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Analysis of News Article: Taxis and Covid-19: 'The ideal doesn't exist' by Sarah Smit

On July 13, 2020, Smit, a news reporter at the Mail & Guardian Newspaper, wrote an article called *Taxis and Covid-19: 'The ideal doesn't exist.'* The article focuses on new government regulations for the Taxi industry in South Africa, which aim to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. The regulations require passengers to wear masks and impose a 70% passenger capacity limit in the taxi for long distance trips. These are less stringent than the previous regulations which were met with dissatisfaction from taxi drivers. The new regulations, according to government officials, are more relaxed not because the threat of the coronavirus has lessened, but rather in recognition of the essential service that the taxi industry provides. Taxis provide people with transport to work and are thus linked to food security and income security. At the end of the article, the author states that government officials appeal for South Africans to adopt more careful behavior with regards to Covid-19 because they believe the best defense against the coronavirus is behavioral change.

The government's Covid-19 restrictions interfere with the order that has naturally arisen from the working class. Taxis are part of the informal business sector. They provide a solution to the lack of formal public transportation in South Africa, which is especially valuable to the lower class as a means of accessible, convenient, and affordable transport. The taxi industry illustrates how people can naturally come together and create solutions because humans

benefit from working together. As Paine states, “The mutual dependence and reciprocal interest which man has upon man... create that great chain of connection which holds it together” (1). The government’s restrictions such as the 70% capacity limit not only disrupted business for the taxi workers, but they also impacted commuters. Taxi fares increased to compensate for the profits lost with few passengers. Moreover, less passenger capacity meant the taxis filled up faster, thereby decreasing accessibility to catch a taxi. Thus, we see that in some cases government regulations can disrupt society instead of instilling order.

Some people have called the pandemic a great equalizer. By this they mean that the pandemic affects everyone equally, regardless of social class. However, while the Covid-19 virus infects people no matter their wealth or race, the Covid-19 regulations that government imposes can serve to create and maintain inequality. This is the case with the taxi regulations that the article discusses. From an objective point of view, such government regulations on the taxi industry are unjust because they have greater impact on the already vulnerable lower class than the middle class. For low-income and unemployed people, taxis are their main mode of transport. Without them, they cannot get to work or seek employment. Whereas the middle class have many more options as most of them have cars and can even afford to take flights. Moreover, the impact of losing a job is greater for the lower-class population who have little to no wealth to survive periods of unemployment. Losing a job can lead to starvation, homelessness and possibly death. Thus, to apply laws that restrict the taxi industry on which the working class depends on perpetuates inequality.

I am glad the government loosened the restrictions on the taxi industry, but one has to question its decision to impose restrictions in the first place. The use of regulations enforced by

the state to control people's behavior is what Fei calls a 'rule of law' (100). He states that "in order to ensure that everyone in the group uses the same methods at the same time to solve common problems, there needs to be some force to control each person. This is what a 'rule of law' means" (100). These laws, however, are a not objective force. They are influenced by human biases, especially those of the dominant class. Fei states, "human factors are always involved in the rule of law" (94). Considering this, it is possible that racial and class bias embedded in public opinion have compelled the government to impose laws on the taxi industry that unjustly harm the working class, who are mostly Black and Coloured. The Coloured is a multiracial ethnic group in South Africa.

Some might see the behavior of commuters crowding into a minibus taxi as irresponsible behavior because it increases the spread of the coronavirus. Even the article mentions how the government has been emphasizing behavior change as a way to curb the spread of the coronavirus, thus implying that individuals are responsible for not spreading the coronavirus. I believe in this sentiment to a certain extent. People should not take unnecessary risks, but sometimes they are faced with no safe options. For the working class, the threat of not earning an income is greater than contracting the coronavirus in the minds of many who are already low-income. Thus, to attempt a solution, it is first necessary to identify the root cause of the behavior. In this case, it is poverty and, on a deeper level, structural racism. Black and Coloured South Africans are oppressed and kept poor. Without money, one does not have the luxury to risk being late for work or taking a car. In that sense, squeezing oneself into a taxi to ensure that one arrives on time is the most logical behavior. Therefore, instead of trying to control the working class to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, the government should

focus on policies that protect the working class, such as guaranteeing the employee rights. One such right could be the right to keep one's job even if you can't come to work because of complications caused by the pandemic. Moreover, they should focus on providing affordable access to quality healthcare to mitigate fatal coronavirus cases.

References

<https://mg.co.za/coronavirus-essentials/2020-07-13-taxis-and-covid-19-the-ideal-doesnt-exist/>