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Casino culture: Crime and media in a winner-loser society

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‘When the (capital) development of a country becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done.’

John Maynard Keynes

I) Introduction: From Riskophobia to Riskophilia - The Coming of Casino Culture

Deviance, crime and control have become defining issues of our time. In Britain ‘law and order’ only became prominent party political matters in the final quarter of the twentieth century (Downes and Morgan 1997), but now crime, fear of crime, and competing policies aimed at containing them, are central to public policy debate. A pivotal part of the political success of New Labour in Britain was its ‘tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ pledge. Labour’s £250m. Crime Reduction Programme and the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act represent significant efforts to deliver on this, although views differ on the prospects of success. The rapidly shifting, increasingly ambiguous boundaries between ‘deviance’ and ‘normality’ are the storm-centre of raging ‘culture wars’, throughout the world.

The conventional popular and political understanding of this is that we have - for disputed reasons – become beset by ever more numerous and ever more serious crimes. This is of course what the official crime statistics indicate. In Britain recorded crime has increased by an average of 5.1% per year since 1918, and recorded violent crime by 6.4% per year since 1947 (Home Office 1999:3). In 1999 the Home Office recorded over 5m. notifiable offences, ten times the 1950 figure and fifty times the pre-1920 level (ibid.:2). In the US although recorded crime rates are generally lower than twenty years ago, that still leaves them much higher than they were fifty or one hundred years ago (Currie 1998).

The popular and political reactions to crime and justice are of course much more complex than a straightforward reflex of crime statistics. Perceptions of crime bear an extremely problematic relationship to any official statistical measures of crime rates, as the vexed debate about the ‘rationality’ and meaning of public ‘fear of crime’ demonstrates (Sparks 1992). In any event, as most criminology textbooks spell out, official crime rates are dubious reflections of trends and patterns in offending (Maguire 1997).

The problematic nature of official crime statistics of any kind has tended to be ignored in recent debate, partly because of the hold of new realist perspectives. Even more

important has been the influence of national crime surveys (such as the British Crime Survey and the US National Crime Victimization Survey) in the last two decades. Although these have demonstrated unequivocally the huge volume of unrecorded crime that exists, the overall trends in survey estimated and officially recorded victimisation have been similar, creating a climate of greater confidence in official statistics. It is likely, however, that the congruence between officially recorded and victim survey statistical trends results from some historically peculiar characteristics of the last twenty years (such as virtually saturation reporting of the most common property offences). They do not constitute a vindication of official crime statistics as a measure of crime trends in general.

In Britain there is certainly much evidence that the decline in recorded crime rates in the 1990s was largely a product of changes in victim reporting and police recording behaviour, paradoxically arising from pressures generated by very high rates of crime (Reiner 1996, 2000). Victims of property crime have been reporting a diminishing proportion to the police because of concern about the insurance consequences of claims, whilst the police have recorded a declining proportion of crimes made known to them as they have become subject to more stringent performance measurement. More generally research on policing continues to suggest that recorded crime rates are highly manipulable in response to political and other exigencies (H.Taylor 1998, 1999).

Nonetheless, despite the continuing limitations of recorded crime statistics as evidence of this, it seems clear that we do now live in what can be called a 'high crime society' (Garland 2000). Crime is a central political and popular concern, and security strategies pervade the routines of everyday life. Debate rages about how to explain the growth of crime rates, and whether and how they might be controlled, with contrasting diagnoses reflecting different political and moral perspectives. Although politicians and some journalists tend to favour single factor explanations, understanding recent changes in crime and criminal justice requires analysis of all the complex and perplexing social, economic, political and cultural developments of the last few decades. There have been some recent attempts to offer synthetic accounts of how the resurgence of free market economics, consumerism, increasing individualism, declining deference, the information technology revolution, and other processes have reconfigured crime and criminal justice (for example Garland 1996, 2000; Currie 1998; I.Taylor 1999; Young 1999; Reiner 2000).

One of the most influential theorisations of the current stage of social development (which has become increasingly applied to issues of crime and justice) is the concept of the 'risk society', the key theme of this volume. For all the proliferation of risk discourses, inside and outside the academy, there is much ambiguity about what is involved. The pioneering analyses of 'risk society' (notably Beck 1992) do not refer to issues of crime or disorder, leaving even more interpretive latitude for those who seek to apply the concept to criminology and criminal justice. There is in particular ambiguity about how far the notion of 'risk society' implies a change in the extent or nature of risk, as distinct from new cultural sensibilities and techniques of seeking to achieve security.

With regard to the kinds of risks which Beck concentrates on (physical dangers of various kinds such as environmental and food hazards) it is implausible to see them as more threatening in some absolute sense than the dangers of 'class society' or earlier social formations. Rather the point is that they are 'manufactured' as opposed to 'external' risks (Giddens 1998: 27-8). In addition one of Beck's central points is that in 'risk society' the threats are global and face everyone more or less equally. Although there may be attempts by the wealthy and powerful to gain positions of advantage in 'the 'distribution of bads' these are largely futile.

