

# editorial

politics, economy and crime

Pat Carlen argues that political economy perspectives are now more than ever relevant to a range of global and local crime and harm issues.

*Before this court there is a certain social class in bulk. Other classes, of course, find other fiddles.* (Probation Officer in Carlen 1976)

When, as a neophyte researcher, I was observing the workings of the London metropolitan magistrates' courts in the early 1970s, the thing that surprised me most was the taken-for-granted way in which court-workers referred to the class-biased nature of the criminal courts, repeatedly commenting on both the poverty of the defendants and the criminal policy prejudices of the politicians. But I should not have been surprised. I already knew that 'the rich get richer and the poor get prison' (Reiman 1978). I knew that, ever since their inception, prisons had been primarily for the destitute, the unemployed, the mentally ill and the stranger. And I had taken a criminology course where there had been lectures on white collar crime and 'marxist approaches'.

At the same time, what everyone seemed to know about the relationships between politics, economy and crime was also what many of the same people seemed to collude in suppressing. Certainly it has been so with the many professionals and academics who, in interview with me over the years, have tried to make me look at these relationships more 'realistically'. 'Obviously, there's one law for the rich and one law for the poor. But I don't need to go to a political economy reading group to understand why criminals do it - there are just some very bad buggers out there' (policewoman, being droll). 'I know the law operates against the poor. But it doesn't help to tell a defendant that she's in court because of the capitalist relations of production' (social worker, being realistic). 'I know most of these people have never had a chance in life. But, are you seriously trying to tell me that a woman steals from Woolworths in order to bring down capitalism?' (magistrate, being sarcastic).

'Home Office grants are for research into reducing crime, not about class justice' (academic mentor, doing his job). And still today, once the obvious relationship between economy, politics and crime has been acknowledged, most penal policy and much academic research proceed as if there were no positive relationships between them at all (see Carlen 2008, forthcoming).

Of course 'everyone knows' that there are relationships between politics, economy and crime. Interrelationships between the economy, its political representations and the governance of punishment condition both what and who is criminalised. Yet such relationships have generally been represented as being so much in the nature of things that to interrogate and disturb them would either be conceptually too difficult (political economy reading groups *can* be rather precious); or politically too dangerous (no grants for investigating the political and economic motives of the lawmakers rather than the psychological motives of the lawbreakers). As a result, and as Robert Reiner writes in the second article of this collection, political economies of crime have, during the last few decades, been sidelined. Hence the importance and significance of this issue.

None the less, though often derided, ignored or even silenced, academic work on the political economies of crime has persisted. Indeed, in the UK such radical work may have been pursued with renewed vigour since it was realised that the New Labour slogan of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime' meant, in practice, that destitute prisoners should be taught to come to terms with their poverty.

'The characteristics of women prisoners suggest that experiences such as poverty, abuse and drug addiction lead some women to *believe* that their options are limited. Many offending behaviour programmes are designed to help offenders see there are

always positive choices open to them that do not involve crime... we are tackling the aspects of social exclusion that make some women *believe* their options are limited.' (Home Office 2000:7 emphases added)

The following articles, specially written for *CJM*, demonstrate that political economy perspectives are invaluable in analyses of the diverse and variable developmental stages in global and local penal strategies, together with their varying forms of governance; and they also demonstrate that politico-economic analyses can be used to inspire and inform realisable programmes of reform and change in responses to law-breaking and other social harms.

In the opening article, **Vivien Stern** puts this collection of contemporary work on politics, economy and crime in its political context with her forceful and authoritative account of how crime has been 'propelled...into the prime policy seat' in the UK and elsewhere at a time when the gap between the richest and the poorest has been widening and, as **Jock Young** later argues, more and more people feel less and less secure.

**Robert Reiner's** clear and concise statement of the history, main features and common criticisms of political-economy perspectives on crime and punishment follows. Then, after **Colin Leys** has argued that a political economy approach is a necessary prerequisite to challenging the assumptions inherent in recent social policy, **Vincenzo Ruggiero** demonstrates how political economies of crime, far from being deterministic, have been realised analytically in a variety of ways. A variation on this theme is taken up by **Nicola Lacey** and **James Dignan** and **Michael Cavadino** who, in two separate articles, argue that global analyses of law and order trends need to be tempered by comparative analysis of the changing and sometimes very different political and economic arrangements in specific jurisdictions.

