
RECESSION, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Steven Box

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Preface

If Weber didn't say 'sociology starts off disenchanting the world and ends up disenchanting its practitioners', he should have. For the longer one considers society, the more difficult it is to resist an invitingly cynical conclusion: it is a 'confidence trick'. Durkheim sensitised us to this when he pointed out that social order cannot be maintained by giving people what they want – that would be impossible – but by persuading them that what they have is just about all they deserve morally. And of course, in a society like ours, which pontificates about equality, freedom and human rights, even whilst encouraging enormous differences in the distribution of income and even more in wealth, the problem of persuading those who haven't got very much to regard it as 'just about right' poses a constant headache. Well, to be more accurate, it poses a headache for those trying to pull off this 'confidence trick', who, by pure coincidence, as Vonnegut would say, happen to be earning and owning a great deal and *naturally* don't want to be separated from it.

Fortunately for them, when the economy is expanding, most people's attention can be diverted from these enormous material inequalities by giving them a little of the enlarging cake. If a majority of people experience some improvement in their living standards, then the comfort of relative contentment seems to cloud their vision of those at the top and makes them indifferent to a small disreputable bunch beneath them – although it needs to be added that the media, including educational institutions, try to fill people's heads with 'fairy stories' about the rich deserving their wealth because of the energy, risk-taking, creativity and, above all, the sacrifice they made earlier in life to acquire qualifications. Those who object to this rosy self-serving story can be stigmatised easily as 'wicked', 'lazy', 'communists', 'nutters', 'criminals', 'jealous', 'anarchists' and 'envious', and dealt with accordingly. Since

these 'outsiders' are only a minority, posing no serious threat to discipline or to law and order, controlling them raises few difficulties and the state need not reveal too much of its unacceptable coercive face. The rich can carry on accumulating wealth under the benign smiling face of consensus which brings a contented workforce to their places of employment and leaves a few at home to stew in their personal inadequacies.

It is indeed a wonderful racket. Well, almost. It tends to come unstuck, as it is currently, when the economy is in a prolonged recession. For over the last decade or so, workers were replaced by labour-saving machinery, the numbers unemployed and unemployable grew to an ugly size, the welfare system bled from a thousand cuts, wages failed to keep pace with inflation or were reduced, sometimes below legal minimum levels, and many full-time workers became part-time. One outcome was widening income inequalities: the poor simply got poorer. Under these conditions, it has been harder to sustain the 'myth' that capitalism is not only good at creating wealth, but it is also good at distributing it – particularly when those shouldering most of the recession's burdens were not doing that well before, while the wealthy continue almost untouched by what a Cabinet minister described conveniently as 'economic misfortunes no national government can control'.

This book considers one major response adopted by some of those suffering from the worst ravages of recession, namely resistance, including criminal activity. In particular, it considers reasons why the unemployed and economically marginalised might turn to property offences, and evaluates the evidence on this possibility. It also examines how governments deal with this potential resistance, particularly by allowing the social control system to expand both at the *hard* end (prisons) and the *soft* end ('community treatment'). It draws almost exclusively from the evidence in the UK and the USA but does consider the applicability of major arguments to other industrialised countries. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 are devoted to theoretical issues, such as 'why' recession leads to more crime, and 'why' the government and minor state officials produce more repression as the economy slumps. Chapters 3 and 6 contain evaluations of the relevant research. For the layreader, these two chapters may be too lengthy and tedious – maybe a quick glance with a longer stop over the conclusions would be in order. But for

the serious student, there is no such quick and easy route to knowledge. As Lewis Carroll, on one of his off-days, might have put it very succinctly:

Don't Hunt in the Dark

The moment is due, the Criminologist knew,
As the view from his room was a mess.
So he set boldly forth, and studied in the North,
To uncover 'the truth', nothing less.

He beavered away, for a night and a day,
Reading journals, both ancient and new,
Till in the end, near 'round the bend',
He discovered a 'secret' or two.

'Should unemployment rise, to an enormous size,
And the poor get poorer too,
Then crime will increase, and harmony cease,
It's as clear as the sky is blue.'

'Build prisons', they say, 'to put them away,
Till their thieving is over and done'.
But he informed them thrice, although it's not nice,
'That's like burying your head in The Sun!'

He'll tell it all now, and then take a bow,
So listen! allow him to plead,
'No need for those walls, or disciplinary tools,
Its just fairer shares that you need.'

