

# British Society of Criminology

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## BRITISH SERIAL KILLING: TOWARDS A STRUCTURAL EXPLANATION

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Leyton (1986) argues that in order to understand the phenomenon of serial killing factors beyond the psychological tradition need to be analysed. His structural account using evidence of American serial killing and focusing on socio-economic factors provides a powerful contribution to a neglected area. How applicable, though, is Leyton's thesis of 'homicidal protest' to the British experience of serial killing? In focusing on known British serial killers since the 1960s, our results suggest that Leyton's work cannot be wholly applied to the modern British experience. While finding Leyton's analysis both limited and limiting, we support the general approach. However, we argue that the focus should be widened to include other social relations, such as patriarchy.

### Introduction

Popular, academic and control agency interest in serial killing has mushroomed over the last decade. Serial killing has become big business, with various state and private interests having vested reasons for keeping serial killing in the news. Soothill (1993), for example, argues that serial killing as an industry has important implications for the revenue of business interests as diverse as film making and publishing through to those corporations involved in the development of police computer hard and software. Whilst such interests exist, often blurring the boundaries between fictional (or 'factional') representations and the reality of serial killing, there are real concerns about the detection and capture of serial killers. In the USA, for example, Caputi (1987: 1-2) quotes FBI statistics to show how serial murders had increased dramatically over two decades, 'there were 644 such murders in 1966 and an estimated 4,118 in 1982, comprising nearly eighteen per cent of all murders that year'. In the United Kingdom the figures highlight a different type of problem. The recent media interest in serial killing is seriously disproportionate to the scale of the problem. Nevertheless, we should not underrate the very real concerns that a spate of serial killing sets off in a community. Indeed, our task is not to deny the importance of the concern, but to challenge the nature of much of the focus. In brief, some questions are being highlighted while perhaps even more important questions are being neglected.

A fundamental distinction is between individual and structural approaches. Certainly the developments in recent years of attempts to 'combat' such offences - psychological profiling, DNA testing and offender databases - are necessarily linked to the offender as individual, with the primary focus in trying to develop *psychological* profiles through offender profiling or *biological* profiles through DNA testing. In essence, these reflect laudable attempts to improve detection.

The focus of detection is upon the individual. However, a problem emerges when the discourse of detection subtly shifts to become the discourse of causation with the suggestion that serial killing is the result of factors located within an individual, whereby a psychological, psychiatric, or biological predisposition to murder is sought. While seeking an explanation within such frameworks is perfectly proper, arguments that the genesis of crime might be more fully explained by considering wider social structures tends to be excluded.

The present 'crime' in terms of explanation is not one of commission - everyone is entitled to proffer an explanation - but one of omission - some explanatory frameworks are rarely exposed. We argue that the dominant *individualistic* discourse fails to meet the challenge of causation satisfactorily and there is a need to consider explanatory frameworks which are more ambitious in their scope. Certainly the main result of the psychologising and medicalising of the causes of crime is that the historical and cultural specificity of crime is ignored. These are ignored at our peril. Without a focus upon wider social factors in causing offender behaviour, any understanding of crime cannot be complete.

## Current limitations of analysis

It is curious that recent sociology which concerns itself with the social origins of crime tends to ignore more serious, albeit more rare, crimes of violence against the person.<sup>[1]</sup> Acts which tend to be portrayed as *individual* manifestations of evil would not have deterred one of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, from confronting an analysis. Indeed, his very choice of focusing on suicide as a demonstration of the importance of *social* analysis was because suicide was regarded as a very personal and individualistic act (Durkheim, 1952).

The second concern is that - with the demise of most avowedly Marxist approaches (whether intellectually justified or not) - the alternative (which now seems a consensus among the main political parties) provides little scope for fundamental change. It is our contention that the mere tweaking of the socio-economic system is not enough to overcome all variants of crime. We need to consider whether it is the very nature of society which 'creates' those people we have come to know as 'serial killers'.

An exception to the limitations of much recent sociological analysis is the work of Elliot Leyton who usually describes himself as a social anthropologist. In brief, his work (Leyton, 1986) on multiple murder provides the opportunity to appreciate that serial killers may be socially constituted. Leyton's work on the U.S.A. experience suggests the acts of serial killers are not simply the result of a deranged or dangerous personality, but, more importantly, may be the consequence of a socio-economic system which cannot by its rabidly competitive dynamic reward the efforts of all, and may dangerously marginalise certain people.

## Defining serial killing

Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks in any study of serial killers is actually defining what it means. First, there has to be a number of murders, and second there has to be a period of time between murders. Such factors may seem simplistic, but confusions soon become evident.

Egger (1984) suggests a six point identification of the serial killer: there must be at least two victims; there is no relationship between perpetrator and victim; the murders are committed at different times and have no direct connection to previous or following murders; the murders occur at different locations; the murders are not committed for material gain; subsequent victims have characteristics in common with earlier victims (quoted in Creswell and Hollin, 1994: 3). Most of the components of this stipulative definition could perhaps be challenged. So, for example, to assert that 'there is no relationship between perpetrator and victim' is a stringent condition and would certainly exclude some perpetrators, such as Dennis Nilsen and Frederick and Rosemary West, whom most would regard as *serial killers*. In fact, what constitutes a 'relationship' is problematic and it seems Egger is too restrictive in his conceptualisation of 'relationships'. Indeed, we later suggest that serial killing can usefully be conceptualised as a relationship in the broadest sense of being grounded in patriarchy and capitalist *relations*.

The assertion that murders have to take place in different locations to be classified as serial killing again is unnecessarily restrictive. It seems curious to disqualify a killer who lures or forces his/her victims to a specific location to be killed from being labelled as a serial killer. Frederick and Rosemary West, who killed at least nine young women (non-familial victims), will retain the label of serial killers despite committing the known offences at the same address in Gloucester (Sounes, 1995).

