ENVIROMENTAL CRIME AND JUSTICE

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BOOK REVIEWS

Green Cultural Criminology: Constructions of Environmental Harm, Consumerism, and Resistance to Ecocide

Routledge International Handbook of Green Criminology

Green Cultural Criminology, a very short book at around 140 pages (excluding bibliography), is an interesting attempt to demonstrate how cultural criminology might be employed to expand and enrich analyses of environmental harms, corporate and individual responsibilities and culpability. At first sight, the format of the book is unappealing, cluttered as it is with many and lengthy quotes and endnotes, but this is, ultimately, the book’s strength in that a broad range of literature, old and new, is used, concisely and effectively, to illustrate the relevance of adopting a multi-perspectival, or interdisciplinary, approach to the subject. Essentially, the authors are interested in the impact of representations of the ‘natural’ (always a slippery term for the social sciences) on the environmental consciousness of humans.

A key point of the book is that criminology should attempt to form new and better working relationships with media, to “participate in the news-making process - to become part of the social construction of public opinion about environmental crime and harm (and about human-nature relationships, more generally)” (p.32). This is perhaps easier to achieve now that, contrary to the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas’s claim that the public sphere has been re-feudalised (privatised), public space has been enlarged due to the emergence of digital communities, for example, social networks, blogs, and citizen journalism (user-led journalism). The purpose of this is to challenge and replace existing media and political discourses that emphasise the frequency and harm of street-crime over environmental crime, and thus re-constitute the meaning(s) of crime and expand the remit of criminology. While cultural criminologists have a reputation for “intellectual lawlessness” (p.118) and for focusing on micro-analyses, that is to say, of subcultures and quotidian experience, green criminologists tend to aim higher to offer critiques of corporate and state crime. What the authors propose is that these seemingly incompatible perspectives are, in fact, similar in their interdisciplinarity and that criminology in general is, or should be, “porous” enough to accommodate new collaborations (p.120).

The International Handbook of Green Criminology, unlike many of the commodities discussed therein, does what it says on the tin: it presents the reader with a thoroughgoing exploration of green criminology in all its shades. Theories, methodologies, and empirical studies from around the world are discussed in this collection of twenty-six essays. The essays on theory enlighten by outlining a history of green criminology, from its origins in studies of crimes of the powerful to its present concerns with ecocide, that is “the contamination and destruction of the natural environment” (p.58).

A clichéd view of environmentalists is that of the hippie-type who dreams of an Edenic past in which humans thrived happily in harmony with nature and enjoyed the wealth of its harvests. While Heckenberg and White (pp. 85-103) discuss an, at times, interesting and varied range of methods and methodologies that could be useful to green criminologists, their essay concludes with the advice that we should attend to “elder
knowledge and expertise” so that we might learn about the “environmental landscapes of the past … the beliefs, values … and practices of former generations” (p.102). Attention to historical narratives is no bad thing, but such assertions epitomise the anti-humanist thread that runs through much environmentalist thought, that is, a self-loathing rejection of the modern that is a consequence of a perceived fall from grace with nature.

However, sometimes you just can’t keep a good theory down, and Robert Agnew’s essay (pp.58-72) on how a modified strain theory helps to explain how strain, brought about by, among other things, excessive consumption and the contemporary habit of comparing oneself to those with wealthier and more privileged lifestyles, is a consequence of conformist practice and ideology, which is to say that ordinary, routine harms (such as central heating; meat-eating) committed by individuals unwittingly serve the interests of dominant social forces. This is hardly earth-shaking news, but the virtue of Agnew’s essay is that he takes established theories (social learning; rational choice) and applies them successfully to explain how and why non-criminal, routine, environmental harms have become commonplace, more so than the street crimes that media and politicians tend to focus upon. So, perhaps listening to old stories isn’t such a bad thing after all.

Marx wrote that it is the task of philosophy to change the world, not merely to interpret it. There are a great many ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ in this book, and it is this proposed shift from the descriptive (what is) to the prescriptive/normative (what should be) that is unsettling, but it is (or ought to be) good to be disturbed by books. Many of the uncomfortable ‘facts’ described in this book such as the systematic destruction of natural resources, the commodification of water, the abuse of non-human species, incite the desire to know more about the myriad harms that, knowingly or unknowingly, are wrought by individuals and organizations, driven by global capitalism’s short-term pursuit of economic wealth. In the concluding chapter, the editors note that humans have the capacity for foresight and thus ought to be able to plan ahead, but in the current stage of modernity infantilisation has “liberated or absolved adults from prospective thinking” (p.411). It is this emphasis on the prospective, rather than the more traditional, retrospective orientation of criminology, that excites the reader as it provides a set of tools (some old, some new) with which to make “connections between individual and group behaviour, socio-economic structures, political organization(s), and environmental harm” (p.411).

Space does not permit further discussion of this worthy book, but it covers such a wide range of theories and methods (old and modified), and interesting research topics, air pollution, food crime, litter, conflict minerals, wildlife trafficking, and even crime films, that it will doubtless prove an invaluable resource for anyone teaching in this area, or wanting to know more about new developments in criminology and environmental matters. Both books recommend an interdisciplinary approach that examines green crime from different, and sometimes unusual perspectives. However, the nature of academic life is such that it encourages a silo mentality, a desire to protect one’s own corner. These books show that this in most definitely not the way forward.