Book Review

O. Crankshaw, *Urban Inequality: Theory, Evidence, and Method in Johannesburg*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2022; 1–129 pp.: ISBN 9781786998941, $103.50–$115.

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*Urban Inequality: Theory, Evidence, and Method in Johannesburg* by Owen Crankshaw (2022) makes an important evidence-based contribution to our understanding of urban inequality by analysing labour market changes and the socio-economic geography of Johannesburg between 1996 and 2011. The analytical methods that Crankshaw employs are robust and contextual methodological adoptions are innovative, while the implications of the trends and their relevance for the theoretical framework and debates are brought to the fore. This review briefly discusses the theoretical and analytical highlights in the book.

The book is anchored around the question of determining social polarisation or professionalisation in greater Johannesburg’s labour market. After establishing professionalisation, the book then addresses the complicated effects of professionalisation and deindustrialization on racial inequality in South Africa. Crankshaw demonstrates that labour market changes benefitted well-educated workers and had the contradictory effect of reducing racial inequality among employed workers, but that high unemployment and the unequal distribution of education qualifications between population groups increased inequality within and between population groups. It is also illustrated how institutional desegregation and redistributive government policies re-shaped the racial composition of the middle class, particularly visible in the growth of African workers in the middle class.

Johannesburg’s economic geography is shaped by economic decentralisation of businesses to the north of the inner city that contributed to spatial inequality and labour market spatial mismatch. The major catalyst for decentralisation was the ‘edge city of Sandton’ where the majority of the city’s wealth is concentrated. In contrast, unemployment is concentrated in Johannesburg’s southern suburbs. Crankshaw argues that this is not due to Black middle-class flight from southern suburbs, but rather that unemployment is associated to the location of low-cost housing in southern suburbs and thus contributes to the reproduction of Johannesburg’s economic geography. These findings emphasise the north-south divide that emphatically characterises the economic geography of Johannesburg.

Chapter 7 shifts away from the labour perspective to analyse the extent to which racial-residential desegregation has taken place in Johannesburg. This provides a lens into structural socio-economic change in the city. Crankshaw critiques the wide-spread use of the Dissimilarity Index (commonly denoted as ‘D’) and goes on to use a local-level spatial perspective to show that racial-residential segregation decreased significantly in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

* A partnership between the University of Johannesburg (UJ); the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits); and the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG).
Crankshaw’s spatial perspective of desegregation is rich and compelling, but his critique of D is misplaced in my view. One must reflect on the original critiques of D and the use of multiple refined segregation indices (Horn, 2005) before focussing on the mathematical properties of the index. A critique of the use of D should rather be placed on the relevance of scale in the analysis of segregation, since D is not useful for understanding local-level dynamics.

In terms of methods, Crankshaw’s classification of occupations, and the debates that inform his classification, is a strength of the book. A key distinction that Crankshaw argues researchers should make is how earnings, as well as the economic activity of a job, determine whether occupations are high-, medium or low-income occupations. Crankshaw also introduces a unique classification of neighbourhoods according to their housing type and geography, which is a differentiation that few other researchers have used. The neighbourhood classification adds nuance to the interpretation of statistical changes.

The book has two important omissions for me. The first is a discussion about prominent trends that shape urban development in Johannesburg in the period between 2011 and 2022 (Ballard et al., 2021) and their potential impact on the continuity or disruption of the patterns that are convincingly established with the 1996–2011 data. Such references would bring the debates and the analysis into the current development context of Johannesburg. Second, the book provides a very detailed analysis of Johannesburg, but simultaneously creates a gap in our understanding of urban inequality in the adjacent, and functionally integrated, metropolitan municipalities (Tshwane and Ekurhuleni) in the Gauteng Province. The inclusion of the adjacent metropolitan municipalities would further elevate the contribution of the book to urban inequality studies in South Africa. Future research efforts should shift their focus beyond the boundaries of just one municipality.

Taken together with other publications about Johannesburg’s geography and development, Urban Inequality: Theory, Evidence, and Method in Johannesburg adds to the rich history of research in Johannesburg with a unique focus on the occupational class structure of the city and its influence on urban inequality. Crankshaw’s analysis undoubtedly confirms that ‘. . . there were dramatic changes to the labour market and economic geography of the city’ (p. 194). In terms of inequality, the evidence presented shows that professionalisation (rather than social polarisation) was accompanied by growing unemployment and labour market spatial mismatch. Even two decades after formal Apartheid, labour market changes benefitted better-educated workers at the expense of poorly educated workers. Thus, along with housing and labour market interventions, the challenge of unequal access to education remains one of the most significant for urban inequality in South Africa.

An academic audience will value the theoretical framework of the book, find the analysis rigorous and the evidence-based insights compelling. Students of Johannesburg can appreciate the detailed overview of historical processes that shape the city. A policy-orientated audience will find the book equally useful, but will likely look for ways to relate the major findings to current and future development trends of Johannesburg. For all audiences, Crankshaw challenges our future investigations into inequality by arguing that ‘the concept of race is no longer a useful proxy for describing social inequality in greater Johannesburg’ (p. 195) and his research suggests that housing and labour markets are better lenses to focus through.

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