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DISCIPLINING CRIMINOLOGY?¹

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Abstract

This essay discusses the current state of criminology and raises some questions about the subject's nature, its relationship to government, and its location in the academic field. The author argues that criminology is best conceived not as an independent subject but as a bridging subject that addresses a practical field using the intellectual resources of more basic disciplines such as sociology, psychology and law. He warns against recent institutional developments that threaten to distance criminological research and training from those disciplines that provide its intellectual energy and distinction. Against these tendencies, the author argues for a dialogic conception of criminology and for the institutional conditions that make that conception possible.

Keywords: criminology; criminological research; criminological theory.

Resumo

Disciplinando a criminologia?

Este ensaio discute o atual estado da criminologia e levanta algumas questões sobre a natureza do assunto, sua relação com o governo, e sua localização no campo acadêmico. O autor argumenta que a criminologia é melhor concebida não como um assunto independente mas como um assunto conector que se liga a um campo prático usando as fontes intelectuais das disciplinas mais básicas como a sociologia, a psicologia e o direito. Ele alerta contra os recentes desenvolvimentos institucionais que ameaçam distanciar a pesquisa e a preparação criminológicas daquelas disciplinas que fornecem sua energia e distinção intelectuais. Contra essas tendências, o autor argumenta por uma concepção dialógica da criminologia e pelas condições institucionais que fazem aquela concepção possível.

Palavras-chave: criminologia; pesquisa criminológica; teoria criminológica.

INTRODUCTION

Criminology in 2008 is a remarkable success story, and this can be attested by a number of important measures.

It has certainly come a long way fast. The idea of a science of crime and criminals is a very recent one, having been around for no more than 130 years. The word itself – “criminology” – did not exist prior to 1890 when it was first used (in its French language version) as a non-partisan alternative to some other strange new names that had recently appeared – “criminal anthropology”, “criminal psychology”, “criminal sociology”, etc. – each of which claimed the subject for a different discipline. When the earliest training courses appeared in the 1930s, many of them were taught by prison medical officers or psychiatrists. The subject entered the universities only after the Second World War, when the first Institutes and departments began to take shape.

When I enrolled in my first criminology class in Edinburgh University's Law Faculty in 1974, criminology was still very much a newcomer in the academic world (Garland, 1985; Garland, 2002). Today, in stark contrast, criminology is a standard part of the undergraduate curriculum in universities all over the world. More and more universities offer postgraduate degrees and doctorates. Particularly in the USA, the UK and Australia, increasing numbers of universities have departments and even whole colleges dedicated to criminology and criminal justice studies (Baars-Schuyt, 2001; Bisi, 1999; Kerner, 1998).

Criminology's professional organizations have also grown. The International Society of Criminology's World Congress attracts 1,000 delegates. The new European Society of Criminology, begun only a few years ago, boasts members from 46 different countries (Aebi and Kronicz, 2008). Dozens of countries have national criminological associations, with membership ranging from 35 in the Slovak Criminological Society, to 900 in the British Society, to 3,500 in the American Society of Criminology.

Quantitative change produces qualitative change and growth of this scale and rapidity brings consequences. As criminology has expanded, attracting more students, more scholars and more research funds, it has changed its character and its position in the academy. Today, it increasingly takes the form of a free-standing, autonomous subject, with criminology degrees, criminology departments and criminal justice colleges operating independently of other academic disciplines.

In an article published in 2006, ISC President Tony Peters noted this tendency and commented as follows:

An undeniable change in the historical position of ... criminology has taken place ... Instead of being a servant or auxiliary discipline in legal, social or even medical sciences, criminology [has become] an autonomous, often independent, entity (Peters, 2006).

