

The background of the book cover is an impressionistic landscape painting. It features a body of water in the foreground with white-capped waves, a dark, wooded shoreline in the middle ground, and a sky with vibrant blue and green hues. The overall style is painterly and textured.

MICHAEL ROCQUE

DESISTANCE
FROM CRIME

NEW ADVANCES IN
THEORY AND
RESEARCH

PALGRAVE'S FRONTIERS IN CRIMINOLOGY THEORY



Michael Rocque

Desistance from Crime

New Advances in Theory and Research

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Palgrave's Frontiers in Criminology Theory

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For Teddy, whose smile always makes my day

Foreword

“The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.”

Anatole France

As a college professor for over 30 years now I have had the great fortune of having many, many wonderful students, and countless enriching intellectual exchanges with those students in our class, my office, the hallway, and over coffee or lunch. Some of these students were, as young people tend to be, brash, noisy, and arrogant; students who truly took to heart Disraeli’s comment that “almost everything that is great has been done by youth.” Others, like the author Mike Rocque, were more contemplative, naturally accustomed to thinking before speaking, but who when they did speak were carefully listened to. Mike was one of those students that all college professors have at one time or another who have a quiet intensity about them, a stillness that suggested both great thought and great humility toward those thoughts. He was also a student whose immense talent was brought about by hard work, one who believed that a good paper was not simply written, but revised and rewritten many times. As a student and as a young professor, Mike was the paragon of hard work, self-discipline, and responsibility toward one’s work. Not surprisingly, like all those who think that their success, if it comes at all, is going to depend on work rather than natural brilliance, Mike lacked self-confidence. It is ironic that most of the really intelligent

people I know, and maybe there is some generality to this, are those who are also the most humble and self-effacing. Nevertheless, I sensed during our seminar meetings on criminological theory when he was in graduate school, as well as our co-authorships soon after he completed his dissertation, that Mike had a bright and productive future ahead of him. I would never have guessed, however, that his success would come so quickly, or so with such a bang.

Mike has written a very important book about a very important area in criminology—desistance. While most criminological scholars of my generation were mainly interested in why people first get involved in crime, what now has the sobriquet of “onset,” for the past 20 or so years a major effort has been devoted within the field to the processes through which people quit or desist from criminal activity. This interest in desistance has generated a great deal of new theoretical work among those who want to explain desistance, new methodological/statistical work among those who want to empirically measure and describe desistance, and countless empirical studies (and more that appear every year) among those who want to subject those new theories to test with the new analytical tools. In addition to journal articles and books about desistance, there has also emerged new subfields in criminology devoted to desistance (developmental and life-course criminology) and new journals entirely devoted to those new subfields (the *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*). As with many newly emerged scientific fields, there is no easy way to describe the literal explosion of scholarship by criminologists in this new field of desistance. If one wanted to study what the new area was about, and why it has generated so much excitement and so much scholarship, how would one go about doing it? The task appears daunting but the solution is simple—read this book by Mike Rocque because it nicely summarizes and explains all that we currently know about desistance from crime.

Although his book is about a relatively recent topic in criminology, Mike shows a rare reverence and respect for the history of the field beginning in the second chapter with a description of the offending ‘careers’ of two young males drawn from the work of Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, two of the earliest American criminologists. Within the first ten pages of the second chapter the reader is given a hint to both

previous and current thoughts about why some juvenile offenders persist in their crimes through adulthood while others desist. Throughout the book Mike continues to link current interest in desistance with the work of past scholars who were concerned with the same issues, but did not label what they were interested in as desistance from crime. In fact, the entire second chapter of this book illustrates in detail the ways in which current conceptualization and theorizing about criminal desistance is linked to previous work—work dating back to at least the mid-nineteenth century. This is a rather useful exercise in showing that while there is great interest and wonder about desistance today, it is simply the most recent manifestation of a continuing issue that has captured the curiosity of criminologists for a long time. Such concern and respect for history is rare in criminology. The Mike who wrote this book is the same Mike I had in my graduate seminar who would remind us that while we might think we're real smart and smarter than anyone before us, it's best to be a little more humble about how original and path breaking we are in our work. While there certainly have been recent advances in theorizing about desistance and especially in statistical models that help us uncover desistance, we fish in a long and very deep stream that has come from a very distant place. This humility exists even though while only a young assistant professor not too long out of graduate school himself, Mike has his own unique multifaceted theory of desistance which he describes in Chapter 6. He does not, unlike most writers, tell us why his theory is better than the others, rather he carefully and painstakingly gives us his story and allows us to judge. It's hard not to be convinced.

