Culture, Gender and Male Violence: a key problem

Steve Hall and **Simon Winlow** argue that there is a need to relate violent crime and criminological theory to the economic principles that underpin culture and society.

In a post-industrial world where consistently high rates of crime, violence, corruption and terrorism haunt the imagination, perhaps the time has come to ask whether a culturalist-dominated gender studies continues to be useful to our political or pragmatic attempts to address these problems. To cut a long story short, older socialist models of crime reduction were based on the ambition of equalising social relations in the economy in the hope that a progressively more civiled culture would emerge from such a transformation. In the 1980s the failure of various socialist projects in the face of a tidal wave of neo-liberal political triumphs across the globe took the wind out of socialism's sails, and the broad churches of culturalism and feminism emerged as the radical alternatives in criminology.

Put simply, the improvement of material conditions by political means, along with a decrease of interpersonal hostility and crime rates, are now posited more as potential effects of cultural causes, and thus radical cultural transformation is the main path to follow. Culture is the means by which human beings make sense of the world, individually and collectively, by interpreting meaning and putting the meanings they temporarily settle on into practice in their everyday lives. Most radical culturalists argue that meanings are not eternally fixed and can thus be changed at will if freedom of thought and identity is encouraged.

Meaning and cultural 'identity'

Nowhere has this basic principle been transposed into criminology more powerfully than in its interface with gender studies. Feminists have been at pains to point out, quite rightly, that traditional criminology's negligence of the fact that men commit the majority of crime – especially violent crime – was jaw-droppingly absurd. Crime must therefore be associated with male nature or male culture. As the first waves of radical feminist essentialism receded, their claims that the male was naturally belligerent were disputed by highlighting the fact that even though 90 per cent of crime is committed by men, most men don't commit any serious crime at all. Liberal and post-structuralist feminists joined with pro-feminist men in the 1980s to suggest that masculinity was about meaning and cultural identity, not biological traits or mechanical responses to material conditions of existence or class traditions.

In fact, the idea that culture was largely determined by class position was all but abandoned, and the upshot of the current pro-feminist position is that a domineering and aggressive type of gendered masculine identity, which can be found in different variations throughout the class structure, currently exercises hegemonic control of the West's major cultural, political and economic institutions. Violence is often portrayed as a reaction to any challenge to 'male honour', which is central to this traditional masculine form. Women and less belligerent males are often victimized because any attempt to assert themselves is seen as a threat to the inalienable right of men to maintain a dominant position in the social order.

Economic and class explanations

In this light, strategies aimed at reducing crime and violence must hinge on the transformation of this dominant, belligerent form of traditional masculinity, which is essentially a gendered cultural 'identity' constructed as a temporary suite of meanings. Thus its transformation is essentially pedagogical, about the learning of new meanings and the adoption of different, and possibly more fluid, identities: a sort of education for freedom. Family, peer-group, education, religion, work, politics and mass media are the main cultural institutions to target in the attempt to encourage young males to abandon this archaic form and embrace something more progressive and civilized. The meaning of masculinity, we are told, can be 'contested and re-negotiated' in localised sites both within these institutions and in the interstices that are emerging between them (Collier, 1998). This would be good for establishing social justice in the gender order, reducing the crime rate and securing a brighter future for all.

Although we would also prefer a brighter future, our criminological research casts doubt on culturalism in general and the strategies associated with it. Our main bugbear is its reluctance to engage with broader and more penetrative social theory and historical analysis, such as Hobsbawm's (1994) work on the way in which the industrial-capitalist continuum of incremental prosperity, reform and progress has been recently plunged into chaos. The decline of traditional work, community and collective moral codes internalised in the 'super-ego', which have been replaced by service work, consumerism, the glorification of the individual and an increasing reliance on the calculating ego to determine behaviour in a competitive consumer marketplace, are largely ignored. The real conditions of existence for many near or beyond the boundaries of social exclusion are beset by insecurity and fear engendered by this profound change of living, and it is very rarely asked whether these conditions are actually conducive to the cultural transformation of gendered identities, or, in fact, to any type of transformation at all (Hall, 2002). In this short article we can't provide fine detail or a watertight theory, but we can outline as a discussion point what is, amongst others, our major theoretical objection to liberal culturalism.

Although economic and structural class explanations are often dismissed as crude and outdated, our research evidence suggests a palpable social patterning of aggressive masculine forms and rates of intimidation and violent crime (Hall and

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Winlow, 2003). In areas of extreme social exclusion where the agents of the criminal justice system do most of their coal-face work, we have found that a deep yet vague sense of insecurity discourages most males from taking up more progressive forms of masculine identity, largely because doing so would profoundly decrease their chances of self-protection, prosperity and status. Further, if we replace 'symbolic meaning' with the more rigorous notion of 'habitus' – Bourdieu's (1992) term for a more durable, embodied form of identity – then the likelihood of transformation looks even bleaker. Our research suggests that a very durable lump of masculinity, which was once actively cultivated as a serviceable form in the industrial capitalist heyday (Winlow, 2001; Hall, 2002), is turning to violent criminality in a desperate and chaotic attempt to obtain a fingerhold on the consumer marketplace. It has existed throughout the capitalist project, but it is now more active and visible, and the ambition to either re-socialise or liberate individuals who are caught up by it in market locations that are far too unstable, insecure and hostile to allow space for reflexive 'identity-work' is simply naïve.

Back to the future

The project of changing individuals by means of cultural intervention is in our view failing more profoundly than the traditional socialist project of changing basic economic relationships and life-purposes. This double failure is leaving the criminal justice system in an impossible situation, where the traditional remit to protect the public is clashing badly with the principle of maintaining and improving humane and progressive forms of dealing with offenders. If criminology is to produce theories and feasible strategies to reduce violent crime, then the liberal-culturalist variant of gender studies is probably the first perspective that needs to be reappraised for its usefulness to our analyses of violent crime in advanced consumer capitalism.

Perhaps now more than ever we need to relate violent crime and criminological theory to the economic principles that underpin culture and society. Gender, like any other form of market-negotiated identity, needs to be related not just to the symbols and meanings of local or global cultural forms, but also to the insecurity, anxiety and hostility that increasingly characterise local labour markets and the global economy. The establishment of a permanently excluded underclass and the supposedly barbaric masculinities that reside here, along with significant rises in risk and fear and significant decreases in community and belonging, need to be addressed not only in a cultural context, but also an economic one. ■

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