The Social Bandit After Apartheid[1]

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"The bitterness, the violence, the brutality, the sadism simmering in the population, the desire to revenge themselves with their own hands, to get some release for what society had done to them since 1929—Patterson understood it perfectly. He understood also that the people did not want this avenger to be a cop—the law, authority, the state. He had to be an ordinary guy."[2]

— *C.L.R. James*

In both my teaching and my research, I have long been interested in the American romance with crime, and as I have learned more about representations of criminals in news, popular music, television, and film, I have come more and more to value the work of C.L.R. James, the Caribbean social theorist who died in 1989. I have been particularly influenced by James' 1953 essay on American culture, in which he linked the romantic representation of criminals in the gangster movies of the Great Depression with the class resentments of European immigrants. James observed that the most popular criminals of the Great Depression were "common men," such as the film gangster James Cagney (who starts as a poor, ghetto-dwelling white ethnic) and the real gangster Al Capone (also in the beginning, a ghetto-dwelling white ethnic). These gangsters were anti-heroes, who evoked admiration as well as fear. They were the repositories of class resentments aimed at the Waspish, the stuffy, and the rich. On my sojourn through South Africa, I often wished that I could consult with James, not only because I think he is one of the great social critics of our time, but also because I wanted to ask him what he makes of the South African romance with crime.

In this essay, I want to make some preliminary observations about the public discourse on crime in South Africa and the criminal anti-heroes in South African popular culture. First, the criminal anti-hero is part of a much larger public discourse on crime in South Africa, most of which is not romantic in any way. Crime plays a very important part in discussions of the South African economy, for example, and almost wholly in a negative way. In his presentation to our seminar, economist Pieter le Roux said that South Africa's escalating crime rate

has had a negative impact on foreign investment and tourism, dampening the growth rate and delaying the elimination of poverty.[3] He was one of many commentators on the economy for whom crime was the number one problem. Crime was a also major item of conversation among ordinary people. In Pretoria, Johannesburg, Durban, and Cape Town, everyone from business proprietors to van drivers told us stories about violence on the streets and warned us to be very careful. Their warnings were reinforced by newspaper reports of carjackings, rapes, and murders. A few days after we left Pretoria, a man got onto a bus filled with black workers and opened fire, killing three people. When we were in Cape Town, there was a carjacking on a mountainside, during which a mother and daughter were murdered and their bodies thrown off a ravine.

Violent crime is so pervasive that property crime, especially housebreaking, seems to receive relatively little attention. In fact, some people seem to have accommodated themselves to living with burglary and theft. One evening in Durban, after three of us from Macalester had dinner at a beachfront restaurant with two professors from the University of Natal, our dinner companions returned home to discover that their house had been robbed. The next day they told us that they had not even reported the robbery to the police. I was surprised to find out that they hadn't even reported the crime to their insurance company. What for, they asked? It would simply make the insurance rates go up. They explained that they had come to accept robbery as a cost of living in South Africa. Some analysts suggest that this accommodationist attitude toward crime grows out of the experience of apartheid. Apartheid was, after all, a regime in which the majority of the people were forced live outside of a wide range of laws, such as the pass laws and the Group Areas Act.[4]

But in addition to fear and accommodation, there is an attraction to crime in South Africa, such as the fascination evident in newspaper discussions of gangster Colin Chauke, who is known as South Africa's "Public Enemy No. 1." I first heard of Chauke in Pretoria, but he is infamous throughout South Africa. A former member of the MK, the guerrilla arm of the ANC, Chauke is known for directing a gang in its "heists-in-transit" and of staging two daring prison escapes.[5] Between 1994 and 1999, Chauke and his accomplices stole millions of Rand, and then flouted authorities by moving freely among the people, even as police professed to be vigorously trying to track him down. After his first escape, in 1994, in what the *Mail and Guardian* called "an extraordi-

nary display of chutzpah," Chauke "stood for public office and became an ANC councillor for two years, after which he resigned to 'pursue personal interests.' " After his second escape, in 1998, he was sighted several times spending, as the weekly *Mail and Guardian* coyly observed, "quality time with his girlfriend." The newspaper also claimed that Chauke attended an ANC deputy minister's birthday party shortly after his second escape.[6] Another story said that Chauke was so bold that he called a radio program in Johannesburg to protest his innocence while he was a fugitive. Again, from the *Mail and Guardian*: "Heist investigator Director Bushy Engelbrecht said yesterday that detectives were 99 percent sure the man who called a Johannesburg radio station on Monday was indeed Colin Chauke, South Africa's most wanted man."[7]

