Review


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Antony Altbeker’s (2006) last book, *The Dirty Work of Democracy*, was an often brilliant popular ethnography of policing. Accessible to the general reader, it was also – at least for this reviewer (Dixon 2007) – a ‘must-have’ for anyone with a professional or academic interest in the state of the South African Police Service. Now, in this new book, Altbeker takes on the more challenging task of explaining, as Jonny Steinberg puts it in his front cover blurb, ‘why South Africa is so violent and what to do about it’.

Once again Altbeker sets out to appeal to the person on the street (or, more realistically, in the mall with a branch of Exclusive Books) while bolstering his arguments with not always flattering references to the work of academic criminologists. Unfortunately, the balance between popular polemic and scholarly reflection proves much harder to strike on this occasion and *A Country at War with Itself* is a frustrating, if gripping, read for anyone even vaguely familiar with the criminological literature on the causes of crime and how to control it.

The bare bones of Altbeker’s argument are conveniently summarised early in the book (2007:33) and take the form of four main propositions. The first of these is that the uniqueness of South Africa’s crime problem lies not so much in the ‘volume of crime’ but its ‘extraordinary violence’, manifested in stubbornly high levels of interpersonal violence and, critically, the ‘exponential growth’ of robbery. The second is that South Africa’s history and current socio-economic condition provide no more than part of the explanation for this ‘addiction to violence’. To complete the account,
Altbeker suggests, we need to consider ‘the way in which violence and criminality have themselves come to shape the context within which young men make decisions about how to behave’. His third proposition is that the crime problem cannot be ‘significantly reduced’ using current policing strategies based on prevention. ‘Far more attention’, he argues, needs to be given to ‘building our capacity to identify, prosecute and incarcerate criminals’ (33-34). Closely related to this is a fourth and final argument. And this is that ‘moral regeneration’ cannot be left to churches and schools but requires a more thorough-going process of institution-building based on a criminal justice system which comes down on violent criminals ‘like a ton of bricks’ (34).

Much of this is uncontroversial and Altbeker develops his arguments with economy and élan: South Africa’s violent crime problem is both real and serious; poverty, inequality and the corrosive legacy of apartheid are indeed incomplete explanations for this state of affairs; the rhetoric of prevention and community policing has rarely been matched by measurable successes in reducing crime (and not least because the underlying concepts have remained fuzzy at best, and incoherent at worst); and it almost certainly is true that expecting teachers and clergy to implement what former President Mandela once described as an ‘RDP of the soul’ is hopelessly idealistic. But there is more to the book than this and it is in developing his central argument that South Africa’s ‘culture of crime’ – the product of ‘self-reinforcing processes’ stemming from persistently high levels of criminal violence (55) – can only be countered by, amongst other things, doubling the number of convicted prisoners between now and the year 2017 (152) that Altbeker gets into serious difficulties.

The book opens with the author and a female companion being robbed at gunpoint in a Gauteng fast-food joint. His account of the incident, and his reaction to it, has the narrative pace and power of a first rate thriller. This terrifying personal, but all too common, experience of victimisation is in many ways the key to understanding the rest of the book. In a country ‘at war with itself’ there can be no doubt which side Altbeker is on – and, after this incident, understandably so. But this is not to say that there isn’t another side to the story of the robbery over steak rolls and slap chips to be told. As Howard Becker (1967:239) reminded us some 40 years ago, the impossibility of doing research ‘uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies’ requires sociologists of deviance to question not ‘whether we should take sides … but rather whose side we are on’. Though
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relatively powerless when confronted by ‘Pointy Face’, the armed robber, and his bungling accomplice, Altbeker is, to paraphrase Becker, a superordinate victim able to define the incident in his terms, and to use it as the basis for a rather lop-sided explanation for South Africa’s ‘crisis of crime’. For criminologists, however, such a partial account cannot suffice, and the rest of the book cries out for the other side of the story – the story of ‘Pointy Face’, his life, his circumstances, and his motivations – to be told too. In failing either to tell that story, or to explain how violence can be ‘driven by its own logic and [become] attractive in its own right … an expression of selfhood’ (119), Altbeker fatally compromises his ability to explain the problem of violent criminality, and thus undermines the credibility of his prescriptions for controlling it.

