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IS CRIMINOLOGY A POLICY SCIENCE?

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ABSTRACT: The question posed in the title is discussed in view of selected evidence from the criminological literature. Criminology's status as a policy science, based largely on the ability of the discipline to present coherent, empirically-based recommendations for the reduction of crime, is evaluated. The review leads to disappointing conclusions with respect to the usefulness to policymakers of the present knowledge base in criminology.

The relationship between public policy and scientific inquiry poses several fundamental ideological and strategic issues. Bertrand Russell (1931: 271-2), for instance, in a rather romantic bit of dicta, maintained that the desire to turn scientific curiosity to manipulative (i.e., policy) ends is a perversion of the purer impulse that first gave rise to scientific work:

Science in its beginnings was due to men who... perceived the beauty of the stars and the sea, of the winds and the mountains. Because they loved them their thoughts dwelt upon them, and they wished to understand them more intimately than a mere outward contemplation made possible.... But, step by step, as science developed, the impulse of love which gave birth has been increasingly thwarted, while the impulse of power (control through knowledge), which was at first a camp-follower, has gradually usurped command.

Granting, arguendo, the value of policy-oriented research, debate persists over the most effective means of deriving recommendations for the achievement of stipulated goals. Paul Goodman (1960: 261) thought that "[t]he present-day preoccupation with careful methodology is academically praiseworthy, but it does not lead to intensely interesting propositions. There is a good deal of sharpening of tools but not much agriculture." Contrariwise, Jerome Michael and Mortimer J. Adler (1933: 58), in a stinging critique of criminology in the 1930s ("the body of knowledge called criminology does not contain a single scientific principle"), thought that one of the field's major difficulties lay in its preoccupation with

practical rather than theoretical concerns. Perhaps the most modulated contribution to the issue is that of David Reisman (1962: 41) who concluded that "the track of the discipline produces in general no more seminal research than the quest of an answer to an extra-academic problem." [1]

Where does criminology stand in regard to this continuum running from total disinterest, if not disdain, for public policy to a compelling concern for work with a tie to action? The remainder of this essay explores this question with respect to the history and character of criminological research.

Setting the Stage

Academic criminology in the United States was practiced in its earliest days by sociologists whose thinking carried a vivid ministerial content. Class interests (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1974) and self-righteousness underlay these initial ventures into the study and characterization of criminal activity. These men (for such they invariably were) tended to be more universal in their definition of crime than most of their successors, reviling with equivalent venom (cf. Ross, 1907) the robber, the rapist, and the railroad magnate. The policy implications of their work clearly were utopian and visionary. The hegira to the cities must be halted, women would have to leave the factories and return to the tenements, and religion would have to resume an integral role as the arbiter of personal conduct. Immigrants were seen as a notably disruptive force in a pattern of ideal existence that was stereotypically bucolic midwestern -- for, in point of fact, the majority of the criminologists of the period, and until the 1960s, were located and/or trained in the Big Ten land grant universities.

There was little wrong with their meliorative blueprints except that, like their biblical counterparts, the early criminologists were preaching against irresistible forces. Immigration might ebb, but the process of the melting pot would balk when faced with the task of homogenizing persons of darker skin. And the movement to the cities and suburbs would prove inexorable. The criminologists could not exorcize the urban evil, nor could they dam the developing ethos which defied worldly ends and blurred the legal definition of the means acceptable to achieve such ends. The calls for new laws and sterner punishments outlined a curative plan that could only be ineffectual when confronted by the overwhelming crime-producing forces in the emerging social order.

Theorizing about Juvenile Gangs

In the period following the second World War, criminological work came to focus its most powerful efforts on urban juvenile delinquency, and most notably on gang behavior. The pioneering efforts of Thrasher (1927) had set the tone for such work. Additionally, crime itself was proving an awkward phenomena for sociologists to study, since their academic training stressed group processes rather than individual traits of persons engaged in distinctive forms of behavior, such as murder, arson, and burglary. But juvenile gangs, congregates of interacting individuals whose members sometimes violated the law, offered an attractive research foci.

