

Concepts of new right realism



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What is distinctive about the political ideas underpinning crime control in the past 30 years?

Margaret Thatcher famously commented that “ there is no such thing as society” (1987) and in that comment is ample evidence of the Thatcher governments adherence to ‘ New Right Realism’, arguably the dominant political philosophy underpinning crime control policies throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s and which continues to be a major influence on criminal justice policy to this day.

Walklate explains the concept of Right Realism as a product of governments targeting public expenditure in response to the changing economic climates of the 1970’s. It entailed a completely new discussion of how social problems should be dealt with. The shift to this new understanding occurred both in the UK, particularly as a result of the election of the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher, and in the US under the Reagan administration among others.

One of the foremost American theorists in the US at the time was criminologist James Q. Wilson. Wilson was President Reagan’s adviser on crime and argued that crime does not have ‘ root causes’ embodied in the context of individual citizens lives but that people choose to commit crime on the basis of the possible rewards offered (Blake, 2001). Essentially, New Right Realism as a political and criminological philosophy began with Wilson who proposed, in association with George Kelling (1982), the idea that crime is an inevitable result of disorder. They argued that if a window is broken and left unrepaired people walking by will believe that no one is in control and no one cares. This will lead inexorably to more windows being broken and

before too long a sense of anarchy and disorder will develop. This idea became known as the 'broken windows' theory. Young (1983) noted Wilson's rise as an influential figure in the US, but he became even more influential with his association with Richard Herrnstein with whom he wrote the book *Crime and Human Nature* (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). In this book, the authors wrote that crime was disproportionately the preserve of young men living in large cities.

Walklate argues that these two authors essentially constructed a criminal personality based on age, sex, body type and personality and that these qualities are presented almost as 'biological givens'. Walklate cites Young (1994) in observing that essentially Wilson and Herrnstein concerned themselves primarily with maintaining order rather than necessarily delivering justice. Young comments that such a view is based on Rational Choice Theory which (in its criminological manifestation) refuses to address the causes of crime but instead is concerned with its management. Cornish and Clarke (1986) not only supported this notion but went on to describe the actions of the criminal as being based purely on economic motives in which human beings are regarded as being driven by profit motives. Fundamentally this way of thinking was a product of the work of Cohen and Felson (1979) who argue that crime is the product of three factors coming together at a particular time, notably motivation, a victim and a lack of a potential guardian. This then set the pattern for the New Right Realism that was to be adopted in the UK, primarily by the Thatcher government.

John Lea (1997) argues that the central task of the Thatcher government was the political and ideological management of the process of destroying the old

Keynesian welfare state but that necessarily entailed a deepening authoritarianism throughout society. Essentially Thatcher sought to isolate the problems of the poor from any consideration of state responsibility arguing that people were responsible for themselves. In this context, the welfare state moved from being seen as a system of support to being a source of debilitating passivity which must be replaced by a concept of people acting for themselves and thereby taking responsibility for their own misfortune. Part of this thinking involved the breakup of the trade union movement or at least placing strong restraints on unions ability to interfere with the labour market, local government or to resist the Thatcherite programme. It also meant that society had to be depoliticised so that libertarian politics and free market capitalism remained formed the basis of everyday life in every sector. Crime control was therefore an essential part of this programme (Downes & Morgan, 1994).

To a certain extent, Lea maintains, a crackdown on crime would have been essential since crime levels had been rising steadily since the 1960's and according to police statistics had doubled in the 1980's. The British Crime Survey (BCS) also indicated such a rise in crime figures. What is important however is that the Thatcher government integrated crime control into political and particularly ideologically-driven thinking since it was considered to be an important element in the drive towards creating the model apolitical citizen advocated by New Right Conservatism. One of the main initiatives in this programme was the Neighbourhood Watch scheme, introduced in 1983. This was an American idea based on the encouragement of ordinary citizens

to keep watch on their own areas and report suspicious behaviour to the police.

