

Marikana, turning point in South African history

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Equating a ‘turning point’ with what William Sewell terms an ‘event’, it is argued that Marikana is a turning point in South African history. The massacre was a *rupture* that led to a *sequence* of further *occurrences*, notably a massive wave of strikes, which are changing *structures* that shape people’s lives. We have not yet reached the end of this chain of occurrences, and the scale of the turning point remains uncertain. In common with other *events*, Marikana has revealed structures unseen in normal times, providing an exceptional *vantage point*, allowing space for collective creativity, and enabling actors to envisage alternative futures.

Keywords: South Africa; Marikana; Lonmin; massacre; turning point; event

[Marikana, moment décisif de l’histoire sud-africaine.] Assimiler un « moment décisif » à ce qu’appelle William Sewell un « événement », il est avancé que Marikana est un moment décisif de l’histoire sud-africaine. Le massacre est une *rupture* qui a mené à une *série* d’autres *faits*, notamment une vague importante de grèves, qui sont en train de changer les *structures* qui façonnent la vie des populations. Nous n’avons pas encore atteint la fin de cette série de faits, et l’échelle de ce moment décisif reste incertaine. Comme les autres *événements*, Marikana a révélé des structures jamais vues en temps normal, offrant un *point de vue privilégié* exceptionnel, ainsi qu’un espace pour la créativité collective, et permettant aux acteurs d’envisager un autre futur.

Mots-clés : Afrique du sud ; Marikana ; Lonmin ; massacre ; moment décisif ; événement

Introduction

On 16 August 2012 the South African police killed 34 striking platinum miners outside the small town of Marikana. This was the Marikana Massacre. TV viewers around the world watched horrified, and as bodies fell to the ground so too did illusions in post-apartheid democracy. Commentators have used different adjectives to underline the event’s importance. It has been described as a ‘watershed moment’ (Bizos quoted in Tolsi 2012), a ‘turning point’ (Legassick 2012; Pityana 2012), a ‘tipping point’ (Gumede 2012), as ‘seminal’ (Wikipedia 2013), as a ‘seismic event’ (Alexander *et al.* 2012) and as marking a ‘tectonic shift’ (Smith 2012). Its significance has been likened to the massacres at Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976) (AZAPO quoted in SAPA 2012) and to the 1973 strikes in Durban (Gentle 2012). For one US historian, the killings ‘signaled the quasi-official end of post-apartheid South Africa’s revolutionary era’ (Cole 2013).

So, the massacre was significant, but ‘how significant’ and in ‘what way’? There are good reasons for ducking these questions. An historically special happening can be eclipsed by a more momentous one, such as the 1994 elections trumping Nelson Mandela’s release

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from prison in 1990. Also, ‘significance’ cannot be fully determined by processes that unfold over time, so, for example, the importance of the Durban Strikes of 1973 was only settled in 1979, with the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions and amendments to the Industrial Conciliation Act. However, it is worth taking a stab at providing answers for two reasons. First, specifically, one wants to know about changes triggered by the massacre, and the way these might shape the future. Secondly, at a general level, there is value in assessing apparently significant events in order to influence resulting processes.

How, then, should we proceed? Our questions are historical in nature, and this article draws extensively, though critically, on theorisation by the historian William Sewell (2005). In considering the issues, I accept, as given, his statement that: ‘events constitute what historians call “turning points”’ (Sewell 2005, 218). But Sewell was operating with hindsight and evaluating, for instance, the French Revolution. At the time of writing, the Marikana Massacre occurred only 14 months previously. My suggestion is that we need to supplement Sewell with the idea of a ‘vantage point’ developed, though under-theorised, by the sociologist Michael Burawoy (2001). That is, the article can be seen as an attempt to link history and sociology using Marikana as an illustration. It first unpacks the key concepts and then examines the massacre and its aftermath.

Events and vantage points

Sewell’s (2005, 218) starting point is that, ‘historical events should be understood as happenings that transform structures’, adding: ‘To understand and explain an event, therefore, is to specify what structural change it brings about and to determine how the structural change was effectuated.’ The broader point is that structures are the ‘cumulative outcome of past events’ (Sewell 2005, 199, referencing Sahlins 1991; see also Marx 1852). For Sewell (especially 2005, 130–135), structures are multiple – related, one deduces, to politics, courts, science, labour relations, paradigms, and so forth. Some are more superficial, thus easier to understand and alter, but others, notably language, are deeper. Seen in this way structures are not necessarily universal, and might be nationally, ethnically or locally specific. Thus the scale of an event – its importance – varies; impacting on more or fewer people and to a greater or lesser degree. While Sewell’s approach helpfully emphasises the importance of agency, he tends to underestimate the extent to which structures have their own dynamics, with internal contradictions and logics that push them up against other structures. Like Marx’s ‘mole of history’, structural change burrows away beneath the ground, occasionally breaking the surface dumping evidence of its subterranean labour. I return to the relevance of this observation in a moment.

