

THE GANGS OF CAPE TOWN

A Review of Don Pinnock's *The Brotherhoods: Street Gangs and State Control in Cape Town*; David Philip, Cape Town 1984.

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Cape Town must be one of the most deceptive cities in the world. For those of us who live or have lived in Tamboorskloef or Newlands or even Observatory, it is a place full of delectable memories, of idyllic images: the dawn light on the face of Table Mountain, sunset at Camps Bay, the galaxy of street lights at night viewed from the terrace of UCT, the tropical paradise of the Gardens, the Parade on a bright Saturday morning, so cheerful in its animation. But there is another face to Cape Town, the city 'where you burglar-bar your windows, don't walk alone at night, never venture into "non-white" areas and perhaps carry a gun' (p. 17). For Cape Town — 'the Fairest Cape', the genial 'Tavern of the Seas' for the brochure writers — is also one of the most violent cities in the world, with an average in the last few years of two murders a day (as many murders in this single city as in the whole of the United Kingdom, including blood-soaked Northern Ireland, in the course of a year.) Many of these killings are associated with bloody battles fought between the gangs of the Cape Flats. These gangs are the 'brotherhoods' of Don Pinnock's title. And the aim of his book is to work out how the gangs came into existence and what their proliferation implies.

Pinnock began his research, so he explains in his Preface, out of a mixture of curiosity and anger — curiosity 'about life in the streets of my home city', anger at the huge disparity in living standards between rich and poor. As the work progressed, the anger grew — anger not just at the nature of the social situation but at the terrible ravages such a situation inflicted on those whom he had grown to care for and respect. His most valued informant, Patrick 'Chicken' Edwardes, a man of 'intelligence and sparkling wit', whose 'insight into the problems of the poor' and whose 'understanding of the dynamics of the city went far beyond mine', received a five-year prison sentence. 'The thought of such a person and others like him living for years in overcrowded prison cells is one of the most painful experiences', Pinnock confesses, 'that I take away from this study' (p 1). There is a totally fallacious notion that academic research — Pinnock's book comes into this category, having originally been written as a MA thesis at the University of Cape Town — should somehow aspire to an Olympian objectivity. On the contrary, the most effective research is that which has been inspired by a strong sense of moral purpose. Academic research certainly demands discipline — a proper rigour in accumulating and assessing material, a thoughtful use of comparative studies and so on. But without a strong sense of its relevance to contemporary needs, an academic treatise is likely to end up suffering the fate of so many theses, collecting dust on subterranean library shelves.

Let me say straight away that I regard Don Pinnock's book as being of the first importance — absolutely essential reading for Capetonians who want to try and understand where their city is going, but equally essential to anyone grappling with the awesome problems of contemporary South Africa. And I would particularly recommend this book to the **apparatchiks** of apartheid, the politicians, bureaucrats and academics who for more than a generation have imposed the straitjacket of their ideology on the living body of South African society. Cape Town's problems are certainly not unique — Pinnock draws stimulatingly on research done in Chicago, Zaire and the East End of London for comparative purposes — but Cape Town's problems have been immensely aggravated by that cornerstone of apartheid, the Group Areas Act. That piece of legislation still — in this 'reformist' age — appears to be sacrosanct. I beg those who are responsible for the implementation of Group Areas to read Pinnock's book and to consider very carefully its implications.

We must start in District Six, that 'bombed site' in the heart of Cape Town on whose rubble is now being erected a police barracks and a technicon. One must resist the temptation to glamorize old District Six. After the Second World War this part of Cape Town was becoming 'squalidly overcrowded': cases were reported of a house built for five or six being occupied by as many as eighty people. There was real poverty: a survey in 1946 found 57 per cent of 'coloured' children in Cape Town suffering from malnutrition (p. 49) After the end of the war there was a rapid increase in unemployment and a concurrent rise in incidents of crime and violence. But District Six still possessed one vital and saving institution — the extended family.

In Black Africa the role of the extended family is a subject so familiar as to be commonplace to any one studying the social strains experienced in cities undergoing a rapid process of population growth. Cape Town, by contrast, looks superficially to be a very un-African city and for its black population influx control has created different sorts of strains, so it has been easy to ignore or overlook the importance of the extended family for those living in the 'coloured ghetto' of District Six. In fact, as Pinnock brings out very clearly, the extended family was an essential institution: for the very poor, the marginalized, the newcomers to the city it provided an effective system of social security and served also as an accommodation bureau and an employment agency.

An essential concomitant of the extended family was a richly variegated informal economy. 'The place has more barbers' shops to the acre than anywhere else in Africa',

Brian Barrow wrote of District Six in 1966. 'There are tailors by the score, herbalists, butchers, grocers, tattoo-artists, cinemas, bars, hotels, a public bath house' (p 21), all professions and institutions that contributed to the maintenance of a 'penny-capitalism'. This combination of the extended family and the informal economy made District Six a place where people could feel at home, where they could experience a comforting sense of 'topographical familiarity' —street corners, alleyways, shops, bars were places deeply known and cherished. This was a world in which each individual created — in the phrase of that wise observer, Dr Oscar Wollheim, one-time warden of the Cape Flats Distress Association — 'his own personal web of interlocking mutual interests'. (p 55).