None of these features of the seminal 'risk society' analyses apply straightforwardly to crime and criminal justice. Arguably there is in an absolute sense more danger of criminal victimisation now than in earlier stages of modernity (although fear of crime is often seen as being disproportionate to 'objective' measures of risk). Crime has always been a 'manufactured' rather than 'external' risk, in that its incidence is socially constructed – although a key feature of popular and media conceptions is the criminal as 'outsider'. Although we do know from victimisation surveys that crime disproportionately hits the more

vulnerable sections of the population, it nonetheless is a threat that faces all social strata, even if more powerful or affluent groups do increasingly seek to buy more adequate provisions for security.

The concept of 'risk society' connotes not only a shift in the nature of risk, but also an alteration in cultural sensibilities, and above all, in strategies for dealing with risk. Here the analysis has parallels with other influential conceptualisations of the contemporary period, such as theories of postmodernity and neo-liberalism. Perhaps the key themes are the decline of the grand narrative of progress - the hallmark of modernity - and the 'death of the social' (Rose 1996; Stenson 1998). Problems are not seen as having fundamental causes that can be ameliorated by collective policy. Rather they are regarded as either the product of chance or of individual action. The state and its agencies are problems not solutions. Remedies cannot be found in social policy but by changing the behaviour of the people responsible, and by individual self-help strategies such as insurance or personal protection. Problems and solutions are de-moralised, de-mystified, secularised. Events are judged problematic not in terms of absolute moral codes but because they risk causing harm to us, or to those we identify or at least empathise with. Actions are good not because they embody virtue but because they work.

Individuals are held responsible for their fates, in a 'winner-loser culture' (James 1995). In an increasingly de-regulated global market-place, where there is a continuous proliferation of new millionaires and new paupers, the stakes are ever higher. The National Lottery is the quintessence of this new casino culture. Instead of the cradle to grave security of a welfare state the ideal is winner takes all, and the compensation for the substantial risk of losing is the scintilla of hope of being that winner. Some thirty years ago when he constructed his magisterial theory of justice (as what has proved to be an intellectual Custer's Last Stand defence of the welfare state) John Rawls could still assume with some plausibility that people were risk averse (Rawls 1973:152-161). This riskophobic culture has clearly been replaced by a riskophilic one. The media play a pivotal role in reproducing this, celebrating the winners as celebrities and devaluing any styles of life other than spectacular consumerism.

In relation to crime and criminal justice this is reflected in many changes of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The optimistic paradigm that crime could and would be conquered by social progress and rehabilitation of individual offenders, which dominated policy from the late 19th century until the 1970s (Garland 1985, 2000), has been eclipsed by a combination of more pragmatic and more punitive responses. This has been underlined by an aggressive analytic 'know-nothingism' epitomised above all by James Q. Wilson's scornful dismissal of the idea of social 'root causes' of crime in favour of a tough administrative realism. The 'rehabilitative ideal' has been replaced by incapacitation, general deterrence and revenge as the purposes of penal policy.

Criminals now are to be condemned and contained, not understood and changed. 'Tough on the causes of crime' means a variety of what David Garland has dubbed 'criminologies of everyday life': pragmatic routines to minimise opportunities for offending such as situational crime prevention and targeting 'hot spots' (Garland 1996). Without a social dimension, individual target-hardening becomes a burgle-my-neighbour tactic; problem-oriented policing becomes problem-suppressing policing. The police are no longer custodians and symbols of public tranquillity and virtue, but compete in a commercialised marketplace for security with other (mainly private) suppliers (South 1997; Johnston 2000). Customers (private and governmental) choose the best deals from a 'pick'n'mix' policing bazaar (Reiner 1997a: 1038-9). Crime becomes a practical hazard not a moral threat. The criminal justice system operates increasingly in actuarial terms of seeking to calculate and minimise risks pragmatically rather than achieving broader ideals of justice (Feeley and Simon 1994).

This chapter attempts to assess the role of mass media representations of crime and criminal justice in relation to the above changes. It does so by considering the implications of our historical study of mass media representations of crime and criminal justice since World War II, and of audience perceptions of these. This research was supported by a grant from

the Economic and Social Research Council of Great Britain, No. L/210/25/2029, for which we thank them. In the next section we consider briefly the long-standing and wide-ranging debate about the media-crime relationship, which informed the research. Section III describes the research methods we used. Section IV offers some key findings about the changing content of mass media representations of crime, whilst Section V looks at audience perceptions drawing on our focus group interviews. Finally the conclusions consider the relationship between mass media representations and the rise of risk discourse about crime and criminal justice policy.

II) The Media-Crime Debate

Anxiety about media representations of crime has flourished for as long as the modern media of communication have existed. It has been particularly prominent in various discourses about why crime rates and patterns have changed since the Second World War (although such respectable fears have a much longer ancestry cf. Pearson 1983). The most familiar of these discourses is that of moral decline and fall: the media are blamed for sensationalising deviance, glamourising offending, and undermining moral authority and social controls.

