



SLAVERY, DARK TOURISM AND DEVIANT LEISURE AT THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CRIMINOLOGY IN NEW ORLEANS

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What is Deviant Leisure?

Over the past two years Dr Oliver Smith and I, along with a growing network of critical criminologists from across the UK, Europe, USA and Australia, have been developing the emerging 'deviant leisure' perspective within criminology (see Smith and Raymen, 2016). The deviant leisure perspective aims to critically analyse the myriad harms associated with the most legitimate, normalised and culturally embedded forms of commodified leisure that feature in our everyday lives.

The deviant leisure perspective takes as its focus an undeniably broad church of topics. Deviant leisure scholars have problematized the harms of violence, sexual harassment and the existential crises associated with consumerism and infantilisation within the night-time economy (Briggs and Ellis, 2016; Smith, 2014). They have looked at the gambling industry's socialisation of 'lifestyle gambling' and its embeddedness within wider circuits of consumption such as football fandom and the night-time economy. While fiercely defended as harmless and non-problematic fun by the gambling industry, which took £12.6 billion from punters last year, our ongoing ethnographic research has found and that the precarious and anxiety-inducing cycle of high-interest payday loans, indebtedness, mental health issues and relationship breakdown are all-too-familiar features in the lives of these lifestyle gamblers that are far from limited to gambling 'addicts' (see Raymen and Smith, forthcoming). Other research has problematized the normalisation of violence associated with Black Friday shopping and consumer capitalism (Raymen and Smith, 2016); video games and pornography (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2015); and the commodification of violence in ice

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hockey (Silverwood, 2015). Drawing upon advances in green and cultural criminology, Smith and Raymen (2016) have also questioned the unequal distribution of environmental harms associated with tourism and holiday-making in countries such as the Maldives; while ethnographers such as Kindynis (2016) have questioned how capital has the privilege of defining space and excluding low-harm and potentially pro-social practices such as parkour and urban exploration from hyper-regulated urban environments.

Social deviance is a term generally applied throughout the social sciences to describe behaviours that contravene socially accepted norms, values and ethical standards (see Downes and Rock, 2007). However, the deviant leisure perspective inverts this traditional interpretation of deviance. In an era of 'cool individualism' in which it is culturally imperative to form a unique identity that is distinct from 'the herd', to transgress or cultivate deviant identities is steadfastly conformist (Hall et al., 2008; Hayward and Schuilenburg, 2014; Smith, 2014). In this sense, what could under a more ethical social order be conceptualized as deviant behaviour is harnessed, pacified and repositioned as a very specific form of dynamism that propels desire for symbolic objects and experiences—desires which are translated into demand within the circuits of consumption dominated by the leisure economy. The deviant leisure perspective therefore proposes a radical shift away from the influence of the 'new criminology' and their emphasis on norms and values towards a context of social harm. Put simply, times have changed and in the contemporary context it is the capacity for norms and values to be manipulated by the ideological dominance of consumer capitalism that opens up a space for harm to result from the individualistic pursuit of leisure, irrespective of what Bauman (2009) refers to as a moral 'duty to the other'.

This is a critical criminological perspective which has grown apace over the past two years, analysing the subject matter of cultural criminology through the theoretical framework of ultra-realism. Eminent figures in leisure studies, such as Robert Stebbins (2016), have very recently returned to issues of hedonism, incivility and the negative of 'deviant' side of leisure. Scholars who cross the leisure-criminology divide, such as Steve Redhead (Brabazon and Redhead, 2016), have begun to communicate deviant leisure perspectives to an increasingly global audience; whilst cultural criminology is beginning to expand its gaze beyond the limited constructs of crime and deviance to take interest in the relationship between consumer culture and normalised harm. Dedicated panels and streams at various international conferences serve to compound the suggestion that this is a perspective that is gaining traction within the social sciences.

Deviant Leisure in New Orleans

Most recently, members of the Deviant Leisure research network attended the American Society of Criminology Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. During our time in New Orleans, there were certainly plenty of experiences and observations that were of interest to a band of critical criminologists interested in crime, harm, and commodified leisure. There were the obvious seductions and temptations of Bourbon Street and the French Quarter, in which many of us enthusiastically immersed ourselves. We toured around the fascinating and eerie 'Museum of Death'. We observed racial abuse and sexual harassment associated with the tradition of flashing one's breasts in exchange for Mardi gras beads (Redmon, 2015); and we had discussions with locals about the political state of the US, the rise of Donald Trump and racial violence. In many ways, it was the ideal location for the conference—a festival of criminology and deviant leisure.

