

Book review

Anneliese Burgess

Elrena van der Spuy*

elrena.vanderspuy@uct.ac.za

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Anneliese Burgess, *Heist! South Africa's cash-in-transit epidemic uncovered*, Penguin Random House, 2018, ISBN 9781776091713.

More than 50 years ago, Howard Becker asked the question Whose side are we on? in our conversations about crime and criminals.¹ Becker intended the question to force us to reconsider our assumptions about the value-free nature of research, the neutrality of the 'law', and the pathology of the criminal 'other'. Becker's argument was that, in our studies of the social world, we cannot avoid taking sides.

Becker's question has long plagued South African criminology. How else, in a political context where law and enforcement agencies served minority interests and where processes of criminalisation for contravening a plethora of apartheid laws so cruelly impacted on the racial underclass? Twenty-five years into the new democracy, Becker's question is still with us. The connection between crime and politics has not been disrupted. Social inequality continues to feed social discontent and moral ambivalence about the law and its enforcers. Furthermore, over the past two decades criminal enterprises and illicit networks have flourished. The destinies of the licit and illicit have become intertwined, and the question Whose side are we on? remains without a definitive answer.

In May 2018 Anneliese Burgess's *Heist! South Africa's cash-in-transit epidemic uncovered* was published. The publication was well timed. A few weeks after it appeared there were concerted efforts to mobilise security personnel, law enforcement agencies, the banking industry and the public around the 'plague' or 'pandemic' of heists. In mid-June 2018 security personnel and their trade unions staged protests in major cities across the country. Key arteries in Gauteng were throttled as cash-in-transit vehicles drove in slow formation. Protest

meetings by security personnel and their trade unions demanded immediate and lethal action against the perpetrators. 'Shoot to kill the thugs' – the title of one poster – summarised the mood. The trade union federation COSATU put forward a number of proposals: improve the conditions of employment for security personnel and upscale their training; utilise new technologies (more heavily armoured vehicles and better weapons) to reduce risk; deploy police escorts for transit vehicles; and root out corrupt elements inside security agencies.

The go-slow protest actions took place a day before the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee convened a debate on the issue (13 June 2018).

* Elrena van der Spuy is a member of the Centre of Criminology, University of Cape Town.

During the debate Police Minister Bheki Cele stated that cash-in-transit heists constituted a form of terrorism. They were meant to spread fear. In response, a high visibility and intelligence-driven campaign – a kind of counter-terrorist strategy – was necessary. He further acknowledged that insider rot in intelligence and police circles formed part of the problem. Any containment strategy also had to tackle ‘feeder crimes’ that stemmed from vehicle hijacking and the trade in illegal firearms. He reassured those present that under his watch he had every intention that the South African Police Service (SAPS), in close collaboration with the private security and banking industries, would ‘turn things around’.

Against this background, *Heist!* brings a disciplined inquiry to a complex issue of organised criminality. Burgess explores the phenomenon through 10 case studies presented over 35 chapters. Viewed together, the 10 case studies reveal key issues of importance for those interested in the study of crime and the discipline of criminology.

Data gathering: In the first instance *Heist!* sets an enviable example of robust data gathering. Documentary research is combined with rich interview data. Burgess possesses key critical skills from her years of investigative journalism. She is adept at following leads, cultivating connections, speaking to a wide range of informers and respondents, and double-checking sources. We read how plans about heists are conceptualised and put in motion. There are details about the heated and fleshy moments of ambush and contact. There is the efficient extraction of loot, of beating fast escapes and the miraculous disappearance into thin air of both perpetrators and their takings.

