

Introduction

On Political Criminology

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Why Political Criminology?

From the establishment of the *British Journal of Delinquency* in 1950 (which later became the *British Journal of Criminology*) and the endowment of the Wolfson Chair in Criminology at Cambridge in 1960, to the development of criminology teaching at modern universities and the growing dominance of the discipline within often shrinking departments of Social Science, the past 65 years appear to have been a truly golden age for British criminology. With huge increases in the numbers of students studying criminology and related subjects, the proliferation of journals, books, newsletters and societies devoted to criminological topics, conferences and symposia covering everything from restorative justice to global injustice, more Professors of criminology than sticks to shake at them, the field looks, at first sight, like a well-tended garden of delightful disciplinary blooms.

Yet some caution ought to be introduced here; as Clifford Geertz reminds us (recalling the poet Randall Jarrell), the problem with golden ages is that the people who live in them 'usually go around complaining how yellow everything looks' (see Geertz, 2001: 96). Surveying criminology's development at the beginning of the 21st Century, it is clear that the journey from the post-War settlement of criminology's intellectual status to the current plethora of criminology's institutional identities has resulted in anything but a planned and consciously demarcated conceptual landscape. As others have pointed out, the expansion of criminology has been driven not by its own scientific or even practical successes but by larger economic, political and cultural currents. Stan Cohen's deservedly famous (1981) 'Footprints in the Sand' essay, exposed criminology's dependence on the institutional agendas of the 'crime control

apparatus' of the state; Kevin Stenson and David Cowell's (1991) collection on *The Politics of Crime Control* emphasised the location of criminology in far-reaching 'regimes of truth' in 'circuits of power and knowledge'; David Garland's (2001) *The Culture of Control* situated criminology in the crisis of penal modernism and the emergence of crime control practices 'organized at a distance'; Loader and Sparks (2007), meanwhile, positioned it in an 'altered landscape of governance' of both crime control and criminological knowledge. It can seem, when reading the accounts of contemporary criminology's emergence, that what it is and does has resulted entirely from a clear socio-historic logic (or logics) whose unfolding is tied genetically to the form that criminology takes at any given time. Yet it is important to acknowledge that many of the significant challenges faced by criminology across the last sixty-odd years have been, to a large extent, unexpected, unpredicted and, if not inexplicable, at least stubbornly resistant to timely clarification. Whether it be the emergence of crack cocaine and its impacts on the urban constellation of criminal gangs, genocides in Bosnia or Rwanda, the devastation of the Niger Delta in the dash for oil, the coltan and cassiterite wars afflicting the Democratic Republic of Congo, the crime wave attendant on mass prawn production across Asia, the enduring slavery and quasi-slavery that underpins Western consumerism, the glue epidemic of punk Britannia, the convoluted criminal justice dilemmas of legal highs, the nefarious shenanigans of state-sponsored terror (from the attack by French Foreign Intelligence operatives on the Rainbow Warrior to the murder of Alexander Litvinenko at the hands of the Federal Protection Service of the Russian State), or the rapid recent escalation of sophisticated terror attacks in the pursuit of armed struggle and the security implications these engender, British

criminology has, in the main, contributed little of practical value in the hour of challenge rather than the day of reflection.

Hindsight, of course, is the best teacher so it is much easier to observe what might have been done differently in the past than it is to illuminate what ought to be done effectively in the present. Indeed, John Braithwaite reminds his readers of a joke about 'the economist who has predicted six of the last two recessions' (Braithwaite, 2000: 234) and it is at least an even bet that criminologists will have successfully predicted six of the last two major crime and security challenges. Part of the problem, here, we contend is precisely the anchored character of criminological perspectives that we acknowledged above. Where criminology self-identifies as interlocked with the crime control apparatus, the regimes of truth or altered landscapes of governance of pluralised and distanced crime control practices and sees its own resistant and contestatory moves in terms of a rejection of the formers' constraints it paradoxically validates and confirms its enchained existence: a discipline permanently in search of an authentic space, free from the restraining impact of extra-disciplinary forces. Rather than rehearsing and replaying that drama of heroic conceptual struggle for disciplinary authenticity, we want to suggest that there is some value in offering qualified support for John Braithwaite's proposal to begin again (and again) by

... constructing new paradigms that sweep across the disciplines in ways that are responsive to new realities of the world, but that fade, like Keynesianism, when those realities change. The disciplinary structure of the social sciences is [the] biggest problem. Criminology as it rises to the heyday of its popularity has now become part of that problem. (Ibid: 235)

The qualification, of course, is that Keynesianism is very much alive and doing very well for some even if not for those it was originally intended to benefit (see Crouch, 2009). Yet, there is something in

Braithwaite's recommendation that is immediately appealing: the encouragement to at least try and imagine a criminology outside of its institutional dependencies and forge alternative visions of how criminologists might contribute to the construction and development of useful frameworks for action.