Anxieties about the media have also figured in liberal and radical discourses about crime and criminal justice changes, although with very different concerns and inflexions. A common theme is that media representations unduly accentuate the risks of crime, fanning public anxieties, and thus bolstering support for more authoritarian criminal justice policy and practice.

There is a large research literature on media representations of crime, and their sources and possible consequences. However, virtually all empirical studies examine only one period in time, although some have collected data comparing a few different years (e.g. Roshier 1973; Sumser 1996). The sole exception is one recent study of the content of American television and cinema over the last half-century, which provides useful material on changing crime and law enforcement images (Lichter, Lichter and Rothman 1994; Powers, Rothman and Rothman 1996).

Our research analysed the changing content of the main British media concerning crime over the period since World War II, and how audiences interpret these changes. The data cannot directly assess the extent to which changing media representations of crime are causally related to crime or fear of crime. To the extent that parallels are found between developments in media images and patterns of crime or fear of crime, the causal interpretation of this is complex.

Previous content analyses have shown that media representations vastly exaggerate the risks and seriousness of crime, as well as the success of the police and criminal justice system in combatting crime. Many studies do indeed find associations between media consumption patterns and various measures of fear of crime (Howitt 1998: Chap.4). Heavy viewing of TV crime fiction, for example, is linked with more fearful perceptions of crime and support for authoritarian solutions (Signorielli 1990: 96-102). Readers of newspapers which present violent crime stories more frequently and more sensationally express more fearfulness in response to survey questions (although not in behavioural manifestations such as not going out after dark), even controlling for age, gender and socio-economic status (Williams and Dickinson 1993).

The problem lies in deciding what causal relationship can be inferred from these associations. Do media crime stories cause fearfulness, or do more fearful people read or watch more? Given that the majority of stories, especially in the past, feature 'happy' endings with crime and conflict resolved neatly, perhaps they reassure rather than disturb viewers who are already fearful due to personal or vicarious experience of actual victimisation (Wakshlag et al 1983). Or do particular life experiences or social positions, such as living in high-crime areas, generate more risk, heightened anxiety, **and** more media consumption?

Our reviews of the voluminous existing research literature on these issues led us to the conclusion that the most plausible model is a dialectical one. There is a continuous process of interaction between changing media representations and patterns of criminality, perceptions of crime risks, and criminal justice policy and practice (Livingstone 1996: 31-2; Reiner 1997b: 216-9, 224-5). Different life positions and experiences intertwine in complex ways with the reception of media texts, which quantitative content analyses can hardly penetrate, requiring interpretive approaches more sensitive to the subtleties of analysing meaning.

Our aim was to gather historical and interview data which could test the validity of particular elements of the competing discourses about the part the media have played in the changes in criminality and justice since World War II. These discourses all assume particular accounts of how media images have changed. For example, the conservative discourse of moral decline presumes that the media *have* become increasingly focussed on crime, present offenders in more attractive ways, and portray the criminal justice system less favourably. The fear of crime debate by contrast assumes that the media increasingly exaggerate the risks of victimisation. Historical content analysis is necessary to assess such claims.

We will argue that the historical content analyses and the focus group discussions we conducted converge in suggesting a particular picture of the changing discourse about crime and criminal justice, both in the public arena constituted by the mass media, and in everyday life and experience. In many ways this parallels the themes of the 'risk society' analyses considered above. Criminality is no longer seen as an offence against the hallowed and absolute norms of a common culture, but as a pragmatic matter of one individual harming another. This process is reflected in a transformation of representations of the moral status of offenders, the criminal justice system, victims, punishment, and fear of crime. Moral status is no longer automatically conferred by a role in the social order; it is subject to negotiation and constructed anew by particular narratives. The police and criminal justice system are not seen as guardians of a social order so much as regulators of risk to potential individual victims. They are often perceived as threatening rather than reassuring.

III) Research Methods

Our study examined representations of crime and criminal justice in three mass media from 1945 to 1991. We also looked at audience understandings of, and relations to, the media representations. Clearly we could not examine all mass media, due to practical constraints of availability and resources. We focussed on the two media which have been most prominent throughout the twentieth century, cinema and newspapers, and the pre-eminent medium of the post-war period, television.

The Historical Content Analyses

The **cinema** research combined a generic analysis of all films released in Britain since 1945 (which included an increasing proportion of US films over the period), and detailed quantitative and qualitative content analyses of box-office hits. The latter were chosen as approximating the most influential films of the period. For **television**, we focussed on fictional crime series. The ephemeral character of television news presents insuperable problems of non-availability for the study of long-term changes in content. The **press** study analysed representative samples of stories from The Times, the British newspaper of record for most of the period, and The Mirror, a paper which contrasts with it in terms of both market (tabloid versus quality) and politics (left of centre versus right). Although inevitably limited this is a larger sampling across media and time than hitherto found in the criminological research literature.

