

# CRIME FICTION AND AUTHORITARIANISM

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Can crime fiction only thrive in democratic settings? Is Haycraft right when he asserts that detective stories are only produced on a large scale in democracies, as they are a “democratic institution” that dramatise the kind of rights enjoyed only in “constitutional lands” (1974: 313)? Or McCann when he links American hardboiled with the “pursuit of a [...] democratic culture” (2000: 5), and describes the detective story as “a liberal genre” (6)? Ultimately, is a regulated, accountable and fair process of upholding the law and fighting the transgressions of its authority necessary for the development of crime fiction? I answer these questions in the negative and argue instead that liberal democracy is not a *sine qua non* for crime fiction: While it is true that many authoritarian leaders loathed crime fiction (Franco, Mao, Stalin, Hitler and the Latin American dictators of the 1970s and 1980s), the genre enjoyed immense popularity in post-Mao China, the Soviet Union after Stalin, Cuba and many countries in the Eastern Bloc.

My intention in this chapter is to ponder the tridimensional relationship between crime fiction, authoritarian regimes and world literature, exploring the extent to which it is possible to understand “the circulation and translation of ideas, themes, and concerns about crime and policing across and between national traditions, while attempting to pay due attention to specific sociocultural and institutional contexts” (Pepper 2016: 10–11). To this end, I will focus on two groups of authoritarian regimes: Communist (mostly Eastern Bloc, but also Cuba), and Latin American military dictatorships.

Katharina Hall analyses the moral implications, problems and opportunities resulting from featuring a police officer as the investigator in crime narratives set in a dictatorship (2013: 288). Focusing on novels featuring a Nazi detective, Hall sees a shift from the traditional role of “villain” afforded to Nazi officers, to a more morally complex investigative agent through which, Hall argues, writers can examine the problem of “reconciling the genre’s dominant depiction of the detective as a representative of truth, morality, and justice with that of a detective working for a corrupt, fascist regime” (290). It is by focusing on this moral complexity that writers avoid the textual crisis they can generate if the reader cannot identify with the detective. Taking this problem as point of departure, Stewart King’s “La novela criminal de dictaduras y la justicia universal” [Crime Fiction, Dictatorships and Universal Justice, 2018] is to the best of my knowledge and at the time of writing the only study to have used a world literature approach to analyse the relationship between crime fiction and dictatorships. King examines four novels set in dictatorships with a twofold aim: To rethink in a multinational context Katharina Hall’s

examination of novels in which the investigator is a police officer working for an authoritarian regime, and to consider whether it is possible to identify in those four novels a sense of shared justice that goes beyond their respective national borders. Referring to Max Weber and Alison Young (who, in turn, refers the reader to Benedict Anderson), King urges us to consider crime fiction as a global phenomenon in which texts produced in specific national settings can be read as part of a “transnational dialogue” (2018: 51). Here, the imagined community is no longer bound by national borders and instead places itself under the jurisdiction of a universal justice that supersedes local laws. King illustrates this by reading four novels as examples of world literature, in which all the authors appeal to a shared universal sense of justice, thus delegitimising the legal system imposed by the dictatorships in which their novels are set.

As will be demonstrated in relation to the two chosen international cases, it is possible to argue that crime novels set in dictatorships can speak to a transnational imagined community, which shares interpretations of the role of the state in relation to justice, legal process, or the fight against transgressions of the law. This circulation of ideas results in a transnational dialogue in which crime authors and readers from different countries engage. While the crime novels mentioned can be read in relation to a national-specific context, a transnational approach, which considers the broader function or significance of these texts, truly expands our understanding.

