Book Review


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The claim that crime rates had been declining consistently within numerous countries during the past two decades was warmly, and understandably, welcomed by many. British politicians, keen for any evidence that their policies are having the desired effect, were particularly enthusiastic about this trend. Criminologists were slightly more circumspect, but arguably not enough. While some debate certainly took place concerning the veracity of the claim, the balance of opinion seemed to tip in favour of accepting the assertion that incidents of crime had been, and were, declining. Those arguing to the contrary and suggesting the discipline may need to look beyond the ‘neat bundle of specially selected illegalities’ (p.157) that were reported to be in decline to attain a more-informed understanding of crime and harm contemporarily, did seem to be in the minority. What was crucial though about the claim that crime has been declining, is that this issue did not remain a purely academic one to be debated amongst criminologists at conferences. The consequences have been very real in the UK. Not that criminologists who claimed crime was declining would necessarily endorse such policies, but the crime decline thesis and some of the evidence provided in support of it were used as a justificatory basis for austerity measures that led to cuts across the British criminal justice system in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2015 the former Home Secretary Theresa May roundly rejected con-
cerns raised by the Police Federation about the impact of the cuts, suggesting the latter were ‘crying wolf’. Several years later, amid what the newspapers and some members of the opposition were calling an ‘epidemic’ of knife-enabled violence in the UK, May, then Prime Minister, had to defend the policy again from accusations that austerity cuts were in anyway implicated in the rise in knife-related attacks and deaths.

Undoubtedly, a critical interrogation of this evidential basis for the crime decline thesis, as well as the tendency to accept with limited circumspection its key tenets, have been long overdue. In his new book *The Myth of the Crime Decline*, emerging critical criminologist Justin Kotzé provides the kind of detailed and sustained critical analysis of this issue that the discipline has needed.

To begin, Kotzé suggests that the survey instruments used to gather the data that indicate crime has been declining, are hampered by a form of ‘tunnel vision’ that blinds them to the shifting landscape of crime and harm in the 21st century. Kotzé sets about this task in some detail by interrogating the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) along with some of the other instruments upon which the crime decline thesis relies. Kotzé alerts us to several important weaknesses that encourage some circumspection about the possibility of a simple ‘decline’ in crime. To this effect, Kotzé suggests that (p.58):

> politically influential sections of criminology continue to be constrained by a narrow view of what constitutes the ‘crime problem’ … and therefore remain largely out of step with the momentous changes in the dynamics of criminality occurring throughout the social landscape.

The book delves into the multiple nooks and crannies that escape the standard victimisation survey, bringing forth the various complexities and nuances that now characterise 21st century crime and harm. To support some of the key contentions in this regard, Kotzé draws upon a case study of the socially and economically disadvantaged location of ‘Laketown’, like which there are now many scattered across the de-industrialised West. Through the experiences and stories of the town’s residents ‘glimpses of experiential lived realities of crime and harm…that occur as familiar constituents of everyday life’ (p. 80) and that are rarely captured by survey instruments, start to come into view.

The tunnel vision to which Kotzé refers in this book is only one issue though. The other is the conclusion that some have reached on the basis of this partial picture. Kotzé sets his sights upon what he suggests is a naïve and misplaced optimism concerning both the current condition and future of capitalist liberal democracies in the 21st century. Certainly, as many of us have watched in collective horror in recent months, the handling of the Coronavirus pandemic by some liberal democratic capitalist states arguably leaves very significant and critical questions for those
who have put their faith in humanity’s ‘better angels’ (Pinker, 2011). Perhaps the more significant message from this book then is that rather than recoiling behind carefully constructed statistical data that tells us what we want to hear … a more honest appraisal of the extent and nature of crime and harm in our world today must be performed (p.157).

Without doubt, Kotzé has ventured into challenging territory here. This book does not offer a simple rejection of the crime decline argument based on ideological prejudice or commitment. Rather, it provides a careful and considered critical examination of the evidential basis for the international crime decline and those broader inferences that have been drawn from it. What Kotzé has achieved with this book is quite admirable. To go against a considerable weight of opinion, especially at the inception of one’s career, requires courage. To effectively articulate an alternative to that weight of opinion requires some ingenuity. Justin Kotzé displays both of these qualities in this book. *The Myth of the Crime Decline* contains the kind of cautious scepticism, thoroughly researched and nuanced critique, that the discipline should have delivered when the claim of an international decline in crime was first being made and lapped up by politicians of various stripes. The fact that it has taken an up-and-coming critical criminologist new to the discipline to deliver this, is, on the one hand, somewhat disappointing, but also a means for much encouragement and optimism.

**References**