In this society the extended family provided social control as well as social security. The children of parents both of whom had to go out to work could be entrusted to the care of an auntie or grannie living nearby. Youngsters who misbehaved would soon be noticed and ticked off by older relatives. But the rapid increase of population during the 1940's brought serious strains. 'Pressure began to build up over territory for hawking, shebeening, prostitution or just standing in' (p 24). It was in these circumstances and at this time — during and just after the Second World War — that the 'skollie' (a term probably derived from the Dutch *schoelje* 'scavenger') made his appearance. And with the 'skollie' the gang — the Jesters, the Goofies and others. To counter this development a group of District Six businessmen came together to form what was initially a vigilante organization, though it was known as the Globe Gang. The Globe cooperated with the police: one policeman recalled its members as being 'very decent blokes'. But before long the Globe too began to turn to illegal activities, running 'protection rackets' of every kind. Illegal activities increased as ex-prisoners, many of them new to the city, began to infiltrate the gangs. 'Young boys arrived and carried guns for no reason', one informant recalled. 'They raped and had tattoos on their faces and necks and they killed anybody for nothing' (p 29). Other more ruthless gangs, among them the Mongrels (a corruption of Mogul), emerged. A new pattern of violence had been established. It was to be hugely increased by the decision to destroy District Six.

The destruction of District Six had been adumbrated as early as 1940 by planners profoundly influenced by the leading architectural guru of the age, the Swiss Le Corbusier. Pinnock sees Le Corbusier as above all 'the urban planner of monopoly capitalism' (p 43). 'Surgery', Le Corbusier asserted, 'must be applied to the city's centre': he was speaking in general terms but his disciples in South Africa were glad to apply his ideas to Cape Town. In South Africa 'post-war urban planning', Pinnock wisely reminds us, 'was not merely the product of apartheid and Afrikaner racism' (p 43). The development of housing estates on the Cape Flats has clear affinities with contemporary town planning in Britain. But as always in South Africa notions of 'white' security were never far beneath the surface, and so 'green belts' came to be seen as 'buffer zones' or even, in the frank terminology of some planners, as 'machine gun belts'. (p 47)

The spatial growth of Cape Town coincided with and was in part related to the rapid growth of the city's industry. But the old informal economy, so vital to the life of District Six, steadily crumbled as the old workshops came

increasingly to be replaced by modern factories, whose growth was in turn largely dependent on the inflow of foreign capital. The Group Areas legislation provided the coup de grace. During the 1960s more and more 'coloured' people were moved out to the new estates on the Cape Flats. Had the planners studied the social network of the old community, many stresses and strains would have been avoided. As it was, the basic unit for which the tenements on the Flats was designed was the nuclear, not the extended family. So the effect of Group Areas was, as Oscar Wollheim graphically and movingly expressed it,

like a man with a stick breaking spiders' webs in a forest. The spider may survive his fall but he can't survive without his web Before there was always something that kept the community ticking over and operating correctly Now the family is taken out of its environment where everything is safe and known. It is put in a matchbox in a strange place. All social norms have suddenly been abolished. Before the children who got up to mischief in the streets were reprimanded by neighbours. Now there is nobody and they join gangs because that is the only way to find friends. (p 56)

The situation was put in even more haunting terms by 'a reformatory brother called Aspie':

I was very small, you see, when my mother and my father they threw me away. There was no more money. And so okay while the years and months passed by, you see, I found myself in a stony place of sadness and madness where each dog was hustling for his own bone, you see. That's why I realized that there's only one thing for me: if I will survive I must play dirty, you see. So that's why I became a gangster. (p 9)

In the course of his research in 1982 Pinnock 'found in daily existence 280 groups who defined themselves as gangs'. Their membership varied from 100 to 2 000. An 'extremely rough estimate' suggests that '80 000 youths would define themselves as gang members or about 5 per cent of the city's total population'. (p 4) It is easy to see why gangs are formed and joined: they offer comradeship, security, excitement, status, a sense of purpose for teenagers who have dropped out of school and find themselves growing up in a society where employment and income and access to consumer goods has become a privilege rather than a right. Here Cape Town's experience links up with other cities: particularly illuminating is a study published as long ago as 1927, F.M. Trasher's **The Gang: a Study of 313 Gangs in Chicago**. But each city no doubt has its own specific typology. Pinnock provides us with a clear, though profoundly disturbing, guide to the gangs of Cape Town.

The commonest gang he terms 'the defence gang', a group formed by youths aged from ten upwards to defend a particular territory. (The sketch map of one area, Hanover Park, shows how it is divided up into no less than 16 gang areas: gang names include the Genuine School Boys, the Sexy Rexies and the Wild Ones. (p 6) The larger and stronger gangs are in a position to go on the offensive, mounting pay packet robberies or breaking into cars.