Work on juvenile gangs was done in Boston (Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958), New York (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Spergel, 1964; Yablonsky, 1962), Chicago (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965; Carney, et al., 1969), and Los Angeles (Klein, 1971), all metropolitan areas. The most readily identifiable effort in this genre to evolve theory having relevance for public policy was by Cloward and Ohlin. They focused on a "total community approach," conceptualizing delinquency as the consequence of a sense of frustration arising among youths because of structural conditions within the community. Gang members were said to be unable to compete in the society's legitimate "opportunity structure." Moreover, some could not gain access to the world of illegitimate enterprise. Violent behavior, an important component of the Cloward and Ohlin schema, is attributed to membership in a "conflict" subculture, one marked by the absence of both legitimate and illegitimate opportunities, and by a failure of integration between age-levels of offenders and between carriers of conventional values and those holding criminal values (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960: 177). The call is for elimination of these conditions -- a rather monumental task. By changing identified "causes," violence would no longer be a means to achieve status, and frustration would be reduced by the provision of opportunity for satisfying achievement.

A very different picture, however, is painted by Marvin E. Wolfgang and Franco Ferracuti (1967) in their description of a "subculture of violence." These authors find violence to be the product of values favoring its use. To reduce violence, Wolfgang and Ferracuti believe, efforts need to be undertaken to disrepute, disperse, or disorganize the subculture.

What is the policymaker to do? Two descriptions of essentially the same phenomenon reach diametrically opposed conclusions with respect to significant public policy: the first, to better organize the subculture around legitimate opportunities, the second to disorganize the subculture completely, if possible. Nor does either description offer more than a glimmer of an outline for a program of

ameliorative action, much less a discussion of the possible eddy consequences of any kind of intervention that attempts so wholesale a disruption of long-standing social patterns.

Re Organized Crime

Now consider the plight of the policymaker who wishes to control organized crime. Recourse to the literature on the subject ought to confuse him/her thoroughly. Cressey (1969) claims that there exists a national organization of "Cosa Nostra" families in the United States which stringently regulates organized criminal activities. Albin (1971) finds this notion absurd; Smith (1975) too believes the idea of the "Mafia" to be a myth. Ianni (1972) locates no evidence of a national crime syndicate, but uncovers an Italian family that fits the now classic "godfather" image. Thus, the basic question of whether there truly exists an identifiable group which is "organized" for long periods of time for the purpose of carrying out criminal acts is fiercely disputed. No one argues, however, that coalitions of criminals operating in the areas of narcotic sale, prostitution and, in particular, gambling are a function of the desire by Americans to participate in such illegal activities and the venturesomeness and agility of some of their fellow citizens, most usually from declass groups, to supply them with such an opportunity. Not surprisingly, curative notions tend to concentrate on ways to suppress organized criminals; not means to eliminate organized crime.

On Involvement with Policy

In an earlier period, Robert Lynd (1939) had asked: "Knowledge for What?" But the intervening camouflage provided by adoption in criminology of a doctrine of "scientific objectivity" shunted Lynd's question into the shadows, until it was revived during the political and academic upheavels of the late 1950s and 1960s. In the field of criminology and deviance, Howard S. Becker's (1967) demanding query: "Whose Side Are We On?" dramatized the resurgence of the press for inquiry based on ideological commitment, be that commitment for the state against its defined enemies or for the "deviant" in his quest for surcease from state actions against him. [2]

Under the new temper of the times, despite their obviously lackluster archival and contemporary lode of insight, criminologists were deeply drawn into the policy arena, especially after the issue of crime became a political issue in an after the presidential election campaign of 1964. Not surprisingly, there proved to be little yield in the way of sensible, much less basic, social action.