However, the topic of this essay is about my reflections on a different and perhaps more mundane deviant leisure experience in which several of us participated during our time in Louisiana. This was a trip to the Whitney Plantation, a former slave plantation that now offers guided tours of the plantation site. The tour presents an education and a history about the horrors of slavery, with a focus on the lived experience of enslavement and plantation life through both touring the buildings and grounds, but also the historically recorded narratives of former slaves themselves. The Whitney Plantation continues to shape the inequalities of New Orleans today, as the family name of the plantation persists in the banks, financial institutions and other prestigious buildings of the New Orleans landscape.



The harms of the homogenised and hedonistic night-time economy are plain to see and well-rehearsed (see Briggs and Ellis, 2016; Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Smith, 2014). However the transformation of slave plantations—the fundamental tool of the astounding growth of 19th century American capitalism (Baptist, 2014)—into a form of commodified ‘dark’ tourism and leisure is arguably of greater interest because it cuts straight to the heart of deviant leisure’s ethical boundaries and dilemmas. At front and centre of the deviant leisure project is a focus on the harms associated with intensifying socio-symbolic competition and individualism through leisure’s relentless commodification. The ubiquity of this scope means that the question for deviant leisure scholars is often not ‘what is deviant leisure?’ but, more problematically, ‘what *isn’t* deviant leisure?’ At what point does a form of ostensibly pro-social leisure become a harmful form of ‘deviant leisure’?

This is the fundamental question at the heart of issues around slave tourism. Is it an exploitative and voyeuristic form of ‘dark tourism’ in which capital continues to be accumulated and extracted from the bodies and free labour of slaves who have long since been in the grave? Or is it, more optimistically, a *pro-social* form of ‘ethical consumption’ that advocates racial tolerance and a remembrance of an important period of American history? Indeed, both of these issues were on display during the deviant leisure panels at the conference itself. Jo Large (Teesside University) challenged the ethics of Volunteer Tourism within consumer capitalism; whilst I offered an initial exploration of how we might define harm for a deviant leisure perspective and in what principles of morality and ethics these should be based.

Slave Tourism: Fetishistic Disavowal?

However, the typical issues of voyeurism and the continued exploitation and marketization of ‘slave tourism’, important as they are, are not the topics of concern here. Rather, the deliberately controversial focus here is quite radically different. It questions how slave tourism’s consignment of slavery to history, to another space-time and alternative political economy, in conjunction with tourists’ and guides’ collective grieving, shock and moral opprobrium, amounts to a collective form of *fetishistic disavowal* (Zizek, 2008) that, through the act of ostensibly ‘pro-social’ consumption, avoids an acknowledgment of how modern-day forms of ‘slavery’ and human rights abuses continue to drive and serve as a fundamental aspect of our contemporary political economy of consumerism and leisure.

This question emerged out of a lingering sense of discomfort as we freely strolled around a plantation that was previously characterised by its opposite. The only problem was that, at

the time, I was incapable of articulating the source of my discomfort. I certainly had concerns prior to the tour. I had heard and read of tours which provided a disproportionate focus on the 'Big House' and the items and rooms within. The White Masters on these tours are spoken of in-depth, while the slaves' role in the very existence of the plantation are often 'symbolically annihilated' and white-washed (there's a term for you) from history; an invisible after-thought which eerily replicates the realities of these grounds while they were in operation as active slave plantations (see Small and Eichstedt, 2002 for more on this). However, the Whitney tour is critically appraised for its reversal of this trend and indeed it prioritised first-hand accounts of enslaved lives which did not attempt to brush anything under the rug. This was an endeavour aided by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, which attempted to capture the lived experiences of those who had survived slavery as an important set of voices and narratives of America's fabric.

The tour-guide, an African-American with indefatigable energy, provided incredibly nuanced knowledge and additional stories which provided a textured feel for the brutality of slave masters and the incomprehensible psychological and physical toil of slaves themselves. Most importantly, an unexpectedly 'pleasant' surprise (if that is the right term to use) was how the guide offered a detailed account regarding slavery's function within the wider political economy of the day and the role of political economy as the key driver underlying slavery. In his wonderful award-winning book *The Half Has Never Been Told*, historian Edward Baptist (2014) bemoans this element that is all-too-conveniently forgotten through the re-telling of slavery's history. Within this field, the apparently dominant narrative is that slavery was an economically inefficient practice connected to the backwards ways of the 'Old South'. According to historians and economists, labour that was free and incentivised worked more efficiently than slave labour, contrasting slavery against the modernising and abolitionist industrial-North of the time. This, as Baptist points out, is simply false at every empirical level. Slave-driven cotton-picking and production was the most prominent driver in the making of US into the global economic power it is today. The explosion of America's cotton exports so drastically exceeded that of any other nation that it ceased to have any competitors. Through processes of torture (described as 'pushing'), higher levels of cotton-picking efficiency translated into investment in more efficient factory equipment in the so-called 'anti-slavery' North. This meant higher wages in the North and lower cotton prices, setting the stage for a burgeoning and democratised consumer economy in cotton cloth-based products all over the world. As Baptist (2014: 128) acknowledges through forensic analysis of empirical data, "most of the world eventually acquired clothes made in the industrial West from cotton picked in the US South".



