



## Townships in South African cities – Literature review and research perspectives



Ulrich Jürgens<sup>a</sup>, Ronnie Donaldson<sup>b,\*</sup>, Stephen Rule<sup>c</sup>, Jürgen Bähr<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Geography, University of Kiel, Kiel, Germany

<sup>b</sup>Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa

<sup>c</sup>Outsourced Insight, Johannesburg, South Africa

### A B S T R A C T

**Keywords:**  
Townships  
South Africa  
Gentrification  
Apartheid  
Post-apartheid

In 2011 South African townships marked 20 years after the scrapping of apartheid legislation. While the spatial impress of apartheid planning will be with South African cities for many decades to come, have townships undergone a dramatic transformation? In this literature overview paper we identify key themes of research that focussed on townships mostly since the 1990s. We conclude the paper by briefly examining urban protests, one of the social pathologies of township life, to show how tensions within the townships have ramifications for democracy, civic peace and the focus on urban challenges of the past.

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### Introduction

Twenty years after the end of the apartheid regime, social and spatial structures in South Africa have changed substantially. If the past was marked by ethnic and racial discrimination in political, economic and social life, which was, among other criteria, defined spatially, then the post-apartheid present is characterised by ‘deracialisation’ and unrestricted social and spatial mobility for all. This is, at least, the ideal as defined by the new South African constitution. Reality, however, does not always correspond to this ideal of a ‘rainbow society’. A form of neo-apartheid has emerged, especially in the socio-spatial differentiation mechanisms and ethnicity-based ghettoisation processes that are taking place in South Africa’s urban centres. The continued use of ethnic association on the part of policy-makers (i.e. in the support provided to ‘formerly disadvantaged groups’ through affirmative action programmes) or discourses on and discrimination against immigrants based on their countries of origin, have made it all too clear that some of the social reflexes learnt in the apartheid era still exist, or remain old habits, difficult to break.

The most obvious remnants of apartheid doctrine, at least with regard to spatial organisation, is the so-called township – a term that emerged to identify ‘non-white’ neighbourhoods alone and was thus a core spatial concept of the apartheid era – but it is

a term that nevertheless continues to be used today. As opposed to the ‘white’ suburbs, the townships developed as dormitory settlements without any substantial ‘urban’ elements, as witnessed by their rudimentary infrastructure (public services, recreation, industry, transport, green spaces). As a rule the townships were, and still are located on the city peripheries, and were deliberately separated from the characteristically ‘European’ city centre by natural or artificial buffer zones. The segregationist doctrine held that any so-called criss-crossing of commuters of different skin colour was to be avoided by all means possible. One of the consequences was ‘geographical marginalisation’ from the economic mainstream. Cronin (2012) points out that the mean distance of a commuter trip by public transport in London (8 km), is less than one-third of that in the Pretoria area (26 km), from the massive outlying townships such as Garankuwa, Mabopane and Soshanguve.

The third world backyard of the modern European ‘first-world city’ was closed to the white population, but also to the media and for a long time even to white-dominated scholarship. In a few rare cases in the 1960s, the townships and other residential areas came to the attention of global public opinion and became, at least for a moment, a symbol of all other townships and dismal living conditions, and epitomised the restrictions and constraint endured by the mainly black population (e.g. Sharpeville, District Six). This did not alter the fact that a systematic or analytical study, which might have allowed for a look either ‘inside’ or even ‘from within’ the townships, remained non-existent and politically inopportune until well into the 1970s.

The aim of this paper is to trace the changing scholarly interests in townships, based on a literature review, with priority put on

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ngg02@rz.uni-kiel.de](mailto:ngg02@rz.uni-kiel.de) (U. Jürgens), [rdonaldson@sun.ac.za](mailto:rdonaldson@sun.ac.za) (R. Donaldson), [outsourced.insight@tiscali.co.za](mailto:outsourced.insight@tiscali.co.za) (S. Rule), [baehr@geographie.uni-kiel.de](mailto:baehr@geographie.uni-kiel.de) (J. Bähr).

a periodisation of the changing positions and reasons behind these changes (Jürgens & Donaldson, 2012). The goal is not to present a definitive model but merely to trace the key themes from key sources. Ideally it should become clear how scholarship, and above all South African scholarship, much as the national political transformation, discussed and gradually opened itself to applied social questions, which had until that time never been asked.

