



Nick Shepherd, Steven Robins, eds. *New South African Keywords*. Johannesburg: Jacana, 2008. 266 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1868-0.



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## South African Keywords

This important new publication of a collection of twenty-one essays on keywords and key concepts in contemporary South African public and political discourse builds on the highly successful *South African Keywords* that was published in 1988 and edited by social anthropologists Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp. Given the impact that earlier publication had in the training of a generation of anthropologists in South Africa and the revitalization of that discipline at the time, it is hard not to measure the publication under review against the tone and direction of its predecessor. Unsurprisingly, the editors of the *New South African Keywords* spend a large part of the introduction outlining what they see to be the main differences between the first and second *Keywords*. In their view the first *Keywords* was “activist in orientation,” “politically relevant and interventionist,” and oriented towards showing the use and abuse of “apartheid state-centred discourse” (p. 2). The new *Keywords* on the other hand does not have the same unity in approach; instead, it is interdisciplinary and heterodox. Indeed, the essays in the new *Keywords* are written by authors from

several disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and are written in a variety of styles including thematic analyses, personal essays, and an interview.

The essays on the keywords “AIDS” and “ethnicity,” for example, are not intended to introduce the reader to the theme or key concept or to serve as the framing of a field of study. Rather, these two entries are personal essays that reflect the arguments of the respective authors. Thus in her important essay on why the AIDS dissident position became such an attractive one for former president Thabo Mbeki and others, Deborah Posel employs discourse analysis coupled with a symbolic structuralist approach to argue convincingly that Thabo Mbeki’s denialism can be understood in the context of the political birth of the new South Africa and Mbeki’s vision of an African renaissance that came to be a centerpiece of his second term as president. The symbols attached to these processes—the democratic formation of the nation-state and the vision of Africa finding its own solutions to its own problems—emphasized birth, rebirth, self-identification, and regeneration. The discourse

surrounding the HIV/AIDS pandemic introduced to the political discourse destructive notions such as death and disease, which symbolically collided head-on with Mbeki's political vision. Moreover, the denialist position effectively shifted the symbolic politics of AIDS out of the discursive space of the sex lives of male Africans and the space of death into the impersonal, structural domain of poverty.

Of the other essays, the two that are closest in style to the first *Keywords* are written by the only authors who also published in that collection. Kees van der Waal's essay on the keyword 'development' is an excellent overview of the theme and a useful introduction to the anthropology of development. Not only does the essay neatly outline the evolved meanings attached to 'development' since the Second World War and in the wake of the post-development literature, but it also shows the normative and practical complexities of current development aims, whether state-led or community-driven. Outlining the divergent positions between those who see 'development' as ideal through the introduction of neoliberal policies and those post-development writers who see 'development' as domination, he suggests that students of development should examine how the state and development actors try and address the broader issues of poverty and inequality. Similarly, Boonzaier and Spiegel's essay on 'tradition' is an excellent piece that examines claims to culture and tradition in post-apartheid South Africa, and should be read alongside their contribution to the first *Keywords* on the same theme.

One of the discernible shifts between the two publications is that most of the contributors to the second *Keywords* make liberal use of discourse analysis, whereas the analyses of apartheid-era discourse that characterized essays in the first *Keywords* were based on case studies and field-based research experience. This does raise a number of questions that are pertinent to the form that academic critique takes in contemporary South Africa, a point remarked upon by the editors in their introduction. For example: one of the few authors in the volume whose reflections and insights are based on practices ob-

served during fieldwork is that of Jonny Steinberg, who argues in his essay on 'crime' that 'violent crime is as sure and steady as clockwork,' an insight he gained after having spent some time with police patrols on the West Rand of Gauteng (p. 30). Moreover, surely it is his experience of policing in South Africa that helped him recognize the feeling of shock and disenchantment among police, politicians, and many others about the levels of violent crime in post-apartheid South Africa. This disenchantment, produced at the very time when the birth of the new nation should be celebrated, is the result of the 'blindness' of both black revolutionaries and white reactionaries to the way in which violence shaped our nation's journey to modernization.

The essays collected in *New South African Keywords* are indicative of a number of shifts that have taken place since the late eighties, indicative of changed political and intellectual contexts. Whereas the earlier text was written in the context of the struggle for political liberation and at a time when a consensual political vocabulary of the Left was available to Boonzaier and Sharp (p. 8), the context today is that of the postcolony, the growing predominance of post-structuralist approaches to understanding society and economy, and competing claims of what it means to be 'progressive' and 'Left' (p. 8). So whereas the first *Keywords* had as its explicit target the apartheid regime and as a result had a remarkable degree of coherence and focus, the latter *Keywords* lacks such single-mindedness, despite several essays claiming to engage with that historically distant and rather monolithic figure of 'Enlightenment Thinking.' While the last decades' focus on questions of epistemology, the politics of identity, and the discursive should be applauded it should not preclude knowledge generated through an encounter with people, their practices, and social processes as well as texts and discourses and claims. If, as the authors claim, critique today should in part be about developing concepts and arguments that are empowering, rather than just an exercise in unraveling (and deconstruction), then a good starting point would be the lives of real people and the ways in which they live and make sense of their own place in the world.

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