

**O**ne very important new topic is already on the [criminological] agenda: masculinity... if emphasis on gender is a key aspect of feminist work, then the further study of masculinity must be vital. Without it there will be no progress... (Heidensohn, 1995: 80-81)

# Masculinities and crime

Richard Collier looks at the 'Man question'.

The relationship between men, masculinities and crime has, in recent years, assumed an increasing visibility, prominence and political significance within both the academic discipline of criminology and in relation to a series of public and high-profile debates around crime, criminality and social (dis)order. Indeed, the 'gender' of men - their masculinities - has emerged not only as a much-heralded 'new direction' for criminology but also as a contested, talked about and pressing issue in relation to a range of concerns bearing on contemporary 'criminal justice matters'. The 'trouble with boys' and persistent youth offending, the dynamics of urban disorder and family breakdown, absent fathers and the urban underclass, pervasive sex discrimination within the legal and criminal justice systems, as well as the seemingly intractable problem of men's violences against women, children and other men - each are just some of the topics which have been addressed by criminology during the 1990s via reference to the language of men, their masculinities and crime.

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For criminology, the 'spectre' of the question of sex - the recognition that crime is almost always committed by men - has become something of a litmus test of the viability of the discipline per se. As such, criminology's present 'masculinity turn' holds a particular significance both for those working within the discipline, as well as those involved in working with men in the diverse fields of criminal justice. It is perhaps a truism to say that the vast majority of conversations and debates about the issue of crime have, in fact, been largely about the actions of men. As criminologists have long recognised, it is sex-status which is, along with youth, the strongest predictor of criminal involvement. Thus, if criminology cannot 'explain' this core fact in terms of an analysis of gender - as it has failed, quite spectacularly, to do - what does this 'gender blindness' then tell us about our taken-for-granted understandings of 'crime' more generally? What, importantly, does it tell us about the nature of criminology as a discipline and, indeed, about men?

## Criminology and the 'problem of men'

The problem has not been that criminology has failed to recognise that the object of its analyses has been, largely, the relationship between men and crime. The target of the now well-established feminist critiques of the discipline which have emerged during the past twenty years has been the way in which the sex-specificity of crime has been conceptualised. Criminology, it has been argued, is fundamentally flawed in (at least) two senses. First, it has failed to account, in anything like an adequate manner, for the nature of women's offending and, related to this, the treatment of women within the criminal justice system. Secondly, criminology has failed to address what has become known as the 'gender of crime' question itself. That is, it has failed to address the 'masculinity' or 'maleness' of crimes, the crimes of men as men; what it is about men:

*"... not as working-class, not as migrants, not as underprivileged individuals but as men that induces them to commit crime? Here it is no longer women who are judged by the norms of masculinity and found to be 'the problem'. Now it*

*is men and not humanity who are openly acknowledged as the objects and subjects of investigation."* (Grosz cited in Walkate 1995)

Addressing the former issue - the failure to account for the crimes of women - has been the object of feminist criminological scholarship. Explicitly addressing the 'masculinity of crime' - from a perspective, crucially, informed by feminist work on gender and power - has been the aim of those texts which, during the 1990s, have come to constitute criminology's present 'masculinity turn'. (see Messerschmidt 1993; Newburn and Stanko 1994; Carlen and Jefferson 1996; Scraton 1990)

## The 'masculinity turn': some key themes

In keeping with broader developments within the sociology of gender, recent criminological studies have stressed the plurality of masculinities, moving away from the fixed model of a unitary 'masculinity' and towards an understanding of the complexity, fragmentation and differentiation which exists between, as well as the continuities which unite, the diverse lives of men. What has been seen as 'uniting' men is an overwhelming propensity, relative to women, towards criminality, as testified to by both criminal statistics and lived experience.

A number of themes recur in the various recent criminological attempts to unpack '...the isomorphism of certain forms of masculine desire and crime: the near perfect fit between the mortice of masculinity, and the tenon of crime' (Jefferson, 1994). These include:

- a rejection of the individualised accounts of 'sex roles' which had marked earlier criminological engagements with gender, alongside a simultaneous concern to question the way in which society itself is presently experiencing a 'crisis' of masculinity, a crisis made manifest (in part) in the changing nature and extent of men's criminality.
- a concern to see masculinity within a process of 'doing gender', something which is, in Messerschmidt's influential phrase, 'accomplished' through men's engagements with crime; and
- a belief that the discipline of criminology can itself 'gain' something by engaging with



masculinity; that is, 'gendering' crime in this way will tell us something new which, in turn, will have implications at the level of intervention and policy. Thus, a new, improved criminology will emerge from the taking on of this strand of feminism's critique of its masculinist (gender-blind) past.

