Politics and Social Structure in *The Culture of Control*

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*David Garland’s* The Culture of Control provides a powerful analysis of trends in crime and criminal justice policy over the last 30 years. This note re-examines two parts of the Garland thesis. First, it argues that punitive criminal justice policy is rooted in an authoritarian neoconservative politics that shares little with free-market ideology. Second, research on the collateral consequences of incarceration suggests that the penal system, at least in America, has become a significant influence on, rather than just a product of, the social structure of late modernity.

David Garland’s *Culture of Control* (2001a) represents a unique effort to connect a variety of seemingly disparate trends in crime and criminal justice policy that distinguish the last three decades of the twentieth century from the first 70 years. The book ranges widely over major currents in policing, private initiatives in crime control, academic criminology, criminal law, and the scale of incarceration. Put most simply, the book argues that trends in crime control and our understanding of crime are linked to basic structural changes in contemporary culture, politics and the economy. Suburbanisation, the growth of consumerism, changes in household structure, and the increasing involvement of men and women in the paid labour force laid the social foundations for a secular increase in crime in Britain and the United States. Under these conditions, the emergence of a conservative politics – Reagan in the United States and Thatcher in the United Kingdom – defunded the welfare state and implemented an expressive politics of criminal justice. Conservatives abandoned rehabilitation for retribution, providing a symbolic politics of security when real security could not be delivered. Mandatory minimums,
sex offender registries, restrictions on parole and, ultimately, mass imprison-ment all followed.

A striking feature of this account is Garland’s success in connecting what appear to be only loosely related trends. In Garland’s analysis, the criminology of routine activities, the moral critique of James Q. Wilson, community policing and mass imprisonment are similarly rooted in the social conditions of late modernity. For its scope alone, I found this to be an extraordinary and stimulating analysis that will spur much research and discussion.

In this comment, I take up two specific issues that arise out of the *Culture of Control*. First, I discuss the tension between neoliberal and neoconservative politics – two ideologies that propel several of the most important policy developments identified in the book. Second, I want to raise the question of whether the analysis of the ‘culture of control’ is essentially epiphenomenal, and a more dynamic line of argument could have taken the analysis even further.

**Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism**

An important theme of the book in characterising the politics of the Reagan–Thatcher period is the simultaneous embrace of neoliberalism and neoconservatism (e.g. pp. 99–100). Neoliberalism is a politics of ‘market fundamentalism’ in which a minimal state unleashes the forces of an unregulated market. These politics delivered welfare state retrenchment, and ultimately a marginalised and wretched urban poor. The main public policy objective for neoliberals was a small noninterventionist state. Neoconservatism, on the other hand, appealed to the themes of tradition, order, hierarchy and authority. The leading American ideologues included Irving Kristol, Charles Murray and James Q. Wilson. The role of the state for neoconservatism was expansive. Forcefully declaring the moral inferiority of criminals, neoconservatives urged a policy of segregation that removed offenders from society.

Although the *The Culture of Control* provides an excellent account of the reactionary origins contemporary criminal justice policy, I would argue for a slightly different emphasis. In my view, the politics of the American right through the 1980s and 1990s were never strongly neoliberal. Instead, right-wing politics were dominated by a moral authoritarianism that is characteristic of Garland’s neoconservatism. This emphasis on the authoritarian character of right-wing US politics more fully acknowledges the fundamental importance of race in the US setting, and
helps resolve the paradox of expanding imprisonment at a time of shrinking social policy effort.

What evidence supports the argument that moral authoritarianism drove conservative politics in the United States, and that free market ideology had only marginal influence? Let us look first at welfare policy rather than the criminal justice system. Welfare eligibility tightened significantly particularly since the early 1980s. The key political arguments of this first wave of welfare reform emphasised not the power of market competition but the undeservingness of the poor.

The moral impetus for welfare state retrenchment is now a familiar theme in research on American social policy. The argument has been reinvigorated by the latest round of ‘welfare reform’. Writing ten years ago before Congress had taken decisive steps to the abandonment of the AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) programme, Piven and Cloward (1993: 396) observed that ‘dramatic allegations that [welfare] recipients are slothful, shiftless, promiscuous, criminal and indifferent to the rules others value constitute rituals of public degradation. Conditioning on approved conduct is the tradition.’ In this policy climate, the social problem to be solved was not poverty, but welfare dependency (Piven & Cloward 1993: 397). Discussing the elimination of cash transfer entitlements, Katz (1998: 342) shows that the moral critique has a racial tint: ‘the late-twentieth century has racialized the undeserving poor, who now carry the triple stigma of sexual licentiousness, willful poverty, and race’. The theme of racialised welfare debates is taken further by Martin Gilens. In his book, Why Americans Hate Welfare, Gilens show that attitudes to the welfare state were fundamentally shaped by people’s predispositions to African Americans. Those with racist attitudes held the strongest anti-welfare sentiments. White Americans mentally pictured welfare recipients as black and blacks, they thought, were lazy and not deserving of assistance.