Nevertheless, our reservations about the definitional efforts of Egger should not mask the point that his work does begin to provide some clues as to how one might consider serial

killing as a distinctive sub-set of 'multiple murder'. No one has (or is) likely to accomplish a completely satisfactory definition for all purposes (Jenkins, 1988: 2) and we hastily acknowledge that the operational definition we use later to identify the boundaries of our cohort of British serial killers owes a debt to Egger!

We have operationalised the following definition of serial killing for the purposes of this paper. We have followed Colin Wilson's contention (personal communication, 1997) that there should be at least three victims. This could, of course, be criticised for not including attempted murder, and indeed, the infamous case of Graham Young, who killed two people by poisoning while several other people he poisoned survived, only missed inclusion because of the survival of his victims rather than any lack of intention on his part. However, that happens to any potential serial killer who is stopped in his tracks in some way. We have also excluded those cases where there is a suggestion that the perpetrator killed more than three people, but they have been charged with less than three murders. So, for example, Hawkes (1970) implies that Raymond Morris may have committed the murder of four young girls in the Midlands in the 1960s. However, he was only charged with the murder of one. As Hawkes notes, his guilt in the other cases remains mere supposition.

To be included in our analysis there must have been a period of time (days, weeks or years) between each murder, and following Jenkins (1988) we have excluded those with an '... explicitly political motive, such as the 'Balcombe Street' IRA group responsible for at least nine deaths in 1974-75' (1988: 3) and 'professional' killers, such as contract killers. In contrast to Jenkins, however, we have included those who have killed to hide (or even finance) other crimes such as theft but who have not - as far as we are aware - been part of a wider movement or business relationship.

Definitions are a pre-requisite of typologies which may provide a further set of meaningful categories. Holmes and De Burger (1985: 56-9) provide an interesting example of a typology relating to serial killing in suggesting that the killers divide into four groups. The first group they identify are *visionary* serial killers, represented by those killers who have hallucinations or who are delusional. Secondly, *missionary* serial killers are defined as those who have decided to rid society of a certain group of people. The third group of serial killers they observe are those seeking *power and control*, and are motivated by a desire to have complete control over the victim. Finally, *hedonistic* serial killers are said to be divisible into several sub-groups, such as 'lust-murderers' who are said to commit multiple murder because they gain sexual enjoyment from doing so; 'thrill-orientated' serial killers who are said to murder not for sexual satisfaction, but for the excitement of the act; and the third sub-group - 'comfort-orientated' serial killers - who are said to kill because they gain instrumental security from the accumulation of victims' property, or insurance payouts.

Whilst such broad classifications of serial killers may be useful in certain environs, such as the detection process, their usage in the *sociological* understanding of serial killing is limited. However, even on their own terms, this type of approach may have its own problems. So, for example, Cresswell and Hollin (1994) note how the groups posited by Holmes and De Burger are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, a serial killer may commence his activities for one reason, but may further murder for different reasons. They offer the example of Dennis Nilsen who killed, in the middle of his sequence of murders, a man just because he was annoying him; previously he had murdered for idiosyncratic reasons (1994: 5). More importantly, though, from our perspective is the fact that these classifications of serial killers concentrate upon individual motives. Serial killers are said to be driven by 'lust' or 'thrill', or they are hallucinatory. Whilst such responses may be given by the killers as the immediate justification for their actions, one needs to look beyond the motives of individuals if one's explanatory framework encompasses the notion that actions - social and antisocial - are structured by wider socio-economic relationships. However, first, a brief recapitulation on the medico-psychological tradition within which most explanations have been trapped.

## The medico-psychological tradition

The primary emphasis of those working in the medico-psychological tradition is upon explaining the actions of the individual within the context of his - the vast majority of known violent offenders are male - psyche. The basic assumption is essentially that individual actors are driven to extreme behaviour because of a single or a coalescence of several psychological 'abnormalities'.

The recent growth of interest in the *psychological* approach has been evident in the development of sex offender treatment programmes in prisons. Indeed, psychologists rather than psychiatrists have become more dominant in recent treatment programmes and their advance is a lesson in professional imperialism. However, the approach of the two disciplines in focusing upon the individual is identical for our purposes. Nevertheless, the shift of emphasis is of interest.

Psychiatrists have historically been struggling with a paradox. Their explanations for deviance are couched in terms of psychiatric abnormality, but few offenders are so psychiatrically disturbed as to be termed mentally ill. Within the criminal justice system the exceptions who are defined as 'mad' are indeed the most exceptional cases. Forensic psychiatrists have tended to limit their treatment interests to these latter cases and, despite fears in the early 1970s of *psychiatric* imperialism, forensic psychiatrists have been fairly reluctant to work beyond a fairly narrow base and have not attempted to make a major impact on the general run of offenders. In fact, in recent years, leading forensic psychiatrists - certainly aware of the critiques of the medical model in the late 1960s and early 1970s - have been comparatively modest in their aims and claims. Interestingly, the increasing concern about the failure of the criminal justice system to confront the problem of some serious offenders, particularly sexual offenders, who have been defined as 'bad' rather than 'mad', has been a challenge which has been embraced by psychologists.

Certainly there has been a change within the psychological approach over the past thirty years. Contemporary psychologists are willing to recognise the importance of the social context much more readily than formerly. Indeed, psychological profiling with some of its origins in environmental criminology makes much play on how a person might operate within a particular social environment. However, David Canter, perhaps the most sophisticated of recent exponents of the psychological approach, pertinently sub-titles his best-selling book, *Criminal Shadows*, as *Inside the Mind of the Serial Killer* (Canter, 1995). Hence, whether *seeking* offenders with the use of psychological profiling or *treating* offenders with behaviour modification programmes or its variants, we contend that the thrust remains essentially the same and the current emphasis has focused on explaining the actions of the individual within the context of his psyche. The social has been identified in the background but the foreground is almost exclusively occupied by the individual. Our aim is to reverse this patterning. We contend that, by foregrounding the social, many more individuals begin to occupy the background. By highlighting the wider structural factors, we can begin to understand why some historical periods have more violence than others. So, for example, there seems no trace of a serial killer in Britain in the 1930s and yet in the inter-war period Germany had at least a dozen cases (Jenkins, 1988). Our main interest is in the period since the 1960s when there has certainly been evidence of some serial killers in Britain.

