Twenty years of punishment (and democracy) in South Africa

The pitfalls of governing crime through the community

Gail Super*

gis220@nyu.edu

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This article examines how the ideology of ‘community’ is deployed to govern crime in South Africa, both by marginalised black communities and by the government. Although the turn to ‘community’ started under the National Party government in the late 1970s, there is no doubt that as a site, technology, discourse, ideology and form of governance, ‘community’ has become entrenched in the post-1994 era. Utilising empirical data drawn from ethnographic research on vigilantism in Khayelitsha, as well as archival materials in respect of ANC policies and practices before it became the governing party, I argue that rallying ‘communities’ around crime combatting has the potential to unleash violent technologies in the quest for ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. When community members unite against an outsider they are bonded for an intense moment in a way that masks the very real problems that tear the community apart. Because violent punishment is one of the consequences of the state’s turn towards democratic localism, we should question the way in which the ‘community’ is deployed as a tool of crime prevention, and subject it to rigorous scrutiny.

With the advent of formal democracy in South Africa in April 1994 one might have been justified in expecting that the criminal justice system would become less punitive and that this would entail less reliance on imprisonment as a punishment par excellence. However, although the numbers in custody have been reduced since an all-time high in 2004, South Africa has the highest incarceration rate in Africa and one of the highest in the world. In 2013, the number of people serving life imprisonment stood at 11 000, as opposed to 400 in 1994. Democratisation has thus brought with it a dramatic increase in long-term prison sentences, ranging from seven years to life. One of the consequences has been an escalation in the number of maximum security risk category prisoners. Prison overcrowding is rife (albeit unequally distributed) and social workers, psychologists and other professionals who are key for rehabilitation are in woefully short supply. Indeed, in overcrowded prisons, prisoners only have 1.2 m² in which to eat, sleep and spend 23 hours of the day. The conditions are, to say the least, appalling.

* Gail Super has a PhD in Law and Society from New York University, an MSc in Criminology from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA LLB from the University of Cape Town. She has practised as a human rights lawyer in Namibia, where she conducted extensive research on the Namibian criminal justice system, focusing on restorative justice, children in prisons and in pre-trial detention. She is currently an honorary research associate at the Centre for Criminology, University of Cape Town.
Yet, in 2002, precisely when the South African rate of imprisonment had almost peaked, the Department of Correctional Services introduced a restorative justice approach ‘aimed at facilitating the mediation and healing process between offenders, victims, family members and the community’.7 This article discusses the apparent contradictions in, and consequences of, the state embracing ‘community’ based criminal justice initiatives in tandem with long-term imprisonment. Although the turn to community started in the late 1970s, under the National Party government, there is no doubt that as a site, technology, discourse, ideology and form of governance, the ‘community’ has become entrenched in the post-1994 era. It is, of course, one of those terms that is so vague and amorphous as to be capable of many different meanings. As such, it appeals to all parts of the political spectrum.

The paper focuses on the punitive underside of community, which, at its most extreme, manifests in the form of vigilante killings. Drawing on ethnographic and documentary research into non-state crime prevention and punishment practices in Khayelitsha, conducted between 2012 and 2014, I argue that vigilantism is in fact part of a continuum of violent technologies that are both connected with, and imbricated in, this shift to governing through the community.8 Not only is the term ‘community’ a discursive construct but, as I argue, because of its distinctively punitive iterations, both in the present and historically, it manifests as a peculiar mix of socialist-based grassroots activism, coupled with violently exclusionary attitudes towards those accused of criminality. I show how violent punishment is one of the consequences of this turn towards democratic localism. As such we should question the way in which the ‘community’ is deployed as a tool of crime prevention, and subject it to rigorous scrutiny.

I start by discussing the argument that community/democratic policing is opposed to the principles of liberal minimalism enshrined in the South African Constitution.9 I then discuss the consequences of the ANC’s version of ‘mass political culture’; how the ‘cultural patterns’ inherited from the struggle against apartheid combine with the way in which the problem of crime, and what to do about it, is framed by political rhetoric, resulting in an approach that significantly stigmatises deviance.10 Deploying Zimring’s concept of ‘symbolic transformation’ I argue that the distrust that poor communities have of the police translates into a call for more (and not less) punitive treatment of criminals.11 Finally, I make some recommendations for future research.

