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## SPILLOVER CONVERSATION

### Interview: Jean Comaroff on the New Anthropology of Crime

This interview continues a discussion begun in our May 2009 "Directions" section, where Ben Penglase, author of an article appearing in that issue of *PoLA*R, interviewed Stephanie C. Kane and Phil Parnell, co-editors of *Crime's Power: Anthropologists and the Ethnography of Crime*.

***In that interview, Ben Penglase [BP] asked this question*:**

**BP:** The Comaroffs and others have argued that concern about crime and discourses of criminalization emerge out of the clash between the aspirations for individual mobility and enrichment unleashed by neoliberal capitalism, and the brutal reality of anxieties and uncertainties produced by rapid global flows. But, within this broad context, crime takes on a multiplicity of meanings in different localities, many of which defy easy comparison or generalization, and discourses of criminalization can serve different purposes. To what extent is it possible to generalize about crime cross-culturally? Or, indeed, is such cross-cultural generalization a theoretically fruitful goal?

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*PoLAR* is excited now to continue the conversation, with a response from **Jean Comaroff** [JC] to Ben's question. It is the beginning of a longer interview in which she discusses her views on today's emerging Anthropology of Crime.*

**JC:** My response to Ben's question would depend in part on the audience you were addressing. The situation in South Africa provides a very useful example. It's quite ironic, because at the very moment that the world was celebrating the South African "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," its very capacious constitution, the exciting forms of enfranchisement of the public—what is coming back, from the grassroots, from a reconstituted middle class, and from social observers of various kinds in South Africa, is a national trauma about social disorder. To which the state has responded somewhat predictably by appointing commissions of inquiry, seeking to regulate the national statistics-generating apparatus, conducting sporadic, highly visible crack-downs on criminal enterprise, etc.).

But, we see emerging from the situation a sense that little of the democratic victory matters if you don't have the minimal conditions of security necessary within the country to realize the terms of this promise. And, crime, here, seems to embody all that threatens real democracy.

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* See *PoLAR*, Vol. 33:1 Supplement/Edge Issue (2010), Directions Section, which contains part of this interview as well.

There are other ground-level issues at work as well, of course—scarce resources, inadequate land provision for the historically displaced, inadequate education, massive unemployment; but for the people we spoke with in our research on South Africa after apartheid, there is a prior question: if you can't minimally secure the conditions of personal mobility and freedom of movement, of the rights to property in which the nascent black middle classes are invested, then what are the new-found freedoms all about?

From that perspective, then, it's all a sham, because the promises mean nothing if the basic terms of security are not met. Escalating crime becomes the index of the failure of governance and betrayal of any viable social contract. And public sentiment about it becomes audible in a particular set of accusations: that policing is not adequate, that youth are not being adequately reincorporated into society after the transition to democracy—so that all that is left to the young who attempt to realize a future are forms of vandalism and gangsterism.

Of course, this is a familiar theme in societies that have not undergone similar transitions, societies like the US, for example. So, returning to the question of when or whether we can generalize about crime across cultures—what's particularly interesting in the post-colonial context of South Africa is the emphasis on crime as a way of evaluating the success of a promise—of economic freedoms, of constitutional freedoms, of political enfranchisement. And the strength of that story does reverberate elsewhere in advanced liberal democracies, although there will be different temporalities, peaks and falls (for example, the authors of Freakanomics argue controversially for why there might have been less overall anxiety about crime in the US over the past couple of decades - although I would hazard a guess that after the current economic crisis, there will be an upsurge in many forms of criminality, not merely in the most marginal and impoverished communities). But the fact is that you can track the South African anxiety about governance elsewhere. In England, for example, you see that the question of crime and disorder has become ever more central to the platforms of the organized political parties. (It was overtaken, somewhat, after 9/11, with a discourse surrounding terror, but the two things are linked, of course.) However, in Britain, the whole problem of immigration, the question of opening the nation's borders up to the wider Europe - very often this discussion gets organized around the issue of criminality.

This was going on in England while my husband, John Comaroff, and I were starting to work on the issue of crime in South Africa, where there was growing concern that the state had withdrawn from its obligation to protect people - and people wanted more evidence of such protection. This is interesting, because much of what we get from the writing of the likes of Foucault in respect of late 20th century Europe is that the problem was one of excessive power, of an over-abundance of order - that the state governs by subjecting people, pervading every inch of their lives. But in places like the South African post-colony, people want more of the state - they want more of a sense that the state has not withdrawn from them. And they want a sense that there is a police protection - not simply for those who are in a privileged elite, but for the population in general. In the past, matters were clear: the police controlled the black majority, and protected their white rulers. But in the new democracy, the populace harbored the expectation that the racially integrated Police Service—that had, with great ceremony, replaced the jackboot of the colonial state—would be there to guarantee their new entitlements.

