

Introduction

As the unique amalgam, in a new genetic configuration of contributions from a man and a woman, one is born into the world, as different from other people, in much the same way as my fingerprints were different from other peoples.

The quote above comes from the serial killer, Dennis Nilsen. It is taken from his unpublished autobiography which was leaked to me, via a circuitous route in 2005, given HM Prison Service's determination that Nilsen should not be allowed to further publicise his views on how and why he became a serial killer. In many respects I agree with the Prison Service and I use this quote merely because it perfectly summarises what this book is *not* about: in other words, the relentless focus of virtually every popular or academic account on the individual psyche of those who kill and kill again. Put simply, I am not interested in Nilsen—the 'new genetic configuration'—who has been endlessly medicalised and pathologised, with every episode in his childhood, youth, army, police and civil service career poured over looking, as it were, for clues as to why he would eventually kill some 15¹ young men in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

What is true for Nilsen is also true for the other serial killers who appear in this book, where the search for why they 'did it' has been rooted in their individual psychology—the so-called medico-psychological tradition—with the implication that if we were just to look more closely at the killer's genetic make-up, his sexuality, his relationship with his father, his mother, or at his childhood more generally and so forth, we would eventually discover the root cause of his or her murderous intentions. My lack of interest stems from several practical concerns, a theoretical perspective developed over many years spent working with serial offenders, and through my work as an academic writing and teaching about them.

The practical concerns can be easily described. In my work with serial killers and other serial offenders I encountered two distinct groups. The first group—the majority of those whom I spent time with and including Dennis Nilsen—had invariably developed a very robust and self-serving view as to why they had repeatedly killed. (Consider, for example, why Nilsen wants to use the description 'unique' and 'different' at the beginning of his autobiography and what this might also imply about how he views himself. Indeed, it is also the

¹ Interestingly, in a letter sent to the London *Evening Standard* on 9 November 2006, Nilsen admitted to murdering the 14 year-old schoolboy Stephen Holmes, whom he claimed he had picked up in a Cricklewood pub in December 1978. Nilsen was never charged with this murder, although in December 2006 the Crown Prosecution Service decided that it would not be in the public interest to prosecute him further, given that he is currently in prison with no prospect of release. In the letter, Nilsen complained bitterly about not being allowed to publish his autobiography.

exact opposite of how his biographer describes how Nilsen came to be 'born into the world'. As such Brian Masters (1985: xiii) notes that Nilsen 'started life unremarkably enough'. Yet, time after time, the views and insights of those killers whom I worked with were more often than not socially constructed to suit the nature and circumstances of their arrest, conviction and imprisonment. All too often their explanations were rooted in the forlorn hope that, for example, there might come a day when release was possible through parole; or they were simply proffered to engineer a more favourable prison transfer; or sometimes to maintain a conception of 'self' more in keeping with their own sense of who they were and what they thought they were entitled to.

More than this, when one investigated their explanations in any depth they could have been applied more generally to each and every one of us. After all, who amongst us has not had a beloved parent, grandparent, uncle or aunt die? Who has not felt lonely, bullied or excluded as a child? Who has not been saddened by the end of a close and loving relationship with another person? Who would not like to be given a little more credit for their achievements and a little less criticism for their failings? Would these everyday—almost prosaic—life-events be enough to push us into 'killing for company', as Masters (1985) claimed in respect of Nilsen? Are these justifications enough to account for the phenomenon of serial killing? And whilst some serial killers—such as Robert Black, who abducted, sexually assaulted and killed at least three young girls in the 1980s—have undoubtedly had appalling childhoods filled with abandonment and abuse, is this justification enough to explain their crimes, especially when so many other people have had similar experiences, but have not gone on to kill and kill again?

These observations about the explanations that serial killers give for their motivation stem from working with them after they have been caught and imprisoned. However, even in the immediate aftermath of arrest—long before their trial and conviction—those serial killers who are prepared to talk regularly construct a picture that is often far removed from the reality of events. Peter Sutcliffe, for example, after his arrest for a series of attacks and murders of women in Yorkshire in the 1970s, gave a variety of interviews to detectives working on the case. He appeared forthcoming, but as the leading expert on the murders has commented: 'It is now wholly evident that he was grossly deceitful and manipulative' (Bilton, 2003: 655). Specifically, Sutcliffe—better known as the 'Yorkshire Ripper'—sought to hide any sexual motive for his crimes, and instead wanted to paint a picture of himself as simply mad, which would thus influence every aspect of his trial and his sentence.

