Book review

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Magnus Hörnqvist, *The Pleasure of Punishment*, Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2021: 173 pp., ISBN 978-0-367-18532-9

In *The Pleasure of Punishment*, the criminologist Magnus Hörnqvist sets out a provocative thesis: To understand modern punishment, we must think about its pleasure-seeking and pleasure-satisfying dimensions. The "excitement of early-modern execution crowds" is the "paradigmatic example of the pleasure of punishment," Hörnqvist writes (p. 4)—think of the execution of Damiens at the beginning of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*—but this kind of untroubled enjoyment is no longer permissible or possible. We are no longer dealing with the straightforward satisfaction of relatively simple desires. Rather, now the pleasure of punishment is mediated through a whole series of complex psychosocial proxies, chiefly to do with the desire for recognition and the satisfaction of *ressentiment*.

In the book's first two chapters, Hörnqvist lays out the book's agenda, which is to reread a broad range of figures from the history of Western philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Kant, Bentham, Hegel, and Nietzsche to name the key *dramatis personae*—and then to "reconstruct the audience experience" of punishment in four separate historical epochs: ancient Greece, medieval Europe, early-modern Europe (mainly the eighteenth century), and the West after 1968. Hörnqvist's core thesis is that desire—and the desire for punishing criminal offenders in particular—is ambiguous; provocatively, Hörnqvist argues that even in the desire for that which is most base and cruel, we find a kind of camouflaged, disavowed desire for the good, for "social justice" *in potentia*. "By pursuing desire all the way," Hörnqvist writes, "we may also find the desire for something radically different. If the desire for social justice is immanent in the most racist, or in the most horrifying acts, disentangling that aspect would be true to the original intention of critical theory" (p. 9).

The book's penultimate chapter draws this out fully, where Hörnqvist subjects a traumatic episode in recent Swedish history to closer scrutiny. In 2015, an Eritrean immigrant, who had been denied asylum in Sweden only a few hours earlier, stabbed and killed two people in an IKEA department store in Västerås, a mid-sized town 100 km west of Stockholm. The attacks provoked outrage, especially on the political right. But the fact that the perpetrator was sentenced to life imprisonment and scheduled for deportation after the completion of the sentence, proved reasonably satisfying even to that central figure of late-modern penality that Hörnqvist, following Nietzsche, calls *the*

angry spectator. As Nietzsche notes, the angry spectator is backward-looking, is often seething with resentment, and feels politically impotent (p. 132).

It is going much too far to say that the book sympathizes with this figure: As Hörnqvist rightly points out, *ressentiment* produces deeply skewed perceptions of reality, where "everything good about the other" becomes misperceived through what Nietzsche describes as "the poisonous eye of *ressentiment*" (cit. p. 140). But Hörnqvist tries to take seriously the outcry of the "ordinary citizen" (p. 131), who sees chaos, crime, and the breakdown of the moral order—and who favors a harsh punitive response to shore up a society said to be under strain. None of this will make sense without placing the role of *ressentiment*, as Hörnqvist does, at center-stage in political analysis. Ours is in many ways an age of *ressentiment*, as Wendy Brown prophetically recognized in the 1990s (p. 129). Hörnqvist defines *ressentiment* as "perceived powerlessness combined with unfulfilled status expectations" (p. 129). But why should penologists care about *ressentiment*? Because as Nietzsche showed, punishment transforms the audience's—and, in particular, the angry spectator's—pain and suffering into pleasure. Their social resentments are at once fueled and satisfied by punishment, offering a release of pent-up tensions and gratifying an angry and humiliated (or so they claim) citizenry.

This ties back into another key notion applied to penological matters by Hörnqvist, namely the concept of *recognition*, developed out of a lengthy discussion of the ancient Greek idea of *thumos*, a need to be recognized as the condition sine qua non for social existence. Hörnqvist asks what sort of desire drives punishment. Asked in this form, of course, we are approaching question-begging: It would be very tempting to say that there is a specific "punishment-desire," which is satisfied by the imposition of punishment—just as opium is said to induce sleep because it is *soporific*. Hörnqvist's solution is to suggest that the desire for punishment partakes of a wider form of social desire, at once *integrative* and *differentiating*. More specifically, "the desire for punishment belongs to a broader register of desire. It is the desire to be fully part of society, or to distinguish oneself over against others" (p. 59). Consuming punishment—being a spectator to it, whether directly or at a remove—generates recognition, in the Hegelian-Honnethian sense, a term akin to prestige, honor, legitimacy, and belonging.

With excessive punishment in particular, this dual socio-functional effect of "being accepted as part of the group and asserting oneself over against others" (p. 166) seems particularly efficacious. The spectators of punishment feel themselves to belong more fully to some definite social order (useful in the case of marginalized minorities and dominated class fractions) and feel an elevated sense of social worth. Punishment operates along hierarchically stratified social space, then: it cements its boundaries (a classical Durkheimian trope), and it empowers those occupying ambiguous positions of intermediate domination/dominance, such as the lower-middle class or dislocated industrial working class. The trouble with this theory for the sociology of punishment, as Hörnqvist recognizes, is that there is no automatic causative connection between the desire for recognition and empirical punitive outcomes. "The desire to be fully included or to distinguish oneself over against others does not necessarily translate into a yearning for punishment" (p. 166). Punitivity is historical. This should prompt further theorizing of the psychosocial conditions of punitive social systems.

