Book Review: *The Number*
JONNY STEINBERG
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Reviewed by Francis B. Nyamnjoh

_The Number_ very broadly articulates the democratization of South African society since the end of apartheid in 1994, and the impact of this transition on prison communities structured on the principles of apartheid and the discipline and punish logic of prisons everywhere. In the words of the author, the book demonstrates “why generations of young black men lived violent lives under apartheid, and why generations more will live violently under democracy” (p.11). Using the life of William Steenkamp/Magadien Wentzel, Steinberg demonstrates the proximity of the history of crime to the central fault lines that have shaped and continue to shape South African society. In William Steenkamp/Magadien, Steinberg sees the sort of man he wanted to write about, especially as: “I was frightened of penning a story about hell; I wanted to find a redemptive tale, to write about someone who had journeyed to the heart of the inferno but had come out the other side.” (p.27-28). _The Number_ thus recounts Steinberg’s and Magadien’s journey into the latter’s past (p.44) Thus informed by how William Steenkamp/Magadien Wentzel has come to understand his own past and why”, _The Number_, a highly researched book rich in prison ethnography and organizational sociology, is as much about history as it is about memory. Two themes have caught my attention: (a) democratization and (b) identity.

**On Prisons and Democracy in South Africa**

In post-apartheid South Africa where the rhetoric of equality of humanity, democracy peace and reconciliation are the order of the day, personal and communal identities are increasingly seeking representation for a complexity and plurality that the rigid policing of identities in the past had rendered invisible to the insensitive bureaucracies of legality and legitimacy. Considered as the most outlawed and subhuman of dehumanized blackness under apartheid when it was commonplace for white men to play out “their fantasies that blacks were animals, and in the process brought out the animals in
themselves” (p.10), the black prison population has not been indifferent to the democracy bandwagon, often appropriating it to reinterpret the past, justify their actions and dream new futures of tolerance, belonging and conviviality. Even the prison administration, used to disciplining and punishing, would have to re-invent itself through a revalorization of black humanity and a more empathic and contextualised understanding of crime and punishment. Both of these dimensions are captured through the story of a prisoner widely known under the false name of William Steenkamp [name in a stolen ID book (p.303)], who joined the 28s [one of the three competing and complementary prison gangster groups – The Number] in the late 1970s while still in his teens, and whom Jonny Steinberg, author of The Number, first met in October 2002, when he was about to be released from Pollsmoor prison.

The winds of change in tune with democracy and the contradictions arising from it in South African prisons are well epitomized by two coloured people at the centre of The Number - Jansen, the new administrator of Pollsmoor, whose philosophy and approach to prisoners Steinberg describes below, and Steenkamp, Steinberg’s main informant:

“He [Jansen] came armed with a philosophy as laudable as it was naïve: an evangelical belief that all men’s souls are naturally gentle, that only the cruelty of history had made them bad. He identified with the gangsters behind the bars. The humiliations he had suffered as a coloured warder working in apartheid’s jails were the same humiliations, he though, that had turned many Cape Flats men into monsters. He believed that violence was born from self-loathing, that if he showed the Generals of the Number gangs how to respect themselves, their innate humanity would shine through.” (pp.24-25).

But both Jansen (as concerns democratising South African prison management) and democratization of the wider society face formidable hurdles, as the reality remains schizophrenic and pregnant with rhetoric.
It is therefore little surprising that Pollsmoor prison is “a world nourished by stories” as “weapons, tools, [and] the stuff of action”, and a place where prisoners want to unload their stories into a journalist’s notebook, organized around the master story of Nongoloza, the God of South African prisoners (p.17-18). Thanks to the mythical feats of Nongoloza, the prison Number gangs – the 26s, 27s and 28s - had demonstrated courage in the struggle against the indignities of apartheid. In the words of William Steenkamp, “They stood up and fought for our rights under the apartheid regime, for us to be treated in a humane way. But when democracy came to South Africa everyone forgot the blood that we shed in prison for the sake of democracy. Instead we were labeled as gangsters. Let me put the record straight: we were never gangsters. With out souls and our minds we were freedom fighters. We put our bodies and lives on the line for democracy, and we are doing it yet again for change.” (pp.28-29) Thank goodness for the prospects offered by trolleys which carry more than just food, as they often serve as the prison’s telephone lines, carrying information and instructions (p.19), that help make dissenters toe the line and harvests whatever dignity is possible within the cosmetic democracy that has inherited apartheid.

A central theme of the book is that to change for the better, prisoners need the active cooperation of the outside world, a concern which William Steenkamp articulates superbly in the following words:

“It is no use us prisoners changing … if the world outside is still the same. You are still labeled a criminal when you leave, which means you don’t get a job. And inside here, we are told when to eat, sleep, walk, exercise, play sport, when to watch TV and when to phone our families. How can you expect a person enslaved in this mentality to have responsibility on the outside? That is why we always come back.” (p.29)

That is why prisoners consider the state and social structures – “the system” “a factory for criminals”, making “criminals out of decent people” (35). It is also why The Number, whose death prisoners seeking redemption may wish, remains very strong even after democracy came in 1994, not only in prison, but also in the streets of cities and townships.
across South Africa (pp.38-39). Parallel to this, is the resilience of racism, despite the
rhetoric of transformation and celebration of The Rainbow Nation.

**On Identity – What is in a Name?**

William Steenkamp, who has “served five or six sentences over the last 20 years. Each
time under a different name” (p.40), was, in the words of Steinberg, “a hell of identities
not yet erased, and identities not yet formed.”(p.43). He captures his identity crisis (or
should I say wealth) thus:

“My mother, she is the Wentzel in my life; she is a Muslim. My foster-mother, in
whose house I grew up, her name is Mekka; she is a Christian. When I was a child
I went to church. I sang in the choir. When I was told who my real family was, I
was sent to mosque. So you can say I am confused.

