

# A political economy of corporate killing

Steve Tombs argues that a political economic approach is essential to understanding safety crime.

## A routine killing?

Simon Jones was a 24-year-old student, taking a year out of his studies before sitting his finals in social anthropology at Sussex University. In April 1998, he signed on for casual work in Brighton with a local employment agency, Personnel Selection – ‘to get the dole off his back’, in the words of his friend Emma Aynsley. Under the Job Seekers Allowance scheme – part of Labour’s broader Welfare to Work strategy – claimants must continually demonstrate availability for work in exchange for continued benefits.

Simon Jones went to work at Shoreham Docks, for Euromin Ltd., a Dutch company, unloading cargo. Within an hour of his first day of work, he was dead, his head crushed and partially severed when a three tonne ‘crane grab’ closed around it. The grab should not have been there; it certainly should not have been open. The work required chains which should have been fastened to a hook instead. Changing back between a grab and a hook costs time and therefore money.

In many ways, Simon Jones’s death was a routine killing; thousands of workers and members of the public die each year in Britain in work-related incidents, rarely making the headlines, rarely attracting prosecution, many not even investigated. But his death was also exceptional in several ways, not least for the campaign it spurred. The Simon Jones Memorial Campaign based its fight around the issue of ‘casualisation’ – a now firmly entrenched feature of working life in neo-liberal Britain, where deskilled, short-term, and often agency-mediated employment are common features of a deregulated labour market.

Such features are bolstered by a benefits system which forces claimants to take work – even work for which they are patently ‘unfit’ – on threat of withdrawal of any minimal financial support from the state. Further, the role of Personnel Selection – acting as the middle-man between the state and Euromin – is also symptomatic of the state contracting out functions to the private sector. In short, Simon’s death is only explicable in the context of a particular political economy, namely neo-liberalism, in an era of globalisation. In the heyday of the Keynesian post-1945 settlement, Simon Jones simply could not have been where he was to lose his life – there would have been no compulsion to

work in exchange for benefits, no role for private companies in finding that work, and no chance of working on the docks without being certified as competent under the national Dock Labour Scheme (Lavalette and Kennedy, 1996). So, if a routine killing, Simon’s death is only comprehensible in the context of wider social, political and economic trends and the prevailing modes of thought and dominant value systems within which these emerge and through which they are sustained; that is, through the lens of political economy.

## Explaining safety crimes?

A political economy of ‘safety crimes’ places their production within prevailing systems of economic, social and political organisation, dominant value systems and beliefs, and the differential distribution of power. Grasping the complexity of safety crimes means addressing a series of inter-related factors, not least dynamically (that is, historically) and beyond the level of the nation state (Tombs and Whyte, 2007).

Victims of safety crimes work in plants or sectors which are disproportionately likely to be ‘casualised’. They are more likely to be sub-contracted and/or increasingly migrant workforces. Vulnerability also varies according to gender, ethnicity, age, and so on. More generally, how vulnerable a workforce is, depends on the strength of workers in relation to management; evidence overwhelmingly shows that the safest workplaces are those that have strong trade union representation (Walters et al., 2005).

A focus on management is also required. Examining specific safety violations often reveals evidence of aggressive management, or managements who ensured that warnings, usually from below, were being systematically ignored. Moreover, we are likely to find a pattern of lack of management accountability for safety crimes, where management decisions and failures to heed warnings are subject to very little external counter-balancing in terms of regulation. Thus managerial practices – and the cultures within which these are embedded – are crucial in understanding the nature of safety crimes. What are fundamentally at issue here are the standards of management that can be regarded as acceptable in any given political economy.

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Beyond the organisational structures and cultures of companies, there are key inter-organisational features which need to be accounted for. These include the ways in which different parts of the same firm relate to each other (parent-subsidiary relationships, for example), agency-contractor relationships (relevant in the case of Simon Jones), how different firms were linked into each other within or across particular sectors, perhaps in terms of long and complex supply chains, or indeed in terms of systematic relationships between legal and illegal businesses (an obvious dimension in the death of 23 cockle-pickers in Morecambe Bay).

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A further group of factors, cultural and organisational, is located at the level of the market or industry. These include the norms that predominate in an industry which dictate what is acceptable or even required for how production of goods and services is organised. This is characterised by Carson's (1982) classic study of the UK offshore oil industry which showed the 'political economy of speed' - alongside real or perceived market pressures, operating locally, nationally, and internationally. Different markets and different industries create quite specific demands for profitability, speed or cost-cutting.

Also requiring critical scrutiny are law and regulation. Contemporary law and enforcement with regard to occupational safety is characterised by the terms 'under' and 'non' enforcement - i.e. the ways in which legal systems have either separated out safety crimes from real crimes, or denied the very idea of safety crimes. Low levels of inspection, detection, formal enforcement and sanctions ensure that safety offences are regarded as less serious than other crimes of violence, an enduring phenomenon that acts to reduce the social opprobrium that is attached to those crimes. Crucially, the way the state does - or does not - frame and respond to safety crimes dictates the extent to which such crimes are tolerated, from the boardroom to the workplace.

**Power and political economy**

Such considerations lead us directly to a central issue within any political economy, namely the nature and distribution of power. In this instance, the production of safety crimes, their representation, and their regulation are all linked, and force us to examine relationships between businesses, states, other organisations and populations.

Most broadly - if most obviously - political economy is defined as the way in which politics and economics interact. It is, however, much more than this. It also entails an understanding of the ways in which 'ideas about what constitutes the

political and the economic' (Gill and Law, 1988: xviii) are constructed and maintained, and thus leads us directly into explorations of dominant values, ways of understanding the world, and of the possibilities for and limits to social change; essentially then, it involves an understanding of the differential distribution, nature and effects of power in any given society. Political economy exposes as socially specific what is taken for granted, revealing how what is, was not always so, and need not necessarily be, with existent states of affairs only comprehensible in the context of macro-level social processes, on both national and international levels.

Political economy, then, is an approach which is essential to understanding what crime is, how it is produced, how and why it is, how it may be regulated, and what the limits to and effects of such regulation may be within specific social orders. It is, then, ideally suited to understanding crime and crime control - in ways that a hidebound and largely state-driven discipline, such as criminology, is unlikely ever to be.

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**References**

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