CRIME, ORDER AND THE TWO FACES OF CONSERVATISM: AN ENCOUNTER WITH CRIMINOLOGY'S OTHER

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Over the past half century conservatism has been a powerful force in shaping public and political responses to crime in Britain. But within criminology, conservative ideology remains curiously neglected and poorly understood. In this paper I develop an interpretive reconstruction of conservative thinking about crime that seeks to make good this inattention. My central contention is that one finds in conservative ideology both an emotionally and culturally resonant case for making police authority and penal control central to the production of order and arguments for sceptical penal restraint and non-penal modes of socialization. But from which aspects of its conceptual morphology do these two faces of conservatism arise? In answering this question, my encounter identifies the claims that conservatism bring to contests over a better politics of crime (claims with which non-conservatives are required to reckon), as well as pinpointing certain shortcomings and blind-spots of conservative ideology.

Keywords: crime, conservatism, democratic under-labouring, ideologies, order, punishment

Introduction: Puzzling over conservatism

Conservatism has been the dominant political sensibility animating an emotive, law and order politics over recent decades. It has become a political cliché that crime is a 'natural' conservative issue. Conservative politicians, it is said, are implicitly trusted by voters to protect the public, back the police, get tough with offenders and support victims. Conservative electoral success has in part flowed from its capacity to tap into and articulate public fears about social breakdown and disorder. Stuart Hall et al.'s (1978) classic account of the rise of the 'new right' in the 1970s showed how traditional conservative anxieties about, and ideologies of, crime were used to remake Conservative politics. David Garland (2001) posits such developments as the collapse of rehabilitation, resurgence of the prison, retributive punishment and zero tolerance as indicators of an emotive 'criminology of the other' – something, he argues, that is a conservative reaction to the predicaments of late modernity. As if to illustrate the point, upon taking office in July 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson reached immediately for the crime issue, promising extra prison places, more police officers and greater stop and search powers.

Despite this dominance there remain relatively few influential conservative writers on crime – the fact that James Q. Wilson (2013) is so frequently touted as such is because he stands as an exception. There are also few avowedly conservative criminologists and no vibrant conservative paradigm within criminology that one can identify and analyze (cf.

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Kania 1988; Wright and DeLisi 2016).[2] One might even argue that conservatism is criminology's other: one strand of an ill-informed, moralizing common sense about crime that criminology seeks to demystify and contest. This antagonistic relation arguably flows from the fact that criminology is a creature of Enlightenment liberalism committed to deploying reason in the service of social betterment. Conservatism, by contrast, is a counter-Enlightenment tradition that refuses to be seduced by 'ruling superstitions of progress' (Gray 2009: 136). The result is that conservatism is an ideology which is routinely gestured at, or caricatured, within criminology, treated as one of the field's boo-words, bandied around as if 'we all know' what conservatism is, what is wrong with it, and why it need not command serious attention.

One must take care not to over-state this point. There has over recent decades been episodic attempts to analyze conservative thinking on crime and justice. Some of this – notably Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* – is explicitly concerned with trying to grasp the cross-class appeal of conservative 'common-sense' on the problem of order. In the 1980s and 1990s, left realist criminologists sought to tackle what they termed 'right realism' (e.g., Taylor 1981: ch. 1; Currie 1988; ch. 2; Young and Matthews 1992). The result, however, was more of a critique and refutation of that position than a sustained effort to understand the character and appeal of conservative thinking on crime. One can also point to Knepper's intriguing attempt to use Michael Oakeshott's work to make sense of recent trends in crime prevention (Knepper 2003). But, for the most part, the point holds. One struggles in vain to find within criminology a careful or systematic analysis of conservative ideas on crime and punishment and why they might resonate so powerfully.

This paper sets out to provide such an account. It offers a 'rational reconstruction' (Drolet 2011: 16) of the ideas, values, arguments and beliefs that conservatives assemble to address to the crime question. It does so with an orientation which is in broad terms anthropological: that is, it seeks in the first instance to apprehend from the inside what it means to be a conservative and what implications this has for thinking and action on crime. My task is to construct a 'best case' rendition of conservative perspectives on crime (one that a committed conservative should be able to recognize, if not necessarily agree with) and to understand its 'emotional component' and cultural appeal (Müller 2006: 365). What follows is an engaged dialogue with the conservative tradition that seeks to clarify and appraise the claims that this tradition brings to contests over a better politics of crime. It is an exercise in democratic under-labouring (Loader 2020).

Such a reconstruction faces several challenges. The first objection – typically made by conservatives – is that conservatism isn't an ideology at all. The claim here is not simply that conservatism lacks the canonical authors or founding texts that give shape to other political traditions (it does, though Burke's *Reflections* is commonly pressed into service), but that to reduce conservatism to a cluster of abstract concepts or core principles is to

[2] Wright and DeLisi's book was recently the subject of a review symposium in this journal (DeKeseredy 2017). It could scarcely bear the weight of such attention. The book is a more reliable guide to conservative paranoia than to conservative ideas.

distort it – and thereby misunderstand it. On this view, conservatism is a sensibility, a disposition, 'less a political doctrine than a habit of mind' (White 1964); the outlook of those who hold 'that a known good is not lightly to be surrendered for an unknown better' (Oakeshott 1962: 412; see also Scruton 2014: vii). It is important to grasp this aspect of conservative self-understanding or at least to recognize that conservatism often takes this 'aesthetic' form (Müller 2006: 361). But this apparent 'distaste for abstract, prescriptive theory' (Paterson 1973: 10) should not blind us to conservatism's political character – to the fact that it offers a distinctive account of governing as a 'limited and specific activity' (Oakeshott 1962: 429), and by extension a preferred vision of good crime governance. As Green puts it, 'Conservatives do possess, indeed *must* possess, an ideological map of the world which enables them to identify objects of approval and disapproval, friend and foe' (2002: 3; emphasis in original; Honderich 2005: 3). Conservatism has to be evaluated as such.

