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Socio-spatial politics of community safety governance in Johannesburg

Katsaura, Obvious

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Abstract

Presenting evidence from Yeoville, Johannesburg, I argue that community safety governance is a *field* of socio-spatial micro-politics in which the crime, violence and safety governance agenda is sometimes superseded by other organisational, institutional and social group interests. More often than not, organisational, institutional, individual and social group actors compete or coalesce for legitimacy, honour, prestige, and economic resources. I observe that 'ethno-national regionalism' is one of the organising logics in community security initiatives. In Yeoville there was criminalising scapegoating and counter-scapegoating between some South African and African immigrant groups. Public perceptions, discourses and practices in the field of community security governance in Yeoville were territorialised. I argue that safety governance at neighbourhood level easily materialises into the discursive politics of appropriation, control and (re)ordering of place and space; which at once either promote or undermine the production of safety.

Following my empirical observations of the dynamics associated with community safety initiatives, I argue that community security governing organisations should not simply be viewed as security producing entities or spaces of creative community building micro-politics, but also as spaces and entities of socially debilitating and sometimes malicious informal or formal micro-politics. If debilitating or malicious, this micro-politics has the potential of undermining safety production and neighbourhood development.

I deploy, test and edify Bourdieusian "thinking tools", using Yeoville, as my social laboratory for thinking the materialities, sensibilities and rationalities of the local politics of community safety governance. The testing of Bourdieusian thought in the study of urban safety is novel, not only to South Africa, but to elsewhere.

Methodologically, I employ a qualitative research design aimed at enabling an in-depth dissection of the anatomy of miniature politics associated with community safety governance; and developing a detailed narrative and theoretical account of this politics. The research methods utilised include participant observation, unstructured and semi-structured interviews and document reviews.