At the same time that we started the work in post-apartheid South Africa, in the mid-to-late 1990's, we also spent some time in England. We went downtown in Sheffield, in the rustbelt north of the country, and we saw this huge Conservative Party poster—it had a picture of a

woman walking across a housing estate with her shopping bags—and looming in the background were these dark figures (because we're also talking here about race and immigration), and the logo said "You paid your taxes, so where are the police?" Here we have the added layer of the racialization of crime: in Europe as in South Africa, the discourse of crime is by-and-large a discourse of race as well. But in the UK example, we also see the anxiety about the withdrawal of the state from those in need of protection, its failure to ensure a fundamental right of citizenship.

So in both places we find this issue of crime, and the putative withdrawal of the state from police protection, taking center stage, winning out over questions of housing, or welfare for the poor. And we also see that, in late liberal times, what "the state" is really about above all else is ensuring the security of your property and person… securing the space within which your rights to a private, self-determining, self-caring existence as citizen can be pursued. And when you begin to look elsewhere, you see that this kind of discourse around crime is much more widespread. In the Netherlands, for example—which of all places, has always been conceived of as being extremely safe in terms of physical security, freedom of movement, etc—you have a whole branch of academic sociology working on the national "crime wave." You read detective fiction from Sweden, the hugely popular writings of Stieg Larsson and Henning Mankell, and you get a sense of a world out of control. But it is fascinating how crime becomes a focus for analyzing social order in so many places in the post-cold-war Western world - and this then becomes a point for comparative assessment of the meaning of "crime" in different times and places, as integral to how different societies conceptualize themselves, how they seek to capture this sense of being part of a world out of control. This is a widely appealing idiom of social imagination in a time when power seems ever more to elude the institutions of formal state governance and regulation. But it also expresses global economic shifts under neoliberal conditions. John Comaroff and I talk about this in Law and Disorder in the Post-Colony (2006), where expanding economies of what could be called "illegal flows" (drugs, for example) are part of globally intensifying, informalizing economies, what people are turning to in order to sustain their basic livelihoods.

So, at a general level, I would say that the question of "crime" is becoming more salient all over the world. In England today, more students are studying criminology than are studying sociology - and this is not just an interest in crime in the narrower sense, but it is an attempt to understand that fragile line between law and disorder as a basis of the social imaginary. I guess I would say that one level at which it is useful to take a more generalized view of "crime" across societies and cultures is to ask what relationship might exist between conceptualizations of "crime" and these increasingly intensified global flows - where borders are ambiguously both open and closed, where law and enforcement have uncertain jurisdiction, where much enforcement is in the private sector, and where the nation state doesn't call on the identity of its subjects in any unambiguous way. Under these conditions, then, how do you conceptualize society itself - how do you imagine "the social"? Think about drawing the line between "law" and "lawlessness" as a way of defining a realm of meaning, recognition, citizenship - of drawing a line that tells you who is included in the social world and who is excluded. This is why, I think, we are also so invested in fiction dealing with crime - because we can draw that line less ambiguously in that kind of fantasy world, than we can in the everyday world. In the everyday world it's much more complicated.

**BP: How would you describe current anthropological perspectives on crime and criminal justice?**

**JC:** While the study of crime in social anthropology goes back to its beginnings—it's as old as Durkheim and "social pathology," for example—nonetheless, it's not been focused on as a topic in its own right until quite recently. So one of the interesting questions is - why now? And why has the topic come to be defined in the particular way it has? Because, we've looked at things like sanctions, we've looked at things like deviance, we've looked at things like witchcraft in anthropology from the beginning. Yet at the same time, the issue of crime as it's understood in criminology—as a kind of modern, social institution in its own right—is of relatively recent vintage in anthropology. When John and I started looking at this problem in South Africa, we were in a world where there were journalists writing about it, and there was, of course, a whole array of crime fiction to read. But there was a disconnect between this sort of commentary and anthropological analysis. In our private lives, when we had a few moments for recreation, we'd put our feet up and read a crime novel, or watch a detective series on TV. But we noted that there was only a tenuous link between that world and our anthropological work. Yet there was of course a more profound connection to be made, and increasingly we have been striving to make it. In fact, I've just written an article about detective fiction, and why it's so often used in our wider society as a mode of social diagnosis and critique. But we as anthropologists have not looked at "crime" per se in this way until relatively recently. So, why now, and why in the way we do?

