

# THE PERSISTENCE OF THE CASUAL POOR IN JOHANNESBURG\*

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginnings of urbanization and urban growth in this country the poor have been an ever-present constituent in South Africa's cities. Although the category 'the urban poor' might describe the greatest share of all persons who either have lived or who are today living in the urban areas of South Africa, their life-styles and their modes of existence have attracted remarkably little attention among social scientists in general and geographers in particular. Published histories of South African cities focus almost exclusively upon themes of modernisation and on the actions of those individuals responsible for that 'modernity'. The story of Johannesburg,<sup>1</sup> for example, is told as that of the rise of the Randlords, the 'magic' of the mineshafts and the making of a modern city.

It must be recognised, however, that there exists another side to this pattern of development in the cities of South Africa. For a significant, and today an increasing, proportion of its largely Black inhabitants, the South African city does not (and never did) afford adequate opportunities for regularised wage-employment. Urban unemployment is only one manifestation of a situation whereby job opportunities fail to match the numbers of potential job-seekers. Living in the city and faced with the prospect of no formal wage-employment, many urban dwellers choose, or are forced, to 'make out' in a variety of occupations which collectively may be termed the urban informal sector. It is the participants in such activities to whom we refer by the term 'the urban poor'. They are, perhaps, more correctly designated as the casual poor, defined as that set of the population which combines "low average incomes with considerable instability and insecurity of income and employment".<sup>2</sup>

It is the intention in this paper to draw the attention of urban historians and historical geographers to these neglected peoples in South Africa's cities. More particularly, the focus is upon the casual poor of Johannesburg. It is argued here that there is firm evidence of the existence and operation of an informal sector in Johannesburg from the city's birth to the present day. Whereas the nature of the activities comprising the informal component of the city's life has varied markedly over the years, the persistence of an informal sector stands out as one important theme. As has been pointed out elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> very little is known or has been written on the size, functioning and character of the contemporary urban informal sector in South Africa. Even less is known through recorded knowledge of its historical antecedents. This paper, therefore, should be seen as exploratory in nature. It is presented

here in the hope of stimulating greater awareness and study of the historical and historical-geographic facets of the casual poor in South Africa's cities.

## THE INFORMAL SECTOR AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN CITY

To many observers of the South African city its economic activities and their organisation mirror what is typical in the city of the Western World. More particularly, it is argued that the morphology, nature and economic systems of our cities reflect the situations obtaining in the cities of the United States of America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Such a perspective is to be found in studies of the South African urban milieu.<sup>4</sup> However, acceptance of the Western tradition as the prime and frequently only model of the South African city is patently false.<sup>5</sup> The existence of a burgeoning informal sector in the South African city is one of many similarities of our cities with those of a Third World rather than with the West. The contemporary South African city clearly combines elements of both Western and Third World traditions.

In broad but nevertheless useful terms, it can be argued that two economic sectors operate in the cities of this country. The sector probably best known to readers is that which is termed the formal or western-type economic system. That sector of the urban economy is characterised by a number of features among which the following are most readily discernible: capital intensive technology, bureaucratic organisation, regularised hours of work and opening, large volumes of stock, ready access to credit from banks and other financial institutions, and use of advertising through mass communication media.

By contrast, there occur other activities well known

1. See J.R. SHORTEN, *The Johannesburg saga* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1970). An alternative approach on the local history of the region is presented in B. BOZZOLI (compiler), *Labour, townships and protest: studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand* (Johannesburg, 1979).
2. R. BROMLEY and C. GERRY, Who are the casual poor? in R. BROMLEY and C. GERRY (eds.), *Casual work and poverty in Third World cities* (Chichester, 1979) p. 14.
3. A point expressed variously by C. SIMKINS, Measuring and predicting unemployment in South Africa 1960-1977, in C. SIMKINS and D. CLARKE, *Structural unemployment in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 1978), p. 42; M.J. DE KLERK, Structural unemployment in South Africa, *South African Outlook* 109 (1293), 1979, pp. 35-38; H. SUCHARD, Informal-sector development, *South African Journal of African Affairs* 9(2), 1979, pp. 98-103; and REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, OFFICE OF THE ECONOMIC ADVISER TO THE PRIME MINISTER, *Ninth economic development programme for the Republic of South Africa: 1978-1987 A strategy for growth 1* (Pretoria, 1979), especially pp. 94, 97 and 105.
4. Implicitly by D.H. DAVIES, *Land use in central Cape Town* (Cape Town, 1965), K.S.O. BEAVON, *Land use patterns in Port Elizabeth* (Cape Town, 1970).
5. R.J. DAVIES, *Of cities and societies: A geographer's viewpoint* (Cape Town, 1976).

