Boycott, resistance and the role of the deviant voice

Reece Walters argues that research carried out under the aegis of the Home Office serves the purposes of the current government. He calls for the development of a criminology that challenges the existing social order.

I recently logged onto the Home Office Research Development and Statistics (RDS) website and was greeted with a large flashing announcement that read; "*economists we want you*". This appeal echoed the views of a senior RDS person I recently interviewed who stated; "We recruit quite a lot of people and it's very rare that we employ people who have degrees in criminology because they don't have any skills... We're employing all sorts of people and the most obvious are those with psychology, economics and physics because they have more skills" (Walters, 2003) – great news for all those criminology students! But what can be said about the trajectory of Home Office criminology and the construction of criminological knowledge?

It is widely acknowledged that Home Office Research Development and Statistics plays an important part in the funding of criminological scholarship in the UK. As Rod Morgan has accurately identified (2000, pp 70-71), Home Office 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 "counter hegemonic movements" (see Tombs and Whyte, 2003)

Home Office criminology has a very clear purpose: to service the 'needs' of ministers and members of Parliament. It is a politically driven criminology, one that provides policy salient information for politically relevant crime and criminal justice issues. Its research agenda is motivated by outcomes that are of immediate benefit to existing political demands – it is embedded criminology. While revealing, it is not surprising that Hillyard *et al* (2003) identify that Home Office 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", concluding that Home Office RDS research serves to reinforce state-defined notions of criminality whilst paying lip service to concerns about state and corporate crime.

It is clear that the Home Office is only interested in rubberstamping 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 doesn't. If it were concerned with violence and human rights abuses it would fund projects to examine the state's role in Northern Ireland or in Iraq or its policies on asylum – but it doesn't. If it were concerned with civil liberties it would monitor and evaluate the ways in which personal freedoms have gradually eroded in Britain during the last decade – but it doesn't. The Home Office remains silent on all those topics that have the potential to reflect poorly on government. Instead, 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.

Boycott and resistance

To participate in Home Office research 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 Home Office research and refused to provide such research with the credibility that academic credentials bring, then Home Office RDS would be forced to either change the existing agenda or to solely engage corporate researchers. If the latter strategy was adopted, not only would Westminster begin to question the lack of 'expertise' informing policy, but the emperor would be without clothes.

In my view, academics must resist the often lucrative markets of contract research and private consultancies. Academics are not paid from the taxpayer's purse to personally profit by granting legitimacy to corporations driven by profit and shareholder interests. Nor should academics participate in government research agendas that ignore, for example, crimes committed by the most powerful and wealthy in society, while endorsing policies that aim to regulate the poor and over-regulated in society. I say academics must boycott the seeking of, and participation in, Home Office research as well as all research for private security firms where the *modus operandi* is commercial profit rather than addressing issues of social injustice and exclusion. My call for a boycott here and elsewhere on Home Office research and private corporate consultancies will undoubtedly be perceived as a position of disengagement or isolationism – nothing could be further from the truth. I mean to promote engagement through diverse narratives that are often regulated, curtailed or prevented by the constraints of government and corporate contracts. Stan Cohen cogently demonstrated in his excellent book *States of Denial,* that there exists what he calls an "intellectual denial" where "well-functioning minds become closed, and the gaze is averted from the uglier parts of their ideological blueprints and experiments. Or they allow themselves – for tangible rewards or an eagerness to please the powerful – to be duped into pseudo-

stupidity. These shameful records of collusion go way back" (Cohen, 2001).

Scraton (2001) argues that what is needed is the expansion of "knowledges of resistance". Such knowledges, he argues, cannot be generated under contract where they are often silenced or neutralised. They require criminologists to stand outside the often lucrative and profitable domains of commercial criminology and actively assert a position of resistance. As Foucault (1977) argues, it is important that scholarship "detach the power of truth from the forms of hegemony... within which it operates".

The development of theoretically grounded critical scholarship cannot occur through the production of technical reports for governments or consultancy advice to private companies. 'Critical' criminological scholarship is now often viewed as anachronistic or, alternatively, as a 'catch-all' term for all forms of research that raise questions or challenge assumptions. All criminologists can, therefore, legitimately lay claim to a critical status. This is clearly problematic as critique becomes softened or watered-down. A vast amount of funding for criminological research is directed to administrative projects that aim to improve existing apparatuses of crime control. This research serves the priorities of contemporary governing technologies.

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 social justice, the promotion of multiple narratives 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, provide important voices of resistance against an emergence of embedded criminology. 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). If criminology is to survive or is to make any sense it must embrace diverse knowledges of resistance – in my view, criminology must be a knowledge of resistance. This calls for a politics of engagement that is often prohibited by the proscriptive and regulated culture of government and corporate-led research, which many academics are seduced by in the name of income-generation or evidence-based decision making. In saying this I am mindful that many junior scholars and research fellows in the UK are currently working on Home Office funded research. Their very livelihoods depend on short-term government contracts – should they also boycott Home Office research and be out of work? While understanding the plight of young criminological scholars, my immediate criticism is with the more senior academic staff who have more choice to bid for research projects beyond Home Office money. It is established academic staff who are well positioned to seek grant-based funding who should boycott all Home Office and corporate funded research. 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 universities 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.

Conclusion

Who are the critics and conscience of the criminological community? Not those in government criminology; nor are they those who are commissioned by government departments, consultants or corporations to undertake research. The illegal and unethical actions of states and corporations are usually most vocally contested by agency workers, protesters and localised forms of resistance. But where is the academic resistance? There are some excellent pockets of knowledges of resistance in criminological scholarship that critique foreign policy and terrorism; human rights; prison reform; civil liberties; discrimination and so on. Such criminological work is crucial during an ascendancy of an intolerant, punitive and moral authoritarian state. However, such knowledges of resistances are often marginalised and seen as the deviant voices within a mainstream that services the political priorities of government and corporate elites. However, in my view, the mainstream is nothing more than knowledge corruption. There is no independence, no commitment to the construction of new and critical narratives; no vision for the long-term academic agenda; no development of theoretically robust discourses and most importantly no will to or no hope of addressing social injustice. Only a criminology of resistance can achieve an active engagement that upholds the role of critic and conscience of society as its mandate and seeks to mobilise networks of collective concern outside the inner and often financially lucrative circles of government and corporate contracted research. ■

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