

Review for THES

By John Adams

*The Culture of Control: crime and social order in contemporary society*

By David Garland

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David Garland begins by asserting, “we quickly grow used to the way things are.” His description of our contemporary *culture of control*, and of our acceptance of it, calls to mind the mythical frog in the saucepan: dropped into hot water the frog is startled and leaps out; but if the heat is turned up gradually it sits there without noticing until it boils to death. In our case – “our” in the book refers to Britain and the United States – most of us have failed to notice a quite rapid turning-up of the heat.

Americans, he observes, now seem quite accustomed to living in a country that executes more than two people in an average week and has a prison population of more than two million, and Britons, with extraordinarily little protest, have adjusted to living with an Orwellian level of CCTV surveillance and a prison population whose growth rate, if not actual numbers, is beginning to rival that of the United States. Such a state of affairs, he notes, only thirty years ago would have seemed shocking, even to the best-informed and most up-to-date observer. Indeed, he insists, “the trajectory of British and American crime control over the last three decades has been almost exactly the contrary of that which was anticipated as recently as 1970.”

*The Culture of Control* describes this trajectory, explains how and why it confounded expectations, and concludes with a view of what it portends. I shall quibble in a moment with his optimism about where it is headed, but first the trajectory and its confounding of expectations. This is a fascinating and disturbing story that Garland tells brilliantly. He is wonderfully readable; he makes the complex simple, but not simplistic.

In brief, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, state agencies of crime control and criminal justice had become increasingly imbued with the spirit of “penal welfarism” and the ideal of rehabilitation; since then they have become dominated by the pursuit of risk management, incapacitation and retribution. In explaining this change Garland notes that the formal institutions of crime control tend to be reactive and adaptive: “too often” he says “our attention focuses on the state’s institutions and neglects the informal social practices upon which state action depends.” Much of the credit for the success of penal welfarism – while it was seen to be successful – he awards to “the informal social controls exerted by families, neighbours, and communities, together with the disciplines imposed by schools, workplaces, and other institutions [that] created an everyday environment of norms and sanctions that underpinned the law’s demands and provided support for penal-welfare interventions.”

“What” Garland asks “is the new problem of crime and social order to which the new system of crime control is a response?” The first and most obvious part of his answer is the large increase in crime and fear of crime, and the perception, especially amongst

the better-off, that existing policies and programmes no longer provided them with effective security. The second, and more interesting part of his answer consists of an account of the way in which the definition of “the problem” has been fought over. The move away from penal welfarism was led paradoxically by liberal academics who were critical of a “correctional” system that sought to impose a white middle-class view of what was “correct” on criminal “deviants”. The correctionalist regime involving psychiatric reports and indeterminate sentencing (time off for “good” behaviour), they complained, was used to repress all those who did not conform to the welfare regime’s mould of normality: blacks, the poor, the young and various cultural minorities. This progressive critique, Garland demonstrates, was hijacked by retributive conservatives. If the individualised programmes of the correctionalists were failing to curb the growth of crime and discriminated unfairly, the right-wing answer was more and longer fixed-sentences: “they argued that in the modern state, individualistic values were better protected by retributive punishment than by an invasive correctionalism that pressed everyone into conformity.”

This is a depressing book. It is eloquent, impressive in its range, penetrating in its insights, and convincing in its analysis, but it offers little hope. The contemporary scene that Garland describes is grim: “The hardening of social and racial divisions, the reinforcement of criminogenic processes; the alienation of large social groups; the discrediting of legal authority; a reduction of civic tolerance; a tendency towards authoritarianism – these are the kinds of outcomes that are liable to flow from a reliance upon penal mechanisms to maintain social order. Mass imprisonment and private fortification may be feasible solutions, but they are deeply unattractive ones. ... A government that routinely sustains social order by means of mass exclusion begins to look like an apartheid state.”

Hope, for Garland, lies in the very unattractiveness of the present culture of control – its “social and political costs make it less likely that such policies will continue indefinitely.” Hope lies also in the recent decline in crime rates, which have made the issue of crime control less urgent. But, even more importantly, it lies in the growing recognition that “effective government in complex societies cannot rely upon centralised command and coercion.” It lies in the harnessing of “the governmental capacities of the organizations and associations of civil society, together with the local powers and knowledge that they contain.” His optimism resides in his belief in the startled-frog reflex - in his belief that society is capable of being roused from its torpor and shocked by his story into changing its “deeply unattractive” ways. And it depends also on his conviction that civil society is capable of turning down the heat by reverting to the more civilised and cooperative practices of our recent past. But how?

The social and political costs to which Garland calls attention are seen by the champions of retributive justice as, if not positive attractions, costs well worth paying; they offer the decline in crime, to which Garland refers, as evidence that their system works. Meanwhile the social capital on which our salvation rests continues to drain away.

The timeframe into which Garland fits the rise and fall of penal-welfarism coincides closely with the rise and fall of Robert Putnam’s indicators of civic engagement. And Garland’s optimism has much in common with that of Putnam who enshrines his optimism in the subtitle of his book *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of*

*American community*. Putnam's solution to the collapse of community, like Garland's antidote to the excesses of the culture of control, involves a revival of community; Putnam concludes: "institutional reform will not work – indeed, it will not happen – unless you and I, along with our fellow citizens, resolve to become reconnected with our friends and neighbours. Henry Ward Beecher's advice a century ago to 'multiply picnics' is not entirely ridiculous today." Putnam presents an impressive set of indicators of "social capital" and "civic engagement" – all of which are still in steep decline. Sadly, picnics are one them, mentioned earlier in the book, as "on the path to extinction." The only mechanism Garland, or Putnam, offers for restoring social capital appears to be a belief in the efficacy of the argument that if we don't, things will get worse still.

Garland's crime and punishment statistics, which feature prominently in his explanation of how we acquired our present culture of control, also feature in *Bowling Alone* as negative indicators of social capital. The United States' prison population of 2 million, which Garland cites at the beginning as a measure of how bad things are, understates the magnitude of the problem. The U.S. Department of Justice website tells us that there are a further 4.5 million Americans on probation or parole – that the total U.S. "correctional population" (the language of penal welfarism lingers on) is 6.3 million, or 3.1% of the adult population – and this percentage does not include the much larger numbers who have not been caught and those who have done their time.

As the scale of the problems that need governing continues to grow, the capacity for democratic government diminishes. As increasing physical and electronic mobility further undermine traditional communities, as criminal empires become global, as backpack nukes and other weapons of international terrorism become increasingly powerful and sophisticated, the justification for an even more centralised, authoritarian and retributive culture of control grows stronger. Garland has produced, in effect, an ethnography of *Blade Runner* – a film, he observes, that has powerful contemporary resonance because we can see so many precursors all around us: "a large population of marginalized, criminalized poor may lack political power and command little public sympathy, but in aggregate terms, they would have the negative capacity to make life unpleasant for everyone else." As fear of crime turns up the flame, and the retributive criminal justice system becomes hotter and harsher, "everyone else", like the frog in the saucepan, shows little sign of jumping.

Read this book, and hope – hope that sufficient numbers of people will find it, as I did, a compelling argument for a change of direction.

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