Hard Lessons: Reflections on Governance and Crime Control in Late Modernity

edited by Richard Hil and Gordon Tait

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This collection of essays examines the deployment of punitive crime control policies in Britain, Australia and New Zealand as a feature of 'late modernity', where risk and ontological insecurity shape the political terrain. Tait establishes the book's tone with the first essay, arguing that the social process of crime control is significant in facilitating and perpetuating governance; it does not matter whether methods of tackling crime 'fail' or 'succeed', rather that they happen and continue to happen.

Individualisation of responsibility for crime and its relationship to neo-liberal notions of the self is a theme that weaves through many of the essays, as is the increased punitiveness that accompanies the extension of a market capitalist management culture into crime control policies. Key themes to emerge from the text are the role crime control plays in the creation of docile subjects, and the devolution of moral responsibility onto the self. This can be achieved through fear of crime, as Lee illustrates, or, as Hil discusses, through harsh treatment in boot camps. McMahon develops the theme of the paradoxical extension of governmental control that is exerted through devolving responsibility for offending, in this case onto parents through restitution schemes. Pitts notes the pervasive managerial and political control of British youth justice, and Cunneen elucidates how the demand to meet performance indicators for 'zero tolerance' policing can exacerbate police brutality, especially towards those from ethnic minorities, while supporting a masculinist approach to crime control.

The concepts of risk, uncertainty and contingency are employed to explore the 'unintended consequences' of crime control policies. This is important because the notion of power that runs through the book is not over-determined; although governmental policies may succeed in extending social control, they are not 'rationally' conceived and implemented. Newbold explains that drug use patterns tend not to be affected by law enforcement, but by other social changes. Hocking and McCallum argue that DNA testing can empower prisoners by enabling them to prove their innocence, and can have the effect of facilitating release from prison, as well as helping to put people there. Carpenter examines deleterious policy side-effects, arguing that governmental regulation of brothels does not necessarily make them attractive to women who work as prostitutes; they may not be willing to work somewhere that practises drug testing, or that does not allow flexibility of hours. The notion of the 'unintended consequence' is challenged by Bessant, who argues that 'unintended' implies that policies are fundamentally rational and well-intentioned. Through an examination of child removal policies in Australia, she argues that imperatives to 'civilise' the nation and promote national 'racial fitness' took prominence over concerns for the well-being of children.

The text's theoretical underpinnings, drawn from Giddens, Beck and Foucault, help to provide a sense of continuity, as well as underscoring the relevance of the themes explored to the current political climate. The various authors draw on theories of modernity, crime and punishment without the essays becoming the kind of disengaged critical criminology Pitts critiques in the book's Postscript. A couple of omissions do stand out, however: inclusion of an essay on the increasingly punitive nature of immigration policies would have been useful, considering the British and Australian contexts, as would a piece exploring the impact of new security measures on particular targeted communities. Both of these areas of policy-making are arguably part of 'crime control' in late modernity.

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