

## **“Why is crime in South Africa so uniquely violent?”**

Antony Albeker  
Research Associate at the Institute for Security Studies and the Centre for the Study of  
Violence & Reconciliation

Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust's 55<sup>th</sup> open dialogue

30 November 2006  
T H Barry Lecture Theatre, Iziko Museum of Cape Town

### **PAPER AND TRANSCRIPT OF DISCUSSION**

---

#### **AnnMarie Wolpe:**

Antony Albeker is the author of "**The Dirty Work of Democracy: A year on the streets with the SAPS**". The book won the 2006 Recht Malan Prize for non-fiction and was short-listed for the Alan Paton Award.

After four years as advisor to the Safety and Security Ministry, where he developed ways of monitoring police performance, Antony moved to the Treasury to work on the security budget for two years. He has also been a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, and a senior researcher at both the Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation, as well as the Institute for Security Studies. Antony has a Masters degree in Economics and an Honours degree in Politics from the University of the Witwatersrand.

#### **Antony Albeker:**

“Why is crime in South Africa so uniquely violent?” This is the great unanswered question: many answers are proffered, but none seem satisfactory. Our thinking is all over the shop and usually reflects ideological or philosophical assumptions, since there is SO little empirical work ... A basic set of answers is familiar to all: poverty and unemployment, and the violence of apartheid and its end. The answers are as familiar as they are unsatisfactory.

- If poverty is key, why are poorer parts of the country often less violent and why are poorer countries often less violent?
- If apartheid and its violence are responsible, why are other societies that have gone through war and civil strife often not as violent?

One problem with the idea that apartheid can explain present day violence is that the explanation would feel much more satisfactory if the dominant form of violence was black on white. That is not the case. A sub-question here is, if apartheid is to be blamed, do we not risk creating the impression – the representational effect – that nothing can be done? History is like geography – you can't fix it. Does that mean we're stuck with this violence for the rest of time?

So before I even begin to answer the question, let me admit that I don't know ... My thoughts are half-baked and provisional. On the plus side, that is true of everyone else's too. Given that, all I can really do tonight is review the range of answers that have been offered – all have something to tell us, though none, I tell you frankly, is wholly satisfactory.

***What is the character of violence in South Africa?***

It is important to realise that violence is not one thing – it has lots of manifestations, and different explanations may be needed for different kinds of violence. We can distinguish, for instance, between expressive violence and instrumental violence: these are not the same thing and often the challenge is to explain, not simply the use of violence, but the use of excessive violence. The violence of a cash-in-transit robbery is purely instrumental – but simply saying that doesn't explain it: we also want to know why people are willing to commit that kind of violence.

The character of violence has changed and is changing. Some obvious points about the recent past:

- state violence and 'political' violence have diminished...
- ... but many people still die at the hands of the police.

What the stats say about the last 10 years is that murder rates have fallen and robbery rates have increased – this is relatively (!) uncontroversial. No-one knows for sure about levels of non-lethal, non-robbery violence: e.g. assault, rape...Here the stats may have come down or stayed the same, but because we don't do enough victimisation surveys, we don't really know whether decreases are just the result of reduced reporting or recording.

Here's my guess: (i) South Africa is seeing less lethal violence between people who know each other, (ii) We are seeing more lethal violence associated with robbery, and (iii) About other less-than-lethal violence, I simply have no idea. Explaining why murder has come down is easier than explaining why robbery, especially large-scale, well-organised robbery, has risen.

*Now a key question: **Is South Africa really uniquely violent?***

There is at least some small question mark about whether we are a uniquely violent society. We know indubitably that we are very violent compared to developed countries. But I am much less certain about developing countries ...Pakistan; Latin America – Caracas; Colombia; India – immolation; Africa – Nigeria.

It is true that South African crime is not only violent, but is also characterised by cruelty. Cruelty has been a feature of many societies at different points in their histories:

- Germans: the most lofty of the great western civilisations
- Russians to Germans and to each other
- Japanese to Koreans
- Iraqis – the most ancient civilisation of them all
- Sudanese
- Cambodians
- Algerians
- British to the Boers

- Americans ... to the Native Americans, Vietnamese

Perhaps we can conclude from this that paroxysms of cruelty are actually quite common. But, there is one big difference between these examples and our violence, namely that these all took place in the context of a grand struggle, a war, and were supported by grand narratives that shaped actions and gave them meaning. In South Africa right now, cruelty is inflicted randomly between private individuals. Some feel that violence against women in South Africa is a kind of war too – but I feel this may be a misreading of violence in South Africa.

