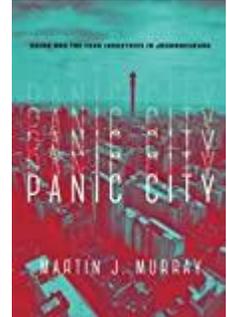




Martin J. Murray. *Panic City: Crime and the Fear Industries in Johannesburg.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 392 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-1126-9.



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Policing Johannesburg

A Great Wall went up twenty years ago around Hyde Park, a wealthy suburb in northern Johannesburg. Four miles long and two meters high, it came equipped with sensor alarms and cameras. Eleven policemen guarded its environs, and two armed-response vehicles patrolled there around the clock. Closing thirteen streets to traffic and costing a lot to build and maintain, the wall did not win universal popularity. Its construction was also, strictly speaking, illegal. Without official sanction from the municipality, it rendered public space—streets and sidewalks—private. The patrolling policemen were not state employees but hired by a private security firm. Because city officials seemed to be procrastinating, the residents of Hyde Park had decided unilaterally to embark on this protective venture. They were panicking that crime there was on the rise, as throughout the city.

Panic City is the third volume in what amounts to a trilogy published since 2008 by Martin J. Murray on the ways Johannesburg's space

has been planned and used since the end of apartheid. Most scholars and commentators on the city, he writes, concentrate on big issues like crime control, constitutional rights, and citizenship. Murray, a radical sociologist as well as a professor of urban planning, focuses instead on the “miniscule, incremental modifications to the urban social fabric” that profoundly shape urban experience (p. xxv). He writes in the hope that his study of the usually overlooked “micropolitics of everyday policing” in affluent Johannesburg communities will “enable us to respond more sensitively to the politics of agency,” like the above *ad hoc* initiative (pp. xxiv, xxv). Murray does not lay out what a sensitive response might be, though he clearly disapproves of these private strategies for reducing risk.

Embedded in Murray's text, and even in his chapter titles, is his sense that the security network represents “a retreat from civic responsibility and a clear drift toward a kind of frontier vigil-

ante mentality with its libertarian communitarian logic” (p. 95). Acts of private policing like the Great Wall threaten popular freedom to move around. There is a real danger that this kind of policing and the way urban space is designed—fortress homes, high walls, boom-gated streets—will lead those who are under- or unemployed to be excluded from the city. Murray sums up in one resounding sentence his underlying sense of what is at stake: “This obsessive securitization of everyday life has resulted in the evisceration of civil rights, the criminalization of the poor (by outlawing their tactics of survival), and the abandonment of the uniform application of the rule of law” (p. 114).

Murray’s revelations about the massive and speedy growth of the “fear industries” can be stunning. He writes, for example, that the private security industry now employs more people than the mining sector. Private policemen outnumber by two to one the public police force and the military *combined*. Even the official South African Police Services (SAPS) has hired private security companies, which can afford more and better weapons, in addition to armored vehicles, high-speed cars, and tracking devices, not to mention ambulances. SAPS has largely ceded guarding and patrolling the suburbs to private companies in order to focus on making arrests and gathering evidence about drug-trafficking, heists, and violent crimes, which are especially prevalent in the overcrowded townships.

Murray based *Panic City* on a decade’s worth of research trips (2008-18) to interview an impressive roster of people associated with the security industry, both providers and customers; he also kept up with the extensive local commentary on crime and security and even conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the crime-ridden neighborhood of Hillbrow. He lays out his findings in chapters that keep repeating his overarching arguments, in effect making it easy for urban studies professors to assign only selected chapters to their students.

Murray opens by taking the reader first through an abstract examination of crime “discourse” (p. 38), a sign that his interest in crime lies mainly in its use as a “social construct[], or rhetorical device[], with mythic characteristics” (p. xix). He moves on to note that the policing paradigm has been shifting since the early 1990s: private security companies have been taking over entire neighborhoods and becoming proactive by using mobile street patrols, CCTV monitoring, road closures and boom gates, and stop-and-frisk tactics. He then pivots to siege architecture, showing how modernist open space and transparency were jettisoned in favor of inward-looking enclosures.

