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CHAPTER 39

CRIME FICTION AND GLOBAL CAPITAL

Andrew Pepper

“It’s not personal, it’s strictly business.” So says Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) in *The Godfather* (1972) to justify his planned murder of a mafia rival. The meaning would seem to be clear. The world of crime, seen from the outside as violent and disorderly, in fact operates according to the rational logic of business and hence of capitalism as “a non-violent, civilized mode of material self-enrichment through market exchange” (Streek 2016: 213). In this reading, we can understand and perhaps even relate to Michael, since his proposed act of murder is not personal but something empirically determined by the laws of marketplace competition. On closer reflection, however, there remains something inadequate about this reading because it lets both Michael and “business” off the hook. By reversing its logic, a different understanding of the relationship between crime and capitalism emerges, one where “business” itself, even when it would appear to be “non-violent”, is better understood as a form of violent criminality (and where the violence is only ever thinly masked by reasonable language to make it seem more palatable). From this starting point, my aim is to trace the implications of this formulation both temporally (or historically) and spatially (or geographically), so that crime fiction’s longstanding capacity for examining criminality as business and vice versa is opened out to consider the global dimensions of this predicament, i.e. where crime and indeed crime fiction are necessarily understood as a global phenomenon.

My point is not necessarily that capitalism and business are inherently violent, though as Harvey explains below, crime and capitalism both operate through dispossession and by appropriating someone else’s wealth (and where the attendant violence is only ever partially abstracted). Capitalism, of course, is typically understood as non-violent in the manner paraphrased by Streek, and Marxist thought has often pointed to the ways in which power is concealed or hidden in language and ideology, requiring careful ideological critique to unmask its hidden logic. However, what distinguishes crime fiction’s treatment and interrogation of capital is its insistence upon drawing out the violence which is often hidden by and in other types of fiction and modes of representation. The attendant collapse in any distinction between crime and capitalism is usefully set out and explored by Harvey:

First, there is the vast array of what we would now consider extra-legal activities, such as robbery, thievery, swindling, corruption, usury, predation, violence and coercion [...] Second, individuals accumulate wealth by legally sanctioned exchanges under conditions of non-coercive trade in freely functioning markets. (2015: 53)

Harvey argues that while “theorists of capital circulation and accumulation typically exclude activities of the first sort as excrescences external to the ‘normal’ and legitimate functioning of the capitalist market”, we need to “recognise the symbiotic relation between these two forms of appropriation” since there are “grounds for believing that an economy based on dispossession lies at the heart of what capital is foundationally about” (2015: 53-54). Harvey’s reference to foundations here is relevant to my argument insofar as I want to suggest that early iterations of crime fiction – even before writing about crime was recognised as a discrete genre with its own codes and readerships – understood the interpenetration of crime and capital and explored its implications. John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) is a good example (see Pepper 2016: 41-45). For what, Gay asks, distinguishes the activities of thief/thief-taker,

Peachum, who stands at the helm of London's sprawling underworld and who trades the lives of his gang members when they are no longer useful to him, and who assigns these individual members a particular role according to "a particular division of labour" (Ruggiero 2003: 46), and of Macheath, the dashing highwayman who would seem to steal only from those who can afford it? As Matt the Mint puts it, "where is the injury of taking from another, what he hath not the heart to make use of?" (Gay 1986: 69). One reading of the play would be to underscore the latter's status as "social bandit" and as such someone who operates to stymie and oppose the capitalist underpinnings of modern society in a form of "pre-political" rebellion (Hobsbawm 1971: 2). A more persuasive reading, however, would be to point to Macheath's equivalent ruthlessness and capacities for exploitation and to draw attention to Gay's willingness to erode any distinction between crime and business – whereby no one is unco-opted and stands outside of the system and no separation exists between the thief who steals "your goods and plate" and a lawyer who steals "your whole estate" (1986: 60).

