

Government crime policy and moral contamination

Reece Walters argues that Home Office funded research has become so tainted, it is time criminologists boycotted it.

We live in a contaminated moral environment.

(Vaclav Havel, 1 January 1990)

During 2006/2007, the Home Office allocated 68 per cent (£46.6 million) of its research budget to crime and criminal justice (Wheeler, 2006). During the same period, the then Home Secretary, John Reid, directed a 'pause', 'to improve the quality of Home office research'. National headlines claimed that the pause was nothing more than an attempt to 'bury bad news', arguing that gun crime research conducted by Chris Lewis at Portsmouth University was poised to reveal the ease in which criminals could access firearms in Britain (Harper and Leapman, 2006). If the pause was a manoeuvre to block research damning of the government, then it was an overt act of suppression and cover-up. If it was an action taken to improve the internal functioning of the Research, Development and Statistics (RDS) unit, then it was a declaration of inefficiency, or indeed incompetence. Whatever the reason, the pause was not intended to promote critical scholarship of the criminal justice workings of government.

The Home Office rhetoric of 'working with academics' and 'building alliances' must be seriously questioned. Take, for example, the Science and Technology Committee, which raised serious concerns about the research undertaken and commissioned by the Home Office RDS. It concluded,

Research must, so far as is achievable, be independent and must be seen to be so. We are not convinced that the current mechanisms for commissioning research deliver this objective . . . We urge the government CSA to investigate proactively any allegations of malpractice in commissioning, publication and use of research by departments and to ensure that opportunities to learn lessons are fully taken advantage of. We would expect the results of any such investigations to be made public. (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2006:97–98)

Finally, the parliamentary record identifies and confirms what criminologists up and down the length of Britain have been saying and experiencing for some time, that conducting research commissioned by the Home Office is a frustrating, one-sided arm-wrestle—where the Home Office ensures that it will almost always 'cherry-pick' the answer it wants. Elsewhere I have identified how Home Office criminology is politically driven; how it provides policy salient information for politically relevant crime and criminal justice issues; how its research agenda is motivated by outcomes that are of immediate benefit to existing political demands—it is the quintessential 'embedded criminology' (Walters, 2006a, 2006b). Critical scholarship is viewed as unwelcome and unhelpful, and is actively

discouraged. Any credible independent research that is likely to shed a negative or critical light on the policies and practices of government will not be procured, funded, published, or even debated by the Home Office. This is clearly problematic. It is widely acknowledged that the Home Office RDS plays an important part in the funding of criminological scholarship in the UK. As Rod Morgan (2000:70–71) has accurately identified, the RDS is the 'largest single employer of criminological researchers in the UK' where almost all its research is 'atheoretical fact gathering', 'narrowly focused', 'short-termist', 'uncritical' and 'designed to be policy-friendly'. The Home Office has become a site of criminological hegemony in the UK within a New Labour politics of 'evidence based research'. As such, its locus of power within the funding and dissemination of criminological scholarship has recently been met with opposition from scholars who argue for criminology to be aligned with much needed 'counter hegemonic movements' that can actively debate and resist the picture of crime created by the Home Office (see Tombs and Whyte, 2003; Hillyard et al., 2004).

Home Office criminology has a very clear purpose: to service the 'needs' of ministers and members of parliament. While revealing, it is not surprising that Hillyard et al. (2004:4) identify that the RDS has experienced a 500 per cent increase in funding for external research in recent years, largely due to New Labour's desire for 'evidence-led policy'. Moreover, they identify from an analysis of RDS research outputs during the period 1988–2003 that, from a catalogue of 571 reports, 'not one single report deals with crimes which have been committed as part of legitimate business activities'. It is clear that the Home Office is only interested in rubber-stamping the political priorities of the government of the day. If it were concerned with understanding and explaining the most violent aspect of contemporary British society (notably the modern corporation), it would fund projects that analyse corporate negligence,

commercial disasters and workplace injuries—but it does not. If it were concerned with issues of due process and justice, it would examine deaths of inmates in British custody (including children), the ill-treatment of mentally ill offenders, the imprisonment of women for minor offences, and the unacceptable levels of miscarriages of justice—but it will not. If it were concerned with the health and well-being of its citizens, it would monitor and evaluate medical misadventure and the unacceptable level of preventable deaths in the NHS – but it does not. The Home Office remains silent on all those topics that have the potential to reflect poorly on government. As a result, it is not an institution that represents the British public—it is an organisation that exists to protect the reputation of government. In doing so, the Home Office employs psychology, economics, and physics graduates in preference to criminology and sociology graduates to perform quantitative and statistical analyses to pressing Westminster concerns (Walters, 2006a, 2006b).

