

Reflections on C³ series – # 3 Voldemort of Mar-a-Lago and the Black Doomsday Mirror

In the phantasy world created by J.K. Rowling ultimate evil resides in the character Lord Voldemort – ‘he who should not be named’. In the story it is said that Voldemort’s power grows each time his name is said aloud. When I was writing *Conflict, Crime and Criminology; An Interdisciplinary Approach*, it was during a time in between the 45th and 47th presidential administrations in the United States that were presided over by the real life ‘he who should not be named’. I made a deliberate effort to not mention him, lest his power grow. Now that power needs to be addressed.



Infamously, the jesting American late-night talk show host Jimmy Kimmel was briefly taken off-air in September of 2025 because of pressure from the Presidential administration regarding his comically critical remarks about Lord Voldemort after a gunman shot and killed the conservative activist Charlie Kirk. Monologues by other late-night television commentators also typically ridiculed the tyrannical American President as a buffoon. I thought their political schticks were something like the antics of medieval court jesters mocking their Kings. It is well understood that, in the feudal age, the King’s fool was one who, with wit and humour, was able to speak truth to power – ‘tell the truth and shame the Devil’ – because the despot’s other advisors only aimed to curry favour and secure their own political status in the structure of power. The jester could take the edge off and modify tyrannical tendencies, using clever banter to relieve the weight of power of some of its might. The fool functioned in a way that, by voicing criticism of the King, ensured his continuing hegemony.¹ Paradoxically, when the Lord Voldemort and his court supporters sought to silence Jester Jimmy – proving they could not take a joke – they ignored the fact that late-night talk show hosts are essential to them. The psychological effect of the laughter these fools’ dark humour provokes somewhat relieves an oppressed public of resentful feelings arising because it is powerless to change the circumstances of subjugation. Late-night jesters like Kimmel, Colbert, Fallon, Myers, and Stewart serve to strengthen the position of ‘he who should not be named’ in the pantheon of pop-culture. Their schticks actively reinforce his centrality in public consciousness. Shutting them up, if that were possible, would diminish Lord Voldemort’s power because their continuous recitation of his name only causes his cultural presence to grow.

An important theme in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* has to do with media effects. The arc of its chapters traces the socio-historical development of media technology. The book manufactures a critique of Technopoly’s authoritarian domination of technological society, arguing we have entered the age of post-democracy and that there is a new form of mass media manipulation in what has become an age of neoliberal ideological subordination. Effectively, it takes the position that Voldemort is a frontman for a techno-oligarchy. It argues Western society has passed the threshold of a revolution, although not quite the one that media and communications theorists think about.² The domain of criminology offers a unique vantage point on the present – an historical period Zygmunt Bauman calls liquid modernity. From it, interdisciplinary thinking can read the organized criminality of the White House as a symptom of underlying psychosocial, cultural, and political-economic conflict and can diagnose global systemic changes in social power as Mobster capitalism takes hold world-wide.



Ideas borrowed from Christopher Lasch and Neil Postman have special importance in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology*. Their thought is combined to say that we are amusing ourselves to death in a culture of narcissism. Lasch and Postman advanced scathing critiques of media-made pop-culture. These ideas are developed in the book through examination of many examples of criminality that illustrate how a strange loop between the world of happenings and the world of imaginings, termed reflexive hybrid realism, has made the world hyper-real. Media reflections of reality act back on the reality they reflect and, in the process, distort happenings in the world creating the conditions of possibility for yet more mediated reflections in a continuous amplification cycle.

A non-criminological example of this phenomenon taken from pop-culture is the so-called ‘Mar-a-Lago face’. This term refers to a cosmetic aesthetic affected by certain women entranced by their own images reflected in hand-held black mirrors. It is characterized by big puffy lips, sharp cheekbones, taut skin, prominent eye-makeup, contoured jawlines and a frozen forehead. It is achieved by cosmetic surgery, Botox injections and elaborate face paint, and it is intended to symbolize wealth, power and alignment with the new ‘conservative’ ideology summed up in the acronym MAGA. This distortion of womanly beauty is the hyper-real achievement of a culture of narcissism mesmerized by the black mirror and intent on amusing itself to death.



