

**Lynn S. Chancer****High-Profile Crimes: When Legal Cases Become Social Causes**

University of Chicago Press, 2005, 288 pp.

\$US 38.00 hardcover (0-226-10112-6)

The book *High Profile Crimes* arrived on my desk accompanied by an information sheet from the University of Chicago Press announcing that 'Lynn Chancer is available for interviews.' In light of the arguments that she develops about the tendency for the popular media to portray complicated issues in a simple dualistic framework, one must wish her luck if she is asked to use that self-same media to convey the nuance and sensitivity to multiple perspectives demonstrated in her book.

Given that her topic pertains to some of the most divisive American legal cases of our generation, such nuance is commendable. Too many commentators have taken the opportunity provided by these cases (the Central Park jogger, William Kennedy Smith, Mike Tyson, Bensonhurst, Rodney King and, of course, O.J. Simpson) to make sweeping generalizations about American society, race, politics, and sundry other topics.

Without diminishing Chancer's analytical insights it is clear that the book's strength lies in the remarkable amount of empirical data that she has collected through an exhaustive research process. This includes some quantitative analysis of media trends, but the most revealing insights come from the over 200 interviews that she conducted with many of the key figures in these cases, including journalists, editors, lawyers, social activists, and citizens. These interviewees often express opinions that one might anticipate given their particular race, class, gender and occupational profile. Nonetheless, there are a sufficient number of people who speak against the grain of their social positioning as to foster the impression that generalizations about the meanings of these cases for different constituencies are difficult and perhaps inherently suspect.

For Chancer these high profile cases are united by the fact that they were 'provoking assaults.' This unfortunately awkward expression is used to designate the fact that for many individuals the cases transcended mere spectacle to become vehicles for attempts to address and resolve contemporary social problems. The emphasis on the public politics of such cases is important in light of the frequent accusation that the American public is politically uninformed and apathetic. As Chancer reveals, in a mass mediated world dominated by a culture of celebrity, high profile cases become a key vehicle to raise issues pertaining to structured inequalities of class, gender and race, which rarely penetrate American policy debates. There is also, however, a characteristic structure to the discourse surrounding these cases that should give us pause. The media tendency (mimicking the dynamics of court cases more generally) to frame these cases in terms of winners and losers serves to partition debate, channeling discourse into very narrow grooves. As cases become equated with larger social causes people are forced to take sides. Many individuals will therefore see the legal outcome of a case as a major setback for the rights of their constituencies.

High profile cases also connect with the rise of the victim's rights movement in criminal justice and a public discourse of victimhood more generally. The largely unassailable position of victimhood appears to make it inevitable that all parties to such cases will claim that they are being victimized. Individuals aligned with the prosecution cloak themselves in the harms suffered by the ostensible 'real' victim, while those who identify with the accused work hard to suggest that they are the victim

of racist police officers, a media 'witch hunt,' or 'gold digging' women. This latter constituency also routinely attempts to taint the purity of the ostensible 'real' victim by suggesting that they were complicit in their own victimization.

Another theme that is returned to throughout the book is the classic issue of journalistic bias. Chancer's work should put yet another nail in the coffin of simplistic pretensions about journalistic objectivity. While she does not rely on Bourdieu's work, her interviews with journalists essentially involve having them try and articulate the habitus that informs their perceptions that some cases are self-evidently news. In the process Chancer accentuates how the typical journalistic approach to objectivity as 'telling two sides of a story' can actually mask important aspects of these stories.

This book will appeal to several audiences. Undergraduate students will be immediately drawn to the subject matter, and I have already recommended the book to two students interested in crime and the media. Such recommendations must nonetheless come with the important caveat that understanding these cases as social phenomena generally tells us nothing about the routine operation of criminal justice. The level of celebrity and media frenzy surrounding these cases ensures that they are far removed from the prosaic routines of the criminal justice system. Other potential readers include criminologists, a group which is often sought out by media representatives eager for credentialized talking heads. Such individuals will finish the book with a greater sensitivity to the dangers of embracing the imperative to 'take sides' on these cases. Individuals interested in the media, cultural studies and social movements will also learn a great deal from this book. Finally, there is also considerable overlap between Chancer's work and themes explored in the 'social problems' tradition. However, the fact that Chancer largely ignores this literature represents a curious omission. Such oversight is not necessarily a problem, but it does represent a possible missed opportunity for Chancer to have connected her excellent work with a much wider academic audience.

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Kevin Haggerty has published widely on policing, risk, governance, surveillance and the sociology of statistics. He and Richard Ericson have just published a new edited collection with the University of Toronto Press entitled *The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility*.

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March 2006

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