# The seeds of structural killing

## ***Hunting Humans: the rise of the modern multiple murderer***

*Hunting Humans* (Leyton, 1986) is a seminal work on the sociology of multiple murder by the Canadian anthropologist, Elliot Leyton. Whilst Leyton's focus is upon multiple murderers rather than just serial killers, the crux of his thesis, that psychological explanations alone are unable to explain the phenomenon of multiple killing, has important applications in the study of serial killing. For Leyton multiple murder is not the province of the mentally disturbed. He argues that one has to look beyond the individual to the society, and in particular the social structures in which he/she lives if one is to explain more fully multiple killing. To develop his thesis he identifies three broad historical periods, and argues that in these three periods the social genesis of multiple killers and their victims are socially specific. Table 1 summarises his historical configurations, and shows the broad socio-economic background of the serial killers and their victims. Table 1 suggests that there have been significant changes in the socio-economic background of killers and their victims between the historical epochs. In broad terms, the socio-economic background of the serial killer has 'fallen' from that of aristocracy in the pre-industrial period to upper-working class/lower middle class in the modern era. The socio-economic background of the victims has, again broadly speaking, 'risen' from being peasantry in the pre-industrial period through the 'lower orders' in the industrial period, to that of the middle classes in the modern era.

Why, though, are there differences between historical epochs? Leyton explains the changes through the concept of 'homicidal protest'. Through this concept he suggests that in each of his historical periodisations the configuration of the social structure is such that some persons when faced with challenges to their position in the social hierarchy react to those challenges through the 'protest' of killing members of the threatening group. Homicidal protest can take differing forms. In order to show these differences we need to briefly discuss the three periods which Leyton outlines.

### **Pre-industrial**

Table 1 demonstrates that the pre-industrial multiple murderer was likely to be a member of the aristocracy, preying on peasants as victims. Leyton gives some lengthy detail, for example, on the fifteenth century French Baron Gilles de Rais, who '... murdered somewhere between 141 and 800 (peasant) children, mostly boys' (Leyton, 1986: 270). Leyton locates the explanation of why serial killers tended to be from aristocratic backgrounds and their victims peasants in the structural crisis of the fifteenth century. He argues that the fifteenth century was a period when the ordered feudal society of overlords and peasants was increasingly being challenged by peasants on the one hand, and merchants on the other hand. The fifteenth century is posited as a period '...in which the established order strove to re-assert itself, often through the savage repression of political and religious peasant rebellions' (ibid.: 273). For Leyton the serial killing of the Baron Gilles de Rais was a symbolic reflection of the threatened status of the nobility, and '...was a personalized expression of the sweeping repressive thrust of his class, and a sexual metaphor in which he tested and enforced his terrible powers' (ibid.).

Of course, the evidence of murderous activity, especially multiple murder, in the pre-industrial era is comparatively meagre and tales of aristocratic slayings are always more likely to survive than those of any other class. Nevertheless, Leyton finds a notable case on which to begin to build his edifice.

## Industrial

In the industrial era the identity of the multiple murderer and his victims was somewhat different. Leyton suggests that the industrial revolution and the related changes in social and economic relations was the driving force behind these changes in the socio-economic identity of serial killers. In fact, he argues that the industrial era was one '... in which middle class functionaries - doctors, teachers, professors, civil servants, who belonged to the class created to serve the needs of the new triumphant bourgeoisie - preyed on members of the lower orders, especially prostitutes and housemaids' (ibid.: 276). Although the multiple murderer had a different social background in the industrial era, there are resonances of the motives of the pre-industrial serial killer, for whilst the middle classes may not have felt materially threatened by the 'lower orders', Leyton suggests that their crimes were a symbolic extension of the need for industrial discipline. In other words, serial killers were taking to their most heinous conclusion the unprecedented control demanded by the cash-nexus of industrial capitalism. Serial killers removed those who lived outside the new moral order, which demanded the maximum extraction of value from the industrial proletariat: 'In killing the failures and the unruly renegades from the system ... they acted as enforcers of the new moral order' (ibid.: 276). The resonances of social control in a period of rapid changes, therefore, gives a degree of continuity to the motivations of serial killers, even if the socio-economic status of serial killers and their victims had changed.

## Modern

Although Table 1 shows the modern era as being post-World War II Leyton more specifically classifies the modern period as being from the 1960s, for it is since then that there has been a significant increase in the recorded incidence of serial killing and serial killers (ibid.: 286). By the time we reach what Leyton conceptualises as the 'modern era', important changes had occurred. In fact, the power relationship of killer to victim had been reversed, for whilst the perpetrators in the modern era are increasingly drawn from the upper working and lower working classes, he argues that victims were increasingly from the middle classes (ibid.: 287). The form of 'homicidal protest' had changed, for no longer were powerful interests controlling the less powerful, but those increasingly excluded from desired socio-economic goals were wreaking their revenge upon those whom they saw as frustrating their ambitions, and therefore, being responsible for their exclusion.

Through analysing the historical specificities of multiple murder, Leyton constructs a useful framework for the analysis of serial killing. In brief, his analysis locates multiple murder in historically located social structures and relationships. It offers, therefore, an explanation of multiple murder which challenges those explanations which psychologise or medicalise the actions of multiple murderers.

However, Leyton's thesis is not unproblematic. Historical periodisations are always difficult, and Leyton's chronology identifies three distinctive periods that could be criticised, on the one hand, for being too broad in their time spans, and, on the other hand, being too rigid at their boundaries. Leyton, for example, does give the impression that the periods are strictly definable while, paradoxically, locating multiple murder within an analysis which essentially focuses upon *social change*. In other words, a focus of change needs a recognition that change is likely to be more gradual than the highly definable shifts which Leyton's analysis seems to imply.