Professor Peters welcomed these developments for the most part. But he also raised questions, asking "what is the added value of this autonomous profile?" In this, the opening talk of the World Congress, I want to offer a response to Professor Peters' question. I want to begin a process of reflection and debate on the nature of criminology today and on the question of its "independence". I will argue that, as criminology becomes more autonomous, the dilemmas and difficulties that affect the subject become more pronounced and harder to manage. I will also argue that much of criminology's intellectual and institutional strength stems from its integration with, and its rootedness in, a number of other, more fundamental disciplines.

I will further suggest that as criminology grows more autonomous, institutionally and intellectually; as it begins to train its recruits in its own literature; focus on its own research agenda; and publish in its own journals, it tends to become more inward-looking and lose its vital connection to the more basic disciplines (cf. Saveslberg and Sampson, 2002). And I will argue that a criminology which reproduces itself internally will inevitably come to narrow itself intellectually.

The resulting loss of connection with the basic disciplines, I will argue, is liable to produce negative consequences – not just in intellectual terms (important as these are) but also in respect of the subject's relation to government and its position in the university.

I will suggest therefore that we should see criminological independence as a temptation to be resisted rather than a goal to be embraced. Instead of aspiring to an autonomous discipline, we should work for an intellectually and institutionally integrated criminology – one that operates as a bridging subject, linking together a practical social field with a range of academic disciplines, one that poses policy-oriented, social-problem questions using theoretically-oriented, social science concepts in a way that enriches both.

1 SOME TROUBLING SIGNS

I began by pointing to the signs of criminology's success – above all, its rapid expansion and newfound ability to attract students, scholars and research funds. These developments are impressive and significant. But let me also point to some troubling aspects of the present. And instead of focusing on quantitative expansion, let me raise some qualitative questions: about the kinds of knowledge we produce, about our relation to power, and about our position in the academy.

I present these points baldly and without nuance, so I should make it clear that my information is largely based on my experience in the USA and the UK. I realize, of course, that criminology's position varies enormously from place to place (Johnson, 1983) and I will be happy to be told that the concerns I raise here do not apply to the same extent in other countries.

Let me begin by identifying five troubling issues:

- (i) Criminology may have expanded its place in the university but its position in the academic field is an ambiguous one. In some countries, the subject is located in elite research universities and graduate programmes but elsewhere it is situated in lower-tier institutions where vocational teaching takes precedence over academic research. As for the research undertaken, in many places it appears increasingly to be responsive to the short-term needs of government departments rather than to basic questions of theoretical inquiry or scientific replication (Ericson, 2003; Austin, 2003; Chan, 2000; Laub, 2004).
- (ii) Criminology has more students than ever, but in some countries – including the USA, where criminology's independence is most extensively developed – its students appear less well-qualified than students who enter other disciplines (Nieswiadomy, 1998).
- (iii) Criminology is establishing more and more undergraduate degrees but the proper goals and content of an undergraduate criminological training remain uncertain and the orientation is increasingly vocational rather than academic.
- (iv) Criminology has become increasingly independent, but as it becomes more autonomous it becomes less deeply rooted in what were once its constitutive disciplines (Savelsberg and Sampson, 2002; Savelsberg, Cleveland and King, 2004)
- (v) Criminology has grown in size but it has not grown in theoretical range or intellectual ambition. We criminologists have been slow to respond to the challenges of our times (Garland and Sparks, 2000): slow to engage, for example, with the emerging world of international criminal law, with crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, all of which entail complex problems of etiology, prevention, punishment and control (Hagan, Rymond-Richmond and Parker, 2005; Brannigan, 1998; Yacoubian, 2000; Day and Vandiver, 2000; Roberts and McMillan, 2003). And we have been surprisingly slow to introduce criminological theory and research findings into debates about terrorism and the so-called “war on terror” with the result that today's most pressing security issues are usually discussed in the public sphere in ways that are innocent of all criminological theory (Rosenfeld, 2002; Savelsberg, 2006; Hogg, 2007; Hamm, 2005; Mythen and Walklate, 2006).

