

For a Zemiology of Politics

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For a Zemiology of Politics

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Key Words: Zemiology, Politics, Crime, Harm, Crises, Criminology, Neoliberalism.

Introduction

In 1913, as the world stood at the edge of an abyss of social harm from which it would not emerge for decades, criminologists contemplated the criminal's hereditary biology (Beirne, 1988). Amid the brutality of war, depression, fascism, Stalinist communism, colonialism, crimes against humanity and genocide that ensued, many German criminologists busied themselves in facilitating Nazi 'criminal justice', devising taxonomies of the pathological criminals and 'asocials' who were to be sent to concentration camps (Rafter, 2008; Gellately, 2001; Wachsmann, 2001). It was, as Rafter notes, criminology's darkest hour. Today, humanity once again stands at the edge of an abyss: it is a moment of severe and, in some ways, unprecedented conjunctural crisis, comprising distinct but deeply entangled ecological, economic, military, social, health, and political crises that have already inflicted extreme social harms on humanity and ecology. Vulnerable populations still suffer the social harms of a post-2008 global financial and economic crisis which, whilst rooted in neoliberal conditions, was met by political parties intensifying those very conditions (White, 2017). Politically, Europe, the US, and elsewhere are experiencing a period in which "forces of conservatism, nativism, racism and imperial nostalgia remain hugely powerful" (Jacques, 2017). Britain has exited from the European Union in a culmination of longstanding anti-immigration politics. The alarming acceleration under President Trump of White House-led racist politics in the United States has led one prominent commentator to identify the insurgent phenomenon as 'neoliberal fascism' (Giroux, 2020). Trumpism has come to symbolise a blatant hostility to reason that is becoming normalised across a range of countries. These harms moreover are reproduced against the background of existential ecological emergency that is deeply exacerbated by the core drivers of

'new neo-liberal' capitalism and its addictive mass consumption (Brown, 2015; Dardot & Laval, 2019; Klein, 2015). Perhaps catastrophically however, the full dimensions and root causes of this emergency are obscured by the protection of dominant economic and political interests and the powerful movements they rouse and sponsor.

In such circumstances, questions arising for criminologists include: what were criminologists doing as these crises exploded? Were they actively resisting, acquiescing in, or contributing to their legitimisation and reproduction? What future judgement will be made, looking back at criminological activity in the early twenty-first century? For the integrity of the discipline and the furtherance of social emancipation, criminology must respond and be seen to be responding, to the gravity of these threats. This article advocates that 'traditional' crime-centric criminological concerns should be recognised as lying within and subordinate to a broader and foundationally social harms-based approach. Criminology, in this sense, should be seen as a sub-discipline of zemiology. The article supports arguments for an urgent change in the discipline's focus, realigning it from its focus on transgression of norms and law, to analysis of, and confrontation with, major social harms. This article does not propose or debate specific definitions or aim to review debates around social harm and zemiology more generally.

These are ongoing and discussion is provided elsewhere (see Canning and Tombs, 2021; Boukli and Kotze, 2018; Pemberton, 2015; Yar, 2012). Our concern rather, is to insert the ideas, institutions, processes and practices of politics into considerations of socially generated or mediated harm, however the latter is specifically defined. As a matter of fact, we happen to agree with the Tombs and Canning's (2021, p. 110) identification of harms 'as those actions, omissions, policies, conditions, states of affairs, assumptions, ways of doing things and dominant structures which contribute to the absence of or distortions in self-actualisation.' It is important to recognise that this goes beyond the denial of narrowly defined needs or rights. Moreover, if we 'gain an understanding of harm exactly because it represents the converse reality of an imagined desirable state' (Pemberton, 2015, p. 32), then by implication the imagined desirable state must have some substance. Davies (2011) illustrates this point for example in his argument that state and corporate 'wellbeing' initiatives, promoted as responses to epidemic levels of occupational stress, are founded on narrow and shallow hedonic (pleasure focused) notions of 'wellbeing' that completely fail to match contemporary organisational-structural 'externalisation of unhappiness'. For Davies (ibid, p. 70) a eudaimonic rather than hedonic conceptualisation of wellbeing or happiness is crucial: representing 'a lack of positive capability to act meaningfully in pursuit of one's own substantive goals'. It is not about pleasure or its absence, it is about deep alienation and deep unhappiness. Hedonic framing of wellbeing₃ indeed

misses the point made by Fisher (2010) that under contemporary capitalism, there is sadly and for many, an inability to do anything other than to seek pleasure.

On a different point, we would agree with Pemberton (2015, p. 6-7) that as a disciplinary term, zemiology is useful in countering the 'co-option of the language of social harm into criminological discourse' and emphasising social harm as the organising concept of zemiological study. Social harm has to be more than a branch, or add-on to the academic enterprise under discussion here, just as 'harm reduction' cannot be reduced to 'wellbeing days' in the contemporary anti-democratic and exploitative workplace. It is worth noting at this point too, that although 'social harm' is a term we use throughout, it should not be taken to imply that there is an easy distinction between 'social' and say, 'natural' harms. As sociologists of disasters have recognised for many years, most natural hazards will, insofar as they may be said to be harmful, be socially mediated in one way or another.

Specifically, this article argues for a zemiology and agnotology of politics. There is a pressing need for an interrogation of the ideological and institutional systems and processes that shape the production, legitimation and therefore reproduction, of major social harms. This implies, in turn, that consistent attention be given to the production of zemiogenic ignorance, at the heart of which lie political systems and ideologies operating, broadly speaking, in the service of global elites and corporate oligopolies. The historic acquiescence of crime-centric criminology before even the most vicious political movements has represented a deeply troubling disposition towards appeasement (see Rafter, 2008). In the absence of a robust and rigorous agnotological zemiology of politics, criminology will, at best, contribute little of importance towards today's crises. Instead, it will confine itself to second-order questions, focusing not on the profound social harms faced, but on how they might cause more 'criminality'. At worst, contemporary criminology will be seen as complicit in the disasters that confront humanity, just as natural and social sciences of deviancy of the past were often complicit in the inhumanities of their times. A zemiology of politics must be public and must publicly meet the moral and political responsibilities of these times.

