

Review

Frans Barker (1999) *The South African Labour Market: critical issues for renaissance*. Pretoria: J L Van Schaik.

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This is the third edition of a now well-established standard source, and one without obvious rivals, apart from rather less systematic material published by the Trade Union Research Project (TURP). Its purpose remains the provision of an overview of the South African labour market: its characteristics, how it works, how it is changing and issues and problems. The book has much institutional description (including summaries of appropriate laws and policies), much useful descriptive statistical material, and short excerpts from economic theory about the relationships which are thought to govern the operation of the labour market. A good point is the clear and concise discussions about the measurement of various key concepts and data-sources.

The book covers labour supply, labour demand, wage determination and productivity, unemployment, human capital, discrimination in the workplace and various of the key collective actors in the labour market. Its particular thrust is to move attention away from what the book portrays as a more traditional South African focus only on the protection of basic worker rights to the current arena of debate in which the role of the labour market in the encouragement or limitation of economic growth becomes the major concern. To point up this newer focus, the subtitle referring to the African renaissance is included, although – puzzlingly – this is not actually a topic which is visited in the book itself.

The developments since the 1992 edition which receive attention in this version include the advent of the new democratic government, the increasing effects of globalisation, rising rates of unemployment and new labour legislation including the Conditions of Employment Act and the Employment Equity Act. It also includes the 1996 census data and 1995

OHS information, as well as the 1996 ILO report on the South African Labour market. Not surprisingly, this source is extensively drawn upon.

In terms of presentation, this is a sophisticated, user-friendly new-age text, which deserves widespread emulation. The text is clearly laid-out, and well illustrated. There is an extensive bibliography and helpful references are made to appropriate web-sites.

The major limitation of the book is its concentration on description and low-level commentary at the expense of a more theoretical and inter-disciplinary treatment. In some ways such a criticism is unfair as the book does not try to do anything more. But, it would not have extended the size of the book much to provide a more far-reaching theoretical discussion. In its theoretical inserts, the book adopts a resolutely neo-classical economic stance, although this is moderated by reference to appropriate empirical studies. But there is no hint of alternative Marxian approaches, nor any systematic recourse to industrial sociology or industrial psychology. Important sociological work of Eddie Webster's *Sociology of Work Unit*, let alone the more trade union-orientated *TURP* are not cited, nor is there any hint that such works have influenced the writer. The book is resolutely unpopulated by any flesh and blood people. They do not appear to work in firms (or be involved in other work-related organisations: although trade unions are briefly covered) or come from households and communities. Given the continuing structuring of the labour market by features inherited from South Africa's recent apartheid system, it would have been appropriate to have directly confronted the issues which arise.

In sum, although this is a useful reference source, it remains at a fairly unsophisticated level. For adequate understanding of the SALM the material provided must be framed by discussion and theoretical resources which come from a wider range of perspectives.