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Anarchy Against the Discipline

Jeff Ferrell

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Method in Criminology: A Philosophical Primer is a deceptively innocuous title for a wonderfully outrageous enterprise: a thoroughgoing epistemic attack which Bruce DiCristina launches on both the day-to-day operations of criminology and the philosophical foundations on which these operations rest. In this brief but engaging book, DiCristina carefully and ruthlessly (Marx, 1972) dismantles the basic assumptions which undergird scientific criminology. In so doing, he exposes not only their internal illogic, but their external utility for the bureaucratic control of both crime and criminology, and for the structural maintenance of inequitable social relations. In place of the dangerous fraud which is scientific criminology, then, DiCristina proposes an anarchic criminology — a criminology which embraces alternative methods and epistemologies, encourages imaginative solutions to social and

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criminal problems, and in the process continually undermines encrusted hierarchies of certainty, truth, and power.

DiCristina begins his decomposition of contemporary criminology by posing a seemingly safe, simple question: “Should any research method be granted a privileged status in criminology?” (p. vii). DiCristina’s pursuit of this question, though, quickly becomes the thread which, once pulled, unravels the entire enterprise of contemporary scientific criminology. The unravelling begins with a deconstruction of causality and causal certainty as the goals of criminology. Pitting the radical uncertainty of David Hume against the proto-scientific methods of John Stuart Mill, DiCristina demonstrates that causal assertions are in fact “little more than constructs of the imagination” (p. 15), with no firm footing in external validation.

Having demonstrated the futility of causal analysis for criminology, DiCristina generously offers those who would pursue a scientific criminology a variety of less stringent options — probability, prediction, falsification — and then proceeds to undermine these possibilities as well. Drawing heavily on Feyerabend’s (1975) brilliant attack on science and scientific method, and on philosophers of science like Kuhn (1970), Lakatos (1968), and Rorty (1989), DiCristina dismisses probability and prediction due to their reliance on wholly unreliable methods of induction and inductive reasoning. He likewise exposes the falsity of a falsification method which fails to understand that theories and the facts by which they are allegedly falsified in reality interpenetrate and intermingle. Finally, he considers the least stringent of options — that certain methods are, if not scientifically sound, at least the most plausible means for pursuing criminological goals. Again, though, he finds that fundamental epistemic uncertainty destroys any hierarchy of plausibility.

Significantly, DiCristina demonstrates that this consideration of criminology’s underlying principles constitutes much

more than an exercise in abstract philosophy. First, he shows that mainstream criminology is carefully guarded by various gatekeepers of scientific authority and methodological purity: journal and book editors and reviewers, curriculum designers, granting agencies, and others. In demanding that criminological work meet the standards of science, and excluding that work which does not, these authorities shape the discipline around narrow (and, as DiCristina argues, unfounded) definitions of scholarship (see Vaughn, Sjoberg and Reynolds, 1993; Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg, 1991; Williams, 1984). Beyond this, the framing of criminology as objective science contributes to the functional rationality of the modern criminal justice system, and is in turn “especially conducive to the maintenance of inequitable distributions of power” (p. 67). As DiCristina persuasively argues, the authority of allegedly objective knowledge, the sheen of scientific method and quantification, both construct new realms of legal domination and social control, and at the same time distance those in control from responsibility for their actions.

Against a criminology which is both unjustifiably narrow in its scope and overtly harmful in its consequences DiCristina, therefore, suggests an anarchic criminology characterized by openness, creativity, and inclusion (see Pepinsky, 1978; Tift, 1979; Tift and Sullivan, 1980; Ferrell, 1993; Ferrell, 1994). In place of the stale straightjacket of (pseudo)scientific criminology, anarchic criminology promotes the widest possible range of theories and methods, values marginal and even “unreasonable” knowledge, and revitalizes the “criminological imagination” (Williams, 1984). In place of the false objectivity of contemporary criminology, anarchic criminology employs a sort of “reflexive hermeneutics” (p. 80 – 84) which encourages both interpretive knowledge and critical awareness. In place of a criminology which is all too useful for inequitable social and legal control, anarchic criminology takes shape in humble con-

versation with those outside the domains of criminology and criminal justice.