Although this article focuses mainly upon state-led politics - the politics of governments, political parties, and the actions of elected officials, who, whether in government or 'opposition', play major roles in contemporary political economies of social harm - this is only one aspect of politics. A zemiology of politics, as some of the discussion below makes clear, would also attend to politically influential forces in contemporary society that exist beyond narrow, official and formal politics, including local and international political activism, corporate power and

influence, popular culture and media for example. These forces have significant capacity to generate, amplify or challenge social harm and their power may be enhanced, for good or ill, by intensifying cynicism towards state-led politics (Hedges, 2018, 2009; Brown, 2019, 2015). Whilst space precludes comprehensive discussion of the myriad forms of both state and non-state led politics, a zemiology of politics would need to cast its analyses over all political players contributing to social harm production. We would also note at this point that the state itself needs to be understood, critically and broadly as the main site of, and deeply intertwined with the political struggles we need to interrogate. Following Coleman *et al* (2009 p. 18), we agree that ‘an analysis that stops at the “institutional ensemble”...is likely to produce a highly reductive account of state power. Any zemiology of politics demands that ‘the state – what it is, where it is and what it does should be constantly re-problematized’ (ibid, p. 14) for as Jessop (cited ibid, p. 14) puts it, ‘the power of the state is the power of the forces acting in and through the state’.

On the Failures of Crime Centric Criminology

The problems of a criminology that orients itself narrowly according to what its host state defines as breaking the criminal law are serious and in the urgent circumstances of today, dangerous. Charting a course set by law implicitly but inevitably follows the agendas and interests of those who make that law. A common rebuttal would be, that in ‘liberal democracies’ at least, the law is an expression of democratic will - it should be followed. Transgressing the democratic ‘social contract’ is, according to this view, an act of deviance that demands social scientific investigation and management. However, the current direction of travel of the United States for example, has been far more (economically) neoliberal than democratic (Giroux, 2020; Brown 2015, 2019; Dardot and Laval, 2018). Moreover, the power to shape the law never has been remotely equal. For example, legislative outcomes in the United States are demonstrably *not* correlated with public opinion (Gilens & Page, 2014). Rather, they correlate to both specific and general requirements of the most powerful social interests. In specific cases, policy, regulatory and legislative outcomes are effectively purchased through ‘lobbying’, campaign support or bribery. For example, lobbying by large pharmaceutical corporations has successfully secured legislative restrictions on the right of state health services to negotiate drug prices worth tens of billions of dollars to ‘Big Pharma’ (Stiglitz, 2012). In a similar vein, through its lobbying and funding of legislators, the financial services industry successfully watered-down proposed regulations on auditor-consulting services prior to the Enron disaster, and resisted structural reform after the catastrophic 2008 crisis. Legal and regulatory systems from ‘war law’ (Smith, 2002) to environmental regulation (Ruggiero and South, 2010) and through to COVID-19 relief legislation, reflect the interests of those comparatively few players most able to influence legislative and policy outputs. In stark contrast, the US Senate’s suppression of black Americans’ right to vote,

most recently evident in Republicans purging voters from registration rolls, has excluded the already structurally vulnerable from even the most basic rights and influence in a democracy.

History testifies that 'elite' direction of the liberal democratic state is not limited to the present moment. Over time, societies construct, renew and periodically reshape ideological 'inequality regimes' that 'justify' the expropriation, and exploitation of natural and social resources by the wealthy (Piketty, 2020). In contemporary liberal democracies, where 'regalian' rights are ostensibly equal, it remains the case that dominant economic interests, via their disproportionate control of material and ideological resources (including those of the state), exclude the mass of the population from governing and arrange law and policy broadly in their own interests (Piketty, 2020; Dardot and Laval, 2018; Brown, 2015, Gilens & Page, 2014).

This 'inequality regime' involves the promotion of broad coincidences of material interest and, crucially, the promotion of hegemonic 'common-sense'. It is within the terms of this 'common-sense' that the answers to fundamental social questions are settled: who matters, what is fair, who owns society, and how and by whom it is to be governed. The mass of people, contrary to liberal democratic myth, have always suffered and continue to suffer, profound exclusion from power over law and policy that govern their lives. In too many cases, the reality of democracy is shallow, cosmetic and fragile. Indeed, in many states the trend appears to be away from, rather than towards, meaningful democracy and for that matter, political liberalism.

All this means that taking criminal law as the criminological enterprise's guide is an inadequate position. The law has been and remains shaped against the many and towards the few. At its centre is its disproportionate and taken-for-granted concern with property, ownership and the protection of 'rights' and interests therein. Piketty (2020) traces the long history of property regimes, culminating in our own globalized hyper-inequality', underpinned as it is by the 'quasi-sacralisation' of property rights. This focus on property is not 'merely' about beliefs – it is of course translated into legal codes, and the policy and practice of deviancy management. And, in property owning democracies it is extraordinarily tenacious. To take one recent instructive example, in June 2020, British Home Secretary Priti Patel condemned the toppling of a statue of slaver Edward Colston in Bristol as "sheer vandalism". Patel concerned herself with the "disorder" that this represented. This concern, given that the toppling of the statue injured nobody, was really about the threat to property order as a whole. The grotesque irony here of course was that what made Colston the figure he was, was precisely a gruesome conception of ownership rights in which people were the commodities, to be kidnapped and exchanged, legally, for profit. Escaping from slavery, not slavery itself was the criminal offence. Nearly two centuries after the official

ending of slavery in British colonies, the gross offensiveness of the public glorification of a slaver, physically memorialized before, among others, (uncompensated) slave-descendants, was, for the Home Secretary, an issue secondary to the maintenance of inviolable property. For her, this “indefensible” “hooliganism” required addressing through the full force of the law.

