

RE-THINKING ARTICULATION THESIS: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES IN POST-APARTHEID SA

Sithembiso Bhengu

Chris Hani Institute (CHI), Johannesburg, South Africa

Email: sithembiso@chi.org.za

Abstract: The paper expands on research arguments from my PhD research (Wage Income, Migrant Labour and Livelihoods beyond the Rural-Urban Divide in Post-Apartheid South Africa: a case of Dunlop Durban factory workers), which examined workers, wages and livelihoods, beyond the rural-urban divide. It revisits Harold Wolpe's 'articulation of modes of production' thesis, through which he theorised the relationship between production and reproduction of the capitalist regime of accumulation through cheap labour power in South Africa. From his seminal "Economy and Society" edition, Wolpe presented how the development of capitalist accumulation entailed bifurcation of productive and reproductive spheres of the economic system, which enabled mining and later industrial (manufacturing) capital to pay wages far below the costs of reproducing labour power, through relegating reproduction costs to workers' households in the country side. In this manner, both the colonial and apartheid systems of migrant labour became social and political formations to create and enforce cheap labour power. My research at a tyre manufacturing factory in Durban show that while migrant labour and rural-urban linkages persist, Wolpe's articulation thesis needs revisiting. While the vast majority of African industrial workers continue to maintain active rural-urban family networks, which they service through remittances and in-kind payments, the countryside no longer functions as the reproductive buffer zone, nor is it a source of readily available labour reserves. The paper argues for a rethinking of the articulation thesis in light of the aforementioned observations.

Keywords: Articulation Thesis; Cheap Labour Power; Social Reproduction; Rural-Urban Linkages; Post-Apartheid Accumulation.

INTRODUCTION

The paper revisits Harold Wolpe's "articulation of modes of production" thesis, through which he theorised the relationship between production and the reproduction of capitalist accumulation through cheap labour power in South Africa. In his 1972 contribution to *Economy and Society*, Wolpe argued that the development of capitalist accumulation entailed a bifurcation between the productive and reproductive spheres of the economic system. This enabled mining, and later industrial, capital to pay wages significantly below the cost of reproducing labour power, as the costs of labour reproduction were effectively displaced onto workers' households in the countryside.

Within this framework, the migrant labour system, together with colonial and apartheid forms of political and social control, is theorised as a set of social and political formations that established and enforced regimes of cheap labour. Drawing on research and scholarship on the South African political economy and labour studies, this paper argues that, although migrant labour persists, it has been substantially reconfigured. While the

majority of African industrial workers continue to maintain active rural-urban family networks, sustained through remittances and in-kind forms of support, the countryside no longer functions as the reproductive buffer zone envisaged in Wolpe's formulation, nor does it serve as a readily available reservoir of labour.

The paper therefore calls for a rethinking of the articulation thesis in light of the transformations that have occurred in post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, it argues for a reconsideration of how capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of labour power through cheap labour should be understood under contemporary social, economic, and political conditions.

One of the key claims of the paper is that the reproduction, lives, and livelihoods of the African working class continue to be organised and reorganised beyond the rural-urban divide. While the livelihoods of most African working-class households draw on multiple sources of income (Scully, 2012, 2015), wage income remains the single most important resource for the reproduction of the African working class in post-apartheid South Africa.

The paper further argues that rural–urban linkages continue to play an important role in organising the lives and livelihoods of workers and their extended household networks. These linkages are sustained through the transfer of remittances, both in cash and in kind; the movement and oscillation of workers and extended family members between rural and urban areas; support provided to adult children and extended family members for education and access to urban accommodation while seeking employment; and the continued use of rural homesteads for the performance of traditional rituals. Through these practices, the articulation of production and reproduction beyond the rural–urban divide continues, albeit in reconfigured forms, in post-apartheid South Africa.

The paper situates this argument within key debates in South African political economy, drawing in particular on Wolpe (1972, 1980) on the articulation of modes of production, Fine and Rustonjee (1996) and Fine (2009) on the Minerals–Energy Complex (MEC), and Harvey (2003) on accumulation by dispossession.

