to an urban future rises very dramatically.

The acceptance of a temporary status in the cities by migrant workers does not mean that the migrants do not feel the pass laws as an infliction.

They, like everyone else, see the laws and regulations as preventing them from optimising their occupational opportunities. A majority of the married migrants also experience a sense of deprivation because of living apart from their families. Not only is there the loss of social support which affects them, but also the fact that they experience anxiety about not being able to cope with problems and emergencies which arise for their families.

There are also indications from the results quoted in this overview that frustration connected with Influx Control is associated with wider political and workplace discontent. In other words, where

Influx Control becomes a political issue for blacks, it represents a very salient factor in the interacting causes of potential social and labour instability.

#### BRIEF POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Results not shown in the array of findings indicate quite clearly that a "political" understanding of Influx Control is much more likely among people with higher levels of education. We have also presented results which imply that as the availability of rural resources and land declines with increasing density of population in the homelands, the "adaptation" of migrant workers to their oscillating situation will decrease.

Therefore, Influx Control laws will become steadily more prominent as a factor contributing to broader political and labour discontent than is presently the case .

The attitudes which have been presented strongly indicate that the constraints of Influx Control must be eased and the system made less rigid. The results also show that there will not be a massive influx of the families of migrant workers if controls on movement were to be relaxed. A relaxation in the regulations would probably mean that only the minority of migrants who feel themselves blocked in attempts to urbanise would opt to settle in the cities.

There would be distinct advantages for our overall economy and society if urbanisation were to be possible for the minority which desires it. The political dangers contained in Influx Control arise mainly in this minority of migrants which feels itself constrained.

Any attempt to pin people to a homeland future who do not enjoy access to resources in the homelands will simply fuel instability and will continue to discredit the idea of decentralised black authority

in certain parts of the country.

Blocked urbanisation could easily become a major factor contributing to South Africa's instability. Because it applies to such a small minority of people in the homelands and among migrant workers and because it can so dramatically politicise this minority, it is a manifestly irrational policy to be maintained. The costs outweigh whatever benefits may exist in reducing pressure on urban resources.



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