

## Criminal degradations of consumer culture<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

In this chapter I take a 'social harm' approach to explore some of the degrading impacts of modern consumerism. My aim is to explore the harmful, often criminal, sometimes fatal consequences that attend the supply of consumer goods in contemporary capitalist societies. At the same time, I note that a focus on social harm begs some very fundamental questions about criminology as an academic discipline – or 'field' of study. When a cradle-to-grave assessment of consumer goods is undertaken it reveals that many personal and environmental degradations are nothing more than the ordinary means by which objects are produced, distributed and discarded in contemporary societies. In order to unpack the mundane character of the degradations of a consumer culture I use the example of prawn production but my more general argument is that what is true for prawns is true for (almost) any consumer object.

### *Introduction*

Criminology has lately developed an overt interest in the concept of 'social harm' – a concept intended to signal a wider intellectual and political agenda than the focus on crime alone. Although it has only recently become an important and explicit subject of debate in criminology its antecedents can be traced back to Edwin Sutherland (1949) who observed that the criminal justice system discriminates unfairly between crimes of the powerful and crimes of the powerless. Whilst tax evaders and corporate mal-practitioners clearly do significant harm to the economy and society they are treated far more leniently, often under civil law, than many petty offenders whose behaviours are regularly criminalised. Herman and Juliet Schwendinger (1970) took Sutherland's observations a step further by asking whether criminologists were interested merely in the problem of social order at the expense of a broader concern with human rights. If the latter is central to criminology's self-definition then the concept of 'crime' is insufficient to grasp the many harmful processes and structures that threaten such rights. The fact is that death or injury by avoidable accident and treatable illness, for example, is far more common than death by murder or injury by assault yet the system of regulation and the penalties attached to responsibility for the first pair are far less serious than those attached to responsibility for the second pair (see Muncie, 2000). In the UK, for example, research has suggested that, every year, 10,000 premature deaths are attributable to the impacts of small particulates on respiratory and cardiovascular systems (Bullock, 1995) but there is no structured criminal (or even civil) means of redress nor any chain of accountability for tracking down and punishing those responsible for the production of these killers.

Indeed, it is not just academic criminologists who have become interested in the idea of social harm. This concept is also coming to play an increasing role in the operation of several Government agencies and is summed up neatly in the UK

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Government's alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy which refers explicitly to the 'social harm' attendant on problematic alcohol use (Department of Health et al, 2007: 49, 66). The same phrase recurred repeatedly in the House of Commons (Select Committee on Science and Technology) (2006) Report on drug classification. By 'social harm' the Government intended to refer primarily to the behavioural consequences of intoxication and the health care burden of problematic consumption but it is telling that the House of Commons Report included the category 'Other Social Harms' – even if these were not defined. Whilst Government departments and academic criminologists do not share the same meanings when they invoke 'social harm' it is clear that this notion is coming to occupy a more central place in both criminological research and Government policy.

Adopting a concept of social harm implies that criminologists and policy-makers concern themselves with a much wider range of personal, economic, political and environmental issues than is involved in the traditional focus on crime as an infraction of criminal law. These might include anything from pay and job discrimination to the activities of the arms industry. Hillyard et al (2004: 1) put it succinctly when they assert that a social harm approach involves 'a focus on all the different types of harms, which people experience from the cradle to the grave'. Whilst there may be a tendency to dismiss such a broad focus as being more relevant to the disciplines of sociology and political science than criminology it needs to be remembered that the exploitation of labour, land-theft, drug-cultivation, civil strife, people-trafficking, toxic waste dumping, species extinction and climate change are not disconnected phenomena. For example, the impoverishment of African and Asian populations and the over-exploitation of their natural resources are, in part at least, consequential on the paths to industrialisation and consumerism taken by developed nations. In turn, these processes fuel the demand for more exploitable land and resources which, according to the Stern Report (2006), is responsible for global climate change. In turn again, such change alters the patterns of rainfall and desertification and intensifies the struggle for arable land and water – a key factor in many civil wars and a driver of economic migration and people trafficking. Adding another twist to an already complicated agenda, a social harm approach has been adopted explicitly in the study of environmental degradation and animal abuse (Beirne, 1999; Beirne & South, 2007) – that is, in the study of harms whose 'victims' are not necessarily or only human.