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to thousands of people resident in the Black, Coloured and Indian areas of South African cities, but less well known to residents of White areas. We refer here, *inter alia*, to the operations of food and clothing hawkers or of the petty producers of commodities in the townships, and to the services of such people as weekend photographers and barbers who operate from open-air sites. The characteristics of these and similar informal sector activities are essentially the antithesis of those described in the formal sector. More specifically, the activities of this urban informal sector and of its participants are characterised by ease of entry, family ownership of enterprises, small scales of operation, high degree of labour intensity, the acquisition and use of skills without recourse to formal training programmes, and a shortage of and lack of ready access to capital.<sup>6</sup>

The distinguishing features of these two sectors or, as Santos<sup>7</sup> prefers, two circuits of the urban economy are summarised in Table 1. Another useful classification is

Characteristics	Upper circuit	Lower circuit
Technology	Capital-intensive	Labour-intensive
Organisation	Bureaucratic	Generally family-organised
Capital	Abundant	Scarce
Hours of work	Regular	Irregular
Regular wages	Normal	Not required
Inventories	Large quantities and/or quality	Small quantities, poor-quality
Prices	Generally fixed	Generally negotiable between buyer and seller
Credit	Banks and other institutions	Personal non-institutional
Relations with clientele	Impersonal and/or through documents	Direct, personal
Fixed costs	Important	Negligible
Publicity	Necessary	None
Re-use of goods	None, wasted	Frequent
Overhead capital	Indispensable	Not indispensable
Government aid	Important	None or almost none
Direct dependence on foreign countries	Great, outward-oriented activity	Small or none

Source: Adapted from Santos (1979), cf. Footnote 7.

that which derives from Hart's<sup>8</sup> researches on Ghana (Table 2). It illustrates and classifies the nature of income-earning opportunities in the informal sector of Third World cities. From Table 2, it is apparent that the casual poor participate in a host of income opportunities which include both working for others and self-employment, both legal and illegal activities and both 'productive' and 'unproductive' activities. Although the casual poor engage in occupations such as theft, smuggling, begging and prostitution, it must be stressed that the numbers engaged thus in *lumpenproletarian* activities are generally small in comparison to the numbers of people performing useful and, in many cases, essential tasks in petty production, distribution, services, construction and transport.<sup>9</sup>

## THE CASUAL POOR IN SOUTH AFRICA'S CITIES

Although the South African dualistic formulations, presented above, have been much criticised<sup>10</sup> as being too simplistic to permit detailed analysis of the functioning of the urban economy, they are nevertheless useful first steps in re-orientating the perspective towards the South African city. All the country's largest urban centres show that the contemporary informal

sector is not only in evidence but that it provides also an essential base upon which thousands of persons are dependent for their day-to-day existence.<sup>11</sup> The task of modifying the classification of informal income opportunities (presented in Table 2) so as to describe the specific characteristics of the contemporary informal

TABLE 2: INCOME OPPORTUNITIES IN A THIRD WORLD CITY

Formal income opportunities	
(a)	Public sector wages
(b)	Private firms (wages, dividends, etc.)
(c)	Transfer payments — pensions, unemployment benefits.
Informal income opportunities: legitimate	
(a)	Primary and secondary activities — farming, market gardening, building contractors and associated activities, self-employed artisans, shoemakers, tailors, household manufacturers of beer and spirits.
(b)	Tertiary enterprises with relatively large capital inputs — housing, transport, utilities, commodity speculation, rentier activities.
(c)	Small-scale distribution — market operatives, petty traders, street hawkers, caterers in food and drink, bar attendants, carriers, commission agents, and dealers.
(d)	Other services — musicians, launderers, shoeshiners, barbers, night-soil removers, photographers, vehicle repair and other maintenance workers; brokerage and middlemanship (the <i>maigida</i> system in markets, law courts, etc.); ritual services, magic and medicine.
(e)	Private transfer payments — gifts and similar flows of money and goods between persons; borrowing; begging.
Informal income opportunities: illegitimate	
(a)	Services — hustlers and spivs in general; receivers of stolen goods; usury, and pawnbroking (at illegal interest rates); drug-pushing, prostitution, poncing ('pilog boy'), smuggling, bribery, political corruption Tammany Hall-style, protection rackets.
(b)	Transfer — petty theft (e.g. pickpockets), larceny (e.g. burglary and armed robbery), speculation and embezzlement, confidence tricksters (e.g. money doublers), gambling.