Contradiction or coherence?

One explanation for the apparent contradiction in embracing the benign-sounding ‘community’, together with ‘the prison’, is that in fact these are not simultaneous, but consequential, penal developments. Thus, although the state embraced community policing and restorative justice in the early days of the heyday of rainbow nation democracy, in fact it soon thereafter shifted into a more punitive gear due to the panic about crime, and pressure to do something about it.12 The argument, brought to its logical conclusion, is that community/democratic policing is somehow opposed to the punitive style of policing recently adopted by the South African state. In a challenging and provocative article Hornberger counters this analysis, arguing that the ‘current [punitive] changes’ should be interpreted as ‘popular rather than elite or autocratic’.13 This helps to make sense of what might otherwise appear to be ‘contradictory, incoherent trends’.14

According to Hornberger, community policing, which she refers to as ‘a policing of proximity’, seeks legitimacy from the community. This involves a ‘penetration of policing by forms of local justice’.15 These forms of justice, which include the call for ‘illegal violence’, are removed from what Hornberger refers to as ‘the civility of the law’.16 I argue that this ‘illegal violence’ is in fact part of a continuum of community-based crime prevention and punishment practices, where the legal and illegal are blurred, and where the state is complicit in the construction of vengeful ‘communities’. In a context of great scarcity and rampant social and economic inequality, ‘mob’ justice serves as an occasion for victims, and the communities with which they are linked, to proclaim the extent of their suffering and seek punitive redress. It is structured by the state insofar as victims (and their communities) have, in the past 20 years, discursively at least if not always in practice, come to assume a central role in the criminal justice system.
Instead of seeing vigilantism as a form of ‘mob justice’, as a scourge, as inimical to ‘civil’ society and as being somehow outside of and opposed to it, I argue that we should acknowledge how vigilantes, or at least their supporters, are in fact part of ‘civil society’.17

‘Mass political culture’ and the community

Rooted as it is in 1980s notions of people’s power and the left-wing notion of grassroots democracy, the term ‘community’ has great rhetorical purchase in South Africa today. It encapsulates the communitarian emphasis of the ‘people shall govern’ clause of the Freedom Charter, echoes the global embracing of informalism, is presented as an effective means of combatting crime, and of course dovetails with the neoliberal shift towards greater responsibilisation – across all fields of government – by shunting responsibility from the state to the ‘people’ (a.k.a. ‘the community’).

This form of governance, one that operates in terms of a ‘liberation paradigm’, valorises local level initiatives by constantly seeking to mobilise communities on the ground.18 Thus, in 1992, the ANC stated that it was ‘the community who are largely responsible for prosecutions [and] ... not the police alone who combat crime’.19 One of the objectives of Community Policing Forums (CPFs) is to ‘enhance the ability of the police to combat and prevent crime, disorder and fear, in partnership with the community’, and parole boards are meant to give the ‘community’ a special say in release decisions.20 Not only has democratisation ushered in a growing discursive emphasis on giving crime victims a role to play in sentencing, bail and parole decisions, but the South African Police Service (SAPS) measures the success of its ‘social crime prevention strategy’ in terms of the number of crime awareness programmes, neighbourhood watches, business forums and street committees that are established to deal with crime.21 In some instances the notion of partnership policing even includes ‘mobilising the community to oppose bail’ via collaboration with the CPF.22 Indeed, the community is so fundamental to policing in democratic South Africa that police will, in future, be subjected to a ‘stringent new recruitment process’ that includes ‘being paraded in front of community members’, via a ‘community parade’.23

A 1997 amendment to the Criminal Procedure Act 51 of 1977 provides for crime victims and/or the community in which the crime occurred to play a role in bail decisions. In particular, a court may refuse bail where the release ‘will disturb the public order or undermine the public sense of peace or security’.24 The criteria that it may take into account relate entirely to how the community will react to the release. Thus bail may be refused where:

- The nature of the offence is likely to induce a sense of shock or outrage in the community where the offence was committed25
- The shock or outrage of the community might lead to public disorder
- The release might jeopardise the safety of the accused
- The release will undermine or jeopardise the sense of peace and security among members of the public
- The release may undermine or jeopardise public confidence in the criminal justice system26