As zemiological literature recognizes, adherence to ‘crime’ as its lodestar places traditional criminology in a fundamentally compromised position. When the motivation for study is not social harm, but the fact that a law has been transgressed, the discipline becomes the implicit supporter of the state and the broader zemiogenic regime on which it rests. In practice this leads too easily to a disproportionate focus on relatively low-harm acts or transgressions against local law and conservative moralities to the neglect of far more socially harmful acts, omissions, processes, and structures, many of which are legal (and conformist, rather than deviant). A critical sociology of injustice has to give its attention to structures that reproduce the mass harms that immiserate, injure and kill, in and across societies. As zemiological scholars we need therefore to ask ourselves: what are the most critical specific social harms of the moment and that can reasonably be foreseen? How should these social harms be debated and resisted? How can the discipline refrain from further servicing harmful relations and instead promote change? In response to these questions, maybe we will find our work to be irrelevant - ignoring harms of the powerful or giving them disproportionately little attention. We might even find our work to be an active accomplice to social harms. It may document harms without identifying the structures and ideologies that reproduce them. It may be steered by league table concerns or our own careerism. And if this is what we do find, then we clearly need to change how we work. A critical zemiology needs to interrogate the material and the ideological, exposing the industrialised generation and legitimation of mass harm. It needs to analyze these issues at macro, meso, and micro levels. This article reflects that standing at the centre of these matrices are the social harms of *politics*, the politics that zemiology must understand, account for, and counteract.

State-led harms, harm regimes and the ‘New Neoliberalism’

The case for a zemiology of politics does not rest upon contingencies of the current political moment. Rather, history shows that the social harms of politics are perennial. Politicians, their decisions and policies, the movements that support them, the ideological systems they sustain and exploit, and the institutions that enable them together comprise unprecedented capacities to injure. This is not only true in the case of state powers to criminalize, incarcerate, and execute – and familiarity for criminologists should not diminish their significance – but also in the extremis of state mass killing: for example in military violence. Here vast state capacities for violent coercion and domination are directed inwards, or outwards against the populations of other states.

It is worth discussing this briefly because it reminds us that for all the (justified) attention paid by critical scholars to the social harms of neoliberal societies broadly 'at peace', it is easy to forget that political movements once in power, do not just work through the manipulation of law or opinion, through tutelage, narrative or aesthetics. They do not simply punish through carefully calibrated and humane 'tariffs'. State operatives, at the direction of their political overlords, kill. They kill frequently, on a vast scale and they kill people who have never committed crimes. This is military homicide: the state 'at war'.

From the medieval period European leaders' demands for ever-increasing military development shaped their societies to the point that by the twentieth century they could be mobilized towards extraordinary levels of sustained slaughter. Whilst World Wars saw industrialized capital and labour directed towards mass destruction, by the century's midpoint the extension of the American war economies into peacetime consolidated what in 1960 the departing American President Dwight Eisenhower warned was an unprecedented and dangerous 'military-industrial complex' (MIC). The fact that in the original draft of his speech Eisenhower actually warned of a military-industrial-*congressional* complex evidenced the embeddedness of militarism in politics. Originating in the context of Cold War, and not least a Keynesian concern to maintain post-war employment, the MIC has successfully survived the end of both. It now offers global military unipolarity and seemingly limitless opportunities for corporate profit (Cypher, 2007). The vast resources now committed to US 'defence' now exceed those of the rest of the world's major military powers combined.

Past and present demonstrate conclusively that state leaders and their followers will frequently become motivated to use such military capacities. Geopolitical motivations include access to, or securing of resources and related strategic interests. As wars can be popular, domestic political factors can also be important. Whatever the motive towards violence here, the key political task in such circumstances is to justify it. Common justifications maintain that violence is defensive (and even pre-emptively defensive) and/or declare moral righteousness. Such claims can be grounded in many ideological foundations, from fear, to humanitarianism but importantly, in legal and moral exception from international norms. Military homicide has been justified as a 'civilizing mission' for centuries. For these political and legal justifications to work, significant ideological and cultural preparatory groundwork is required. Today, military violence is glorified and transformed into hedonic heroism by the mass media, in sports and in other entertainment and cultural settings (Kelly, 2012; Gagnon, 2010; Butterworth and Moskal, 2009; Elias, 2011; Ottosen, 2009). Military violence by proxy, on gaming consoles, television news broadcasts, or cinema screens can be manipulated very easily to excite and thrill. Simultaneously, subjects are called to

recognise (in acts of remembrance, or sports contests dedicated 'to those who serve') the heroism of sacrifice and duty. Military personnel themselves are usually the victims remembered here, not their victims, no matter how unequal the combat may have been. Underpinning these activities lie longstanding and carefully cultivated popular nationalist prejudices and notions of ethnic identity. Cunningham (2004) notes that post 9/11 United States military violence was not just a response to that traumatic day, but was also entirely consistent with half a century of American hegemonic domestic militarism. History also demonstrates the weakness of obstacles to political deployment of military homicide. Leaderships and their movements themselves have offered little protection, which might be rather obvious in relation to governments that seek to launch violence, but it has also proved true of opposition movements. During World War One international socialist solidarity crumbled before calls of patriotism and duty (Leonhard, 2018; Watson, 2015). Female suffragism also fell behind respective national war efforts and women became propaganda weapons in enlistment campaigns. Post-World War Two, consent has been granted by democratic opposition parties for numerous wars. Military homicide has also been immeasurably aided by the compliance of mass media. Indeed, much of the mass media go far beyond acquiescence, vociferously cheerleading for 'those who serve'. This is produced through news and entertainment selection processes, journalistic embedding and less obviously, in a 'covert grammar' that masks suffering of victims and removes agency from the violent (Lukin, Butt, and Matthiessen, 2004). The media is really no restraint at all.

International legal restraints on military violence have also been limited. International Military Tribunals after World War Two failed to properly address many Axis war crimes, or to address Allied war crimes at all, with the consequence that aerial bombardment of civilians has remained largely unpunished ever since. Moreover, to the extent that 'war law' has advanced, it has done so by creating an asymmetry that heavily favours militaries that are 'lawyered-up' and equipped with hi-tech surveillance and weaponry (Smith, 2002). Notwithstanding its pronounced advantages in terms of both, the most powerful military state on Earth has made clear its position on inconveniences of international law (in its 2005 National Security Strategy – cited in Iadicola, 2010, p. 39) by equating legal opposition to American security interests with opposition through terrorism. International law then, when it conflicts with state interests, is to be opposed or disregarded. More fundamentally as Dauphinee (2008) argues, one evident consequence of declaring some categories of military homicides illegal has been the implicit legalization all other military homicide. What this all amounts to is that political drives towards military killing often remain un-counteracted. Though it might be argued that militarily powerful states deter each other, political decisions are often irrational (see Allison, 1999) and such deterrence does not work, even theoretically, where one state has a major military advantage. Rather, since World War Two,

military homicide has continued to be an accepted and frequently used instrument of politics, as Ukraine, Yemen and elsewhere tragically attest.

