

Criminology and the crystal ball

Michelle Grundy, Michelle Rogerson and Ken Pease look to the future.

Looking at criminology databases using the keyword 'future' shows that the body of that work concerns the prediction not of crime, but of offender careers, most often of rates, times and types of reconviction. An excellent book entitled 'Prediction in Criminology' (Farrington and Tarling 1986) is exclusively about anticipating the course of criminal careers. Why would readers not be misled by such a title? Because that is what prediction in criminology has traditionally been about. The one book whose subtitle suggests that its contents should deal with future crime rather than future justice is *Visions for Change: Crime and Justice in the Twenty-First Century* (Muraskin and Roberts (1996)). This does not fulfil the promise of its title as regards crime, although it makes some brave attempts in anticipating trends in justice. Even the science fiction and fantasy literature concentrates upon the criminal justice process rather than upon crime itself.

Looking forward

Just as criminologists have by and large neglected the future, so futurologists have largely neglected crime. None of the books in the World Future Society's bookshop bear a title

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which suggests it deals with crime (Future Times 1998). None of that Society's 'Sixty-Five Forecasts About Your Life' deals with crime (The Futurist 1998).

Is the crystal ball a useful tool of the criminologist? We think it is, so long as anticipation is based on a mixture of experience, evidence and creative imagination. It matters less that prediction turns out wrong. In fact, in the best case scenario, prediction turns out to be wrong because it has been heeded and a potential harm headed off. Our belief is that because all preventable crime lies in the future, criminology should be future-oriented. This has informed our recent research, funded by the Loss Prevention Council and the Home Office. In this, we have reviewed the Department of Trade and Industry's Foresight Programme for its crime implications, interviewed 'domain experts' in a Delphi exercise, and are extrapolating crime trends evident in the British Crime Survey. Not everyone enthuses about our work, deriding it as a 'blue skies' approach. (Why do people never describe strategic vision as a grey skies approach: is there unwarranted optimism around?) Those who would criticise aircraft manufacturers for not doing accelerated fatigue testing on new types seem indifferent to the crime consequences of innovation. Why is neglect of the crime consequences of change not equally culpable?

As to future crime, what mix of continuity and change can we envisage? Human cupidity and aggression, distributed unevenly across people, will continue. People will continue to pursue self-interest by force or fraud. The extent to which, and the means whereby they do this will depend upon social and physical arrangements. Crime is a by-product of the way in which we conduct our lives, the hum in the machine of social and economic life.

The dynamism of crime types is belied by Home Office categories, which give an impression of stability. New crime types are fitted into old crime categories. For example, computer hacking in the early days was prosecuted as unlawful abstraction of electricity. The dynamic relationship between crime and

change is better likened (as Paul Ekblom repeatedly contends) to an arms race, with move and countermove giving temporary advantage to one side or another; or alternatively co-evolution, with species prospering or declining as their ecological niches change. This view of crime as co-evolution is self-evidently correct, but we don't behave as though it were.

Relationship between innovation and crime

Generally, what is the relationship between innovation and crime? There are invariably three phases.

- Innovation with neglect of crime consequences
- Reaping the crime harvest
- Retro-fitting a solution

If our military behaved like this, we would be defeated all the time. Sometimes we are. The French built the Maginot line, and the Germans unsportingly went round the end of it. The British in Singapore produced formidable defences based on the assumption that the Japanese would invade from that direction, but the Japanese sneakily came through the jungle in the hinterland. This myopia, while not uncommon in the conduct of war, is typically the way in crime control.

The general point is well illustrated by the introduction of uPVC windows, where design neglected the criminal opportunities which were offered by external uPVC beading, followed by the emergence of the crime method rendered easy by the material, followed by the re-design of the windows. The same three phases can be identified for every innovation one can think of, from coinage to mobile phones. The purpose of a future-oriented criminology would be to speed the process, and ideally, by considering crime consequences at the point of innovation, to prevent the crime harvest altogether.

Let us be specific. There will be many crime harvests. Predictable ones will track; the introduction of the Euro (unless very carefully managed); the Year 2000 bug (fraudulent 'fixes' are already around, and since any infrastructure breakdown on January 1st 2000 will be



The Criminal Justice System Forum

The Criminal Justice System Forum (CJS Forum) is an electronic discussion list (listserv) designed to encourage open discussion of all aspects of community safety and the criminal justice process in the United Kingdom. The list draws together academics, practitioners, and those affected by crime and the judicial process to share views, experience, publications, details of events and to promote greater public understanding.

The list was started in May 1997 and already has over 200 members both in the UK and abroad drawing members from higher education, the voluntary sector, the legal professions, police, prisons, and probation amongst others. Hosted by Mailbase at the University of Newcastle and funded by the Higher Education Community, the Forum is free to join and open to anyone.

In addition to discussion on matters of contemporary interest, the Forum also seeks to act as an information and learning resource. The Home Office regularly posts details of new information on their web site and details of crime related jobs in higher education are also regularly posted to members.

For more information about the Forum, including how to join, please visit the web site (address below) or contact the list owner, Dr Simon Marshall, at c-j-s-forum-request@mailbase.ac.uk

Find the CJS Forum online at : www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/c-j-s-forum

interpreted as a bug problem, sabotage will create a window of crime opportunity); and the digital TV which, flagged by a distinctive aerial outside a home, will become a highly desirable object of theft once people recognise the delights of the technology.

A future orientated criminology

Lest this all seems distant from your workaday world, let us remind you of Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which enjoins all local authorities to consider crime and disorder reduction while exercising all their duties! Taken literally, this means that any planning application, any change in the ways in which schools are run, streets are lit and refuse collected, must have its potential crime and disorder impact considered. Unless criminology becomes future-oriented, and quickly, it will rival the proverbial chocolate fireguard in its usefulness to local authorities in their statutory duty to consider crime consequences.

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