So too Fred West, before taking his own life, left 111 pages of autobiography. However, as David Canter (2003: 62) explains, anyone hoping to discover clues in this autobiography as to why West killed would be disappointed for 'the

journal ignores all of this'. Canter's observation would come as no surprise to John Bennett, the detective in charge of the West investigation. After West was arrested, his interviews with the police amounted to 145 tape recordings that translated into 6,189 pages of transcript (Souness, 1995: 278).² Nonetheless, since his retirement Bennett has commented: 'West's interviews were worthless except to confirm that nothing that he said could be relied upon as anything near the truth' (Bennett and Gardner, 2005: 168). Indeed, Gordon Burn, one of West's most perceptive biographers, simply dismisses him as a 'bullshitting liar', who claimed, for example, to have travelled the world with the Scottish pop singer Lulu (Burn, 1998: 136). Burn explains that West would talk 'palaver while apparently talking the truth. Laying out and simultaneously covering up' (Burn, 1998: 253).

The second group that I have encountered were the mirror opposite of the first. In short, they never talked at all about the motivation that drove them to murder and they kept their secrets well-guarded. For example, just after his conviction in April 2001 for the murder of 15 of his patients, West Yorkshire Police decided to re-interview Harold Shipman—Britain's most prolific serial killer—about the deaths of other patients whom he had attended whilst practising in Todmorden. Their videotape—which I have viewed—is very revealing and I quote here from a transcript.

Police officer: No replies are going to be given to any questions during the course of this interview and any subsequent interviews. I think it is fair to say for the purposes of the tape that we are happy that we are interviewing Harold Shipman. (Officer gets up and walks round the table to place a picture in front of the face of Shipman, who has turned to face the wall.)

Police officer: To start with, if I can try to jog your memory by showing you a photograph, that's Elizabeth Pearce. Of the three ladies there it's the elderly lady dressed in black. For the benefit of the tape Dr Shipman's eyes are closed. (Officer returns to desk and picks up two photographs.)

Police officer: Unfortunately we don't have a photograph of Mr Lingard. To try and jog your memory here is a photograph of Eagle Street and there is a photograph of

² On the other hand Rosemary West said nothing of substance in her 46 police interviews between 23 April and 1 June 1994 (Souness, 1995: 278). Here it is also worth noting that Masters (1996: 334) suggests that Rose West should have been acquitted at her trial and maintains that 'there were no witnesses to the alleged crimes, no confession from the defendant, no cause of death had been established for any of the victims, no time or place of death could be accurately ascribed and on six counts there was nothing to suggest that the defendant had even met the girls she was alleged to have killed'. Whilst this is of interest, Masters consistently downplays much of the evidence against Rose West—particularly in relation to the assault on Caroline Owens and the significance of this (see *Chapter 5*). However, as with all those serial killers who appear in this book, I have accepted the judgement of the courts against them and written on the basis that their convictions are legally sound as of the time of writing.

where Mr Lingard lived. Just for the benefit of the tape, Dr Shipman's eyes are closed and he didn't look at all. (Officer returns to desk and returns with another photograph which he places again in front of the face of Shipman.)

Police officer: Just to try and jog your memory, Dr Shipman, I have here a photograph of Lily Crossley. Just for the benefit of the tape Dr Shipman's eyes are closed and he didn't look at all. (See, also, Peters, 2005: 170-171)

This final note from the police officer exactly sums up this second group of silent and uncommunicative serial killers—'just for the benefit of the tape Dr Shipman's eyes are closed and he didn't look at all'. Not only did he not look, but he also never spoke. Shipman never discussed why he killed 215 (and possibly 260) elderly people either in Todmorden, Hyde or elsewhere and ultimately, like Fred West, he chose to commit suicide in his cell—at HMP Wakefield in Shipman's case—in January 2004, rather than reveal the circumstances that led him to murder.