Pictures of Slave Quarters (Above) that would sleep 10 to a room and the 'Big House' (Below) where the Slave Masters would stay at the Plantation.



Coming away from the tour, I was thoroughly impressed and my previous concerns were assuaged. But my discomfort persisted. Eventually, I realised that it was not just what was present at the plantation, but what was *absent* that was the source of my discomfort. Overwhelmingly, it was the historicisation of slavery in every sense that bothered me. It was the lack of acknowledgment in how slavery continues to be a persistent and fundamental aspect of our contemporary political economy and how, through our 'ethical' consumption and condemnation of these practices, we could purge the word and practice of slavery to an 'other-space' of barbaric history, disconnected from our contemporary present.

Let me be clear: I am not condemning the staff at the Whitney Plantation for their endeavours. They do so in good faith, and provide a stirring history that urges for such relations between one group and another to never be enacted again. In times of such racial tension across the US and beyond, tours which explore barbarism of slavery—told through the historically-preserved narrative accounts of those for who survived dehumanising injustice—are a valid and useful project. I am merely questioning the subconscious role that such consumption plays in denying ourselves the acknowledgment of what we already know: that ‘slavery’ is alive and well in our current global political economy (albeit in mutated forms) and that we all play a complicit role through other practices of consumption which are underpinned and made possible by these mutated methods of indentured servitude. This is the classic Žižekian fetishistic disavowal: *I know, but I don’t want to know, therefore I don’t know* (Žižek, 2008).

If such a process is enacted through the collective consumption of slave-tourism, how does it take place? I argue it is through the spatio-temporal othering of slavery, the discarding of it to another space-time. We can see this clearly enough in Baptist’s (2014) observation that the white-washed and economically inaccurate account of slavery serves the purpose of detaching the political economy of slavery from that of the present day. However, through consigning slavery to the reserve of *history*, we see this play out further. It happened here, but it is not here. It belongs to a different America, a different economy that has long-since condemned slavery to the dustbin of history. As Žižek (2002) argues, despite our abstract fear of terrorism and war, it is something that happens somewhere else, played out in the archaic and conflict-torn realms of the Middle-East, disconnected from our reality. Irrespective of their prominence within Western nations, practices such as FGM or honour-based violence don’t happen here in the progressive, civilised and multi-cultural west. They happen somewhere else, an othered space that we are happy to divorce ourselves from. We *culturalise* these practices.

Slavery is also something which not just happens *somewhere* else, but belongs to another time and set of economic arrangements. *Their* economy, the American economy of the 19th century, used slavery. Nowadays, our enlightened liberal consumer economy that caters to our tastes and desires enables us to buy tickets and tour the plantations for the purpose of collectively *denouncing* such practices. By the end of the tour, considerations of capitalism’s role in the perpetuation of socio-economic and racial inequality were almost entirely absent from the narrative, exemplified by the widespread use of the popular #blacklivesmatter hashtag which reduces the plight of African-Americans today to an issue of race, rather than capitalism’s systemic and historical exploitation of African-Americans and other ethnic

minorities into positions of sustained socio-economic and political marginalisation. Thus, slavery becomes an economic practice that is fundamentally different to our contemporary real economy that is predicated on consumption.

These are the stories we tell ourselves. But are they necessarily true? A quick survey of the production of commodities, institutions and events that underpins our leisure, consumerism and 'real economy' of consumption quickly begins to reveal some frayed holes in this logic.

Slavery: The Foundational Labour of Consumer Capitalism?

Let's start with Qatar, host of one of the largest consumer events in the world, the 2022 World Cup. Much of the infrastructure and stadiums being built in preparation for 2022 is being done by migrant workers under the *Kafala* system. This is a 'sponsorship system' which requires unskilled migrant workers to have an in-country sponsor (usually an employer) to be responsible for their visa and legal status. Human Rights organisations have long called for the abolition of the *Kafala* system (Amnesty International, 2016), arguing that it amounts to an 'ownership' of migrant workers by binding them to employers and offering easy exploitation. Indeed, this is playing out in Qatar as we speak. While the mainstream media attention it has received has been scant, news outlets have reported that thousands of migrant workers are held in squalid and over-cramped conditions, have their passports confiscated by their employers so that they are unable to legally leave the country, and are withheld the meagre pay they are due and forced to work with threat of further withheld pay and other sanctions. Deaths related to the construction of the 2022 World Cup are rising rapidly, while FIFA's response was that it was 'disappointed' and 'looking into the matter' (Amnesty International, 2016; BBC News, 2016). As Amnesty International have established, this amounts to forced labour under international law. All the while, broadcasters and advertisers will accrue enormous profits throughout the 2022 World Cup, while many of the same tourists who have taken the tour of the Whitney Plantation will watch on TV, drink beer, revel in the festival of football and cheer their team on blissfully despite having shaken their heads, gasped in shock, and furrowed their brows at the historicised exploitation that occurred at the Whitney Plantation.