In this way then, the door is opened for an ambiguous and vengeful ‘community’ to play a central role in the supposedly neutral criminal justice system. Pratt refers to this as a ‘decivilising process’ in terms of which the ‘liberal notions of unemotive sentencing and bail decisions’ are undermined.27

History of the present

Marginalised communities in South Africa have a history of self-policing. Moreover, political violence has always played a prominent role in local politics.28 Both the National Party government and the ANC liberation movement used the death penalty against their enemies, and the radical traditions of people’s power and ungovernability sometimes resulted in violent punishment.29 As such, punishment in South Africa has historically been relatively unconstrained by the minimalist considerations associated with liberalism.30

In the turbulent 1980s the apartheid state depicted township activists as violent criminals and terrorists,
stripping their acts of any political dimension. At the
same time the ‘comrades’ committed violent acts
in the name of politics while accusing South African
government officials and their lackeys of being the
real criminals. At times, when criminal gangs looted
trucks driving into the townships, some political
activists claimed that this was part of the struggle.31
Similarly, certain acts – such as ‘necklacing’ – that
might otherwise be regarded as gratuitous violence,
assumed some kind of political salience, due to the
fact that the targets of these acts were accused of
being spies or apartheid collaborators, and thus on
the wrong side of the ‘just war’. In fact, there was
some substance to the claims of both the state
and political movements. Among and alongside
the ‘comrades’, activities and people emerged
to take advantage of these township struggles to
wreak violence for their personal gain – hence the
appearance of the label ‘comtsotsis’, meaning
criminals masquerading as ‘comrades’.32
With the transition from a white minority government
to a black majority government in 1994, the ANC had
to transition from a liberation organisation calling for
ungovernability in the black townships, to a governing
party. As such it had to govern and demonstrate
control over a crime situation about which citizens
were becoming increasingly vocal, and which it had
hitherto ignored. Tensions arose between its previous
pronouncements on how it would deal with crime,
the punitive practices that it now adopted, and its
attempts to legitimate the police via community or
‘democratic’ policing. As crime became increasingly
politicalised – the subject of many parliamentary
debates and a general consensus on the need to
treat criminals harshly – so too did the new ANC
government seek to simultaneously legitimate the
previously vilified police and prove that it was not
soft on crime. It did so via a two-pronged strategy
of implementing community policing and uncoupling
criminals from a political and social context,
presenting them as a threat to the country’s young
democracy. Thus, at the opening of Parliament
in 1995, then President Nelson Mandela blamed
crime and violence for ‘eroding the foundation of our
democracy’, necessitating a ‘harsher approach’.33 A
decade later, political leaders have called on police
to ‘kill the bastards’,34 to ‘teach them a lesson’35
by means of the use of lethal force and to show
‘no mercy’.36 This is a far cry from the 1992 ANC
discussion document ‘Crime and crime control’
which, to give one example, ascribed gang formation
to ‘structural and political reasons’ and presented
gang members as having ‘legitimate economic
needs’.37
As such, there is no doubt that crime and punishment
have assumed an ideological importance in the
‘new’ South Africa that is markedly different from the
situation during apartheid. This ‘hyper-politicisation
of penal policy’ frames the field of punishment (and
other ‘self-help’ initiatives) in Khayelitsha and other
marginalised South African townships.38

The legitimacy conundrum
Community solutions to crime and policing are
attractive, not because they actually reduce the
incidence of offences but because, like punitive
punishments, they reassure people that something is
being done to collectively prevent crime.39 De Klerk
argues that the ideology of collectivism encourages
vigilantism because the raised expectations
generated by institutions of partnership policing, such
as CPFs, are inevitably not met.40

