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Azikwelwa ! (We Will Not Ride !) Minibus Taxis in South Africa : Political and Social History of an Anomaly.

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The Kombis or minibus taxis are typical of the South African urban landscape. People will often link them to the segregationist policy of the 45 years of the apartheid era, but if one takes a look at other parts of the world, from Latin America to Asia, or other parts of the African continent, other countries also adopted this type of semi-public transport. Vehicles are small vans which can host 16 people on four rows, including that of the driver. Unlike buses, there are no routes, stops or fares publicly announced or fixed in advance. Competition, the number of potential passengers and custom will ultimately determine the busiest routes, the most convenient spots to park and the fares -which are based on the destination of the passenger's ride. It is assumed there are 130, 000 operating taxis in the country, directly providing employment for 185, 000 people and indirectly generating another 150, 000 employments. Strange as it may seem, it is the overwhelming means of transport with an average of 65% of all the trips on "public" facilities, far from the 21% with buses or the 14% with trains.

Why is there such a system and what transformation has it undergone since 1994, when the people won the right to political expression through their struggles?

1 - In the beginnings, there were trains for diamonds, gold and other types of ores.

As early as 1913, reports by the head of transport promoted the new mechanized road transport: the train. The main argument was that South Africa, still known as the South African Union, a British colony, was a huge territory in which the two biggest economic centers were 1,400 km apart. What mattered was that the gold, diamond and coal deposits of the northern part of the country around Kimberley and Johannesburg be connected as quickly as possible to the big harbours, notably that of Durban and Cape Town, and that livestock and grain be easily accessible to the market places. Mineral production was to be sent to the world market, agricultural production to the home market in the beginning, and there was also a need to convey the imported goods for the development of the colony.

British colonizers had both a financial and strategic interest in the building of the railroads, following their policy of imperialist expansionism in Africa. The tremendous state investments in the railway system and in the harbour facilities were first there to comply with the mine owners' needs.

In June 1976, when the youth took to the streets and defied apartheid it was just a month since the railway line from the iron mines of Sishen ,in the North, to Saldanha Bay, near Cape Town, had been opened. Two years after the mines and the townships had been on the verge of revolution in 1987, this line set a world record of the longest and heaviest iron train in the world... Monopolistic almost from the start, the extraction industry did not want to pay high fares for a private transport system. As a consequence, and from the very beginning, the transport industry had been run by the state and politically controlled. For example, the Motor Carrier Transportation Act of 1930 "prohibited all transportation of goods or passengers by road for profit without a permit obtained from a Local Road Transportation Board".¹ This act was still enforced at the end of the 1980's and it is this very dictatorship on the transport industry which boosted capitalist companies such as De Beers and Anglo-American.

And of course there was another kind of dictatorship burdening the great masses of the African population. The settlers, who had fought each other on the military field ten years earlier in what everybody considers today as the first industrial and international war of modern times, with concentration camps and hundreds of thousands of soldiers involved, seemed to easily agree on dispossessing the inhabitants of the big majority of their lands. In 1913, the Native Land Act compelled 80% of the population to live on 13% of the land. The developing industries, especially that of the mine and of agriculture, needed a numerous workforce, so the state intervened to legalize the theft of land. It strengthened the landowners and left no other choice to the people but to look for salaried jobs. This violent process of proletarianization was opposed by both African laborers and white workers during numerous strikes or real uprisings. But, in South Africa like elsewhere in the world, the Second World War accelerated the ongoing process.

¹ Jackie Dugard, 'From Law Intensity War to Mafia War : Taxi violence in South Africa (1987-2000)' *Violence and Transition*: 10

2 - Bus boycotts and first taxis.

