Book Review

Trevor Ngwane and Malehoko Tshoaedi (eds) (2021) *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A Sociological Critique*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. 172 pp. ISBN 9781431431557. ZAR267 (softcover).

Reviewed by
Fuzile Jwara, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

This book is a collection of papers presented at the 2019 South African Sociological Association plenary session titled "Critical Perspectives on the So-called Fourth (Capitalist) Industrial Revolution". This body of literature comprises eight chapters that provide a critical analysis on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) within a Marxist theoretical framework that centralises the possible implications of 4IR for Africa and other parts of the Global South. In this critique of capitalism, the works of Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois and Manuel Castells form the foundational framework of conceptualising the term 4IR in the context of global relations.

The first two chapters of this book delve into the concept of the 4IR and where it stems from. It illustrates the historical foundation of how the Fourth Industrial Revolution came to dominate political, economic and academic discourse. In this regard, the originality of the Fourth Industrial Revolution is questioned: Ngwane and Tshoaedi elucidate in Chapter 1 that this 4IR is driven by the World Economic Forum, an annual meeting of business and government elites (p. 2). In this chapter, Ngwane and Tshoaedi argue that sociologists cannot be excluded from debate about the Fourth Industrial Revolution as part of the critical evaluation of capitalist development in Africa (p. 4). This critique stems from postcolonial thought grounded in Marxist theory of capital exclusion of the working people. In Chapter 2, David Cooper argues that 4IR is not a new concept, rather a continuation of post-1970 neo-liberal policies; he calls it the Third Capitalist Revolution (p. 15). Subsequently, Cooper applies Marxist theory to link the university as inseparable to the advancement of neo-liberalism worldwide, thus placing universities as the vehicle that propels 4IR. To prove his point, he refers to universities as the emergence of a "knowledge-based economy and society" (p. 17). The chapter presents a critical analysis of the university's role in reproducing labour, research and technologies that benefit those who own the means of production.

In Chapter 3, the argument continues the Marxist analysis of the contestation of ideas. In perspective, the introduction of 4IR as a concept for the current technological advancement was declared by Klaus Schwab at the World Economic Forum in 2016. As of 2021, 4IR discourse has dominated the spheres of political, economic, scientific and technological spaces at a national level in South Africa (p. 42). This highlights the notion that the ideas of the elites are the ruling ideas in society, as observed by Karl Marx (p. 49). Consequently, Mokong Mapadimeng stresses that digitisation of labour could deepen social inequality as certain aspects of the labour sector become more automated, leading to higher unemployment (p. 46). Therefore, the 4IR discourse is elitist in nature, which Mapadimeng labels as a pre-existing industrial capitalist order; he points out that many who champion it cannot determine whether the revolution is emerging or current. This contradiction reveals the limitations of 4IR in the lack of theoretical analysis to support its

existence, while also pointing out that digitisation of labour is detrimental to the working class as technology-driven unemployment affects them most. In this sense, the 4IR discourse appears to overlook the impact of technology on labour relations.

Furthermore, in Chapter 4 Rasigan Maharajh argues that the current discourse on 4IR is largely decontextualised and ahistorical. As such, this chapter depicts the historical progression of industrial revolutions, lamenting that this current push for a Fourth Industrial Revolution contradicts the historicity of social, economic and political transformation brought about in each industrial revolution (p. 73). This reduces 4IR to a new phase of the third industrial revolution. Importantly, Maharajh (p. 73) argues that the discourse of 4IR excludes the social realities of the Global South, thereby ignoring the uneven power relations that highlight uneven capitalist expansion. As such, it can be argued that perhaps there is an exaggeration of technological potential to address historical social and economic injustice. Subsequently, the introduction of new technology in the Global South would have to address systemic failures that the Third Industrial Revolution failed to address as a result of neo-colonial structures that place former colonies as peripheral states (p. 76). This means that, global labour relations are determined by the uneven development within capitalist expansion, in turn affecting the labour market in locations such as Africa where high unemployment and underdevelopment are epidemic (p. 76).

