Book Review: Martin Innes, Signal Crimes: Social Reactions to Crime, Disorder and Control

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Book Review


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Martin Innes’ book *Signal Crimes* is comprised of an articulate, intellectually captivating and conceptually persuasive series of essays that present and substantiate a framework for understanding social reactions to crime, disorder and control. The core argument of the book is that some crimes and disorders, and the control responses to these, can change the way we think, feel and act as we appraise our personal and collective security following such events. Innes refers to these events as ‘signal crimes’, ‘signal disorders’ and ‘control signals’ that constitute ‘signs’ which can be connected to the discrete and distinct ‘effects’ that they trigger and induce. The signal crimes perspective (not a theory) is the product of Innes’ own thinking, research and collaboration of more than a decade, resulting in a convincing framework for rethinking how we understand social reactions to crimes and disorder.

The book is made up of six essays that can be read either as stand-alone essays or as a connected whole, in addition to ‘An Afterword on Method’. The essays are connected via three meta-narratives: the presence of a generic process of reaction; that culture and situation matter; and, the varying legacy of signals. The six substantive essays flesh out each of these narratives. In essay one, Innes presents the fundamentals of the perspective. Here we see the conceptual framing of signal crimes as a product of the integration of interactionism with semiotics. For instance, Innes blends the work of Erving Goffman in recognising the significance of social convention in how signals are articulated and interpreted in human communicative interaction with that of Umberto Eco’s pragmatist semiotic theory that foregrounds the role of pre-existing ideas in framing how people perceive signals and how they assemble interpretations to render information meaningful. By blending these ideas, Innes sets out the principles of the perspective, arguing that a ‘signal is a sign that has an effect’ and that such signals are constituted of three component parts: the ‘expression’ (the signifier or denotative crime or disorder); the ‘content’ (the risk to security and order that is connotatively signified); and, an ‘effect’ (the change induced from connecting the content to the expression) (p. 3). Innes argues that by listening to how people talk about crime and disorder, signals and their effects can be detected. The empirical and theoretical study of social reactions through this perspective presents an alternative to predominant academic models more concerned with public understandings of crime that have gravitated around the concepts of ‘fear of crime’, ‘moral panics’, and ‘broken windows theory’.

Essay two focuses on the ‘signal disorder’ and the key idea that the criminalisation of particular issues only marginally influences how people react to them. For instance, Innes explains that ‘some disorder incidents that are dismissed as relatively trivial by juridical institutions, assume a significant role in terms of how ordinary people symbolically construct their understandings of different public spaces’ (p. 49). Disorders may be physical or social and have differential impacts on people and communities, but where there is co-occurrence of multiple disorders and crimes ‘signal amplification’ can arise and increase people’s perceptions of vulnerability and risk. Innes makes clear that such reactions are very much dependent on the situation in which they are located.

Essay three raises the question of how fear travels in the aftermath of particular signal crimes. In his analysis of the reaction patterns across space and time to homicide, Innes argues that the various behavioural, affective and cognitive reactions to crimes are notably structured by degrees of ‘temporal’, ‘geographical’, and ‘social distance’. In other words, contexts influence the resilience (or
lack thereof) of communities following signal events that can lead to real harms to individual and collective security. More specifically, how collective reactions travel following homicides of varying public visibility can be analysed in terms of multiple ‘harm footprints’ (of private, parochial and public nature) and this provide a ‘significant extension and elaboration of the signal crimes perspective’ (p. 72).

In essay four we see an analysis of how rumours of crime events, or ‘phantom’ signals (p. 98), can in some cases generate similar influences and reaction patterns to where crime events actually occurred. Innes substantiates how ‘soft facts’ (p. 76) can shape perceived realities and lead to instability and public disorder. Essay five presents a case study of (counter-)terrorism with the core argument being that signal crimes can similarly impact on social institutions leading to significant institutional reform. For instance, Innes argues that since post-9/11, and subsequent terrorist attacks, an institutional reaction pattern has emerged that can be conceptualised as forming an ‘arc of social control’ (p. 125) consisting of initial innovation, adaptation and reform to social control before being institutionalised over time. Related to this, the final chapter analyses ‘control signals’ in order to demonstrate the communicative properties of acts of social control. Control signals are central to attempts to persuade, instruct, regulate and coerce people’s thinking and behaviour. These signals function either as ‘signals of control’ (p. 153) (that is, post-hoc signals that register and communicate that an act of control has taken place) or ‘signals to control’ (p. 153) (that is, intentional and targeted signals aimed at prevention).

Throughout the book we see the integration of concepts, research and evidence drawn from varied data sources and an examination of different case studies. For example, the essays apply the signal crimes perspective to varied forms of criminal and social disorder, such as anti-social behaviour, homicide, and terrorism, drawing on both high-profile incidents as well as more regularly occurring disorder and incivility. Throughout the essays we see a methodological blend of unsystematic (e.g. a creative, opportunistic and situated method characterised by ‘naturalism’, ‘unsystematic social observation’ and ‘discovery and revelatory insight’ underpinned by good intellectual craftsmanship (p. 157, citing Wright Mills (1959)) and systematic (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys across multiple localities) approaches and a ‘casually comparative’ approach to concept and theory building. This comparative analysis is useful for evidencing how the perspective is not limited to the idiosyncrasies of specific crimes, but applicable to a broader array of social issues.

However, the crimes and disorders analysed in the book all possess features that make them particularly visible to the public and have clearly tangible indicators that can be ‘signalled’. In all cases, victims are easily identifiable, as is some form of control response. This raises questions over how the perspective can be applied to less tangible, less visible forms of crime and disorder. For instance, the bribery of public officials is clandestine, often involving consenting actors, and has no clearly discernible direct victims. Such an event does not send signals to the public and thus does not necessarily produce a generic process of reaction. Even with those white-collar and corporate crimes that are detected and have substantial harm, such as the Libor scandal involving the UK’s major financial institutions, public indignation of such offences is short-lived and minimal, causing behavioural, affective, and cognitive influences in only a small number of cases, when the opposite should transpire. Empirically understanding social reactions to ‘white-collar’ crimes would illuminate such questions and further inform the perspective. That said, the signal crimes perspective has had notable impact on policy and practice, with policing authorities utilising the conceptual framework as part of strategy and operation. It is easy to see why this is the case as the book is accessible for a wide range of actors including policy-makers, practitioners and academics involved in criminal justice.