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The Culture of Control

Notions of social control

In this chapter I want to explore some of the philosophical and theoretical explanations for the move towards the greater degree of social control which appears to have proliferated during the last few decades, the background to this and to explore the potential problems that this raises. The nature of this book, and in particular the length of this chapter does not allow for the sort of in depth analysis provided, for example in Garland’s (2001) book, The Culture of Control, but my aim is to highlight some of the salient aspects of what Garland describes as a transformation of both governmental and citizens’ attitudes to crime and contemporary crime control both in Britain and the United States of America. I also want to highlight other factors which I perceive as being relevant in explaining theses changes including the demise of policing by consent and the difficulties of reconciling issues of law and morality.

Democracy and crime control

O’Byrne (2002) comments that the concept of an ‘open’ society of which humanitarianism, equality and political freedoms are the foundations was originally developed by philosopher Henri Bergson. The central tenet is that governments in such societies should be responsible and tolerant with transparent and flexible political mechanisms, in contrast to totalitarian regimes. Writing in the British Journal of Criminology in 1996, Garland initially offered some explanations for what he saw as the rise of markedly different strategies of crime control in Britain and the USA, both of which are so-called ‘open’ societies committed to individual freedoms and civil liberties. Garland asks how
are we to explain the excessive concern with penal and social controls that have come to characterise these nations in the past few decades. He has since extended this work (2001) and in so doing accepts that although the work is quite general, that there are benefits to seeing general trends and patterns. He acknowledges that his approach may involve an ‘uncomfortable degree of simplification’ but stresses its benefits in highlighting ‘structural patterns not otherwise available to inspection.’ In further self-defence Garland suggests that this is a field which needs more overarching studies. General works may evoke an ‘energetic critical response.’ Specifically his discussions of the UK and USA are intended to identify the social and cultural changes that may have shaped social relations and to suggest what trans-Atlantic similarities might exist, arising from both political imitation and policy transfer. He argues that the countries have some similarities in their historical development. These, he says, have come about in a manner captured in the concept of ‘late modernity’ in which shared patterns of ‘social, economic and cultural relations’ have resulted in an ideology of shared risks and problems regarding crime control. More specifically Garland (2001) argues that current crime control arrangements have been shaped by two underlying social forces which he describes as the ‘distinctive social organisation of late modernity’ and ‘the free market and socially conservative politics’ which he suggests began to ‘dominate the USA and UK in the 1980s’.

Garland’s book cites a series of studies which show how different agencies (the police, prosecution agencies, courts, prisons government and elected officials) were presented with new problems attributable to these social changes. Garland believes these problems mainly stemmed from high crime and disorder rates, and the realisation that the ability of criminal justice to provide security and control crime was limited. His central chapters look at the evidence for governmental understanding of these problems and focuses on how strategies were devised to deal with this (either by adaptation or evasion).

Garland believes his analysis suggests that ‘the structures of criminal justice have changed in important ways in recent decades’ and the most important changes have been linked with prevailing cultural assumptions in the response to crime. He asserts that a new ‘crime control culture’ has emerged that involves what he terms new ideas of ‘penal-welfarism, a new criminology of control, and an economic style of decision making.’ He also indicates how this new ‘culture of control’ fits in with social and economic policies shared by and heavily influential in both the UK and USA. He does this by illustrating how the historical development of crime