Understanding criminal justice through analysing its communication

Rob C Mawby explores imagery and crime.

There is something powerful in the imagery of crime and justice, punishment and policing. Take, for example, the Lady of Justice statue that stands outside the Old Bailey with sword in one hand and scales in the other, symbolising both the power to punish and the fair administration of justice. This symbol is recognisable across continents and has endured across centuries. It is regularly called upon by satirists and was notably parodied by Banksy whose 2004 statue, in Clerkenwell Green, depicted Justice as a prostitute, a pointed symbol of perceived injustices (see Figure 1).

Visual statements

This is but one resonant image among many. The fabric of the prison estate provides visible symbols of punishment. As Jewkes and Johnston (2007) have argued, since the late eighteenth century prison architecture has been used to convey meaning, reflecting the dominant penal philosophy of the time, namely reform in the late eighteenth century, repression in the mid-nineteenth century and rehabilitation during the twentieth century. Such austere visual statements as isolated Dartmoor prison, fortress-like Leicester prison and gothic Leeds prison leave little doubt as to the punitive meanings of imprisonment.

In contrast to these stark symbols there is, in the realm of policing, the more positive imagery of the 'Bobby on the Beat'. This was no accident but was designed into the identity of the new police of the Metropolis in 1829 as a means of garnering acceptance and support (Mawby, 2002). The image was subsequently contested in the dominant media of the nineteenth century. The satirical magazine *Punch,* which appeared in 1841, initially ridiculed the police in verse and in cartoons, but later mellowed to more affectionate portrayals. In the emerging theatres of Victorian England, the police appeared as the butt of jokes but, at the same time, were characterised as decent and honest, e.g., in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* in 1880. However, the police image achieved its highpoint in film and then television through the media creation of *Dixon of Dock Green*. Introduced in the Ealing film *The Blue Lamp* in 1950 and resurrected (literally) for a television series that ran from 1955 to 1976, constable, later sergeant, Dixon was the epitome of the British Bobby providing a visibly reassuring presence, symbolising the police as guardians rather than oppressors. Such images supported the claim of the British Police to be the best in the world during a mid-twentieth century halcyon period regarded as a golden age when police legitimacy was at its height (Reiner, 2000).

The world moves on and in today's media saturated society, the established symbolism is challenged and complemented by numerous other images. In the domain of old media, nostalgic police series like *Heartbeat* share the schedules with *The Shield* and *The Wire*. News images of the policing of the G20 demonstrations in the City of London and the death of Ian Tomlinson in April this year sit side by side with reality cop shows that communicate the dangers and frustrations of modern response policing. Re-runs of the prison sit-com *Porridge* sit uneasily with the reality of the fly-on-the-wall *Holloway*. These send mixed messages and with the increasing penetration of new media, representations of crime and justice are even more ubiquitous. YouTube, for example, contains a miscellany of

Figure 1. Courtesy of artofthestate.co.uk

representations of crime and justice from gang life to football violence to police brutality.

Threats and opportunities

This provides a context in which criminal justice agencies are presented with both threats and opportunities. In terms of threats, criminal justice agents are now amongst the most watched, subject to scrutiny by citizen journalists in tension-filled situations (e.g. the G20 policing) and targeted by undercover investigative reporters with sophisticated equipment capable of capturing backstage behaviour (e.g. the BBC's *The Secret Policeman* in 2003). On the other hand, new media and technological advances provide opportunities. Criminal justice agencies, in particular the police, have become more adept at 'image work' or what Thompson (1995) termed the 'management of visibility'. Individual police forces have established Facebook sites; Greater Manchester Police were the first in April 2008 and have been followed by others including West Midlands Police. Individual forces are also using YouTube as a means of channelling community safety messages and appealing for information. Police force websites are increasingly sophisticated and often include blogs from specialist officers and staff, including Community Safety Officers and, sometimes, the command team.

In addition to the activities of individual police forces, national campaigns, including full page newspaper advertisements and billboards in prominent public places, have been co-ordinated in recent years to hail the introduction of Neighbourhood Policing Teams and the Policing Pledge across England and Wales. This forms part of the wider campaign to bolster trust and confidence in the criminal justice system.

Symbolism and meaning

While the police are proactive in our jurisdiction, other agencies have not developed their image work to the same extent. However, interesting cases have emerged elsewhere. In the United States, Sheriff Jo Arpaio of

Maricopa County, Arizona, provides a self-contained case study of the communication of criminal justice. Continuing the symbolism of prison architecture, he created 'Tent Prison City' for 2,000 inmates, as a means of coping economically with prison overcrowding. He hosts a 'Deadbeats Parents Hall of Shame' on the Sheriff's Office website (www.mcso. org) that comprises 'Wanted' posters of parents who have defaulted on their child support payments. Linking-in proudly to notorious historical practices and buying-in to the symbolism of punishment, Arpaio also introduced male chain gangs and the 'world's first' chain gangs for women and juveniles (though closer examination suggests that these are high visibility community-oriented programmes). While, thankfully, international policy transfer hasn't picked up on all of Arpaio's initiatives, since the Casey Report of 2008, it is now possible to spot offenders undertaking projects in our own communities wearing orange 'community payback' jackets, mirroring the spirit of Arpaio's chain gangs. Both in the US and the UK it seems that the spectacle of punishment is once more acceptable.

Inter-weaving with the visual symbols of criminal justice and the communication activities of agencies is a plethora of popular films and television programmes based around crime and justice themes. These provide both information and entertainment and blur the boundaries between the two. It would be wrong to dismiss these as inconsequential. For example, Reiner and Livingstone's (1997) study of films, television (and newspapers) between 1945 and 1990 identified significant changes in the representation of victims, offenders and the police. Relating to prisons, the documentaries made by Rex Bloomstein have contributed to our understanding of prisoners' and their families lives even if, as Mason (2006) argues, generally the media represent prison uncritically as a solution to crime, and media representations of prisoners exclude rational debate of alternatives to prison.

Visions of the future

Dramatic representations are interesting in that they can focus on the possible futures of criminal justice, something that factual representations clearly can't do. Unfortunately, the projected futures in film are decidedly dystopian. The depicted societies tend to be the worst of all worlds in which cities are a mix of the crumbling and the modern and civil society has broken down (*Bladerunner*); power resides with faceless and unaccountable corporations (*Robocop*); and criminal gangs hunt in packs, killing and robbing indiscriminately (*Mad Max*). In these futures the police are beleaguered, a stretched thin blue line. They have 'armed up', fight pitch battles with criminals, and the appliance of science and hardcore weaponry comes to the fore.

Visions of the future of punishment are particularly harsh. Nellis's analysis (2006) of science-fiction films reveals awful private prisons run by global corporations that utilise new control technologies for tracking and punishment. These include, in *The Running Man* set in 2019, exploding neck collars that activate when the prison boundary is crossed. In the same film punishment has again become a public spectacle, but as entertainment rather than deterrent, as convicts fight gladiatorial-type battles before television audiences. While we should not perhaps take these visions seriously as probable futures, deriving as they do, more from a need to create entertaining scenarios than from a wish to predict the future, Nellis is surely correct in wondering whether we are being softened up for the future development of penal practices.

To conclude, we live in a highly mediated society in which resonant historical symbols of crime and justice co-exist with apocalyptic visions of the future. Crime is a 'state of the nation' index and is likely to remain so. Accordingly, analysis of the imagery of crime and justice and of how the police and other agencies communicate is important to understanding the current criminal justice context and its debates. Such analysis will continue to be a

conduit to understanding and articulating concerns within society about crime. ∎

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