

Insecure lives: questioning 'The Precariat'

Peter Squires introduces this issue of *cjm*

*In this edition of **cjm** we examine precarious living in modern conditions. Guy Standing's work on *The Precariat* provides a reference point in relation to this theme. Standing's book is subtitled 'the new dangerous class': this immediately pitches the idea into a maelstrom of inter-disciplinary concerns. Historically, notions of the 'dangerous class' take us straight back to the seething combinations of criminality, pauperism and vice in the nineteenth century and the worlds that modernity, democracy and the welfare state had presumed to have left behind. Culturally, the idea brings to mind the supposedly demoralised 'underclass'; their feckless offspring, the needy and the risky, of welfare citizenship and an indulgent nanny state. Sociologically, this dangerous class poses questions about inequalities, divisions, social exclusion and the forms of advanced marginality becoming characteristic of late modernity. Politically, the idea raises the spectre of a revolutionary vanguard, of militant resistance, protesters, rioters or 'enemies within' and, drawing these ideas together, where marginality manifests itself as 'radicalisation', of 'suspect communities', threat profiles, aliens and enemies. It follows that, above all, 'The Precariat' is a fertile ground for criminology.*

Yet Standing's argument is not just concerned with the disorderly consequences of precarious life: he also seeks to explain its emergence. There are two wings to the 'precariat' concept, corresponding partly to 'lived experiences' on the one hand and 'living conditions' on the other. Respectively, perhaps, these could be 'communities of hope' and 'communities of fate', although Standing himself refers to the 'politics of paradise' and the 'politics of inferno'. He is as interested in the opportunists who elect to live their lives on the margins (or who are able to do so) as with those who are reluctantly shunted into casual and insecure work, hidden or illegal economies, and inner-cities, sink-estates, ghettos, banlieus, projects, favelas, squatter camps and shanty-towns. Although, as is clear, it is these latter groups that are by far the more typical objects of social and public policy, not to mention criminal justice systems. Maybe this is one of contemporary criminology's limitations.

The papers in this edition of *cjm* originate from commissions for or presentations at a research symposium at the University of Brighton in September 2012. The event followed an earlier research day conference which critically explored the work of Loïc Wacquant (Squires and Lea, 2012). Both events shared a concern with the wider social, economic and political

contexts in which social divisions arise, and invariably become wider and more entrenched. They are culturally reproduced as 'moral panics', or as demonisation, marginality, social exclusion and neglect, discrimination or criminalisation.

John Lea begins the sequence with an article exploring the ideas underpinning the precariat concept connecting the idea with the making and, more recently, the neoliberal 'unmaking' of the working class. He focuses especially on the role of policing in maintaining order and division in the face of seemingly incoherent 'protest' and political expression, whether nineteenth century Luddites or the rioters of 2011. **Matt Clement's** article follows; his earlier work has explored the so-called 'Tesco Riot' in Bristol, of April 2011 (Clement, 2012), an event which, arguably, presaged the Summer 2011 riots, after police were accused of heavy handed police tactics against community groups protesting a local Tesco store development. For an extensive coverage of the riots please refer back to the March 2012 edition of *cjm*, *The August 2011 Riots*. Here, Clement points out the existence of a 'precarious class' of often underemployed and typically underpaid people (especially women, young people, BME community members and migrants – the bottom 15 per cent) and looks at the politics of demonisation that have been associated with this explicit resurgence of inequality.

In a similar fashion, **James Treadwell** explores the ways in which contexts of marginalisation and radicalisation have served as the foundations for 'Jihadism', and what has been termed 'counter-jihadism' (better known as the emergence of far-right extremism and most visibly represented by the street protests of the English Defence League). These bitter and divisive conflicts, surely evidence of Standing's 'politics of inferno', represent, one is tempted to say, 'a precariat' (a class, a condition?) at war with itself.

