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BOOK REVIEW

Invisible Crimes and Social Harms. By Pamela Davies, Peter Francis and Tanya Wyatt (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 280pp. £65.00 hb)

Cogently argued and expertly researched, presented and written Invisible Crimes and Social Harms is a timely and trenchant reminder that a plethora of deleterious yet ‘relatively invisible’ illegalities and harms continue to persist. Nevertheless they exist beyond the investigatory scope of much criminological scholarship. Accordingly, the book’s contribution towards illuminating the contours of invisibility by facilitating the advancement of new and progressive research capable of challenging popular conceptualizations of crime and harm is indeed a salient one. Drawing, to various degrees, upon the ‘seven features of invisibility’ first identified by Jupp et al. (1999) and organized around the conceptualized categories of the body, the home, the street, the suite, the environment, the virtual and the state—and their concomitant levels and sources of power—the book presents 13 enticing chapters.

Chapter One by the editors helpfully explains in more detail the seven features of invisibility and presents pertinent contemporary examples that help the reader link theory to practice and vividly sets the scene for what is to follow. In Chapter Two, Pamela Davies examines how sexual violence, despite its long history and well-known scandals, has traditionally been treated as a ‘natural’ thing, producing hidden harms and invisible victims. Women, especially in the context of sexual violence, have conventionally been neglected by criminological investigations and ‘gender’ often comes last as an academic and policy concern. Within this milieu, Davies presents a critical journey of the silencing of gendered victims in the Jimmy Savile case, revealing the ‘silencing agents’ that actively stalled every attempt victims made to expose the crimes committed against them. By unravelling these layers of silence, the chapter crystallizes the importance of seeing through entrenched attitudes of agents in the system, amongst which are the police, judges, the media and even the public.

Illustrating the complexity in the political application of the term ‘terrorism’ Hayley Watson and Tanya Wyatt in Chapter Three shed light on what has perhaps become a ‘catchall’ concept (Redissi and Lane 2007). Importantly, they explore the role the media plays in selectively, and often inaccurately, applying the terrorist label and how this serves to highlight the visibility of certain threats whilst aiding in maintaining the invisibility of others and the far reaching implications of this mislabelling. Addressing the important yet socio-politically inert issue of climate change Avi Brisman utilizes his space in Chapter Four to cogently explain how what he refers to as ‘climate change micropsia’ and ‘climate change myopia’ (p. 65) impairs our visual acuity of climate change. The fundamental upshot is a continuing difficulty in stimulating an animated public concern which ultimately perpetuates both public and political inaction. Chapter Five, by Alexandra Hall, re-engages with gender in the context of invisible honour crimes affecting the life of women in British–Pakistani diasporic communities. Hall conducts a thorough investigation on the interplay between such communities...
and wider social structures which allows honour crimes to be underreported, poorly understood and under-estimated. Essentially, the chapter focuses on how immigration and border control provisions increase the vulnerability of women within these communities and seeks to reveal the ‘silence’ of the communities as well as the silencing practices of the wider social structures. Hall argues that in the future a more inclusive criminal justice system(s) would make honour crimes more visible. Along the same lines of interpreting harm as acts ‘not often coming to the attention of the criminal justice system’ (p. 102), Chapter Six offers a comparative study of elder abuse between Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Similar to Chapter Five, Matthew Hall revisits the dichotomy between the polis or public realm and the oikos or private sphere of the home and family to investigate divisions and inequalities based on age. Consistent with the wider argument of this book, two principal features contribute to the invisibility of elder abuse: ‘positivistic surveying methods’ and the limited remit of justice.