His final section zeroes in on the “fear industries” that “profit from insecurity” (p. 117). Those industries include not only the private companies but also the neighborhood associations that organized to hire them. Voluntary Community Active Protection (CAP) groups get official permission to create Residential Improvement Districts (RIDs), which take formerly public space—like parks, playgrounds, sidewalks, and streets—and make it into “mass private property” (p. 118). They do so mainly by hiring firms whose employees—two per vehicle (a driver and a “shooter”)—drive around looking for “Bravos” or “Bravo Mikes” (young Black men) to stop and frisk, in case they might be thieves. Patrols of ordinary citizens called Community Policing Forums (CPFs, established by the state in 2006) join in, engaging enthusiastically in the control and surveillance of their streets. In poorer peri-urban communities, the CPFs often rough up suspects, but wealthier neighborhoods achieve the same end by, for example, hounding squatters out of vacant land and getting them arrested. “Penal populism,” to use Murray’s nice phrase, extends across South African society to all races and classes (p. 224).

Because Murray’s familiarity with South Africa is broad and deep, no one could accuse him of having been drawn voyeuristically to its sometimes spectacular crimescape. On the contrary,

one might wish he had given his readers a richer sense of what is driving people in all strata of society to “obsess” about crime. Only occasionally does he refer to frightening experiences like the approach of a three-car convoy carrying fifteen highly organized thieves, some of whom may have had military experience. Despite the first word in its subtitle, the focus of this book is really not on crime but on the perception of, and actions taken against, crime. The dimensions of the crime wave are, in any case, hard to define because the statistics are inaccurate.

Another deliberate lacuna lies in the absence of poor people themselves. A focus on the northern suburbs means that the less wealthy, including how they deal with crime, are relegated mainly to the epilogue on Hillbrow.

While Murray may have justifiable reasons to sideline discussion of actual crimes and of the non-affluent, it is hard to defend some of his word choices. When he deploys psychological words like “obsession,” “fantasy,” “neurosis,” or “hallucinatory,” he comes dangerously close to pathologizing the reactions of people who have good reason to feel frightened. He also underestimates their awareness of root causes of crime.[1] When these people are white, as they often but not always are, is it fair to racialize their desire for class separation by saying they are “invariably” yearning for racial exclusivity (p. 69)? Surely not. Further, are efforts to save aesthetically pleasing urban spaces in general and the Central Business District in particular driven solely by the desire to attract capital and lure tourists?[2]

Recourse to private security, like anger at poor service delivery, exists in a particular political context. Understanding that context would entail an assessment of governance by the African National Congress (ANC) so that the “neuroses” could be linked to actual policy decisions. Why, for example, does the state lack the resources to fund an official police force adequate to the city’s criminal challenges? (Why does the Rand Merchant Bank

offer to pay to maintain its local police station?) Knowing more about the syphoning off of public monies by political players would have enhanced *Panic City*’s power to explain the contemporary crimescape. The ANC is mentioned only once and the Democratic Alliance, the official opposition that claims to run all of the best-performing municipalities in South Africa, not at all. If the breakdown of the state monopoly over the legitimate use of force was “neither inevitable nor necessary,” what exactly happened to bring it about (p. xii)?

By sidelining politics and history, *Panic City* will probably disappoint South Africans and others who might have hoped that a book of this nature would suggest a way forward. They might have wished that Murray had taken us beyond the pessimism of radical critics like Mike Davis who see the urban future of the Global South in dystopian terms.[3] Unlike Marxist geographer David Harvey, who urges the formation of a broad social movement to secure the “right to the city,” Murray does not point the way to a solution.[4] His exceedingly well-informed study does, however, lay important groundwork that should benefit comparative efforts to define what is in fact a global threat. What is at stake globally, as Murray eloquently writes, is no less than “the death of the public city, that is, the classically liberal dream of the modern metropolis as open congregating space—the civic habitat for the entertainment and pleasure of free citizens” (p. 35).

Notes

[1]. The following statement seems less like a revelation than an observation commonly, if not universally, heard in Johannesburg: “What one needs to understand is how enduring inequalities, persistent poverty and limited opportunities for upward mobility reproduce the victimization and criminalization of the poor, the indifference to their plight, the disregard of their rights, and their lack of access to justice” (p. 37).

[2]. See, for example, Gerald Garner, *Johannesburg, Ten Ahead* (Craighall Park: Double G Media, 2011) to learn about efforts to revive the CBD for an array of reasons, material and affectionate.

[3]. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

[4]. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (September/October 2008), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii53/articles/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city>.

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