The second challenge lies in the claim – made by its opponents – that conservatism 'is simply the ideology or the specific political program of a particular social group trying to hold onto its privileges' (Müller 2006: 361; Robin 2011). On this view, conservative 'ideas' are articulated and defended in bad faith; they are self-interested rationalizations of those seeking to buttress the status quo and cling to power. What is therefore required in respect of conservatism is not the subjectivist analysis of ideology but grounded ideology critique, the unmasking of claims activated to defend powerful economic interests and shore up unjust political arrangements (e.g., Butler and Seymour 2020). There are no doubt good reasons to apply the hermeneutics of suspicion to conservative thought (the core idea that inequality is 'natural' is, after all, more likely to be made by, or appeal to, those who benefit from the extant allocation of social benefits and burdens). But the interplay between ideas and interests is not unique to conservatism. Nor does it pay to *reduce* conservatism to self-interest in a manner that dispenses with the burden of examining conservative ideas and the answers they provide to fundamental political questions, and taking seriously the emotional and cultural appeal of these ideas – not only to the entitled and contented, but to the aspirational, anxious or fatalistic (see, on this, Steinfels 1979). The priority given to disorder, and the programmes for restoring order that flow from conservative beliefs, may turn out to be an aspect of that appeal.

Thirdly, there is the challenge of particularity, of asking whether there is an entity called conservatism that travels though time and spans national boundaries, or whether we have to attend to conservatisms in the plural. This problem is especially pronounced in respect of conservatism because, as we shall see, it is a philosophy of place, of attachment and belonging to home, community and nation (Scruton 2014: 24). No one, as Müller (2006: 360) nicely puts it, has ever proclaimed 'Conservatives of all Nations, Unite!'. So the analysis of conservatism has to attend to this historical rootedness, while also remaining alive to family resemblances between different conservative traditions. In this paper, I resolve this difficulty by focusing analysis on the tradition of sceptical, British conservatism and the ideas and arguments its adherents have assembled around crime. Drawing on

political/philosophical treatises, election manifestos, political speeches, reports from Conservative Party research departments and aligned think-tanks produced since 1945, I reconstruct and appraise the 'operative concepts' (Green 2002) that generate the distinctive account of good crime governance to which conservatives are committed. My aim is not a chronological analysis of the evolution of conservative thinking over that period. Rather, I offer a 'morphological' account of how conservative concepts have been cashed out in the domain of crime and its control (Freeden 2013). I also make no claim that this is *the* or the *only* conservative account of crime control; merely that this it is one, plausible reconstruction of what conservatives think and feel about the topic.[3]

My claim is that conservative ideology, thus understood, operates with two faces. First, it is committed to the idea that crime is a moral and cultural problem and that the restoration of order (which in conservatism is not only a core, but a thick, symbolically resonant idea) demands the reassertion of strong state – and especially police – authority. But conservatism is also a sceptical creed, attentive to the limits and overreach of government. This, I argue, generates conservatism's second face – one committed to penal prudence and to cultivating in civil society non-penal practices of character formation and impulse control. The chapter concludes by identifying the risks the conservative tradition poses, and the resources it can offer, to a profoundly non-conservative project: building a better politics of crime (Loader and Sparks 2011).

Morality, order and (police) authority

The resurgence and remaking of Conservative politics during the crisis-ridden 1970s had much to do with the break conservatives made with the liberal consensus on crime that was ascendant during the middle decades of the 20th century (Loader 2006). The break with that consensus saw Conservative politicians and commentators tap into and mobilize public fears about rising crime and violence and plug them into a wider narrative of race, industrial conflict, social breakdown and a crisis of governmental authority (Hall et al. 1978). Early sightings of this ideological and tactical repositioning appeared in the Conservative election manifesto of 1966, which promised 'an all-out attack on the rising wave of crime that besmirches our society'. Shortly after becoming Conservative Party leader in 1975, Margaret Thatcher used her conference address to associate the Labour government with rising violence: 'The first duty of government is to uphold the law, and if it tries to bob, weave and duck around that duty when it is inconvenient, the governed will do exactly the same thing, and then nothing will be safe, not home, not liberty, not life itself'.

Analysis of the conservative mobilization of law and order tends to focus on its electoral dividends, as if it was only or mainly a tactic for leveraging support from non-

[3] The question of whether, and why, the current Brexit-centric Conservative Party has departed from wider conservative ideology lies beyond the scope of this paper. For a post-Brexit re-statement of 'one-nation conservatism' that resonates with the version of conservatism reconstructed here see Skelton (2019). Interestingly, Skelton's tract contains not a single reference to crime, policing or punishment.

conservative voters. In part it was. But this mobilization also needs to be situated ideologically. When crime becomes of public concern – as it did from the 1960s to the 1990s – conservatives are able to capitalize because they have things to say that flow, as it were naturally, from the conceptual morphology of conservative ideology – and especially the centrality it affords to the values of stability and order. This makes conservatives *at ease* with the issue of crime in ways that liberals and social democrats are not. They also bring to bear on the topic a social theory of crime, its causes and remedies that is importantly distinct from neo-liberalism. Conservatives have little time for the latter's insipid, amoral (rational choice) theory of crime and little enthusiasm for its restless, perfectionist search for market solutions to the problem of order.

There are in other words *conceptual* reasons why, when crime comes to public salience, conservatives are first and most eagerly out of the traps in responding. There are also conceptual reasons why at moments of political crisis and heightened social anxiety (such as the 1960s and 1970s) conservatives can readily code that anxiety as a question of crime and disorder. The prospect and imagery of chaos come easily to the conservative mind. They are attuned to the political value and uses of fear. They are conceptually well-equipped to make connections between dis/order and wider questions to do with the condition and future prospects of valued entities such as family, community and nation. Order, for conservatives, is intimately entangled with matters of identity and belonging, with the location and reaffirming of moral boundaries, with the line between 'them' and 'us'. Conservatives are, moreover, readily able to treat crime as an issue that goes to the heart of the activity of governing – in respect of its overreach and failures, and its core tasks and limits. Let me elaborate on these themes and, by so doing, explicate the core concepts found on the conservative ideological map of crime.

