The massacre of 34 migrant workers at the Marikana mine in August 2012 has raised and continues to raise important questions of an analytical and political kind in South Africa. The reason is arguably because both the miners and the state did not react according to theoretically expected ways. The workers insisted on representing themselves and seemed to reject trade union representation while the state did not pursue its response through corporatist structures, something a liberal democratic state would be expected to do, but rather reacted with intense violence.

Yet the dominant accounts see the Marikana moment either as a criminal act or as a simple effect of the conflictual relations between labour and capital. But other questions also arise. One such question is not unconnected to the displacement of migrant labour from official discourse and not least because the idea of 'migrant labour' has been replaced in state discourse by other terms such as 'illegal immigrant'. In other words whereas in the 1980s Harold Wolpe and others had seen the 'migrant labour system' as the social foundation of the apartheid state, with the legal demise of apartheid, migrant labour although still extant has disappeared from dominant nationalist discourse today. The ideological context is one for which migrants who come to the city whether from rural areas or from abroad tend to be seen as 'foreigners' or 'outsiders', as burdens on society not as builders of industry. It should be recalled that the majority of workers at Marikana (especially the RDOs) were migrants from the Eastern Cape and also included some from the traditional 'periphery' of the South African economy.

A number of questions arise therefore: How is the subjectivity of the striking miners to be understood? Were they simply strikers for a higher wage or were they rebellious workers threatening state power? Did they threaten only the NUM or traditional unionism as such? Were they acting on their own volition or were they being manipulated by agitators and how did this question inform state thinking? How far were poverty and living conditions causes of the strike? What were the consequences of this moment for worker organisations in trade unions? What was the role of migrancy in shaping workers' subjectivities? Is the rural still present in the urban (to paraphrase Mahmood Mamdani)? How are we to understand the role of women and community members in the strike?

On the side of the state a number of questions also arise which cannot simply be reduced to its representing the interests of capital. It is in fact extraordinary to think that it has become possible for a state founded on liberal-democratic norms to react so brutally to a workers’ strike. What does the state action tell us if anything regarding the character of South African democracy? Was the deployment of violence in this instance an accidental occurrence or the effect of a systemic problem? Is there any connection between this instance of violence and other forms of violence (such as xenophobic violence or police violent reactions to Abahlali baseMjondolo or to community protests) in the country? Are we creating a ‘culture of violence’ in South Africa? Do apartheid and colonial thinking still exercise effects on state power? Does the migrant labour system still influence the character and subjectivity of the post-apartheid state?

Full papers will be presented which will address these questions and others.

Presenters include: Ms Sarah Bruchhausen (Rhodes), Dr Judith Hayem (Université de Lille1), Ms Camalita Naicker (Rhodes), Prof Michael Neocosmos (Rhodes), Prof Suren Pillay (UWC), Dr Paul Stewart (Wits).
PROGRAMME

08.30 - 08.45  Welcome  Fred Hendricks (Dean, Humanities)

08.45 – 09.00  Introduction  Michael Neocosmos (UHURU)

09.00 - 10.00  Worker Struggles as Community Struggles: The Politics of Protest in Nkaneng  Camalita Naicker (UHURU)

10.00- 11.00  Understanding Marikana through the Mpondo Revolts  Sarah Bruchhausen (UHURU)

11.00-11.30  Tea

11.30- 12.30: Citizen and Migrant: Rethinking Political Violence Then and Now  Suren Pillay (CHR, UWC)

12.30 – 13.00  General Discussion

13.00 14.00  Lunch


15.00 – 16.00  'We came together as Rock Drill operators (…) the only thing we want is to see the employer': An analysis of workers’ political subjectivity in Marikana  Judith HAYEM (Clercé, Lille 1 University, France)

16.00 – 17.00  The Marikana Moment: worker rebellion, state massacre and the failure of politics as representation  Michael Neocosmos (UHURU)

17.00 – 17.30  Summing up and Conclusions

Chair: Richard Pithouse

Abstracts

1.  Understanding Marikana through the Mpondo Revolts. Sarah Bruchhausen, UHURU, Rhodes University

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate some of the ways in which rural histories can enhance our understanding of both rural and urban resistance, both past and present, in contemporary South Africa. In order to do so, it explores two books in conversation with each other, ThembelaKepe and LungisileNtsebeza’s edited volume Rural Resistance in South Africa: The Mpondo Revolts after Fifty Years as well as Peter Alexander, ThapeloLekgowa, BotsangMmope, Luke Sinwell and BonganiXezwi’sMarikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer. These two books provide a useful platform from which to engage in a re-examination of rurally based protest and repression in order to locate some of the suggestive links, particularly in regard to the transmission of repertoires of struggle, between the Marikana strike and the Mpondo revolts, as well as the on-going struggles of the organised poor in some of South Africa’s urban centres.
2. 'We came together as Rock Drill operators (...) the only thing we want is to see the employer': An analysis of workers' political subjectivity in Marikana Judith Hayem, Clerés, Lille 1 University, France Judith.hayem@univ-lille1.fr

Analysing the interviews collected by P. Alexander and his team (Marikana a view from the Moutain a case to answer) as well as interviews conducted by journalists, not only as sources of information but also as an indication of what striking mineworkers thought, the paper examines Marikana strikers' political subjectivity during the first sequence of the strike (i.e before the police killings). I show that the strikers' insistence on being received and listened to by the employer himself without any mediation from the Unions, reflected their political will to be acknowledged for themselves, as RDOs and workers. I contend that this political principle guided the workers as much as their demand for a salary increase. I argue that their insistence on being independent from trade unions and outside the usual bargaining process is a key reason for the brutal state intervention to try and stop the strike. In conclusion, I will discuss the meaning of the appearance of this new figure of the worker in South Africa as well as the qualification of Government politics in dealing with it.