Chapter 5, written by Mondli Hlatshwayo, predicates its argument on the historical relationship between capital and the black working class of South Africa. In this sense, the argument critically analyses whether 4IR addresses social and economic injustice caused by a history of racialised capitalism under colonialism and apartheid. The main point places 4IR as a replication of social and economic inequality in a neo-liberal domestic economic environment. Moreover, Hlatshwayo highlights the glaring issue of the black working class continuing to struggle to access of resources that were provided to others in the previous industrial revolutions, namely electricity and efficient public transport (p. 89). In this way, he illustrates the alienation of the working class from the means of production and the fruits of their labour in the distribution of resources (Maggott et al., 2022: 2).

In Chapter 6 Bridget Kenny expands on the historical analysis of technological revolutions and their implications on race and gender relations in South Africa. The discussion pertains to the reinforcement of gender and racial bias in the technology itself, an extension of racial capitalism in South Africa (Go, 2021; Ashman, 2022). According to Kenny (p. 129), "The fantasy entrenches an instrumental logic of engagement with the problems of work, labour, reproduction and life that belies concrete histories of racial capitalism". Therefore, it can be extrapolated that the South African 4IR discourse is dominated by market perspectives that undermine the social conditions of the black working class in order to advance capital interests (p. 90). In this regard, the advancement of 4IR in South Africa appears to entrench historical social inequality at the expense of the working class, thus slanting labour relations in favour of the capitalist ruling class.

The last two chapters of this book examine the future of labour struggles in South Africa and the subsequent role of trade unions. Zingiswa Lozi of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), in Chapter 7, critiques the state of the South African economy as merely based on primary commodity production, such as mining (p. 135). She then argues against the neo-liberal agenda to de-industrialise the South African economy, where the government invests in manufacturing and in the public sector. This means that South Africa needs to focus on contextualised policy-making that is relevant to the needs of South African workers. In addition, Lozi emphasises the effects of automation on job losses in the banking and retail sectors of the South African labour market (p. 134). She goes on to reiterate the changing nature of the labour market, which prompts labour union leaders to collaborate with sociologists to combat capitalist

exploitation. As such, there is a need to emphasise the importance of sociological inquiry in labour relations within the national debates on the Fourth Industrial revolution.

In the concluding chapter, Trevor Ngwane extensively discusses the role of COVID-19 in propelling the 4IR even further. Consequently, the shortcomings of 4IR technologies are front and centre of the argument in this chapter, which exposes the ruthlessness of neo-liberal capitalist policy as many workers were retrenched, thus indicating that 4IR may not be mythical answer to all social problems (p. 143). In this critique, Ngwane reiterates that many of the capitalist nations with advanced technology failed to respond promptly to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in many lives being lost (p. 144). In this regard, the infallibility of 4IR in times of crisis is questioned, particularly in an unequal country such as South Africa. Subsequently, one could ask the following question: "How do the working poor access technology that they cannot afford, and who benefits the most from rapid digitisation in South Africa?"

In conclusion, this book provides an extensive critique of 4IR as a concept, including scrutiny and critical explanation of the origins of the concept. As such, the content of this book is refreshing to read, especially the contextualisation of 4IR to South Africa and its implications for the South African public. Moreover, the questions posed in each chapter create a curiosity to understand what 4IR entails from a sociological perspective, derived from a localised application of Marxist social and economic theory. However, this book fails to address an important aspect of 4IR at the national level: the counter-revolution from the working class, where new technology is rejected by the general public, such as the e-toll bridges in the province of Gauteng, the economic hub of South Africa. Nonetheless, each chapter addresses relevant questions at a national level, especially the impact of digitisation on the labour market and what the future may entail if 4IR debates continue to be dominated by market perspectives as opposed to the social, economic and historical labour relations of South Africa.

References

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

FUZILE JWARA is a postgraduate student at the University of Johannesburg, studying Sociology. [E-mail: 219099095@student.uj.ac.za]