These problems arguably reflect Leyton's own somewhat confusing focus. In the main chapters of the book, his focus is on *American* multiple murderers - four serial killers and two mass murderers. In the concluding chapter of the book - where he develops his socio-structural account of multiple killing - he dramatically switches from the specific focus of his earlier chapters to a more generic focus on world-wide multiple murder. It is this leap from the nation-specific focus of the USA to a wider, international focus which perhaps contextualises the main critique of the detail of Leyton's thesis. Certainly there is scope for exploring the Leyton thesis in another location. The British experience of serial killings since the 1960s provides such a location.

## Modern British serial killers

Since 1960 - and following our definition of serial murder - there is evidence of 15 trials involving 17 serial murderers.<sup>[2]</sup> In the following outlines we have highlighted some of the main details about these serial killers and their victims as the background to an evaluation of whether Leyton's thesis can be applied to the British experience of post-1960s serial killing.

The material is summarised in Table 2 which focuses on the name of the defendant(s), the year of the trial, the occupation at the time of the main events, and the kind and number of victims. While we are seeking patterns, heterogeneity is also evident as these short 'pen-portraits' vividly reveal.

### **Michael Copeland (tried 1965)**

Copeland, 'a former regular soldier' (*The Times*, 17 March 1965) committed his first murder when on active service in Germany with the British army. His first victim was a 16 year male murdered near the barracks he was stationed at. His other two victims were gay men killed in Derbyshire. It was unclear in court why Copeland had murdered (he denied the charges). There was some suggestion that he killed his last two victims because they were gay (*The Times*, 17 March 1965), although he denied this in court (*The Times*, 26 March 1965).

### **Ian Brady and Myra Hindley (tried 1966)**

Ian Brady was employed as a stock clerk when he committed, with Myra Hindley (employed at the same chemical company as a short-hand typist), five murders. Their victims were a young man of 17, a 12-year-old boy and a girl aged 10. According to the judge the issue of culpability was clear. He told the jury: 'From first to last in this case there has not been the smallest suggestion that either of these two are mentally abnormal or not fully and completely responsible for their actions' (*The Times*, 6 May 1966).

### **Patrick Mackay (tried 1975)**

Mackay was an 'unemployed gardener' (Clark and Penycate, 1976, p. 4) when tried for three murders (two other murders were left on file and it is thought he may have committed up to a further six). He was charged with the murder of two wealthy elderly women (aged 84 and 89) and a Roman Catholic priest. He was found guilty of manslaughter on the grounds of diminished responsibility. He had previously been diagnosed as a psychopath, although in court the judge suggested that '...the medical evidence made it clear that Mr Mackay was not insane, because he knew what he was doing, and he knew that it was wrong' (*The Times*, 22 November 1975).

### **Donald Neilson (also known as the Black Panther, tried 1976)**

When Neilson committed four murders he was '...mainly engaged in small jobbing work and house conversions' (*The Times*, 22 July 1976). His victims were two sub postmasters and the husband of a sub-postmistress (all were shot during robberies) and a 17 year-old woman who died whilst being held for ransom by Neilson.

### **Archibald Hall and Michael Kitto (tried 1978)**

Hall (who was also an accomplished confidence trickster) was employed as butler when charged with five murders (Lucas and Davis, 1979). His victims were acquaintances (a gardener and a housekeeper), his employers (a wealthy former Labour MP and his wife) and his younger brother. He was jointly charged with Michael Kitto - a criminal friend - on three (the housemaid, Hall's brother and Hall's female employer). The murders were executed in order to hide the crimes (mainly burglary and robbery) of Hall and Kitto.

### **Peter Dinsdale (also known as Bruce Lee, tried 1981)**

Dinsdale admitted the manslaughter of 26 people, aged 6 to 95 years, on the grounds of diminished responsibility. The arson attacks through which he killed his victims were said to be 'motiveless' and 'random', although in four charges of arson (in total he faced ten counts) he was said to have been motivated by a grudge against his victims, albeit 'trivial in nature' (*The Times*, 21 January 1981). He was detained 'in a special hospital without limit of time' (ibid.).

### **Peter Sutcliffe (tried 1981)**

Sutcliffe was a lorry driver when arrested. He was charged with 13 counts of murder. In court, it was alleged that Sutcliffe murdered because he was on a mission, allegedly directed by God through voices he heard, to kill prostitutes. The fact that six of his victims were not prostitutes rather undermines such arguments, and the court case was posited around a female-blaming discourse (blaming the victims, his mother and his wife) to prove whether he was a 'lunatic or liar' (Bland, 1987).

**Dennis Nilsen (1983)**

On arrest Nilsen was working as an Executive Officer in a London jobcentre. He had previously been in the army and the police force (Masters, 1986). He murdered a total of 16 'vagrants and gay men' (*The Times*, 5 November 1983) '...for a variety of reasons, but mainly because he couldn't bare [sic] the thought of them leaving' (Clark and Morley, 1993, p. 80).

**John Duffy (tried 1988)**

Duffy was unemployed when he killed three women after raping them. His three victims were a schoolgirl and two secretaries. He had committed a series of other rapes before he began to murder. Indeed, it is argued that he began to murder the women he attacked after seeing a survivor of one of his rapes whilst appearing at court on charges on assaulting his wife (Canter, 1995, p. 67).

**Kenneth Erskine (tried 1988)**

Erskine was 'unemployed and of no fixed address' (*The Times*, 29 January 1988) when arrested and charged with the murder of seven pensioners. It has been argued that he murdered because he longed for fame and killed pensioners because they 'weren't a physical or sexual threat to him' (Clark and Morley, 1993, p. 35).

**Beverly Allitt (tried 1993)**

Allitt was employed as a nurse when she murdered four children - aged seven and nine weeks, 15 months and 11 years - on the ward on which she worked. In court it was argued that she suffered from the 'personality disorder' Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (*The Times*, 18 May 1993), through which the sufferer thrives 'on the attention the child's supposed illness attracts' (ibid.).

**Colin Ireland (tried 1993)**

When arrested Ireland was '...an unemployed drifter (who) wanted to make his mark in life' (*The Times*, 21 December 1993). He murdered the 'vulnerable group of homosexual men who indulged in sado-masochistic sex' (ibid.). His five victims included a theatre director, a librarian, an American businessman and a warden of sheltered housing.

