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# “These violent delights have violent ends”: good subjects of everyday South African violence

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While the deaths of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali barely registered in the media and public consciousness, they can be read as an exemplar of South African violence. The more closely we examine this incident, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between those fighting for justice, and those undermining it. The imagined boundaries between law-abiding citizen and criminal become unclear, as does the distinction between the use of force to protect citizens, and the use of violence to damage the social fabric. This leads to a critique of the conventional attributions of criminality and ideas about effective criminal justice, and instead reframes the problem of violence as one of the constructions of certain kinds of subjects, persons for whom the normalised exercise of various forms of unrecognised or legitimated violence is part of the texture of everyday life.

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*Most of the evil in this world is done by people with good intentions.*

TS Eliot

*Those who commit acts of violence are surely responsible for them; they are not dupes or mechanisms of an impersonal social force, but agents with responsibility. On the other hand, these individuals are formed, and we would be making a mistake if we reduced their actions to purely self-generated acts of will or symptoms of individual pathology of 'evil'.*

Judith Butler, Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence

*These violent delights have violent ends and in their triumph die, like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume. The sweetest honey is loathsome in his own deliciousness, and in the taste confounds the appetite. Therefore love moderately. Long love doth so. Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.*

Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

Althusser (1971) posed the question of how capitalism reproduces itself. That is, given it is in so few people's interests, how does it continue to exist? In the overdeveloped world at least, it does not perpetuate itself by simple brute force alone, although this is certainly a primary tool of its imperialist extension. Rather, it requires other means of engineering its continuation, of ensuring that people neither rise up in revolt nor simply refuse to participate in the logic of its practices (Althusser 1971: 17). Following the lead of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci and other cultural Marxists, Althusser argues that capitalism reproduces itself by producing a certain kind of person, the kind of person who continues the system by merely carrying on with their everyday lives (Althusser 1971: 34). That is to say, capitalism reproduces itself by producing good subjects of capitalism (Althusser 1971: 37). This is to argue that society produces people who, because of what they experience as self-evidently true, feel that it is normal and right to do the things that ensure that the social system continues in its current form through their everyday participation.

Here, however, our focus is on violence rather than capitalism (if they can be so neatly separated). Thus we ask: can violence also be said to reproduce itself by producing 'good subjects' of violence? And how could we understand such a claim? Specifically, to wonder why violence in South Africa, despite being in so few people's interests, is so intractable and continues through history despite such elaborate attempts to address it as a social problem. Here Althusser's

(1971: 13) notions of the repressive and ideological state apparatuses are not exactly applicable, because we see that the massive machinery of the criminal justice system which consumes more than R100 billion a year (Kahla 2020), not to mention the ideological apparatuses of schooling, media and religion, are at least *ostensibly* committed to reducing violence. And yet it continues.

In this paper, we explain this reproduction of violence through a case analysis of a specific incident. The focus is not on the violent acts themselves, or even on the putative 'causes' of these acts, but rather on the *meanings* of these acts for all those involved, including the meanings for the broader society as a media audience (Stanko 2005: 3). This focus on meanings immediately runs against both the prevailing popular common-sense and dominant scientific practices in this field, and is precisely why we are adopting a theoretical framework that emphasises the (re)production of violent subjectivities, which is to say, people who would more-or-less spontaneously act violently in these circumstances (Brown and Hogg 1996).

We commit to a theoretically anti-humanist notion of 'subjects' to distance ourselves from the received liberal humanist notion of 'individuals', with its implied conceptual assumptions of rational self-interested agents, decision makers who act so as to pursue consciously calculated gains (Gilligan 1997: 94). Replacing this idea of 'the individual' with the notion of 'the subject' allows us to move beyond the two dominant ways of understanding those who are violent, and the consequences of these interpretative frameworks. The first is an implicitly theological and moralistic popular account which intuitively proceeds by classifying those engaging in violence as 'bad': the tautology of bad people doing bad things because they are bad people (ibid: 92). The second is an assumption that the violent people are self-interested rational agents calculatedly committing acts of violence because of the benefits these may bring to them (ibid: 94). Both of these frameworks for understanding violent 'subjects' justify our current punitive/deterrent interventions, from beatings to imprisonment, which despite their popular appeal, have historically failed to solve the problem of violence in society (ibid: 93).