The question you raise about a distinctly anthropological perspective on the criminal justice system is important: in some ways, a critical focus on the topic could be seen as flowing from the classic legacy of anthropology—as a field that has focused on the underdog, on marginal populations—and that has been profoundly counter-hegemonic in the way that it approaches its subject matter. As anthropologists, we question surface categories; we question the stories that social institutions tell about themselves. In that sense, there is a tendency in anthropology to assume that authoritative structures and institutions should be questioned rather than accepted at face value. We "come from below" methodologically and theoretically.

Increasingly, however, this is not always the case. The work that John and I have been doing recently, for example, centers around problems of policing - in part, from the point of view of the police themselves, and regarding the challenge of effecting social control and managing public information about crime and security. But we are also asking why it is that in some places, the police themselves have become objects of obsessive preoccupation—even mythology. In people's minds, they've become the "thin blue line" that stands between themselves and their sense of growing disorder. And here is a place where public representations—like detective fiction, that is ever more popular world-wide—come in. Such fiction colludes with fantasies about heroic figures capable of restoring order from chaos, and the collapse of authoritative norms. Where official control seems to falter, popular culture creates an identification with the rogue detective, with a film noir kind of view of alternative policing, in which social order is restored from its creative margins (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; also see Karpiak - May Supplement 2010 "Edges" issue of *PoLAR*).

There are various reasons why anthropologists have traditionally approached the study of crime the way they did (our focus was on "pre-modern" societies; on the perpetuation of social order, on dispute resolution; on the weight of culture, tradition, and ritual to reinforce norms). But all that is shifting, as anthropology itself has moved away from defining itself as centrally about the

study of small-scale, marginal groups and has become more concerned with studying the modern and the mainstream as well. This has also involved what Laura Nader (1974) long ago called "studying up," working on those who are more established and powerful. And of course, as we're doing this, we're suffering a certain kind of identity crisis, as we come to share our terrain with other kinds of scholars - sociologists, criminologists, historians, political theorists; but increasingly, we've learned to do this, with good effect. And this raises all kinds of others questions about our distinctive analytical objects, and methods, and so on.

But there is more to the question of: why now? As I already implied, not all of this is entirely new. In terms of detective fiction, the pleasures of seeing the criminal investigator as a kind of social scientist are as old as writers like Edgar Allan Poe. Yet now, in many of the places where we as anthropologists work, this genre has taken on exaggerated importance. In the consciousness of people in this moment (in the "ethnographic present") -- in their obsessions, their desires, their preoccupations -- there is increasing focus on crime as "standardized nightmare," as Monica Wilson (1951) would have put it. And this is not just as a marginal pastime. Crime (rather than war, or civil strife) is seen increasingly in many places - from Sweden to Russia, Colombia to China - as one of the key threats facing democracy.

For instance, in the new South Africa - and this is what led us to the topic - after the transition to democracy in 1994, John and I assumed that the questions we would be studying as anthropologists would be questions of a new democracy - of citizenship, the constitution, how the latter gets implemented. And when we went back for the first time to do fieldwork (we hadn't worked there for a long while, as there had been an academic boycott called for by the ANC), what we found was an obsession that we didn't expect. We found that people had a sense that the new order was in some sense hollow, because the world was so disorderly that their new rights and entitlements were in fact not realizable. The state appeared to have lost sovereign authority in significant respects. People said things like "This is now such a lawless society that there is absolutely no restraint on young people, or on crime." They claimed that they were in effect prisoners in their own houses, because organized gangs had taken over large domains of public space in the rural areas, where they had expected to realize a new kind of civic order and set of entitlements.

