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Researchers turn a critical eye on safety, anxiety, and how they're shaping society

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Jean and John Comaroff, professors in the Departments of African and African American Studies and of Anthropology, divide their teaching and research between Harvard and universities in South Africa. Their scholarship has focused on colonialism and the transformation of societies in the postcolonial and late modern worlds. A recent joint

effort, "The Truth about Crime," documents their "existential engagement" with the interplay of crime, policing, and sovereignty, in response to what they see as a rising global preoccupation.

The Comaroffs joined the academic boycott of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s until the transition of power and formal end of apartheid in 1994. Upon their return to Cape Town, they immediately noticed an overwhelming preoccupation with crime in South Africa. Their desire to unpack this obsession, and what it says about modernity and our relationship to the state, is the subject of their book. Together, the Comaroffs consider the economic, political, and sociological shifts that underlie modern attitudes toward criminality and how these shifts have contributed to the fear of one another, to racial violence, and to public distrust in government.

The Weatherhead Center spoke to the Comaroffs from their home in Cape Town, and asked them to tease out some of the complex relationships between crime and policing and how they affect the concept of citizenship.

Q: Wasn't there an empirical rise in crime just after the transition of power in South Africa in 1994?

JEAN: Crime rates, particularly in places where there has been radical transition—such as post-Soviet Russia and Latin America—have tended to increase in the wake of such change. In South Africa, after the 1994 transition there was said to be an uptick in crime, then a tailing off, a plateau, and then a diminishing in many categories of felony. However, most people would simply not believe this; the most adamant being those who were least vulnerable because they could afford private protection.

JOHN: For us, then, the question became: Why do those who are least

affected by crime panic most about it?

JEAN: Ironically, the populations most affected by crime—the poor, black South Africans, especially women—obsessed about it least. They suffered massive unemployment, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and domestic violence against women and children. They were the ones who victimized each other in a state of desperation; these communities had so much to worry about that they did not obsess nearly as much about crime, which had long been a fact of their everyday lives.

JOHN: Globally speaking, criminologists debate whether crime rates have gone up or down. And that is a complex question, largely depending on what and how we count. But the question for us is: What do we actually talk about, what do we actually mean, when we talk obsessively about crime?

Like Americans these days, South Africans have a lot to panic about. We ought to panic here in South Africa about accidents—or at least what appear to be accidents, the rates of which are extremely high—and about rising poverty and inequality; just as in North America we ought to worry about the disappearance of security nets at the behest of conservative ideology, which is putting more and more people in deeply desperate conditions. But we seem not to panic too much about these things. Or, at least, not for long or in any systemic way. When it comes to crime here in South Africa, we all have stories, bad stories, but these do not necessarily add up to statistically significant phenomena—which figures on poverty and inequality do. Ironically, it is only the poorest, the most destitute, who actually suffer criminal violence with the kind of frequency that is statistically significant. Ironic, because it is those populations who are more often accused of crime, rather than seen as its usual victims. One of the objectives of the book is to explain all this, to make sense of the phenomenology of fear—and why it is that we invest so much attention away from things that should worry us toward those

that, while certainly a cause for concern, are hardly cause for panic. And yet elections across the world are fought in the name of law and order, of being tough on crime. Not poverty or inequality.

Q: You say the white elites in South Africa have the highest anxiety about crime, yet they experience the fewest incidents. What accounts for the disconnect in their reaction?

JEAN: They are used to controlling their worlds. So, if they suffer a domestic robbery or a carjacking, it feels momentous, life-threatening—which it sometimes is, although less often than South African whites believe—because life is meant to be safe for people like them. Or so they assume. They buy insurance. They live in well protected homes. They believe that the state ought to protect them. Those who live on the South Side of Chicago or in black townships—or, for that matter, in US inner cities—are not in control of their worlds in the same way. And do not have the same expectations.

Q: Do you both feel safe living in Cape Town?

JEAN: We feel no less safe living in Cape Town than we did when we lived on the South Side of Chicago, where affluent and deprived communities live in close proximity. In both, crime rates vary enormously across the urban scape. If one knows the social geography and crime maps of the city in which one lives—and one has the means, the capital—one can avoid dangerous areas to a significant degree.

Q: Is disproportionate fear of crime a global phenomenon?

JOHN: What has struck us as interesting is that rising fears of crime appear to be popping up all over the world, including in unexpected places. If you read Swedish newspapers, people are panicking about immigrants and lawlessness, even though their actual rates are miniscule. In Singapore there are street signs saying "Low crime is not no crime." Why in Singapore of all places? In Chicago people talk very similarly about crime as they do here in South Africa. And everywhere they tend to attribute it to contingent circumstances—to the failure of police, to the inherent violence of (usually racialized) others, to the sheer badness of, to invoke Donald Trump, "bad hombres," to poor socialization by irresponsible parents—not to structural conditions in our social order. For example, in many parts of the world moral panics about crime correlate very closely with the shrinkage of the welfare state. But very little public discussion attends to this fact. In the United States, it would be regarded as "too ideological," even "socialist," to raise the possibility.