So an expanded criminology is not an unproblematic one. And criminology's relation to itself and to the wider academy raise important questions that we ought to consider. In order to think clearly about the institutional and intellectual issues that these developments entail, we might begin by considering some of the fundamental features of our subject, in particular criminology's character as disciplined, eclectic, contested and governmental.

1.1 First of all, criminology is disciplined

Like any academic subject, criminology has intellectual and organizational dimensions.

Intellectually, it consists of a body of accredited and systematically transmitted knowledge; approved procedures and techniques of investigation; and various clusters of questions that make up the subject's research agendas. These intellectual materials and activities are loosely organized by means of a "discipline" – the standard organizational form of the modern academy (Garland, 2002).

The discipline establishes and enforces norms of evidence and argument; evaluates contributions to knowledge; fixes and revises the canon of exemplary theory and research; oversees the training of students; and distributes status and authority among accredited practitioners.

These disciplinary functions are carried out by various institutions – peer-reviewed journals, professional associations, conferences, funding agencies, and so on – which make up the material infrastructure of the enterprise.

There is nothing especially unusual or interesting about this – in all these organizational and institutional respects, criminology is no different from any other academic discipline. The interesting question is a prior intellectual one: how and why did this rather inchoate, eclectic, practical subject come to form the basis of an academic discipline in the first place? This question is even more puzzling when one considers that, unlike most other academic disciplines, criminology has no distinct theoretical object and no distinct method of inquiry of its own (Garland, 1985; Savelsberg and Sampson, 2002)². Which leads to my next observation...

1.2 Criminology is eclectic

Criminologists address themselves to topics that bear upon crime and its control. The list of topics is long and diverse, as a glance at the World Congress programme will show. We investigate these topics by means of quantitative and qualitative methods, using data sets of every description, drawing upon a whole gamut of theoretical perspectives, and with a variety of ideological and political slants. In our teaching and research, we criminologists draw on other disciplines, most notably sociology, psychology and law but also history, anthropology, public health, biology, economics, political science, operations research, and so on.

One of the constitutive dynamics of criminology is the incessant raiding of other disciplines for new ideas with which to pursue and renew the criminological project. As a discipline, criminology is shaped only to a small extent by its own theoretical logic and logic of inquiry. Its epistemological threshold is a low one, making it open to radical innovation but also prone to the intellectual disorganization of eclecticism (Garland, 2002).

1.3 Criminology is contested

Given this diversity, there will always be competing visions of what criminology ought to be – criminology as experimental science; criminology as social science; criminology as policy prescription; criminology as security management; criminology as criminal justice training; criminology as public discourse, and so on (Sherman, 1998, 2005; Petersilia, 1991; Balvig, Christie and Tham, 2008; Sarat and Silbey, 1988; Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2006).

Relatedly, there are also competing conceptions of criminology's proper position in the academic field. Among the most important of these visions are the following: (i) criminology as an independent, stand-alone discipline (Radzinowicz, 1962; Wolfgang, 1963); (ii) criminology as a sub-field within other more fundamental disciplines (Savelsberg and Sampson, 2002); and (iii) criminology as a dissolving pathway into larger studies of regulation (Braithwaite, 2000, 2003), or peace-making (Pepinsky and Quinney, 1991) or human rights

violations (McEvoy, 2003), and so on. In the course of this talk, I want to outline an alternative vision of a *dialogic criminology* – a conception that builds upon criminology’s past and preserves its most vital intellectual features. This conception would constitute criminology as an interactive, integrative enterprise, a bridging subject connecting the practical world of crime control with the academic disciplines of social science and law, a dialogic enterprise that undertakes the work of criminological inquiry in on-going conversation with the diverse academic disciplines that bear upon its subject-matter.

1.4 Finally, criminology is governmental

Let me return to the puzzle I mentioned a moment ago. Criminology’s eclecticism, and the absence of any theoretical problem or object of analysis that it can call its own, make its emergence as a “discipline” seem puzzling. How did this disparate bundle of policy-related inquiries come to acquire the status of a distinct academic subject? How did criminology achieve its current position in the academic field and in the institutions of higher education?

