

Neoliberal capitalism and middle-class punitiveness: Bringing Erich Fromm's 'materialistic psychoanalysis' to penology

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Abstract

Why is it that imprisonment has undergone an explosive growth in the USA and Britain over the last three decades against the background of falling crime rates in both countries? And why has this development met with a significant and escalating degree of support among the public? To the extent that governing elites on either side of the Atlantic have been eliciting public support for their authority by inducing concerns about issues of crime and punishment, what explains the selection of crime as a means to this effect, and in what precise ways do crime and punishment fulfil their hidden political function? Moreover, how do Americans and Britons legitimate their consent to objectively irrational policies and the elites responsible for their formulation? In seeking to advance the study of these questions, the present article rediscovers the method and key findings of Erich Fromm's 'materialistic psychoanalysis', bringing them to bear upon insights produced by political economies of contemporary punishment and related scholarship. Particular attention is paid to the hitherto understudied themes of the political production of middle-class support for punitive penal policies under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, and the crucial role played in this process by the privileged position accorded to violent street crime in the public domain.

Keywords

Erich Fromm, neoliberal capitalism, political economy of punishment, psychosocial criminology, state and middle-class punitiveness, violent street crime

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It is a fundamental puzzle in Anglo-American penology that, whereas imprisonment purports to be a 'rational' response to the problem of crime, the number of individuals behind bars has undergone an explosive growth in the USA and Britain over the last three decades or so even though crime rates have been falling concurrently in both countries (see, for example, Tonry, 2007). If anything, imprisonment has been shown to be diversely counter-productive in that it causes reduced job opportunities for offenders, the social disorganization of communities, increased psychological and financial burdens on prisoners' families, and a stronger likelihood of future criminal activity (see, for example, Travis and Visher, 2005). As if this were not perplexing enough, there is also empirical evidence that the expansion of imprisonment on either side of the Atlantic has met with a significant and escalating degree of support among the public (see, for example, Enns, under review; Johnson, 2009; King and Maruna, 2009; Van Dijk et al., 2007). In and of itself, this latter point should occasion no surprise; to the extent, as political psychologists tell us, that the preferences of the average citizen in representative democracies set limits to the design and implementation of government policies (see, for example, Gibson, 1992), one could in any case infer an important level of correspondence between the scale of imprisonment, on the one hand, and public opinion, on the other. What complicates the matter is the decreasing prevalence of crime. Put simply, a sizeable proportion of the public approves of increased investment in an institution whose designated target problem has long been losing actual urgency. There is certainly a widespread misconception that crime in general and violent street crime in particular have been on the rise, at the same time that fear of violent criminal victimisation in public places has been increasing dramatically (see Farrall et al., 2009). But these are developments that beg the question of punitiveness, rather than addressing it; indeed, they form part of the riddle to be solved, not part of its solution.

The aim of this article is to make both an epistemological and a substantive contribution to explaining the rise in state use and public endorsement of imprisonment in the USA and Britain today. Epistemologically, an argument is developed for the employment of psychoanalysis and especially Erich Fromm's 'materialistic' strand. The motivations people consciously evoke for holding given attitudes are, in this view, the pretext for the unconscious expression of instinctual drives through these very attitudes and the activities they authorize in turn. Moreover, both the attitudes as such and the conscious motivations and unconscious drives that lie behind them are regulated by the state so as to promote particular economic imperatives. This approach coheres with the commitment of so-called 'psychosocial criminology' (Gadd and Jefferson, 2007) and 'criminology of the shadow' (Matravers and Maruna, 2004) to unearth and scrutinize the subtle symbolic functions of punishment as they relate to human instincts, although the scope of inquiry is hereby broadened to include the ties between human instincts, political power and class differentials. The approach advanced is also consistent with various large-scale surveys suggesting that the goals individuals name to explain their attitudes towards punishment are better understood as

rationalizations of emotive forces, and that punitiveness reflects economic insecurity and associated frustrations (see, for example, Costelloe et al., 2009; Johnson, 2009; King and Maruna, 2009).

In turning to Fromm's 'materialistic psychoanalysis' for inspiration and assistance, this article also helps to rediscover an unjustly 'forgotten intellectual'. Fromm was born into a Jewish middle-class family in 1900 in Frankfurt, Germany, and died in 1980 in Locarno, Switzerland. After briefly studying law at the University of Frankfurt, he moved to the University of Heidelberg, where he studied sociology under Alfred Weber (Max Weber's brother), psychology under Karl Jaspers and philosophy under Heinrich Rickert. In 1922, he completed a PhD at Heidelberg with a dissertation on the function of Jewish law in maintaining cohesion among three diasporic communities. Over the next few years, Fromm trained in psychoanalysis under the direction of Freudian teachers, and set up a private practice in Berlin. In 1930, he was made the tenured director of the Social Psychology Section of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, now better known as the 'Frankfurt School'.

It was there that Fromm, building upon his rare interdisciplinary background, began his lifelong effort to combine Marxist and Freudian insights into human behaviour, thereby also paving the way to the influential psychosocial work undertaken later by other members of the School, most notably Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. But Fromm's sustained critique of Freud's libidinal determinism in light of the historical materialism propounded by Marx soon estranged him from his core School colleagues, who viewed libidinal instincts as a built-in form of biological resistance to the repressive role of society.¹ Due in no small part to this conceptual divergence, Fromm's affiliation with the Frankfurt School ended under bitter circumstances in 1939; so bitter, indeed, that Fromm was gradually written out of the history of the School.² Still, with a string of classic books, from *Escape from Freedom* (1994 [1941]) to *Man for Himself* (1986 [1949]) to *The Sane Society* (2006 [1955]), Fromm rose to become a major figure in both psychoanalysis and the social sciences in the western world and beyond between the 1940s and late 1960s. Yet he quickly fell out of favour thereafter, not least because of his principled insistence on interdisciplinarity and anti-dogmatism amid a climate where academic disciplines and networks of scholars increasingly guarded their intellectual boundaries in a sect-like fashion. What is more, the way in which Fromm's writings have been read ever since was largely defined in the mid-1950s by Marcuse, who misleadingly accused his old rival at the Frankfurt School of preaching adaptation to the status quo (see further McLaughlin, 1998, 1999; also Friedman, 2013; Jay, 1973).

It is no surprise, therefore, that the foundations of research into the relationship between punitiveness, politics and the economy are commonly traced by contemporary penologists back to the 1930s and the sociological writings of Georg Rusche and Otto Kirchheimer of the Frankfurt School, without acknowledging that Fromm, himself a prominent member of the School at the time, also dealt head-on with this theme in two articles he published in 1930 and 1931, respectively

(Fromm, 2000 [1930], 2000 [1931]).³ Indeed, Fromm's own analyses raised and provided imaginative clues to issues such as the symbolic facets of punitiveness under capitalism, which still remain under-studied today. Similarly, while plenty of ink has been spilt on the concept and empirical study of the 'authoritarian personality' as developed by Adorno and a research team he led at the Frankfurt School, few remember or know of Fromm's earlier concept of the 'authoritarian character' (on which more presently) or the fact that he worked on the first public opinion survey ever to apply modern psychological methods to the investigation of political behaviour, including support for authoritarianism (see further Cheliotis, 2011a, 2011b).