Now's an opportune time, to put this in rhyme,
And capture 'the truth' for a day.
'Don't hunt in the dark, not even for snark,
You'll never make progress that way.'

In preparing this book, I have been dogged by the usual round of domestic duties which seem, in an age of 'female liberation', to have expanded out of all proportion to my abilities. In addition to these intrusions, I have had my 'collar felt' by P. C. Edwards on more occasions than I care to remember. Hopefully, with her recent semi-transfer from a social control bureaucracy to a 'Seat of Learning', she may cease this arresting habit.

Chris Hale, with whom I have collaborated previously, would have been an enthusiastic and positive contributor to this project, but he cleared off to China in hot pursuit of the ancient Pot of Gold. A variety of 'friends' in the 'invisible college' of critical/radical/realistic criminology communicated their gratefulness for receiving a draft manuscript and then the lines went curiously dead. I've assumed it's something to do with the inefficiency of British Telecom under privatisation. On the positive side, it is nice to belong to a department of sociology on which the University Grants Committee pinned the equivalent of a Michelin three-star rosette, even if the methods of arriving at this decision were bizarre to say the least.

Finally, in addition to driving me round the vineyards of Burgundy, Michael Lane and Joan Busfield diligently ploughed their way through wine merchants' catalogues and located some delightful bargains. Without the sustenance derived from these strenuous efforts, this project could never have been completed. When your domestic life is chaotic, and your academic friends have not got time to whisper a word of advice in your ear, there's nothing like a bottle (or two) of Grand Cru Chablis to help you through the working day. It is more than a pity that a large section of the British and American population cannot afford their favourite tipple.

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1 The Lost World of the Sixties

Even without looking through the sanitary prism of nostalgia, it is easy to see that some things *really* were better twenty or so years ago. There was consensus that 'full employment' should be maintained, the principle of reducing income inequalities occupied a space on the political agenda, and the idea of reducing the prison population by encouraging alternatives in the community was taken seriously. Others may remember the Sixties differently, but it is hard to imagine that any person, sensitive to human suffering and hardship, could be indifferent to or not grieve over the disappearance of these modest liberal objectives.

Fewer people were unemployed

In 1965, the Beatles thought Strawberry Fields would last forever. The knowledge that only a handful of Britains were unemployed (328,000, or 1.4 per cent of the workforce) may have contributed to this sense of optimism. In the USA that year, while Bob Dylan revisited Highway 61, the total unemployed was 3.4 million (or 4.4 per cent of the labour force). Not only did these proportionately small numbers of unemployed persons have the joy of pleasant music, but they did not expect to be listening to it from 9 to 5 for long. In Britain, job vacancies more or less matched the number registered as unemployed. This high unemployment/vacancies ratio enabled people to lose one job and obtain another within a matter of weeks. Of those unemployed in the summer of 1965 one-quarter had only been without work for two weeks and a further quarter for less than two months. Over two-thirds could expect realistically to be back in work before Christmas that year.

The US unemployment rate may have been double the UK rate, but the average duration of unemployment was under twelve weeks. Nine out of every ten people made unemployed in June 1965 were working again before the New Year. In those halcyon days before monetarism mesmerised politicians, Keynes was not a dirty six-letter word. The Kennedy–Johnson administrations and the Wilson government were ‘interventionalists’, committed to managing the economy to maintain ‘full employment’.

Alas, all that is no more. The recession since the mid-1970s has transformed this rosy landscape into a polluted dump. The British official unemployment figure by the end of 1985 reached 3.28 million, which was *ten times* higher than twenty years previous. However, even this frightening total is an undercount because Ministers of Employment since 1979 have altered the counting procedures to massage the figure gently downwards. The Unemployment Unit, which publishes data comparable to that produced by the previous counting procedures, calculated that the total stood at 3.72 million (or nearly 15 per cent – *one in seven* – of the labour force). Even this omits nearly 500,000 young people on various temporary ‘training’ schemes, such as Community Programmes and Youth Training Schemes. So by the beginning of 1986, the total unemployed in the UK pressed hard up against, or even spilled over, the 4 million barrier. Such a total out of work would have been unthinkable twenty years ago; then, there was a comforting and, as it turned out, naive conviction that any government allowing unemployment to race past that necessary to oil friction between parts of the economy would be swept from office by a morally outraged electorate. Yet the unimaginable happened, not only in the UK but also in the USA. By the end of 1983, there were nearly 11 million unemployed American citizens, or *one in ten* of the potential workforce. The difference, however, is that the American government, no doubt shocked by the ravaging effects of monetarism, reflatd the economy and engineered the ‘official’ total unemployed down to around 8.5 million, although that still represents *one in fourteen* out of work by the end of 1985. However, some of this reduction is more illusion than real. There is more than a suspicion that the ‘official’ unemployment rate is manipulated downward, presumably for political reasons. For example, according to Cunniff (1983), an Associated Press business analyst:

The Bureau of Labor Statistics announced a decline in the jobless rate to 10.2 per cent in January from 10.8 per cent in December, creating confidence in and beyond the White House . . . however . . . the number of jobs didn't rise at all . . . [and] . . . the number of jobless actually rose to 12,517,000 from 11,628,000.

A major proximate reason for these high levels of unemployment is that fewer jobs are available. Using UK Department of Employment estimates of the proportion of vacancies recorded by Jobcentres, it was possible for the Unemployment Unit to report that 'by the late 1985 the average number of vacancies in the U.K. economy in each month would be approximately 480,000, or *one for every seven unemployed claimants*' (*Statistical Supplement*, Nov. 1985).

The typical unemployed Briton therefore no longer expected re-employment within a matter of days or weeks at the most. Of those unemployed at the end of 1985, 40 per cent (or 1.5 million) had been so for more than one year and a further 20 per cent had been on the register for between six months to one year. Whereas the typical unemployed Briton in the mid-Sixties was between jobs, now that person is literally between being employed once (if at all) and being *unemployable*.

A similar, though less pronounced, pattern occurred in the USA. Between 1965 and 1983 the average duration of unemployment nearly doubled from eleven to twenty weeks, and the proportion unemployed for half a year increased from 10.4 to 23.9 per cent. Undoubtedly a major reason for this was the substantial drop in the number of vacant jobs. The US Employment Service received 724 new vacancies per month in 1965, but by 1983, when there were three times as many people unemployed, it received only 541, a drop of 25 per cent (*US Statistical Abstracts*, 1985, p. 409).

Not only were more and more unemployed Britons and Americans being transformed from 'temporary' to 'long term', but another significant change accentuated this shift. It would be out of place to talk of unemployment in the Sixties as a *burden* unevenly shared among the population. But it would be incongruous not to do so now. Unemployment is a long-term *burden* involving financial hardship, psychological trauma, marital tension and interpersonal disharmony, and it is a *burden* unevenly shared

out. It is primarily experienced by youth, especially young ethnic minority males, and by semi-/un-skilled workers and inner-city dwellers. The rates of unemployment, and particularly long-term unemployment, experienced by these groups are grotesque.

At the end of 1985, 1 in 4 British males and 1 in 5 females aged 18–24 were unemployed. Nearly one-quarter of the long-term unemployed were young males and just over one-third were young females. Both these rates are higher than would be expected if unemployment, temporary or long-term, occurred randomly throughout age cohorts.

A similar pattern exists in the USA. The unemployment rate in 1983 for white males aged 16–19 was *twice* that of white males aged 20–24 and *triple* that of older white males. These differences between age and unemployment are just as marked for American blacks and Hispanics (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 *Males unemployed in the labour force by race and age (rates)*

	Ages 16 to 19			Ages 20 to 24			Ages 25 and over		
	Whites	Hispanics	Blacks	Whites	Hispanics	Blacks	Whites	Hispanics	Blacks
1978	13.5	19.7	36.7	7.7	9.4	21.0	3.0	5.6	6.8
1979	13.9	17.5	34.2	7.5	9.2	18.7	2.9	5.0	7.2
1980	16.2	21.6	37.5	11.1	12.3	23.7	4.2	7.3	9.9
1981	17.9	24.3	40.7	11.6	14.2	26.4	4.5	7.5	10.6
1982	21.7	31.2	48.9	14.3	18.3	31.5	6.7	10.5	14.8
1983	20.2	28.7	48.8	13.8	17.1	31.4	6.9	11.1	15.2

Source: US Department of Labor.