The solution to this puzzle has to do with criminology’s perceived ability to further governmental interests by bringing its knowledge to bear on crime policy and the practice of criminal justice (Foucault, 1977; Garland, 1992). Criminology’s basic organizing principle is the empirical study of crime and its control – which is to say, the study of a legally-defined entity and a state-directed practice. Unlike other sciences and well-constituted academic disciplines, criminology’s object is not a self-generated theoretical entity or a naturally-occurring phenomenon but instead a state-defined social problem and the means by which that problem is managed. As a consequence, criminology is intimately (at the *epistemological* level) and directly (at the *social* level) tied into government (Garland, 2002).

This governmental dimension was especially obvious in the early years when the subject flourished in the prisons, the courtroom, and the juvenile justice hall – a flourishing that was directly encouraged by government support and sponsorship (Garland, 1988, 2002). Criminology’s subsequent location in the university has, to some extent, obscured this knowledge-power link and alleviated some of the problems that stem from being too identified with government, but the linkage and the problems remain nonetheless (Garland, 1992). Criminology’s social status continues to rest in large part upon its practical utility and its value for government. Even within the academy, the subject is valued as much for its ability to attract research funds and student numbers as for its distinguished academic achievements.

This dual commitment to government *and* to the academy, to policy *and* to science, sets up a series of recurring problems and tensions for criminology and its practitioners.

TENSION Nº 1: *Criminology’s relations with government*

The central difficulty that stems from criminology’s dual commitment is one that is familiar to all criminological researchers and consists in the struggle to maintain academic integrity while seeking government access and research funding. But this problem also has a more fundamental aspect that is less often noted and less easily dealt with – and it has to do with criminology’s *epistemological relation* to government.

Is it acceptable for an academic subject to derive its concepts, its categories, its questions, and its objects of study from state institutions? Should criminology’s objects of study be legal categories, governmental problems, and institutional products that are given to it by state practices and political processes?

Is criminology obliged to understand the categories of “crime”, “offender”, and “victim” in accordance with the meanings given to them in the legal process? Must it accept the theories of action and responsibility

implicit in legal discourse and court decisions? Or can it reconstitute these categories and theories in its own terms?

In all of these issues, practical considerations (of relevance, of influence, of funding, of communication) may press in a different direction than scientific considerations. How should we manage that tension?

The solution lies, I think, in the company that criminology keeps, or to be more precise, in the intellectual diversity of the academic field it inhabits and of the intellectual exchanges in which it is routinely involved. It lies in criminology's capacity to establish dialogue with contiguous academic subjects, to bridge the gap between its practical domain and the academic subjects that can provide resources for conceptualizing it.

Let me offer a concrete illustration. A criminology that investigates state-defined criminal offences and state-identified offenders ought to be in constant dialogue with a sociology of deviance that refuses to take these terms as unproblematic givens. Such conversations can take place in lots of ways – in departmental meetings, at conferences, in undergraduate lectures, in the evaluation of manuscripts submitted to journals, or in the understanding that sociology graduates bring to postgraduate criminology programs. Where this kind of dialogue routinely takes place, it acts as a healthy reminder that the law's categories are social constructions that can be questioned, and that the state's conceptions of "normal" and "deviant" are the outcome of political processes that are historically contingent, subject to change and open to challenge. Such conversations also bring into focus the extent to which criminalizing and penological practices are bound up with wider social processes, reminding criminologists of the links between crime and social issues such as stratification; labour markets; urban ecology; class, race and gender; family relations and the life course; and political economy³.

Criminology's institutional location *vis a vis* other disciplines, and *vis a vis* disciplinary journals, conferences, graduate students, etc are liable to produce intellectual consequences for the subject. Wherever routine contact occurs between criminology and the other disciplines, criminology can retain its practical focus and yet benefit intellectually from contiguous disciplines. These intellectual benefits are much less likely wherever criminology asserts its autonomy and sets itself apart institutionally.