The account, thus far, leads to another critical characteristic of events. They are not merely a single momentous happening, but, rather, ‘should be conceived of as sequences of occurrences that result in transformation’ (Sewell 2005, 227). Such sequences, says Sewell, ‘begin with a rupture of some kind – that is a surprising break with routine practice’. This captures Marikana rather well. As we will see, the massacre, the rupture, led to a sequence of other occurrences, mainly strikes, that turned killings into an event. There is a further, related feature of an event that should be noted. This is that events open new opportunities for agents. For a moment, some structures are disrupted, opening space for action and debate about that action. Sewell (2005, 250) puts it this way: ‘Historical events are acts of collective creativity’. This assessment is extended by Sewell (2004, 99) when he argues that the ‘consequences events will have depends on how they are interpreted’. ‘Interpretation’ matters in a tactical way, shaping actors’ collective creativity, but it is also important

in glimpsing pertinent structures and gauging possible transformations. What is the *mole* revealing for our attention? How do contemporaries – as distinct from historians – go about recognising the significance of an event or potential event? Here we introduce the concept of ‘vantage point’.

For Burawoy (2001), one can develop local studies as vantage points that provide evidence of broader processes. His cases are taken from ‘normal’ times and, while they go a long way in providing evidence of the vulnerability, internal conflicts and unintended consequences of globalisation, they tell us relatively little about structures as such. Events create special vantage points, ones that have the potential to reveal the deeper frictions and fractures that produce and shape social transformation. In this way, events not only have historical and theoretical significance, they also have methodological value. They allow us to see and then interpret the structures that give rise to an event. This can be achieved in a conscious manner by trained researchers, but it is also undertaken informally by other contemporaries. A relevant example is provided in the following observation. Writing about the 1946 African miners’ strike, Ruth First asserted that it ‘was one of those great historic incidents that, in a flash of illumination, educates a nation, reveals what has been hidden, destroys lies and illusions’ (quoted in Wieder 2013: location 931). We might come to say the same about Marikana.

So, then, events – that is, turning points – involve *sequences* of activity released by *ruptures*; they provide scope for *interpretation* of actions and structures; and they lead to *re-configured structures*. Armed with these tools we turn now to the specific case of Marikana.

Rupture

Sewell (2004, 219) writes: ‘social transformations that are effectuated in events depend on the details of what happens.’ As a concomitant of this, unless one knows what happened, scientific interpretation can be wayward and unconvincing. It is not necessary to repeat the emerging narrative of the massacre (Alexander *et al.* 2012; Chinguno 2013). Here I limit myself to key issues.

The workers struck in support of a demand for R12,500 per month (about US\$125). It is unclear whether this was gross or net pay (different workers had different versions), but it was up to triple the net salaries paid to ordinary workers. Their action was ‘unprotected’ (that is, they could be fired for not following processes set out in the Labour Relations Act), and it was led by an independent strike committee, not a union. Yet, within a day, most of Lonmin’s 28,000-strong workforce had withdrawn their labour.

While low pay – and associated inequality and injustice – was the focus of the strike, workers raised other grievances in interviews. These included danger, with risks intensified by pressure to work in hazardous locations; the arduous character of work, which often, because of production targets, included shifts lasting 12 hours or more; doubled-up bodies endlessly shaken by heavy drills; artificial air full of dust and chemicals; high levels of sickness, including TB; and managers (often white) who were disrespectful and adversarial. In many cases workers were caught in a debt trap, leading to forced deductions from wages and payments to micro-lenders and lawyers that left some workers paying 15 times the value of their original loan (Bond 2012). Income was further stretched by the need to support old and unemployed dependants, and, since most workers were oscillating migrants with two families, costs were often doubled. Housing conditions were generally abysmal. In 2010 Lonmin admitted that half the people living within 15 km of its mines lived in informal housing, and a high proportion of these were miners and their families (Chinguno 2013, 9–10).

Workers also complained about the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), to which most workers belonged before the strike. They mentioned its corruption and its collaboration with management. One complaint was the need to pay a human resources manager and a shop steward to get a job, with the going rate about R5000 (roughly US\$500). On the night the strike started, 10 August 2012, NUM mobilised scabs to break the action. The following day, 11 August, shop stewards from the union shot at a peaceful march of about 3000 strikers, seriously wounding two of them. The workers fled, eventually arriving at a koppie (an igneous outcrop) they called the ‘mountain’. Here they remained, arming themselves with traditional weapons in order to defend themselves from NUM. On 13 August, Frans Beleni, NUM’s general secretary, called for ‘the deployment of the Special Task Force or the South African Defence Force’ (Alexander *et al.* 2012, 178). Three days later it was the task force that carried out the massacre.

