

Governing through Crime in South Africa: the Politics of Race and Class in Neoliberalizing Regimes by GAIL SUPER

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With the twentieth anniversary of South Africa's first democratic elections upon us, this is unlikely to be the only book to look back to, and beyond, the climactic of 27 April 1994 in an effort to make sense of the country's continuing preoccupation – some might say obsession – with crime. But it would be surprising if it is not among the most thought-provoking and influential.

The essence of Gail Super's argument is that, contrary to the assumptions implicit in much post-apartheid criminological writing, neither the 1994 election, nor the unbanning of the liberation movements and the negotiations that preceded it, represented the clear break in thinking about crime, criminals and ways of controlling them that successive post-apartheid governments, not to mention their critics and supporters, would like to imagine. The conceptual framework for the book is provided by literature on governmentality and what the author, following Brenner *et al.* (2010), calls 'variegated neo-liberalization'. The former directs her attention to the 'systems of thought . . . that supplied the authorities with the knowledge, objects and images to enable particular forms of action' (p. 14); the latter captures the 'uneven development' and contingent impacts of regulatory structures such as the criminal justice system in line with the broad 'market logics' of neo-liberalisation (p. 15). These conceptual tools are used to analyse how 'crime' has been defined (particularly in relation to politics) and explained, 'the criminal' constructed and reconstructed, and approaches to crime control ranging from social crime prevention to the purposes of imprisonment imagined and re-imagined over a period beginning with the township uprisings of 1976 and ending with the African National Congress's third election victory in 2004.

Focusing in each case on discursive shifts and continuities in 'official criminology', but with regular, often wry, asides on the competing, occasionally complementary, narratives provided by more critical observers in civil society (including non-governmental organisations as well as the academy), Super suggests that the patterning effects of neo-liberalisation were as evident in the period between 1976 and 1989 when the National Party began to reform Verwoerdian apartheid as in the 15 years of transition to (1989–1994), and consolidation of (1994–2004), the 'new' South Africa that followed. Thus, for example, unemployment and socio-economic explanations for crime more generally found favour with white minority and black minority governments alike but without either making a serious attempt to tackle the structural conditions under which it occurs. Both preferred, Super argues, to stereotype and demonise individuals as authors of their own, and the country's, misfortunes. Similarly, the emphasis placed on the moral regeneration of the citizen as a response to persistently high levels of violent crime by the first two post-apartheid governments had much in common with the responsabilisation of individuals and communities as sources of social stability when efforts to dismantle the formal regulatory infrastructure of petty apartheid gathered pace in the 1980s.

There are one or two errors that a more rigorous edit might have picked up – the implication that Thabo Mbeki was already president when the National Crime Prevention Strategy was being drafted in the mid-1990s (pp. 14–15) and the description of the so-called Scorpions as ‘the first organised crime-fighting unit in the South African Police’ (p. 34, n. 19) – are particularly unfortunate; Mandela was President until 1999 while the Scorpions were part of the National Prosecuting Authority. But these are minor blemishes and this book deserves to have a profound and long-lasting effect on how we understand the governance of, and governance through, crime, not just in contemporary South Africa but in any society where democratic, egalitarian ideals rub up against the brutal logic of neo-liberalism.

REFERENCE

Brenner, N., J. Peck & N. Theodore. 2010. ‘Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways’, *Global Networks* 10, 2: 182–222.

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