Having noted the difference, there is a similarity between our violence and these examples: the cruelties committed in the course of these conflicts were not committed by abstractions – classes or nations or ideologies – they were committed by individuals, just as they are here. One question is, can we learn something about our violence by thinking about the conditions under which individuals in other contexts behaved inhumanly?

I remember reading an interview with Franz Strangl, commandant of the death camp at Treblinka, in which he was asked by Gitta Sereny why the people murdered there were first beaten, humiliated, and undressed. His answer: “To condition those who actually had to carry out the policies. To make it possible for them to do what they did.”

What he is pointing to is the ‘dehumanisation’ that precedes acts of cruelty – the precondition to cruelty is a denial, in the eyes of the perpetrator, of the claims of the victim to a common humanity. It may be that as a species we simply cannot do things to other people if we see them as having the same claims to life as ourselves. Thus, we need to dehumanise them and ‘other’ them before killing them.

This seems to me to be logical, a truism almost: if we recognise that the being in front of us shares a common humanity with us, then certain forms of behaviour towards that being become impossible. So, even if this is just an effect of the language, ‘dehumanisation’ must be necessary to allow some kinds of behaviour to happen. For instance, calling people terrorists or vermin immediately puts a distance between us and them. If there is something to the idea that the dehumanisation of the victim is a precondition for cruelty, then we must ask: what are the preconditions for dehumanisation?

Now we mustn’t overly romanticise matters: it is far from clear to me that people naturally understand that all people share a common humanity, or that, for this reason, it is necessary for someone (like Hitler) to persuade them of the opposite.

It may be that our starting point as a species is that other members of the species are different from us and the idea of a common humanity is something we must actually learn. It may be, therefore, that what Strangl was doing was not teaching his staff that Jews were non-people, but that he was stripping them back down to their un-tutored selves. This leads to an important question:

- Is the ‘de-humanisation of the victim’ that may be a prerequisite for some kinds of behaviour something that is ‘added to’ the person who does the deed, or is it something that is missing from him? Something that has been taken away?

The reason why this question is important is because it takes us into another way of framing the question about the violent character of South African society: **are we a**

**violent people because of something we lack or because we have too much of some other ingredient, some other element?**

I ask this question because it's a way of organising an approach to existing contributions that people have made on the subject of violence in South Africa. For some, for instance, violence is explained by things that are missing from our society. Some think the answer is straightforward: the death penalty. In my view this is highly doubtful. A slightly more respectable argument is that what South Africa lacks is moral values: the President sometimes says this and it is the premise of the Moral Regeneration Movement (remember that?). But values are philosophically awkward matters to talk about, and besides, saying that a people in a country with high levels of violence lack moral values is less an explanation than a description.

In any case, South Africans are a very religious lot and I doubt there are many who don't know what values matter. Another, more compelling, argument relates to our family structures: starting with migrant labour, fathers have been yanked out of their families, leading to dramatic changes in the way that family structures have been organised and creating new patterns of life which, for whatever reason, create all too many young men packed full of rage and behavioural problems.

Another way that these matters are sometimes explained is in relation to the manner in which apartheid (and now urban unemployment) emasculated men: by denying them traditional routes to manhood as well as more modern rites of passage that involve gaining legal majority, enfranchisement and the self-empowerment of a job. Men have been left with too little self-regard, too little self-esteem. This generates rage... We only have to add an inter-generational transmission mechanism and we can account for continued problems.

A final version of the arguments based on the missing link is that what is missing is Hope: here the argument is that poor people who are without prospects, people who lack a future, are simply less concerned about their own welfare and more willing to take risks. Here again, hopelessness can lead also to rage...

I had quite a bit of contact with a group of Thokosa youths who attended group sessions weekly. The character of these boys' lives and backgrounds can be described as follows:

- No parenting
- Lots of despair --- a sense that death is in the air
- A sense that they had no agency – no control over their lives
- Employment prospects, even matric results, seem random and the odds are stacked against them – they have no hope, and no idea where they would find self-realisation

If these are all arguments about things that are missing in our society, then there are also ways of explaining violence that revolve around ingredients in our lives of which we have too much. For instance, one of these is alcohol:

- The pharmacological effect of alcohol is to suppress various neurotransmitters that would normally inhibit aggression by causing anxiety or fear, thus the familiar nickname, Dutch Courage.

