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Enemies of the "state": Vigilantism and the street gang as symbols of resistance in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the South African government has found itself increasingly challenged by the continuing violence and instability in certain communities that have been caused by street gangs and so-called vigilantism or popular justice. Street gangs have been a particular problem in predominantly coloured communities in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. The phenomenon of popular justice has become characteristically associated with black African townships, and instances of popular justice have flared up in various townships. At face value, the extreme violence which is endemic to both the street gang and vigilantism would appear to be meaningless and senseless. However, these phenomena do pose a serious underlying challenge to the state. This article seeks to reflect on street gang and vigilantism as examples of symbols of resistance to the state. Through an analysis of the socio-cultural contexts of both, the author shows how the street gang and vigilantism are symbols of the challenge to state authority.

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Contents

1. Introduction

Post-1994, the transition to a democratic dispensation under the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) has seen the South African national and public agenda dominated by not only crime, but violent crime. While there are many types and examples of violent crime that have focused national attention on this issue, the violence and violent behaviour associated with street gangs and vigilantism have warranted particular attention. The activities of street gangs, as well as those involved in vigilantism or, as it is also called, popular justice, have posed particular challenges to South African authorities. The

Western Cape Province has become (in)famous as the heartland of street gang violence in South Africa, specifically among the coloured communities of the Cape Flats in Cape Town (Jensen, 2008; Kinnes, 1995, p. 5; Kinnes, 2000; Kynoch, 1999, p. 56; Pinnock, 1984, 1997). The Western Cape is closely followed by the Eastern Cape Province where, in the city of Port Elizabeth, the coloured communities of the Northern Areas also experience the violence of street gangs on an almost daily basis (Wilson, 2012). In a local Eastern Cape province newspaper in 2012, it was reported that more than 150 gang-related cases had occurred between April and December the previous year, and that in these cases, twenty-two people were killed and more than thirty-five people were wounded (Petrus, 2013, p. 71; Wilson, 2012). Despite various government and law enforcement efforts to curb street gang violence, it continues, with gang wars and battles injuring and even

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killing many community residents unfortunate enough to be caught in the middle of ongoing gang wars.

In the same vein, in the predominantly black African and coloured townships across South Africa, vigilantism has become a significant problem, characterized by extreme forms of violence against "criminals" in these communities, often perpetrated either by organized and mobilized groups, or by "mobs" of community residents (Bangstad, 2005; Buur & Jensen, 2004; Fourchard, 2011; Oomen, 2004). In many instances these acts of vigilantism are regarded as a response to the high crime levels in these communities where residents feel that the police are ineffective in dealing with crimes such as robbery, murder and rape. As is the case with street gang violence, vigilante violence often takes extreme forms and impacts on the entire community involved.

While the article concentrates on street gangs and vigilantism within the South African context, it must be pointed out at the outset that both phenomena are linked to global processes. Regarding street gangs, Hagedorn (2005, p. 153) has argued that

'The…study of gangs can no longer start and stop with local conditions but…must also be rooted in a global context…[G]angs are a significant worldwide phenomenon with millions of members and a voice of those marginalized by processes of globalization.'

The critical point emanating from the above is that 'Gangs cannot be understood outside of their global context' (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 163) because they are influenced by various dynamic processes of globalization. Some of these processes include 'unprecedented worldwide urbanization'; the failure of state-sponsored welfare and institutions of provision; growing resistance of marginalized identities to state authority; the burgeoning of informal 'underground' economies as a survival mechanism for marginalized groups; and the institutionalization of groups such as street gangs (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 154). As this article illustrates, the street gangs in South Africa are products of these global processes. However, they are also the result of the particular political, social and economic dynamics and processes that have shaped South African society, largely due to the impact of colonialism and apartheid.

The same processes of globalization as outlined above have impacted on local forms of vigilantism. One of the effects of globalization has been the apparent increase in the privatization of policing and security, which has, in turn, led to the gradual decline in the state's monopoly over the use of "legitimate" violence for the protection of citizens. This rise in the privatization of policing has ushered in 'an era characterized by a transformation in the governance of security' (Bayley & Shearing, 2001, p. 1). The combination of increasing insecurity brought about by global neo-liberal policies, the resultant rise in levels of criminality and lawlessness and the growing perceptions within local communities of the state's inability to maintain law and order has led, among other things, to increasing levels of vigilantism.