Chauke was most recently imprisoned in January 1999, but even now he has not disappeared from South Africa's public discourse on crime. Indeed, the very audacity of his exploits has made him an almost mythic figure. I have much more to learn about Chauke's representation in the news before I reach any definitive conclusions, but my preliminary observations lead me to believe that he occupies the same kind of position in South Africa once occupied in the United States by Al Capone. Indeed, Chauke is explicitly referred to with the same language once used to describe Capone.[8] David Ruth, a student of both Capone and the gangster films of the '30s, attributes Capone's popularity to his upward mobility and his daring. "The central theme of the Capone narrative was an individual's escape from obscurity to wealth, power and fame. . . . The audacity behind acts like the St. Valentine's Day killings constituted a major source of fascination with the Chicago gangster. . . . [W]riters glorified in the exploits of men who seemed willing to try anything, no matter how daring, and almost always succeeded."[9] These are the same elements that seem to define Chauke's appeal.

But the Chauke narrative also differs from Capone's in the sense that it is much more political. Given that Chauke was a former MK member and ANC councillor, and that he seemed to have friends in high places, including among the police, his misdeeds were often construed as a negative reflection on the ANC. After he was captured, the *Mail and Guardian* editorialized that "it is only with friends and associates in the police and in influential circles that Chauke could not only have escaped but also managed to remain a free man for more than a year without leaving his old haunts." The most important question to

be asked about the Chauke affair, the editorial said, was, "What are his links to high ranking politicians such as the deputy minister whose birthday party Chauke reportedly attended shortly after his escape?" Clearly, the newspaper said, the Chauke episode is an indictment of ANC favoritism, corruption, and incompetence. Chauke himself has fed into this narrative by arguing that his enemies are motivated by a desire to bring down the ANC. In the story about his call to the radio program, for example, Chauke is described as saying that the police had a "vendetta against him and had framed him because he was a member of the African National Congress." The ANC element in the Chauke narrative has no counterpart in the story of Al Capone. Neither do the many stories that attempt to link Chauke and other black gangsters to a Third Force of racist white South African police who once operated in support of apartheid, but who now have joined the ranks of organized crime. Police corruption is an ongoing theme in the Chauke narrative, although sometimes it targets the ANC and sometimes the old regime.[10] I began to study the Chauke narrative early in my trip and, among other things, it forced me to be more attentive to the political distinctiveness of the South African gangster narrative.

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The style of South African gangsterism, from the designation of Colin Chauke as Public Enemy No. 1 to the names of prominent gangs, is not only reflective of local political and economic conditions, but also owes a great deal to styles imported from the United States. Since the late 1940s, South African gangsters have been referred to as Tsotsis, a name derived from the zoot suit, a popular fashion that was originally worn by Chicano youth in East Los Angeles. Zoot suits became popular far beyond the barrios, first among African Americans in Detroit and elsewhere, and eventually internationally as it circulated through film and popular culture (e.g., in the films *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*). A study of South African gangsters on the Witswatersrand in the 1950s claims that *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky* were enormously popular in South Africa and started a zoot suit craze. South African gangsters paid special attention to Cab Calloway, who was featured wearing a zoot suit in *Cabin in the Sky*. The Tsotsis also developed a vernacular language, called Tsotsitaal, similar to the hipster language that developed among African Americans at about the same time.[11] As we traveled through the Cape Flats, which contain the black and

coloured communities of the Cape Town area, we saw graffiti everywhere announcing the names of the major gangs: the Americans, the DKNY's, the Vikings, and the JFK's. Given the general influence of U.S. culture around the globe, the fact that the U.S. gangster style should be so influential in South Africa is not surprising, but it is quite interesting to see how American influence there is articulated in and through race. We arrived in Cape Town right after the annual Coon Carnival, a coloured New Year's celebration influenced by U.S. Blackface minstrelsy. This racialized (some would say racist) form of theatrical performance, which dates back to the 1820s, has been widely interrogated by U.S. scholars over the past several years because of its complicated relationship to constructions of whiteness. Blackface minstrelsy was originally a form of U.S. popular culture in which white ethnics, especially Irishmen, blackened their faces and pretended to be black on stage. Before the 1990s, the leading scholarship on Blackface minstrelsy, such as the work of Robert Toll, dismissed it as entirely racist. Eric Lott has revised this earlier scholarship by arguing that Blackface minstrelsy was a practice built on attraction as well as repulsion.[12] Whites in blackface were engaged in a process that involved the construction of identities based on the envy of blackness as well as the desire to not be black.