The call for cross-fertilizing the study of punitiveness with Fromm's psychoanalysis is not entirely devoid of precedent (see, for example, Anderson, 2000; Chancer, 2000). With little and limited exception (e.g. Arrigo, 2010; Arrigo and Milovanovic, 2009), however, it has not been issued outside the confines of Fromm's early critique of the criminal justice system. Thus left unexplored and unexploited have been the abundant stores of conceptual tools, theoretical notions and empirical findings available in his broader work on political domination and social exclusion. The present article seeks to rectify this, although by no means implying that the outcome might qualify as a new orthodoxy in penology. Rather more modestly, and in line with Fromm's contextualist method, the article synthesizes and uses various of his works as a foundation, also elaborating and modifying them as appropriate, in order to offer a novel analysis of the specific theme of punitiveness in the contemporary Anglo-American world.

In particular, by bringing Frommian psychoanalysis to bear upon insights produced by political economies of contemporary punishment and related scholarship, the substantive goal of the article is to trace the ways in which penalty allows governing elites in the USA and the UK to manage public insecurities under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. By default, then, the argument breaks with the valuable but insufficiently political penologies of Durkheimian and Foucauldian lineage, the former viewing the punishment of scapegoated minorities as the cathartic remedy for majoritarian anxieties that occur as the by-products of disembodied cultures, and the latter treating penal power as an autopoietic structure, stripped of human agents and concrete objectives. Yet the Frommian argument presented below also extends beyond what may be termed 'proto-Marxist' political economies of punishment, whereby the ruling class deploys penal sanctions to keep the proletarian swathes of the population under physical control, just as it extends beyond 'neo-Marxist' variations whereby physical penal control over the proletarian masses serves the additional aim of instilling into them beliefs and values that legitimate the reproduction of capitalist relations of production.⁴ The focus is rather on the symbolic role of physical penal control over the weakest cohorts in eliciting support from the middle classes for elites failing to meet their expected responsibilities on the socio-economic front.

Trends in middle-class punitiveness, but also in the relationship between class and punitiveness more generally, have remained largely under-studied in recent

decades (notwithstanding attention received by Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007; Wacquant, 2009; and Young, 2007). This is peculiar for at least three reasons. First, the middle classes have historically been far from immune to punitive attitudes despite their self-portrayal as the enlightened classes (see, for example, Ranulf, 1938). Second, there is widespread recognition that socio-economic insecurity, itself a known predictor of punitiveness, has been felt increasingly deeply by the middle classes before and after the millennium (see, for example, Young, 2007). And third, there is substantial and growing scholarly interest in the correlation between other key socio-demographic variables, such as gender or age, and punitive public opinion (see further Maruna and King, 2009). Indeed, in light of the relative absence of pertinent data, middle-class consent to punitive penal policies has often been inferred negatively. To take the best known example, Garland speaks of 'the dog that did not bark' to signify the passive role played by 'the professional middle classes, an otherwise powerful and articulate group, who have done little to oppose the drift towards punitive policies' (Garland, 2001: 152). But it is also possible to deduce an active form of middle-class consent to state punitiveness if one accepts that the middle classes carry primary responsibility for voting into power successive punitive governments. This is an as yet unverified but plausible hypothesis, given that levels of formal civic participation and voting in particular are overwhelmingly imbalanced in favour of citizens with higher incomes, greater wealth and better education (Hansard Society, 2008; Lijphart, 1997), at a time when crime and its control are said to rank among the top conscious priorities of the 'sophisticated' electorate (Cummings, 2009; Economist/Ipsos MORI, 2011).

Another under-studied theme, and one this article also explores at length by way of building upon the work of Fromm, is that of the political prioritization of crime over other risks in the public domain. While there is no shortage of accounts suggesting that political elites make strategic use of the issue of crime to promote personal and in-group interests, little has been done to explore the prerequisite implicit in this suggestion; namely, that crime, or at least certain types of crime, carry attributes that render them publicly more compelling and thereby politically more suitable than other dangers, whether constructed or real (exceptions here include Box, 1983; Christie, 1986; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Simon, 2001; and Wacquant, 2009). It is, of course, rightly assumed in related scholarship that the evocation of crime as a serious threat serves to legitimate state and public punitiveness in the field of crime control. Yet there is arguably much greater scope for analysis, both in terms of the objects of legitimation and the context, language and content of political discourse that makes such legitimation successful.

The article begins by introducing Fromm's work on the concepts of narcissism and 'social character', explicating their role in the construction of consent for unjust policies and the elites responsible for their formulation. The article then focuses on the nature and intensity of frustrations and insecurities experienced by the middle classes under conditions of neoliberal capitalism, as these problematize consent to unfair socio-economic policies and their architects. The way in

which the political challenge posed by this ambivalence is managed by governing elites is examined next. It is argued that law and order politics are deployed by elites as a means of assuaging the legitimacy deficit of their authority in the eyes of the middle classes. More specifically, the use of imprisonment against weaker others lends itself as an outlet for the continuous cathartic discharge of stubborn middle-class anxieties, while these anxieties are channelled to the resolution provided by imprisonment in large part through the vehicle of heightened concerns over violent street crime. In addition to inviting decisive state intervention in the relatively inexpensive form of expanding the practice of imprisonment by drawing on established grounds of rationality and morality, violent street crime has another three intrinsic attributes that help make the degree of attention accorded to it appear justified in the first place. First, it poses angst suitably analogous to that borne of neoliberal socio-economic policies; second, it supplies convenient and serviceable scapegoats; and third, it can be regarded as a persistent challenge. The article concludes with some short remarks as to the role penological scholarship and especially Frommian critique may play in countering neoliberal capitalist penalty.

Methodological and conceptual signposts

As already intimated, the forthcoming analysis of punitiveness treats the US and UK states and publics in a reductive manner. This approach has been criticized for either undermining 'American exceptionalism' by cutting it down to the size of a 'civilized' Britain, or projecting an overly dystopian vision of Britain by equating her with a 'decivilized' America (see, for example, Lacey, 2008; Tonry, 2009; Zedner, 2002). It has similarly been argued that looking at the USA as a homogeneous nation may result in glossing over important differences between individual US states in terms of levels both of state and public punitiveness (see, for example, Barker, 2009; Lacey, 2008; Newburn, 2010). Yet comparative studies of the rates at which state punitiveness has grown over recent decades, whether in the USA and Britain as unitary nations or even across the various US states themselves, have revealed substantially greater degrees of uniformity than critics would have us believe (see, for example, Wacquant, 2012; Zimring, 2010). Quantitative matters aside, the risks of approaching the US and UK states and publics in a reductive fashion are arguably counterbalanced by the resulting ability to draw transatlantic (and, in the case of the USA, intra-national) connections in terms of *patterns* both of formal policy-making and lay public attitudes as these relate to one another.

Pursuing this line of analysis, the article has the particular aim of explaining why and how neoliberal capitalism lies behind excessive state and public punitiveness in the USA and the UK today. This is not to be confused with the erroneous notion that the general economic principles of neoliberal capitalism are applied uniformly across different countries and jurisdictions. Nor should one

deduce the equally mistaken idea that neoliberal capitalism is a necessary or even the exclusive precursor of excessive state and public punitiveness wherever these manifest themselves. It is, in fact, debatable whether punitiveness is greater in neoliberal capitalist environments than elsewhere (see further Cheliotis and Xenakis, 2010; Nelken, 2009). For all that, few would disagree that the US and UK economies have followed remarkably similar trajectories of neoliberalization over recent decades, which also warrants the reductive approach comparative penologists have increasingly adopted when investigating the role of neoliberal capitalism in causing or at least enhancing the rise of punitive policies and attitudes in either country. One last caveat should be issued as to the comparative scope of this article. To the extent that state and public punitiveness in the contemporary Anglo-American world are said below to carry strong overtones of authoritarianism, the concern is not with the specific structural components of authoritarian regimes as such and the degree to which they are present in the countries under scrutiny. The concern is rather with the contextual conditions and symbolic mechanisms that combine to give rise and expression to authoritarian sentiments.