Lonmin attempted to absolve itself of responsibility, claiming that clashes were a consequence of competition between NUM and a new union, the Association of Mine-workers and Construction Union (AMCU). But the strike committee included members of both organisations, and union leaders rightly denied that rivalry caused the stoppage. In the days leading to the massacre Lonmin lobbied government to treat the workers’ actions as criminal, rather than an industrial dispute, thus justifying a police response along lines proposed by Baleni. Lonmin also provided crucial logistical support for the police, including offices for its Joint Operations Centre, intelligence collected by security personnel, access to more than 200 security cameras, accommodation and food for police, and transport. It donated helicopters used on the day, and it provided ambulances and a detention centre. Critically, the company refused to talk to their employees. According to Bishop Jo Seoka (2012), who later brokered a settlement: ‘the massacre could have been avoided if Lonmin’s management had listened to the workers’ concerns.’

There is no doubt that police gunfire was the immediate cause of the massacre. The police killed all 34 men (and no police were injured). The strikers had been sitting peacefully on and around the mountain when the police reeled out razor wire in front of them. Fearful of being penned in, they began to leave the area, most walking northwards in the direction of Nkaneng, the nearby informal settlement where many of them lived. Video footage shows that the workers were not running and not a threat to the police. It was at this point that the police started shooting. Only then did the men begin to run, but they were scattering, not charging at the police. At some point, a middle-ranking officer tells his men to shoot if they feel threatened, which, in the context, can be interpreted as permission to kill. Within a few seconds, 20 strikers were shot dead by task team gunfire. This occurred within a small area the inquiry called ‘Site One’. Many workers then retreated towards a low koppie about 300 metres west of the mountain. Here they were surrounded, and a further 14 were slaughtered. When this place was first revealed by two fieldworkers and myself, we called it the ‘killing koppie’ (Lekgowa, Mmope, and Alexander 2012). The inquiry preferred the sanitised name ‘Site Two’.

The police claim they acted in self-defence, but this cannot justify disproportionate use of force, or the killings at Site Two, or the fact that – so it is widely understood – 14 of the 34 dead men were shot in the back or the back of their head. Had the police wanted, they could have dispersed the gathering with few or no fatalities using rubber bullets, tear gas and water cannon fired from the safety of armoured vehicles or helicopters. Events could have been filmed and arrests made later. These are standard tactics for public order policing. But special paramilitary task teams, not the public order police, were deployed in the front line of defence and attack. These task teams were armed only with automatic weapons

loaded with sharp ammunition, making it almost inevitable that workers would be killed. Indeed, the police ordered four mortuary vehicles early on the morning of the killings, so they were expecting deaths to occur. Immediately after the massacre, police placed weapons alongside dead strikers, making it appear that they had been a mortal threat. Recently, having analysed a police hard-drive, the inquiry's evidence leaders stated that the South African Police Service (SAPS) had given evidence that was 'in material respects not the truth'. Evidence is mounting that the massacre was not an accident, but, rather, the consequence of a premeditated decision to use lethal force against strikers.

Sequence

What happened next transformed Marikana from a dreadful occurrence into an important historical event. According to Luke Sinwell (2013, 96): 'At approximately 7 pm [on the evening of the massacre], still unaware of whether their missing colleagues had been killed or were arrested and in jail, about 20 workers met and decided to continue the strike. They did not want the public to think that it was only those who had died that were organising it.' Like the occupation of the mountain, this was an important act of 'collective creativity'. As argued elsewhere (Alexander *et al.* 2012, 195):

In other settings, events [sic] of this kind [the massacre] have led to the defeat of a movement, or at least its abeyance. But that is not what happened here. On the contrary, the strike got stronger. Workers faced trauma, the tribulations of burying their dead in far-away places, threatened sackings, lack of money for food, and attacks from unions and politicians. But, by 7 September, the company was reporting that attendance at work was down to two percent, and after that it gave up providing statistics. There was an undeclared state of emergency and a community leader was killed, but still the workers fought on, until, on 18 September, they agreed to a settlement that secured them [partial] victory. Had the strike collapsed, people across the country fighting poverty and injustice would have been cowed. The opposite happened . . . This was one of the most remarkable acts of courage in labour history.