This notion of an open, anarchic criminology sheds light on a variety of ongoing discussions within and beyond contemporary criminology. To begin with, it provides a useful framework for making sense of the various alternative criminologies which have emerged in recent years. The Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin's infamous injunction — that “the passion for destruction is a creative passion, too” (1974: 58) — here reflects the notion that the destruction of paradigmatic hegemony in criminology in fact opens up intellectual space for the creation of various alternative criminologies. If the deconstruction of theoretical certainty and methodological privilege by DiCristina and those who have gone before him has created a sort of negative space, an epistemic void, it is a void that has been quickly filled by a healthy tangle of fresh perspectives. In this sense, the plethora of criminologies which have blossomed in recent times — peacemaking, newsmaking, feminist, narrative, cultural, anarchist — constitutes perhaps a crisis of criminological certainty, but more so a measure of disciplinary life.

In unmasking the myth of an objectively scientific criminology — in realizing that we are only discarding something we never had — we are also pushed to reconceptualize research methods and methods of knowing. The “reflexive hermeneutic” which DiCristina proposes incorporates “both interactive analyses and historical-contextual analyses” (p. 81), and demands a certain degree of consensual agreement between researcher and subjects; that is, it “takes subjectivity seriously” (p. 83). For criminological researchers, this implies experiential closeness in place of pseudo-scientific distance, and epistemic humility in place of intellectual arrogance. In other words, it demands, as a requisite feature of understanding and analysis, a sort of “criminological verstehen” (Hamm and Ferrell, 1994; Ferrell and Sanders, 1995) between criminological researchers and

Williams, F. P. (1984). The demise of the criminological imagination: A critique of recent criminology. *Justice Quarterly*, 1, 91–106.

their subjects of study. And thus it is, within this model, that criminological ethnographers, anarchic criminologists, and others may know infinitely more about their subjects of study than do survey researchers or statisticians, and at the same time claim to know infinitely less.

Finally, anarchic criminology as sketched by DiCristina and others clearly informs, and is informed by, those orientations grouped under headings like “postmodernism” and “cultural studies.” DiCristina notes that “perhaps the most refreshing anarchic developments in criminology will be sifted from the work of postmodern criminologists” (p. 98), and indeed anarchic and postmodern criminologies have much in common. The epistemic assault on various forms of legal and intellectual authority; the decentering of both centralized power and the certainty which accompanies it; the rejection of metanarratives which position themselves as true and universal accounts of social or criminal life — these are the projects of postmodern and anarchic criminologies alike. And as these projects open up the constricted intellectual space of scientific criminology, they at the same time lead criminology into new domains of research and analysis. DiCristina in this sense argues that “criminological inquiry is more than a question of logic. Questions of aesthetics and morality are just as important” (p. xi). Like others (see Ferrell and Sanders, 1995), he thus recognizes the importance of aesthetic and stylistic processes in constituting both criminology and criminal action, and attempts to reclaim this “cultural trash” from the dustbin of scientific, rationalist criminology.

DiCristina might have productively explored many of these issues more fully; though he notes postmodern and aesthetic issues in the context of anarchic criminology, for example, he all but fails to follow his own lead. He might also have more thoroughly rooted his anarchic criminology not only in prior anarchist work within criminology, but in the long history of anarchist thought. Though brevity may be the soul of wit, a

hundred page book might well be expanded to include more thorough exploration, and a few more pages. In addition, the book, though simply and understandably written, would have benefited in places from a good round of editing. Utilizing conventional language in new or intentionally inappropriate ways certainly carries anarchic potential; simply writing “and so forth” or “etc.” into sentences seems more sloppy than seditious. These, though, are minor criticisms of an exciting and courageous contribution to criminological thinking. *Method in Criminology* transcends its own limitations in inventing a far-reaching critique of contemporary criminology, and imagining a humane and flexible alternative to it.

And in this spirit of anarchist imagination, I offer a closing note as to means and ends, process and product. Dicristina concludes that, given anarchic criminology’s promotion of “freedom of thought and creativity” (p. 102), an anarchic criminology benefits criminology as a whole, despite the fact that it may never be fully accomplished. I would agree, but go a step further to argue that anarchic criminology is beneficial precisely *because* it can never be fully realized. By its own logic, anarchic criminology serves best, it seems, as an unfinished and uncertain project, an emerging sensibility floating around and “against criminology” (Cohen, 1988), a critique which folds back on itself so as to undermine not only mainstream criminological rigidity but its own encrustation as well. And in this sense, we arrive at an anarchic criminology only as we continue to stumble toward it.

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