In addition to the longstanding capacity of political leaderships to incarcerate and kill, in today's 'new neoliberal' moment, they can wreak a whole range of other hurts upon sections of society. Piketty (2020) as noted above, identifies the historical ubiquity of 'inequality regimes' (justifying, for example, such diverse societies as ternary societies, emerging and varied European ownership societies, slave, colonial, social democratic, communist, and post-communist societies). "Every human society", he finds, "must justify its inequalities - unless reasons for them are found – otherwise the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse" (Piketty, 2020, p. 1). It is not difficult then as zemiologists, to posit by analogy the notion of different zemiogenic, or 'social harm *regimes*'. These we might consider to be the combination of political, economic and social arrangements that together generate, facilitate and sustain widespread social harms to humans (and if we are to incorporate the lessons of Green Criminology, to other species and to wider ecologies). It is the case that most, if not all systemic social harms need to be justified at some level, within human societies. Neither private nor public law stand above the ideological projects to which this imperative gives rise. Rather, they are cast, moulded and re-moulded in the ideological furnaces of their specific eras and their places. We can see such regimes clearly in hindsight with for example, slavery, apartheid, colonization, genocide, expropriation and exploitation. For reasons of space however, putting to one side such illuminating histories of injury, the urgent question to be asked is, how might we apply the idea to today?

Neoliberalism, or 'new neoliberalism' as some scholars now suggest, is an example of one such regime. For Brown, (2015, p. 21) neoliberalism is:

...a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects. A conduct of conduct' and a scheme of valuation... [driving a] ...generalized practice of 'economizing' spheres and activities heretofore governed by other tables of value.

As a set of ideas, neoliberalism began to take hold politically in the 1970s as elites fought back against postwar shifts towards mixed and managed economies on the one hand and the reduction of economic inequalities on the other. It successfully revived classical liberal economics at a theoretical level and dramatically weakened the of the working class at industrial and political levels (Whitehead and Crawshaw, 2014).

The neoliberal formation determined that the stability of money, through strict financial and market discipline, was to be prioritized over the stability of all other social institutions...The neoliberal class project extolled individual responsibility, personal freedom, competitive markets, and privatization within the economic sphere. The result was the spread of social inequality. (Ibid, p. 22)

Today's accelerating hyper-inequality and many of the social harms that flow from it are meritocratically justified either explicitly or implicitly. Its values reify 'success' and 'individual responsibility' and laud its 'elites' whilst simultaneously blaming its victims for their 'failure'. Piketty identifies key features of the ideological regime that have developed to support neoliberalism thus:

Justificatory narratives comprise themes of property, entrepreneurship and meritocracy: modern inequality is said to be just because it is the result of a freely chosen process in which everyone enjoys equal access to the market and to property and automatically benefits from the wealth accumulated by the wealthiest individuals, who are also the most enterprising, deserving and useful. (Piketty, 2020, p. 1).

Both 'success' and 'failure' are, according to dominant myth, produced by the naturalised and irresistible flows of economic markets. Though this is an extensive and multi-faceted field, neoliberalism and 'new neoliberalism' have become so fundamental and pervasive a part of today's social harm regimes that it is important to at least sketch out some key features and consequences.

First and fundamentally, there are the physical and mental social harms directly inflicted by rising inequalities between individuals, groups and communities. This is the fourth decade of an unrelenting drive towards hyper-inequality. In today's *most egalitarian* countries "the bottom 50 percent of the population owns barely 5 percent of the wealth, while the top 10 percent owns 50 - 60 percent" (ibid, 2020, p. 652). In the most inegalitarian societies "one would arrive at estimates of top decile shares on the order of 80-90 percent...a level of inequality close to that of the most inegalitarian slave societies ever observed" (ibid, 2020, p. 655). "The ratio between the top centile's share and that of the bottom 50 percent is currently about 25 in Europe, 80 in the United States and 160 in the Middle East" (ibid, 2020, p. 657). In the UK, recent politics of austerity have

inflicted lower real incomes, benefit cuts and sanctions, inadequate social housing, homelessness, dramatic increases in stress, anxiety and depression, and negatively impacted life expectancy on those who were already the poorest and most vulnerable. Hyper-inequality, unnecessary and counterproductive in economic terms, plays an extremely important role in the generation and legitimization of a whole range of injuries to individuals, the social fabrics in which they live, and the ecologies that they require to sustain them.

Second, and not entirely distinct from the mental harms noted above, neoliberal (ir)rationality has driven or insinuated itself into the furthest and least obviously 'economic' areas of life; it has worked indeed, to re-forge the human subject. This has involved the creation of *homo-economicus* as "financialized human capital: [whose] project is to self-invest in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do so across every sphere of its existence" (Brown, 2015, p. 33). *Homo-economicus* of today's neoliberalism acts in markets that immerse her in maelstroms of supposedly free and fair competition, not, significantly, exchange. Indeed, competition *replaces* exchange as the market's supposed basic good with all actors rendered as 'little capitals', "at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of [their] own" (Brown, 2015, p. 37). This is ideologically important. Traditionally market justifications highlighted exchange, implying a process of mutual benefit. The ideology of 'new neoliberalism' by contrast, implies winners and losers – with losers left behind.

As human capital, the subject is at once in charge of itself, responsible for itself, yet an instrumentalizable, and potentially dispensable element of the whole. In this regard, the liberal democratic social contract is turning inside out. (Brown, 2015, p. 38).