### The early period to the mid-1970s

Legislation was passed and implemented by successive governments during the 20th century to restrict the movement of black Africans from rural to urban areas and to limit their residential settlement options to specific urban areas of South Africa. The laws included the notorious Native Land Act (1913); Natives (Urban Areas) Act (1923); Group Areas Act (1950); and Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (1951). Between 1950 and the early 1980s, more than 3.5 million people were removed in order to satisfy the racially segregated geographical ideal envisaged by the ruling National Party (Setswe, 2010). Until the key political event of the Soweto Riots of 1976, scholarly interest in the townships with a systematic examination or questioning of apartheid structures was virtually non-existent. If at all, the only issues discussed concerned the structure and architecture, financing and 'cost-effectiveness' of these neighbourhoods (Kieser, 1964). However, insights into the social lives of the township residents, as an early indicator of poverty, into survival strategies and informal employment in these infrastructurally desolate residential areas can be found in works by Reyburn (1960), Rädcliff et al. (1963) and Suttner (1966). In the 1960s, the doctrine of apartheid as such is nevertheless left unquestioned by white-dominated scholarship. This is done instead in pamphlets, documents and black books published by the likes of the Institute of Race Relations or Black Sash, which challenge the official state dogma on ideological terms. The early discussion on the townships is thus less one of generating 'knowledge' than of justifying political ideals, at most merely demonstrating the 'rightness' of the latter by means of propaganda (such as the information published for the South African embassies abroad: South African Panorama, South African Digest).

### Late-apartheid and the 'discovery' of the townships as an object of research

A more thoughtful perspective can be found in works of the mid-1970s (Bozzoli, 1979; Hlophe, 1977; Maasdorp & Humphreys, 1975), in parallel to the culmination of the political and social crises in the townships and other residential areas, such in the Soweto Riots. This was a shock for the white apartheid regime, both internally and externally: internally it caused a shift from white immigration *into* South Africa to white emigration *from* South Africa, and externally it prompted the imposition of international boycotts and condemnation. This led to a growing 'radicalisation' of scientific analyses. The focus now shifted away from issues of mere urban planning and the realisation of global models, in which the people remained invisible factors. Rather, for the first time, data documenting living conditions in the townships, standards of justice, political and social morality (Harvey, 1973; Smith, 1974) was collected independent of political propaganda ideals (Grinker, 1986). The new international mainstream of neo-Marxist geography made its mark, although most notably in Anglophone scholarship in South Africa. Rogerson and Beavon (1980) described the self-reflected and small-scale study of the townships as the "awakening of studies". Perhaps in a manner reminiscent of the ideal of scholarship not on but, instead, for the people, Beavon (1982) described the so-called black residential areas as a 'terra incognita'. These approaches were not in line with

the political mainstream and remained the exception until well into the 1980s, also owing to restrictive access to the townships. Since empirical work was often rendered impossible by political unrest and state records and census data from the Central Statistical Service from 1970, 1980 and 1985 could not necessarily be trusted, many authors approached the issue of the townships, their origins and problems from a historical perspective (i.e. Christopher, 1987; Parnell, 1989; Pirie, 1988). In a fresh analysis of archival material, some authors reinterpreted official documents from the apartheid era, and considered the role of language and names (Hart, 1986; Pirie, 1984) in relatively early examples of media discourse in geography. Initially, socio-economic issues at the grass-roots level remained 'preliminary' in form (Ndlovu, ca. 1984; Padayachee, 1985). One of the most important works of the period is Mashabela's (1988) directory, in which for the first time all townships in the Johannesburg–Pretoria–Vereeniging region were identified. This work also makes clear that beside the "figurehead township" of Soweto, many other regions existed that required political attention.

