Book Review


Mobile banditry is the organized and systematic theft of goods, cash, and desirable objects, which can be re-sold by groups of criminals, who often use forays into foreign (usually richer) countries, or exploit criminal nationals already resident there, to engage in shop and cargo theft, break-ins of homes and companies, fraud, skimming and pickpocketing (EU Council, 2010, quoted in p. 9), to which the author of this book, the Professor of Criminology at Utrecht University, adds theft from and of vehicles. Dina Siegel’s informative, compact book (150 pages) details outcomes of interviews with police and criminal perpetrators, provides ‘insider perspectives’, analyses media reports, and makes in-country observations—including using many of her own photographs—to reveal an effectively organized, professional and adept transnational criminality which the Dutch Police have made a priority for countermeasures and crime prevention since 2011. This is not just a Dutch problem, of course. Other European countries, including the UK, France, and Belgium, have experienced similar activities, but Dina Siegel’s cogent analysis can be regarded as typifying the Netherlands’ experience of itinerant criminals from Lithuania, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania: these four countries predominate in the police figures (p. 10).

It is always dangerous to generalize from studies as this into racial stereotyping or to demonising nationalities (as we saw across Europe with Yugoslavia in the 1970s and gypsy travellers in the UK in the early 2000s), but Siegel is a cool, dispassionate interpreter who handles her data well and steers firmly away from anything approaching a media-inspired moral panic (p. 12). She takes us through the history of such offend to show that ‘mobile banditry is anything but a new phenomenon’ (p. 49) and demonstrates that there is some inevitability in the migration of poor people from economically deprived areas of Europe to places where there are rich people with ‘craved’ material possessions. Criminality often accompanies or galvanizes such mobility; it may be that with the absence of formal borders and greatly developed material wealth, such mobility is on a bigger scale than ever before.

As one who has had to negotiate the difficult, obstacle-strewn paths of cross-nationality research in Europe, I have considerable admiration for Siegel’s adroit handling of her wide-ranging material and deployment of her research assistants (including, commendably, her readiness to acknowledge their contributions in amassing data, and accessing the hard-to-reach). I liked particularly her use of direct observation of and informal conversations with artists, musicians, pickpockets, beggars and swindlers (p. 18) both in the originating countries and in The Netherlands. This lends detail and colour and the gritty texture of authenticity to the more cerebral presentation of data and statistical analysis.

Countermeasures to this phenomenon are also considered and include the familiar tropes of...
legislation, asset recovery (p. 116), prevention, intelligence (p. 120), deterrence and target hardening (p. 123), and interdiction at the point of origin (pp. 125–6), but there is nothing unfamiliar here. Unfortunately, it seems that ‘mobile banditry’ is lower in priority for many of Europe’s police forces than illegal drugs smuggling, the sex trade, and people trafficking. Professor Siegel’s research may change perceptions, but the process is likely to be both gradual and fraught. Meanwhile, this is a detailed, brisk, readable text which shines welcome light into a small, dark corner of crime in Europe, and one that will be a useful case study in criminology generally.

Bryn Caless
Senior Lecturer in Policing
Law and Criminal Justice Studies
Canterbury Christ Church University
E-mail: bryn.caless@canterbury.ac.uk