Philip Goodman, Joshua Page and Michelle Phelps, *Breaking the Pendulum: The Long Struggle Over Criminal Justice*, Oxford University Press: New York, NY, 2017; 219pp.: 9780199976065, £16.99 (pbk)

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The pendulum – with its regular, mechanical movement between extremes – is an intuitive metaphor for thinking about the process of penal change, and popular in undergraduate teaching. However, this provocative new book argues persuasively that the metaphor has outgrown its usefulness – and that it advances a mechanical, homogeneous version of penal change which distorts historical fact without explaining why penal systems change dramatically *in particular ways and at particular times*.

Chapter 1 proposes instead a theoretical approach previously developed by Goodman, Page and Phelps (2015) – an ‘agonistic’ framework with three key axioms: that penal change results from struggle between various types of actors, that these struggles are constant and consensus often illusory, and that these struggles are affected in complex ways by larger social developments. Plate tectonics – a process in which apparently ‘settled’ terrain hides gradual, constant shifting, with occasional climactic reorientations – is convincingly advanced as an alternative metaphor.

The next four chapters apply this approach sequentially through the history of American imprisonment, beginning with the ‘penitentiary era’ between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars (Chapter 2) and continuing through the Gilded Age and Progressive era (Chapter 3), the post-war ‘heyday’ of rehabilitation (Chapter 4) and the punitive late-modern era (Chapter 5). Each of these chapters includes two case studies – a (usually familiar) exemplar of the established, apparently ‘settled’ narrative of the period (e.g. the rehabilitation model in 1960s California), and a contemporaneous example which runs partly counter to this narrative (e.g. the partial adoption of rehabilitation *rhetoric*, but not practice, in 1960s Florida). In each of these chapters, they emphasise contestation over meaning and practices, the ‘braiding’ of apparently opposing ideals and practices and the existence of historical continuity as well as change. A particularly timely theme is how the legacy of slavery has manifested in prison regimes and debates over imprisonment, in the North as well as the South. Relatedly, conflicts over imprisonment are shown often to have been struggles over prison *labour*; structural racism, and the system’s particular failure to provide for women, are emphasised throughout.

Chapter 6 returns to the three axioms to consider the terrain at the end of the Obama presidency and the growing apparent consensus on ending mass incarceration, pointing out that powerful resistance remains even to moderate reforms. As in Chapters 2-5, it highlights that the shift happened because of the titular ‘long struggle’ by reformists of many types, whose largely hidden activities bore fruit when social circumstances (especially the 2008 recession) created opportunities for them to do so. The book ends with four lessons for better understanding penal change: to consider apparently ‘settled’ periods as well as ruptures in the penal terrain; to ‘map out’ the penal field in full; to understand the relevance of broader social and cultural factors; and finally, to avoid fatalism. To this last might be added the corollary ‘prepare for unforeseen consequences’ – this chapter also makes the compelling argument that discourses advanced to *support* penal moderation at the height of mass imprisonment actually serve to *limit* the possibilities for reform now that they have entered the mainstream. In particular, an emphasis on the injustice of imprisoning non-violent drug offenders may have hardened support for incarcerating even minor violent offenders, who make up most of the US prison population.

The book does not claim to be a comprehensive history of American imprisonment, but it might have been valuable to include more in-depth theoretical discussion in the historical chapters, of the sort found in the authors’ earlier work. The reliance on secondary sources means the reasoning for adducing particular details or examples is not always explicit. It would also be valuable – as the authors note – to consider the extent to which the ‘agonistic perspective’ could apply to less politically fragmented and internally differentiated jurisdictions.

However, the book succeeds in arguing for a more nuanced understanding of penal change supported by a convincing analysis of US prison history, with a refreshing emphasis on theory as a means rather than an end. As well as advancing further the use of Bourdieu’s theory in criminology, it forms a major part of a growing body of work that critiques and builds on earlier ‘punitive turn’ scholarship (especially Garland, 2001), by focusing at the meso-level on processes, institutions and the often imprecise enactment of policy.

With its clear, concise and accessible style (helped by the editing of Letta Page), and – not insignificantly – a reasonable price tag, this book will be of value to anyone interested in the sociology of punishment or the history of American criminal justice, but I commend it in particular to postgraduate students seeking to develop more nuanced understanding of criminological theory and to build on their reading of Garland (2001) and other classic penological studies of late modernity. Over forty pages of notes and an extensive bibliography and index add value for readers wishing to pursue particular details.

Recent events in the United States have raised concerns that the movement to reverse America’s punitive turn will be brought to a halt before it can make serious headway. But as the authors note in a recent blog post, “Trump’s administration will be able to make important changes … But they can no more end criminal justice reform than a Democratic president could have “ended” mass incarceration” (Goodman, Page and Phelps, 2017). The long struggle will continue, and this book gives us cause to hope it may yet bring about the next earthquake.

**References**

Garland D (2001) *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Goodman P, Page J and Phelps M (2015) The long struggle: An agonistic perspective on penal development. *Theoretical Criminology* 19(3): 315-335.

Goodman P, Page J and Phelps M (2017) On criminal justice reform, keep fighting. In: OUPBlog. Available at: https://blog.oup.com/2017/05/on-criminal-justice-reform/ (accessed 19 May 2017).