To illustrate and further explicate these points, the remainder of this article brings together sociological approaches to everyday life in neoliberal capitalist societies, including inputs from political penology, and critical psychoanalytic concepts. The latter are borrowed mainly from Erich Fromm and his 'materialistic psychoanalysis'. More particularly, the article draws on Fromm's conception that, on the one hand, the instrumental and moral motives people consciously evoke to explain their attitudes and actions are in significant measure the justificatory expression of their unconscious instincts, and that, on the other hand, both the instinctual 'substructure' and its justificatory expression are moulded under the influence of socio-political factors and the overarching economic 'superstructure' (Fromm, 1970). Particular attention is paid to the concept of the 'social character', which comprises the sum total of cognitive and psychic traits typical of human beings in a given society or group, and to the innate narcissistic forces that are formed and find outlet therein.

To clear the ground for the ensuing discussion, a few more preambles to Frommian psychoanalysis are required. Fromm contends that at their most basic level, or at what one may term 'first-order' level, human attitudes and actions are driven by private corporeal needs, such as securing food and shelter. But – and here basic or 'first-order' needs assume an additional, ontological dimension – humans

could not remain sane even if [they] took care of all [their] material needs, unless [they] were able to establish some form of relatedness to others that allows [them] to feel 'at home', and saves [them] from the experience of complete affective isolation and separateness. (Fromm and Maccoby, 1970: 14)

Other fundamental ontological needs consist in happiness, rootedness and transcendence (see, for example, Fromm, 2006 [1962]).

Fromm elaborates that basic or 'first-order' needs, be they corporeal or ontological, are built in the instinctual apparatus, and specifically in the 'narcissistic core' of the psyche. This implies that the general directions of basic or 'first-order' needs, as well as their tenacity, intensity and universal spread, are biological givens. Fromm adds, however, that the specific content of narcissism, and thus of basic or 'first-order' needs, is highly modifiable. In the process of maturation, personal narcissism may be transformed into group or social narcissism, even though the individual must always retain a sense of individuality within a collectivity, just as it may come to revolve around different objects.

Crucially, Fromm argues that narcissism also forces individuals constantly to evaluate and try to ensure the legitimacy – that is, the rationality and morality – of their attitudes and actions. It follows that the search for a clear conscience, which is an ontological need in and of itself, makes it imperative that satisfaction of corporeal and other ontological needs be sought in legitimate or, at least, legitimizable ways. Whichever the case, and insofar as motivations are concerned, self-perceptions of legitimacy are epiphenomena of what may be termed a 'second-order' narcissistic need – a need relating to the quality of the specific content and type of resolution of basic or 'first-order' narcissistic needs (see further Cheliotis, 2011b).

These observations are only the beginning of Fromm's effort to develop a holistic explanatory approach to human attitudes and action. He proceeds to raise a number of important questions that orthodox psychoanalysts usually either ignore or avoid by dint of focusing their attention solely on the causal efficacy of narcissism; by treating narcissism strictly as an 'independent variable' that can elucidate other phenomena without calling for an explanation of its own development. What determines whether narcissistic needs acquire a corporeal or an ontological direction in the sense of greater urgency? What determines the specific content needs assume and the particular group that appears preferable to the individual? What defines the precise ways in which needs are to be satisfied and the attendant consequences for the individual and society as a whole? What shapes the general techniques and particular ideals and ideas that are employed to legitimate the struggle for the satisfaction of needs in given ways, including who or what may be viewed as posing threats to corporeal survival and identity?

Fromm's reply, tempering the psychoanalytic fixation on instinctual drives with a sociological emphasis on socio-political influences upon human attitudes and conduct, is that all these issues are typically dependent on the social character that is predominant at a given historical moment. Operating as a reciprocal mediator between the economic superstructure, the ideals and ideas prevalent in society and the narcissistic needs of the individual, the social character transforms 'general psychic energy into specific psychosocial energy' (Fromm and Maccoby, 1970: 18). The argument here is not merely that socialization serves subtly to align mass desires and their pursuit with the interests of powerful economic elites and their political allies. This alignment, it is argued further, requires that socialization work simultaneously to misguide people into actively accepting the legitimacy of the desires and pursuits prescribed for them.

While, in other words, narcissistic urges inescapably set in motion the process of continuously assessing the legitimacy of one's own attitudes and actions, there are no guarantees as to whether engagement in this process will bring about objectively rational and moral outcomes. This is because the concrete standards, the knowledge resources and the cognitive operations by which attitudes and actions are evaluated, commonly derive from one's social existence and especially from the unfolding of the economic environment. Thus, insofar as the social character promotes ideological incorporation through control of culture, it plays a key role in the maintenance of unjust civil orders and their economic foundations (Fromm, 2006 [1962]).

What Fromm terms the 'hoarding' character orientation, for instance, privileges a puritan approach to work and accumulation of wealth. The hoarding character was the backbone of 19th-century capitalism, because the 'combination of a stable world, stable possessions, and a stable ethic gave the members of the middle class a feeling of belonging, self-confidence, and pride' (Fromm, 1986 [1949]: 81). By contrast, *homo consumens* develops in capitalist societies that nurture the greed for consumption by tying it to symbolic recognition of distinction and success in life (Fromm, 1997 [1976]). 'Our economy', Fromm was writing of the USA back in the 1960s, 'would face a severe crisis if people – the working and the middle classes – were not to spend most of their income on consumption, rather than to save it' (Fromm, 2006 [1962]: 63).

Nevertheless, as Fromm is quick to recognize, the growth of contradictions in society threatens to provoke a 'revolutionary' mode of thinking on a mass scale, which would dissolve the social character in place, including any justifications this provides for ongoing and growing social contradictions, and shake the economic order to its roots (Fromm, 1970). Resolution, Fromm explains, tends to be found for the ruling establishment in the nurture of new character orientations that are neither alternative to the old nor necessarily mutually exclusive of one another. At the furthest extreme of such resolution lies the 'authoritarian character', the person who 'admires authority and tends to submit to it, but at the same time . . . wants to be an authority himself and have others submit to him' (Fromm, 1994 [1941]: 162).

Here the ruling establishment displaces mass anger onto out-groups scapegoated as dangerous, and activates an aggressive striving to dominate over them, thereby producing the 'legitimate' need for authoritarian action that the establishment is both specially equipped and amply willing to undertake. To achieve domination over scapegoated others, the people must submit to, and identify with, their otherwise failing and repugnant rulers. It is not simply that '[b]y this symbolic participation in [rulers' lives], man has the illusion of acting, when in reality he only submits to, and becomes a part of, those who act' (Fromm, 1964: 31). It is also that this illusion of power facilitates 'the development of economic forces even if those forces contradict the economic interests of [one's own] class' (Fromm, 1994 [1941]: 295). Fromm's preferred example is the rise of Fascism in antebellum Germany, and particularly the way in which the lower middle classes were drawn into Nazi ideology amid a climate of widespread socio-economic insecurity,

itself the outcome of mass unemployment, hyperinflation and a severe crisis in the stock market (see further Fromm, 1984 [1973]).