The rehabilitative ideal and human imperfectability

We can usefully start with the conservative critique of the rehabilitative ideal – and wider paradigm of penal welfarism – that stood as the organizing rationale of the justice system until the 1970s. Rehabilitation was during that decade subject to an ideologically multi-pronged attack from a 'momentary alliance of accumulated enemies' (Garland 2001: 71). It came under pressure following mounting evidence of the failure of individualized treatment to reform offenders and reduce re-offending (Martinson 1975). Rehabilitative treatment also came under fire from the left – notably when the American Friends Service Committee (1971) charged rehabilitation with neglecting individual rights and due process. But there also emerged at this juncture a distinctive conservative critique of the rehabilitative paradigm. Unlike the technocratic and left-liberal critique, the conservative assault did not emerge from inside the system or share then settled assumptions about the root causes of crime. Instead, it is best viewed as a hostile reaction to the governing orthodoxies of penal welfarism. The critique can be reconstructed into three key claims.

First, rehabilitation is wrong because it rests on a denial of individual responsibility. By theorizing crime as a presenting symptom of psychological or social problems which need

to be ameliorated, the rehabilitative ideal overlooked the moral agency of the offender, the fact that they have exercised a choice for which they ought to be held to account. This was closely aligned with a wider critique of the UK welfare state and 'Great Society' programmes in the US that emerged from the 1970s onwards (Mead 1986; Murray 1990). These too were charged with not encouraging people to take responsibility for their own lives. Welfare programmes were also charged with having generated the unintended consequence of perverse incentives and welfare dependency. Taken together, this conservative critique added up to the contention that treatment and social programmes had indulged criminals and the poor and pitifully failed to stem the rise in crime and violence witnessed from the 1960s onwards.

Secondly, the rehabilitative ideal offended conservatives because it was deemed to rest on an unwarranted faith that government can be used to engineer a better world. For conservatives making rehabilitation the governing orthodoxy of the penal system was to license government over-reach, to expect it to do too much; it smacked of what Oakeshott (1962) called 'rationalism in politics'. In so doing, rehabilitation rested on the faulty assumption that 'human impulses are naturally benign, peaceable or reasonable' (Gray 2007: 280) and was committed to erroneous and naïve hopes about human improvability; something, as Freeden (1988: 339) observes, which has always been 'a special butt of conservative displeasure'. This benign and misplaced optimism about the capacity of the state to – in Kant's terms - straighten crooked timber also, in the conservative view, contributed to spiraling and unchecked escalations in crime and violence.

What was required, thirdly, was a reckoning with some harsh realities about human behaviour and its resistance to manipulation. This was forcefully and influential expressed by James Q. Wilson who opened his 1975 treatise on *Thinking about Crime* with the claim that 'The proper design of public policies requires a clear and sober understanding of the nature of man' (Wilson 2013: xxi).[4] In respect of crime, Wilson spelled out clearly what he took this to mean:

> Wicked people exist. Nothing avails except to set them apart from innocent people. And many people, neither wicked nor innocent, but watchful, dissembling and calculating of their chances, ponder our reaction to wickedness as a clue to what they might profitably do. (Wilson 2013: 248)

This was nothing less than a wholesale departure from prevailing official and criminological wisdom about crime, launched from outside of criminology. For conservatives two consequences followed from this necessary reappraisal of the realities of human wickedness and frailty, and the wholesale critique of the penal welfarist paradigm that it implied. The first was a restatement of the idea that crime is a moral issue and ought to be responded to as such. The second was a reassertion of what conservatives view as the primary duty of the

[4] All citations from this text are taken from the revised 2013 edition.

state – to exercise the firm hand of sovereign command in the form of police authority and penal control.

Crime as a moral issue

Conservatives are often derided by their opponents for moralizing crime. But for conservatives the charge makes no sense. In their judgement crime is self-evidently a moral issue and it has to be approached using an appropriate set of concepts and sensibilities. To do otherwise is to miss something essential about the nature of crime – the crossing of a line between right and wrong. This helps to explain conservatism's long troubled and often conflictual relations with criminology in particular and social science in general – and its status as outsider to those fields. Conservatives evinces a distaste for causal explanations of crime that, in their view, efface individual responsibility, condone bad behaviour and complicate the question of punishment – surround the offender with 'a fog of excuses', as Margaret Thatcher once put it. They also often feel critical bafflement, even anger, at the indifferent distance of those who can produce such anemic accounts – how an earth can you respond to crime like *that*! Moreover, the centrality of morality to conservative narratives of crime enables conservatives to speak in an uncomplicated, 'we get it' idiom that appears rooted in experience and able to cut through the cant of liberals and experts (Hall et al. 1978: ch. 6). This then is further reason why, when crime is brought to public salience, as it has been over recent decades, conservatism is the ideology most willing and able to get on the front foot. But what elements of the conservative crime story enable it to do this?

First, a critique of structural explanations of crime and a disconnection of crime from any wider register of economic and social in/justice – unemployment, poverty and inequality. The view that poverty is a cause of crime is time and again dismissed in Conservative Party literature as the view of 'misguided idealists' (One Nation Group 1959) or as 'the socialist error' (Cooper and Nicholas 1963). The theme was taken up by James Q. Wilson (2013) in his analysis of what he termed 'crime amidst plenty', by which he meant the post-war co-existence of rising crime and rising living standards. But it is not only the empirical veracity of the no-peace-without-justice claim that is being disputed. What offends conservatives is that structural explanations of crime commit a category mistake: 'Crime is a moral issue. No analysis of social or psychological causes of crime and no policy for dealing with it should be allowed to ignore this basic fact' (Thorneycroft 1966: 11).

Crime then needs to be treated as a matter of morality and values – it is not the result of economic but of 'moral poverty' (Bennett et al. 1996). The axiomatic conservative starting point for thinking about crime is that human beings 'acting on their own uncontrolled impulses, will on the whole act badly' (Quinton 1967: 13): they therefore need to be socialized, regulated, taught and reminded to control their appetites. Crime stems from a failure to inculcate values of restraint and responsibility. From these premises conservatives pinned rising levels of crime from the 1960s onwards on the culture of self-expression, the collapse of discipline, the 'dismembered' family, and the triumph of

entitlement and rights over obligations and duties (see, inter alia, Murray 1990; Dennis 1993; Wilson 2013). In short; with what Conservative politician Norman Tebbit called 'scorn for traditional standards': 'We are', he wrote, 'now reaping the whirlwind' from the idea that 'good manners are no better than bad manners', that 'criminals deserve as much sympathy as their victims' and from 'disorderly homes and classrooms' (Tebbit 1985: 16).

