Subaltern crowds challenge authority

In Bourdieu the symbolic violence which works through habitus is linked to the broader symbolic order through which the hierarchies of society, and the meanings of those hierarchies, are stabilised and made normal. Just as in Gramsci the state is central to the organisation of hegemony, so in Bourdieu the state is central to maintaining and naturalising this commonsense social order. The state is the authority of authorities, and as such imposes classification systems that sanctify prevailing hierarchies, establishes and reproduces shared symbolic forms of thought, and presides over a symbolic order that is, "in appearance at least, coherent and systematic... adjusted to the objectives structures of the social world..." (2000: 176). Just as the state claims a monopoly over physical violence, so it claims a monopoly over the legitimate use of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1994).

South Africa presents substantial challenges to such conceptions. In South Africa social order has not settled into 'commonsense' shape. Both in society and in the state the symbolic order is contested, fluid, ambiguous.

Research into the state (Von Holdt 2010a) suggests a profound contradiction between the Weberian rationales of a modern bureaucracy -- which is, formally speaking, what is enshrined in the constitution, legislation, regulations and policies of the government -- and informal rationales which constitute the state as the premier site of African sovereignty and black advancement. The result is a deeply racialised instability in the meaning of skill, authority and 'face' within the bureaucracy. Whereas the symbolic order of apartheid stabilised skill as an attribute of whites and fundamentally devalued the skills of blacks, the transition opened up a sharp contestation over the meaning of skill: many whites continued to question the skills of blacks at the same time as many blacks questioned the skills of whites who, in their view, had gained their positions because of race rather than skill.

The meaning of skill inside the state has become deeply ambiguous, and in many cases managers have been appointed who lack the experience through which complex technical and managerial skills are developed. Black advancement becomes more important than questions of competence or institutional performance. In such cases incompetence spreads, as managers who lack the necessary skills appoint others who in turn cannot perform. There are, on the other hand, managers, policymakers and political heads who view these developments with alarm, and attempt to craft counter strategies to build a competent and skilled bureaucracy – with considerable success in some sectors of the state. The net consequence, though, is the destabilisation of skill and its symbolic meanings, which opens up new opportunities for struggles over who gets appointed and why, while in too many institutions the state loses technical competence and may be said to be dysfunctional.

Similar processes have destabilised authority (Von Holdt 2010a). As well as fundamentally challenging the legitimacy of the state, the struggle against apartheid

destabilised the racialised authority structures in workplaces, both private sector and public sector (Von Holdt 2003; Von Holdt and Maserumule 2005). The transition to democracy has neither stabilised the authority of the state nor the legitimacy of authority structures in many workplaces; on the contrary, authority at many levels of our society remains provisional and contested. In public sector workplaces, in particular, it is not only that shop stewards and significant groups of workers challenge or reject the authority of supervisors or senior managers; senior management also appears to have deeply ambivalent attitudes towards the authority of front-line supervisors. In hospitals, for example, front-line supervisors and indeed hospital managers have very limited disciplinary authority, and are frequently second-guessed by departmental officials ensconced in head offices.

The result is a breakdown of discipline and the erosion of authority in many state institutions. Trade unions prevent education officials from visiting schools to assess performance. According to shop stewards interviewed in some hospitals, the majority of hospital staff participate in one or other form of 'corruption'. Nurses associate this situation with the broader changes brought about by democratisation:

> When the ANC took over, everything became relaxed; you could do anything in the new dispensation … The lowest categories control the hospital. Since the unions were introduced the shop stewards have been running the hospital, but they cannot even write their names! They get out of hand and it is difficult to handle. Management is scared to discipline and control. The shop stewards confront and victimise the nurses. We also belong to a union but we do our job. Everyone barks at us. We have no dignity; we are degraded. There is supposed to be democracy, but not in the manner of [name of hospital]. (Von Holdt & Maserumule 2005: 450)

Such breakdown of authority coexists with a culture of extreme deference towards the administrative and political leadership within the state. Elaborate rituals of deference are linked to the necessity of defending African sovereignty in the face of a hyper-critical 'racial gaze'. In an extreme case, a white doctor, hearing the KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Health tell staff that white doctors are only interested in profit, threw a picture of the MEC into a dustbin. The doctor was suspended pending a disciplinary enquiry, the MEC publicly accused white doctors of being racist, while the Health Minister told reporters that the incident 'smells of anarchy' (*Mail and Guardian*, 25 April–1 May 2008, 2–8 May 2008; *Business Day*, 6 May 2008). In this case the picture had become a highly charged symbol of respect and face. From one side the incident appears as a typical case of how the concern with face overshadows crucial delivery concerns, while from another an agent of the racial gaze is deliberately undermining the authority and credibility of the state. (Von Holdt 2010a)

The instability and contestation within state institutions over its meaning and purposes undermines the ability of the state to establish and sustain a coherent structure of symbolic domination. Skills and authority are not simply technical matters, but are crucial dimensions of a classification system and its symbolic order; if the state is

internally divided with respect to such dimensions of symbolic order, there is very little possibility that it will be able to enforce and stabilise symbolic order throughout society.