So, in a very practical way, the situation in the place where we began to do fieldwork in the 1990's centered around the figure of the criminal, as did the public imaginary. And the problem with the figure of the "criminal" in South Africa then was that it was both ubiquitous and ill-defined. The "criminal" could be your neighbor, could be somebody right within your immediate community. This marked a shift from the apartheid past, when people had been very used to drawing a clear line between "friend" and "enemy" - between the enemies who stood in the way of people being fully accepted as citizens, and the friends who stood together working for full democratic participation. And suddenly here, along with the advent of democracy, you had this new kind of impediment. The figure of the "criminal" was now central. It personified a new range of inchoate threats, but it was also productive. Around it grew up a new set of local demands on the state—the call for better statistics tracking crime, for example, and the tendency to evaluate the state's capacity to govern according to its ability to handle crime—to get the criminal justice system working, to get infringement of law off the streets and into some kind of formal process. Indeed, the extent to which the government was failing to do this became a source for civil society critique, local community organizing, demands for statistical clarity, and calls for protection of person and property. This resonates with what some have called the "popular punitiveness" gaining ground elsewhere, in Europe and North America (Bottoms 1995).

Crime statistics have become a major index of social viability, and a domain of political contestation: in South Africa, there were accusations that the government's withholding of crime statistics, for example, was a fundamental denial of democratic freedoms and citizen's rights.

So the "criminal" became the imaginative prism around which people were trying to figure out the problem of social dis/order, and to find a basis for civic action—even to define the meaning of citizenship. And here, I think, is where an anthropological approach can be particularly valuable—because this is not just about how a formal set of institutions is functioning (i.e. the capacity of the criminal justice system or the police force to contain lawlessness; or even the foundational Durkheimian question about norms, and "making the obligatory desirable"). A key question becomes: what is emerging in the popular discourse - what can we learn from the kinds of anxieties and mobilizations we see, from the sorts of demands that people are placing on their representatives in government? At what level are these issues being raised, who is controlling this discourse? Is this something that middle-class people are more worried about than the people who have been classically disenfranchised? And what does this tell us about changes in the nature of governance and the operation of law under current social conditions? When you look at the local level in many places right now, you see that people are trying to resurrect forms of what they see as "traditional" authority and discipline, thinking that this can bring some kind of order and predictability into their worlds. There is a crisis of "sovereignty" in many places, brought about by deregulation of various kinds, a perceived rise in the rate of moral laissez faire, if I can put it that way, and the privatization of many aspects of security and enforcement. In South Africa, where the state has lost monopoly control over the means of violence in many respects, traditional diviners will tell you that people are coming to them for medicines to protect their houses from break-ins; ordinary people will tell you that they hold their wakes for the dead during the day now, because they are afraid of going abroad at night time - because young criminals control the streets. Many of the young lions who fought for freedom - who were activists against colonialism - are seen to have become street thugs, not being reigned in by any kind of authority. People claim that they have reconfigured their everyday lives, their ritual calendar, their freedom of movement as a result. A host of structural problems are being expressed here, but they are personified in an eroding line between law and lawlessness.

**BP: Could you translate for non-anthropologists in the audience: when anthropologists talk about a cultural "imaginary," does it mean they are only interested in peoples' ideas and imaginations?**

**JC:** We do care a good deal about "collective consciousness" (to use a very old-fashioned Durkheimian phrase, indicating culture, ideas shared by particular groups of people). And in assigning significant weight to such "subjective" dimensions, we give more weight than many disciplines to the force of human intention in shaping the world - intention that we understand as crucially shaped by membership in communities of discourse and interaction. But I also think that it is incumbent on anthropologists who analyze this level of social phenomenon to show precisely where it exists - exactly what forms of discourse, what kinds of practices are involved - and where these things emerge, what social conditions generate them. One doesn't simply mine the discourse as text for metaphors, tropes, indexical references; one looks for the ways that people are connecting that talk (for example, about criminals) to other parts of their lives - patterns of sociality, expectations of the polity, hopes that have been thwarted - and where this translates into action. One's role as an anthropologist, I think, is to follow the talk and the practices. And indeed, when people say, "We can't go to wakes, rituals for the dead anymore at

night as we have always done because the streets are too dangerous," an anthropologist then follows up to see what people are actually doing, how the "criminal imaginary" is changing cultural practice. This is a strength of ethnography: it can reveal the grounded practices of the people we work with; how imaginaries and actions construct each other.