Criminal justice policy was also racialised and similarly driven by an impulse to punish troublesome marginal populations, personified by poor urban blacks. This argument has been made most forcibly by Loic Wacquant. Wacquant (2000, 2001) argues that racial disparity and the penal system grew in tandem with the economic decline of the ghetto. In his analysis, the “recent racialization of U.S. imprisonment” is fuelled by a “supernumerary population of younger black men who either reject or are rejected by the deregulated low-wage labor market” (Wacquant 2001: 83–84). In Wacquant’s analysis, however, growth in prison populations and city police forces is not driven chiefly by the rise in crime, but by the
Garland, I think, would agree with much of this analysis: Welfare state retrenchment and punitive criminal justice policies shared origins in a sustained moral critique of poor urban minorities in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. I would part company with the *Culture of Control* by emphasising the racial overtones of US neoconservatism that shaped welfare and criminal justice policy. In contrast to Garland’s argument, this racial animus may be linked as much to political developments as it is to crime. Civil rights protest, the political achievements of voting rights, affirmative action and the development of legal protections against discrimination are all plausible bases for a punitive sentiment among white suburban voters.

Notwithstanding the racism endured by Asian and West Indian communities in Britain, the deep connection of American social and crime policy to the problem of race has no real British parallel, and is strikingly glossed in the *Culture of Control*. Viewing race as central to policy discussions about America’s poor helps explain why the coercive power of the state was used so expansively in a political culture that is apparently committed to limited government.

Welfare and crime policy trends can be seen as different products of an overarching trend to punitive public policy. Punitive public policy aims to restore moral order among deviant social groups. It does this either through enforcing moral behaviour, such as marriage or drug or alcohol abstinence (now required by some US welfare programmes), or through exacting retribution for moral failure. While the goals of neoliberal policy are explicitly economic – say encouraging employment through the removal of disincentives – the goals of punitive policy are the restoration of moral balance. While outwardly similar, there are clear tensions between the two approaches. The punitive policy maker holds no deep reservations about the state as an instrument of social regulation and no particular commitment to markets as an instrument of economic allocation.

Punitive public policy has observably different implications from neoliberal public policy. Neoliberal policy will tend to limit spending on transfer payments, but may link benefits to work, or provide education and training. Such measures may well raise employment, but could also increase inequality due to the expanding supply of low-wage workers to the labour market. On the other hand punitive public policy will shift the
commitment of public resources from transfers to social control functions, from welfare benefits to surveillance and incarceration.

Empirical evidence for the punitive trend in is shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 plots the shift in welfare spending between 1980 and 2000 and the shift in spending on policing and corrections. In each case, spending is expressed as a fraction of total state spending. Figure 1 suggests a negative relationship between changes in welfare spending and changes in criminal justice spending. States with the smallest increases in welfare spending have the largest increases in criminal justice spending. States that have been least generous in expanding welfare effort have been most punitive in expanding corrections and policing.

In sum, I am not completely convinced that culture of control was borne of a tension between the free market ideology of neoliberalism and the moral authoritarianism of neoconservatism. In my view, neoliberalism in America has not been influential in public policy. Instead, the neoconservative impulse has been dominant, tapping into racist sentiment
among white voters, embracing a punitive role for public policy and an activist role for the state in the area of crime control.

Is the Culture of Control Epiphenomenal?

The analysis of *Culture of Control* identifies several basic large-scale social structural transformations that generated changes in crime control. In statistical language we might say that changes in the social structure – in suburbanisation, in households, consumption and the economy – were exogenous or external to changes in crime control. In the most vulgar formulation, the culture of control is a superstructure sitting on a base of economic, geographic and demographic developments. I would push this analysis further to argue that crime control efforts have become so pervasive in poor urban communities that they have distinct effects on the social structure. Indeed, crime control in the ghetto is constitutive of the social structure.