In general, where a social harm approach has been adopted in criminology there has been a tendency to uncover the 'hidden' victims or non-criminalised perpetrators, or to examine the broader contexts of political and economic inequality which give rise to the uneven social distribution of harms. The driving intellectual agenda behind the approach is the idea that preventable harms, rather than being exceptional incidents, are regular, routine features of an unequal world. In important senses the academic interest in social harm constitutes an extension of the critical criminological search for a 'fully social' approach to crime and deviance (see Taylor, Walton & Young, 1973: 269-70) – one that is neither narrowly correctionalist nor idealistically Romantic (Taylor, Walton & Young, 1975: 16-17). However, the social harm approach raises several theoretical problems. These include, notably, the problem of 'agency' in criminological theory and, as a corollary, the question of how to theorise social practice in an analytical framework that construes 'harm' not as an exceptional event caused by identifiable malefactors but as the mundane reality of modern society. In this chapter I explore some of the problems of social agency and social practice by tracing the chain of harms that are embedded in the production and

distribution of a consumer good: the humble prawn. I will show that, descriptively, it is a relatively straightforward task to list a catalogue of harms embedded in the production and distribution of this good. At the same time, I will also note that it is far less straightforward to develop a criminological (or sociological) explanation of the relationships between perpetrators and victims of these harms.

*Not Keane on Prawn Sandwiches*

The substantive topic of prawn production and its deleterious human and environmental consequences was brought to my attention by the collision between two media-highlighted events – one farcical, one tragic. The first was a comment, in January 2000, by Roy Keane, then Manchester United’s central midfield player, who stuck his verbal boot into what he saw as a cadre of disinterested and disconnected voyeurs of the ‘beautiful game’ of football in the following terms:

‘Away from home our fans are fantastic. I’d call them the hardcore fans. But at home they have a few drinks and probably the prawn sandwiches, and they don’t realise what’s going on out on the pitch.’ (Roy Keane on sections of Manchester United’s home supporters following a Champion’s League game against Dynamo Kiev, 2000)

Known for his acerbic and often vitriolic outbursts against footballing colleagues and occasionally violent interpretation of the laws of the game, Keane’s regular pronouncements on everyone else’s failings provided a steady flow of stories for sports writers around the world. This particular remark spread rapidly through the media and was repeated ad infinitum in critiques of modern sport. The Guardian includes it in its ‘top ten classic Roy Keane rants’ and The Sunday Times in its ‘top ten Roy Keane battles’ whilst searching Google under the key words ‘Keane’ and ‘Prawn’ generates over eight hundred hits. The remark struck such a chord that even the Irish Parliament appropriated it to depict the parlous state of the Irish Rugby Football Union<sup>2</sup> and the fall-out it generated was dubbed ‘prawn-gate’ by sections of Manchester United supporters. Keane’s outburst was intended as a critical comment on the absence of supporter passion and club involvement consequential on the rise of the corporate ticket-holder whose interest in Manchester United Football Club extended no further than the spectacle of Old Trafford – the ‘Theatre of Dreams’, as the ground is often called.

In Keane’s view, this section of fans had no interest in the fortunes of the team and may as well have been eating and drinking at a game of tiddly-winks as at a game of football. The image of the prawn sandwich was a metaphor for the disinterested day-tripper: besuited and privileged, disconnected from the real, passionate, meaningful world of professional football.

Personally, I have no interest in Manchester United football club and, under most circumstances, I care not at all what an overpaid footballer thinks about what people eat. What struck my interest about this particular outburst was the issue of disconnection: the image portrayed by Roy Keane of posses of over-privileged parasites experiencing something they neither understood nor cared for. Of course, what irked the then Manchester United captain was not that the club served prawn

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Roy Keane got it right when he said the prawn sandwich brigade was present to an unhealthy extent because they could pay the exorbitant ticket prices.’ (Seanad Debate on the condition of Irish Rugby Football, January 29<sup>th</sup> 2003)

sandwiches but that the latter meant more to those devouring them than the exertions of the players on the pitch. They represented, to borrow Cohen's (2001) phrase, 'bystanders' at a monumental event where great risks were taken and real dangers loomed.