### **Crime fiction and Latin American dictatorships**

In the 1970s and 1980s, authoritarian regimes mushroomed in Latin America, where crime fiction had been a popular genre for some time (mainly in Mexico and Argentina, but also in Chile). As right-wing dictatorships became the norm, the left leanings of many crime writers hindered the development of the genre, sometimes with tragic consequences, as in the case of Argentinian writer Rodolfo Walsh’s “disappearance” after writing an “Open letter to the Military Junta” (1977). Others, like Chilean Roberto Ampuero, or Argentinians Mempo Giardinelli and Sergio Sinay, went into exile.<sup>1</sup> Those who stayed were forced to publish overseas or under pseudonyms, or produced metaphorical texts such as Ricardo Piglia’s *Respiración artificial* [Artificial Respiration, 1980], a thought-provoking text that borders crime fiction. The initials of *Respiración artificial* (RA) are also those of República Argentina (Argentinian Republic); the allegorical intention of the novel is clear. In most cases, it was only after the return to democracy that crime fiction resurfaced, and when it did, crime writers turned to other sources for inspiration, such as the works of Spanish writer Vázquez Montalbán, who also represented the transition from dictatorship to democracy, or the French *néo-polar*, with its highly violent, socially conscious take on the genre that challenges hegemonic narratives of power, with the occasional nod to postmodernist trends à la Jean-Patrick Manchette. Most importantly, in the context of this chapter, many crime writers shared an awareness of being part of a transnational phenomenon that eventually led to what is known as *neopolicial*.<sup>2</sup>

As Argentinian José Pablo Feinman puts it, the question crime writers asked themselves, not dissimilar to the one Katharina Hall analysed in her above-mentioned article on Nazi detectives, was:

What happens to police fiction when crime is not simply in the streets, but it is there, in the streets, because the State is responsible for the existence of the crime? What happens when the police, far from representing the image of Justice, represents the image of terror?

(2011: 215)

The typical answer was to feature what King calls “ethical outsiders” (2018: 56) as investigators, or to leave the crimes unpunished, justice being considered an impossibility: “The purpose of the investigation may be to know the truth and, at its best, make it public; never to obtain justice” (Gamerro 2011: 329).

Since the novels abandon the belief in the possibility of justice, the emphasis shifts from the crime to the surrounding context, where the novels explore the limits between fiction and reality, and position at the centre of the text discussions on power, and who holds it (Fraser 2006: 199), echoing what Hammett or Sciacia, among others, had already done in other settings. In Giardinelli’s *Luna caliente* [Sultry Moon, 1983], for example, there is no mystery to solve, as the focus is on the dictatorship’s ability to control and, ultimately, force the killer to work for the regime. In Feinman’s *Últimos días de la víctima* [Last Days of the Victim, 1979] the investigator is in fact a contract killer who decides to find out more about the person he has been paid to kill, *Külpe* – a name Spanish speakers associate with *culpa*, guilt, and with a Kafkaesque K (Simpson 1990: 142). Ultimately, this decision leads the investigator into a trap in which he is murdered: The searcher of the truth becomes the victim. In Saer’s *Nadie nada nunca* [Nobody Nothing Never, 1979], Inspector Caballo Leyva, who has to investigate the killing of a number of horses (*caballos* in Spanish), is ready to torture where necessary. At the end of the novel, the mystery remains unsolved, although there is a suggestion that the army may have used the horses for shooting practice. In Brazilian Rubem Fonseca’s *High Art* (1983) investigator Mandrake decides to learn *Percor* (literally “perforate and cut”, a combat knife-fighting technique developed by the police) after he is attacked and his wife is raped. While the murderer behind the first (of many) killings is found, his suicide and the violence encountered in the investigation leaves no doubt: Justice is nowhere to be seen.

When dictatorships gave way to democratic regimes, crime writers grappled with the collective trauma and tried to make sense of their new realities, often still wary of the judicial processes in place. Thus, Argentinian Eduardo Sacheri’s *La pregunta de sus ojos* [The Secret in their Eyes, 2005], Chilean Ramón Díaz Eterovic’s *La oscura memoria de las armas* [Dark Echoes of the Past, 2008] and Guatemalan Dante Liano’s *El hombre de Montserrat* [The Man from Montserrat, 2005] examine not only the haunting atrocities of their respective dictatorships, but the challenges faced by the new democratic regimes in search of an elusive justice. To this end, in crime novels written after the dictatorships, events in the plot often begin during the dictatorial regime and conclude in democracy, thus emphasising the continuities between governments.