For example, one of the things that got John and me started on all this was noticing how people were securing their homes: why so much domestic expenditure was going into security systems. And then, the next question was to look at the people controlling those security systems; there were people who were really profiting from the situation, who were commissioning advertisements playing on particular fears of crime, and so on. So we began to look at the way people imagine or conceptualize their situations, how they redefine space and time; and we looked at the related material practices they are engaged in—but also we look at the different sites, the different places where these fears and anxieties become focused and congealed. For example, how do people balance their desire for security with their longing for freedom from regulation after generations of colonial control? How do they express these anxieties in the pressure they place on local political representatives? What comes out in church meetings, in quests for empowerment and sovereign protection in other registers, as it were? What gets written in newspapers? And how exactly do people engage with the public institutions they feel should be responsive, the vaunted organs of "democracy" and "empowerment"?

So one of the things that we became very interested in was: what issues do people take to police, as opposed to other possible sources of authority? Like "traditional authorities," religious leaders, diviners, political representatives? What is considered admissible, as people experiment with new kinds of entitlements and promises of citizenship? If you say the police are unresponsive, where do you go? As an anthropologist, you follow the thread provided by people's discourse and actions. You find that they congeal in certain locations, and around certain concerns and anxieties - and they presume certain listeners. For example, one place that these concerns about criminals congeal is around local politicians. And indeed, those local politicians - in South Africa as around the world -- have to respond, and they are increasingly making crime, safety and security an important part of their political platform. So that then these become centrally related to defining what government, what the state, is about. As I have noted, we see a rising sense that government is about controlling insecurity and disorder - responding to a kind of popular punitiveness - which is being written about across the Western world as well as in places like South Africa. In South Africa there is a lot of public sympathy for a return of the death penalty, for policies that are tough on crime; and government has responded by quite overtly saying to police: "You have been given guns; when you face violent criminals, use them!"

**BP: Is there a contribution that anthropology can make to public discussions on this issue? And if so, what would it be?**

**JC:** Yes, I think that there is a particular contribution that anthropology can make. A lot of work that has been done on the social roots of crime, very laudably, points out the relationship between social marginalization and the degree to which lawfulness becomes a luxury people can't afford - making the point that people come to consider certain things licit, if not fully legal, under conditions of necessity. This has all been very well-studied, and it's important; it adds a cultural nuance to more mainstream arguments about crime and poverty. But I will use the South African case to illustrate where anthropology's special contribution can complicate our understanding of the relation of crime and material necessity.

In the kind of situation we see in respect of crime in South Africa, we need to understand aspects beyond the brute utilities involved. It is anthropology that can shed light on the practices that are emerging in people's everyday lives - which may or may not be viewed as legitimate or legal by the state, but often are differently regarded by the people themselves, who have a different understanding of how legitimate the law actually is. In places where the law has been an overt instrument of repression, like colonial contexts, the post-colonial legal apparatus has to prove itself. A state may have a great constitution in place, but if it leaves a whole generation of people effectively unrecognized within the polity - because they haven't been incorporated yet into legitimate economic life in any way - then they don't regard that law as binding on them necessarily. And they see crime as a mode of income redistribution. So there's a whole culture surrounding the politics of legitimation that becomes quite important.

Beyond that, crime becomes a mode of practice that carries a certain compulsion of its own. I'm not saying that there's a "culture of criminality;" this is as problematic as the discredited "culture of poverty" argument. But we need to capture the part of this dynamic that isn't just about marginality or scarcity. A lot of the people who get involved in the criminal economies, we know from anthropological and sociological studies, are not technically impoverished. In these kinds of social situations, involvement in particular sorts of criminal activities can provide modes of self-realization and pleasure - the frisson of danger, of being able to commit crime and get away with it - this can become a form of institutionalized sport. It may indeed start in the margins where people have to accept risks in order to survive, but then it in fact becomes part of more embracing cultures that are invested in youth, in whole modes of display of status accumulation, in structures organized around masculine solidarity - and sometimes female as well.

So there is a whole world of organization around criminality that becomes institutionalized. And this can flourish where there is an absence of real alternatives, or where the culture of getting and spending is so emphasized; in the new South Africa what counts, for instance, is the ability to show that you have succeeded in certain forms of post-racial capital, to display signs of this status. It's emphasized all the time in the importance attached to market-driven notions of entrepreneurial possibility. And crime is one of the ways of demonstrating entrepreneurial skill, risk-taking, bravado, most immediately.