Key actors and groupings: Burgess provides a detailed breakdown of the human actors involved in heists. Cash-in-transit heists are not infractions committed by lone actors. Organised

forms of crime require groups of individuals to band together in pursuit of a common criminal goal. Such groupings are invariably stratified. There is role specialisation, with divisions of labour between individual cogs in the looting machine. The actors involved belong to social hierarchies and form social networks. They have social histories and career trajectories. While they are all men, they differ in role and personal history. There are the kingpins who write the crime script and give the orders. Foot soldiers play subsidiary roles. There are accomplices (or ‘Fingers’), recruited from the criminal justice system and the private security sector. In *Heist!* we confront a medley of actors – the drivers of cash-in-transit vehicles, the perpetrators and their accomplices.

Modus operandi: The technical or performative elements of law-breaking behaviour have been a respectable focus of criminological enquiry. Cash-in-transit heists are not crimes of passion committed in the heat of the moment, but require cool heads, professional skills and hard tools (men, vehicles, guns, explosives). Precision and nerve are necessary traits in this business. Burgess captures the modus operandi, the degree of planning and the level of organisation leading up to the event, and the mechanics at the moment of execution of a heist. For students of criminology, this engagement with the technical operationalisation of the crime sets a fine example of what it takes to map crime offence dynamics.

Motivational incentives: The motivational factors which propel people towards deviant or criminal activity have been central to criminological debates. Textbooks routinely invoke a wide range of risk factors organised into micro, meso or macro levels in search of explanations of criminal involvement. Not a professional criminologist, Burgess still succeeds in capturing critical moments in the lives of heist operatives. Here and there we

confront the critical motivations which spurn, push or pull them into the vortex. We also learn a fair bit about the rationalisations they invoke to justify their actions.

The seduction of crime: In 1988 Jack Katz lambasted criminologists for their lack of attention to the 'seductions of crime' or what he described as 'the moral and sensual attractions in doing evil'.² When crime is interpreted in social pathological terms, there is little space to recognise the thrill of law-breaking behaviour. Burgess succeeds in confronting the allure of the heist as action-on-steroids. Her respondents talk about the addiction to the thrill, of the build-up of tension before the hit, the rush experienced in the execution of that hit and the satisfaction-after-action. This kind of crime executed on highways constitutes public theatre. As public spectacle, it comprises bravery and violence, and yields bags of loot. The emotions invoked in spectator circles are contradictory. Horror and intrigue intermingle. The perpetrators project images of modern Robin Hoods pitted against the corporate giants. In their rationalisations of their actions they talk about a redistribution of wealth and of the insurance industry offsetting the losses of the industry. In effect, the author poses the question: *Whose side are we on in this instance of cash-in-transit heists?* Here the book moves beyond self-serving rationalisations and structural imperatives to consider the costs associated with cash-in transit heists, both for the economy and for society.

The trouble with organised crime: *Heist!* illuminates too the connections between the illicit and licit – between gun-wielding perpetrators, criminal networks and corrupt elements within the police and prosecutorial services. The complicity of state officials across the security and justice sector is described in compelling detail. She captures too the slow grinding of the wheels of justice; the tricks

utilised by defence lawyers in drawn-out court proceedings and the routine intimidation of witnesses. Such systemic features, combined with the tampering of records and the disappearance of evidence through corrupt court officials, result in institutional paralysis.

Heist! makes for riveting and troubling reading. It also poses a challenge to us all as we search for an appropriate balance between rich description of the complexity of crime dynamics; sound explanations that recognise both structure and agency; and policy-orientated interventions that can begin to contain the costs associated with organised forms of criminality. The spirit of enquiry she exhibits follows the advice of Howard Becker in the concluding paragraph of his essay:

We take sides as our personal and political commitments dictate, use our theoretical and technical resources to avoid the distortions that might introduce into our work, limit our conclusions carefully, recognize the hierarchy of credibility for what it is, and field as best we can the accusations and doubts that will surely be our fate.³



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Notes

- 1 H Becker, *Whose side are we on?*, *Social Problems*, 14:3, 1967, 239–247.
- 2 J Katz, *The seduction of crime: moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*, New York: Basic Books, 1988.
- 3 Becker, *Whose side are we on?*, 247.