

Review

Alan Morris (1999) *Bleakness and Light: innercity transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

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Bleakness and Light is about the transformation of Hillbrow, a famous, once supposedly bohemian Johannesburg neighbourhood. In stark form it is the change from an all white group area to one dominated by black people in the new non-racial South Africa. The most common image usually conjured up when thinking of Hillbrow today is that of the degradation of an innercity suburb, with associated projections of crime, sleaze, and illegal immigrants. These images are not denied, but are challenged in Alan Morris's book *Bleakness and Light*. Hillbrow more than any other neighbourhood in South Africa, as the book demonstrates, has a multiplicity of dimensions, ranging from its prevailing transient population, racial prejudices, and class structure, to new elements which signify both contemporary innercity decline and the emergence of interracial co-operation and friendships. It is a bricolage of events and people, of struggle and resistance, of white flight, and more recently black flight to the suburbs, of decay and attempts at urban renewal, imbricated with the voices of black and white tenants and notorious landlords, city councillors and members of parliament, building inspectors and new migrants, transients of various kinds, some with occupations of dubious legality.

Using mainly, though not exclusively, three standard research methods – historical archival work, a household survey and in-depth interviewing – Morris has provided a finely documented sociological study of the changes in the neighbourhood, reflecting them partly as a microcosm of changes occurring in South Africa, and partly as unique to Hillbrow. It is this ethnographic quality that allows the book to be read at a number of levels. For example, and the most obvious, this is a study of changes taking place in a single neighbourhood, with particular emphasis on race relations, or rather more accurately the interracial interaction in a period of

desegregation. Thus we read of landlords complaining of the destruction of building facilities by black tenants, whereas others praise the sobriety of black tenants who pay their monthly rents promptly. Then there are white tenants' prejudices, apparent in the refusal to acknowledge black tenants, or the clustering of ethnic groups in particular buildings. Conversely there is evidence of black and white tenants getting on with their lives in tolerance and respect of each other, of friendships and marriages across the colour line. While the flatlands breed alienation and anomie, it also provides anonymity for gay people and freedom for many black tenants seeking refuge from overcrowded and violent townships.

Hillbrow, over the last two decades, presents a bewildering array of racial interactions. It is in the sociological evaluation of these everyday racial interactions that the book makes its most significant contribution, and where most serious critical attention needs to be exercised. The dust cover claims it to be 'a major contribution to the study of innercity transition' and the 'field of urban studies'. There is no doubt that it makes a contribution to understanding innercity transition, especially of racial interaction, where none existed in the past except on a master-servant basis. So, in this sense, it is pioneering in its analysis of contemporary racial interaction and the degree of integration in the 'new' South Africa. *Bleakness and Light* will probably be a benchmark for future studies of this kind.

But the book is not just a mere chronology of racial incidents and situations. Morris provides a context for these emerging and sometimes entirely new social situations. Although Morris does not provide an explicit historical periodisation, the book delineates five periods: the classic apartheid period of the 1960s and early 1970s; the early signs of 'greying' in the late 1970s and early 1980s; a period of intense neighbourhood activism and state political manoeuvring in the early 1980s, followed by the dramatic change in the racial composition in the late 1980s and early 1990s, followed by post-1994 period characterised by new migrants, apparent innercity decay, in part a result of red lining by banks, and inadequate control and lack of foresight in creative service provision and planning by the municipality. The early periods are interesting for they provide a carefully argued case of the way in which factors external to the neighbourhood played themselves out and shaped events inside them. Thus, for example, in the 1980s the ever-widening contradictions of apartheid became part of the sharply focused political attention on the application of

the Group Areas Act in Hillbrow. Morris shows how the state's options were limited in returning the status quo ante, given the backdrop of a fiscal crisis, an inability to address the issue of an urban housing crisis, and effectively to challenge and extinguish neighbourhood activism because of its attempts to woo Indians and coloureds into the tricameral parliament. This meant that despite some sabre rattling, the National Party government could do nothing substantial about contraventions of the Group Areas Act. Indeed it sets the scene for the formation of the Conservative Party, and the flood of new migrants into Hillbrow from the nearby townships and the rest of the country.

