



Expanding the Criminological Imagination

Critical readings in criminology

Edited by

**Alana Barton, Karen Corteen,
David Scott and David Whyte**



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The process of editing any book can be arduous and difficult, and this text has been no exception. However, the sustained teamwork, collaboration and friendship between the editors has meant that editing this book has been not only intellectually stimulating and challenging but also, sometimes, really good fun. The editors' names appear on the book and on relevant chapters in alphabetical order to reflect the equal contribution made by each.

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Chapter I

Introduction: developing a criminological imagination

*Alana Barton, Karen Corteen, David Scott
and David Whyte*

Future generations of social scientists will look back critically at this period and ask why liberal democracies continued to expand their apparatuses of criminal justice when, at the same time, officially measured and defined rates of 'crime' had been in steady decline. They will question why the UK government's response had been to create more and more criminal offences (over 1,000 since 1997 at the last count), expand the range of 'interventions' in the lives of the young, fill the prisons to bursting point and build a new generation of prisons for profit. They will question how and why some of the fundamental principles of due process, such as the right to trial by jury and habeas corpus, were being eroded. They will question why policing costs were spiralling out of control and why more police officers and new legions of community safety officers were being recruited when they had little impact on reducing reported crime rates or even on reducing the fear of crime (Crawford *et al.* 2003). They will also question how, despite substantial evidence to the contrary, individual or socio-pathological explanations of criminal and anti-social behaviour prevailed and why, subsequently, 'problematic' individuals and their families were subject to greater state surveillance and intervention by Parenting and Anti-Social Behaviour Orders.

Future generations of social scientists will want to know why public resources were being ploughed into the coercive apparatuses of criminal justice while, at the same time, support services for the most vulnerable and facilities that did have a measurable impact upon offending (such as free leisure facilities for young people) were

being withdrawn. They will question why social issues, such as drug use, prostitution, 'inadequate' parenting and teenage conceptions, were defined and responded to in a punitive manner with little or no recognition of their structural contexts. If the next generation of researchers ask what criminologists were doing to prevent social and governmental obsessions with crime careering out of control, and to counter the falsehoods and mythical assumptions upon which criminal justice policy is based, they will struggle to find an answer. Criminology's response has largely been to jump upon the bandwagon and greet the expansion of the discipline with open arms, as if the only thing that matters for the enterprise is the enterprise itself. Criminology remains largely a self-referential, self-perpetuating practice that lacks the ability to look outside itself.

The lack of challenge to this social and political obsession with crime is not necessarily down to criminologists' inability to critique: there is no shortage of work within criminology that is critical of the state and of criminal justice agencies. Since the 'radical break' in the 1960s (See Sim *et al.* (1987) for a full discussion of what became known as the 'radical break'), some criminologists have sought to imagine new ways in which the discipline can challenge intellectually and practically the agendas of the powerful. Given the ascendancy and consolidation of a state-driven agenda within and outside criminology, a critical and creative imagination is necessary now more than ever. It is time for criminologists to reflect upon the utility of the discipline in order to reawaken, revive and expand a criminological imagination.

Current developments in mainstream and administrative criminology have presented us with an unimaginative and individualized discourse that has displaced criminal actors from their broader structural, economic and political contexts. However the limitations on what we can and should say about the problem of 'crime' and the contours of possible social policy responses do not have to be reduced to a discourse framed around individual or social pathologies requiring 'solutions' that invariably are exclusionary and punitive.

This chapter will discuss the way in which a more imaginative criminology can help visualize radically alternative visions to those proposed within the current limited framework of mainstream criminological knowledge. Further, through an overview of the chapters that follow, this chapter will expound the contribution that criminology can make to a further expansion of the criminological imagination.

