

Insurgent Criminology in a Period of Open Social War

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Criminology has throughout its history been a dualist field of knowledge proceeding along distinct, often separate tracks. On the one hand is academic criminology based in institutions of post-secondary education or public policy. On the other hand is a community criminology, often insurgent, coming from and expressing the experiences of people and communities subjected to the violence of the state and institutions of criminal justice. This goes back to the early days of criminology when the first and sharpest criticisms of academic criminology—such as that of Lombroso, for example—were being provided by insurgent criminologists, primarily anarchists like Peter Kropotkin and criminalized rebels. Today these dual tracks stand in somewhat stark contrast as community movements opposing state violence and brutality, from Black Lives Matter to Idle No More to new poor people’s movements, are developing and asserting some of the strongest and most incisive analyses and opposition to systems and institutions of criminal justice in liberal democracies like Canada and the US.

The struggles of the present period are stripping the cover off of policing as military institutions for social war waged against the working class, especially racialized and poorest sectors, in defense of statist management, capitalist ownership, and accumulation. The police are increasingly revealed as agents of pacification and regulation (as they have always been) rather than of public safety or security.

There is an insurgent criminology—lively, engaged, informed, vital, analytical, honest, brave—emerging not in the halls of the academy nor in the sessions of academic conferences but rather in the streets and neighborhoods of those who are targeted by the state for ongoing punishment, repression, violence. That insurgency is bringing with it important critiques of criminal justice as well as the beginnings of compelling challenges and alternatives, moving through and beyond reformist demands. One of the most important and promising developments has been the posing and pondering of alternatives to policing and the raising of abolitionist perspectives, responses, and projects. These are the voices academic criminology must hear and must heed. And the movements they must support as active allies, even more as accomplices and public defenders.

Taking Sides

When Black Lives Matter Toronto (BLMTO) stopped marching during the Toronto Pride parade and demanded that police be kept out of Pride parades they were openly, courageously, with clear sight affirming that police are not part of communities of the oppressed. That the police are in fact oppressors. This position moves vibrantly, vocally, beyond liberal (and even too many critical) approaches in criminology that seek conciliation, compromise, or accommodation with police (often on supposedly “realist” grounds). Yet the BLMTO approach is a profoundly realist one. It identifies and acknowledges and opposes the reality of policing as a historic force of brutality, harm, inequality, and injustice in the day to day lives of oppressed and exploited people and communities.

Criminologists need to follow the courageous, principled example set by BLMTO in the Pride parade and openly challenge the attempts to normalize the presence of active police officers in sites of social life such as university departments. Active officers must be openly opposed, their presence in university departments as active agents of surveillance and repression rejected. Not

only the demilitarization of campus police¹, but the full call for “Cops off Campus” as raised in the civil rights and student struggles of the 1960s and 1970s² must once again be taken up in movements of engaged, critical criminology today. Criminologists need to challenge openly all attempts by police (border security, state intelligence, police, etc.) to recruit students behind the cover of faculty positions. University campuses and departments must not be transformed into recruitment offices. An appropriate response would also include opposing recruitment tables at job fairs and other events on campus. At the same time police must not be allowed to gain the ideological benefit of presenting police propaganda—let’s call it copaganda—from the respected status conferred by a faculty posting—neither from a position at the front of a classroom, nor through media appearances nor via “public advocacy” efforts such as townhall meetings designed to promote growth of snitch culture in working class communities.

Academic criminologists need to stop the subservience to a false collegiality with oppressors in their own departments or schools and recognize that social struggle does not stop at the doors to the academy or on the pavement outside campus. Social war infuses, pervades institutions of higher learning as it does all areas of social life. This is true perhaps especially within criminology departments. It is true in funding, programming, co-op and practicum placements (which go overwhelmingly to systemic institutions), boards of governors, advisory committees, research grants, etc.

The insurgent criminologists of the community uprisings are in many ways far ahead of even the critical criminologists in their analysis of the nature of policing, incarceration, the prison-industrial complex, and in understanding how to mobilize to confront these. In many respects, they are also out front in their willingness and preparedness to consider and develop alternatives. And they are doing so from the direct, experiential position of those who have felt the power of the state levelled against them, their families, their communities, even over generations. In this, the insurgent criminologists, members of oppressed and exploited communities, put the lie to so called realists who again and again seek to link the oppressed to “better” policing (as part of a “realist” desire for safety and security, of which the police provide neither).

This is increasingly a time for critical criminologists to take sides with the insurgents to actively support the resistance forces in this social war. Time to abandon allegiances and alliances with the dominant structures. The last few years have shattered the façade of consensus in neoliberal democracies and thrown the social war that always rages beneath state capitalism out into the open to be properly viewed and confronted. From the police killings of civilians, particularly Black and Indigenous people in the US and Canada, to the fascist mobilizations in the wake of Trump, to the more obvious military trappings of policing in municipalities large and small alike. Trenchant new analyses are required to openly, honestly and publicly challenge unprecedented new surveillance regimes which increasingly concern themselves with predictive policing and the development of algorithmic governance and control mechanisms which tighten racial and class profiling, from the constantly shifting redlining of whole neighborhoods down to even personalized, individualized containment.

