

BOOK REVIEWS

A product of the system: my life in and out of prison, Mark Leech, 1992. Gollancz, £15.99

Is criminality the product of heredity or upbringing? Mark Leech's reply is in his title. Without making excuses, he describes what happened and how he reacted. Readers can draw conclusions.

Punishment has unwanted side-effects: aged six, beaten by his mother with a wooden spoon, he burnt the spoon. After his mother died, his father became alcoholic; Mark was taken into care, and sexually abused. In approved school, borstal and prison, he learnt to hotwire cars and use chequebooks and credit cards. Released with next to no support, he continued to offend, and was soon back inside again. He saw and experienced beatings (so that the man who now created victims once again became a victim himself), fought back, was placed in solitary confinement and strip cells, and still fought back with the only weapon left to him - excrement.

To their credit the authorities allowed him to study law. Court cases, helped by reforming lawyers, rectified several unjust practices of governors, Boards of Visitors and the Home Office. They should be grateful: fewer wrongs mean fewer riots. But the reforms may be too little, too late; one is left wondering whether the prison system is reformable or should be scrapped and replaced, like the juvenile system in Massachusetts under Jerome Miller.

After twenty-three years mostly in institutions Leech was finally helped to confront his behaviour, at Grendon prison. He found this very tough, and the book's conclusion shows that the process is not yet complete. He only stayed the course with the help of skilful staff and the loving support of loyal friends outside. For almost the first time he thought of his own victims. Clearly such a process is needed at an early stage, before delinquency becomes a career. Leech's book should be read by anyone who believes that punishing parents would solve anything, that prisoners' rights should be curtailed, or that tough regimes breed respect.

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Families, Children and Crime, Anna Coote (ed), 1994. P/6 147 pp (IPPR)

This collection derives from a joint IPPR/Independent on Sunday conference of the same name, organised towards the end of 1993.

For many of the contributors, there is a belief in the link between family experiences and criminality. Moreover, for some the description of the crime crisis is located as a problem of masculinity, either in the loss of effective role models or the crisis in male identity resultant from a loss of employment.

Writing in the introduction, Coote expresses the view that whilst women have added the role of wage earner to the more traditional ones of home maker and carer, for young men, however, changes have resulted in the loss of their traditional role and future prospects as breadwinner. This has meant the possible broadening of the base through which girls may achieve adult status - motherhood and employment - yet for boys with the severing of old routes without replacement, new ways of growing up must be found.

One possible solution may be through peer group attachment. As Angela Phillips argues 'by the time they are seven, the coercive process of masculinisation is well under way. Boys mercilessly tease those who don't conform to the group idea of masculinity'. Further identification at home can allow young men to check and adjust what they have learnt against the reality as they experience it. The absence of effective fathers thus provides a good determinant for criminality, with criminality often the best opportunity of proving masculinity for many young men.

The theme of family life and criminality is further discussed by David Utting, whose analysis forwards the notion that 'under the roof' factors such as poor parental supervision and parental discord are related to a child's later delinquency. Parenting, it is argued is seen as the direct channel by which poverty and disadvantage influence young people's behaviour and development.

The slim volume is divided into four sections. The first, discussed above, explores the links between families, emerging masculinities, feminine identities and crime and deviance. Section two examines the relations between research, analysis and policy, while the final two focus analysis upon working with offenders, and strategies for prevention and evalua-

tions of existing measures. The latter includes analysis of strategies aimed at increasing support to families in dislocated communities, voluntary organisations' role in improving parenting, and the role of educational programmes.

However, despite the volume's broad range of topics, its analysis appears partial, in some cases confused and certainly under-developed. While it is the case that many of those contributing have already focused attention on gender differences, the discussions as presented in this volume require much more analytic discussion, empirical evidence and theoretical sophistication if they are to gain support across the criminological enterprise.

For one, the correlation is not necessary causal. No-where is there reference given to the long tradition of critical study on the relationship between the family, criminality and crime rates. Moreover, there is an expressed intent amongst many of the contributors to extinguish the silence surrounding what Coote sees as the one incontrovertible fact in the history of explaining criminality - the fact that crime is overwhelmingly a male pursuit. Yet it seems to me that there has been in no sense a remarkable silence about masculinity, but rather the masculine nature of crime has been central to much criminological debate. It is usually the criticism that too much has been written on masculinity and on male offending not too little. Finally it appears a little misleading to explain away the rise in crime by a crisis in masculinity. A look at the general increase in offending since the 1970s highlights a remarkable constant in the ratio of male to female offenders. Surely it is this latter point which is as important for any discussion on gender and crime, and a need to examine the broader social and economic factors which underpin changes in crime amongst men and women over time, rather than gender differences.

As Coote herself argues, the volume does not pretend to be comprehensive either in its diagnosis of the crime problem, nor in its prescriptions. However, given the paucity of much contemporary debate on explaining criminality coupled with the right's demonising of the family as provider and regulator of children's delinquency, it is a shame that such an analysis was not forthcoming.

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