WOLPE’S ARTICULATION OF MODES OF PRODUCTION

The articulation of modes of production is a Marxist critique of the capitalist economy that extends Marx’s analysis of the capitalist system, particularly the relationship between the production and reproduction of capitalist accumulation. Wolpe (1980) engages with the concept of articulation to develop a critique of what he terms the **cheap labour power** regime in South Africa. Through the concept of articulation, Wolpe also explains apartheid as a social formation and political apparatus through which the contradictions and crises of capitalist accumulation were managed, particularly as the expansion of capitalist modes of production increasingly undermined pre-capitalist modes of reproduction and subsistence.

For Wolpe (1980; see also Meillassoux 1980: 192), the articulation of modes of production represents an engagement with, and critique of, Marx’s relatively under-theorised account of the development of capitalism in the colonies, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, within classical Marxist literature (Wolpe 1980: 3). Wolpe argues

that Marx’s own writings provide an important starting point for the debate on articulation. In his reading, Marx conceptualises primitive accumulation primarily as the pre-history of the capitalist mode of production, but does not sufficiently explain or theorise how the capitalist mode of production (CMP), once established, relates to and transforms pre-capitalist modes of production (PCMP).

The dominant Marxist interpretation of this relationship, Wolpe argues, can be traced to Marx’s writings, including the *Communist Manifesto*. According to this interpretation, the emergence of capitalism—whether through “internal” development, as in Europe, or through “external” imposition, as in the colonies—was assumed to signal the relatively rapid and ultimately inevitable disintegration of pre-capitalist modes of production and the incorporation of their producers into capitalist relations of production (Wolpe 1980: 2).

From this perspective, classical Marxist theory tends to conceptualise the articulation between the CMP and PCMP in terms of the former progressively dissolving, displacing, or subsuming the latter. This implies a movement towards the separation of direct producers from the means of production. Drawing on *Capital, Volume I*, Wolpe cites Marx:

“As soon as capitalist production is once on its own legs, it not only maintains this separation of producers from the means of production, but reproduces it on a continually expanding scale” (Wolpe 1980, citing Marx).

For Wolpe, however, the concept of articulation points to a more complex and historically contingent relationship between different modes of production. Rather than assuming that the expansion of the capitalist mode of production necessarily results in the complete dissolution of pre-capitalist modes of production, articulation directs attention to the changing relationship between the direct producers of goods and services, the means of production, and the ownership and appropriation of the products of labour.

Wolpe argues that a conventional Marxist approach focused primarily on the expansion and dominance of the CMP leaves insufficient analytical space for the possibility that, at different phases of the circuits of capital or at different stages of capitalist development, the articulation between

the CMP and PCMP may produce transformations of pre-capitalist modes of production without resulting in their complete dissolution. In other words, the incorporation of pre-capitalist relations into capitalist accumulation does not necessarily entail their immediate disappearance or the complete separation of producers from the means of production.

Such an analysis, Wolpe argues, requires more than an examination of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production alone. It also requires an understanding of the structure, dynamics, and reproduction of pre-capitalist modes of production and, crucially, the specific ways in which these modes become articulated with capitalist production. The concept of articulation therefore shifts analytical attention from an assumed linear transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist relations towards an examination of the historically specific and mutually transformative relationships between different modes of production.

At the heart of the concept of the articulation of modes of production is an explanation of capitalist accumulation through super-exploitation, whereby capitalism accumulates by preserving and incorporating modes of subsistence that sustain working-class reproduction outside wage income. In South Africa, the production and reproduction of capitalist accumulation has historically been premised on the preservation of cheap labour power. This was achieved through the articulation of extremely low industrial wages, state mechanisms and legislation that dispossessed Africans of productive land, various forms of taxation and levies that compelled African men to enter migrant labour, and the preservation of rural households and homesteads as sites of livelihood, subsistence, and the reproduction of cheap labour power.

