

Harmful Societies

Steve Tombs reviews Simon Pemberton's new book

Each year, the Office for National Statistics calculates the number of 'excess winter deaths' – deaths from December to March compared with the average number of deaths occurring in the preceding and following four month periods in England and Wales. The figure for last winter is likely to see a significant hike up to some 36,000 – mainly of older people, not killed by the cold *per se*, but by illnesses brought on by lack of access to affordable heating, or suitably warm, dry accommodation, or most likely both.

The term 'Deaths Brought Forward' (DBF) is commonly applied by the Committee on the Medical Effects of Air Pollution (COMEAP) when looking at statistical evaluations of air quality effects at a population level.

COMEAP's most recent annual figure is 29,000 such deaths. Other estimates are higher; the all-party Environmental Audit Committee concluded in 2010 that '[a]ir pollution probably causes more deaths than passive smoking, traffic accidents or obesity', possibly:

...contributing to as many as 50,000 deaths per year...Averaged across the whole UK population it is estimated that poor air quality is shortening lives by 7–8 months. In pollution hotspots it could be cutting the most vulnerable people's lives short by as much as nine years.

(Parliamentary News, 2010)

And each October, the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) press releases the numbers of 'fatal injuries' to workers as the trail to its annual statistical publication. Often referred to by HSE as fatal *accidents*, this headline figure of somewhere around 150 in fact obscures the 50,000 or so deaths per annum related to working in Britain. While we know little about the vast majority of these deaths, we know for sure that they are overwhelmingly not the result of accidents, a term implying these were unforeseen, unpreventable, or usually both. Quite the contrary, they are mostly the effects of failures of employers to meet obligations in criminal law to protect the health, safety and welfare of workers and members of the public.

Language

The language used across these three quite disparate areas of social life – or, rather, social death – is revealing. 'Excess winter deaths', 'deaths brought forward' and 'fatal injuries' each seem to combine the technical and the

prosaic, but in neither respect does the language signify the extraordinary phenomena to which it refers. None conveys a source, nor any sense of agency or structure, nor responsibility regarding the deaths at issue. None reveals that the deaths are much more likely to be concentrated in some social groups rather than others – dimensions of a multi-layered, structured vulnerability. All terms could, in fact, be describing some natural phenomenon. Taking these observations together, it is perhaps unsurprising that none of data attracts much, if any, popular or political attention.

Meanwhile, the odd death from ecstasy or PCP, some specific types of homicides amongst the 500-plus a year in England and Wales, or the sporadic death or deaths related to so-called terrorism are the stuff of headlines: these consistently demonstrate a capacity to invoke widespread moral outrage, pervaded by the urge to 'do something' (usually very punitive), in a spiralling political, media and popular frenzy of vengeance. Moreover, these forms of death are the tip of an iceberg of concern with inter-personal harms identified as 'violent crime' that has a firm grip on the construction of violence pervading academic criminology.

Yet on closer scrutiny, each of these forms of death refers to a form of violence; to widespread, routine, preventable killing. They are exemplars of what Chernomas and Hudson termed 'social murder' – the inevitable effects of forms of capitalism within which profit maximisation is prioritised, at virtually any (and very considerable) cost. It is hardly a coincidence that Chernomas and Hudson begin their book with the same quotation selected by Pemberton to open *Harmful Societies. Understanding Social Harm*. Through citing Engels' *The Condition of the English Working Class*, Pemberton claims that the sentiments and analyses offered by Engels therein represent 'one of the original, if not *the* original, social harm analyses'. And in this brief but telling reference point, the focus and substance of *Harmful Societies* is immediately revealed.

Observing that much has been written about the potential of 'social harm', Pemberton's starting point is that, at present, such an approach:

...remains a relatively empty space, insofar as few studies have actually sought to develop the conceptual lens and to operationalize it through empirical study. It is hoped that this book will