We are more sympathetic to formal research projects that try to identify the underlying social 'causes' of violence by establishing correlations between specific conditions and violent outcomes (Stanko 2005: 1). These findings can, at least, lead to the justification of positive social change. But here too, our commitment to a post-structuralist theory of the subject precisely argues that these forces are not simply abstract structural determinants, but rather that these social conditions are mediated in the experiences of individuals through the structures of interpretation and meanings with which they engage their everyday worlds (Butler 2004: 15). Hence our focus on the *meanings* of this incident for

the participants, and our analytic focus on the way that these meanings make sense of their actions, while showing that they are not simply self-produced interpretations in the minds of rational actors. Rather, they are revealed to be shared frameworks of meaning in socially shaped *subject positions*. Thus we proceed by examining the violent activities, their meanings for the participants, and how these meanings arose from a background of socially constructed interpretations operating at the level of common-sense for the participants.

This approach also allows us to acknowledge violence as an expression of multiple elements at different levels which interact in a nonlinear way within a complex system. Rather than the typical 'scientific' project of isolating a single underlying cause (be that evolutionary, genetic, psychological, historical, cultural, economic or any other kind), we converge with complexity theory in seeking to understand a dynamic adaptive system, of which the individuals, groups, and broader society, are parts (Gear et al. 2018: 2-3). Many, but not all, of these dynamic elements can be revealed by analysing the emergence of, and responses to, the meanings that shape the unfolding of this incident.

## The Incident

Consider the following story. Although it functions as a kind of parable, which is to say, a model for an ethical critique, let us pause and consider that this is a true story, about actual people – not just cases, not just figures in a narrative. For it is precisely in being reduced to figures in particular narratives that these two individuals had their identities erased so forcibly that they are no longer alive among us. For us this story is not simply a parable, but a conceptual commemoration of the lives of Mlungisi Nxumalo, husband of Jabulise Nxumalo, brother of Ntokozo Mbanjwa, and of Lucky Sefali, uncle of Malusi Zangwa, father of a five-year-old son.



Mlungisi Nxumalo



Lucky Sefali

### Scene 1

It is around 5pm on Tuesday 5 September 2017, at the Stanfield Lane transport hub in Pinetown, KwaZulu-Natal. Bukisa Cele is driving with his 11-year-old son and his closest friend, who will be turning 44 years old the next day (Dlungwana 2017). The son goes to school in KwaNdengezi, and has a mental condition which requires some special care. His son has become agitated, so Bukisa stops the car near a shop to run and get him something to eat and drink, while his friend remains in the vehicle to care for the distressed child (Wicks and Olifant 2017a, 2017b).

### Scene 2

It is a regular workday afternoon, and as usual a bustle of commuters are heading home from work. Some of them notice a child screaming and struggling to get out of a vehicle. As the crowd gathers, someone reports hearing that a girl was seen being bound and forced into the boot of the car. This information is quickly circulated on the popular social media account of a local private security company. Back in the crowd, further information circulates that the man holding the child captive is a ‘kwerekwere’, an African foreigner.

The gathering crowd try to get the man out of the car, but he has locked himself in. They vigorously rock the vehicle from side to side until they manage to roll it over. The man gets out of the car and attempts to flee, but is accosted by the angry crowd who beat him to death. Another unrelated person attempts to stop the attack, but the crowd turns on him violently. The police and ambulance services arrive as the scene subsides. The crowd dissipates and no arrests are made. The person who tried to stop the attack is taken to a local hospital, where hours later he dies from his injuries (Highway Mail 2017a, 2017b).

### Scene 3

Bukisa Cele returns from buying food for his son to find his car rolled over on to its side and the bloodied body of his friend, Mlungisi Nxumalo. Mlungisi’s sister, Ntokozo Mbanjwa, described witnessing the brutal violence, without realising the victim’s identity: “It happened in front of me. There was blood everywhere and he was badly injured. I could see they wanted him dead. It was a horrific sight, so I decided to leave. I didn’t know they were killing my brother.” (Chutshela 2017).



This ghastly story is worthy of considerable reflection. More, we would argue, than the incessant stream of sensationalised reports of hijackings, housebreakings and violent property crimes that dominate the South African media. Yet, initially this story appeared only in the local neighbourhood *Highway Mail*. Then the unfolding horror of what had happened was taken up in emotional news stories about the innocent victims in the online *TimesLive* and the tabloid *Daily Sun*, only to vanish almost instantly from public awareness. Cell phone video of the attacks briefly spread rapidly on social media before disappearing.