With the pleasures of crime and the pleasures of the masculine fused, criminology itself, for so long the target of feminist critique as the apotheosis of a 'masculinist' discipline in terms of its epistemological assumptions, methodology and institutional practices, would at last appear to be addressing its very own 'sex question'. Or so, at least, it would seem...

### ....And some concerns....

It is important not to overstate either the originality or the impact of criminology engaging with masculinity. Within that familiar, neat and compact linear narrative, which traces a progression from the 'dark ages' of Lombrosian biologism through to the sociogenic Enlightenment of the contemporary discipline, masculinity has been a recurring, if contested, presence within criminology. The recent pro-feminist 'masculinity turn', indeed, is to be judged, Messerschmidt suggests, as a critique and a reconceptualisation of these past, broadly, functionalist, positivist engagements with the 'maleness' of crime. The general problems relating to biogenic and sociogenic criminological ac-

counts of masculinity have, of course, been well-documented within feminist scholarship (Naffine, 1997). And therein - in the relation to feminism - lies an important concern around what it means for the discipline to engage politically with questions of masculinity at the present moment.

British criminology largely remains, as commentators from diverse positions and perspectives have argued, '... a masculine discipline...', dominated by men and 'untouched by feminism'; '...criminology is a masculine discipline, and the other big idea of the 1970s, feminism, has not spread very far within it.' (Rock, 1994) In such a context it is perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority of criminological scholarship, of whatever political or theoretical hue, continues to generally 'feminise' a consciousness of 'gender issues' by associating sex/gender with the pervasive 'Woman question' (albeit that it might increasingly be doing so in an ostensibly pro-feminist form). This, however, is a very different thing from reflexively 'sexing' its own 'Man question', as well as rendering contingent the historically specific male subject of criminological discourse (him)self, in terms of the discipline's methodological prescriptions and epistemological assumptions. Men remain the unexplored, de-sexed norm as the sexed specificity of crime, the male body and masculine (ised) corporeality continue to be evacuated, disallowed and disavowed within both 'mainstream' and self-consciously 'critical' criminology. The 'man question', in short, continues to be si-

lenced at the point of knowledge production, notwithstanding the growing broader cultural salience of, and a growing willingness to speak about, the 'maleness' of crime, of the crime of men as men.

### The limits of masculinity

There is another problem. What, ultimately, does it mean to speak

of the 'masculinity' of 'crime' in the first place (as if each concept were itself a self-evident and uncontested term)? At the very moment that the concept has come to serve as a reference point against which a diverse range of men's behaviours and identities have been evaluated within criminology, sociological accounts have highlighted a profound uncertainty as to what is meant by 'masculinity' (Hearn, 1996) Noting in particular its ethnocentric origins, Hearn writes 'it is as if this concept exemplifies the field of concern and even, possibly, distils the aggregation of activity of men in the social world into one neat word.' (Hearn, 1996)

Within accounts of masculinity as being 'accomplished' through an involvement in crime, men are seen as 'doing' their gender (masculinity) by engaging in diverse crimes such as burglary, rape, the sexual abuse of children, the taking of motor vehicles without consent, corporate crime, football 'hooliganism', state terrorism, traffic offences, 'road rage', violence towards other men and so forth (each of the above has been the subject matter of recent analyses).

To account for such diversity is, however, asking a great deal of the concept of masculinity. What is actually being discussed in so many accounts of 'hegemonic masculinity' and crime is, in effect, a range of popular ideologies about the ideal or actual characteristics of 'being a man'. On the one hand masculinity is taken to refer to those characteristics which are made to signify 'the masculine' in particular cultural contexts. At the

same time the concept is depicted as the cause of the crimes of men. Masculinity is conceptually imprecise, its various uses each standing in an ambiguous relationship to culture and, importantly, to biology and questions of sex difference; that is, 'masculinity' stands in an uncertain relationship not just to 'gender' but to the male body itself, understood not as a neutral, pre-discursive tabula rasa on which various cultural scripts of maleness are inscribed but as a 'lived in' corporeal artefact which, psychically and libidinally, is given and gives meaning to social subjects. It is unclear, moreover, how '...in terms of ageing and movement through the life-course - what is thought of as a personal time - ... masculinity might be thought to figure'. (Hearn, 1996) No sooner, it would seem, has masculinity surfaced on the criminological agenda than within sociology and social theory at least, its conceptual limitations are such that it is fading away, in a number of respects, as a useful analytic tool.