It is essential to clarify at this point that Fromm in no way adheres to the much-scorned ‘conspiratorial’ approach to elite conduct. He argues that, while exploitative elites are typically driven by a ‘first-order’ narcissistic greed for power and pay, they are no less subject to the ‘second-order’ narcissistic need to keep one’s own conscience satisfied. This impels them to legitimate their position and decisions to themselves and to their immediate staff at least as much as to the masses they govern. Similar to lay people, moreover, the standards, knowledge and methods by which the elites gauge the legitimacy of their status and decisions, follow directly from their socio-economic environment; the same culture and economic ‘superstructure’ that shape the general directions and specific content of their ‘first-order’ needs as well (see Fromm, 1984 [1973]). As I have sought to illustrate elsewhere with regard to criminal justice policy-making (Cheliotis, 2010b), this analytic approach allows a distinction to be made between what serves as an ideological veil for elites themselves and what is often mistaken by suspicious onlookers as a cynical mask of lies.⁵

Whether under the broader rubrics of class domination and violence, or even focusing specifically on crime and punishment under capitalism, Fromm has bequeathed us a wide array of in-depth characterological analyses. Fromm’s analyses were rare in their time, in good part because they combined theoretical construction with a painstaking search for empirical evidence in a diverse range of sources (Cheliotis, 2011a). Subsequent revisionist research has not always provided unequivocal support for Fromm’s conclusions. Most notably, Hamilton (1982) has demonstrated that, while electoral support for Hitler’s party in Weimar Germany varied according to socio-economic class, it was not particularly concentrated among the lower middle classes. Such revisionist challenges, however, should by no means detract from Fromm’s broader effort to infuse the study of political economy with psychoanalytic inquiry into fundamental human needs (McLaughlin, 2007).

Insofar as Fromm’s specific findings and observations bear relevance to contemporary affairs in a host of countries and jurisdictions (see, for example, Anderson, 2000), the explanation is best sought in particular contextual homogeneities and consistencies as they appeal to the human psyche, rather than in Fromm’s aptitude for general theorization. Indeed, just as Fromm stood firmly opposed to biological determinism, so too he was cautious enough to eschew the search for transhistorical or universal constants in socio-political and cultural matters. Despite its hedgehog air, his theory of character orientations was only meant to serve as a method by which to pose and solve problems in given temporal and spatial contexts, without disregard for specificities. Its heuristic and explanatory merits for present purposes – what it allows us to take into account, and what to account for – may be summarized as follows: it recognizes both the organic and ontological dimensions of instincts; it weds the instinctual and the societal within the socialized self without collapsing the former into the latter or vice versa; it interprets the self outside the

mainstream, individual clinical setting, and as a broader, anthropological category; it views societal influences on the self both in terms of the economy and its cultural components (e.g. consumerism); it links the economy and its cultural components to the regulatory powers of state elites and institutions; and it pays equal attention to the material efficacy of symbolic power and the symbolic efficacy of material power, as they stand to one another in a relationship of mutual constitution and reinforcement (see further Cheliotis, 2011a, 2011b; also Burston, 1991; Funk, 1982).

The insecurities of neoliberal capitalism and the problem of order

Any account which predicates political domination and the maintenance of social order upon the manipulation of public anxieties needs to elucidate the constitutive content and inner psychic resonance of the anxieties at issue. The goal of this section is thus to argue that the problem of order for governing elites in the USA and Britain today consists in managing the corporeal and ontological insecurities their neoliberal socio-economic policies have generated among the public and the middle classes in particular. Attention is focused on the middle classes because, on the one hand, the intensity and even the nature of their insecurities have in recent years come closer to lower-class experiences, and because, on the other hand, middle-class individuals are generally more likely to seek to influence their life conditions by making use of the readily available democratic means of political participation, notably voting.⁶

There is broad consensus that neoliberal capitalism has supplanted welfare liberalism as the dominant model of government on both sides of the Atlantic over the last three decades or so. Whereas welfare liberalism aimed at strengthening social inclusion by protecting the most vulnerable fractions of the population, for example through provision of social security benefits, the advent of neoliberal capitalism has brought about the deregulation of financial flows, the relaxation of administrative controls on the employment market and the retrenchment of social spending. As is widely accepted, transnational and domestic elites have been reaping the benefits ever since, at the same time that the lowest social strata have been falling deeper and deeper into joblessness and pauperism (Reiner, 2007). Less consideration has been paid to the fact that the middle classes have also found themselves under soaring pressure, from spreading unemployment, under-employment and precarious labour (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009) to escalating poverty and even hunger, as illustrated by their expanding use of charitable food distribution (see, for example, *CNN*, 2010; *The Guardian*, 2012). To make matters worse, developments on the fronts of employment and household finances have naturally had crucial ontological repercussions for middle-class persons. Most characteristically, falling into joblessness and undergoing a dramatic drop in income have been experiences that signal inability to meet long-cherished middle-class ideals of

self-development necessary for attaining or sustaining the respect of others (Beck, 2007 [1986]).

Even though – or, indeed, because – the middle classes have not necessarily lost in terms of consumerist power, their ontological insecurity has been exacerbated rather than allayed. The sustenance and growth of neoliberal markets, it may be recalled, rely inextricably on extensive, abundant and incessant consumerism; they rely on that character orientation which Fromm terms *homo consumens*. Success in life has thus been made to appear commensurate with the range and quantity of commodities people can afford to purchase, from goods and services to access to ‘cultural experiences’ like tourism and fashion, or else one falls within a derided ‘underclass’ of ‘flawed consumers’ (Bauman, 1998). While policies of credit liberalization have been introduced for the middle classes in order to secure consumer spending despite uncertainty of income, thousands of borrowers have been lured into heavy indebtedness. True, then, as it may be that the middle classes still enjoy material and ontological advantages over the lower classes, their fear of bankruptcy and downward mobility has been mounting all the while (Young, 2007; Wacquant, 2009).

The immediate question for present purposes concerns the bases of continuing consent to the authority of incumbent neoliberal elites. If, as Fromm (1994 [1941]) argues, submission to rulers and their regimes always remains contingent upon the availability of logics that render it or make it appear legitimate, which are the logics that neoliberal elites evoke to justify and thereby sustain their authority over the people for whom they fail to cater? Surrendering the economy to financial markets is justified as a writ of fate; either negatively, as the unavoidable by-product of the ‘elusive’ forces of globalization, or positively, as the only road to individual and national prosperity in an environment of global market competition. This two-pronged teleology underpins those discourses which seek to naturalize the shift of responsibility for security and welfare onto the shoulders of private individuals themselves (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1999). The message is no different today than the one detected by Fromm in post-war America, where the cultural ideal of consuming commodities relentlessly was coupled with the caveat that ‘each one has to look out, and be responsible, for himself, and that he has to use his own initiative if he wants to “get anywhere”’ (Fromm, 1986 [1949]: 79).