### Post-apartheid and the 'opening' of the townships in the early 1990s

With the political transformation of the country in the early 1990s, the pass laws and other mobility restrictions were abolished, opening the townships for the first time. This new access was the most important factor for allowing scholars to experience the townships academically – in a relatively pacified environment (as compared to the frequent riots of the mid-1980s and the virtual civil war that reigned in the early 1990s). This enabled extensive investigations which were no longer historical in their approach, but examined contemporary structures and viewpoints. For the first time in the history of South Africa, these approaches were met with political support and financed appropriately. It was hoped that the townships were to become an integral part of the post-apartheid city. Decades of discrimination against the non-white population groups were to be succeeded by visible improvements in the formerly deprived areas. The pressure on the new, democratically legitimised regime to realise this vision was understandably high, and the affected population in turn was understandably vocal in its demands for improvements. This pressure was also felt by academia, which was called to ask new questions and suggest suitable solutions. Vital to this process was the transformation and pluralisation of the academic sphere, which now included individuals of once disadvantaged parts of the population. Many of these new academics themselves lived or continued to live in the townships and could contribute insider perspectives, their own life experiences and personal networks into their analyses, opportunities unavailable to their white colleagues. The following key issues of study which have emerged since the early 1990s can therefore be identified as the following:

- a) Basic empirical research on the situation in the townships using measurable analytical methods, thus making it possible to characterise developments yet to be realised (Beukes & van der Colff, 1997; Guillaume, 1999; Mears, 1997; Piazza-Georgi, 1999; Rule, 1993). The long-term studies of the Central Statistical Service/Statistics South Africa with its repeatedly applied General Household Survey, Living Conditions Survey and community surveys provide the base data ([http://www.statssa.gov.za/events/Sub\\_Sites.asp](http://www.statssa.gov.za/events/Sub_Sites.asp)) which can be used to document changes over time.
- b) The restructuring of the apartheid city into new, democratic administrative units with infrastructural links to originally segregated residential areas. This includes the reallocation of

finance from rich to poor neighbourhoods and the new demands on urban planning and democratic participation (Beall, Crankshaw, & Parnell, 2002, 2003; Harrison, 1997; Oldfield, 2002; Saff, 2001). Many of these works identify new forms of governance in the townships which function as (informal) means of self-help where the state is not yet in a position to meet these needs sufficiently (Bähre, 2007; Bak, 2008; Fourchard, 2011).

- c) The matter of housing has produced a variety of studies (cf. bibliography in Huchzermeyer, 2003), be it on housing construction, community and gender participation, funding mechanisms or dwelling types in the townships and their revaluation or conversion potential (formal housing construction, squatting, backyard housing, hostels) (Crankshaw, Gilbert, & Morris, 2000; Gilbert, Mabin, McCarthy, & Watson, 1996; Minnaar, 1993; Penderis & van der Merwe, 1994; Stevens & Rule, 1999). Following democratisation, large proportions of the national budget were allocated to housing, resulting in the construction of 2.4 million new dwellings during the 12 years following the 1994 elections (Burgoyne, 2008; Sisulu, 2007).
- d) The growing diffusion and differentiation of urbanism and lifestyle in the townships: the appearance of residents with different socio-economic background (Soga, 1989) and lifestyles, sexual orientations and cultural interests show that the townships are developing in their sociological diversity to become 'normal' cities with all their chances, hopes, failures, tests, anonymity and absolute mobility. The pluralisation of society has come to the townships (Lammas, 1993; McLean & Ngcobo, 1995; Tucker, 2009), which nevertheless also includes, especially in the last decade, new forms of xenophobia (Bonner & Nieftagodien, 2008; Pérouse De Montclos, 1999).
- e) The examination of where the potential economic base for these neighbourhoods might lie, and the base that these neighbourhoods had in the days of apartheid, was systematically denied in their function as appendages to the 'white' cities. Early studies on the informal sector have been published (Rogerson & Beavon, 1980, 1982; Rogerson & da Silva, 1988) which describe the survival strategies of the local population in both the tertiary and secondary sectors. However, more recent studies by Mbonyane (2011), Chao (2010) and Bähre (2007) show that start-ups in the townships still face many restrictions. Efforts to develop townships as tourist destinations and to create jobs have met with some measure of success; the global awareness that resulted from the South African application to host the 2004 Olympics and the successful organisation of the FIFA World Cup in 2010 also benefited the townships. Works by Butler (2010), Booyens (2010), Nieves (2009), Nemasetoni (2005) and Rogerson (2004, 2008) discuss the varieties of niche tourism which are being addressed, such as heritage tourism, which combines the experience of tourism with the political history of the townships.
- f) Identifying social pathologies emerging from the continued existence and even growth of poverty, unemployment and lack of education opportunities. Eaton (2012), Kalichman (2003), Magwaza (1993), Mathee (2000), Wood (2010), Salo (2005) and Pillay, Rule, Rubin, and Ntema (2010) reveal the scope of these issues which manifest themselves in characteristic protests, diseases, malnutrition, violence and gender-based discrimination. In the next section a brief overview of protests, one of these social pathologies, will show how tensions within the townships have ramifications for democracy, civic peace and the focus on urban challenges of the past.

