The representation of the crime question in Cape Town
by
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Most of the responses to crime and violence in Cape Town have failed dismally because this issue has been transformed into an essentialist and simplistic moral debate about crime and its perpetrators. Crime as a moral and political issue has provoked strong emotions and conflicting responses leading to contradictory and puzzling associations:

- Att the conceptual level, *all responses against crime* have been portrayed by the press as a *unified* and unwavering *'moral'* rebuttal (in this scenario notions of 'morality' is presented as the same for everybody); and

- On the ground, all sorts of alliances have taken place, based on political, social, religious and intra-religious dimensions rather than on the forthright need to address the criminal question

Historical precedent

Much has been said and written about the major crime and gang problems in South Africa and how to solve them. Newspapers comment daily on the 'crime epidemic', regularly using the 'crime problem' as a headline with which to sell their wares. These newspapers provide us with 'statistics' on recent increases in crime, and they relate the 'human stories' associated with 'criminal' incidents. But they also offer viewpoints that significantly impact on public awareness.

In South African history, there have been moments when communities were quite effectively mobilised (by the newspapers, for one) around the issue of crime and violence to restore 'order' and to effect some sort of 'consensual-society'. In the 1940's, for example, with the sharp increase of rural to urban 'coloured' migration in the Western Cape, the fear of crime among urban-dwellers was cynically used to focus the attention of the inhabitants of the city on social order rather than on unemployment and poverty. Thus the Wilcocks Commission of 1938 (Report of the Commission of Inquiry regarding the Cape Coloured Population of the Union of 1938) focussed on the "degree of disregard among the submerged strata of the Cape Coloured as to what the morrow shall bring", as

well as the "little regard they showed for the forces of law and order to which they found themselves in constant opposition" (UG 54-1937, 30). Of particular concern was the definite link made (at that time) between a 'skollie' class and their values of 'untrustworthiness', 'lack of industry' and 'little interest in work'.

In January 1944, two articles that appeared in the *Cape Times,* titled "The Skolly Menace" and "American Comics act as incentive for Crime", likewise focussed on this new 'skollie' phenomenon to which the recent increase in crime was attributed. A government investigation headed by Minister of Justice, C. F. Steyn, into the alleged increase of serious crime in the Cape Peninsula also found that the rise in serious crime by 63.9% in the period 1939-1942 was principally related to the presence of a 'skolly menace'.[*] In its specific meaning at the time, the term 'skollie' was applied to all those won't-works, juvenile delinquents, loafers and *all* anti-social elements of the 'coloured' and 'Malay' communities of Cape Town who were not interested in their economic futures.

So the very notion of *'anti-Crime'* as a 'rallying call' in this period served as a divisive mechanism among 'coloureds', conjuring up stereotypical images of a lazy, drunk and thieving 'coloured' underclass regarded as detrimental to the economic progress of the region. In 1942, at a conference organised by the National Liberation League (NLL) in Cape Town to discuss the 'skollie menace' (headed incidently by Cissie Gool), it was found that the increase in 'coloured' juvenile crime in Cape Town was directly related to the general effects of rapid urbanisation, poverty and the lack of adequate social welfare and education facilities. However, the 'established link' made between the poor 'coloured' underclass and crime subsequently served to temper calls by an emerging 'coloured' middle class for radical social change in the 1940's; and focussed instead on reformist initiatives such as the provision of state-funded welfare facilities for the 'coloured' poor. In this way the emerging 'coloured' middle class 'bought' into the discourse of 'order' and effectively joined in the call for forceful measures to combat 'skollie' crime. And since then, public awareness of crime in Cape Town has invariably concentrated on how to effectively *control* this 'skollie' phenomenon, rather than to question why the situation is the way it is.

While the recent increases in crime and violence in Cape Town are quite unique and unprecedented, it is necessary to explore the complex mix of social and political factors in South Africa which impact on the phenomenon of crime as we know it. It is this analysis that would be useful in understanding the dynamics of the present situation.

The current 'crime epidemic' plaguing South Africa needs to be assessed in the context of increasing inequalities in the international and global economy, at a time when New Right and neo-liberal discourse have become increasingly obsessed with 'security'. But 'security' has been firmly attached in the 1990's to a form of moral *dodo*-ism (like in dinosaur) that feverishly feeds off *the fears* that circulate around the criminal question; fears which are then subsequently mobilised as a potent cultural and political force.

Even though street violence and disorder are durable features of the social landscape, it needs to be recognised that ordinary people generally struggle to comprehend the processes that have ushered in, or contributed to, crime. For example, the establishment of a number of 'correctional institutions' in the Western Cape in the 1940's and 1950's (e.g. Ottery School of industries est. in 1948, and the two Faure Reformatories for 'coloured' boys and girls in 1955 and 1956 resp.) was a direct response to the prevailing 'skollie menace' problem, but served rather to exacerbate the growth of gangs in Cape Town in this period. These initiatives to address the 'skollie' question deepened the problem.

In other words, simple policy formulae based on 'moral outrage' trivialise the problem. The confrontation of change involves dealing with difficulties inherited from past social conditions. But it also involves the understanding of the effects of past policies which are well entrenched and will not vanish overnight.

The security discourse

On the other hand, one should not malign the fears of communities and their responses to crime and violence by claiming that these fears are misplaced and therefore insignificant. Such a stance ignores the fact that crime and violence are immediate social realities. But we are nowhere near a solution if we continue the preoccupation with 'security' as pursued daily by our local newspapers.