So, to apply Gordon Burn's phrase about Fred West more generally, we have one group of serial killers who 'lay out' and another who 'cover up'; some who talk endlessly—although not necessarily to any purpose and others who refuse to, or indeed cannot, talk at all.

FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TO THE SOCIAL

These practical concerns are thus real enough, but there is also a theoretical perspective that should stop us simply viewing serial killing from the point of view of the killer. For, as the anthropologist Elliot Leyton (1986) in *Hunting Humans* has argued, the 'individual discourse' of the medico-psychological tradition about serial killers fails to meet the challenge of causation by ignoring cultural and historical specificity. After all, dangerous and deranged individuals are a constant feature over time and between cultures. Yet, given that this is so, how are we then to explain why Britain had no serial killers during the 1920s and 1930s, whilst just across the Channel Germany had 12 (Jenkins, 1988)? Indeed, why did the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s produce so many British serial killers? For Leyton, focussing on North America, the answer to these questions of cultural and historical specificity is to argue that serial killing cannot just be understood as the result of a greater or lesser number of dangerous personalities existing in society at any one time, but rather has to be seen as the product of the socio-economic system which cannot reward the efforts of all and thus may dangerously marginalise certain people.

Leyton goes further and argues that serial killing should be viewed as a form of 'homicidal protest' (1986: 287)—a theme which is discussed more fully in the first two chapters of this book, but which in essence suggests that some people

will react to challenges to their position in the economic and social structure by killing those in the challenging group. Leyton's analysis is dynamic, provocative and, as the title of this book suggests, much of what appears here is an extended argument with Leyton to see if it is possible to understand Britain's 19 serial murderers and their 326 known victims since 1960 in this way. Indeed the time-frame chosen for the book has been partly constructed around Leyton's argument, which thus helps to explain why I do not consider British serial killers from the 1940s or 1950s, such as John Reginald Christie or John George Haigh.

So, the theoretical perspective that is presented here consciously moves the discourse about serial killing away from the individual—the pathological and the medical and into the social. It argues that to truly understand why serial killers kill we need to investigate the very nature of the social structure—the society—that has created these people whom we label as serial killers. And, as is implicit in this analysis, it also suggests that the responsibility for serial killing therefore does not lie so much with the individual serial killer, but can be better found within the social and economic structure of Britain since 1960, which (generalising on a theme developed later) does not reward the efforts of all and in particular has marginalised large sections of society.

It therefore should come as no surprise that the victims of British serial killers have been exclusively confined to certain marginalised groups in our culture—the elderly, gay men, prostitutes, babies and infants, and young people moving home and finding their feet elsewhere in the country—and that women make up a significant number in all but one of these categories. It is people from within these marginalised groups who are the focus of this book, although I do not claim to be an expert on, for example, gerontology or queer theory. Instead, whilst sketching in the backgrounds to how individuals from within these groups come to be victimised I use more familiar criminological territory—such as policing initiatives or cultures to develop my argument more fully.

CRIMINOLOGICAL METHODS

In creating this focus and to make my argument a wide range of academic disciplines and research methods have been employed. Most obviously this is a book of criminology and its primary concerns are with the crimes committed by the 19 serial killers. However, it is also a book about history. By 'history' I do not mean the chronicling of ever more, spine-tingling, fetishistic detail about the crimes that were committed—the provenance of the 'true crime' genre—but rather the use of the historical realities of these crimes to make a criminological argument. In short, by looking at the wider forces that produced the victims of serial killers in Britain I am attempting to discern and thereafter interpret wider

patterns and regularities in our recent past, so as more clearly to understand our present and, hopefully, better mould our future.

As for research methods, most obviously I have interviewed several serial killers both whilst working as a prison governor and now as an academic. As I have already inferred, one or two serial offenders maintain a regular correspondence with me. I have used these experiences to inform my understanding of what they did, whilst not necessarily accepting the insights that they offered as to why they thought that they had killed. Indeed my academic concerns with them were usually simply practical. In other words, what I was interested in discussing with them was how they chose their victims and whether that choice contributed to their ability to escape detection for as long as they did. Of course here it would be traditional to name those who were interviewed, but I want to resist that temptation for two reasons. Firstly, because to do so would inevitably mean that the reader would become seduced back into the individual discourse and secondly because I am less interested in the serial killers themselves than I am in their victims. To me naming them gives them a status which I would prefer to deny them.