Fake News!
It's all fake news!

‘He who should not be named’ was never a career politician, nor did he have any experience of government prior to his initial election victory in 2016. However, he had made a success of celebrityhood, notably in a ‘reality competition show’ called *The Apprentice* in which he evidently enjoyed humiliating aspiring entrepreneur-contestants competing for the opportunity to work for him. This made him a ‘big dog’ entertainer. Later, when *acting* as President of the United States, he famously belittled besieged Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in front of a phalanx of media cameras in the Oval Office in February of 2025. Among other putdowns, he said “I don’t think you can be a tough guy”. He ended by turning to the cameras remarking “this is going to be great TV”. He is a classic product of the culture of narcissism. His televisual appeal to a people yearning for lost ‘greatness’ masks the reality of decaying American power clearly evidenced by the war crimes abroad and domestic police repression. Lord Voldemort of Mar-a-Lago is a phenomenon. He is both product and producer of a reflexive hybrid reality where he is King. And his political position in the real world makes him dangerous.

The disconnect between the imagined reality at Mar-a-Lago and the real world is spelled out theoretically in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* by highlighting the socio-historical context. Historical sociologists recognize the importance of ‘infrastructural power’, as opposed to mere ‘despotic power’, and the role of ‘mega actors’ in historical change.³ The latter is a sociological category referring to individuals who wield greatly amplified influence due to their occupying leadership positions in large institutions and organizations. Mega actors often occupy what mid-20th century American sociologist C. Wright Mills called, in his classic book *The Power Elite*, the ‘commanding heights’ of major social institutions. They are positioned to greatly influence society because of their control of infrastructural power. On the other hand, a mega actor may in fact depend on ‘despotic power’, that is the power to intervene in social ordering without consultation with non-elite groups. These are interesting and important ideas. Unfortunately, academic criminology has mostly been disciplined in a particular way and it leaves such considerations out.



A consistent theme in the book is the decay of American Empire and the rise of Technopoly under conditions of liquid modernity. Briefly condensing and greatly simplifying the picture of a complicated situation, there began intense class conflict in America during the first decades of the 21st century, both within factions at the elite level and among identity groups in lower echelons.

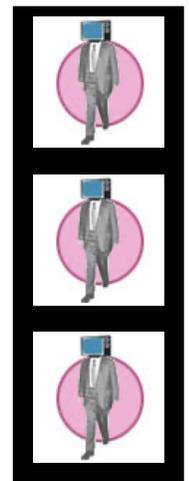
At the elite level, there is conflict between old money finance-capitalists and new money tech-capitalists vying for ultimate control. Simultaneously, intra-class conflict in the lower strata of the social pyramid is marked by anti-social narcissistic madness made even more intense because everyone is viewer-viewed in the black mirrors of so-called ‘social media’ owned and operated by the tech-capitalists. Social and political elites maintain dominance because this narcissistic rage-machine effectively divides the more numerous members of the lower classes against each other.



A new mode of production is rising based in ‘high-tech’ (no, not that kind of ‘high’). Robots, IT, AI, drones, etc. are the new means of production. Old-style capitalist exploitation of massed workers’ labour is over. Nobody knows how this new form of techno-capitalism – called Technopoly – can sustain itself over the longer term or the duration of the revolutionary transitional period. But, as the early 20th century English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead reputedly said, “major advances in civilization all but wreck the societies in which they occur”. Thus, all Americans are caught in a state of anxiety as their hero-system – the American Dream – fails.

That Lord Voldemort of Mar-a-Lago is presiding US President at this crucial juncture in world history is significant. A crooked businessman who was forced to declare corporate bankruptcy for failing financial ventures multiple times, his celebrity success positioned him as frontman for the rising techno-elite in the conflict for control in America. This faction is intent on the destruction of the old infrastructural power using despotic power to make way for Technopoly’s domination creating criminogenic conditions. The psycho-social, cultural, and political-economic conflicts arising in the liquid modern interregnum are acute symptoms of epochal shifts.

