

Review

The dirty work of democracy: a year on the streets with the SAPS Antony Albekker (Jonathan Ball)

Transforming the Robocops: changing police in South Africa Monique Marks (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press)

Reviewed by Karl von Holdt

South Africans are currently in the grip of a moral panic about the high levels of crime in our society, with calls for reinstating the death penalty and for firing the minister and the commissioner. Two recent books cast some doubt on whether we can expect the police to reduce crime significantly anytime soon.

Antony Albekker follows the police into the mountainous spaces of rural Transkei, the dense and transient shacklands and townships of the cities, the family homes which are the scenes of domestic violence, and the crime scenes of violent robbery. He finds that there are virtually insurmountable limits to the ability of the police to prevent crime or find and convict the criminals.

Monique Marks focuses on the internal organisation of the police, investigating the attempts to transform the Durban Public Order Police Unit from an apartheid-era organisation. She finds that while there have been some improvements, managerial confusion and low morale are pervasive.

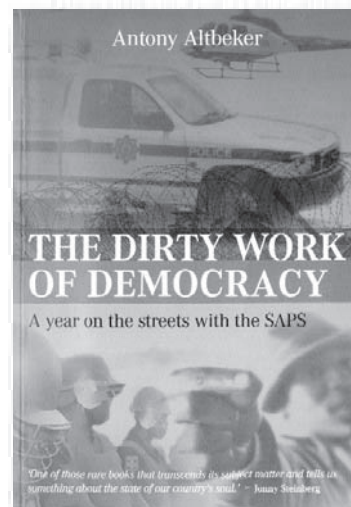
THE DIRTY WORK OF DEMOCRACY
Albekker's book, *The dirty work of democracy: a year on the streets*

with the SAPS, describes the year he spent with the police at different police stations across South Africa. He went into deep rural areas, in the suburbs and townships, in the coloured ganglands of Cape Town and the decaying inner-city of Jo'burg. Each chapter describes what he experienced at a single police station, and highlights a particular kind of crime-problem.

Thus in Galeshewe he follows police officers into the intimate hell of casual domestic violence where broken families and failed relationships are wrecked on poverty and alcoholism. The police don't like this work and feel powerless to make a difference because they are unable to fix families and relationships or make any difference to poverty and drinking. The victims of domestic abuse frequently withdraw charges a few days after laying them, leaving police officers frustrated and angry.

In the deep rural areas on the border between the old Transkei and Lesotho, the police are so thinly stretched they find it close to impossible to prevent the stock theft that plagues the area. When the traditional low-intensity stock theft escalates into a high-intensity stock-war between neighbouring

communities, the police broker a pact between the warring communities. The chiefs and headmen must monitor the stock in their own communities, and report



suspicious movements of cattle to the police. Peace committees were formed to oversee the agreement.

The result is the end of the stock war and the reduction of stock theft. The police superintendent admits that there may be an element of vigilantism: "... sometimes we find bodies on the mountain, and no one can explain who they are or what happened to them". But, he

explains, despite this the police have to work with the traditional community authorities because “without them there is no way we can keep the peace and control stock theft”. This is not policing according to the rules of the modern democratic state, but where the state is too weak to impose those rules, it has to negotiate new rules with older institutions with pre-modern origins.

In Elsie's River the police also confront powerful institutions beyond the boundaries of the modern state: the gangs and shebeens they control. For the gangs to be effective in the community they need to be highly visible and to control their turf, the public space of streets and shebeens. The station commissioner, himself a tough guy who grew up in Elsie's River and became an MK commander, sees this as the strategic weakness of the gangs. The police strategy is to continually harass the street gangs, searching them, roughing them up, threatening them to get off the streets, raiding shebeens continuously. “If we can come in and arrest them for carrying drugs or being drunk in public, push them up against a wall to search them, then it says that they are not the ones who govern these streets.”

Altbeker sees this as a confrontation between the institutions of the law and the gangs which have their own codes. That may be, but to this reader the confrontation resembles nothing so much as a confrontation between rival gangs. The victory of the gangs may be that they have forced the police to behave exactly like street gangs themselves. And of course

the gang of police officers “rules only where they stand”; when they leave, the gangs and shebeens grow back “like weeds”.

The case of restaurant robbers in Jo'burg leads Altbeker to reflect on the role of luck in solving predatory crimes of this sort. There is usually very little evidence, and research in countries such as the US reveals that arrest rates for this kind of crime seldom rise above 10%.

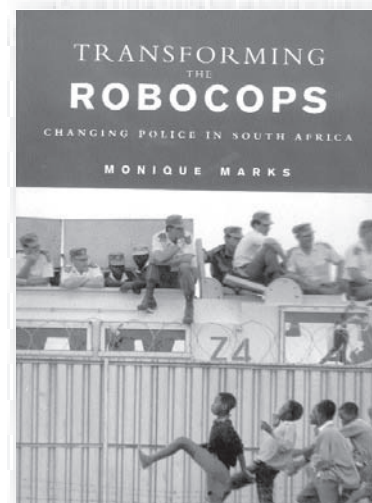
Nonetheless, in the Jo'burg case the detectives noticed the getaway car some months later in Hillbrow, and arrested the occupants. Unable to find any solid evidence that would stand up in court, they were forced to release the suspects.

