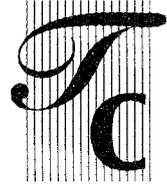


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Katherine Beckett

Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics

New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 166 pp. £25.00 (hbk) ISBN 0-1951-3628-8; £9.99 (pbk) ISBN 0-1951-1289-X

• Reviewed by Jonathan Simon, University of Miami, USA

After a period of being ignored, America's incarceration boom has become the subject of intense scrutiny by social scientists who analyze the present in terms of a contradictory confluence between economic prosperity and soaring penal populations. After hovering at 100 per 100,000 from the 1920s through the 1970s, the imprisonment rate climbed to nearly 500 at the end of 1999. Recent books have emphasized the explanatory importance of residual racism, the politically conservative shift of national politics since the 1970s, and the imperatives of economic restructuring. These approaches imply the inadequacy of what Beckett calls the 'democracy at work thesis', i.e. the idea that the incarceration increases of the last 25 years have responded to popular demand for protection against crime. Alternatively, critical scholars have pointed to a gap between crime rates and imprisonment rates, suggesting that crime has not really been at issue per se. When crime and violent crime (as reported to the police) were on the rise in the 1960s and 1970s, incarceration rates had declined. But during the 1980s and 1990s, when incarceration rates have steadily increased, crime and especially violent crime have been erratic. The trends have gone down, then up, then down again more recently without any obvious relationship to the upward movement in the incarceration rate.

Katherine Beckett's *Making Crime Pay* is the most thorough and rigorous study to date to examine the politics of the incarceration boom. She demolishes the 'democracy at work thesis' by showing definitively that popular concern about crime has followed rather than led politicians' initiatives. *Making Crime Pay* will not be the last word on how to interpret the American punishment boom, but it lays the foundation for all serious inquiry from here forward. In three years, its extensive citation by other scholars working on this and related issues verify that *Making Crime Pay* is in the early stages of becoming a classic. In the remainder of this review, then, I outline the major elements of Beckett's analysis before offering my own reflections about where debate needs next to go.

Beckett argues that political developments, especially the civil rights and welfare movements, set the stage for the punishment boom. Faced with growing political demands for the federal government to intervene in the task of producing a more egalitarian society, political conservatives seized on crime to discredit the constituencies demanding these changes. These same conservatives used punishment as a wedge to separate the post-New Deal federal government from its traditional working class base. In the 1980s and 1990s, two developments assisted with the institutionalization of punishment. First, the collapse of rehabilitative penology and its replacement by a technocratic managerialism eliminated internal sources of resistance within the correctional establishment; this was replaced by a leadership geared toward uncritically managed growth. Second, the rise of 'New Democrats' such as Bill Clinton matched the Republicans' own rhetoric about crime. As a result, the national commitment to punishment as a social policy of first choice increasingly became sacrosanct and beyond the pale of democratic electoral debate.

The idea that mass incarceration is a responsive democratic policy has surface appeal. Being tough on crime is popular. For much of the last 25 years, steady growth has occurred in the number of survey respondents who say they support the death penalty and feel that the courts are insufficiently 'tough'. But this well-recognized consensus hides significant variation in the degree of interest and in the complexity of these views about punishment. Using multiple regression techniques, Beckett examined the effects of crime rates (measured by reports to police), media attention and political initiatives on variation in how much importance survey respondents accord to crime and drug problems. Beckett's analysis shows that the two strongest predictors of increases in the percentage of people rating crime and drugs the most serious problem in America are political initiatives highlighting these problems and media attention. Crime reported to the police has no statistically significant effect.

Beckett supports this quantitative analysis by looking in detail at the pattern of polling data during the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Both presidents sought to make crime and drugs a major issue. Yet with the exception of periods immediately following a major political speech or initiative, the polling data indicate that even during this period of conservative ascendancy, there was no consistent focus of public concern on crime or drugs.

For Beckett, the real roots of the punishment boom pre-existed violent crime taking off as an issue in the 1960s. The growth of the civil rights movement in the 1960s provided a fundamental challenge to the political alignment that had dominated American politics since the 1930s. This was the tense coalition between the urban North with its immigrant and increasingly African-American working classes, and the white South with its inherited hatred of the party of Lincoln. Escalating demands for federal responsiveness to the civil rights movement in the 1960s forced the Democratic Party to make a fateful choice. With first halting steps by President Kennedy, and then a full embrace by President Johnson, the Democratic Party put itself fully on the side of the civil rights movement. As a result, the African-American vote which had been close to even between the parties in the 1950s swung lopsidedly to the Democrats.

