

A brief history of criminology

Ben Bowling and James Ross on the evolution of an academic discipline.

Criminology is one of the fastest growing academic disciplines in Britain. A generation ago, the subject was a rare specialism taught at a handful of universities. Now there are at least 30 undergraduate criminology degrees and more than 100 joint honours courses on offer in the UK. One can see its attractions: it provides an exciting synthesis of ideas in sociology, law, economics, psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and political science, seeking to explain deviance, dishonesty, violence, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Perhaps criminology is the new 'PPE' or generalist degree organised around the delicious theme of human sinfulness. With the apparently inexorable growth of this hybrid subject in mind, this article considers the history of criminology as an academic discipline.

A history of criminology, however brief, will be influenced greatly by what the term is taken to encompass. If 'criminology' is taken to refer to *any* formal thinking or discourse on crime and criminal conduct, then the scope of the investigation will be very broad, stretching back to even the most primitive of societies. Then there are the 'criminologies of everyday life' – popular theorising about crime that can be read in the op ed pages of any newspaper. This article does not attempt such wide-ranging analysis, defining British criminology as the continuous specialised and systematic investigation into crime and its relationship to society after World War II. Nevertheless, it is necessary to start the story earlier than that to put the subject in perspective.

The Enlightenment philosophers – Beccaria, Bentham and Kant in particular – are often described as the founding fathers of 'classical' criminology. Their conceptions of the rational subject and the 'social contract' led to new systems of law and criminal justice under which punishment should be proportionate to the crime committed, thus claiming that the law can have an intrinsic moral authority. This philosophical approach to the problem of crime was questioned by the so-called 'positivist' criminologists – such as Lombroso – who followed. They argued that a more scientific and objective approach was required, maintaining that classical conceptions of the subject did not reflect the realities of how crime manifests itself in society. Although the initial physiological theories – that there was an anthropologically identifiable 'criminal type', for example – were later roundly criticised, it was in the course of this criticism and the attempts to provide better explanations of the causes of crime that criminology began to emerge as a special field of enquiry in its own right.

An academic discipline can be identified as having its own journals, textbooks, professorships, learned societies and academic courses of study. British criminology grew from a number of diverse and eclectic sources. For example, the first lectures in criminology had a distinctly medical flavour and were directed at postgraduate medical students and senior prison medical officers. This is a reflection of the British criminological preoccupation with psychological questions. In contrast, thinkers in continental Europe – such as Weber and Durkheim – were more interested in the sociological aspects of crime and crime control. Indeed, David Garland has pointed out that had it not been for "the appointment of three distinguished émigrés, Hermann Mannheim, Max Grünhut, and Leon Radzinowicz, to academic posts at elite British universities, British criminology might not have developed sufficient academic impetus to become an independent discipline" (Garland, D. 2002).

Changes taking place in British society in the middle years of the 20th century encouraged the growth in the popularity of criminological study: in response to demand created by the burgeoning social work and probation professions, numerous research centres and institutes began to spring up.

In July 1931, the 'Association for the Scientific Treatment of Criminals' was established in London. (This was renamed the 'Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency' in July 1932, and the 'Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency' (ISTD) in 1951. It has been hosted by King's College London School of Law since 1993 and adopted its current name the 'Centre for Crime and Justice Studies' in 1999.) The aim of the early founders of what became the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency (ISTD) was to promote the notion, backed by systematic research, that there was a better way of dealing with offenders than prison and to translate this idea into action. From the outset it was concerned with the interface between research, policy and practice in crime prevention and aimed to develop education, training and publication whilst cooperating with similar organisations around the world.

In its early years, ISTD was strongly oriented to psychoanalytical approaches to crime and criminality. Significant early figures included Grace Pailthorpe, Edward Glover, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and Otto Rank. The Portman Clinic, now part of the NHS, was set up by ISTD in 1933 to treat delinquent and criminal patients through psychotherapy. In 1953, it set up The Scientific Group for the Discussion of Delinquency Problems as a forum for academic debate and analysis of

crime and criminality. The Group became independent of ISTD in 1955 and in 1961 adopted its current name of The British Society of Criminology.

