

Review

Antony Albeker (2005) *The Dirty Work of Democracy: a year on the streets with the SAPS*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball.

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It almost suffices to say that this book does for operational policing in the South African Police Service (SAPS) what Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands* (2002) and *The Number* (2004) have done for the racialised politics of rural homicide and gangsterism in South Africa's prisons. As none other than Steinberg writes on its front cover, *The Dirty Work of Democracy* is 'one of those rare books that transcends its subject matter and tells us something about the state of our country's soul'. But to leave the discussion at that would be to do Albeker and his work an unpardonable injustice. A book of this quality on so important a subject deserves more than a one line encomium. Albeker is no shrinking violet when it comes to expressing an opinion and – while what he has to say is both challenging and eminently sensible – there are also some more questionable judgements. Entrhralling as it is then, is this book more than a rattling good read? Does it really have important things to tell us all – the specialist as well as the general reader – not just about the work of the SAPS, but about the contemporary condition of South Africa too?

The structure of the book is straightforward. Albeker begins with a short preface in which he explains that it is based on time he spent observing police officers going about their duties at eleven police stations across South Africa in 2003. He also explains very briefly why and how he has taken steps to disguise the identities of most but not all of his informants (a task undertaken at greater length in a note at the end of the book). He then follows in what he wryly notes is a long established tradition among students of

operational police work in paying tribute to the ‘courage, integrity and determination’ of the officers he observed (2005:xiii). Having expressed such sentiments ‘as a kind of fee paid to purchase the moral space to criticise some – but not all – of the people’ he describes, Altbeker adds that police officers are not ‘superheroes’ but fallible human beings, ‘ignorant, lazy, brutal, and even corrupt’ (xviii). Yet, he concludes, they ‘don’t have to be supermen [sic] to do good. All they have to do is turn up for work’ (xiv). It is this frank admiration for ordinary people routinely coping with extraordinary events, and an underlying conviction that even rather poor policing is almost certainly better than none that informs the rest of the book.

With these preliminaries out of the way, the first two chapters take us to Galeshewe in the Northern Cape and establish a pattern that is maintained more or less throughout the rest of the book. In chapter 1 we are introduced not only to the township, its residents and the ‘cops’ responsible for policing it, but also to what Altbeker describes in his concluding author’s note as his ‘theoretical framework’ for understanding policing: the work of Egon Bittner and Carl Klockars and the notion that what is distinctive about the police is not the goals that they claim to pursue – crime-fighting, order maintenance and so on – but the means that they employ in dealing with a wider set of ‘something-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-something-ought-to-be-done-now’ situations (Bittner 1974) – the use of coercive force (4 and 269). In doing so, in turning up ‘after the milk has been spilt and the shit has hit the fan’, Altbeker argues that the SAPS is responsible for doing the dirty work of the ‘newly democratic South Africa’ in much the same way as George Orwell had seen and done ‘the dirty work of Empire at close quarters’ during his period of service as a police officer in Burma in the 1920s (7).

In the next chapter the history, sights, sounds and smells of Galeshewe are brought to life, the characters of the police officers he accompanies finely drawn and the incidents which they are called upon to deal with described with a sharp eye both for detail and the wider significance of the apparently mundane. So, in the ‘dry heat’ of Galeshewe (a place of ‘cramped’ but generally ‘well established and consistently maintained’ houses ‘of brick and zinc’) Altbeker accompanies the ‘Laurel and Hardy’ partnership of Inspectors Molefe and Jansen (both ‘[d]yspeptic and bitter’, the one ‘well-rounded and soft-faced’, the other ‘angular’) to the scene of a domestic dispute in a province ‘notorious for having some of the highest per capita levels of family violence in the world’ (10,12).

From the policing of domestic violence in Galeshewe, Altbeker takes the reader off on night patrol with the Stock Theft Unit in the Drakensberg, to the northern suburbs of Johannesburg to work with ‘the bodyguards of the possessing classes’ in Rosebank and thence to the bleak ganglands of Elsie’s River on the Cape Flats, the increasingly cosmopolitan streets of Yeoville and Sea Point and the deceptively uniform ‘mass’ that is Ivory Park with its ‘ant-lines of RDP matchboxes’ and backyard rental shacks huddled round water and electricity mains like ‘puppies sucking at the teat’ (89-90). The writing is, as this image would suggest, wonderfully evocative. But this is no mere travelogue for wherever he goes Altbeker’s descriptions of people and places are leavened with some shrewd reflections on the state and social context of contemporary policing.

Thus, for example, he peppers his account of his time with Inspector Luyanda Thembeke and Sergeant Samuel Sibi in the mountains of the Eastern Cape, and the sudden eruption of communal violence which overtook the area in 1998, with some trenchant observations about the need for effective policing if a Hobbesian war of all against all is to be prevented in a society where, ‘[w]hatever we tell ourselves about the strength of social bonds in our communities and the power and currency of *ubuntu*’ it is no longer possible to rely on the fact that everyone knows everyone else to keep the peace (41). And then, apropos of gangsterism in Elsie’s River, he remarks on the non-instrumental, expressive nature of much gang-related violence (84) before reflecting on the relationship between gangsters and the communities in which they live and operate and the surprising degree of public respect, even affection, which gang leaders enjoy in places like Elsie’s River. This, he argues, is to do with the gangster’s ability to get on and get out of poverty and to represent the aspirations of the poorest people to be ‘rich and powerful and glorious’. What matters is not the gangsters’ success in buying people off like so many ‘silly, sweets-obsessed children’, but their ability to transcend humble beginnings, and allow others to gain some vicarious purchase on a better, more glorious life. Finally, time spent with the hard-bitten Inspector Ronnie Govender in Johannesburg yields the following insight into the relationship between police and public:

