

BOOK REVIEWS

SEX CRIME AND THE MEDIA: SEX OFFENDING AND THE PRESS IN A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Chris Greer. Willan, 2003; pp. 229; £30, hbk. ISBN 1-84392-004-2

Chris Greer's book is important both as an empirical study and a sophisticated theoretical analysis of sex offending, a family of crimes which fascinates and frightens citizens throughout all late modern societies. Within the book there is a discussion of a disparate collection of crimes including incest, paedophilia, rape, sexually motivated homicide and prostitution. Much of the public's interest in and fear generated by sex offending is sustained by the media, in particular the popular press which is awash with salacious and sensationalised stories about sex crime. *Sex Crime and the Media* provides a cogent analysis of the portrayal of sex offending in the context of Northern Ireland, a society fractured as a result of an inter-ethnic conflict underpinned by religious rivalry. Whilst public concern about sex crime in general is well documented, a notable strength of Greer's unique contribution is that it provides a novel analysis of the representation of such offences in a politically divided society. Having said that the book's key findings and arguments are far off being parochial and have resonance in all late modern societies. This is especially so given the globalisation of media led communication.

A major positive feature of the text is that it offers an insightful account of the complex processes surrounding the social construction of sex crime in media narratives. This is achieved through a thorough analysis of the media's contribution towards shaping public and political perceptions of the extent and prevalence of sex offending in a variety of forms. It shows how the media provides a template which suggests how citizens ought to react to the complex reality of, and risks posed by, sex offenders. An organising argument of the text is that the work of the media has a strong and softly deterministic influence on the public's understanding of sex crime. However, there is also a suggestion that the media is reacting to the demands of an audience that is 'dumbing down' and withdrawing from conventional party politics and so-called serious debates and issues in public policy.

Above all Greer's book is a welcome addition to the literature examining the linkages between the crime and media because it considers sex crime in the context of the news production process. The fieldwork in the book, for instance, considers the activities of journalists and their sources in relation to the social construction of sex crime. This micro level analysis is then clearly located within broader socio-economic cultural and political changes. It provides a compelling account of the commercialisation of news production in

an increasingly competitive market in which customers would appear to prefer spending their money on tabloid newspapers. In comparison to the broadsheets, the tabloid press are more adept at disseminating often inaccurate information about the nature of sex offending to wider sections of the public. It also outlines in some detail the nature of the relationship between the media and those criminal justice practitioners involved in assessing and managing the risks posed by sex offenders. A message contained in the book is that the quality of the information about sex offending produced by the media is generally poor and does not really adequately educate the wider public about the practical problems represented by such crimes. It may be concluded from this that a better informed public in possession of a more accurate understanding of sex offending would be beneficial for policy makers involved in the difficult task of preventing and solving this type of crime.

In my view this book is important and deserves to be read by a wide audience, including academics involved in teaching modules which focus on the relationship between crime and the media, specifically the influence of the media on the criminal justice policy making process. Some of the examples would also be ideal for stimulating the interest of students approaching criminology for the first time. Journalists would also find the book to be an interesting description of their working environment and the extent to which their activities are interconnected with an important area of public policy. Criminal justice practitioners who are required to work with the media may also find the book helpful as a way of familiarising themselves with the workings of an increasingly commercialised and market driven media industry.

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**CRIME AND EVERYDAY LIFE.
Marcus Felson. Sage Publications 2002; pp.211.
pbk. ISBN 0-7619-8761-4**

Marcus Felson is a major and significant contributor to the 'routine activity approach' to crime rate analysis. This is his third edition of this book, in which he has re-worked and developed some of his original concepts noted in the first and second editions (1994,1998). These additions include offender decisions, selling of stolen goods, 'white-collar' crime and the concept of *crime science*; a theme which Felson endeavours to communicate throughout this text.

This book offers a useful and accessible perspective into crime in everyday life. In particular, it is clearly written and Felson works hard to encourage the reader to engage in extended discussions and activities outside the text. In this sense *Crime and Everyday Life* would be useful for students who are new to this discipline. This is because Felson interestingly crystallises and asserts some of the 'fallacies' or untruths about crime, by inviting the reader to think hard about their own experiences in everyday life. In this way Felson is able to provide some explanations about the origins and causes of crime based on human behaviour and social environments. This text is a manifesto for *crime science*, suggesting that the phenomena of crime can be examined precisely and systematically, almost as if under a microscope. I would warn however, that Felson's focus is entirely on situational crime, whereas crimes like domestic violence, sexual and racist crime are overlooked in this text.