Yet no enquiry has taken place (as mentioned above in the recommendations of the Science and Technology Committee). There has been no investigation into the cultural morays of the Home Office that seek not to advocate for justice and truth but to maintain and support political power.

Boycott and resistance

For years, I have listened to civil servants (and academics) declaring the importance of an academic/government research and policy alliance. The power imbalance that exists between civil servants and the providers of knowledge (academics, consultants, members of the public) severs all possibilities of an egalitarian relationship where mutual interest and expertise can be expressed in government policy. The rhetoric of bringing the academic world closer to the workings of government policy will always encounter applause, yet, at present, it is unachievable and undesirable. As things stand, they must remain separate. To participate

in the Home Office is to endorse a biased agenda that omits topics of national and global concern in favour of regulating the poor and the powerless. If all academics boycotted government research and refused to provide such research with the credibility that academic credentials bring, then senior criminal justice civil servants would be forced to either change the existing agenda or solely engage corporate researchers. If the latter was adopted, not only would Westminster begin to question the lack of ‘expertise’ informing policy, but the Emperor would be without clothes.

A boycott on government research and private corporate consultancies does not mean disengagement or isolationism. I mean to promote engagement through diverse narratives that are often regulated, curtailed, or prevented by the constraints of government and corporate contracts. What is needed is the expansion of critical knowledges of resistance. Such knowledges cannot be generated under contract where they are often silenced or neutralised. They require criminologists to stand outside the domains of commercial criminology and actively assert a position of resistance (Scraton, 2001, 2007).

There is much to be gained through establishing networks of collective concern (with academics, professional bodies, parliamentary committees, political parties, campaign, and voluntary groups) that advocate for the promotion of multiple narratives, social justice, and the dissemination of new and critical knowledges. The promotion of new critical narratives in patriarchy and power, human rights, transnational justice, as well as state and corporate crime provides important voices of resistance against an emergence of embedded criminology. This calls for a politics of engagement that is often prohibited by the proscriptive and regulated culture of government research which many academics are seduced by in the name of income-generation or evidence-based decision making. Rather than having young scholars employed en masse

by Home Office funded projects that are highly regulated to provide government with information that supports its political priorities, I would prefer to see established criminologists employing research fellows on grant funding or university’s providing careers for young scholars to pursue research of their own interest. In doing so, they will provide important contributions to theoretical and critical knowledge.

Pat Carlen, Stan Cohen, Joe Sim, Stuart Hall, Barbara Hudson, Phil Scraton, Ian Taylor, Jock Young: such knowledges represent the hallmarks of the discipline and as such we should constantly celebrate the critical voice. The merit and value of the critical scholar stand the test of time and not those who spend their careers writing technical reports for government.

Conclusion

Academic criminologists commissioned by the Home Office to conduct evaluations of government policy are often in the position to unearth the relationship between politics and policy, which is why authorities often seek to control the production, distribution, and consumption of emerging new knowledges about their world of policy making and practice. When researchers reveal critical insights of these processes through their evaluative work, then those in power may seek to control the distribution and consumption of these new knowledges and question the production process itself (Walters and Presdee, 1999).

In my view, civil servants in the Home Office do not want to ‘learn’ from academics—in their minds, there is little that academics can teach them. They seek credible reassurance and endorsement for political priorities and not genuine debate, challenge, or disagreement; and certainly not anything spoken or written that will embarrass a minister and/or denounce the actions of government. We live in a society where government manipulates or cherry-picks criminological knowledge and produces distorted pictures of the ‘crime problem’. The offspring of this flawed process are

polices of deceit which fail to target the most deleterious and socially injurious criminal aspects of British society. State-produced criminological knowledge through the Home Office is, to quote Vaclav Havel, 'morally contaminated'.

The catch-22 facing government administrators is that they must produce credible 'scientific' endorsement for their own failed and misguided policies, hence the process of suppression, control, and manipulation outlined above.

Academic criminologists must not grant legitimacy to such a corrupt process. I suggest that what is needed is an increase and a vocal outpouring of the critical voice or what I call 'deviant knowledge' (that which is critical of contemporary forms of governance and challenges the existing social order).

To challenge state power is to enter the eye of the storm, the very epicentre of discrimination, institutional bias and social injustice; to do otherwise is to become 'co-creators' in a morally contaminated environment of intolerance where the poor and powerless remain the objects of government scrutiny and over-regulation. Those who challenge state power will always experience various obstacles that attempt to silence or moderate their dissent. Yet,

the critical voice is most needed, most respected, and most influential when actively engaged in contestation with policies and practices of governmental power. ■

This article is based on a longer essay Reece Walters has written in the forthcoming Critical thinking about the uses of research, a monograph produced as part of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies Evidence Based Policy series. www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/harmandsoproject.html

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