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# WHAT IS CRIMINOLOGY?

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*Edited by*

MARY BOSWORTH AND  
CAROLYN HOYLE

*University of Oxford*

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## FOREWORD

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Criminology tends to be viewed as a lowbrow discipline by folk from other social sciences. Perhaps that is because intellectual standards were once lower in criminology than those of the best criminology today. Perhaps it is also because other social scientists see criminology as a populist field. Naturally, they notice those criminologists who appear on television to speculate on what might be motivating a serial murderer who has not been apprehended, whom the commentator has never met!

Perhaps the negativity is because so many of the social sciences are in decline in the west while criminology flourishes. Some of the most powerful disciplines that dominate prestigious learned academies have seen a drop in their share of student enrolments and therefore in their faculty. My more controversial view is that most social sciences are neither as interesting nor as vibrant as they were in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In contrast, fields such as biology and information technology experienced remarkable intellectual growth in this period by reorganizing their intellectual communities around newer ideas like networked cyberspace, the new molecular biology and by revisiting older notions of evolutionary biology and ecology.

We also see a certain disdain from the continuing, if waning, domination of continental criminology by the discipline of law. Some continental lawyers imagine they study solid, complex stuff with a technically demanding logical core; to these lawyers, their criminologist colleagues seem barely playing at being scholars. They would prefer the intellectual company of a philosopher or even an economist to a criminologist.

I have always been a doubter and dissenter from the disciplinary organization of the social sciences, never a hardcore member of any discipline, including criminology. This commitment to interdisciplinarity means I spend more of my time attending conferences organized by non-criminologists than by criminologists. From this comparative vantage point, and from the perspective of being decidedly not a 'true believer' in criminology as a project to discipline young minds, I am nevertheless inclined to conjecture that criminology deserves its success. And the plural debate in this volume confirms that inclination.

First, consider the populist tag. While some students enrol in criminology because they would like to learn to be a ' profiler' of a kind they have seen in Hollywood crime dramas, they actually learn more important things about crime when they arrive in the class. One might predict our disappointed profilers would drop out after the first

year. But the meat of the subject seems to sustain them more than the ephemera that attracted them to enrol.

That meat is still a seductively social kind of scholarship. Despite being drawn to other subjects I enjoy the company of criminologists more than colleagues from those other intellectual communities. Police officers are also wonderful company, interesting people, as are the occupants of prisons, on both sides of the bars. Corporate criminals are gripping conversationalists! A strength of the criminological ethos is that it is engaged with narratives of such lives that cross boundaries. As Alison Liebling puts it, good criminology tends to engage with such people 'appreciatively', taking all accounts seriously, and striving to comprehend their passions, insights and disappointments with life. So, while our aspiring young profiler might arrive thinking what will motivate her is the forensic search for clues from a cadaver, what actually does engage her is a more basic appeal that criminology shares with fiction—narratives of lives that transgress.

Undergraduates also find that criminology is a more human subject than psychology. Rats drove much of the narrative from psychology classes that many of us experienced. Criminology had serious psychology in it, substantively and methodologically, yet it also had the ethnography that so appealed in anthropology classes. And it engendered C Wright Mills's sociological imagination. Ironically, at least for me, it accomplished this better than my sociology classes. A few years later, I came to relish reading the sociological classics. But as an undergraduate, I could cotton onto the idea of a sociological imagination, of seeing institutional and macro-historical explanations for social change, seeing the personal as political, via the more concrete engagement with the crime problem, especially the study of corporate crime and gendered crime. This raises one of the interesting debates in this book: whether in the teaching of criminology what we do is engage students with the contested politics and methods of crime policy more than induct them into a discipline. I think we do, and this is the better part of what we do.

The contributions to this collection illustrate why so many undergraduates find criminology engaging in the development of their personal intellectual biographies. The chapters discuss the narrative, the social structural and the quantitatively rigorous faces of criminology. They also consider the interface between explanatory theory and normative theory that is a strength of much criminology. How could one study something like deterrence only technocratically? If it turned out empirically that boiling criminals in oil in the town square deters crime, we would still feel compelled to ask if this would be right. Integrating explanatory and normative theory tends to improve both (Pettit and Braithwaite 2000).

