SCANDINAVIAN STUDIES IN CRIMINOLOGY

THE SNOW-WHITE IMAGE

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FLEMMING BALVIG

UP

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The Snow-White Image

The Hidden Reality of Crime in Switzerland

Flemming Balvig

Translated by Karen Leander

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Preface

If through their research criminologists aspire to be useful to society—and in one sense or another of the word useful I think they do—one ought to consider whether criminologists are put in the right place and selected according to the right criteria. Criminologists are generally placed—and conduct their research—where society exhibits its most negative and unhelpful aspects in regard to preventing and fighting violence, theft, vandalism, etc. There are more criminologists in the USA than in Europe, more in the European metropolises than in the countryside, usually more men than women, and more young than old people.

Even when criminologists *are* put in the right place and *are* selected in a proper way they often fail to make good use of their position. The criminology of females becomes the study of the abuse of women and the exploitation of the female sex, and not a forthright and sharp rebellion against a society that fails to make use of strong female cultural traits like sensitivity, creativity, understanding and tolerance for which the society does have a potential, and which are really needed in society, especially from a crime-preventive point of view.

The criminology of old people—if a discipline of this kind can be said to exist at all—becomes a description of weak, powerless and anxious citizens and not the cultural challenge it could be of a society that gives first priority to materialism and a hasty tempo in life. Older women in the countryside are thus the real—the best, the true—experts of crime prevention. They constitute a group in the Western societies which presents the most concrete and enlightening practical example that it *is* possible to exist without being violent, without stealing, without polluting, without vandalizing, etc. They have more to offer in this respect than any other group in society.

Young men in US metropolises represent the opposite pole. They have absolutely nothing to offer when it comes to crime prevention—only a vision of horror. But where do criminologists

go when they choose their area of research and the places to which they travel? It is my experience that many more go to the young men in American metropolises than to the old women living in small villages—either literally or indirectly through the journals, papers, books and other things they read. Or more precisely, when we as criminologists want to be *professional*—when we want to learn something about how to behave in a way that does not trigger violence, stealing, robbing etc.—then we literally or indirectly go to the violent, fraudulent, thievish men in the American metropolises. On the other hand, when we just want to be human beings, to be *private*—when we personally want to be treated caringly, lovingly and pleasantly by people who really worry about us, listen to us, and spend time with us, we turn to our grandmothers on the so-called periphery of society. Basically this exposes a widespread alienation among criminologists—a deep disruption which has its roots in, among other things, the positivistic ideal of social science, with its insistence on total separation between the objective and the subjective, the professional and the private.

When we bring up our children we don't do this by asking them to spend as much time as possible together with other children whom we least of all want our own children to emulate, for the purpose of teaching them something about their opposites. But when we try to bring up society, this is the strategy we employ.

The point here is very simple: criminology must study areas and population groups where crime does *not* exist. It is here—practically speaking—that there is most to study and most to learn. A criminology that implicitly or explicitly aspires to prevent crime is best off when studying respect for the law instead of disrespect for the law. Maybe many criminologists agree with this, but then just look at the tables of contents in a few of the most well-known criminological journals and see what criminologists in fact spend their professional time doing.

There are other important reasons for orienting criminology more towards conformity than deviance, but this should suffice for presenting *the rationale* behind this book: it is a book concerned with the law-abiding as a means of gaining new insights into the non-law-abiding.

This is an uncommon approach, but this is not the first criminological work with conformity as its general orientation. It is not even the first book to focus on the *concrete* subject that has been chosen: Switzerland—the country that the American criminologist Marshall Clinard put on the criminological map of remarkable

places in 1978 with his book, *Cities with Little Crime*. In this book Clinard claimed that Switzerland distinguishes itself from other prosperous and highly industrialized Western societies by its low criminality. Switzerland thus appears to be one of the few geographical grandmothers left among the highly industrialized and urbanized Western societies.

This book then takes a look at the seemingly exceptional Swiss social structure, at the scope and development of criminality as a product of this structure, and at the Swiss method of dealing with problems of crime—but with the ultimate goal of attaining a yardstick, a suitable mirror-image of, and a competitive alternative to what is, in my opinion, a bogged-down, ritualistic, and ineffective criminal policy and method of crime prevention in countries like my own, Denmark, and most other Western countries.

The book has turned out very differently from what was originally intended because, after a closer look, the *problem* turned out to be different. This book has become more concerned with how we relate to crime than about how we reduce it—which is not a less important matter, just a different one. The conversion of the problem reached in the analysis has also meant that the book is more critical and less 'positive'—more structural and less mechanical, more sociological and less criminological—than first planned. It should be stressed that the criticism contained herein is not aimed at individual *persons*, but rather at certain ways of *studying* and certain ways of *forming* society.

For the fact that the book has come into being, I owe a debt of gratitude to many institutions and individuals.

First of all, I am indebted to the Council of Europe for awarding me the criminology stipend which made it possible for me to spend the month of February 1986 at the Institute of Criminology, University of Zürich. The Social Science Research Council in Denmark has also kindly supported the study financially.

Next, I am grateful to the University of Zürich and its Faculty of Law for the space and facilities they put at my disposal.