Turning from state institutions to society, our research into community protests and the subaltern crowds that take to the streets of townships and informal settlements suggests that, in post-apartheid South Africa, social order has not settled into 'commonsense' shape, and that subaltern consciousness exists in a complex relationship with authority, social hierarchy and the state.

Typically community protests start with a cycle of mass gatherings, marches and petitions. Responses by the authorities are generally inadequate, and at some point police violence sparks running street battles between police and crowds of youths, and state buildings such as libraries, clinics and halls are burnt down. Informants – among them protest leaders, youths involved in the street battles and violence, and ordinary community members – provide a variety of contradictory views regarding the destruction of community facilities such as libraries and clinics.

So, for example, in a particular town one of the protest leaders, a churchman, maintained that the clinic that had been burnt down 'belonged to the apartheid regime' and that the municipal officials had misappropriated money meant for it. The community felt that 'we deserve much better'. As for the library, ' It was a library by name only. You go inside, there is no content.' Asked about the community hall, he answered: 'The community hall? That was excitement. You burn one, you burn them all.' Other informants endorsed his views, but elderly women residents of the township contradicted him: the clinic was conveniently located, and 'to burn it down for us old ladies with high blood pressure and bad knees... it was a big mistake'. School students expressed a similar opinion about the burning of the library, which they were accustomed to using as a place to study and do homework. Another protest leader said that the burning of the buildings was wrong, because they belonged to the community, while a third said it was the action of criminals. A teenage school student probably came closest to describing the meaning of this action for protesters: 'People said, this is the municipality, we are going to burn it down.' (Dlamini 2010)

Clearly a library or a clinic, and the act of burning it down, have different meanings for different actors in the community. For many it is a public amenity with important practical uses, even if it is inadequate. For others, its manifest inadequacy shows that little has changed since apartheid, and government is failing the community. It's practical usefulness is immaterial. Indeed, in the second time the protesters claim that 'nothing had changed' in the library was manifestly untrue: it had been equipped with 20 new computers, which were all burnt or stolen in the protest (Langa 2010).

There is a continuity between the apartheid past and the democratic present in the symbolic meaning of library or clinic as a structure that represents authority, and an authority that is indifferent to subaltern voices. Burning it down is a symbolic disruption of that authority, an assertion of the anger and grievances of the community. However, protest leaders who are more prominent figures, occupy positions of responsibility and

are mindful of the importance of ' public opinion', do not attempt to defend the action of the crowds, but blame it on 'criminals' -- even though in all probability they anticipate the action and share in its symbolic assertion.

It is a symbolism that is well understood, both by community and by authorities, since it was central to the struggle against apartheid authority. Yet its meaning has shifted with the establishment of democracy. Whereas in the 1980s the destruction of state property symbolised the rejection of the apartheid state, and the ambition to destroy it, in the democratic era it is intended as a message to the highest levels of authority in the state: 'The Premier undermines us. He'll see by the smoke we're calling him.' (Dlamini 2010) Symbolically, such actions both disrupt the authority of the state *and* reaffirm its authority by calling for those at the apex of its structure to ensure their grievances are responded to.

Such contradictions are accentuated by the fact that in many community protests at least some of the protest leadership are themselves members of the dominant political formations of the Tripartite Alliance, including the ANC, the ANC Youth League and the SA Communist Party, and usually protagonists in internal struggles within the ANC and the Alliance over access to political and administrative positions in local government, and access to jobs and tenders for business contracts. Instability and contestation within the ANC is linked to such processes within government and within the community.

As these studies show, in a situation of historical upheaval and change such as South Africa's, it is not only the state that is the source of symbolic order: subalterns too construct symbolic orders from below in their struggles to appropriate, disrupt or reshape dominant meanings. Just as the post-apartheid state does not hold a monopoly over material violence, so it is unable to monopolise symbolic violence. In South Africa today very little is self-evident, established or settled. Indeed, what we have is not so much a classification struggle in the Bourdieusian sense, but a classification crisis, a symbolic crisis. 'Decolonisation, which sets out to change the order of the world, ' writes Frantz Fanon, ' is clearly an agenda for total disorder.'(Fanon 2004:2)

But this brings us to the next chapter.

References

Bourdieu, Pierre (1994): 'Rethinking the state: Genesis and structure of the bureaucratic field' in *Sociological Theory* 12:1 March