

*City of suspects: Crime in Mexico City 1900–1931*, Pablo Piccato. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. 365 pp. (including index). (cloth). ISBN 0-8223-2750-3; (pbk). ISBN 0-8223-2747-3.

Pablo Piccato's *City of suspects* is a nuanced and vivid reconstruction of 'the texture of crime as experienced in everyday life' (p. 3) in Mexico City between 1900 and 1931. It seeks to illuminate the actions, motivations and sentiments of those that committed crimes, were victims or witnesses of them or otherwise lived lives that brought them into close contact with the world of crime. From a certain point of view, 'a history of crime is (. . .) a history of the city and its inhabitants' (p. 1). From a different angle, it is the history of the lower classes, those most likely to be the perpetrators and victims of crimes. One of the arguments of the book, in fact, is that during this period both authorities and the public opinion constructed lawbreakers as a single, identifiable 'criminal class' whose members, not surprisingly, belonged to the lowest tiers of society.

In a statement that echoes David Garland's treatment of the subject in his *Punishment and modern society* (1990), Piccato sets out to treat crime and punishment as 'cultural products' (p. 11). In order to do so, he directs his efforts to analyzing both 'the practices and narratives constructed around specific offenses' (p. 6). Conceived at the intersection between cultural and social history, *City of suspects* creatively uses crime and its multiple meanings as a very refreshing window to witness the changes and continuities brought about by the late *Porfiriato* and the Mexican Revolution to the lives of the poor and their relationship with other social groups and the state.

After the usual 'setting' chapters that reconstruct some of the societal changes taking place during this period – including urban growth, the modernization of the police and the importation of scientific notions of crime by Mexican criminologists, all of which, in one way or another, 'reinforc[ed] the signs of social difference' (p. 71) in Mexican society – the author presents the core sections of the book. In part II he analyzes three types of crime – public personal disputes, violence against women and monetary crimes – that allow him to offer a rich and multi-layered treatment of the many social and cultural ingredients that shape both the commission of a specific crime and the different reactions to it. In part III, the author looks at repression and incarceration, highlighting their contested nature as well as the way in which they shaped individual and collective identities.

It would be impossible to do justice, in this short review, to the richness of the materials and the complexity of the arguments presented in *City of suspects*. Let me just offer a couple of examples of the way in which Piccato carries on his research agenda. In chapter 4, 'Honor and violent crime', for example, he offers a fascinating discussion of violent fights among members of the lower classes. He convincingly argues, first, that these crimes must be interpreted as honor-related confrontations that obeyed certain rules and procedures (borrowed and adapted from upper-class dueling practices) and which were taken very seriously by members of the lower classes: 'Honor was a right that had to be defended daily, against many threats, and at a very high cost' (p. 81). Second, he advances the idea that honor was not an exclusively male value, for women also engaged in disputes trying to defend theirs. For lower-class men and women alike, honor encompassed certain values and personal qualities that affected the relationship between individuals and their communities, such as 'reliability, resourcefulness, loyalty'.

By looking at the weapons used in these fights, the actions of all those involved, or the words used in those exchanges, Piccato refutes simplistic views (put forward by contemporary authorities and criminologists) of lower-class violence as the product of their alcohol consumption, machismo and/or rusticity of character.

Similarly, in chapter 7, 'The invention of rateros', Piccato reconstructs the ways in which petty-thieves were imagined as belonging to a 'collectivity', i.e. a 'clearly defined group, identifiable by its criminal skills and its presence in certain spaces of the city' (p. 164). This construction, in turn, had palpable effects on the way in which the problem of 'raterismo' was addressed. Rateros were treated as recidivist criminals even when there was no evidence that it was always the case; they were singled out as responsible for a variety of problems, instead of a symptom of larger social issues; they were harassed just for being there (and for being what they were or looking the way they looked), not necessarily because they had committed a crime; and in the rush to provide 'solutions' to the 'problem' of crime, authorities (and in particular the police) did not pause to consider the individual rights of their suspects, thus converting the war on rateros into a clearly class-biased repressive campaign. Mexico City became, indeed, a 'city of suspects'.

Besides highlighting the cultural and political contents behind representations of crime, and the class biases of the criminal justice system, Piccato's book also succeeds in bringing back to the discussion of these issues the impact of those collectivities he chose to call 'urban communities' – the *barrio*, the *vecindad* or the *colonia*. In terms of the actual commission of crimes, the punishment they provoked and especially the resonance they had throughout the social body, these communities proved to be crucial. 'Urban communities were the public opinion that judged crime, justice, and the value of their own members', argues Piccato (p. 215). This integration of the community as a central element in the analysis of the social impact of crime is indeed one of the main virtues of this extremely valuable contribution to the history of crime in Latin America that deserves wide readership and discussion by scholars of Latin America and beyond.

## Reference

Garland, David (1990) *Punishment and modern society: A study in social theory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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*Becoming delinquent: British and European youth, 1650–1950*, P. Cox and H. Shore. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002. 196 pp. £45. ISBN 0–7546–2228–2.

More than ever, as it runs to catch up with 21st-century change, criminology needs to be an historically aware discipline. Signs of modernization in crime and justice are eagerly observed in every part of the field. But how does criminology define the modern? And how does it treat evidence of continuity, when appearances of change prove to be deceptive or elusive? This book suggests that modern European youth justice has older lineages than we tend to assume.

In a key chapter the editors of *Becoming delinquent* argue that evidence of