

# UNDERSTANDING 'POINTY FACE'

## What is criminology for?

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*A Country at War with Itself, Antony Altbeker's book about 'South Africa's crisis of crime', begins with the dramatic story of a robbery in which Altbeker himself was involved. One of the robbers is a man who Altbeker refers to only as 'Pointy Face'. Beyond the unusual shape of his chin, his high cheekbones and the hardness of his muscles, readers are told nothing about 'Pointy Face'. He is a man from nowhere, a man with no history, no life before or after the evening he confronted Altbeker and his companion as they sat in a Johannesburg fast-food joint eating steak rolls and slap chips. In the context of recent international debates about the purpose of criminology, this paper asks what criminology is for in a country like South Africa. After reviewing the development of criminology in South Africa over the last 25 years or so, it argues that important questions about why crime – and violent crime in particular – has remained so high in the post-apartheid era have not been either asked or answered. It suggests that an understandable concern with controlling crime more effectively has led to insufficient attention being paid to why it occurs in the first place. In the rush to make sure that 'Pointy Face' and people like him are caught, prosecuted and imprisoned, and lives and properties secured against their depredations, few serious attempts have been made to understand where the 'Pointy Faces' of contemporary South Africa come from and why they do what they do. The paper ends by suggesting some reasons why criminologists seem to have lost interest in understanding why crime happens and how researchers might begin to respond to this explanatory crisis.*

Antony Altbeker's book *A Country at War with Itself: South Africa's Crisis of Crime* begins with the dramatic story of the author's encounter with armed robbers in a Johannesburg fast-food restaurant.<sup>1</sup> He calls one of the robbers 'Pointy Face'. But, beyond the unusual sharpness of his chin, the height of his cheekbones and the hardness of his muscles, readers are told nothing about 'Pointy Face'. He is a man from nowhere, a man apparently without motive or history; he has no personality and no life before or after he confronts Altbeker and his companion over steak rolls and *slap* chips on a cold highveld evening three years into South Africa's new democracy.

Later in his book, Altbeker has more to say about why South Africa produces so many men like 'Pointy Face' and what he believes should be done about them. I will come back to these points later.

Reading Altbeker's portrait of 'Pointy Face', it is hard not to wonder what brought him, and a bungling teenage accomplice, to be emptying cash registers and wallets at gunpoint, prepared – or so it seemed to Altbeker – to kill anyone foolish enough to stand in his way. And what does this urgent acquisitiveness, and this readiness to use extreme violence, say about the South African condition, the structures and mores of post-apartheid society? As a criminologist I believe that these are exactly the kind of questions that criminologists should be trying to answer. What I want to argue in the rest of this paper is that, over the last 25 years or so, South African criminology

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has either been relatively uninterested in these questions or, on the occasions when it has attempted to answer them, been shown little respect by those – politicians and policy-makers – best placed to do something with the answers. I conclude by suggesting why this has happened, and what can be done to put things right.

## WHAT IS CRIMINOLOGY, AND WHAT IS IT FOR?

But what exactly is criminology? What is it for? Rather surprisingly, criminologists have expended a good deal of energy on both of these questions recently.<sup>2</sup> Accusations of navel-gazing are not entirely misplaced and the finer points of the debate need not detain us here. Suffice to say that, as David Garland and Richard Sparks put it a dozen years ago now, ‘Criminology, in its broadest sense, consists of our organised ways of thinking and talking about crime, criminals and crime control.’<sup>3</sup> They go on to say that academic criminology is only the ‘best-elaborated and most scientific sector’ of a much wider ‘discourse’ that extends far beyond universities into the worlds of government, the mass media and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> They show how these worlds overlap and how events in one may have a profound effect on what happens in the others.

With this caveat very clearly in mind, I want to focus here on work that can (albeit rather loosely) be described as ‘academic’ in the sense that, irrespective of whether it has been written by people who self-identify as ‘criminologists’, or are employed in recognised academic institutions, it is scholarly in its approach, based on a more or less systematic appraisal of the available evidence and engages in some way with a wider literature. And when I talk about South African criminology (and criminologists), I mean academic criminological work (and its authors) that is concerned with South Africa, regardless of where (or by whom) it may have been written. For present purposes then, I regard myself as a contributor to South African criminology; insofar as this paper is critical of that project, it is, at least in part, a piece of self-criticism.

