

# Taking on Altbeker

## *A Country at War with Itself:* The debate continues

ANTHONY COLLINS

School of Psychology, University of KwaZulu-Natal  
collinsa@ukzn.ac.za

*Anthony Altbeker's book A Country at War with Itself provides a strong basis for considering what is wrong with current approaches to dealing with violent crime. In this article psychologist Anthony Collins reviews the book and argues that developmental psychology might offer alternative insights and solutions that go beyond policing and punishment.*

Anthony Altbeker's book, *A Country at War with Itself* presents an analysis that fills the bleak space between the sensationalist reporting of the popular press and the formal writing of academic criminology. As a concerned and thoughtful citizen who has both experienced the sharp end of violent crime, and has spent time on the street with the police, he has many stories to tell. The great strength of his writing lies not only in the skill with which he spins these yarns, but the thoughtful way in which he explores the deeper significance of everyday events in the world of crime and policing.

In *A Country at War with Itself* he offers a highly readable account of his personal reflections on what can be done about the high levels of criminal violence in South Africa. His stories are rich and engaging, but his analysis is fairly simple and straightforward. He summarises the four-part argument that is developed in the book as follows:

The first [argument] is that what makes South Africa's crime problem unique is not as much the volume of crime as its extraordinary

violence, with interpersonal violence and the exponential increase in robbery as the principal manifestations of this. The second is that our addiction to violence is only partly explained by our socio-economic profile. The rest of the explanation lies in the way in which violence and criminality have themselves come to shape the context in which young men make decisions about how to behave. The third is that our crime problem cannot be solved, or even significantly reduced, using current police strategies which focus on preventing crime from happening and that far more attention needs to be paid to building our capacity to identify, prosecute and incarcerate criminals. The fourth is that moral regeneration cannot be achieved through the lectures of teachers and churches, but demands the rethinking of the process of institution-building right across society, and requires as a precondition a criminal justice system that comes down like a ton of bricks on people who commit violent crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Altbeker explores the unhappy situation of policing policy in South Africa. He shows how

much of it is an attempt to develop alternatives to the brutal history of apartheid state violence and to establish more democratic methods of crime prevention.

While he acknowledges the economic issues that underpin crime, his aim is to explore other social factors. At the core of his argument is the important claim that South Africa has a culture of violence that influences the actions of those who end up committing crimes. Here he is less concerned with how this culture of violence came into being than the fact that its current existence creates a social environment in which people can all too easily come to see criminal violence as a reasonable option. He is thus led to ask what the policing system can do to change this in the immediate future. Rather than try to develop policy based on a radical social analysis, he suggests that we should be progressing from seeing the criminal justice system as one part of a larger social effort to change society, to seeing it as an institution with a singularly important mission: to find and prosecute the people who commit crimes.<sup>2</sup>

In a nutshell, we need to get better at investigating crime and at getting criminals convicted and punished.

This summary does no justice to the thoughtfulness and complexity of Altbeker's arguments. He weaves a absorbing commentary through a wealth of experiences and research data, and raises two absolutely vital issues: namely that what is extraordinary about crime in South African is the extent to which it is violent, and that this violence is sustained by social norms that have become embedded in many parts of our society. Nevertheless, critical readers will probably be alarmed that Altbeker's solution to the problem of violent crime ultimately boils down to putting more people in jail.

At a time when senior politicians are calling for the return of the death penalty and advising police to use lethal force against violent criminals, this argument resonates uncomfortably with a shift towards the fascist inclination to establish

social order by brute force. It seems to be premised on the nostalgic idea that the best way to stop citizens being violent is to make the state violent. The problems of imprisonment are also well known: in a country with limited resources it is expensive, it is not always an effective deterrent (especially not in subcultures where it becomes a positive rite of passage), and worst of all, it not only fails to rehabilitate, but actually entrenches criminal cultures and lifestyles.

But it is important to note that Altbeker's argument for increased imprisonment is not the most conventional one – he is advocating it neither primarily as a punishment, nor as a way of separating offenders from society, not even as a deterrent in the usual individualistic sense. He argues that it is required in order to change social norms. The problem, in his analysis, is that South Africa is already so violent that violent crime has become normalised. Offenders have insufficient sense that what they are doing is both unusual and unacceptable. Moral exhortations have been, and will continue to be, ineffective. What is required is a visible demonstration of society's disapproval: offenders must face a high risk of rapidly being caught and facing punishment, so as to reassert the social norms against these behaviours. Violent crime must be made deviant.

