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Still Policing the Crisis?

JOHN CLARKE, The Open University, UK

Writing this has been a troubling experience. Returning to a text 30 years on in this way combines intellectual, political and personal reflections in an unsettling way. These range from a powerful attachment to processes of collective or collaborative intellectual work that *Policing the Crisis* (*PTC*; Hall et al., 1978) embodied and enhanced to a rather depressed sense of how many things the book got right about the trajectory of the British social formation in the mid 1970s (other futures might have been preferable). And above all, there is a sense of what the book stands for in the emergence of cultural studies as an institutionalized academic field. As a way of trying to digest these different responses, I have tried to address three sorts of questions: why *PTC* mattered, where it belongs and why it continues to have echoes in the present.

CONTEXTS AND CONJUNCTURES: DISCERNING THE CRISIS

For me, the great pleasure of *PTC* is not its depressing accuracy about the moment being analysed, but the means by which that analysis was constructed and created. The book emerged out of a set of overlapping commitments – to inter-disciplinarity, to what Larry Grossberg (2006) has called the ‘radical contextualism’ of cultural studies as a practice, and to the importance of ‘conjunctural analysis’ as a focus and form of intellectual work. *PTC* works around the edges of a number of academic disciplines and fields – from the sociology of deviance, through media studies, political sociology, to sub-cultural or youth studies with many more stopping points on the way (not least a massive contribution from social and cultural history). But none of these mark the field of the book – it is not a contribution to criminology or media studies. Nor do any of them represent the ‘master discipline’ that shapes the book – it owes no such debts or obligations. On the contrary, it tried (perhaps too successfully?) to escape the feudal structuring of disciplines and fields that organized most of the space of the British academy in the 1970s. Such border crossings – what some have dignified as ‘trans-disciplinary’ intellectual work – were vital to the development of *PTC* and its arguments, but also gave rise to problems of belonging and ownership.

PTC – and cultural studies more generally – could not have existed without those encounters; in part because existing disciplines claimed to know things about the subjects we were engaged by, and in part because the uneven radicalization of parts of the social sciences meant that conversations and dialogues were part of this process of development. *PTC* is unimaginable without the emergence of a radical/critical sociology of deviance, or the debates about how media studies should be developed. Those borrowings and more or less friendly conversations were tied into conceptions of what it meant to do cultural studies, and to do a cultural studies analysis of the triggering event – the sentencing of three young men to long custodial sentences for a ‘mugging’. It was this event that provoked our engagement with the multiple overlapping and intersecting contexts that constituted its possibility – its conditions of existence, to borrow an Althusserian phrase of the time.

For me, this remains one of the critical features of *PTC* and has something to do with its lasting value. One way of reading the book is to trace the many contexts it lays out as productive elements in the way mugging condensed elements of the crisis in the British social formation. Some of those contexts were local – the specificities of Handsworth and Birmingham as sites of racial formation. Some were local and national media, actively assembling a British social imaginary dislocated precisely around the axis of race. Some were the apparatuses of the state – the police and the judiciary, in particular – constructing the maintenance of law and order as the final frontier of civilization, beyond which lay barbarism. Above all, these were articulated to the crisis of consent – the exhaustion of a project to modernize Britain in its post-war, post-imperial phase. I say, ‘above all’ but that should not be taken as a statement about this as a more fundamental context or condition: it could not exist without the others. It was produced precisely in its articulation – the connection and condensation of the multiple contexts which also involved early intimations of the transnational character of the national crisis and its construction as a crisis of authority. America – the USA, more precisely – featured (as it increasingly came to do) as a model and warning; what Jamie Peck (2001) calls the leading/bleeding edge of one version of modernity. But this crisis was also a crisis of a post-imperial Britain, already entangled in the toils of what Paul Gilroy (2005) has termed ‘postcolonial melancholia’.

This contextual model of analysis stands as an alternative to two other characteristic ways of doing social science and/or cultural studies. One is the study ‘in depth’ – where one deepens and enriches the understanding of a specific object of inquiry. *PTC*’s con-textualism is different from this for important reasons. It is not a study ‘in depth’ that more focused delving could enrich, because its object has only a temporary and superficial unity – the sentencing of Paul, Jimmy and Musty to their unprecedented custodial detention was important because it was the effect, the point of condensation of many contexts. The actors – whether the three boys, their victim, the local police, the judge, the journalists – became the bearers of the sign ‘mugging’ and all the symbolic weight that singular word was being asked to carry.

At the same time, *PTC* was not a singular narrative recounting a transition from a past to a present, even though it is sometimes read and represented as such. It is not the story of the movement from consent to coercion as a fundamental shift in British

society (for which the investigation of 'mugging' is merely a pretext). Instead, it is an attempt at 'conjunctural analysis', trying to identify the multiple forces, tendencies, pressures in play in a historical moment and to identify how the balance of forces is being worked on, shaped, directed in the search for a 'solution' and a 'way forward'. This idea of conjunctural analysis has been a powerful one in cultural studies (and elsewhere) because it combines two critical things: first, the concern that a sign ('mugging') condenses and articulates many meanings and puts them to work in a specific setting; and second, that conjunctures are always in process. As a result, their character and direction cannot be known in advance or specified theoretically: conjunctural analysis requires analytic work.