In proposing this bridging, dialogic solution, I am refusing a more radical suggestion that criminology should reject state definitions, abandon its focus on "crime", and reconstitute itself on a different basis (e.g. H. and J. Schwendinger, 1975). Why? Because the state's legal categories and institutional definitions are real and powerful. They shape our world, they organize our lives, they determine the fates of millions of people. To reject these categories, to give them no place in our analyses, is to opt out of an engagement with the real world – an engagement that has always been one of criminology's chief virtues.

But we need always to view these state-defined categories for what they are: a specific regime of truth, made possible by specific institutions, specific social relations and definite balances of power. Because a policy-oriented governmental criminology is prone to forget that, a routine, on-going association with critical theory and comparative sociology is a crucial corrective and we should seek institutional arrangements that make this possible.

TENSION Nº 2: *Criminology's role as policy adviser*

Criminology's role as a policy adviser brings definite benefits. It brings research funding and access; an opportunity to shape policy and serve the public good; training and employment opportunities for our students; and an insider knowledge that enhances our credibility and public authority (Radzinowicz, 1962; Ericson, 2003).

The danger, however, is that criminology will become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the criminal justice state, with the criminal law dictating our object of study, government agencies dictating our research questions, and politicians and the press dictating our frames of relevance.

This Foucauldian image of criminology as power-knowledge in the service of the state is an ever-present danger, given the subject's basic disposition and orientation. If we have escaped that fate, and have succeeded in creating a critical distance and a measure of scholarly integrity, it is due to our position in the academic field and our connections with other academic disciplines (Foucault, 1980; Garland, 1992).

To the extent that we change that position, to the extent that we loosen these connections, to the extent that we establish an independent criminology that stands on its own, we thereby make ourselves more vulnerable to being co-opted by government⁴.

Am I suggesting that criminology ought to disengage from all government involvement? That criminologists should cease giving policy advice? Am I adopting the view of Stanley Cohen (1985: 238) who declared: "It is simply not our professional job to advise, consult, recommend or make decisions?" Or that of John Hagan (1989: 257-8), who would subsume criminology into an explanatory sociology, completely unconcerned with policy matters?⁵ Or of Nils Christie, who insists that criminology should be "problem-raising" rather than a "problem-solving"?⁶

No, I am not. Nor is there any need to do so, since the issue can be viewed as a matter of "also/and" rather than "either/or". Criminology would quickly cease to exist if it gave up its ambition to improve penal policy and offer crime control advice. But a policy-oriented criminology has its best chance of remaining detached and critical and intellectually alive if it is taught alongside, and in dialogue with, the kinds of criminology that Cohen and Hagan and Christie have in mind: criminologies that are critical, explanatory, or downright trouble-making.

The "policy-oriented criminologist", the "academic sociologist of crime", the "critical criminologist" – these are three different job descriptions and working personalities and they each imply a different vision of what criminology should be. But there is no reason why our subject has to commit itself exclusively to one or other of these visions. The field of criminology can fruitfully contain all three kinds of scholarship and facilitate the cross-fertilization of each by the others. Theoretical and critical work stand to gain from an engagement with the details of institutional practice and the messy complexities of policy-making. Policy advice can benefit from an understanding of the theoretical frames and critical perspectives that bear on the subject. A broad field composed of different ways of doing and conceiving criminology, and drawing on a range of different disciplines and perspectives – that's the arrangement that has worked best for criminology in the past and that's the working arrangement we should seek to foster in the future. If an expanded, independent criminology risks leaving that behind, then I, for one, am against independence.

TENSION Nº 3: *Criminology's position in the academic field*

Criminology's secure location in the academic world and its status as a respected field of scholarly inquiry are, it seems to me, of paramount importance for the intellectual and institutional health of our subject. Criminology's academic integrity and status as a university-based subject are also, as I have suggested, crucial in managing the subject's relations with government.

