

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

Essays in Honour of

VISHNU PADAYACHEE

Edited by

Rajend Mesthrie

Robert van Niekerk

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Political Economy and Critical Engagement in South Africa - Essays in Honour of Vishnu Padayachee

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Review by Megan Bryer

University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2024, R400

Vishnu Padayachee was a brilliant intellectual, but more than that, he was an engaged scholar, an activist, a cricket enthusiast and a collector of rare books. The essays in *Political Economy and Critical Engagement in South Africa* pay tribute to his wide-ranging interests and contributions, offering both personal reflections and rigorous academic engagement with the ideas he championed. Many contributors – colleagues, collaborators and former students of his – wrestle with a question that preoccupied Padayachee: the role of the intellectual in shaping societal change, how scholars can move beyond academic inquiry to influence economic policy and progressive movements.

This was not just an abstract concern for Padayachee but one informed by lived experience, from his early activism under apartheid to his role in advising South Africa's liberation movement and, later, his critical stance as progressive economists were sidelined in post-apartheid policy spaces. His work, as this collection makes clear, remains deeply relevant for those committed to economic justice today.

The book brings together a range of contributions, from memoir-like reflections on Padayachee's formative years in Durban to extensions of his intellectual theories and applications of his interdisciplinary, historically grounded methodology to contemporary political economy. Many essays highlight the significance of place – particularly Durban as a crucible of radical thought and anti-apartheid resistance. There is a certain nostalgia in these accounts, not because they romanticise the past, but because they recognise the city's "vibrant interaction between academia, organic intellectuals of the struggle, [...] student activists and a shop stewards' movement emerging in the unions" during the so-called 'Durban moment' (Erwin, 2024: 351). This was a time when ideas were forged in semi-clandestine reading groups, where young scholars like Padayachee gathered to study political economy, debate strategy and build movements (Mesthrie & Van Niekerk, 2024: 346).

Many essays critically assess the failures of post-apartheid economic policy, particularly the ANC's rejection of the progressive strategies outlined in the *Macro-Economic Research Group (MERG)* report, in which Padayachee played a key role. MERG offered an alternative economic strategy to guide South Africa's transition to democracy but was ultimately sidelined as market-oriented policies became dominant, a shift that Padayachee and his colleagues critiqued extensively. The book does not shy away from acknowledging these disappointments – the persistence of inequality, poverty and unemployment despite the promise of economic transformation. But, as Sender argues, Padayachee's commitment to heterodox ideas reminds us that South Africa still produces "activist authors and progressive academics who, like Vishnu, are capable of arguing very effectively against economic illiteracy and orthodoxy" (Sender, 2024: 231).

A recurring theme across the essays is Padayachee's commitment to building institutions and fostering collaboration. This was reflected in his leadership at the University of Natal's Development Studies department, where he played a crucial role in shaping a space for critical economic inquiry. As Morrell notes, Padayachee was



not only a rigorous thinker but a “skilful negotiator and team builder” (Morrell, 2024: 51). His ability to bring people together, to work across disciplines and to create lasting intellectual networks was central to his impact. This focus on institution-building is especially relevant today, as the space for progressive economic thought in South Africa remains contested, and as global disillusionment with neoliberal policies has not necessarily translated into a coherent alternative economic vision.

For those familiar with Padayachee’s work, this book is a powerful reminder of his intellectual range and prolific output. For those encountering him for the first time, it offers a compelling portrait of how an engaged scholar can leave a lasting impact – not only through ideas but through mentorship, collaboration and institution-building. His career demonstrates that intellectual influence does not move in a straight line; there are moments when heterodox ideas gain traction and periods when they seem to lose ground. But the necessity of critical economic debate, of scholars who challenge dominant paradigms and of engaged intellectuals who see their work as part of a broader struggle for justice remains constant.

At a time when neoliberalism is under scrutiny yet progressive alternatives struggle to take root, the essays in *Political Economy and Critical Engagement in South Africa* serve as both a tribute and a call to action. They remind us that economic ideas matter, that institutions and intellectual networks must be nurtured and that the project of creating a more just economic order requires both rigorous critique and practical engagement. In a world where the wealthiest individuals openly deride institutions designed to address inequality – where figures like Donald Trump’s adviser Elon Musk can boast of “feeding USAID into the woodchipper” without serious consequence – Padayachee’s commitment to critical economic thought and progressive policy-making remains as urgent as ever.

This collection is not only for economists and policy-makers but for anyone concerned with the intersections of scholarship, activism and economic justice in South Africa and beyond.