¹ Movement for Black Lives: Demilitarization of Law Enforcement policy brief: <https://policy.m4bl.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Demilitarization-of-Law-Enforcement-Policy-Briefs.pdf>

² See also the Schwendingers’ “Who Killed the Berkeley School? Struggles in Radical Criminology” an open publication from our Thought|Crimes press imprint at <http://thoughtcrimespress.org/BerkeleySchool>

For more on the recent campaign in London (in historical context), see “How to Get Cops Off Campus”: <http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2014/01/15/how-get-cops-campus> or on twitter, look for #CopsOffCampus

Criminology has a great opportunity now to shift its positioning within the social war of neoliberal capitalist regimes. It has a chance to situate itself in solidarity with the insurgent criminologists of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and the new poor people's movements, anti-borders movements and asylum seekers defense, those organizing inside (or outside support) such as the Prisoners Strike³ etc. To continue to press for systemic change alongside those many who have struggled for years demanding a full inquiry into the hundreds of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, even while we recognize along with them that the current "Terms of Reference" are too vague, and not holding police accountable, and much further action will be necessary.⁴

Criminologists can provide real resources including community material resources (meeting space, technology, equipment, etc.) and immaterial resources (analytical skills, software, methodological practices, engaging with processes to access information, making matters of public record, etc.) which can very tangibly support movements. As well criminologists have decades of research and case analysis, practical assessment of alternatives from transformative justice, community safety, community healing, and various approaches in abolition (whether police, prison, or systemic abolition). These can be brought into conversation with insurgent criminologists provided the academic criminologists do so as allies willing to listen to and learn from the insurgents.

An Honest Realism: (Against an Ideological Discipline)

Criminology has been in many ways a classically ideological discipline. That is, it has served the dual functions of covering up inequality and injustice while legitimizing or justifying the actions of ruling groups. Criminology does this in part by putting forward various appeals to a "realism" that accepts the existing institutions of criminal justice as proper, appropriate, necessary instruments of security, safety, protection—that is, of justice. Every time criminology accepts state definitions of crime, notions of justice, or forms of punishment it plays an ideological role.

An honest realism, however, is one that pulls no punches in describing, and explaining, the brutality of criminal justice system practices as the everyday, regular, expressions of those systems, not as atypical, irregular, or divergent. Such a realism would not seek to reform systems that, history has shown us, cannot be reformed and, in fact, were designed to do exactly as they are doing. An honest realism would not seek excuses to compromise with such systems and especially would not seek excuses from the political left (as in various forms of left realism). An honest realism would say openly and unflinchingly that to be against police brutality is at its core to be against police—given that the institution itself is inherently and thoroughly one of brutality. An honest realism would situate this brutality in the regimes of control, accumulation, exploitation, regulation, and pacification that it upholds, and was always designed to uphold. An honest realism will also recognize and state that the police have always been militarized, rather than militarizing recently, and have been always been deployed to secure social war (for the state and

³ The prison strike (across US private and public jails) was called for September 9th 2016 (45th anniversary of the Attica Rebellion.) See SupportPrisonerResistance.net or <http://iwoc.noblogs.org>

⁴ "Coalition Calls Federal Plan for National Inquiry too Vague." <http://www.bwss.org/coalition-calls-federal-plan-national-inquiry-vague/>

capital) rather than social peace. This is the realism reflected in and expressed by the insurgent criminologists of Black Lives Matter, Idle No More, and the new poor people's movements.

Conclusion

During the recent protests against the killings by police of Alton Sterling and Philando Castille, I was part of a network, mostly community organizers and activists, sending regular reports and criticisms of police across social media. Many were contributing analyses of very high caliber. Interestingly there were two major criminology conferences happening at the same time. So my social media timeline was interspersed, strangely, with messages from academic criminologists (mainly critical and progressive ones) about the fancy conference meals and swank settings, while insurgent criminologists were sending urgent messages of great insight and analysis from the midst of often brutal struggle and direct, systemic mass violence. This was a visual expression of the duality of criminology. The messages of the insurgent criminologists showed where criminology needs to be more fully. In the streets and organizing centers of the neighborhoods. Not in the bistros and ballrooms.

The promise of this moment will relate in part to connections critical criminologists are willing and able to make with insurgent criminologists in the streets and communities. And criminologists must take the initiative of acting to support and defend those whose bodies are quite literally on the line. Criminologists should seek guidance from the movements in terms of resources and labors that are needed and that criminologists might be uniquely capable of providing (research, writing, meeting spaces, popular defense, court defense, anti-ideological work, etc.). Criminologists can look to the recent reaction of librarians who vehemently protested against managerial directives their profession should be "neutral" on Black Lives Matter, reminding all that "At their best, public libraries exist to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable" and of course that "to stay neutral in situations of injustice is to choose the side of the oppressor."⁵

⁵ See their "badass tweetstorm" of reaction at #NoNeutralLibraries; <http://aplus.com/a/black-lives-matter-storytime-underground>]

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