

Time for Criminology

The Established is not Enough

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2015

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The present period has a certain premonitory feel about it. A sense of historic promise. There is a real air of change. The mood is one of resistance, of uprising.

In terms of social sciences, it could be said that the current period of austerity and state violence, and resistance to them, is a period of criminology. Some of the most compelling, incisive social commentary has come in the form of criminological works (see *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander or *Locked Down, Locked Out* by Maya Schenwar as only a couple of examples¹). And around the world we are seeing critical, indeed radical, criminological approaches press forward with a renewed urgency.

During more placid periods of socialization and social democratic recuperation (under the postwar welfare state, for example) sociology came to the fore as the social science of the day. Now, after almost four decades of neoliberal capitalist austerity (imposed on the working class, the poor) the softer managerialism of the welfare state has been stripped away, the liberal democratic state is more clearly streamlined to its purely repressive, its *brutal* aspect—its criminological aspect.

And these repressive aspects are being exerted at all levels, high and low, dramatic and subtle. They are expanded through regimes and practices of surveillance, border restraints, detention, deportation, murders by police and militarized policing. Indeed militarization in general continues apace—wars, invasions, occupations, even in operations signaled as earthquake or hurricane “disaster relief”, and especially in the repression of refugees displaced by all of these dislocations. It is also exercised through neo-colonialism (really continued colonialism) and targeting of indigenous communities by states (and their extractives industry sponsors).

And all of this is given cover by new laws against “bad thoughts” which have been passed in the US, the UK, and, more recently, Canada (as in Bill C-51, see Shantz 2014). These bad thoughts laws are emerging in the so-called liberal democracies that supposedly pride themselves on freedom of thought and expression.

Given the colonial and racist histories of the Canadian and US states, austerity and repressive mechanisms have been particularly violent in relation to racialized and indigenous people and communities. Not surprisingly, given the settler colonial and slave structures of the North American states, resistance has once again been sharpest among indigenous and African American communities. And these communities in struggle are developing the strategies and tactics for opposing repressive police state austerity as well as honing theoretical perspectives on the nature and character of (neo)liberal democracy.

The movements in the streets and on the land are in many ways reaching more thoroughgoing conclusions than are many criminologists. In the wake of the Eric Garner murder by police and police tantrum of refusal to pursue low level activities in New York City, residents of poor and racialized neighborhoods noted that their lives were less stressful and violent and that communities felt safer *in the absence of police* (Ford 2014; Hager 2015). And crime worries did not increase. Thus an organic abolitionism arose, gained from experience (or was reinforced for those who had been subjected to police violence and knew they would be better off without police in their faces).

It should be clear that radical criminology must further develop its anti-colonial and anti-racist analysis. As well it must recognize developing aspects of ownership and control (as in extractives industry battles) and class in relationship to manufactured economic crisis and aus-

¹ Full titles in the bibliography, below.

terity policies (as in the policing of poor neighborhoods and the carceral management of poverty). The question of public criminology has recently re-emerged and it is typically conceived as taking criminology, criminological insights, to the people, the public. Even more, at present, it might be more appropriate to bring the insights of the people (the exploited, oppressed, repressed) to criminology.

At the same time we must go forward without some of our most important teachers—those who developed and sustained critical criminology in an earlier period of uprisings in the 1960s and 1970s. In the last few years alone we have lost some of our great mentors—Nils Christie, Stan Cohen, Julia Schwendinger, and Jock Young to name only a few. Closer to home, my own department, last year, suffered the loss of one of our trusted voices, Tom Allen, whose views were informed by life as a prisoner as well as a criminologist. Their guidance is missed but they leave us crucial lessons. We gain significant insights by returning especially to their earlier works. The struggles of the present period find important precursors in the struggles of the Berkeley School as documented, for example, by the Schwendingers (2014). These are histories of an engaged, rooted criminology directly involved in resistance struggles in alliance and solidarity with specific exploited, oppressed, and repressed communities.

Once again criminology must throw itself unequivocally against the systems of injustice that we too often take as mere objects of study. These are not systems of justice; they are not eternal, they are not natural, they are not neutral, they are not legitimate human endeavors. We must be unflinching and uncompromising in our analysis and in our actions. At the same time we must work to develop alternatives. And in the present period, happily, many are thinking about this too.

It is still too early to tell if this is becoming one of those moments in which, as Henri Lefebvre suggests, people will not, indeed cannot, continue living as they did before, when the established is not enough, and they shatter the bounds of everyday life (1991, 297). Nevertheless, it is clear that critically important change is happening.

And criminologists, as those who live by studying and analyzing institutions, structures, and relations of justice and punishment (and the state that makes monopoly claims on both) have, as much as ever, a duty to contribute to it. In the communities of the surveilled, the repressed, the governed, and the ones killed by the state, new questions are being asked and new, better, answers are being given. It is there that a renewed criminology must locate itself. With, and for, the communities, against the (neo)liberal capitalist state and its criminal “justice.”

Jeff Shantz, June 2015,

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Recommended

The Ferguson Syllabus:

<http://sociologistsforjustice.org/ferguson-syllabus/>

The Charleston Syllabus:

<http://aaihs.org/resources/charlestonsyllabus/>

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