**Robert Black (tried 1994)**

Black was a van driver, whose work took him to various parts of the United Kingdom. He was found guilty of the murders of three girls aged 11, 5 and 10 years between the years 1982 and 1986. One police officer reportedly theorised his crimes as such: 'He was not a psychopath, he did not kidnap to kill. But once he had slaked his sexual desires it was obvious he had to dispose of his victim' (*The Times* 20 May 1994).

**Frederick West (hanged himself before trial) and Rosemary West (tried 1995)**

Frederick West was employed in 'odd manual jobs' (Sounes, 1995, p. 31). Rosemary West was his wife and a part-time prostitute. Frederick West was facing 12 charges of murder before hanging himself, while Rosemary was found guilty of 10 charges. All the victims were female - family members and young women - who latterly were in the care of local authorities or foster-families, or who were living at the West's home after leaving their familial residences. Moore was the entrepreneurial owner of a string of cinemas in North Wales. His victims - four males - were a 'security manager'; a 'retired railway worker', 'a crematorium worker' and 'a drug addict and drunk' (*The Guardian*, 12 November 1996) killed over a three month period in 1995. Insanity was not an issue in the case. Alex Carlisle, QC for the prosecution, for example, was reported as saying: 'There is no question of insanity. There is no question of diminished responsibility.' (*The Times*, 12 November 1996).

## Perpetrators and victims of serial killing: the British experience

We have seen how Leyton suggests that, in his 'modern' era (post 1960), serial killers were drawn from the upper working class and lower middle class, and that victims were predominantly from the middle classes. Considering the Leyton framework, it becomes evident that paradoxically the experience of Britain since the 1960s both supports and refutes his claims concerning the perpetrators and victims of serial killing.

In support, the argument that serial killers are not drawn from the 'truly oppressed' is, on the whole, borne out. If, for example, persons from minority ethnic and females are representatives of the 'truly oppressed', they are rarely serial killers. There was no evidence of a serial killer being from a minority ethnic group. In terms of gender, we have found evidence of only one female British serial killer (Beverly Allitt) tried since the 1960s who killed



alone, although two - Myra Hindley and Rosemary West - were co-accused with their male partners. Beyond this, however, the 15 male perpetrators of serial murder (including Frederick West) seem to fall into two distinct groupings in terms of employment status.

Firstly, there is a group of nine male serial killers who were gainfully employed *either* in blue-collar occupations (namely, Michael Copeland, Donald Neilson, Archibald Hall, Peter Sutcliffe, Robert Black, and Frederick West) *or* in white-collar occupations (namely, Ian Brady, Dennis Nilsen, and Peter Moore). In contrast, a minority - six male serial killers (namely, Peter Mackay, Michael Kitto, John Duffy, Kenneth Erskine, Colin Ireland, and Peter Dinsdale) - were almost certainly unemployed at the time of the offences.

So how does one evaluate this evidence relating to the employment status of British serial killers? Certainly an enthusiast of Leyton's position would stress how 60 per cent of the *male* killers were gainfully employed, and most would probably be identified at the time as being from the lower middle class or from the supposedly 'respectable' working class. Hence, these seem broadly supportive of Leyton's thesis. However, a sceptic would point to the fact that 40 per cent of the known *male* killers were almost certainly unemployed and some were very much living on the margins. These exceptions seem to challenge the Leyton thesis - or do they?

Exceptions, in fact, probe the rules and one needs to remember that Leyton is pointing to class position and not employment status. That employment status is often used to measure class position does not mean that they necessarily coincide. Aristocrats may be unemployed and maintain their class position. In fact, Leyton is talking of the fragility of class position. Considering Leyton's focus is upon the fragility of class position it should be of little surprise that the unemployed feature among the ranks of serial killers. There can be no demonstration of such a fragile relation to capitalist production as stark as unemployment. Ambition and aspirations can be frustrated as much by a fall from the socio-economic 'ladder' (as in the case of unemployment and reliance upon low state benefits) as it can be by an inability to climb the 'ladder'. So, for example, in their study of benefit (albeit not all were unemployed) recipients in Newcastle-upon-Tyne Bradshaw and Holmes (1989) conclude that:

They (benefit recipients) are just the same people as the rest of our population, with the same culture and aspirations but with simply too little money to be able to share in the activities and possessions of everyday life with the rest of the population (quoted in Oppenheim and Harker, 1996: 18).

Aspirations and ambitions can be destroyed through unemployment. The relatively high proportion of unemployed men among British serial killers, therefore, is congruent with Leyton's thesis, as unemployment can be seen as a more extreme form of frustrating ambition. Leyton's thesis, however, becomes more problematic when the victims of British serial killers are considered.

The crux of the Leyton's thesis relates to his notion of killing as a form of 'homicidal protest' by frustrated members of the upper working and lower middle classes who tend to kill *victims from the middle classes*.<sup>[3]</sup> The British experience certainly does not confirm the latter aspect of the Leyton thesis. It is quite evident from Table 2 that the victims of modern British serial killers are *not* from the relatively powerful middle classes, but are from relatively powerless and vulnerable groups - children and young adults; gay men; women (particularly those vulnerable through their work in the sex industry or on account of the breakdown of familial relations); and pensioners. In fact, the general *absence* of persons from relatively powerful positions is especially noticeable.

## Evaluating homicidal protest: the British experience

While the relations of capitalism (class) are central to Leyton's conception of 'homicidal protest', the clinching evidence seems to be lacking in the British context. So where does this leave Leyton's conception of homicidal protest? Do we dismiss it in the light of the British evidence? Or, perhaps more constructively, can we begin to modify the Leyton approach to accommodate the British experience? The answer to such conundrums seems complex, but the analysis is instructive.