The entire 'prawn-gate' episode might have passed me by if it were not for a tragedy that occurred just a few miles from where I live. On a cold February night in 2002, twenty-one Chinese cockle pickers died on the sands of Morecambe Bay and two more remain missing presumed dead. They were all resident in the United Kingdom despite lacking the proper authorisation. They lived together in overcrowded accommodation in Liverpool and were bussed around the country to wherever labouring gangs might be needed. They were able to work on the sands of Morecambe Bay because the Government had failed to implement a permit system that would have enabled monitoring and supervision of cockle-picking operatives. They were unable to escape their fate on the night because no-one in the gang had any familiarity with the bay and its tides. As the Irish Sea rushed up the estuary, cutting them off from any escape route, some used mobile 'phones to contact family members in China for help. They did this because, in some cases, their fluency in English was not good enough for them to make their own calls to British emergency services or, in other cases, because they simply did not know how to do it. Some of the drowning cockle-pickers 'phoned other members of their gang, who were also drowning, in a desperate bid to secure assistance. The exploitation they experienced encompassed the robbery of their labour, their degrading living conditions, their linguistic exclusion from meaningful participation in their destination culture and a disregard for their fundamental value as human beings. If there ever was an empirical example of a crime 'wave' then surely this must be it.

I think that this appalling tragedy might stand as a microcosm of the criminal, quasi-criminal and downright harmful foundations of a consumer culture. A consumer culture, contra the 'playful' and 'performative' interests of the sociology of consumption – in which the significance of consumer objects lies in the social practices of distinction which they symbolise (see Baudrillard, 1990: 76) – is, in large measure, a culture of disconnection. It is a culture that, as Marx observed, encourages the fetishisation of the goods it consumes and construes them as existing on a plane of reality somehow different to the dead or degraded labourers without whose legions there would be no consumer culture at all. In a consumer culture it is not in the general interest to ask too closely about the costs of producing objects of desire: like supermarket sausages they taste nice so long as you do not know how they are made. 'We do not think of the purchase of a Sports Utility Vehicle ... or our patronage at Wal-Mart as a political act', writes Steven Winter (2005: 62), yet 'each has social consequences and repercussions far beyond our immediate, supposedly individual "lifestyle" choice'.

Several things emerge from the disconnection between the two incidents described above. First, whilst Roy Keane railed against the disinterested disconnection of some privileged people from his football club he did not ask about the origins of the contents of their sandwiches. Thus, his diatribe was directed not against *over-identification* but *under-identification*. His analysis was precisely the opposite of that offered by Jock Young (2003: 49) in his account of the over-identification of petty criminals with 'the values of consumerism and hedonism' (See also Katz, 1988 on the 'attractions' and 'repulsions' of crime). The actions of the prawn sandwich brigade represent not an over-identification with values but an under-identification with processes – an under-identification of which Keane is himself

equally guilty. Whilst Keane was interested in the passion of football, he did not consider the dangers, risks, emotions and suffering that are embedded in producing what the prawn sandwich brigade were consuming.

Secondly, the two stories also encourage serious critical reflection on some of the contemporary criminological discourses that seek to renew or recharge the discipline's engagement with crime, power and society. In fact, they encourage a focus on how difficult it is to specify the locus of criminality/harm in the ordinary, if consequentially tragic, practices, habits and routines that underpin a consumerist normality. Take Milanovic's attempt to specify the core of a constitutive criminology, for example. In his 'edgy' interpretation of critical criminology, Milanovic (2002: 253) writes:

'Constitutive criminology indicates how some categories become dominant over others and how harm results in these discursive distinctions. Thus, offenders are better conceptualised as "excessive investors," investing energy to make a difference on others without those others having the ability to make a difference on them.'

It is certainly the case that 'dead Chinese cocklepicker' became, for at least twenty-one men and women, a category that dominated over 'living Chinese cocklepicker' and that the categorical domination was final and absolute. But the identity of the 'excessive investors' in the fatal event is more difficult to assert with any degree of certainty. 'Crime,' according to Milanovic is an 'expression of some agency's energy to make a difference on others' where the 'others' are 'rendered powerless to maintain or express their humanity' (ibid). 'Agency,' here refers to anything or anyone that can be said to 'act' in any way and, by definition, 'crime' is equivalent to a process of 'othering' through active agency. The problem of agency is, of course, crucial sociologically in describing and explaining social action but criminologically it represents an enormous problem. In the case of the cockle-pickers the question arises as to who is the criminal – in this case, the agent of death? Who rendered twenty-one Chinese labourers, quite literally, in Milanovic's words, 'powerless to maintain or express their humanity'? Is it the 'gangmaster' who controlled their work, accommodation and wages – and who was sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment in March 2006 on various charges including manslaughter? Is it the alleged 'Snakehead' gangs who trafficked the labourers from China to the UK? Is it the Liverpool based company that subcontracted the work to the gangmaster? Is it the Conservative government of the 1980s that unleashed deregulated and subcontracted labour practices onto the UK economy? Is it the current New Labour government that failed to establish the conditions and requirements for safe and rewarding working conditions? Is it the paella- and pizza-eating public that gorges on the salty fruits of the exploited labourers of Morecambe Bay?

