

# Book review

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## Don Pinnock, *Gang town*

**Elrena van der Spuy\***

Elrena.Vanderspuy@uct.ac.za

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*Gang town, so promises the back leaf, 'tells a tale of two cities'. The front cover juxtaposes the two cities – Cape Town and gang town. The outline of Table Mountain beckons in the distance. Superimposed onto that world heritage emblem of the city is the body of a young man. A crude tattoo is visible on his naked torso. The arms of the body are stretched outward. The hands clasp a handgun. The torso, the tattoo and handgun signify 'the gangster'. He hails from gang town. The gangster subject is not without agency. The body is tilted in anticipation of the deadly velocity of the gun. But that agency, we know, is painfully circumscribed by the debilitating conditions of social exclusion that characterise gang town. So it is with anticipation that one turns to Pinnock's account of the interplay between structure and agency and gangs.*

In *Gang town*, Don Pinnock once again brings his skills as journalist, photographer, criminologist and youth justice activist to bear on a field of study, which he, as much as anyone in South Africa, has helped establish. The style of the book reflects Pinnock's long career as a journalist. At the same time his strong foothold in academia has enabled him to produce a work that displays a grasp of much of the strictly academic studies that have appeared since his own seminal book on gangs, *Brotherhoods*, was published in 1984.<sup>1</sup> Later, in *Gang rituals*

*and rites of passage* (1997) he explored the role that Cape Flats gangs played in providing poorly educated, young coloured males with a sense of belonging and purpose in an environment characterised by family dislocation, poverty and violence.<sup>2</sup> And, after a 20-year hiatus, *Gang town* could perhaps be viewed as completing a gang trilogy, a summation and updating of Pinnock's work on this topic.

The South African literature on gangs is relatively well established. Historical inquiries, sociologically orientated explorations of both street and prison gangs, and more recent political analyses of the links between local gangs and global organised crime networks

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\* Elrena van der Spuy is attached to the Centre of Criminology, Faculty of Law, at the University of Cape Town.

have assembled, by South African standards, a respectable body of 'gang' studies. For example, historians such as Charles van Onselen, Gary Kynoch and Clive Glaser contributed much to our understanding of the emergence of defence-type gangs on the streets of urban townships on the Reef from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>3</sup> As work in the 1980s by Nicholas Haysom, WJ Schurink and especially Charles van Onselen has made clear, neighbourhood gangs in South Africa have become inextricably linked to the formation of the so-called 'number' gangs in the country's prison system.<sup>4</sup> One of the best ethnographic explorations of gangs is Jonny Steinberg's *The number*, in which the life of one man from the Cape Flats is traced from early street crime to membership of a number gang in prison, and the abiding consequences upon his release from incarceration.<sup>5</sup> In light of all this literature, it is striking that gang development in this country, both within and outside of the prison system, has so closely paralleled similar phenomena elsewhere in the urbanised world. Prison gangs are almost ubiquitous in the United States (US) and Latin America, the places where the most relevant studies have been undertaken. And increasingly their links with gangs on the outside have proliferated.

In 2008 the Danish anthropologist Steffen Jensen produced perhaps the best ethnographic study of conditions in a Cape Flats township – Heideveld – and the operation of gangs in the area.<sup>6</sup> It followed a useful study by Elaine Salo of life in the sub-economic flats of Manenberg and the pivotal role of women in sustaining a quasi-respectable lifestyle there.<sup>7</sup> Jensen's work remains a landmark study, marred only by his recourse to an often arcane cultural studies vocabulary. Political scientists Andre Standing (2008) and Derica Lambrechts (2012) extended this literature to the study of transnational organised crime and illicit markets, a shift that local observers such as Wilfried

Schärf and Clare Vale had begun to stress, and which local media had not been slow to pick up on.<sup>8</sup> Thus the focus on gangs as subcultural entities was supplemented by structural analyses of the interrelationship between global syndicates and local crime groupings, and changes in the form and functions of locally based associative groupings.

Thus, when Pinnock began to write the work under review, he had nearly 20 years of new academic work, together with a plethora of policy documents and press reports, to draw on. To all this often tedious material he could add his years of involvement in work with youth at risk and many hours of activism as a co-founder of the Usiko Trust, as well as his involvement with the transformation of the old Constantia Porter Reformatory into what has become known as the Chrysalis Academy. The author may perhaps justifiably claim to be the most academically informed and practically qualified person in the Western Cape to write on youth gangs in the area.

The result is a highly informative but perhaps over-ambitious book. The first chapter plunges once again into community life in District Six, with the implementation of the Group Areas Act in the 1960s. As the author puts it:

The ultimate losers in this type of claustrophobic atmosphere were the working class families. Torn from the areas they knew and scattered across the Cape Flats, the emotional brutality dealt out to them in the name of rational urban planning was incalculable. The only defence the youth had was to build something coherent out of the one thing they had left – each other. Between windblown tenements on the dusty sand, gangs blossomed. The city urban managers now had a major problem on their hands – violent crime. (p. 40)

In the second chapter Pinnock pursues a conceptual agenda around gangs. It has proved

notoriously difficult to develop a consensus on an acceptable definition of the term. What sense is there to make of gangs as a sociological and legal construct? How narrow or how wide should we stretch its definition? Do stereotypical notions of gangs still hold in a context where the organised criminal economy has gained so much traction, and where there is an increasing overlap between licit and illicit economic activities? 'Gangs' take many different forms. There are corner kids, brotherhoods, warrior gangs and fully fledged merchant gangs. Each has a different structure and function. And the interlinkages between these types are complex, especially in the current global and local contexts in which these criminal associations operate. Particularly welcome is the author's discussion of youth gangs in Khayelitsha on which little work, apart from Pharie Sefali's useful overview, has appeared to date.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps one must accept, as Jensen seems to do, that no one term will ever capture the fluid, ephemeral nature of many street gangs, and rather focus on how some gangs achieve an institutionalised, multi-generational existence.

