



Neoliberalism and Harm Production: A Zemiological Perspective on the Social Production of Harm

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Introduction to the Special Issue ‘Neoliberalism and Harm Production: A Zemiological Perspective on the Social Production of Harm’

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Since the publication of *Beyond Criminology* (Hillyard et al., 2004), a range of critical scholars have drawn on social harm, as a form of social enquiry that can provide accurate and systematic analyses of injury in late capitalist societies (Pemberton, 2015; Scott, 2017; Lloyd, 2018). A key concern of this approach has been to contextualise harm and to consider the forms of injury that have the greatest social impact. In doing so, it has sought to build a more sophisticated and comprehensive picture of the lived reality of injury, focusing for example, on the inter-related nature of harm, its social patterning, and how harms accumulate across the life course from the ‘cradle to the grave’. One of the principal motivations driving this work is to foreground structural harms within social science analysis, to understand the varied ways that the organisation of societies serves to injuriously compromise human flourishing.

Interest in social harm as a tool for critical scholarship, results from a desire of a number of writers to chart the destructive consequences of the shift from ‘embedded liberalism’ to increasingly neoliberal forms of social organisation, that has occurred across the last 40 years in many advanced economies. Much of the collateral damage that has been caused through the neoliberal reconfiguration of our societies has ultimately been structural in

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nature. The potential of the social harm approach for many then, lies in its capacity to uncover and lay bare the often 'invisible' structural harms. As neoliberalism has embedded within the varieties of capitalist formation, it has brought a series of 'disorganising' logics that have sought to dismantle and erode many aspects of harm reduction in these 'host' societies in order to promote 'free markets' and 'individual freedoms'. The contributions in this Special Issue cover a range of case studies that illuminate facets of neoliberal harm production. Four key themes emerge in relation to this process:

Inequality has risen across many advanced industrial societies over the past decades, and in many instances this trend has intensified since the global financial crisis. Undoubtedly the significant factor that underlies increasing inequality has been the socio-economic restructuring undertaken under the auspices of various neoliberal projects, that have reshaped taxation regimes, social security and labour markets. As Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) argue, and as the evidence base seems to suggest, those societies that are characterised by higher levels of inequality are marked by greater forms of social dysfunction, or as Pemberton (2015) argues are 'chaotic' and 'fragmented' societies that prove to be more harmful forms of social organisation.

The connection between inequality and the invisibility of suffering is evident in Sam Scott's investigation of labour exploitation. As global trafficking of human beings increases to satisfy demands for cheaper and more malleable workers in neoliberal economies, Scott argues that governments find themselves in an irresolvable bind where they need to be seen to be engaged in harm reduction while remaining economically competitive in a fraught and uncertain global marketplace. Victims of human trafficking and forced labour become stateless and are, consequently, deprived of equal civil and human rights; they are perpetually hidden, and their suffering persists unacknowledged. This intensification of harm is echoed in Victoria Canning's article on the dehumanisation of refugees in Britain. Canning's exploration of the testimony of people subjected to the degradations of the asylum process, which often involves unexplained and indeterminate periods of detention, reveals a bureaucratic system designed to inflict harm, to punish surreptitiously under the guise of official protocol, as a means of transmitting a message of deterrence to future refugees seeking protection from authoritarianism or a better quality of life.

Deregulation of specific markets and the workplace is a critical aspect of the neoliberal project, with the explicit purpose of freeing the market and encouraging wealth accumulation. Thus, over the last 40 years, the 'fetters' on market activity, often referred to as 'red tape', such as regulatory systems that served to enforce labour standards in relation to health and safety or pay, or that regulated industrial pollutants, have been subject to contestation,

renegotiation and reform to readjust the ‘burdens’ these systems placed on business. Yet, these ‘fettters’ are critical to harm reduction in many capitalist societies.

Steve Tombs application of a social harm framework to the Grenfell Tower fire, is a powerful reminder of both the cost of deregulation as a mechanism of neoliberal policy and the value of a social harm approach, to identify and record the nature of suffering such events leave in their wake. Tombs is concerned with the potential for law to address the omissions that contributed to the fire, and to highlight accountability, but he also recognises that legislation cannot provide a response that effectively addresses the depth or longevity of the suffering involved or prevent future incidences like Grenfell. A social harm perspective, Tombs avers, needs to penetrate the protective barriers of procedure that prevent policy makers from witnessing and feeling the blowback of their decisions.

