

TECHNO-POLITICS, RESISTANCE, AND EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER APARTHEID

Democracy's Infrastructure: Techno-Politics & Protest after Apartheid.

By Antina von Schnitzler.

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Democracy's Infrastructure places at the center of its analysis the prepaid meter, a familiar device in South African households, which forces residents to pay in advance for utilities such as electricity and water. As a 'traveling' technology the prepaid meter imbibed certain prerogatives from its inception, in this case the 'moral reform' campaigns that targeted the working class in Victorian England (108). In apartheid South Africa, nearly a century later, municipal engineers adopted the device to remedy the crisis of non-payment in black townships. They hoped it would symbolically separate the provision of basic services from the discredited apartheid state. The book subsequently follows the prepaid meter into the post-apartheid era to examine its role in recurrent service delivery protests, as well as to consider what it reveals about the history of neoliberal policies in South Africa more generally.

Although an anthropologist by training, Antina von Schnitzler breaks new ground in South African historical scholarship, which will be the focus of this review. By focusing on an unassuming technological artifact, von Schnitzler mobilizes the analytical lens of 'techno-politics' to explore the mutual shaping of the technical and the political in South Africa (10).⁹ This approach reveals that the quotidian roots of popular protest under apartheid stretched beyond the ambit of the national liberation struggle. In Chapter Three, von Schnitzler discusses the 'fiscal disobedience' characteristic of urban unrest in the 1980s and the rent boycotts that began in Soweto in 1986, when township residents refused to pay rent for certain utilities (82). She draws on both secondary and primary sources to argue that the Soweto Civic Association, which couched the boycotts in terms of the liberation struggle, adopted campaigns that had been initiated by residents.¹⁰ This process does not mean, however, that the boycotts were initially apolitical. A core argument of the book is that administrative shortcomings became the locus of political action even earlier, from the late 1970s. Confronted with the outpouring of rage during the June 1976 student uprisings, apartheid officials sought to depoliticize infrastructure provisioning by decentralizing its governance. This masked the direct and intimate connection between citizens and the state.

The reformed governance of black townships assumed a distinctive neoliberal hue in the late 1970s, as von Schnitzler shows in Chapter Two. The link between political reform and neoliberal doctrine that was simultaneously gaining political traction in other parts of the

⁹ This term has been fruitfully applied elsewhere; see T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002).

¹⁰ M. Swilling and K. Shubane, 'Negotiating urban transition: the Soweto experience', in R. Lee and L. Schlemmer (eds.), *Transition to Democracy: Policy Perspectives* (Cape Town, 1991).

world broadens our understanding of the new ‘language of legitimation’ that the apartheid government adopted at that time.¹¹ These strategies also shed light on aspects of South Africa’s economic history. Scholars have previously suggested that the roots of neoliberalism predate the African National Congress government’s Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy of 1996, but no one as yet has specified the modality of incorporation or periodization of arrival for this policy regime.¹² Towards this end, von Schnitzler combs the writings of an economist, Jan Lombard, who served as a government advisor in the late 1970s. He applied the neoliberal tenets propounded by Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek to the South African sociopolitical context, while remolding them according to racist principles.

That the prepaid meter emerged as a solution to non-payment was in keeping with the ‘micro-logical forms of intervention’ associated with neoliberal governing techniques (111). The nature of this form of governance in the post-apartheid period is explored in the last two chapters of the book where von Schnitzler argues that counterinsurgency, in the form of ‘low-intensity battles’, has revolved around such technologies of the everyday (200). Chapter Five describes methods of calculation and of producing knowledge that have been used more recently and which differ from the state-centered ‘mania for measurement’ characteristic of the Verwoerdian apartheid state (133). Chapter Six demonstrates how campaigns for improved access to basic services have been enveloped in a discourse of human rights. In this way, Von Schnitzler shows that neoliberalism has reshaped, rather than occluded, the terms of ‘social citizenship’.

The focus on neoliberalism’s role in political reform provides important insights into the transformation that authoritarian governance underwent in the late 1970s. This perspective is also important in understanding the subsequent trajectory of the South African state. However, while von Schnitzler considers the reception of neoliberal principles in South Africa, the extent of the penetration of these ideas beyond a handful of influential economists is not entirely clear. Political parties and trade unions negotiated, and at times resisted, the terms of neoliberalism, particularly during the democratic transition, and this study’s neglect of their role weakens the case for the pervasiveness of neoliberalism. Von Schnitzler notes in Chapter Two that the reforms of the late 1970s failed to curb the militancy of urban protests because they disregarded the question of political rights. That dynamic highlights the importance of organized political collectives, which were also important drivers in campaigns for political rights. Those processes point to areas that merit further examination and should not diminish the value of this provocative and eminently cohesive narrative.

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11 D. Posel, ‘Language, legitimation and control: the South African state after 1978’, *Social Dynamics*, 10:1 (1984), 1–16.

12 P. Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (London, 2000).