One perhaps needs to recognise that if class relations are to be regarded as *the* defining criteria of homicidal protest (i.e. upper working/lower middle class people wreaking revenge on the middle classes who are seen as frustrating their ambitions), then it is quite evident that this variant of 'homicidal protest' lacks usefulness in helping to explain the British experience

of modern serial killing. In fact, in many respects the recent British experience seems to have more of the resonances of how Leyton describes the 'industrial' era. Perhaps Britain has not yet reached the 'modern' era which seems to encapsulate the United States. On the other hand, perhaps there is an unnecessary narrowness in defining protest simply in class terms. Hence, if the focus of social relations is widened to those *beyond* class relations to include other social relations, such as patriarchy, then we suggest it is possible that 'homicidal protest' still has some conceptual value in the British context. Widening the analysis in this way provides scope for being able to classify a greater variety of serial killers.

Certainly it can be argued that several British serial killers did have *materially* frustrated ambitions and/or were marginalised through unemployment. The latter group include John Duffy, the unemployed former British Rail carpenter, Kenneth Erskine who was 'unemployed and of no fixed address' (*The Times*, 29 January 1988), and Colin Ireland, described as an 'unemployed drifter' (*The Times*, 21 December 1993). Among those employed, frustrations are sometimes apparent. So, for example, it is said that Ian Brady, at an early age, had '...acquired a consuming resentment of what he perceived as other people's wealth of good fortune. He had nurtured this over the years...' (Clark and Morley, 1993: 117). Similarly, Donald Neilson was described as being 'mainly engaged in small jobbing work and house conversions, but *the returns were smaller than his ambitions*' (*The Times*, 22 July 1976, emphasis added), while it has been reported that Frederick West had, as early as the 1960s, become 'frustrated by low pay' (Sounes, 1995: 103).

Second, there is a broad group of serial killers who could easily be described as 'socially' frustrated, perhaps manifesting itself as social isolation. So it has been said that Dennis Nilsen murdered '...for a variety of reasons, but mainly because he could not bear the thought of [his victims] leaving' (Clark and Morley, 1993: 80). Similarly, Robert Black was reported to be a 'loner' who was '...abandoned by his mother as a baby, ridiculed by his school mates and despised by many of those with whom he worked' (*The Times*, 20 May 1994).

Certainly there is evidence, therefore, that among some British serial killers a degree of socio-economic frustration existed. However, it would be both bold and inappropriate to identify socio-economic frustration as either a necessary or sufficient condition for serial killing. Equally, it would perhaps be both bold and inappropriate to deny that such factors may sometimes be relevant, but they clearly do not represent the full story.

The problems are equally evident when one considers the *victims* of serial killers. Broadly speaking, the victims of British serial killers do not belong to the middle classes in the way Leyton's thesis would predict. While, again, some of the victims of British serial killers have been middle class - for instance, Frederick and Rosemary West killed two university undergraduates and Colin Ireland's victims included a theatre director and an American businessman - there is little evidence that these victims were chosen *because they were* middle class. So, for example, Colin Ireland was reported as focusing on the '*vulnerable* group of homosexual men who indulged in sado-masochistic sex' (*The Times*, 21 December 1993, emphasis added), while Frederick West seemed to be targeting a local authority social service home in order to find victims (Sounes, 1995: 163). In failing to consider social relations other than those of capitalism (class), Leyton cannot easily explain why the victims of British serial killers tend to be females, children and young people, gay men and pensioners.

To explain these kind of victims of serial killers we need to locate serial murder within power relations which go beyond those of class, recognising that social power is not limited to those relations reflecting capitalism. In this sense, 'homicidal protest' becomes understandable as a form of revenge, but a revenge that is wreaked upon relatively powerless groups in society. This brings us to a fairly familiar argument.

Feminist commentators have for many years rejected arguments that violence against women and children is merely an extension of class-based power relations (Cameron and Frazer, 1987: 117; Kelly and Radford, 1987: 240; Walby, 1990: 132). Indeed, it needs to be recognised that Britain is both a capitalist *and* a patriarchal society. Violence against women and children, therefore, is seen as being reflective of patriarchal relations through which 'men maintain power over women and children' (Kelly and Radford, 1987: 238). Recognising patriarchal relations, it becomes clearer as to why serial killers often murder women and children. It is an expression of power through which men are able to dominate and oppress women and children. The construction of masculinity is central to this. In the case of Peter Sutcliffe, for example, Lucy Bland (1987) argues that he was able to carry out his murderous attacks for so long because of his male 'normalness'. In other words, Sutcliffe was reflective

of 'a normal male culture of drinking, prostitution and violence' (1987: 206-207). Indeed, violence against women was a central feature of the environs in which he circulated. So, for instance, when Sutcliffe attacked Olive Smelt, he was out with a friend, Trevor Birdsall, whom Sutcliffe left in his car whilst he executed the attack. However:

Next day, reading about the apparently motiveless attack on Olive Smelt in his local paper ... Birdsall had little doubt that it was the same woman. But misplaced loyalty prevented him from doing anything about it. Violence aimed at women was, in any case, a commonplace in the circles in which he moved ... Violence could, and regularly did, flare up in a matter of seconds ... and women - prostitutes who had 'crossed' their pimps, girlfriends turning up late, wives 'caught' looking at another man - were not infrequently on the receiving end (Burns, 1984: 105; also Bland, 1987: 207).

Moreover, on the murder of Helen Rytka, Sutcliffe has said that: 'I had the urge to *kill any woman*. The urge inside me to kill girls was now practically uncontrollable' (ibid.: 241). It seems clear then that certainly Sutcliffe's choice of victim was reflective of the 'wider context... of widespread misogyny and a culture which encourages and supports a male sexuality based upon violence and aggression towards women' (Bland, 1987: 208). Sutcliffe's systematic murder of women was inextricably bound in the patriarchal nature of society, through which men are able to maintain their position of relative power and authority through various strategies which includes violence against women (Walby, 1990).

A similar analysis can be developed to explain the murder of gay men. The fact that as many as four of the serial killers killed gay men suggest a pattern rather than the outcome of random acts. The four can be equally divided into the two killers (Michael Copeland and Colin Ireland) where there is no evidence that they were gay and the other two killers (Dennis Nilsen and Peter Moore<sup>[4]</sup>) who were, by all accounts, gay themselves. The similarities in the cases are their exploitation of cultural difference, namely, homosexuality, which emphasises the continuing vulnerability of gay men.