If, as Streek argues, "Capitalism is and always was about capital accumulation" (2016: 205), the first part of this essay explores how the accumulative tendencies intrinsic to capital manifest themselves in crime fiction as criminal violence. In this context, criminality is also figured as an extension of capital production and the everyday activities of commercial exchange. For the proto-capitalist gangsters of Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), failure "to keep abreast" of the expansionist tendencies of capitalism means, as Luxemburg puts it, "quitting the competitive struggle" and not just "economic death" (1951: 41-42) but perhaps also death quite literally. The relentless accumulation of surplus values, which as Luxemburg tells us, is the key "aim and incentive of capitalist production" (1951: 39), results both in the kind of geographically limited social destruction we see in *Red Harvest*, and also in new models of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2005: 144) which are global in nature and not contained by city, regional or state borders. The second part of this essay examines how what Harvey calls the "spatial fix" – where the problems of overaccumulation are "solved" by colonial and neo-colonial practices of theft or dispossession (2005) – is interrogated in or by the global turn in crime fiction. Here the capacities of two contemporary crime novels – Alan Glynn's *Bloodland* (2012) and Massimo Carlotto and Marco Videtta's *Nordest* (2005), translated by Antony Shugaar as *Poisonville* (2009) – to confront and lay bare the destructive potentialities of global capitalist expansion, figured as global criminality, are considered. The final section of the essay examines whether we might identify the system of global capital itself as criminal insofar as it is premised on the violent "appropriation and accumulation" of the "common wealth created by social labour" by private individuals and corporations and their state backers. Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) uses a familiar typical crime fiction set-up – the single dead body and the lone private detective – as its starting point. In light of this move, the essay asks how well an individualist approach to the structural problem of crime is able to identify and counter not merely the individual criminal(s) but also what is abstracted by what Žižek calls "the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (2008: 2).

Primitive Accumulation and (Economic) Death

If the symbiotic relationship between crime and business has been a feature of crime stories from the early 1800s onwards, this thematisation found its fullest initial articulation in the hardboiled US crime stories of the 1920s and 1930s. Novels like *Red Harvest* brought to the surface the era's conjoined anxieties about organised crime, unchecked industrial expansion and monopoly capitalism (i.e. concerns that too much power was concentrated in the hands of one or two key figures). As the "president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto the First National Bank [and] owner of the Morning Herald" Elihu Willsson "was Personville, and he was almost the whole state" (1982: 12). However, following a vicious

strike at the mine, where he had to bring in private gunmen to break it up, Willsson temporarily cedes control of the town to the criminal gangs who operate as proto-capitalists, competing with Willsson on albeit disadvantaged terms. For Luxemburg, and indeed for Willsson and the gunmen, who include Max Thaler, Lew Yard and Pete the Finn, the aim of capitalist production is “not a surplus value pure and simple” (i.e. extracting surplus profits from commodities and labour) but “a surplus value ever growing into larger quantities, surplus value ad infinitum” (1951: 39). What we might call “primitive accumulation”, then, means staying ahead of the competition, and, as Luxemburg tells us, “failure to keep abreast of this expansion” means (economic) death. In Willsson’s case, precisely because he has failed to keep a check on the gunmen’s expansion from the realms of bootlegging and gambling into other activities, his preeminence is threatened. If Marx understood all too clearly the violence implicit in capital’s accumulative tendencies (and famously described how capital “comes dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (2004: 926)), these practices are typically masked or abstracted in the social practices of capitalism. What is so instructive about a novel like *Red Harvest*, then, is that violence which is sparked by economic competition between Willsson and the gunmen is not abstracted but rather turned into spectacular excess. In the process, the despoiling of Personville into its alter ego, “Poisonville” – where “[e]verybody’s killing everybody” (1982: 130) – spreads to every part of the body politic; as the novel’s protagonist, the Continental Op, puts it, with his flair for language, “from Adam’s apple to ankles” (1982: 61).