Like most of the participants in the more recent debates about the scope and purposes of the discipline, Garland and Sparks were primarily concerned with criminology in the English-speaking countries of the global north.<sup>5</sup> Among the few exceptions to this rule are Clifford Shearing and Monique Marks, who take up the Australian criminologist Chris Cunneen’s call for a postcolonial perspective.<sup>6</sup> They suggest that the kind of questions a postcolonial criminology should try to answer in a place like South Africa differ from those asked in ‘western democracies’.<sup>7</sup> The first of these questions is: ‘Why are criminal acts so violent in nature?’<sup>8</sup> This of course is precisely the kind of question prompted by Antony Altbeker’s brush with the enigmatic ‘Pointy Face’. And answering it must be central to the purpose of any ‘organized [way] of thinking ... about crime [and] criminals’. But it is only one of an (admittedly non-exhaustive) list of seven questions put forward by Shearing and Marks, six of which are concerned not with crime or criminals but ways of controlling and responding to them. This is no great surprise, since the focus of their chapter is on the need for ethnographic research sensitive to the myriad arrangements that exist in South Africa ‘to govern crime and restore justice.’<sup>9</sup> But this absorption with control rather than crime, controllers instead of criminals, is very typical of South African criminology since the last, dark days of apartheid in the late 1980s. It is this feature of post-apartheid criminology, and its implications for the way in which we seek to understand and respond to the behaviour of people like ‘Pointy Face’, that I want to consider here.

## UNDERSTANDING ‘POINTY FACE’: SOUTH AFRICAN CRIMINOLOGY SINCE 1985

There have been several attempts to trace the development of South African criminology over the last quarter of a century.<sup>10</sup> With varying degrees of clarity, all of these discussions distinguish between three traditions: Afrikaner nationalist, legal reformist and, in Dirk van Zyl Smit’s original formulation, a ‘criminology for a new South Africa.’<sup>11</sup> They also assert, with equally varying degrees of conviction, the superiority of one

tradition, the third, over the others. Largely unremarked in all of this is the pre-eminence of work across all three traditions on social reactions to crime at the expense of criminal acts and actors. With the legacy of brutal, militarised and discriminatory policing bequeathed by successive colonial and apartheid governments,<sup>12</sup> the incipient threat posed by an unreconstructed police force to a new democratic government,<sup>13</sup> and the persistence of high rates of violent crime, it is easy to see why, from the publication of Mike Brogden and Clifford Shearing's *Policing for a New South Africa* in 1993 to the brilliant ethnographies carried out a decade and more later by Altbeker, Marks and Steinberg, policing and the police have been at the heart of the criminological enterprise.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the peace-making initiatives undertaken by Shearing and his collaborators in the Western Cape township of Zwelethemba and elsewhere are among the most creative responses to the task of 'governing security' attempted anywhere in the world.<sup>15</sup> They continue to prompt both theoretical debates about the role of the state and the 'public police' when the latter no longer enjoy a monopoly on the use of coercive force, and to generate practical proposals for encouraging and regulating the involvement of non-state actors in 'everyday policing'.<sup>16</sup>

This overriding concern with controlling crime is evident even in those all-too-rare instances where attention is paid to the sources of insecurity. So, for example, in a recent book on house robbery based on interviews with a sample of 30 convicted offenders serving terms of imprisonment in correctional facilities in Gauteng, Rudolph Zinn makes it abundantly clear where his priorities lie:

This book describes in detail the methods used by house robbers. My hope, in sharing this information, is to help the police achieve a more effective rate of arrests, and to assist householders to improve their security and safeguard their lives in the event of a violent robbery.<sup>17</sup>

Later in the book he has this to say about one of his respondents, a man who became known as 'the professional shooter':

He explained how he had called together his relatives who had previously 'looked down at him and made him do hard manual labour before they were willing to give him and his orphan brother even a piece of bread' and shown them his five firearms 'to prove to them that he is now a man'. He described also how shocked they were and interpreted this to mean that they now respected him. Throughout my interaction with this young but hardened robber it became clear how the early death of his parents, the ensuing rejection and exploitation by his relatives, and a system that failed to help him and his brother, contributed to his becoming a criminal.<sup>18</sup>