Crime, on this view, is not fundamentally the result of the absence or weakness of effective policing or resolute punishment – vital though those things are. It stems from the decline, or failure, or neglect of a range of social institutions and actors and an erosion of the controls that they once instilled. This has been a recurring theme of conservative narratives about crime and disorder. In 1966, a report by Peter Thorneycroft MP highlighted 'the breakdown of certain of the spontaneous agencies of social control which worked in the past – family, Church, personal and local loyalties' (1966: 11). This decline in the 'agencies of direct social and moral instruction' meant, he continued, that the police were doing their job, 'without an entrenched moral demand from the public for certain standards of behaviour and public order' (ibid.: 12). In a pamphlet written in the 1970s to introduce the Conservative Party to 'readers overseas', a cognate account of Conservative thinking about crime was offered: 'the decreasing willingness of society as a whole to support strict moral standards and especially the lessening pressure of the knowledge and sentiment of local communities, especially in large cities, has reduced old forms of control and the risk of detection' (Clarke n.d.: 39). This theme was returned to in the 1980s by Home Secretary Douglas Hurd (1988) in an analysis of the urban riots. In a plea for greater 'social cohesion' (rather, he makes it clear, than equality), Hurd asked, not only where were the police, but where were the churches, the parents and the teachers, 'who should have helped to mould the sense of responsibility, obligation and discipline of these youths and who might have been expected to exercise some influence over their beliefs and behaviour'.

In these respects, conservative ideology articulates the crime question in an affective register in ways that have no equivalent in neo-liberalism, liberalism or social democracy, each of which are animated by abstract principles. It gives expression to the idea that crime doesn't reduce to the amoral language of cost-benefit calculus or to structural theories of social causation, but is instead legitimately an occasion for indignation, denunciation, stigma and blame and can and should be addressed through the vocabulary of virtue, duty and responsibility. Crime is, in other words, made the site for bemoaning the de-moralization of society and demanding the restoration of lost sources of authority (Anderson 1995). In so doing, conservatism taps into lay sentiments in ways that competing ideologies do not. It is able to ground its claims in 'common-sense' in ways that signal understanding for the anxieties and aspirations of the 'law-abiding' majority against the evasions, denials and apparent indifference of liberal elites. Norman Tebbit couched the crime question in precisely these terms in 1986: 'Too many well educated and well to do people are inclined to regard public feeling on law and order with a certain lofty disdain. They're wrong to do so. I believe the public want a society which reflects the plain truth of the difference between right and wrong.' (1986: 8). Twenty years on, Conservative Prime Minster Theresa

May mobilized the same plain-speaking common-sense, and attacked the same elite enemies of ordinary people, in her first conference speech as leader: 'They find your patriotism distasteful, your concerns about immigration parochial, your views about crime illiberal, your attachment to job security inconvenient'.

Conservative ideology has a conception of order, and its close relation to 'home' and belonging, that speaks to these 'illiberal' sentiments and 'parochial' concerns.

The value(s) of order

Crime and disorder may be moral issues that call upon a web of institutions in civil society to tame impulses and instill conscience. But this does not, for conservatives, detract from the idea that the occurrence of crime and disorder demands the firm hand of sovereign authority. Two core components of conservative ideology enable conservatives to grasp the vital importance of this task: its account of the primary duty of government and the dominant place that order occupies in its conceptual morphology.

Oakeshott (1962: 408) contends that the conservative disposition is tied to 'certain beliefs about the activity of governing and the instruments of governing'. In his view, governing is a 'specific and limited activity'. Its task is to 'attend' to a society's arrangements so as to 'resolve some of the collisions' between the variety of beliefs and activities; 'to preserve peace . . . by enforcing general rules of procedure upon all subjects alike' (ibid: 428). For Oakeshott, 'the intimations of government are to be found . . . in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth and perfection' (ibid.). One finds a cognate account in the work of John Gray (2009: 135) for whom governing entails not the pursuit of 'indefinite betterment, but the staving off of ever present evils.' Its primary task, he contends, lies in 'the avoidance of civil strife'. This vision of the firm but limited character of government echoes through Conservative Party pamphlets and lectures. In 1949, T. E. Utley, opined that 'politics is the science of the application of public force. A politician is a man whose business it is to manipulate as justly and humanely as he can the most powerful instrument of torture and destruction which human ingenuity has invented, the sovereign state'. Margaret Thatcher (1980: 6) wrote of the importance of a 'strong state to preserve both liberty and order': 'what we need is a strong state determined to maintain in good repair the frame which surrounds society. But the frame should not be so heavy or elaborate as to dominate the whole picture'. The primary duty of government to protect the law-abiding citizen has also been a rhetorical staple of Conservative election manifestos since the mid-sixties. In 1997, the matter was put thus: 'People have a right to sleep safely in their homes and walk safely on the street. Government has a duty to maintain that security'.

This duty of government is closely interwoven with what is the most prized concept in the conservative room: order. Conservatism is not, like (neo)liberalism, first and foremost a philosophy of freedom – or, at least, 'freedom is not a clear or sufficient answer to what conservatives believe in' (Scruton 2014: 10). While conservatives are clear that the balance between order and freedom needs constant vigilance and adjustment – 'it is the central

problem of politics' (Clarke n.d. 11); they are equally sure which of the two has priority: 'order in society is a condition of freedom. . . All the experience of Western civilization shows that the greatest threat to freedom is not order but disorder' (ibid.). Nor, unlike (neo)liberalism, is conservatism first and foremost an ideology of individualism. Rather, it is a philosophy of attachment (Scruton 2014: 24) - to place, home, community and nation. As John Gray (2009: 142) put it: 'Conservative individualists recognize that, before anything else, even before freedom, human beings need a home, a nest of institutions and a way of life they feel to be their own'. Conservatives value what former Prime Minister Edward Heath called 'the spirit of loyalty and attachment to the place where we live and communities in which we dwell'. 'A strong nation', he continued, 'is built like a honeycomb of interlocking cells – each family, each village, each town or country has its own ties of loyalty and its own patriotism. Each one of these is a force for the unity of the nation: each binds citizen to citizen, community to community' (Heath 1974).