Continuation of the Marikana strike was followed by a sequence of dramatic unprotected, or 'wildcat', stoppages that spread across the mining industry. The first started on 29 August, when about 12,000 workers from Goldfields KDC East mines came out in support of a demand for R12,500. On 9 September, they were joined by 15,000 workers at KDC West. When 32,000 AngloGold Ashanti workers struck between late September and early October, they demanded the same. At Amplat, where there were strikes at different times from 12 September to early October, they called for R16,000. Goldfields is the world's fourth biggest gold producer; AngloGold Ashanti is the third biggest; and Amplat produces more platinum than any other company in the world. From 3 October, about 300 workers at Kumba's Iron Ore's Sishen mine went on strike demanding R15,000. This surprised many observers, because in 2011 these workers benefited from a five-year bonus-scheme payout worth about R570,000 per employee. There was also action on smaller mines, including an underground sit-in at Samancor. The length of the stoppages varied, as did the outcomes, but all strikes were organised by non-union committees and all demanded a specified salary rather than a percentage increase.

From September 2012 militant strikes spread beyond mining. There were unprotected stoppages in the car industry, and a sometimes violent truckers' strike. In November a strike for higher pay broke out across the farming areas of the Western Cape, where workers are

highly oppressed and very badly remunerated. They wanted their pay increased from R69 to R150 per day (about a quarter of the Lonmin demand). A Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) spokesperson declared: ‘Marikana has come to the farms!!!’ (COSATU 2012a). In the end, early in 2013, the minimum wage was raised to R105, still a small amount, but a landmark decision that raised pay by more than 50%. Wildcat strikes continued through 2013, with major stoppages at the huge Medupi Power Station construction site, at two important coals mines, at the Matla Power Station, and among City Power workers in Johannesburg.

In 2013, struggles took off again in the platinum mines. This time they were more defensive. At Amplat there were strikes against retrenchments in February, May and October (the last of these being a ‘protected’ stoppage led by AMCU). Initially 14,000 jobs were threatened, but, eventually, nearly all these were saved and there were no forced redundancies. At Lonmin, workers struck for two days in May following the murder of a popular local leader of AMCU. At Implats – where a pivotal six-week unprotected strike had preceded the Lonmin stoppage – workers took action in June 2013, this time in response to an unfair dismissal.¹ In the course of the wave of militancy in mining, workers moved en masse from NUM to AMCU. AMCU became the dominant union across the platinum industry and recruited a majority of workers in three of the richest and largest gold mines. AMCU has not yet reported its membership figures, but it has probably grown from about 20,000 members at the beginning of 2012 to more than 150,000 members today.

In early May 2013, I had separate conversations with two leaders of left-wing unions, and both, without prodding, said they were now under pressure from their members. They were not hostile to this, but were slightly troubled. In one case, there had been a national bargaining conference where workers argued for doing a ‘Marikana’. Marikana had become a byword for militant resistance. This mood fed into large ‘protected’ strikes that occurred from August through September and into October. Four of these were in key industries: gold mining and construction, both organised by NUM, and motor manufacturing and auto parts, both organised by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). These led to pay rises of, respectively, 8% (after less than a week on strike), 12% (after three weeks), 11.5% (after three weeks), and 10% (after four weeks). Set against an inflation rate of less than 6.5%, these are very substantial increases. There is probably more to come.

The strikes had knock-on effects. In the wake of Marikana, Moody’s downgraded South Africa’s bond rating from A3 to Baa1, making it more costly to borrow funds, thus slowing economic growth. The rand fell 22% against the dollar and 33% against the euro in the 12 months following the massacre; the consumer price index increased from 5.5% in July 2012 to 6.3% a year later; and a record balance of payments deficit was recorded in the second quarter of 2013 (the latest figure). The official rate of unemployment worsened from 24.9% in the second quarter of 2012 to 25.6% a year later (latest figure). Economic forecasts are bleak and the Minister of Finance has warned that government income may fall, thus precipitating cuts in expenditure. It would be wrong to ascribe all decline to the Marikana effect, but the massacre was a trigger.

One indicator bucking the trend is the Johannesburg All Share Index, which has risen more than 20% in the past year. Many South African companies are still making substantial profits by maintaining high levels of exploitation, and, notwithstanding some impressive pay rises, the gap between workers and the wealthy is still immense. The weakened economy will sharpen the intensity of class conflict.

Interpretation

The post-massacre strikes underlined the importance of Marikana, but its significance is also about the vantage point it has provided and interpretations that have emerged. Here, I am necessarily selective.

Migrant labour and housing

Conflict at Lonmin and elsewhere has highlighted the significance of changes in labour recruitment and housing. On the surface it seems that recruitment has altered little. In 2010, only 18% of Lonmin's workers were from local communities (and some of these may have originated elsewhere); 83% were immigrants, mostly from within South Africa (Lonmin 2010, cited in Chinguno 2013, 8). However, labour migrancy should not be confused with the migrant labour *system*. The latter was institutionalised from the late nineteenth century as a means of supplying labour regarded as 'cheap', because, at least in theory, it was subsidised by rural production. Today the reverse happens. Migrant workers' budgets must include support for impoverished rural families, and their pay, though low by international standards and in comparison to bosses, is higher than most other South African workers. Understandably, employers would like to reduce dependence on migrant workers. In the meantime they cut costs and attempt to weaken union organisation by hiring contract workers, paid, on average, 60% the wages of permanent workers for the same work. Contract workers can be sacked relatively easily, and are often expected to work in more dangerous locations than permanents. According to one estimate, they represent up to 30% of the workforce on platinum mines (Bench Marks Foundation, cited in SAPA 2013a; see also Forrest 2013). The use of contract workers has long been a thorn in the side of the labour movement.