I admit that I do not know the final answers to these questions. I realise that criminalizing cockle-consumers in the same category as a people-trafficking gang is a logical error as well as being politically over-zealous. But it remains the case that each of these sets of agents participates in and contributes to injustice and harm as a condition of the supply of a consumer product. They may each inhabit different distances from the *cause* of twenty-one deaths but they are all, collectively, *conditions* of the occurrence of those deaths. The 'agent' of harm in this case is dispersed rather than localised, and inhabits the chain of connections that associates disinterested consumers, de-regulated labour practices, transnational criminal enterprises and

private companies going to market in search of cheap labour rather than being situated in a single (or collectively) identifiable agent.

Thirdly, how are critical criminologists to construe the connections between social harms and consumer culture? It is true that consumerism has been blamed for just about every ill in the modern world – from the waste crisis to deforestation, from depression to obesity (O'Brien, 2007: 28). It is no surprise, therefore, that it is regularly blamed also for fuelling high crime rates (see Winlow & Hall, 2006, for example). Yet, precisely how consumerism and crime are associated – in anything more than the most banal finger-pointing sense – is difficult to articulate. For, whilst it is clear that the mass-supply of goods and services is associated with the exploitation of people, animals and natural environments it is not at all clear, as I hinted above, which particular (or general) qualities of those exploitations should be considered 'criminal' or which particular (or general) practices render them uniquely 'harmful'. Consequently, grasping the connections between 'crime' and consumerism will require that criminology, as John Muncie (2000) developing the earlier abolitionist agenda put it, must be 'decriminalised.' The links in the chain that stretches from a cold February night in Morecambe to people trafficking from China via the supermarket shelves and restaurants of the developed world are too intricate and too solidly grounded in the normal operations and expectations of contemporary society to be adequately labelled under the convenient label of 'crime.' They also require a shift of attention away from those categories that dominate the (at least Anglo-American) criminological agenda: the 'petty theft, shoplifting, recreational drug use, vandalism, brawls, antisocial behaviour' (ibid: 4) and towards corporate and state fraud and misappropriation, environmental destruction and attendant displacement and impoverishment, negligence, malpractice, and victimisation. In short, in order to develop a critical analysis of 'social harm' in consumer society, the entire edifice of criminological thought needs to be overhauled and perhaps even replaced with a new discipline – 'zemiology', in Hillyard et al's (2004: 276, fn1) formulation.<sup>3</sup>

This problem leads to a conceptual question about how to construe the social practices through which harms are consumed in contemporary society. The issue here, in brief, is whether criminology can or should be 'materialised' in the sense that the ordinary objects of desire that circulate around a consumer culture – upon the basis of which lived normality is sustained in contemporary capitalism – can be conceptualised critically precisely in terms of the links in the chains of harm that result in the rendering powerless of others. This move towards acknowledging and exploring the 'materiality' of culture has taken hold in sociology following Arnan Appadurai's edited collection *The Social Life of Things* (1986; see Dant, 1999; Griswold, 2004, for example) where the objects of daily life become the focus of attention and 'culture' is taken to be the 'set of common practices that surround material objects' (Dant, op cit: 11). In sociological terms, Tim Dant suggests that the concept of material culture refers to the idea that 'things' are 'not only [...] our products, designed to help us fulfil basic animal needs, but also they are an expression of who and what we are that shapes how society can proceed' (ibid: 12). This framework also inspired Jeff Ferrell's (2006) adventures in scroungeland, where his trash-picking and dumpster-diving lifestyle led him 'one trash pile and Dumpster at a

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<sup>3</sup> In their footnote Hillyard et al observe that 'zemiology' derives 'from the Greek Zemia, meaning harm'. In fact, Zemia also refers to loss or damage and is a more apt descriptor than it is given credit for. However 'horribly named' some may consider it, 'zemiology' is actually spot on as a label for the intellectual framework for studying what currently passes under the banner of 'social harm'.

time' to a 'cornucopia of material culture' in which the detritus of excessive consumption provides both for (some of) his material needs and an 'existential orientation' toward that very culture (Ferrell, 2006: 45, 192). Indeed. But, in these terms, as Ferrell critically acknowledges, the question of how 'society can proceed' needs also to add in the human and environmental cost of 'its' proceeding in one set of ways rather than another set of ways. A criminology that is critical in any sense of that term has at its heart some version or at least some dimension of this problem. With this precept in mind, my basic theoretical contention is that the materiality of consumer culture is a practical matter in so far as harms are perpetrated, condoned or realised (*made real*) in the disconnected dispersal of agency that simultaneously links and separates the producer of a good to its final consumer – and even here the identity of the 'final consumer' is itself difficult to articulate. As a corollary, my basic empirical contention is that a consumer culture rooted in capitalist and post-imperialist exploitation can 'proceed' only on the basis that someone pays, through identifiable harms, the price of consuming desires.