True to his nature and given the large literature about desistance that already exists (and the question I had before reading the book myself), Mike asks the question out loud that anyone confronted with a book of this nature inevitably would ask: "Why do we need a book on desistance"? He answers that question through seven extraordinarily well-crafted chapters that summarize what is known about theory, methodology, the empirical research on desistance, and in the concluding chapter what this all means or might mean for policy. I cannot exaggerate how well this book is written, it is engaging and dare I characterize it as decidedly 'non-academic,' and thereby intend it as the highest compliment. Mike practiced early on the lesson that I tried to impart to all my students over

the years, a lesson that I learned only much later in my career from author and conservationist Wallace Stegner that "hard writing makes easy reading." Hopefully too we can learn more than just what desistance is from Mike Rocque. By witnessing how he treats past and current work with admiration and appreciation we can learn how to be still and quiet and let his story unfold without jumping to conclusions, hysterics, or vapors of professional jealousy. Although Mike disagrees with some past work on desistance, and rightfully takes a personal as well as a professional interest in his own theory, his review of this previous work is always conducted respectfully. The word that comes to mind, and the sentiment is very rarely seen in academic writing, is charity: Mike treats past and present efforts to understand desistance with charity. He does not agree with everything that has been written about how desistance comes about and how it may be promoted, but he has no ill-humored quarrel with them either. Just perhaps the readers of this fine book can be silent and remember Nabokov's advice that "all silence is the recognition of a mystery." There is a mystery that unfolds in this book, the mystery of desistance from crime; to best enjoy it, read it with silence and with the same stillness with which it was written.

Ray Paternoster

Preface

My interest in desistance from crime stems from my time as a graduate student at the University of Maryland from 2005 to 2007. It is hard to imagine a place more flush with giants in criminology, actively working on theory and research that would come to shape the direction of the field for years to come. I was lucky enough to take a theory course with John Laub, who is perhaps the most recognized name in desistance research, contributing as he did both an updated and restored version of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's dataset from *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* as well as a fresh age-graded theory of crime over the life-course. I can still remember as if it were yesterday my friends and I staying late after class to interrogate him about how he found the data, what he thought about it, and how he came to devise his theory with his friend Rob Sampson.

While at Maryland I also had the honor of engaging in a class called the History of Criminological Thought, taught by Ray Paternoster. Ray, perhaps the best teacher, writer, and mentor one could hope to know, was deep in the process of adding his own perspective to life-course theory, in particular his identity theory of desistance, written with Shawn Bushway. This class sparked an interest in theory that developed into a flame which still burns today. Ray was also kind enough to share drafts of his identity paper with me before publication, taking my comments seriously and respectfully. I came to see that there are many

plausible and probable factors that are likely to be responsible for the near ubiquitous decline in crime with age that characterizes both the macro and the micro.

I continued my exploration of desistance during my time at Northeastern University, where my dissertation examined whether thinking about the various theories of desistance as identifying pieces of a larger puzzle might be profitable. In researching that work, I came to realize that while desistance research has grown exponentially in recent years, there does not appear to be a book-length treatment of that work. Most reviews of desistance literature can be found in articles and book chapters. The books that are in print on desistance are typically self-contained studies or original contributions rather than syntheses or overall assessments of the literature. It seemed it was time for a 'what do we know' volume on this increasingly important body of work.

Thus the goal of this book is to offer an accessible, comprehensive overview of what we know about desistance from crime. For my money, the best reviews of desistance research can be found in Laub and Sampson (2001) *Understanding desistance from crime* in the review journal *Crime and Justice*, and Lila Kazemian's work (2007; 2015). Yet the first is over 15 years old, and Kazemian's reviews, excellent though they are, are constrained by page limits (being either journal articles or book chapters). In this book, I wanted to go a bit deeper, starting with the story of desistance from the beginning, before any researcher used that term to describe the process of slowing down and eventually ceasing criminal behavior. And so I start with Adolphe Quetelet, whose work on the age-crime curve is well known as a starting point. I document the ebbs and flows throughout criminology's history in terms of its focus on age and crime, taking us up to the present, in which desistance is finally a subfield in its own right. Even before the term 'desistance' became common in criminological parlance, researchers knew of the phenomenon. They just didn't have a standardized way to describe it. A variety of terms were used, including 'spontaneous remission,' 'maturation,' and 'delinquency devolution.' It wasn't until a common name was applied that research began to accumulate and we really came to start to understand the process of desistance. Thus, while scholars knew of desistance,

they did not know much about why or how it occurred until recently. That more recent work represents the heart of this book.

Because this is a book-length treatment, I wanted to provide some insight into theories or perspectives that are sometimes seen as on the periphery of the literature or not often included in overviews of desistance from crime. As an example, there is a growing body of work on the importance of changing contexts or environments for desistance, with David Kirk (who was also at Maryland as a professor when I was a student there) leading the way. Kirk has ingeniously used data from New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina as a natural experiment to document the effect of not being able to return to one's old haunts upon leaving prison on later behavior. In this book I also cover neurocognitive research on age-related brain development in early (or emerging) adulthood, a relatively recent area of research that is not often found in desistance reviews. Brain maturation research has had a significant impact on policy, via US Supreme Court cases (see Chapter 7).