If people, be they Black or White, had been forced to get closer to the towns and cities to look for jobs and if the flow of African workers was strictly restricted to the needs of industrial production and services through the humiliating and discriminating system of the “pass laws”, nothing had been planned as far as housing was concerned. Black and White workers coming from the countryside had to be accommodated somehow and they would often pile up with other families or relatives in one single place. While White workers were quickly able to rent or buy their own house, the very right of Black workers to remain in the city after working hours was not recognized. Tens of thousands were accommodated in the backyards of the rich for whom they worked, others were only temporarily accepted in what was called “locations” within white areas, others lived in “compounds”, exclusively for Black males, and still others had gone far away from the inner cities (around 20 km away) and had first been able to rent or even buy their own housing in sort of mixed areas. This was the case in Alexandra for example, where 40,000 people lived in the 1930's, 15 km away from downtown Johannesburg. Even that far away from the cities, African people started to be threatened by the policy of “segregated housing” which came from the higher authorities but was taken up by many Whites¹. Prime Minister Smuts, who had proved on whose side he stood when ordering the massacre of several hundred miners on strike in 1922 and who would receive the recognition of what is called the “international community” when he was asked to write the charter of the newly found United Nation Organization in 1945, clearly stated that white supremacy was to be maintained in South Africa. Part of that plan was to foster separate living areas.

During the war years no new housing was built as most resources were directed to the war economy. Smuts' government spent money on subsidising new industries to produce weapons, uniforms and other war requirements. The Rand's city councils, responsible for urban housing, had insufficient funds to accommodate the massive increase of newcomers, who were supposedly 'temporary'. And employers refused to pay extra for housing.

The central government glossed over the problems by commissioning city councils to work out housing plans to be put into operation once the war was over. Central government policy

¹ This policy did not start thus with the Nationalists in 1948.

was one of segregation. 'It is fixed policy', declared Prime Minister Smuts in parliament, 'to maintain white supremacy in South Africa... maintaining our white civilisation and keeping our white race pure.' For this reason, he said, it was necessary to set up separate residential areas and to build separate townships¹.

What was impending before the Second World War was to be implemented afterwards with the first large scale "forced removals". Confronted to such violent policies, and to a continuing flow of people coming from the countryside, initiatives were taken by the people themselves who started to build shelters from scratch, improving them as soon as they could. They joined forces and presented sometimes the authorities with a fait accompli, asking for roads, water or electricity. But these areas were built further and further from the cities and transportation to and from these places was always a big problem. It was a considerable waste of time, money and energy for the people. Since industrial interests had had railroads built for their coal and livestock, they could now use them for the transport of their workers and they did so against money; South Africa being a country where people travel longest distances by train to go to work. As for the rest of the transportation needs, nothing was provided for. In this empty space which neither the authorities nor the bosses cared about filling in, some saw the opportunity to start small businesses and started running buses. There were white and black bosses in the beginning and they shared a common interest in agreeing on fares. They did so by constantly trying to impose increases on the back of the passengers. People responded by boycotting those busses and in Alexandra for example, there were repeated boycotts in 1940, 1942, 1943 and 1944 against an attempt to raise the fares by 33% from 3 to 4 pennies. The last black business had to close in 1944, but the other ones had their busses bought off by the state a year later. In 1945, a Public Utility Company (PUCO) was created which only agreed to operate as long as it received public subsidies for its profitable activities. It was a centralization, which, twelve years later led to a centralized anger, when the company, now named PUTCO, announced a fare increase from 4 to 5 pennies. During this famous three-month boycott in 1957, thousands of people, women, children, maimed or aged workers all bravely walked tens of kilometers to go to work and come back. Their determination not to yield, even to a first compromise leading to the reimbursement of part of the increase through a complicated process, changed the situation.

¹ Callinicos, Luli, *A Place in the City* (Johannesburg: London: Raven Press, 1993).
<http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/specialprojects/Luli/Place-in-the-city/Unit2/unit2.htm>

The bosses had long refused to pay wage increases so that their workers could afford transportation, but during this first mass movement where people took their decisions during open meetings and where production and business in general started to be impaired, they had to admit to paying a transport tax to public institutions which in return agreed to keep subsidizing the bus company on public funding.

Amidst this 1957 boycott, individuals, both black and white, started to give a ride to other people in their private cars. It happened both as a necessity and as a sign of solidarity which could sometimes be costly, especially when the driver was a black person. The police was indeed ordered to harass people and arrest them on the charge of overloading. Within this context of exploited, low-paid work force and of racial segregation, which had created misery and destitution, sprang solutions which were forcibly incoherent and non economical, but they at least were there to try to answer a basic need. And this is how started to operate the first paying cars where the driver would take people who went more or less in the same direction. We could say that even this car-sharing¹ within a prison-like poverty system, which became a profitable activity using minibuses, only came into existence because of people's mobilization.