Deregulation, as clearly demonstrated by Helen Baker’s work on the suffering of women subjected to the injurious practices of the pharmaceutical industry, has also allowed corporate interests to override the bodily autonomy of the individual. Women’s bodies and reproductive abilities are acquired and reconfigured by the pharmaceutical industry, the abuse to which they are subjected and the harm they experience is ignored. In the search for accountability for these harms, Baker, like Tombs, sees the limitations of the law and advocates a social harm approach focused on the ‘*collective* activism’ of women in sharing and publicising their suffering. Social harm, as articulated by Tombs and by Baker, is concerned with empowerment of disempowered and neglected communities who have been deliberately and systematically excluded from the political and public arena.

Austerity policies across the last 40 years, are the key mechanism through which neoliberal projects have attempted to remould states – an anti-statecraft – through a fiscal strategy that has often followed economic crisis. In the most obvious and recent example, amidst the global financial crisis of 2007/8 and the unfolding crisis of the Eurozone, various European societies undertook to differing degrees public expenditure cuts in order to ‘rebalance’ their economies. Greece, undoubtedly saw the deepest and most rapid cuts, enforced via the European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, with public spending cuts totalling 23 billion euros across a four year period (2010-2014). Countries like the UK, Spain and Portugal undertook less dramatic but nevertheless unprecedented cuts. The UK coalition government embarked on a programme of austerity that equated to a reduction of approximately 13 per cent of 2010 public expenditure, an unprecedented retrenchment - the like of which had not been seen in the UK ‘since the 23 per cent cut of 1921–2’ (with the exception of the spending cuts undertaken in the

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Second World War) (Taylor-Gooby, 2012, p 64). Undoubtedly these packages have reshaped nation states' capacity to protect their populations and have, conversely, created contexts where harms are increasingly produced.

An interesting expression of the politics of austerity is presented in Alex Simpson's examination of the attitudes of finance workers in the City of London to their wider sense of social responsibility. The narrative of austerity has resulted in a pernicious reiteration of individualism, which exhibits itself in two distinct ways in Simpson's article. The impoverished and socially excluded individual is blamed for their own suffering in the sense that they have 'chosen it' through their lack of ambition; the implication of this judgement being that the individual finance worker is a product of self-perpetuated initiative and drive. As Simpson points out, this mentality is reinforced by the encapsulated nature of financial work in London, geographically and socially, and the wider psychological impact of austerity on cultural sensibilities and sensitivities.

The Strong State is a key feature of neoliberalism, insofar as the state is conceived as the 'nightwatchman', operating at the margins of the economy to ensure markets operate freely, and to ensure both our physical security as well as private property. The work of Poulantzas (1978) in particular, alerts us to the historical emergence of the 'strong state' during the 1970s in many nation states to replace elements of the 'social state' that flourished as a result of 'embedded liberalism'. The argument here is not that the 'social state' withers away entirely at this point; it is more the case that in many societies, the balance between the 'coercive' and 'beneficent' features of the state has been reconfigured in favour of the former (Supiot, 2013).

Raymen's contribution on the need for a viable social harm approach to espouse a 'theory of the Good', can be viewed as a response to the *Strong State*, as an injurious embodiment of harmful political and social values. The values of neoliberalism, it could be argued, are innately dehumanising. These values parse human significance and meaning with economic worth and thus demean human experience. Raymen suggests that this is due in part to a neoliberal focus on the individual, disconnected from a wider community. In his exploration of how social harm may help to reconfigure the values of the state, to secure human flourishing and prevent injury, Raymen asks challenging questions regarding the values of social harm itself. We need to reflect on shared values, morality, and a sense of what constitutes 'the Good': a demonstrably better quality of life and a significant reduction in suffering to which we can aspire in our work and public engagement with the prevalence of harm.

Raymen's work advocates reflection on what impels the social harm approach in a similar vein to Young (1992), who emphasised the 'importance of utopias in criminological thinking'. The articles in this edition present

layered accounts of suffering and provide feasible explanations for why such harm persists. It is also the case that these articles furnish us with insights into how we can move forward with a social harm model, guided by a need to acknowledge hidden suffering by combating official and systematic narratives of denial and political unaccountability. It may take time for a more distinct sense of the Good to emerge but, as the work in this edition shows, its characteristics are evident in the unified voices of those of who have been harmed coming forward to reveal and share their experiences.

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