In the *Economy and Society* contributions, Wolpe, together with contributions by Meillassoux and Morris, uses the concept of articulation to explain capitalist accumulation through cheap labour power. The central argument is that the actual costs of the social reproduction of the working class were displaced onto rural subsistence economies and households. Within this theoretical framework, apartheid constitutes a significant social formation that emerged through concrete class struggles while also functioning as a

political mechanism for managing the growing contradictions associated with the bifurcation of social reproduction between the industrial economy and the countryside.

The institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948 was therefore an important, although not determining, factor in shaping the subsequent trajectory of capitalist super-exploitation from the 1950s onwards, contributing to the conditions underlying South Africa's subsequent period of rapid capitalist expansion. The apartheid system itself should be understood as constituting a set of concrete economic, political, and ideological conditions through which capitalist modes of production were shaped, while also emerging from concrete class struggles and reproducing the conditions for further struggles.

The apartheid social formation also represented the political ascendancy of Afrikaner nationalism and sections of farming capital, alongside their class struggles over the supply and control of cheap African labour and their attempts to secure greater leverage within an increasingly industrialised capitalist economy. Through statutory and institutional mechanisms, the farming capitalist class helped establish new conditions for the production and reproduction of cheap labour for both agriculture and industry. These mechanisms linked the regulation of African mobility, land access, taxation, and household reproduction to the wider requirements of capitalist accumulation.

While the apartheid social formation thus reflected the outcome of concrete class struggles in South Africa, it also generated contradictions of its own. These contradictions contributed to the emergence of new forms and terrains of class struggle, which in turn reshaped the political, economic, and social conditions under which capitalist accumulation and labour reproduction took place. The articulation of modes of production should therefore be understood not as a static relationship between capitalist and pre-capitalist forms, but as a historically changing process in which capitalist accumulation, social reproduction, state institutions, and class struggles continually transform one another.

A LIBERAL CRITIQUE OF ARTICULATION OF MODES OF PRODUCTION

Two notable critiques of Wolpe's articulation of modes of production thesis were advanced by liberal economists Nattrass (1981) and Lipton (1985a, 1985b). Their critiques sought to develop an alternative account of the historical trajectory of capitalist development in South Africa, while highlighting what they considered to be two important areas that Wolpe had overlooked in his analysis of capitalist accumulation.

First, Nattrass (1981), while recognising the historical linkages between mining and manufacturing, emphasised the developmental potential of the manufacturing sector. Although she acknowledged the declining capacity of manufacturing to generate unlimited employment by the beginning of the 1980s, she nevertheless viewed the sector as possessing significant potential for economic development. From this perspective, the persistent racial bifurcation of South African society under apartheid constituted a major obstacle to the development of a more competitive manufacturing sector, the expansion of skills, and the emergence of a larger Black middle class.

Lipton (1985a, 1985b), similarly, focused on the developmental potential of manufacturing and commercial agriculture. She argued that these sectors provided forms of economic and occupational flexibility for Black workers that were less available within the mining sector. From this perspective, Wolpe's articulation thesis, centred on capitalist accumulation through cheap labour power, did not fully account for the internal contradictions of capitalist development in South Africa. In particular, Lipton argued that the apartheid political and institutional system increasingly became a constraint on economic development by restricting the development of productive forces and hindering the expansion of industrial and manufacturing production.

Both Nattrass and Lipton therefore drew attention to the tensions between apartheid institutions and the requirements of capitalist development. They argued that the deterioration of the conditions of reproduction of the working class

generated contradictions within the process of accumulation. In their view, apartheid ultimately became detrimental to the development of productive industrial and manufacturing capacity, thereby constraining the broader development of capitalism in South Africa.

