

Journal International De Victimologie

International Journal Of Victimology

Tome 8, numéro 2 (2010)

Victims of economic crime

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Abstract

Economic initiative may cause benefits while simultaneously generating harm and victims. When victimisation is the outcome of economic enterprise, strategies of denial, concealment or erasure are put in place. This paper discusses a number of such strategies. Economic crime, here, is described as power crime, namely crime committed by actors such as states, corporations, financial institutions, and other similarly powerful organisations. These actors possess an exorbitantly exceeding amount of material and symbolic resources when compared to those possessed by their victims. The argument presented revolves around this excess of resources that determines the denial and, at times, the very disappearance of victims. The suggestion is also made that the lack of resources hampers and nullifies the claims of those who have been victimised.

Key words: power crime, victims, participation, corporation, valueless lives

Résumé

Par définition, l'activité économique constitue un effort humain et social dévolu au bien-être collectif. Quand, parmi des bénéfiques plus ou moins quantifiables, une telle activité cause du tort à autrui et génère des victimes, des stratégies sont développées pour tenter de restaurer la pureté et l'apparente immuabilité de la définition proposée plus tôt. Cet article passe en revue un certain nombre de ces stratégies, lesquelles favorisent la dissimulation, le gommage ou encore l'occultation achevée des victimes de crimes économiques.

Economic initiative, by definition, is a human and social effort devoted to the collective wellbeing. When, along with more or less measurable benefits, such initiative causes harm and generates victims, strategies are put in place that attempt to restore the purity and apparent incontestability of the above definition. This paper deals with a number of such strategies that permit the concealment, the

blurring, or the outright erasure of the victims of economic crime.

In order to provide some preliminary coordinates for the analysis that follows, distinctive notions of power, control and criminalisation need to be identified.

Power, crime and participation

The explanatory framework adopted here is in debt, first of all, to analyses of economic crime as power crime. This

framework is built around the premise that economic crime is committed by actors such as states, corporations, financial institutions, and other similarly powerful organisations, namely offenders who possess an exorbitantly exceeding amount of material and symbolic resources when compared to those possessed by their victims. It is this excess of resources that determines the denial and, at times, the very disappearance of victims. On the other hand, it is the lack of resources that hampers and nullifies the claims of those who have been victimised. Let us see in more detail how an extreme polarisation of material and symbolic resources between offenders and victims leads to the disappearance of the latter.

Social inequalities determine varied degrees of freedom, whereby individuals are granted a specific number of choices and a specific range of potential actions they can carry out. Each degree of freedom offers an ability to act, to choose the objectives of one's action, and the means to make choices realistic. The greater the degree of freedom enjoyed, the wider the range of choices available, along with the potential decisions to be made and the possibility of realistically predicting their outcomes. This asymmetric distribution of freedom makes those endowed with more resources the prerogative to establish which means and which ends are to be considered acceptable. We can argue, with respect to the crimes of elite, that criminal designations are controversial and highly problematic, due to the higher degree of freedom enjoyed by the elite. High-level economic actors, for instance, possess the capacity to control the effects of their actions and to negotiate (or conceal) their criminal nature. Such actors, in other words, have greater possibilities of attributing criminal definitions to others and repelling those that others attribute to them. They also have greater ability to control the effects of their criminal activity, and usually do not allow this to appear and be designated as such (Ruggiero, 2007; Ruggiero and Welch, 2009).

The disappearance of the victim finds further explanation if control balance theory is applied. Tittle's (1995) theory takes as its organising theoretical variable the degree of control actors exercise in relation to the amount of control they experience. According to his formulation, control surpluses (an excess of control exercised relative to control experienced) give rise to autonomous forms of deviance, namely deviance aimed at extending the existing control surplus. This includes offences which do not entail direct interaction with victims, ranging from acts of exploitation (corporate price-fixing, influence peddling by political figures) to acts of plunder (pollution, destruction of forests and animals), and a variety of forms of indirect predation (Piquero and Piquero, 2006).

An example of exploitative deviance [is] committed by corporate executives who authorise dumping of toxic waste into rivers after having carefully calculated that those who would be harmed most immediately – farmers and fishers along the river – will not be able to do much about it. Businesspeople do these things when they become aware that they, through the corporate vehicle, enjoy a surplus of control, which can be extended by any means (Tittle, 1995: 164).