There is more to this portrait of Zinn's 'professional shooter' than Altbeker's 'Pointy Face'. We get a sense of how his biography and the social context in which he grew up – his experiences of bereavement, emotional deprivation, physical hardship, uncaring public authorities, the premature assumption of responsibility for his younger sibling – may have played their part in the making of the man and the sense of desperation in his search for (self?)-respect. Yet his story, and the nature of the society that allows young lives to be distorted in this way, remain firmly in the background. The glare of Zinn's attention is concentrated not on him but on what he did and how he did it. He is interested in what householders can do to protect themselves and how the police can become more effective in keeping the 'professional shooter', and people like him, off the streets. Handicapped by this lack of curiosity in his sample of robbers as people with lives, emotions and a sense of self much like anyone else, Zinn is unable to explain why, despite having 'large amounts of money', they continue to 'commit serious and violent crime only to spend the proceeds on luxuries'.<sup>19</sup>

Even when offenders rather than potential victims or crime controllers are the main focus of attention, the explanations offered for their behaviour tend to be unconvincing or remain unexplored. Having opened *A Country at War with Itself* with the apparently unfathomable behaviour of 'Pointy Face', Altbeker does eventually offer an

explanation for violent crime more generally. In doing so he quite rightly rejects the notion that it is explicable solely in terms of South Africa's history and current socio-economic condition. Instead he suggests that crime is as 'pervasive and violent as it is' as the result of 'a chain reaction that has seen high levels of criminality lead ever more people copycatting others into crime.'<sup>20</sup> At first blush this is reminiscent of the great American criminologist, Edwin Sutherland's,<sup>21</sup> notion of differential association, but Altbeker leaves too many questions – how, where and under what circumstances does this 'copycatting' take place and what evidence is there that 'Pointy Face' and his ilk take to holding up fast food restaurants in response to environmental cues picked up from the behaviour of others – unanswered for this to be more than a superficially attractive, but empirically untested, hypothesis.<sup>22</sup>

If Altbeker can be criticised for failing to provide an evidential base for his theory, the work of Breetzke and Horn on what they call the 'spatial ecology of offending' in the Tshwane municipality is a solid empirical study of the area of residence of offenders incarcerated in the city's five correctional facilities.<sup>23</sup> From this analysis they conclude that:

The location of offenders within Tshwane appears to be associated with the spatial incidence of four broad factors—low social status and income, a large and young family, unskilled earners and high residential mobility.<sup>24</sup>

They take great care to deny any implication that these are 'criminogenic risk factors', preferring instead to suggest that they may 'create a more favourable environment for offending, or increase probabilities associated with risk factors.'<sup>25</sup> Compared to Altbeker's sweeping generalisations, this is a refreshingly circumspect conclusion. But it too leaves some vital questions unanswered: why do low income, low status neighbourhoods inhabited by transient populations of unskilled workers with large families tend to produce a disproportionate number of 'Pointy Faces'? Might it simply be that the kinds of offences people from

such areas commit are more likely to come to the attention of the police and/or that those accused of committing them are more likely to be convicted and imprisoned than residents of other, more stable and prosperous parts of Tshwane? And how do some (almost certainly most) people (women as well as men) in these deprived neighbourhoods, and exposed to the same environmental factors, seem to avoid becoming involved in crime? On closer examination then, Breetzke and Horn offer no more than some statistical evidence that 'a definitive link' exists 'between the geographical distribution of offenders and social and economic deprivation in an urban context.'<sup>26</sup> The precise nature of that link remains shrouded in mystery.

Over the last 25 years there have been some attempts to pierce this shroud and to exercise what C Wright Mills famously called a 'sociological imagination', 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society.'<sup>27</sup> None of these efforts matches the sheer scale of the work undertaken by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) on behalf of the Justice, Crime Prevention and Security (JCPS) Sub-Committee of the Cabinet. This project consisted of six distinct components including an initial 'concept paper', four studies of particular aspects of violent crime and a final report summarising the main findings of these studies and making recommendations on addressing violent crime.<sup>28</sup> It is impossible to do justice to the scale of this project here. All that can be done is to suggest why it gives such an important clue as to what criminology can and should be for in a country like South Africa, and how it may help us understand the likes of 'Pointy Face' and the 'professional shooter'.