3 - Taxi owners are checked by law but they nonetheless manage to multiply.

In the 1960's it was very difficult to obtain a license to operate a taxi since the 1930 Transport Law was still running and different clauses regarding duration of residence in one place, good behaviors at work and thousands other irksome regulations prevented 90% of black applicants to get what they wanted. The rich layer of society still fiercely needed its state monopoly in the transport industry to make profit, even though this was a time when slowly people started to drive private taxis.

And once again, people's response to this situation was detrimental in the opening of new opportunities. The PUTCO company, who benefited to the Carleo family, was not only responsible for expensive fares and inadequate services for its passengers, it also under-paid its own drivers. In 1972, these drivers decided to go on strike for wage increases and to protest against a R5 fine imposed for six months whenever a driver was found guilty of

¹ Interestingly enough, the official French translation of car-sharing (co-voiturage) only appeared after the great railway strike of 1995.

letting someone in the bus with no ticket. The entire work force was threatened to be laid-off and township inhabitants had to resume to riots to free imprisoned workers, but once again the state had to yield money. PUTCO was awarded an annual R2, 5 million subsidy. Like for the previous struggles, people did not win better living conditions through wage increases from their bosses, but they succeeded in curtailing the burden of transport expenditures (it was vital because it represented over 20% of their expenses) and they won the irreplaceable knowledge that they could have a tremendous political strength.

In front of the racist stupidities of the white nationalist leaders, which led to the uprisings of the seventies, like that of Soweto in 1976 and which menaced business in general, South African bosses called for a commission of enquiry. In 1977, the Van Breda Commission on Road Transport not surprisingly concluded that: "passenger transport was an unattractive government investment due to its escalating politicisation and economic inefficiency" (Dugard 2001 : 11). Bosses who had benefited for years from the subsidized transport system suddenly realized that they were supposed to be in favor of the market economy, that is to say of a free competitive system. Like South African Jackie Dugard puts it in an article taken from her Phd dissertation on the topic, business leaders tried from that period on to sell their idea of the free market to the black townships. "Deregulation was implemented as a means of strengthening the economy by giving enough blacks a stake in the system to dilute the revolutionary climate ((Dugard 2001 : 10)." However it was easier to claim than to actually implement because the big majority of the people did not want to buy this type of economy; their own agenda was socialist or communist oriented. And for ten more years, they seemed to be in the lead. However, both the white businessmen and the aspiring few black owners finally got what they wanted from government. The White Paper on Transport policy in 1987 and the Deregulation Act of 1988 legalized minibuses carrying 16 people, recognizing thus a new sector of the economy, namely the taxi industry.

"Industry" is not only the sector of the economy, it also clearly shows to which extent this phenomenon had developed and was developing, because both the political authorities and the financial interests of the country did not, and could not anymore, take care of the transport of the workforce to the workplaces. This phenomenon was only able to take root among the black population because its own leaders (ANC, SACP and PAC mainly) accepted to negotiate and had no intention whatsoever to harm the fundamental structures of the

economy, or the private property of capital in the country. They labored to focus the objectives of people's political struggles around the sole right to vote and they let it know that Blacks themselves could also have access to the business world. This policy is now fully sponsored by the ANC government under the name of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE).

As soon as the political obstacles were removed through the Deregulation Act, licenses were suddenly handed out like confetti. Corruption spread and some people could get one license free for one which they had bought. It resulted in an immediate commercial war between the various operators of the new taxi industry. This was consciously organized chaos and destabilization efforts went even further in the townships which had become uncontrollable for the authorities. For example, in 1990, while an existing taxi association, Lagunya -for Langa, Guguletu and Nyanda Townships- had been regulating the restricted taxi business for over 20 years, an opponent association, Webta -for Western Cape Taxi Association- was unfairly favored by the authorities when it was the only association allowed in the downtown area of Cape Town where most of taxi earnings was made (Dugard 2001 : 6). A very similar conflict arose in Alexandra with the two taxi associations SABTA and SALDTA. This political objective of "diluting the revolutionary climate" resulted in bloody armed confrontations leaving several hundred dead in just a few years. Victims of this political violence were people in the townships themselves because as it was shown during some of the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, the police was ordered to try to destabilize the areas where people organized for mass demonstrations.