So too I have triangulated a voluminous secondary literature about serial killing with contemporary records where these exist, most obviously in reports about these serial killers as they appeared in *The Times*, the *Guardian* or in other newspapers and which would—almost incidentally—provide details about their victims. Official inquiries after a series of deaths had occurred, such as, for example, the Allitt Inquiry, which was concerned with investigating the murder of four children and a number of serious assaults by the nurse Beverly Allitt in 1991, also proved a useful source in relation to the victims of serial killers.

More than this, primary research has been conducted with a variety of the groups that have been the targets of British serial killers—most obviously young people, gay men and the elderly. As such, I conducted research about the protection offered by the police to gay men and women in Birmingham (Wilson and McCalla, 2004) and for three years co-ordinated a research programme on behalf of the Children's Society—the results of which have been published in a variety of sources (see, in particular, Wilson, 2003; Wilson, 2004). So too as part of my research for my last book I conducted primary research with elderly men who were imprisoned (Wilson, 2005). This helped me to understand how the elderly cope in a social structure that was specifically designed for the young and mobile. Finally, I acted as a consultant on the Channel 4 TV documentary *Dressed To Kill* (2001, dir. Stuart Clarke), which told the story of the Welsh serial killer Peter Moore and which afforded me access to various materials related to that case.

All of these methods were further enhanced when I was engaged by *Sky News* to advise them on a series of murders of young women working in the sex

industry in Ipswich in late 2006. As such I got to see at first-hand the police investigation of these murders and how they were reported upon by the various journalists working on the case. This proved to be an invaluable experience for a variety of reasons, but chiefly because it allowed me access to the sites where the bodies of these young women had been dumped after their murder and also to the red light area of Ipswich where the journalists involved interviewed a number of prostitutes.

As befits a book about criminology, I have drawn heavily on some texts to inform the argument which is presented. Indeed I have already drawn attention to the fact that this book can be read as an extended argument with Elliot Leyton's *Hunting Humans* (but which, in any event, might be more properly described as anthropology). However, in attempting to understand the 46-year time period that forms the backdrop to the book I am indebted to several key texts that I would like to acknowledge here.

Most immediately I have drawn inspiration from Jock Young's (1999) *The Exclusive Society* which (p.vi):

traces the rapid unravelling of the social fabric of the industrialised world in the last third of the twentieth century, charting the rise of individualism and of demands for social equality which emerged on the back of the market forces that have permeated and transformed every nook and cranny of social life.

In attempting to understand these 'market forces' more fully I have used Will Hutton's (1996) *The State We're In* to develop a better insight into the dynamics of the economics of Thatcher's Britain after 1979, which could arguably be described as still dominating the economic life of Britain today. So too I have relied on Dominic Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good* to sketch in the social life of Britain (if you like, the 'nooks and crannies' described by Young) at the beginning of the period under consideration here. I have also relied on Steve Hall and Simon Winlow's remarkable *Violent Night* from the end of our time period to try to understand the meaning, place and context of violence in the night time economy of Britain and to look at what happens when young people from working class communities become immersed in the consumer economy, its practices and values. I have also benefited from reading Alessandra Buonfino and Geoff Mulgan's (2006) edited collection of portraits about what it means to live in Britain called *Porcupines in Winter* and Nick Davies's (1997) *Dark Heart*. Finally it should also be acknowledged that I have written theoretically with Professor Keith Soothill of Lancaster University about Harold Shipman (Soothill and Wilson, 2005) and Professor Soothill's own work with Chris Grover (Grover and Soothill, 1999) has been particularly helpful in allowing me to understand structural explanations related to British serial killing.