- South Africa has bad drinking patterns: per drinker, we have one of the highest rates of consumption in the world.
- We are particularly characterised by hazardous drinking: drinking alone, binge drinking.

Another thing we have too many of is firearms. Of course it's true that guns don't kill, people do.... But having a gun at a robbery, or a domestic violence incident, or a moment of rage, increases the likelihood of serious injury / fatality. A more significant issue, I think, is that we have a lot of violence in our society. Violence is a self-replicating organism (rage, vengeance, cycles of violence). Violence and the need not to appear vulnerable are closely linked. When I worked with the Thokosa youth, there was a powerful need amongst them to appear tough. If you appear vulnerable, in their environment, you invite trouble, you are asking to be attacked.

Violence has dehumanising effects...But the trouble with the argument that our history of violence explains our current violence is that the level of violence shouldn't be used to explain itself. This doesn't take us forward. Another thing we have a lot of in our society is inequality, and with that goes inferiority: something that emerges from making comparisons between oneself and others. Flowing from that is resentment: something that comes from the character of interactions between unequal people. And while we do have these feelings in South African society, this is another explanation that would feel much more satisfactory if the dominant form of violence was black on white....

We must remember that violence is not one thing – there are lots of manifestations and different explanations may be needed for different kinds of violence. The same may not be true about other ways of framing the question: we might ask, for instance, why there is so much rage or why so many people act in ways that imply that they see their victims as lacking the right to go about their lives unmolested.... Answers to these questions might offer explanations for many different kinds of violence.

### **Questions from the floor:**

1. Could you say something about youth violence; who are the people committing violence and what is the influence of drugs?
2. I am puzzled by the title of your book. Why bring democracy into it? The implications of your title are slightly discomfiting. Secondly, you say that you don't know any of the answers, but I think you *do* know the answers - why don't you say so? Is it something to do with your academic hangover, that you won't say you know the answer? You know it intellectually from your work, and emotionally from your contact with people such as the Thokosa youth. Why not be unequivocal about it?
3. You've consistently used the terms 'we' and 'our', but is there a 'we' in violence? Is violence uniform across the population, or do you see patterns coming across? Secondly, is any violence flowing from the impact of media exposure? Are there any reliable studies on whether TV promotes violence? Do you think positive media images could have an effect and do media messages strike people from different sectors of the population in the same way?

4. To what extent do people's beliefs that they won't get caught cause them to commit crime, combined with declining moral values and declining religion?

**Antony's responses:**

1. The book's called **The Dirty Work of Democracy** because I'm a huge fan of George Orwell. Orwell was a policeman in Burma in the 1920's, and he said that the job brought him into contact with the dirty work of empire – he was imposing British rule in a place where it wasn't wanted.

That is not what my book is about, but I do think that any society needs the law to be enforced - and quite ruthlessly. Living in a society in which the work gets done is very different to doing the work yourself, and it's a necessary condition for the possibility of that society, that someone does that work. Those people are not alone, there are a number of them, but cops do a lot of dirty work - it's nasty and brutish, and that's really what the title is about. You're not the first person to tell me that the title leaves a bad taste in their mouth.

2. A fundamental fact of violence around the world is that it's committed almost exclusively by young men. The age bands vary, but violence is done largely by men between the ages of 15 and 30. Using the 'we' is important for two reasons – when people do self-report surveys of men, almost all men surveyed will say that they have committed an act of violence at some point.

Having said that, not everybody is equally likely to commit an act of violence during their lifetime. Certain things do matter, such as drugs and alcohol, and prison experience certainly matters. There is some evidence that genetic factors play a role, with men having the YY chromosome disproportionately represented in prison populations (most men have the XY chromosome, and women have XX).

Income matters, and so does education. There is a range of things that matter, and there is a whole lot of 'softer stuff' for instance: the culture of place you've grown up in, the need to project a tough image, and so on. As an aside, there was a study done in the USA in which they tracked a group of teens from school into their mid-20s. They looked at whether they'd committed any crimes, and if so, and what kind. The study found a statistically significant relationship between the people who had committed a crime, and whether the interviewers had rated those people as physically attractive or not. Those rated physically unattractive had a higher chance of having committed a crime. I don't know what to do with that information, but there it is.