## Imagining violence

This incident is interesting from an analytic point of view precisely because it is not what South Africans imagine when they think about violent crime (Collins 2013: 31). This statement immediately signals a crucial claim in our argument: that people imagine *something* when they think about violence (Stanko 2005: 3). Their understanding is not guided by technical conceptual terms or research findings, but rather by a set of everyday ideas about what kinds of violence are occurring, and which of these they need to worry about (Gilligan 1997: 91). These ideas tend to be provided socially, primarily in the media (Jewkes 2004: 58-91), who have a vested interest in representing the most distressing kinds of threat, as captured in the news media editorial wisdom '*if it bleeds, it leads*'. Substantial analysis has been conducted (Best 1999; Jewkes 2004) identifying how the process of selecting stories for newsworthiness results in accounts of extreme (and thus less common) forms of violence, in which there is a clear moral framing of a monstrous perpetrator and an innocent victim. In these stories readers are meant to clearly identify with the vulnerable victim, and feel outrage towards the monstrous perpetrator (James and Collins 2011: 5).

This media strategy leads to a proliferation of stories about people killed during carjackings, family members killed during housebreakings, and particularly gruesome sexual assaults, especially on children or victims perceived to be attractive or with high social status (Christie 1986: 17-30). These stories do not

simply appear in the news media, but are further circulated on social media and in everyday conversation, constructing a version of reality in which such events are felt to be clear and present dangers (Collins 2013: 31). The proliferation of these stories has a number of consequences. It produces an imagined landscape of threats and solutions (Dosekun 2007). A world in which a young man with a gun is likely to shoot you while hijacking your car is a world with different problems and solutions to one in which negligent managers of your local water purification plant allow *E.coli* into your water supply, causing potentially fatal diarrhoea in your children. The fact that child fatalities from contaminated water massively exceed fatal shooting by carjackers has little impact on this imagined reality. The hijacking scenario is lived more vividly, because it is an established narrative with a clear cast of actors. The age, race, class and gender of the perpetrators are easily imagined. A list of possible solutions is already at hand – put barriers on suburban roads, arm oneself, authorise use of lethal force by police, increase jail sentences, bring back the death penalty. This means that these imagined scenarios directly shape material realities – how people interact with each other, how they try to protect themselves, what political responses they demand, and what type of criminal justice system they support. This occurs regardless of how demonstrably incorrect these deeply felt ideas may be (ibid: 30).

The problem with the opening incident is that it disrupts this imaginary world in several important ways. But then that is also precisely its advantage.

## An exemplar of South African violence

How does the account of the killing of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali disrupt the prevailing ideas of violence in South Africa?

Firstly, these murders were not related to property crimes. They did not happen in the execution of a mugging, housebreaking, hijacking or business robbery, where most violence is imagined to happen. It is significant that typically when people discuss threats, they speak of crime and criminals. Thus, South Africa is first of all said to have a crime problem, rather than a violence problem (Collins 2013: 30). Violence is imagined to be simply one of the expressions of a rampant criminality, and the favoured strategy of criminals attempting to execute property crimes. Altbeker (2007) has already shown that in fact South Africa does not have especially high crime rates by international standards, rather it has exceptionally violent crime. But the deeper issue is that most violence is not even related to these types of crime (Collins 2009; Collins 2013: 31). Most assaults and murders are not part of the use of coercive force to redistribute material resources, they are what we would ordinarily think of as fights (Ratele et al. 2009). The criminological data (CSV 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; SAPS 2019) reveals that the

typical violent scenario is not a robbery, but young men out drinking with their peers on a Friday or Saturday night. Less *'open the safe or I'll shoot'*, and more *'you check me skeef?'* These masculine honour contests are far more common threats to men, just as intimate partner violence is a more common threat to women (CSRV 2007). Similarly, those who committed the Pinetown killings were not robbers, they had entirely different motivations.

But if they weren't robbers, what were they? This question leads us to the most troubling, and most important, part of the analysis. Here we must each ask ourselves, "What would you do to protect a vulnerable child?" If a child were being abducted to certain rape and probable murder in front of your very eyes, what would you be prepared to do? Phone the police and hope they arrive within an hour of the victim's disappearance? Intervene physically yourself? Do whatever was immediately necessary to incapacitate the perpetrator and save the child? This, in a practical, embodied manner, was a question answered by those in the crowd. Those who intervened were, in some terrible sense, good citizens – people who would go out of their way to protect a vulnerable member of their community, rather than look the other way or pretend that the authorities had the matter under control. Whatever else we may say about their actions, our analysis must at least begin by acknowledging this element of their good intentions. This is the second important way in which this incident is a more accurate depiction of violence than most media accounts: the way in which most violence in South Africa is not committed by those who identify as criminals, but rather by people who think their actions are reasonable and necessary, even well-intentioned (Collins 2013: 35).