**Alessandro De Giorgi's** piece also argues for a new economy of punishment; one which moves from a traditional concern with the relationships between the amount of official punishment and the official unemployment statistics to more qualitative and ethnographic analyses of the total 'punitive assemblage's' continuum for controlling not only lawbreakers, but also whole sectors of 'disposable others', including immigrant

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workers and welfare recipients. **Magnus Hörnqvist's** innovative article is an excellent example of the type of sophisticated qualitative analysis which De Giorgi recommends; and that can be most productively realised when global theorising is used to inform very specific regional analyses; in this case, the ideological and theoretical significance of the cognitive behavioural programmes currently employed in Swedish prisons.

A common and ill-informed criticism of political economy perspectives on crime is that they are too simplistically deterministic. In emphasising political and economic conditions, argue the critics, politico-economic perspectives miss out on the human motivations and cultural sensibilities which predispose people to both law-breaking and punitiveness. But such a criticism cannot be levelled at the work of **Jock Young**. Now, in his article here, he further refines his theoretical usage of the concept of 'vertigo', giving a scintillating portrayal of the late modern condition of ontological and economic insecurity as a fear of falling, of being economically and culturally excluded. Specifically, the feared descent is from a higher to a lower state of security and social status via loss of work, income and respect.

The articles comprising the first part of the Issue together demonstrate that political economies of crime can be both global and local; that local cultures, far from being ignored, are irremediably related to political and economic conditions at global, regional and local levels. The articles in the second part variously suggest that in relation to particular substantive issues a political economy perspective is a salient debunker of government discourses that routinely bracket off the material and political conditions in which crimes are both committed (or not) and punished (or not). Thus, **Susanne Karstedt** on the crimes of the powerful, **Jo Phoenix** on prostitution, **Reece Walters** on environmental crime, **Steve Tombs** on corporate killing, **Dave Whyte** on the regulation of corporate crime, **Andrew Jefferson** on western imperialism in relation to the export of rights discourses to Africa, **Barbara Hudson** on migration and **Elliott Currie** on the uneven class distribution of criminal violence victimization – all put forward very coherent and evidence-based analyses which call into question the relevance of governmental pronouncements and policies on the same

issues.

Finally, the issue is brought to a close by **Loïc Wacquant** and **Ian Loader** who each sets an agenda for a new politics of crime. For Wacquant, the emphasis in any newly-rational penal policy must be on changing the ways in which we conceive of crime and punishment: by relocating crime politics within the politics of social inequalities; by radically limiting the use of penal containment and extending the range of less socially injurious approaches to the crimes of the poor (for example, via increased housing provision and non-punitive treatment for psychological afflictions); and by renewing respect for all those professionals in social work, housing, education and medicine whose work constitutes the non-penal arm of the state.

For Ian Loader, the dilemma facing UK governments is how to achieve a viable penal politics which eschews both paternalism ('the man in Whitehall knows best') and consumerism ('give the public what it wants'). As Loader emphasises, this will be a hard course to steer, though he sees some cause for optimism. That being so, it is appropriate that this issue of CJM ends with Ian Loader's plea that, in future, crime be treated 'as *one* problem for government, not *the* problem of government'; and his timely and inspirational reminder that 'What matters in a liberal democracy is not that we control crime but *how* we control crime – for the means we select to do so, and the temper we bring to the task communicates a great deal about the kind of society that Britain is, or aspires to be'.

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#### References

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### CJM Developments

From January 2008 CJM will be published by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies in partnership with the academic publisher, Routledge. The magazine will continue to be produced quarterly with the first issue of 2008 coming out in March. It will be published online with full access to back issues dating back to when CJM was first started in 1989. CCJS members will have full access to this back catalogue.

The magazine will have a refreshed design and new look. We also have a reconstituted editorial advisory board who will be helping us to develop CJM's critical content and direction. There will continue to be a themed section but there will also be new additional sections providing comment and analysis on most criminal justice developments.

We hope that you will continue to support CJM and enjoy the quality and diversity of its work.

### Special Thanks

CCJS would like to extend a very special thanks to Stewart and Danni Borrett at Amberwood Graphics who from the very beginning have worked with us on the production of CJM.

Over the last 18 years they have provided an invaluable service to the magazine. Stewart and Danni's hard work and dedication – at one time Stewart used to deliver CJM to our office himself driving through the night from Dorset to miss the rush hour traffic – has been immense. They have become good friends of CCJS, supporting the organisation and its values and always providing a professional service.

We wish Stewart and Danni the very best of luck and hope that others will be encouraged to use their services.

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