[C]ops often see themselves as men apart, as standing outside and above the society they police. They look down on laypeople [the *hase* or rabbits] with a mixture of paternalism and suspicion, all the while trying to ensure the safety of a citizenry whose motives and intelligence they doubt. (132)

Interesting and important though such observations are, it is not until Altbeker turns to ‘race’ and nationality that what he has to say becomes potentially incendiary. First, recalling spells with the SAPS in Sea Point, Wynberg and Rosebank, he observes that, ‘where races mixed, cops [of all races] kept their eyes peeled for young black men’ (123). Then, writing of his experiences with the police in Yeoville, he warns that, ‘whatever apologists, lobbyists and knee-jerk activists might have you believe, cops are not inventing the problems that are posed by migrants’ since ‘more than a few’ of them (both ‘refugees and “refugees”’) ‘survive, and occasionally prosper, through crime’ (191-2). Altbeker evidently derives some grim satisfaction from disabusing armchair liberals of some of their favourite notions, yet his own conclusions on both of these issues are carefully balanced. On the one hand he argues that any gains made in police efficiency as a result of ‘racial profiling’ are likely to be more than offset by the damage caused to police legitimacy when police officers – even black police officers – plunge into the ‘deep reservoirs of historical anger’ filled by the ‘strategies of exclusion and denial and humiliation’ implemented under apartheid (126). On the other, he suggests that the common sense connection between migrants and criminality made by police officers should be treated with some scepticism not only because it is so convenient to make – ‘as much an expression of a deep-seated wish than a reflection of empirical reality’ – but also because it is the product of a process of ‘prejudice-amplification’ he sees at work in the way in which neighbourhoods with large numbers of (often illegal) migrants are policed (196-7).

Only when it comes to his concluding chapter, does the sureness of Altbeker’s touch begin to desert him and the careful interweaving of reportage and comment show signs of unravelling. The chapter begins inauspiciously with a passing remark about Lenin returning ‘to Moscow’ in 1917 when, as Altbeker must know, he arrived back in his homeland at the Finland Station in what was then the city of Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg) (247). From there he goes on to explain, indeed to excuse, the failure of the police to implement the pro-arrest policy at the centre of the Domestic Violence Act as an understandable reaction to the pettiness of most of the incidents to which they are called and the natural reluctance of officers to ‘immerse themselves in other people’s family problems’ (252). In the light of his earlier description of the brutal murder in Thokoza of a young woman he calls Busi by her boyfriend, a neighbourhood thug by the name of Sello, this is a quite extraordinary conclusion to reach. Altbeker is clearly horrified

by Busi's death and the failure of her neighbours to intervene to stop the beating which led to it (216-7). Yet he seems strangely oblivious to the fact that their unwillingness to come to her aid, to involve themselves as ordinary citizens in a 'something-ought-not-to-be-happening-and-about-which-something-ought-to-be-done-now situation', differs from the reaction of the police officers with whom he sympathises in his conclusion only in so far as the attack on Busi led to her death rather than a few cuts and bruises to go with the next morning's hangover. The point of course is that if the good citizens of Thokoza were under some kind of duty to prevent the not necessarily predictable tragedy unfolding in their midst, the obligations of state officials bearing Egon Bittner's mandate can hardly be less onerous. If the lives of women like Busi are to be saved, the police simply cannot stand aside however messy, unpredictable and 'petty' domestic incidents may seem. Neither they nor anyone else can know whether the next blow will be fatal. It is in truth the very messiness and unpredictability of such incidents that makes effective intervention – up to, including and beyond arrest – by the authorised bearers of coercive force so essential.

Finally, and in an attempt to resolve the thorny issue of whether 'more cops' equals 'less crime', Altbeker asks why a 'left-of-centre' ANC government which believes that most of South Africa's problems stem from the 'social and economic debris left by apartheid' would buy into the argument that they do. His answer is that by claiming – albeit disingenuously – that controlling it is the sole responsibility of the police, the government can leave the SAPS to 'carry the can' for crime rather than admit that it has many causes and risk the 'blame for it sticking to every state institution' (257). Given the muscular good sense Altbeker dispenses elsewhere, this is disappointingly limp, particularly when a more plausible explanation is so close at hand. Surely the government's perverse cleaving to policing as the solution to crime has less to do with any fear of guilt by association than with a more fundamental unwillingness – shared, it has to be said, by other supposedly 'left-of-centre' administrations around the world facing much less intimidating crime problems – to shrug off the straightjacket imposed by neo-liberalism and take some of the bold transformative steps needed to deal with the legacy of apartheid in other areas of social policy.

In the context of the rest of this marvellous book, however, these are relatively minor imperfections which loom so large because there is so much to admire elsewhere. As a popular, erudite and beautifully written introduction to the challenges facing both the SAPS and South African society more

generally, this book will be very hard to beat for many years to come.

References

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