Naturally, there is a keen debate to be held about who defines what is 'useful' and how that term should be understood but there is no doubt that utility is marching into the heartland of criminological research. An indication of the magnitude of these changes may be seen in the increasing focus on impact in the Research Excellence Framework overseen in the UK (for now) by the various Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in the drive for public engagement that has become a key demand placed on many institutions over the last decade. More than this, in the aftermath of the Conservative Party's 2015 election victory, there can be little doubt that a smaller, and fundamentally neoliberal state, with tighter public finances is set to dominate 'impact' and 'engagement' agendas for some time to come. In this context, it may be that it is no longer enough for criminologists to deconstruct criminology through critiques of 'state definitions of crime and ... analysis of the nature of the political economic arrangements and inequalities in and between societies' (Tifft, Maruna, and Elliott, 2006, p.388). To survive and thrive in 21st century Britain, there is the distinct possibility that criminologists may need to combine critical engagement with something of the dull and mechanical administrative criminology that characterised the discipline's early years – and to make that combination explicitly political.

What Political Criminology?

The term political criminology is defined as the study of forces that determine how, why, and with what consequences societies choose to deal with crime and criminals. At the core of this conception of political criminology is a focus on the nature and the

distribution of power as it shapes the social and political construction of crime and influences crime control policies. (Scheingold, 1998: 859)

Here is an oddity. There is no established field of political criminology. There is a longstanding tradition in political sociology, there is a well-established division of political psychology with its own international association and journal.¹ There is a political geography research group and a long-running *Political Geography* journal.² There is, of course, a very well-known field of political economy; yet there is no established field or association of political criminology. Neither the American nor the British Society of Criminology has a division or network devoted to it. In the European Society of Criminology, the European Governance of Public Safety Research Network (EUGPSRN) recently reconstituted itself as the 'Crime, Science and Politics' Working Group with a focus on:

... the tensions between scientific inquiry and popular-democratic representation in evidence-based policy-making; the call for social scientists to become 'public intellectuals' with a duty to intervene in and shape public controversies around crime and control; disputes over the appropriate methodological frameworks for evaluating 'what works' in crime control; and disputes over the possibility and desirability of demarcating science and politics in these controversies³

So whilst there is in the European Society at least an acknowledgment of the place of politics in criminology this is a politics of inquiry rather than a politics of crime or a politics of criminology itself. As one of us has noted before (O'Brien, 2008: 14), there is an almost complete alphabet of criminological schools, foci and models ranging from the study of

alterity to the practice of zemiology yet the letter 'p' is dominated by penology, positivism and postmodernism rather than the political. This is, at least on the surface, an odd circumstance, indeed.

Reflect, for example, that political sociology is the study of power and conflict, of the relationships between states and societies. It focuses, on the one hand, on large-scale, collective forces that give rise to political institutions and shape the forms taken by nation states; on the other, it considers the influence of social identities and group affiliations on voting behaviours or other forms of social and political participation. It has a long-standing and respectable intellectual pedigree, drawing on the works of Marx and Weber, in particular, but also on Durkheim, Michels and Mosca. Its adherents include some of the most famous sociological scholars of the twentieth century – including Edward Shils, C. Wright Mills, Ralph Dahrendorf, Karl Mannheim, Harold Lasswell, Theda Skocpol and Richard Bendix – and many of their works are cornerstones of sociological thinking about power, social change and social conflict. Consider, here, that this tradition includes such classics as Ralph Dahrendorf's (1957) *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, Daniel Bell's (1962) *The End of Ideology*, C. Wright Mills's (1956) *The Power Elite* and Joseph Schumpeter's (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. In spite of the centrality of power and the political to sociological scholarship and in spite of the affinities between criminology and sociology it is a vain enterprise to search for a specialised field of political criminology – even though it had been name-checked by none other than Sir Leon Radzinowicz who claimed in *Adventures in Criminology* that it had become 'an integral and lively part of modern criminology' (Radzinowicz, 2002: 455). It is not at all the case that criminologists have ignored power and politics – indeed, these issues lie at the heart of some of the

¹ See <http://www.ispp.org/> Last accessed 30/10/2015

² See <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/09626298> Last accessed 30/10/2015

³ <http://www.esc-eurocrim.org/workgroups.shtml#safety> Last accessed 30/10/2015

deepest debates between schools of criminological thought and guidance on key issues of politics and power can be found everywhere from James Wilson to Loïc Wacquant. But mention the phrase 'political criminology' anywhere outside the classroom with its attendant power pointed definitions and curious stares invariably ensue: 'Do you mean critical criminology?' has been the common questioning riposte although, increasingly, 'do you mean public criminology?' is taking its place. This last is hardly surprising, given the plethora of publications ostensibly devoted to giving criminology a public identity – and displacing any attention to political criminology along the way. Witness Carrabine et al's (2000: 207) riposte to Pat Carlen's earlier attempt to develop a political criminology when they:

argue for taking a political criminology a step further, by retaining the achievement of Carlen's synthesis of theoretical positions and political critique, but articulating it in a way that takes it "back to the people." In other words, to reconceptualize a political criminology as a "public criminology." (Carrabine et al, 2000: 207)

