Book Review

Richard V. Ericson and Kevin D. Haggerty
Policing the Risk Society and Harm Reduction
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997

Yuet W. Cheung and Patrick A. O'Hare
Harm Reduction: A New Direction for Drug Policies and Programs
Edited by Patricia G. Erikson, Diane A Riley,
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997

Review by Howard Doughty.

The dominant theme in innovation studies seems to be economic. Changes are promoted which maximize profits in the private sector and minimize costs in the public. It is therefore refreshing to see lucid arguments about organizational change that are not exclusively preoccupied with the fiscal "bottom line" but embrace a more comprehensive definition of success.

Two recent books from the University of Toronto Press are excellent cases in point. They deal with issues in law enforcement and in social work, the hard and soft sides of the coinage of social control. Both present comprehensive challenges to prevailing public and professional opinion regarding what police officers and those social workers concerned with problems of drug abuse actually do. Both provide intelligent alternatives to traditional theory and practice. Both, it may be said, articulate a vision whose time has come. Both are helpful starting points for the reinterpretation of programs in almost any field in which public policy is infused with ethical controversies.

Harm Reduction is a book that asks us to reassess the practical goals we ask social work professionals to meet. It encourages us to ponder the contesting approaches to drug abuse. It implies that those who condemn moral corruption and favour a "war on drugs," those who prefer to medicalize deviance and treat drug abuse as an illness, and those who retort that prohibition is at best ineffective, at worst conducive to international corporate crime and so invite us simply to legalize all so-called illicit drugs, fundamentally miss the point. They start from starkly contrasting ethical positions from which it is extremely difficult to withdraw. As a result, they talk at cross-purposes and lose sight of a genuinely innovative approach.

That approach would place the focus of public attention on identifiable harm, whether criminal, medical, social or personal. It would demand that we set aside our emotionally-charged and ideologically-driven prejudices and set out an empirically determined inventory of drug-related problems for which appropriate practical solutions can be found. Within this anthology are a number of instructive and constructive examples of harm reduction strategies than run from realistic suggestions for crop substitutions among peasant farmers in Bolivia ("harm reduction at the supply side") to public health approaches to lessening alcohol-related damage in suburban southern Ontario. What is common to all is a refusal to demonize either drugs or drug abusers and a desire to search for methods that do not purport to conquer problems but only to make their aggregate effects less destructive.

For specialists, there are new clinical and laboratory studies that illuminate such issues as drug testing, athletics and pharmacology. For those with broader interests, topics such as national and international human rights, prisons and incarceration, and traditional matters of public health are addressed in ways that

demonstrate the vitality and utility of the emerging harm reduction approach. Perhaps paradoxically, the net reported results seem to be all the more beneficial not despite the absence of ideological rigidity but precisely because of the theoretical humility and openness that guides them.

Ours, after all, is a culture in which the electric light switch might be an apt metaphor for our preferred means of deciding questions of social importance. We cheerfully divide ourselves into competing camps which can be turned off or on by views that challenge our own. Like Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee, we have "agreed to have a battle"! So, when subjects of controversy arise, we are quick to polarize and equally quick to deny ourselves and others the possibility of the consensus that would permit reconciliation.

Police work, for all the apparent clarity of such statutes as the Criminal Code, is not so different. Seen authoritatively in the simplistic context of games of "cops-and-robbers." policing is one thing; viewed structurally as the instrument of thinly legitimated violence by the ruling élite against the socially oppressed, it is quite another. One result is that the culture of authority pays little heed to radical critiques of its hegemony (except, perhaps, to gather evidence against "the usual suspects"), while those who regard authoritative institutions skeptically (if not always conspiratorially) show neither the wit nor the will to understand the function of policing from a police perspective. Again, rigidity emerges as the enemy of understanding, to say nothing of innovation. And again, redefining what is at issue in actual police work can constitute a genuine advance toward positive change.

In Policing the Risk Society, Ericson and Haggerty do a splendid job of demythologizing policing as the putative resolution of the conflict between good and evil. Instead, they ask us to understand that all our daily affairs inevitably bring us into danger. Whether from accident or intended assaults on persons or property, we regularly face hazards. Police work thus becomes an integral part of society's process of communicating information about danger and managing risk.

The implications of their book are advertised as "shocking" and "revolutionary." They are, in fact, neither more nor less than the recognition that policing is becoming a matter of empirical social science and that police work is becoming increasingly involved in the transmission of knowledge wherein "the police have become information brokers to institutions, such as insurance companies and health and welfare organizations, whose operations are based on a knowledge of risk." Data collection and transmission, as much or more than dramatic confrontations with law-breakers, has become the defining characteristic of bureaucratized and information-intensive regulatory agencies.

Common to both books and to both forms of social management is the primacy of specialized surveillance, data storage and analysis. Calm exercises in empirical methodology at their best, they demonstrate how the minimization of harm and the reduction of risk can be achieved by professionals able to generate testable hypotheses about social behavior and to carry out dispassionate research as part of a strategy for the pursuit of crucial policy goals. Some, of course, will still worry about the sensitive political question of whose material interests will be reflected in the social definitions of harm and risk; most, however, will acknowledge that the appeal to reason and evidence can only improve the quality of discourse and open the way for innovation in the provision of public services. Social reformers from the Fabians to critical theorists in the pragmatic tradition of Jürgen Harbermas will be hard pressed to complain about the ideas presented here.

About the author:

Howard A. Doughty, Professor, Faculty of Applied Arts and Health Sciences*,* Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology*,* King City, Ontario, Canada