The emergence and consolidation of a criminological imagination

In his classic work, the American postwar radical thinker C. Wright Mills sets out what the *The Sociological Imagination* entails:

a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities ... [It] enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society ... [and] to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux ... [It] enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meanings for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him [*sic*] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions ... [and allows the possessor to] continually work out and revise views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect (1959: 15, 6, 11, 5, 225).¹

The sociological imagination signified a way of thinking about or interpreting the world. It represented a particular way of conceptualizing and approaching social problems, their implications and resolution. It provided a broad-ranging interpretive framework for locating the individual within structural and social contexts, ultimately providing a new way of understanding the social world that makes intimate connections between individual meanings and experiences and wider collective and social realities. The sociological imagination therefore facilitated a form of interpretation that placed understandings of an individual's biography within the sensibilities of wider historical and structural contexts. It demanded that understandings of the present were firmly connected with the ways in which the phenomena under scrutiny had been produced and reproduced. In this sense individual identities and lived experiences could not be considered in isolation, for no meanings could be attributed to a person's actions outside their social, historical and structural contexts. Through this interpretive lens, while the biographical details of individual offenders remain important, their problematic, troublesome or illegal behaviour cannot be detached from their historical and material contexts. To understand the problem of 'crime', therefore, criminologists must use their

imagination to provide clear connections between the actor, the event and location of the criminalized incident and the structural, spatial and historical determinants shaping definitions and applications of the label of 'crime', deviance and illegality at that particular time (Becker 1963).

This criminological imagination (as evidenced in Sim *et al.* 1987) provided a new means for conceptualizing 'crime' and its relationship to the social. In this sense it presented an alternative means of interpreting the world. A key influence here were the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971) developed in the work of Stuart Hall *et al.* (1978) and Hall (1988). Hall pointed to the importance of creating an alternative 'counter-hegemonic' discourse, infused with socialist values and principles, that reconceptualized the organization of society. In a similar vein adoption of the criminological imagination challenged existing and dominant individualized ways of thinking about crime and punishment. Connecting individual offenders with their (less visible) historical and structural contexts inevitably provided an opportunity to reinterpret or reimagine the real. This itself, as Gramsci hoped, delivered an opportunity to foster a new form of radical consciousness facilitating alternative means of conceptualizing and dealing with both the personal and the social.

Mills (1959) had made this approach to sociological problems most clear in his discussion of the relationship between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. A *trouble* is a private matter that occurs within the lived experiences of the individual and affects his or her immediate relationships and social world. An *issue*, on the other hand, is a public matter which should be understood through an analysis of the political and economic structures of a given society. The two are intimately tied as:

many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of individual life (Mills 1959: 226).

Through the sociological imagination, troubles were translated into issues in terms of presenting the individual with a new and plausible 'bigger picture' of his or her social world, one that offered new orientating values, feelings, motives, understandings and meanings.

What the discussion above draws us towards is an understanding of the importance of fostering and further developing a criminological imagination. That is, the encouragement and enhancement of:

a kind of criminological imagination that is able and willing to break free of old constraints and look at the problems of crime and punishment with fresh eyes. That kind of criminological imagination has always been a great strength of the movement we loosely call critical criminology (Currie 2002: viii).

As Currie points out, then, the theoretical and political priorities of critical criminology have been the realization of a criminological imagination (Sim *et al.* 1987; Scraton and Chadwick 1991; Scraton 2002). The development of critical criminology since the 1970s has been rooted in a synthesis between the Meadian-inspired symbolic interactionism (Becker 1963), focusing on everyday social relations and the experiential, and social structures, first around class and production by Marxist-inspired criminologists (Taylor *et al.* 1973), but later around 'race' (Hall *et al.* 1978) and gender (Smart 1977). In so doing critical criminology has produced a new vocabulary or critical discourse for understanding lived experiences, and therefore represented a radical departure from the decontextualized analysis found in much criminological, political and media discourses on 'crime'.

Rather than focus upon the individualized or family-centred causes of crime, critical criminologists focused attention on understanding the social, economic and political contexts that produce both crime itself and state responses to crime. Critical analysis has examined the relationship between the individual and the social through emphasizing the boundaries placed upon everyday interactions, choices, meanings and motivations of criminals and deviants through these contexts. Alongside this has been a problematization of the political and ideological construction of 'crime' and deviance and the processes which have led to the naturalizations of these dominant conceptions. This has included a concern not only with the structural processes which have led to the sedimenting of the dominant discourse on what 'crime' is understood as meaning, but also with those social harms which have been excluded from such a definition or under-enforced, for example around gendered and racialized harms, state-sanctioned violence, economic deprivation, poverty, war and crimes of the powerful. Dominant definitions of 'crime' have been understood through an examination of the power–

knowledge axis within social structures arising in a given historical period. This has led to questions concerning power and legitimacy, and as identified above, three structural contexts have been central to their understanding in the criminological imagination: class, 'race' and gender, though concerns around age and sexuality have emerged more recently (Sim 2000; Scraton 2002; Corteen 2003; Wahidin 2004).