Q: In your book, you give many accounts that illustrate a loss of trust in government to protect people and enforce the law. As you explain, the possible reasons for this are very complex. Failure of trust is evident in the security systems we have on our houses, and also in the instinctive fear that arises when we encounter black youth wearing hoodies. Can you describe the deep structural changes that may underlie this crisis of trust?

JEAN: Many people from Africa who come to the United States say the first thing they notice is the profound mistrust in government, as if the state is there to rob you, to spy on you, to extract your secrets.

We argue in our book that ultimately this is due to the ways in which the

relationship between the state, the private sector, and policing has changed. Since many of the classical functions of government, including warfare and enforcement, are now outsourced, we can never really be sure who actually is drawing that line between the law and its transgression, between good and ill. Or with what intent: for their own profit or for the interest of those they claim to be serving.

JOHN: One of the great successes of conservatism in the United States is to make us fearful and untrusting of the state. Arguably, the historical periods that we regard retrospectively as "good times," times of ethical centeredness and social civility, are those in which the welfare state has been strong and active. Many economists, left and right, see the best decade in US history to have been the 1960s, although some now say the 1990s. Note that the 1960s was the strongest era of the welfare state in America. Unions were strongest, taxes were highest. And, save for the far right, we were happiest. GDP was elevated, inequality was much lower than today.

Q: Another key argument you make is that inequality lies behind our persistent fears about crime, and judgments about who is the criminal. Does everything come back to inequality?

JEAN: The relationship between poverty, inequality, and race is very tight. Both here and in the United States, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we began to see the effects of the chronic disposability of large sections of the population, of high unemployment that is with us to stay—whatever politicians promise to the contrary. In a growing number of cities there are now large populations that seem to have little reason to exist. And little economic means to do so. This is also true in parts of England, where industrial working classes are now chronically without work.

So there is a sense that there are whole sectors of the population of these countries that are compelled to live by means that are neither orderly nor respectable. They're not governed by the routines of work and property. Here in South Africa, liberation came with economic liberalization: the end of apartheid was heralded by the dawn of a new, largely postindustrial moment, with large-scale mechanization of mining, and with the downsizing of the workforce. Suddenly there were these black youths who had been promised a better life but experienced the opposite. And so some of them took what they felt should have been theirs. And some had little choice but to turn to crime for their survival. It became the only real means of redistribution. That, certainly, is part of the story.

Q: As you point out, corrosion of trust stems from not knowing if your government is good or bad, if law enforcement is on your side or working for the interests of the privileged. How has this ambiguity toward the state been reflected in our popular art forms?

JEAN: For one thing, the content of crime television shows has changed a lot sociologically. For a long time our predominant model was the "positive" detective, a "goodie," who, even if he had to break the law to catch his criminal adversary, even if he was a maverick, managed to solve the puzzle and put the world to rights. That's why it is often argued that crime fiction is on the side of state power and social order. What has shifted recently is the proportion of shows in which it's not so clear to who is on which side. Or where the line actually is.

Credit: Harvard University

Think about the popularity in the United States of the Sopranos and Breaking Bad, TV dramas that do not allow us to draw a clear distinction between the criminal and legitimate. Who are the criminals? Are they the cops? How do we differentiate in Breaking Bad between the drug manufacturer Walter White and his police officer brother-in-law? Who's paying for whose medical care? The officer's wife is a kleptomaniac, but her husband does not treat her thefts as crime.

JOHN: And in these stories we don't trust the state to solve the problem. The guy who is supposed to be the law is often now himself in the game.

Q: So, popular art is acting like a mirror on our modern anxieties about the state?

JOHN: Yes, both popular art and everyday docudrama. Think about the Bulger trial in Boston. Once it started to play out it wasn't clear whether he or the FBI was on trial; the feds had allowed this man to operate in the interest of getting at the local mafia. Meanwhile, everybody was on the take, including, allegedly, Bulger's brother, a long-time state senate president.

The line between the legal and the illegal is essentially murky because there are huge zones of "a-legality": activities that aren't really legal, but they're not technically illegal either. This, incidentally, is the domain that Donald Trump has navigated all his life. Is it illegal that the feds rent space in Trump Tower in order to protect him and his family? It certainly seems to be crossing a line, but nobody's prosecuting him. Exactly the same sorts of thing have happened here in South Africa around the presidency and political cadres. As we explain in the book, this has everything to do with changing relations between government, business, and policing. The relationship between them is very complicated, and often deeply complicit.

Q: In the United States, we have seen a pattern of homicides of unarmed black men by police. Beside the issues of inequality and lack of faith in law enforcement, does your research help us to understand the culture of fear of one another?