This uncomfortable realisation is probably exactly why this story so rapidly disappeared from the popular imagination. It had the other elements of a viral headline story – horrific brutality and innocent victims (Jewkes 2007: 65–6, 78–80). But where it fails is in the perpetrators. They did not fit with the popular idea of the criminal. This idea is built on the clear moral distinction between 'us regular folk' and a category of essentially 'bad' people – ruthless, brutal, without respect for authority, and most of all fundamentally different from us decent law-abiding citizens who are at risk of becoming their victims (Gilligan 1997: 94). This sense of fundamental difference, of profound othering, is essential to the popular idea of criminality, and to the logics of populist responses – shoot them, hang them, lock them up and throw away the key. The difficulty is in imagining this crowd as simultaneously well-meaning and bloodthirsty. And yet, is it not clear

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1 "Did you observe me askance?" doesn't quite convey the confrontational aggression of this South African phrase.



that the populist responses to criminality listed above contain exactly the same combination of good intentions and unbridled aggression?

Perhaps then the difference between us and those who intervened is not that they are intrinsically bad people, but rather that they made a terrible mistake. Maybe this is a Greek tragedy with fatally flawed heroes rather than a Hollywood action movie with good guys and bad guys. But if the problem was that they made a mistake, should we not pause to carefully consider if we might also be in danger of making similar errors?

## A matter of interpretation

It is clear that the motivations of this deadly crowd were related to an interpretation of the situation. This is why we argued that the study of violence should attend closely to the *meanings* of violence (Stanko 2005: 3). The crowd members believed children were at risk, and that immediate intervention was required. Here it may be useful to ask how this interpretation became possible, for it did not simply occur to them based on the visible evidence of the moment, but was structured by a network of pre-existing understandings. This, in turn, is why we argue that the study of violence should proceed from the theoretical inquiry into *subjects* structured by pre-existing discourses, rather than presumed rational agents (Butler 2004: 15).

Foremost in this incident is the pervasive anxiety about child abuse. While it was previously denied and ignored, from the 1970s feminists began to reveal the extent of sexual abuse of children (Herman 2015: 40-4). This awareness grew until by the 1990s it had escalated into a moral panic (Hall 1978: 218-9) with some groups making bizarre claims of ritual satanic cults, while others focused on evidence-based exposure of systematic child sexual abuse in families (Russel 1997), schools and religious organisations. The life of this moral panic is visible in the escalation of the #savethechildren hashtag which in 2020 became part of the massive QAnon conspiracy theory linked to the Trump presidency, with claims that hundreds of US political leaders and socialites were involved in elaborate child sex trafficking networks, and were draining the blood of abducted children to extend their own longevity (CBS News 2020). Once again we see most extreme claims receiving media coverage, and public reactions to these imagined threats overshadowing the real work of dealing with the underlying social problems (Dosekun 2007).

What is interesting here is that this focus on child *sexual* abuse deflects attention away from the other ways in which children suffer serious harm, and becomes an exemplar of the very worst imaginable kind of events. Within

the context of this enduring moral panic, the sight of a child struggling to get out of a car was easy to interpret as indicative of abduction with the intent to sexually assault, and the random allegation of another being bundled into the boot was readily believed without any supporting evidence. Not only this, but these inferences triggered the deepest moral outrage, and a need to act so as to prevent this most horrible of possibilities.

Another key element in the crowd's interpretation of events is the problem of widespread xenophobia. A pre-existing discourse associating migrants from other African countries with criminality, and specifically a tradition of wholly unfounded allegations of abduction of children, further linked to sensationalised media reports of sexual trafficking, were already present in the minds of bystanders (Human Rights Watch 2020). Thus the random claim that the man in the car was a foreigner further supported the child abuse interpretation. But it did more than this. It served to other him, to make him an outsider and a threat. He became someone against whom violence was not only necessary, but that in his dehumanisation this violence was less of a moral hurdle than it would have been if he had been a local community member. Not only that, but in this (mis)classification, he also became an object of all the rage that had already been incited against migrants – the ongoing tradition of spuriously blaming foreign nationals for problems of unemployment, low wages, difficulty in accessing social housing, as well as drug dealing and other problems of criminality in marginalised communities. He thus simultaneously became the object of rage and a legitimate target of violence.