A further complication emerged in Blackface minstrelsy in the 1870s, when black troupes began to perform in blackface. The story of how Blackface came to influence the Coon Carnival in Cape Town, as told by Denis Constant-Martin, illustrates some of these complications. The adoption of Blackface minstrelsy in the Cape was heavily influenced by the Virginia Jubilee Singers, an African American Blackface troupe that traveled to the Cape at the turn of the 20th century. While there, the troupe ran out of money and fell apart. Subsequently, some members decided to remain and become part of the Cape coloured community, and these settlers helped popularize the practice of Blackface performance in the annual coloured New Year's celebrations there.[13] Initially, I was prepared to dismiss the Coon Carnival as a practice that showed the complicity of the coloured community in the oppression of black Africans. But the history of black American influence on the Coon Carnival has given me pause. I'm not yet sure what I make of it, but I do know that I must be more attentive to the way in which South African culture(s) have been influenced by the United States.

In my work on gangster culture in the United States, I have given a great deal of thought to the meaning of the death of the white ethnic gangster and his replacement by the urban black male. The differences between *Public Enemy* and *Boyz in the Hood* are vast, and not only along the lines of race, but one thing those films share is their focus on the lives of the urban poor. The gangster narrative in South Africa never seems to have had a serious white ethnic phase. Since at least the 1950s, the dominant figure in the South African gangster narrative has been the Tsotsi, who is black.

I was therefore not prepared for the suggestion that South Africa's gangster narratives are divided along racial and ethnic lines. As we moved through the Cape Flats, I noticed that almost all the gang graffiti was in coloured communities. Also, the strongest anti-gang vigilantism, by an organization named Pagad, was centered in the coloured community. In the coloured township of Athlone, for example, we came across a parking lot that had been closed by a Pagad bomb. It was in the middle of a shopping area that was literally covered with gang graffiti. While I saw many representations of coloured gangsterism in townships, however, I rarely saw such representations in news, television, music, and film. In those arenas, the most talked about gangsters were black.

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Mapantsula, one of South Africa's most critically acclaimed films, is about a Tsotsi named Panic who lives off women, including his landlady and his girlfriend Pat. Panic also makes money by robbing white people and informing for the police. In these respects, Panic is purely a predator, like other Tsotsis in South African gangster films.[14] But *Mapantsula* is not only a gangster film, it is also a film of resistance.[15] Shot in Soweto during 1988, the film shows the gathering resistance to apartheid in the townships from the very first frame. The people of Soweto are in motion against rent increases and poor conditions in the schools, and the film is filled with scenes of demonstrations, some of which are led by the character Sam, who is the son of Panic's landlady. The film also depicts the oppression of Pat, who works as a domestic for a self-absorbed rich white woman. After Sam is captured and killed by the police, and Pat leaves Panic for an anti-apartheid activist with the domestic workers union, Panic has a last minute conversion. Under

severe pressure from the police, who are torturing him to make him inform on the trade union organizer, Panic decides to remain silent.

As a film of resistance, *Mapantsula* was celebrated not only in South Africa, but also around the world, winning awards ranging from the South African M-Net Vita Film Award for best picture to the Un Certain Regard at the Cannes film festival in 1989. Besides its status as a film of resistance, *Mapantsula* is also known today as an important postcolonial film in which Panic represents the destabilized subject, a man without loyalty to nation or race.[16] Throughout the film, he demonstrates that he has no allegiance to his ethnic group, his class, or his history. At several points, other black characters, including his girlfriend, push him to define who is he is, but he never can.

These themes of postcoloniality and resistance have been a mainstay of critical commentary on film, but critics almost never talk about *Mapantsula* as a gangster movie. But in many ways, *Mapantsula* is just like the gangster films James identified, along with the genre those films established. Like James' subjects, Panic is a romantic figure, who is handsome, audacious, in control, and apolitical. Except for the final scene, Panic is much like the film gangsters of the United States, including the most recent crop of black gangsters. But it is also true that the uprising makes Panic's choices very different from those of Tre, the hero of *Boyz in the Hood*, who resolves his dilemmas by going to college.