Hardly had a political criminology emerged onto the sands of the discipline's intellectual shoreline when it was chased back into the choppy waters of criminology's incessant chatter (on which, see Young, 1994). In its place, has emerged an admittedly muted debate about the extent to which criminology can 'engage' with the public sphere and take its findings 'back to the people' – although precisely what findings, which sphere and which people are in the frame for this public largesse is itself a very complex debate. Rather than devoting unnecessary space to outlining this criminological publicity (on which, Loader and Sparks, 2010, is clearly the go-to source) we note that Loïc Wacquant has laid bare the fundamental dilemma very effectively already when he writes that for public criminology to attain its:

... proposed aim of a 'better politics of crime and its control', we should dissolve

criminology into a sociology of penalty cognizant of its location in the field of power that is its very object. With Stan Cohen (1988), then, I submit that we should work against criminology to save it from solipsistic scientism, subservient technicism and the faddish illusions of 'public sociology'. (Wacquant, 2011: 447)

What this suggests is that the study of 'criminality' and of 'crime control' exceeds the scope of criminology as it is currently constructed and that any attempt to treat criminology as a kind of simple alms-giving exercise in public munificence is bound to impale itself on the mighty thorn of what criminology is and what it is 'for'.

To cut immediately to the chase, political criminology, in our understanding of the phrase and in our proposed agenda for the journal, is oriented towards exposing the political contexts, agencies and strategies that drive forward contemporary criminal justice and security agendas. These include the momentous impact of geo-political trends – migration, mobility, globalisation of goods, services, information, for example; the policy consequences of human-caused catastrophic events – 9/11 (USA), 7/7 (UK), Mumbai 2008 (India), but also Deepwater Horizon 2010 (Gulf of Mexico), or the 2012 factory fires in Karachi and Lahore, for example; the consequences of rapidly spread rhetorics, ideologies and 'memes' by multiple, fractured interest groups – including think tanks and political parties as well as vested interest groups from terror cells to 'parastates' (see Cribb, 2009), for example. Whilst it is true that, as Loader and Sparks (2012: 19) point out, criminologists have long known that '[crime], criminalization, sanctioning, and social control have always been socially and politically constituted at their very core', politics is too often treated as if it were external or tangential to questions of justice and security. Yet, crime and security agendas are invariably, inextricably embedded in the political turmoil surrounding major social transformations. The reality of justice and security in the contemporary world is a concatenation of

contradictory forces: the domestic 'need' to sell stability and safety in a rapidly changing world; the confusing transnationalisation of criminal threats and attempts by law enforcement agencies to react to them; and the equally confusing but rapidly increasing intersections between public criminal justice functions and private interests.

How Political Criminology?

A political criminology needs to be both analytical and practical. Politics has to be placed at the centre of what criminologists research, analyse and recommend which means that debates about the political character of criminology's role in justice and security are necessary but so too are concrete interventions into relevant policy arenas. While criminology has, traditionally, been good at engaging with criminal justice practitioners, less success has been evident in terms of engagement with policy makers. The reasons for this are many, reflecting, at least in part, the dominance of ideology and political imperatives, rather than evidence, in the policy decision making process. At the same time, a reluctance to engage with questions on a practical level, a focus on general theoretical questions and failure to distil complex findings into meaningful policy interventions, can all be cited as impediments to criminology's meaningful engagement with criminal justice and security policy. Criminology's 'successful failure' in its mission to contribute to better public policy, it has been suggested, is marked by the discipline's 'expansion inside Universities [coinciding] with the decline of a receptive constituency within government' (Loader and Sparks, 2010: 14). Whilst there may be some truth in this, it needs to be declaimed loudly that a politically-oriented criminology cannot be conceived only in terms of whatever party political ideology happens to capture the governmental apparatus at any given time. A political criminology, to paraphrase Ruggiero (2012: 158), is consciously in the business not only of understanding social change but also of being involved in shaping crime, justice and security policy in the realisation of that change.

The *Journal of Political Criminology* is designed to be a response to these converging challenges – the why, the what and the how of political criminology. Envisioned as a peer reviewed, interdisciplinary and open access journal, it aims to present theoretical and empirical articles that address crime (broadly defined) in a way that is accessible to professionals working on and in the areas of crime and security policy, offering as clear and unambiguous analysis as possible so that the implications for policy and practice are clearly articulated. The journal intends to publish compact and tightly focused articles on a wide range of crime and security questions but always with a focus on politics and policy as guiding themes. In so doing, it is hoped the journal can play a small part in helping criminology to fulfil but also go beyond Radzinowicz's early vision of a useful and relevant discipline that engages constructively with crime and security policy processes whilst simultaneously opening up for scrutiny the politics of crime and security in the 21st Century.

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