This occurred within another important framing – a general lack of faith in the police. While this belief that the local police are often slow to arrive, unenthusiastic in their interventions, and inefficient in their investigations, may be more readily supported by available evidence, it remains as dangerous as the other beliefs. In the absence of an effective police service, justice becomes a private matter. Here a kind of collective justice entrepreneurship emerges, where individuals and communities feel the need to take matters into their own hands, involving anything from establishing neighbourhood watch networks to initiating physical attacks on alleged criminals. Thus, in imagining the group of people finding themselves confronted with the scenario of children at risk of sexual assault by hostile outsiders, with little hope of timely intervention by the authorities, one can certainly understand the impulse to intervene.

A key problem in the perceived failure of the criminal justice system is that the Weberian idea of the state as the entity that is granted a monopoly on violence in democratic society breaks down, and violence becomes a legitimate resource to be used by citizens to solve their social problems. The striking thing

about this ghastly story is not that bystanders intervened to save an imagined vulnerable child, it is the sheer violence with which they did so. Although there were many of them and only one unarmed suspect, they did not attempt to apprehend and hold him until the police arrived: they vigorously, one might even imagine gleefully, beat him to his death. In the words of Mlungisi Nxumalo's sister, Ntokozo, who witnessed the escalation of the attack on her brother, "*there was blood everywhere and he was badly injured. I could see they wanted him dead.*" Not only this, but when an unrelated person, Lucky Sefali, attempted to stop the assault, they beat him to death too.

Somewhere here we have transitioned from the understandable, if misguided, interventions of collective justice activists protecting vulnerable members of their community, to the sickening brutality of a bloodthirsty vigilante mob.

## Thresholds of violence

It is in this uneasy transition between community justice and murderous vigilantism that we arrive at the core question of this analysis: why did this group feel moved to use violence in their intervention, and why this level of violence? Asked another way, how had the subjectivity of these citizens been structured, such that their response to the situation was to enact this violence? There is specific value in framing them as subjects, shaped by complex social conditions, rather than as moral agents deciding to do right or wrong (Althusser 1971: 34; Butler 2004: 15). We can assume that theirs was not a reflective decision based on a critical assessment of the situation and the viability of a range of strategies. Rather it was an immediate, intuitive response to their understanding of the situation. Just as their understanding was shown to be constructed from other prevailing discourses, this embodied response needs to be understood in terms of its underlying conditions of possibility rather than as an abstract moral judgement. As outlined earlier, this shows why adopting an anti-humanist theory of subjectivity is more productive than the conventional humanist notion of the individual as a rational, autonomous agent.

The issue here is that while retrospectively many people may agree that the vigilante crowd's actions were wrong, it also seems that these were not 'ordinary' criminals. There may have been some psychopathic bystanders who joined in the escalation once they spotted an opportunity for cruelty to helpless victims, but this is not what triggered the collective assault. It is here that we need to disrupt the ease with which violence and criminality are commonly conflated, and specifically the way in which the idea of the criminal serves to other certain groups of people, neatly dividing society into good, decent citizens, and outlaws who exist only as threats (Collins 2013: 35). This in turn supports the idea that

violence is something criminals do, and that it can be clearly distinguished from legitimate uses of force.

One question to ask is: what would people have thought had this vigilante action *not* been based on mistaken interpretation? If the victims had indeed turned out to be career criminals, abducting children and trafficking them into international paedophile networks? If they had been found to be serial rapists and child killers? The answer to this question can be found in the comments below almost any South African online news article about violent crime. Mostly, bystanders would have cheered. The brutal killings would not only have been perceived as justified, but triumphal. Society would have been cleansed of its worst scourge, and those responsible would be heroes. Another example of this can be seen in the defence mounted in the Oscar Pistorius trial (Phips 2014). Pistorius's actions were said to have been justified because he didn't mean to kill Reeva Steenkamp, he was merely shooting a suspected criminal in the bathroom. That he actually killed his partner was a terrible tragedy. The assumption at work, widespread in South Africa but astonishing to many elsewhere, is that the killing would have been acceptable if the victim had really been a criminal. Despite the fact that there was no claim that this imagined criminal had actually threatened him, despite that he had no idea who they were and what their motives and strategies might be, the mere idea of the person as a criminal legitimates lethal violence in the popular imagination, if not in law. It is this common-sense that would have been guiding the killers of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali.