### Whither criminology...?

At the present moment, and bearing in mind the disciplinary imperative to seek out new subject matters, new disciplinary terrains - to go boldly where no criminologist has gone before - shifting organisational/institutional, epistemological, social, economic and cultural factors are pushing criminology towards an engagement with masculinity, its very own 'Man question'. Yet it is necessary to ask - what is the objective of the 'masculinity turn'? Is the task to make mainstream criminology 'aware' of feminism and gender perspectives? Is it about re-educating (presumably male?) criminologists to the inequalities of sex/gender? Or is it to confine the masculinity question only to certain offences, say, the terrain of the sex crime, sexual offences, men's violences? Given the nature of the institutional structure of British criminology it must be open to question whether a criminological orthodoxy which is itself suspicious of, if not overtly hostile to, feminism will then seek to 'take masculinity seriously' at the level of its own institutions, methods, practices and theoretical assumptions. A very different emerging project - at the interface of feminist, queer and postmodern theory - has involved an attempt to reconfigure the nature of criminology itself by reassessing

the complex historical discursive construction of ideas of both men, masculinity and crime. (Collier, 1998) In such an endeavour it may well be the case that, as Carol Smart suggested in 1990, the concepts and categories of the discipline of criminology do not provide the best place from which to start. The political headache which contemporary critiques of collective 'gendered' projects has resulted in (not least for feminism) cannot be confined to questions of the well documented (in)authenticity of 'Woman'. They also raise some revealing and disturbing, questions about the (in)authenticity of both feminism's and criminology's 'Man'.

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**W**hat is criminology? Criminology is what criminologists do and criminologists are those who meet at international congresses for criminology. Both are ironic illustrations of the existing embarrassment in defining what criminology actually is. Adding to the problem is that the field of criminology now really is complicated. Until the sixties, criminology could be identified with the scientific study of crime and criminals, but it has since then broadened the scope of its interest, by including also the study of crime control. It seems sometimes as if there are now two or more criminologies, having little to do with each other.<sup>1</sup>

a small research unit. Moreover, several non academic institutions do important research with undeniable criminological relevance.

For the sake of this short article, we shall make do with an intuitive concept of criminology, considering all research or scientific expertise on crime and crime control as potentially criminological.

### International differences

Criminal policies use such criminological expertise very differently and very selectively. Roughly, countries with a Latin tradition base their policies more on concepts and legal principles, whereas Anglo-Saxon oriented countries seem to pay more attention to instrumentalist issues and empirical data. That is even visible in the way criminology itself is practised. For example, French criminology is dominantly theoretical, discussing social theories, socio-ethical and legal principles, with a subordinate and less strict use of observation<sup>3</sup>. Of course, this leads to differences in attitudes to and the use of social sciences.

The use of criminological expertise is also selective. Governments do not let themselves be guided by scientific options or data. Governments use criminology like a menu, from which they choose a la carte what fits best into their political and electoral options. They use criminological data to improve the implementation of their choices. For example, in situational prevention, they use criminological language as a form of pseudo-scientific window dressing, as they do in prison reform. They pay lip-service to criminological options, like restorative justice, without really implementing the concepts behind the words. But it is still more complicated.

In the Netherlands, for example, criminology is not strong in the university structures. Several universities have small criminology units, mostly composed of one part time professor and some researchers. Teaching is limited to one or two optional courses. But there are two important extra-academic research institutes. One of them, the

# Criminology, criminal policy and democracy

Lode Walgrave introduces a European perspective.

Grounding a definition on academic institutionalisation is not possible either, as the academic position of criminology is too different.<sup>2</sup> On the European continent, most universities locate criminology as a part of the Law department, but some place it within the department of Social Sciences (as in Stockholm) or in the Faculty of Medicine (as in many Italian universities). In most Belgian universities, and a few others, criminology is a fully fledged university degree, including a PhD programme. The majority of academic institutions, however, offer criminology only as a specialised course, a seminar or

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Research and Documentation Centre (RDC) of the Ministry of Justice, is doing a lot of good research with high criminological relevance. It has a close relationship with policy makers. As a consequence, they have to carry out many short term research projects on very specific topics, ordered by the Ministry. Yet the close relationship permits them also to influence the agenda of the policy makers themselves. The question here then is whether criminology does influence the government or if government has 'domesticated' criminological practice.

