



The UKZN Griot. of Hazard and Safety

BY:

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A law derived by one of my students who started his degree studies at the age of 36, after working as an electrician on the mines, goes something like this: “The likelihood of a disaster occurring increases in proportion to the educational level of management.” In other words, disaster is likely to strike when the professionally certificated and managers refuse to listen to the workers on safety issues.

The Tongaat mall labourers knew this. They knew that building codes were being violated. They anticipated disaster. The disaster happened. The contractor had taken short cuts and removed scaffolding before the concrete had set. The city council had tried to stop the illegal building. It lacked the necessary teeth. Labourers’ lives were at stake and some paid the price. The owners who did not seek building permission are “sorry” for the death and injuries caused. They assured the council that the contractor had guaranteed safety. And, as the press soon revealed, the mall developer had his fingers in many municipal and other tills.

This story that broke in late November last year goes to the heart of how people make sense. When the good sense of workers when it comes to safety issues is ignored – as has always been the norm in South Africa –the price can be high. This is the case in the minibus taxi and trucking industries where some owners force their drivers to endanger millions every day to save costs and time. Just look at the stats for Field’s Hill.

The mall collapse reminded me of Shepperson Law. Arnold Shepperson had warned mine management for many months in the early 1980s that a switching gear on a mine shaft was faulty, that when it failed that people would get killed. He was ignored, belittled and told to mind his own business; he was not a qualified engineer, and didn’t even have a diploma. Eventually, the inevitable happened and eight miners were killed. That the union lost the court case –

despite his testimony - further eroded Shepperson's confidence in the value of education, this time in relation to the judiciary. So Shepperson decided to enter the belly of the beast – the educational institution – to find out what ails it.

Arnold registered for electrical engineering. His worst fears were realised. The curriculum, he said, was idealised, and in his view did not address the kinds of daily problems that workers face both above and underground. So he shifted to English and Philosophy. Perhaps via these disciplines he might be able to make sense of how certified professionals make sense, and of why they can't see the wood for the trees. But sometimes they can: the engineers' warning to NASA management of a seal flaw went unheeded and in 1986 the Challenger shuttle was launched against their advice - only to explode 73 seconds later, killing all astronauts on board.

In Philosophy Shepperson bumped up against logical positivism. In English he learned about how literature shaped the Anglo-Saxon world view of culture, problem solving and how the world is interpreted. Neither explained his lived experiences on the mines. So, he ended up doing cultural studies in his search for a theory to explain the ideas of hazard and safety and how to develop strategies to deal with these. He soon realised that the central mechanism is that of 'power'. In the case of the mall it was the power of the owners and the contractor to ignore the law, to pull on political networks, and to dismiss hazard ('we know best, because we have decision-making power, the expertise and the educational certificates to prove it; we know better than the council's building inspectors, and in any case neither they nor legal injunctions can stop us').

In the case of the mine incident, Shepperson, who was already reading Immanuel Kant's *Philosophy of Reason* at the coalface, was ignored because his reading habits identified him as "learned", and because he did not have any electrical engineering certificates. All he had was on-site experience, clearly muddled by reading also Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Like with the mall labourers, the (ill-educated) but certified supervisors and managers dismissed him as a crank. In both cases people died and were injured. In these circumstances, knowledge is not power. It is a burden because the workers know that the managers are putting their lives in danger. It is a double bind because the workers need their jobs.

Shepperson's academic motivation until his premature death was the study of the semiotics of hazard. He raised funds from the Safety In Mining Research Council (SIMRAC) to pursue his PhD. He delved into historical discussions of culture, literature and applied semiotics (the study of meaning-making) to make sense of how the mining industry and the legal system made sense of hazard. How does culture and ideology blind one to the real material world where concrete slabs collapse, lifts crash, runaway trucks cause massacres and space shuttles explode? Why is what is so blindly obvious to uneducated and uncertified victims of hazard so opaque to better educated supervisors, managers and owners? The workers in these instances were not blinded by power, ideology and output imperatives but by the culture of fear – fear for their safety and fear for their jobs, and fear for loss of self-esteem. The owners who are responsible for crashes on

Field's Hill and mining and construction disasters fear little, as they have expensive lawyers who will protect them. In the political realm they have tame doctors in tow who will diagnose them as terminal and let them out of jail, when they will resume their former golfing ways.

I sometimes feel the same way about the academy and its neoliberal instrumentalism, managerialism and commodification. Those at the material class-face (we no longer use chalk) know what's coming. And it ain't pretty, no matter our educational qualifications. Anyone for golf? The range is adjacent to the Old Mutual Sports Hall.

Keyan G Tomaselli is still employed at UKZN. This column is dedicated to the memory of Arnold Shepperson as was a special issue of *Critical Arts* (2008) on the topic of philosophy, logic and mining safety.

- The views expressed in this column are the author's own.