The problem, as Willsson and the gangsters discover, is that the violence which the Continental Op sets off in order to try and wipe out Willsson’s competition, is “no good for business” (1982: 136), where business is understood both as the illegal activities of the gangs (e.g. gambling, bootlegging) and the legal enterprise owned and controlled by Willsson. In this case, the survival of the capitalist economy is paramount and the state – in the guise of the National Guard and the co-opted presence of the Continental Op – intervenes to return the town to Willsson’s control; as the Op puts it, “all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again” (1982: 181). But of course the town was never “nice and clean” for at the start of the novel we are told about the “smelters” and “brick stacks” and that Personville, aka Poisonville, was “an ugly city [...] set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining” (1982: 7). The despoiling of Personville and the destructive violence unleashed by economic competition between Willsson and the gangs, and the willingness of the state to sanction and even underwrite these conditions, are enabled by and indeed are the product of the market liberalisations first identified by post-World War 2 economist Karl Polanyi, namely “the running of society as an adjunct to the market (2001: xxiv). Horsley uses the novel’s political pessimism and statist solution to question its Marxist credentials, despite “its representation of the greed and exploitation of unrestrained capitalism” (2005: 167), but the particularity of her claim misses the extent to which most if not all crime fiction is better able to point out underlying problems than come up with lasting solutions (a critique one could just as easily redirect at Marx himself). To give Marx his due, he saw, arguably better than Hammett (who remained an *American* crime novelist), the global dimension of the problem of capital accumulation (2010: 164-65). In the next section, I consider how well the globalising imperative of contemporary crime fiction has been able to do what Hammett could not: lay bare the globalising imperative of capital accumulation which, as Luxemburg tells us, “seen as an historical process, employs force as a permanent weapon, not only at its genesis, but further on down to the present day” (1951: 371).

The Globalisation of Capital, Crime and Fiction

The globalisation of crime fiction takes two distinctive forms: the opening up of new national traditions beyond the dominant Anglo-US axis and/or the recognition of hitherto under-

examined national traditions; and the move within individual crime stories to examine the consequences of globalisation, especially in relation to the blurred distinction between crime and capitalism – for example, the conjoined domains of multinational corporations and globally networked organised crime groups. The two novels under consideration in this section – Glynn’s *Bloodland* and Carlotto and Videtta’s *Poisonville* – fall into both of these categories: the former, part of a new vanguard of Irish crime fiction that has really only emerged since the turn of the century, and the latter, part of a longer and more established tradition of Italian crime fiction that has been the focus of renewed critical scrutiny; and both examining what Carlotto calls “the famous locomotive” where “the legal and illegal economies merged in a single system” which is global or at least transnational in scope (2006: 108).

Carlotto and Videtta originally published their joint novel under the title *Nordest*, a reference to the Veneto region of Italy where Carlotto has set most or all of his novels. But the decision, taken by his translator, Antony Shugaar, in conjunction with his English-language publisher, Europa, to rename it *Poisonville* speaks to or about the ongoing influence of Hammett’s *Red Harvest* as an exemplary work of political crime fiction and the notion, expressed by Walter Mosley, that we all now “live in a hardboiled world, a corrupt world, a kind of global Poisonville” (2009: 601). There are two crime scenes at the start of the novel, which Carlotto and Videtta attempt to reconcile. The first, more typically, because this is a crime novel, is the site where the corpse of Giovanna Barovier, fiancée to Francesco Visentin, the novel’s first-person narrator and scion of a well-to-do Veneto family, is discovered. The second is a more general and indeed normal “scene” – “A winter Wednesday in northeastern Italy” where “four more companies had gone out of business” and “There were four more now-empty industrial sheds with ‘For Rent’ signs, posted in Italian and in Chinese”. In this milieu where de-industrialisation, environmental degradation, people smuggling and drug trafficking go hand-in-hand with the globalisation of finance and crime, we see two specific markers: the ubiquity of Chinese finance and the growing presence of “criminal cultures from Eastern Europe and the third world” (2009: 12-13). Here, then, the particular crime that sets the investigation in motion, the murder of Giovanna Barovier, is part of a much larger manoeuvre by the town’s business and political elite, under the umbrella of the Torrefranchi Foundation, to shore up its position by moving its operations from the Veneto, with its high-cost-base, to “an industrial site just outside Timisoara, in Romania” in order to be able to better compete with the Chinese who, we are told, “are eating our lunch on a daily basis” (2009: 96). With its position threatened by the influx of Chinese capital, the Foundation – in effect a privately owned multinational corporation – led by the formidable Contessa Selvaggia in consort with Francesco’s father Antonio, willingly sanctions arson, fraud and toxic waste dumping, and hires in “muscle” from the Romanian mafia in order to kill off those like Giovanna who threaten to expose the connections between legal and illegal domains.

What Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession” (2005) takes multiple forms in the novel and is tied to the expropriation of the common wealth by the Torrefranchi Foundation for its own enrichment, the use of extra-legal means including violence to further this process, and the move to exploit lower wage costs in other parts of the globe (for example, Romania). In doing so, the line between crime and finance dissolves spectacularly as both allow capital to expand “more intensively (reaching ever deeper into social life and commodifying ever more human relations) and expansively (spreading globally, taking command of the production capacity and reproduction of whole populations)” (Haiven 2014: 38). The move by the Foundation to relocate its production to Timisoara in Romania is intended to bring down “[h]igh operating costs” (2009: 96) in Italy and exploit a lax regulatory regime in order to create “a free-market network [...] that not even the most reactionary and pompous apparatus of government could hobble” (2009: 64). But insofar as this network and its financial benefits cannot be realised without violence, predation, theft and murder suggests that the global

intensification and expansion of capital, described by Haiven and thematised in the novel, are characterised by Carlotto and Videtta as criminal. Hence, the novel's original crime scene is not a single dead body but rather the "Wednesday like any other". The role or function of crime fiction is not merely to thematise criminality but also to intervene and punish. Here, *Poisonville*'s far-reaching social and economic insights retreat into something more familiar, where, following Hammett's hardboiled original, individual solutions have to suffice. Francesco's private enquiries, together with the public ministrations of the quietly dogged Inspector Mele, publicly expose the guilt of the Foundation up to a point, but it is left to Francesco, as individual, to exact private justice for the murder of his fiancée, while the wider crimes of waste dumping and pollution go unpunished. If *Red Harvest* concludes with the return of Personville to Willsson "all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again", *Poisonville* ends with Contessa Selvaggia safely ensconced in the Foundation's new HQ in Romania using the language of "competition" and a "flexible labor market" (2009: 222) to abstract the violence which the novel has shown to be central to the company's successful global expansion.

The violence and destruction implicit and explicit in the social and territorial expansion of capital is again figured in Glynn's *Bloodland*, where the initial "crime" – the "accidental" death of Irish socialite-celebrity Susie Monaghan in a helicopter crash along with five others – is gradually linked to a wider political-corporate conspiracy premised on the convergence of crime and finance and on the criminality implicit in the capitalist practices of acquisition and accumulation (imagined as a global phenomenon). The conspiracy revolves around attempts by US corporate bigwig, Chuck Rundle, chairman and CEO of BRX, a privately owned engineering and mining conglomerate, and Jimmy Vaughn, chairman of the private equity firm Oberon Capital Group, to exploit and murder in the present in order to speculate on and appropriate the future. Their plan is to acquire a mining concession in Congo (from under the noses of the Chinese) in order to stockpile a rare metallic ore, thanaxite, by exploiting local workers. The rare metal is then to be used in the development of new automated technologies of warfare. Here, then, the lofty language of risk management, tied to the mapping out of multiple possible futures ("You can only ever have access to the tiniest, slimmest portion of it" (2012: 355)), is underwritten by neo-colonial exploitation and the aggressive cornering of the arms market. As such, the novel's individual "crimes" (for example, the staged helicopter "crash" and the exploitation of mine workers in the Congo) help to service the wider corporate power grab. Here, a nexus of multinational corporations, private security and equity firms and national governments (for example, in Ireland and the US) coalesce to produce what Wendy Brown calls a "neoliberal political rationality" (2015: 47) which requires the orientation of politics (for example, the decision of Rundle's brother to run for the US Presidency) towards the demands of capital and the usurpation of judicial principles by the logic of accumulation.