In the context of this chapter, it is important to emphasise the self-perception of crime fiction authors, readers and critics from Latin America as a transnational community trying to cope in similar ways with the trauma of their respective dictatorships and their transition to democracy, topics further developed in the chapters on memory and trauma in this volume.

### **Crime fiction in communist countries**

In the following paragraphs, crime fiction written in communist countries will be analysed, in order to show that the genre shared similar traits with some Eastern Bloc countries and in Cuba – what I term crime fiction *Internationale*. The profuse circulation of novels in translation and theoretical readings of the genre throughout these countries clearly demonstrates the development of a transnational take on the genre. Sharing analogous aims and rules, this *Internationale* developed a distinct crime fiction model, in direct opposition to those produced in capitalist countries.

For decades, the Soviet Union under Stalin (1922–1952) banned the publication of crime fiction, considering it “the most naked expression of bourgeois society’s fundamental ideas on property” and a mere market-driven product whose main goal is “maximum money-making” (Eisenstein 1988: 91). In 1938, however, the Central Committee of the Komsomol, the Union of Communist Youth, foresaw what they believed to be the genre’s potential as a tool to foster revolutionary education for the Eastern Bloc and began to promote detective films. The conditions for crime fiction’s emergence were facilitated when Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, denounced in 1956 Stalin’s cult of personality, and the newly elected Central Committee of the Soviet Union Communist Party felt the need to distance itself from past mistakes. This, coupled with the continuing urge for patriotic exaltation in the midst of the Cold War, reinforced the educational role afforded to crime fiction.

That same year, the magazine *Yunost’* [Youth] published the first crime novel of the post-Stalin era: Arkady Adamov’s *Delo Pestrykh* [The Motley Case, 1956]. The 1962 German edition of the novel included a telling prologue by the translator, Valerian P. Lebedew, who stated: “This is not a simple confrontation of policemen and criminals, but of the embodiment of the class-conscious man who watches over the morality of the State, and the parasite of society, the anti-Communist type infected by Western individualism” (Adamov, quoted in ana 2013).<sup>3</sup> Adamov’s aim, therefore, was not only to provide an example of the success of Soviet security forces in their fight against crime in a specific case, but to make readers aware of the confrontation between Communism and Western individualism. While at one level the intended readership is Russian, this and similar novels are not bound by national borders, but aim to speak to a larger, transnational imagined community that, from the authors’ point of view, shares their views on justice, morality and social duties.

The KGB played a significant role in the development of crime fiction in the Soviet Union and in the broader Eastern Bloc, where Soviet guidelines on how to adapt the genre to a communist setting were applied. KGB director Vladimir Semichastny (1961–1967), keen to improve the agency’s reputation and to respond to the growing popularity of Ian Fleming’s James Bond series, supported “positive fictional portrayals” of Soviet intelligence agents, with officials ultimately turning to Bulgarian author Andrei Gulyashki to create a Bond-like character (Jens 2017: 34). In Gulyashki’s *The Zakhov Mission* (1963), however, the protagonist is closer to Sherlock Holmes than James Bond, and dishes out long explanations on the virtues of a simple life while investigating the theft of military information (Nette 2014). After Gulyashki, during a trip to London apparently financed by the KGB, failed to get permission from Ian Fleming to use 007 as a character for his novels, the author published *Спеуу 07* in 1966 (literally “Against 07”, but translated and published in Australia as *Zakhov vs 07*). In the novel, British agent 07 kidnaps a Russian scientist attending a conference in Bulgaria, killing a few people in the process. An international persecution ensues, taking the characters to Paris, Tangier (where 07 is helped by an ex-Auschwitz doctor) and Antarctica, culminating in the rescue of the scientist, and the escape of 07, thus making possible the continuation of the novel in the series that would follow. The international pursuit, the diverse nationalities of the characters, the Nazi link (which, by extension, criminalises the West as a whole, portrayed as a continuation of the Nazi regime), as well as the almost simultaneous publication of the novel in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, all point to an understanding of criminality and a readership that goes well beyond the domestic limits, and which would spawn a number of similar products in other countries in the Eastern Bloc, as well as in Cuba.

