Socio-political change and crime

A discourse on theory and method in relation to the new face of crime in Germany

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Abstract. This article offers an epistemological approach to criminological inquiry that draws on political and economic perspectives to create a theoretical context for hate crimes and xenophobia in contemporary Germany. The paper concludes that criminology as a discipline may be inadequate to grasp the complexities of criminal interactions and that criminology must draw heavily on the perspectives of other disciplines. Ultimately, it may be more important to illicit ideas rather than attempt to know the truth. The author wishes to note that this paper draws on an earlier published work and was constructed post facto from his comments and presentation at the conference.

Introduction

Criminology's claim to be an ordinary and respected member of the family of scientific disciplines has been contested time and again and continues so to the present. However, to doubt the existence of criminology as a science is hazardous because it may lead to the demise of a necessary discipline rather than the enhancement, strengthening and reinforcement of the field.

Therefore a benevolent view will be used to criticize the current state of scientific knowledge about crime and penal practices. Criminology does not lend itself to a handy, neat definition, nor a definitive profile. It is impossible to discuss criminology in the singular mode. To use a concept that has not yet gained much familiarity in criminology, there exist several criminological discourses in our discipline.

I prefer the concept of "discourse", taken from Michael Foucault, as opposed to "perspective." The underlying sense "perspective" is based on a specific understanding that I would like to challenge rather to share. Talking about different perspectives implies an epistemological orientation that assumes the identity and the "reality" of the object of crime that can be treated and analyzed from different perspectives while retaining its true, real and unchangeable essence. Precisely this assumption seems to me to be an issue
in criminology and deserves to be admitted for discussion not on the margins of the discipline, but, in the center.

My arguments are organized in four steps: (1) by detailing my epistemological remarks I will propose two main orientations in criminological reasoning; (2) I will discuss the relation between criminology and penal policy; (3) I deal with crime and politics, particularly in relation to the new face of crime that is emerging in Germany; and (4) I will (treat?) the relationship between economics and crime. In other words, I have chosen to treat methodological and theoretical issues not on a substantive rather than formal and abstract level.

Epistemological options

Let me start by emphasizing an epistemological principal. I agree with the English sociologist Anthony Giddens and the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu that no empirical science has its own philosophical structure and orientation specific to its own field of research. Philosophical and epistemological conceptions about the production and acceptance of knowledge to apply to the theoretical and methodological strategies of all the different empirical areas of research. Even the long held dualistic epistemology that separates the natural sciences from their human counterparts tends to collapse in view of construction, deconstruction and chaos theory.

Indeed, there have been dramatic and far-reaching developments and evolution in the philosophy and theory of science. The most fundamental attack on the basis of modern science and all its branches surely aims at the conception of the relationship between human knowledge, on the one hand and the object of this knowledge on the other hand. It has almost become scientific common sense that the neat and straight idea of pure and uncompromised virginity belongs to those goods in the business of science that have tremendously lost their value. Human knowledge and science cannot be excluded from the philosophical finding that ultimately and irreversibly what is known and believed to be true it is stained and impregnated with human interests, goals and values though one can find a widespread reluctance in the field to accept this epistemological position. Despite this aversion, however, criminology need not circumnavigate the empire of philosophy to realize that our discipline, at least in some parts, is also haunted by these ideas. Criminologists don’t have to get too involved in the vigorous and passionate philosophical debate of Richard Rorty’s “Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature” (1979) and its sweeping rejection of the idea that the architecture of human knowledge has to correspond and has to reflect the architecture of the object and the reality “out there.”