If this is the consummation of a process first identified by Polanyi and described by Streek as "Now states were located in markets, rather than markets in states" (2016: 22), it has implications both for our consideration of crime fiction *and* global capital. For just as an "Irish" crime novel like *Bloodland* no longer takes place predominantly in Ireland or deals with exclusively Irish concerns, the capacity of crime fiction, tied as it has been to the state's security agenda, to expose the ill-effects and indeed criminality of global capital flows must have its limits. But nor is it the case that states, at least ones as powerful as the US, wither away in the face of corporate expansionism. In *Bloodland*, Vaughn's ambitions, as chairman of Oberon and a sitting member on the Council for Foreign Relations, are linked to the accumulation of profit *and* enhancing the US's military capabilities: in this instance, by developing, in conjunction with the Pentagon, a fully automated battlefield management system with "lasers, sensors, antitank rockets, thousands of rounds of ammunition" (2012: 328) and with no scope for human error or "sentiment" (2012: 329). Typically, crime fiction has maintained and

enacted an uneasy relationship with authority and *Bloodland* is no exception. As such, a set of corresponding (but equally uneasy) anti-corporate or anti-capitalist sentiments, also typically present in the genre, require that this kind of power grab be thwarted. Hence, in *Bloodland*, the conspiracy is exposed by Jimmy Gilroy, an Irish investigative journalist, and the fallout exposes Chuck Rundle and ruins his brother's tilt at the Presidency. But it is pertinent that the prime mover in the plot, Jimmy Vaughn, who best analogises capital accumulation under neoliberalism, is allowed to walk away unscathed. In doing so, Glynn suggests that he is untouchable precisely because he epitomises the logic of the free market, free trade and entrepreneurial rationality (even as this logic is shown to be founded upon greed, exploitation and violence).

Individual Crimes, Global Systems: or the Human Consequences of Accumulation

The crime novel, by and large, tells individual stories and in the cases of, for example, *Red Harvest*, *Poisonville* or *Bloodland*, uses these individual stories to dramatise or at least bring into partial focus “structural violence” (Žižek 2010: 2) so that we see criminality not merely as individualised but more importantly as systemic. In this final section, I want to think about the capacities of one particular crime novel, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood*, which tells the story of an individual murder, to lay bare the ills of an entire system: “a new, complex, interconnected spectrum of procedures for exploiting material and human resources” (Rodríguez 2012: 9-10) where the human resources in question comprise the hundreds of thousands of mostly poor, mostly dark-skinned and mostly female workers employed at the maquiladoras or assembly plants on the Ciudad Juárez side of the US-Mexico border. It is not strictly true that *Desert Blood* tells the story of a single murder, that of Cecilia, a pregnant woman whose baby the novel's protagonist, Ivon Villa, is going to adopt; rather, this murder is itself part of a series of murders also known as the femicides or feminicides – “the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history” accounting for “over five hundred women [...] found brutally murdered on the El Paso/Juárez border” since 1993, with “thousands more [...] reported missing and [...] unaccounted for” (Gaspar de Alba 2010: 1). These murders were ineptly investigated by the Mexican authorities and routinely ignored, for a long while, by the local, national and international media. At the same time, they have been the subject of intense critical scrutiny by feminist and anti-capitalist scholars for the ways they connect the exploitation and disposability of precarious labour and a culture of uninhibited misogyny to the post-NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) emergence of a particular kind of extreme capitalism: “corporate, monopolistic, global, speculative, wealth-concentrating, and predatory” (Rodríguez 2012: 12).