This attachment to place not only helps explain the priority conservatives give to order, it also helps to flesh out their conception of it, supplying it with symbolic resonance and thickness. For conservatives, order does not reduce to anemic, operational-sounding concepts such as safety and protection. Order signals and implicates much more than that. It is entangled first with an affective attachment to, and the perceived precariousness of valued places - homes, streets, villages, suburbs, towns. It is also bound up with the unity, flourishing and in extremis survival of imagined and valued sources of belonging – family, community, nation, the British people. This makes order, for conservatives, a boundary-drawing question, a site for the articulation (and defence) of who 'we' are, what 'we' believe in, and who threatens 'us'. In the conservative imaginary, order is bound up with nostalgic affection for these entities and the felt need to guard against further loss. It is always in the end about issues of inclusion – and exclusion. As Roger Scruton (2014: 36; emphasis in original): 'We have to take our neighbours seriously, as people with an equal claim to protection, for whom we might be required, in moments of crisis, to face mortal danger. We do this because we believe ourselves *to belong together in a shared home*'.

This combination of the constitutive duty of government to protect, and a thick, symbolically-charged conception of order, helps to account for the primacy afforded to policing in conservative ideology and the support - bordering on affection - that conservatives feel for the police. The police have a special place in conservative imaginaries of order. When crime is at issue, conservatives reach, as it were, instinctively for police authority on the understating that 'without them, there can be no effective protection of society' (Cooper and Nicholas 1963: 14). As one Conservative Political Centre pamphlet put it in 1973: 'The government will continue to give the highest priority to the combatting of crime and the development of policies in support of law and order, and particularly in the support of and strengthening of the police.' Such themes recur in Conservative Party literature. Backing for the police has been an ever-present promise of election manifestos since it first surfaced in 1964. That year, the party pledged to fight crime by 'building up the strength of the police'. In 1966, they spoke of giving the police the powers, equipment and

organization they need to tackle crime. In 1974, the police were to be 'strengthened' because they are our 'principal defenders versus internal attack'. By 1979, Margaret Thatcher promised that the police were to be exempt from the Conservative mission to shrink the size and cost of the state: 'we will spend more on fighting crime even while we economise elsewhere'.

Two broad themes resound through these statements of conservative enthusiasm for police authority – one material, the other symbolic. The first is a recurring promise to back the police with such things as more officers, greater powers, better equipment, more training and higher pay – as a means of 'protecting the front line against crime' (Conservative Party 1973: 19), or giving effect to the British people's 'instinct' for 'more bobbies on the beat' (Conservative Party 1998), or as a result of continuing faith in the idea that 'detection is the surest means of prevention' (Clarke n.d.: 39). As the 2005 Conservative election manifesto put it: 'more police will catch more criminals, it's not rocket science is it'. The second is the paramount importance of offering the police what the 1992 election manifesto called 'whole-hearted support' (as if only conservatives can, in the end, by trusted to do that) – by bolstering their morale, protecting them from their critics, freeing them from bureaucracy, and reassuring officers that they undertake brave, courageous duty on behalf of all of us (e.g., Warren and Tredinnick 1982). This deeply-felt sensibility is perfectly captured in this 1976 'statement of Conservative aims and values:'

> More important than ensuring that the police have adequate resources is that there should be a positive commitment by Parliament, politicians and the people as a whole to our police service. A nation which fails to support its police will not succeed in protecting its citizens' freedoms.

It should not be forgotten that Conservative governments over the last two decades have at times become sharp critics of the police. During the 1990s, Conservative administrations accepted and acted upon the neo-liberal idea that the police are a wasteful, inefficient public bureaucracy – even if many conservatives never fully shared the doctrinaire enthusiasm for market-based innovations that flowed from that critique. Upon re-election in 2010, the Conservative-led government became the architect of a decade-long programme of radical cuts in police budgets and officer numbers, steadfastly facing down police opposition to the effects of austerity. They also loosened their commitment to the once sacred notion of constabulary independence, and foisted on the police a new form of democratic localism in the shape of Police and Crime Commissioners (Loader 2016).

This does not detract however from the prominent place that the *idea* of the police – a police force of the imagination (Loader and Mulcahy 2003) – assumes in the conservative ideology of order (e.g., Acheson 2019). The police have long been central to that conception of order because they represent a form of comforting visible authority in everyday life and because the police seem an essentially conservative institution – one tasked with protecting and preserving valued (and often imagined) entities and ways of life. This conservative attachment to a particular idea of policing has over recent decades been challenged by

changing realities on the ground, not least the entanglement of the police with the politics of race, gender and sexuality. The ensuing scandals (e.g., the murder of Stephen Lawrence, Hillsborough, failures to prevent child sexual abuse) have been acutely uncomfortable for those of a conservative disposition. They have also at times prompted a conservative counter-reaction that re-identifies with police authority in ways that elevate order and control over the rule of law, and 'in-group' protection over minority rights. That, it seems to me, is no accident, nor simply a clinging to power and privilege. Rather, such popular authoritarianism is a proximate risk of the symbolically central, and emotionally-charged, place that police authority is accorded within the morphology of conservative ideology.

State scepticism, penal prudence and the cultivation of civility

It would be mistaken to claim that conservatives lack enthusiasm for the other institutional lever they instinctively reach for to assert social discipline and control: punishment and especially the prison. It has long been a cliché of British politics to describe Conservative Party activists, or backbench MPs, or *Daily Mail* readers, as members of the 'hang 'em and flog 'em' brigade – salivating champions of penal severity. Arguably, not without cause. The return of the Conservatives to office in 1979 sparked a flurry of parliamentary debate on whether to reinstate the death penalty, as well as a brief revival of 'short, sharp shock' regimes for young offenders. Conservatives administrations in the UK and US in the 1980s led a re-moralization of crime (and its attendant vernaculars of responsibility and blame) that supplied much of the emotional and cultural energy behind the resurgence of the prison. In 1993, then Conservative Home Secretary delighted in declaring that 'Prison Works' and initiated a period of penal policy focused on making sentencing harsher and prisons austere. When crime is of public concern, or during times of rising violence or social and political tension, conservatives do not flinch from the need for resolute punishment. As Norman Tebbit put it in 1986: 'It is fundamental to a free society that those who infringe others' freedom must be – and be seen to be – punished . . . We all know that where there is no punishment worthy of the name crime proliferates' (1986: 8).