What we have to understand is that the roots of crime are very complicated. They may have their origins in certain forms of scarcity, but they are not limited to that. Here is one place where anthropology is uniquely situated to make a contribution. It can guide those trying to understand and intervene, trying to find ways to bring young people who've never had a regular job back into a moral economy, a social consensus, into a social contract to which they have not previously been a party - to make forms of legitimate economic participation possible. But one can't simply assume that that by itself is going to solve the crime problem. Because that is not all that it's about - it's also about the valorization of certain kinds of legitimate possibilities. We must not forget what Walter Benjamin said about the criminal: the criminal can represent an instant of freedom beyond the constraints of the law. So criminality can carry a sense of liberatory potential. Of course, this logic carried out to its furthest conclusion results in forms of terror, of the terrorizing of whole communities.

But conversely, there are whole communities that live off of the profits of illegal modes of production. So this is a double-sided issue, and in fact the morality is ambivalent, and people will live with that ambivalence because the more clear-cut, legitimate alternatives are not there, or are

less immediately lucrative, less exhilarating. Also, because other means of affirming citizenship and personhood and status are not there, or are less effective. So here is a place where anthropologists can shed light - in thinking, for example, about why kids with college degrees will go out onto the streets and hijack cars. How do you move from situations where many high-school kids feel they have to go through a rite of passage, shoplifting from the store once or twice - to a situation where it becomes a mode of life that is valorized? How does this become a whole system of circulation of value among young people in places like South Africa that in some ways resembles a potlatch - a conspicuous expenditure of brand-name commodity wealth to obtain status.

There are fantastic cultural documents that describing this system - for example, the South African indie film called "Hijack Stories" (Oliver Schmitz 2000). This film uses the "crime business" as a lens for looking at new patterns of class formation among young black South Africans - above all, the interplay between those involved in the everyday illegal economy (in particular, hijacking cars to order) and those from the new African middle class, who watch crime on TV. One of the latter class, an aspiring young actor who seeks a role in a new crime show, wants to "learn the moves," to find out how it really is on the street. So he goes back to the hood where he came from, and gets involved in the criminal gang of some old schoolmates who have not had his suburban advantages. These kids show him some tough truths. Among other things, the film explores how inseparable are the realities of crime and its representations: how much criminal acts themselves are a form of knowledgeable cultural performance. The "culture of criminality" here involves extraordinary extravaganzas that take place when the kids have succeeded in pulling off a heist. When they've hijacked a car and they've got the money, they pick up the girls, and they go into these large, sparkling shopping malls. These are places where the new upper middle classes get to perform their higher status. Here the successful young criminals have their own extravaganzas, where the money gets thrown about, they buy these exorbitant designer clothes, and they then have a dance out on the street. During all of this, they have the guns that they used for the hijack displayed in their belts, and there is a sense of a kind of orgiastic pleasure pulsing through their revels. So while we see in all this a crude parody of new legitimate forms of status validated through conspicuous consumption, we also see the outrageous gangsta chic of flaunting crime's own iconoclastic pleasures.

**BP: Could you talk about anthropological contributions to understanding what so many people are describing as "globalization" - to analyzing all the layers and mediations involved?**

**JC:** Well, for example, crime in the media and crime in life are constantly imitating each other. The very soap operas or crime stories that are part of the extension of the new South African media, which everyone is watching on their flat-screen TVs at home in fascination and terror, are then recycled into the way in which people understand what it is to be masculine, what it is to be powerful, what it is to be recognized. South African crime and detective shows are part ethnography, part taken from police files, part imitation of the long-established crime genres in US and European TV and movie archives. So there is an historical system of validation that draws the line between the legitimate and the illegitimate, a distinction that is both local and translocal, and that is at once a "model of," and a "model for" reality—all these layers are things we need to study and understand. And that is where one has to begin, with the mediation itself - which is extremely complicated, and often driven by what seem to be legitimate forms of market development that add glamour, outcast empathy and erotic appeal to criminal types, even if the

law brings them down in the end. Such mediations have consequences that ripple through the communities. Already in the mid 20th C, urban black South Africans were resisting the ideals of humble tribal masculinity that their colonial rulers sought to impose on them, and choosing images from American gangster movies instead - of the Cagneys and the Bogeys. Likewise these days, images of suave, canny, politically cynical young hoods impart an instant heroic appeal. What is the appeal of years of patient toil of in an educational system when the future job market is uncertain, and if you can go out and steal a BMW and instantly have power and recognition? This sort of dilemma is not unique to South Africa; we are familiar with it in the US inner-city. And it raises incredible ethical problems - for all of us involved in seeking to analyse and represent crime and its causes, and to offer insight to policy-makers and educators.