Lea argues that the idea of an 'active citizen' as espoused in the thinking behind the Neighbourhood Watch Scheme, was an essentially middle class concept and this explains why the scheme had little effect on crime, since Neighbourhood Watch systems were set up in middle class areas where there was little actual crime and therefore where they were not actually needed. They were areas where the fear of crime was growing rather than crime itself. Meanwhile, in areas affected by real poverty, in which there was little sense of community, high unemployment and high crime rates such initiatives were actually quite useless, since there often tended to be a sense of active warfare between young people and the police. Local council estates were particularly affected and so local authorities were considered to be the main agents for crime control. A philosophy of 'dangerousness' and 'risk management' began to form the basis for discussion with regard to crime and this led to the idea of poverty and homelessness being breeding grounds for disorder rather than being considered as social problems.

Because much of the funding for crime prevention came from central government, the government came to insist that in order to be eligible for funding, local authorities had to coordinate their crime prevention plans with the police. This was little more than an attempt to ensure that political influence was kept to a minimum. While all this was going on the Thatcher government also began to compel local authorities to sell off public housing to those people who could afford to buy their own homes. This meant that the remaining public housing stock was inhabited by the poorest

communities in the country and therefore areas in which crime was rife.

Central government funding was increasingly restricted and was accompanied by measures to reduce the power of local authorities to vary local taxes. This meant that while local authorities were being asked to become the main agents for crime control they very often found they had limited resources to fund initiatives.

Many local authorities concentrated ‘problem families’ in particular areas and with regards to the physical environment of council estates, a form of ‘architectural determinism’, as Lea puts it, began to take over. In essence, a number of theorists began to suggest that particular architectural styles of building could be used as an agent against crime. Much of this was directed towards council estates and one of the most prominent thinkers in this respect was Alice Colman who offered guidance to the Design Improvement Controlled Experiment (DICE) programme of redesign begun in 1990. Lea notes that the idea was to make it harder for criminals to enter and also to escape from these estates but he observes that this has led to an assumption in which a criminal is someone who is essentially an outsider, who needs to be watched and deterred from entry. In practice however, most criminals are locals rather than strangers. A number of critics have condemned these ideas as almost completely ineffective (e. g. Foster, 1983; Osborne & Shaftoe, 1995) while according to Rose Gilroy et al (1995) some tenants have complained that the practice of dividing blocks into units and encouraging accompanying gardens merely prepares public housing units for private ownership.

It can be seen therefore that the essence of Right Realism is essentially punitive. Montorosso refers to this as ‘popular punitivism’ and he explains it as something that is based more on emotions and symbolism than on expert-driven penal policy. This lends itself to political advantage (Maruna & King, 2004), particularly to those politicians advocating prison as an almost default solution – the ‘prison works’ idea (Frieberg, 2001). This then tends to diminish criminology by virtue of subordinating criminal policy to tabloid interpretation, something that has been extended by the Labour government through their courting of the media. In essence, high profile cases are allowed to take precedence which then creates a fertile ground for authoritarian responses. In the process the debate is transferred from the realm of criminologists to the public arena, particularly with regard to those who are ‘living in fear’ and thus demand action (Garland, 1996, Thomas, 2004). Thomas notes that in this climate, the interests of the victim and ‘victim status’ underpin punitive approaches.

Montorosso comments that the Thatcher government maintained a sustained discourse based on a punitive rhetoric characterised by themes of retribution and deterrence and reinforced by a ‘near-unconditionally backed police service’. This approach continued to be followed by the Major government. Both administrations argued that crime could not be explained by ‘social conditions’, thus following the philosophy of Wilson and Hernstein. To some extent, having also been promulgated by the New Labour governments of Blair and Brown and characterised by the stock phrase ‘tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime’, it continues to this day. Some may express surprise that the New Labour government followed their Conservative

predecessors, but Montorosso accurately notes that New Labour has regularly been described as ‘populist’ and ‘punitive managerialist’ in nature, drawing attention that after Blair’s election over 1000 new offences were created up until early 2005.

