

Important book on the antecedents of current popular protest

William Beinart and Marcelle C. Dawson (eds), *Popular Politics and Resistance Movements in South Africa*

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The product of workshops conducted at the Universities of Oxford and Johannesburg in 2006 and 2007 respectively, this collection of essays explores a range of themes that centre on popular politics and resistance in South Africa. These include:

continuities and change in popular politics; the strategies, scale and influence of popular activism; the role of leadership; ideological shifts; patterns of violence across time and space; the changing relationship between state and protesters; different sites, symbols and modes of protest; newer issues such as AIDS activism; and the use of media (p 3).

Contributors base their analyses on African history, social history, leftist critiques of the transition in South Africa, and social movement theory. In so doing they seek to transcend nationalist discourses and historiographies that appropriate and conflate all forms of protest and resistance under the “struggle” rubric. A shared interest in the potential of popular protest and alternative political traditions independent of the ANC in power is the golden thread that ties the volume together.

In the wake of the recent “Marikana massacre”, a series of events that grabbed the popular imagination (both locally and internationally) and that may forever change the South African economic and political landscape, some chapters are particularly important if we are to develop thorough understandings of the antecedents to the situation in the country at present.

Julian Brown’s chapter on the Durban strikes of 1973, for instance, analyses the complex relationship between protest and violence and the roles of the state and company managers respectively in the containment (or lack thereof) of protest. Tracy Carson’s, in turn, shows how unions with limited legal recognition, subject to state repression and employer hostility, have been able to successfully forge alliances with community groups and as a result further not only the narrow economic interests of their own members but also have a significant impact on national politics. Kelly Rosenthal’s chapter focuses on the relationship between the nature of the state and the ideology of resistance. By comparing pre- and post-apartheid protest movements in Soweto, Rosenthal shows how different forms of oppression engender different forms of resistance. In drawing the attention to key discontinuities between popular movements of the 1980s and early 2000s, Rosenthal complicates the notion that grassroots organisations were uniformly socialist (indeed, many accommodated capitalist aspirations) and that the ANC government has thus betrayed the “struggle”.

The essays in this volume explicitly make no comparisons with other African countries. Yet they will appeal to a wide readership. Drawing on the work of the Nobel Prize-winning economist Arthur Lewis, the anthropologist Keith Hart argues convincingly that an “apartheid principle ... is to be found everywhere in local systems of discrimination”.¹⁵ It follows that insights that result from analyses of South African forms of protest and resistance may be successfully applied to a variety of contexts the world over. The central themes of this volume will therefore resonate with scholars interested in inequality and the potential of the different forms of protest that this engenders; the Occupy Movement being the most obvious example.

Rebecca Hodes’ chapter on the struggle for HIV and AIDS treatment on South African television examines the role of mass media in the growth of social movements and is of particular interest here. In showing how the treatment access movement in South Africa was inspired by the radicalism of American AIDS activism, Hodes gives clues as to how local and global

15. C. Hann and K. Hart, *Economic Anthropology: History, Ethnography, Critique* (Polity, Cambridge, 2011), pp 104–105.

forms of struggle might influence, shape and pattern one another. Marcelle Dawson's chapter shows how local struggles over the provision of services have been located within the context of the spread of global multinationals and aligned to similar movements in the global south that have as their aim to alleviate debt burdens. In an analysis of the ways in which the image of Nelson Mandela was employed to attract international support for the anti-apartheid campaign, Genevieve Klein's contribution demonstrates how symbols can be created and used to garner international support for and solidarity with what otherwise might have remained relatively parochial concerns.

The book will also appeal to a readership interested in continuity and change in the ideologies of resistance movements. Rosenthal and Dawson's chapters have already been mentioned. Simonne Horwitz's chapter illustrates continuities and differences in black nurses' strikes at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto between 1984 and 2007. Horwitz highlights the complex contradictions faced by nurses and how they negotiated power and identity in the context of broader political issues when deciding whether and how to embark in protest action and/or strikes. Nurses, the chapter argues, became more militant and more organised as workers during the period under consideration despite these contradictions.

An overtly and exclusively modernist slant may be the book's only weakness. By consciously ignoring factors such as witchcraft, neo-patrimonialism and ethnic violence, contributors run the risk of eliding and/or obfuscating "tradition" and "culture" as a metaphor for making sense of misfortune, as a rallying point for resistance against inequality and oppression, as a way of formulating alternative moral economies, and as a platform for the discussion of civic virtue. Some arguments might therefore at times, as John Lonsdale puts it, represent "Western transubstantiations that have squeezed African responses to colonial rule [and, one might argue, other forms of oppression and inequality] into the prefabricated, imported, moulds of nationhood and class formation."¹⁶ One blind-spot notwithstanding, this is a very important book.