

MORAL BLINKERS

Crime and social exclusion

For some years, the British government has routinely dismissed any idea of a connection between crime and socio-economic conditions. The pattern was established in Mrs Thatcher's response to the summer disturbances in 1981, when she told the House of Commons that 'the violence in Liverpool had nothing to do with the city's problems of pay, housing and unemployment... It was a spree of naked greed'. Some years later as Home Secretary Mr Douglas Hurd was to offer a particularly blunt expression of this kind of view in response to the Handsworth riot in the summer of 1985 which, he said, was 'not a social phenomenon but crimes'. 'It is not a case history for sociologists to pore over, but a case for the police,' he added, underscoring the government view that matters such as this were merely a consequence of human 'wickedness'. Indeed, we should remind ourselves that so deeply ingrained had these habits of thought become that when the Archbishop of Canterbury's working party published its report *Faith in the City* later in the same year, pointing among other things to links between crime and inner-city deprivation, it was shouted down by a number of government ministers as 'Marxist'.

My aim in this short article is to ask to what extent the question of crime and social exclusion can be addressed in ways which are not simply rhetorical and ideological. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognise how deep and far this ideological crusade has been carried in the past fifteen years in Britain, at a time when the nation has experienced unprecedented levels of postwar unemployment and when the gap between rich and poor has widened appreciably. In North America, where the climate of debate on crime can be exceptionally bitter, even the ultra-Right-wing social thinker Charles Murray admits the link between crime and social exclusion in his controversial text *Losing Ground*. Drawing attention to 'large and increasing number of young persons' who were 'no longer in the job market', Murray writes: 'Yet they were surviving. One of the ways in which they were surviving was through crime'.

A sense of history

It would also have been unthinkable to deny the link between economic conditions and crime in Britain during the depression of the 1930s. In 1933 the Chief Constable of Birkenhead warned, in the wake of serious rioting between the

unemployed and police which had visited more than thirty towns and cities in the preceding months, that crime and disorder were a direct consequence of unemployment and that 'until these conditions improve... and men, particularly the young men, are absorbed into industry, I am very much afraid that there will be no downward tendency'. One among many voices in the 1930s was that of Baden-Powell the founder of the Boy Scout movement who even went so far as to state that crime among the young unemployed was 'rather a promising sign' since it showed the poor were not entirely demoralised and 'there was still some spirit of adventure among those juveniles'.

We do not have to share Baden-Powell's sometimes maverick enthusiasms to recognise that this is not only a lively social controversy, but also one with a long history. Indeed, some of the earliest analyses of social statistics in the mid-nineteenth century in England and other parts of Europe attempted to unravel the connections between economic cycles and crime rates. On one side there were those who established, at least to their own satisfaction, that an increase in the price of bread or in economic distress led to an increase in crime. Whereas others, such as the Reverend John Clay who was Chaplain of Preston Gaol in the 1840s, produced counter-arguments which suggested that it was economic affluence which led to an increase of crime as a result of an increased consumption of alcohol among the poor.

Suspect assumptions

To a large extent, in spite of economic and statistical sophistication these same controversies are still with us. In all likelihood they will never be resolved.

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with the equally complex phenomena which we call 'crime'. Indeed, where the crime-unemployment link is concerned, in one sense it involves a set of arguments based on highly suspect assumptions. Clearly it has little to do either with the 'crimes of the powerful', such as routine infractions of regulations concerning environmental protection and the discharge of toxic waste, nor with the 'fat cat' crimes associated with share-dealing and other forms of corruption which are self-evidently so commonplace. Nor can the concern with unemployment encompass the unfathomable depths of

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'crime at work' and the so-called 'hidden economy', whether this involves using the employer's time and materials for personal gain, or tax evasion. Indeed, when these kinds of illegalities are included in what we mean by 'crime', then it is likely that most crime is committed by those in work.

This is however not what we usually mean when we speak of 'crime'. Rather, we mean those aspects of crime which form the routine work of the police: common theft, burglary, and to a lesser extent crimes of personal violence. And here, if we restrict our observations to a local level - rather than attempting to reveal the workings of the 'invisible hand' of the national and global economy - we can more confidently assert some kind of connection between areas of multiple deprivation and high crime rates.

Crime and social deprivation

What the British Crime Survey has shown, for example, is that the highest levels of victimisation are found in the poorest housing estates and in 'inner-city' localities. This is not about whether social deprivation causes crime, however, but about where crime and the fear of crime hurt hardest - which is amongst Britain's poorest neighbourhoods. These dense concentrations of multiple deprivation are also where Britain's most serious problems of drug misuse settled during the heroin epidemic of the 1980s, leaving a legacy of broken lives and a combination of drug-related crime and serious public health issues.

These 'urban clustering' effects - whereby crime and drug misuse huddle together with high levels of unemployment and poverty, wretched housing, and poor access to public services such as health

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and education - have been known and described by criminologists since the work of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s. One way in which these forms of social exclusion work is through the mechanism of the housing market which draws together into 'hard-to-let' housing estates only those with the most urgent housing need and who are marginal to the housing market: the defenceless and the weak, the homeless, women on the run from violent men, single parent households, and pensioners with no other means of support. This 'magnet effect' will thereby heap one social difficulty upon another in these embattled communities, often compounded by social exclusion and discrimination on the grounds of race and colour.

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If the poor and disadvantaged are largely passive victims in these processes of exclusion which manufacture ghettos of despair, the active human spirit will also strive to create alternative systems of status, achievement and social meaning under such circumstances. Among the young, for example, who suffer blocked opportunities in terms of both school and jobs, it is this active self-assertion which gives rise to what we call 'subcultures' - whether these are organised around prowess in fighting, thieving, drug misuse, or graffiti writing. It is also no accident that those groups who are socially excluded from the formal economy will situate themselves with the 'informal economy' which trades in illicit goods and services. This has been eloquently demonstrated by Peter Reuter's economic study, *Disorganised Crime*, which points to the ways in which across the decades America's most newly arrived immigrant communities have positioned themselves within various rackets such as illegal gambling, drug dealing and the vice trade. Equally, Terry Williams in his book *The Cocaine Kids* offers a compelling account



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of how African-American and Latino youths have scrambled in the streets of New York City, often taking great risks to gain a foothold in the retail trade in cocaine and crack. Williams emphasises that in spite of their illegal dealings, these young people's aspirations are essentially conventional - financial security, home comforts, status, prestige, respect. 'Struggling young people', Williams writes, 'trying to make a place for themselves in a world few care to understand and many wish would go away.'

In other words, what Terry Williams and others describe is how among the socially excluded certain forms of crime can be a way of trying to get a foot on the ladder of economic and social opportunity. Of course, people sometimes get damaged along the way - whether as offenders or as victims of crime. A society which only remembers to protect itself against crime, however, and which forgets why people commit crime is one which barely understands itself at all. We used to say that 'The Devil makes work for idle hands'. But this is now apparently to be regarded as some obscure version of Marxism! In order to engage in the reconstruction of our embattled urban communities, we need to challenge this social and moral blindness, and to reassert the long-standing social preoccupation which links crime and deprivation. Social exclusion is the enemy of all members of

society, rich and poor, and we are a poorer nation if we forget it.

Further Reading

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