4 - The coming to power of the ANC.

This climate of extreme violence in the taxi industry continued to spread because it benefited those who did not want to yield their power and because there was no fundamental change in sight for the availability of transport in the country. In 1994, and after bitter struggles under harsh conditions, South Africans had won political freedom. However, the new "rainbow" leaders agreed with the previous pale nationalist leaders not to require anything from business owners, for the workers to be able to go to work. Reorganizing both urban life and transport infrastructures so that it would comply with people's needs, was out of the question. As Jackie Dugard once more put it: "The continuation of violence into the

democratic era is mainly a result of the success of violence as a means of extracting profits” (Dugard : 15).

And this violence did increase: there were 123 dead (murders) in 1991 and 258 eight years later in 1999. Violence also escalated because of an increasing number of associations and joined association within mafia-like networks. Weekly membership to such associations can vary between R25 and R2, 000, depending on the routes. It is assumed there are approximately 1,300 such associations which in turn join other regional associations. These “mother-bodies” can earn as much as R100, 000 each month and for each affiliated association. Another cause for the ongoing violence in the deregulated taxi industry, has been the remains of the old police forces, those very police forces who had directly enforced the policy of destabilization and terror in the townships. Several enquiries, among which an official report by Jane Barret for the International Labor Organization, provided evidence that police officers owned approximately 10% of the taxi industry as individuals¹. The same officers still hold the power to deliver conformity licenses for the vehicles. The police were accused on several occasions to have links with the mafia networks behind the “mother-bodies”. The people of South Africa pay a heavy price for economic backwardness and lasting exploitation. But the political price may also be heavy as those nostalgic of the old regime are eager to demonstrate that what they consider a black government is unable to curb violence.

5 - Towards a greater integration to the world market.

The taxi industry market had become a real jungle and on several occasions, the new government decided, until recently still, to resume to closing the taxi ranks in major cities, sometimes for several weeks in a row. With the first multiracial elections in between in 1994, it took 13 years from 1987 for two organized and centralized forces to appear in the taxi industry. The first was born in the year 2000 with the establishment of the South African Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU)² and the second, which was called the South African National Taxi Council (SANTACO) and was a business association, was created in 2001. In today’s political context, and because part of the government’s policy is

¹ Barret, Jane, ‘Organizing in the Informal Economy: A Case Study of the Minibus Taxi Industry in South Africa’, ILO publication, 2003 : 8.

² They are supporting a minimum wage which will probably range from R900 to R1, 300 per week.

based on the most advertised Black Economic Empowerment, SANTACO is in the foreground with this both arrogant and derisory consciousness of being the first sector for the concentration of black-owned capital. Because of the economic role of transports and of the symbolic political importance of the sector, government can decide to orchestrate real media campaigns, like the one which took place last year in the *Mail and Guardian* for several months with an article on the taxi industry almost every other day. The coalition of the taxi business interests directly stems from the political decision to form the National Taxi Task Team (N triple T) in November 1994. As Jane Barret explains, “Initially it was comprised of nine provincial representatives of owners in the taxi industry, nine government representatives, and nine specialist advisors. [...] some time later organized labor was asked to participate [and SATAWU] took up the three seats it was offered (Barret : 14).” Not surprisingly, the recommendations of this commission echoed the business claims. They exposed the public subsidies given to the bus and train sectors while taxis said they had none. And they stressed the high costs of replacement of vehicles. In 1994 however, and while thousands of South Africans walked several kilometers or stood in line for hours to vote with pride for the first national election in their life, one could already see in which direction would flow the money when a public subsidy was granted to taxi associations in big cities like Cape Town for taking some people to the polling stations¹.

These incentives started what is now called the “recapitalization of the taxi industry”. The agenda was supposed to be achieved by 2005 and its main decision consisted in a scraping allowance of R30 000 for each vehicle to be replaced. It was not made compulsory to buy a new taxi since one of the targets was to have the number of taxi-owners decreased and to concentrate the capital ownership in the industry. Conversely, one had to own a license (paid to the local authorities) and a taxi association membership (paid to the mother-bodies or the business union) to be allowed to buy a new taxi. The new vehicles were supposed to be standardized to the size of 18 or 35 seats, with a pre-paid electronic system for collecting the fares of passengers, replacing thus the people who worked as fare collectors in the taxis. A public bidding would determine which of several auto companies would manufacture this unique vehicle for the South African market.