Besides age, ethnic group membership is another major factor associated with unemployment. The unemployment rate for ethnic groups in Britain was estimated by the *Labour Force Survey* 1984 and reported in the *Employment Gazette* (Dec. 1985). According to this survey, 29 per cent of West Indians compared with 11.0 per cent of whites were unemployed in spring 1984. When ethnic origin is compounded with age, the disparities in unemployment are shocking, to say the least. As can be seen from Figure 1.1, the unemployment rate for West Indian males aged 16–24 was 42 per cent and for whites it was 19 per cent. For other age groups, the magnitude of these unemployment-rate differences among ethnic

groups persists, although the absolute rate drops. The same pattern exists for females, although as can be seen from Figure 1.2, the differences are less marked: 17 per cent of white females are unemployed compared with 27 per cent of West Indian females.

This economic marginalisation of young, males, and ethnic groups also occurs in the USA. As shown in Table 1.1, the total unemployment rate in 1978 was 6.5 per cent, but for black males aged 21–24 it was 21.0, and for 16–19-year-olds, it was 36.7. By 1983, when the national unemployment rate had risen to 9.6 per cent, the rates among teenage blacks stood at a staggering 48.8 and for young adult blacks at 31.4. These rates far exceed both the national average and that experienced by older persons and by whites of the same age (Austin and Krisberg, 1985, p. 27).

In addition to age and ethnic group, the level of occupational skills is related to unemployment rates. Thus those with semi- or un-skilled capacities are very vulnerable, particularly when, as has happened, the manufacturing, industrial and construction sectors which would employ proportionately more semi- and un-skilled workers, shed jobs at a much faster rate than the service sector. Thus although the semi- and un-skilled represented 20 per cent of the economically active population in the UK in 1985, they represented 40 per cent of the unemployed; in contrast, those with managerial and professional skills represented one-quarter of the economically active but only one-tenth of the unemployed.

By the end of 1983, nearly 20 per cent of US construction workers and miners were unemployed. These rates stand in stark contrast to the rates of 5.5 per cent for government employees and 4.3 per cent for those employed in finance, insurance and real estate.

Vast differences in economic sector unemployment rates are reflected in the wide differences per region of the UK. Top of the league are old industrial areas like Cleveland (22.2) and Merseyside (21.0). Close behind in the league of regional recession are other parts of the North East such as Tyne and Wear (19.9) and Durham (18.7), and parts of Wales, such as Gwynedd (19.3), Glamorgan (18.7) and Glwyd (18.5). At the other extreme are relatively sheltered areas where professionals and other high-status white-collar workers congregate, such as Cambridgeshire (9.6), Oxfordshire (7.7), Berkshire (7.2) and Hertfordshire (7.1). As the manufacturing and industrial infrastructure of the British

Figure 1.1 *Unemployment rates for males by age*

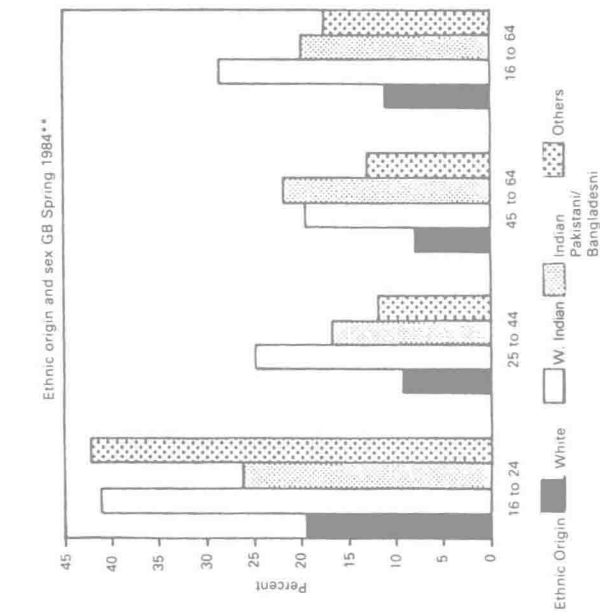
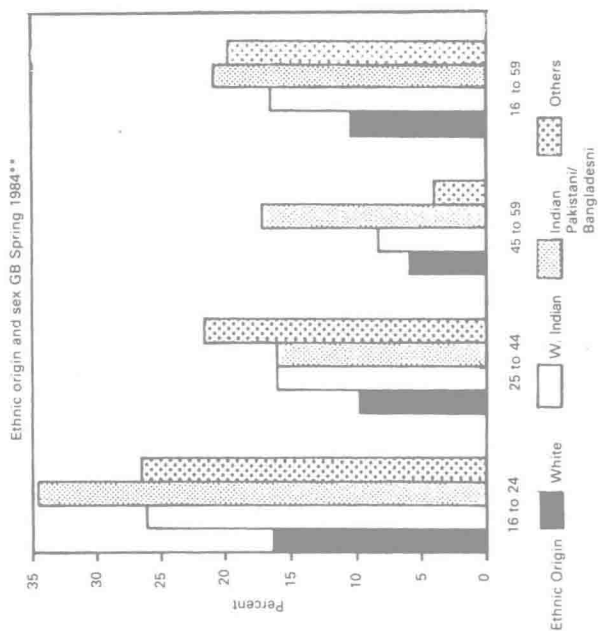