In my academic work I have always tried to write in a tradition of ‘accessibility’ to the general reader and I hope that this book is no exception. As such, I have kept academic references to a minimum and where theory is used I hope that this is sufficiently explained so as not to dissuade the non-specialist reader from persevering. This accessibility has been consciously chosen for, as befits the desire to understand our present and mould our future, I do not believe that this can be done simply by appealing to the academy. If change is to come, I believe that this will only happen when the general reader and the wider public understand—and hopefully accept—the arguments and insights that academics take for granted.

Of course the demands of accessibility are many and varied (for me, accessibility has never implied simplicity) and in relation to a book that seeks to make a criminological argument within a historical context, this has meant that I have had to think very carefully about how to structure the materials that are presented here. So, for example, I could have chosen to handle the historical data in one or two chapters, before dealing with the criminological detail in others, but separated from the history. Whilst on one level this seemed appealing (it has the appearance of simplicity), it struck me as being unsatisfactory, suggesting as it did that the story that I wanted to tell had two separate, if connected parts. Thus, throughout, I have attempted to weave historical detail into each chapter.

The book opens with a long introductory chapter that seeks to provide an overview, both to the historical period under discussion and to the main criminological arguments. Thereafter each chapter takes its primary focus from the group that has been victimised, although where appropriate further historical detail is also provided. In short *Chapter 1* offers some broad-brush strokes, whereas the finer detail is presented in subsequent chapters. Last, but not least, a conclusion attempts to re-state and amplify the argument that has been presented.

Throughout the text, both as a means of making this argument accessible and also as a way of connecting the argument to those who read the book, I consciously use the individual narratives and biographies of the victims of serial killers—where I have been able to reconstruct them through secondary materials such as newspaper articles and from ‘true crime’ accounts. In this latter genre I am particularly indebted to the work of Brian Masters and Gordon Burn. As such, I try to open each chapter by building up a portrait of someone who has been victimised and attempt to tell their story to the reader, rather than setting out the story of their killer. In doing so I am trying to connect the reader to that life, in the hope that that victim does not seem distant and anonymous, but is instead humanised and, as a result, given some dignity. Yet there is also more going on here, for in trying to provide these pen pictures of people who are rarely seen within popular accounts of serial killers or in the academic discourse

about serial killing, I am attempting to create a different interpretation about who it is who is victimised and in what circumstances. Indeed, as Nicci Gerrard has argued in writing about the murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham, Cambridgeshire by Ian Huntley, 'in the single narrative, we extrapolate wider meanings.' She goes on:

One life will engage our personal sympathies while a whole plethora of statistics will not. We need to imagine what it is like, need to identify in order to properly care. Through stories we impose patterns, make meanings, give beginnings and endings, because we cannot bear a world or self without them. (2004: 11)

Of course this has not always been possible. The murders of Holly and Jessica—two young, attractive, white schoolgirls in a sleepy Cambridgeshire town—attracted world-wide attention that brought in its wake a great deal of biographical detail which allowed for the re-construction of 'beginnings and endings'. However the victims of serial killers (unlike the killers themselves) have rarely garnered the same attention. Quite simply, the victims of serial killers are often those who are on the margins of society for one reason or another, who as a result have left no record from which to reconstruct their lives. They do not leave letters, diaries or autobiographies; they do not maintain websites, nor are they the subjects of television documentaries, or films. Some victims do not even have a name and are identified in police records simply by their physical characteristics, such as the colour of their hair, the condition of their teeth or perhaps a tattoo. Indeed it should come as no surprise that one of the victims that we know most about—Lucy Partington, who was murdered by the Wests—was a relative of the novelist, Martin Amis, who has since written about his cousin's life (2001). Even so other victims of the Wests were not even reported as missing to the police. In short, our lack of detail and understanding of the nature of their lives, and sometimes simply the absence of images about the victims of serial killers, has resulted in both a popular and academic over-concentration on the serial killers themselves where images and details—if not necessarily understanding—abound. If history is written by the 'winners', then the story of serial killing has been almost universally written from the perspective of those who have 'won' merely through their prosecution, conviction and imprisonment for some of the worst crimes that this country has ever witnessed.