So we can locate a fondness for retributive and deterrent punishment on the face of conservatism that privileges sovereign authority as a response to crime. Yet to characterize British conservatism solely in these terms is at best partial and at worst a motivated caricature. Alongside these penal enthusiasms one can find in conservative ideology a recurring ambivalence about the prison, troubled attention to what happens inside prisons, and a pervasive sense of that institution's futility. This has often made conservatives active proponents of penal reform, sometimes more committedly so than those on the political left. Their moralizing conception of crime can also lead conservatives to reach beyond the penal realm when seeking to locate what is required to produce self-regulated citizens. In both cases, the impulse to punish that one finds in conservative politics is tempered and restrained by an overarching ideological scepticism towards government as the solution to social problems. Let us examine each element of this second conservative face in turn.

Penal prudence

British conservatism is a sceptical creed. Indeed, this is one thing that distinguishes it from the can-do, will-do optimism of American neo-conservatism on the one hand (Drolet 2011) and the market utopias of neo-liberalism on the other (Gray 2007: ch. 1; Skelton 2019: ch. 5). Conservatives do not believe that the purpose of governing is the search for truth, or perfection, or seeking to fashion a better currently unknown world. They are not persuaded by the idea that government is a place of endless experimentation or innovation. They are dubious about what politics is able to achieve, and hold that it should never become 'the be-all-and-end-all of life' (Heath 1974). For conservatives, government is mired in uncertainty and 'cluelessness' (O'Hara 2014: 57); beset by unintended consequences, prone to repeated failure. For these reasons politics is not about raising expectations and government should not be treated as the vehicle for grand projects.[5] Rather:

> The business of government [is] not to inflame passion and give it new objects to feed upon, but to inject the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation; to restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile; not to stoke the fires of desire, but to damp them down. (Oakeshott 1962: 432)

It does not require a great deal of imaginative effort to apply this disposition to questions of punishment, or to see it as the source of a conservative critique of the punitive practices and rhetoric of recent decades. Indeed, this scepticism has arguably produced within conservatism an attitude of *penal prudence* - one that, in respect of the prison in particular, is struck by the endemic failures of that institution, determined to moderate its use, minimize the damage it can cause and seek more constructive alternatives.

This prudential orientation to the prison is a recurring theme in conservative writings on crime and punishment. In 1971, a Conservative Political Centre pamphlet entitled *Crisis in Crime and Punishment* bemoaned poor conditions, cell sharing and the lack of training and reform. It contended that 'at present many men and women are being sent unnecessarily to prison', before adding: 'the ordinary prison is a hopeless waste of time and resources for people like alcoholics, drug addicts and the mentally disturbed' (Conservative Political Centre 1971: 15). The authors concluded that: 'No effective policy of rehabilitation and reform is possible without a reduction in the prison population'. The report of a 1977 Conservative study group on the 'proper use of prisons' complained, in similar vein, about overcrowding and the failure of the prison to reform offenders as well as protect the public. It also bemoaned the use of prisons for the addicted, the disturbed and what the group called 'inadequate petty offenders' and demanded shorter sentences for first time criminals. These sentiments have on several occasions during the past several decades animated the penal policy of Conservative governments. During the early 1980s, for example, Home

[5] This of course is why Brexit, a nation re-building leap into the dark with radically uncertain consequences, sits so uneasily with components of the conservative political tradition (though, see Gray 2019).

Secretary Willie Whitelaw presided over an explicit policy aim of reducing the prison population. This was repeated later in the decade when – in the lead up to the Criminal Justice Act 1991 – a government White Paper declared that prisons were 'an expensive way of making bad people worse' and set about reducing their use (Home Office 1990). This theme was picked up over two decades on by former British Prime Minister David Cameron, when in 2016 he declared that 'we have to recognize that the prison population draws mostly from the ranks of those whose life chances were shot to pieces from the start'. Prison reform, he continued, 'is a golden opportunity to correct some earlier – often catastrophic – state failure' (Cameron 2016).

This prudence in respect of punishment can also be reinforced by the aforementioned conservative belief that crime is a moral question and ought to be treated as such. This take on crime can, as we have seen, be an emotive penal aggravator fueling demands for the strong grip of sovereign control. But it can also serve as a resource for moderation and restraint. Three cases in point are worthy of note.

The idea that offenders must take responsibility for their actions has, firstly, fed into a conservative critique of the prison as places of 'enforced idleness' (Ministry of Justice 2010), irresponsibility and further demoralization – and driven a determination to make prisons into sites of useful work. In 1964, a report by the Young Conservatives (1964: 23) noted that 'there is nothing more soul-destroying than the inability to do useful work' and urged that prisons become places where men 'can learn useful trades'. The report of the aforementioned Conservative study group on prisons echoed this call: 'In prison nothing is more important than an adequate supply of useful work opportunities' (1971: 16).

The moralization of crime has, secondly, generated an anxiety among conservatives about punishment becoming a site of vengeance and 'valueless' retribution (Young Conservatives 1964: 23). As David Price (1961: 12) put it: 'Because revenge is a strong human passion there is a good argument for excluding it from judicial punishment. It is not the job of the state to engage in a wild form of justice. The law must be cold, temperate and impartial. Revenge is above all personal. The law must be impersonal.' The corollary of this worry is concern to ensure that those in positions of responsibility and authority discharge their duties with humanity and decency, as explained in this account of Conservative philosophy: 'The exercise of authority must do nothing which diminishes the human dignity of the individual or derogates from his right to be treated in a manner which acknowledges the common humanity underlying human differences' (Clarke n.d.: 14).[6]

Thirdly, conservatism is not opposed to the idea that the penal system can be a site of reparation and reformation – so long as this is not elevated into a systemic ideological ambition with all the false and inflated hopes that attend such over-reach. Hence this: 'the willingness of society to reform its criminals is a sign of inherent strength and self-

