

Breaking the pendulum: the long struggle over criminal justice

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Abstrak

The history of criminal justice in the United States is often described as a pendulum, swinging back and forth between strict punishment and lenient rehabilitation. While this view is common wisdom, it is wrong. In *Breaking the Pendulum*, Philip Goodman, Joshua Page, and Michelle Phelps debunk the pendulum perspective, showing that it distorts how and why criminal justice changes. The pendulum model blinds us to the blending of penal orientations, policies, and practices, as well as the struggle among actors who shape laws, institutions, and how we think about crime, punishment, and related issues. Through a reanalysis of more than 200 years of penal history, starting with the rise of penitentiaries in the nineteenth century and ending with ongoing efforts to roll back mass incarceration, the authors offer an alternative approach to conceptualizing penal development. Their agonistic perspective posits that struggle is the motor force of criminal justice history. Punishment expands, contracts, and morphs because of contestation between real people in real contexts, not a mechanical swing of the pendulum. This alternative framework is far more accurate and empowering than metaphors that ignore or downplay the importance of struggle in shaping criminal justice. This clearly written, engaging book is an invaluable resource for teachers, students, and scholars seeking to understand the past, present, and future of criminal justice in the United States. By demonstrating the central role of struggle in generating major transformations, *Breaking the Pendulum* encourages combatants to keep fighting to change the system.