Regarding housing, in the early 1990s the companies and NUM negotiated a living-out allowance, reducing dependence on hostel accommodation and substantially increasing the number of workers residing in informal settlements. At the time of Lonmin's strike, the allowance there was R1830 per month, a substantial contribution to workers' income. Only about 10% of employees lived in company accommodation (Chinguno 2013, 10, quoting Lonmin 2010). For workers, the new arrangement meant greater freedom, and many developed second families. The downside was that miners now lived in poorly-serviced, low-quality accommodation.

Ownership and inequality

Recruitment and housing policies contributed to the militancy of the strike, but they represent a deeper problem: satisfying shareholders' demands for maximum profits. The following table, Table 1, is instructive.

For sake of argument, Lonmin's expenditure may be divided into three components. Payments to suppliers, taxes and social capital can be regarded as neutral in class terms. These total US\$729 million. 'Social capital', which includes community projects and other donations, was only US\$1.8 million more than the US\$7 million shared between three executive and eight non-executive directors. The income that went to capital totalled US\$704. Critical commentators tend to focus on directors' remunerations and dividends, but the largest amount by far was cash retained for new investment; that is, for expanding the net worth of the company (owned by shareholders of course). Rather than new fixed capital coming from overseas, in the case of Lonmin, and many other South African

Table 1. Lonmin's Expenditure, 2011

	US\$ million
Suppliers	680
Government taxes	40
Social capital (community projects and donations)	9
Directors remuneration	7
Shareholders distribution	30
Cash retained for sustainable growth	667
Human capital (salaries and benefits)	796
Total	2229

Source: Lonmin Annual Report (2011).

companies, it is generated locally (from employees' work). Further, much of the 'cash retained' is moved off-shore, so is of no benefit to local economic development. Salaries and other workers' benefits totalled US\$796 m. We can put matters another way – of the US\$1.5 billion expenditure that went to capital and labour combined, 47% went to capital and 53% to labour. It is not surprising that Lonmin could find the resources that would eventually settle the Marikana dispute, and had it done so earlier the massacre would have been averted. Moving forward, platinum prices are about the same now as a year ago; Lonmin's average monthly sales are higher than last year; and, because platinum is sold in dollars and the rand has fallen about a fifth against the dollar, rand income will be up about 20% per ounce. The conclusion is that Lonmin – and the other platinum companies – can accommodate very substantial pay rises, despite claims to the contrary.

Capitalists investing elsewhere in the South African economy have also done well, and South African companies are among the most profitable in the world (Reddy 2013). According to the government's *New Growth Path*, the share of national income that went to profits increased from 40% to 45% between the end of apartheid and 2009. The share that went to workers declined, from 50% to just over 45% (George 2013). Most workers received almost no increase in real pay. Based on data from Statistics South Africa's Household Survey, in 2011 the median wage for formal sector workers was R3800, the same as it was in 1997 (in 2011 prices) (Reddy 2013). Meanwhile, unemployment levels increased significantly, adding to workers' costs. In terms of income, most workers have not benefited from apartheid's defeat, so racial and class injustice have become added grievances.

Widespread resistance

It is hardly surprising that there has been a high level of industrial action over many years. Marikana provided a jolt to militancy, but also underlined the scale of resistance. Since 2005, South Africa has probably experienced more strike days per capita than any other country (Alexander 2012, 63). Historically, the highest number of days lost was in 1987 (the year of a famous miners' strike). This was overtaken in 2007, and the new record was surpassed in 2010. Public sector strikes were the main cause of the high figures in both instances, with, according to Claire Ceruti (2012), more grass-roots activism in the second. 2011 saw the fourth most strike days on record, and there were even more in 2012. The Department of Labour reported that close to half the 2012 strikes were 'unprotected', and it noted greater levels of violence and damage to property than in the past (Paton 2013; Pressly 2013).