Not far up the road from Whitney is the Angola Louisiana State Penitentiary. In a strange twist of meaning and fate, Angola is a former slave plantation-turned-prison. While prisoners won't be taken to the stocks or receive the bull-whip, once cleared by the prison doctor they can be legally forced to work without pay under threat of punishment as severe as solitary confinement (Benns, 2015). A short documentary shows the dark bodies of African-

American prisoners peppering the prison's horizon, working out in the field harvesting Sugar Cane, still the crop of choice since Louisiana's heyday of slavery. How is this legal? America's Thirteenth Amendment, which allegedly outlawed slavery. However, section 1 states that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." If one is imprisoned, they can be forced to work as punishment for their crimes. This was one of the mechanisms through which slavery persisted past 1863, and states such as Texas and Arkansas, in addition to Angola in Louisiana, continue to have this tradition in their own prisons.

However, the commentary on the documentary is most revealing. Opening the documentary in bewilderment, the narrator says: "*Once you pass through Angola's front gates you can't help but feel you've gone back in time...to a different America, to another South*". Is this not the exact form of fetishistic disavowal mentioned earlier? The historicisation of slavery, the moving it to a different spatio-temporal order despite what one sees in front of one's own eyes?

Of course, the vast majority of prisoners across the US engage in compensated work, but it does not amount to much more than forced labour. In many prisons, inmates receive as little as 12 cents an hour, with riots and protests increasing in prisons across the US due to poor living conditions and to quote protest groups, 'slave labour' (Kutsch, 2016). However, while perhaps controversial, we should not see this trend as caused by an overly-punitive and racist state that is hell-bent on implementing a draconian system. We should rather see this in the wider context of the political economy of prisons. In an era of privatisation and big business, prisons are maintained by prisoners through basic maintenance work, cooking and cleaning; or by producing commodities and products for businesses retailing their goods on the outside, thus keeping payrolls low and business high.

For many of us, when buying our sublime consumer objects, we do not want to know where they came from. To provide another New Orleans reference, we can see this same fetishistic disavowal in an interviewee of cultural criminologist David Redmon's documentary *Mardi Gras: Made in China*. Redmon's (2015) documentary traces the journey of the infamous Mardi Gras beads from the factories of China, replete with various human rights abuses, to the hedonistic and conspicuous consumption of New Orleans' Mardi Gras festival. When he asks consumers in New Orleans where they think the beads came from, he receives various responses such as "I don't want to know", "I don't care I'm on vacation". When he tells interviewees about the Chinese workers' wages and working conditions, he receives

responses such as “Get away!” and “Don’t tell me that!” as consumers experience a traumatic encounter with the real energy that underpins and props up the late-capitalist consumer economy.

Through the collective act of consumption, through our implicit celebration that slavery is no longer with us and that we live in a society enlightened enough to denounce its horrors, I suggest that such tours partake in a collective form of subconscious sublimation of what we already subconsciously know and choose to discard from consciousness: that our economy of enjoyment is predicated upon similar practices persisting today. Even the reactions—the sighing, the gasping, the crying and the whispers of ‘Oh my God’ to one another—reflect an almost cathartic purging of slavery from our reality. Some might contest that the forms of labour I have described here do not constitute slavery. After all, individuals are not being bought and sold or bred like cattle. But when the largest event for the most global sport in the world is built by migrant workers in Qatar who are forced to work for free, under the ‘sponsorship’ of employers, with passports confiscated to prevent them from leaving, what other term is there to use? ‘Forced labour’ appears to be the preferable term. However, is there not something else suspicious about our reluctance to use the term ‘slavery’? To return to Edward Baptist (2014), he recalls how white abolitionists in the US North were reluctant to use the term ‘torture’ during slavery to describe the methods of punishment, preferring ‘discipline’ instead. It was the relationship and the reliance, Baptist argues, of the industrial North and their cotton mills upon the US South that drove this semantic reluctance. He writes:

Perhaps one unspoken reason why many have been so reluctant to apply the term “torture” to slavery is that even though they denied slavery’s economic dynamism, they knew that slavery on the cotton frontier made a lot of product. No one was willing, in other words, to admit they lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture (Baptist, 2014: 139).

Perhaps, similarly, none of us care to admit that our consumer economy and leisure - be it clothes from Primark, our enjoyment of an international sporting event, or accumulating beads during a drunken stagger down Bourbon Street - is predicated on a global economy whose bottom gear is slavery. Those are the dark corners of leisure that we would rather not explore.

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