The challenge for *Desert Blood*, then, is two-fold. First, it is to find a way of using the single murder of Cecilia, and Ivon Villa's private investigation into it, and subsequently the disappearance of her sister, to explain “how the threat of violent death continues to prevail as a technique of governance in contemporary settings” and where “a patriarchal state ideology” permits the violence to continue unimpeded” (Wright 2011: 709, 726). And second, it is to dramatise these murders and their consequences for ordinary families in order to mobilise state and civic forces to shine a light at the multiple killers who remain hidden in plain sight. As we shall see, the fact that the novel is more successful in the latter task speaks to a larger problem for the genre, which I will try to address, briefly, in the conclusion. So when Cecilia is found murdered – “Stabbed to death and with a rope around her neck” (2005: 41) – the novel lets us see the grief and anger of her friends and family and their determination, together with civic organisations such as Contra el Silencio, to expose and punish the “Sick fucks running loose in this city” (2005: 42). And when Ivon visits the mortuary and actually sees the horrifically mutilated body “of the girl who was going to be her mother” (2005: 50), the effect is not merely shock and bewilderment but a desire to act, in consort with other predominantly female

community figures, in contrast to the masculinist, individualising tendencies of hardboiled crime novels like *Red Harvest*. If *Desert Blood* manages to bear witness to the horrors of the femicides in order to inform and educate readers (especially Anglophone ones) and expose “the social, political, economic, and cultural infrastructure of the U.S.-Mexico border that makes it possible for such crimes to take place with impunity” (Gaspar de Alba 2005: v), it is arguably less successful in its efforts to implicate the wider practices and operations of global capital. In the end, Gaspar de Alba points to the “bilateral assembly line of perpetrators” (2005: 335) on both sides of the border who have made possible the production of violence: “Pornographers, gang members, serial killers, corrupt police men, foreign nationals with a taste for hurting women” (2005: 333). And while the novel ostensibly dismisses the “whodunit” aspect of many traditional crime stories, asking instead “Who was profiting from the deaths of all these women?” (2005: 333), it does, at the same time, give us a culprit or culprits and a solution which includes the safe return of Ivon Villa’s sister, a move that reassures insofar as it suggests that individual action in the face of global capital’s abstracted violence will and can produce good outcomes.

Conclusion

It is perhaps unfair to single out *Desert Blood* for this kind of criticism and for, effectively, doing what crime fiction has typically done, i.e. find individual solutions to problems that have been produced by wider systems (e.g. capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy) and where structural solutions or transformations do not appear to be possible. Therefore, rather than condemning specific crime novels for their depoliticising endings (whereby, as Moretti puts it, individuals are punished and yet the factory, as synecdoche of an entire system of social organisation under capitalism, “is innocent, and thus free to carry on” (1983: 139)), we should think about crime fiction in general outside or beyond the logic of their endings or redirect “attention away from the finality of the solution towards the dynamics of the investigation” (Gulddal, King and Rolls 2019: 6). In the case of *Desert Blood*, what endures longest in our minds is not the pat resolution but the horrors of the murders and the difficulties faced in bringing the multiple parties responsible to account. But insofar as global capital is also mobile, elusive, crosses borders and cannot be easily discerned or indeed corralled, we might also argue that serial crime narratives are better equipped to lay bare its essential features and violences – rather than those like *Red Harvest*, *Poisonville*, *Bloodland* and *Desert Blood*, where some kind of definitive ending is attempted, and even where the solution is presented as a temporary sticking plaster. A TV series like *The Wire* (2002-2009) springs to mind, whereby the “narrative loops connecting the different dramatic scenes” across episodes and even series might be seen as “narrative cycles” which in turn are implicated in the various cycles of capital accumulation (Kraniauskas 2012: 181). And yet even here there are limits because, as Kraniauskas also argues, “the narrative pursuit of money through the cycle (or loop) of accumulation from the street into finance only goes so far” (2012: 181). Which is another way of saying that insofar as crime narratives are always located somewhere, for example, Northeastern Italy, El Paso-Juárez or indeed Baltimore, their abilities to track the flows and effects of global crime will always be somewhat circumscribed.

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