I should like to extend special thanks to Cloudio Faoio, Reinhard Frei, Günther Kaiser, Martin Killias, Christian Schwarzenegger, Heinz Stadler and Renate Walder—all of Switzerland—for their help and professional stimulation. I also wish to thank Karen Leander for her diligent translation.

Copenhagen, January 1988

Flemming Balvig

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In Search of a Land of Little Crime

Criminology derives its sustenance from deviance, but in such a way that it depends both too much and too little on deviance for this sustenance.

When criminology views the search for deviance as the be-all and end-all of its discipline, it is only half alive. Criminology must also search for the *absence* of deviance. It is just as important for understanding the meaning and character of deviance to ask why deviance does not exist as to ask why it does. Criminology should not only concern itself with big cities, men, young people, the USA or other 'crime-intensive' areas, but also with the elderly, women, sparsely populated areas, and countries with little crime. When, for example, the question is raised whether crime and deviance can be prevented, it is important to recognize that women have more to offer men, rural areas have more to offer cities, and low-crime countries have more to offer high-crime ones, than vice versa.

This lopsided concern with crime-intensive areas results in the over-criminalized picture of the world that criminologists work with and convey to others. In the criminological view of the world young persons are transformed into juvenile delinquents, big cities into centers of crime, and streets into settings of random violence, despite the fact that crime is rarely the dominant feature of the persons, groups, or societies being studied. Another consequence is that criminology is afflicted not with bad theories, but with theories that are too 'good'. Theories that explain too much crime in relation to what reality has to offer. For example, in relation to most theories on juvenile crime, we should expect a much higher youth crime rate than is actually the case. Criminology needs to

decriminalize its view of the world in order to describe and locate criminality more appropriately within its social context. It is a desirable, or even necessary, step in this process to focus on that part of reality which compels criminologists to try to answer the question: why is there no crime, or why isn't there much more crime than there actually is?

Viewed from another angle, deviance is a necessity for criminology. In all scientific work, deviance—in the sense of exceptions—is of invaluable importance for the production of knowledge. Even if the task of science is to find constant contexts and structures, the advancement of knowledge is still dependent on its seekers keeping a constant eye open for deviations from established theories and ideas. If one advances a hypothesis that alcohol and violence are closely related, our knowledge is not enhanced by information about a society or community where circumstances concur with this hypothesis. Meeting and analysing exceptions and deviations such as societies with negligible violence but widespread alcohol consumption, or the reverse, is much more fruitful for research. In fact, I believe that 'analyzing of deviations' is the most important scientific means for testing and understanding established hypotheses and contexts as well as for promoting the emergence of new frameworks of understanding.

In sum, it is important and productive for the advancement of knowledge and for crime prevention to steer criminological research towards areas with low levels of crime, away from high-crime areas, and especially towards areas of low crime where this low level is unexpected, that is, where it is not compatible with existing theories.

We know that on a national scale, the total level of crime is closely related to the level of affluence and industrialization. The higher the material prosperity and degree of industrialization, the higher the level of theft, vandalism, and violent crimes. The 'deviant' question is then whether it is possible to find examples of countries where, despite wealth and advanced industrialization comparable to that found in, for instance, Scandinavia, there is both an absolutely and a relatively low level of crime.

Most of the countries in the world with little criminality—such as China, Japan, and Saudi Arabia—have such different economic structures, forms of government, cultural traditions, and histories, that, from a shortsighted practical point of view, they are rendered less interesting as possible sparring partners in the field of criminal policy. The ideal here is a country so similar to Denmark in other

aspects that it should also be similar with respect to criminality. In other words, we are on the lookout for a crime-prevention sparring partner than can function in the same titillating and challenging way that Holland has done for many years in the field of criminal policy.

Switzerland as a Land with Little Crime

'It is remarkable, but true, that there is almost no crime in Switzerland'. This statement is found in the Danish version of the best-selling guidebook about Switzerland (Berlitz, 1978).

It is not only guidebooks for tourists which convey an image of Switzerland as a corner of the world that is almost free from criminality. Similar images are also found in the existing criminological literature dealing with this Alpine country, in particular in a book by the American criminologist Marshall Clinard, *Cities with Little Crime. The Case of Switzerland* (1978). Clinard's book came out in 1978 but is primarily concerned with the crime situation in Switzerland prior to and during 1973. After a survey of crime statistics, insurance statistics, crime reportage in the media, political debates, and after carrying out his own studies, Clinard felt justified in declaring that it was remarkable, but true, that criminality in Switzerland was low and did not follow the rising trends found elsewhere. What was strange in Clinard's eyes was that we could expect the opposite to be true, taking the country's level of prosperity and degree of industrialization into consideration.

The most recent scientific confirmation of this image of Switzerland as a country of little crime is given by another American criminologist, Freda Adler, in her book *Nations Not Obsessed with Crime* (1983). In this analysis, Switzerland is ranked as one of the ten countries in the world with the lowest rates of crime.

Despite various criticisms of parts of Clinard's and Adler's works, their central conclusion that Switzerland is a country with little crime has not faced serious criminological, scientific resistance or challenge. On the contrary, Clinard's book has virtually become a classic within the field of criminology and has been called a milestone in comparative criminology and acclaimed for being extremely well-documented (see for example, Peck 1979 and Baldwin 1982). Even Swiss criminologists (those few who exist) seem to have accepted this conclusion, not only as a description of