During evidence given at the Commission of Inquiry
into Policing in Khayelitsha (hereafter referred to as
the Khayelitsha Commission), a senior police officer
stated that he knew about ‘formal meetings’ that
had resulted in a decision to evict people from their
homes due to a crime.41 A resident testified that
when the ‘community’ had called her to a meeting,
demanding that her nephew leave the area due to
his alleged ‘criminality’, she did not argue, and did
not think of other options: ‘Our main concern was
that he should leave the house so he wouldn’t be
harmed. We could see the mood of the residents
and it appeared that they would do something.’42
Another witness stated that the boys who had
allegedly stolen his niece’s money, leather jacket and
cellphone climbed into his car voluntarily because
‘they were asking us not to assault them, saying that
their parents were going to pay back the money’.43
Similarly, a teenager living in a tin shack in Enkanini
told me that when her blankets and hair-iron were
stolen during a break-in she did nothing, because
she did not see the thieves – but that if she had seen them she would have alerted the ‘community’ to assist her in retrieving her goods. In this sense then, there is a desire for criminals to be banished and for the victims to get their goods back.

Banishment in informal settlements sometimes takes the form of demolition of the dwellings of suspected criminals. In some instances a decision taken at street committee level to banish an ‘offender’ by demolishing his/her shack is taken too far when the enforcers not only destroy the dwelling but also assault (or kill) the resident, sometimes destroying other homes in the purging process. One of my interviewees was a member of three different committees, all with varying relationships with the state: the local neighbourhood watch, a less formalised community patrol group, and the Khayelitsha CPF. He had also been a participant in the demolition of three shacks in an informal settlement after a decision to this effect was taken at a ‘general council’ gathering of the street committees in his area. Thus, members of neighbourhood watches and street committees may be, or may have been, the same people who become part of a ‘mob’ – the point being that there is fluidity between structures. As such it becomes difficult to distinguish the mob from the community, the unlawful from the lawful.

Where the police encourage the public to engage in partnership policing, join neighbourhood watches, establish community patrols, and observe and report crimes, they create the expectation that they will be available to assist in instances when crime is detected. However, given a scarcity of resources, particularly in poorer communities, this promise cannot be fulfilled. There are widespread allegations of police complicity and police have themselves admitted that they tacitly permit violent community-based ordering processes. Surprisingly, some members of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC) also expressed support for the beating of ‘criminals’ by ‘community members’ as a technique to retrieve stolen goods, even though they stated that they themselves did not participate in violent activities.

Dominant public discourse in South Africa is replete with allegations that criminals are released on bail when they should not be, that prisons are like five-star hotels, that the criminal justice system is too slow, that the police do not do their jobs properly, that there are too many acquittals, that there are too many early releases; the list is endless. One only has to peruse the record of the evidence given at the Khayelitsha Commission to find overwhelming evidence in this regard. The point of this article is not to prove/disprove the veracity of these claims but to note their prominent presence and, at the same time, to observe how, in the quest for harsh treatment of criminals, the negative consequences of imprisonment are almost entirely excised from the debate.

Despite this lack of trust in the criminal justice system, in what Zimring refers to as a process of ‘symbolic transformation’, the consistent call from residents in marginalised communities is for a more intimate relationship with a punitive state. This translates into a call for more arrests, punitive punishments, including long prison sentences, and the reinstatement of capital punishment. Even though the state is largely absent/failing/distant, however one describes it, citizens of ‘frontier societies’, lacking the resources that the well-off have to deploy private security, translate an exercise of police power (in other words a punitive criminal justice system) into a service for victims.

**Conclusion**

As Garland points out, ‘liberal institutions’ such as the rule of law and Bill of Rights are not the same as democratic institutions. Whereas the former tend to constrain state punishment, the latter are not concerned with restraint but with punishing in accordance with what the majority wants. In South Africa the history of the liberation struggle, combined with apartheid-sanctioned self-help township initiatives, people’s courts, notions of community empowerment and grassroots localism, have given popular democracy an exceptional flavour. Looking back from the vantage point of 2014, it is clear that the South African version of mass democracy exists uneasily, side by side, with the liberal minimalism of its Constitution.
While the idea of community sounds progressive and inclusive, important questions should be asked about the power relations between different communities, within communities, and between communities and state agents. The danger of rallying communities around crime combatting is that it can, and does, unleash violent practices in the quest for a ‘moral community’. The ironic twist is that ‘mob justice’ is part of a mass technology to protect private property in a context of endemic inequality. When community members unite against an outsider, they are bonded for an intense moment in a way that masks the very real problems that tear the community apart and/or separate it from other less or more socially connected and empowered communities.

