

New South African keywords

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New South African keywords is, as its concise but informative title indicates, a publication in which a compendium of 21 keywords and/or key concepts are debated of which some have become central to post-apartheid public and political discourses. The editors and authors see this publication as the opening instead of the closure of debate, meaning that further conversation is necessary.

No fewer than 28 international and local experts from Anthropology, Geography, English, Sociology, Health and Human Rights, Education, Agrarian Studies, Business Administration, African Studies, Gender Studies, Political Studies, Development Studies, and History contributed to this book. Under the editorial guidance of Nick Sheperd (from the University of Cape Town) and Steven Robins (from the University of Stellenbosch), *New South African keywords* seeks to make sense of the terminology of South African society in the early 21st century. There is no uniformity in approach, and readers are offered a set of perspectives with which to gain fresh meaning.

In a concise historiographic outline, the editors and contributors acknowledge the authors of the keywords that led to *New South African keywords*. In this regard, the published works of Emile Boonzaier and John Sharp (1988) and Raymond Williams' classic *A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) are mentioned as the most important for envisioning a "genuinely useful" new publication "as a set of empowering ideas".

To make sense of vague and complicated issues, renowned current thinkers were commissioned to write essays on selected keywords (some familiar and others relatively new or unknown) with a view to providing the reader with "useful" and "empowering" insights. The keywords selected for discussion are: AIDS, crime, culture, democracy and citizenship, development, empowerment, ethnicity, faith, gender, heritage, indigenous knowledge, land, market and economy, race, rights, tradition, transformation, trauma, truth and reconciliation, xenophobia, and writing about Africa (from Achille Mbembe's book entitled *On the Post Colony*). The editors explain that overlaps in the explanations of keywords result from their changeable or "protean" nature in which meanings tend to go in several directions at once, and that this feature was expected.

While reading through the keywords, I realised that it takes first-hand experience and an informed mind willing to research, explore and cross racial/language/sexual and political barriers to articulate meaningful debates. Not all the debates in *New South African keywords* succeed equally in achieving this. The editors and contributors probably expected this since the interpretation of any keyword will be debated differently among South Africans and others because of their different experiences. The discussions in *New South African keywords* are not fully representative of the entire South African population (including the use of sources). However, the reader is reminded that the publication serves as a point of departure and not (yet) as an end in itself, and

should therefore not be too critically analysed by serious academic researchers and scholars. The editors emphasise that there was no specific intention to be neutral at all times.

Commentators have already noted some of the strengths and shortcomings of *New South African keywords*. One (Anonymous 2009), for example, felt that some topics in *New South African keywords* are:

... guaranteed to raise hackles, others may seem a tad woo-woo to the cynical... The question of so-called 'Indigenous Knowledge' is so sensitive that two different writers tap dance around it, with one at least terrified that the very name devalues such knowledge by presumed opposition to 'scientific knowledge'...

Another (Egan 2008), using the language of John Citizen, observed:

Reading this book is a bit like playing the word association challenge. As one progresses through any essay, a comment or observation or illustration of the point sparks off a range of personal associations in the reader. These could be connected to who s/he is, where one lives, where one stands on a range of political and economic questions, one's past and present experience and one's future expectations...

The authors try to overcome obvious gaps by referring to absent keywords like 'nation', 'state', 'sport', 'sexuality', and 'nationalism'. To this list can perhaps be added: 'poverty', 'class', 'corruption', and 'violence' ('violence' perhaps to be discussed on its own and separate from crime, and not just as an adjective to discuss crime). *New South African keywords* ambitiously offer us an "understanding of the way in which we describe ourselves to ourselves in the process of becoming" (p. 11). For observers alike, it offers a detailed account of the "articulation between language and society, in all the particularity of a complex and fascinating social context and historical moment" (p. 12). The publication also has a concise index which readers will find useful.

Since this publication marks the beginning of necessary and well-deserved deliberations, it is hoped that the editors will follow-up on this by expanding the scope to include a variety of perspectives and thinking about keywords used in South Africa.

References

Anonymous, "New South African Keywords". Available at: <http://www.iol.co.za/tonight/books/book-review-new-south-african-keywords-edited-by-nick-shepherd-and-steven-robins-1.964293>, 22 January 2009, Introduction.

Egan, A. "Review, New South African Keywords", Mail&Guardianonline. Available at: <http://mg.co.za/article/2008-11-26-word-power>, 26 November 2008.