In SA, because of our history and the nature of our society, many factors are correlated with race. There are huge differences between victimisation and commission of crime across the race groups. If you're white you have a much higher chance of going through life without ever being a victim of crime, or committing violent crime yourself.

3. I do know the answer, yes: anger and fury. They are the big issues to talk about, but explaining why we have that anger and fury is much trickier. There are a lot of factors, although many of them are obvious. I think there's more to it than the obvious, which is why I keep insisting I don't know the answer. I don't believe anyone has a quick solution.

4. I have read things that say media encourages violence, but a lot of violence we see on TV is very cartoonish in nature, and far removed from real life. Having said that, there are particular strains of pop culture which are more encouraging of crime. Gansta rap, for instance, unabashedly glamourises and advocates crime and violence.
5. I do think deterrence is a factor and we must work hard on fixing it, but it's one factor amongst many and it cannot overcome the other factors alone. I don't think that certainty of being caught will really address the underlying issues which are driving people to want to commit violent crime in the first place.

#### **Questions from the floor:**

1. I taught at a high school in 2005 and one of the most powerful values that the kids held was that you never split on someone who has done something wrong. If it's true that deterrence, i.e.: fear of being caught, is what stops crime, how do we turn around this culture of saying 'I will never rat on a criminal'?
2. You mentioned that a lack of parenting may contribute to criminal behaviour later – are you aware of the recent research showing that a lack of bonding between the young infant and the caregiver, coupled with neglect and abuse, can result in a psychopathic personality?
3. Relating to what you said regarding anger: a study was done by the Department of Sociology at Columbia University, looking at waves of violent crime in the USA. The study found that, almost invariably, the waves coincided with a lack of expectations amongst people, or expectations which had been dashed. What is your comment on that?
4. You mentioned that the big question was why there has been such an increase in serious armed crime – could it not be because we're coming down harder on petty crime, and the sentence for a crime in which the victim is killed is not so different to the sentence for a crime in which they are not killed? Faced with that reality, a criminal may choose to eliminate his victim because there is then less chance of being caught, and if he is caught, the sentence will not be much harsher anyway.

#### **Antony's responses:**

1. The question of being an informer – you mention it existing at school, and it exists elsewhere too. The big difficulty in these environments is that not giving information is about loyalty - and loyalty is in fact a positive human value. It's a trade-off for people living in these kind of environments – to be loyal to friends or to do the lawfully correct thing? Often, loyalty trumps lawfully acceptable behaviour.

One interesting thing with Thokoza kids was the way in which the community reacted to them. The message was: don't mess in your own nest. There was an understanding that if you had to commit a crime, you couldn't do it in the areas in which you lived. The kids were expected to do the crime elsewhere.

I think part of your answer on the 'how' is to figure out how to expand the idea of who constitutes my community. If we can expand that sense, we can expand who people's loyalty applies to. But that is very hard to do. Our bonds are naturally stronger with those close around us. In particular in cities, people live amongst strangers and neighbours change all the time. It's much harder to build loyalty in those circumstances.

2. I'm not familiar with the study about bonding and psychopathic personalities, but there's a lot of US research on crime prevention, and one study was about parent training. It found that the returns on parenting training were delayed, but very high. The results were excellent. That seems to correspond with the study you mentioned.
3. The explanation of unmet expectations is probably accurate. I've read other psychological research (and these are not hard sciences) which shows that in the case of poverty, people adjust their expectations to their circumstances; but this is much harder to do in unequal societies, and even harder in societies where expectations are rising but quality of life is not. There's an ancient theory of revolutions called the Davies-Jay curve, which postulates that as long as living conditions are going up, everything is fine. But if conditions plateau, while expectations keep rising...discontent grows.
4. I do think the increase in cash-in-transit heists is a displacement effect, particularly from bank robberies, as banks have become more secure. People attack a different point in the chain. Whether the tough sentences encourage people to kill, I don't know. Our sentencing policy is a mess at this point.

One thing that cannot be said of our sentencing policy is that it's too lenient. We put a lot of people in jail, for very long periods. It's possible that since the sentences are the same for robbery or murder *and* robbery, people may decide to kill to minimise their risk. The other aspect is that the harsher you make the penalties, the more you encourage people to kill witnesses as well. I don't know the answer for sentencing. There are numerous factors surrounding good sentencing, but I think as it stands currently, it's a debacle.

