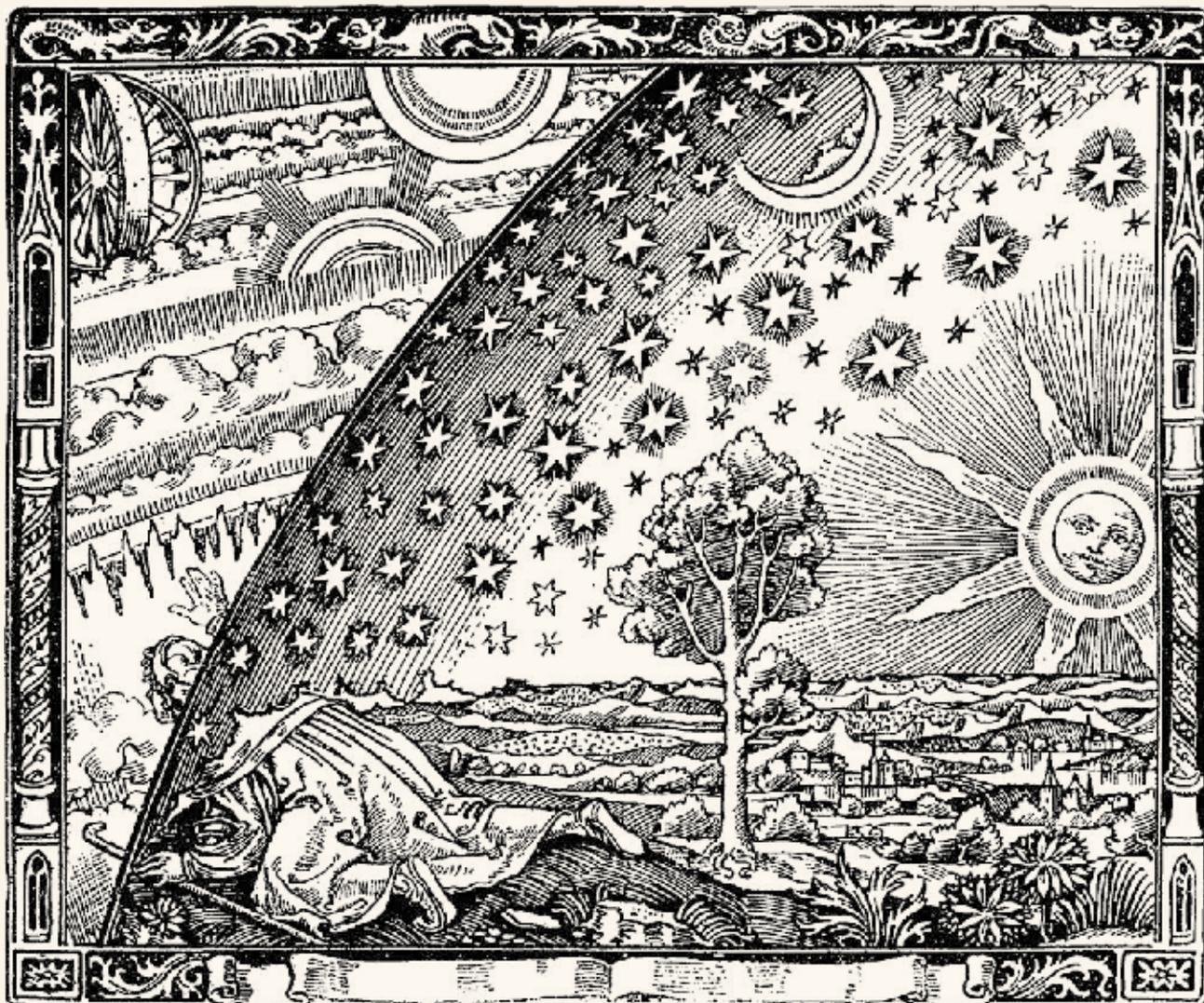


# scottish justice ' matters

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## REIMAGINING PUNISHMENT AND JUSTICE

# BOOK REVIEW

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## Offending and Desistance. The importance of social relations.

Beth Weaver (2016) Routledge. ISBN: 9781138799721

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Reviewed by **David Orr**

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*Offending and Desistance*, Beth Weaver's fascinating, exhaustively researched and (at times almost impenetrably) dense contribution to the burgeoning desistance literature is an absorbing read. Arguably there are two ways of approaching it. For those of a less academic bent, the material which is likely to be most accessible and engaging can be found in Chapters 4 to 10 where the "Story of The Del" is brought to life through the lived experiences of the book's six pivotal figures: Seth, Harry, Jed, Jay, Evan and Andy. All of these men were either born or grew up in and around a small seaside town, "Coaston", in West Central Scotland in the sixties.

It was an era defined by "a dominant 'macho' patriarchal culture" in which their families and their lives were scarred by "a collective sense of hopelessness emerging from burgeoning inequalities, increasing poverty and diminishing opportunities".

Their parents struggled – some were violent and abusive, some were emotionally detached, some sought to numb the pain with alcohol. As they moved into adolescence the six (along with others whose stories are not elaborated in detail) became a naturally forming group known as "The Del". As the young boys developed into young men patterns of persistent and at times serious co-offending behaviour duly emerged with attendant negative consequences. Weaver maps and analyses the six individuals' pathways into co-offending and their subsequent efforts over many years (with varying degrees of success) to (co-)desist.

For those with a passion for critical realism and relational sociology (and specifically the works of Margaret Archer and Pierpaolo Donati whose ideas are developed to provide Weaver's conceptual framework for theorising desistance) there is another layer to this book entirely. It is one that requires a significant degree of intellectual labour to grasp and a 600 word book review cannot do these meaty ideas justice. Fergus McNeill's observation on the sleeve-notes about the need "to read and re-read" the material is well made.

Essentially Weaver wades in to the structure-agency debate. She argues that "by relegating social relations to the domain of structures and by neglecting to analyse the dynamics or properties of social relations," studies which do so, "lose sight of individuals-in-relation . . . the reflexive individual in his or her relationally and emotionally textured world". For those individuals who find it easier to absorb complex concepts through images as well as words (unfortunately I am not one of them), a diagram outlining the investigate framework adopted by Weaver is repeated at numerous intervals

throughout the book. Chapter 11 which deals with *The dynamics of desistance* is where the various theoretical strands threaded throughout the stories of the individual members of The Del in the preceding chapters are synthesised.

Based on a crude reading of the text, in answer to the question "What makes people stop offending and stay stopped?" one could legitimately respond, "Employment, intimate relations, God, football and friends". Alas, it is a little more complicated than that. As Weaver repeats time and again through the text, the unique contribution of this book in terms of its contribution to desistance theory is that it takes "social relations as the central unit of analysis". Fundamentally, what the work demonstrates is that:

"Identities are . . . tried, tested, performed and negotiated in different relational spheres which are more or less constraining or enabling to the extent that these (changing) identities (whether as a worker, father, provider, husband or a man) are realised and recognised by those participating in the relation".

All we need now is for someone to do a study of a female co-offending group and to take note of the suggestion that there may be room for greater use of restorative approaches when responding to offending behaviour by individuals.

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See also: Weaver, B (2013) *The Importance of Social Relations in Personal Change* *Scottish Justice Matters* 1:2, 12

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