What counts as 'crime' is, of course, subject to enormous definitional and conceptual debate and difficulties. For the purposes of this research a straightforward legal positivist

definition was adopted: we took a 'crime' in a media narrative to be any act which appeared to violate English criminal law (at the time of the story).

In the quantitative analyses of our data we adopted a three stage periodisation: 1955-64; 1965-1979; and 1980-1991. Clearly any single year cut-off points are fairly arbitrary. However, this broad three-fold division corresponds to the picture given by most histories of the period since the end of World War II. The first period is one of post-war recovery, merging into what is usually seen as an era of unprecedented mass affluence, consumerism, and political and social consensus. The middle period - the 'sixties' - sees the continuation of mass affluence and consumerism. However it was widely experienced as a time of conflict, change, and questioning of traditional patterns of morality, authority, sexuality, and relationships between generations and ethnic groups. The third period sees the attempts by the Reagan and Thatcher governments to combine a return to earlier moral certainties with neo-liberal economic policies. In the end the latter tended to undermine the former, although 'culture wars' about morality, gender and family continue to rage. What became increasingly clear was that there had occurred a profound break in social and economic development during the 1970s, whether this is interpreted primarily in terms of late or post-modernity, risk society, globalisation or other competing theorisations. We began the research with this rough periodisation in mind, but translated it into the precise three periods we used for the quantitative analysis after this appeared to fit the emerging data most coherently.

The **film** study was based on two different samples. A random 10% sample of all films released in Britain since 1945 was drawn from a source which also provided synopses of these (Film Review which has been published annually since 1944). This sample was coded by genre to calculate the changing proportion of crime films (i.e. with narratives centred on the commission and/or investigation of a crime), and the extent to which there were significant representations of crime in other films. A smaller sample of 84 films was drawn randomly from the 196 crime movies since 1945 that had been listed amongst the top box-office hits in Britain. These were viewed and analysed in detail to assess qualitative changes.

The **press** study also used two related samples. To assess the proportion of crime stories a random 10% sample of all 'home news' stories since 1945 in The Times and The Mirror was coded. A more detailed qualitative analysis was conducted for a smaller random sample of stories. Ten days were selected randomly for both newspapers for every second year since 1945. In those issues all front-page stories, editorial or op-ed items, and letters concerning crime were analysed, as were the most prominent crime news stories on the home news pages.

The **television** study examined all the top twenty television programmes for every year since 1955 (when audience ratings first became available). These were coded according to genre to see the changing proportions which were focussed on crime or criminal justice.

Audience Reception of Crime Media

Historical study of how audiences interpret mass media representations of crime and criminal justice clearly raises profound methodological difficulties. Our project combined methods from oral history with audience reception methods, using homogeneous focus groups to interpret specific media contents. The key dimension of analysis was age, although we also considered gender, ethnicity and class. Audience age indexes two phenomena: position in the life course and generation.

Selected examples of images and texts were used to stimulate focus group discussion of the media in relation to crime, social change, and notions of authority and responsibility. After a pilot group discussion, sixteen focus groups (of approximately 20, 40, 60, and 80 years of age, each separated by gender and into two rough class groupings) were recruited from seven locations in the South-East of England (covering urban, suburban areas). Ninety six people were interviewed in all.

IV) The Changing Content of Media Representations of Crime

Crime narratives and representations are, and always have been, a prominent part of the content of all mass media. Our study attempts to assess the long-term trends in crime content since World War II. For the cinema and newspapers we measured the proportion of all narratives which were primarily crime stories. We also estimated the proportion that had significant crime content, even if not primarily focussed on crime. The absence of change in the quantity of crime represented would not falsify any claims about possible relationships between trends in media content and developments in crime and criminal justice.

Nonetheless a significant increase or decrease would be of considerable interest in examining the validity of the different discourses about the media/crime link. For example, an increase in crime stories might be seen as related to the rise of crime risk discourse.

In our random sample of cinema films there did not appear to be any significant pattern of change in the extent of representation of crime. There is no clear trend for the proportion of crime films to either rise or fall, although there are many sharp fluctuations in individual years around this basic steady state (Allen, Livingstone and Reiner 1997). Crime has clearly been a significant concern of the cinema throughout the postwar period (and probably before that as well). In most years around 20% of all films released are crime films.

The results of the analysis of a random sample of newspaper stories between 1945-91 suggest a more complex picture. By the end of the period the proportion of stories about crime had increased considerably. In the Mirror the average proportion of stories which were centrally about crime in the years 1945-51 was 9%, whilst in The Times it was 7%. By 1985-91 this had risen to 21% for both papers (the drawing level of the two papers suggests the general process of tabloidisation of The Times). The proportion of stories about the criminal justice system or policy (as distinct from specific crimes) also rose in both papers. It had increased from an average of 2% in the Daily Mirror between 1945-51 to 6% between 1985-91, and from 3% to 9% in the same periods in The Times. Whilst newspapers' concern with crime and criminal justice appears distinctly higher in the last period of our study than the first, the years in between show a marked pattern of cyclical fluctuation around this overall rising trend.

