

## Citizens and cities: A South African review

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Popular politics in South African cities: Unpacking community participation



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This book is a special achievement in that it presents substantial original material, ultimately based on a rather small research grant under the CORUS framework (administered by the French International Development Research Agency). The book shows what can be achieved through dedicated construction of groups of diverse scholars working together over sustained periods – in this case 4 years. Such collaboration should include interaction between graduate students, younger scholars and a few more established figures. In this case, it also included collaboration between geographers based in France and diverse South African academics. Such projects require determined leadership. The editor of this collection clearly played that role over the life of the project – which apart from this book has resulted in several special issues of journals and other individual papers. As a reviewer, I had a minor role in initiating this project but I did not play an active role in research, or in other ways, once the project was under way. I take no personal credit for its success.

The collection is about collective citizen participation in processes intended to achieve significant change in urban politics and local government practices. Although such participation generally does not result in dramatic alterations, many people continue to engage in such processes – and this is the underlying theme of the contributions. The book is divided into two sections. The first section contains five studies of participation in which party politics play a central role in the dynamics of governance. The second section offers six studies, each of which is informed by seeking to go beyond the typical distinction between ‘invited’ (usually official, institutional) and ‘invented’ forms of collective expression related to city problems, plans and prospects. The ‘invited’ forms are usually official and institutional, whereas the ‘invented’ forms imply something ranging from unruly to revolutionary.

The studies presented are mostly drawn from Johannesburg, with Cape Town being a second focal city. Not quite in the former category is a study of public meetings in Vosloorus, a large township in Ekurhuleni, not far from Johannesburg. A couple of chapters take a more general view of participatory democracy in South Africa – and indeed beyond. The book is introduced by the editor in a dozen compact pages, describing the nature of the process, and setting out key themes and arguments. The closing piece, titled a postscript, tries to ‘view South African urban governance from an Indian perspective’ – an apparently odd fit, but in this short text Glyn Williams offers a commentary on South African experience in a novel way.

The book presents a wide range of collective citizen activities, which sometimes include ‘foreigner’ activities – a dangerous distinction indeed in recent months. These activities attempt to redirect public investment, alter governmental direction, or fulfill demands for both small and large changes in urban space and priorities. By no means does a single political organisation dominate in all ways at all times in almost any area presented here.

Luke Sinwell offers a fascinating account of shifting alliances between the nascent Landless People’s Movement and the well-known African National Congress (ANC) and Democratic Alliance (DA) in a relatively new area in the Soweto complex. Sinwell’s account highlights the lack of stasis that many narratives of politics in South Africa might lead readers to expect. Laurence Piper shows something similar in his study of Imizamo Yethu, one of the classic cases of a generally poor informal area wedged within a high-income, formal space in Cape Town. The editor, writing with two of her students, portrays similar complexity and contradictory loyalties in an inner-city area of Johannesburg (co-authored with Eulenda Mkwanazi) and in a part of Soweto (with Boitumelo Matlala). Obvious Katsaura draws on his doctoral work in Yeoville to explore party attempts to shape direction in a local official forum, again with far more mixed results than a simplistic understanding of political allegiance might suggest. These studies in the first part of the book present important narratives, and raise intriguing questions that political developments alone can answer.

The second part of the book turns towards suggesting newer ways of thinking through citizen collective action in South Africa’s young democracy. Daryl Glaser reflects on the unruliness of the citizenry, drawing on both the ‘people’s power’ phase of the township struggle against apartheid in the 1980s, and the violent xenophobia in recent months and years. Questions of political theory, political power, recourse to jurisprudence, and actions beyond the purview of the state intersect in these pages. The mix of legal and courtroom strategy with street action is perhaps the most globally intriguing phenomenon here, with Laila Smith and Margot Rubin explicitly addressing the issues in two Johannesburg cases. Alex Wafer and Sophie Oldfield similarly offer a deeply informed study of a changing neighbourhood in Cape Town.

The nature of ‘citizen voice’, the expression merely of grievances as well as demands for radically different action, and the apparent simplicity of the ‘public meeting’ all come under scrutiny in Marianne Morange’s work with Cape Town street traders. Philippe Gervais-Lamobony’s engagement with Vosloorus residents offers a similar analysis. Chloe Buire provides insights into the relatively unusual Cape Town attempt to ‘bring government closer to the people’ through its more than 20 subcouncils, in a situation in which all large cities in South Africa have but one elected council structure. The results, as Buire illustrates, have been very mixed.

In general, the methods applied to the cases are mixed and diverse. Some studies draw on archival material, mostly participant observation and interviews, and there is strong use of media and other secondary sources. Most chapters pay specific attention, in limited space, to the nature of the research. More attention could have been given to the limitations of the work done, and to future research possibilities.

A few themes link this volume together more successfully than many an edited collection, perhaps because of the process through which the authors connected over several years. One theme is how various forms of dominance are reproduced in local political contexts. These contexts may take the form of political party dominance through

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patronage networks; a 'dominance of disempowerment' through almost endless and sometimes meaningless activities; or even participation in the life of institutions that perpetuate domination, by the very people who are dominated – as Morange argues in the case of Cape Town street traders. Another example is the ways in which local participation both opens and closes creative and positive relationships between the state and citizens. Open exploration of these themes is not as common as one might have wished for in South Africa (or indeed many other countries). For this reason, the volume is well worth the attention of all readers who are interested in the direction of change within South African cities.

Naturally, there is room for doubt and dispute around some of the material in the book. Not all claims made are supported by evidence. For example, Sinwell suggests that 'where the DA is in power in the Western Cape, it has had arguably similar exclusionary effects to the ANC nationally' (p. 79). This statement might or might not be correct; either way, the support cited for this statement in a footnote has to rank as weak. The claim seems unnecessary in the midst of Sinwell's rare account of complexities of party and other political formations. Similarly, in Buire's chapter, it seems a slightly limited view – even in the light of her own evidence – to go beyond the important study she presents and claim that Cape Town's subcouncils are merely about 'Christmas trees' and not 'substantive palpable' matters (p. 222).

Some readers might find they are left with a nagging feeling that the studies in the book are mostly based on strong, but not always stated, views on the state and 'popular politics'. The phrase 'popular politics' could suggest that collective views framed outside formal processes can

somehow be more legitimate than the processes of 'the state'. Other readers might feel the work is based on sources just a little too narrow to justify some of the strong conclusions put forward.

One is reminded, by the overwhelming presence of Johannesburg and Cape Town in the pages of this volume, that studies on other South African cities are sorely lacking. Although Ethekwini (Durban) receives more attention than most cities, the book focuses mainly on just these two of South Africa's many cities. Most of the other cities and towns – whether small, medium or large – are effectively sidelined. A great deal of the 'celebrated civic activism' (p. 289) associated with South Africa has historically occurred in places such as Cradock, Emalahleni (Witbank) and Nelson Mandela Metro (Port Elizabeth). It was in Nelson Mandela Metro that the first powerful 'black township civic' arose, after all, in the 1970s.

In coming years, one would expect to see views that confound – or at least complicate – some of the arguments in the present volume, as more work takes place across a broader variety of city spaces in South Africa. In the same way, many other kinds of citizen activity (some but by no means all addressed in other publications emanating from the same project) could usefully receive more attention in future. The opportunity is indeed wide open and will surely be stimulated by reading this provocative volume. The subject will remain of great interest, as political contest among various forces – particularly at local level – is likely to accelerate through 2016 and beyond. This contest will have profound implications for the future of the country and for its citizens both individually and collectively.

