Masculinities and Crime

Simon Winlow reconsiders the social, cultural and economic context of 'criminal masculinities'.

Masculine identity, and the relationship between masculinity and crime, has rightly been the focus of a great deal of academic attention over the last ten years. Much of the theoretical and substantive history of criminology as a discipline has dealt with issues relating to masculinity, without tackling the subject head on. From the 1980s onwards, the growth of 'masculinity studies' has addressed a range of modern theoretical streams associated with the social construction of gendered identities and aspects of male power.

Connell's work (see for example, 1994) has been profoundly influential, and within criminology is closely related to the ideologies of male power as a basis for violence and discrimination. While this focus on patriarchy, hegemony and the social construction of masculine identities has undoubtedly brought a great deal to our understanding of both masculine identities and masculine crime, these themes have tended to overshadow a critical focus

violent situations, while remaining mindful of the need to sustain elements of a socially, culturally and economically constructed masculine self-identity (see Winlow, 2001; Hobbs *et al*, 2003).

For generations, lower class life and the construction of lower class masculinities has related directly to the nature of the economy, and it's now becoming increasingly difficult to extricate criminological theorisation of lower class masculinities from ongoing debates about an urban underclass and its relationship to the global economy. As traditional forms of male work, for example in factories, shipyards, steel mills and mines, radically change, and as social identities are increasingly based upon consumption and leisure rather than production and work, social cohesion and social capital become increasingly challenged by the end of mutuality and traditional forms of community and belonging. Now, underclass men are rendered increasingly problematic: welfare dependency, poor health and

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upon the manner in which criminal masculine identities frame the visceral pleasures often associated with deviancy (see for example, Katz 1988) and the ways in which aspects of social, cultural and economic change have challenged traditional ways of embodying masculine identities.

The pleasures that some criminals get from some of their crimes, the adrenaline rush, the nervous energy, the gratification derived from violence, tends to relate to aspects of masculinity and social, cultural and economic background, which in turn reflects the nature of contemporary social life. Crime is not however simply the result of social and economic pressures that push young men into crime. 'Doing wrong' can be thrilling and intrinsically enjoyable and it can also be linked to forms of status attainment and identity. The communication of this enjoyment of crime and appreciation of violence usually occurs within the masculine social networks of the lower classes.

I am not suggesting that lower class men are evil or inherently violent, but rather that the practical and cultural nature of lower class existence often creates a heightened awareness of violence and its place in everyday life. Young lower class men often learn the cultural importance of violence; they learn about the status that is often afforded successfully violent men; they learn about the emotive nature of physical combat. They are also likely to learn a variety of scripts enabling successful negotiation of potentially

high levels of imprisonment drains taxpayers' money. They're supposedly responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime, especially violent crime, which has the knock on affect of creating a cloud of social anxiety. They're also often cast as scapegoats, blamed for the end of the traditional nuclear family and for the social problems that are often associated with the growth of one-parent families, and so on. Virtually everything they do, or don't do, is translated into the growing vocabulary of market-oriented neo-liberalism, linked to the increased desire to cast aside and vilify problematic groups and identities.

There does, however, appear to be a number of good reasons to worry about the social construction of underclass masculinities. Their permanent exclusion from the formal economy unavoidably moulds identities in ways that are not conducive to our sanitised and anxiety-laden culture. The loss of a practical/economic point to their lives signifies society's desire to jettison problematic populations and leaves these men outside of the institutions of social control and with little hope of entering the new disciplines of the market and consumption. These young men don't work, aren't in full-time education and aren't part of a family unit, and as a consequence their behaviour isn't constrained and regulated to the same degree as if they had been. In a climate such as this, it makes sense to consider critically what becomes of the forms of masculinity that were once grounded in the careful negotiation of physicality and

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labour, and the men who, in a relatively short period of time, are freed from the traditional structures of social control.

As social fragmentation and the permanent exclusion of sections of society increasingly inform the manner in which both criminology and sociology deal with contemporary debates about crime control and social order, it is time to ask serious and perhaps disturbing questions about what becomes of those that the capitalist economy leaves behind.

While neo-liberal conceptions of underclass masculinities tend to focus on the perceived flaws in an individual's character as the root cause of their marginalized position, more rigorous theorisations have correctly identified wholesale economic change and the development of increasingly contested, demanding and unstable labour markets as the root cause of the development of an urban underclass (see for example, Wilson, 1996). Once this process has been set in motion, problematic aspects of culture become ingrained within neighbourhoods, perhaps the most notable of which is the supposed development of an increasing feral and anti-social strain of lower class masculinity. The rise of selfish individualism takes on a bleaker edge as it impacts on the urban underclass and the forms of criminality that are customarily related to this social group. There is, as yet, little empirical data to support the claim that a form of violent, amoral and barbarous lower class masculinity has developed within our crime-ridden estates, but cultural and economic trends may make this an increasingly pressing issue in the coming years.

What next?

The breakdown of traditional communities and competitive individualism's colonisation of virtually every sphere of social life appears to justify some of the anxieties contemporary society feels about our uncertain future. We cannot simply assume that the next phase in the history of advanced capitalist societies will be a utopia of increased freedoms and universal prosperity, just as we cannot simply dismiss the possibility that it might be a significantly bleaker world of perpetual apprehension and deepening social divisions based upon the remorseless market logic of consumer capitalism.

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