Felson uses the 'chemistry of crime' as a manner of understanding the journey of the criminal act, which in turn can help us to understand how offending can and might be reduced. He suggests that the routine of everyday life punctuates certain crime opportunities, thus enabling an offence to take place much more readily. Moreover, the absence of 'guardians' or protectors against crime is also an important element to Felson's approach. Here the offender and victim relationship or interaction is perhaps over simplified; the presence or absence of bystanders or 'guardians' can determine whether or not a crime is committed. It is these crime opportunities that enable the process. Felson advocates that if the scientist can detect these opportunities or 'niches', thus criminal activity can be reduced. In part this colludes with victim blaming discourses and the so-called demand for young people to be subject to curfews, 'It aims to protect the local community from anti-social behaviour instigated by groups of young people at night.'¹ This is linked to the UK Government's Street Crime Initiative (2002).

Felson to some extent rejects the exploration of the criminal mind or social explanations for crime. However, through this text we are invited to consider social situations where crime can take place, which can appear contradictory. But what Felson is asking the reader or crime scientist to do is to put themselves 'into the mind of a criminal'. Instead of the situational and psychological insights, Felson stipulates this as a list of tasks, a

mechanical process in which they occur in succession within a larger system of processes or activities. Yet this science is surely embedded in both psychology and sociology?

Most interestingly, Felson's chapter on marketing stolen goods provides an insight into this behaviour. This example highlights the problems that everyday life can be almost encouraging people to steal and in turn, buy stolen goods. It can be argued that even traditional high street shops almost invite people to steal; goods are openly on display and opportunities can and do arise for an offence to take place. This is perhaps explained by geography and proximity to appropriate outlets to market stolen goods.

Felson's later chapter reinforces the notion of 'local design' or urban planning. This tries to fuse the perspectives offered earlier in this text. The very spaces human beings design and create can and will contribute to the crime opportunities Felson readily expresses in this book. If we can understand how and why crime is structured in modern everyday life, it can according to Felson assist us in crime prevention. Yet as Felson himself suggests, crime is complicated, but I feel further more complicated with the rejection of theory or perspectives to think about crime and its outcomes. Despite this Felson is persuasive by serving to realign our thinking about the complexities of situational crime. I would, however, be interested to observe how Felson would react to crimes committed by the state.

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Notes

- 1 <http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/youth18.htm>

**CONFRONTING CRIME: CRIME CONTROL
POLICY UNDER NEW LABOUR**
**Michael Tonry (ed). Willan, 2003: pp 251, £30
hbk. ISBN 1843920220**

This publication is a welcome and timely contribution to the continuing debate around the development of criminal justice policy under New Labour and develops a particular focus on the impact of the Criminal Justice Bill 2002 (as it then was) within a range of key areas including: drug-dependent offenders, sex offenders, nuisance offenders, court procedures and sentencing. The contributions from both academics and practitioners emerge from a Cambridge Crime Policy Conference in 2002 and meetings of the Cambridge Sentencing Policy Group that met throughout the same year.

The book opens with a lively introductory chapter from the editor Michael Tonry which seeks to set the scene in terms of providing a brief overview of current debates around the rise in punitive populism and a rapidly escalating prison population at a time of apparently reducing crime levels; David Garland's contribution to this criminological discourse is drawn upon here and at other times by other contributors to this publication. The theme is developed into a critique of the alleged relationship between policy making and an evidence based understanding of what works within criminal justice. Briefly, but effectively, Tonry challenges the idea that the Criminal Justice Bill 2002 is grounded within evidence based policy making and instead offers alternative rationales which emphasise the continuing primacy of the judiciary and the political realities as interpreted by the current government. The reader is drawn into the discussion and looks forward to a more detailed analysis in subsequent chapters.

The focus on policy making is somewhat dissipated in Chapter Two which examines drug dependent offenders and 'Justice for All'. The early content of the chapter includes a useful and succinct overview of the relationship between offending and drug use and provides some clear thinking in what are frequently muddied waters. However the subsequent discussion of policy initiatives within the White Paper is somewhat constrained by the parameters set by the authors which are primarily the efficacy of coerced treatment and the implementation and public support issues that might arise from the government's approach. What is missing is a broader based policy discussion about the relationship between the apparently competing agendas of criminal justice and public health/social policy; what about, for example, the developing risk that sentencers will view custody as an opportunity for a period of detoxification that is not available within the community? The allocation of resources to a criminal justice response surely requires a consideration of public health priorities?

