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South Africa

The Violent Work of South African Gangs

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Public debate about gangs doesn't really grapple with why ganging practices and cultures have been a part of the fabric of South African society, at least since the union of 1910.

For working class communities on the peripheries of South Africa's urban centres, gang violence is part of daily life, in the home, taxi, school and streets. Daily rituals of commuting, shopping, playing and recreating life are played out alongside shootouts, drug-induced robberies and sexual violence. Recent years have been particularly violent as gangs come into increased conflict over the territories vital to securing drug and other profits. The result is a mainstream media littered with reports of gang and non-gang members, on the Cape Flats, Westbury or Port Elizabeth, killed or caught in crossfire.

These reports rarely offer anything more than a superficial understanding of gangs. They reflect and exploit a racialised fascination with gangs. They present us with scary images and implausible scenarios while reinforcing stereotypes and creating new ones.

Beyond references to vague "social ills" and questioning whether the military should be brought in to violently crush gangs, the public debate about gangs doesn't really grapple with why ganging practices and cultures have been a part of the fabric of South African society, at least since the union of 1910. Nor does it come to grips with the agency and role of gangs and gang members in communal processes of making space and identity.

The nature of work

Marx's early theorisation of *work* brought attention to the role that work plays as: 1. a social relation, and 2. a meaningful act of making constructing something that makes social life possible. Understanding an activity as work helps us understand its role in shaping our identity, place and role in society and the world. It helps us understand how racial, gender and class hierarchies are reproduced, but also challenged and remade.

Feminist scholars' great success was to shift discussion of sex work away from the terrain of morality and into the terrain of work. Feminist theorisation of sex work was itself borne of a rich tradition which challenged the devaluation of women's unpaid labour in the household and in the family as "non-work". Feminist scholars were able to unveil how the sexual, emotional and household work that women are consigned to perform (as a result of gender constructions) directly contributes to the profitability and reproduction of capital.

Violence Work

Coming back to gangs, MarÃ-a JosÃ© MÃ©ndez has recently argued that the activities of gangs can be thought of as "violence work". This means that the activities of gangs are a part of, not separate from, the political economy of the rest of the world, including dominant modes of capital accumulation and distribution.

In concrete terms, this means that the drugs, guns, police corruption and violence of gangs contribute to the livelihoods of gangsters and their families, but also to the profits and incomes of drug and chemical manufacturers, arms manufacturers, corrupted and uncorrupted police(men) and politicians, border officials, taxi drivers, soldiers,

private security companies and their employees, pimps, druglords and unemployed youth of our country.

History of South African Gangs

The Cape Flats, Westbury and Northern Port Elizabeth. These three locations are normally the focus of news reports of gangsterism, either individually or together, as the three most gang-ridden communities in the country. And yet the history, development and current expressions of gangsterism are not limited to these “coloured” townships.

Around the time of the consolidation of colonial rule (which culminated in the Union of South Africa in 1910), a group of bandits led by Mzuzephi Mathebula (aka Nongoloza), established a violent enterprise that targeted migrant labourers, township dwellers and white labourers alike. Nongoloza and his followers saw themselves as “rebels against the law of the government”. They established a strict military discipline, ideology, ritual, code and practice. Under conditions of general criminalisation and repression of black life, Nongoloza was able to use the colonial prison system to develop criminal networks spanning the major centres of the country. The harsh conditions of the segregated townships and mining compounds of early Johannesburg provided Nongoloza with the recruits necessary to raise an army that continues to exist, though vastly evolved, in South Africa’s prisons and more recently, streets.

As the political economy of the Witwatersrand developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, migrant labourers and urban youths, known as tsotsis, formed groups. They served both as a defence against violence from other tsotsis and the state, but increasingly also to commit violence for gain. By the 1930s, Johannesburg boasted gangs such as “Amalaita” and the “Americans” and “Msomis” – legendary gangs of Alexandra township. Later gangs such as “AmaRashea” (The Russians) and AmaJapane (The Japanese) would form in the Western Areas, present day Westbury. These gangs drew on imagery of fierce fighting armies in the aftermath of the second Imperialist War to project not only power but also discipline and resilience.