In so far as he does attempt to explain the behaviour of ‘Pointy Face’, Altbeker sees him, and others like him, as essentially rational beings whose decisions to offend are shaped not just by their own personal values but, crucially, by the behaviour of others around them and the context which that behaviour creates (113). So, he argues:

Crime is as violent and pervasive as it is [because] of a chain reaction that has seen high levels of criminality lead ever more people [into] copycatting others into crime. (130)

To illustrate the point, Altbeker goes back once again to his own experiences: firstly, of sitting in a traffic jam seething with resentment as other drivers pull into the emergency lane before eventually deciding to join them; and, secondly, of being lured on to the dance floor at parties only when there are enough people already strutting their stuff to distract attention from his own lack of accomplishment.

In many ways this is a plausible explanation and the analogies are beguiling in their simplicity. But they are thin gruel indeed for a criminologist reared on Edwin Sutherland’s theory of differential association – the idea that criminal behaviour is learned in interaction with others (especially in personal settings), and results from exposure to an excess of definitions favourable to the violation of the law. Are behaviours as different as dancing, emergency lane driving and armed robbery really learned in similar ways? And, if so, exactly how does this learning take place: what is learned, by whom and under what conditions? And where too is the empirical evidence that men like ‘Pointy Face’ ‘decide’ to become robbers in response to contextual cues derived from the behaviour of others? Without answers to these questions, Altbeker’s picture of the armed
robber as a rational decision-maker responding to the general lawlessness around him – his criminal ideal type is implicitly male as well as young, poor and black – is incomplete and unconvincing.

Equally dispiriting for criminologists is his unwillingness to acknowledge the degree of sophistication with which their discipline has sought to explain the connection between crime and relative deprivation. Seventy years ago, Robert Merton argued that:

It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain common symbols of success for the population at large while its social structure rigorously restricts or completely eliminates access to approved modes of acquiring these symbols for a considerable part of the same population, that antisocial behavior ensues on a considerable scale. (Merton 1938:680, emphasis in original)

This is much more than a straightforward ‘inequality-causes-crime argument’ of the kind Altbeker dismisses for being based on ‘dodgy’ statistics and failing to account for the ameliorating effects of South Africa’s relatively well-developed welfare state (104-5). If, as he concedes, poverty and inequality really do have something to do with crime, he should also acknowledge that criminologists have much more to contribute to explaining that connection than he is prepared to admit in caricaturing them as obsessed with establishing (or, worse still, assuming) crude mechanical relationships between statistical measures of crime and inequality:

[I]nequality is frequently identified as a major cause of crime in South Africa because, as almost everyone knows, our Gini coefficient, the standard measure of inequality, is among the highest in the world. ‘Aha’ you can almost hear criminologists exclaim, ‘That’s why we’re so plagued by criminality’. (105)

Altbeker’s solution to the problem of violent crime follows on from his analysis of its causes and is predicated on the idea that the only way to prevent more people learning to become robbers like ‘Pointy Face’ is for the criminal justice system to become more adept at identifying and convicting ‘Pointy Faces’, and more willing to incarcerate them in ever greater numbers as well. The analogy he uses here has the state acting as a bouncer wading onto an unruly dance floor to ‘kill’ a party spiralling out of control by throwing out some over-exuberant guests (154-5). But again the comparison is only superficially attractive. Throwing people out of a party does not impose any duty on the host to provide them with alternative
entertainment. Imprisoning people, on the other hand, costs money, money which could otherwise be spent on dealing with some of the social and economic problems which Altbeker concedes contribute to the problem of violent crime. Nor for that matter does throwing people out of a party make much sense if they are only likely to return not chastened by their ejection but more ‘exuberant’ than before. In the end, his conviction that South Africa’s salvation lies in the incapacitative and deterrent effects of mass incarceration seems to be based more on a hope born of desperation than any serious appraisal of the available evidence from the United States of America and elsewhere.

Well-written, and perhaps rather too deliberately provocative though it is, this book will be a grave disappointment to any criminologist of a critical, or even mildly social democratic, persuasion. Altbeker tells his own story with considerable panache but with little regard for that of his main protagonist, the inscrutable ‘Pointy Face’. As a result, he can never hope to understand, let alone explain, his assailant’s behaviour. And because Altbeker cannot explain why ‘Pointy Face’ became a robber, he has no idea what could be done to get ‘Pointy Face’ to desist, or to prevent others from following in his footsteps. Having painted himself into this corner, his clearest prescription for South Africa’s crime problem is mass incarceration – a dismal, divisive and dangerous prospect.

In many ways this is not a bad book; but it is a woefully misguided one.

References