Belgian criminology is academically well rooted. Six universities together now deliver yearly about 400 criminology degrees, and these new criminologists find their way to jobs in prevention, victim support, prisons, juvenile courts and so forth. Some of them are now in administrative positions that allow them to influence policy directly (and further recruitment of criminologists). Moreover, universities carry out many research projects. Some of them

are specifically ordered, focused on short term policy questions, while others are oriented on longer term, more fundamental issues.

### Criminology and policy

The relationship between criminology and governmental policy is complicated. Contrary to other applied sciences like technology or medical sciences for example, criminology has to compete with popular and populist interpretations. Whereas the public and governments accept easily the expertise of engineers or medical scientists, they do not evidently do so on crime matters. The media and the public develop lay theories on crime and crime control, which very often deviate considerably from criminological visions. A governmental crime policy cannot just rely on criminological scientific data. Firstly this is because a democratic decision process has to consider public wishes. Basing governmental policy on mere scientific data would lead to a technocratic regime that is far from being the

ideal political regime. Secondly, because criminological scientific data themselves are not unequivocal, routine activity theories, clinical theories, socio-structural theories are all based on systematic observation, and can appear to be convincing to some. Scientists discuss the quality of the observations and interpretations, but policy makers are not scientists. What they see is the criminological menu, from which they can freely choose.

The emergence of crime policy can be presented as based on the interplay between three parties: the government, the public and criminological science<sup>4</sup>. The public exerts electoral pressure on politicians, politicians decide and criminology informs. The information channel of criminology must, however, not only be addressed towards governments. In an electoralist democratic regime, governments rightly care about what the public wishes. That is why criminology should also address the public.

Criminology (and other social sciences) can add scientific results and questions to the public discourse on crime and crime policy. It can enrich the intellectual-cultural patrimony, in order to contribute to the quality of the democratic debate and to the social constructiveness of the political decisions. Criminology has done this in the past. Many now commonly known (not always accepted) opinions on crime and crime control are deeply rooted in criminological research. Debates on crime policy take a position on issues like, for example, the inaccuracy of recorded crime to estimate the real amount and kind of crime; social exclusion as one of the most basic causes of crime; the disastrous impact of negative prejudices and stigmatization on crime and crime control; the poor efficiency of punishing crime; the importance of social policy in basic crime prevention and so many other scientifically based views. Maybe this is one of the main reasons why European crime policy generally is less disastrous than that of the USA: criminological ideas are more included in European debates on crime policy. Why that is so, is to be examined, but the role of the media would certainly be one of the most important topics<sup>5</sup>.

Such an intellectual-cultural

role for criminology (and other social sciences) is only possible under certain conditions. First, criminologists must find a way to reach the public. A strategy towards the media is needed. In the very highly commercialised climate of the media, it is a real challenge to get their cooperation, without a loss of quality of the criminological message. Secondly, and still more importantly, criminology must defend a large margin of autonomy. As crime and public safety increasingly become hot political issues, policy makers become increasingly inclined to control research on these topics. They favour research considered to be 'useful' to their options and are not interested in longer term, more fundamental research that may not be supportive of the policies carried out.

There is a strong tendency to 'domesticate' criminology as a servant of policy makers. The risk is that this will lead to an impoverishment of criminology as a science and to the loss of the criminological contribution to the public democratic debate on crime and criminal policy. After all, the degree to which a political regime supports autonomous social (and criminological) research is a key indication of its democratic calibre.

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#### Notes:

1. S Quensel, Crisis of Criminology. Chance for a Fresh Interdisciplinary Start? *Ann Int. de Criminol.*, 1989, 27, 37-55; L. Walgrave. A la recherche de la criminologie. *Revue de Criminologie et de Police Technique*, 1993, 1, 9-22.
2. According to a survey by Peter Goris and myself in 1995
3. See e.g. the content of the French journal *Deviance et Société*
4. This is of course a very reduced version. Some would (rightly) add the media as the fourth actor. Moreover, the public and criminology are not uniform. Public opinion is divided, and there are very different criminological approaches to crime.
5. Another factor would also be the fact that judges in the United State are elected. This puts them in a weaker position to de-escalate the punitive populist outcries.