

Reviews

Rick Sarre & John Tomaino (eds), Exploring Criminal Justice: Contemporary Australian Themes. Adelaide: South Australian Institute of Justice Studies Inc, Adelaide, (1999) ISBN 0 86803 624 2

This book provides an introduction to diverse topics within the broad area of criminal justice. It is intended as a textbook for undergraduate students, but would be of interest to members of the general public as well.

The book is comprised of nine substantive chapters which cover topics such as the nature of crime, the idea and practices of justice, policing and police issues, punishment theory and practice, victims and justice, and what works in criminal justice. There are four contributors to the book: Rick Sarre, Mark Israel, John Tomaino and Tim Prenzler.

The choice of material for the book appears to have been largely dictated by the teaching requirements of the editors. In fact, the book is primarily designed as a teaching aid. With respect to this, each chapter is formatted so that there is a table of contents, glossary of key terms, suggested activities relating to the topics, questions designed to stimulate discussion, and a list of resources for further reading and research (such as web sites and reference material). As such, the book is very reader- and user-friendly, and is well sign-posted throughout.

As a 'textbook', the book is nevertheless somewhat uneven. The prose is certainly straightforward and clear. Basic information and ideas are explained simply and without undue use of jargon. Many examples are provided to illustrate main points, and key terms are explicitly defined and 'bolded' in the text. The writers speak directly to the reader in a friendly and encouraging manner, and they walk through the material using 'plain language' throughout. The format, language and structure of the book are excellent.

However, the choice of, and approach to, the substantive content has a number of limitations. As is always the case with a book of this nature, editors must make difficult decisions regarding what to include and what to exclude. They must also come to grips with the usual dilemmas surrounding whether we assume 'too little' or 'too much' on the part of the reader.

While the style and format of the book usefully guide the reader through important substantive discussions, there are a number of places where perhaps more could have been done to lay the groundwork for the analysis provided. For example, the chapters on the police tend to assume a certain baseline knowledge on the part of the reader regarding the diverse tasks and workplace contexts of policing. More could have been said about the routines and practices of 'traditional' or conventional police practices, the administrative structures and hierarchies of policing, and the tensions within policing over key policy issues. This would have assisted in better framing the discussions of 'community policing'.

The discussions of 'justice' similarly move fairly quickly into an extended review of 'restorative justice'. Again, for the student reader, it would have been useful to sketch out

in greater depth the nature of the adversarial system, the history and development of retributivism as a core rationale, and the basic features of a system which reflects particular state-citizen relations. Likewise, in the discussion of victims, it would have been useful to explore further the different perspectives within 'victimology' as a distinct field of inquiry, and how these contribute to our understanding of victimisation as a social process.

More generally, while the book raises questions about varying perspectives and differing opinions on selected issues, it would have been of assistance to the reader if the divergent viewpoints had been explicitly acknowledged and more clearly positioned in relation to the key social theories relating to crime and deviance.

It would have been useful, as well, to provide a few more statistical or empirical indicators of crime and criminal justice trends, in appropriate sections. For example, the chapter on punishment practice makes the claim that there has been a shift away from prison and to community-based punishments. This needs to be demonstrated empirically. In fact, recent evidence seems to suggest the opposite: that there is a significant increase in prison populations, especially in particular jurisdictions, and that this is being accompanied by a simultaneous growth in community-based orders. The impact of law-and-order politics, the increased number of privatised prisons, and the introduction of mandatory sentencing (in places such as the Northern Territory and Western Australia), are clearly issues of concern, and will continue to add to the expansionary pressures on the criminal justice system. These pressures and trends vary from state/territory to state/territory, but overall patterns nevertheless need explication and require further critical exploration and explanation.

As a 'topics' book, the general reader will find the book very useful and insightful. The book provides a valuable critique of the role of media, introduces interesting and important material relating to indigenous people and human rights, includes an informed critical analysis of community policing and police accountability, and generally invites the reader to question many different aspects of criminal justice at both the level of theory and with regard to practical applications. The contributions are well-written and generally well-researched, with an emphasis on Australian materials and issues, while drawing upon overseas examples as warranted. The use of figures, tables and dot-points ensure that the information is conveyed in a succinct and attractive manner.

The book is published by the South Australian Institute of Justice Studies. The Institute aims to provide education in justice administration, to foster increased community awareness of justice administration issues, and to develop publications relating to justice administration. In furthering these goals, this book provides a fine example of progressive, informed commentary which will enlighten as well as inform, encourage as well as critique, stimulate as well as introduce. The editors and contributors are to be commended for a publication which provides 'something for everyone', and which makes a useful contribution to Australian criminal justice research and teaching.

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