Source: After Hart, (1979), cf. Footnote 8.

- These characteristics of formal *vis-a-vis* informal sectors are set forth in INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE, *Employment, incomes and equality: A strategy for increasing productive employment in Kenya* (Geneva, 1972). For introductory discussions on this topic see also, T.G. MCGEE, The persistence of the proto-proletariat: occupational structures and planning of the future of Third World cities, *Progress in geography* 9, 1976, pp. 1-38, and R. BROMLEY, Introduction — the urban informal sector: why is it worth discussing?, *World Development* 6(9/10), 1978, pp. 1033-1039.
- M. SANTOS, *The Shared Space: The two circuits of the urban economy in underdeveloped countries* (London, 1979).
- K. HART, Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11(1), 1973, pp. 61-89.
- BROMLEY and GERRY, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- See the following, O. LE BRUN and C. GERRY, Petty producers and capitalism, *Review of African political economy*, 3, 1975, pp. 20-32; P. WILLIAMSON, Is there an urban informal sector or just poverty?, *Yag-Ambu* 4(1), 1977, pp. 5-24; BROMLEY, *op. cit.*; N. LONG and P. RICHARDSON, Informal sector, petty commodity production, and the social relations of small-scale enterprise, in J. CLAMMER (ed.), *The new economic anthropology* (London, 1978), pp. 176-209; T.G. MCGEE, An invitation to the "ball": dress formal or informal?, in P.J. RIMMER, D.W. DRAKAKIS-SMITH and T.G. MCGEE (eds.), *Food, shelter and transport in Southeast Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra, 1978), pp. 3-27; C. MOSER, Informal sector or petty commodity production: dualism or dependence in urban development?, *World Development* 6(9/10), 1978, pp. 1041-1064.
- On Durban see G.G. MAASDORP and A.S.B. HUMPHREYS, *From shantytown to township* (Cape Town, 1975); on Cape Town see J. MAREE and J. CORNELL, *Sample survey of squatters in Cross Roads* (Cape Town, 1978); on Grahamstown see M. WILSWORTH, Poverty and survival: the dynamics of redistribution and sharing in a Black South African township, *Social Dynamics* 5(1), 1979, pp. 14-25; on Johannesburg/Soweto see K.S.O. BEAVON and C.M. ROGERSON, Hawking and the urban poor: how not to make out in the contemporary South African city (paper presented to the South African Geographical Society, Cape Town Conference, July 1979); also P. MORRIS, Employment in Soweto (unpublished report for The Urban Foundation).

sector in South African cities still waits to be undertaken. It should not, however, be assumed that the urban informal sector is static and unchanging in character. Indeed, looked at historically, it appears that the informal sector may be understood as something of a moving frontier<sup>12</sup> with the nature of activities engaged in by the casual poor shifting with time. We now turn to illustrate these themes of the persistent nature and changing character of the occupations of the casual poor in Johannesburg.

An informal sector and a class of casual poor appeared early in the historical development of the City of Gold. For example, the records of the Johannesburg City Health Department provide a vivid description of life in early Sophiatown: "The general life of Sophiatown is for the husband to be a Trolley or Cab driver or suchlike works, and his wife to do a little washing ... collectively a fairly large amount of washing must be done in the township as almost each householder has a bundle of washing to get through".<sup>13</sup>

Without substantive research to fill the gaps in our

mass of casual poor in Johannesburg, are the product, at any specific historical moment, of two factors. First is the emergence and perpetuation of conditions of structural unemployment,<sup>14</sup> a situation in which there appear a mass of people who are marginal to the wage-employment sector, never, or at best only occasionally, being absorbed into it. Second, the character of the informal sector at any specific historical juncture is related also to what may be loosely termed the 'technology' and customs of the time. These points may be illustrated with reference to some brief descriptive vignettes and photographs of certain informal sector occupations which today form but one part of the other side of the story of Johannesburg's transformation from mining-camp to latterday metropolis.