[6] In his biography of Winston Churchill, Roy Jenkins suggests that Churchill's famous (and today oft-cited) interest in penal reform was driven by his lofty abhorrence of the notion that 'underdogs' (prisoners) were being treated badly by 'middle-dogs' (prison officers) (Jenkins 2001: 180).

confidence. A strong society can afford to redeem its criminals' (Price 1961: 15). In this respect, the sentiments conservatives insist are the proper register in which to think about and respond to crime are not only those of blame, censure, condemnation and stigma – dominant though these have tended to be. That emotional register also extends on occasions to mercy, forgiveness and redemption. The moral and religiously-derived discourse of redemption was, for example, a central concept in the 'rehabilitation revolution' launched by the British Conservative government in 2010. As (then) Justice Secretary Michael Gove (2016) put it: 'We want individuals who leave prison to be changed characters - to be redeemed, to have rejected violence as a way of settling disputes, to have overcome the impulsiveness, weakness and lack of self-respect which drew them into crime in the first place, to have become assets contributing to society rather than liabilities who bring only costs'. It is easy to develop a critique of this agenda and argue that it was doomed to failure while the question of overall prison numbers is treated as off-limits for policy intervention. There is some force in these charges. But one also needs to acknowledge – and reckon with the fact - that this agenda is not simply an act of bad faith. Reforming prisons – and the redemption of offenders – is a project with firm conceptual roots in conservative ideology.

Civil society and the making of order

The second element of conservatism's prudential, or even non-penal, disposition towards crime stems from two further and inter-linked components of conservative morphology: the fact that conservatives do not see the state as a solution to social problems, but seek instead to tap (and free from the dead-hand of the state) the voluntary spirit and resources of civil society (Green 1993). This is well expressed in the following extract from a 1998 Conservative Party pamphlet:

> The key to a strong and stable society is to trust local communities and institutions. We have to resist those who respond to every problem with another scheme for central government intervention and another excuse for political interference. We do not see the level of public spending as an index of compassion. (Conservative Party 1998: 1)

On this view the central task of government – and of politics – is not to solve (or threw money at) problems but 'to enlarge the space in which civil society can flourish' (Scruton 2014: 136). We are returned at this point to the view of government as a specific and limited activity – a view which holds that government 'does not have all the answers' and would enhance its authority if it sought to do less (Thatcher 1980). But this is now coupled with a distinctive conservative account of community. On this account, 'man is a social animal' who fulfils himself 'in family and among friends, in clubs and associations' (Goldman 1956: 11). S/he is both an individual and a citizen – 'the member of a complex network of small communities which go to make up society – family, neighbourhood, church, voluntary organization, work-place and so on' (Conservative Party 1976: 17). Community, by extension, is a site of 'richness and diversity' (Thatcher 1980: 5) composed of 'pluralistic,

multiple centres of power and influence' (Clarke n.d.: 11). It is a place of 'natural' (not socially-produced) inequalities and hierarchies, but one in which 'every human being' is 'equally important' to the 'foundations of our society' (Thatcher 1980). It is, moreover, constituted by free association and social cooperation; by feelings of duty, obligation, compassion and responsibility to one's neighbours and to those less fortunate than oneself; by practices of voluntary effort, mutual aid and shared membership. As one Conservative Party pamphlet once pithily put it: 'We believe in the strong helping the weak rather than a weakening of the strong' (Conservative Party 1950).

For all that Conservatives invest in the necessary work performed by police and punishment in sustaining social order, this view of the state-society nexus also permeates the conservative approach to the crime question. As John Gray (2009: 141) puts it: 'the formation of individual character cannot itself be a direct concern of government – it is rather the task of intermediate institutions, families, churches and voluntary associations'. This first limb of this view – concerning the limited reach of government viz. the sources of crime – is a recurring theme of conservative literature on crime. In 1959, a report by the One Nation Group on *The Responsible Society*, expressed the view that 'lawlessness not just a matter for the Home Secretary or judiciary. Its roots lie deep in society and cannot be instilled by government'. It then added: 'The welfare state may have made things worse. Moral obligations have to be instilled by family'. Government, the argument runs, only has limited tools at its disposal – notably legislation – and these are unable to reach the source of the problem: 'The genesis of the chain of moral decline which results in the commission of a crime lies far beyond the reach of criminal law.' A 1964 report by the Young Conservatives echoes the point: 'Rising crime not be cured by legislation. The belief that man can be made good by legislation is the fundamental heresy of the Left'.

The vital task of instilling restraint, fostering responsibility and forming character – and thereby cultivating regulated citizens – lies with the community, with the actors and institutions of civil society. David Price (1961: 4) expressed the sentiment thus: 'the problem [of crime] is as much one of morals as it is one of making the criminal law more effective. Each one of us has a responsibility to raise the general level of morals in our society. There is a particular responsibility on parents, managers, trade union leaders, holders of any public office, above all churches'. In 1966, Peter Thorneycroft MP made a similar point. In a nostalgic idiom he detected a 'weakening of natural and traditional checks upon unlawful conduct' such as those founds in communities and schools and urged that 'stabilisers are needed to offset the strains associated with increased opportunity and ambition'. He concluded that: 'any lasting solution or amelioration must involve the work of institutions, such as the church, which lie outside the ambit of politics'. We have already seen Douglas Hurd (1988) revisit these themes in his anguished bemoaning of the failure of schools, parents and related institutions of civil society to instill values that could have prevented the urban disorders of the 1980s.

