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Making a Life

Young men on Johannesburg's urban margins

Hannah J. Dawson

Among the young men Dawson meets, many consider employment in the formal sector a defeat best avoided. She thus writes of 'the productivity of unemployment' because remaining outside of the formal economy involves ceaselessly inventive, creative work. Dawson's deep dive into moral lives on the urban margins is accomplished and rewarding and very often tugs against our intuitions.

— Jonny Steinberg, Yale University

Making a Life: Young Men on Johannesburg's Urban Margins explores the dynamic everyday life-making strategies of young men in Zandspruit, a sprawling informal settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg. In many ways, Zandspruit typifies the precariousness of life in South Africa, where two-thirds of young people lack waged employment. However, rather than seeing Zandspruit as dumping ground, Hannah J. Dawson calls for an integrated understanding of the complex linkages between people's lives and livelihoods, and the multifaceted sociopolitical landscape of urban settlements.

Based on 14 months of ethnographic research, Dawson investigates how social belonging, identity and economic realities intertwine in informal settlements like Zandspruit. This approach not only challenges conventional approaches to studying work; it also questions the increasingly prevalent perspective that romanticises the adaptive survival strategies of the urban poor. By exploring the intricate connections between those with and without waged employment, the author shows how young men manage complex social, political and economic conditions.

Making a Life offers insights into issues such as urban work, citizenship, un(der) employment and inequality in South Africa. At the same time, it contributes to a global understanding of how young people – men especially – manage economic uncertainty.

About the Author

Hannah J. Dawson is a senior lecturer in the Anthropology and Development Studies department at the University of Johannesburg and a visiting researcher at the Southern Centre for Inequality Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Keywords: urban livelihoods; Johannesburg informal settlements; economic inequality in South Africa; informal economy; precarious employment; male livelihood strategies; young men's struggles; Youth Bulge; township economy; identity and belonging.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

List of Illustrations

Introduction: Making a Life on the Urban Periphery

Chapter 1 Zandspruit: A Redistributive Economy on the Urban Margins

Chapter 2 Networks of Distribution: Hustling and Brokering in the Township Economy

Chapter 3 'Who You Know Matters': Social Connections and Property Ownership Mediate Distributive Outcomes

Chapter 4 'I Want to Live, Not Survive': Refusing Low-Wage Jobs

Chapter 5 The Aspiration to 'Afford': Momentary Consumption when the Future Is Out of Reach

Chapter 6 'Fighting for Our Future': Protests, Patronage, and the Politics of Belonging

Conclusion: Do-It-Yourself Futures in an Abandoned Zone

References

Index

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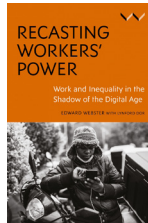
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