Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa (review)

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Review

Monique Marks (2001) *Young Warriors: youth politics, identity and violence in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press

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The memory of youth struggles in the late 1970s and 1980s may have dimmed but there is no doubt that the youth remain an important political constituency and an educational and socio-economic challenge. Today it is easy to forget how central the anti-apartheid struggles of black township youth were to the politics of liberation and how vocal the youth were. In this clearly written and accessible book, Monique Marks takes us back to the time before the new South Africa was born. She does this not just to remind us of the violence and brutality of that period, but to consider how that period shaped the youth, and how they shaped it. These academic goals allow us to think about the 'youth problem' today in historical terms.

This book joins a number of studies which focus either on the gangs and social organisation (Glaser 2000) or the days of the post-Soweto anti-apartheid struggles (Seekings 1993) in shedding light on the politically important and demographically large constituency of African township youth.

The book describes the way in which African working class youth organised in Diepkloof (part of Soweto) in the mid to late 1980s. It is based on the author's intense engagement with members of the youth movement and as such the text reads almost as a series of biographies. The activists interviewed reveal their passions, hopes and beliefs. These were years of strong views and of optimism. And also of anger at the humiliation that the apartheid state heaped on the parents of the youth who became activists. Many of the youth were initially spurred to action by a sense of injustice and seeing how 'the system' exploited their parents.

Young Warriors is primarily a book about the development of a social movement and about the politics of political transformation in South Africa. It is also a book organized around the question of a life, that of Comrade Vuyani Mabaxa, who was killed by police in 1991. He died before seeing the dawn of the age he fought for – a democratic South Africa. Violence is a central concern of the book. The author does not evade this difficult subject or deal with it simply by invoking the brutality of the state. Rather Marks seeks answers to the questions she poses thus: 'To what extent have township youth been victims of violence? To what extent have they been agents of political violence?' (2001:87).

These are questions that particularly interest me and for the rest of the review I shall concentrate on the theme of gender and violence.

Violence, individual or collective, is a gendered act. To understand it, the place it occupies within gendered identities needs to be understood. When a group of young men identify themselves as 'young warriors' what does this say about masculinity and gender relations? What does it say about their self-perception? Marks does not pose this question, but this richly observed and perceptive book offers some answers.

The race and class history of Diepkloof is a good place to begin in trying to generate answers about the gendered meaning of being a young warrior. Black working class youth in Diepkloof drew on the traditions of the Freedom Charter and were inspired by the 1976 uprising. Apartheid South Africa provided very poor life prospects for their parents and themselves. Thus it was that young people joined the liberation movement as an act of hope – to become 'symbols of a new future' (2001:6). For Marks, the young members of COSAS and related organisations were laudable in their intentions. She rejects the view that these were people driven by anger, rage and disillusionment and that their acts were anarchic. For Marks they were consciously intent on building a new future and this is where an assessment of their actions should begin.

Yet, if Marks commends the 'young warriors' for their contribution to the overthrow of apartheid, she does not conceal the fact that violence was often wide of its target and that the student movement was filled with acute gender inequalities. I would add, that it was also filled with machismo.

The account of the young warriors is a story of certainty – a total belief in the anti-apartheid mission. But this was a belief that also housed intolerance and a reluctance to listen to others (elders and women, for example) which produced and still produces gender flashpoints (Campbell

1992; Carton 2001). In armed or insurrectionary struggles, constructions of masculinity understandably privilege political knowledge, zeal, certainty over emotional knowledge, generosity and tolerance. These are, after all, the qualities necessary for successfully challenging 'the system'. But after the struggles are over and the battle ostensibly won, how usable are these versions of masculinity? Thokozani Xaba (2001) shows that they can be very destructive and become anachronistic. When the new society faces not the coercive forces of apartheid, but the deadly and invisible threat of AIDS, what are the consequences of a struggle machismo?

We do not have any clear answers to this question and the evidence we have is contradictory. The elements of thoughtfulness, responsibility and commitment are today reflected, for example, in the emergence of new masculinities which esteem hard work, parental support and relational fidelity. Such masculinities are creating spaces for the emotional expression of vulnerability and uncertainty (Morrell 2002). On the other hand, township machismo drives young men to prove themselves in heterosexual terms. Having many partners and competing with other men for the sexual favours of women goes along with the (sometimes violent) assertion of sexual entitlement. It is this configuration of masculinity which can be deadly in an AIDS environment (Campbell 2001; Wood and Jewkes 2001).

Marks answers her question about violence and the youth by distinguishing political from other violence. The use of, and support for, political violence was not the preserve of young men – a few of the women comrades were directly involved and all strongly supported the violence. Marks argues that the Diepkloof youth always had clear justifications for their actions (which were about the country's future rather than about their own personal agendas). This meant that the violence of Diepkloof youth only got out of control in the mid 1990s when the experienced cadres were no longer in place, the social movement was weaker and the political terrain had changed. For Marks, the political violence needs to be considered as a means to an end and not as a symptom of broader societal violence. Whether this distinction satisfactorily answers bigger questions about South Africa's very high levels of violence at the turn of the millennium is open to question.

Young Warriors is a book which captures the spirit of an age. It is a book which offers a well-informed and sympathetic view of the footsoldiers of the struggle. Scholars trying to understand the changing position of youth in South Africa will benefit from considering its submissions.

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