But again, in multi-party democracies such as the USA and Britain, the mix of diminished governmental accountability and continuing public insecurities has the potential to stimulate a ‘revolutionary’ mode of thinking among the citizenry, give rise to a ‘legitimation crisis’ for the established party-political order (Habermas, 1975) and lead to opposition voting, at least as concerns the middle classes. While neoliberal capitalism is not thereby necessarily challenged – for despite proclamations to the contrary, it may be embraced invariably by politicians of the centre-Right or the centre-Left (Wacquant, 2009) – neoliberal elites in office may face a real prospect of losing power. It is at this juncture that crime and its control enter the picture.

The psychopolitics of law and order

History, according to Fromm, teaches us that state governments lacking either the resources or the will to provide adequately for the majority or large segments of the populace, first turn to the formation of social characters that may provide mass legitimation for the unjust order of things as they stand. Once this ideological effect wears off as a result of persistent basic insecurities among the public, Fromm goes on to explain, state governments resort to the cultivation of the ‘authoritarian character’.

In the case of the authoritarian character, real public insecurities – and thereby also public anger towards incumbent rulers – are displaced onto concocted substitutes and are acted out aggressively against them. ‘Sadism’, Fromm writes, ‘is the great instinctual reservoir to which one appeals when one has no other . . . satisfactions to offer the masses’, or when other ‘instinctual satisfactions of a more positive nature are ruled out on socio-economic grounds’ (Fromm, 1970: 113). But the authoritarian character may only be complete so long as ‘sadism’ is accompanied by ‘masochism’, in the sense of willingly subordinating oneself to powerful and unjust or otherwise failing authorities. Indeed, sadistic acting out functions as a lure to masochistic submission, which is why failing rulers take it upon themselves to perform sadistic violence on behalf of their constituents.

The means by which displacement, masochistic submission and sadistic acting out are set and kept in motion, consists in well-crafted political myths. In the first instance, political myths must work to designate particular objects or situations as posing dangers in urgent need of decisive state intervention, and particular rulers as being prepared to undertake such intervention in response (Fromm, 1964: 19). But the symbolic and material outcomes of the process of designation – from the construction of dangerousness and the appropriate method and authority to deal with it, to citizens’ submission to decisive rulers and the decisive action of rulers in itself – also have to appear valid and moral, in accordance with the ‘second-order’ narcissistic need for a ‘popular sense of justice’ (Fromm, 2000 [1930]: 126). Ironically, some of the basic ingredients of successful authoritarian mythologems may be found in the very quandaries the state has generated and is thereby trying to manage. In other words, rather than the state merely surviving its contradictions, it has the capacity to live and thrive through them.

At least in part, Fromm explains, the popular appeal of political myths is to be explained by reference to the particular conditions of the moment and the ways in which these impact upon the psyche. Humans, he argues, exhibit greater susceptibility to mythical narratives that promulgate danger and call for harsh reaction by a superior power, when feeling tangled in situations of intense insecurity as to their actual life prospects; when there are objective reasons to fear powerlessness and insignificance (Fromm, 1964: 78–79). To this extent, the allure of alarmist political myths lies outside their discursive realm, and is rather deeply rooted in the narcissistic negative compulsion we all have to evade or escape factually unbearable situations (Fromm, 1994 [1941]).

Whereas an ideological construct may be timely in striking sensitized chords in the realm of basic drives, however, timeliness alone cannot account for the construct's appeal where it lacks grounding in empirical reality. The construct needs somehow to attend to the 'second-order' narcissistic need for a lasting sense of self-legitimacy. This is all the more so when ideological constructs imply the need for weighty concessions, such as those accompanying the acceptance of authoritarianism, from bestowing the mandate to rule on powerful authorities to consenting to the violent exclusion of others. The weightier the concessions implied by an ideological construct, the more frequent and attentive its subjection to assessment against prevalent standards of rationality and morality, and the more likely its demystification in turn (Cheliotis, 2011b).

Anticipating this challenge, Fromm also draws attention to the rhetorical form of political myths as these may provide authoritarianism with an aura of rationality and morality. Before all else, he observes, successful myth-making rests on extant cultural frames of reference; on familiar descriptive idioms and dominant ideas about causation and methods of evaluating the world, the acceptability of which helps further justify what would on closer scrutiny turn out to be irrational. It is not merely that justifications must fit certain conventions in order to be grasped. The very fact that justifications are thereby grasped enhances their apparent credibility, and especially when they are used to overcome a sense of personal or in-group failure (Fromm, 2006 [1962]: 87–100; see also Herzfeld, 1992). But again, although language is typically rich enough to allow for a host of dangers to enter public awareness and be viewed as credible – indeed, suitable idioms and ideas may be furnished by the very language of the system at risk – not all mythologizable dangers lend themselves to the political functions of distracting public attention away from the real sources of insecurity and legitimating the discharge of aggressive urges against given others through subordinating oneself to the acting state. Thus, alongside addressing the context and language of effective political myths about danger – *when* and *how* they are uttered – Fromm also returns to clarify their specific content – *what* they utter, or the substantive attributes characterizing the danger which they name.

Fromm's views on the matter can be fruitfully brought to bear upon the substantive theme of this article: the symbolic means by which incumbent elites in the USA and Britain manage the psychic repercussions of their neoliberal socio-economic policies for the middle classes. Below I engage in just that exercise, making the case that well-established conventions of neoliberal rhetoric are employed to rebrand the nature and sources of middle-class insecurity in the narrow sense of violent street crime (e.g. robbery and physical assault). In addition to its capacity to authorize the expansion of imprisonment by way of protection and retribution, the specific choice of violent street crime is further explained in conjunction with three criteria. Violent street crime may qualify as urgent in ways identifiable with the insecurities triggered by neoliberal capitalism, it may be linked to the very minorities neoliberal capitalism has rendered or kept weak and may be attributed to their supposed inclination to cheat in the race for consumerist pleasure, and it can take on the appearance of a persistently intractable problem. As a

result, it is argued, middle-class insecurities are protractedly displaced and discharged from the actual onto suitable substitute objects and subjects, without obviously opposing commonly cherished principles of rationality and morality.

'Suitable threats' and 'suitable enemies'

Two confusions must be avoided at this juncture. First, although Fromm himself does not raise this point, to speak of displacement is not to claim that public consciousness is wholly diverted away from the original sources of insecurity. This, in the case under consideration, would not be possible, given that socio-economic adversities always impinge directly and heavily on the human psyche. Nor would it even be politically desirable, as socio-economic concerns work to increase (if not, as we have seen, fully and permanently ensure) personal susceptibility to exploitation as both a worker and a consumer in the neoliberal marketplace. Displacement is to be understood, instead, as a matter of prioritizing or at least rebalancing different concerns according to their perceived levels of importance and urgency, be such perceptions justified or not by objective factors. In this sense, socio-economic insecurities may be kept constant or even increase but either take a back seat to, or not far exceed, insecurities related to the likelihood of criminal victimization on the street.

The second confusion to be avoided also concerns the process of displacement. To suggest that the source of middle-class worries is displaced from neoliberal socio-economic policies onto violent street crime is not to subscribe to the behaviourist concept of 'stimulus generalization', whereby a given response may extend to objects or situations outwardly resembling the original stimulus. As well as referring to the rise of new but not substitutive stimuli, the concept of generalization fails to explain why superficially similar objects or situations are not equally effective in triggering the same response. Here one needs to recall, this time with Fromm, that stimulation requires that the stimulus be commonly thought of as bearing a causal link to the response. For example, although fear is a biological instinct found in all sentient organisms, a man will feel threatened with danger to his life only to the extent that the source of danger has previously been nominated as such. Displacement, it follows, requires that there be unconscious associative connections between new objects or situations and their original counterparts; that there be sufficient identity in the responses each of them may be said to elicit, regardless of any similarities they may or may not share in terms of outward form (Fromm, 1984 [1973]: 321–325).

