

I have just returned from the Annual American Society of Criminology meeting held this year in Washington DC. The meeting is the biggest of its kind in the world with 2,800 participants; it is a circus. The experience of participating is both an enlightening and frustrating one, revealing a lot about the nature and prospects for thinking 'big' or engaging issues from a variety of sources in contemporary criminology.

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The difficulty of thinking BIG

Wayne Morrison discusses social control theory in the light of the ASC conference.

An intellectual void

These annual meetings have clear institutional functions (such as job hunting, networking for book contracts or journal features, liaising with colleagues from around the world) but the idea of participating in grand intellectual debate(s) is not one of them. Instead I could not help but wonder if the very structure of the conference is deliberately designed

to prevent theoretical discussion. A variety of different sessions take place concurrently, with very little time allocated for any one participant to deliver their paper: inevitably discussion is limited ('author meets critics' sessions, for example, were almost inevitably occasions of mutual congratulation with very little active confrontation).

Certainly there was no real interaction between the vastly divergent concerns of the British and American criminologists. While much of recent British criminology, exemplified by the writings of Jock Young and Ian Taylor (both of whom will have substantial books coming out next year), have concerned issues of inclusivity and exclusion, the demands of the market, and the messages of mass consumerism, mainstream American criminology seems tied into anti-theoretical quantitative projects (one leading 'crime as routine action' writer Marcus Felsen actually celebrated his personal 'anti-intellectualism'), number crunching games, based on situational crime perspectives or individual differences among officially labelled 'offenders'. Perhaps it is a question of funding. While money is available for dry computer regression projects, asking what is the big picture? what does all this information add up to? or what is the impact upon the big picture of most of this? does not appear to get far.

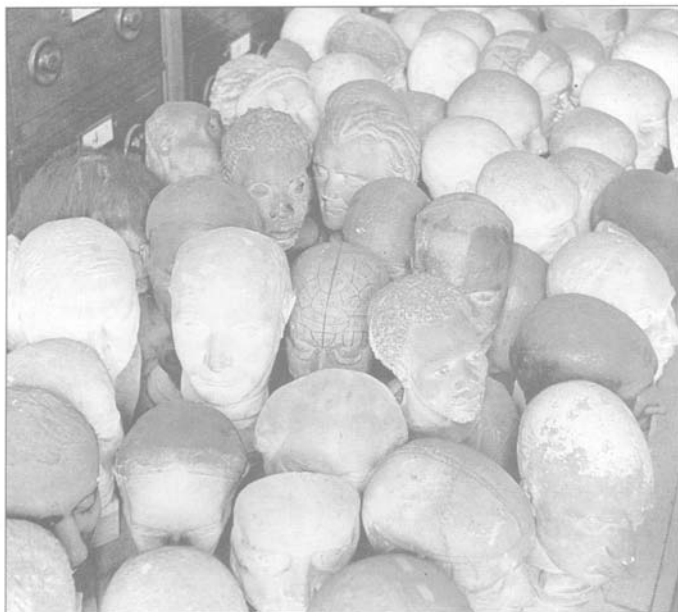
Sitting in sessions I was reminded of Karl Popper's famous quip that it's better to resolve issues through an active confrontation of ideas and arguments rather than guns, and wondered whether perhaps the conference organisers sought to prevent arguments in case we had brought our guns into the building. As with the fact that only minor attention was given to the question of whether ease of access to guns is part of the explanation of American exceptionalism with respect to crime (the extreme levels of violence), the guiding motifs appeared to be: avoid disputes, keep your head down onto data, don't look up into the rather

chaotic world of a globalised 'late-modernity'.

Washington

The actual location of the conference, appeared designed to reinforce this. Set in the white area of a mostly black city (Washington is more than 70% black, the Marriot Wardman Park Hotel is in the fashionable North West quadrant, an area almost exclusively white) the Marriot appears to be staffed by pleasant and efficient Asian receptionists, Indian doormen, and Black barmen, waitresses and porters who commute into the north west quadrant from elsewhere in the city. Outside the hotel it was almost 100% comfortably white. Walk the city centre, with its monuments of power, and most of the visible blacks are foreign tourists or low level government employees (security guards, doormen, clerks), but go a quarter of a mile south east from the Capitol or Supreme Court building and you enter another world of broken windows, rundown apartment buildings, litter strewn streets and an atmosphere of tension.

'The war on drugs' and 'the war on crime' are effectively largely aimed at people of colour, whilst 'crime control' rapidly becomes the great growth industry in the US. (If one added the numbers of those incarcerated at any one time onto the unemployment rate something amazing happens. The claim that America's 'flexible labour market' gives it lower unemployment than Europe seems misplaced. It's simply that they have more than 1,600,000 inmates unemployed but uncounted and if those engaged in the prison industry were also counted...?) But the mainstream discourse of American criminology resorts to the barren language of positivist social science in which questions of social justice, race and exploitation are for the small groups of 'radicals', who unfortunately often seem to lose themselves in the borrowed (from literary theory) clothes of 'post-modern' intellectualism.



La Scienza e la Colpa

“Hirschi’s early versions of control theory fitted well the aspirations of an organised modernity; a social ordering where there was social consensus, limited differentiation, and restricted imagery as to the good life.”

Ideas: control theory

In this atmosphere it is all too easy for certain theories to gain intellectual support as if it was their supposed ‘scientific merits’ which occasioned their acceptance rather than their ideological compatibility with the practical demands for legitimation made by contemporary political structures. One very popular American perspective is that of social control as developed by Travis Hirschi and Michael Gottfredson in 1990. Their thesis centred upon the idea that offenders are differentiated by their lower degrees of ‘self control’.