## The contemporary restless township landscape

On two occasions in history the world's spotlight was firmly fixed on South Africa. Firstly, 27 April 1994 ushered in a new era for Africa's last bastion of colonialism and white supremacy when the first democratic election was held. Secondly, June 2010, when South Africa hosted the FIFA Football World Cup. Remarkable changes have taken place since the autumn of 1994. A globally admired constitution was negotiated, and neo-liberal policies followed in a flurry of legislation, aiming to undo the apartheid legacy. The South African apartheid city's spatial structure was not expected to disappear overnight. The government's annual Yearbooks, however, tell us how much the country advanced, both in providing homes and infrastructure in the 'previously disadvantaged' areas of the cities, and addressing economic and social inequalities in all spheres of life – former President Mbeki consequently became synonymous with the sound-byte comment 'what crisis?' Yet underneath the annual reports' gleaming statistics and the former President's apparent ignorance of the challenges still to be faced in the country, lurk the untold unresolved tensions of social distrust, hatred, disadvantage, corruption, poverty, crime and xenophobia – and government's inability to create habitable sustainable settlements. Essentially, the country's cities are in a state of urban revolt, even perhaps a pseudo-urban revolution, and the townships are the fulcrum of this revolt. A binary of disgruntlement from opposite ends of the spectrum perhaps mirrors best the dual nature of the contemporary post-apartheid city. On the one hand the affluent (of whom a significant proportion are now categorised as Black Diamonds) have retreated into new laagers, this time gated, fenced and protected by private security firms. On the other hand the indigent, those living in the townships, informal settlements, RDP estates, the unemployed and homeless, have yet to experience apartheid-free urban living:

The emergence of urban South Africa has generally been associated with a history of violence. Over the last century the primary perpetrator of violence has been the state. State brutality manifested itself in the slaughter of political activists and the undermining of the human dignity of the disenfranchised majority. The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) bear testimony to the brutal atrocities of the apartheid regime. In post-apartheid South Africa the state perpetuates a cycle of violence through the ineptitude of its organs to govern effectively. The inability to provide basic services, especially in the townships has resulted in widespread protests over the failure to deliver water, sanitation, electricity and, mostly, housing (Booyens, 2007; Botes et al., 2007; CDE, 2007). Booyens (2009, p. 128) suggests that "while the 'service delivery protests' continued to be 'grassroots' actions, the triggers were increasingly national-level responsibilities, including housing, land and jobs." Alexander (2010) provides a discussion on protests during the era of Mbeki and the early part of that of his successor, President Zuma. During the Mbeki era the protests were principally about the lack of basic services and inadequate local administration, and were not that widespread (see

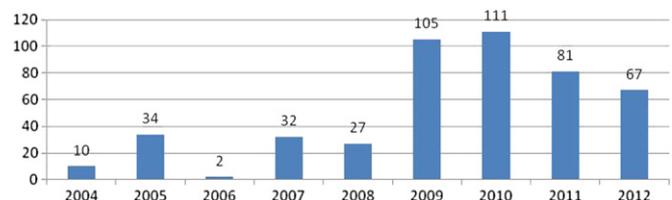


Fig. 1. Major service delivery protests, by year (2004–May 2012) (Municipal IQ Municipal Hotspots Monitor, 2012).