Changes in levels and patterns of offending, or of fear of crime, cannot be attributed to a sheer quantitative increase in crime content in the media. This has not occurred at all in the cinema, although there has been some increase in crime content in newspaper stories. This is nowhere near as marked or as continuous as the rise in recorded crime but it may be a factor in increasing concern about crime, as well as a reflection of it. Changes in the way that crime narratives are constructed are more significant than their sheer quantity.

Media crime patterns

Our analysis of cinema films distinguished three types of crime in terms of their function within the narrative (Allen, Livingstone and Reiner 1998). Adapting Hitchcock's terminology for the object that is pursued in a story, we call the crime providing the primary focus or motive for a story the 'McGuffin'. 'Consequential' crimes are those which are necessary adjuncts of this, either before or after (for example in order to escape capture). 'Contextual' crimes are those which are represented in the narrative but are not related to the 'McGuffin' (for example the bank robbery Clint Eastwood encounters while munching a hamburger in Dirty Harry).

Throughout the period 1945-91 the most frequent 'McGuffin' was homicide, but to a slightly diminishing extent: in 50% of crime films between 1945-64; 35% for 1965-79; 45% 1980-91. Property crime 'McGuffins' virtually disappeared: 32% of films 1945-64; 20% 1965-79; only 5% 1980-91. Sex-related 'McGuffins' (e.g. rape or prostitution) have become more frequent, although still rare: 3% 1945-64; 10% 1965-79; 15% 1980-91. Drugs have shown a curvilinear pattern: 2% 1945-64; 10% 1965-79; 5% 1980-91.

The extent of violence depicted in the presentation of the 'McGuffin' has increased considerably. The proportion of films in which it was associated with significant pain rose

from 2% 1945-64; 20% 1965-79; to 40% 1980-91. This has consequences for the typical representation of offenders, victims, police and the criminal justice system.

The representation of consequential crimes has changed even more markedly. Between 1945-64 14% of films depicted no consequential crimes, 43% showed one, and 43% featured multiple consequential crimes. After that there are hardly any films without consequential crimes, and over 80% feature multiple offences of this kind. The extent of violence depicted in these crimes has also multiplied considerably. Whereas between 1945-64 74% of films had consequential crimes involving little or no violence, and only 5% featured significant levels of violence, by 1980-91 these proportions had changed to 16% and 47% respectively.

The representation of contextual crimes is the most striking change. Contextual crimes have proliferated, connoting a society pervaded by generalised crime risks. Between 1945-64 32% of films had no contextual offending at all, 9% showed just one contextual crime, and 59% had multiple crimes of this type. By 1980-91 only 15% of films showed no contextual crimes, and 80% featured multiple offences unrelated to the central narrative. An increasing proportion of contextual offences are violent and/or sex and drug-related, and a diminishing proportion are property offences (as with the 'McGuffin' crimes). The extent of violence portrayed in these offences has increased. In 1945-64 90% had no or only minor violence, by 1980-91 these proportions had changed to 29% and 65% respectively.

Overall then our findings show that although murder has always been the most common 'McGuffin' crime in films, there is over our period a diminishing proportion featuring property crime, and an increase in the representation of violent crimes of all kinds. The extent of violence inflicted in these offences has sharply increased. The large rise in the depiction of consequential and especially contextual offences implies a picture of a society much more threatened by all pervasive risks of violent crime.

Our sample of newspaper stories shows a rather similar pattern of change. Murder (including attempts) is the most common single offence type throughout the period, although to a slightly increasing extent. It accounted for 20% of all newspaper crime stories between 1945-64; and 28% in both the later periods analysed, 1965-79; 1980-91. In newspaper stories the most rapidly increasing single type of crime reported was terrorist offences: 0.7% of stories 1945-64; 5.3% 1965-79; 8.8% 1980-91. Overall there was a clear shift from stories featuring property crimes (such as burglary and car theft) to offences against the person, including homicide, assault, and sexual offences. The proportion of stories reporting property offences went down from 20% in 1945-64; to 12% 1965-79, and 8% between 1980-91. Offences against the person stories rose from 33% between 1945-64; to 44% 1965-79; and 46% 1980-91.

This means that the standard research finding that the media over-report violent and sexual offences disproportionately (Reiner 1997b: 199-203) requires some qualification. This has indeed been true throughout the postwar period, but the extent of the imbalance has increased markedly. Stories purely about property offences have virtually disappeared. Almost half of all crime related news stories are now about violence and/or sex.

Criminal Justice

The representation of the criminal justice system and its agents has changed in substantial ways. However, on most dimensions the representation of criminal justice alters in a curvilinear pattern. Variables are at their highest or lowest in the middle years (1964-79) of our period.