Plate 1 shows a group of shoe-shine men on the market square of Johannesburg about the turn of this century. At this time shoe-shine men were a feature of the way of urban life in places as widespread as London, New York and Sydney. Still today the shoeblack trade is an important informal component in many cities of the

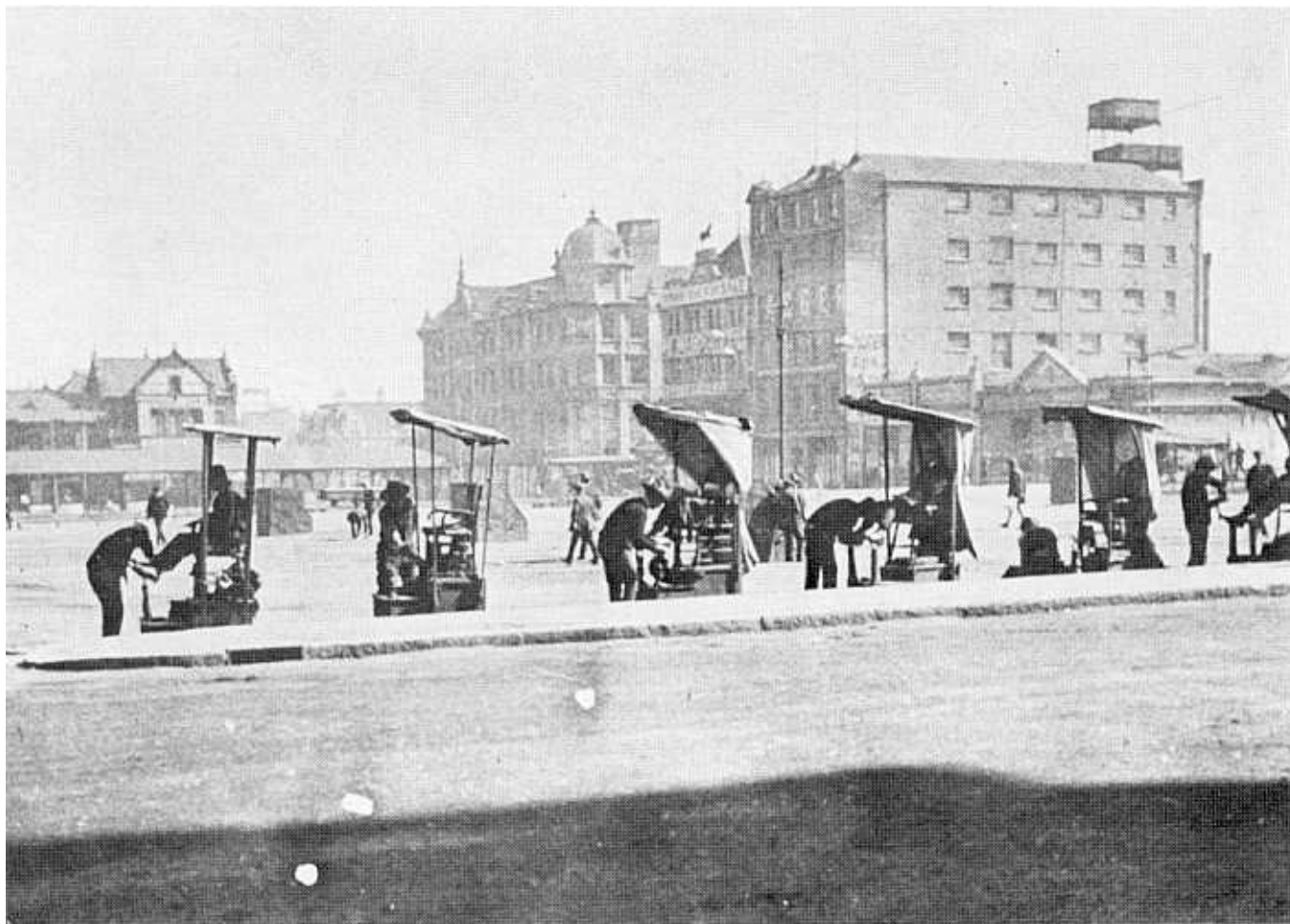


Plate 1  
The shoeblacks of Market Square, Johannesburg at c. 1900.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

historical knowledge of the workings of the Johannesburg informal sector and of the life-worlds of its participants, the following discussion of the characteristics and subsequent historical development of the city's casual poor must be regarded as of a preliminary rather than definitive nature.

