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The Real “Dangerous Classes”

Jeff Shantz

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As the state capitalist carnivals of the G8/G20 got underway in cottage country and Toronto widespread public outrage focused on the \$1.3 billion security extravagance—the fences, security cameras, weapons, vehicles and mass policing that have become regular features of such elite get-togethers. While governments of the G8 claim the need for austerity, social spending cuts and belt tightening for the working classes, they have no shortage of public money to spend on their own comfort. The Conservative government in Canada and its corporate sponsors have justified these costs as necessary expenditures in the face of protesters, and, in the words of Federal Minister of Trade and Treasury Board president Stockwell Day “anarchist thugs.” By the second day in Toronto police aggression and intimidation had imposed regular random and unlawful searches, requests for identity papers, preemptive arrests of supposed organizers and “leaders” and home invasions. Rubber bullets and tear gas were used against people doing nothing more than sitting outside the main detention centre.

All of this is part of the ongoing attempts by states and capital to present the working classes and poor people as primary

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threats to social order and peace. Certainly elites have been, and continue to be effective in this. It has always been members of the working classes who have been the targets of criminalization. The legal and correctional systems of liberal democracies are based on this. The overwhelming majority of people processed through the criminal justice systems in countries like Canada have been, historically and at present, working class and poor people. Almost all involve petty property crimes and low level street crimes. The working classes, especially the poorest, are presented as the “dangerous class.” Their lives are more regulated, and in neo-liberal regimes poverty is re-moralized as personal failing rather than economic structure.

Crime problems are constructed as being “street crimes” (like vandalism and property damage during a protest). “Suite crime,” the crimes of elites (such as those meeting behind the security fence), receives minimal attention and scorn. Yet suite crime is more injurious. While street crimes tend to have a low level, localized impact involving one or two people immediately involved (and often with no victim physically harmed since damage is to property), suite crime typically has profoundly injurious impacts on individuals (including workers who are hurt and killed), communities and the environment. It is resonant damage and spreads over space and time, impacting many (as in a chemical spill that hurts the workers in a workplace, communities that have to be evacuated and water and air that are contaminated) in way that goes well beyond the impacts of street crime. Even if one considers the most extreme instances, particularly involving death, the numbers are telling. In Canada, in 2005, there were 655 murders. In 2007, 594 murders. These killings are the basis for much panic and anxiety and serve to justify policy expenditures, “get tough on crime” legislation and “law and order” media stories. Yet, if one looks at another cause of avoidable death in Canada, namely workplace deaths, the comparison is stark. In 2005, at least 1097 people died

simply trying to earn a living. In 2007, the number was more than 1005. In 2003, the homicide rate was 1.7 per 100000 in Canada but the rate of work related deaths was 6.1 per 100000. These numbers are actually undercounts since they only record deaths accepted within workplace compensation boards (and arbitrarily exclude dangerous occupations like farm labour). Imagine if murders were recorded so ideologically. Yet there is little public outcry, no legislative mobilization, and virtually no coverage. Indeed, most of these deaths would fit the definition some give for crime: avoidable misconduct that causes unnecessary harm to individuals or society. When bosses cut corners on safety equipment and someone dies. When there is a speed up or lack of training or working shorthanded and someone is killed or maimed. When proper treatment facilities are not installed in order to keep costs down and profits up. Occupational death is the third leading cause of death in Canada (more than motor vehicle accidents). Yet suicide is not treated as crime and politicians and bosses responsible are not held to account. These harms will not even be called what they are or considered crimes. The people responsible will be treated as “community leaders” and feted during parties like the G8/G20. They are the real dangerous classes—those who willfully and carelessly damage individuals, communities and nature in pursuit of property and profit. They, and their actions, are the real issue at hand, not the street level actions of those who would oppose them.

All of this should provide some context as the moral panic around black blocs, “violent protests” and anarchism unfolds in the days, weeks and months to follow these G8/G20 meetings (and as other meetings occur and are opposed). “Look, they have smashed some windows,” they cry. But what of the smashed windows in abandoned workplaces in cities like Windsor and Brantford, communities harmed by the social and economic policies pushed by the G8 leadership and their corporate backers? “Oh, laws have been broken,” they shout. But

what of the lives broken in the pursuit of profit? “Police were hurt.” But nothing otherwise of the hundreds of thousands of workers hurt in Canada every year, simply trying to feed their families. And the G8/G20 will only make these situations worse with their agreement to halve deficits (which will of course be done through cuts to social spending and public sector wages while giving tax break gifts to investors).

Capital has been able to justify its personal harms and rationalize its toll on society through a variety of ideological techniques. Next time I look at three primary means by which the social and individual damage caused by the most dangerous classes have been excused, their perpetrators left off the hook, others made to pay the costs.