

BOOK REVIEWS

A Jacana Pocket History – Poverty in South Africa: Past and present
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The theme of book *Poverty in South Africa: Past and present* is captured in the title. The emphasis of the book is on poverty within South Africa. The essence is on what poverty means materially, socially and politically. The history of the phenomenon of poverty is highlighted within the context of South Africa's past and current evolution. The focus of the book is on providing "an historical overview of poverty in South Africa" (p. 12). The book acknowledges that poverty is not exclusive to South Africa as it is prevalent in many countries and has been the focus of researchers' overtime. The book makes a case for the "distinctive dimension" (p. 13) of poverty in South Africa. In other words, poverty in South Africa is affected by racial discrimination, prevalent through the country's legislation, its traditions, discriminations within its systems and deep-rooted prejudices.

The structure of the book is logical. The theme of poverty's past is encapsulated in the beginning of the book, which features a historical look at the precolonial past with a focus on the nature of poverty. There is a mindful attempt in the beginning to outline the anguish of the poor against the background of precolonial and colonial South Africa. This gives the author the margin to present the various arrangements of the disparities and poverty that were prevalent within precolonial indigenous societies. These disparities marginalized some members of the communities in comparison to others. Having set the arguments that South African poverty has been profoundly racialized (p. 13), the book proceeds to look at poverty among the white and black population as well as poverty in urban and rural areas of South Africa.

Poverty within the white population is approached more as a question

than a problem. Whilst acknowledging the severity of poverty suffered by the African and Coloured population, the book makes a case for a chapter on “white poverty” (p. 40). The case in point being the implications for policy implementation to address poverty within the white population and implications for poverty for the black population. One of the stark contrasts explained is on policy differentiation in addressing poverty among the white and black people. Poverty among the rural and urban blacks was well noted by policy makers, yet very little was done to tackle this problem (Chapter 3).

The chapter details poverty experienced by the rural and urban blacks. The causes of rural poverty explained from social and economic perspectives start as far back as the first half of the twentieth century. Urbanisation of Black areas in South African cities is described as typical of urbanization in other countries, in terms of pace. The urban areas described include Sophiatown (p. 67), Johannesburg (p. 69) and Durban (p. 72). One of the motivations for such urbanization was to create barriers for growth and to create restrictions for blacks within these cities. The discussion on such barriers is carried through the chapter on apartheid and urban poverty. The main features of the three phases of apartheid are provided as an explanation for urban poverty. The author goes on to explain “social engineering” (p. 110) during the period of apartheid and the ripple effect for poverty in the rural areas. Having attained the goal of discussing poverty in South Africa before 1994, the next chapters explains post-apartheid poverty. The arguments from the post-apartheid period are used to show through empirical evidence how the assumptions under the first five chapters have shaped the present. It is against this background that the author maintains that: “All visible aspects of poverty – some of which are so familiar they are barely noticed – are historically formed” (p. 34).

Several theoretical arguments are presented in the first five chapters. The first argument is the acknowledgement that poverty is a global phenomenon and not solely a South African problem. That poverty in South Africa has uniqueness in that it is “colour-coded” (p. 13). Inherent within this assumption is the reference to blacks were subservient in comparison to white settlers. Accordingly, Bundy closes chapter one with the following statement: “For three centuries, poverty in South Africa was profoundly shaped by changing forms of unfree labour and by social and political relations that were colour-code” (p. 39). The second argument is that capitalism and urbanization was result of colonialism. The intention of policy in response to poverty experienced by blacks was to create measures that controlled the black population and strengthen the white supremacy. Bundy

captures this as “stringent measures controlled where Africans lived, worked, were schooled – and on what terms” (p. 56).

The chronological presentation of arguments is important for this book and is in keeping with the theme of past and present. This is evident firstly in the title of chapter one, namely, *Precolonial and colonial poverty* and in the introduction of poverty during precolonial and colonial times. Secondly, in the discussion of the poor white problem from 1860 to the Union government as well as the creation of employment for whites around 1933. Thirdly, in chapter three’s discussion of poverty in the rural and urban areas where blacks resided prior to 1948. In addition, the chapter on apartheid and poverty in urban areas records the period of apartheid as part of three subdivisions from 1948 to 1990. Finally, is the post-apartheid period in which African National Congress (ANC) rules and the organization’s policy response to poverty in South Africa from 1994 to 2004 and 2014 election.

The emphasis in chapters 6 and 7 is on policy with respect to poverty in South Africa. In chapter six Bundy provides a brief description and analysis of how the ANC uses social security policies as an integral part of the organizations’ campaign. The importance of social welfare and its distribution form an essential part of the chapter. This is followed by a tracing of racial appropriation of social welfare during the Pact and Fusion government in favour of whites. The arguments on social welfare are fully explored with the author using different literary text to explicate his views. An explanation is given on the how social protection policies began from 1994. The discussion and illustration of expansion and technology associated with the distribution of pensions and grants is charted in this chapter. Following on the expansion is thinking that by not changing the “shape” as opposed to the “size” of the welfare system, the author explains that “there was less incentive to reconceptualise” (p. 123) and to question the assumptions that were part of purpose of such a system. The author then looks at the impact, limitations and ideology of the ANC with respect to social security. The chapter then notes the paradox of the ANC with regard to its “pro-poor policy” (p. 126).

The concluding chapter in the book revisits the theme of the book. The author starts the chapter with three questions, one of which is: “How did [poverty] come about”? (p. 133). The conclusion drawn is that poverty has its “scars” from factors such as “colonial dispossession and coerced labour (p. 133) and capitalism that resulted in racial segregation and exploitation of black labour in South Africa. The impact of capitalism post-apartheid

through inequality and unemployment are covered in this chapter using both the broad and narrow definitions. The conclusions drawn with respect to policy options in this chapter relate to the following two issues. The first relates to how the importance of growth in the economy is recognised with the proviso of such growth being “pro-poor” (pp. 144-145). Second is the recommendation to create jobs through “public works or public employment projects” (p. 147). Finally, Bundy recommends “political solutions” (p. 154) to address the challenges of poverty. These include: (i) poverty alleviation by means of “redistribution through welfare and social wage” (p. 149); (ii) capacity building; (iii) land reform that favours the poor.

This book is certainly a valuable and useful source on understanding poverty in South Africa. It is well written and provides an in depth historical account and analysis of poverty from as far back as precolonial times. The theoretical assumptions are clear and can make sense even to new scholars entering the field of poverty studies. The book provides the theoretical underpinnings behind the broad theme of colonialism having a lasting impression on poverty in South Africa’s past and present. This book is a notable contribution to the current body of knowledge on poverty. Its contribution to South African context is noble. The contents of the book span an economic, political, social with an emphasis on historical dimensions, to name just a few. The style, language and scholarly approach of the book are of a high quality especially with regard to the challenging subject of poverty in South Africa and the author thus should be applauded.