Perhaps the most successful of these was *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (1969), by Iulian Semyonov, who had already gained recognition with *Petrovka, 38* (1963), a novel about Moscow police. Yuri Andropov, who succeeded Semichastny as the head of the KGB, commissioned

Semyonov to write “a follow-up novel about a Soviet agent in Germany during the Great Patriotic War”, for which he received considerable support from the agency, including access to secret archives (Rosenberg 1987; Jens 2017: 34). Andropov had been First Secretary of the Yaroslavl Komsomol Regional Committee at the time the Komsomol was promoting detective films in 1938, and he must have been very familiar with this policy. In this case, however, he stressed the need “to write a novel in which the most important thing [would be] the constitution and the law”. The result was a text in which “the KGB major-general and lieutenant-general concern themselves with legality [and] worry [...] about what is morally the right thing to do”, an approach that widened the reach of a novel no longer limited to national events, and was without a doubt one of the keys to its success outside the Soviet Union (Rosenberg 1987).<sup>4</sup>

In the novel, Soviet agent Maxim Isaiev infiltrates the SS under the name of Max Otto von Stierlitz, and plays a crucial role in the demise of the Nazi regime. Historical events are altered, when not rewritten, in a careful attempt to reclaim the Soviet Union’s role in the German defeat, while maintaining a safe distance from Stalin’s excesses. This bending of historical events would be furthered in the ensuing television series, based on the novel and scripted by Semyonov, which convinced many Soviet citizens that Maxim Isaiev was a real agent, and that it was thanks to him that the Third Reich was defeated. The success of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* led to a series of novels in which Stierlitz travelled to the Far East, Spain (during the Civil War), Belgrade, Zagreb, Paris, Krakow and post-war West Germany, pointing again to the internationalisation of the conflict (and the safe setting of criminal activities outside the Soviet Union).

Adamov, Gulyashki and Semyonov, together with the brothers Arkady and Georgy Weiner, Leonid Slovin, and Vil Lipatov made crime fiction one of the most popular genres in the Soviet Union (Brine 1985: 415–16). Their readership, however, was not exclusively Soviet, as translations of their books (and TV series based on them) were readily available in many of the Eastern Bloc countries. In Romania, for example, the “Enigma” collection published translations of Soviet, Polish, Bulgarian, Czechoslovakian and Hungarian authors, with the “Aventura” collection publishing Romanian writers. As these examples show, the Eastern Bloc developed its own crime fiction publishing structures, with a fluid circulation kept outside the western model. Such circulation, however, was not limited to books in translation, as the Soviet formula itself was reproduced domestically, with recurrent features like the setting of criminal activities in foreign countries, the emphasis on collective work and austerity, the complete absence of investigators outside the organs of state security, the bipolar view of the world, or the conception of any crime as an attack on the state. This was the case of East Germany, Bulgaria and Poland, as well as Cuba, where “revolutionary crime fiction” appeared in the 1970s. Given the unprecedented extent of the support given by Cuban cultural (and army) officials to the development of the genre, which by the 1980s would be the most widely published and read on the island, it is a case worth examining in closer detail.<sup>5</sup>

Crime fiction in Cuba emerged in the wake of the First Congress of Education and Culture held in Havana in April 1971, at which Cuban cultural officials decided to implement new policies based on three main principles: The consideration of art as a weapon of the Revolution; the need for a political assessment of artistic manifestations; and the call to intensify the control of literary awards, which were perceived, in essence, as political acts. The Congress also reiterated that Cuba was at war with Capitalism, and demanded, as a consequence, that all cultural manifestations openly support revolutionary processes. Cuban cultural officials imposed strict censorship and a tight control over every cultural activity, coupled with the promotion

of cultural manifestations or specific genres perceived as especially useful in the war against Capitalism.

