K.S. León, *Corrupt Capital: Alcohol, Nightlife, and Crimes of the Powerful*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021, 151pp, £96.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Steve Tombs

While not averse to enjoying the (quieter!) aspects of the nightlife economy within which alcohol is central, I have, when younger, shared some of the experiences of the author here of being on the “other side” of the bar. From my late teens to early thirties, intermittent stints working bars at two universities, in a serviceman’s club, several regular pubs, a holiday campsite, a high-end hotel hosting English FA cup finalists and the national football team, and a sports club, certainly whetted my appetite for a book focusing on “alcohol, nightlife and crimes of the powerful.” Moreover, only a few pages in, it was already clear that León writes with a style, an élan, a voice which engages, consistently and very self-consciously maintaining a non-academic style of prose. *Corrupt Capital* is highly readable, full of intriguing, insider insights by a scholar who clearly knows his way around the concepts and perspectives of critical social science. León begins by committing himself to a sociology not of how things should nor could be—he eschews any “self-serving notion of being on intellectual or moral high ground”—but, rather, states a promise “to explain how some things actually are” (xix). In this aim, he only partially succeeds.

Across the first three substantive chapters, he provides a somewhat eclectic overview of a more or less related sets of concepts, perspectives and orientations.

Chapter 1 defines the key terms and concepts that are used throughout the text, with attention to socio-legal contradictions, the state, nightlife economies, political economy, crime, power, class consciousness and much else besides. Seeking to retain a grasp of both the personal and the structural, León concludes that “Alcohol—both in the form of powerful systems and intimately personal practices . . . offers a novel platform for studying the crimes of the powerful” (20). This leads, in chapter 2, to a critical dissection of the criminological enterprise, with León arguing that the understanding and defining of crime, criminality and criminalization are “inseparable from broader features of political economy” (25). While this opening assertion to the chapter kickstarts an intriguing journey through critical discussions of empire, modernity, imperial criminology and neo-colonial justice systems, the chapter concludes with the statement that to call capitalism criminogenic is “to paint with too broad of a brush” (43), an observation which sets up a whistle-stop tour of claims around “white-collar crime and corruption” in chapter 3, somewhat inevitably leading to the conclusion that any adequate explanation of the crimes of the powerful must seek to combine both structure and agency within organizational frameworks.

Indeed! Although I would note that to state this is not incompatible with the claim that capitalism is, indeed, criminogenic, and that some versions of capitalism are more or less criminogenic than others.

None of this is uninteresting nor insignificant, but none of it is especially original. It appears to be a slightly laboured path towards the meat of the book, which draws upon an insider account of five years working in the nightlife economy, the site of an auto-ethnography which is detailed methodologically in the first half of chapter 4. The remainder of this and chapter 5 document a fascinating series of features of work and working in the nightlife economy. These chapters are the real added-value of *Corrupt Capital*.

Chapter 4 introduces the reader to the occupational environment of bartenders, bar culture, tips, mixology, holding onto a job and the role of racialized and gendered workplaces—bars—in a consumption society. But each of these, and other, considerations is mostly far too fleeting, a problem perfectly illustrated by the final sub-section of the chapter, “The regulators and regulated,” which spans just half a page. Indeed, at this point the reader still has no sense of the political economy of the nightlife economy in its most macro-senses—who owns and controls it, what are its oligopolistic and oligopsonic features, which are the key players, how are they organized globally or internationally, what are the typical relationships between, for example, the largest manufacturers and the smallest retailers, what are the key features of the labour market, the supply chain and so on. This is not merely the usual criticism of a book for what it does not do that the reviewer would have preferred it had done; it is more a case that, in the absence of these structural considerations, alongside the macro-organization of regulation of the various elements of the nightlife economy, many of the more micro-level details, such as the precarity of bar work or the centrality of tips to make a living, cannot fully be explained or understood.

Much the same observation could be made of chapter 5 which explores the sector as one where cash predominates; here León skilfully and with the eye of an insider reveals the myriad of ways in which cash is central to a diverse range of criminality across the sector. Again, however, much of the reportage remains at the level of the inter-personal and the agentic—“managers” and “management” appear but never in any systematic form, nor do corporate structures and bodies and nor, again, until a final three or four pages, do regulation, although when regulation *does* appear it is through a focus on the interactions between some on-the-ground regulators and the regulated population. Fascinating but far from a complete enough picture. And so the chapter concludes, that, “When so many kinds or actors or players engage in . . . money games, the law itself becomes a game-like process, where people learn various kinds of rules, both official and unofficial, to keep the game going” (115). And this is an accurate observation

which has been richly demonstrated and is not in itself inconsequential. But for all of the really engaging observations, the sum is somewhat less than its parts. Moreover, crucially, while there is a great deal of agency here, there is, in my view, far too little structure. So key questions go begging: what and where are the interests which are less visible in the game itself but who have the key stakes in its maintenance and its outcomes, those economic and political forces which, ultimately, set the rules?

Some of these questions *are* raised in a closing 20 pages which double as a substantive chapter 6 and a conclusion. Notwithstanding some curious anomalies—a commitment to describing the system “as is” while not offering any view as to how it could and should be reshaped, coupled with an out-of-the-blue commitment to “ultra-realism” which, citing Hall and Winlow, it is suggested offers “a coherent critique of the whole advanced capitalist way of life” (134)—much of this short chapter offers more by way of insights into how state-corporate relations frame the sector than the 120 pages which have preceded it. So it is a source of great frustration for me that the crucial glimpses offered here are not further developed. The book ends with a final clarion call for social scientists to specify the “political project that our research and writing serves” (137). I can agree, but wonder why this was a closing statement rather than a starting point for the study.

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