

# 'What are we gonna do now?' Revisiting the public roles of criminology

Ian Loader and Richard Sparks examine the role criminologists play in contributing to public discourse.

Crim readers who have been students of criminology or who earn their livings as 'criminologists' may be well used to answering—or fending off—awkward questions at parties or family gatherings: What is criminology really? What do criminologists actually do? What is criminology *for*?

Yet it is not only slightly sozzled party-goers or inquisitive in-laws who pose such questions. In our view, among the more striking things about criminology are its chronic and recurrent tendency to put similar questions to itself and its equally chronic inability to find agreed or settled answers to them. We do not expect that questioning to stop any time soon. Still less do we imagine that any attempt of ours to answer such questions is likely to prove conclusive. There are, in fact, few things that we would wish for less.

We do however take the view that the ways in which these questions have been asked and answered—explicitly or by practical implication—both historically and in the present, can be very revealing. To look again at such problems in a reasonably systematic way offers a means of focusing discussion about the character and scope of social science work on crime, justice and public policy from a number of points of view. In our current work, we are examining the roles, stances, and commitments of those who have participated in such activities—their intellectual, personal, and

professional identities, so to speak, and the varieties of social networks and relationships in which they have been engaged (Loader and Sparks, forthcoming). We think there is some merit in examining the ways in which criminologists have understood their craft and positioned themselves in relation to the great controversies of their day—whether as analysts, advisors, consultants, fact-finders, muckrakers, activists, or social critics. How did these diverse commitments and affiliations arise? How have they gained or lost credibility and influence?

Our purpose is to make such issues the object of serious (historical and, in principle, comparative) investigation—rather than episodic reflection and idiosyncratic stance-taking—and in so doing ask pertinent questions about influence and relevance. We want to know something about what people mean by these sorts of terms and about their social conditions of existence—not just about how to acquire more of the assets they appear to promise. For us, posing these sorts of questions is anything but an introspective, navel-gazing activity. It is about refining the naïve 'what is criminology for?' question into something more sophisticated and with greater purchase on current and emergent problems of crime and justice. How do, and how should, criminologists and their allies or associates engage with politics and public policy? How can criminology

find a voice in what is today a febrile, insecure, and globalising world in which crime and punishment loom large in government agendas and public discourse? Who claims expertise in these fields, and how are their claims justified? What, with apologies to the late Joe Strummer, are we going to do now?

## A successful failure?

Lately some of the more institutionally embedded and reputable forms of criminology appear to have been experiencing a bout of introspection and adopted a certain style of anxious self-interrogation. 'How', they ask, 'can we be so successful and so useless simultaneously?' We might call this a paradox of *successful failure*. On one hand, the story goes, criminology is booming. It boasts new courses, more jobs, more students, new journals, more and larger conferences, bigger and new professional associations, the creation and awarding of prizes—in short, and against the inclinations and expectations of some of its leading figures, the entire paraphernalia and institutional apparatus of a *discipline*. On the other hand, this has coincided with, or may even have been an effect of, the rising prominence of crime within the mundane culture and political programmes of a number of Western societies, and the increasing drift towards more punitive solutions to crime and more intrusive approaches to security issues that is evident today. Viewed in this light, against the backdrop of the field's marginality to a penal culture that has become harsh, shrill and impelled by quite other forces than its arguments and findings, the recent success and future directions of criminology seem more uncertain.

Two contrasting diagnoses typically accompany this observation. For some, this is explained by a fall in *demand* for many kinds of criminological products, especially on the part of government itself. As criminology has burgeoned, so, the allegation runs, government has turned its face. It has become less willing to attend to independent criminological enquiry into crime

problems, drawn more towards a more compliant research consultancy market and increasingly pursues policy agendas that dance to the tune of other voices—typically those pressed by the media, or gleaned from focus groups or opinion polls. There has, in the process, been a weakening of the shared assumptions about what government can and should properly do to govern crime in a democratic society around which criminological practitioners, government officials and senior practitioners were once able, from their respective institutional locations, to make common cause. This has been coupled with the propensity of government to encroach—in the name of public safety—upon the liberal values and institutions which many criminologists continue to hold dear.

A second, contrasting, analysis pinpoints a shortfall in the *supply* of criminological goods of sufficient relevance or quality. Versions of this argument have been pressed both by those working inside government (Wiles, 2002) and by radical criminologists urging their colleagues to subject ill-informed, punitive penal agendas to more vigorous public challenge (Currie, 2007). The growth of criminology, their contention goes, has been accompanied by criminologists turning away from government and public life. The result is an inward-looking profession absorbed in a world of arcane journals and conferences; a field which lacks the research skills that can assist in solving contemporary crime problems and whose practitioners are unwilling or unable to engage audiences beyond the academy. The more criminology has grown, in other words, the more it has fractured into self-referential specialisms that have lost their essential connection with the public concerns that they ostensibly address, and which provide criminology with its *raison d'être*.

### A skewed picture, genuine challenges

We think it is wise to pause before accepting either the supply or demand side versions of this story.

For us, both elements of the apparent 'successful failure' paradox are too complex and uneven for it to be an adequate account of recent history or current dilemmas. This is, moreover, a quite parochial, or at least time- and place-specific reading. It is a depiction that emerges from—and makes at least some sense in—the US and England and Wales, societies where a criminology that was once closer to centres of power, and once 'cautioned the nation about underlying social needs and problems' (Skolnick, 1994:2), has seen its expansion inside universities coincide with the decline of a receptive constituency within government who shared criminology's liberal commitments and were minded to call upon its practitioners for advice. It may well be that the successful failure paradox illuminates some aspects of crime control in those political cultures which have been most radically reshaped by neo-liberalism since the 1970s and where penal policy has become more punitive in substance and populist in style. But—to paraphrase Foucault—it cannot breathe anywhere else.

Yet the issues of what topics criminologists work on; how they work on them; the forms of knowledge they strive to produce; the audiences they envisage for their work; the intersections between that work and government or practice communities or social movements; the positions criminologists assume and interventions they make in wider public controversies about crime, punishment and security—these all represent genuine choices and challenges. They are scarcely novel, but they arise today in materially altered ways in new cultural, technological, and political contexts.

We do not think that criminology can resolve these problems internally, because they are by no means exclusive to it. Neither, by extension, are they greatly illuminated by criminologists of different persuasion scolding one another or announcing in a legislative manner that there is only one viable solution and that all must now adopt this or that method or approach. Nor is much clarification

likely to follow from announcing (not for the first time) that criminology is all washed up and must be dissolved into some parent discipline or a superior new formation such as 'crime science'.

It is our strong impression that the accusations circulating at the moment that criminology has become introspective and indifferent are misconceived and that instead there exists a sometimes frustrated longing on the part of many for more satisfactory, and perhaps more varied, ways of defining their role, voice, and sense of purpose. It is for this reason that we increasingly see reference to the idea of a 'criminological imagination'. In the famous work to which this notion refers, C. Wright Mills (1959:7) speaks of the sociological imagination as the means by which people 'hope to grasp what is going on in the world and what is happening in themselves'. Students and researchers in this area do not, in the main, actively desire what Mills called 'the lazy safety of specialization', even if this is sometimes all they are offered. As Mills (1959:21) insisted, whatever obstacles might stand in the way of the development of imagination, 'the qualities of mind that constitute it . . . are coming to be felt as a need'. ■

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