If *Mapantsula* pushes the boundaries of the genre, it is because of the film's setting in a moment of social transformation that has no counterpart in earlier versions of the gangster narrative, either in South Africa or the United States. Indeed, one of the things that interests me most about the South African gangster narrative is the way it has responded to the struggle against apartheid. At the height of the uprising, there was *Mapantsula.* Today, there is gangster rap. On the last day I was in South Africa, I decided to visit a black barber shop, partly because I needed a hair cut, but also because I have always found barber shops in the United States to be important sites of political discourse.

The shop was owned by a black woman and was in a section of Cape Town where black people were not even allowed to live when *Mapantsula* was filmed. There were four women in the shop at the time, talking about their money problems and their troubles with men and watching American rap videos on television, including those that romanticized the "thug life." And they knew all the words to the songs. I left that shop knowing that I have so much more to learn, and

wondering what James would have said about the South African embrace of gangster rap under conditions of black majority rule. ◉

Notes

1. Reference to le Roux's piece for this journal.

2. C.L.R. James, "Popular Arts and Modern Society," *American Civilization*, p. 121.

3. See article in this journal by Pieter le Roux.

4. As Simba Kamunono, Editor, Africanperspective.com., wrote last year:

First of all the main crime in South Africa is the way wealth is distributed. Wealth, which is the creation of the African labour, and heritage in land remain in the hands of a minority of whites and tiny minority of Blacks. Majority of Blacks remain in poverty. Millions are unemployed or underemployed. Land still remains in the hands of the Whites. Millions of Blacks live in slums in the cities and arid areas in the countryside. There is a real alienation of the Blacks from the means of production. In addition, the South African rich and the State instruments especially have always promoted criminal methods. The Big Business sponsors cross-border smuggling of diamonds, ivory, cars and all sorts of commodities. The police are involved in drug trafficking, in smuggling and in sponsoring violence. Did they not sponsor the violent and gangster organization called PAGAD — People Against Gangs And Drugs before it ran out of their control? Don't the South African police have a long history of sponsoring Black-on-Black violence? A last year report showed that more than 1,700 cops were involved in criminal activities in a period of less than 2 years. Thus the question of crime in South Africa goes deeper than people think. It is embedded in the social economic system and is directly rooted in the past apartheid system. Thus it can only be overcome by fundamental changes to the system that strike at the root of the wealth ownership and the instruments that protect those who own this wealth, especially the South African police. A struggle to carry out such fundamental changes will create solidarity among South African people and make them reject anti-social practices that promote crime. Those who advocate dealing with the crime problems through more laws, more cops, more jails and bringing back death penalty are either not aware of what the root cause is or they are genuinely lying about it. The South African police cannot solve the crime problem and nothing else can short of a full blown social revolution that is organized as a continuation of the Democratic revolution that took place in that country. As it is, attempts to do otherwise will meet with failure. In www.Africanperspective.com, Issue #17, 13 February 1999.

5. David Beresford, "SA crime is getting organised," 13 February 1999, www.mg.co.za

6. Anon., "Keep Chauke Inside, Alive," 22 February 1999, www.mg.co.za

7. Anon., "Verbatim," 23 October 1998, www.mg.co.za

8. David Beresford.

9. David Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture, 1918*–1934 (The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 123–124.

10. For examples of stories that link Chauke to corruption in the ANC, see "Verbatim," 22 July 1999, www.mg.co.za; Tangeni Amupadhi, "Secrets Die with Fingers," 21 August 1998, www.mg.co.za; and Anon., "Keep Chauke Inside, Alive" 22 February 1999. See

Wally Mbhele, "Chauke's Arrest is Imminent, say Police," 13 February 1998, for a story linking Chauke to a Third Force.

11. Clyde Glaser, *Social Bandits on the Witswatersrand: 1943*–1958, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Witswatersrand, 1990.

12. Robert Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

13. Denis Constant-Martin, *Coon Carnival: New Year in Cape Town, Past and Present.*

14. In *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* (Chicago and New York: Smyrna/Lake View Press, 1988), Prof. Keyan Tomaselli says black gangster movies were part of the "conditional Black urban film" genre, which also included the nostalgic "homelands" film, p. 73.

15. Chas Unwin and Colin Belton, "Cinema of Resistance: The Other Side of the Story," In Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha, *Movies, Moguls, Mavericks: South African Cinema, 1979–1991* (Cape Town: Showdata, 1992), 277–299.

16. See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994) for a discussion of the postcolonial subject in film, pp. 37–46.

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