This book suggests that criminology take debates about social justice seriously. This message resonates elsewhere too; law schools might better engage and serve their students were normative debates, that contest what justice should mean, placed at the centre of learning—procedural justice, formal justice, punitive justice, restorative justice, social justice.

Criminology has its share of intellectual factionalism and epistemological dogmatism, though less than it used to. Yet, overall, a key strength of criminology, compared with most of the social sciences, is that epistemological pluralism is the dominant ethos. If you share my belief that the social sciences have dug themselves into a terrible set of holes, pluralistic openness to diverse tools, and new tools, will be needed to dig toward the light.

A final reason criminology has deserved its comparative success is that it offers material that policy-makers can use. 'Nothing works' nihilism used to be common. Recent decades have seen not only quality research on why institutions like imprisonment can be so counterproductive, but has also identified better investments that can reduce crime, and sometimes increase social justice and victim justice at the same time. These fruits have made criminology more successful than many other social sciences in attracting funding from foundations and the public purse.

Even so, more work needs to be done as politicians and the public do not always wish to believe criminological evidence. My own suspicion is that the social movement for restorative justice, conceived as a long-run agenda of social justice transformation starting with conflict resolution in schools, could educate future generations to be more thoughtful and less automatically punitive in their thinking about how to respond to violence and theft. We are not born democratic and decent; civility is something we must learn in a structured way.

In the early and mid-1990s some of us spent more than a few years avoiding criminology conferences; it seemed more strategic to build evidence-based restorative justice in hybrid researcher-practitioner communities outside the walls of the academy. By the late 1990s, however, criminology had become extremely welcoming to those restorative justice debates that it had previously viewed as marginal. These debates were productively incorporated within criminology's broad church. Again, we might see that kind of history as evidence of a field that is now mature in its openness.

For all those virtues, criminology remains far too Anglophone an intellectual tradition. It also has too weak a comparative imagination, though the rise of higher quality crime research in Asia and at Europe's margins feeds hope, as does work in the south with a postcolonial and a transnational sensibility that has been ably embraced into this volume. Marcus Felson is surely right in his chapter when he says criminology 'does best when considering crime as a very local matter'; yet it is impoverished by the limited set of localities it learns from. An American mentor once described the pages of *Criminology* as applying progressively greater rigour to ever more trivial questions. Little wonder Jeff Ferrell in his chapter 'drifts' away from such journals—akin to the way a delinquent drifts from the discipline of dominant normative orders. Our undergraduate classes are more intellectually engaging than most of the work published in our journals. Still we all learn how to find those pieces of wheat among criminology's piles of chaff. And the contributions to this volume will help us think critically about how to sift.

As I write, I am preparing papers for the 2010 International Peace Research Association conference, and feel glad to be a peace researcher rather than a Peaceologist. I would prefer students to study research methods of general use in the social sciences that can also be applied to crime and theory about particular kinds of crime and particular kinds of institutions. So it surprises me how very useful criminological theory so often proves in the study of peacebuilding.

The editors have done a splendid job of setting up the conversation in this volume, both at the conference in Oxford and in their introductory chapter, and have brought together a stellar collection of contributors. I understand those who the editors say declined the invitation to contribute. There is some virtue in getting on with the job of doing whatever one is best at without devoting large swathes of professional time to navel gazing. Then again, a certain amount of this can be healthy if your navel is worth a look, and I can promise readers some high quality, insightful, gazing here. More than that, we can learn quite a bit from this book about how to retool criminology worksites to be more productive, sharper in their insights, more fun and more just.

**John Braithwaite**

## REFERENCE

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- P. Pettit and J. Braithwaite (2000), 'Republicanism and Restorative Justice: An Explanatory and Normative Connection', in H. Strang and J. Braithwaite (eds), *Restorative Justice: From Philosophy to Practice*, Aldershot: Dartmouth.