This attack upon enlightenment notions of a 'social contract' should have attracted more criminological attention than it has, if only because it radically undermines traditional foundations of our obligation to obey the law. For the expropriation and exploitation of socially produced wealth upwards to be accepted, Hedges (2018) suggests, has required a collapse of political literacy and the ascendance of 'magical thinking'. This defines the ideology of capitalism where nothing is impossible for those with "the right attitude and the right technique. When capitalism thrives, we are assured, we thrive" (Hedges, 2018, p. 44). Yet, we do not thrive. We are deeply diminished. Through our incarnation as *homo-economicus*:

[the] merging of the self with the capitalist collective has robbed us of our

agency, creativity, capacity for self-reflection, and moral autonomy. We define our worth not by our independence or our character but by the material standards set by capitalism ... We are moulded into a compliant and repressed collective ... It is the Disneyfication of America, the land of eternally happy thoughts and positive attitudes. And when magical thinking does not work, we are told, and often accept, that we are the problem ... The system is never to blame. We failed it. It did not fail us. (Hedges, 2018, p. 44).

A discipline that accepts that the value of a human being comes to be determined by its success or failure in the market will contribute little to challenging the social harms of the present or future.

Third, and intimately related, there are the harms to our social and political norms, processes and institutions. Specifically, humanity is witnessing an alarming purchase, co-option, and takeover of politics and the media by corporate and right-wing interests. This is not merely a comment on the widely noted 'post-truth' of Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, or Johnson. Neoliberal failures to produce stability, social cohesion and well-being were denied, obscured, or otherwise neutralized in the three decades before Trump. But across the last decade there has been a clear escalation and diffusion of brazen organized lying, misinformation, and rejection of established political norms - to the point of insurrection. Noting that in the United States that nearly a third of the population is illiterate or barely literate, Hedges (2009, p. 44) argues that "we are a culture that has been denied, or has passively given up, the linguistic and intellectual tools to cope with complexity, to separate illusion from reality". As "junk politics", "miniaturizes large complex problems' those captive to images cast ballots based on how candidates make them feel" (Hedges, 2018, p. 47, 46). This is not a case of condemning electorates or parts of them as inherently incapable of governing themselves. But it is to recognize the dangerous success of intertwined structures and unstructured processes of ignorance manufacture in contaminating and debasing political debate and practice.

Political parties, wider political systems, and both mainstream media and coordinated social media reproduce ideological systems underpinning the manufacture of zemiogenic deceit and ignorance. Strong political characters utilize the power of repeating simple, highly emotive messaging over the sharing of reasoned, evidence-based understanding. This is not new. It was evident, to note just three examples, in the disastrous rise to power of both Bolshevism, Nazism Maosim in the last century. In the present day, maybe controversially and certainly not optimistically, Hedges (2009, p. 49) reminds us that:

In an age of images and entertainment, in an age of instant emotional gratification, we neither seek nor want honesty or reality. Reality is complicated. Reality is boring. We are incapable or unwilling to handle its confusion... In this world all that matters is the consistency of our belief systems. The ability to amplify lies, to repeat them and have surrogates repeat them in endless loops of news cycles, gives lies and mythical narratives the aura of uncontested truth. (Hedges, 2009, p. 49).

Here, Hedges elucidates a state of deepening cultural harm in the United States (and far beyond). Notwithstanding the election of President Biden, a Republicanism captured by the extreme Right continues to facilitate the production of falsehood as truth and fantasy as reality with breath-taking deceit. Despite his 2020 electoral defeat Trump still claimed he had won. And when conspiracy moved his supporters to violent action against the Capitol, Trump declared love for his 'patriots' and urged them to march on the Capitol. Most of the defeated Republican party failed to contest these lies and chose to amplify them. Communicative reason, essential for political health, is undermined at its very foundations by bad faith of such depth. Leading United States politicians openly supported or acquiesced in delusional conspiracy theories and armed assault on democracy. An adequate political zemiology must seek to understand these developments – rather than simply condemn them. They are merely the latest progression of a politics that needs to be understood if it is to be resisted.

The mass production, ubiquity and impunity of lying make it very evident that a zemiology of politics requires attention to the mass production of zemiogenic ignorance. "Given the role of ignorance in both generating and securing acquiescence in mass harm" (Barton, Davis and White, 2018, p. 14) agnotology, the study of the production of ignorance, has become a component for the analysis of mass political harm.

Fourth, taken together, the intensification of inequality, anti-rationalism, and anti-democratic corporate-populist authoritarianism characterize a 'new neoliberalism', or even 'neoliberal fascism' (Giroux, 2020; Dardot and Laval, 2019). For Giroux (2019, p. 47):

...neoliberalism and fascism conjoin and advance in a comfortable and mutually compatible movement that connects the worse excesses of capitalism with authoritarian 'strong man' ideals — the veneration of war, a hatred of reason and truth; a celebration of ultra-nationalism and racial

purity; the suppression of freedom and dissent; a culture which promotes lies, spectacles, scapegoating the other, a discourse of deterioration, brutal violence, and ultimately erupting in state violence in heterogenous forms.

As left-wing parties have deserted their working-class bases to become what Piketty (2020) terms the 'Brahmin Left', the opportunity this has presented for the populist and authoritarian extreme Right has been gleefully seized. Grievances have become focused on migrants, ethnic minorities, and perceived foreigners. It is as if the most painfully learned lessons of the twentieth century are unravelling around the world.

The ascendance of neoliberal fascism to government places the state's coercive apparatus in the hands of movements bent on cementing Schmitt's (1932) 'friend / enemy' distinction. As Stanley (2018, p. xiii) notes "a distinguishing mark of fascist politics is the targeting of ideological enemies and the freeing of all restraints in combatting them". This has been evident in the United States and elsewhere by corruption and the growing confidence of right-wing street violence, even to the point of insurrection. But as Stanley also argues, focusing only on street violence would be a mistake. In power, at the helm of the state, politicians' capacities for destruction are vast.

In the United States, Trump increased executions, attacked protestors, spied on rivals, halted admission of refugees and normalized an entry ban on Muslims. Family separation was enforced upon undocumented migrants and detention camps were effectively sealed off from scrutiny and denied education, recreation and legal funding (ibid, 2018). Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was hugely empowered with "powers directed at political outsiders inside [United States] borders" (ibid, 2018, p. xvii). Resistance to these developments was more than offset by the weight of vested interests in their continuance. For example, the prison / detention industrial complex has benefited hugely from this extraordinarily lucrative war against 'the other'.