For Nattrass (1981) and Lipton (1985b), the central issue underlying the economic crisis was therefore not primarily a conflict between different fractions of capital, but the constraints imposed by the apartheid system itself. From this perspective, the deracialisation of the labour market was regarded as a critical condition for the development of a more dynamic form of capitalism centred on industrial manufacturing. Their analysis thus shifted attention from Wolpe's emphasis on the articulation of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production and the reproduction of cheap labour towards the institutional and economic constraints that apartheid imposed on the development of productive forces.

The disagreement between these approaches therefore concerns not only the interpretation of apartheid but also the underlying dynamics of capitalist development in South Africa. Whereas Wolpe emphasised the structural relationship between capitalist accumulation, cheap labour power, and the reproduction of labour outside the capitalist workplace, Nattrass and Lipton placed greater emphasis on the developmental constraints created by apartheid institutions and the dominance of mining within the South African economy.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Other scholars sought to theorise the contradictions of apartheid capitalism not as external to capital, or as forms of resistance or constraint imposed upon capital, but as integral to the systemic contradictions of capitalist accumulation itself. Bill Freund (2009), for instance, critiques the approaches of Lipton and Nattrass, arguing that their analysis rests on an overly sharp separation between apartheid as a political apparatus and the capitalist mode of

accumulation. To further elucidate the contradictions of apartheid capitalism, it is therefore important to consider the contributions of Freund (1988, 2007), Gelb (1991), Legassick (1974, 1977), Morris (1991), and Fine and Rustonjee (1996), particularly the framework that Fine (2009) describes as the **Minerals–Energy Complex (MEC)**.

The concept of the Minerals–Energy Complex examines a core set of industries associated with large-scale mineral extraction, energy provision, and related downstream sectors. It provides a framework for theorising the broader system of accumulation underpinning the incorporation—or exclusion—of other sectors and its implications for socioeconomic development more generally. The core MEC industries are closely interconnected, with energy provision historically dependent to a significant extent on coal extraction, while mining and mineral-processing industries have absorbed a substantial proportion of the energy produced. The MEC therefore provides a framework for understanding the structural centrality of mining and energy within the development of South African capitalism.

Martin Legassick (1974, 1977; Legassick and Wolpe, 1975), in his historical analysis of systems of accumulation in South Africa, argues that mining capital occupied a central position in the country's system of accumulation from the period of the Anglo-Boer War onwards. South African capitalism, in his account, was built upon and remained dependent on cheap labour. Its development and reproduction involved the mobilisation of state power in ways that served the requirements of capital, alongside the reinvestment and reproduction of institutions and practices associated with the coercive labour economy.

In his critique of Nattrass and Lipton, Legassick argues that manufacturing was unable to fully detach itself from this broader system of accumulation, largely because the advantages derived from the existing system outweighed its costs from the perspective of capital. Consequently, the South African system of accumulation continued to depend upon forms of labour that were neither fully free nor fully reproduced through the wage relation alone throughout much of the twentieth century. Apartheid, understood as a social formation, further institutionalised the role of the state in

coordinating capitalist interests and managing the contradictions within this system of accumulation (Legassick, 1977).

Another important contribution to the analysis of capitalist accumulation in South Africa is David Harvey's (2003) concept of **accumulation by dispossession**. Building on Luxemburg's (1951) analysis of primitive accumulation and what she conceptualised as imperialist accumulation, Harvey uses the concept to analyse processes through which capital accumulation proceeds through dispossession, particularly in response to contradictions associated with over- and under-accumulation. Accumulation by dispossession thus extends the analysis of primitive accumulation beyond the historical transition to capitalism and conceptualises dispossession as an ongoing feature of capitalist accumulation and imperialism.

This perspective has also been applied to contemporary forms of global capitalism. For example, Bond (2004, 2005) analyses processes described as the "looting of Africa" in relation to broader patterns of uneven and combined development. From this perspective, dispossession is not simply a historical process associated with the origins of capitalism but can continue to operate through contemporary forms of global accumulation.

