Book review

Lisa L Miller, *The Myth of Mob Rule: Violent Crime & Democratic Politics*, Oxford University Press: Oxford & New York, 2016; 259 pp. (including index): 9780190228705, £22.99.

Reviewed by: Gail Super, *University of Toronto, Mississauga, Canada*

The Myth of Mob Rule is a highly original and methodologically innovative book that makes a timely contribution to debates on crime, democracy and punishment. It focuses on serious violence as a starting point for asking whether the political salience of crime, in other words its prominence as a 'public and political issue', and the accountability of legislators to 'democratic publics', necessarily leads to repressive policies that are disconnected from 'real crime risk' (p. 2). Miller's analysis, conducted through the lens of a political scientist, is based on a comparative historical case study of how the public and political salience of crime co-varies with real rates of violence in the United Kingdom, the United States and the Netherlands.

Instead of focusing on the state's monopolization of force, as most political analyses do, Miller's emphasis is on the state's role in securing people from predatory violence (p. 31–32). This is motivated by her concern that violent crime is a political problem and that security from violence should be a core protection offered by the state, along with protection from other social risks, such as poverty and unemployment. As the title indicates, Miller argues against the 'mob rule thesis' (p. 2) which holds that it is dangerous to give 'democratic publics' too much power (p. 1). Instead, she seeks to understand how 'political institutions can enable the capacity of mass publics to self-govern' and influence criminal law (pp. 15–16). Miller argues that the more the state's capacity to enact social policies that respond to the 'collective needs of mass publics, the *less* crime and the *less* punishment a democratic system is likely to provide' (p. 8, emphases in original). She draws a compelling comparison between the United States (Chapter 4) and the Netherlands (Chapter 5) in order to make this point.

In Chapter 2, Miller compares rates of violence across historical periods and countries by using homicide data. The risk of violence increased dramatically across her sample in the second half of the 20th century and, unsurprisingly, the United States was an extreme outlier: the average overall life risk is seven to eight times higher than in Europe, and black males aged 18–24 have a disproportionately high life risk of 183.5 per 100,000 (p. 44). Miller finds that when crime appears more frequently in the news, and is on

legislative agendas, this is always preceded by high or rising rates of violent crime. Thus, there is a direct link between increasing (or high levels of) violence and public concern about it. However, even when attention to crime is high, it rarely monopolizes the political agenda (pp. 53–54).

Although homicide and violent crime were increasing from the mid-1960s in post-war Britain, it was only between the early 1980s and mid-1990s that political attention started to be paid to it and it still lagged behind the social realities of violence and public worries about it. Political attention was punctuated and inconsistent and, under Gordon Brown, crime mostly dropped off the political agenda (p. 97). Miller does not find that New Labour embraced crime 'without cause' even as it adopted neoliberalized social policies (p. 96). She argues that the (albeit truncated) social welfare agendas that ran alongside criminal justice changes could be relatively easily implemented under a parliamentary system of government with strong political parties.

The United States, on the other hand, is an example of a 'fractured multi venue institutional configuration' where 'small groups and individual political actors' have the opportunity to 'strip the more comprehensive policy approaches of anything but their most punitive elements' (p. 97). Miller tracks how, for six years during Clinton's presidency, the Republican Party controlled both chambers of Congress, enabling it to effectively veto the legislative priorities of the majority. This 'legislative fragmentation' meant that the coordination of comprehensive social policy was challenging for the Democratic Party (p. 134). After 30 years of increasing rates of violent crime and with crime at a second peak, it was far easier to follow a 'lowest legislative common denominator agenda' through punishing offenders, rather than implementing social policies that would ameliorate the causes of crime. This 'feedback loop' that exists between veto politics on social policy and punitive crime policy reinforces existing race and class divisions, leading to 'racialized state failure' (p. 100). Increasing penalties is popular with both lawmakers and the public because costs are spread across state populations, whereas increasing spending on education or employment requires more local spending and is not as popular (p. 156). Thus, rather than being 'overly accountable to mass publics' lawmakers in the USA are actually not accountable and 'pass the buck on the provision of social goods' (p. 160).

In the Netherlands, even during the high violence period in the second half of the 20th century, there were still only 1.4 homicides per 100,000. Unlike in the United Kingdom where there was initially little political responsiveness to the rise in homicide and violent crime, in the Netherlands homicide rates and discussions of crime in the Annual Speeches rose and fell together, for almost the entire post-war period (p. 173). Miller is not worried about the Netherlands becoming a 'prison state' because of the 'exceptionally low' rate of violence and the 'robust state responses to social risk' that are facilitated by political institutions (p. 190). This context of low social risk also contributes to public and judicial support for alternatives to imprisonment because there is confidence that these will lead to desistance from crime (p. 189). Thus, as Miller observes, not only is there a relationship between political economies, crime and politics but institutions and political economies shape 'real social risks, including crime' and this contributes to the way that the public responds to rising rates of violence' (p. 190).

It is hard to find fault with this brilliant book. I will conclude by posing a few questions, not as a means of backhanded critique, but as a reflection on Miller's thought-provoking arguments. Given the complexity of 'mass democratic politics' what kind of control should the public have over criminal justice policy, particularly in a context of scarcity on the social welfare front? More specifically, as Glaser (2015) discusses in the context of the South African liberation struggle, what should the interaction be between liberal principles and participatory democracy? How can we guard against the risk that the alleviation of poverty will be subsumed under a more 'muscular' approach by 'mass publics', simply because arrest or imprisonment is easier to implement? According to Miller, the prison is the 'one policy response that is supported across demographic groups' and left wing democratic governments should not be averse to it (p. 209). In view of this should the Left call for imprisonment in conjunction with improved social welfare? What about the problem of bifurcation? Can the prison ever, as Miller (p. 39) argues, play a truly 'emancipatory role'?

Reference

Glaser D (2015) Uncooperative masses as a problem for substantive and participatory theories of democracy: The case of 'people's power' (1984–86) and the 'xenophobia' (2008). In: Benit-Ghaffou C (ed.) *South Africa: Popular Politics in South African Cities*. Cape Town, HSRC Press, 139–170.