Evaluations of criminologists' contributions to the Presidential crime, commission, for instance, are almost uniformly negative. No one denies that they had something to offer; rather, it is maintained that what they put forward was more the stuff of personal opinion and the stuff of convictions about what "ought" to work rather than recommendations based on substantial and careful empirical work. As James Q. Wilson (1975: 59) dryly puts it: "The major intellectual difficulty governing the relationship between social scientists and policymakers with respect to crime was...the problem of how to arrive at policy proposals in the absence of scientific knowledge that would support them."

Some Current Considerations

Today, the area of deterrence research is receiving increased attention in criminology, and a growing "school," concentrating on "crime control through environmental design" has come forth with recommendations regarding physical arrangements conducive to the reduction of crime. But the idea that under certain conditions the threat of punishment inhibits criminal behavior, or the notion that better lighting discourages some theft (or, at least, relocates some of it) both are somewhat "neighborly." That is, they are the kinds of ideas that plumbers and accountants (and criminologists' neighbors) employ when suggesting ways to control crime. They are based on the same principles that influence persons to wear heavy coats during the winter, employ umbrellas when it rains, and take their life jackets when they enter the lifeboat.

Such commonsensical notions only tease at the core of the issue of how, if they desire, criminologists might respond to requests for sound public policy. Research might be shifted to focus on "policy" variables, that is, variables amenable to manipulation (see the recent recommendation to this effect in Wilson, 1975. See also Demerath, et al., 1975). It does a policymaker little good to learn, for instance, that murderers in America are mostly young men (though, as we stress presently, we personally think this is well worth knowing), unless he is ready to advocate a program of massive transsexual operations and/or a means for aging male youngsters more quickly.

Take too, as a final illustration, the extremely influential paper by Walter Miller (1958) on lower-class juvenile delinquency. The central conclusion was that delinquency, and, presumably, much adult criminality is the result of a configuration of values which predisposes persons in the lower-class toward such illegal behavior. The policy thrust is that lower-class values ought to be altered.

Unfortunately (or fortunately), we do not know how to accomplish this end, and most certainly not in a manner that would be tolerable. Nor do we have any idea what other consequences might ensue were it to prove feasible to undertake such a far-reaching effort. And, lastly, of course, nobody is certain that Miller is, in fact, correct in the first place.

Both liberal and radical criminologists display a zestful concern with public policy. For the liberals, the aim is to locate programs which will bring the amount of "really dangerous" crime down to an irreducible minimum. For the radicals, the policy goal is the achievement of a socialist society where the incentive to crime no longer exists. Human beings, many of the radical group believe, "behave (or are capable of behaving) cooperatively and altruistically without the need of financial rewards or penal sanctions" (Quinney, 1976: 416). The radical criminologists, however, are radical only in their proposed changes. Otherwise, they emulate the traditionalists whose views they so scorn in pursuing a traditional criminological exercise: addressing theoretically the question of the causes of crime in order to do something about them.

Prospects

The only way in which criminal activity is going to be reduced appreciably in the United States in the reasonably near future is to, somehow, convince people that they should not behave in ways which violate the criminal laws. There are matters which contribute somewhat, but not very much, to this state of affairs. Crime can be made more difficult by the use of things such as burglar alarms and better car locks. It can be made more hazardous by additional police, karate-trained women, and random checks on drivers at Christmas time. It can be made less rewarding and less appealing by programs which provide potential criminals with skills and with access to enable them to get what they desire or need by legal means. And it can be made less common by locking up chronic offenders for periods of time, thus preventing the crimes they might otherwise commit, and perhaps also deterring potential violators. Certain criminal laws can also be repealed, thus, by definition, eliminating some criminal activity.

These, however, are at best peripheral matters, and their ingredients arise most readily from common insights rather than from social science inquiry.