But in another stroke of luck, a few weeks later a member of the public followed the cars of a gang after they had robbed another restaurant, and informed the police of their whereabouts. The gang was arrested, and the police were able to link 22 other cases to the gang, including the first restaurant robbery. Luck is important, but so is the alertness of the detectives, efficient bureaucratic systems, and good record keeping.

Such systems seem to break down in the inner-cities, townships and shacklands. Here poor record keeping, unreliable witnesses and contradictory evidence, absconding suspects and witnesses and vigilantism combine to undermine the ability of police to solve crimes, and therefore undermines the public's belief that the police will protect them.

In describing cases like this, Altbeker provides a sober analysis of the limits of police work. He also does much more, discussing corruption and police morale, providing portraits of a variety of

police officers, good cops, bad cops, cynical cops, passionate cops, corrupt cops, and drawing a fascinating picture of the nature of police work. The ordinary police officer has to cultivate a wide range of skills and make rapid and complex decisions far from the support of supervisors, far more so than many other low-level workers. Indeed, Altbeker's book makes an important contribution to our understanding of public service work processes.



TRANSFORMING THE ROBOCOPS

In her book, *Transforming the Robocops: changing police in South Africa*, Monique Marks provides a case study of the attempts to transform the old Durban Riot Squad from a unit whose purpose was to repress public demonstrations under apartheid, into a unit which would manage public demonstrations in a way appropriate to our new democracy.

Marks finds that the results of this transformation were ambiguous. On the one hand there was greater recruitment of African police,

affirmative action meant that more black police were in managerial positions and, most importantly, the unit had been successful in adopting a completely new approach to demonstrations and crowd management. No longer did the police view demonstrations as 'unrest' which they should use violence to quell.

However, much of the change only went skin deep. Many of the police in the unit were frustrated by this new kind of policing, preferring the old days when they could use force. This was particularly clear when they did crime prevention policing in the townships. There, far from the public gaze, Marks observed them engaging in random violence against suspects, beating them up, threatening them with guns, humiliating them.

One of the police officers attempted to justify this behaviour to Marks: "These people in this area are not normal. They have no respect for human life. This is another world."

Marks argues that the authoritarian culture of the police means that they accept instructions to do things differently, but that change brought about in this way is limited change. She quotes an officer: "Police have changed because of instructions... when we are out of the public eye we go back to our old behaviour. When faced with change, there is no real mind change. So, old ways sometimes leak out of us."

She finds a deep tension between authoritarianism and participatory management in the Durban unit. Many of the police managers felt confused and disillusioned, and complained about the lack of training and support for new ways of doing things. Rank and file police officers complained that their managers "just order us around and treat us like we

can't think for ourselves", while their managers complained about the loss of discipline.

Marks makes a number of recommendations for ways in which police transformation could be deepened, including more directive leadership and flattened, more participatory work structures.

SOME THOUGHTS

What is the prospect for reducing crime soon? It is undoubtedly true, as both authors suggest, that policing has improved over the past few years: bigger budgets, recruitment of more police officers, more advanced technology, the development of intelligence-based policing against organised crime, have all helped. It is also true that crime in certain categories has fallen somewhat. Nonetheless, crime levels remain very high, and organised crime is proving highly innovative, finding new targets when old ones become difficult. Our society is racked by violence.

Read together, these two books suggest that crime rates are unlikely to go down significantly anytime soon. Altbeker tends to think that the police are doing as well as they can be expected to, while Marks argues that much needs to be done to improve police effectiveness. In my view Altbeker tends to minimise the problem of poor police performance and particularly weak police management.

However, the obstacle to improving police performance, as in so many other areas of the public service, is the acute shortage of innovative and proactive managers. Without them, Marks' recommendations cannot be implemented. We are likely, therefore, to see continued

improvement, even excellence, in some areas and some units, and stagnation and possibly even decline in others. Unless a strategy can be devised to consistently improve the quality of management on the street, in the police station, and above, policing is unlikely to become more effective.

Of course, any such strategy will of necessity only have an impact over the medium and long-term. Further, as Altbeker points out, the high incidence of violent crime has much deeper social causes than policing is designed to deal with. This includes the violence of apartheid, uncertainties of transition, the disintegration of families and community structures, the pervasive experience of illness and death because of HIV/AIDS, the lack of moral leadership from our politicians. It is not clear that we have any strategies at all for dealing with these social problems. And if we do have strategies, it would most likely take at least a generation to make a difference.

The unhappy conclusion, then, is that policing is not likely to become more effective soon, and that even if it does, South Africa will remain a society plagued by crime for a long time to come.

Finally, should you buy these books? Altbeker's book is well-written, fascinating and aimed at the general reader. In short, it is a must-read for anyone wanting to understand more about the problems of crime and policing in our country – and who doesn't? Marks provides valuable insights, but her book is aimed at a more specialist audience interested in policing and organisational change. It could also have done with tighter editing and shortening.

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