It is therefore worrying that criminology's position in the academic hierarchy has often been an ambiguous one, and that stand-alone criminology (or criminal justice) degrees are – at least in the USA – most often associated with low-ranking colleges where teaching and vocational training take precedence over research and scholarship.

This status problem is linked to some of criminology's essential characteristics. As we have seen, criminology is organized around a policy problem and largely consists of empirical studies that produce local

knowledge. In the academic hierarchy, “problem-oriented fields” of this kind are typically less prestigious than fundamental disciplines (Abbott, 2001)⁷.

The explanation for this status differential has to do with the difference in the kinds of knowledge produced by the different kinds of subject. The basic academic disciplines produce “portable knowledge” and transferable analytical skills that are more competitive, more enduring, and more valuable over time, compared to the localized “problem-based knowledge” of subjects like criminology.

Why? Because “portable knowledge” has the power of abstraction, enabling it to address new situations and new problems by means of principles learned in other settings – in contrast to “problem-based knowledge” which tends to be more local and more limited in its application. The two forms of knowledge are also intellectually distinct, the former aspiring to theoretical depth and analytical understanding, the latter more focused on surface description and practical know-how.

Of course, policy-specific research has intrinsic value, as does vocational training. And criminology would not exist in the university system today were it not for its capacity to provide these. But a university-based subject will ultimately be evaluated in terms of the university’s own values, and these are fundamentally to do with the quality and depth of scholarship and the extent of theoretical understanding. We ought therefore to take care that the expansion of the subject and its increasing independence do not develop at the cost of its research capacity and academic standing.

This, to me, provides another powerful reason why criminology needs to remain close to its constitutive disciplines. Only by drawing on the fundamental disciplines, and contributing to them in turn, can we hope to sustain the scholarly erudition, intellectual depth, and theoretical insight that bring prestige and status in the academic world and which have always marked the very best criminological writings.

TENSION Nº 4: *The training of criminologists*

To make academic contributions of the highest kind, it helps if criminologists are properly trained in the basic disciplines prior to specializing in crime and punishment. It is not always enough to be introduced to these disciplines in passing, as part of a criminology degree: all too often such courses are a diluted form of disciplinary training, offering light-weight versions of the real thing, trimmed and tailored to fit into a criminology curriculum. And this problem will likely get worse over time. At present, most criminology graduate programmes are staffed by faculty trained in the basic disciplines. But as the subject’s institutional independence grows, criminology graduate programmes will increasingly be staffed by faculty with criminology graduate degrees with the result that the institutional relation of these programmes to the basic disciplines will become ever more distant, their intellectual connections ever more attenuated.

To thrive as an academic discipline, criminologists have to compete on equal terms with other social scientists and lawyers. If we write about our research and present our findings in a sociological, psychological, historical or legal mode, we mustn’t always be the amateurs, the self-trained outsiders. When we recruit our students and our faculty, we want the best and the brightest of these other disciplines coming into criminology, and we want to export criminological ideas and findings back into these disciplines. It seems to me that the more independence criminology acquires, the more it moves away from the fundamental disciplines, the more difficult it is to achieve real academic distinction.

There are several sources of status and power in the university system – student numbers, research income, policy impact, media presence – and criminology does relatively well in all of these terms. But the key measure of academic achievement is quality and distinction in scholarship. On this measure, criminology has a more mixed record. If we want to thrive in academic settings, we have to aspire to the highest scholarship

and reconnect with the fundamental concerns of social science and social theory. Creating an independent criminology that disengages institutionally from these larger disciplines risks disengaging on intellectual terms too, and that's a risk we ought not to take⁸.

2 SPECIALIZATION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THEORY

I have described some of the risks entailed in criminology becoming an independent specialism – the risk that it will be cut off from the basic disciplines, the risk that government will extend its dominance, and the risk that the subject will lose academic prestige. There is a final risk: namely that an independent criminology will tend to fragment into distinct specialisms unconnected by any overarching theory.