However, as with street gangs, it is not only the global processes, but also the local that impact on vigilantism: '[V]igilantism obeys not only the logics of neo-liberalism but its own local and national historical and cultural logics.' (Pratten, 2008, p. 5) Kynoch (1999, p. 56) alluded to the relationship between vigilantism and the South African state, where, towards the ending of apartheid, 'State sponsored vigilantism…provides a sobering reminder of the ways in which vigilante groups can contribute…to levels of violence and lawlessness.' He also refers to vigilante movements that emerged from the dynamics of the post-apartheid context, specifically the movement known as People Against Gangsterism and Drugs or PAGAD (discussed in more detail later in this article), that contributed to various violent clashes with not only the street gangs of Cape Town but also with the police (Kynoch, 1999, p. 56).

This article seeks to explore the notion that street gangs and vigilantes are symbols of resistance to state authority. As the article shows, both street gangs as well as vigilante organizations have a historical context rooted in resistance to state authority. It seems that the transition to a post-apartheid context has not eliminated the need for these symbols of resistance, nor their use of violence as a mechanism for expressing that resistance. The discussion begins with an outline of a theoretical framework within which to make sense of vigilantism and street gangs as symbols of resistance. This is followed by a conceptualization of vigilantism and street gangs, as they occur in the South African context. Finally, the discussion reflects on both of these phenomena as examples of symbols of resistance to authority. The arguments made in the discussion are based on the author's review of both historical and contemporary literature of various South African examples of vigilantism and street gangs. Hence, the exposition is not based on an empirical account of these phenomena but rather seeks to reflect possible insights gleaned from documented examples from South Africa specifically, and elsewhere more generally. It must be pointed out that in the discussion the author considers street gangs and vigilante groupings as distinct from each other, although there are examples in other parts of the world where gangs and vigilantes are virtually indistinguishable (see, for example, Pratten, 2008, p. 1; Baker, 2002; Hagedorn, 2005, p. 150).

2. Crime anthropology: a theoretical framework for understanding vigilantism and street gangs

A crime anthropological approach is most useful when attempting to make sense of the dynamics inherent in vigilantism and street gangs. According to Parnell (2003, p. 5), crime anthropology as an approach focuses on 'processes of change as locuses of crime's power.' The approach emerged in response to two central themes emanating from global ethnographic research on crime. The first theme concerns the mechanics involved in criminal category construction and how people in different contexts use the criminal category in their everyday lives. The second theme involves an analysis and interpretation of crime's ability to 'fracture and partition social nexuses and organize ways that groups interrelate' (Parnell, 2003, p. 2). It is both of these themes, as well as their interconnectedness, that distinguish the crime anthropological approach from those of criminology (Nader, 2003, pp. 58–60; Parnell, 2003, p. 5).

One of the primary features of crime anthropology is the cross-cultural perspective that views crime as 'a cultural construct' (Nader & Parnell, 1982, p. 207). Crime categories are not simply given and cannot be universally applied because their meanings are located in specific social and cultural contexts that are influenced by various dynamic processes of change. Crime anthropology thus shows how these dynamic processes are constantly shaping new social contexts that impact on how crime 'constantly challenges and changes how the criminal category is constructed and used' (Parnell, 2003, p. 6; Petrus, in press).

From the above it becomes clear that the crime anthropological approach seeks to understand phenomena such as vigilantism and street gangs as more than merely "criminal" entities, but rather aims to understand them as holistically as possible. In fact, the crime anthropological approach may even view the categorization of these formations critically, especially if such attempts at categorization fail to consider the external and internal dynamics that influence the emergence and continuity of these groupings. Within the context of the current discussion, the crime anthropological approach frames vigilantism and street gangs as symbols of resistance to state authority. It reflects on how vigilantism occupies an ambivalent position *vis-à-vis* the state regarding the question of whether vigilante movements should in fact be labelled criminal or not. Similarly, the approach also illuminates the ambiguous role of street gangs within the complex set of interrelationships that they have within both the micro-structural context of their communities, and the macro-structural context of the wider society and institutions that govern those communities. Of even greater significance in the case of street gangs, the crime anthropological approach illustrates how these formations can actually be interpreted as fulfilling a