

# **PERSPECTIVES ON CRIME**

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL TRESPASS OF COMMON SENSE

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From different viewpoints the scenery of the world takes on different shades. There is the perspective of law and order, for instance. It is observed by police, investigators and paramedics whose close encounters with crime have the crude colors of reality. They can smell the blood of the victims and feel the pain of peaceful people violated in their bodies, properties and dignity. Or it is felt by those honest citizens that live in neighborhoods ruled by overbearing criminal gangs where they suffer the daily humiliation of being subdued by psychopaths that the state is unable, often unwilling, to control. That same state that, notwithstanding its leniency with the strong, does not hesitate to severely punish the weak, should they dare an act of active self defense. And even petty crime, under this light, should not be taken lightly, because it makes the world an unfriendly place ruled by mistrust. A hostile land where people are afraid of strangers, doors must be locked and any cry for help is better ignored because it could be an ambush. But from another viewpoint, at a safe distance from crime, there is the perspective of restorative justice, of the rejection per se of incarceration. This is what the social workers and psychologists see in the eyes of the unfortunate cons sunk into despair behind the sad and afflictive nature of the prison walls. Eyes that have forgotten the arrogance of their past and beg for help and compassion, at least while restrained. This is the vision that social philosophers and advocates of human rights picture in their minds when they theorize the dignity and sacred nature of our subspecies, *Homo sapiens sapiens* (Apes, our taxonomic close companions, are sadly excluded from this privilege).

There are many other viewpoints, and each one has its own perspective. With the books of Hugues and Robert, instead, we capture the scene in its entirety, the victim and the criminal are both present on stage, as they should be. These two short biographies render better than any tract the tangible nature of crime. They should be adopted as introductory textbooks in any criminology faculty, because a scrupulous observation of the reality is a prerequisite for studying or conceiving any theory. And everyday life and crime – it should never be forgotten! – belong to that domain of practical matters where down to earth common sense does a much better job than elaborate abstract philosophical principles. Statistics for 1978 record that in the U.S. territory about 20 thousand people were murdered, 68 thousand women were raped and over one million people suffered some sort of violent aggression. Only an acceptance of crime by ordinary people, as it were a normal feature of society, can explain such large numbers. The banality of evil, as Hannah

Arendt observed looking at the moral collapse of Nazi Germany, but if the victims are spread at random throughout society, instead of belonging to precise groups as then, is the evil less evil?

Nothing was trivial in the vicious aggression that, in 1978, added a unit to the statistics and sentenced Hugues de Montalembert – a handsome 30 years old visual artist – to blindness for life. Hugues is no common man – a peak in the random pattern of evolutionary complexity – and the contrast with the futile existence of the primitive junkies that changed his life is confounding. The nature-nurture debate appears pointless when viewed from such an extreme and it is tempting to look back at the end of the 19th century when Lombroso – not yet shamed by emergent radical egalitarian moods – approached criminology with a compassionate scientific mind, rather than with a judgmental moral heart. But if we look at the tormented life of Robert Luke, this reassuring picture appears less clearly defined. Robert is an example of a stubborn criminal who has suddenly re-routed his course, eventually enjoying a peaceful and wise social life. Was this the product of miraculous self healing or the expected effect of the inflexible prison regime? Does this really matter when you have accepted the waiving of your rights of self defense, and the responsibility for keeping the criminals far away from the good citizens rests on a judiciary guided by laws? How effectively judges and juries isolate the threats is your concern, nothing else! The nature and origin of Robert's paranoia, as well as the etiology of its dissolution, have little to do with the safety of the potential victims. In medicine, the issue of protecting the community – hence the isolation of contagious patients – is kept well apart from that of treating the sick and identifying the source of infection. But justice is traditionally a subject under the sway of ideology. And ideology is a pathology of the mind that blurs the vision hampering the ability to separate domains that, in fact, are completely independent. The protection of citizens, the social environment, the management of criminals and the organization of society – whose model, to some extent, defines the crime itself – belong to different spheres that, although somewhat related, cannot be addressed as an inchoate whole.

Books' reviews by F. Bianchetti

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