Recession, Crime and Punishment

Also by Steven Box

**DEVIANCE, REALITY AND SOCIETY
POWER, CRIME AND MYSTIFICATION**

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Steven Box

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For Patricia

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Preface

If Weber didn't say 'sociology starts off disenchanting the world and ends up disenchanting its practitioners', he should have. For the longer one considers society, the more difficult it is to resist an invitingly cynical conclusion: it is a 'confidence trick'. Durkheim sensitised us to this when he pointed out that social order cannot be maintained by giving people what they want – that would be impossible – but by persuading them that what they have is just about all they deserve morally. And of course, in a society like ours, which pontificates about equality, freedom and human rights, even whilst encouraging enormous differences in the distribution of income and even more in wealth, the problem of persuading those who haven't got very much to regard it as 'just about right' poses a constant headache. Well, to be more accurate, it poses a headache for those trying to pull off this 'confidence trick', who, by pure coincidence, as Vonnegut would say, happen to be earning and owning a great deal and *naturally* don't want to be separated from it.

Fortunately for them, when the economy is expanding, most people's attention can be diverted from these enormous material inequalities by giving them a little of the enlarging cake. If a majority of people experience some improvement in their living standards, then the comfort of relative contentment seems to cloud their vision of those at the top and makes them indifferent to a small disreputable bunch beneath them – although it needs to be added that the media, including educational institutions, try to fill people's heads with 'fairy stories' about the rich deserving their wealth because of the energy, risk-taking, creativity and, above all, the sacrifice they made earlier in life to acquire qualifications. Those who object to this rosy self-serving story can be stigmatised easily as 'wicked', 'lazy', 'communists', 'nutters', 'criminals', 'jealous', 'anarchists' and 'envious', and dealt with accordingly. Since

these 'outsiders' are only a minority, posing no serious threat to discipline or to law and order, controlling them raises few difficulties and the state need not reveal too much of its unacceptable coercive face. The rich can carry on accumulating wealth under the benign smiling face of consensus which brings a contented workforce to their places of employment and leaves a few at home to stew in their personal inadequacies.

It is indeed a wonderful racket. Well, almost. It tends to come unstuck, as it is currently, when the economy is in a prolonged recession. For over the last decade or so, workers were replaced by labour-saving machinery, the numbers unemployed and unemployable grew to an ugly size, the welfare system bled from a thousand cuts, wages failed to keep pace with inflation or were reduced, sometimes below legal minimum levels, and many full-time workers became part-time. One outcome was widening income inequalities: the poor simply got poorer. Under these conditions, it has been harder to sustain the 'myth' that capitalism is not only good at creating wealth, but it is also good at distributing it – particularly when those shouldering most of the recession's burdens were not doing that well before, while the wealthy continue almost untouched by what a Cabinet minister described conveniently as 'economic misfortunes no national government can control'.

This book considers one major response adopted by some of those suffering from the worst ravages of recession, namely resistance, including criminal activity. In particular, it considers reasons why the unemployed and economically marginalised might turn to property offences, and evaluates the evidence on this possibility. It also examines how governments deal with this potential resistance, particularly by allowing the social control system to expand both at the *hard* end (prisons) and the *soft* end ('community treatment'). It draws almost exclusively from the evidence in the UK and the USA but does consider the applicability of major arguments to other industrialised countries. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 are devoted to theoretical issues, such as 'why' recession leads to more crime, and 'why' the government and minor state officials produce more repression as the economy slumps. Chapters 3 and 6 contain evaluations of the relevant research. For the layreader, these two chapters may be too lengthy and tedious – maybe a quick glance with a longer stop over the conclusions would be in order. But for

the serious student, there is no such quick and easy route to knowledge. As Lewis Carroll, on one of his off-days, might have put it very succinctly:

Don't Hunt in the Dark

The moment is due, the Criminologist knew,
As the view from his room was a mess.
So he set boldly forth, and studied in the North,
To uncover 'the truth', nothing less.

He beavered away, for a night and a day,
Reading journals, both ancient and new,
Till in the end, near 'round the bend',
He discovered a 'secret' or two.

'Should unemployment rise, to an enormous size,
And the poor get poorer too,
Then crime will increase, and harmony cease,
It's as clear as the sky is blue.'

'Build prisons', they say, 'to put them away,
Till their thieving is over and done'.
But he informed them thrice, although it's not nice,
'That's like burying your head in The Sun!'

He'll tell it all now, and then take a bow,
So listen! allow him to plead,
'No need for those walls, or disciplinary tools,
Its just fairer shares that you need.'

Now's an opportune time, to put this in rhyme,
And capture 'the truth' for a day.
'Don't hunt in the dark, not even for snark,
You'll never make progress that way.'

In preparing this book, I have been dogged by the usual round of domestic duties which seem, in an age of 'female liberation', to have expanded out of all proportion to my abilities. In addition to these intrusions, I have had my 'collar felt' by P. C. Edwards on more occasions than I care to remember. Hopefully, with her recent semi-transfer from a social control bureaucracy to a 'Seat of Learning', she may cease this arresting habit.

Chris Hale, with whom I have collaborated previously, would have been an enthusiastic and positive contributor to this project, but he cleared off to China in hot pursuit of the ancient Pot of Gold. A variety of 'friends' in the 'invisible college' of critical/radical/realistic criminology communicated their gratefulness for receiving a draft manuscript and then the lines went curiously dead. I've assumed it's something to do with the inefficiency of British Telecom under privatisation. On the positive side, it is nice to belong to a department of sociology on which the University Grants Committee pinned the equivalent of a Michelin three-star rosette, even if the methods of arriving at this decision were bizarre to say the least.

Finally, in addition to driving me round the vineyards of Burgundy, Michael Lane and Joan Busfield diligently ploughed their way through wine merchants' catalogues and located some delightful bargains. Without the sustenance derived from these strenuous efforts, this project could never have been completed. When your domestic life is chaotic, and your academic friends have not got time to whisper a word of advice in your ear, there's nothing like a bottle (or two) of Grand Cru Chablis to help you through the working day. It is more than a pity that a large section of the British and American population cannot afford their favourite tipple.

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