Review


Bill Freund
freund@ukzn.ac.za

This collection is devoted to chapters based on life in one province, largely contemporary takes on development issues although with some historical material. These chapters include widely-published authors such as the historian Jeff Peires, who considers the relative historic decline of the Eastern Cape, Patrick Bond on the Coega harbour project, Lungisile Ntsebeza on the historic imposition of chiefship on a corner of the Transkei, and Ashwin Desai on a phase of labour relations at Volkswagen South Africa (VWSA) in Uitenhage. Most are critical of local and national authorities and highlight unresolved problems. Some expose issues that have obtained little national prominence such as land reform efforts on the periphery of Queenstown by Luvuyo Wotshela and the (largely negative) impact in the Kouga district of the minimum wage for agricultural workers by Gilton Klerck and Lalitha Naidoo. They certainly showcase the extent to which the Eastern Cape has been the site of important research. Most of the researchers, such as Greg Ruiters himself and his successor Robert van Niekerk as director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research, are employed by or have a link to Rhodes University which continues to be an important generator of social science thinking in the country.

However, it is less clear whether the volume really lives up to its portentous title. Does the Eastern Cape really have a distinctive fate? As Ruiters points out, it is only in the context of CODESA and pressure from the old ruling party that the Eastern Cape, despite its genuinely distinctive nineteenth century history, was born as a new province and separated from
the old Cape of Good Hope as part of a semi-federal dispensation. The old Cape was much the biggest South African province. The Eastern Cape by itself is very large, almost the same size as the American state of Texas. The stereotype tends to see it as an extension of the rural Xhosa-speaking Bantustans Ciskei and Transkei. However this is inaccurate. As Ruiters points out, the province is highly diverse. A large part of the land area of the Eastern Cape was part of the old white South Africa; Graaff Reinet and Uitenhage were actually founded late in the period of VOC rule and the province has a significant Afrikaans speaking population. Moreover, it contains two populous urban areas designated as Metros, effectively Port Elizabeth and East London, and a significant industrial presence. There are big differences internally in human development indicators with low incomes in the poorest regions somewhat mitigated through the national government presence and the social grant system.

Ruiters sees the province as a kind of landmark case of administrative failure characterised by extreme poverty and mismanagement. Of that there is certainly plenty. However, it is less clear that some kind of provincial reordering would do anything to solve this problem, let alone some kind of reunification of the old Cape. The differences in living standard within the province between the former black and white areas alone show that provincial ordering does not determine today’s social and economic differentiation. The attractive gentrification initiatives in Port Elizabeth Central augur nothing at all for improvements and amenities in Mthatha or Lusikisiki. The key resources that come from the state may filter through the provincial structures but do not originate with them. The problems Ruiters and his team emphasise recur at the municipal level but also find resonance especially in ex-Bantustan areas elsewhere in South Africa, even in the Free State with its heavy black majority. Could bringing in personnel from Cape Town or Johannesburg remedy the situation and would it be accepted? The feuding ANC factions of the Eastern Cape will be very hard to dislodge.

What is rather defining the growing national pattern of spatial inequality are the plus factors in a limited number of selective places by contrast to most of the country: the distinctive dynamism of the Western Cape on the one hand, and the centralised development focused on Gauteng with the national capital of Pretoria and the business capital of Johannesburg at its core on the other. While the corridor from Johannesburg to the sea at Durban benefits to some extent, it is questionable whether even the wealth-producing mine-rich territories of North West and Mpumalanga do in most respects.
Insistence that the Eastern Cape is ‘by any account, the most deprived province in South Africa’ (page 1, see also 29) ignores deep widespread problems in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and elsewhere where conditions are not very different. The problems that recur in these chapters are not very distinctive; their importance lies rather in their typicality. The Eastern Cape should be a byword for national problems as a whole, rather than being seen as somehow exceptional in South Africa.

The construction of Coega suggests that the national government is eager to put money into the development of the Eastern Cape (which has been an ANC stronghold) and, however problematic they may be, it is not the fault of the provincial government or of the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro that Coega has not been the hoped-for spark thus far; the national government must take the blame. However, there will also have to be very significant local input before such sparks take off and the fire begins to sizzle. After all, the initial industrial development of the province owed itself almost entirely to locally-based entrepreneurs coming to industry from farming and commerce. At least to this reader, the problems revealed in this volume evoke not so much a misbegotten provincialism conceived at the bargaining table in Kempton Park but our national failure so far to target development initiatives appropriate to 2014 very effectively. It is a central problem at government level but the answers don’t simply lie in the government. These initiatives must take into consideration and address the very large parts of the country where economic growth is more or less stagnant and where a huge part of the population is and no doubt will continue to be located.