It is this period before the 1994 elections when dramatic changes in Hillbrow's racial and ethnic composition are experienced, though not necessarily a fundamental shift in the transient nature of the population or class structure. Morris shows that the underclass or 'ghettoization' thesis of American cities has little relevance when applied to Hillbrow. The changes in the racial character of Hillbrow are carried over into the post-1994 period, but ambiguities abound in terms of interracial relations. These become enmeshed with a rise in crime, drug dealing, the proliferation of sex workers and the arrival of émigrés from outside the country. Changes in racial, ethnic and national composition are the new realities of the neighbourhood. These however, contribute to the growing mythology of Hillbrow as a crime and drug-infested, and decaying innercity district. Such myths are debunked by exploring the variety of interracial interactions, particularly the everyday urban experiences of racial integration. Such racial integration that exists is simultaneously superficial and anonymous, supportive of friends and neighbours, and other times confrontational and violent. But then some of these racial interactions may well be based on myths, which begs the question of the relationship between mythology and reality.

Bleakness and Light, however, is also suggestive of a range of other issues. To mention just two: Hillbrow presents its own unique flavour for an extended analysis of race, class and nationality in contemporary times. Much earlier work on these themes has been historical, and confined in large measure to critiques of, or support for, the 'four nation' theory, or more quaintly to questions of pluralism, multi-culturalism and ethnic identity. But the presence of foreigners, particularly African foreigners, in significant numbers in Hillbrow provides for a rather different interpretation. Morris constructs the question of these new émigrés as double victims:

first, as victims of economic and political instability in their own countries, and second, as victims of South African xenophobia. While the victims play their roles in the interracial drama that is important to the story of Hillbrow's transition, the really interesting question is the construction of 'the other' in the discourse and behaviour of South Africans. What is the purpose of labelling African foreigners as job-stealing illegal immigrants, criminals, drug dealers and disease ridden sexual deviants? What exactly do the emergence of these new points of urban social interaction mean in terms of nation building (the rainbow nation)? How does this connect with the lofty sentiments of the African renaissance in Hillbrow? More broadly, is the construction of 'the other' a necessary corollary to building a South African nationalism? I am not suggesting that Morris should have looked at these issues, but it is certainly a path worth pursuing.

A second interesting aspect that the book implicitly raises is that of the theory of social change. The relationship between the neighbourhood of Hillbrow and outside social and economic forces becomes the locus around which social change is conceived. Morris suggests the unfolding events and processes over the last two decades reveals a combination of structures and agency with unforeseen consequences. The structures he refers to are mainly the 'material circumstances' such as fiscal crisis, housing shortages, conflict and violence in townships, while agency refers to people's actions as represented by their willingness to break the law, the formation of tenants organisations (ACTSTOP – Action Committee to Stop Evictions), challenges to landlords and the local state, etc. The combination of these structures and agency led to social change with multiple and unforeseen outcomes.

This is all suggestive of a materialist interpretation of Giddens' structuration theory, and should generate useful discussion on its applicability to race relations and urban studies in contemporary South Africa. However, it is not clear what is the status of 'neighbourhood'. Is it merely a spatial concept defined as such for empirical convenience as suggested in the beginning of the book so as to accommodate the limitations of social survey methods? Or is 'neighbourhood' the locus of social relationships within an urban locality whose context generates the possibility of a range of actions and interventions within a larger context of state, society and economy? Certainly neighbourhood/urban studies as invoked by Morris's *Bleakness and Light* provide a bright searchlight for more urban studies in South Africa. One should look forward to stimulating empirical studies and theoretical debates inspired by Morris' study.