### *Consuming Crime*

In January 2001 a man called Jurin Ratchapol was shot in the head whilst collecting cashew nuts a few hundred metres from the hamlet of Paklok in Thailand. His death sparked an uproar in coastal villages throughout the region partly because, shortly before being murdered, he was presented with an award by Thailand's Queen Sirikit for his work in helping to protect what remains of Thailand's mangrove swamps from the depredations of the prawn-farming industry. In November 2001 the body of Rolando Castro Méndez was found in a creek near to a shrimp farm called 'Hondufarm' in the Honduras. He, too, had been shot allegedly because of a dispute about the farm and land access. In April 2002 Abdur Rob Howladar and his son were viciously attacked by a gang of seven or eight men wielding machetes near their small shrimp farm in Bangladesh. The gang demanded money and a share of the farm's annual profits. Abdur was blinded in one eye and his arm was very badly gashed whilst his son suffered severe head injuries (see Gearing, 2001; Environmental Justice Foundation [EJF], 2003).

These are just three instances of extreme violence and murder from a catalogue of many hundreds of officially reported attacks – and many more thousands of unreported ones – that have swept through the prawn production industry across the world. And this catalogue of violence and murder is only the tip of an enormous iceberg of abuses, injustices and human and environmental degradations that characterise prawn farming.

In the Satkhira region of Bangladesh 120,000 people have been driven off their lands under the pressure of the prawn industry in the last two decades. Forty eight thousand people were driven off lands in the Indian State of Andhra Pradesh in just three years. The same story of displacement can be told about Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala and other prawn-producing regions whilst in Burma the military junta confiscated all the large shrimp farms and evicted thousands of villagers from their lands in order to build yet more farms.

Reports of rape, kidnapping, intimidation, land-theft, victimization and the exploitation of child labour are systematically filed in all of these regions yet the industry continues to operate business as usual with hardly a peep from the world's governments. It is only through the work of charitable foundations and NGOs that any of this information is in the public domain at all.

The prawn ‘gold rush’, as the EJF (2004b) calls it, began in the mid 1980s. Whilst prawns were already a recognisable menu item in the developed world by this time global production and consumption has increased by thousands of percentage points across the intervening two decades. Thailand’s prawn industry grew from under 10,000 tonnes per annum in 1980 to almost 300,000 tonnes p/a in 2000. Indonesian production grew from less than 5,000 tonnes p/a to over 138,000 tonnes p/a in the same period whilst Indian production grew from virtually zero to more than 50,000 tonnes p/a (EJF, 2003). This incredible explosion in the growth in prawn production was ignited by the provision of loans and credit arrangements by individual Western governments, the International Monetary Fund and, in particular, the World Bank. Between 1986 and 1990 China received almost two billion dollars in loans from the World Bank for the development of industrialised aquaculture whilst Brazil received \$630 million dollars in 1987 alone. Across the developing world, loans and credit agreements totalling many billions of dollars were disbursed in order to stimulate quasi-industrialised aquaculture. In 1991 the World Bank alone made \$1.78 billion of such facilities available. As a direct consequence of these investments, by the early 1990s prawns made up 30% of global seafood trade (Maybin & Bundell, 1996).

I don’t know if it might be considered ironic or not but these funds had two main purposes. One was to encourage dollar-tradable exporting industries from the developing world in order to bring more markets into the fold of the World Trade Organisation. They were made available, in part, because ‘trade not aid’ was the ideologically preferred mechanism for relieving poverty and its associated social problems – such as land-theft, murder, intimidation, exploitation of child labour, and so on. Providing economic infrastructures to secure employment and development was, and is, a key goal of the World Bank’s loans strategy. The second purpose was to provide for development that was ‘sustainable.’ Instead of investing in polluting heavy industries or manufacturing industries that would simply add to the global glut of consumer products the loans were made on the basis that prawn production, being already indigenous on a small scale in the target countries, would provide a kind of organic, locally-generated development pattern. In the same year that the World bank loaned \$630 million dollars to Brazil for the development of aquaculture the World Commission on Environment and Development published *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987), popularising the phrase ‘sustainable development’ and proposing that such development should leave for future generations a natural environment that is at least as diverse, healthy and productive as at present.