Crime probably most characteristically and generally springs from human feelings of relative deprivation [3], though we would quickly endorse the early wisdom of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967: 1-2), (wisdom

which went unheeded by the Commission itself in its later pronouncements) that "[e]ach single crime is a response to a specific situation by a person with an infinitely complicated psychological and emotional makeup who is subject to infinitely complicated external pressures," and that "[t]he causes of crime, then, are numerous and mysterious and intertwined." Ted Robert Gurr (1972: 133) defines relative deprivation as the "perception of discrepancies between the goals of human action and the prospects for attaining those goals," and John Fowles (1969: 279) nicely captures the essence of the condition:

...a much more interesting ratio is between the desire and the ability to fulfill it. Here again we may believe we come off much better than our great-grandparents. But the desire is conditioned by the frequency it is evoked: our world spends a vast amount of its time inviting us to copulate, while our reality is as busy frustrating us. Are we not so frustrated as the Victorians? Perhaps. But if you can only enjoy one apple a day, there's a great deal to be said against living in an orchard of the wretched things; you might even find apples sweeter if you were allowed only one a week.

Relative deprivation springs from the essentials of social arrangements in our society, and its intensity is not going to be changed without fundamental alterations in the nature of American life. The same may be said about crime in general: it will not be reduced notably except by dramatic changes in the social system. Sophisticated "traditional" criminologists (e.g., Taft and England, 1964: 27-31; Halleck, 1967: 129; Morris and Hawkins, 1970: 49; Sutherland and Cressey, 1974: 93-110) and current Marxist writers (e.g., Taylor, Walton and Young, 1973; Quinney, 1977) all have clearly stated this basic proposition. Traditional criminologists tend to inveigh against the social and economic arrangements in the United States as crime-inducing; then they pretend that the other matters they present, derived from investigations following scientific principles, mesh with their views about the criminogenic character of American society. The Marxists issue a call for reform or revolution, and proclaim (with little or no evidence) that the upheaval they favor will dramatically reduce -- indeed, might well eliminate -- criminal activity. They also maintain (again with little evidence) that such results will be brought about not through fearsome tactics based on control and retaliation, but through the flowering of individual goodness and human appreciation for the fairness and decency of the new, rather vaguely-defined, arrangements.

Both sets of criminologists, we believe, operate in terms of a fundamental and important truth: Control of crime in any significant measure is beyond the ken of criminological inquiry which follows the track and precepts of social science. Put another way, criminology does not and may never have much to say to policymakers seeking fundamental, large scale changes in the incidence of crime in terms of conclusions derived from scientific inquiries. And nor should criminologists be expected to provide such directions; demographers, though they chart and analyze population changes, are not expected to be expert on matters of birth control, at least by virtue of their demographic training.

There is, of course, no sound reason for preferring science to polemics, and no guarantee that folklore and rhetoric will not have more powerful and meaningful impact on social conditions. Neither is there any substantial reason to maintain that criminology, as the investigation of sources of criminal law, violations of law and responses to such law, ought to be an important arena of academic concern. If, nonetheless, there are those who are inclined to dedicate themselves to understanding, as best they can, some of the elements of criminal law and criminal behavior through the use of social scientific methods, it appears to us essential that they specify -- to themselves and others -- that their work will be much as Bertrand Russell saw (or imagined) early scientific work to be: little more (but no less) than an endeavor to satisfy one's curiosity about an interesting and problematic kind of condition.

Footnotes

1. Reisman added, in an interesting aside, that "[o]nly a very rare person will be an intellectual self-starter."
2. While we have generally used the matter of "policy" in the sense of its relating to the suppression of crime or to the suppression of social and economic considerations believed to breed crime (seen either as a politically undesirable or a political excusable or commendable form of behavior), it can also be noted that criminological knowledge can serve other policy ends. Travis Hirschi (1973: 171), for instance, offers the following quotation from a (perhaps) hypothetical criminologist:

I study deviant behavior because I am interested in quadrupling the rate at which people engage in it....
I want to make one big cat house of the world. In

pursuit of this goal, I will ask the question students of deviance have always asked: why do they do it? Once I find the answer to this question, I will flood the market.

3. The term "relative deprivation" was used originally by Stouffer and his associates in The American Soldier, and referred specifically to "promotional prospects" or "chances for advancement" among non-commissioned officers in the Military Police and Air Force.

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