I think that anthropology's contribution to understanding the culture of "the crime business" can be conveyed quite well to people in policy circles. For example, we can convey that one has to work on crime on several fronts at once. Clearly, poverty's linked to crime. There are obvious facts that you can track to establish this correlation When people don't have legitimate access to basic things that in their world seem key to life, not only do they need to survive by whatever means it takes, but the whole normative order seems illegitimate because it doesn't include them. Of course, the capitalist economic system overtly tells them that it does include them, but it actually doesn't. In fact, as the recent market crisis makes plain, it is not the corruption of over-greedy bankers that is at its root, it is a generalized culture that celebrates making the most money, in the shortest time, at the least possible labor cost. So the line between that and crime is a very thin indeed. In fact, there's a kind of mimicking quality—of risk-taking, of maximizing profit and minimizing costs—that we find in these very flamboyant subcultures of inner-city criminality, which must be taken quite seriously.

**BP: To some outside of anthropology, it can seem that a great deal of anthropological research has wound up charting an ongoing downward spiral, in which conditions in so many places continue to get worse as the so-called global economy and accompanying forms of culture spread. So where, if anywhere, in this anthropological account would you say that there is any place for hope?**

**JC:** I'd say that there is and there isn't a downward spiral: because such grand teleologies are always looped back through local circumstances, and through forms of life and accommodations that take them off in unexpected directions. So, yes, we're not going to go back to the small-scale face-to-face vision of the social community. That vision is no longer sustainable. We have to deal with a problematic world of very large scale. But out of every situation come new possibilities for finding novel forms of critique and ethics, that start from where people are and work with the conflicts that exist within the local system they inhabit. If you think about the early moments of industrial capitalism, you see that their inherent tensions led to forms of labor organization and protest, and then gradually, to kinds of accommodation like the New Deal, the Keynesian or welfare state - which were modes of accommodating the system to the agitations of working people. These claims didn't totally reverse the way the exploitative nature of the system worked, but they were organized around an ideal of equity for a larger community.

It seems to me that we are in another such moment now, as regards the implications of globalization in its neoliberal phase - where the increasing scale of economies of exchange and inequality are now presenting themselves in very stark ways. And we're beginning to see new forms of claim-making, new sorts of calls for rights and inclusion - often by means of litigation.

Now I'm not an unambiguous optimist about this. I don't think the multitude is simply going to arise and attain definitive social justice out of these circumstances. But I think we have to look in the right places to find the grounds for limited optimism. For example, look at the kinds of things that have come out of AIDS activism in the global South, where there have been successful efforts to modify agreements protecting the intellectual property of global pharmaceutical companies from the North, whose patenting of life-saving drugs has in effect held the rest of the world to ransom. The result has not been a significant cut in those companies' profits, or an undermining of their abilities to ensure incentives for the development of new medicines. But there has been a renegotiation of the conditions under which exceptions to patent protection—and the issuing of so-called compulsory licenses to produce cheap generic drugs—would be negotiated. This has made anti-retroviral medicines available to many—granted, not all—who had no previous access to them, for example. And activists have done this by using novel forms of politics and claim-making that come partly from deploying legal instruments, partly from exploiting the new ways in which media work, partly from a very old politics of sacrifice and shame. These kinds of issue-based approaches have their limits, but they have made certain inroads possible in the legal-bio-technical regimes that characterize the current global order.

Even in our current political situation in the US, flawed though it may be—there has been a shift for an entire generation of students and young people, who had become entirely disenchanted with the very idea of politics. Politics had become a dirty word that meant self-interest and backroom dealings. Obama's election was no panacea, to be sure. But to some extent, there has been some reclaiming, with his ascent, of the possibility that politics could serve as a form of moral discourse about society. And it's in that context that we need to reconceptualize issues around crime: the context of a heightened concern with lawlessness provides for various, renewed forms of claim on the state by citizens—vide the assertive critiques that have come out of communities in South Africa and elsewhere, where levels of crime are regarded as unbearable. And this goes beyond mere popular punitiveness, though this in itself is instructive, and needs to be understood. There has also been profound reflection—popular and scholarly—on the minimal requirements that communities need to be viable, indeed, on the elusive ideal of "community" itself. These conditions have also given rise to new forms of neighborhood organization - again, some purely defensive, some aimed at efforts to rebuild moral interdependence. Then there are scholarly attempts, at the international level, to try to get our hands around this growing preoccupation - even paranoia - about crime and protection. How do these anxieties relate to changing patterns of illegal activity, to criminal economies, to what comes to be defined as corruption under current geo-political conditions? This is where one has to look for signs of new forms of claiming and dispensation.