In March of that same year Cuban writer Ignacio Cárdenas Acuña had published *Enigma para un domingo*, the first Cuban crime novel since the 1959 Revolution. Although the genre, until then, occupied a negligible position in Cuban literature, Acuña's novel was an immediate and unexpected success both in Cuba and within the Communist Bloc with translations into Russian, German, Romanian, Hungarian and Ukrainian. As a consequence of its success, the University of Havana convened a panel towards the end of 1971 which concluded that crime fiction could be used within a communist context, and the Ministry of Interior announced the creation of the Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution Crime Fiction Award. Thanks in part to this award, crime fiction became the most important genre of the 1970s with a staggering thirty-eight per cent of novels published in Cuba between 1979 and 1983 being crime fiction (Braham 2004: 126). As one critic notes, it is impossible "to find another cultural area that enjoyed the support and incentives" that the crime genre did during this period (Fernández Pequeño 1994: 14).

Aware of the apparent contradiction of fostering what they perceived as a capitalist genre in a communist setting, parallel to the publication of crime novels, collections of short stories and even theatre plays, an impressive number of programmatic texts were published, insisting almost obsessively that Cuban crime fiction was a new phenomenon, a genre with few connections to its capitalist origins. For intellectual heavyweight José Antonio Portuondo, the crux was the understanding of the role afforded to the concepts of justice and legality in revolutionary crime fiction as opposed to other crime fiction models. The British model, he argued, was based on the idea that "what is legal is therefore just" (that is, crime fiction is written to support a legal body that, according to Communism, is unjust by nature); in hardboiled crime fiction, the detectives are forced to act outside the sanctioned legality to defend what is considered just; and in spy novels intelligence agents constantly resort to illegal activities in defence of a system that is unjust. Revolutionary crime fiction, on the contrary, was based on the idea that "what is just is legal", and therefore justice and legality coincide completely. In this setting, crime fiction acquires "a political and literary dimension" impossible to place "outside the confrontation between Capitalism and Socialism". Therefore, whereas in a capitalist context crime fiction was considered to be an ideologically rotten genre, in the context of the Revolution it becomes a weapon, contributing to the ideological education of workers (Portuondo 1973: 133), and helping to establish the opposition "state security organs + citizenry vs delinquents", considered to be the beating heart of revolutionary crime fiction (Cristóbal Pérez 1979: 11).

While it is interesting to note that these programmatic texts seem quite reluctant to mention similar developments in other Eastern Bloc countries, translations of communist crime fiction were readily available, together with Bogomil Rainov's 400-page essay on crime fiction.

As occurred in the Eastern Bloc, Semyonov's novel *Seventeen Moments of Spring* and its television adaptation were also an extraordinary success in Cuba. While watching the series, a young Uruguayan living in Cuba, Daniel Chavarría, decided to write a Cuban version, entitled *Joy*, that won the Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution Award in 1977 as well as the award for the best Cuban crime fiction novel, 1971–1981. It would also become a bestseller in the socialist world.

### **Daniel Chavarría's *Joy***

*Joy* is what many Cubans insist on calling counterespionage or counterintelligence fiction (emphasis on "counter", or defence against an attack), in an attempt to distance this model

from James Bond's actions. The novel tells of a plot that is discovered to introduce a virus in Cuba that can eventually destroy the national citrus fruit production. This discovery leads the intelligence service to open an investigation that successfully derails the attempt and allows Cuba to produce a documentary, to be shown all over the world, detailing the CIA involvement in the affair.

