

Book review

Exploring modern probation. Social theory and organisational complexity. By Philip Whitehead (The Policy Press: Bristol, 2010, 186pp. £23.99)

Over the last decade the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom has been carefully scrutinized due to apparent signs of institutional change and shifts in its direction. Multiple attempts have been made to come to terms with new phenomena such as the politicization of crime, the criminal justice system and its constituent agencies. Correspondingly, there is no doubt that the probation service has moved away from social work principles such as acceptance, individuality and non-judgement towards enforcement, and offence focus which fall into the new approach to punishment (Farrant, 2006). The changes in the modern probation service have mirrored those appearing more generally in the criminal justice apparatus especially under the policy of New Labour. Prioritization of evidence based policy and practice gave rise to the new modernization agenda based on features including what works, risk management and partnership which contributed significantly to the birth of the National Offender Management Service (Burke & Collett, 2010). Although policy analysis is dominant in this area, scholars began not only to contribute to the general discussion by presenting their research findings but also to increasingly use classical theoretical reasoning in order to reach a better understanding of the current conditions of the criminal justice institutions. Amongst them is Philip Whitehead who also engages more deeply with the topic and provides valuable insight into the debate about the current form of probation in the United Kingdom.

Philip Whitehead's book is a meticulous, succinct and extremely well written analysis of the probation services in the United Kingdom and provides a scholarly reflection bringing into focus the changing nature of the institution. The central thesis of this book is that since New Labour came to power in 1997 it has had an adverse impact on the operation of probation services in the United Kingdom. The book is cleverly structured such that it can be viewed not only as a resource for criminologists, penologists and other scholars investigating changes in criminal justice system but also as a textbook for students of social work wishing to work as probation officers. The author acting both as a researcher and practitioner deliberately explores what probation has become and the word itself is a key message of the book. As a discerning observer the author begins by examining policy, legal framework, practice and the subsequent reforms related to probation (Chapter 1) as well as the origins, history and rationale of the organization following the work of the 'good guys' – scholars whose work presents more humanitarian views (Chapter 3). Simultaneously, the analysis of probation encompasses a constant attempt to place probation in relation to the criminal justice system. In order to appraise correctly the modern probation service the author seeks clarification in sociology, by referring to the work of the 'big guys' and making use of frequently forgotten social theories. Moreover, the complexity of the organisation is reflected to large extent in Whiteheads's own research and its findings presented in Chapter 4. In fact, from the beginning it can be understood that changes that have influenced probation were not induced by evolutionary processes **initiated from within**, but they were a result of radical shifts **imposed from**

without by central government for political more than sound penological reasons [p.15]. Moreover, the author emphasises that the organisation's leaders themselves would probably not choose the same direction.

A major strength of the book is its emphasis on the sociological account of probation as an institution or more precisely the sociology of punishment (Chapter 2). Having set the policy background and current political climate around probation in Chapter 1, the focus turns to the work of the 'big guys': Durkheim, Weber, Marx and Foucault by *'employing the metaphor of a loose rather than tight-fitting jacket'* [p.24]. By approaching the subject of probation from these sociological perspectives, the author hopes to explore probation practice based on a multi - theoretical foundation that is also supplemented briefly by the work of other notable sociologist such as Comte and Merton as well as Kant. In so doing, the author not only analyses the material himself but also refers to secondary sources and previous articles written by Garland, Hudson, Giddens and Rusche and Kirchheimer which offer a plethora of valuable information. Subsequently, in Chapter 3 the author introduces the 'good guys' (Ignatief, Harris, Bryant, Bottoms, McWilliams, Haxby, Raynor et al.) whose scholarly activity establishes the point that religious beliefs, personalist impulses and moral sensibilities have been *'woven into the textures of the penal system and particularly the Probation Service throughout its 100 years of history'* [p.79]. Although this section of the book remains highly descriptive, it provides an extensive and pertinent source of literature related to the origins of probation organisation as well as a far reaching sociological approach towards punishment. The author concludes with the argument that there might be a classifiable set of values examined by the 'good guys' that is still shared among managers of offenders. However, the atmosphere of the politically controlled, computerised and bureaucratized working environment might actually lead to another conclusion. The probation officers could also be involved in expressive, *'knee-jerk reactions consistent with a heightened emotional response towards offenders (Durkheim); function as bureaucratic technicians within the NOMS structure (Weber); punish and sometimes exclude (as a conduit to prison) the recalcitrant residuum (Marxist); and operate as disciplinary regulators and normalisers, the eyes and ears of the courts and an increasingly centralised and authoritarian state'* (Foucault) [p.104].

Furthermore, the book draws on the author's own research between 1985 and 1989, where a mixed method approach was adopted in order to examine if the Probation Order was being used as an alternative to custody after implementing a new policy in 1983/1984 (Chapter 5). The study was then followed up in summer 2006 with a similar design. Although the major research theme remained the same focussing on the modernisation of probation, the fieldwork was conducted in a different political climate and policy settings. Whitehead interviewed solicitors, court clerks, magistrates, barristers and judges asking them how they viewed and perceived probation as a profession and an institution. The neglected and disdained values of befriending and assisting as far as relations between probation officers and offenders are concerned, form a leitmotif of the study and as a consequence the chapter itself. The concluding remarks showed convergent results when compared to general trends and changes in the criminal justice system. This implies issues of managerialism, bureaucracy and a target-driven institution have in the end unbalanced the criminal justice system [p.154]. In this regard, despite the author's best efforts, the research still depicts more what probation has become rather than what it ought to be, as the chapter demonstrates conclusively the punitive and risk oriented approach of the organisation towards offenders.

This book will make a significant contribution to the literature around probation and the criminal justice system. The author provides an interesting socio-political analysis of an organisation which over the last few years has become a semi-penal institution, following in the criminal justice system's footsteps leaving no space for compassion, befriending or constructive assistance. The word 'rehabilitation' is much under-used in the book which rightly reflects the reality. The book is a great source of information not only for scholars but also for students who start off as social

workers, as it introduces the origins and stipulations of probation as an organisation and reflects on the current state of the institution. What is lacking in the book and could initiate a further discussion is the question of the profession of social work and given the contemporary condition of probation and criminal justice system, should probation officers still be considered as social workers? What is more, the author mentions the role of the third sector, and the current endeavours to endow charities, faith communities etc. with punitive responsibilities joining at the same time the old values that ought to represent probation i.e. humanitarian values of care and compassion, tolerance and support as well as emphatic understanding [p.160-162]. This section of the book, if elaborated further, could be a great continuation of the on-going discussion around the cultural change of modern probation in the United Kingdom.

References:

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