The theoretical lens returns to invisible crimes in Chapter Seven. Mary Laing intriguingly attempts to explore illegalized sex work as an ‘invisible crime’, focusing on some criminalized aspects of commercial exchange in England and Wales. For Laing, solicitation is not simply a criminalized act but a performative act; a set of embodied tactics or ‘sexual choreographies’. The crux of the argument is that ‘performing the invisible crime of solicitation through choreographies of walking, looking and dressing allows men selling sex on the streets to be obviously visible to some, while remaining ambiguous and “in place” to others’ (p.129). Bringing to the fore that which criminology has largely neglected, Reece Walters investigates in Chapter Eight the invisible violence of air pollution and the geo-social extent of its resultant ‘social murder’ (Chernomas and Hudson 2007). Interestingly, Walters argues that this form of systemic violence has become normalized and rendered increasingly invisible in advanced, and rapidly developing, capitalist industrial nations as it is often considered to be ‘an “essential” by-product of contemporary “progress” and technological development’ (p. 146). As such, rather than being viewed as indictable acts of violence air pollution and other environmental offences are often dealt with via ‘administrative mechanisms’. Congruently, in Chapter Nine Tanya Wyatt focuses on biopiracy and the invisible nature and power dynamics of the pillaging and theft of natural resources by corporations. Through a persuasive exploration of two British corporations, Wyatt fleshes out the harms and exploitation of this hidden practice. Rooted in the Western hegemonic intellectual property system, Wyatt acknowledges the need for more transparent knowledge production strategies and argues for active resistance against the harms inflicted upon indigenous communities.

Representing perhaps one of the most innovatively compelling chapters of the book, Chapter Ten by Wayne Morrison aptly reminds us that whilst the act of war is fairly visible its true architects often remain in the shadows shielded from public and legal scrutiny with only some of its agents subject to the judiciary’s condemnatory gaze. Written in a refreshingly reflexive style Morrison also helps to explain why the atrocities of war on distant shores now stimulate so little public reaction by advancing the position that the relative invisibility of such events has been further strengthened by our increasingly prioritized defence of the right to remain blissfully ignorant to the suffering of others. Equally stimulating, Chapter 11 presents a lucid account of the often hidden ‘health and safety’ crimes in the United Kingdom. Through a meticulous analysis, Steve Tombs
suggests that deregulation has served to remove workplace harms from the register of crime. Though seemingly counterpoised the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007 promised further criminalization initiatives and a ‘tough on corporate crime’ attitude. However, Tombs sees through the clash between deregulation and criminalization initiatives and upholds that this Act sits in tension with the general decriminalization trends, attested by the grave failure to prosecute. Accordingly, health and safety crimes persist largely unabated as they ‘legislatively’ disappear from view. Chapter 12 by Michael Levi delineates the difficulties in successfully investigating and prosecuting fraud offences. He lucidly explains that whilst everyday corruption and frauds are highly visible, higher level misconduct is much less so. However, it is noted that even detected frauds are extremely expensive to prosecute which inevitably limits inspection and the proactive development of intelligence.

Drawing to a close what is undoubtedly a highly informative and thought-provoking read, the editors return in Chapter 13 to consolidate the book’s dominant organizing themes. Representing a salient thematic running through the various chapters of the book, we are once again reminded of the vital position the seven features of invisibility retain amongst the critical criminologists’ toolkit. Indeed this set of carefully constructed analytical conceptualizations maintains a remarkable utility for assessing the relative invisibility of hitherto neglected areas of study, which in many ways should perhaps be repositioned closer to the forefront of the discipline’s focus. If there is to be one area of general criticism, for reasons of balance rather than substance, it would be that the book perhaps focuses too much upon state crimes and systemically induced social harms without due consideration for the second layer of hidden victimage often perpetrated and experienced by the very victims of these state crimes and systemic harms. Moreover, and perhaps somewhat contradictorily, individual chapters appear to position the state and its repressive institutions as both the perpetrators and impartial adjudicators of crime and harm. Nevertheless, the editors and their collaborators have undoubtedly contributed significantly to the continuing task of illuminating hidden and neglected forms of crime, harm and victimization which deserve to be taken more seriously by mainstream criminology. Quite simply, this book is a remarkable triumph and deserves to be widely read not only amongst criminologists but by anyone interested in crime, harm, criminal and social justice.

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References