Critical criminology has located the problem of 'crime' within the contours of advanced capitalism and the unequal distribution of wealth. Rather than seeing the law as a crude instrument of capitalist oppressors, critical criminologists have pointed to the contradictory nature of the law in capitalist societies. While the law and its enforcement can, and do, protect the general population and while many 'crimes' that are recorded in the official figures tend disproportionately to victimize vulnerable and/or impoverished individuals, the criminal justice system at the same time plays a decisive role in maintaining structural divisions in society. 'Crime' and law enforcement cannot be understood outside this context. Consequently, a central concern within critical criminology has been to connect processes of criminalization, class conflict, poverty and other forms of 'social exclusion'. The almost exclusive focus by law enforcement agencies on the criminality and subsequent punishment of what have been described variously as the 'sub-proletariat' (Hall *et al.* 1978), the non-productive labour force or the un- or underemployed, has reinforced the social marginalization of the most structurally vulnerable.

A further point highlighted in critical analysis has been the statistical over-representation of black people and under-representation of women in the administration of criminal justice and state punishments. This requires explanation. For critical criminologists the continued subjugation of African-Caribbean, Asian, Chinese and other minority ethnic groups must be located within the structural context of neocolonialism. Through the combination of xeno-racism and economic, political and social exclusion minority communities are increasingly over-represented in the surplus populations of advanced capitalist societies (Sivanandan 2002). In addition, critical criminology in the last 30 years has started to recognize how law and regulation are intimately connected with reproduction; that the lived experiences of men and women cannot be detached from gendered hierarchies of power (Bosworth 1999; Ballinger 2000; Malloch 2000; Corteen 2003; Barton 2005; Corcoran 2006). Problematizing the masculinist basis of 'criminological knowledge', the marginalization and exclusion of women and the consolidation of heteronormativity,

critical criminology has highlighted the complexity of the existing relationship between 'justice' and the exploitation and subjugation of marginalized groups. Concerns around patriarchy and masculinist hegemony reverberate in many current critical imaginaries.

Much recent critical and post-structural literature has correctly highlighted the dangers of reducing complex social phenomena to simplified essentialisms, pointing rather to the hybridity of social factors in shaping human experiences and identities. The relationship between class, 'race', gender, age, sexuality and (dis)ability is complex. Ann Smith (1998: 26) provides an excellent summary of the intertwined nature of social divisions when she states that:

[c]apitalist formations shape and are shaped in turn by non-class based forms of oppression. We are never actually confronted with nothing but capitalism; similarly, sexism, racism and homophobia never appear in isolated form. We experience, instead, contextually-specific hybrid formations that emerge out of the combination of these forces.

Importantly Smith does not advocate abandoning the notion of structure but stresses the importance of developing an analysis of social structures, especially for developing effective collective resistance, and conceptualizing a basis around which alternative criminological imagery can be formulated. These post-structural insights should leave the critical criminologist with a keen awareness of the dangers of slipping into an exclusionary political discourse which wrongly homogenizes individual and group experiences. Further, theoretically critical criminology must also allow for the interrogation of its own assumptions, imaginaries and alternatives.

Critical criminology is not merely concerned with reflecting some vaguely ascribed 'view from below', but has emphasized the importance of comprehending the relationship between processes of marginalization and criminalization. Central to this task has been the development of work that seeks to explain the aetiology of crimes of the powerful and develop ways of making more visible those forms of offending (for example Pearce and Tombs 1998; Tombs and Whyte 2003; Green and Ward 2004; Walters 2004).

For critical criminologists the power to criminalize is a political process which is, in advanced capitalist societies, always related to the maintenance of a particular order of power relations. Just as critical criminology must explain how the process of criminalization regulates, disciplines and contains subordinate groups, so critical