This formulation completes the depiction of how victims of economic crime 'disappear', in that it combines the criminal capacity of actors endowed with an excess of control on others with the incapacity of the victims to describe themselves as victims. This leads to another key point that, in its most simplified form, can be presented as follows. Any criminal activity accompanying economic initiative requires a degree of participation by actors who are extraneous to such activity but contribute to the rationalisation, justification and at times total nullification of that activity as criminal. Legislation, for example, may play an important role in this sense, when it fails to regulate entrepreneurial activity, thus reflecting prevailing philosophies of *laissez-faire*. However, this process, in extreme

circumstances, may involve the very victims of economic crime, who may be persuaded that the harm they suffer is preferable when compared to the damage they would suffer if economic initiative were in anyway hampered. Does the emphasis on market freedom incorporate the ability to perpetrate crimes while denying the existence of victims?

It would be extreme, however, to assert that freedom of enterprise amounts to incitement to entrepreneurial crime. On the other hand, local and global contexts, their characteristics and contingent features, do set the scene for criminal opportunities.

Crimes without criminals

To what extent does the unfettered expansion of global enterprises contribute to economic crime? And how is the concealment of the victims achieved? These apparently new questions, in fact, bring us back to similar, old concerns; for example: does corporate crime increase in periods of economic stagnation or in periods of economic growth? Are small firms operating in competitive markets more likely to commit crime than large companies enjoying a monopolistic condition? Students of corporate criminality have discussed these issues for decades, but the outcome of discussions has proven inconclusive (Ruggiero, 2000). The reason, perhaps, lies in the extreme versatility of economic crime, which is capable of reproducing itself within a wide range of diverse conditions.

There are three variables which provide the background to such versatility. The first falls in the normative domain, or rather it is associated with the lack of it. Trans-national business enjoys what old colonialism has always enjoyed, namely the lack of clear, written rights protecting the populations it addresses. Like colonialism building the industrial revolution on predation, new corporations and states build their profits on deregulation. Both, however, enjoy various degrees of complicity on the

part of local elites who grant access to territories and peoples in exchange for status and private gain. Access to territories and peoples, in the present circumstances, does not translate into beneficial effects for developing countries (Kiely, 2005). Far from reducing poverty, trans-national economic activity generates criminal opportunities which lead to the type of conducts we currently witness: the use of forced and child labour, the export of dangerous or defective goods, the dumping of poisonous substances and waste, the purchase of women's and children's bodies or, on demand, of their organs. Deregulation is an essential aspect of trans-nationalism, and epitomises an unbalanced economic development, a skewed system of opportunities allowing the removal of resources from poor environments and their transfer towards wealthy areas (Prashad, 2002). Among the justifications accompanying this transfer is the well known 'trickle down principle', according to which the profits made by powerful economic actors will eventually benefit vulnerable groups and individuals as well. Resources, in this sense, do not belong to local or global collectivities, but to those who, in exploiting them, create wealth destined to 'trickle down' for the benefit of all.

The second variable for the understanding of economic crime is mobility. This variable includes a notion of speed: financial and commercial conduits have to be quickly identified if quick profits are to be made. The task consists of reaching specifically suitable places, with fast, short-term investments, before the effects of those investments are perceived. Such investments will be all the more remunerative in countries where a well-disciplined, undemanding workforce is available, often a workforce victimised by elite misconduct, rulers' abuse or military dictatorship. Investments, in these contexts, have to be resolutely fast, and indeed extremely mobile, because the vagaries of the political climate might bring change and

therefore make regimes more unfavourable. New regulations may be introduced in developing countries, a new political climate may emerge, the international community may expose unethical or criminal conduct by corporations, thus forcing corporations to quickly find new arenas of investment. Mobility, swiftness, speed in identifying new receptive territories are crucial. It should be noted that speed was and is also important for conventional criminals: the most successful, legendary, bank robbers of the past had an advantage on law enforcement in terms of mobility and speed: they bought the fastest cars. The most successful drug dealers keep moving, exploring, penetrating new markets, and approaching new pools of customers. They repeatedly change their residence addresses, both official and informal, in order to escape detection. Similarly, it has been suggested that the white collars who are most inclined to commit crime are extremely mobile, they change employer quickly and frequently, so that they do not develop any sort of loyalty for the company employing them or, for that matter, for customers, the market, and society at large. Mobility is, typically, a resource that distinguishes powerful, or at least, wealthy people from marginalised individuals.

