

Street Blues. The Experiences of a Reluctant Policeman by Andrew Brown. Zebra Press, Cape Town, 2008. ISBN 978-1-77022-032-4.

Gangs, Politics and Dignity in Cape Town by Steffen Jensen. James Currey, Oxford, Wits University Press, Johannesburg, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008. ISBN 978-1-84701-103-9.

Thin Blue, the Unwritten Rules of Policing in South Africa by Jonny Steinberg. Jonathan Ball Publishers Ltd, Jeppesstown, 2008. ISBN 978-1-86842-303-3.

These three recent books have in common the question how men and women in post-apartheid South Africa face a violent environment and how they build a sense of order. These stories are related to a specific urban environment (in or around Cape Town and Johannesburg) in which violent crime has a long history, except in white suburbs where violent crime according to Andrew Brown, Jonny Steinberg and others is mainly a post-apartheid concern. These authors draw on a long, albeit very diverse, experience of engaging with a violent world: as a reservist and a police insider operating in the suburbs of Cape Town (Andrew Brown); as a journalist and academic patrolling with constables in Johannesburg's townships and suburbs (Jonny Steinberg); as an academic and ethnographer in the Cape Town coloured township of Heideveld (Steffen Jensen). These books are fascinating because not only are they based on other people's accounts (even if they also rely on secondary sources and interviews), but because the core material is a thick description of what the authors have experienced in their everyday involvement with a community or with a group of professionals (mainly policemen and gangsters). As such they represent incredibly rich ethnographical accounts of everyday violence and policing in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead of being a vision from officials, it is an engagement with the everyday practices of people's lives. The main protagonists are policemen, community leaders, reservists, gang members, patrollers, victims, most of the time voiceless people, many of whom prefer to remain anonymous and whose accounts help understand the place of violence in everyday life and the role performed by security professionals. The three books are, however, too different to be summarised together: they deal with different issues, they have different ambitions, methodologies and approaches that need to be looked at before coming back to common issues.

Brown's book is the story of a white reservist entering the South African Police Service (SAPS) in 1999 to serve his country after decades of white oppression. Rather than a description of the South African police world, his account is a set of stories which take place in the white and coloured southern suburbs of Cape Town. The author soon evokes the sympathy of the reader, as he not only performs his duties free, like other reservists in the country and the world, but because he portrays himself as the kind of anti-hero who is far from usual in official reports or crime novels: constant fear is more present than acts of bravado,

responsibilities are stressful and poorly rewarded, the police's daily activities are exhausting and dangerous in a country where violence has permeated the entire society. He succeeds in describing the ordinary and often dirty work of the lower ranks of the police service whose reservists have neither real professional skills nor specific training. Probably what came as a surprise in a country which has set up so many police branches is the diversity of work conducted by Brown beyond the usual routine of patrolling and bureaucratic work. These include operating first-aid to victims of road accidents and of violent crime, fighting against fire in shack settlements and suburban villas around Table Mountain, participating in anti-riot squads during the 2008 xenophobic attacks, counselling victims of housebreaking and domestic violence, and so on. The author clearly assumes his subjectivities: he wants to rehabilitate the work done by ordinary constables despite the lack of resources. Specialists of state policing will probably like the author's freedom of speech (Brown left the SAPS a few years ago) and its critical tone on the incoherence and inconsistencies of police services (the reluctance of many policemen to enter first the crime scene, the poor cooperation between sectors, the difficulty of getting promotion from the lower ranks). Social scientists and sociologists will probably find the book too descriptive. Brown has written this first nonfiction book as if it was fiction, going into many anecdotal examples which most often do not help to understand the situation on the spot. In selecting the more catching stories of his ten-year experience (some of them being especially dramatic), the author has privileged the extraordinary over the routine. For example, he describes his intervention during the 2008 xenophobic attack in the squatter camp of Imizamo Yethu, but he leaves the reader to infer what was at stake here and in other South African townships and what did the police do to stop these attacks.

The author has clearly assumed a position: he tells us his personal history and he is not an academic (there is no reference to academic work). But the two approaches cannot be easily divided. In other words, some of his generalisations may sometimes be seen as shortcomings. As a reservist of ten years, the author claims to have unusual ideas of what is the South African criminal world, but we do not know what is 'the' normative vision of crime and if there is any. He also suggests that 'the zero-tolerance approach' is inadequate for post-apartheid South Africa as the notion of 'order' is too closely linked to what the apartheid police did for decades: but we are not too sure if this specific approach is prevalent among the rank and file of the police. This book could have contributed significantly to the academic debate, but unfortunately the author fails to address the major challenges faced by the ordinary police station: the strong divide between officers and constables, between reservists and non-reservists, the prevalence (or instead the decline?) of racial stereotypes within police ranks, and the cooperation (or lack of cooperation?) between the police and community organisations, which became one of the priorities for rebuilding the legitimacy of the SAPS after 1994.