These themes of community responsibility, voluntary action and localism have at various points informed Conservative policy over recent decades. Hurd's analysis of the

causes of the riots was a prelude to a call for active citizenship as a means to prevent and counter crime, notably in the form of neighbourhood watch. The Conservative manifesto at the 1987 election claimed that 'government alone cannot tackle such deep-rooted problems' and urged that 'all of us, not just the government or the police, share a responsibility to make safer our streets and our homes'. This theme was returned to and expanded upon in 2010, under David Cameron, who promised a shift from 'Big Government' to 'The Big Society'. Here the Conservatives sought to encourage 'social responsibility, not state control' as the means to mend what the 2010 manifesto called 'the broken society'. The state's job was not to supply answers to crime, but to agitate and 'galvanize social action', to foster a 'culture change' that will generate:

> A society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities. [It involves] redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities; giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives. (2010: 39)

These initiatives have, again, been charged by critics with supplying rhetorical cover for the failings of Conservative policy. The 'responsibilization' agenda of the late 1980s was accused of victim-blaming as well as with deflecting attention from the failure of Conservative 'law-and-order' policies of the early 1980s to stem rising levels of crime. The Big Society agenda not only failed to translate into much by way of practical action; it never fully managed to shrug off the allegation that it was simply a device for obscuring the damaging effects of austerity on public services (Morgan 2012). There may again be substance to the charge that these plans are an ideological smokescreen or disconnected from sociological realities. But they should not detract from the genuine ideological roots that these policies have in conservative thought. For conservatives the problem of order is intimately entangled with the project of getting Burke's 'little platoons' to thrive – and to play their part in cultivating the necessary virtue of self-restraint.

Conclusion: Conservatism and a better politics of crime

I have in this paper offered an interpretive reconstruction of what is distinctive about the sceptical British variant of conservatism and what that outlook entails for thinking and action about crime. At the outset, I described this encounter as an exercise in democratic under-labouring. Let me conclude by explaining what this means and why such an encounter may be of wider value.

Democratic under-labouring strives, minimally, to raise the quality of political argument about crime (Loader and Sparks 2011: 132-133). This requires, *inter alia*, the construction of 'best case' accounts of the political ideologies and ideas that assemble around, and contest, the crime question, and clarification and appraisal of the plausible worlds of crime control that competing ideologies project. Through such encounters, it becomes possible to advance a clearer understanding of what is fully at stake when crime

and its regulation are brought into public dispute (Loader 2020). It is the interpretive reconstruction of what conservatism brings to such contests that I have endeavored to produce here. But how can we relate the analysis of conservative ideology to the thicker ambition of democratic under-labouring: extending practices of democratic deliberation about crime? What is an intellectual project committed to seeking ideas for re-making and re-imagining crime control in ways that are more democratic and egalitarian (Loader and Sparks 2012) to do with a political tradition which is resolutely unsympathetic to that task? That tradition, one might recall, holds that politics 'does not begin with a vision of another, different, or better world' (Oakeshott 1962: 428).

There are three possible answers to that question. The easy place to start is with critique. Here one treats the claims reconstructed in this paper with a hermeneutics of suspicion. This means tracing their connections to established patterns of privilege and exposing the ways in which conservative ideas function as 'meaning in the service of power' (Thompson 1990); or subjecting conservative ideology to close analysis and scrutiny with a view to determining its overall coherence or the truth value of its particular claims. I have mostly steered clear of the first option (and the dangers of reductionism that attend it), while remaining alive to how conservative accounts of crime speak to particular interests and forms of social experience. I have not embarked on the second path on the grounds that, if one is not careful, such critical analytic intent stands as a barrier to understanding (e.g., Honderich 2005). My preference for interpretation over critique has not, however, prevented identification of certain risks that flow from the conservative tradition – notably its tendency to over-identify with sovereign authority. Nor does it prevent one naming salient silences and omissions, or matters that conservatives treat lightly or gloss over. Questions to do with class, racial and gender inequalities, crimes of the powerful, and human rights loom large among such blind-spots. So too does conservatism's thin conception of democracy – what Butler and Seymour (2019: 8) term its 'fondness for decisionism and distrust of deliberation'.

A second response is sociological. This comes closer to my ambitions in this paper, though they have not extended to the task of asking whether certain recurring conservative ideas and policy nostrums are, sociologically speaking, exhausted. Rather, my purpose has been to understand, not only the distinctive character of conservative thought on crime, but also its cultural and emotional resonance. What is it about conservatism that has enabled it over the last half-century decades to affectively and effectively tap into the lived experience, the anxieties and aspirations, the fears and fantasies, of significant swathes of the population – a connection that extends far beyond those who see in conservative ideas a vehicle for defending their interests? This is a sociological and political task with which non-conservatives would be wise to reckon. My own reckoning has involved showing why conservatives are conceptually well-placed and equipped to mobilize when crime (and other in-group/out-group issues such as migration) come to public salience – not only because they meet disorder with the promise of sovereign control, but because they can effortlessly

frame the relevant questions in symbolically-loaded terms pertaining to the value, loss and protection of 'home'.

A third responsive is one of engagement and appropriation. Here one asks not about challenges the conservative tradition poses to a democratic egalitarian politics of crime, but about the resources conservatism might offer such a project. I have sought to correct the cardboard-cut-out version of conservatives as myopic enthusiasts for police power and penal control that is commonly mobilised in public (and sometimes criminological) discourse. To be sure, sovereign authority looms large in conservative accounts of ordering. But conservative ideology on crime is far richer and more internally variegated than this caricature allows. In this respect, one can locate within conservatism several ideas with which a non-conservative search for a better crime politics can engage. That project might retain conservative scepticism towards governmental programmes (and their unintended consequences and proneness to fail), though without buying into the complacent miserabilism into which conservatism too easily and eagerly lapses. A democratic egalitarian crime politics may want to make room for localism and an enlarged civil society, though without conservatism's attendant anti-statism and the fantasy that civil society can thrive without regulatory frameworks or public funding. One might, finally, reckon with the ways in which conservative ideology speaks to and articulates a human desire for rootedness, for places that feel like and can be enjoyed as 'home', for secure and effortless belonging. Critics of conservatism have been tempted to flee from the illiberal dangers of such ideals and sought instead to defend the rights and minority protections that are thought to be threatened by them. It may be, however, that the more pressing challenge lies in thinking harder (than conservatives do) about the economic and social underpinnings of secure belonging and in crafting a politics that accommodates notions of place/home without lapsing into the reactionary nativism that tends to accompany their conservative rendition.

Funding

Research for this paper was made possible by a 'Mid-Career Research Fellowship' from the Independent Social Research Foundation. I am immensely grateful for their support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dominic Aitken, Harry Annison, Naomi Creutzfeldt, Cecile Fabre, Jesse Norman MP, Peter Ramsay, Richard Sparks and Lucia Zedner for their constructive comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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