One problem with the Durkheimian theory of the communicability of punishment is that punishment quite frequently is *hypo-visible*, even near-invisible. Most people lack a realistic appraisal of what goes on inside a courtroom or prison wing. For punishment to have communicative, boundary-enforcing, audience-bolstering effects, it would have to be actually visible or at least sensible. The relative invisibility of punishment is a major strike against the theory of punishment's communicative effects, because communication presupposes an audience. What is striking about contemporary punishment is a comparative lack of spectators, even at a remove.

In the book's final chapter, Hörnqvist tackles the question of what he calls "obscene enjoyment." The author returns to Nietzsche's apt observation that "in punishment there is so much [that is] *festive!*" (cit. p. 149). As Hörnqvist observes, by drawing attention to its joyous, passionate dimension, Nietzsche signalled that the enjoyment of punishment had become problematic to the nineteenth-century spectator. Pleasure-in-punishment would have to become a secret enjoyment—or at least *relatively* secret: Hörnqvist recounts a 2016 Trump rally where the presidential candidate promised policies "much tougher than waterboarding" to "audible sounds of approval" from his audience (p. 161).

What Hörnqvist calls obscene enjoyment is the specifically late-modern way the public comes to enjoy punishment. And this is not just a sideshow, but in many ways the main production. The degradation of black working-class and subproletarian men by the U.S. prison system, and their ritual denial of parole in states like California, seems fueled at least in part by an element of what Lacan called *jouissance*, which Hörnqvist interprets as the "specific pleasures of transgression" (p. 151). They involve the performance of a kind of circus of obscene pleasure-seeking and the satisfaction of dark, obscure desires in the majoritarian mind. The *secret pleasure*—a motif in the thought of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan—taken in punishing (or maltreating) criminal offenders, deviants, "terrorists," and mere suspects is a central explanans in making sense of why societies punish to the scale and form they do. Strangely, hardly anyone tilling the fields of penology seems to have noticed. There exists, after all, a family resemblance between a variety of forms of state intervention that broadly involve the *application of negative social energy*, ranging from stigmatization to detention, conviction to incarceration, torture to capital punishment, housing demolitions to extraordinary renditions. The enjoyment of punishment is itself causative of macro-level punitive outcomes. Hörnqvist takes up less traditionally rigorous theorists like Lacan and Žižek, pivoting away from the social sciences, because, as he points out, the field of pleasure-in-punishment has been largely relegated by sociology to psychoanalysis (p. 155). Elias, Durkheim, and Foucault all make room for emotions in their analyses—as the refinement of manners (Elias), "institutionally channelled moral outrage" (Durkheim) (p. 7), or techniques of power (Foucault)—but have little time for pleasure as such.

Žižek's concept of a "nightly" law (the law as inherently transgressive rather than rule-bound) is conceived of as a parallel system enjoining its participants to transgress—exemplified in the finding that Guantanamo Bay torture methods sprang directly from the desk of Donald Rumsfeld rather than being individual acts of aberration at ground-level. What is so suggestive about Hörnqvist's appropriation of this concept is

the argument that the nightly law is itself operative within the more humdrum realities of the penal system, or at least in the causative origins of this system: Should we really be shocked when yet another "prison scandal" is broken by investigative reporters in the media, having to do with decrepit conditions of confinement—or should we rather ask whether this is not integral to how the system is meant to operate, tacitly allowing "illicit" impositions of pain as part of its routine mechanisms of functioning? While the owl of Minerva alights only at dusk, the scales of Justitia seem to fall in an ever-present night.

Returning to the beginning, then, Hörnqvist's earlier claim about punitivity being psychosocially linked—at least potentially—with social justice, can be read as an implicit argument about how other more nurturing policies and institutions might be mobilized to satisfy a *ressentiment*-ridden public. Instead of punishing harshly, might not these angry constituencies be appeased with higher (union-enforced) wages, shorter working hours, free healthcare and better schools, greater social protections—all those collective defense mechanisms established against the fluctuations of ontological insecurity produced by market society—perhaps combined with a re-allocation of social enmity away from lower-class immigrants and toward the bourgeoisie and billionaire class? *Ressentiment* can be fed with more substantial fare than longer prison terms and harsher conditions of confinement. To punish harshly is not just a sign of the political left's failure to win a narrow symbolic struggle over criminal justice policymaking, but its political defeat across the board—especially in economic affairs. It is one of the outstanding achievements of this book that it maps this failure indirectly in its psychosocial mediation via such concepts as recognition and *ressentiment*. What the political economists have only alluded to, Hörnqvist draws out both skilfully and sensitively.

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