

The poverty of punishment

Vincenzo Ruggiero introduces the contributions to the themed section

Many would agree, particularly those who are their prime targets, that penal policies are predominantly aimed at 'punishing the poor'. But irrespective of the specific sector of the population being punished, it is becoming urgent to discuss the 'poverty of punishment' itself, namely its debatable utility, its official and hidden motivations, its effects on individuals and society and, ultimately, its visible dysfunctions. 'The Poverty of Punishment' was the title of the conference organised by the Crime and Conflict Research Centre at Middlesex University on 30 March 2012. Driven by the need to collectively make sense of the current punitive trends, the organisers invited scholars, students and campaigners to discuss cultures and philosophies of contemporary penal systems, the meanings of rehabilitation, the impulses of revenge, the notions of social defence and deterrence, in brief, the concepts and justifications underlying the whole apparatus of penalty.

Are we faced with what Nietzsche termed 'a vulgar substitute for irascibility'? With what Durkheim described as 'the instinct of vengeance'? Or with what Marx equated with 'the glorification of the hangman'? The papers collected in the following pages provide some answers to these questions: from a variety of angles, they address the issue of re-socialisation, the effectiveness of deterrence, the infliction of pain, the reproduction of crime and poverty, and the warehousing of social problems.

We start with a general, introductory, contribution in which I detect two divergent analytical

positions: the former emphasising the institutional function of imprisonment, the latter stressing its material function. The first is embedded in the notion of retribution and, in its extreme manifestations, addresses imprisonment as a means for the destruction of bodies. The second looks at prison as a regulatory tool and mainly focuses on the productive use of bodies. I suggest, however, that a broad theoretical map should incorporate an additional element. Contemporary prison systems can be identified as a synthesis of the institutional and the material function. Although the former seems to be prevailing, the latter is far from having become redundant. The material function is undergoing wide modification, and we can still employ the term 'material' because it conjures up a notion of productivity, but suggests that it should not be assimilated to the notion of the workhouse nor with that of 'prison as factory' of early capitalism. Prisoners' work and exploitation mainly take place beyond the prison walls, notably in those social areas where marginalised activities and precarious jobs intermingle with overtly illegal activities. These areas are termed *carceral social zones*, where the general and individual deterrent roles of punishment are not only directed to repeat or unmanageable offenders, but also to the excluded populations in general.

Who governs these areas of exclusion is a matter of ideological contention and economic competition. In his contribution, **Mick Ryan** argues that the idea of punishment as a mere commodity to be traded in the marketplace, in the UK, is still resisted. 'But there is no



guarantee that this position will hold, as David Cameron looks set to continue along Thatcher's radical path and roll back the state still further.' His analysis of the 'Big Society' focuses on the hypocritical attempt by the British government to re-shape relationships between the individual citizens and their communities. How can people, devoid of resources, take responsibility for themselves and their communities, and create active, sustainable communities? The idea of 'sharing' advocated here, given the drastic impoverishment of disadvantaged communities, can only turn into sharing poverty and misery. But the official argument is that state agencies are still too generous and intrusive, and that they therefore stifle civil society. They have to shrink and hand back, or at least share, many of their acquired responsibilities to civil society. So, the voluntary or private sector should deliver some of the social services currently delivered by the state and, in some cases, deliver at a reduced cost as a result of increased competition between public and private providers. How this model of participatory democracy, which echoes ideas of old anarchist 'mutual aid', is consistent with welfare cuts and the refusal to tax the untouchable rich is beyond rational explanation.

Frances Crook looks at the growing polarisation of wealth in

contemporary societies. Warning that such societies cannot flourish when so many of their members are doing so badly, she links soaring inequality with protest movements from London to New York, from Tel Aviv to Santiago and from Plaza del Sol to Tahrir Square. She concentrates on the viciousness of the policing and punishment of this inequality and consequent unrest, particularly amongst the young and the poor. True, poor young people have always been key targets for harassment and intrusive intervention by the agencies of criminal justice, but the excessive punishments inflicted upon young people involved in last summer's riots, she argues, depict the penal system as a force for the mere control of the poor.

The authoritarian response to the disturbances in August 2011 is also addressed by **Joe Sim**, who unveils the hypocrisy and mendacity which are deeply embedded in what passes for social democratic politics in the UK. His article discusses how the obsessive concentration on 'feral', poor, single-parent families led to the demand for, and delivery of, exemplary sentences. Neoliberal Britain, creating its own enemies, knows very well who they are: the inhabitants of the 'bleak, shadowy wastelands' that it produces. Sentencing for those involved was heavier and harsher compared with those inflicted on similar offences committed in non-riot situations.

The 'poverty of punishment', as discussed at the conference at Middlesex University, spreads to rehabilitation work, whose current 'poverty' is epitomised by a shift 'from its roots in philanthropy to an offender management system supervised by the probation service'. This is the topic broached by **Anthony Goodman**, who attempts to explain how this development occurred, and how the new configuration of offenders' treatment, as in the hypothesis of pioneers Rusche and Kirchheimer, is determined predominantly by economic forces. If this 'materialistic' hypothesis still holds true, he asks, what are the implications for the rehabilitation of offenders under the Coalition government?

Ruth Jamieson reflects on the relationship between victimhood and punishment, and is inspired by the discrepancy between public policy promoting the reintegration of former political prisoners in Northern Ireland and their actual exclusion. She remarks that, in post-conflict societies, attributions of blame, innocence and victimhood are bitterly contested. Each group selects narratives about who is responsible for violence and should therefore be punished. Her contribution discusses the politics behind differential punitive choices and the forces determining the amount of suffering to be inflicted.

Among rehabilitation programmes operating in prison institutions are those based on artistic expression. **Leonidas Cheliotis** focuses on these programmes, and while appreciating their potentially positive functions, questions their validity as rehabilitation tools. How can artistic expression neutralise precursors of offending such as unemployment and lack of housing? 'So long as these precursors continue to go unaddressed, ex-prisoners will be effectively forced back into crime, and arts-in-prisons programmes will have taken upon themselves a heavy load of undeserved blame'.

'The Poverty of Punishment' conference hosted a photographic exhibition by **Robert Gumpert**, who has taken pictures inside a San Francisco penitentiary. Gumpert was among the invited guests, and a brief commentary by **Anthony Goodman** on his work accompanies his photographs.

Finally, **Loïc Wacquant** puts a powerful case forward that it is the 'result of policy choices, not a preordained necessity imposing a necessary path on contemporary societies' which has seen the prison population rise so dramatically over the past decades. With the current political ideology what will it take to reverse this situation? ■

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