Obviously, Gro Brundtland and the World Bank were not on speaking terms because the meteoric growth of the prawn industry has had and continues to have severely deleterious impacts on environmental quality across the prawn-producing regions of the developing world. Prawn production is murderous and environmentally destructive. Its environmental impacts arise from a variety of characteristics. First, very many prawn farms are located in sensitive environments – in particular, the coastal mangrove swamps of Asia and Latin America. The farms have been constructed at the expense of the mangrove and the steady retreat of the swamps has had predictable knock-on effects for a range of indigenous species. Second, the swamps are also afflicted by the grossly polluting methods that have been used to ensure high yields. In a short report for *Pesticides News* Shanahan and Trent (2003) note that a wide range of toxic additives have been used to sustain prawn production:



‘Chemicals used in intensive shrimp farming include fertilizers, disinfectants, coagulants, liming materials, feed additives (e.g. steroid hormones, probiotics, feed attractants, vitamins, and immunostimulants), and antibiotics (e.g. sulfonamides, tetracyclines, quinolones, nitrofurans, and chloramphenicol – the latter two banned in the US and EU).’

Although there is poor and often non-existent monitoring and regulation of the use of these additives, Shanahan and Trent go on to observe that:

‘This is of grave concern given the widespread discharge of untreated shrimp farm effluent into surrounding waters. Intensive shrimp farms require considerable water exchange and organophosphate bath treatments result in the release into the surrounding waters of significant quantities of toxic material liable to affect fish, molluscs and crustaceans, particularly larval stages.’

The sheer scale of this toxic mix represents a major problem because the combination of swamp clearing, farm-construction, salination and pollution has had devastating impacts on the regional environments where prawn farming has taken hold.

Third, prawns are not very efficient converters of inputs to outputs. For every one kilogram of prawn meat produced, somewhere between ten and twenty kilograms of marine life is destroyed. Between three and five kilograms is needed to fatten the one kilogram of prawns and the remainder is destroyed in the catching process or simply discarded. The sheer volume of waste involved in commercial prawn farming means that this industry is responsible for a third of the world’s entire discarded catch of marine life (*New Internationalist*, No. 358: July 2003).

This story of murder, abuse, exploitation, theft and environmental destruction is a tale about the ordinary operations of an industry supplying a consumer good to the developed world. The packets of prawns sitting on the supermarket shelves and, more insidiously, the prawn ingredients in pizzas, paellas and curries belong to a globally degrading, injurious and, all too often, fatal industrial machine. Their consumption by fattening westerners is one point in a long chain of associations that disguises the fate of Jurin Ratchapol and others behind the multi-coloured packaging of the ‘convenience’ food industry. Yet this tale of abuse, theft, displacement and murder it is only half of the story. Another set of social practices that shapes ‘how society can proceed’ is also attendant on the consumption of prawns. The second half of the story concerns the production and management of the materials that are needed to ensure that prawns can be produced, traded, stored and transported as commodities: the chemical additives involved in production and the plastic packaging in which they are attractively displayed to catch the consumer’s eye.

I just noted that large-scale prawn farming requires the use of a wide range of toxic substances. In this case, the issue of where those substances come from is also relevant. It is relevant because the hazardous chemical industries that generate the toxins are invariably located in zones inhabited by poor and relatively powerless communities (see Bullard et al, 2007; Atlas, 2002; United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, 1987; and, on related matters, Pearce & Tombs, 1998). In a telling summary of how the poor are targeted to bear the burdens of toxic industries, Heiman (1996) reports on a decision-making process for the siting of a low-level radioactive waste repository in North Carolina, USA. Initially, twenty-one candidate locations were produced and eventually these were whittled down to two.

Heiman reports on a ‘windshield survey’ of the areas that was undertaken for the Board of Commissioners. This ‘windshield survey’, undertaken by PR and other staff of the plant contractor, involved driving through the candidate locations and recording impressions. It provides a neat example of the assumptions and the realities informing decisions about the selection of hazardous facility sites. Heiman reproduces part of the list of 21 sites, including the impressionistic comments of public relations and other staff. Their observations include:

‘Coleridge “houses fairly wealthy” out  
‘Slocumb “affluent” out  
‘Cherry Grove “residences of site minority-owned” in  
‘Ghio “trailers everywhere” “forecloses then resells” “distressed County” in’  
(Heiman, 1996: 403)

Whilst this example refers to radioactive waste the pattern of locating hazardous facilities on the doorsteps of poor communities is well-established. In the US, Heiman continues, a quarter of America’s entire petrochemical industry is situated along ‘Cancer Alley’ between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Mile after mile of hazardous industrial infrastructure snakes its way alongside and through the neighbourhoods of Louisiana’s disadvantaged black communities.