As far as 'history' and social structure are concerned, Component 4 of the project set out to discover 'how inequality and exclusion drive South Africa's problem of violence.'<sup>29</sup> The main author of the report on this Component was none other than Antony Altbeker, but the conclusion it reaches is rather different from the one arrived at in *A Country at War with Itself*. One key paragraph is worth quoting in full:

[D]espite the fact that the international evidence doesn't offer unambiguous support for the thesis that inequality is at the root of South Africa's crime problems, we believe that this is, in fact, the case. This, we believe, is not just because the extent of the inequalities is as great as that of any country in the world, but because the character of inequality in South Africa – which is driven by the systematic exclusion of millions of people from participation in the labour market – has important effects on the way many millions of people interpret the gap between the implicit and explicit promise of equality, on the one hand, and the reality of deeply entrenched inequality on the other. This, we believe, drives crime in part by creating a set of incentives that lead some relatively poor people to choose a life of crime over the hard slog of trying to 'stay straight'. More importantly, however, it drives crime through the psychosocial fallout of inequality. Obviously, the frustrations and grievances that result are magnified by the fact that they are based on exclusions, the roots of which lie in the injustices of the past and, for that reason, are even more likely to be seen as an affront to the human dignity of the poor.<sup>30</sup>

For evidence of the 'psychosocial fallout' from these 'frustrations and grievances' and the multiple exclusions and deprivations that underlie them, we need look no further than the case studies of the perpetrators of violent crime discussed in Component 5 of the project, and the story of a man the report calls Mandla.<sup>31</sup> At the time he was interviewed in Johannesburg Central Prison by researchers at the Human Sciences Research Council, 29 year-old Mandla was five years into a sentence of 10 to 15 years imprisonment for an attempted murder committed in the course of an armed robbery at a restaurant. Mandla could, in many ways, be 'Pointy Face'.

Even in the necessarily abbreviated form set out in CSVR's report, Mandla's story is too complicated to rehearse in any detail here, but the impact of South Africa's history and its current condition on his life is not hard to detect. Growing up in Orlando, Soweto, in the declining years of apartheid, one of three siblings each with a

different father, he was aware of gangs 'robbing and stabbing people'.<sup>32</sup> He remembers 'nice' neighbours and a mother who 'truly hated crime'.<sup>33</sup> But, fatherless, he also felt cut off from his 'cultural heritage and ancestry' and unsure about how to 'achieve success as a man'.<sup>34</sup> After leaving an often violent home in his mid teens Mandla turned to alcohol, drugs and crime – 'stealing, robbing and car theft'.<sup>35</sup> Crime became both a way of supporting himself as well as a means of indulging his taste for 'fashion' and his need for respect among his male and female peers.<sup>36</sup> As a teenager he and his friends targeted 'amashangaans', foreigners too fearful of deportation to report their victimisation to the police. In prison in his twenties, Mandla heard that one of his siblings, the mother of two young children, had died, 'probably as a result of HIV/AIDS'.<sup>37</sup> The early exposure to gangsterism, the fractured family structures and cultural dislocations characteristic of apartheid, the ruthless victimisation of the structurally disadvantaged and the loss of a sister to the AIDS pandemic connect Mandla's life, and his behaviour, to South Africa's present and its past. In the words of C Wright Mills they connect 'the personal troubles of [his] milieu' with the 'public issues of social structure'.<sup>38</sup> His taste for 'fashion' and need for respect go some way towards explaining why Zinn's interviewees were not content merely to survive on the proceeds of their crimes but wanted to live a little too.<sup>39</sup>

## CRISIS OF UNDERSTANDING

In the CSVR study, then, we have a serious attempt to understand what makes and motivates people like 'Pointy Face' and the 'professional shooter', and what links social and economic deprivation and unstable families to high rates of violent offending. Yet, as David Bruce, the lead researcher on the project, has remarked, the government's engagement with its findings has been 'superficial' and its reaction to the recommendations contained in the final report no more than lukewarm.<sup>40</sup> Writing in the wake of the report's presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Police in Parliament on 9th November 2010, Bruce noted how the Ministry and Secretariat concentrated on the limitations of the study.<sup>41</sup>

Other official reactions have claimed that the study says ‘nothing new’,<sup>42</sup> and fails to deal with the fundamental issue of ‘why crime [is] so violent’.<sup>43</sup> Bruce attributes this distinctly unenthusiastic response not to the substance of its findings but to the ‘palace coup’ that took place within the ruling African National Congress (ANC), after the research was commissioned but before it was completed and presented to Parliament.<sup>44</sup>