As a tentative proposition, it is suggested that the size and character of the informal sector, and of the

12. This concept derives from K. KING, Kenya's informal machine-makers: a study of small-scale industry in Kenya's emergent artisan society, *World Development* 2(4/5), 1974, pp. 26-27.

13. From report by District Inspector W. Watson entitled Washing at Sophiatown, 18 September 1911, in Johannesburg City Health Department, Washing Licences, Vol. 1, 18.9.11 to 26.4.28, File number 4211.

14. Discussions of the causes of structural unemployment in South Africa are contained in A. ERWIN, An essay on structural development in South Africa, *South African Labour Bulletin* 4(4), 1978, pp. 51-69; J. MAREE, The dimensions and causes of unemployment and underemployment in South Africa, *South African Labour Bulletin* 4(4), 1978, pp. 15-51; DE KLERK, *op. cit.*



Third World.<sup>15</sup> The demand for shoe-shiners must be seen as a function of the custom of the times coupled with the need to earn an income by those who found themselves without other means of gainful employment in the formal sector of early Johannesburg. From Plate 1 the strong similarity of the shoe-shine 'technology' is clearly evident in the consistency of the form of chairs, foot-rests and covers. A dearth of published research material does not permit, however, further speculation on the possible organization and role of the shoe-shine men in the informal sector of the period.

By contrast, the modes of existence and organization of the washermen (Plate 2) have been reconstructed and

intensive steam laundries made their appearance in 1894. The advent of the technology of the formal sector, not to mention the advent of the owners of such capital plant, signalled the demise of the informal sector washermen. Slowly but ruthlessly they were forced out of the income-earning opportunities to which they previously had had access in the informal sector. By 1906, the washermen were effectively no more. The moving frontier had passed them by.

Once again, a lack of research material precludes a positive suggestion that those who participated in activities threatened or destroyed by their formal sector equivalents and its guardians would necessarily re-



Plate 2  
Washing - Newclare wash site c. 1910.

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

documented by Van Onselen<sup>16</sup>, although in material as yet unpublished. Van Onselen<sup>17</sup> clearly demonstrates how the AmaWasha, the Zulu washermen's guild, arose to fill a niche in the developing capitalist economy by providing a service for the largely White male resident population in early Johannesburg. The washermen collected dirty washing and 'laundered' it at various sites in the Braamfontein Spruit. Along the stream a series of basins or dams were dug. Washing was done in the upper stream dams and the effluent allowed to collect and settle in the lower dams. Once again points common to the technology employed by the operators in the laundry business are evident (Plate 2). The washermen continued to perform this useful service, for which there was an undoubted demand until the capital-

appear in different guise in other occupations in the informal sector. In the example of the washermen this was not the case for reasons discussed elsewhere (Van Onselen<sup>18</sup>), but was it, perhaps, the case with the shoeblacks? Notwithstanding this type of speculation the selection of photographs in this paper does demonstrate the persistence and varied nature of informal income opportunities in Johannesburg over

15. See J.T. MUKUI, Anatomy of the urban informal sector: a study of food kiosks and shoeblacks in Nairobi, in S.B. WESTLEY (ed.), *The informal sector in Kenya* (Nairobi, 1978), pp. 119-145.
16. C. VAN ONSELEN, AmaWasha: the Zulu washermen's guild of the Witwatersrand 1890-1914 (unpublished essay that forms part of a forthcoming two-volume study of the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914, entitled *New Babylon, New Nineveh*).
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*



Plate 3  
*The barrowmen in Market Square, Johannesburg c. 1910.*  
 PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

nearly a century. Moreover, it also tends to support the thesis that there occur surges of 'popular' activities in the informal sector at different times. This, in turn, lends credence to the notion that people forced out of the income-earning activities possible and 'permitted' in one period will re-appear as people in a new niche discovered elsewhere in the informal sector.

Plate 3 shows the barrowmen, surely the precursors of the hawkers who recently operated from non-mobile barrows in Johannesburg, on the Market Square in c. 1910. As in the instance of the shoe-shine men these barrowmen all use a similar form of 'technology', namely barrows made out of formerly fashionable baby perambulators. Plates 4 and 5 provide photographic illustration of what appears to have been a major surge in a *genre* of informal street trading which, beginning in the late 1920s and early 1930s, built up into a major source of informal income opportunities in the 1950s and early 1960s. We refer here to the phenomenon of the *cafe-de-move-on* or the coffee-cart traders of Johannesburg.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the carts were originally mobile units the evidence displayed in Plates 4 and 5 shows that by the sixties the carts had become immobile stands or stalls. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons that gave rise to this degree of semi-permanence which the 'carts' had come to assume shortly before their final disappearance. Research on this topic is currently being undertaken by Rogerson. Once again

the photographic evidence provides the basis for observing the striking similarity in the 'technology' of the 'carts'. As shown in both plates 4 and 5 the 'carts' have low-pitched roofs, upward-folding serving flaps and a similarity of texture. Planking from packing cases, corrugated iron, and flat sheet metal from former ornate steel ceilings seem to be the main materials used.