The cinema research shows an increasing prevalence of criminal justice agents as heroes (or at any rate the central protagonists) of narratives, although this is subject to something of a U-shaped pattern. The key aspect is the rise (and partial fall) of police heroes. The police are the protagonists of only 9% of films between 1945-64, but 50% of those between 1965-79, and 40% of those between 1980-91. There was a continuous decline in amateur investigator heroes: 36% 1945-64; 5% 1965-79; none 1980-91. Victim-related protagonists clearly increased, but also in a curvilinear pattern: 13% in 1945-64; none 1965-79; 25% 1980-91. Overall there is a clear decline of amateur sleuths in favour of criminal justice

professionals especially the police, and an increase in victim or victim-related heroes. The police predominance is especially marked in the middle period, although substantial more recently as well. The rise of police protagonists is structurally related to the representation of crime risks as all pervasive, and hence requiring a bureaucratic organisation of professionals to contend with it.

Overall the representation of police protagonists has become less positive over time, although there is a clear curvilinear pattern. Critical and negative images are most common in the period 1964-79, although they are more frequent in 1980-91 than 1945-64. This applies both to the success and the integrity of the police protagonists.

The police and criminal justice system are portrayed as slightly less successful over time. Throughout the period the overwhelming majority of movie crimes are cleared-up. However there is a marked change in how this is achieved. In the first period 1945-64 the most common method of clear-up is that the offender is brought to justice: 39%. However in the two later periods this becomes very infrequent (15% 1965-79, 10% 1980-91). The most frequent method of clear-up becomes the killing of the offender - in 35% of films 1965-91.

The police come to be represented more frequently as vigilantes than as enforcers of the law. In 89% of films 1945-64 the police remain within the parameters of due process of law in their methods, but they break these in 80% of films between 1965-79, and 67% from 1980-91. The police are also shown as more likely to use force, both reasonably and excessive force. Between 1945-64 the police protagonists are not shown using force in 54% of films, and in 40% the force used is reasonable and proportionate (e.g. minimal self-defence). Only in 3% of films were they shown using excessive force. But this is shown in 44% of films from 1965-79, and 25% from 1980-91.

The police protagonists are represented as entirely honest in personal terms in 89% of films 1945-64; but only in 67% between 1965-79, and 77% 1980-91. In no films in the early period are they shown as seriously corrupt, but they are in 13% of films 1965-79, and 15% 1980-91. They are shown as engaged in petty corruption in 11% of 1945-64 films; 20% between 1965-79, and 8% between 1980-91. They are also represented as increasingly personally deviant (in terms of such matters as excessive drinking, swearing, and extra-marital sexual activity).

The criminal justice system is also portrayed as more divided internally. Conflict within police organisations features in only 15% of films 1945-64, but 79% from 1965 to 1979, and 56% 1980-91. Conflict between criminal justice organisations, e.g. the police and the courts, also becomes more frequent. It is represented in only 20% of films 1945-64, but 70% from 1965-91. Police officers themselves become more internally divided: conflict between buddies occurs in only 9% of films 1945-64, but over 50% thereafter.

Similar trends can be found in newspaper representations of criminal justice. The increasing proportion of stories about criminal justice in itself is an indication of the more politicised and controversial character of criminal justice issues. News stories in which the police are mentioned critically have increased (6% 1945-64; 10% 1965-79; 17% 1980-91). Stories with approving or even neutral accounts of the police have declined. Approving stories were just over 11% from 1945-79, but only 6% from 1980-91. Neutral mentions declined from 13% to 11% and then 8% through the three periods (the police were not mentioned at all in about 69% of crime news stories in all three periods).

The police and criminal justice system are represented in news stories as less successful in dealing with crime, especially in the middle period. Between 1945-64 23% of news stories feature crimes which are not cleared up, but this rises to 37% from 1965-79, although there is a slight decline thereafter to 31%. Crime is explicitly represented as out of control in a growing minority of news stories: 3% 1945-64; 6% 1965-79; but 13% 1980-91.

Criminals

We have not uncovered any significant trends in the portrait of the personal characteristics of offenders. Throughout the period they are predominantly middle-aged or older (though there is a small tendency to portray young offenders more frequently), white (although the proportion of ethnic minority offenders is increasing slightly in both fiction and

news stories), and male confirming earlier studies). One way our findings challenge previous content analyses is that we find that only a minority of stories feature middle or upper-class offenders. This does not change significantly over time.

Criminals are overwhelmingly portrayed un sympathetically throughout the period, in both fiction and news. There is little change, and what there is suggests an increasingly unfavourable image of offenders. For example, they are shown using excessive or sadistic force in an increasing proportion of films (80% between 1980-91 as compared to 50% 1945-64). They are portrayed as committing crimes because of external causal pressure in a decreasing minority of films (30% 1945-64; around 15% thereafter). Increasingly they are represented as purely evil and enjoying their offending (from around 60% 1945-64 to 85% 1980-91). Films in which some sympathy is shown for offenders have declined over time: 40% 1945-64; 20% 1965-79; 15% 1980-91).

