Book review

Uniting a divided city: governance and social exclusion in Johannesburg
Jo Beall, Owen Crankshaw & Susan Parnell
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This is a rather good book, but with some limitations. The limitations are suggested by the cover photographs, for what is one to make of a book whose title, *Uniting a divided city*, is belied by cover pictures that show the city centre and a squatter settlement that looks suspiciously like a misplaced photograph from South America? Whatever happened to the northern suburbs?

Instead of imagining that the authors, some of whom are renowned geographers, might have selected the photographs, one’s initial misgivings on first picking up the book turns to the thought that it must be the publishers, in their selection of photographs, who are geographically challenged.

However, it is in the location of the case studies that the book’s limitations emerge. The empirical richness of the case studies, as the authors point out, arises in part from work commissioned by donors. Donors serve a market that consists of the poverty of others in other countries. The result is a book whose case studies traverse Johannesburg in search of poverty and inequality, and not the anxieties and investments of the well-to-do and the manner in which this is shaping Johannesburg.

So to a book whose great strength, to my mind, lies in its theoretical grasp, its insight into the forces driving urban change, governance issues and the potential for, and constraints on, policy options. To begin, the authors demonstrate that Johannesburg should be viewed neither through the lens of its being a post-apartheid city, nor even as an African city (whatever that means). Instead, with comparisons in the literature most often being with São Paulo and Los Angeles, or sometimes even Budapest, Jerusalem and Calcutta, Johannesburg is positioned on a global stage, one that reflects and informs conditions in cities around the world.

Thus the authors portray Johannesburg as a typical 21st-century cosmopolitan city whose economic base is in transition. They explain this in theoretical terms through reference to Johannesburg being a post-Fordist city. This involves, first, a decline in often unionised manufacturing employment, which has better wages than those available at the low end of the service sector, where there is an increase in jobs; and growth in highly paid, highly skilled jobs where there are excellent wages; all of which exacerbates income inequality. Second, this involves the withdrawal of state involvement from the economy and, increasingly, from government itself, for example, in the delivery of water and sanitation services. Third, this involves growing spatial isolation of the lowly skilled and unemployed, a problem that was already acute due to apartheid spatial planning. The post-Fordist city becomes the key to explaining familiar changes – increasing unemployment, poverty and inequality, inner city decline, financially constrained local government, pressures for privatising services – and the limitations to what progressive forces in government and civil society might do about these changes.
At the outset the authors make the point that the economic changes to be found in a post-Fordist city are driving both poverty and inequality. This is an important counterbalance to the Millennium Development Goals that were ratified at the World Summit for Sustainable Development, where the main focus was on poverty. Inequality is a more contentious subject. Poverty and inequality are interrelated and the authors demonstrate that both are driven by national policy and the manner in which the city’s economy is linked into the global economy. Globalisation proceeds by selecting for employment those whose skills are relevant to competing in the global economy and leaving aside those whose skills are not. This outcome is reflected fully in South Africa’s Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy, with its emphasis on export-led growth. As a result, South Africa’s economy is distinguished less by the racially based wage differences among the employed (as in the past) than by income differences between the employed and the unemployed. The authors thereby set the stage for analysing approaches to uniting a divided city, where political transformation is not accompanied by economic redistribution and inclusive social change.

The book has four sections – ‘Ways of understanding the divided city’, ‘The changing spatial structure of the city’, ‘Institutional responses to urban change’ and ‘Living in a divided city’. In the first section the authors make the case for Johannesburg being typical of 21st-century cities. In the second section they lay the post-Fordist theoretical groundwork for understanding the transformation under way in Johannesburg. The next two sections proceed through case studies. In the third section the focus is on local government and iGoli 2002, and in the fourth section attention turns to challenges to inner city regeneration, informal settlement upgrading, housing and services in Soweto and gated communities. As noted already, most of the studies are both informative and insightful.

The book points to the contradictions embodied in the shift from race to class and the constraints this imposes on the allocation of resources between the rich and the poor. Can one doubt who will win when the need for increased spending in the south is set against the imperatives of competing in a global economy – enhanced services, a more attractive physical environment and the interests of the ever more influential, increasingly African, middle class?

Emblematic of this struggle over services and expenditure and Johannesburg’s future policy direction is the city’s increased outsourcing (not privatisation) of the delivery of water and sanitation, waste removal, roads and electricity. iGoli 2002 charted the way forward for outsourcing service delivery. iGoli 2002 was presented, and has been generally viewed, as a necessary response to Johannesburg’s financial crisis in the 1990s. Surprisingly, the authors claim that the financial crisis was ‘talked up’ as a means of justifying recourse to the private sector for service delivery and represented a constellation of power within the city that was more concerned with efficiency than equity. In this it was aligned with GEAR and, indeed, the structural transformation of the city has been sustained by grants from the National Treasury. Thus it comes as no surprise that in iGoli 2030, which post-dates this book, the answer favours unequivocally enhancing Johannesburg’s ability to compete in the global economy.

Are the authors correct in their view that the crisis was talked up? In the 1997/8 financial year, the Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Local Council and the four local councils were heading for an unfunded position of R2 billion, although this position would not have been reached as the councils would have been insolvent by the end of
February 1998. Perhaps the issue is less one of a crisis being exaggerated than a response to the opportunity represented by the crisis.

There are probably few alternative outcomes. In the publication by the United Nations Commission for Human Settlements, entitled *Cities in a globalizing world*.

Kofi A Annan notes that one impact of globalisation on cities is to accentuate ‘patterns of segregation’. Later in the same book it is observed that we are seeing cities whose ‘inhabitants are more concerned with only their immediate individual and local neighbourhood interests than with their common future as citizens of the same city’. No doubt this resonates in Johannesburg, with whites still constituting a majority in the northern suburbs and with the south being almost exclusively black.

Again, what is the potential for alternative outcomes? In the early 1990s, civic associations and other members of civil society in the Central Witwatersrand Metropolitan Chamber played a leading role in formulating Johannesburg’s future; but the role of the Chamber was quashed by the African National Congress in the mid-1990s, and the party’s centralising tendencies coupled with GEAR would seem to accentuate Kofi Annan’s pessimism. Where civics and civil society are still active, their activities are mainly issue-based within small areas. It seems that the precursors to progressive change are lacking.

In addition to the case studies, *Uniting a divided city* is well worth reading for the insight it provides into the forces driving change in Johannesburg, although this will be a little disheartening for those concerned with poverty and inequality in the city. The book also enhances the ability of the reader to reflect not only on Johannesburg, but also on many cities dispersed throughout the world.

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