Despotic power, not only domestically in the United States, but also internationally, is being administered by mega actors for whom a main tool of domination, if not the only one, is the means of mass media manipulation. *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* explains that liquid modernity is an interregnum when an old system of global domination fades and a new one evolves, placing American geo-political power in ‘Thucydides’ trap’, a reference to the causes of the 5th century BCE Peloponnesian War (in which the established power’s fear of loss of place to new rising powers ‘makes war inevitable’). There are important differences between the present historical situation and previous eras when empires decayed and new ones arose Phoenix like from the ashes. One is the proliferation of nuclear armaments in a multi-polar geo-political context. Another is that people are watching the action in a hand-held black mirror mistakenly called a ‘smart phone’. It is not an exaggeration to say that these differences may make Lord Voldemort of Mar-a-Lago’s reflection in that mirror a potential harbinger of Domsday.





Watching the watch-man, man.

A broad interdisciplinary approach contributes insights that a narrower disciplinary focus does not. For instance, media-minded cultural criminologists think about the effects of news and entertainment media *content* on audiences. They theorize about folk devils and moral panics, and the framing of ‘the Other’ in relation to social order. In *Conflict, Crime and Criminology*, these views are supplemented by adding other ideas, notably from Lasch and Postman, but also Marshall McLuhan and Ernest Becker. McLuhan said ‘the medium is the message’, drawing attention away from exclusive concentration on the effects of media content to say something important about the affects of media technology. Emotional affect is crucial, as Becker maintained, because everyone experiences inner psychological conflict resulting from repressed fear of death which is a fundamental aspect of the human predicament.

Becker argued that all conflict arises from the paradox that we humans are conscious and self-conscious animals who use symbolic communication, and can think to see past, present and future thereby attributing meaning to our existence. Out of this arises the imperative to develop methods of denying and distracting ourselves and it is how social institutions – called ‘hero systems’ – gain their power. According to Becker, the absurdity of being both an animal fated to die and a self-conscious being with the ability to construct in the imagination timeless symbolic worlds is the psychological origin of inequality and social conflict. It is the motor of history and the basis of criminality.



See the world in a grain of sand and eternity in an hour.

The interdisciplinary approach in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* aims to link thinking about individual psycho-social conflict via a middle range theory regarding cultural conflict, with theoretical concerns about organizational, institutional and political-economic conflict – up to and including conflict on the global geo-political stage – all considered in a broad socio-historical light. This describes a complex set of relations in which a character like Lord Voldemort of Mar-a-Lago is visible as an important mega actor. His celebrity placement in the infrastructure of mass media manipulation allows the projection of his image and thought-processes through the black mirror onto the widest possible audience thereby affecting the social imaginary for billions of people. His influence at the present historical conjuncture is immeasurable, but it needs to be emphasized he remains at the mercy of historical forces he does not control. His dependence on sustaining his image in a black mirror he does not own and is not fully in control of is his weakness. As others decline to recognize his reflection, his power shrinks, he is diminished, he fades from view.

Such thoughts create room to speculate about the discernable outlines of neoliberal, divide-and-rule, post-democratic governance of self-identity obsessed subjects driven to neurosis from the anxiety of living in liquid modern conditions of chronic uncertainty which conspire to facilitate techno-capitalism’s consolidation into authoritarian Technopoly. Such complexity can only be gestured at in a short essay. The lengthy exploration of a range of criminological topics in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* tackles these issues in more detail. I hope you read the book.

¹ Otto, Beatrice K. (2001) *Fools are Everywhere; The Court Jester Around the World*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press

² Curran, James and Redden, Joanna (2024) *Understanding Media; Communication, Power and Social Change*, London: Pelican/Random House

³ Duina, Francesco (2019) *States and Nations, Power and Civility; Hallsian Perspectives*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press

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