In the case of Michael Copeland, and although he denied it in court (*The Times*, 26 March 1965), there is some evidence that he killed two gay men *because they were gay*.<sup>[5]</sup> He was reported, for instance, as telling police officers that in one of the murders he committed in England that he met his victim in a public house and:

I knew he was one of them [gay man], and I hated him. It was premeditated as far as he was concerned. I was going to kill him, because he belonged to something I hated most (*The Times*, 17 March 1965).

Similarly, we could find no evidence that Colin Ireland was gay, but he did murder gay men. Indeed, from press reports it seems that Ireland's desire was to be famous following the loss of his job and a second divorce (*The Times*, 21 December 1993). He decided his route to fame was to be through serial killing and by targeting the particularly vulnerable group of gay men whose culture revolved around sado-masochistic sex. These two serial killers therefore are reflective of the homophobia which pervades Britain, and is a more exaggerated form of the oppression of gay men (and women) which, for example, does not allow 'out' gay people to serve in the armed forces or to become foster parents.

In contrast, the crimes of Peter Moore perhaps seem easier to explain. Moore had for about two decades brutalised gay men through violence and sexual assaults (*The Guardian*, 30 November 1996). The murders were seemingly an extension of his want to dominate and control sexual encounters. In this sense, his actions are akin to those of patriarchal relations entwined in the murder killing of women and children. On the other hand, Dennis Nilsen's murders were not overtly about a wish to dominate, but followed the break-up of a long-term relationship and several unsuccessful attempts to form a new stable relationship (Clark and Morley, 1993: 98-9). However, the break-up of a relationship can also symbolise the lack of anyone to dominate. Nevertheless, he appears to have murdered, because he felt lonely. But it also clear that Nilsen was frustrated by his 'ordinariness', and longed to be 'extraordinary' (ibid.: 83) and in this respect there are resonances with Ireland's desire to be famous.

Finally, the remaining vulnerable group who can be the focus of the ravages of serial killing are the elderly who can be perceived as - and often are - frail. Two serial killers - Patrick Mackay and Kenneth Erskine - deliberately chose pensioners as victims. As these offenders seemed to choose pensioners as providing opportunities for theft and the killings may simply have been to mask other crimes, they are sometimes left out of some discussions of serial killing. However, the vulnerability of the victims clearly provides links with other kinds of serial killing we have discussed. The vulnerability of these victims, among others, also demonstrates how serial killing shows the limitations of current societal organisation.

## Theorising the 'homicidal protest' of modern British serial killing: developing the Leyton thesis

We have argued that Leyton's thesis of 'homicidal protest' can be developed through widening the focus of class relations to consider other social relations. The argument needs to be explored further by considering 'revenge' which is a pivot of Leyton's ideas. His main assumption is that revenge in the modern era will be along class lines. We have criticised this assumption. In fact, rather misleadingly he seems to be suggesting that in the modern era people can only have their ambitions frustrated by those above themselves in the social hierarchy. Studies of relative poverty or wealth, though, tell us that people often compare their social position with those 'below' themselves as well as those 'above' themselves (for example, Dean, 1992; Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992: 127). Hence, it seems a misplaced assumption that if individuals do feel frustrated they will necessarily wreak revenge on those people of 'higher' social classes. The perceived source of frustration may come from elsewhere. Indeed, it has particularly been emphasised over the past two decades that Britain is under threat from the economic and moral degradation of a so-called 'underclass' - a catch-all phrase which has been applied to those who have not conformed to the moral and economic imperatives of the New Victorianism of the New Right (and now New Labour) (Murray, 1990, 1994; for critique see Bagguley and Mann, 1992; Mann, 1994). Moreover, such ideas are not restricted to the 1980s and 1990s. MacNicol (1987), for instance, shows how there has been a concern certainly since the nineteenth century with 'the apparent existence of an economically unproductive residuum of social outcasts' (1987: 296). The label 'underclass' may be relatively new, but dominant concerns with the perceived moral and economic degradation of the unemployed and other marginalised groups are not.

The possible link with serial killing begins to emerge when one recognises that the victims of serial killers not only reflect wider social relations, but they may be victimised because they are perceived as living outside the moral order of competitive capitalist society. Indeed, this would bring our analysis of 'modern' British serial killers closer to that of Leyton's 'industrial' serial killer where, as we have seen, he suggests that those perceived not to be conforming to the economic and moral order of industrial capitalism were targeted by serial killers. In other words, many of the victims of British serial killers have been those who are increasingly seen as a socio-economic 'burden' on society: poor women; homeless people; children and young adults with family relationship problems; or they have been people socially marginalised through their sexual orientation (gay men) or age (pensioners).

Certainly serial killers and serial killing do seem to provide a message which needs to be recognised. The message emanating from the study of modern British serial killing is that Britain is inadequate in its provision of social and economic protection for the poor and vulnerable. For instance, some of the prostitute victims of Peter Sutcliffe had clearly been forced into prostitution because of their socio-economic circumstances - Wilma Cann, for example, had to bring up four children after her husband left 'on what she could earn on the streets' (Burns, 1984: 106) and Irene Richardson who 'separated from her husband, with her two daughters, aged four and five, fostered out, ... had spent most of the previous ten days wandering about, homeless and penniless, in Chapeltown' (ibid.: 121).

Similarly, Frederick and Rosemary West could only continue many of their activities by trading on the desperation of young people. For most of the victims state agencies afforded little protection, and as *The Times* rightly highlights in the Dennis Neilson case:

...there is a social relevance. Neilson's victims, mainly homosexual and vagrants could have been manufactured for him by a society which provides neither jobs nor cheap accommodation for the growing numbers of young people drifting to the cities. (*The Times*, 5 November 1983)

The situation has not changed and, in the name of greater economic competitiveness, the employment prospects for young people have not improved while their entitlements to social security benefits and social housing have been reduced.