The petrochemical industries are responsible for manufacturing not only the fertilisers and chemical additives that go into the production of the prawns but also for the plastic materials that are used to package the prawns so that they can be transported, stored and displayed on supermarket shelves. Once the prawns have been consumed, of course, the packaging and other associated waste has to be discarded. In the UK, at least, this plastic packaging is landfilled, incinerated, illegally fly-tipped or shipped to the developing world for ‘final disposal’. In all of these cases a disproportionate share of the post-consumer burden is placed on poor and powerless communities who are more likely to suffer the impacts of atmospheric or ground-water pollution arising from the ‘normal’ operations of the disposal industries or to face the dangerous consequences of unregulated dumping (Clapp, 2001; Miller, 2000). Additionally, the waste management industry is, and has long been, associated with criminal and quasi-criminal activity (Block & Scarpatti, 1985; Crooks, 1993; Hayman & Brack, 2002) an association recently investigated by a Channel 4 documentary in the UK (Channel 4 Television, 2006). Illegal dumping, uncontrolled burning, unlicensed storage and trading, profiteering, fraud, corruption and environmental destruction are endemic characteristics of the waste industry both in the UK and across the world. I include this tale of waste (mis)management not only to acknowledge that the harms of prawn production and consumption stretch beyond the food item itself but also to note that the harms arising from their consumption do not stop once the prawns are swallowed. A prawn – indeed any item in a consumer culture – is simply a single object in a matrix of co-dependent goods and services that includes, in my examples, the products of the petrochemical industries and the waste management industries – each of which have their own further ‘consumers’. My point is that the consumption of anything is a point in a long and complex chain of events and processes that stretches backwards and forwards in time. To consume an object, in this outlook, is to validate its harmful history and instigate its harmful future.

## *Consumerism and Criminology*

My aim in this chapter has been to indicate, from ‘cradle to grave’, some of the practices that are attendant on the consumption of prawns and how these practices might raise questions about a social harm approach to criminological inquiry. In particular, I have tried to think through the connected issues of (i) a broader understanding of ‘crime’ as some species of ‘social harm’ by investigating what lies behind the meteoric growth of the prawn industry and (ii) illustrate some difficulties with the notion of ‘agency’ that arise when a broader approach is taken to criminal, quasi-criminal and otherwise harmful activities and forms of organisation. Moreover, I have illustrated some of the issues that arise when a ‘material culture’ approach – that defines culture as ‘sets of common practices surrounding material objects’ – is used as a lens for viewing criminological problems or a means of asking criminological questions. I propose that what a material culture approach might help to reveal is that the common practices surrounding, in this case, prawns as objects of consumption include murder, land-theft, rape, violence, victimization and environmental destruction. These are crucial common practices supporting a consumer culture: they are what render prawns available for consumption and sustain their availability in the shops and restaurants of the developed world.

However, as I noted in my introduction, whilst it is a relatively straightforward task to provide a description of the harms embedded in a global system of production, consumption and disposal of consumer items it is much more difficult to move beyond the level of description to provide explanations, even less theories, of the relationships between identified social harms and the practices that sustain them. In a traditional criminal justice approach the perpetrators of murders and assaults, of thefts and frauds can, at least in theory, be held accountable for their actions: they can be identified – i.e., their *agency* and *identity* can be brought together in a single causal account of who did what to whom. Yet if any system of justice attempted to pursue *all* of the relevant actors embroiled in the harms attendant on prawn production and consumption it would be rapidly and unavoidably overwhelmed by the sheer numbers involved and undermined by the legal and moral complexities of deciding ‘fault’, let alone ‘guilt’. And, it must be remembered, the case I have outlined relates only to one of the many millions of goods and services produced and consumed in contemporary society. This is precisely why, notwithstanding their claim that the social harm critique is of particular relevance to criminology, Hillyard et al (2004: 269-70) conclude with what is effectively a manifesto for a new multi-disciplinary template. At the same time, a critique of social harms that has any practical or policy relevance cannot be tied to any currently existing system of justice: the critique, by definition, exceeds the capacity and purview of actually existing justice systems.