Desistance remains one of the more interesting aspects of a field that is full of interesting topics. After all, what could be more fascinating than trying to figure out why people commit heinous acts of violence? The story that opens Chapter 2 recounts the tale of John Wesley Elkins, who in the dead of the night murdered his family over 120 years ago. He was 11. What could have been the reason? Or what sorts of policies can make society safer? What should we do with cases like little John? Is he a born criminal or do people change (we now know most do, at least behaviorally)? These are things that appeal to most everybody (as any criminologist familiar with the dinner table conversations at Thanksgiving can attest). But there's something counter-intuitive to the idea that hardened criminals, those engaged in antisocial behavior over their entire lives, eventually make good. There's a strain of thought in society that rears its head every once in a while arguing the exact opposite—that the more heinous an act a person committed, the greater the proof that he (usually it's a man) is unnaturally evil, won't/can't change, and needs to be incapacitated in some way, shape, or form. For example, in the spring of 2016, a family member of a homicide victim told the court, "This man is pure evil.

I requested the death penalty. I want to see this man dead.”¹ This statement is not an isolated one; research indicates also that people who endorse the view that some people are ‘pure evil’ are more likely to support the death penalty (Webster and Saucier 2015). And so the idea that desistance may be the norm for not only the less serious but also chronic (or even ‘pure evil’) criminals is especially intriguing.

It is my hope that this book then, appeals to a broad base, from those causally interested in criminal behavior and criminal careers, to those teaching and studying the topic. I’ve begun each chapter with that broad based appeal in mind, telling a story that relates to the subject matter at hand. None of these stories are fictional, however. The purpose of the stories is to demonstrate the relevance of desistance to both everyday life and the history of the field. Readers purely interested in the meat and potatoes, though, can feel free to skip the stories should they prove to be too long and will not be too much the worse for wear.

Even with a book-length treatment of a topic, it is not possible to include everything (nor is it reasonable to do so) in the literature on desistance. As I write these words, theoretical and empirical studies are being published adding to the knowledge base on desistance. That is the exciting thing about this subfield—it is growing and morphing. Theories are developing and being tested and work is being done to bridge the divide between scholarship and policy every day. It will be interesting to see what comes of these developments. For now, I hope this book provides a foundation on which some of that work can be built.

As with any project of substance, this book was a product of the efforts of many generous souls. Ray Paternoster has been a tireless mentor and colleague since I left the University of Maryland. He served on both my master’s thesis and dissertation committees and has published with me several times. I always value his advice and comments and was very pleased when he agreed to write the Foreword to this volume. His influence can be seen throughout this book, in the way I think about theory and the way I write (I am quite sure ‘taking someone to the

¹ <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2016/05/18/pure-evil-killer-sentenced-to-life-plus-100-years/>

woodshed' as I describe scholars doing the work of David Matza in Chapter 5 is a phrase I first heard from him in his theory class). Steven Barkan is to be credited with being my first mentor and the person who first piqued my interest in criminology as a scientific field of study. I entered the University of Maine, where he teaches sociology, interested in crime and detective work, but unaware of criminology as a discipline. Within the first few sessions of my first course with Professor Barkan, I was hooked. He has remained a good friend and colleague. Speaking of friends and colleagues, this book would have been a much different product were it not for the assistance of Professor Chad Posick of Georgia Southern University. I first met Chad during orientation for the PhD program at Northeastern University. We became fast friends and colleagues, working on several studies together while students. Chad read every draft chapter of my dissertation on desistance and every draft chapter of this book. I owe him several cocktails and my thanks.

Thanks also to Chet Britt, of Iowa State University. I now, heart-breakingly, must add 'late of' Iowa State University. Chet tragically passed away shortly after providing feedback on this manuscript, in the summer of 2016. Chet was on my dissertation committee at Northeastern University and helped sharpen my arguments and writing throughout the dissertation. He also graciously read a draft of this book and provided, as usual, sharp-eyed critiques which helped shape the final product. It is safe to say this book would not have happened without him. The world, both criminological and otherwise, got a little less kind with the loss of Chet. Brandon Welsh, professor at Northeastern University, who I also met during my time there and have continued to work with, read a draft of this book and provided many valuable comments and insights, including a much needed change to the title.

I'm lucky enough to have met and work with some of the luminaries in criminology. Two of these, Alex Piquero and Matt DeLisi, gave me the opportunity to submit a proposal for the series on criminological theory they are editing. I'm grateful for the opportunity and look forward with interest to reading the other contributions to the series.

At Bates College, I'm surrounded by great colleagues. I presented Chapter 3 of this book at the Sociology Research Lunch series and received excellent feedback from my fellow sociologists: Francesco

Duina, Emily Kane, and Heidi Taylor. The students at Bates are also top notch. I'm grateful for the help of Brynn Wendel and the editorial assistance of Emma Bilodeau. Emma read each chapter and provided terrific, and sometimes funny, sometimes mean (but always on target), feedback. Students in my Crime over the Life-Course seminar read drafts of the chapters. Thanks to those students: Josh Geisler, Molly Pritz, Mallory Cohen, Kate Rosenthal, Nate Levin, Savannah Stockly, Hannah Yibrah, and Ali Rabideau. If not for the kind assistance of all these folks, this book would have been a much lesser product.

Litchfield, Maine
June 25, 2016

Michael Rocque

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