Specialization is an intrinsic dynamic in the field of criminology proper, given its focus on specific institutions, problems and policies. Prison studies; police studies; probation studies; sentencing studies; treatment studies; victim studies; juvenile studies; violence studies; crime prevention studies; fear of crime studies... the list goes on, each one a growing subfield poised to spin off from the larger discipline.

There are obvious benefits of specialization, but the most salient drawback of this process is its negative effect on communication. Wherever specialisms proliferate, the tendency is for conversation across the field to decline. Criminologists end up as so many specialists with little to say to each other, with negative consequences for collective learning.

In most academic fields there are two centripetal forces that work to unify research and generate conversation between researchers. One is *topic* and the other is *theory*⁹. Topics bring scholars together but the inherent disposition of *topic* is a drive towards concreteness and specificity. Scholarship that is organized around a topic tends to become ever more specific, ever more specialized. The more scholars there are in the field, the more the field can support numerous specialisms. The more specialisms there are, the more fragmented the field becomes. In the end, there is little to talk about outside the rooms where small specialist groups discuss the arcane details of their speciality.

The tendency of *theory*, in contrast, is towards abstraction and generalization. Its aim is to include ever more data, ever more processes, and ever more situations, ever more *topics* in its scope. It strives to link causal arguments and to build unified explanations. Different topics cease to be unconnected specialisms and become, instead, multiple opportunities for theoretical reflection and analysis. Theory gives rise to conversation and community – or else to focused conflict and disputation. It operates to unify the field in collective projects that transcend particular research and esoteric specialisms¹⁰.

Theory can, of course, divide an academic field just as it can unify it. But whether it unifies or divides, theory *organizes*, it generates collective conversations, it pulls researchers into a dialogue with one another, moving them beyond their concrete specialism to engage with larger questions. All of which enhances individual scholarship and serves the collective good of the subject. It is theory that provides the intellectual resources to take on new challenges and new problems – to extend our explanatory range and engage with new issues as they emerge. Theory is what enlivens and energizes an academic subject. And since theory is generated by the fundamental disciplines, the vitality of our field depends on criminology's continued connection with them.

Let me be clear. I am not objecting to the existence of criminology institutes or criminology departments. Some of the most profoundly important scholarship on crime, control and punishment has come from such places. Nor am I saying that criminology undergraduate degrees cannot be academically first rate. But I am saying that criminology must never cut itself loose from the disciplines that supply its intellectual energy and inspiration – and the move towards institutional autonomy threatens to bring this about¹¹.

IN CONCLUSION

My argument has been that although criminology has an institutional core, its most important intellectual sources are eccentric, off-centre, originating from outside the subject itself. My own experience is testament to this. If I were to list the texts that have been most important to me in my work, they would not be the “classics” of mainstream criminology – though I have engaged with these classics and learned a great deal from them. My most useful exemplars have been works that loomed on the horizon of criminology, on its margins, most of them coming at crime and punishment from well beyond the criminological domain. In addition to the central thinkers of the sociological tradition (Marx, Weber, above all, Durkheim) I think of the work of figures like Paul Q. Hirst, Stuart Hall, Gareth Stedman Jones, Michel Foucault, Jacques Donzelot, Nikolas Rose, Norbert Elias, Clifford Geertz, Pierre Bourdieu, Ian Hacking, and Mary Douglas. These authors were not “criminologists” in any recognizable sense. And none of their inspirational works was generated out of criminology’s core concerns. But every one of them advanced criminological understanding and helped redefine what criminology might be. Every one of them altered the ways in which criminologists could frame their questions, opening up new theoretical understandings in ways that were ultimately productive for the field as a whole.

If criminology is to continue to realize its potential as an academic subject and not just a governmental one, if it is to continue producing scholarship of the highest quality, it needs to remain dialogic rather than detached, and eccentric rather than self-enclosed. It is not an autonomous criminology we need, it is an expansive criminology able to embrace and engage an intellectual world that sometimes begins where an independent criminology would likely leave off.

