

Punish And Critique: Towards A Feminist Analysis Of Penality

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In *Punish and Critique*, Adrian Howe makes a major contribution both to the literature on penality and to postmodern penal politics. Howe reviews the range of critical perspectives, Marxist, post structuralist and feminist, that have proliferated in the field of penology over the past twenty five years. This exegesis, however, is a means to an end: the second half of the book reflects Howe's concern to alter the ground of the debate, to effect a paradigm shift that will move the study of punishment to a consideration of the 'gendered characteristics of disciplinary procedures'.

The comprehensive review of masculinist and feminist approaches to punishment systems provides a firm basis for the author's engagement with the question that lies at the core of her book: 'what comprises a feminist theorisation of penalty?' Howe sees limitations in both sets of literatures: the impoverished conception of 'the social' that undermines the analytic power of the masculinist critical perspectives on punishment, and the limitations of gender as an explanatory variable. At this point the author opens up a number of issues: how to move beyond the dualistic focus on women as prisoners that has dominated much of the feminist analysis of punishment, how to use feminist analysis to problematise the extraordinarily masculine character of penality, and the associated but broader question of the ways in which men, especially working class men, are regulated to make 'class and gender deals' in modern society.

Howe argues for a feminist study of punishment that pursues the Foucauldian project of extending our investigations beyond the prison to examine the several ways in which the boundaries between policing and

punishment become blurred in Western society. This brings her in the penultimate chapter to a review of the postmodernist literature of the non-legal, non-penal coercion of girls and women in Western society. However, as she points out:

Penalty thus finds itself locked into a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, critical analysts of penalty ... remain imprisoned within the confines of a narrowly construed legally defined penal arena where they continue to focus almost exclusively on men's prison systems. On the other hand, feminist research on questions ranging from the coercion of privacy to the disciplining of the female body, ... have contributed immensely to the project of developing a feminist, and thus more nuanced, social analysis of penalty. Yet ... (w)e still await a sustained critical engagement between masculinist analyses of the penal realm and feminist analysts of the disciplining of women which will transform our understanding of punishment (p.206).

The final chapter focuses on what Howe calls 'a final disjuncture — that between theory and practice'. Here the reader is provided with a thoughtful overview of the debate about 'who can speak for whom'; a discussion that has, as the author demonstrates, a particular resonance for researchers in the field of penalty.

One critical point: given Howe's concern about the latest forms of penal surveillance and control, and the extension of the penal panopticon gaze out into the community, there is one set of literatures that is omitted from her critical gaze - the feminist analysis of the relationship between domesticity and penalty, particularly as it addresses that social population who are constrained by the penal system through their family obligations to sentenced offenders. As we are now living in a penal era which includes electronically monitored home imprisonment at the 'soft' end of the contemporary penal-welfare continuum, this set of literatures deserves to be brought into any overview of the feminist analysis of penalty. However as Carol Smart, the series editor points out, *Punish and Critique* is not so much a finished project as an ongoing conversation which calls for further debate and elaboration.

As a final comment, it is important to point to the clarity of Howe's writing and the conversational style with which she engages with the theoretical issues. This makes it excellent basic reading for teachers introducing students to the debate in any field of contemporary social theory.