Title
Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa

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South African political and popular discourse condemns levels of indebtedness of members of the new black middle class: borrowing unsustainably for extravagant purchases, these “black diamonds” are taking the country from credit apartheid to debt peonage. Motivated by such consternation over debt, even before the 2008 global financial crisis, Deborah James’s important book challenges overly simple understandings of the post-apartheid financial world.

As in other recent work on southern Africa (e.g., James Ferguson, Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), the new politics of redistribution through state monetary assistance figures prominently here. Yet James insists that neoliberalism and redistribution inextricably intertwine. In the story she tells, it is difficult to “separate ‘bad’ from ‘good’ protagonists; ‘perpetrators’ from ‘victims,’ and ‘benefactors’ from ‘beneficiaries’” (p. 8).

Chapter 1 explores how consumption goes hand-in-hand with social obligations, especially around bridewealth. Well-paid civil servants face increasing demands on their resources. Aspirations for their children’s advancement through education, and thus for generational upward mobility, as well as attempts to mitigate social comparison among peers, drive greater consumption. Debt drives familial investment, becoming a form of care.

The police massacre of workers at the Marikana mine in 2012 opens Chapter 2. James reveals an underappreciated part of the story: electronic deposit of miners’ paychecks also permitted automatic deduction of debt payments. This cut miners off from informal credit practices, and in making debt collection easier, also insulated creditors from risk. The government opened the door to new, non-bank lenders in the form of microfinance operations, often run by Afrikaaners who were former members of the civil service. James writes, bluntly, “State monies were flowing into the bank accounts of black civil servants, out of which the new entrepreneurs were making efforts to divert them” (p. 68).

Chapter 3 describes credit cultures before and after apartheid. Land dispossession, supported by credit for white farmers and its denial to blacks, led to internal migration and redistribution through remittances. She reviews informal credit arrangements, from furniture purchase (a prime desire in the era when homeownership was an impossibility) to moneylenders. Nodding toward Keith Hart, James makes the provocative observation that the “far-flung distribution of ownings, borrowings, and advances within a community can mean that no one knows, at any given moment, what his or her ‘income’ is, or how much money he or she has”; thus, “selective remembering and forgetting of debt has a redistributive effect” (pp. 98–99).
Informal savings clubs (*stokvels*) occupy James in Chapter 4. If direct deposit makes earmarking money more difficult, savings clubs can make pots of money separable and incommensurable—allowing savings toward rent payments, say. *Stokvels* are on the rise, yet, James argues, their incentivization by state and market actors is not just about harnessing the latent capital of the poor. *Stokvels* also garner their participants a sense of belonging while nevertheless fostering social differentiation.

Chapter 5 directly takes up the global financial crisis. James surveyed people’s everyday financial arrangements in a township outside Johannesburg with a local researcher, Daphney Shiba. Ethnographers studying closely guarded financial lives will benefit from James’s frank discussion of method. The survey provided structured data and became the starting point for in-depth conversations with Shiba about the details of individuals’ lives, while maintaining their anonymity.

In Chapter 6, we encounter the real estate market. Secured lending requires repossession in case of default—but what if tenants are unwilling to leave? Vigilantes often defend relationships of kin and community for those who refuse. Furthermore, struggling mortgage holders often fail to pay because of the burden of bills for municipal services. James explains why natal homes do not enter the secondary housing market and, as a result, speculation on family houses is cut off. “Marriage, income, and inheritance” (p. 193) constrain liquidity supposedly guaranteed by security of title.

Chapter 7 places the rise of charismatic Christianity and financial self-help organizations in the same frame. There are no striking conversion tales but instead self-reflective stories of almost calculated forays into the church as a concomitant of middle-class status. Just as the church provides a ladder to respectability through redistribution for those who have already achieved it, self-help is less about creating a new neoliberal subject than providing the technical knowledge needed for the middle class who have already arrived.

“Aspiration and indebtedness are intertwined,” James writes (p. 237). The South African case shows how conversion and conveyance among scales of value allow people to make a life alongside mainstream capitalism (p. 146). James is relentlessly attentive to ethnographic detail—signature forging, payment card sharing, retail purchases on credit, strategies of repo agents. This attentiveness reveals that the “nothing” in the book’s title does not just refer to government jobs created for political expediency, or imaginary monies of credit. It is also the ineffable, yet durable obligations perhaps best exemplified in the ash sprinkled on money placed on enamel plates wrapped in plastic bags toward which one bows during a funeral club meeting.

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