3. Worker Struggles as Community Struggles: The Politics of Protest in Nkaneng Camalita Naicker, UHURU, Rhodes University

This paper examines the changing spatial landscape of the mines in the post-apartheid era. It is here that the link between worker and community struggles becomes apparent, given the changing nature of space and community on the mines. It becomes more difficult to deny women’s roles and contributions to political life on the mines in South Africa when we are confronted with the Marikana massacre. For the first time, women on the mines have made a public statement about living and working and being on the mines, a realm of experience previously ignored or silenced in most labour historiography. After the 1980s, mine-compounds were ethnically de-segregated and in the recent past, mine companies began to offer a living out allowance (LOA) to mineworkers who preferred not to stay in the hostels. As a result, there was an immediate growth of shack settlements around the platinum belt. With the development of shack settlements has been the introduction of family life on the mines, which has brought with it a new form of community politics that has not adequately been addressed in the public sphere or in new labour literature. It shows the continuation of a subaltern sphere of politics on the mines evidenced by the worker committees, and it shows how these struggles are linked to, and reinforced by the struggles of women and community. The paper presents research done in Marikana in November 2012 and it is an attempt to write a living history of people who currently occupy the shack settlement called Nkaneng.

4. The Marikana Moment: worker rebellion, state massacre and the failure of politics as representation. Michael Neocosmos, UHURU, Rhodes University

The state massacre of 32 migrant workers at the Marikana mine in August 2012 has raised and continues to raise important questions of an analytical and political kind in South Africa. The reason is arguably because both the miners and the state did not react according to theoretically predictable ways. The workers insisted on representing themselves and seemed to reject trade union representation as such (at least initially), while the state did not pursue its response through corporatist institutions either, something a liberal democratic state would have been expected to do. Rather it reacted with extreme violence. Yet the dominant accounts insist on seeing the Marikana moment either as a simple criminal act or as an effect of the conflictual relations between labour and capital.

These accounts are structural at heart. Of course it is obvious that this moment reflected an institutional failure as both sides acted outside processes of ‘collective bargaining’ inter alia. But institutions of state can lose their legitimacy and this is what happened in this case. Yet the dominant accounts are insufficient and often unhelpful; they simply see political subjectivity – whether that of the miners or that of the state – as representing conflicting interests: those of labour and capital. But much more is required for an explanation than a genuflection towards political economy. After all, the miners acted with reason as thinking beings, while the state reacted beyond liberal-democratic norms. In each case those actions were subjectively motivated.
The paper will provide an account of Marikana as a historical moment illustrating a crisis of theory as well as a crisis of politics in South Africa. It will be shown not only that workers are capable of thinking rationally for themselves, but that the deployment of violent state repression on that day can be understood as an effect of a systemic political subjectivity which the state has been operationalising in uncivil society since at least 2007. An appropriate account of this moment and its effects requires the superseding of the understanding of politics as merely expressive of class interests.

5. Citizen and Migrant: Rethinking Political Violence Then and Now Suren Pillay, Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape

There is a rich history of scholarship in Southern Africa on the migrant. It is largely a scholarship interested in the migrant as a migrant labourer. That this happens reflects a certain political and intellectual convergence, a particular conjuncture, which produced that kind of subject and object. What if we return to the question of the migrant, not only as labour, but as a political subject? As a mobile subject forever having to ask the question, where you from, and never assumed to be from the place you're in or having the right to be in the place you're in? As the political subject then through which to think the violence of apartheid, and to think the violence of the postapartheid?


Since 23 January 2014, the overwhelming majority of the 70 000 mineworkers on strike on the platinum belt in South Africa are back in their rural homesteads. They are apparently tilling their lands, looking after their wives and rural families and trying to live on R5 a day. This is the social buffer of a solid strike whispered to last for six months if necessary. The mineworkers’ union, the Associated Mineworkers and Construction Workers Union (AMCU), have instructed them to listen to the radio to know when to return to work.

The exclusively migrant labour rock drill operator (RDOs) occupation is the backbone of the strike. To begin to understand this strike – as was the case with the 2012 mining strike wave – the role of the rock drill operators (RDOs) must consequently be appreciated. Independent and informal RDO’s workers’ committees have been negotiating directly with management since 1985. AMCU is at least the fifth union which has attempted to formally organise them. After a generation of independent struggle, the RDOs have finally broken the bounds of their occupational syndicalism and united the working class on the platinum belt behind them. A full scale study is required to understand the trajectory of the RDOs struggle and the broader assertion of working class power on the platinum mines: the sit-ins, strikes and occupations since 2009, the Impala strike in February 2012, Marikana in August 2012 and the on-going industry-wide strike.

The currently available, but limited evidence drawn from the voices of platinum workers, the RDOs in particular, strongly suggest these workers’ wage demand of R12 500 a month was straightforwardly rooted in their explicit self-identity as those who work the hardest in the mines, fuelled by the financial pressure of maintaining dwellings on both the platinum belt and their rural homes. Yet this is no ordinary strike. The death of fellow migrant workers at the hands of state violence at Marikana has immeasurably stiffened their resolve. These migrant workers are determined to remain in their rural homes until they win their wage demand. If their union does not negotiate a deal acceptable to them, the experience of the RDOs suggests, workers who return to the platinum mines will again be looking for an organisational voice to articulate their long-held demands.

A Special issue of the Journal of Asian and African Studies on Marikana revolving around revised versions of these papers is currently being worked on