In that sense, Brown's story is very different from Steinberg's account of everyday policing in different townships and suburbs of Johannesburg: the reader is taken through one of the oldest black areas (Alexandra) and a few townships in the West and the East Rand, to a wealthy Jewish neighbourhood in north-eastern

Johannesburg. Instead of going into an ethnographic account of these various places, the author prefers to follow up the routine of police professionals (constables, captains, inspectors, community leaders involved in neighbourhood policing). Steinberg's contribution is radically different from Brown's as the former contends that the major problem of the South African police is the lack of consent of the general population to be policed. Two major reasons are advanced: first, the police were never forgiven for their role under apartheid; and second, they are among a large category of township people who aspire to find a place in the growing black middle class but, as they do not earn enough to get there, they are especially prone to corruption (22-23). Most of the stories in the book gravitate around these two major trends.

Thus unlike Brown's book, the apartheid legacy appears particularly central in Steinberg's work. Post-apartheid police cannot easily get rid of their past. As mentioned by the author, only the state can detect violent crime with competence and impartiality, but that is precisely what had been missing for generations of township life (99). The author is very convincing when dealing with daily routine in some specific neighbourhoods. Patrolling Alexandra became possible around 1999 only because former ANC members and community leaders set up a patrol group and invited back the police they had forced out of the township during the 1970s and the 1980s. Even though joint police and community patrols are now common in the township, Steinberg clearly explains that lonely constables do not feel comfortable in policing public space by night as they never know if they will have the support of the community. Police found that they had authority only when entering private homes, most of the time to rescue women victims of domestic violence. I will come back to the issue of corruption later on, but Steinberg's account is a well-written and illuminating book based on participatory observation and long-time engagement with the South African penal system.

Jensen's book is very similar in content (as the author deals with violence, crime and policing), but looks like a classical and well-researched academic book based on a rich ethnographic account of a single poor coloured township on the Cape Flats (Heideveld). It traces the ways township people sought to maintain dignity and how officials have tried to maintain professionalism in the execution of their duties in the face of hardship and danger. The author explores general processes of social exclusion based, in part, on derogatory stereotypes, and traces how people stake their claim to dignity (11). At the centre of the book is an abstraction of a working-class coloured man who is the embodiment of danger and crime in Cape Town (3). This danger is associated with the *skollie*, an Afrikaans generic word which means someone who refuses to work for a living. A *skollie* is typically a poor, coloured male: a stereotype built over decades by colonial and apartheid officials and internalised by coloured people themselves. After an opening historical chapter on the production of coloured subjects by colonial and apartheid officials, the author uses the situation in Heideveld in the late 1990s to explore many topics and directions: the creation and local perceptions of gangs, local government actions to win back the township, encounters between the police and township residents, women's aspiration to respectability and dignity, and masculine imperatives of leadership, protection and discipline.

The chapters on the multiple worlds of gangsters are probably the most interesting as the author successfully contests the reification of the existence of the gang (prevalent in much academic research on gangs) in tracing the complicated individual histories of its 'members'. There is a lengthy discussion on how to define a gang: as mentioned by the author, it is exceptionally difficult to stabilise gangs as objective entities as young men clearly operate outside the gangs as well and women participate in practices pertaining to gangs (98). Instead, there is the contested claim of being a gang member. Most of the time, what from the outside could be constructed as gangs are loose groups of friends which only harden and territorialise during conflict. The author is convincing when dealing with state policing on the Cape Flats. He found analogous points with Steinberg's account, such as similar difficulties in ruling communities that do not want to be policed, contestation over police harassment of certain categories of people (street corner kids or young boys). The daily routine in the local police station provides a vivid account of the way policemen make distinctions between *kak* cases and relevant police work. The chapter on the politics of respectability among women gives fascinating and contradictory accounts of how women are caught between dominant notions of respectability and the realities of violent everyday life. There are less convincing chapters, however. Those on dissociating state policing (chapter 5) and the community involvements in policing (chapter 7) are probably not that relevant as state policing and community policing are not such neat categories as this divide suggests. More importantly, to consider the politics of protection as a 'male affair' or expressing a 'masculine imperative to protect' proves to be wrong, especially on the Cape Flats. In Manenberg, a township close to Heideveld as well as in middle- and working-class areas of Mitchells Plain, women actively participate in neighbourhood watches and sometimes they are even the majority of the members. There are historical flaws too: instead of considering neighbourhood watches in the Cape Flats as a 2000 phenomenon (189), it is a much older practice (from the 1970s and 1980s) which was common in white and coloured areas and whose history might better be thought of as cyclical rather than linear.