Invisibility is the third variable connoting trans-national economic activity. Traditionally, invisibility is regarded as one of the characteristics of white collar crime, and relates to the offender as well as to the victim: in this respect, some economic crimes appear to be offences without offenders. Victims may also be invisible, or they may even be unaware of being victimised. This is due to the fact that white collar criminals, often, do not share the crime scene with their victim: the place in which the crime is committed and the place where its impact is experienced and suffered may not coincide. The same applies to time: the time when the crime is planned and the time when victimisation is experienced do not coincide. Invisibility, in the current times, also applies to the profits,

which along with the perpetrators and the victims, need to be hidden, they have to disappear in financial networks often inaccessible to public scrutiny.

It should be clear, at this point, that the process leading to the disappearance of the victims of economic crime is triggered by a combination of traits characterising contemporary economic initiative: versatility, mobility and invisibility. While becoming increasingly international in nature, such initiative becomes also more easily concealable, because it takes place in contexts where statutory control is problematic. Crimes are committed 'abroad', where national or international legislations have little clout, while proceeds are enjoyed domestically. Here, the dream of reformers seems to come true: the task is not to get rid of crime, but to use it productively; not to eliminate it, but incorporate it in legitimate business; finally, not to suppress it, but to divert its impact (Foucault, 1977).

Recent episodes appear to prove that trans-nationalism, coupled with neo-liberal philosophies, does not simply equate with an encouragement to commit crimes, but with an untold guarantee of impunity. In this sense, the dilemma of previous forms of business and trade returns, albeit in a different guise. In the 18th century traders and entrepreneurs, along with moral and political philosophers, were engaged in identifying the limit beyond which commercial practices amounted to unethical or criminal practices. Similarly, today, economic enterprise is struggling to establish a new moral justification for its activity. For this reason, each economic conduct, though illegitimate, may become normative, in that it can establish new regulations and values, and enact new ethical codes and legitimacies. Like in the 18th century, what is at stake now is a definition of what is legitimate and what is not. Forcing the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate economic behaviour is becoming crucial for the development of new forms of enterprise.

First, entrepreneurs adopt a certain practice, then they 'wait and see': reactions to their newly adopted practice may vary, and if they are weak or non-existent, the new practice becomes routine and can subsequently spread. In this sense, economic crime encapsulates a normative element, and while challenging legality it may end up establishing new norms and legislations. This process requires a constant readjustment of the features and nature of the corporation and the firm in general.

The adventures of the corporation

The history of the corporation is also the history of its endless attempt to sell wellbeing. Prosperous businesses sell, along with what they produce, their image as successful enterprises to consumers, investors, and society at large. The entrepreneurial jargon is affected by this attempt, where prosperity is equated to safety, certainty of development and happiness: think of phrases like 'safe investment' and, in the financial vocabulary, of words such as 'securities', which implicitly stave off the general perception that economic life is unpredictable, and instability is the norm. Business entails, therefore, an in-built contention to repel notions of risk and to spread, in the collective imagination, one of safe, guaranteed, harmonic growth.

In the history of the corporation, one of the first moves aimed at increasing certainty of profits consisted in separating ownership from management. Despite the decentralisation of risk this implied, the move did not prove effective, as gigantic scandals erupted showing the vulnerability of the new arrangement (Mitchell, 2001). Fraud and breach of trust affected investors, while a number of sensational bankruptcies caused relevant tension not only within specific national contexts, but also in international relations (Pins, 2004). Working harder on the variable certainty, the corporation then resorted to the notion of limited liability: investors, in case of financial crisis, were only personally liable, and therefore financially exposed, for the amount

of money they had invested, not for the whole loss of the firm. This, however, determined a consequent loss of power in the control of corporations by shareholders. With managers becoming the main decision-making force, shareholders tended to disappear from the scene, thus distancing themselves from the corporation they owned. In this way, risk associated with investment grew rather than shrink, as lack of control by investors turned into lack of certainty for the finances they engaged. Investors, thus, joined the list of the 'invisible' victims of economic crime.