¹ This subsidy was quite low, around R48,000 but it caused chaos when only awarded to one specific association.

But on July 1st 2005, the program was officially launched again, after bitter inner struggles within the world of taxi owners. In loudly voicing their grievances, taxi owners managed to raise the bidding to R50, 000 for the scraping allowance. And if they first asked for a quick enforcement of the recapitalization program, mainly of the payment of the subsidy, they ultimately asked for and obtained a four-year extension of the deadline to buy vehicles with the new standards. What is more, government seems to have completely abandoned the compulsory size of 18 or 35 seaters: owners would still be able to buy the old models, including second-hand ones. And among the eight auto company ready to build the new taxis, all of them and not only one, would be able to benefit from this forced but shrinking market.

Meanwhile the press revealed the figures at stake in this policy. Everyone had to be aware that the trains got R2, 4 million and the buses R2, 1 billion in public money. It was just claimed fair by the taxi owners to get at least as much in subsidies. It was then first announced that the government had made a provision of R2, 7 billion for transformations in transports from which a total of a third would be designed for the taxi recapitalization. Another figure indicated that R900 million for three years or R7, 7 billion for five years would be allocated to reform the taxi industry, which gives an average of a little bit over a billion Rand per year¹.

The saddest in this situation is that it all comes back to mere figures. Not was it thought of completely shaking the social structures, from wealth ownership in the country, to the distribution of incomes or urban segregation. People's plight is not an official data. The only focus is to marginally shake sectors of the economy which had become too fragmented and were harming the general flow of business or the aspiration of a handful of newly rich men who had been prevented from making money under apartheid.

When taken from a broader perspective than the sole transportation question, the recapitalization agenda is part of a scheme whose main objective is to lower the cost of labor in the country to make it more competitive. This comprehensive presentation is particularly striking in a public document published on the Internet and called *Moving South Africa: a transport strategy for 2020*². South Africa has reintegrated the world market and all economic

¹ *Mail and Guardian*, May 20th and June 6th 2005.

² <http://www.transport.gov.za/projects/msa/index.html>

indicators are compared with those of the rest of the world. One can for example find charts showing that public transport in South Africa is inadequate because in the developed countries, there is a huge amount of fixed capital being invested in public transport, making it cheap for any additional individual transport while the big amount of private and fragmented capital in the taxis make any additional individual trip expensive. If one translates this obscure language in simple terms, it means that people are confronted to the exact same situation than in the forties when they had to oppose unwillingness by capitalists to pay higher wages or higher taxes for public facilities. The business class as a whole considers that the taxi industry is against rational organization for maximum profits. However, a small portion of an aspiring wealthy category of people would like to keep enjoying profit-making in the taxi industry. This contradiction has led the loud announcements on the necessary transformations of the taxi industry to the present stalemate where public money has started to be handed away without any other changes. The world analysts also underlined the two opposed burdens of the road transport in the country. On one side there are the striders and “stranded” passengers: they cannot afford any public transport and they go on foot. They represent 8,2 million people and 35% of the population. As the report openly said, “they will grow by 28% by 2020 if nothing is done to meet their needs”. And on the other side, there are the officially named “stubborn” passengers who will only use their own private cars. They represent 14% of the population but this figure is twice as big as other comparable countries in the world, like Turkey or Argentina. Capitalist overexploitation and apartheid led to millions being deprived of means of transport and a minority developing car frenzy... A last feature among numerous scares left by a hideous system is the longest distance driven for each taxi ride and the lowest average of taxi occupancy if compared to other comparable countries. In order not to conceal the origin of such a report, it has to be said that it is named after a previous program implemented in the US under the name of... *Moving America*. This does not mean that the report speaks an American language but rather it speaks the international language of business interests, and like the authors explain, economy does not care about national boundaries. No one can guess what the future of the taxi industry will be in South Africa, but unless they resume to mass opposition, the people and their needs are clearly not on the agenda.

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