Figure 1.2 *Unemployment rates for female by age*



Source: *Employment Gazette* (UK Dept. Employment) 1985, p. 474.

economy collapsed so those areas that were traditionally its backbone found themselves redundant and experienced regional rates of employment exceeding one-fifth of the labour force. Furthermore, within these regions there is also considerable variation, particularly between inner-city areas and the rest. Thus although unemployment in the Metropolitan area of London was 10 per cent by the beginning of 1986, it was double this figure, or more, in those inner-city areas abandoned by entrepreneurs seeking havens elsewhere for capital accumulation.

Paul Harrison's (1983) evocative and haunting account of 'life under the cutting edge' in an inner-city borough of London reveals an isomorph description of these cross-national characteristics. According to him:

unemployment became a vast engine for increasing the existing inequalities in British society – a welfare state in reverse gear. There was no question of equality of sacrifice in the fight against inflation. The belts of those who were thinnest had to be tightened hardest. The most disadvantaged areas and the most disadvantaged people were hit most brutally. The Hackney figures tell a sad tale, paralleling national developments. Unemployment hit manual workers harder than non-manual: between 1979 and 1980 14 per cent of jobs in the 'operative' category disappeared, but less than half of 1 per cent of office jobs. It hit women harder than men: between 1979 and 1981, female unemployment rose at twice the rate of male. Black unemployment rose twice as fast as white. Recession hit the younger harder than the old, the unskilled harder than the skilled, the disabled harder than the fit. (p. 113)

A similar variation in the geography of unemployment, reflecting the concentration of manufacturing and mining enterprises, occurred in the USA. Thus West Virginia had twice the national average, whilst the rate in suburban and urbane New Hampshire, home for many aspiring Booker or Pulitzer Prize novelists, was only half the national average.

So by the mid-1980s a future of endless possibilities that dominated the psychedelic mind of the Sixties turned out to be a present of immense suffering and hardship, particularly for those carrying the lion's share of unemployment and unemployability –

the young, the unqualified, inner-city dwellers, amongst whom ethnic minorities were over-represented. It has been a nightmare trip from a 'permissive' to a 'dismissive' society; those strutting down the corridors of power replaced compassion for the disadvantaged with a passion for market forces and were morally indifferent to the avoidable human suffering this produced.

Income inequalities widened

Not only did the recession result in grotesque numbers of people being made unemployed and unemployable, but the income differentials between the poorest and richest, already morally repugnant, actually *widened*. According to *Social Trends* (1986, p. 91) the distribution of final income (i.e. original income less direct and indirect taxes, plus benefits in kind, like National Health Service) between 1976 and 1983 revealed more inequality; the bottom one-fifth share dropped from 7.4 per cent to 6.9 per cent whilst the top one-fifth share rose from 37.9 per cent to 39.3 per cent.

In other words, during that seven-year period, the poorest fifth of the British population experienced nearly a 7 per cent drop in their share of the country's final income. This was of course not offset by any redistribution of wealth. Between these years the most wealthy 50 per cent slightly increased their share from 95 per cent to 96 per cent. In a society described as a 'property owning democracy', this did not leave much to be shared out among the poorest half of the population! This redistribution of income, in the direction of more *inequality*, affected groups of people already on the razor-edge of material existence, including the unemployed. In 1978 30 per cent of the unemployed received 'replacement incomes' (from various state benefits) that were less than half they had received while in work. Changes in the benefit system between then and the end of 1982 resulted in one-third more unemployed persons' 'replacement incomes' being less than equivalent to half their previous income. This redistribution also adversely affected manual workers. Male manual workers in all industries and services in 1979 managed to earn £93.0 per week, compared with £113.0 earned by non-manual workers. This can be expressed as a ratio: manual workers' weekly earnings were 18 per cent less than non-manual workers'. By 1985, six years later, this