However, as **Daniel Briggs** shows, in the first of three international contributions to the debate, precariat is not just in conflict with itself. As a case study of the exclusion of gypsies from the Spanish city of La Coruña demonstrates, popular demonisation layers onto municipal, social and political discrimination. In the interests of economic development, gypsies were evicted from urban areas and forcibly relocated to the city's periphery, where, in the context of recurring popularly orchestrated panics about crime and drugs (deeply underpinned by xenophobia), they have been forced to remain. Turning now to Brazil, **Fernando Lannes Fernandes'** commentary on the policing of Rio de Janeiro's favelas explains how the treatment of excluded

groups can deteriorate in the face of economic pressures, political indifference and widespread popular fears. Furthermore, investment opportunities can be a double-edged sword. The World Cup and the Olympics in 2014 and 2016 (the mass street demonstrations in Spring 2013 highlight the social tensions arising in relation to, among other factors, investment in such sporting events) provide an imperative to tackle the violence, crime and drugs either by 'community solutions' or by heavy police enforcement and security practices which further exclude indigenous communities. The mass street demonstrations in Spring 2013 highlight the social tensions arising in relation to, among other factors, investment in such sporting events. The centre piece of Fernandes' study is a summary of police shootings during 2007-2011. The figures may be falling, but the omens are not so good.

In a third international perspective **Carly Goldsmith** and **Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti** turn to a comparison between the precarious lives in Brazil and Britain, taking issue with Standing's analysis. They argue that his portrait of precarious groups as 'deficient', or flirting with xenophobic political views and lacking an intrinsic sense of community is seriously out of kilter with their own observations. They point to traditions of alliance, mutuality and support in poor communities. The hidden and illegal economies that sustain people and selective patterns of criminalisation can disrupt these networks when vested interests shape and control the order that the law defends. A fascinating microcosm of this can be found in the article, based on recent original research, by **Teela Sanders** and **Kate Hardy**. They explore one of the more historical and permanently precarious avenues of non-standard, or irregular, labour for women – sex work. Their focus is on the striptease business. Having developed a profile of the women working in this area, they note how the formal regulation of strip clubs, while it may serve the interests of the clubs, only rather partially responds to the needs of the women who work there. Significant areas of concern surface here around the behaviour of male customers, insecure working conditions and financial exploitation. The authors conclude that criminalisation can be a blunt tool with which to regulate; alternative models based on human rights may offer greater promise.

Our final two articles address further ways in which state policy and practice might be said to be impinging upon the lives of the precariat. In the first, **Wendy Fitzgibbon** explores the restructuring of the probation workforce and its impact upon the ways in which staff perceive and respond to their 'precariat clients' sentenced by virtue of their involvement in the Summer

2011 riots. The irony she details is one of a probation and criminal justice workforce sharing increasingly more 'precarious' features (relating, for example, to workload, role, training, de-professionalisation and occupational culture), something which has affected their perceptions and attitudes (for example, rising punitiveness) regarding those whose behaviour they are required to manage. Finally, **Denise Martin** extends the analysis concerning the management of 'precariousness' into the education environment, describing how this has become increasingly related to two trends, visible especially in post-primary education. The first is a growing commodification of schooling in its role of fitting young people into a highly segregated labour market. The second development is ancillary to the first and concerns the increasing concern with school security, surveillance and discipline. Both developments, she argues, reinforce social divisions.

This selection of articles share a number of themes and relate to a range of policy areas for addressing inequality, exclusion and social division. Perhaps inevitably they engage rather more with the criminological end of Standing's spectrum of concerns but, as indicated at the outset, this always has been a pretty fundamental issue for the state, public policy and the law.

In the topical section, **Michael Lavalette** and **Gerry Mooney** focus on the Scottish Government's legislation from 2012, arguing that it has worked to criminalise certain groups of football fans. **Clare E Griffiths** suggests that the continuing myths and stereotypes surrounding immigration need to be dispelled, and **Lucy Welsh** warns against miscarriages of justice as a result of the government's proposals to introduce Price Competitive Tendering in the legal aid process. In a personal tribute **Harry Blagg** remembers Geoff Pearson. ■

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References

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