

BOOK REVIEW

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Sarah Pickard (ed.) *Anti-Social Behaviour in Britain: Victorian and Contemporary Perspectives*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 375 pp. £75.00 hardback. ISBN 9781137399304

Anti-Social Behaviour in Britain is a very welcome addition to the literature, not just in the field of criminological studies in this area, but also to the growing library of books on historical aspects of crime and deviance. By focussing on comparisons between the Victorian period and contemporary Britain, the reappearance or continuation of particular political, economic and social anxieties regarding the behaviour of its members is critically informative and thought-provoking. Sarah Pickard has innovatively composed an excellent collection of essays into this edited volume which details a variety of behaviours from incivility to riot and the vast spectrum of different conducts between them (which also includes offences and behaviours related to blasphemy, truancy, football hooliganism, public protest, homelessness, nomadism, and alcohol and illicit drug use).

The book is carefully dissected into three parts. Each carefully observes and analyses historical and contemporary issues around anti-social behaviour (ASB). The first part addresses ASB within the urban environment and public spaces. The second examines the vulnerable and the marginalised while the third focuses on ASB and recreation and leisure. Each chapter is relatively short, and while this proves frustrating as some of the chapters are deeply engaging and leave the reader wanting more, the mammoth 25 chapters that are on offer are carefully interlinked and there is subtle continuity between them that keeps the reader interested and absorbed.

What is striking about this collection of essays is the far reaching nature of what may be deemed as ASB. For example, many of the ASB examined also fall within the realm of public order offences. Section 36 Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 defines ASB as, 'behaviour by a person which causes or is likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more other persons not of the same household as the person'. It is unsurprising that such offences are also likely to fall within the remit of ss 4A and 5 Public Order Act 1986 which also carry the phrase 'harassment, alarm and distress'. Both provisions are so vague that they can encompass and criminalise a multitude of behaviours. A key achievement of this book is to

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relate these modern legal concepts to the Victorian period which demonstrates how many of today's concerns were also shared over 100 years ago. For example, Craig Johnstone's excellent chapter on the control of public space makes this comparison brilliantly as obstruction laws introduced in the early nineteenth century could be used to effectively control and manage the public space, while in the New Labour era the agenda was similarly set to control the use of public spaces with the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviours Orders, Dispersal Orders and the Local Child Curfew Scheme. Although the Victorians were predominantly concerned with the vagrant as their symbol of disorder and groups of loitering young people came to symbolise ASB in the Blair years, importantly, a common feature of both these groups that were targeted by the political agenda was that they were (and are) socio-economically marginalised.

Furthermore, the chapters authored by Aurélie Baudry-Palmer and Anne Beauvallet also tackle the problem of youth ASB in the context of Victorian concerns regarding children and young people and how they could be reformed and elevated from criminal behaviours. Baudry-Palmer's study, which is set against the backdrop of the developing reformatory schools, provides a fascinating insight into the social perspectives on juvenile crime and punishment which were faced by the reformer Mary Carpenter in the Victorian era. The heart of these reforms were encapsulated by the desire to remove children from 'their perverting environment' and provide industrial training to help them benefit society rather than being 'its bane' (p.120). In the following chapter, Beauvallet's study examines further links between the responses to juvenile ASB in both periods. She identifies parallels between the responses of Victorian Britain and contemporary Britain under New Labour, who both associated truancy (as an activity linked predominantly poor and deprived children) as a threat to the social order.

The links between ASB and ideas on respectability are also discussed throughout. This is a prominent part of John Mullen's chapter on the music hall in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Performers were expected to tone down the 'vulgarity' of their acts in order to conform to the tastes of the 'social elite' (p.261). This links with the important issue of class which resonates throughout the volume. The majority of chapters highlight how the ruling elite (whether social or political) regulate or legislate against particular behaviours they find distasteful in order to 'civilise' or control the 'underclass' in their own image. Pickard (pp.310-311) makes this point in her conclusion, adding that the governments in both eras have distanced themselves from any structural factors within society, 'othering' marginal and vulnerable groups such as the poor so that the state cannot be accountable for 'disreputable' behaviours while individuals, families and communities are responsible for their own

problems. This is certainly a provocative and thought-provoking standpoint and one that needs to be expressed. Furthermore, the view that ASB was the preserve of the poor or the working classes is challenged by Pickard herself who discusses the view that the police and the government had acted anti-socially during the student riots in the winter of 2010/11. And this view brings us back to another central issue: What is anti-social behaviour? The term, even in its legal definition, is so vague that it amounts to 'taste' and a particular standpoint that may so easily be influenced by social standing. As demonstrated in the chapters by Andrew Millie and John Mullen in particular, where the ruling elite governs the tastes or behaviours of what they perceive as an unruly underclass, the result is the gratuitous creation of folk devils or a marginalised 'other' which alienates particular groups and can lead to the restriction of freedoms which effect society more widely. It is here that Pickard leaves us with the thought that we should have a more 'constructive approach to difficult or challenging behaviour... [and have more] tolerance of potentially anti-social behaviour.' I am inclined to agree and think that the debates opened here deserve to be engaged with and explored further.