Marxist scholarship has consequently demonstrated how apartheid can be understood as a social formation that emerged within, and contributed to, a specific historical configuration of capitalist accumulation. While the capitalist social formation of the 1970s and 1980s generated significant contradictions for manufacturing and other sectors, it nevertheless retained the broader orientation of a system of accumulation dependent upon cheap labour power. The crises of the 1970s and 1980s that ultimately contributed to the dismantling of apartheid can, in this interpretation, be related to the progressive deterioration of the mode of labour reproduction that had historically depended upon pre-capitalist and subsistence forms of production in the countryside.

The crisis of capitalist accumulation was therefore simultaneously a crisis of the reproduction of labour power. As the capacity of rural subsistence economies to reproduce labour power deteriorated, the costs of reproduction could no longer be externalised to the same extent from

capitalist production. This generated increasing contradictions within the system of accumulation, culminating in a broader crisis of the South African economy, particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gelb, 1987, 1991).

Apartheid should therefore not be analysed solely as a political system of racial control. Although it emerged through concrete class struggles and was facilitated by state institutions that served the interests of sections of the farming capitalist class and Afrikaner nationalism, it also represented a particular historical form of capitalist accumulation organised and enforced through the state. Through apartheid policies and institutions, mining and farming capital were able to sustain and reproduce cheap labour power by maintaining an articulated relationship between capitalist production and reconstituted forms of pre-capitalist and subsistence reproduction.

The supply of cheap labour was, however, itself a persistent problem for the capitalist class, particularly for farming capital, which faced competition for African labour from industry, where wages were generally higher (Callinicos, 1985, 1987; Morris, 1980; Terreblanche, 2002). The relationship between agricultural, mining, and industrial capital was therefore characterised by both interdependence and contradiction.

Wolpe (1980, 1988) similarly argues that the crisis of South African capitalism emerged from contradictions within the prevailing system of accumulation. As the productive forces developed, contradictions within the system increasingly intensified. These included statutory policies that further restricted African households' access to agricultural land and means of subsistence, as well as the deterioration of land-use capacity in the African reserves as a result of both natural and social processes.

The unrest and resistance of the 1950s can therefore be interpreted, within this framework, as forms of class struggle emerging from the deepening contradictions of accumulation and reproduction. The capitalist state responded to these struggles through coercive and repressive mechanisms, enabling the existing system to be stabilised and creating the conditions for another period of capitalist expansion during the 1960s.

These contradictions resurfaced and intensified during the 1970s, contributing to the deepening

crisis of South African capitalism during the 1980s and ultimately to the dismantling of apartheid in 1994 (Fine and Rustonjee, 1992; Gelb, 1991). Within the Marxist political-economy literature, a significant body of scholarship therefore interprets the crisis of apartheid as inseparable from the contradictions of capitalist accumulation, on the grounds that apartheid constituted a particular social formation through which capitalist accumulation was organised and reproduced (Fine, 2009; Fine and Rustonjee, 1996; Legassick, 1974, 1977; Wolpe, 1972, 1980, 1988).

Thus, although the capitalist social formation of the 1960s and 1970s generated significant contradictions for manufacturing, it continued to reproduce a broader system of accumulation dependent upon cheap labour power. The crises of the 1970s and 1980s can, in this interpretation, be understood partly through the progressive deterioration of the rural and subsistence-based mechanisms that had historically contributed to the reproduction of labour power. As these mechanisms became increasingly incapable of sustaining the reproduction of workers and their households, the contradictions between the production and reproduction of labour power became increasingly difficult to contain. The crisis of the reproduction of labour power consequently became an increasingly important component of the wider crisis of capitalist accumulation, particularly during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

RE-ARTICULATION: WORKERS, WAGES AND LIVELIHOODS

Harold Wolpe's notion of the articulation of modes of production represents a critical theoretical and political contribution to the analysis of capitalist accumulation in South Africa. Equally important are Meillassoux's (1980) emphasis on the significance of analysing social formations and Morris's (1980) focus on modes of production and reproduction as outcomes of particular economic, social, and political conditions and concrete class struggles. The history of capitalist accumulation and its changing social formations—from colonialism and segregation to apartheid—must therefore be understood in relation to concrete class struggles among mining capitalists, farming

capitalists, white workers, African workers, indentured labourers, and poor Afrikaner nationalists. These struggles were central to the historical development of capitalist accumulation through cheap labour in South Africa.