“My father was a Christian. But I am not sure if he was really my father. If he was
my father, why didn’t they give me his surname? Why Wentzel? Why my
mother’s name?

“When I get out of jail, I am going to ask my mother for forgiveness for the things
I have done to her. I will cry in front of her, and then I will sit down and ask her
some difficult questions. I want to know who my father is, and when I find out, I
want to take his name. And then my sons must take his name. JR and Steenkamp
must disappear. I owe it to my children that they know who they are. And to their
children and the children after that. I have fucked up my life. Why must I also
fuck up the lives of children who have not yet been born? Why must they wander
around nameless like me?” (pp.40-41).

To get a job with Mr Morris, he had to work under the name of William Steenkamp, a
stolen ID he had assumed. “I could not work under my real name. You don’t get a job
when you have a record like mine.” (p.41). But the troubles of going through with a false
name were enormous, as the identity of ‘William Steenkamp’ haunted his work and made
life at home intolerable.

http://www.nyamnjoh.com/
“When I’d been working a while, I started saving some money … The question was what to do with it. Do I open an account in the name of Magadien Wentzel? Or William Steenkamp? We opened an account in my wife’s name. What sort of family man can’t open a bank account? He doesn’t exist.

“Then the phone would ring at home, Johaah would answer and it would be Farieda. She wants to speak to William. How do you explain to your son who William is? How do you explain to him that although he is your son, you have a stranger’s name and he will not carry your legacy?

“Do you understand what it means not to have a name?” […] “You are luck. You can take it for granted that you are Jonny Steinberg. You’ve never even had to think about what it means. It means you are a Jew, that your grandparents came to South Africa in x year, that your father was born in y year. That you know your name means you will never have to sleep in a gutter or wander the streets like a stroller. You belong.” (p.302).

Uncomfortable with living a lie, “I wanted to go back to jail so this lie would end” “I couldn’t live this life” (p.41) “I need to be Magadien Wentzel to live a proper life” (p.42). But there was the fear that this might never happen: “I have forgotten my own life … I was too fucking angry to take notice of my own life. I’m scared I will never get it back.” (p.44) And he is right to be scared, as it was all up to “a bunch of faceless bureaucrats, shifting through a biography that had been reduced to a slime dossier” to determine which of his lives was really his, often with an arbitrariness that shattered whatever sense of self he was trying to cultivate. (p.289).

The encounter between Mr Morris and Steenkamp demonstrates that reconciliation and empathy are possible between the world of crime and that of order, between imprisonment and freedom, and between communities rigidly divided and at conflict under apartheid, if only everyone in post-apartheid South Africa could make an effort to see the humanity in the other. Despite Steenkamp’s dishonesty, Mr Morris, a white South
African, is able to see the goodness in him. Talking of Steenkamp who has been re-imprisoned because of stealing from him, Mr Morris says:

“...I was devastated by what he did to us. Truly devastated. But you know what? I don’t have my own business any more. We’ve had our own trouble, there was a sword over our own heads. But if it was in my power, and he came to me after he is released, I would employ him all over again. Because he is a good man. Whatever his past, whatever he did, he is a good man.”

Like Steinberg, Mr Morris was agreed that “going straight after a life of crime is near impossible, hat the prospect of getting a straight job under one’s real name is remote, that one must either lie or steal to get by.” (p.287)

As for Steenkamp,

“I was brought here to serve this sentence because of what I did to Mr Morris,” he tells me. He swallows hard, stares at his hands for a while. “I loved them, you know, Mr and Mrs Morris. But a piece of me always held back. I would do stupid things to hurt him. I would smash the bakkie on purpose and then blame it on someone else. I would break his glass…

“A couple of years ago, I phone Farieda. She said there was a new boss now; the Morrices went bankrupt. I walked back to my cell in a daze. I put my head on the pillow and cried. You see, I knew it was because of me, because of the glass I stole from him. I had destroyed him. He offered me love and I spat on him and destroyed him.” (p.288).

[...]

“When I get out, I want to work and save and try to pay him back. I know it will take me a long time. If he’s not there I can pay back his children. This is one debt I need to repay.” His voice falters; he doesn’t trust himself to continue. He lowers his head and begins speaking to his navel. “As you can see, it’s breaking me up.” (p.288)
Finally released into the ‘normal’ world where he hopes to re-integrate himself into a ‘normal’ life as a ‘normal’ citizen of the now ‘normal’ South Africa, William Steenkamp/Magadien Wentzel comes “to learn that one cannot reinvent oneself without reinventing the people around whom one has lived a life”, for identity is not just how one sees and positions oneself, and also how others recognize and represent one. Identity, to make sense, is a negotiated reality.

Conclusion
This is a fascinating book with a compelling story told mostly from the standpoint of gangsters in prison who are more used to being disciplined and punished, than being given a voice to share their predicaments with the wider world. Steinberg has succeeded in doing what most writers cannot manage, being able to share, in a creative and irresistible narrative, the results of scientific enquiry or journalistic investigation with the wider reading public whose primary concern is a good story well told. The style is that of a master storyteller, but the content remains factual and sociologically outstanding. The Number is a major contribution to the peace and reconciliation, and to the crystallization of renegotiated identity essentialisms that should come from an understanding of all the facets and nuances of South African society past and present. Through his outstanding craftsmanship Jonny Steinberg has given a voice to the desperately voiceless in a new South Africa where every voice matters.