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“Radical Criminology Lives”

Forward to Who Killed the Berkeley School? Struggles
Over Radical Criminology

Jeff Shantz

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The assault on the Berkeley School of Criminology (at the University of California-Berkeley), a hub of radical organizing, theorizing, and action, is one of the likely forgotten or overlooked (or never known) salvos of Ronald Reagan’s frontal assaults on dissent and resistance (particularly in domestic terms). Launched in the 1960s and carried out extensively between 1973 and 1976, the campaign against the Berkeley School radicals would see final victory in 1977.

In this engaging and pointed book Julia and Herman Schwendinger, two key participants in the Berkeley School (and two who were penalized for their committed involvement in the school and broader community struggles against exploitation and oppression), provide important insights and open, honest, unflinching assessment of these battles. They provide crucial lessons for contemporary organizers and activists in the academy, and beyond, and reinforce the great need for radicalism within disciplines like criminology that are supposed to identify, analyze, and end practices (and causes) of social harm. And speak out

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against the role of power holders in generating and reproducing social harm.

Like the better known attack on the air traffic controllers union only three years later, the breaking of the Berkeley School would decimate an infrastructure of resistance to neoliberal capitalism (and ideologies expressed in New Right criminology in this case) in its early stages as well as sending a message to possible allies that they should watch their step (lest they endure a similar fate). It also, like the air traffic controllers struggle, tested the resolve of neoliberalism's potential opponents—and the willingness of “soft supporters” or liberal forces to act on behalf of those caught in the crosshairs. In both cases the broad oppositional forces, and particularly potential allies and soft supporters, were found fatally wanting. And the emergent forces of neoliberal reaction (and New Right ideology) gained important victories and developed new confidence to push on.

The Berkeley School radicals identified the real sources of social harm in society—state, military, and corporate actions. They also insisted on calling these harms by their proper name—crimes. They openly identified the wars against Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island as what they were—campaigns of genocide. The Vietnam assault was recognized not as unfortunate war, geopolitical event, or American crisis (or tragedy) but, unflinchingly, as a criminal endeavor undertaken by the US state. The Schwendingers lay out the captive place of the university in the military-industrial-complex, detailing the depth and breadth of corporate influence and control.

Most of all, the Berkeley School radicals, perhaps more than any academic criminologists before or since, bridged the false gap between community resistance and academic labors. They immersed themselves in struggles, not apart from or in conflict with their roles as researchers, learners, and/or knowledge producers—but as a direct outcome of those pursuits. For this they were targeted by politicians and administrators. Punished as community members and activists, reprimanded and fired as intellectual workers.

The Berkeley School stands as a model toward which contemporary critical (even better, radical) criminology might strive. The account by the Schwendingers offers both a guide to organizing in the present and a caution about steps to avoid and the lessons learned through real struggle.

This compelling work reminds us of a criminology not of the classroom but of the communities and workplaces. It reminds us of a criminology of active resistance. It is a criminology rooted in real world responses to ongoing concerns about social harms in communities most subjected to those harms. This is a criminology that is neither utopian nor ideological because it actually identifies and names the social structures and relations that cause social harms and which prevent them from being addressed. And it openly confronts and challenges those exploitative and oppressive structures and relations (rather than accepting them merely as objects of study).

This is also a proposal and an invitation. Not only to radicals but to those who claim to be critical in good times but become “pragmatists” or “realists” when it affects them personally (with apologies to Phil Ochs). Criminologists in pursuing social justice will, eventually (and must) offend university administrators, criminal justice officials, law enforcement agents, and politicians. We should not apologize for this nor should we hide our analysis away in the comfort of lecture halls, seminars, or conferences.

Compromise has become a signal word of the neoliberal period (like the “consensus” of an earlier epoch). Yet compromise tends to overlook the imbalance of forces— of resources, of power, and of harm. It offers a profoundly unjust equalization of (unequal) responsibility and obscures the fact that certain groups (classes, strata) bear the brunt of harms inflicted one-sidedly by another group (class, stratum). This compromise almost always ends up satisfying (and justifying) power holders.

The current period of New Right hegemony (in government, media, and the academy) and the decades long promotion of law and

order ideology as public policy, requires, finally, an active, organized opposition from criminology that is based not only in (ineffectual) critique but political mobilization in solidarity and community with those who have been subjected to the right wing onslaught.

This is a crucial history, a significant example of struggle. It is relevant for anyone interested in the development of neoliberal capitalism and austerity governance. It is required reading for anyone concerned with building infrastructures of resistance in the current context and, particularly, linking the struggles of campus and community in a way that might challenge dominant structures and relations of ruling and forge and maintain connections of solidarity and active resistance.

The assault on the Berkeley School radicals was nothing short of, as the Schwendingers state it, “the repression of a struggle for justice.” And it had lasting impacts, both on social struggles and on the development of criminology (which shadowed the Reaganomics of the 1980s with New Right ideology and ‘broken windows’ class violence).

More than a work of criminology, this is a vibrant and honest telling of overlooked histories of radical struggle (and the perhaps surprising, for current audiences, part played by criminology in solidarity with movements of the poor and oppressed). It fills in missing pieces in the history of the peoples’ liberation movements of the late twentieth century.

As the Schwendingers note, it is impossible to understand radicalism (or criminology) without recognizing social context. In particular it is necessary to understand particular contexts of social struggle, social movement, and change. The interface of social and political movements, and the place of criminologists within these (radical or otherwise), is important.

In the context of Occupy mobilizations and mass repression in various sites (including extensive violence by police at the University of California-Berkeley itself) this is essential reading for any-

one seeking a deeper understanding of repression and resistance. The Schwendingers’ recount tactics, such as early manifestations of kettling, that are perhaps too often viewed as recent manifestations of neoliberal policing practice.

Readers might also note the use of demonizing language to discredit all forms of resistance. The phantom communist of the 1960s and 1970s has been morphed by state capital into the phantom terrorist of today. In each case the specter is used by governments to justify growing uses of repressive violence, illegal state surveillance, and violations of civil and human rights.

As critical thinking in the academy is sacrificed to concerns of the labor market or “relevance” (for whom?) and technocratism, managerialism, and expediency drive “curriculum,” over scholarship broadly conceived, this story has much to tell us. This is a living and vital document of a vital (and still living) movement and project. It should be read, reread, studied and, most importantly, built upon in practice.

In the era of neoliberal austerity and “law and order” hegemony it is as pressing as ever that criminologists demystify traditional rationales for exploitation and oppression. Indeed, criminologists must address the very nature and aims of criminology in this period of surveillance and repression. As the Schwendingers ask, how can conscientious criminology students and faculty, whose very subject of study is crime, remain quiet in the face of state and capitalist atrocities? The answer remains, now as then—we can’t.