This may well be true, but how do we explain the wider crisis in understanding evident in South African criminology: the reluctance to ask, and attempt to answer, questions about crime and why it is so violent; the tendency to focus on crime control rather than crime itself, the victim and the would-be crime controller instead of the criminal; and the failure to have the ‘quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world’?<sup>45</sup> It has already been suggested why police reform was seen as a priority immediately before and after 1994 and it would be unwise to attempt a definitive answer here, but a number of other factors may also have combined to produce this reticence. To begin with there is the belief (shared by many if not all of those committed to the kind of broadly critical criminology that might have sought to explore these issues) that the end of apartheid and the institutionalisation of democratic values and practices would bring with it a sustained and observable reduction in levels of both political and interpersonal violence. Unfortunately democracy has not been the panacea that those committed to building a ‘new’ South Africa hoped for. Progress has undoubtedly been made, particularly when it comes to political violence; but, as Hein Marais notes in his magisterial survey of contemporary South Africa, fears about personal safety remain so ubiquitous that no less a figure than former President Thabo Mbeki was moved to say that:

... we cannot claim the happiness that comes with freedom if communities live in fear, closeted behind walls and barbed wire, ever anxious in their houses, on the streets and on our roads ...<sup>46</sup>

That criminologists personally committed to the cause of democracy have struggled to come to terms with this disappointment should come as no surprise. Sympathetic to the new ANC-led government elected in 1994 and (though perhaps with decreasing fervour) to its successors, their unwillingness to add fuel to the fires of afro-pessimism is all the more understandable when one considers the almost painful whiteness of South African criminology. This whiteness presents practical problems too. It is inherently more difficult for an Afrikaans or English-speaking researcher to do the kind of qualitative work needed to uncover the ‘divergent meanings’ that actors give to crime and violence,<sup>47</sup> to understand why they do what they do, when those actors are not cops (or their allies) but robbers, not members of a disciplined organisation in search of respect and accustomed to using an accessible *lingua franca*, but freewheeling township-dwelling vernacular-speakers, wary of outsiders and with little or no interest in having their story told.

Finally, and this is a point emphasised by Loader and Sparks in the context of the global north, South African criminology exists, to use their expression, in a very hot climate indeed.<sup>48</sup> Since 1994 violent crime has become one of the (if not the) most contentious issues in South African politics. Remember, for example, the late Steve Tshwete promising in 1999 as incoming Minister for Safety and Security that criminals would be treated ‘in the same way a dog deals with a bone’.<sup>49</sup> Or think of the Acting Commissioner of the South African Police Service (SAPS), Lieutenant General Nhlanhla Mkhwanazi, informing reporters twelve years later that his organisation would ‘meet fire with fire’.<sup>50</sup> As the rhetoric from politicians and policemen alike has become fierier it is easy to see why the cool, scholarly contemplation of the causes of crime and violence may have become increasingly difficult to sustain. At a time when the default response to criminality is ever more vigorous condemnation, it is hard to blame criminologists for either going along with the prevailing mood – take Altbeker’s call in *A Country at War with Itself* for ‘a criminal justice system that comes down like a ton of bricks on people who commit violent crimes’ for instance –

or attempting to moderate the more extreme measures proposed by the belligerents in government and the police. See, for example, Marks' and Wood's stout defence of a 'minimal' and 'minimalist' public police in the face of the incipient 'remilitarisation' of the SAPS in their *South African policing at a crossroads*.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

What does South African criminology need to do in response to this explanatory crisis? What needs to happen if we are to develop a fuller understanding of men like 'Pointy Face' and 'the professional shooter'? I would like to suggest that we need to reconnect the criminological enterprise with a more searching analysis of what Hein Marais calls 'the political economy of change' in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>52</sup> At the same time we must also follow the lead provided by CSVr in their study of the perpetrators of violent crime.<sup>53</sup> But perhaps the best indication of the way forward is in Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's remarkable exploration of the life and times of Eugene de Kock, the man all too reassuringly written off as 'Prime Evil':

When, in addition to his own feelings of vulnerability, an individual is plunged into a system in which his career is defined by violence, then the issue of choice may not be as easy as it seems. Violent abuse damages – and, yes, even corrupts – the individual's psyche. It intrudes upon and invades the victim's unconsciousness so that, in an environment that rewards evil, there are few resources on which the person can draw to resist it.<sup>54</sup>

Here, where history and structure meet biography and the human psyche lies the future of South African criminology.



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## NOTES

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