Despite these shortcomings, these books add substantial empirical data to the growing literature on post-apartheid policing and violence. Four other issues have been tackled partially (the historicity of violence, police corruption, racial stereotypes and state involvement in defining crime) and need further investigation.

First, there is a permanent and understandable hesitation in explaining the predominance of violence and crime in today's South Africa as being either a transition issue or a legacy of the past. On the one hand, Steinberg, Jensen and many others seem to consider that violence is inherited from colonial and apartheid times and that policing South Africa remains most of the time poorly adapted to the new democratic context. As Steinberg mentions, 'where a population is reluctant to give its consent to being policed, you police it by outnumbering it'. This was prevalent during the apartheid period and is still evident in many places today. The fact that South Africa is one of the countries in the world where there are more policemen and reservists per inhabitant indicates that the problem is not, contrary to Brown's testimony, of a police force that is understaffed. On the other

hand, Jensen does not really depart from the idea that rising crime levels and political transition seem to have accompanied one another (10). This assertion is too general to be valid: crime and violence are too historically rooted in specific local and national environments to be linked to world 'democratic transitions'.

The second issue is police corruption. There is no trace of it in Brown's account but this may be linked to the fact that the author wants to limit his criticism of the police. According to Steinberg, there is widespread corruption among constables and this largely explains their lack of authority in the townships. Police constables are also seen as patrons participating in clientele relationships: they have girlfriends in their jurisdiction, which is an indication that policemen redistribute, in a very specific way, part of their salaries to the community. In Jensen's book, townships residents share a widespread perception that the police are corrupt. The problem with these accounts is that they repeat stereotypes about the police (which may be true) without bringing forward new evidence (although there is an interesting account of the modus operandi of shift officers in Heideveld by Jensen). Steinberg's account is based on the experiences of a few constables. It is difficult to generalise to the police service as a whole. As such, all these statements fail to bring a clear understanding of the way police corruption operates on a daily basis.

Third, there is a central argument in Jensen's book about the abstract coloured man and the *skollie*. But if racial stereotypes are too strongly rooted to die out in post-apartheid South Africa, does this discourse not help reproducing the very category the author wants to deconstruct. Jensen asserts that *skollies* were different from the African *tsotsis* because it was derogatory to be a *skollie* (while it was not to be a *tsotsi*). But the African *tsotsis* and the white Ducktails were also a product of state officials and academics, who identified specific social and racial maladies attached to these groups. Similarly, African youth cultures were, according to Jensen, closely related to the mining industry and its single-sex hostel environments, which were associated with the anti-apartheid struggle of the 1970s and 1980s, while coloured gangs were not (16). But Clive Glaser and David Goodhew have clearly shown that *tsotsis* were associated not only with this environment but with a very common township life, while Gary Kynoch has indicated that Russians gangs' involvement in the struggle was much more ambivalent than has been assumed. Without equivalent historical research on coloured gangs during the 1970s and 1980s, it is hard to come to a conclusion on the differences between coloured gangs and African gangs.

Eventually, Jensen is much more convincing when he considers the unequal impact of apartheid government policies in dealing with crime and delinquency. He argues that 'whereas the violence against Africans manifested itself in the unequal encounter between a grotesquely racist police and activists, the violence against coloureds was located in social welfare offices and prisons' (39). He clearly shows, following Steinberg and Pinnock, that prison was one of the most important elements in the perpetuation of gangs in coloured communities. He also mentions that prison gangs and street gangs were not separate entities; rather they animated one another in intricate ways (86). This is probably one of the more interesting directions to be taken by historians, sociologists and anthropologists

in the near future. Previous studies of the specific youth or crime subcultures have proved to be of limited use as it is very difficult to identify cultural practices exclusive to one group. Jensen, although referring sometimes to these subcultural studies, has demonstrated that no cultural practices can be identified as specific to the gang. Moving beyond this approach, a recent academic trend in studies of crime and violence has looked at what is central in the definition of a criminal group: its incrimination. In other words, the way various state departments have come to deal with different racial groups, classes and gender in South Africa in the last decades is decisive in understanding the way crime and violence came to be defined, produced and reproduced in this country. At the heart of the historical process leading to everyday crime and violence in South Africa lies the role of the state, but this has not been sufficiently looked at in the various studies on crime in South Africa. According to Gary Kynoch, massive incarceration is a central element in explaining why South African urban violence was so exceptional in the continent before the 1970s.¹ Steinberg's and Jensen's book are contributions to this trend, but there is still a need for more systematic investigation both in history and in the social sciences.

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¹ G. Kynoch, 'Urban violence in colonial Africa: A case for South African exceptionalism', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35 (2009), 629-645.