In *Marxism and Literature*, published the year before *PTC*, Raymond Williams (1977) made an important distinction between 'epochal analysis' and 'authentic historical analysis':

In what I have called epochal analysis, a cultural process is seized as a cultural system, with determinate dominant features: feudal culture or bourgeois culture or a transition from one to the other. This emphasis on dominant and definitive lineaments is important and often, in practice, effective. But it then happens that its methodology is preserved for the very different function of historical analysis, in which a sense of movement within what is ordinarily abstracted as a system is crucially necessary, especially if it is connected with the future as well as the past. In authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system. (p. 121)

Much contemporary writing opts for the epochal approach – announcing either the end of something or the rise of its opposite. The dominant epochal mode of address is 'from/to', whether the new is reflexive modernity, neo-liberalism, globalization or the post-emotional society. *PTC* embodied the alternative – an attempt at Williams' 'authentic historical analysis' based on a commitment to trace the multiple and contradictory elements at stake in the crisis and in its representation as a crisis of social and political authority. The tracing of this double movement – the crisis of consent and the representation of that crisis – stands at the heart of the book; but it is not a linear account of an unfolding of a crisis whose elements and resolution could be known in advance. Instead, *PTC* traces the ideological, discursive, signifying work that went into representing the crisis as a state of exception that required an exceptional state – a law and order state capable of taking the tough measures needed to restore authority and discipline; in short, to restore British society to its proper self. But it also matters that *PTC* traces the place of race in that system of representation – race provided the figures through which British society and its disorders were mapped, grasped and displayed. Race (racialized thinking and categories, that is to say) produced 'mugging' as the exemplary crime; race organized the distinction between normal British society (and its organic social order) and its 'others' (disorderly and dangerous). The crisis could not

have been represented as a crisis of authority without this racializing of Britain and its imagined social order. In the final section of this contribution, I want to return to these themes about the place of authority and of race in representing the crisis, given that they are some of the continuing echoes of that conjuncture. But first, I want to reflect on the peculiar dislocation of *PTC* as an academic text.

AFFILIATIONS AND ATTACHMENTS: *PTC* AS A MOBILE TEXT

PTC's longevity is remarkable (not least to its authors, who thought it was an intervention in a very specific moment). It is, in part, remarkable because of the sense that the book does not really belong anywhere in the contemporary academic field. It has certainly spread across that field – being cited (not always positively, of course) in media studies; criminology; youth studies; politics; studies of race, racism and racialization; in examinations of moral panics; theories of crisis; the sociologies of policing, teaching, and masculinity; state theory and even eco-tourism. It has been taken as a model of how to do social research and as an exemplar, or even cause, of misguided deviations. Despite or perhaps because of this, it does not seem to belong anywhere in particular. In one sense, this might be an effect of its oddly inter- or trans-disciplinary approach: it is not a media studies text or a criminology book; it is not about policing, nor is it a theory of the state. It cannot sit comfortably in such locations because it does not contribute to any disciplinary sense of mission or development. On the contrary, it implies that knowledge cannot be adequately generated or contained in such a fragmented form – it invites border crossing as a necessary condition of doing cultural analysis.

So much is predictable, but the book's marginal place in the development of cultural studies is perhaps more surprising. Institutionalizing accounts of cultural studies as a subject, quasi-discipline or field have tended to leave it to one side – an aberration from a line of (more or less) coherent development. There are several plausible reasons for this displacement. *PTC* does not fit within the various sub-fields: not sub-cultural or youth studies, not media studies, not literary or visual studies. Nor does it lie comfortably in the categorizations of cultural studies by method or style of analysis, being neither 'textual' nor 'ethnographic'. At the same time, its scale (and the basis of extensive collaborative work that it required) is intimidating or potentially off-putting. Who can, or wants to, work like that? In a climate where academic work has become more commodified, intensified and managerialized, the practices of sustained collaboration on an idiosyncratic project look increasingly unlikely. The creation of *PTC* also owed something to the conjuncture – the shifting intellectual conditions of the mid-1970s, processes of intellectual radicalization working their way through from the 1960s and the specific political, ethical, intellectual commitments of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (and the protection of the organizational space to put them into practice).