I have argued in this article that violent community-based punishments are constitutive of, and constituted by, violent state punishments and crime prevention practices (both lawful and unlawful). For this reason South African researchers and policymakers would do well to heed Johnson’s exhortation to ‘examine the conditions that determine whether and to what extent participants in community-based crime prevention initiatives are prepared to act outside the law in given circumstances.

In particular, a research agenda in marginalised communities should include the phenomenon of punitive populism by mapping the field of crime prevention and punishment practices – asking how penalty is constituted within specific localities. Instead of presenting ‘communities’ and ‘mobs’ as self-evident binaries we should interrogate the power relationships, local politics, societal networks, social capital and other dynamics that constitute these transient and non-homogenous groupings.

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Notes

1 In 1992 the ANC stated that ‘our crime problems are NOT being solved by large-scale imprisonment’ and that ‘however much one condemns those deeds’ the state response should show compassion for the perpetrator [emphasis as in the original]. See African National Congress (ANC), Discussion document: crime and crime control. What role should the police play?, Centre for Applied Legal Studies, File AK 2195, P2 Police, South African history archives, University of the Witwatersrand, 1992, 7.


6 The conditions, as is the case with overcrowding, vary from prison to prison.

7 Department of Correctional Services, Annual report 1 January 2000 – 21 March 2001, Foreword.

8 My research methodology included selective in-depth interviews with residents of Khayelitsha: a member of Mayytsho (a community patrol group), the Chairperson of the ‘Father’s Committee’ in Enkanini (an informal settlement), members of the Social Justice Coalition (SJC), community journalists who were following vigilante incidents, five street committee members, four residents who openly identified themselves as ‘vigilantes’, and three mothers of victims of vigilantism. I also conducted participant observation in the SJC ‘Campaign for Safe Communities’ meetings, attended the first ten days of the proceedings of the Commission of Inquiry into Policing in Khayelitsha (hereafter referred to as the Khayelitsha Commission) and the proceedings in The State vs Mziwabantu Mncwengi, Mzinasi Mncwengi, Buyelwa Mncwengi, Lunmko Babalaza, Xolani Makapela, Mawende Siborna, case number SS03/2013, Western Cape High Court, South Africa (part-heard), where the accused were charged with the kidnapping and murder of four youths who were alleged to have stolen the plasma television set of one of the accused. This was supplemented by documentary research (including the official records of the Khayelitsha
Commission, the judgements in court cases that dealt with vigilante incidents, and documents that the Western Cape Department of Community Safety made available for my perusal.

I use the term ‘liberal minimalism’ to refer to those Chapter Two rights that constitute the essence of liberal democracies, namely life, equality, freedom and security of the person, access to courts and the rights of arrested and detained persons. However, it should be noted, as one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, that because the South African Constitution protects civil, political, economic and cultural rights there is debate as to whether it is minimalist or not.


According to Zimring the ‘symbolic transformation of capital punishment’ entails its transformation from being a symbol of a powerful state into a form of victims’ redress. This is crucial in constructing popular support for the death penalty in the American South where distrust of government is the norm. Zimring argues that “vigilante” cultural traditions sustain the idea of harsh punishment as a communal ritual on the victim’s behalf and counteract the inhibiting effect of distrust of government on support for the death penalty’. See Steven Messner, Eric Baumer and Richard Rosenfeld, Distrust of government on support for the death penalty’. See Steven Messner, Eric Baumer and Richard Rosenfeld, Distrust of government on support for the death penalty. Messner, Eric Baumer and Richard Rosenfeld, Distrust of government on support for the death penalty.


Ibid.


Darracq, The African National Congress (ANC) organization at the grassroots, 595.

ANC, Discussion document: crime and crime control, 8–9.


Michelle Jones, New breed of police recruits on parade soon, Cape Times, 28 March 2014, 7.

Criminal Procedure 2nd Amendment Act 1997 (Act 85 of 1997), Section 4(d).

Section 4 (e) inserts Section 8A into the original Act, i.e. into Criminal Procedure 1977 (Act 51 of 1977), Section 60 (a).

Section 4(d).