#### **Questions from the floor:**

1. Two aspects that I feel influence violent behaviour are culture and biological nature. In terms of culture, I think role models are very important, and I think you underestimate the effect that violent Hollywood role models have on kids. From the biology side, you may be asking the question the wrong way round. You're assuming that we're naturally not violent, but if you look at animals, from which we've come, we see that the tendency is to take out animals that pose a threat by violent means, and also to form in-groups and out-groups, where members of out-groups are treated with violence. Do you not think we are 'programmed' to react with violence, and that what we have to learn is not to be violent, but to be peaceful?
2. I am curious about your views on poverty. I heard the view of a Zimbabwean opposition MP speaking in Cape Town recently, who believes that the crime rate in SA has been bolstered a lot by high numbers of young Zimbabweans crossing our borders illegally – what is your comment on that?
3. What I'd like to see is where you can take it, from what you've said. I've always struggled with the way we've been dealing with crime and violence –



our gut response is to punish people harder and get them to read their bibles more. But I agree with your approach in that if we can enhance people's chances to achieve self-realisation within society, that might work.

One of my ideas about prison is to allow prisoners to work and earn money within prison, which can go into a savings account, to be made available to them when they get out. That might teach discipline and self worth, and will serve as a springboard for them back into society when they are released.

4. From your experience with young offenders, do you think they even consider the prison sentence when they contemplate committing a crime, or is it much more impulsive?

#### **Antony's responses:**

1. I'm not going to disagree with you about the impact of Hollywood, but I have to say that it seems too soft an explanation, for me. The point you make about in-groups and out-groups - that's sort of my point about dehumanisation. The question is, who's in the in-group? Do we have to learn to see each other as fellow human beings? I think we do want to co-operate, as long as co-operation benefits ourselves, and over the history of humanity, the field of those we will co-operate with, has grown. But I think we still have a long way to go, and South Africans don't have a national identity which sees ourselves as one big in-group.
2. I really hate characterising our problems as 'caused by outsiders', or 'caused by a particular group'. I don't think that Zimbabwe is the cause of our problems; our problems have preceded the meltdown in Zim by many years. However, there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence involving Zimbabweans in one form or another, and perhaps I must let go of my knee-jerk response, which is to reject outright the idea that a certain group may bear some responsibility. One old theory is that cash-in-transit heists are undertaken by ex-soldiers from Zim, who are trained in combat, have guns and so on. I suppose it's not that far-fetched.
3. Your point about self-actualisation: I completely agree, although I don't know how we get from where we are to there.
4. While I was working with the Thokoza kids, three were arrested for an assault of which they were guilty. Two didn't get bail, and went to Boksburg prison to await trial. I can tell you that after that they thought a lot about prison! Before, however, they didn't. For those kids, a lot of what happens, happens completely randomly, from their perspective.

The experience of being arrested does not follow as the logical consequence of something they did – all around them people are doing similar or worse things, and sometimes those people are arrested and sometimes not. It is a matter of chance, and as such, they can't engage with it properly, so they just write it off.

The experience of awaiting trial that those boys had really scared them, I think. In the USA they have a programme called Scaring Them Straight, which has been heavily criticised by criminologists, but I suppose the idea is that if people get a taste of the consequences of crime early on, they may think twice.

**Questions from the floor:**

1. You made the statement that violence begets violence, and also that it's anger which is at the root of violence. Doesn't anger beget anger? It's easy for me to say that, as a woman, I'm not violent. But I can't deny that I've been angry. Have there been any studies on South African anger levels, as opposed to crime levels?
2. Don't you think that economic disparities could contribute more to disintegration of values?
3. You said that crime is really a male problem. Do you see any correlations between heavy militarisation of a country, and the crime levels therein? In particular, does this have any relevance for South Africa?

**Antony's responses:**

1. I don't know of any studies about how angry South Africans are, but I think you make a good point.
2. Inequality gets much more traction in criminological literature than does poverty. There is a strong correlation between inequality levels and crime levels, and much less of a correlation between simple poverty and crime. I think it's linked to inferiority and resentment, both of which flourish in unequal societies.
3. I don't know that militarisation explains enough about the differences between countries and their levels of crime etc. I don't think that South Africa is a particularly militarised society any more, although we were in the past. I don't think our male identities are as wrapped up in guns and tanks as they used to be. There may be a link between militarization and crime levels, but I'm not aware of it.