What our analysis reveals is that violence is not just a practical tactic used by criminals, but rather that, in many different ways, it is a normalised strategy used by ordinary people for negotiating their worlds (Collins 2013: 31-2). It is used for managing labour disputes, drawing attention to poor service delivery, protesting exclusions from universities, discouraging economic competition, contesting politics, protecting one's property, resolving perceptions of personal status, policing gender norms, managing intimate relationships, regulating the behaviour of children, and a broad range of other social interactions. Some of these are at the threshold of criminality, but are highly contested, such as the legitimacy of damaging property in protests when the conditions being protested are more damaging than the destructive acts. Some are almost completely normalised, like hitting children in the name of discipline (Karr-Morse and Wiley 1997), despite decades of research showing the harmfulness of this practice and its recent prohibition under South African law.

Violence is deeply embedded into everyday life, but for the most part it is not recognised as violence because it is understood as normal, legitimate and necessary. It is only when it exceeds certain thresholds that a problem is flagged:

when too many miners are shot dead in a single incident, when the Uber driver is burned to death in the boot of their car, when the assassination of a community leader is revealed on television, when the xenophobic attacks escalate to 50 murders in a single month, when an intimate partner is found dead, when the bullied learner dies by suicide, when the disciplined child has to be hospitalised, when the sexual coercion involves physical blows rather than psychological manipulation. Through all these examples, there is no stark contrast between the peacefulness of law-abiding citizens and the violence of outlaws. Rather, there is a continuum of normalised violence and an unstable threshold of when it ruptures into social unacceptability. The 'good subjects' of violence are much more ordinary than we have been inclined to assume (Collins 2013: 31-2).

This normalisation of violence is nothing new. The history of colonisation was first and foremost a history of brutal violence, and this certainly continued in the brutal politics of apartheid. This history not only entailed colonial and state violence, but legitimated the violence of resistance. But it is not simply historical political violence that produces current subjects. The structural violence of poverty, inequality, and socio-economic stress is strongly correlated with interpersonal violence across many societies (CSV 2008b, Bruce 2010). Intergenerational cycles of violence are perpetuated through exposure to corporal punishment and family violence. Emotional trauma and neglect in childhood are known to increase the risk of later violence (Karr-Morse and Wiley 1997). Thus, the preconditions for the formation of violent subjects are in place across multiple dimensions. Further, the conditions that might ameliorate these processes are weak. The failure to change the massive economic inequality of South African society, the brutal material conditions of life for many millions, and the weakness of existing social safety nets, produce stress and conflict. Violence, abuse and neglect of various kinds are built into families, childrearing, and education – often with widely accepted social justifications despite being formally criminalised. There is an ongoing failure to offer effective non-violent forms of negotiation in interpersonal and political life, and the lack of confidence in the criminal justice system serves to legitimate vigilante action.

It is here that complexity theory can be fruitful in showing the complex adaptive systems in which incidents of violence occur, and of which they are an expression. Rather than the common reductionist tendency to focus on one select underlying cause, we recommend paying simultaneous attention to the multiple elements that interact in nonlinear ways (Gear et al. 2018: 2-3), and how these form intersecting systems: some transient like this incident, some stable like the historically sustained patterns of violence in South African society.

The preceding analysis reveals that the killers of Mlungisi Nxumalo and Lucky Sefali were not simply guided by prejudices and an incorrect interpretation of circumstances. They were also potentially driven by many other forces: the terrible frustration of trying to survive under impossible economic circumstances, their own histories of social and interpersonal trauma, the normalisation of violence in their communities and families, the histories of beating in the name of discipline at home and school, the bullying from which they were never protected, the failure of their worlds to offer them effective non-violent skills for managing situations of crisis and conflict, and a sense of having to fend for themselves in a dangerous world, to name but a few. They understood and responded to a situation through frameworks of meaning that they did not themselves create (Butler 2004, 2020).

The force of this analysis is to show that if all we have to offer in the face of these horrible killings is a conceptually unsustainable moralising distinction between good citizens and criminals, if our inclination is to respond to threats with calls for more violence – more forceful neighbourhood watches, more aggressive vigilante action, more brutal policing, more cruelly punitive incarceration – then we have very little indeed. For the problem outlined here is not one of criminality, but of the construction of ‘good subjects’ of violence: ordinary people whose social worlds have produced conditions of violence and normalised it as an everyday strategy in many different ways, and who have come to accept as routine the use of ‘good’ violence in their lives, only to be horrified when it inevitably escalates into exactly the kind of violence they are trying to avoid. Thus the fantasy of addressing this problem through the counter-violence of punishment and retribution fades away, and the much more difficult work of dismantling the multiple complex systems which produce these subjects of violence comes into focus.

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