In 1950, ISTD published the first issue of the *British Journal of Delinquency*, Britain's first specialist criminology journal. In 1960 the journal's name was changed to the *British Journal of Criminology*, reflecting, in Edward Glover's words, the long-term policy of the ISTD to promote the extension of research into various non-criminal fields of observation. The *BJC* – now one among dozens of journals in the field – remains one of the foremost English language peer-reviewed journals in its subject area.

The growth of criminology in London was mirrored by similar developments elsewhere. Cambridge University established a Department of Criminal Science in 1941. This institution, which had research and publishing roles, would eventually form the base upon which the Institute of Criminology would be built in 1959. It was around this time that British criminology textbooks began to appear, the first being Howard Jones's *Crime and the Penal System*, published in 1956. The first postgraduate course for the training of criminological researchers and teachers – perhaps the defining event in the emergence of British criminology as an academic discipline – started at the Cambridge University Institute of

(1968-1975) shifted the substantive and theoretical parameters of the study of the developing discipline, heralding an era of much more critically engaged research including work on prisoners' rights, the abuse of police power and engagement with such issues as domestic and racist violence. While some scholars of this period eschewed mainstream criminology, returning to safer terrain in sociology or cultural studies, the critical tradition lives on and continues to provide a counter-balance to mainstream and administrative criminologies.

There is now an extraordinary diversity in the field of criminology and criminal justice. Few aspects of deviance and control have escaped criminological inquiry using theoretical and methodological approaches drawn from eclectic and multi-disciplinary scholarship. Within this diversity, one overarching theme is the professionalisation of the discipline. The British Society of Criminology now has over 850 members, including 80 overseas members from all continents. The Society has a well-attended annual conference and regular local meetings across the United Kingdom. The growing number of criminology professionals (working in universities, research institutes and in the criminal justice system itself), together with the increasing numbers of specialised postgraduate and undergraduate criminology courses, entrenches the awareness of criminology as a discipline in its own right.

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Criminology in 1961. Building on the foundations laid by Grünhut, Dr Nigel Walker established a Penal Research Unit at Oxford University in 1966 (later to become the Centre for Criminology) before returning to Cambridge to succeed Radzinowicz as Director of the Institute of Criminology in 1972. By this time, criminology had migrated well beyond the 'golden triangle' of London and Oxbridge to be established in universities countrywide.

Since the early days of British criminology, the discipline has developed numerous diverse strands of thinking about crime and crime control. One notable theme is the growth and development of what George Vold describes as 'administrative' criminology: the attempt, generally by government, to provide descriptive, analytical accounts of crime, criminals and crime control. Although the *Criminal Justice Act of 1948* allowed for the regular provision of Treasury funds for criminological research, it was not until the 1950s that a British government made any serious commitment to it. The Cambridge Institute of Criminology was funded by the Home Office and by 1957, the Home Office Research Unit was inaugurated as an infrastructure for policy-led criminological research. The Unit (now Home Office Research Development and Statistics) is a multi-million pound operation providing empirical data and analysis readily accessible to all via the internet.

A second important theme is the development of 'radical' or 'critical' criminology. Inspired by the work of Marx and Engels, and the insights of the sociologists of crime and deviance such as Durkheim and 'labelling theorists' like Becker, a growing number of critical criminologists have explored the relationship between crime and inequality and the role of the state in crime causation. The National Deviancy Conference

Looking ahead, who knows: perhaps people will become bored with crime and punishment, prison numbers will fall and people will call for 'fewer bobbies on the beat'. But judging by perpetual public fascination with human wickedness, conspicuous growth in the criminal justice occupations and the swelling numbers of students choosing to study criminology at university, it seems likely that the discipline will continue to grow into the foreseeable future. Since 'crime and deviance' is the most popular option in sixth-form sociology, this trend seems set for now. How long before secondary school students can take an A-level in criminology?

Ben Bowling is a Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice at King's College, London. **James Ross** is a pupil barrister and research assistant at King's College, London.

References

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