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NOTES

- ¹ This is a revised version of an address presented to the World Congress of the International Society of Criminology in Barcelona in July 2008. The author is grateful to Erin Braatz for research assistance and also to the Filomen D'Agostino and Max Greenberg Research Fund of the NYU Law School. Joachim Savelsberg is also to be thanked for some very helpful comments as the speech was being revised for publication.
- ² Savelsberg and Sampson (2002) use the term “discipline” to refer to an academic field with a distinctive, self-generated intellectual core of problems and concepts – and they argue, correctly in my view, that criminology is not, in that sense, a discipline. My own usage is rather different, referring to the *organizational* practices that constitute and regulate criminology as a demarcated academic field. Many academic subjects are, of course, disciplines in both senses of the term. Criminology is not. As I argue here, the field of criminology lacks a coherent, self-generated, scientific object because its objects of study (crime, criminals, control) are given to it by extra-scientific processes.
- ³ I illustrate my point here by referring to criminology’s links with sociology, but one could make the same point by reference to the other disciplines with which criminology carries on conversations – psychology, law, history, political science and so on.
- ⁴ See Savelsberg and Sampson (2002) who argue that “criminology’s isolation from sociology comes at great cost.” “As criminology closes itself off from other academic disciplines, it opens itself up to extra-scholarly interests, especially those of the state.” It thereby risks losing its academic integrity. They conclude that this process ought to be resisted, and that “concern with disciplinary credentials [and autonomy] should be replaced by a renewed focus on intellectual ideas.” See also Savelsberg, King and Cleveland (2002) for empirical evidence supporting these claims.
- ⁵ In his more recent work, Hagan appears to have revised his view. His new book about Darfur (Hagan 2008) argues that criminology ought to come to terms with genocide and the causal processes underlying it. In the course of his argument, he makes it clear that he envisages a policy role for criminologists, providing international courts and organizations with evidence and expertise that can help justify and direct humanitarian intervention.
- ⁶ Quoted in Zedner and Ashworth (2003:16)
- ⁷ As Andrew Abbott points out, “status differences... keep the disciplines in superior power. Criminology departments hire from sociology departments, but seldom vice versa.” Abbott quoted in Ericson (2003)
- ⁸ I say this with some confidence because something of the sort has already occurred in the USA. During the first half of the 20th century, crime and its control were central topics of research in America’s leading sociology departments. (Think of the Chicago School, for example, or of Edwin Sutherland’s department at Indiana.) In the 1960s, however, the US government decided to professionalize criminal justice and funded a massive expansion of criminological training, much of it based in new criminal justice colleges. The subsequent expansion of criminology and the rise of these self-standing criminal justice programs led to the gradual abandonment of the specialism by the sociology departments of all the leading research universities. Until very recently, there was hardly a sociologist of crime and punishment to be found in any of them – with major consequences for the kind and quality of work done on criminological topics. See Savelsberg, Cleveland and Ryan (2004) for empirical evidence about the way that institutional location (criminal justice program or sociology department) shapes research and theory choices. Recently, this process has been reversed, largely because America’s penal system has grown to the point where it has become a major engine of social organization and stratification.
- ⁹ Methodological discussion can also have this effect, but I’m going to ignore that for the moment.
- ¹⁰ Here we ought to take our lead from the field of anthropology – a discipline in which each individual scholar engages in specialist field research, focused on a particular place and particular people, and which might easily have become utterly fragmented but for the discipline’s strong commitment to theory – a commitment that is institutionalized in textbooks, university curricula, graduate training, journals, and the overall status system of the discipline.
- ¹¹ As the work of Savelsberg et al shows (2002, 2004), the capacity to sustain serious connections between academic subjects is determined by institutional arrangements, organizational routines, and the structurally-conditioned habits and orientations of individual academics. It cannot be left to good intentions.

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