Thus, albeit due to the unequal distribution of resources under neoliberal capitalism, corporeal insecurity among the middle classes is attributed to the supposed spread of violent street crime and the threats it poses directly to the human body. Similarly, inasmuch as middle-class ontological insecurity springs from reduced geographical mobility, it is blamed not on financial constraints but rather on the socio-spatial implications of violent crime on the streets, for example the avoidance of public places denoted as 'danger zones' or 'no-go areas' (see further Garland,

2001; Simon, 2007; Wacquant, 2009). Arguably, however, neoliberal capitalism can have actual, if indirect, criminogenic effects, in that it brings about the economic ills and wider existential gaps that may push a minority of people to take up violent street crime. (This, incidentally, is an observation which Fromm (2000 [1931]) elaborates in the context of earlier forms of capitalism.) By implication, and at least in this limited sense, the process of displacement becomes one where the original danger and its resembling substitute are not only associated causally, but also share a certain grounding in lived reality. Indeed, governing elites may manipulate the criminogenic side-effects of neoliberal capitalism to their own political advantage. By arbitrarily extrapolating from the relatively few concrete instances of violent victimization on the street – by putting together ‘[l]ittle straws of truth’, as Fromm (1964: 85) would phrase the point – elites may accord semblances of reality to the fictional image of violent street crime as a danger similar in its spread to the insecurities directly borne of neoliberal socio-economic policies. At the same time, the apparent root causes of the substitute danger that is violent street crime, whether fictional or real, must be disassociated from the governing party and its socio-economic policies as such. If not, displacement risks defeating its political purpose, both in terms of incumbent interests and the broader neoliberal project to which these are subtly and tightly tied.

It is important here to elaborate on the neoliberal framework of blame and accountability within which violent street crime is depicted and explained in political and public discourses. Blame and accountability in general, and the identity of those held responsible for the problem of violent street crime in particular, are key to further deepening our understanding of the process of displacement at issue. For resolution, if such it can be termed, cannot be reached by governing elites if they merely deny responsibility for the problem they have chosen to foreground. The outlet where responsibility is transferred has crucial functions to perform besides, over and above assuming the burden of blame, hence it needs to satisfy a battery of very particular criteria. In fact, the political utility and selectability of a given danger are largely commensurate with its capacity to be attributed to sources that can meet these criteria.

As Fromm (1964: 85–87) notes, a danger cannot be sufficiently attractive as a substitute for the real source of one’s insecurities unless it leads to the identification of specific others, and unless it helps to mobilize disdain for them as opposed to praise for one’s own group. This is because a central function of substitutive dangers is to drain off the narcissistic needs for a sense of mastery over destiny (although, as we shall see, mastery must by no means be absolute to be politically effective) and for achieving or reaffirming significations of social superiority. What thus allows violent street crime to appear liable to regulation and provoke targeted disdain is first and foremost that it can be given a familiar face, as when mugging is linked to young Black males (Hall et al., 1978; Simon, 2001; Wacquant, 2009; Tonry, 2011).

Not all categories of persons are equally suitable for the purposes in hand. Fromm (1964: 86) points out that scapegoats need to issue from ‘a minority that

is sufficiently helpless to lend itself as an object for narcissistic satisfaction' (see also Christie, 1986; Hollway and Jefferson, 1997). If, as Fromm elaborates, the helplessness of scapegoats is generally to be conceived in socio-economic terms, then governing elites in the case at issue manage to twist yet another complication of neoliberalism to their own advantage, here laying responsibility squarely on the backs of people whom neoliberal socio-economic policies have kept or pushed into the most disadvantaged positions in society (Reiner, 2002; Wacquant, 2009).

Once personified, Fromm goes on to argue, selected dangers may be framed in the language of extant self-serving effigies that divide societies into pairs of extremes along moralistic lines. Crucially, besides furnishing idioms for describing the general qualities of human conduct, such effigies also offer precise ideas about how human conduct is to be explained and how it should be weighed morally (Fromm, 2006 [1962]: 87–100; see also Herzfeld, 1992). In all these senses, the violent street criminal's demerits are constructed in a classificatory language that feeds on the symbolic order of neoliberal capitalism. More specifically, the perpetrators of violent street crime are said and thought to be enjoying instant access to material and ontological gains, from the goods they seize to unrestricted spatial mobility through taking over streets. Thereby induced among the middle classes is the sense of unfairness one consciously feels when others 'short circuit the whole marketplace of effort and reward, when they are perceived as getting exactly what they want without any effort at all – or, more precisely, exactly what *you* want and can only achieve with great effort' (Young, 2007: 45, emphasis in original). Purporting to be causally associated with failing performance in the marketplace, violent street crime soon comes to be viewed as the means by which 'flawed consumers' manage to offset the effects of personal 'irresponsibility' and 'laziness' (see further Bauman and May, 2001; also Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009).

It is not hard to see how governing elites once more manage to draw symbolic benefits from deeply problematic features of their neoliberal socio-economic policies. Not only do they deploy the scathing rhetoric of the market to theorize and castigate the violent street criminal. In so doing, they also conflate the disadvantages their very policies have done so much to produce with a constructed succession of taints, from irresponsibility and laziness, to criminal propensity, to reduced morality. This argument may be advanced further: rather than assuming that the politico-symbolic benefit at issue is restricted to relativizing the significance and urgency of middle-class socio-economic insecurities vis-à-vis violent street crime, the discourse of violent street crime may be viewed as allowing the reconstruction of middle-class socio-economic insecurities as such, treating them as a signifier of responsible citizenship and thereby unconsciously enhancing their public acceptability.

In this case, while the disadvantaged are berated for allegedly rejecting 'responsible' alternatives in favour of crime as the easy route out of their predicament, praise is extended to the middle classes, who equally allegedly make the hard 'responsible' choice of abstaining from crime despite the persistence of their own socio-economic insecurities. Among the middle classes, stubborn socio-economic

insecurities may thus come to be regarded as indicators of righteousness and responsibility, both in terms of entrepreneurship and approach to the rule of law. To this extent, crime allows for expanding the meaning of success in life under neoliberalism to include reference to the legal merits of the means by which one struggles for corporeal and ontological security, opening up opportunities for finding a modicum of narcissistic satisfaction in the process of struggling even where, ironically, the ultimate desired goals remain pending. But the irony goes further still, insofar as the dichotomous discourse of responsabilization as applied to the public reflects, and ultimately serves, the interests of neoliberal rulers who thereby try to evade nothing less than responsibility for their own civic failings and misdeeds.

'Suitable remedies'

No matter how attractive in terms of the nature and sources of danger it narrates, the myth of violent street crime still faces at least three crucial challenges. First, it stands in flagrant contradiction to everyday lived reality. Second, it needs to effectuate the cathartic discharge of displaced anger and insecurities. And third, this catharsis must allow for the reproduction of state power.