Chapter Three begins with a refreshing debunking of recent myths regarding the nature and extent of the threat posed by sex offenders and questions the rationale for the proposals contained within the Criminal Justice Bill 2002, preferring instead the strands of thought that have given rise to the sex offences White Paper, ('Protecting the Public'

2002). What follows is a persuasive argument for an approach to sex offenders that reflects the inherent complexities within which sex offending 'is recognised as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that requires a range of strategies including treatment programmes and multi-agency management'(Page 66). The uncertainties of risk assessment and prediction are evidenced and criticisms of risk management as a process and incapacitation without treatment are levelled. The concluding section includes some interesting suggestions for the development of a more evidence based and comprehensive approach to policy making; this could have been usefully developed further.

The discussion of nuisance offenders in Chapter Four is predicated on the assertion that there has been a poor fit between existing police and court responses to the accumulation of relatively minor anti-social behaviour which has a major impact on individuals and communities. As policing and sentencing has traditionally been geared to what the authors describe as 'one-off events', cumulative anti-social behaviour has largely been bypassed by the criminal justice process. Anti-Social Behaviour Orders are, within this argument, a response to the failure of existing legal sanctions to deal with cumulative harm. There then follows a discussion of ASBOs with some references to isolated case histories. As is often the case with edited collections, the parameters for this discussion vary considerably from the earlier chapters. The complexities of offending which suggested a multi-faceted response to sex offenders are not mirrored in the discussion of anti-social behaviour. The authors do not engage with issues of Human Rights, proportionality and rehabilitation and appear to be community rather than offender orientated. An alternative view might locate the nuisance offender as part of a troubled community in which a process of restoration has some value.

In contrast Human Rights considerations move closer to centre stage in Chapter Five which mounts a powerful critique of the implications of the White Paper 2002 with regard to process and evidence within the court system. The much heralded 'better deal for victims and witnesses' is contrasted with the gap between existing legal protections and their availability in reality; concerns are expressed about the implications of police officers having authority to impose bail conditions before charge; changes in terms of admissibility of evidence and double jeopardy raise questions about fair trials and Human Rights. The authors bemoan the absence of a principled approach and the ascendancy of a 'crime control' model of justice at the expense of due process.

Similar themes are picked up in the following chapter on Sentencing Guidelines in which Neil Hutton identifies the difficulty of constructing sentencing guidelines when the sentencing process has divergent aims and no primary or unitary rationale. Having identified a simple set of features that underpin an effective system of sentencing guidelines, he concludes that, when measured against this, the arrangements within the Criminal Justice Bill are severely wanting with the relationships between the Court of Appeal, Sentencing Advisory Panel and Sentencing Guidelines Council confused and opaque.

In a less critical chapter on Sentence Management the authors identify existing opportunities for sentencers to play a role in the oversight of court outcomes, particularly DTTOs and cautiously welcome the extension of judicial oversight to include Suspended Sentence Orders within the Criminal Justice Bill 2002. Their chief concern rests with the potential duality of role that sentencing and sentence management implies although in fact probation officers, within a different arena, juggle potentially conflicting roles within the breach and enforcement process.

Slightly out of context, Chapter 8 asks whether sentencing in England and Wales is institutionally racist. In fact the authors reject the term 'institutional racism' as unhelpful and refer to Macpherson's much quoted definition as 'artless, almost incoherent'. Having established their starting point the authors then review some of the literature to identify that processes within the criminal justice system are institutionally racist but that the use of this term 'obscures rather than advances understanding of racial disparities in sentencing' (page 178). This is a challenging chapter which finishes with a series of proposals designed to reduce disparities; these are radical and run the risk of encouraging a knee jerk rejection from policy makers. Chapter 10 retains a similar hard hitting approach and sets out a series of measures which would, if implemented, have the effect of reducing the prison population. Given current indications from the Home Office that the prison establishment is about to reach capacity, these proposals may seem timely but again it could be argued that their range and breadth go well beyond current policy making realities.

Sandwiched between these two chapters Jenny Roberts and Michael E. Smith consider the arrival of custody plus and minus and raise a series of pertinent questions about the blurring of the distinction between custodial and community sentences and the possible consequences from a sentencing perspective. Their analysis echoes the concerns expressed in preceding chapters regarding the absence of a clear rationale and along the way the authors cast some cautious doubts about the nature of the claims being made in support of the What Works evidence base. What emerges is the degree of uncertainty and risk associated with radical sentencing shifts and the possibility for unintended consequences to raise their potentially ugly head.

This book was conceived before the publication of the Carter review and does not seek to grapple with broader policy making issues associated with the management and governance of the justice system. Readers will need to go elsewhere to examine the progress of managerialism and new public management. However within the parameters set this book is a stimulating and robust analysis of some of the recent developments and successfully combines contributions from academics and practitioners/managers to engage the reader in what is generally a lively and well informed debate.

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