

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IN 20TH CENTURY BRITAIN: AUDIENCE, JUSTICE MEMORY (2014)

Lizzie Seal

Routledge, 181pp excl. appendix and references

ISBN: 9780415622448

Reviewed by Dr. Wulf Livingston, Glyndwr University

There is often a deep ambiguity between the repeated calls for capital punishment, especially in response to very particular crimes, and any societal comfortableness with the actual execution of individuals by the state. This book provides a really lucid and rich exploration of these uncertainties, as experienced through the British twentieth century journey towards an ending of capital punishment. It is a detailed sociological history, fusing academic and original sources, which help us, understand the how and why of the passage that led up to the British abolition of capital punishment in 1965. Beyond the account of a nation's move to the primacy of life sentences, this skilfully crafted narrative offers deep reflection on the collective emotional relationship that occurs through the processes associated with the state ending an individual's life.

Seal explores developments in British responses to capital punishment across a number of thematic considerations; the nation as viewers of executions, changing responses in comfortableness with the implications of death sentences, long lasting disquiet with miscarriages of justice and the hanging of the innocent, and the legacies of memory and current policy debate. In order to contextualise these conversations the book's initial chapter provides an overview of concepts and events associated with capital punishment. This and the subsequent chapters are underpinned by a dextrous use of traditional academic sources and a range of other archive material. These latter sources are from local, regional and national newspaper archives; plus other national archives and, in particular, letters to politicians.

The analytical discussion begins with two chapters that explore the continued viewing from afar (the 1868 Act made executions no longer public), via the media, and how tales of the gallows remained both entertainment and causes of increasingly ambivalent disquiet. What is especially good about these chapters is how they capture the sense of an enduring audience, and its feelings about the leaked details of the process of death and the character and crime of those hung.

Chapter four articulates how these feelings increasingly represented a popular protest against execution. Seal does this through accounts of the most uncomfortable of killings, such as that of Derek Bentley; and explorations of key campaigners like Violet van der Elst. The book then moves on, through the themes of; justice, doubt, mitigation, arbitrariness, inequity and retribution to consider the diversity of public responses, as often expressed in detailed letters. The book really begins to stretch out, offering a detail for those studying or working in these arenas to reflect upon their own understanding of history and current policy debate.

The two exemplars of Edith Thompson's 1923 and Timothy Evans' 1950 hanging are subsequently used to illustrate how some of these themes played out in detail. But more than

describing the events, Seal provides a crafted exposition of how the disquiet about the appropriateness of these killings then lingers, as a ghost to haunt subsequent generations and discourses. The penultimate chapter brings together the ambiguities and memories into considerations of the post-abolition of execution period. Thus, an account of those who still give support and voice for a return to capital punishment, calls for more punitive considerations, the fear of miscarriage and the mistrust of the efficiencies of any method of execution.

Seal concludes with an exploration of the relationship between the law, actions of execution and subsequent memory. In doing so she explores the spaces where the legitimacy of appropriate justice, the fascination with the detail of the killing and the subsequent reflective re-examinations merge in to a collective societal discourse. In this sense the book is a fascinating companion to other sociological orientated explorations of execution, like that of Brook et al (2008), which help us understand that the events of any particular killing have a legacy discourse that frequently speaks beyond events and into the shaping of future narratives and understanding.

The theme of dissonance between desire for (even fascination with) exacting punishment and unease at states taking life, is one that continues to prevail in Britain. Indeed the book's concluding chapter explores three key aspects of current British policy; the desire for punitive punishment of particular heinous murderers (notably Myra Hindley and Ian Brady – the 'Moors Murderers'), unease with the possibilities and consequences of miscarriages of justice; and dismay at the current American experiences. Thus, while this book concentrates on the specifics of the British predicament, it acknowledges the wider global context and in particular the tribulations of the current USA approach. These contradictory pulls remain a global phenomenon, perhaps best illustrated by the 22% decrease in executions being carried out worldwide in 2014 (to an known minimum of 607), set against a 28% increase in people being known to have been sentenced to death – to at least 2,466 (Amnesty International 2015). This book helps provide a rich contextual analysis of the qualitative considerations that help explain the paradoxes between the desire to punish by sentence to death and the reluctance to have state executions.

REFERENCES

Amnesty International (2015). *Death sentences and executions 2014* London, Amnesty International.

Brook, T., Bourgon, J. and Blue, G. (2008). *Death by a thousand cuts USA*, Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College.