Invariably, political mobilisation around crime and violence ignores the deep social structures under which it occurs. We need to therefore address the way in which neo-liberal discourse, primarily through newspapers, has dominated the debate on crime, persistently concentrating public attention on the *social and economic impact* of crime and violence and in so doing distracted us from confronting the legacy of, and problems associated with, inequality in our society.

Race repressed

Furthermore, we underestimate the ideological impact of the race issue on the perception of crime and disorder, and how this detracts attention from fundamental issues of inequality and injustice. In South Africa, race has been used in our urban settings to produce images of urban crises as can be seen in segregationist and apartheid discourse on migration into towns and cities. Particularly in contemporary South Africa, the call for safe streets has involved not only a specific conception of social control, but readily mobilises these images of disorder, mayhem and social mismanagement.

Today we have neighbourhood-watches and 'active' citizenship which exist alongside fears of crime and are mobilised by the need to confront these same fears. Security-minded groupings were 'born' in a particular context and a discourse which invoked two essential themes: the 'need' for the 'community' to become more involved in their 'well-being', and the 'fear of crime' which threatens to unravel whatever 'rights and privileges' *they* had managed to secure. This points to the engagement of particular arenas of neo-liberal discourse. On the one hand, the South African State withdraws the provision of certain services, including its former sole responsibility for security. On the other hand, it engages a discourse of crime (in which, incidently, the reproduction and legitimation of racist images of 'black'criminality' flourishes) to ensure that law and order prevails. This call for 'safer streets' thus involves a conception of social control in which those most affected by crime are not only given the responsibility to protect their 'defensible space', but they also bemoan the breakdown of their community's responsibility and involvement. This has served to distract communities from addressing the *structuring social conditions* in which much of this 'disorder' occurs.

In Cape Town for instance, recent responses of the 'coloured' community to crime and violence reveal a community turning on each other, and protesting about the general lack of involvement and responsibility to resolve the 'criminal question'. This 'community' has become the site of a particular model of social control, and divisions between 'coloureds' (based on religious, political and class differences) ensure that the conflict remains ensnared within this 'community'.

Criminalisation is a process which is empirically tied to the institutional racism inherent in housing, education and social service projects. Criminalisation and racialisation can be seen in the institutions of the criminal justice system such as the police, courts, prisons, reform schools, industrial schools, children's homes, hostels and probation services. Constructions of criminality and their link to racially-circumscribed processes of criminalisation therefore need to be disassembled, and the role of the criminal justice system in the reproduction of a 'racialised' society needs to be scrutinised; similarly with the discourse in which racist stereotypes of 'racial difference' frenetically feeds into public knowledge and state 'punishment' policies. At a time when local communities are increasingly being given the responsibility to effect the material and social restructuring of our cities, we need to be aware of the potential for the perpetuation of previous patterns of criminalisation, which has been exacerbated by the institutionalisation of stereotypes within the fabric of the agencies of change.

Crime on the Flats.

Over the past two years, crime and violence on the Cape Flats have taken on 'epic' dimensions and have changed *life on the Flats* in ways that was not thought possible. A 'racialised' ('coloured') community, not known for its homogeneity, has been confronted by an issue (crime) that threatens to fragment and divide 'it' even further, based now however on class and religious lines. The conflict between Pagad and gangsters began as a 'community-response' in a 'new' democratic society where the 'community' was no longer willing to accept a situation on the Flats where their daily lives were held to ransom by criminal elements. Pagad thus initially enjoyed widespread support, based on a discourse of 'community' involvement in their own well-being and as a response to the 'perceived' general withdrawal of state welfarist provisions to this community.

Subsequently, however, deep schisms have appeared within the 'coloured community' based on diverse religious, political, ethnic and class agendas.

While the need for real change is recognised, the question remains, how to respond to these age-old barriers, and to effect a working relationship between divergent groups. A general and sustained response to the crime problem of the Flats has therefore been twarted not by overzealous anti-crime fighters or the 'radical' nature of the response, but rather by the very fragmented nature of life on the Flats.

In Cape Town political agendas thrive on race, class, ethnic and religious difference, and Capetonians respond to the issue of crime from particular social (ethnic), economic(class) and political standpoints. The portrayal of Pagad from the outset as a Muslim organisation was a death knell to the movement not because other 'coloured communities' did not believe in the justness of their call, but because 'coloured identity' has for decades been divided along the lines of class, political allegiances and religion. Who benefits from this 'divided' stance in Cape Town?

The inhabitants of Cape Town therefore need to be far more critical of the ideological viewpoints of newspapers (dominated by a neo-liberal discourse) and other critics when they speak about crime on the Flats. The focus on law and order by the press generally neglects to confront the complex social aspects of living on the Flats, especially of the very poor. Yet the outrage of the Flat's working class communities is presented as similar to that (for example) of the 'rich' white propertied class on the other side of the mountain. This sets into motion ideologically contradictory associations which could further reinforce and perpetuate past inequalities and injustices.

The focus in this paper on an underlying discourse of stability and order in Cape Town does not however suggest that disorder is a fundamental requirement for change pace Pagad. On the contrary, structural inequality in the Western Cape will be so much harder to break down if we continue to ignore the class, generational, political, and religious differences that do exist within the communities of the Cape Flats. And that the bridging (or at least, the engagement) of these divisions are a fundamental part of the resolution of the crime problem of the Cape Flats. We need to thus effect a discourse of change which

does not 'feed' off these divisions, *but* which is *also* fully conscious of historically produced inequality and difference.

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[*] Report of the Departmental Committee released on 04 January 1944