

CRIMINAL IDENTITIES AND CONSUMER CULTURE: CRIME, EXCLUSION AND THE NEW CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

**By Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum
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Book Review by Roger Hopkins Burke¹

At the time of writing – December 2008 – the world is undergoing an ongoing major economic ‘correction’ which could well turn into a slump the like of which we have not seen since at least the 1930s. This is all seems to be the outcome of a ‘credit crunch’ whereupon short-term boom conditions have been artificially sustained throughout the world economies – but in particular, the UK and the USA - for at least the past ten years by banks loaning large sums of money that does not really exist to people with a dubious ability to repay. At the outset of the crisis, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, felt it his duty to inform the public that the UK faced its worst economic crisis in at least 60 years (BBC News, 2008a) and not long afterwards a leaked draft letter from the Home Office advised that crime levels will inevitably increase because of the downturn. Rising property crime and violent crime, and increased hostility to migrants, were also considered likely. Home Office minister Tony McNulty informed the media that the letter was a ‘statement of the blindingly obvious’ as it was clear that crime would inevitably increase during the economic slowdown and this argument which refers to property crime, such as burglary, and violent crime was based on the experience of the recession in the early 1990s (BBC News, 2008b) when we might observe that conditions were nowhere near as severe as those that existed during the 1930s and which we are probably going to encounter in the foreseeable future.

Such changed socio-economic circumstances should of course provide abundant opportunities for critical criminological research and analysis and indeed provides support for recent arguments among those studying crime and criminal justice for a return to traditional Marxist analysis. Russell (2006), for example, observes that since the early 1990s, the progressive ‘new directions’ in critical criminology which have sought to

¹ Roger Hopkins Burke is Principal Lecturer and Criminology Subject Leader in the Division of Criminology Public Health and Policy Studies at Nottingham Trent University. His research interests are currently: policing, young people and crime and criminological theory. Recent books are *Hard Cop, Soft Cop: dilemmas and debates in contemporary policing* (Willan, 2004); *Young People, Crime and Justice* (Willan, 2008). His third edition of *An Introduction to Criminological Theory* will be published by Willan early in 2009.

broaden the focus of the discipline beyond a narrow emphasis on crime and its control - such as zemiology, or the study of social harms (see Hopkins Burke, 2009 forthcoming) - have simply excluded Marxism on the grounds that it is an out-dated mode of analysis.

Marxism nevertheless remains as relevant as ever for analysing crime, criminal justice, and the role of the state, not least because we might observe, the current economic crisis is going to impact on whole groups of 'white collared' professionals working in banking, financial services and information technology, among many others, who have not previously been considered members of the working class, not least by themselves. Such groups, overly represented among the relatively pampered population of London and the south east, and considered in recent years to be immune from the negative extremes of the trade cycle, will in fact become increasingly proletarianised victims of the downturn with both their homes and jobs at risk. The affect on the psyche of those with strong bonds to the conventional liberal democratic social order and their achieved socio-economic status who are suddenly cast adrift in unfamiliar and significantly impoverished changed circumstances could have major implications for crime and criminality.

We should thus differentiate between the Marxism that identifies the inevitable internal contradictions of capitalism and the constant and ever worsening economic crises that it is proposed will one day lead to its total apocalyptic collapse as a mode of production and those variants which have produced seemingly fanciful predictions as to what will happen when the end does finally occur. For to-date Keynesian economic strategies have been used to stave off that final reckoning and the governments and central banks of the major world economies are doing just that.

Criminologists have long sought to establish causal links between the prevailing economic conditions and the level of criminality in existence in society at any given time and have rightly described how inequality – the widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' – is probably a significant measure of how criminogenic a society is likely to become. There has, however, been hardly any research conducted in recent years to examine the most obvious criminological reality: namely, that we should see the crime explosion of the past twenty years as the direct outcome of the neoliberal political economy with the reality that much of the crime we are currently experiencing has its origins in business deregulation. Thus, it is not simply a question of how crime might rise in such circumstances, but rather how it is that these circumstances have already created the crimes that have brought devastation to whole swathes of our towns and cities.

The impact of the transition from traditional forms of capital, community and politics to a globalised economy built on unstable labour markets and consumerism is excellently demonstrated by Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum in this excellent new book which is based on a long-term, ethnographic study of crime and criminality in some of the most disadvantaged and socio-economically dispossessed communities in the north-east of England. The extent of this exclusion from the traditional liberal economic good life is demonstrated by the reality that on one of the large housing estates on which the research is centered has no-one in proper legal 'on the cards' employment. Central to

the authors' argument is the recognition that the 'smart liberals' have not controlled the 'nasty side' of capitalism and they proceed to demonstrate how the expansion of consumption through credit has created a culture obsessed with material goods, and where competitive individualism – the 'me project' – has emptied old, solid, working-class communities of value and meaning so that these have become places to escape from, rather than fight for and improve as a collective. In such communities they observe that 'crime is an instrument for achieving fantasised positions of social distinction and "respect" in consumer culture' with the outcome that the people they interviewed wanted to become 'stars' of a criminal underworld as a means of gaining access to the material possessions that conferred status and meaning on their lives.

This is a north east which is nevertheless far removed culturally from the one which existed during the depression years of the 1930s and where there was, regardless of mass unemployment and wide-spread poverty, very low crime rates. Norman Dennis (1997, with Ray Mallon) observes that people were poor but basically honest during those pre-war depression years and blames the subsequent explosion in crime on the breakdown in the respectable cultural traditions of the working class. The implication of his account is clear. Crime can be reduced by rebuilding the old respectable working-class cultural traditions and restoring the moral certainties of modern society. The defining characteristic of the lives of the great majority of people working class people during the 1920s and 1930s – and in particular, in geographical locations such as the north east - was poverty and that was the case whether in work or not. The extent of ambition for most people in this situation was to earn sufficient money to feed, clothe and keep a roof over the heads of their families. There was no television, limited radio, no videos, no motor cars for the vast majority of the population and certainly no overseas holidays. Most people were poor, had few ambitions and aspirations beyond basic survival, and in reality, many of them were rather unsophisticated. Significantly, there was a high level of social consensus and group solidarity because people had very similar life experiences (cf. Durkheim, 1933).