Here Fromm would draw our attention to the activities whereby constructed problems may be conceivably resolved. More specifically, he would point to the fact, nature and protagonists of the activities of resolution. For one, Fromm (1964: 86) argues, alarmist political myths may be validated retroactively, by evoking the very fact that they have already spread concern and reactive measures. The analytical trick is to couple the quest for understanding how deeds may originate from words with an inquiry into how words may derive their efficacy from deeds (Fromm, 2006 [1962]: 122; see also Herzfeld, 1992; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). While this may apply to the whole gamut of politically constructed dangers, not all such dangers are equally capable of producing the acting out of diverted anger and insecurities and the attendant 'compensatory' effect of overcoming feelings of exploitation and weakness (Fromm, 1964: 31). This is because acting out requires that the resolution of constructed dangers acquire a physically violent form. In other words, effective political myths about danger need to demand, rationally as well as morally, the exercise of violence against the alleged culprit. One more problem remains: if violent catharsis of diverted anger and insecurities is to necessitate attachment to state elites, then the state needs to retain monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. Ultimately, effective political myths about danger are those which call for violent action falling exclusively within the purview of the state itself (Fromm, 2000 [1930]). With these observations in hand, we can now account for the political selection of violent street crime by reference to the 'commonsensical' reaction it most usually triggers: the long-established practice of state-sanctioned imprisonment.

Before all else, by dint of targeting and inflicting pain on the criminal's body, imprisonment can produce strong cathartic effects for outsiders. As Fromm

(1964, 1984 [1973]) observes, however, forms of state violence whose prime if hidden function is to fill psychic voids must undergo legitimation, or else they may create a psychic void of their own – they would frustrate the ‘second-order’ narcissistic need for preserving a ‘popular sense of justice’ – and soon cease to operate as such. ‘Instrumental’ and ‘retaliatory’ maxims, from incapacitation to deterrence to just retribution, are thus systematically deployed to dress the cathartic use of imprisonment in a veil of legitimacy. But insofar as violent street crime is part and parcel of a political myth rather than an experience grounded in lived reality, imprisonment and the principles that undergird it seem bound to become redundant. That is especially so in light of the morally onerous nature of consenting to the spread of as harsh a method of punishment as imprisonment. For, as mentioned earlier, taxing decisions trigger regular and attentive reflection on life as experienced at first hand, which in turn increases the likelihood of alertness to possible mystifications.

This is why legitimacy is practically sought through a process that draws in circular fashion on preceding events. The fact of imprisonment validates retroactively the logics and stereotypes that give it rational and moral justification. That imprisonment as such is exercised and that its scale is becoming ever wider are interpreted, whether singly or in concert, as signifying that crime poses real and urgent threats to public security and moral order. Likewise, placement behind bars is taken to attest to the criminal dangerousness of those who suffer it, no less than the label of criminal dangerousness warrants panic over security, moralistic condemnation of scapegoats, and calls for punitive action against them. Note, too, that the forceful nature of imprisonment serves to enhance by hindsight the perceived truth-value of the alarmist logics and arbitrary classifications that underlie it. Indeed, the compact walls of the prison may be said to ‘cement’ the essentialist symbolic divisions between the lawful and the criminally dangerous in a quite literal sense, while conscious support for the enhanced use of imprisonment against the latter becomes itself an indicator of responsible citizenship.

For the fragile middle classes, it may be suggested further, the spectacular violence of imprisonment and the false feelings of strength and superiority it creates carry undertones of consumerist culture (Fromm, 1984 [1973]: 280–283). Expectant middle-class consumers may now find relief in the treatment of others, the despised ‘flawed consumers’, as wasteful commodities to be taken off streets and placed in faraway sites of mass containment (Bauman, 1997). In the broader scheme of things, however, the cathartic or compensatory functions of state punishment are mere prerequisites for the formation of the ‘authoritarian character’ under conditions of neoliberal capitalism. This is because the ‘sadistic’ satisfaction a middle-class person may find in identifying with rulers who exercise force against scapegoats is the inducement to ‘masochistic’ submission of oneself to the very same rulers, even as they fail to deliver on the socio-economic front (Fromm, 1994 [1941]). Such, in fact, is the symbolic potency of penal domination over scapegoated others that it also comforts the strains attending submission itself. Imprisonment, in this view, is primarily an institution through which the capitalist

state and its governing elites manage to reproduce and strengthen their power (Fromm, 2000 [1930]).⁷

'Suitable outcomes'

Sooner or later, a paradoxical challenge can emerge for the process of cathartic penal violence. If, as is the case in the public mind, violent street crime does not appear to succumb to penal interventions, their expressed utilitarian function of protecting the citizenry may eventually be thrown into doubt. To this extent, the hidden actual utility of penal violence as a means of acting out socio-economic insecurities is subject to exposure and thereby to risk of cessation. What makes this challenge look all the more formidable, and even more paradoxical, is that it stems in good part from the discourse used by incumbent neoliberal elites and their seneschals. If, as the dominant scholarly view has it, the presumed ineffectiveness of crime control policy works to undercut the authority of the state over the public – the implication being that such perceptions inevitably frustrate the 'first-order' need for 'narcissistic security' and so fail the 'second-order' need for a sense of legitimacy in subordinating oneself to state power – then why would canny statesmen themselves encourage and cater to the impression that penal policy fails in its crime-fighting mission?

For Fromm, this sort of self-confessed failure may qualify as paradoxical only insofar as one commits the prior analytic error of taking the formal instrumental aspirations of the penal system – in short, its 'crime-fighting mission' – at face value. What Fromm suggests, instead, is a critical two-step approach. The first step comes with approaching the success of penal policy in terms of increased state authority without treating the reduction of crime as a necessary mediator. This, according to Fromm (2000 [1930]: 126–127), is because '[s]ociety needs the criminal justice system for purposes that have nothing to do with effective approaches towards the criminal'. The second and far more radical step consists in revealing that state authority stands in inverse proportion to lasting or even accruing insecurities about crime among the people. Fromm, in other words, deems it necessary to recognize how the unconsciously positive symbolism of policy failure and its productive political effects outdo what policy failure otherwise signifies and generates when judged by the principles of 'instrumental rationality' (Fromm, 1964; see also Herzfeld, 1992).

Fromm's tactic is richly suggestive for present purposes. To the extent that policies of crime control are not always the result of crime, they do not intrinsically embody aspirations of crime-free communities. Ineffectiveness on the part of the criminal justice apparatus is, in fact, a necessary ingredient of that form of state domination which is heavily predicated upon displacing substantive public anger and insecurities and discharging them against weak out-group minorities. Such domination cannot materialize on a steady footing without the persistence or continuous emergence of problems fit to rationalize and moralize the repeated violent resolution of esoteric psychic conflicts. That is to say, failure to control crime provides the logico-moral alibi of necessity which is absolutely crucial in prolonging public consent to what is in essence cathartic state punitiveness, thereby also safeguarding

attachment to ruling elites. In the last analysis, just as the state must be viewed as ‘doing something about crime’, so too it must ensure it is seen as failing in this endeavour. If crime is a politically expedient problem, this is not because it lends itself to successful state intervention, but because it is a field where the state may openly acknowledge failure by way of reproducing its hegemonic power.⁸

Much in the same circular fashion I described earlier, the augmentation of imprisonment in the name of crime control functions to enhance the perceived truth-value of its own apparent cause and to legitimate the stereotypes that attend it. Meanwhile, augmenting the violence inherent to imprisonment serves to boost the underlying process of catharsis. But – and this is commonly silenced by ruling elites – imprisonment, like neoliberal capitalism itself, also carries proven criminogenic outcomes, its intensified use serving practically to sustain the crime problem. Although with a heavy touch of exaggeration, preconceptions about the spread and sources of criminal danger may now be evoked as factual realities, socially weak groups being coerced to acquiesce in the stereotypes previously attached to them. By the same token, classificatory conventions of explanation may now masquerade more effectively as objective and categorical judgements, substituting the outcomes of state action for character flaws, such as laziness and irresponsibility, that entrap their purported owners in an irredeemably pathological condition of dangerousness (Cohen, 1985; see also Christie, 1986; Herzfeld, 1992).