A proper history of the unaccountability of the corporation is yet to be written. This history, however, would have to pay particular attention to the crucial shift occurring towards the end of the 19th century, when through a bizarre legal alchemy, courts managed to transform the corporation into a person. The corporation, thus, assumed its own identity, separate from the people who owned it and managed it. Again, this made some people safer, but society as a whole more unsafe, as it became extremely problematic to identify responsibilities and culprits for malpractice and deviance: economic crime became crime without criminals.

In the 1980s, the emphasis on market freedom brought deregulation and privatisation, leading to the unprecedented international expansion of business. As already pointed out, freedom of enterprise came to be identified, among other things, with freedom from the bonds of location, and was enhanced through a number of international agencies or agreements: all measures that might restrict international trade were banned.

Certainty and interest for some translated into risk for entire populations, though the very concept of 'interest' underwent a subtle modification. In corporate jargon, for example, though interest is regarded as the only *raison d'être* of economic enterprise, the notion of

'corporate social responsibility' is gaining increasing currency. 'Interest with an attitude' is the new creed, as corporations try to show their philanthropic nature and reject imputations of greed and self-centredness. In the new climate, corporations may easily become a major force in responding to the environmental and social problems they have caused. Are we witnessing the development of a free market economy with a conscience? Tobacco giants, for example, are creating centres for Corporate Social Responsibility, while corporations seem to be set to compete against one another for higher moral standards by setting up 'moral' business schools. The message is clear: corporations care about the environment and communities, they are not sheer profit-pursuers.

More realistically, however, economists such as Milton Friedman, when asked about recent developments, reiterate a concept that can hardly be escaped:

There is only one social responsibility for corporate executives: they must make as much money as possible for their shareholders. This is a moral imperative. Executives who choose moral and environmental goals over profits – executives who try to act morally – are, in fact, immoral (Bakan, 2004: 34).

There is only one instance in which corporate social responsibility is acceptable, this is when responsibility is not an end in itself, but is yet another way to maximise profits.

In a recent definition, an 'irresponsible firm' is a firm which assumes that it cannot be called to account to any public or private authority, or to the public opinion, for the social, economic and environmental consequences of its activity (Gallino, 2005). Irresponsible firms prosper thanks to the emphasis on the maximisation at any cost, and in the short term, of their market value in the stock exchange,

irrespective of their budget or revenues and of their productive dimension. Although 'maximisation at any cost' appears to benefit all share holders, including small ones, in practice throughout the 1990s it resulted in the disproportionate creation of wealth for large share-holders and managers and in the loss on the part of the small investors (Mitchell, 2001). Further, irresponsible firms experience changes in their functioning and governing apparatus. Recent changes include the return to the direct power of the proprietors, along with family-type property and capital. New investors, however, also include institutional actors: private and public pension funds, investment funds and insurance companies (Prins, 2004). The managerial phase of the firm, according to Gallino (2005), was superseded when proprietors realised that the decline of revenues (between the 1960s and 1980s) required more aggressive practices. Hence, proprietors started to exert increasing pressure on managers, who devised strategies prioritising the creation of stock value above any other objective, even if this was to the detriment of small investors (Henwood, 1998; Mombiot, 2001).

The corporate scandals of the 1990s took place against this backdrop, with hundreds of bankruptcies. These included the collapse of Enron (US 2001), a global leader in the production and distribution of energy, at the time 7th world conglomerate in the stock exchange, three times on the front cover of 'Time' in a few years as one of the most dynamic firms in the world (Blackburn, 2002). In Europe, this was followed by the cases of Kirsch Media Group (Germany 2002), Royal Ahold (The Netherlands 2003), Vivendi (France 2002), and finally Parmalat in Italy (late 2003), whose dimensions, in terms of capital evaporated, with some 20 billion euros in debts, were well beyond the loss of Enron. As I have argued above, the adoption of new corporate practices follows a somewhat experimental logic, whereby initiatives are taken with a view to assessing social and institutional responses. If regulations are

violated, it is the intensity of such response which will determine whether violations are worthwhile or should be avoided. In this sense corporate crime becomes normative, as it establishes in empirical terms the features of which economic practices are to be regarded as acceptable or otherwise. The Enron case, in this sense, acted as a successful experiment, and was replicated by a number of other corporations throughout the world, all giving the impression of prosperous business through fraud or false accounting, all showing a constant increase in the market value of shares, irrespective of production performance.