Simultaneously a huge group of voters, both southern whites angered by the attack on segregation and northern suburban whites made anxious by busing and affirmative action, found themselves dislocated and suddenly up for grabs by a Republican Party whose economic ideas were long anathema to these voters.

It was the old-line segregationists who first began the rhetorical reconstruction: linking civil rights to crime. Laws to protect civil rights were rewards for lawbreakers (p. 30). National Republican politicians like Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon soon found that without having to embrace that particular formula, they could insist that federal policies generally—both welfare and crime-related—had undermined deterrence by checking the punitive power of the state. To governments facing the increasingly militant demands of the welfare rights movement in the 1970s, crime seemed to provide an object lesson in the wages of giving people ‘something for nothing’ (p. 87). For the important group of swing voters alienated by the Democratic Party’s civil rights turn, the crime issue formed a perfect wedge by which their traditional reliance on government help could be morally distinguished from hand-outs given to the undeserving poor. The rapid spread of crack cocaine among the urban poor during the 1980s seemed to document this loss of personal responsibility and community control brought on by permissive social policies.

Still the political war on crime might not have generated an incarceration boom were it not for the drug issue. Nixon followed up in office with a number of legislative initiatives, but was stymied from making crime a bigger part of his effort by the enduring view that it was not a federal priority. He also faced considerable resistance from the federal bureaucracy, even the law enforcement bureaucracy, about making street crime the main enemy. Yet it was the drug issue that provided a bridge for a full-scale federal invasion of crime under Reagan and Bush. Not only has the federal direct role in criminal justice grown but, as Beckett describes, the federal government has taken an aggressive role in promoting state incarceration.

Beckett’s strong emphasis on political agency does not lead her to ignore political culture. Drawing on interpretive frame analysis developed by sociologists of culture, Beckett closely examines the narrative logic of media coverage of crime. Stories about crime and drugs are disproportionately narrated in frames that emphasize the loss of respect for authority, the imperative of punishing traffickers, and the importance of responding to even minor delinquency (zero tolerance). Excluded were discussions of the causes of crime or the effects of the war on drugs. Beckett concedes that the punishment agenda succeeded politically in part because pre-existing tendencies in American culture, reflected in the media, support an emphasis on individual responsibility and intentional wrongdoing over the structural causes of crime or the complex realities of implementing punitive solutions. However, even here she documents that the media bias in framing stories is largely an artifact of where these stories come from, i.e. they are overwhelmingly based on government sources.

For those convinced by *Making Crime Pay* that the ‘democracy at work thesis’ is bunk, several paths of inquiry seem open. Even if the objective pattern

of crime increases, and if decreases do not drive popular opinion in the short term, it may be that the long-term pattern of higher crime since the 1960s had had independent effects below the level of political consciousness. In his most recent work, David Garland (2000) has begun to explore what he calls 'the culture of high crime societies'. While Garland remains something of an agnostic on the 'democracy at work thesis', his arguments about the cultural changes generated by fear of crime pose an important challenge to those who wish to think beyond the punitive turn. From this perspective, Beckett's focus on public opinion may capture political subjectivity in too conventional a manner.

A second track of ongoing research, already suggested by *Making Crime Pay* and explored further in Beckett's subsequent work, moves from the relationship between crime-and-politics to that between punishment-and-government. That is, if crime politics are only about winning elections, its effects might be limited to campaign season. However, the appeal of punishment as a popular mode of governing has come at a time when government is undergoing reinvention. Signs indicate that the increasingly punitive functions of the state are influencing the rationality of governance far more broadly (Simon, 1997). Thus Beckett's insightful analysis of the centrality of crime to the de-legitimation of New Deal-style government is a first step toward showing exactly how punishment has been key to solidifying a post-New Deal approach.

References

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Sharon Lamb (ed.)

New Versions of Victims: Feminists Struggle with the Concept

New York: New York University Press, 1999. v + 217 pp. \$55.00 (hbk), ISBN 0814751520; \$18.50 (pbk) ISBN 0814751539 .

• Reviewed by Tara Parrello, Fordham University, USA

'The media won't like this book' are Sharon Lamb's first words as she introduces this provocative new book. The collection includes essays from a list of accomplished authors who proudly proclaim they are not 'victim-feminists'. Collectively, the authors decry 'look at me feminists': these are victim advocates who, in their treatment of women, unwittingly teach women to be victims