Wall Street gives billions in loans to facilitate the profits of companies who run detention centers; large companies make profits by selling their wares to them, and former high-ranking administrative officials serve on their boards. On the local level, county jails bolster their budgets by housing those detained by ICE's massively broadened mandate. The legal, material and economic structure of these camps is evocative of Nazi Germany's early concentration camps. (Stanley, 2018, p. xvii).

The United States is only one example of where a lurch to the right that has put extreme

nationalists/xenophobes into political power. In India, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janta Party has been engaged in identifying non-citizens to be deported, with a fast track to citizenship provided to Hindus, but not to Muslims. In South America, President Bolsonaro came to power vowing to rid the country of “red criminals in a cleansing never seen before in the history of Brazil” (Cowie, 2018). In Europe, Poland and Hungary have been in open dispute with the European Union over their blatant assaults on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In short, political systems around the world have been under open assault from movements which have no qualms in ignoring the norms, conventions and statutes that are meant to restrain both them and the state. In many cases they follow paths paved by ‘old’ neoliberalism. The route to mass incarceration in the United States for example, was laid open by ‘liberals’ like President Biden. The extraordinary resources of the state are now deeply vulnerable to partial, if not always, total control of a ‘neoliberal fascism’ openly ‘at war’ with its enemies.

Fifth, the corruption and destruction of politics are of unprecedented importance because of the hazards humanity currently faces. We have witnessed the rise of zemiogenic orders that generate multiple and intensifying tightly-coupled crises of enormous scale, whilst simultaneously undermining our abilities to respond to them. Ecological crises are now of such gravity that scientists are debating whether human activity has propelled the planet into a new geological and biological epoch – the Anthropocene. Yet new neoliberal / neoliberal fascist movements have extended and amplified anti-scientific “cognitive dissonance”, ignoring the crisis, ‘doubling-down’ on the policies that intensify it. At the same time a myriad of financial, economic, and health crises have been generated by injustice, incompetence, and corruption. In 2007-8, inequality deregulation and unrestrained prioritization of profit accumulation led to a financial crisis from which the global economy continues to stagger today, on state funded life-support. Despite the neoliberal roots of this disaster most political leaders and their parties regrouped and resuscitated the project, temporarily at least. Governments across Europe accelerated their attacks on the remaining vestiges of social democracy to enforce programmes of austerity that brutally shifted the burden of the disaster from the financial sector and the wealthy onto the most vulnerable. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, austerity had impeded life chances, and the health and wellbeing of millions. Cumulatively it is estimated to have killed around 150,000 people in the UK alone (Watkins et al., 2017). Simultaneously, asset price inflation, underpinned by quantitative easing in monetary policy made sure that the investment portfolios of the super wealthy grew at even faster rates than before. This ‘crisis management’ became in reality, a process for furthering the interests of monopoly and oligopoly capital interests, flying in the face of economic or social reason. Indeed, as Davies (2016, p.121, 122) has argued, the latest incarnations of neoliberalism attack rationality itself, evidencing “a shift to unreason”. “Increasingly” he continues, “it

appears...that government are operating outside of the norms of judgement altogether” (ibid, p. 122). With neoliberalism a project for serving class interests, neoliberal ‘crisis resolution’ of the financial crisis, such as it existed at all, became “[a]pparently impervious to evidence, evaluation or the merits of alternatives” aimed at ensuring that neoliberal conditions, notably deregulation of private capital and austerity, persisted (ibid, p. 121).

More recently, whilst in some states proactive leadership following reliable scientific data helped to keep death tolls for Covid-19 comparatively low, in others state-led responses inflicted excessive deaths. In the UK, belated, partial and unclear responses were heavily tainted with a disastrous mix of neglect, denial, cronyism and alleged corruption (see for example Calvert and Arbuthnott, 2021). In the case of the United Kingdom, austerity-led cuts and fixation on Brexit meant that protective equipment was out of date or in insufficient quantity with health staff having to improvise their own from bin-liners. Borders remained open and returning Chinese students were neither temperature tested nor required to quarantine. Lockdown when it came, was weeks too late. The overall consequence was the facilitation of transmission, increased illness, and unnecessary deaths. Giving evidence to a UK Parliamentary Committee in May 2021, former senior advisor to Prime Minister Johnson, Dominic Cummings, painted a picture of an absent and negligent leader, distracted and incompetent ministers and gave the extraordinary admission that neither he nor his colleagues were qualified for the jobs they were doing. Alternative approaches, it is estimated, might have saved over 40,000 COVID-19 deaths between March and June 2020. Such culpable homicide it is important to stress, is the consequence of more than crisis mismanagement. They grew out of specific politics, out of a ‘social harm regime’ that had for years undermined public infrastructures and operationalized its biases towards private companies, cronyism, and secrecy.

Politics became synonymous with deceit and the deliberate promotion of ignorance. Commenting on the case of the UK, Abbasi (2020), executive editor of the British Medical Journal, put it thus:

Science is being suppressed for political and financial gain. COVID-19 has unleashed state corruption on a grand scale, and it is harmful to public health. Politicians and industry are responsible for this opportunistic embezzlement. So too are scientists and health experts. The pandemic has revealed how the medical-political complex can be manipulated in an emergency—a time when it is even more important to safeguard science.

As noted above, this is not a specifically British phenomenon. It is evident across a range of

political cultures, movements and systems from China to Brazil. In the United States, mired in the rise of Presidentially approved libertarian conspiracy theories and a widespread rejection of science, between February and December 2020 “more than a quarter of a million Americans...died from COVID-19 – a fifth of the world’s death from the disease, the highest number of any country” (Packer, 2020). In late 2021, millions of Americans still refused to be vaccinated as infection rates soared. In the UK the revelation that politicians and staff had partied, ignoring restrictions, triggered desperate attempts to ‘de-criminalize their transgressions. The resignation of ethics advisers only adds to a growing, if belated recognition of ethical collapse at the heart of national affairs during times of extreme crisis and hardship.