Reading the sociological, political science and social policy texts that dominate my current work, it is clear that hardly anyone imagines such a model of working,

or such an analytic method. The dominant practices reflect an inclination to reduce collaboration to collecting comparative case studies, or to produce heroic epochal statements (announcing variously the end of welfare, politics, the state, and the nation or even the death of the social). At the same time, disciplinary and subject borders have been reinforced – in part through the apparatuses of university regulation developed since the 1980s. As a result of all these (and more) changes, I have a sense of *PTC* leading a strange existence in the spaces at the edge of disciplinary knowledge – surviving in the interstitial spaces, which also turn out to be the places where the most interesting conversations go on.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

Part of *PTC*'s continuing value, it seems to me, derives from the sense that the crisis has never quite been resolved. There are several banal ways to treat that connection. It is easy to note the ways in which the 'law and order society' whose emergence is traced in *PTC* has provided a sort of template for political strategies in the intervening 30 years. Thatcherism appeared to be the natural inheritor of law and order politics, not least in the intensified suturing of the police into political rule. New Labour, however, might be seen as the true believers – with the criminalization of a greater range of social behaviour than ever before; the 'discovery' of anti-social behaviour; the infiltration of CCTV into the urban fabric, and more recently, the development of the security state. Such trajectories feed into accounts of the 'culture of control' (Garland, 2001) or 'governing through crime' (Simon, 2007; see also Stenson and Sullivan, 2001).

Alternatively, one might trace the ways in which the crisis has been recurrently mapped through the articulations of race and nation. The processes of criminalization run in tandem with the continuing turbulence of ideas of the nation – the discovery and abandonment of a grudging 'multi-culturalism'; the shift from community relations to community cohesion; the segues between race, ethnicity, culture and faith; the shifting figure of the enemy within (from disaffected black youth to radicalized Muslim youth); and the continuing problematization of 'immigration' as an index of national crisis. In the last decade, these figures co-habit an uncomfortable urban landscape with the re-discovered (or reinvented) white working class (see, for example, Dench et al., 2006). Such tropes have whirled around the question of what it means to be British/English (and that distinction became increasingly unstable too) and how such Britishness/Englishness is to be both identified and inculcated (Home Office, 2007). One of the former Home Secretaries argued in characteristic New Labour tones that:

Britishness is defined not on ethnic or exclusive grounds – but through our shared values, our history of tolerance, of openness and internationalism, our commitment to democracy and liberty, to civic duty and the public space. These values, embodied in our great institutions – such as the NHS, the BBC, The Open University – tell a national story that is open to all citizens. (Blunkett, 2005: 4)

There are, of course, different readings of that history – and of the pacification of struggles for tolerance, openness and internationalism in the face of those intolerant, closed

and nationalist tendencies in British/English political culture that continue to both fuel the crisis of the nation and offer themselves as the only sensible solution to it.

In these ways, the concerns and the analysis in *PTC* continue to speak to the present. Although I have no intention here of trying to bring the book 'up to date', nor engage with the many and diverse criticisms of and challenges to it, it may be worth just thinking about how that 'crisis' now looks over 30 years on. From this vantage point, the crisis looks deeper, more durable and more complex than we allowed. We have seen several attempts at 'modernizing' Britain since the end of the 1970s, each of which has certainly wrought substantial changes on the economic, social and cultural landscapes, but none of which has succeeded in establishing a new settlement or stabilized solution to the antagonisms and contradictions of the contemporary situation. Some of those modernizing strategies have gone a long way in changing balances of power, in reorganizing parts of the state, and even responding to some demands for equality, openness and tolerance. But they appear locked within the 'exhaustion of consent' – struggling to deal with grudging, sceptical, demanding and divided publics while elaborating the recomposition of power, wealth and inequality. They also appear locked into the problematic of the 'law and order' solution to those problems – in the form and action of state power (as well as its privatized supplements), in the response to deviance and dissidence, and in the voicing of populist politics.

But what strikes me most in 2007 is how much the spatial character of the crisis has changed – or at least how many of its dimensions and dynamics work both on and across a larger scale than the uncomfortable assemblage of England/Britain/the United Kingdom. Some of this concerns the ways in which at least elements of the crisis are paralleled or echoed in other places. This is perhaps most obvious in terms of the crisis of the nation – where in Europe has not been undergoing its version of the crisis? And where in Europe has not figured that crisis precisely through the terms of race/ethnicity? But the question of scale is also about the greater visibility of the multiple flows and trajectories that connect these 'national' crises: whether it be the demonized flows of people deemed to threaten national social solidarity (Alesina and Glaeser, 2004); or the flows of political strategies, policies and devices that travel global circuits, offering themselves as solutions to the problems of economic development, social disorder and political disaffection; from empowerment to policing policies and practices (Gill, 2004; Elyachar, 2005; Ong, 2005; Sharma, forthcoming). This sense of the enlarged crisis – across both time and space – points to structural problems in the formations of what Larry Grossberg (2006) has called Euro modernity. But the spread across time and space makes conjunctural analysis more, not less, important since this is precisely the grand scale that invites 'epochal analysis'. This is where the grand narratives return to offer themselves – the rollout of corporate globalization; the surrender to the culture of control; the neo-liberalization of everything (Clarke, forthcoming). The problem needs to be restated: how to recognize the multiplicity of currents that make up a conjuncture; how to treat their simultaneity and interconnectedness without collapsing their specificity as forces shaping the present and as possible routes to the future. In the end, it is that – the mode of analysis – that represents the value of *Policing the Crisis*.

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JOHN CLARKE, Professor of Social Policy, Department of Social Policy, The Open University, UK. Email: john.clarke@open.ac.uk