Of course the use of biography and narrative within criminology has a long history dating back to the Chicago School and has of late gained new momentum with the work of ethnographers and cultural criminologists. Of the former, Ken Plummer (2001: 395), for example, has argued that 'to tell the story of a life may be one of the cores of culture ... these stories—or personal narratives—connect the inner world to the outer ... They make links across life phases and cohort generations revealing historical shifts in a culture'. So too Paul Willis (2000: xi)

has suggested that ‘ “big ideas” are empty of people, feeling and experience’. He continued:

In my view well-grounded and illuminating analytical points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded.

Echoing these themes, the cultural criminologist Mike Presdee has suggested that ‘biography’ and ‘biographical accounts’ of everyday life provide ‘superior accounts’, explanations and descriptions of crime than the ‘nurtured ignorance’ produced by rational, scientific academic research. In short, when trying to understand the reality of crime and how it impacts on everyday life, we need to understand how people live and how they make sense of their lives. Thus, he suggests that ‘(auto)biography is the raw material; our material’. However, ‘it cannot stand on its own, it needs to be ‘worked on’ (Presdee, 2004: 43).

I have attempted to ‘work on’ the lives of those who have been victimised by serial killers and see how their individual circumstances created their social vulnerability, which thereafter facilitated their murder. This ‘working on’ has involved many things. Crucially it has been about analysing, and in doing so making connections between individuals and the reality of their lives, so as to discern broader patterns in operation over our historical time-frame and thus create a link between those who might have been killed in the 1960s and those who were murdered many years later. So too this ‘working on’ involves making a criminological argument and by harnessing these individual lives to the broader patterns that can be discerned I hope to suggest something about the type of society that Britain has become between 1960 and 2006.

Some critics might suggest that 19 serial killers and their 326 victims do not make a very large ‘sample’ on which to build an argument.³ In one sense this is true. However, I believe that it is possible to justify this small sample and the conclusions that can be drawn from an analysis of it for two reasons. Firstly, the serial killer ‘industry’ is now so large and omnipresent in academic, and especially in popular discourse that it is vitally important to start to deconstruct that industry by moving it away from the individual into the social (see also Seltzer (1998: 2) for an attempt to understand what it is about ‘modern [American] culture that makes the type of person called the serial killer possible’). We have to start somewhere and the victims of serial killing seem to me to be an ideal place to start that deconstruction. Secondly, and as I argue in *Chapter 1*, serial killing is a unique phenomenon and therefore we have to use all our skills to understand that phenomenon better. Attempting to explain serial killing at the social level is not an easy task, but by analysing the serial killer’s

³ By way of comparison it has been calculated that since 1900 in the USA there have been 558 serial killers responsible for at least 3,850 deaths (Fox and Levin, 2005: 32).

victims we can at least begin to discern wider patterns at work in society and in doing so gain a deeper, richer understanding of how we have helped to create serial killers.

Finally, I do not discount the anger that much of the argument that is contained in this book will engender. After all, in relation to the government's (and sometimes the general public's) view of offenders—especially serial offenders—we have been completely wedded to ideas of 'personal responsibility' now for quite some time. Thus, the desire to replace the 'individual' with the 'social' in relation to serial killing will not chime well with policies that seek to blame and pathologise the individual, and exonerate the society which that individual inhabits. However, I am not trying to let the various serial killers who are presented here 'off the hook'. Nor am I trying, as Mary Midgley (1984) warns against in her philosophical essay about wickedness, to blame society for every sin. Rather, I am instead trying to demonstrate that those who want to kill repeatedly can only achieve this objective when the social structure in which they operate allows them to do so by placing value on one group to the detriment of others. For when this happens and when communities are fractured and anxious, when people feel isolated and cut off from each other, and when the bonds of mutual support have been all but eradicated as each individual believes that they have to struggle simply to survive, those who want to kill large numbers of their fellow human beings achieve their purpose.

Sadly, in this way, serial killing becomes a useful guide that reveals the limits of our current social arrangements and the inadequacy of our provision for the social and economic protection of the poor and the vulnerable. For if children, young people leaving home, gay men, prostitutes and the elderly are the prime victims of serial killers this is only because we have created a society where children, young people leaving home, gay men, prostitutes and the elderly are also generally the victims of a social and economic system that does not see value in their lives and routinely excludes them from the protection of the state.