According to social control theory, as first developed by Hirschi in 1969,¹ people commit criminal acts when they are not prevented from doing so by their bonding to conventional society. Motivation to crime is assumed as part of human nature and any crime is capable from those unrestrained by fear of the social consequences of detection, whether seen in terms of the formal or state sanctioned responses to crime or informal. Hirschi referred to four social bonds that lead to conformity and successful socialisation: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief. Inadequate socialisation processes in children and youth allow or even create unconventional attitudes that facilitate the youths involvement in crime and delinquency.

Building upon the control perspective, Hirschi and Gottfredson in 1990² sought to combine control theory and the emphasis which criminological positivism had shown upon differentiation and typologising individuals. First, they differentiate *criminality*, as stable differences among individuals in the propensity to engage in criminal acts, and *crimes*, as criminal events which may be occasioned by a variety of factors, for example opportunity. Second, they propose ‘self-control’ as the independent variable which runs through the

diversity of empirical data on crime commission. Crime is portrayed largely as a mundane and little-paying occupation, criminals are losers, yet they keep on, relatively speaking, at it. Why? Different levels of self-control provide the answer.

Why this theory now?

What is the problem with this perspective? It was a subsidiary theme of my criminological text³ that self-control is all too obviously a central organising concept for any criminological theory, but that the American versions suffer from a lack of historical positioning both at the level of the subject (basically we need to understand how the demands of self-control have been placed on the late-modern subject) and avoidance of theorising (in other words, they do not ask ‘why this theory now?’)

Hirschi’s early versions of control theory fitted well the aspirations of an organised modernity; a social ordering where there was social consensus, limited differentiation, and restricted imagery as to the good life. Of course he largely ignored other criminologists, like David Matza,⁴ who talked of subterranean values of excitement, and of thrills which led youth into delinquency not in the face of cultural messages but because of them. Hirschi’s theory downplayed the ambivalence of modernity and depicted the need for successful socialisation and bonding into a relatively stable social order. The delinquent was the unsuccessfully bonded.

Now, only 30 years on, we face a vastly different social ordering some call late-modernity, others post-modernity. Whatever, it is a world where old stabilities, old certainties, have been undercut. It is a world of difference and temporality, of an explosion in communication networks bringing a variety of images and messages of the good life, of happiness, of the need for high learning and tolerance in the face of different views and a multiplicity of

demands. It is a world where the subjects are in a real sense cast adrift and must organise their life, seek their happiness as a set of projects to be managed. In this situation the message is for the subjects to take control of their lives, their environment, and create their future; self-control is an essential requirement. For Gottfredson and Hirschi self-control comes out of early life experiences and it is then relatively stable; this must have a degree of truth, but while in the conservative theories, this amounts in the end to a differentiation of the offender and culture of failure of socialisation of some groups (read blacks again).

The evil state

But we do not need simply to refer to changed conditions as demanding an increased complexity and reflexivity for any ‘control’ theory. We could ask what would be the impact of including such ‘crimes’ as the Holocaust or what is loosely called either ‘crimes of obedience’ or ‘sanctioned massacres’, acts of state sponsored terror, torture etc as acts calling for engagement with criminological theorising? In these cases the individuals involved as perpetrators may well be acting in support of conventional values, lodged in chains of attachment and belief as they carry out their actions.

In the case of Nazi Germany the entire apparatus of the state and sub-state institutions (such as educational or ‘health’ institutions), were consciously redesigned to destroy deviancy and enforce socialisation into conformity. The diversity and clarity of language suffered as euphemisms are used to structure and mediate individual awareness, ultimately turning killing into ‘cleansing’, ‘sterilisation’, or ‘social protection’ actions. Recent debate has focused on the actions of reserve police battalions in the hunting down, shooting and transportation of Jews. As to whether the holocaust was conducted by ‘ordinary men’ or ‘ordinary Germans’, the argument has surely been won by those who believe in the potentiality of ordinary men to be capable of monstrosity in specific situations.⁵ Such a situation reverses the ethical underpinnings of a control

theory which assumes the state and social order are worthy of respect.

Conversely, research on those who helped the victims (usually at great risk to themselves) indicates that they often displayed the characteristics of social outsiders - individuals who maintained for some reason or other their distance from convention; in many cases individuals who experienced a variety of loyalties, in other cases they appear as individuals for whom socialisation into convention had failed. These were people who when they were implicated in the often mundane chain of events which led to millions of Jews, and others being exterminated, did their ‘own thing’ in the face of demands to be loyal to what were then the ‘conventional values’.

Certainly it was self-control that was exercised, but it was that of a self which was at odds with the force of much of its contemporary society’s socialisation and attachments. It is not the place in this short conversation piece to dis-locate the language of criminological control theory from the situation in which it was produced and reproduced but this is the kind of task a reflexive concern warrants, and the kind of exercise the pace and institutional demands of current academic life makes difficult.

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Notes:

- 1 Hirschi, T (1969) *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press
- 2 Gottfredson, M and Hirschi, T (1990) *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- 3 Morrison, W (1995) *Theoretical Criminology: from modernity to post-modernism*. London: Cavendish
- 4 Matza, D (1964) *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: Wiley
- 5 The debate was between Christopher Browning (author of *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992) New York: Harper Collins) and his critics (particularly, Daniel Goldhagen (1996) *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York.