Healthy Politics and Principles of a Zemiology of Politics

There is not the space here to develop a political-philosophical ‘healthy politics’. However, some points can be ventured before considering some foundations for how a zemiology of politics should develop. In part and noting our support for a broadly Gramscian conception of the state, with the opportunities for and obligations towards resistance that this involves, these can be deduced as the converse of the political developments we have sketched above. Politics needs to help generate conditions of enduring social health. Hence a healthy politics would need to work to minimize for individuals, ‘the absence of or distortions in [their] self-actualization’ (Tombs and Canning, 2021, p. 110). It would need, as a necessary condition, to propagate dramatically more sustainable relationships with the ecological systems on which human societies depend. Plundering the planet it is increasingly clear, has no good future and many bad ones. As an opposite to contemporary zemiogenic politics that have concentrated power, a healthier politics requires a dramatic shift of power into the hands of the commons.

In the context of today’s Left, this would require struggles around both distribution and recognition (Fraser, 2019), resistance to and dismantling of unaccountable concentrations of economic, political and cultural power, and the democratization of organizations and settings within which people labour (paid and unpaid), and take their leisure. It would require a reversal of the systematized degeneration of political and cultural literacies and what Whitehead and Crenshaw (2014, p. 25) vividly describe as “the ascendance of the body [as a storage site for] obscene drives, bundles of neurological energy, grasping at the tantalizing mirage of freedom, which repeatedly threatens the human condition with anomie”. Fundamentally, the challenges that we face demand a recognition of the common interest, the common good, shared interest in the common-wealth (defined broadly) and the potential and the necessity of collective enterprise. Viewed in the longest of perspectives it would ultimately require the overturning of the fateful moments at the end of human pre-history when previously shifting social hierarchies became

fixed, and escaped the control of their subjects (Graeber and Wengrow, 2022).

Whatever we consider to be desirable politics of the future – and of course readers may well differ with the authors on our suggestions - the key argument of this article is that politics *as it is* requires consistent, forensic and critical zemiological attention. In that sense one descriptor of a healthier politics would simply be that it does less harm – far less harm actually - than do historic and contemporary political systems and movements. We suggest five starting points for a zemiology of politics emerging from this initial exploration of contemporary political hazards and social harms. Firstly, that zemiology here is more valuable than criminology and therefore the latter should be seen as subordinate to the former. Political harm-doing is often thought of as outside the boundaries of disciplines concerned with justice. Notwithstanding criminological concerns with the general inefficacy of imprisonment, the double standards between politically generated social harms on the one hand and conventional crimes on the other are stark and flagrantly unjust. Indeed, the behaviours of political leaders over the last few years have been so egregious that they should demand the attention of even a comparatively narrowly focused crime-centric criminology. The behaviour of Donald Trump in the United States for example, might yet bring criminal prosecution beyond his impeachment and to be clear, we would not argue that criminalization of all harms should be dispensed with. Rather, a criminology of politics, drawing on critical, radical and counter-colonial approaches, has a role to play for example, in exploring and advocating for the outlawing of zemiogenic features of our politics. However, such a narrow criminology would miss extensive political harms of the types noted above. Thus, it can offer little in relation to broader current crises or the social harm regimes which contextualize them. Criminology is best seen therefore as a sub-discipline of zemiology.

Second, a zemiology of politics must be inclusive – it must be international in scope, exploring the full range of state and non-state political forces, seeking to understand social harms of the present and future and how they came to be, in part through zemiological understanding of the past. Politics is the nexus of social harm prevention: infliction; recognition; understanding and response. Political forces can facilitate, inflict, maintain, address, rollback, ameliorate, or end social harm. As this article has argued, a zemiology of current politics stands before a potential abyss of harms consequent upon disastrous political failures. For example, understanding current and future eco-crisis requires examination of the decades of political failure within which it has incubated. It is nearly four decades since scientist James Hansen first testified to Congress about human agency in global warming. Yet since then, state-led politics have largely ignored the crisis and intensified ecological violence. Scanning the horizon, fundamentally dangerous politics emanating from a concoction of economic and financial systems and libertarian, racist, magical

and fascist ideologies, are positioned to push the most structurally vulnerable into deep, life-threatening struggles. These are alarmingly, a politics that have broad support. Neither the rise of the political Right nor the conditions that gave rise to it show signs of dissipating. It is vital therefore, to understand how we came to this point. At the same time, a zemiology of politics must recognize and champion the power and potential within the nation-state and local state for positive change. States after all provide arenas and capacities for transformation as well as regression.

Third as a consequence, given the central importance of politics in zemiogenic legitimisation, a zemiology of politics must challenge the acute and chronic violence and injustices of socially harmful ideological systems, the policies they spawn, and their narration of both specific and more general regimes of social harm.

Thinking about what progressive social change might look like – as well as the possibilities for its emergence – necessitates an understanding of the state’s institutional and discursive power... Serious consideration should...be given to how the state both represents itself and mystifies itself with respect to its relationship to the maintenance and reproduction of the current, inequitable social order, as well as to the mechanisms through which critical voices within and outside the state terrain remain in a process of contestation. (Coleman et al, 2009, p. 15).

A zemiological agnotology of politics needs to understand and challenge ideological and political systems that produce and legitimize social harm regimes through sharing false knowledge and false ‘understanding’; in other words, it must interrogate the political and cultural production of ignorance. These are the systems that operate to decide what is known and what will remain unknown – what will be understood and what will be misunderstood. Their effects are debilitating, unjust and de-stabilizing. They are fundamental to the survival and reproduction of the established zemiogenic regimes that order and disorder our lives and societies. For example, political debate around the 2007-8 financial crisis worked only to “close down space for rational debate about alternatives” (Shorthose, 2011, p. 110) and “cripple our imaginations” (Giroux, 2014, p. 24). It was highly successful in confining debate within the deeply restrictive ideological framing of regimes of social harm and stored up danger for the future. For Giroux (2014, p. 27), “the dis-imagination machine”, operated by leaders and the ideological state apparatus functions primarily to short-circuit the ability of individuals to think critically, imagine the unimaginable, and engage in thoughtful and critical dialogue, or put simply, to become critically engaged citizens of the world.