Fig. 1). However, Alexander (2010) highlights the role of unemployed youth and school students as a cause for concern. It was also during the Mbeki era that the country experienced its first major outbreak of xenophobic attacks. During the second half of May, 2008 (and continuing through the month of June), a series of short violent outbursts took place mainly in urban informal settlements, townships and hostels. According to Bekker (2010, p. 1) “the violence during these outbursts was perpetrated by civilians, and was inflicted on the property and the person of civilians. The perpetrators were largely young poor black South African men; the targets largely the property and businesses of foreign African nationals as well as these civilians themselves, and the locations [...] Since the reaction of many of the victims was flight from their residential areas, a number of temporary refugee camps were established (in Gauteng and Cape Town, in particular). During the aftermath of these outbursts, more than 20,000 refugees were accommodated in this way, numerous African foreign nationals were reported to have left the country, and government urged refugees in camps to return to the residential areas from which they had fled since these were said to have calmed down.” The CDE’s (2007) report on urban protests states that “it is not the intensity of the disturbances that should concern us most [...] but] that they have been widespread, repeated over a long period, and triggered by a variety of grievances, thus illustrating a persistent and general malaise in our system of governance (CDE 2007, p. 53). There was also a widely held belief that the protests were linked to power struggles within the ANC” (Alexander, 2010).

At the 52nd ANC conference Mbeki was ousted as ANC president and subsequently recalled as president of the nation in September, 2008. While Kgalema Motlanthe was elected the next president, he held the position for only 7 months, until Zuma replaced him. Since 2009 the form of protests has been similar to those in the Mbeki era. The ‘battlefields’ are still the formal townships and informal shack settlements. Alexander (2010, p. 32) describes the process as follows: “Generally (but not always), a memorandum was formulated at a community meeting and delivered to the local municipality (though, in the case of Piet Retief, it was addressed to the provincial premier). There were processions (with marchers sometimes wielding pangas, axes, and knobkerries), stayaways, the construction of simple barricades within townships and/or informal settlements, occasional blockading of major highways, much burning of tyres (perhaps an emblematic feature of the protests), confrontations with the police, some arson of symbolically significant buildings (e.g. council offices and councillors’ houses), and often the looting of shops.” Alexander’s (2010) research reveals striking resemblances with the apartheid period, when police brutality was common, often precipitating counter-violence by protesters, and in some cases protesters being shot dead.

The intensity of the protests increased dramatically during the first five months of 2012 (Fig. 1). Protests during this period accounted for 14% of all protests recorded since 2004, with May 2012 recording more protests than any other month since 2004. Municipal IQ Municipal Hotspots Monitor predicts that 2012 is likely to eclipse the peak records of 2009 and 2010, given the wide geographical spread of protests and the numerous demands. Recent protest action appears to be an increasingly accepted way for communities to air grievances. In the context of the aftermath of the North-African Arab Spring of 2011, ANC treasurer-general Mathews Phosa warned that if the government does not tackle rising unemployment among youth effectively, South Africa will experience its own Arab Spring. He furthermore warned that “the ruling party would have to moderate its election promises to avoid protests” (Ngalwa, 2012, p. 1).

## Conclusion

This paper has traced the trajectory of township research in South Africa. Filling the pre-1970s vacuum, a plethora of investigative papers was published on the emergence and development of this quintessentially South African phenomenon. More recently, the socio-spatial changes to the Apartheid City prior to and subsequent to the abolition of segregationist legislation, have been extensively documented. In spite of massive post-apartheid efforts on all sides of the political spectrum, race continues to infiltrate much of the current political debate in South Africa on socio-economic development. As said by Jeremy Cronin (2012), the incumbent Deputy Minister of Transport, “The flippant dismissal of the weight of the past on our collective present is just as unhelpful as its opposite, a simplistic evocation of that past as an alibi for our own weaknesses. Both have tended to produce shallow explanations for the deep-seated challenges we confront,” – a sentiment that is wholly applicable to the lingering socio-spatial realities of urban South Africa. Nevertheless, a much more effective and efficient use of developmental skills and resources is essential to short-circuit the increasing nationwide clamour for better urban infrastructure and municipal services. The failure of the ruling ANC to satisfy the real needs of a significant sector of its constituency underlies the current robust debate about the potential benefits of a shift from the ‘mixed economy’ model to one entailing greater state intervention. Academia has an important continuing role in the description and interpretation of the impact on the urban structure of ongoing changes in policy and legislation, differing rates of policy implementation or aspects of emphasis, and the resultant societal responses to these issues.

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