

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



## Book Reviews

**Ross Coomber, Joseph Donnermeyer, Karen McElrath and John Scott (2014) *Key Concepts in Crime and Society*. London: Sage.**

**Gary R Potter**

Lancaster University, United Kingdom

This addition to the Sage: Key Concepts series will be invaluable to anyone with a serious interest in academic criminology, whether student, teacher, researcher or practitioner. Somewhere between textbook and encyclopaedia, *Key Concepts in Crime and Society* will be particularly useful as both an introduction to and a refresher for a range of topics central to the criminological endeavour. Essentially a primer, but one that goes into more depth than, say, the *Sage Dictionary of Criminology* (McLaughlin and Muncie 2012) and that engages more critically with its subject matter than the average introductory textbook, the primary audience is likely to be undergraduate students: I will definitely be recommending it to my own. It is certainly a great teaching tool, especially useful for those who find themselves teaching outside their preferred specialist areas or covering those topics they haven't really looked at since their own student days, or that weren't even part of the canon back then. But it will also be useful for researchers and practitioners, again as an introduction to new areas of interest or to refresh and update knowledge of older, part-forgotten ones. For reasons outlined below, it is not a substitute for a more traditional textbook, nor for a comprehensive dictionary or encyclopaedia, but is definitely complementary to both.

The book consists of 40 chapters, each dedicated to a single concept and most of which are undoubtedly 'key' to criminology by any definition. Other complementary chapters are on topics which are more peripheral to an orthodox conceptualisation of crime, criminals and criminal justice, and represent the very latest developments in the subject (discussed further shortly). Each chapter starts with a clear and concise – although not always uncontested – definition (can 'crime' really be reduced to the definition 'deviance which violates a law'?). The reader is then presented with a short essay (three to five pages in length) that covers the main ideas, key thinkers, historical development and/or current challenges (in terms of both academic understanding and policy implications) appropriate to that topic. Finally, each entry is followed by a short list of references (usually a dozen or fewer) to point the reader to key materials should they wish to explore the topic in more depth. A particular strength is how the authors manage to cover the basics – the core elements of each topic – whilst also engaging critically and introducing cutting-edge research and key debates within each area. It is this critical edge that really sets the book as different from (and complementary to) more traditional textbooks. Well, that and its size; the book is significantly more portable and eminently more easy to navigate

than most textbooks. For example, it is a fraction of the size (and weight) of Tim Newburn's (2012) *Criminology* or the *Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (Maguire, Morgan and Reiner 2012), to name two of the leading UK textbooks. This tome is cheaper as well, which increases the chances of students actually buying a copy.

The 40 chapters are across three sections. Section one, 'Understanding Crime and Criminality,' is the largest and most comprehensive of the three. It outlines the building blocks of academic criminology: definitions of crime and deviance; introductions to theoretical and epistemological positions; discussions of crime statistics and methods in criminology; an overview of the criminal justice system. It also includes chapters that provide introductory analyses of some of the key dimensions of the sociology of crime and criminality (gender, race, age, class) and related subjects such as risk, victimology and fear of crime.

Section two explores 'Types of Crime and Criminality', and it is here that the book really demonstrates its cutting-edge credentials. Alongside such 'obvious' categories as violence, gangs and drug-related crime sit more contemporary – and global – concerns including human trafficking, environmental crime, cyber-crime and terrorism, and even the particularly niche area that is rural crime (the selection reflecting, at least in part, the interests of the authors as much as the overall landscape of twenty-first century criminology). Such a selection is commendable but it does come at the expense of some more established and more commonly recognised crimes. There is nothing on theft, burglary, vandalism or car crime, for example, despite these categories making up the bulk of numbers in crime statistics and accounting for much of the focus and workloads of most criminal justice systems (CJS).

The final section, the smallest, focuses on 'Responses to Crime'. There is less breadth here than in the other sections; less exploration beyond the mainstream and notable absences even within 'core' areas of the way societies deal with crime. Yes, there are chapters on policing, punishment and prisons, and on non-CJS responses to crime including crime in the media and moral panics. But the range of CJS outcomes other than incarceration, including restorative justice alternatives to traditional punishments, are crammed into one chapter (and one of the shortest in the book at that), which barely does justice (forgive the pun) to this vast area of both scholarship and practice. Of course, it is somewhat unfair to criticise a book for its omissions while offering praise for its exciting and cutting-edge inclusions and compactness, but one does wonder whether criminal justice and other responses to crime should be deserving of more space. The book could be a little longer without undermining the advantages of portability and affordability, or it might be better to deal with criminal justice in a separate book. After all, criminology and criminal justice are often addressed as separate topics – and separate university courses – particularly in the US.

I do have one further criticism. While the authors bring a wealth of experience in teaching and research from across the Anglophone criminological world, and the book provides a thorough grasp of the North American, UK and Australasian traditions, the flip-side of this is arguably some neglect of non-Anglophone traditions, and particularly those from beyond the more developed countries of the 'global north'. Of course, this may be justified in the sense that such a book is supposed to reflect the state of play in its academic field, and criminology as a whole can be criticised for neglecting large parts of the world. But in a globalised (post-)modern world, and particularly with topics such as environmental crime and terrorism being incorporated in the text, more attention should be paid to Africa, Asian and South American contexts and contributions.

All things considered, however, the authors should be congratulated for producing a book that, in the main, strikes the right balance between breadth and depth, orthodox and critical, mainstream and cutting edge. I have two copies (one in my office on campus, and one that

ostensibly lives in my study at home but spends much of its time travelling with me), and both of them are already well-thumbed, such is a reflection of their value.

*Correspondence:* Dr Gary R Potter, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, Law School, Lancaster University, Bailrigg, Lancaster LA14YW, United Kingdom. Email: g.potter2@lancaster.ac.uk

### **References**

Maguire M, Morgan R and Reiner R (2012) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (5th edn). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

McLaughlin E and Muncie J (2012) *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology* (3rd edn). London: Sage.

Newburn T (2012) *Criminology* (2nd edn). Cullompton, United Kingdom: Willan.