



7:15 p.m., pulling out of Pretoria on 7 p.m. Marabastad - Waterval Bus

Pic by: David Goldblatt

IMAGES OF POVERTY

South Africa: the Cordoned Heart. Essays by twenty South African photographers. Edited by Omar Badsha. The Gallery Press, Cape Town.

Reviewed by Colin Gardner

This is the book of the travelling photographic exhibition which has grown as an accompaniment to the great Second Carnegie Enquiry into Poverty and Development in Southern Africa.

The photographs are superb: not because they are arty and self-regarding but because they are skillful, dramatic and yet modest - modest in the sense that they are wholly in the service of the reality that they portray and probe.

That reality is the painful, ever-present, infinitely varied world of South African poverty - the world which, in one degree or another, the vast majority of South Africans inhabit.

Here are presented, for our contemplation (photos invite contemplation in a way that films don't), the crumbling walls, the litter-filled streets, the old clothes, the crowded rooms, the squatter dwellings made out of almost anything, the barren so-called homelands. But what stands out in all the photographs are the people: dignified, interesting, alive, people who are as important (of course) as any people in the world. We see them suffering in many situations, grieving, meditating, waiting, planning, praying; but we also see them going about their daily work, talking, enjoying a moment of religious ecstasy, protesting, proclaiming.

Since the Carnegie Conference in April 1984 some of the poor of South Africa have begun to assert themselves in a new way, to affirm their total unwillingness to continue to acquiesce in the status quo. **The Cordoned Heart** presents vivid and moving images of a part of what lies behind the turmoil of our country.

Every photograph in the book makes a strong impact. Three images struck me especially forcibly.

The first appears in a series of photographs, taken by David Goldblatt, on the long-distance commuter buses which carry workers from KwaNdebele into Pretoria and out again. The first bus leaves Waterval at 2.30 a.m. The photographs show the passengers trying to get some sleep on the miserably uncomfortable upright seats. They are like scenes of torture; in a way they are scenes of torture. The commuters are made to writhe by the poisonous Verwoerdian blueprint for South Africa.

The next is a picture of a large oval-shaped boardroom table, presumably in a high-rise building in Johannesburg. (The photographer is Lesley Lawson.) Everything is there: the big ashtrays, the plush seats, the pot plants, the picture on the wall, the discreet lighting. The surprise is that on the table, kneeling, is an African woman, polishing like fury. Presumably it is early in the morning. How many of those who sit down at boardroom tables realise that the bright surfaces in front of them were polished in this way by anonymous but very real women?

The third image is in the photographs, produced by Ben MacLennan, of Johannesburg compounds. Of many disturbing sights, the most appalling is that of the small pigeonhole-like, Rainbow Chicken-like concrete beds in which the men sleep, almost as if their bodies were being arranged and processed in a mortuary. It is all too symbolic: to live in a hostel of that sort is to endure a kind of death.□