For Wolpe (1980), capitalist accumulation through cheap labour power continued throughout the twentieth century, even as the social-reproductive capacity of subsistence economies in the countryside increasingly deteriorated. The resulting crisis of the reproduction of cheap labour was addressed through an increasingly interventionist and authoritarian apartheid state, including the establishment and administration of Bantustan homelands. These institutions sought to manage the reproduction of African labour by maintaining rural households and communities as sites of subsistence and social reproduction while simultaneously regulating the movement and supply of African workers to urban and industrial centres.

Within Marxist scholarship, there is considerable emphasis on understanding the crisis of apartheid in relation to the contradictions of capitalism in South Africa. This raises an important question: if the crisis of apartheid was also a crisis of capitalist accumulation, why did the democratic transition not result in a socialist transformation? This question brings renewed significance to the contributions of Meillassoux (1980) and Morris (1980, 1991), whose analyses were influenced by Althusser and Poulantzas, as well as to the work of Harvey (2003), Bond (2004, 2005), and Hart (2002, 2005a, 2006) on accumulation by dispossession and the political economy of transition.

From this perspective, the transition to democracy should not be understood as the inevitable outcome of a predetermined historical trajectory. Rather, it represented an indeterminate outcome of economic, political, and social conditions interacting with concrete class struggles. The South African transition can therefore be situated within a broader Marxist understanding of the contingent and indeterminate character of class struggle. This perspective resonates with Althusser's reflections on the difficulties encountered by working-class movements in France and Algeria, as well as with Poulantzas's analyses (1974, 1975, 1980; see also Jessop, 1985) of authoritarian and fascist

trajectories in Greece, Spain, and Portugal during the post-war period.

The contemporary system of capitalist accumulation in South Africa cannot, however, be explained through Wolpe's original formulation of the articulation of modes of production alone. Nevertheless, a reconstituted, and at times contradictory, articulation between the urban and rural spheres, and between production and reproduction, continues to shape the lives and livelihoods of African workers and their extended household networks. Wolpe's articulation thesis explained a historically specific regime of accumulation centred on cheap labour power. My research at Dunlop suggests that, although the relationship between rural and urban areas and between production and reproduction persists, the institutional arrangements through which apartheid organised these relationships have been replaced by an open and democratic political order.

The post-apartheid regime of accumulation, however, continues to generate conditions associated with cheap labour power, albeit without the same form of authoritarian state intervention through which apartheid managed the contradictions and crises of the system. Persistently high unemployment and weak economic growth over the past two decades have contributed to conditions in which workers' wages remain under substantial pressure, reproducing important elements of a cheap-labour regime in post-apartheid South Africa.

My research at Dunlop further suggests that an articulation between urban and rural livelihoods continues to structure the lives of African workers and their extended household networks. The research indicates that workers' wages frequently fall short of the costs associated with reproducing not only individual workers but also their extended household networks. Dunlop workers referred to what they described as "continuing apartheid wages" during the second decade of democracy. In interviews, a full-time shop steward reported that many workers had become trapped in cycles of indebtedness, including debts to *mashonis* (informal moneylenders) and, in some cases, garnishee orders, as wages failed to meet the expanding demands associated with extended-family livelihoods.

For many workers, this debt cycle was intensified by the continuing obligation to support extended family networks extending between township or hostel households and rural homesteads. The reproduction of labour therefore remained connected to a wider network of household obligations that could not be understood solely through the wage relation at the point of production.

