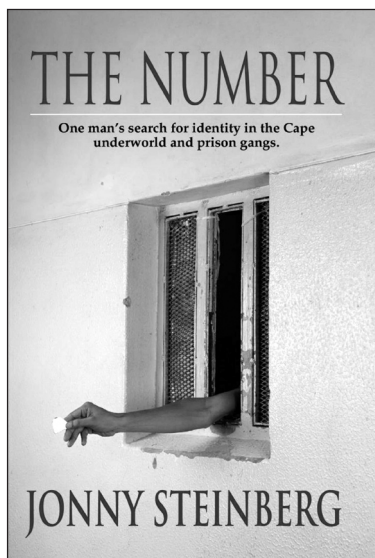


BOOK REVIEWS

THE NUMBER

JONNY STEINBERG

Jonathan Ball, 2004



There are almost 190 000 men, women and children (mostly men) in South Africa's prisons. Literally hundreds of thousands more trudge through their gates every year. Those who are entering the system find themselves in institutions that are overcrowded and understaffed, and in which they must learn to cope with endemic violence and constant material deprivation. Those who are leaving after months or years of confinement are seldom better equipped to deal with the challenges of life than they were before their incarceration. Indeed, for a large number, to resort to criminality is made all the more likely by the brutalisation they endured in prison and the impact of a criminal record on their job prospects.

This pattern is common throughout the world. But it is not the only way in which prisons – the basic functions of which are identical in most countries – are similar. Another example is the prison gang, a phenomenon that is so common that it is a symptom of some essential feature of the institutions in which it is found.

Prisoners all over the world, cut off from the rest of the world by the bars that surround them, develop distinctive and distinguishing social institutions to give shape and meaning to their lives. That this is so is hardly surprising since one of the intended effects of prison life, with its complete, 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week subjugation of diverse human beings to a set of rigid institutional rules and timetables, is to dissolve the individual identity of prisoners into the mass of their fellows. The quest to preserve one's identity, to re-establish, if only for oneself, the idea that one is a self-directed agent, often leads prisoners to develop their own institutions and through these to craft new identities that reshape and rearticulate their experience in more glamorous hues. These institutions, in other words, are premised on the deep human need to assert one's existence even in the face of the humiliation, mortification and alienation that comes of being a prisoner.¹ The result, often, is the existence of gangs.

Prison gangs in South Africa and many other jurisdictions are criminal enterprises – making money from drugs and robbery and extortion, for instance – and quasi-religious, cult-like institutions. In South Africa they are bound together through legends and arcane rituals shot through with references to the semi-mythological figure of Nongoloza, an early-20th-century bandit who later became, ironically, a prison warden.

If these gang cults have not exactly flourished over the generations, they have more than held their own against the authorities who run South Africa's prisons, constantly reproducing themselves through complex rituals of recruitment, initiation and promotion. Of all the more important institutions of socialisation in South Africa, these are perhaps the least known and the least researched. This is a pity, not only because they are interesting in their own right, but because their effects on prison management and prisoners are deeply problematic.

Fortunately, with the publication in 2004 of Jonny Steinberg's *The number* and the monograph *Nongoloza's children* that preceded it, this gap has, to a very large extent, been closed.

The number, Steinberg's biography of Magadien Wentzel, an unemployed former prisoner now in his forties who spent about half his adult life in prison and was a leader in one of the prison gangs, is a large, complex book. It weaves together an intimate history of the coloured community in Cape Town; how that community experienced the final decades of apartheid; and the transition to democracy; as complete a description of the structure and mythology of the prison gangs as can be found; and a heartbreakingly human tale of how these forces shaped the author's primary subject, Magadien Wentzel.

Like many coloured boys of his day, Wentzel, whose family were relocated from District Six to the ghettos of the Cape Flats in the 1960s, spent part of his desperately deprived youth in reformatories. For the rest, he was sucked into a local street gang, which led, inevitably, to his committing crimes of increasing seriousness. Most were simple property crimes or arose from the violence that came of the turf battles in which his gang was involved. Later he would commit crimes of dishonesty, stealing from his employers. It was these crimes that led to his arrest, conviction and being sent to jail for the first of numerous prison terms.

When we first meet Wentzel, he is in his last few months of his latest sentence. We meet a man who, despite a life of crime and a long career in prison gangs, is deeply committed to 'going straight' on his release and reconstructing his relationship with his family. The puzzle is where this commitment to going straight comes from.

The era in which Wentzel grew up was one of ever-tightening cycles of political conflict. He was not untouched by this and, for a while, participated on the margins of the resistance struggle. This changed dramatically when he entered prison and was quickly recruited into one of the gangs. There he latched onto the gang's self-image as a bastion of resistance against apartheid in the prisons, and a bearer of a distinctive and valuable culture. The experience was life changing.

The gangs offered an identity from which Wentzel could draw strength and re-imagine himself. This is not to romanticise prison gangs and Steinberg is especially careful to show their

malign influence: the violence they perpetrate on warders, their own members and members of other gangs; and their ruthless exploitation, often sexual, of other prisoners. But, ironically, in imbibing the gang's ideology, Wentzel was able to build up the strength of character that, nearly twenty years later, would make it possible for him to give up criminality.

Wentzel's transformation is the result partly of his character and partly of the transformation through which the country, its prisons and the prison gangs have gone. One of the principal *raisons d'être* for the existence of the gangs – resistance to apartheid – has gone with the transition to democracy. Others remain, such as the need to foster and hone a positive self-image, however warped, while in prison, and the need to maintain pressure on the authorities to improve living conditions. For Wentzel, however, the gangs, which have become channels through which drugs are sold and power is brokered, have become corrupt and corrupting. He is disillusioned by their failure to live up to the principles they espouse. He is older and wiser and, with half his life gone, he realises that he has little positive to show to his family, especially his daughter. For all these reasons, Wentzel is committed to going straight and the final chapters of the book trace the enormous difficulties he must overcome – his poverty, his family's desperate straits, the temptations of easy money from selling drugs and committing crime – as he tries to fulfil this ambition.

The number is a complex, powerful biography told with masterful care and subtle insight. It is an important book about the way the forces of history and the institutional logic of prisons toss ordinary men and women about. It is essential, if sobering, reading for anyone dedicated to the reform of the criminal justice system, especially prisons.

*Antony Altbeker*²

Notes

- 1 For an exploration of these issues, see J Steinberg, *Nongoloza's children*, Centre for the Study of Violence, Johannesburg, 2004.
- 2 Full disclosure note: the reviewer of this book counts himself a friend of the author Jonny Steinberg.