This is exactly where the academic criminologists will find this book lacking, and will have much to say about why people engage in deviant behaviours even when facing a high risk of social disapproval and punishment. They will be able to offer much more complex and detailed accounts of how people come to commit offences and will be more cautious about arrest, conviction and imprisonment as the best possible solutions. They would certainly want to point out that if our problem is that young men are being socialised in cultures that normalise violent crime, then South African prisons are probably the worst possible places to put them. It is hard to imagine another environment where violence is so fundamental and accepted a part of the social structure. Altbeker is certainly not naive about this, and argues that prisons need to be less overcrowded and more geared towards rehabilitation, and that

violent and non-violent prisoners should be separated. These are preconditions for the viability of the rest of his argument, yet ones from which we are woefully far away.

Perhaps the strengths and weaknesses of this work are derived from Altbeker's close association with the police services. This leads him to frame the question of violent crime from a policing standpoint. It also allows him to identify extremely important issues such as the need to support the detective services and dramatically increase arrest rates, but at the same time to avoid focusing on complex competing analyses. This said, Altbeker himself argues that these strategies to increase conviction rates are only the precondition of 'rethinking the process of institution-building' with a view to changing social norms and values.

Perhaps the most important analytical contribution of his book is to highlight the problem of violence rather than simply of crime in general. This opens up a potentially productive line of enquiry about why South Africans are so willing to engage in acts of violence, rather than simply committing 'normal' property crimes. Most people are considerably more distressed by acts of cruelty than acts of thievery, and would rather arrive home to find their most valued possessions missing than to experience the emotional terror of being persuaded to hand them over to someone who is threatening them with serious injury and imminent death. Here Altbeker's focus on the rise of robbery as a crime that hinges on the traumatic threat of violence is significant, and can perhaps be drawn out even further.

If threats of injury, torture, rape and brutal death are so emotionally distressing, not simply to the victims but to anyone imagining one human being treating another in that way, how is it that so many South Africans have made their peace with using these atrocities as a way of conducting their daily business? It seems that one of the essential human capacities – the ability to identify and empathise with other people – has been broken. Beyond the lines that have to be crossed

in order to transgress the law, an additional barrier must be broken to overcome the aversion that we expect people to feel at the prospect of deliberately inflicting pain and terror on another human being. It is at precisely this point that such offenders are popularly described as animals.

Certainly, questions raised by existing criminological accounts of social learning, subcultural norms and desperate motivations (to name but a few factors) must be applied here. But perhaps there is also scope for considering the work of developmental psychologists who have argued that the capacity for empathy and identification is merely a potential, and one that may or may not be brought into being through the appropriate facilitating environment. If this is the case, matters may in fact be worse than initially suggested. It may be that offenders are not just being offered ways of overcoming their aversion to violating others, but that the aversion may in fact not exist at all, or only very weakly.

Intervening in these processes may be far more effective than better policing or more punishment, and certainly more effective than the exhortations of the moral regeneration movement. But this area of knowledge is hidden in the recesses of psychology, and not part of the dominant intellectual terrain of safety and security planning. Nevertheless, being able to facilitate the development of the psychological mechanisms that ordinarily inhibit violent behaviour may help make crime in South Africa an entirely less scary business.

The other area that urgently requires more detailed consideration is the complicated question of South African masculinity. Nearly all violent crimes are committed by men, and mostly by young men making the extended transition from boyhood into adult manhood. Most of this violence does not happen as part of other crimes such as robbery, but is part of everyday social interactions between people who know each other: domestic violence, child abuse and drunken brawls. Feminists and criminologists have previously pointed to the ways in which both crime and violence are ways of establishing

masculine identity, especially in environments where it is under threat from the forms of powerlessness produced by poverty and social marginalisation. Reshaping the forms of South African masculinity to make them more benign and less violent would cut to the heart of the crime problem.

The problem is not simply that those in the business of crime prevention do not usually consider these approaches, but that they offer no quick fix. They involve complex social interventions that would have to be developed gradually over time. Something needs to be done right now. South Africa is 15 years into its democracy, and things don't seem to be any better. The official community policing approaches to crime prevention have so far failed to deliver and there is a level of impatience. Albeker is grasping for something, anything that might help in the short to medium term. But, as he acknowledges in the final chapter, the unhappy truth is that in reality such an urgent solution may not exist.

Despite this pessimistic possibility, *A Country at War with Itself* is a useful and important book. The comments above can do little more than identify a few key themes and suggest some additional considerations, none of which are a substitute for reading this thought-provoking and entertaining book. Albeker remains a challenging and engaging writer, regardless of whether we feel fully satisfied by his conclusions.



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## NOTES

- 1 Antony Albeker, *A Country at War with Itself: South Africa's Crisis of Crime*. Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2007, 33, 34.
- 2 Ibid, 147.