The Survival of the 'Informal Sector': The Shebeens of Black Johannesburg

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Abstract: The present paper constitutes a contribution towards an historical geography of the informal sector. A longitudinal analysis is pursued of the survival of shebeens, an institution for the provision of liquor, in the areas of Black settlement around Johannesburg. The concepts 'conservation' and 'dissolution' which derive from the Marxian based literature on petty commodity production afford a theoretical lens for interpreting the survival of the informal sector. Three major phases in the persistence of shebeening in Black Johannesburg are delineated, viz., (1) the era of liquor prohibition extending to 1937, (2) the period 1937–76 when shebeens confront the system of municipal monopoly and a progressive relaxation on liquor controls, and (3) the progressive moves from 1976 towards the official acceptance and legalization of shebeens.

Introduction

The world of the casual poor, of the street trader, the backyard artisan or common lumpenproletarian, is one only recently entered by the social science community as a whole. The beginnings of a penetration into the 'hidden worlds' of such peoples were established during the early 1970s with the excitement generated in academic and policy making circles by the formulation of the informal sector concept. Major research projects were launched in many parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America in order to understand the characteristics, organization and position within the wider economy of the informal sector. Whatever the preferred vocabulary of the researcher — be it studies of the informal sector, petty commodity production or casual poor — the empirical findings of the early forays contributed immensely to a widening of horizons adding "to our knowledge of many relatively little known economic activities" (Bromley 1978a, p.1035). Within the sphere of development geography prominent contributions to the literature were submitted by McGee (1974a, 1974b; McGee, Yeung 1977) and associates on street trading in South East Asia, Bromley (1978b, 1978c, 1981, 1982) on street traders, beggars and the pavement people of Colombia, Birkbeck (1979, 1980, 1982) on the garbage vultures and criminal gangs of Colombia, and most recently by Forbes (1981a, 1981b) and Rimmer (1978, 1982) on trishaw riding in Indonesia and Malaysia.

With a progressive accretion of knowledge concerning the world of the casual poor, the broad literature on informal sector studies is shifting direction with certain problems identified as demanding further or new attention. Particularly striking are the several problems arising from the position of the informal sector as one of the cornerstones of a new 'reformist' paradigm within development studies (Rimmer, Forbes 1982; Forbes 1984). Although situated at the heart of a field of study which was increasingly turning to historical explanations for understanding contemporary issues of poverty and under-development, informal sector research was largely pre-occupied with matters dealing with the present. It is now increasingly realized, however, that this by-passing of historical research by geographers was unfortunate because the contemporary casual poor, discovered only in the 1970s by social scientists, did not spring into being overnight. In recent reflections on a decade of informal sector studies the neglected historical dimensions of the informal sector were identified as a priority research focus (Forbes 1981c; Rogerson 1983). Historical studies on the struggles of the casual poor can greatly enrich understanding of contemporary struggles (Diemer,
van der Laan 1981; Banarjee 1982; McGee 1982). In addition, the adoption of an historical perspective “denies the validity of descriptions of the informal sector as a ‘novel’ segment of the labour market” (Portes 1983 p. 163).

It is the objective in this paper to examine an aspect of what might be broadly termed the historical geography of the informal sector. This research arena has hitherto been the domain of social historians, such as Stedman Jones (1971) and van Onselen (1979, 1982), who have produced several vital contributions to informal sector studies. The geographical focus of this study is the Witwatersrand, in which the changing path of the informal sector from nineteenth century to the present-day has been documented as a ‘moving frontier’ of economic activities (Rogerson 1985). In terms of the dynamics of this changing mix of informal sector pursuits, it is valuable to contrast the durability or survival of certain income niches over considerable periods of time with the ephemeral character — the rise and fall — of other informal income niches. In the present analysis, the survival of one informal sector activity will be traced in a longitudinal study. More specifically, the focus is upon the persistence of the shebeen or outlet for the illicit provision of liquor in the areas of Black settlement around Johannesburg (Fig 1). Constituting a study in the lives of the common people, this investigation may be

Fig 1 The Changing Patterns of Black Residence in Johannesburg, 1930–85.