Class struggle is not confined to the workplace. Since 2005 there have been increasing numbers of community protests, most of them over provision of basic services. These are

part of a ‘rebellion of the poor’ (Alexander 2010). A high proportion has occurred in informal settlements, where service delivery is particularly awful. There are at least four cases where new settlements were named after the massacre. Boitumelo Maruping interviewed a resident at one of these, the Marikana near Potchefstroom, who explained: ‘We will do exactly as they did at Marikana, and we will get what is ours.’ Sometimes the protests involve over 10,000 participants, and barricades are often used to exclude police from working-class neighbourhoods for two or more days. According to data collected by our research team, the number of protests in 2012 was much the highest on record and 50% higher than in 2011. There is still a high measure of separation between workers/strikes and the poor/community protests, but this is not a class difference; it is about ‘different relationships to the means of protest’ (Alexander and Pfaffe 2013). Moreover, there are examples of communities and workers acting together. For instance, there was a major battle outside Marikana in 2011, when local residents attacked Lonmin property and police vehicles in a protest against discrimination in job hiring. Moreover, a *Workers Survey*, undertaken for COSATU (2012b), showed that 25% of the federation’s members had participated in a community protest during the preceding four years.

State and capital

Increased unemployment, stagnant real wages and heightened inequality arise from the government’s pro-capitalist economic policies. The African National Congress (ANC) government permitted massive capital flight from South Africa soon after it came to power (Ashman, Fine, and Newman 2011). It privatised important industries, including the Kumba Iron Ore mine, now owned by Anglo American, which is one of South Africa’s most profitable businesses. Its general approach has been neoliberal and there has been no significant attempt to restructure the economy. The one important reform has been support for ‘black economic empowerment’ (BEE). A major beneficiary of this policy has been Cyril Ramaphosa, the first general secretary of NUM and former secretary general of the ANC, who became the single largest shareholder in Lonmin and a member of its board of directors.

Ramaphosa was a member of the ANC’s national executive and in the days before the massacre he used his influence to ensure the state’s active intervention on the side of Lonmin. In the transcript of a meeting with Bernard Mokoena, Lonmin’s executive vice-president for human capital and external affairs, Lt. Gen. Zukiswa Mbombo, the provincial police commissioner, is quoted as saying that the Minister of Police had told her that Ramaphosa is ‘pressurising him’ (McClenaghan and Smith 2013). His role as the company’s chief agitator is also clear from emails he sent company executives on 15 August, the day before the massacre, including one that read:

Dear all, I have just had a meeting with Susan Shabangu [Minister of Mineral Resources] in Cape Town. One, she agrees that what they are going through is not a labour dispute, but a criminal act. She will correct her characterisation of what we are experiencing. Two, she is going into cabinet and will brief the President as well and get the Minister of Police, Nathi Mthethwa, to act in a more pointed way. (Marikana Commission of Inquiry 2013)

The email has not been refuted by Ramaphosa, and Shabangu has not denied that she attended the cabinet meeting, briefed the President or influenced Mthethwa. Moreover, by the morning of 16 August, there had been a change in mood: the police presence at Marikana increased considerably, the task teams arrived, 4000 rounds of ammunition were ordered, and a police spokesperson said that this was ‘D-Day’. Ronnie Kasrils (2012),

former ANC Minister of Intelligence, had no doubt that the scale and character of the police mobilisation ‘denoted an order from on high’. He went further, drawing out the implication for an understanding of the relationship between the South African state and a powerful section of capital:

These people were hardly occupying some strategic point, some vital highway, a key city square. They were not holding hostages. They were not even occupying mining property. Why risk such a manoeuvre other than to drive the strikers back to work at all costs on behalf of the bosses who were anxious to resume profit-making operations?

Structures

Within South Africa, Marikana remains a topic of discussion, partly because the inquiry is ongoing and partly because sequences are still unfolding. Commentators of most political stripes regard it as a turning point. In the popular imagination it is something that has its own recognisable label – there was the Sharpeville *Massacre* (1961), the Soweto *Uprising* (1976), and now the Marikana *Massacre* (2012). Sewell (2005, 228) proposed that, ‘a historical event . . . is recognised as notable by contemporaries.’ From that standpoint, there can be no doubt that Marikana passes the test. But what has been its effect on ‘structures’? Here we need to distinguish between the government, which is in denial, and impact on other areas of life, most importantly labour and politics.

Denial

There is a literal sense in which the government is in denial. Its spokespersons refuse to describe Marikana as a ‘massacre’; rather, it is a ‘tragedy’. This is not coincidental, it is matter of policy, and extends to the upper ranks of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). Whereas ‘tragedy’ implies a serious accident or natural catastrophe, massacre indicates an occurrence in which many people die as a consequence of an overwhelming imbalance of force. Marikana was indubitably a massacre. The problem for the government is that ‘massacre’ implies human intervention, so points the finger at the police and poses questions about ministerial involvement. The stance of the government is not only farcical, it also creates the impression of running from truth.