30 See David Garland, Penalty and the penal state, Criminology 51 (3) (2013), 475–517, where he discusses this in an American context.


34 ‘Kill the bastards’ – Minister’s astonishing order to police, The Star, 10 April 2008.


37 ANC, Discussion document: crime and crime control, 8–9.


39 See Nicola Lacey and Lucia Zedner, Discourses of punishment and society, 217.

40 De Klerk, Community Policing Forums – inducing vigilantism.


42 Personal notes taken during Nomakuma Bontshi’s testimony, 24 January 2014.

43 Personal notes taken during Mr Simelele’s testimony, 27 January 2014.

44 Interview, 16 October 2013.


46 It should be noted that, although interviewees consistently referred to street committees as making the banishing decisions, this does not necessarily mean that these bodies are affiliated to SANCO, since the term is a code for many types of gatherings. See Bongani Tsehela, Non-state justice in the post-apartheid South Africa – a scan of Khayelitsha, Johannesburg: Ravan, 1992; Jensen, Gangs, politics and dignity in Cape Town; Minnaar, The new vigilantism in post-April 1994 South Africa: Michael Morris and Douglas Hindson, South Africa: political violence, reform and reconstruction, Review of African Political Economy 53 (1992); Gail Super, The spectacle of crime in the ‘new’ South Africa: a historical perspective (1976–2004), British Journal of Criminology 50(2) (March 2010).

47 De Klerk, Community Policing Forums – inducing vigilantism, 51.

48 See Major General CP de Kock, Serious crime in Khayelitsha and surrounding areas, Crime Research and Statistics, Crime Intelligence (AL 30), 3 August 2012, iv. In this report De Kock, after referring to taxi associations as being in ‘control of vigilante actions’, states: ‘They [the taxi associations] even went as far as imposing a curfew after 21:00 in the evening. Everyone (including the police) was very happy with the decrease in crime at the time …’ Although this was admitted in the context of what happened six or seven years ago, police complicity is still evident. See in this regard the testimony of school principal Mr Mjonondwana, Khayelitsha Commission, 28 January 2014. This was also the sense I got from chatting to police officers during court adjournments at the Western Cape High Court in August 2013.

49 This was communicated to me during interviews with four SJC members on 4 February 2013, during informal conversations I had, and during a group meeting facilitated by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation on 13 March 2013. Given the SJC’s left-wing, human rights-based credentials and the fact that it is sensitive to the social, economic and structural circumstances that might lead some people to committing offences, one might have expected SJC members to be less supportive of the harsh treatment of criminals.

50 Messner, Baumer and Rosenfeld, Disturb of government, 561–662.

51 Ironically, even Advocate Masuku, acting for the SAPS in the Khayelitsha Commission, referred to the desirability of the death penalty when, while cross-examining a witness, he stated: ‘So if for example a person was arrested and evidence was properly collected and the prosecution was properly done and there was a conviction and the person went to jail and in certain instances there was the death penalty … if that were to be done people would feel a little...


53 Garland, Penalty and the penal state, 506.

54 The term ‘moral community’ comes from Buur and Jensen, Introduction: Vigilantism and the policing of everyday life in South Africa, 139–152, 144.

55 Violent retrieval of goods is clearly one of the goals of ‘mob justice’. This is clear from a perusal of the evidence given at the Khayelitsha Commission, where numerous people testified to ‘mobs’ having beaten alleged thieves to death in the quest to retrieve their property. It is also borne out by all of the interviews that I conducted. According to a police report, between April and June 2012 there were 78 recorded ‘vigilante incidents’ in Khayelitsha. Most of the victims were young men, between the ages of 18 and 30, with at least half having either been caught in the act of stealing/robbing/housebreaking and/or suspected of the same. See South African Police Service, Bundu courts, 01 April to June 2012, Khayelitsha Cluster, unpublished report.

56 See George Herbert Mead’s classic piece on the psychology of punitive justice where he states: ‘The criminal does not seriously endanger the structure of society by his destructive activities, and on the other hand he is responsible for a sense of solidarity, aroused among those whose attention would be otherwise centered upon interests quite divergent from those of each other.’ George Mead, The psychology of punitive justice, American Journal of Sociology 23 (1918), 577–602, 591.