What evidence supports this argument? A growing research literature indicates the negative effects of imprisonment in a wide variety of areas. Labour market studies show that going to prison reduces both earnings and employment after release (Western, Kling & Weiman 1999 review the literature). In large part this is due to the stigma of a criminal conviction. Employers of low-skill workers are extremely reluctant to hire men with criminal records. The stigma of a prison record also creates legal barriers to skilled and licensed occupations, rights to welfare benefits, and voting rights. The negative effects of incarceration also extend to marriage markets. Ex-prisoners are less likely to get married, and they are at higher risk of divorce or separation (Western, Lopoo & McLanahan 2004). Note that this research on the collateral consequences of imprisonment has tried to identify a causal effect of incarceration and not just measure the life chances of crime-prone men who risk entry into prison or jail. Marriage and employment, as we know, are also keys to criminal desistance. By eroding labour markets and marriage markets, incarceration may also provide a pathway back into crime.

Because of its collateral consequences, imprisonment also acquires a significance for the entire life course of those who go to prison or jail. For life course analysts, the volatility of adolescence is resolved as young men grow into the adult roles of worker and husband. If incarceration undermines employment and marriage prospects, the markers of adulthood will be significantly delayed – sometimes permanently –
among men serving prison time. What does this research on collateral consequences of incarceration tell us? Going to prison is a turning point in which young crime-involved men acquire a new status involving diminished life chances and an attenuated form of citizenship. At the aggregate level, there is good reason to think that the prison boom has deepened inequality.

How common a life event is imprisonment? Table 1 compares some estimates of cumulative risks of imprisonment to the prevalence of other life events that we more commonly associate with passage through young adulthood. Mass imprisonment among recent birth cohorts of non-college black men challenges us to include the criminal justice system among the key institutional influences on American social inequality. The growth of military service during the Second World War and the expansion of higher education exemplify projects of administered mobility in which the fate of disadvantaged groups was increasingly detached from their social background. Inequalities in imprisonment indicate the reverse effect, in which the life path of poor minorities was cleaved from the well-educated majority and disadvantage was deepened, rather than diminished. More strikingly than patterns of military enlistment, marriage or college graduation, prison time differentiates the young adulthood of black men from the life course of most others. Convict status inheres now, not in individual offenders, but in entire demographic categories. In this context, the experience of imprisonment in the United States emerges as a key social division marking a new pattern in the lives of recent birth cohorts of black men.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Life Event</th>
<th>Whites</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison incarceration</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military service</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-college men</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison incarceration</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma/GED</td>
<td>73.5</td>
<td>64.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military service</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>72.8</td>
<td>55.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The incidence of all life events except prison incarceration were calculated from the 2000 census. Source: Pettit and Western (2004).
From a predictive point of view, I think this is an important extension to Garland’s analysis. At the end of *Culture of Control* we are left a little uncertain about what the future holds. If we think however that mass imprisonment contributes significantly to the marginalisation of African Americans we are led to predict that current system is self-reproducing. Men who go to prison will tend to be crime prone, because imprisonment undermines two keys to criminal desistance: steady employment and stable family relationships. The political power of such men is likely to be slight, and their criminality is confirmed in public perception by the fact of their high incarceration rate.

Thus the culture of control sows seeds for its own reproduction. This suggests prison populations will remain large despite state budget shortfalls (which are now acute) and falls in crime (which are now substantial). This theory of a social structure made more unequal by punitive public policy may be wrong, but it does a yield a prediction about the likely development of crime and social policy. The culture of control may ultimately be more encompassing and enduring than Garland would have us believe.

*The Culture of Control* provides a breathtaking analysis of the causes and character of criminal justice in late modernity. The book reveals Garland’s encyclopedic command of official statistics, academic criminology and social theory. More than this, Garland challenges familiar claims about American exceptionalism and shows how the politics of crime is related as much to shifts in the social structure as it is to crime itself. While Garland provides a masterful treatment, the unique history of American race relations gives rise to an unusually punitive politics. Given extreme racial disparities in incarceration and the sheer pervasiveness of incarceration among blacks, it seems hard to argue that America is not exceptional in this respect. The prevalence of incarceration among poor men of colour suggests that the *Culture of Control* may be even more far-reaching in its effects that Garland acknowledges. By significantly adding to the marginalisation of poor black men, mass imprisonment is not just a by-product of the late modern social structure, but a constitutive element that further deepens race and class inequalities.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

These comments were originally prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, August 2003.
REFERENCES