## Conclusions

We have argued that it would be both unwise to accept unconditionally the Leyton thesis to help to explain serial killing in a British context and equally unwise to reject the Leyton *approach*. Indeed, in theorising about serial killing, there currently seems a paucity of explanations which go beyond the individualistic approaches derived from biology, psychology and psychiatry. In this respect, Leyton's work provides an alternative beacon. However, as currently developed, the beacon may mislead rather than guide. Leyton's theorisation is both limited and limiting.

The Leyton thesis is limited because it will not explain the British experience of serial killing, even if it does provide insights into the American experience.<sup>[6]</sup> It is limiting because of the narrow emphasis on class relations and the failure to recognise the possible importance of other kinds of social relations, such as patriarchy.

However, while challenging the Leyton analysis which we suggest needs to be expanded, we will end by applauding the approach. The *approach* brings us closer to understanding the *meaning* of serial killing at a societal level. John Donne's reminder that 'No man is an Island, entire of it self' (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624, 'Meditations XII') also encompasses serial killers. The notion of 'homicidal protest', for example, introduces a social dynamic which must not be neglected. The actions of serial killers, sadly but usefully, identify social breakdowns. We suspect that the British context is different from the American experience on which Leyton bases his analysis. The meaning in the British context seems clear.

The engine of patriarchal capitalism is social and economic competition. For those who cannot compete on its terms for whatever reason are cast out and pathologised as the incompetent or lazy. The state legitimises this treatment of those deemed to be marginal to the production process by affording them minimal social and economic protection because it is thought such provision will merely exacerbate their 'idleness' (c.f. Harris, 1988; Murray, 1990, 1994; Lilley, 1993; Marsland, 1994). At this juncture, the inability of individuals to compete on the terms of patriarchal capitalism and a lack of social provision not only has a role in 'creating' serial killers who simply but grotesquely exploit many of the cultural meanings of a society, but the increasing vulnerability of certain groups plays an important role in providing the victims for serial killers. While Elliot Leyton's analysis may not be totally satisfactory, his structural account still provides a beacon which we may neglect at our peril.

**Table 1. Historical epochs, serial killers and their victims**

	Pre-Industrial (Pre-late century)	19th Industrial (late 19th century - 1945)	Modern (Post-WWII)
<b>Killer</b>	Aristocratic	Middle classes (e.g. doctors, teachers)	Upper working/lower middle class (e.g. security guards, computer operators)
<b>Victim</b>	Peasantry	'Lower orders' (e.g. prostitutes, housemaids)	Middle classes (e.g. university students)

Source: Leyton (1986: 269-95).

**Table 2. Known serial killers 1960-1995**

Name	Year tried	Occupation	Victims	No. of victims
Michael Copeland	1965	regular soldier	youth and 2 gay men	3
Ian Brady and Myra Hindley	1966	stock clerk; short-hand typist	children and a young person	3
Patrick Mackay	1975	unemployed gardener	elderly women and a priest	3

Donald Neilson	1976	jobbing builder	3 men shot during post office raids; young woman	4
Archibald Hall and Michael Kitto	1978	butler/ unemployed	acquaintances and employers	5(3)
Peter Dinsdale	1981	unemployed	'random'	26
Peter Sutcliffe	1981	lorry driver	women	13
Dennis Nilsen	1983	civil servant (executive officer)	vagrants and gay men	16
John Duffy	1988	unemployed	women and schoolgirl	3
Kenneth Erskine	1988	unemployed	pensioners	7
Beverly Allitt	1993	nurse	children	4
Colin Ireland	1993	unemployed	gay men	5
Robert Black	1994	van driver	schoolgirls	3
Frederick Rosemary West and	1995	builder; housewife/part-time prostitute	young women and family members	10
Peter Moore	1996	cinema owner	gay men	4

**Notes to Table 2:** The number of victims is shown as the number for which the perpetrators were tried in court. In some cases the perpetrators were thought to have killed more people, although to date they have not been tried for these additional murders.

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## Notes

1. We would exclude here those publications by feminist criminologists which show the social basis of crimes against women violence as being grounded in patriarchal conceptions of power and within the construction of masculinity (e.g. Kelly and Radford, 1987; Cameron and Frazer, 1987). Indeed, such arguments are central to our belief that serial killers are socially constituted, for their victims, on the whole, are women and children. However, while the feminist focus is on violence against women which is both serious and more widespread than usually acknowledged, our concern is with the rarer events of serial killing. [\[Back to text\]](#)
2. Focusing on trials involves excluding likely serial killers. So, for example, the assailant known as *Jack the Stripper* (also known as the '*Nudes' Murderer*) is excluded. In fact, the identity of Jack the Stripper has not been revealed to the public, for the man most suspected of being him committed suicide before arrest (Du Rose, 1971). He is thought to have killed six prostitutes between January 1964 and January 1965. Similarly, only Rosemary West was tried for serial murder as her husband, Frederick West, hanged himself before trial. We have included Myra Hindley (who was only charged with two murders and, thus, technically, as outside our definition) for to dissociate her from Brady (who was charged with three murders) could cause confusion. [\[Back to text\]](#)
3. Leyton does acknowledge that: 'Occasionally... they (serial killers) continue a metaphor from the earlier era and discipline unruly [sic] prostitutes and runaways' (1986: 297), but he goes on: 'Much more commonly... they punish those above them in the system - preying on unambiguously middle-class figures such as university women' (ibid.). [\[Back to text\]](#)
4. There is evidence, in fact, to suggest that one of Moore's victims was not gay. [\[Back to text\]](#)
5. We could find no evidence that the first of Copeland's victims - a 16 year German young man - was gay, although Copeland claimed he was (*The Times*, 17 March 1965). [\[Back to text\]](#)
6. Our task here is not to test or review the American experience of serial killing. Certainly, though, one of our concerns would be that Leyton seems quite selective in his choice of subjects to discuss in *Hunting Humans*. In contrast, we have taken *all* known serial killers in Britain since the early 1960s. [\[Back to text\]](#)

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