One way or another, the language of consumerism once more furnishes apt descriptive and explanatory metaphors. On the face of it, failure to deliver on the promise of public protection is a product with no obvious use-value to consumers. But the need for experiencing empowerment through consumption is not truly left ignored as such, at least insofar as the object of desire consists unconsciously and perversely in an unending state of insecurity, rather than in a fixed condition of security. Heightened criminalization of weak minorities ensures a constant and sufficient stream of humans whose wastage and disposal compensates for repressed but always present socio-economic insecurities, including providing fodder to the insatiable middle-class pursuit for consumerist pleasure. Not to stretch the metaphor too far, but it is here and here alone that the middle classes may at last consume limitlessly.

Concluding remarks

With the global ramifications of the ‘credit crunch’ of 2008 ongoing, Frommian scholarship is especially germane. Times of economic recession are precisely the instances when capitalist elites in office may be most tempted to symbolically manipulate dangers such as violent street crime, and to deploy state coercion as through the exercise of penal violence, in order to distract and relieve mounting public anger and insecurity, not least because socio-economic policies driving such anger and insecurity may nonetheless be maintained. Yet the political urgency that the myth of crime and the reality of state punitiveness assume against the background of financial crises is itself reflective of the degree to which different courses,

penal as well as socio-economic, have already become possible. That is to say, to the extent that political exploitation of crime and punitiveness heightens during periods of recession, it is because these are the times when the people are most likely to reconsider and even seek to alter the conditions of their relationship with governing capitalist elites, from their support for state punitiveness as it stands, to their toleration of unjust socio-economic policies.⁹

This being the case, a penology which aspires to put a halt to the excesses of the penal system and to promote progressive grassroots reforms in society as a whole needs to intervene promptly in the field of symbolic politics and engage directly in public debate. The starting point of such intervention is to reveal the hidden functions of state punitiveness, and this in turn may reorient public attention hitherto unduly paid to issues of crime and punishment towards politico-economic change. To the extent that the primary duty of the penologist becomes to expose, explain and thereby help correct the fallacies underpinning punitive attitudes and policies, Frommian scholarship can offer guidance and inspiration in at least six ways. First, it sheds light on the psychological roots and functions of illegitimate forms of social arrangements, without knowledge of which any account must be incomplete. It does so, second, by refraining from fatalistically blaming human nature, at the same time as avoiding the alienating castigation of individuals or groups for their complicity in irrational and immoral phenomena. Attention is drawn, instead, to the social, cultural, political and economic factors under the influence of which all humans may come to hold attitudes and engage in actions they would otherwise reject. Third, in seeking to account for the ways in which illegitimate states of affairs come to assume appearances of legitimacy, Frommian scholarship does not shy away from including intellectuals and the knowledge they produce and disseminate in the array of fields to be scrutinized (see, for example, Fromm, 1970). Fourth, both in the sense of a yardstick by means of which to assess the legitimacy of current states of affairs and as a socio-political ideal type to be actively pursued, Frommian scholarship encourages a firm commitment to the moral philosophy of humanism, which can bind individuals in harmony without stifling individuality and difference (see further Cheliotis, 2010a, 2011b). Fifth, it sets an example of how to combine scientific and philosophical endeavours with civic activism, not just by way of debunking social reality through one's writings, but also by directly immersing oneself in social movements. Sixth, and finally, commitment to the pursuit of humanism is fortified with hard-headed realism, whereby illusions are dropped and practical difficulties appreciated. In Fromm's own words, 'to hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime' (Fromm, 1968: 9).

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Notes

1. Fromm uses the term 'materialistic' to describe both orthodox Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxian theory; the former because it is rigidly focused on the allegedly instinctual bases of all social phenomena, and the latter because it is focused primarily on the role of the economy and related social institutions (see, e.g., Fromm, 1970). As used in this article, the term 'materialistic psychoanalysis' is meant to connote Fromm's effort to bring 'materialism' in the Marxian (i.e., economic) sense to bear upon 'materialism' in the Freudian (i.e., biological) sense (see also Fromm, 2003 [1961]).
2. In the meantime, the coming of the Nazis to power in 1933 had forced the Frankfurt School to emigrate, first to Geneva, Switzerland, and then to Columbia University in New York. Like his School colleagues, Fromm moved to the USA in 1934 (see further Friedman, 2013).
3. It is true that Fromm's articles were originally published in German and were not translated into English until several decades later. But it has now been fifteen years since Kevin Anderson (1998) first provided the Anglophone world with a comprehensive summary of Fromm's articles in a paper he published in the widely circulated US journal *Justice Quarterly*, and thirteen years since the full English translation of Fromm's articles appeared in print.
4. For an overview of the literature on the political economy of punishment, see De Giorgi (2006).
5. Particularly as concerns the metaphors of the 'veil' and 'mask', I have borrowed them from Merquior (1969) and his discussion of their distinct connotations in the context of ideology and power.
6. A full application of Fromm's method would incorporate detailed psychological material and socio-economic and cultural data on the American and British middle classes (in terms, for example, of their main types of occupation, levels of education, access to medical care, housing and other capital possessions, consumption of goods and participation in political, religious and cultural activities), in the manner Fromm and Michael Maccoby (1970) reported their ethnographic study of a Mexican peasant village in the 1960s. Such an analysis is omitted here for reasons of space, but is offered in the book that forms the basis of this article (Cheliotis, in progress).
7. Eschewed here for reasons of space is a discussion of how penal violence may dissuade both scapegoated minorities and the broader public from engaging in political dissidence and organized resistance (see further Fromm, 2000 [1930]).
8. As explained elsewhere (Cheliotis, in progress), however, the 'first-order' narcissistic need for a sense of security functions to impose limits on the magnitude of self-confessed failure, requiring that one's own ineffectiveness in the fight against crime be presented as relative. If not, governing elites risk injecting an excessive dose of criminal insecurity into the narcissistic core of the public psyche and consequently losing power to eager opposition parties ever ready to compete for 'toughness' on law and order.

9. That political pronouncements may be made concurrently in favour of reducing the fiscal impact of penal expansion by downsizing prison populations only serves to reinforce the point, at least to the extent that such pronouncements are designed to signal to the middle classes that incumbent politicians are willing and working to rectify basic deficiencies of the broader economic system in place. It could also be argued that pronouncements of prison downsizing in times of recession may contribute to alleviating the burden of financial concession that accompanies the acceptance of neoliberal penalty as such and threatens to provoke its demystification. One way or another, however, the actual implementation of such pronouncements and their consequent political utility may at best be temporary and partial, not least because the use of imprisonment remains an exceptionally potent political means of dealing with high and rising levels of anger and insecurity among the public.

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