

# Review

## *Undressing Durban (Madiba Press, Durban, 2007)*

*Reviewed by Khona Dlamini*

Many of the 54 essays in *Undressing Durban* were initially written for the International Sociological Association meeting held in Durban in 2006. These essays were written as a way of introducing delegates to the conference to Durban, including subjects that would interest them. Due to popular demand, the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Sociology campus decided to extend the essays and publish them in book form.

That said, the essays in this volume are generally not too academic. They are accessible to academics and to anyone interested in the politics that drive Durban as a microcosm of South Africa.

The book deals with a wide range of topics that look at life through the varied experiences of people in Durban. These range from identity issues for local people as well as exchange students and refugees; the lives and struggles of shack dwellers; crime in the city; street children and the homeless; sex workers and HIV/AIDS and how those affected and infected relate to it.

One of the most poignant chapters is titled 'Fear of Crime and Moral Panics'. Interestingly, of the five essays in this section, only one is written by a South African. They are mostly written by exchange students from various countries in the Eastern and Western world. What all these students note is the obsessive talk about crime. It seems on their arrival they were bombarded with warnings on how unsafe the streets of Durban are, reinforced by the fortifications of homes where they stayed.

The exchange students also make interesting observations on the way people talk about crime. They raise how this discourse takes place in a vacuum. Belgian exchange student, Ralph Callebert, in his essay 'Undressing the Crime Discourse in South Africa,' writes, "failure to recognise [the] historical dimension of crime (and other societal problems this country is facing) reinforces assumptions about the equation of majority rule with violent crime. The absence of this dimension in the discourse therefore seems to serve latent racist ideas; the crime discourse in this way resembles the notion of *die swart gevaar*. The implicit equation of young black men with crime seems obsessive."

German researcher, Sabrina Grosse Kettler in her essay 'The Security Challenge for Durban's Tourism Authority',



recounts a 'Pro-Tourist Workshop' that she was invited to by *Durban Africa* at Westville Prison. The aim of the workshop was to teach inmates "about the benefits tourists bring to Durban" in the hope that once they are released they would not commit crimes against tourists. This misguided attempt at ensuring the safety of tourists is one of the ways that talk about crime takes place in a vacuum.

One of the recurrent themes in this volume is the impact of apartheid city planning on Durban today. It is ironically in the new democracy that these divisions have become more pronounced and reinforced, while they

have also taken on a class dynamic. An essay by Eritrean exchange student Biniam Misgun and Canadian-born Wesley Oakes illustrates how different beaches in the city have become synonymous with certain races and classes. Interestingly, the beach that is considered 'white' is not predominantly white, but is frequented by middle-class blacks who are identified as white because of their dress, class and presumed proximity to whiteness.

This ties in well with Mxolisi Ngcongo and Humphrey Glass' look at 'Homogenisation and Zulu Nationalism in the Casino City', which speaks of the transition from minority to majority rule in the city. The writers explain the transition as "a revolt of the masses" rather than as revolution, "such a revolt is about access and not about revolutionary overthrow of the existing economic system. This successful revolt did not overthrow capitalism but sought to remain within the capitalist confines of production and consumption and thus distribution and redistribution entered into the political vocabulary of South Africa."

This has meant that Durban, like many other city centres countrywide, has not seen revolutionary changes that can make a difference in the lives of the majority of its population. Rather, a black elite has simply occupied the spaces and positions formerly reserved for whites while the same systems that were responsible for inequality are still in place. One of the ways in which this is evident is in the lives of shack dwellers dotted around the eThekweni Municipality. The articles in Section 6 of this book "point to key contradictions between the rhetoric of a new democratic South Africa and the systemic disregard for the rights of certain (black) people" - in

particular, the poor who find themselves on the periphery of mainstream society.

The essay that speaks to signs of the time is 'Restructuring at the UKZN and Job Losses: The Case of Cleaners and Ground Staff', by Mokong Simon Mpadimeng and Sthembiso Bhengu. This piece looks at the effect of neo-liberal policies on the lives of ordinary South Africans.

The writers did research on the restructuring that took place at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the effects that this has had on staff at the lowest levels. The writers expand on the the introduction of "trade liberalisation and capital markets, fiscal conservatism and the privatisation of state assets" through GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) and its effects. This economic policy has badly affected staff such as cleaners, ground staff and security guards, and potential students from working class backgrounds. Many 'non-essential' staff members have been retrenched, while those still employed by the university have lost many privileges such as medical aid and substantial study subsidies at the university for their children.

The focus is on running the university as a business and on skilling graduates for the labour market with less emphasis on developing creative and critical minds. This shift in focus on the role of academia highlights the void that has been left by the lack of critical academic analysis of current policies by the government and its effectiveness in addressing imbalances in this country.

One of the issues which is dealt with thoroughly by writers is identity. Although at the outset, the intention was not for the book to concentrate on this, race issues cannot be divorced from South African society and this is apparent

in the pages of the book.

One of my criticisms of this book is that it reinforces the stereotype of coloured people as gangsters lacking upward mobility. There are chapters on Indian and black identities and their constructions and these are examined thoroughly by writers. There is no chapter on white identities, but this gaping hole is explained extensively in the introduction.

The only chapter that looks at coloured identity is one on gangsterism in Newland East. No account is given on why there is a shortage of essays that look at colouredness as an identity outside of gangsterism in Durban. It is as if it is not taken seriously as an identity which many people ascribe to. This is regrettable as I believe that the formation of colouredness as an identity, particularly when looking at different generations of coloured people, is interesting.

There is one essay by Wesley Oakes, a Canadian student of mixed race which addresses identity as a black person rather than a coloured person. He says that, "being coloured is not simply an amalgamation of bloodlines, it is a culture, Durban coloureds have their culture just as the Cape coloured and Malays have theirs". It would have been interesting to probe deeper into coloured identity as it presents itself in Durban.

This volume of studies, essays and observations is worth a read. For the most part the book is accessible to most readers and offers insights into many local, national and international issues. *Undressing Durban* made me look and think about the city of my birth in different ways. LB

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