Fieldwork at Dunlop also revealed complex forms of rural–urban interaction in the everyday lives of workers and their families. Much of the financial support provided to extended rural family networks took the form of remittances. Workers also provided support in kind, including receiving school-going children from rural areas into their urban households so that they could attend better-resourced schools in the townships. They also accommodated adult members of extended families, assisting them with enrolment in post-school education and training and, in some cases, supporting their search for employment in urban areas.

The rural homestead consequently continued to serve an important role as a source of cultural and social capital for workers and their extended households. It remained a site for the performance of family and traditional rituals, as well as a place of retreat and recovery for those experiencing economic and social difficulties in the city. The majority of Dunlop workers interviewed reported sending remittances to extended family networks in the countryside.

These findings suggest that rural–urban linkages have not disappeared with the end of apartheid. Rather, they have been reconfigured within the social and economic conditions of post-apartheid South Africa. While the countryside no longer functions in precisely the same manner as the reproductive reserve envisaged in Wolpe's formulation, rural households and homesteads continue to perform important social, cultural, and economic functions within extended household networks. The reproductive significance of the countryside therefore persists, particularly at the socio-cultural level, even as wage income and social grants have become increasingly important sources of subsistence for both rural and urban households (Ranchhod, 2009; Posel, 2010; Scully, 2012; Köhler and Bhorat, 2020).

The evidence from Dunlop therefore points towards neither the disappearance nor the simple continuation of Wolpe's articulation thesis. Instead, it suggests a **reconfiguration of the relationship between production and reproduction**, in which wage labour remains central to household reproduction while workers' livelihoods continue to depend upon extensive rural–urban networks of remittances, care, accommodation, education, cultural practices, and reciprocal support. The challenge, therefore, is to rethink articulation not as the persistence of the apartheid-era relationship between capitalist production and rural subsistence, but as a historically transformed relationship between production and reproduction under post-apartheid capitalism.

HOW DO THESE CONCEPTS RELATE TO THE RESEARCH TOPIC?

The contributions of Wolpe (1972, 1980), Fine (2009; Fine and Rustonjee, 1997), and Harvey (2003) provide useful theoretical frameworks for explicating the dynamics of capitalist accumulation in South Africa. Wolpe's articulation of modes of production explains the historical system of accumulation through cheap labour power, while also drawing attention to the concrete class struggles and social formations through which capitalist development was constructed and reproduced during the twentieth century. The Minerals–Energy Complex (MEC), in turn, provides a framework for analysing the structural organisation of South African capitalism. It also enables an examination of the enduring hegemonic position of mining capital throughout the history of capitalist accumulation, including its role in negotiating the political settlement and its significance during the transition to democracy.

Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession provides a further framework for analysing the post-apartheid regime of accumulation within the context of globalisation. It draws attention to processes including the systemic exclusion of significant sections of the working-class population from secure employment, the expansion of surplus labour, the commodification of everyday life, and changing forms of state power and governmentality.

This theoretical framework underscores the continuing importance of studying workers, wages, and livelihoods in order to understand the reproductive capacity of capitalism in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as the possibilities and limitations of class struggle in workplaces and communities. My research begins from the premise that wage income constitutes a central resource around which livelihoods and processes of social reproduction are organised across the rural–urban divide.

The research argues that the crisis in post-apartheid South Africa should be understood not only as a crisis of accumulation but also as a crisis of reproduction: a crisis concerning the subsistence, survival, and reproduction of working-class households across rural and urban spaces. The research therefore examines how the concrete economic, political, and social conditions

experienced by workers and their households intersect with concrete forms of class struggle, both on the shop floor and in the everyday lives and communities of working-class households.

In this sense, the study seeks to reconnect the analysis of capitalist accumulation with the question of social reproduction. Rather than treating the workplace and the household as separate spheres, it examines how wages, employment, household obligations, rural–urban networks, and community relations interact in the everyday reproduction of working-class life. This approach provides a basis for rethinking the relationship between production and reproduction under post-apartheid capitalism and for assessing how the changing conditions of workers' livelihoods shape the terrain of contemporary class struggle.

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