I think that to call this "optimism" or "pessimism" is too all-or-none. Because in some ways, we find in every situation in our late modern world an intensification of forms of control, commodification, and inequality. But at the same time, we find in some of these same situations an opening up of new spaces for protest against unfairness and inhumanity, new kinds of collaboration between peoples who are in structurally disadvantaged situations, new kinds of rights-based movements. Of course, these in turn carry their own limitations, and are certainly not going to bring the system of economic inequality to its knees. But they open up new spaces for debate and critique, and new possibilities for social action.

There's a generation of really interesting anthropologists out there now who are pushing the limits of the field in ways that bring to the fore a lot of these kinds of issues we've been talking about. It's not only that they're writing in interesting ways about problems of crime and order and

politics and social ethics; they're pushing the limits of how you write about these things and for whom. And they're raising questions about how you make anthropological insights available to a wider audience. There is a rapprochement between ethnography, journalism, fiction, and the media. So it's also a very interesting moment for our field, because anthropology is starting to go places it has never been before—I mean, there hasn't been a lot of concerted attention paid to the anthropology of dis/order and social breakdown for a long while; we're coming back to these foundational questions in ways that are extremely useful. My students have worked in prisons, for example, or among populations haunted by the fear of Satanic corruption. They have been inspired by writers like Jonny Steinberg—journalist, crime writer, and political theorist—who wrote a book about prison gangs in South Africa (The Number, 2004) that combines ethnography, social history, biography, and the style of the thriller. This is an account of what Benjamin called "the great criminal" that provides a compelling analysis of a whole society at a particular moment (1978:281). And it has been read inside the academy and way beyond. In the US, similarly, a TV series like *The Wire* provided compelling, grounded insight, via the prism of crime and policing, into the social transformation of urban America under late capitalist conditions. This is ethnography at its best, and an excellent example of what it is that an anthropology of crime can offer the project of understanding society and history in our times.

**BP: How would you describe current directions in our field, especially among younger scholars?**

**JC:** There is a return to a sense that we have a responsibility that goes with the privilege of being able to do this kind of research—and also a growing commitment to engagement. I see many people in legal anthropology, for example, actually getting drawn in through the situations in which they are doing research. We operate in a post-colonial world; it's no longer the case that would-be ethnographers just walk into colonial villages and expect that people will talk to them. Now we do our research with people who know that their time and resources are valuable, people in courts and elsewhere. So they want to know what we have learned, and they want us to talk to them in language that they can understand. I see more and more of this, and it moves beyond the traditional models of applied anthropology. It is a form of engagement with people who are also very capable of assessing the worlds we are examining in registers that carry weight, though from a different vantage. This requires something more of us, in interesting ways.

So there's that, and there's the fact that increasingly our universities are enriched by a global student population. And they come from worlds and go back to worlds to which they have to speak. This summer, I was involved in a summer school on New Approaches to Poverty at the University of Bergen. Students came from all over—from Cuba, from Latin America, from India, from Africa. The students and faculty came together with a willingness to engage in an open intellectual and policy discussion. At one point, a sociologist with a very different training than is found in the US or Europe contributed insights about issues of translocal crime—especially re the operation of narco-trafficking—that was astounding to me, because it came from an unexpected angle—it had a very different genealogy, but it spoke powerfully to things that we're struggling with in the global north as well. This also reinforces to the idea that the global south has much to teach us, because it runs a bit ahead of us—and there's this much more dialectical form of social science thinking that moves between theoretical work and the thinking of intellectuals who are active in the public sphere, in policy, in the political process.

For all of these reasons, it's a very exciting time to be in anthropology.

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**Notes**

1. When anthropologists talk about "counter-hegemonic" perspectives, they mean that they question commonly accepted, dominant views in societies - views that may emanate from the more powerful parts of the population who control access to public media, education, and other institutions that disseminate information.

2. Anthropologists use the term "imaginary" to describe cultural imagery and ideas that are widely shared in the imaginations of groups of people. This set of ideas and images itself can then shape how people respond to situations and to others, regardless of how accurate it is, or how well it meshes with ideas held by other people in society.