It appears that the tea and coffee-cart traders emerged to occupy a niche that was opened up by the inadequacies of the then existing, and derogatorily termed, 'Kaffir' eating houses, and by the lack of alternative refectory facilities for Black city workers at this time. Further impetus was given to the rise of the *cafe-de-move-on* by the growing spatial separation of home and workplace for Blacks. Despite their relative longevity as a way of making a living in Johannesburg, no published work has yet recorded the modes of existence of these traders. This is all the more regrettable since present research is revealing a possible link between the death of the coffee-cart trade and a further surge in street trading, although now in the hawking of foodstuffs and soft goods.

In Plate 6 the food hawkers in the vicinity of Jeppe railway station are shown offering mealies, fruit and vegetables for sale. The 'stalls' of tomato-boxes and light packing cases strongly resemble the 'counter

19. M.L. FREEDMAN, The problem of prohibition and control of illegal street trading in urban areas of the Transvaal, *Public Health* 61(12), 1961, pp. 7-29.



Plate 4

*The cafe-de-move-ons of Johannesburg c. 1960.*

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

technology' visible in the streets frequented by hawkers until recently. The change from a substantial if immobile stall of the type represented by the coffee 'carts' to the light disposable stall pictured in Plate 6 almost inevitably reflects the change in attitude of officialdom towards the hawkers. For example if they were raided by the authorities the 'stalls' could now be abandoned at relatively little cost to the hawkers.

Finally, brief mention must be made of the continuity in Johannesburg, and probably also in other South African cities, of those informal occupations of a lumpenproletarian kind. We here refer to activities such as theft, begging and prostitution. There is but little research into such persistent activities in the South African urban scene. Again, Van Onselen's work on banditry on the early Witwatersrand<sup>20</sup> and his unpublished work on prostitution in Johannesburg<sup>21</sup> are outstanding. Also of note is one study<sup>22</sup> undertaken on aspects of begging (largely by Whites) in Johannesburg in the immediate post-World War Two years. Significantly, this latter study highlights the link between lack of formal wage-employment opportunities and participation in informal occupations, since unemployment was the major impetus to taking up begging as an occupation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The need to examine contemporary facets of urban informal activities in South Africa is at last being recognised. There is much to be gained by adding an historical dimension to such investigations. Viewed from this perspective, the evidence presented here suggests that the informal sector and the casual poor have been ever-present constituents of Johannesburg's economy. The persistence of informal income opportunities in the cities of South Africa should not be confused with a picture of static and unchanging modes of existence by the casual poor. The idea of a moving frontier best captures the essence of the informal side of the city's economic life. While certain income opportunities are ephemeral, others may be of considerable duration and offer a source of livelihood to more than one generation. It is this latter feature of urban informal occupations which leads us to proffer that the class of casual poor may be squeezed, for a

20. C. VAN ONSELEN, "The regiment of the hills": South Africa's lumpenproletarian army 1890-1920, *Past and Present* 80, 1978, pp. 91-121.
21. C. VAN ONSELEN, Prostitutes and proletarians (unpublished essay that forms part of a forthcoming two-volume study of the social and economic history of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914, entitled *New Babylon, New Nineveh*).
22. This study is reported in ANON, Some aspects of the problem of begging in Johannesburg, *Welfare News*, 3 June 1949, pp. 5-12.





Plate 5  
*Construction of a new coffee-cart c. 1960. Note the non-functional wheel of the "cart" on the left.*

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

Plate 6  
*Street hawking of food, Jeppe c. 1965.*

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY AFRICANA MUSEUM, JOHANNESBURG

variety of reasons, out of one informal income niche only to resurface later in a further and alternative informal guise. That said, it remains to reiterate the need for more detailed investigations of both the life histories of South Africa's casual poor and of the workings, adaptations, and changes in the urban informal sector from the historical past to the present day. ■

