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Book review - Unleashed: the phenomena of status dogs and weapon dogs by Simon Harding

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Unleashed: The phenomena of status dogs and weapon dogs

by Simon Harding

A Review by Dr Louise Grove, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Social Policy, Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University

Examining the phenomenon of dogs used both as status symbols and weapons, this book tackles a much misunderstood and under-researched area. There is a relatively small corpus of literature on status dogs in a social policy context. It is particularly challenging to conduct ethical research and accessing willing participants and, moreover, the topic is hotly debated. Even the definitions of status and weapon dogs can be antagonistic. This book therefore begins with a consideration of the challenges inherent in researching this contentious topic, with a broad brush overview of some of the ethical and methodological issues faced by researchers.

Despite the paucity of reliable data on status dogs in the UK, Harding makes a good effort to triangulate elements of the problem using, amongst other methods, analysis of media reports; observations of 'problem' parks; and interviews both with owners and professionals. Perhaps the key success of the book is the drawing together of pre-existing, yet disparate sources of information into one place for the first time. This not only demonstrates our existing knowledge on the issue of status dogs, but more importantly gives us a clear indication of where we have significant gaps.

Harding's approach to the topic can at times feel a little scattergun, but this is reflective of the sheer diversity of the topic at hand: dog fighting; cruelty and welfare; impact on public spaces; motivations of owners; role of the media; legislative responses; links to criminality and gangs; considerations of identity; and discussions of the long running deed vs breed argument are all included in this text.

Harding also includes an afterword, attacking negative aspects of reviews of the first edition of the book. This is a surprising addition, particularly given the need for closer proof reading and editing

throughout – entire paragraphs in places are repeated, which I would expect to be rectified in a second printing. This afterword also provides space for Harding to update the reader on some key developments since the book was first released – notably the report by Hughes, Maher and Lawson (2011) which outlines both the problem of and possible responses to status dogs.

Any book addressing the use of dogs as weapons is inevitably going to be contentious, with different parties expecting a specific focus on their own preferred area – I openly admit I would have preferred a greater emphasis on possible preventive strategies for problematic dog ownership, although it is good to see some recommendations revisited in the afterword. Nevertheless, *Unleashed* makes an important contribution to specific elements of an under-researched area, and I would hope to see it act as a springboard for future research and policy developments.

Hughes, G., Maher, J., & Lawson, C. (2011). *Status Dogs, Young People and Criminalisation: Towards a Preventative Strategy*. Cardiff University.