Given my earlier comments about the disconnection characterising a consumer culture it may be, as Pemberton (2004) has argued, that a theory of moral indifference is a necessary component of a social harm perspective. Yet a theory of moral indifference is not a sufficient framework through which to investigate the harms of consumerism. The reason for this is because a consumer culture stretches out beyond any nation state and envelops private companies, governments, individuals, criminal gangs, armies and paramilitaries as well as individuals and families across the globe. Precisely whose ‘moral indifference’ is to be held responsible or accountable for the cradle-to-grave harms of prawn consumption is difficult to specify and, moreover, many of the players in that social, political and economic scheme are not morally indifferent at all. Murders, assaults, thefts and corruption are committed by persons

with deep moral involvement in the process and consequence of their actions – as are the deregulation and opening up of global markets, the pursuit of profit and shareholder dividends, consumers' demand for cheap goods and services. At the same time, in a more general sense, it is not clear that modern consumers are morally indifferent to the fate of others. Certainly the evidence on charitable giving and volunteering suggests that humanitarian principles and at least basic social awareness are very widespread amongst members of developed nation states (Brooks, 2006; Philanthropy UK, 2007; Volunteering England, 2007). It may be that the fate of the thousands of daily 'victims of the "global" economy' (Pemberton, 2004: 67) are outside the immediate cognitive orbit of many modern consumers but that is not the same thing as damming the latter's collective moral indifference. Like everyone else, consumers are at least, to quote Karstedt & Farrall (2007: 3) out of context, both 'sheep and wolves': blithely indifferent in some ways and urgently implicated in others.

I would argue that the key sociological and criminological issue in grasping the harms of consumerism relates not so much to moral indifference as to political-economic disconnection. In contemporary capitalism the identity and the agency of the consumer are divided: they are practised as different exigencies. The consumer's *identity* is ideologically uninhibited: a 'process of self creation' (Miller, 1987: 215) in which the goods and services of consumer capitalism are malleable, interpretable, available as humanising moments in a world of alienating institutions (Miller, 1995: 31. See also Gardner & Sheppard, 1989). The consumer's *agency*, on the other hand, is shackled because every good and service s/he touches is, in its material totality, a link in an economically infinite chain of harms. The depressing fact is that those harms are always valuable to someone, somewhere: whether it be, in my example, armed gangs seeking to control prawn-producing land, governments seeking increased World Bank funding, petro-chemical companies seeking expansion of markets for their goods and services, consumers seeking cheaper choices, waste-management industries seeking greater profits from the piles of discards or, indeed, social scientists seeking enhanced research reputations by the cataloguing of catastrophe. To paraphrase Frederick Talbot's (1919: 12, 23) acute comment on waste: '[harm] creates wealth' and also useful employment.

### *Concluding Comments*

In these respects my analysis supports Muncie's and others' proposals to expand the concept of crime to include, as a central part of criminology's agenda, harms and injustices that do not often feature centrally in criminology. Doing this, I suggest, shows that whilst Muncie's brawlers, vandals, drunks and druggies may well commit the most obvious and visible crimes, the greater harms may be contained in the prawn curry with which many a weekend reveller finishes off a rowdy evening – or, indeed, in the prawn sandwiches so conspicuously consumed in the imagination of a passionate footballer. But, as a corollary to this, I have also argued that a social harm perspective does not provide ready-made theoretical answers to the routine, normalised problems and injustices of contemporary capitalism. Part of the reason for this is that, like critical and alternative criminological perspectives of many stripes, the critique from social harm faces the daunting task not simply of assisting in the creation of a 'harmless' Criminal Justice System but in the creation of a 'harmless' society in which to realise principles of justice and respect. As Richard Quinney (2000: 27) remarks of Peace-Making criminology that 'the means cannot be different

from the ends, peace can come only out of peace' so a social harm perspective has to find a way of instigating the principles and practices of harmlessness at a societal level. Given the infinite links through which the harms of consumer society are attached to each other, and the vested interests and moral involvement of people and organisations in perpetrating and sustaining those harms, the road to harmlessness looks even rockier than the road to peace. Yet, rather than ending on this brutally pessimistic note, a social harm perspective at least has the potential, as Joe Sim (2004: 132) argues, to contribute to criminology's disciplinary redemption from intellectual compromise and theoretical timidity. The question, of course, is whether such a redeemed discipline would still be criminology.

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