Unlike similar novels, *Joy* is not based on a real case. As López Calvo has shown in relation to another Cuban crime novel, Juan Ángel Cardí's *El American Way of Death* (1980), it is possible to see in *Joy* "the influence of Soviet 'factography' on Cuban writing" (2012: 32). Rather than aiming to reflect reality, factography was concerned with transforming reality through what was known as "operativity", "a situational aesthetics that conceptualized representation not as an objective reflection of a static world, but as an operation that by definition intervenes in the context of the aesthetic act" (Fore 2006: 105). Factography, therefore, disregards objectivism and emphasises the performative role of literature. Accordingly, *Joy*'s approach is more subjective than objective, disregarding the mimetic in favour of the operational. Real events and people mix with fictional characters and situations in order to achieve the books' main goal: To present what might be called a collectivised view of crime, victims and investigator, thus transforming the readers' views and, ultimately, reality.

In line with what programmatic texts demanded from crime fiction novels, *Joy* does not depict a confrontation between a private eye and a criminal, but instead, it broadens its reach by collectivising the crime (the spread of the bacteria in Cuba is a trial for future attacks on other communist countries), the investigating team (the protagonist flies to the USSR to consult with colleagues; a network of spies from different nationalities investigate in a number of countries to help Cuban officials), and the victim (Cubans at the outset, extending to all of humankind).

Thus, *Joy*, like the many crime novels from the Eastern Bloc and Cuba that were translated and published in other communist countries, appealed to a large imagined community, who read them in a transnational rather than exclusively domestic context.

One can only hope that transnationality becomes one of the foci of future studies on the relationship between crime fiction and authoritarianism, paying due attention to King's concept of "transnational dialogue", mentioned earlier. To date, for example, an almost exclusively national approach has been applied to the study of crime fiction in the Eastern Bloc. While these studies are certainly useful, a deeper analysis of what I have termed the crime fiction *Internationale* seems crucial to fully understand an intrinsically international phenomenon. This should be done without imposing our views from the West and, by incorporating other perspectives, we can hopefully develop a more complex appreciation of the role of crime fiction in authoritarian regimes. Thus, research on the extent to which, for example, Romanian readers and writers knew about Cuban or Bulgarian crime fiction, or on the international commonalities of the criteria applied for translation and publication of crime fiction novels in the Eastern Bloc would undoubtedly help us better understand the development of the genre in communist countries.

Future research on crime fiction and authoritarian regimes should also analyse the evolving relationship between genre and state power. Recent criticism (Pepper 2016) argues that crime fiction displays a sceptical and ambivalent relationship with the state, a move that seems to also take place in countries under authoritarian regimes. In Cuba, for example, revolutionary crime fiction has given way to a more openly critical *neopolicial*, which often reflects on anxieties about the efficacy and reach of the state power. Whether a similar evolution can be traced in other authoritarian contexts is certainly worth investigating.

## Notes

- 1 Ampuero lived in Cuba between 1974 and 1979 at the time the aforementioned series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* was broadcast. The protagonist of his crime fiction is a Cuban detective living in Chile. Political divergences with the Cuban authorities, though, have hampered the circulation of his books on the island.
- 2 The term *neopolicial* was coined by Mexican writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II but was made popular by Cuban writer Leonardo Padura. In this and many similar articles on the topic, critics tend to study *neopolicial* as a continental rather than a domestic development.
- 3 The quote is a translation of the 1964 Spanish edition of the novel (Editorial Molino), which in turn appears to be a translation of the 1962 German edition (*Die Bunte Bande von Moskau*, Goldmann, 1962). In the context of this chapter, it is interesting to note the international circulation of the novel, as well as the irony of having a communist book published in a fascist dictatorship, for which I have no explanation. It has also been translated into Chinese and Ukrainian.
- 4 Placing crime in foreign countries was also a common occurrence in crime fiction written in Spain and Italy during their respective fascist dictatorships.
- 5 Not all crime fiction written in Eastern Bloc countries should be seen as identical, though. In each country, literary traditions and the sociopolitical context combined to create a national specific flavour. In Poland, for example, finance crime received an attention absent in other countries.

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