Chapter 49

Cape Town Gangs:
The Other Side of Paradise

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ABSTRACT

Almost all gang studies throughout the 20th century and most in the 21st locate the reasons for both gang membership and a tendency to violence in the environments within which young people are raised: family, neighbourhood, school, poverty, access to drugs and general deprivation. In Cape Town all these were present under apartheid and still persist 20 years after the country became a democracy. The reasons for this persistence have to do with global and local economics, skills shortages, corruption, political mismanagement and neglect of certain neighbourhoods and are beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, acknowledging these influences, this study looks at how gangs are defined and examines them from a more finely grained perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Woven deeply into the urban tapestry of Cape Town is a shadow city, its threads firmly anchored in the capitalist economy, knotted into local control and governance systems and extending far beyond the borders of the country. Its activities are hidden to all but those who know where to look and – when you do – it suddenly seems to be everywhere. Its influence is considerable and maintained through covert connections, graft, coercion, illegal trade and, not infrequently, murder. It has a history. (Pinnock 2016)¹

Until the early-1990s South Africa was a country encircled by fences and surveillance systems with soldiers on the alert for ANC guerillas and the threat of communism. Its borders were protected against penetration by anyone other than official travellers and wide-eyed holidaymakers. On the Cape Flats, the job of the police was to control the political volatility and hunt down spies and saboteurs. Illicit activities were low on the apartheid government’s perceived list problems and, accordingly, these flourished. For citizens already victims of harsh racism and aware of police complicity in applying it, state designations of legality were considered largely irrelevant or merely a challenge to overcome or undermine.

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An example of this in Cape Town is the subversion of bottle stores, a seemingly small matter with large implications. In line with the perception that Coloured (mixed race) people abused alcohol, throughout the 1970s and 1980s the government owned, managed and limited to about 20 the number of bottle stores in Coloured areas. These did not allow credit to ‘non-whites’ and were generally bleak places with nowhere to sit, eat, dance or listen to music. This attempt at control backfired when individuals fitted their houses as shebeens where illegal liquor could be bought and consumed in congenial surroundings. Shebeening spread rapidly across the Cape Flats, supported covertly by large alcohol producers that found these watering holes a convenient way to offload low-grade wine and spirits. (Standing 2006)²

Trouble easily follows alcohol consumption, however, and shebeen owners could not expect police to respond to calls from illegal establishments. In most areas the local gang was amenable to a protection arrangement against alcoholic excesses by patrons. They had the added value of being lookouts against police raids and for collecting outstanding debts from customers on payday. Gangs could, unasked, also insist on protection payments from shebeens in return for not wrecking them, a practice that was to extend to all business in some areas. A gang member from Manenberg put it plainly (Lambrechts 2013)³:

See, sometimes the HL”s (Hard Livings) can come in and rob you…They can take the stuff anytime if they want to, but if you want protection you’ve got to pay us for the protection so that you don’t get robbed and if you don’t want to die, you also have to pay for protection.

Certain police officers, alert to useful additions to their own pay and pleasure extracted favours from shebeen owners in the form of cash, liquor and meat. In the 1980s, while in a Hanover Park shebeen interviewing the owner, I was startled when two uniformed officers walked in and, after a brief conversation with the shebeener, left with four bottles of brandy. None of the customers batted an eyelid. Shebeens were technically illegal but, in practical terms, largely ignored.

A similar situation resulted from the prohibition of mandrax tablets, which were developed as a cheap legal sedative. In the 1970s mandrax became popular as a recreational drug when mixed with alcohol, then exploded across the Cape Flats when smoked in a ‘white pipe’ mixed with cannabis. Banned in the late 1970s, its import and eventually local manufacture became one of the most lucrative illegal industries in Cape Town. It was sourced by merchants and sold on the streets by gang members. From minor skirmishes, deadly gang wars soon erupted over control of sales turf. In this way gangs grew in wealth and power.

After 1994 a door opened and the world entered. Through it poured political goodwill, investment, tourists and the criminal underworld. From top government officials and businessmen to kids on the ghetto street corner, the boom in illegal goods and services changed everything.

In the slipstream of globalization throughout the 1980s, transnational criminal activity had spread throughout the world, operating across national boundaries and outpacing the ability of enforcement agencies to contain it (Gastrow 1998).⁴ This change fed on the expanding information and communication revolution, the increasing interconnection of banking systems and the opening up of opportunities following the end of the Cold War. Particularly, however, it fed off transitional political confusion and targeted weakening of control systems in Russia, Central Europe, South America and Africa (Gastrow 1998).⁵ After 1994 a globally reenergized city like Cape Town – conveniently positioned between east and west and historically a colonial conduit for import and export – could hardly escape the attention of worldly savvy criminal networks.