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Look to Japan?

Introduction

I started this book by asking two main questions:

1. Why is it that Japan, a modern and urbanized society, appears to a large extent to have succeeded in combating (predatory) crimes during the period 1950–85?
2. Is there anything to be learned from the Japanese case concerning the Western crime paradox (increasing affluence and increasing crime despite increasing crime policy)?

As I argued in Chapter 1, the ‘war against crime’ in Western countries has been a failure. In my view, this is because the question, ‘what is the problem?’ (Bacchi, 1999) has been wrongly framed. Too often politicians and social scientists have searched for ‘preventive measures’ as if crime could be understood as a kind of virus problem and be solved by some kind of interventive social technique. If one could only find the source of contamination it would be an easy task to abolish crime. Preventing crime and preventing contagious health problems seemed to be one and the same type of problem. In both cases it has been out of the question to define the core of the problem as a value conflict. Health problems and crime problems both seemed to call for some kind of social engineering programmes. Consequently, preventing crime did not represent a challenge to the main political priorities in Western countries. It did not represent a challenge to value priorities in these societies. Even though it was admitted that rapid social change could represent a possible challenge to social integration in society, this problem was not regarded as antagonistic. Even though important aspects of the value foundation in the
economic system seemed contrary to values propagated for the socio-cultural system, this contradiction was not regarded as irreconcilable. With insight from criminologists and social planners it was taken for granted that an individualistic, competitive, and efficiency-oriented value system in the market place could proceed at great speed without destroying the social web in society. The crime problem was supposed to be solved by means of well-informed strategies prepared by social science experts.

An alternative way of answering the question ‘what is the (crime) problem?’ would be a more ‘politicized’ approach, in which crime is regarded as the final consequence of conflicting aims and values in society. The rhetoric of ‘crime prevention’ and the promise of ‘giving social values first priority’ (Leonardsen, 1993) might alternatively be critically analysed in the light of other important political aims and values. This way of addressing the complicated matter of understanding social problems has been illustrated by George and Wilding (1979). In discussing the failure of the welfare state to achieve its fundamental aims within health services, education, social security, and housing, they focus on the paradox of continuing inequalities in modern Britain. Why is it that inequality in the provision of health care has survived, that poverty lingers, that inequalities of opportunity within the educational system remain, and that homelessness is still prevalent? While the commonest explanations are given in terms of shortages of resources or administrative weaknesses, George and Wilding address more fundamental reasons for the failure of social policies to achieve their aims:

If it is to flourish, any economic system both requires and generates a particular value system. Capitalism is no exception. It depends on and fosters the development of an ethic of self-help, freedom, individualism, competition and achievement – the classical liberal values.

Such a value system, which is required for the successful operation of a capitalist economy, is in clear opposition to the values needed to underpin a successful public welfare system. If such a system is to flourish, the stress on the virtue of self-help must be replaced by stress on the need to help others. Individualism must be replaced by a concern for the community at large; competition by co-operation; achievement must be defined in social and communal rather than in individual terms – values which are socialist rather than liberal. The economic system and the welfare system, therefore, require and depend on quite different value systems. Conflict between economic and social purposes and between liberal and socialist values is therefore