This denialism is reflected in the government’s most important Marikana-related initiative, the ‘Framework agreement for a Sustainable Mining Industry entered into by Organised Labour, Organised Business and Government’ (Presidency 2013). This mentions ‘intermittent tensions’, but makes no reference to Marikana or the post-Marikana strike wave, even though these are *raison d’être* for the document. Problems are blamed on the global economy, history and not doing enough of certain things; commitments are made to abide by existing legislation; possible reforms are limited by the acceptance ‘that economic realities constrain our decisions’; and labour committed itself to ‘work with Government and Business to improve investor sentiment’.² There is no hint that ‘tensions’ might be connected to low pay and huge profits, and no attempt is made to flag adjustments to policies that contributed to the conflict.

President Zuma appears to be driven mainly by a desire to win a majority in the 2014 general election (scheduled to take place in May). Fortunately for him, the Marikana Inquiry has taken so long he will not have to respond to its findings before the election. From his perspective it is best to avoid controversy. A cabinet-backed move to amend the Labour Relations Act by (a) introducing compulsory strike ballots; and (b) prohibiting

anyone other than striking employees from participating in picketing, was quietly dropped ‘as a result of a back room deal between COSATU and the ANC’ (Paton 2013). This does mean there will be no Marikana-propelled, government-generated structural change; just that this is likely to be delayed. The 1922 Rand Revolt led to the seminal Industrial Conciliation Act (ICA), but it was 1924 before this was introduced. It took six years and the Soweto Uprising to move from the Durban Strikes to the 1979 amendments to the ICA (which granted black workers the status of ‘employees’, placing them on equal footing with whites). However, it would be wrong to equate the present event with 1922 and the Durban Strikes. In my view, Marikana’s underlying causes are more fundamental. They are about generalised socio-economic inequalities that have been allowed to persist following the end of apartheid (reflected in the ‘rebellion of the poor’ as well as rebellion among workers). I cannot see a way of addressing these effectively, short of nationalising mines in a manner that benefits the working class. However, any appetite for this course of action that existed within governing circles has dissipated, and, as reflected in Marikana, the BEE glue bonding capital and the ANC is, for the time being, sufficiently strong to withstand popular pressure for substantial nationalisation.

Labour

The Lonmin strike and wildcat stoppages that followed were organised by rank and file committees. This is not as unusual as some commentators assume, especially in mining, but in South Africa there has been nothing to match the spread and scale of the 2012/2013 strike wave. For union leaders, the action was a powerful reminder that if they become too removed from their base, members might act independently or defect to another union. In this instance, both happened. While informal committees can organise strikes and win victories, in ‘normal’ times representation and bargaining require trade unions. Here, AMCU was the main beneficiary. While the union is not burdened by NUM’s baggage of alignment with the governing party, it retains inherent dangers of bureaucratisation, which in South Africa’s mining industry includes senior stewards paid by companies at the level of junior managers. AMCU has grown massively out of militant strikes and this will produce stresses within the union, but it is too soon to know what form these will take. What is clear, however, is that NUM, previously COSATU’s largest union, has been badly wounded. In terms of membership it has slumped to fourth place and been replaced in the top spot by NUMSA. There is considerable tension between NUM and NUMSA, intensified, especially after Marikana, by NUMSA recruiting in NUM-organised industries.

COSATU’s response to Marikana was limp. Its congress, held in September 2012, passed a wordy resolution that spoke about a ‘tragedy’ rather than a ‘massacre’ and omitted to condemn the police, even though 14 of the dead strikers were members of a COSATU affiliate (i.e. NUM). Unity around this position concealed deep division. On the one side there are leaders associated with the South African Communist Party (SACP), whose general secretary Blade Nzimande, a cabinet minister, is closely identified with Zuma. These include Senzeni Zokwana, president of NUM, who doubles as chair of the SACP. The other side includes NUMSA and Zwelinzima Vavi, COSATU’s general secretary. NUMSA’s own resolution on Marikana stated:

Marikana . . . must go down in our history as the first post-apartheid South African state massacre of the organised working class, in defence of the local and international mining bosses and their profits. (Van Driel 2012, 107–108)

In August 2013, Vavi was suspended from his position, ostensibly for having workplace sex with a member of staff (which is not denied), but actually as a consequence of his increasingly anti-government stance. Nearly half of COSATU's unions, including NUMSA, have called for a special congress to resolve the issue. It may be possible to paper over cracks in time for the election, but a difference of vision will remain. In essence, the divide is between unionists whose first loyalty is to the SACP/ANC alliance, and those who privilege the wishes of their members. This reflects a 1980s division between 'populists', including NUM, and 'workerists', who included NUMSA's forerunner. Marikana sharpened this conflict, which may yet lead to a split in COSATU.