Chapter 3 emphasises the nature of *adolescence* – a critical phase of the human life cycle for understanding why impoverished young males cohere into something more than a mere friendship group. The topic was of course central to work by the Chicago School in the 1920s, culminating in Thrasher's monumental study of that city's gangs. Pinnock's new book echoes some of the author's earlier writings, but he draws on a body of recent scholarship on the developmental trajectories through which many youngsters travel. Contemporary research relating to 'pathways' to criminal careers, 'life persistent' deviance, the kinds of factors that make for 'resilience' and 'desistance' – is harnessed here.

It is no surprise that Pinnock devotes Chapter 4 to the context of family life in the shaping of

deviant young men. The influence of female-headed households in poor communities has for decades been one of the stock themes of much Western social science. Who can forget the outcry raised by the Moynihan Report in the US in the 1960s, which took account of the malaise affecting black families in inner city areas?<sup>10</sup> It is an ongoing topic, and of much relevance to certain areas of the Cape Flats. The consequences of an absent father for parent-child role modelling are briefly considered. Second, the absence of fathers puts considerable strain on others (mothers in particular, but also relatives and other caretakers) who take on the burden of raising children. How do such strains impact on the newly born, the toddler and adolescent?

It is in thinking through these consequences for child development that Pinnock draws on new research emanating from 'biological' criminology and evolutionary psychology. Here, Pinnock departs from a long-standing reluctance in criminology to engage the non-social. The reluctance to engage with biosocial explanations for criminal behaviour is widespread, but such reluctance may be even more accentuated in contexts such as South Africa, where environmental stresses are acute and social inequalities brutal. A current hot topic among geneticists is what is termed 'epigenetics' – crudely put, the argument that the standard model of DNA-based transmission of the genetic heritage of an offspring is inadequate in accounting for the appearance of heritable traits whose causes arise after the conception of the foetus. The details are technical but the potential consequences are easy to understand. Malnutrition, substance abuse and stress experienced in mothers as 'incubators' of the unborn may lead to children who suffer from physical stunting, tendencies to deviance and mental disorders, among them schizophrenia. The toxic stress to which mothers in poor neighbourhoods are exposed alters the

efficiency of the embryonic development, with the unexpected related outcome that these alterations may themselves become heritable. As a consequence of maternal behaviour, male children may be primed for 'threat detection' and create hyper-alert organisms conditioned to respond in particularly aggressive ways. But the implications are far from new. When Morgan and Posel claim that '[t]he fact that an adverse socioeconomic environment is almost entirely mediated by caregiver/parental behaviour has profound implications: caregivers are the critical nexus between young brains/minds society is sculpting and society at large', (p. 13), one can only cry: welcome to standard criminology!<sup>11</sup>

Chapter 5 'steps out of the door' (p. 184) and into the surroundings. The chapter's title is 'Toxic neighbourhoods'. It is in this reviewer's opinion the least satisfactory part of the book. One cannot quarrel with the author's concept of 'socially disorganised communities' (p. 185) – it is a standard social science conceptual cliché. There are slums, sink estates, *favelas*, *barrios*, ghettos and other terms that worldwide designate the poorest, most undesirable areas of our cities. The question is what, if anything, makes areas on the Cape Flats, as the title *Gang town* implies, so extraordinarily gang-ridden and subject to a kind of violence that goes beyond run-of-the-mill 'altercations', so well explicated in a book like *Homicide*?<sup>12</sup> Pinnock's answers – a kind of culture of violence, availability of firearms, widespread drug usage and low quality unsuitable school education – in a sense explain everything, but leave us wondering precisely what the key variables are.

The author presents some sensible recommendations in the final chapter. They are very sweeping, and, given current political structures, budgetary constraints and a cultural and institutional conservatism, their acceptance by policymakers and bureaucratic elites seems

unlikely. Major changes to education, as Pinnock suggests, face constitutional, fiscal and union obstacles. The same applies to reform of drug and policing practice. Nevertheless, they may help provoke the kind of debates that are the forerunners to the needed reforms.

In a book of such a wide sweep, academics are always going to be able to find points about which to carp. For example, both Jensen (p. 43) and Standing point out that, in the latter's words, 'there are several reasons why the link between forced removals and gang formation is not as clear-cut as many may believe' (p. 13), and that rural coloured migrants to Cape Town may have made up the bulk of those who were to be labelled gangsters. Then there is Pinnock's adoption of the fashionable idea of 'neoliberalism' (p. 48). To his credit he does not conjure it up on almost every page, as Samara's (2011) crime and gang book does.<sup>13</sup> Yet it remains problematic that undefined concepts such as neoliberalism are uncritically inserted as apparent explanatory devices. The concept does not provide us with a workable and reasonably objective analysis of contemporary political economy in an age in which gangs increasingly intersect with trans-border groups and syndicates. Further, while one welcomes Pinnock's venture into recent developments in biology, he ignores the fact that this debate predates the new advances in the field of 'epigenetics'. Finally, there is much to be said about, and for Pinnock to provide a personal account of, the work of the Chrysalis Academy, and some indication how it differs from the notorious Porter Reformatory, on whose premises the Academy now stands. On second thoughts, given that Pinnock has just finished a 300-page book, the request is perhaps rather unfair.



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## Notes

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