Meanwhile in Cape Town, the rural crisis of the 1930s and 1940s saw waves of rural poor of all races, the so-called “plaas-jaapies”, entering and changing the complexion of the city. In the context of impoverishment and over-crowding, conflict-ridden gang cultures developed. The first of these were formed as vigilante groups, based in familial and kinship ties, to protect residents from the criminal menace of the “skollie”, who robbed and violated the community. Later, police repression and economic need drove these groups to increasingly engage in criminal activity.

Around this time, gangs began distinguishing themselves from other workers by dressing differently, talking differently (Isicamto, Tsotsitaal and the Sabela are the cultural legacy of urban youth) and, importantly, choosing different forms of labour. Robbing, territorial battles, extortion and physical violence became the means of securing a livelihood outside of racist exploitation. But they were also a way of asserting gendered and racialised identity in the face of state criminalisation and brutalisation. In many ways, the activities of the gangs mirrored those of the colonial state, itself rooted in robbing, pillaging and territorial control.

The community was also able to impose itself upon gang members. While gangs were renowned for predation and violence, this was often directed against those outside the gang’s community and often the spoils of such work played a crucial role in securing the community’s material needs.

Gangs and identity

Ganging practices allow men to define and perform masculinity within the context of gendered relations. Their rituals and practices reflect locally constructed and refracted values of masculinity. Ganging activity also allows for defining community spatially. Often gang territories criss-cross municipal boundaries and demarcations and are more organically grounded in the historical, kinship and religio-cultural ties of the gang. Ganging practices “exist within, and are an integral aspect of both the cultural and economic reproduction of personhood in a township community”.

Gangs and gangsterism are also contradictory. During the 1980s, gangs around Johannesburg and Soweto adopted the “com-tsotsi” identity, contributing to the effort to render the townships ungovernable as young lions and foot-soldiers of the struggle. Nonetheless, gangs such as the “Jackrollers” engaged in particularly brutal acts of predation and sexual and physical violence against communities. Cape Town gangs too adopted an antagonistic stance toward the police, security apparatus and general governability of the townships. At the same time, some gangs in the Cape were collaborating with security apparatus to assassinate activists of the United Democratic Front.

Neoliberalism, Drugs and the Street Numbers

The 1980s were also a time of reconfiguration of the relationships between street gangs, the prison gangs and drug markets. Apartheid security personnel were already deeply implicated in the supply and distribution of Mandrax in coloured and Indian townships. Wouter Basson would later claim to have been acting under orders in supplying drugs to gangsters for “crowd-control” purposes. They effectively assisted in setting-up the infrastructure for drug trafficking today. They found partners in the criminal supergangs, such as the Americans (of Cape Town) and Hard Livings. They in turn were able to forge material and ideological links with the prison-gangs, which until then had observed a strict separation between prison ganging practices and life on the outside.

Today a handful of high-level drug lords and their partners across the state and non-state divide continue to profit from the violence and degradation of the drug trade. Unemployed youth and their parents, neighbours and friends in marginalised communities necessarily continue to rely on the violence work of gangs to provide material and ideological resources in the time of neoliberal social crisis.

As the crisis has deepened over the last five years, the rhythm of gang violence has increased. Communities, which may have been more tolerant of youth gangs in the past, have become increasingly frustrated as gangs have transgressed long-held codes that limited gang violence and victimisation. Understanding gang activities as work, shaped in the context of racialised and gendered and class oppression and resistance, might help us come to see more clearly what the problems are and how to begin to tackle them. The violence work of gangs is a deep-rooted and historical phenomenon. Any attempt to engage in transforming it will need to take account of this history.

[Amandla](#)

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