Above the multitude of 'defence gangs' are two 'super-gangs', the Cape Town Scorpions and the Born Free Kids. These had their origin not on the streets but in the places to which delinquent youths are consigned, the reformatories and schools of industry. Each branch of these more

powerful gangs possesses its own citadel, a backyard protected by a high stockade of corrugated iron, where the 'brothers' foregather to smoke white pipe' (a mixture of dagga, tobacco and mandrax) and plan their operations which usually take the form of housebreaking or robbery.

At a higher level still come 'the family mafias', some retaining links with the old gangs of District Six. Their activities include protection rackets, warehouse robberies and acting as wholesalers in the drug trade. The mafias merge into the 'syndicates', 'best described as associations of merchants organized for the purpose of securing the supply or monopoly of some commodity' (p 11). Liquor for supply to shebeens is one of the commodities sought by the syndicates, but far more lucrative is the trade in dagga and mandrax. Pinnock clearly explains the economics of the drug trade and quotes the head of the Narcotics Bureau in Cape Town as saying in 1982 that the number of drug-pedlars was 'absolutely uncountable'. They're on nearly every corner in this city'. (p 12)

By the more privileged sections of society the gangs of the Cape Flats may well be seen as evidence of anarchy and degradation. For many ordinary people living on the Flats their existence is a constant source of fear. But how can society deal with them? The conventional answer lays stress on the importance of punishment and the need for more effective policing. Pinnock's researches included long conversations with staff members from the reformatories and with local policemen. From both groups he derived some very uncomfortable truths. 'Reformatories', a former staff member of Porter School, ('situated on a farm in the beautiful Tokai valley') remarked, 'are the high schools of violence, and prisons the university.' (p 72) As for the police whose problems Pinnock deals with sympathetically, they are seriously undermanned. Grassy Park, for example, a police district on the Cape Flats with a population of about 100 000, 'is patrolled by one van and two policeman every shift'. (p 79) (For those who think of South Africa a little too glibly as a Police state' it is worth remarking that in 1979 South Africa's police force of 34 646 men was 'the same size as that of New York City'. (p 78) But even 'if we had a full staff – all the men we required', one policeman pointed out, 'and made the number of arrests we would like to, the people at the courts would chuck up their job and go home. Because at the moment they can't cope, they're so snowed up. They're even having court on Saturday mornings! But then even if the police and the courts could cope, then the prisons couldn't because they are too full. It's crazy'. (p 80)

Confronted with this situation the State, Pinnock points out, has turned increasingly to the use of paramilitary methods, with the establishment of the Riot Squads recruited from men who have already seen active service against guerillas in Namibia and other operational areas. (p 82) This new development is intimately related to the growing importance of the military in the decision-making

process at the highest level. Yet on the ground the situation becomes more complex, with a clear divide between the detectives of the SAP, slowly building up their essential network of contacts and informers, and the Riot Squads with their more violent and therefore more clumsy methods.

The gangs survive. Their exploits weave themselves into folk memory. 'They cannot be confined by the authorities to inconspicuous, powerless and therefore acceptable limits' (p 105) But do they have a political role? Clearly, Pinnock concludes, they 'are not evolving a culture of liberation'. 'We should rather say that they are constantly on the threshold of resistance'. (p 105) So what of their future? 'Any solution', Pinnock asserts, 'demands far more than well-meaning programmes of upliftment'. Progressive organizations need to make an effort to help 'street youths' to understand their problems, possibly through the formation of 'Poor People's Committees' or even of a 'Poor People's Party'. But in the long run there is really no alternative to far more drastic changes: 'a redistribution of wealth, changes in the labour process, the reorganizing of entire cities, and a rethinking of the urban-rural relationship'. 'The State cannot be waited upon to do something about street gangs. The initiative will have to come from the people they affect and from the street brothers themselves'. (p 106)

This is a short book, no more than 116 pages – and no index, a reprehensible omission in a book so crammed with detail. Brevity is an excellent quality: it ensures that a book is more likely to be read from cover to cover. But inevitably brevity leaves many issues dealt with in too sketchy a manner. More important, the book raises many questions that it could not, given its scope, be expected to answer. The book is dedicated 'TO THE WORKING CLASS MOTHERS OF CAPE TOWN, whose efforts to hold their families together in the face of harrassment and deprivation are nothing short of heroic'. One would like to hear much more about the way these 'ordinary' women succeed in coping. And what of the girls growing up in this violent society – and of all those boys, the majority after all, who go straight and do not get caught up in gangs at all? And what happens to most of the teenage gangsters when they grow up? How many of them manage to find steady jobs and a regular family life? All these are questions that need to be answered. In the meantime Don Pinnock has provided us with a book that is innovative, stimulating, or controversial (depending on the way a reader reacts to his analysis) and, in the way it has been researched, courageous.

Finally a brief note of appreciation for the generous section of photographs by Paul Koning. The faces that stare out at us, from the shabby settings of District Six or the Cape Flats, the old and the young, the mothers, the teenagers, the small children, have expressions that are sorrowing or reproachful or defiant – disturbing in their different ways for those of us who have been lucky enough to live only in the gentler, the more peaceful parts of Cape Town. □