This predominantly (and slightly increasingly) unfavourable portrayal of offenders goes against the claim that crime has been stimulated by more sympathetic media representations. However, crime is represented as increasingly rewarding. In 91% of films between 1945-64 'crime does not pay' in that the offenders are unsuccessful and/or apprehended. After 1965 this is only true in 80% of the stories - although this still suggests an overwhelming message about the folly of offending (especially in the light of the low and diminishing clear-up rates found in official statistics).

Victims

Probably the clearest and most significant changes we have found are in the representation of victims. Victims have moved from a shadowy and purely functional role in crime narratives to a pivotal position. Their suffering increasingly constitutes the subject position or the *raison d'être* of the story (mirroring the 'discovery' of, and increasing concern about, victims in criminal justice systems around the world cf. Rock 1990, Zedner 1997). In the film sample, no concern is evinced for the plight of the victim in 45% of cases 1945-64; 35% 1965-79; but only 11% 1980-91. Victimisation is shown as having traumatic consequences in 74% of films between 1980-91, 40% 1965-79, but only 25% 1945-64. Victims are increasingly represented as the protagonists of films i.e. as the principal subject position. They are protagonists in 56% of the films where they are presented as characters at all (as opposed to corpses or case-files) between 1980-91, but only 26% 1965-79, and 16% 1945-64.

News stories also increasingly present the plight of victims in sympathetic or concerned terms. This was found in 11% of stories 1945-64, 18% 1965-79, and 24% 1980-91.

V) Audience Perceptions of Media Representations of Crime

The popularity of crime media

In the interviews, people varied in which type of crime fiction they enjoyed (if any). Young women were particularly keen on media which are realistic and offer them information about the nature, consequences and prevention of crime. These were appreciated as informal instruction about the actuarial risks and how to limit them. Men preferred action plots, with fast pace, special effects and humour. Most people were ambivalent about press crime reporting, wanting to know but not to be voyeuristic. Older people recalled past media largely in terms of notorious events, prominent drama series, television and film stars and little was recalled of specific narratives. Young people showed little interest in past media.

Perceptions of past crime media

Despite age and other differences, respondents were remarkably consensual in their characterisation of the postwar period. This consensus tells a story of change in which crime representations (and society generally) shift from the 'pre-sixties' days, of little, mild crime where difficult issues were largely hidden, crime was largely nonviolent and the police were your friends. After the 'sixties' crime is much more prevalent, media images more

explicit and upsetting, violence has increased and police are themselves more distant and more violent.

This shift is interpreted, again consensually, as a transition in morality. An era when good and bad were clearly distinguished and authority structures were respected (a culture of discipline), has been replaced by one in which the boundary between good and bad has blurred, criminals are sympathetic and authorities are corrupt (a culture of disrespect and desubordination).

However, the generations differed markedly in their relation to and evaluation of this. Older people tell a story of decline - the do-gooders in the 60s upset the proper social order. Media representations are now too much 'in your face', voyeuristic and disrespectful of authority. Young people, on the other hand, tend to see this as a story of progress. They are optimistic, because they welcome the media championing civil rights in areas like gender, sexuality and ethnicity, the greater legitimation accorded to alternative viewpoints, and are glad that controversial issues are no longer hidden. They approve of the idea that morality should be decided by context, and respect must be earned, not given automatically to those in certain social roles.

Life course also mattered. What is most striking is that people are almost universally positive about the media they encountered during their youth (and into their mid-thirties), irrespective of whether this was, in fact, media from the 50s, the 70s or the 90s. With the exception of the youngest group, people were far more tolerant of the media from before they were born than they are of media from later in their adulthood. The importance of life course suggests that the media of one's youth set the interpretive framework, the expectations for subsequent experiences of media.

Positioning the audience in relation to crime

Respondents continually 'commute' (Liebes and Katz, 1995) between a concrete concern with crime in the media and crime in everyday life. They also commute between a concern with the concrete, such as who commits what kinds of crimes, and the moral (what does this say about the moral and social order?). This suggests that everyday perceptions of crime in society provide a salient context within which media crime is interpreted; conversely, media crime triggers thoughts and feelings that are central to daily life.

Audiences seem more powerfully positioned in relation to crime media according to their perceived positioning in relation to the risks of crime and criminal justice. Particularly in our early period, crime media typically offer audiences the subject position of 'criminal justice protagonist', the criminal becomes 'other', and the victim is virtually invisible. However, 'real world' crime offers three subject positions: police/law enforcer, criminal and victim, and our different groups perceived the media through the lens of these.