Politics

The ANC's lack of sympathy with its working-class base was symbolised, in December 2012, when its Mangaung congress elected Ramaphosa as its deputy president (hence the person most likely to succeed Zuma as president of the country). Former SACP leader Raymond Suttner (2013) provided the following observation: 'The Marikana massacre is remembered most vividly by the ANC, the SACP and COSATU for the displacement of the NUM as the dominant union on the platinum belt. That is what they see as the real crime at Marikana.' At the first anniversary commemoration of the massacre, held in Marikana, there were messages of support from leaders of all political parties except two – the ANC and the SACP. Even Lonmin was represented. The ANC could not bring itself to appear at an event where the keynote speech was given by Mathunjwa, the workers' main leader. Marikana is emblematic of the ANC's separation from much of its voting base, mostly poor.

There is a possibility that in the 2014 election the ANC's support will fall from more than 60% to less than half of all voters. Older supporters will find it difficult to vote against the ANC, and are more likely to stay at home than back another party. But, with voters under about 35 years old, the new Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) offers a real alternative. The EFF is led by Julius Malema, former president of the ANC Youth League, who was expelled from the ANC in April 2012 but harboured hopes of reinstatement at Mangaung. On 18 August, he was the first politician to visit Marikana. Addressing a crowd of about 12,000 people, he lambasted Zuma and capitalism in terms that were often witty and always powerful, and he reinforced the miners' determination to continue their strike. In a memorial meeting soon afterwards, he was the platform speaker when four ministers and the provincial premier were chased out of the hall. Then, at the invitation of workers, he went from mine to mine, encouraging participation in strikes, which cost the owners several billion rand. His anti-capitalism was more than just rhetoric, and if there had been any chance of him remaining in the ANC, now there was none.

The new party describes itself as 'a radical, leftist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movement' that 'draws inspiration from the broad Marxist-Leninist tradition and Fanonian schools of thought' (EFF 2013a). It calls for expropriation of land and nationalisation of mines and banks, without compensation. However, one detects a left populist and radical nationalist agenda. Foreign and monopoly capitalists appear to be the enemy, rather than capitalism; salvation will occur within the confines of the national state; the agency and means of transformation are not identified; and Malema is accorded the title of Commander-in-Chief (EFF 2013b). The official launch of the party was held in Marikana, where a large audience gave it a good reception. The big question is how well will the EFF perform in the election? In a survey of 3585 18- to 34-year-olds, conducted in June 2013, soon after the party's formation, 35% said they would vote for the ANC and 26% opted for the new

party (15% backed the Democratic Alliance, the leading opposition party) (SAPA 2013b). However, while Malema is an impressive orator and connects with the anger of the poor, he has credibility problems, in particular, he is young and faces corruption charges. The main issue is whether the EFF can persuade the youth to vote. Half the voting-age population is under 35 years, but in the most recent elections, the local government ballot of 2011, the turnout among 20- to 29-year-olds was only 28% and among 30- to 39-year-olds it was only 37%; this compares with over 60% among the older age groups (HSRC 2012).³ While the EFF's electoral future is unclear, it is a significant new factor in South African politics, and it has grown out of post-Marikana sentiment.

Conclusion

If we place weight on Sewell's definition of a turning point – that is, an event that transforms structures – Marikana's impact has, so far, been relatively modest. It lies principally in three kinds of change. First, there has been a shift in the 'mood', particularly among workers, which, while difficult to measure, is indicated by the frequency, form and demands of strikes. Second, Marikana led to the rapid rise of a new union opposed to political alignment, and it contributed to division within COSATU between pro- and anti-government unions. Third, it has spurred the development of a radical new party with the potential to mobilise millions of unemployed youth. However, the 'sequence' has not yet reached its limits and 'interpretation' continues. In particular, it looks as if the police's case is beginning to unravel before the Marikana Commission. Even if this does not lead to official acknowledgement that the massacre arose from political intervention, every new revelation shifts the balance of arguments against ANC supporters. My expectation is that after the 2014 election the government will introduce policy changes emanating out of the massacre. If this does not happen, the ANC must expect continuing deterioration in its popular support.

While the historian can and should emphasise the importance of structure in measuring the significance of a turning point, contemporaries, not knowing what happens next, must place the stress elsewhere. For researchers and the public alike, events provide vantage points from which to examine their world and, through comparisons, make assessments about the significance of what has occurred. The way this happens within the population at large is a subject worthy of further attention. For me, the massacre has illuminated the role of black capitalists in mediating the relationship between international corporate interests and a democratically elected government, and it has shown how some union leaders are sucked into this nexus. It has also demonstrated that no genuine reforms are possible without substantial nationalisation, and that workers continue to be a powerful and creative social force in South Africa. For many people, Marikana was, as one writer put it, 'the massacre of our illusions' (Gentle 2012).

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Notes

1. Implats is the second largest platinum mine in the world, and Lonmin comes third.
2. AMCU did not sign the document.
3. Only 23% of 18- and 19-year-olds were registered. The ANC's vote was just 26% of the voting age population (Alexander 2012).

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