

Informality and Governmentality in post-apartheid Johannesburg

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Alex Wafer – Abstract

Panel 91: (Re)ordering Cities and Histories: African Urban Street-Level Workers

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The inner city of Johannesburg, once the epitome of the apartheid economy, accommodates a large population of so-called 'informal' street traders. These informal traders are connected into a range of networks of association that both intersect with and subvert or resist the rationalities of the local municipal authorities. The everyday practices of these urban users has greatly challenged traditional town-planning expectations, and created a challenge for the local state to include these urban users and practices into a democratic post-apartheid city, and at the same time to appease local business communities which contribute the majority of the rates base of the city. While this raises important questions about the limits of the idea of the public in Johannesburg, it has also created the context for a number of potentially innovative urban planning responses.

The Johannesburg Municipality has committed itself to a project of locating traders into purpose-built market facilities. While this has been actively encouraged by the local business community, which advocates a policy of clearing traders from the streets, the market facilities have also been a way for the municipality to intervene into the everyday lives of traders in a context of illegibility. Through the market places, the local state has been able to register traders for education programmes, co-operative schemes and HIV/AIDS testing. While arguable part of a 'neoliberal' response to informality, I suggest (following Ferguson, 2007) that this response speaks rather to a range of more contingent rationalities, including the context of radical illegibility and the political imperative of an inclusive post-apartheid city. Referring to the work of Law (2003) among others, I show how the market place functions as part of an emerging spatiality of state power in post-apartheid South Africa that takes account of the fragmented and discontinuous encounter between state and subject.