Indeed, Montorosso comments that the Blair government showed ‘incredible aptitude’ in its management of ‘message’ through a policy of focusing public attention on toughness via press conferences, interviews and public meetings. Mackenzie (2008) has suggested that New Labour’s approach effectively established moral and normative reference points for governance through a media and politically driven focus on the icon of ‘the other’, in essence the perceived sense of threat represented by archetypes of the irritant, the outsider and the dangerous. This then provided encouragement and justification for punitive state action and this was further encouraged by the ‘war on terror’ rhetoric (Loader, 2006). These messages were delivered in a language that was easily understood by the public, particularly via tabloid journalism (Mackenzie).

Montorosso correctly identifies American influence in the policies of the Blair government. He comments that the ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric has been prevalent in the US since the days of President Nixon with his ‘war on crime’ of the 1960’s, turning into a ‘war on drugs’ during the Reagan administration of the 1980’s. Montorosso observes that this form of discourse is a ‘well entrenched’ ingredient in American political debate. It formed an important part of President Bill Clinton’s electoral victory over Michael Dukakis, primarily through the support of George Bush Senior who

instituted a negative advertising campaign claiming that Dukakis was 'soft on crime'.

Conclusion:

Lilly, Cullen and Ball (1995) argue that there is no particular dispensation of conservative politics towards Right Realism but Walklate argues that the obsession with the individual in Right Realist theories lends itself towards such a conclusion in particular social contexts. He argues that in times of economic stress, it is tempting for governments to blame the individual as a means of cutting back public expenditure. Lily, Cullen and Ball critique Wilson and Hernstein's work on the basis that, through viewing criminality in terms of a particular biological disposition, credence is given to the idea that criminals are beyond redemption and therefore worthy of punitive action. Walklate supports this conclusion by arguing that it tends to result in particular policy inconsistencies and even contradictions. Thus Right Realism argues that crime is directly a result of what is 'real', rather than resulting in changes in reporting practice, policy or the law. It is therefore inherently political and ideological.

This meant that the approach taken by the Thatcher government towards crime control was characterised most notably by its authoritarianism. Rather than moving away from this approach, both the Major and New Labour governments enforced it. New Labour particularly were very effective in managing an authoritarian crime control policy in the style of an almost 'corporate' PR campaign which manipulated and milked public support.

This is the distinguishing feature of political involvement in crime control of the past thirty years. An attitude marked by authoritarian penal policy,

extensive state support for the police, isolation of poverty stricken areas within the community accompanied by a certain level of ‘demonisation’ both directly and through the media. Something that hasn’t been discussed in this essay but which forms an important part of the authoritarian approach of the past thirty years is the, again American inspired, philosophy of ‘zero tolerance policing’. Lea discusses this in his online essay noting that a great deal of support for this idea has been expressed by British police forces. It originated in New York, the brainchild of the NYPD police chief William Bratton (1997) and described by Lea as essentially a more belligerent form of the Wilson-Kelling strategy and involving an aggressive response by police officers towards incidences of disorder and petty anti-social behaviour. As with other forms of punitive penalism, it targeted the poor, particularly street beggars, drinkers and ‘squeegee’ car washers operating at traffic junctions. Bratton and others claimed it was an effective measure, but the reality is, as Lea points out, that crime rates had been falling in most North American cities for some years previously and therefore had nothing to do with the aggressiveness of police officers. Nevertheless, the UK Home Secretary at the time warmed to the idea enthusiastically despite the fact that aggressive policing in the UK is hardly new. As Lea points out, such policing tactics were often used to clear young black males from London streets but Chief Constable Charles Pollard of Thames Valley Police has argued that such an approach merely ends up targeting ethnic minorities resulting in potentially explosive situations and actual riots such as that which occurred in Brixton in 1981.

As Montorosso notes, punitive approaches are not limited to the UK. Having spread across the globe, originating primarily from the US, such attitudes are now found in many countries across the world. Montorosso argues that penal policy should embrace values of safety and freedom from fear but that it should be achieved through a mix of measures including rehabilitation of offenders, developmental or situational crime prevention, socialization and education alongside deterrence and incarceration. However, achieving the right level of balance is not easy but the dangers of getting it wrong through the implementation of an overzealous penal policy means that a state can become, as Montorosso puts it, 'unduly and unjustly intrusive on the liberty of citizens'.

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