Thus, life in the 1920s and the 1930s was characterised by a generalised, shared working class experience of poverty, whether in work or not. Today, the level of home ownership among working class people is substantially higher than in the past, car ownership and holidays in increasingly more exotic overseas locations are becoming far more widespread. The workless and homeless live alongside, or at least not far from the relatively affluent. Moreover, the wonders and delights of the consumer society are aggressively and significantly advertised during the low budget television programmes churned out twenty-four hours a day to entertain the 'new leisure classes', while the contemporary economically dispossessed have very different aspirations than their predecessors sixty years ago, thus aspiring to the products they see in the television commercials and they are not easily distracted from these ambitions. They do not accept long-term unemployment and poverty in the same stoic fashion as their predecessors. They have legitimate aspirations to a share in the 'good life' and it is these various socio-economic changes that have provided the cultural context for the huge explosion in recorded crime that has occurred during the past fifty years (Hopkins Burke. 1998). Interestingly, Hall, Winlow and Ancrum observe a residue of that old traditional working

class collective spirit with their respondents acknowledging that domestic burglary was only committed by the desperate at the bottom end of the criminal hierarchy, commercial burglary was far more socially acceptable. The real criminal money was nevertheless to be found in the widespread highly competitive and violent drug dealing markets that provide the greatest illegal source of income not just in the north east but throughout the world.

The very idea of widespread illegal drug markets providing illicit substances to the working class communities of the north east - or anywhere else for that matter - would have been unthinkable to virtually anyone during the 1930s. With the exception at least of the eminent writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley whose futuristic novel *Brave New World* originally published in 1932 predicted a future where a superfluous population of workless people would be controlled by a drug called soma. This narcotic would be used on a daily basis by the citizens of this futuristic society in small doses to dull the senses, or keep people impassive and unfeeling. In special circumstances, a high dosage treatment would be given to someone who feels unhappy or in any way emotional. This latter procedure would be referred to as being 'on holiday' because the person being treated would be in a state of stoic ecstasy. Huxley predicted that this drug control process would be administered by a benign and relatively benevolent state. The reality is that is administered by a far more efficient global competitive free-market with the same criminogenic outcomes that the prohibition of legally accessible alcohol had created in the USA in the years following the end of the First World War.

Global organised crime is estimated to gross \$1.5 trillion a year and is a significant rival to legal multinational corporations as an economic power. Global crime groups moreover have the power to criminalise politics, business and the police, developing efficient networks and extending their reach deep and wide. All have operations extending beyond national borders, and they are now developing strategic alliances which are linked in a global network, reaping the benefits of globalisation (UNDP, 1999). Crime syndicates prefer globalisation, for it creates 'new and exciting opportunities, and among the most enterprising and imaginative opportunists are the world's criminals' (UNDP, 1999: 43). The UNDP (1999: 41) thus observes that 'the illegal drug trade in 1995 was estimated at \$400 billion, about 8% of world trade, more than the share of iron and steel or of motor vehicles, and roughly the same as textiles (7.5%) and gas and oil (8.6%)'. There are now 200 million illicit drug users throughout the world and in the past decade the production of opium has more than tripled and that of the coca leaf more than doubled in order to meet the huge demand from this illicit market. The problem of drugs is thus not restricted to a few countries but is a global phenomenon with widespread demand and numerous wannabe drug barons throughout the world willing to inflict violence and brutality – from the micro level of the local neighbourhood to the macro level of the international drugs cartel – in order to secure a lucrative position in the distribution hierarchies and which gives the successful player the same consumer rewards as legal international business people, sports and music stars. For the people from the north east housing estates researched by Hall, Winlow and Ancrum in this book this is by far their best opportunity for gaining any level of the material success prescribed by involvement in the consumer society.

Successful involvement in illegal drugs markets in the north east mirrors successful involvement in legal markets such as banking and finance. It is not just the material trappings of consumerism which can be flaunted in the faces of the less successful but the similarity of attitudes. Those surviving honestly on state benefits while maybe even believing in government rhetoric about the reintegration of the socially excluded and the provision of meaningful employment are sneeringly dismissed as losers and 'divis' marked out for all to see by their cheap trainers and sartorial inelegance which are the badges of failure and lack of status in a consuming society. Even worse in some ways are those who find low-paid employment for which they work hard for little return and little or no status. The old working class values of hard work, thrift and collective action in order to bring about improved conditions seem to have left with the heavy industry which once gave working class people in this area pride, dignity and respect.

This is an important book which considers identities in a consumer society where successful involvement in criminality – and predominantly in the burgeoning and thriving illicit drug markets – is the only way of achieving status in world where the legal marketplace is in permanent recession. It is well written and logically argued but could be accused of being a tad over-theorised. For example, I wonder if it is it really necessary to delve into the world of Jacques Lacan and the Frankfurt School to discuss the predicament of these marginalised north eastern criminogenic communities? This book is nevertheless extremely well done and the critique of liberal criminology from Merton onwards makes a significant contribution to contemporary criminological theorizing. In short, a very good book which helps to bring critical and cultural criminology back in touch with Marxist economic materialist realities. It will be widely read and it deserves to be. I will certainly include it on my reading lists and indeed recommend it to you.

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