An agnotological zemiology needs to resist inter-related shifts in ideological and discursive production that neutralize or legitimate social harm and detach it from its generative contexts. As this article has illustrated, these include corporate/ neoliberal purchase of politics and attacks on democracy together with expropriation, exploitation and hyper-inequality that together have created the conditions for these attacks. They include too the fundamental re-making of human beings into vehicles for self-capitalization and the attacks on life-sustaining ecological systems that threaten civilizational collapse.

Fourth, a zemiology of politics must actively and publicly resist the practical *realpolitik*s of social harm and injustice and envision and struggle towards models of healthier politics. As a public social science it needs to disseminate knowledge and understanding “to a broader and potentially more efficacious audience than ourselves” (Currie, 2007, p. 180). Social science must be understood therefore, “not just as a science but as a moral and political force” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 6). As Currie (2007, p. 188) argues:

Truth doesn't thrive unless it is assertively promoted and nurtured...Truth needs advocates. It needs assertive defenders. And my own feeling is that truth has never needed those advocates and defenders more than it does today.

Following the principles of organic public sociology (see Burawoy, 2005), “powerful counter-narratives to the ignorance-producing machinations of the state” must be constructed and disseminated widely (Stanley and Mihaere, 2018, p.129). Social scientists must engage in a “dialogue”, “a process of mutual education”, and commit to “collaboration” “with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public” (Burawoy, 2005, p. 8, 7). Informed by their discipline and in the role of truth advocates, zemiologists of politics must collaborate with colleagues, students, and beyond university walls, with wider civil society. It must struggle for a healthy and progressive politics for the common good. Public knowledge of state and corporate harms alone without alternatives and mechanisms for challenging them both within and outside of the “formal political sphere” induces anger without an outlet, anxiety and at times apathy (Tombs & Whyte, 2020, p. 22), and therefore cannot sustain on their own a challenge to the status quo. The radical diminution in recent years, of any genuine politics of the common good in ‘liberal democracies’ has generated a series of crises and disasters. Politics that merely reproduces or acquiesces in dominant regimes of social harm, justifying them by falsehood, deceit, and dis-imagination have dramatically exacerbated the emergencies we face both as a species and a planet. Such urgent predicaments clearly demand more than a return to a ‘pre-Trump’ or ‘pre-crisis’ norms, in which

the modern histories of advanced capitalist societies and their politics are indulgently re-imagined. Political zemiogenicity is of far longer and deeper standing than that. Liberal democracy, under assault now from the right, has rarely been very democratic or very liberal. Indeed, it has incubated the very conditions that generate its own precarity – and the precarity of its populations. Consequently, a zemiology of politics is urgently required as an element within broader equality movements, whose radicalism meets the urgency of our human tasks. As Fisher (2009, p. 17) put it:

...emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.

Fifth and more than a caveat, a zemiology of politics needs to be reflexive and non-fundamentalist. That is to say, it requires ongoing awareness that harm is not *all* that matters, and relatedly, that notions of social harm *themselves* can be appropriated and used to legitimize practices and policies that themselves bring injury. To have any meaning at all, notions of autonomy and liberty require some freedom to act in ways that might lead to degrees of at least 'hurt', or maybe even harm to self or others. Simply put, a society with high levels of equality and political health may decide for itself that some, and perhaps many actions or omissions, might be hurtful or socially harmful without necessarily requiring policing or intervention. There are in practice a myriad of behaviours – for example in leisure activities that entail risk - in which there will always be ongoing debates to be had and balances to be struck – often *through political systems*. From a zemiological perspective it is one of the reasons why healthy politics are so important. These are not matters to be taken lightly even in self-proclaimed democratic systems, as the mass global incarceration of people who have contravened drug laws attests. To take the point further, the claim to be preventing, reducing or mitigating harm is itself a very powerful one – and can be misused, not least of course in justifying excessive criminalization. History shows that disingenuous calls for safety and social wellbeing can be extremely dangerous. It is no small coincidence that the first modern model for totalitarian tyranny was based around Robespierre's *Committee for Public Safety*. Stalinist, Maoist, Fascist and Nazi regimes have each legitimized their harms / crimes through appeals to protection and safety. Wars, crimes against humanity and genocides have been justified in this way. More recent decades have seen civil liberties under regular assault in the name of wars on terror, drugs, criminals and assorted other threats. The implication here is not that reducing social harm does not matter – *its very potency as a justification is derived in the fact that it does*. Rather, the point is that zemiologists need to be alert to the potential harms of 'social harm' discourse itself – and to reflect critically and continually

about upon what 'counts' as social harm serious enough to require response and the nature of that response.

Conclusion

As humanity faces unprecedented conjunctural crises, social scientists of crime, harm and injustice need to ask, where and with whom, do we stand? Does our work focus upon the most critical social harms of the moment and those that can be reasonably foreseen? Does it challenge social, political and economic systems of domination and destruction? Or are we acquiescing in, or even contributing to the legitimization and reproduction of crisis, injustice and injury? For the integrity of an emancipatory social science a zemiology of politics is required. As a starting point, traditional' crime-centric criminological concerns need to be recognized as lying within, and subordinate to, a broader, foundationally harms-based approach. Academics must urgently align our work with resistance to harm-regimes of the present and future informed by analysis of social harm regimes of the past and their origins. Such a zemiology of politics must expose and confront the material relations, organizational forms and discursive and ideological systems that shape the production and reproduction of the harms we face. As at the beginning of the twentieth century, we stand at an abyss. That we do so is to some extent obscured by the professionally industrialised manufacture of ignorance which offers, instead of a politics that confronts its responsibilities, a "language of fascism [that] revels in forms of theatre that mobilize fear, intolerance, and violence" (Giroux, 2019, p. 38). It is in this perilous context that active struggle for a healthy, good, and progressive politics is urgently required. "Too much is at stake in the current historical conjuncture for the truth not to be told" (Giroux, 2019, p. 41). And part of that truth is that the most violent individual actors in history – ancient and modern - have been political leaders and the states they have ruled. Their bases and their ideas have shifted and changed, but their capacities to do mass harm or indeed mass good, through the material, institutional and ideological capacities they command has never diminished. In fact, they are greater than ever before.

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