The social costs of irresponsible conducts by firms are difficult to measure, and at times it is even hard to identify who exactly can be held to account for such conducts. For example, due to the intricate web of concessions, sub-concessions, contracts, subcontracts, in other words to what is termed the placelessness of production, it is difficult to establish responsibilities as to who imposes certain labour conditions and violates human rights. In more general terms, and limiting costs to the mere fiscal dimension, estimates suggest that the amount of money not paid by corporations in tax would guarantee universal primary education in developing countries, and is three times higher than the potential cost of universal health basic service.

In brief, it should be noted that while production, distribution and exchange of goods are becoming globalized, regulations and institutions are not. The result is a global society formed by a number of protectorates, where the absence of a credible central power and a set of universally-accepted international norms leaves nation states with the task of protecting international transactions. In this way, while in the past states controlled their own territories in order to monitor the wealth produced, today it is no longer the state which decides how to tax wealth, but it is

wealth itself which decides how and where to be taxed (Cavallaro, 2004).

Valueless lives

Academic researchers and investigative journalists have reiterated that economic crime is extremely difficult to pin down due to its dynamics and to the environment in which it occurs. For instance, when attempting to study 'bank robbery from the other side of the counter', one may discover that bank managers and bank employees are responsible for a large and yet unknown number of offences. However, once detected, the banks are likely to cover up rather than publicly expose the offenders. 'To do so would cause the public to lose confidence. But we pay anyway. The bank might simply pass on the cost to the consumer' (Masters, 1989: ix).

In this paper, I have so far argued that at issue is not only the detection of economic crime, but also its definition as crime. Difficulties are also encountered when precise culprits are sought, when attempts are made to bring them to court, and finally when punishments are meant to be inflicted. Such difficulties are compounded by the very invisibility of the victims and, as mentioned above, by their inability to claim their status of victims. We have seen how legislation, not being immutable, may pave the way for abuse and crime. Other factors are related to the organisational make up of companies, such as those pertaining to their structure, decision-making processes, or internal information flows. It has been suggested, for example, that decentralised organisations, whose top management are unable to exercise fully informed oversight, are more likely to offend than those companies which have a "flatter" organisational structure. Environmental factors, in their turn, may be of relevance, as political and social circumstances might contribute to the disappearance of economic criminals as well as their victims.

Criminological contributions on the subject matter have drawn attention to the blatant lack of concern for life and property shown by economic criminals, to their disregard for the wellbeing of employees and for the health and safety of the public. 'It is convenience, not necessity, which produces this disregard. The pursuit of profit can blind people to likely consequences of action. To meet or exceed a sales quota or production deadline can become a single-minded goal. Under such pressures, cutting corners or taking risks may become not merely tempting, but standard practice' (Grabosky and Sutton, 1989: xiv). Attention is also paid to economic regulatory settings, where the likelihood of crime detection is dismal and the probability of punishment is low. Regulatory officials may shy away from the responsibility of creating obstacles to business, and when they do take on such responsibility, they may prefer means of friendly persuasion rather than harsh tools of control. In this way, they are often in a position to protect business, not its victims. When specific victims of economic crime are mentioned, these include workers, consumers, creditors, investors and taxpayers, along with those honest businessmen who suffer competitive disadvantage at the hands of their dishonest colleagues. Above, I have attempted to identify the ways in which such victims undergo a process of disappearance. In the remaining part of this paper I will focus on specific ideological strategies that allow the disappearance of the most visible, undeniable, victim of economic crime, namely the men and women who lose their life on the work place.