Those aged 80 perceived media throughout the period, not only through the lens of their youth (the culture of respect), but also through the lens of their present day perceived vulnerability, as potential victims of crime. The loss of a culture of respect weakens their identification with authorities. While both the media and everyday experience tell older people that they are muggable, our youngest groups felt they were continually portrayed as 'dangerous youth', potential perpetrators of crime. Thus they welcome a civil rights focus and the questioning of police authority.

Recalling that each generation is most positive about the media of their youth, we suggest that young people are positive about present day media because they, like it, are ambivalent about police heroes, seeing themselves as often positioned as suspected criminals in daily life. Their desire is to understand both sides through the media, to question both authority and the criminal.

Gender and generation

This picture is cross-cut by gender. Unlike the men, young women are aware of their potential victim status, particularly their vulnerability to male violence, and so they welcomed coverage of such crimes. The oldest women shared their generation's pessimism, yet also expressed some approval of the destruction of the 'fairy tales' of their youth - the glamorous

images of femininity and masculinity which some perceived to have trapped and distracted them.

The youngest women, on the other hand, shared their male peers' scepticism about the criminal justice system and so turned to reliance on themselves *not* the authorities. Their orientation to media was actuarial and risk related. It centred on how media provided information and opportunities to think through situations offering self-protection, through realistic assessments of risk. It was mainly if police heroes are female or feminised (as in Silence of the Lambs or the Cagney and Lacey) that younger women showed some approval or identification with the criminal justice system.

Neither younger nor older men in our groups would accept views of themselves as potential victims. Rather the older men accepted the proffered identification with the protagonist, typically a law enforcement hero. Younger men were particularly interested in forms of crime media in which the criminal was as much a focus as the law enforcers and in which the moral boundaries between the two were ambiguous or unresolved. Some saw the police as presenting them with more risks of trouble than criminals did.

VI) Conclusion: From Morality Tales to Calculated Risks

The media representation of crime since World War II exhibits a clear periodisation in terms of three ideal-type narrative structures. The first postwar decade is a period of consensus and social harmony in representations of criminal justice. Crime stories - news as well as fiction - present an image of society as based largely on shared values and a clear yet accepted hierarchy of status and authority. Crime was as defined by Durkheim: it united all healthy consciences to condemn and extirpate it. Criminals were normally brought to justice: crime did not pay. The forces of law always got their man. The criminal justice system was almost invariably represented as righteous, dedicated, and efficient.

During the mid-1960s the dominant mode of representation of crime and justice shifts discernibly. The values and integrity of authority come to be questioned increasingly. Doubts about the justice and effectiveness of criminal justice proliferate. Increasing prominence is given to conflict: between ethnic groups, men and women, social classes, even within the criminal justice system itself. Whilst street-cops more frequently feature as protagonists, they are often morally tarnished if not outright corrupt. However, the increasing criticism of the social order and criminal justice is from a standpoint of reform, the advocacy of preferable alternatives.

Since the late 1970s another shift is discernible, the advent of what could be called a post-critical era. Stories are increasingly bifurcated between counter-critical ones, which seek to return as far as possible to the values of consensus, and those which represent a hopelessly disordered beyond-good-and-evil world, characterised by a Hobbesian war of all against all. It is this division of narratives which accounts for the curvilinear pattern of many variables: there is some attempt to restore the values of the past, challenged by those which portray the exacerbation of the conflicts of the middle period.

Underneath the shifts in the mode of representation of concrete aspects of crime and justice, however, can be discerned a more fundamental shift in discourse, encompassing both media representations and popular discussion (as captured in our focus groups). This echoes the themes of the 'risk society' discourse outlined earlier. There is a demystification of authority and law, a change in the conceptualisation of criminal justice from sacred to secular. Pragmatism and contingency push out moralistic certainties.

The marked changes in the representation of victims are the clearest emblem of the new risk discourse in popular cultural conceptions of crime. Crime moves from being something that must be opposed and controlled ipso facto - because the law defines it thus - to a contested category. Crime *may* be wrong, but this is a pragmatic issue, turning on the risk of harm to individual victims that audiences sympathise or empathise with, not from the authority of the law itself. The moral status of characters in a story (news or fiction) is no longer ascribed by their formal legal role. It has to be established from scratch in each narrative, and turns on who causes serious suffering to the victims occupying the subject

position. Increasingly the latter may be the legally defined offenders, represented as victimised by a criminal injustice system.

However, the majority of narratives continue to work to justify ultimately the criminal justice viewpoint, although this has to be achieved by demonstrating particular harm to identifiable individual victims. In this sense the media both continue to reproduce a more complex and brittle order, and to function as sources of social control. Above all they reflect the increasing individualism of a less deferential and more desubordinate culture. Media narratives traditionally performed the ideological work of reconciling tensions between the values of individualism and community, suggesting a dynamic interdependence between them. Plots rescued individualism from tipping over into egoism as regularly as their rugged individualist heroes came in the end to act as saviours of social order (Bellah et.al. 1996: 144-7). In the risk discourse which has come to prevail, however, heroes are merely the fittest individuals in a struggle for self-preservation.

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