JOHN: Cops are terrified of black men, and black men are terrified of cops, and each side has their reasons, their justifications, their fears. The point is that these are two worlds each reading the other as intensely and universally hostile. Part of the problem is that neither side can, in effect, read the other; they cannot tell apart those of whom they might be legitimately afraid from those who are essentially benign. For both, the signs are largely unreadable.

Black youths in predominantly white Southern towns are terrified by white kids with crew cut hair, and other stereotypic signifiers of whiteness. When black youths see these signifiers, they assume they're going to suffer white supremacist violence. Statistically, the chances that they will encounter such violence is actually quite low. But that does not allay fears. Just one incident is enough to induce a defensive reaction. The same is true for most black kids seeing a cop. Given the recent history of police killings, whatever the circumstances that may have caused them, that cop is going to be presumed armed and dangerous—even though, in statistical terms, the vast majority of officers do not kill. But the phenomenology of fear presumes the exact opposite. This is true for all of us all the time.

JEAN: We live in a profoundly divided social world, one that "reads" race very quickly, but does not read class terribly well. Perhaps this is because both South Africa and the United States are societies whose modern capitalist form was based on racial bondage, and hence on very sharp distinctions forced in color. If cops coming across a black youth on the South Side of Chicago could read the signs that signal "middle-class kid" or "propertied family," they would probably leave that kid alone. But they can't read those signs. British cops had a similar crisis back when we were teaching there. Black students would tell us that police who saw them carrying a briefcase or a computer simply assumed that they had stolen it. Every black person, to them, was a criminal-in-waiting. We are, in short, a society very poor at social reading—and one

in which it is widely believed that crime lurks everywhere.

In point of fact, most of us go through our lives without encountering much crime. But nonetheless, fear pervades. So when we see a hoodie, we presume violence. We don't jump to the conclusion that its wearer may be a young human being who has just watched the latest hip hop video and is acting out what he saw to be trendy. A hoodie is often just a hoodie.

Racism goes in every direction in our world. In its most innocent form, it arises from the inability to read social signs—and the fears that follow. Of course, it has many much less innocent forms.

Q: How can we become better "readers"?

JEAN: One of the problems is that we live in increasingly isolated worlds. We watch different television, we read and listen to different media, and we rarely cross ideological or cultural divides. In South Africa, and to some degree in the United States, where people do actually work together and get jobs done together, they learn to read the signs and break across those lines of difference. At the same time, rising inequality and the growing gap between livable and unlivable neighborhoods has the opposite effect: it makes us strangers to each other. We look at each other across increasing distance and we can't really see each other. It's rather like an old-style colonial situation.

JOHN: Even more so when we look at the world and each other through digital screens, which we now do all the time. Social media algorithms surround us with things that we've already seen, said, heard before and they trap us in echo chambers where we encounter only what we already think, what we believe we want. Not things that, heaven forbid, may discomfort us, force us to think, or be creative.

Q: How do we address the blurring of lines between government and business that's eroding our sense of security and citizenship?

JOHN: The great modern American tragedy is to see the state and society as opposed to one another. Human accomplishment has often lain in mutual trust, mutual enablement between the two. That is what we mean by democracy: by democracy being the investment in government of the will and the agency of a people. We're in a situation where, for example, after the Sandy Hook school shootings, some 90 percent of Americans wanted a debate over gun legislation. It didn't even get onto the floor of Congress. By any measure, that is profoundly antidemocratic. That is state acting against society, not state existing for society. Whatever the outcome—and that ought to have been determined by public opinion, by the public that government ought to, but rarely does, serve—allowing debate would seem to be a first obligation of representative government. Which we have only in theory, especially since Citizens United v. FEC. What we urgently need is a political theory that sees civil society and the state as partners and doesn't allow the market (that is, the corporate sector) to play God. The market always favors wealth and power over the powerless.

Q: How do we create this kind of politics on an individual level?

JOHN: One lesson we can learn from South Africa is that here we do talk across social and ideological lines; here we fight about issues. People get into the street and they argue. They go into classrooms and they shout at each other. But at least this produces a kind of social and political awareness, which, in effect, we have tended to withdraw from in the United States, where liberals only listen to liberal radio and read only liberal papers; and conservatives do the same. Here, in South

Africa, everybody basically listens to, reads, and watches the same media.

JOHN: The campuses here are majority black and black students don't simply accept what is taught them. They want the universities to be decolonized. And they speak in harsh, demanding language. And white students have to listen. At first they resisted. But with time they began to hear and slowly inroads were made. Some of them feel silenced and shut up, but others did begin to speak. And so there is a glimmer of hope for real democracy, not the kind of democracy in which we don't actually communicate.

Q: What do you think holds back Americans from this kind of public debate or dialogue?

JEAN: Well, for one thing, they are a relatively disempowered minority now facing a great deal of conservative white racism, validated by the highest office in the land. I think that, for them, it will involve seizing back the idea of democracy in action. It requires that people get off the online petition and get out into the world, there to press up against people face to face—and make themselves fully heard. That, at least, is part of the issue.

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