There are ways of rationalising deaths at work, the first being the mobilisation of the variable externalities. Economic crime is often downplayed to the rank of unwanted effect of industrial production or commercial transaction. This is to say, whoever suffers the consequences of an economic operation in which he/she does not take part is the victim of unintentional actions: her or she is an

'externality'. Deaths at work may be assimilated to such unintentional costs, although the dead do indeed participate in the production process. This rationalisation, in other words, is viable only if deaths as externalities are viewed within a hierarchical make up of society in which some lives are valueless. Lack of control and imperfect legislations may well contribute to deaths at work, but it is only through the establishment of ontological priorities and the spreading of social necrophilia that some lives may become valueless. Some lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense. There are lives worth living and lives worth destroying, the former being valuable and grievable, the latter devalued and ungrievable (Butler, 2009). Utilitarian reasoning would not object to such distinction, as the death of some workers does not diminish the total happiness generated by the economy. This distinction, in other words, implies the neglect of individual wellbeing and happiness, while the ranking of social goodness and the selection of what is to be chosen is done simply on the basis of the sum total of individual welfares (Sen, 2009).

'The utilitarian calculus based on happiness or desire-fulfilment can be deeply unfair to those who are persistently deprived since our mental make-up and desires tend to adjust to circumstances, particularly to make life bearable in adverse situations. It is through "coming to terms" with one's hopeless predicament that life is made somewhat bearable by the traditional underdogs, such as oppressed minorities in intolerant communities, sweated workers in exploitative industrial arrangements, precarious share-croppers living in a world of uncertainty, or subdued housewives in deeply sexist cultures' (ibid: 282).

This 'coming to terms' includes the acceptance of differentiated distribution of vulnerability and precariousness that the economy itself promotes. Victimisation of workers, therefore, becomes one of the elements of such distribution and includes differentiated allocation of the possibility to

die. But such possibility is expunged from a victimisation framework, as certain deaths will not be recognised.

There is second way of rationalising deaths produced by economic development. This revolves around the idea that development, like war, requires sacrifice and, at time, heroes or martyrs. It would not be surprising, for instance, to hear such justification being mobilised by car manufacturers, who might claim that the victims of road accidents are no less than martyrs of the process of technological and economic advancement. Critical social scientists may argue, in this respect, that the translation of victims into martyrs requires the use of a high degree of hypocrisy (Runciman, 2008), which is only acceptable in the name of sovereignty, and in our case, more specifically, in the name of economic development. However, a distinction may help clarify this critical argument.

In 'The Fable of the Bees', Mandeville (1970) distinguishes between malicious and fashionable hypocrites. The former are said to pretend blind faith in a creed, but know that their faith is false. The latter are forced to display their beliefs and show devotion lest they are excluded from the related social benefits that belief will bring. Using Mandeville's definitions, we can suggest that high-rank economic actors are malicious hypocrites, in that their belief in the freedom of markets falls short every time they succumb to the urge to violate the very rules of market freedom and establish monopolistic advantages. By contrast, some underprivileged actors within the economy may be described as fashionable hypocrites, in that their faith in the economic system derives from the conviction that what they get out of it is better than nothing. As Galeano (2009) has remarked, entrepreneurs invented the fairy tale of free trade after systematically preventing others to enjoy such freedom; once at the top, then, they kicked away the ladder. Nowadays, when 'the disadvantaged cannot

sleep at night, they still tell them that story to put them to sleep' (ibid: 128).

Conclusion

A number of variables contribute to the disappearance of the victims of economic crime. Among these, I have discussed the gigantic polarisation of power and resources, the increasing globalisation of markets, and the mobility, versatility and invisibility of international business. Throughout the previous pages I have also pointed out that this process requires the participation of the victims themselves, who may be reluctant or just unable to claim their status as that of victims. This needs some concluding specification.

As Sen (2009) suggests, the hopelessly deprived may lack the will or even the desire to radically change their social conditions. An easy option for them is to limit their expectations to the minimum they are likely to achieve. Their desires, in other words, become adaptive and realistic, an adaptation to reality that at times includes the acceptance of potential death. To reverse the situation, and therefore to make the victims of economic crime 'reappear' would require a paradoxical condition whereby those who lack the power to be recognised as victims acquire a sufficient degree of it in order to impose such recognition. Unveiling the victims of economic crime, then, amounts to turning vulnerability into power. A utopia?

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