DIVISION AWARD-WINNING
GRADUATE STUDENT ESSAY

New Right, New Left, New Challenges:
Understanding and Responding to
Neoconservatism in Contemporary Criminology

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This essay examines the rise of neoconservative thought within criminological discourse from the enlightenment ‘quarrel’ with ancient philosophy and church supported scholasticism in the 1700s to the present day. From the perspective of criminology, it is argued that there is little new about the ‘new right’ with the exception that it has managed to galvanize itself as a popular retributionist alternative among the working class in the United States, Canada, and England. The current organization of social institutions in a modern ‘risk society’ facilitates the easy re-definition of the crises of late-modern capitalism into issues of social control. It is not surprising we find the right reinvigorated and prominent under these conditions. New left realism and crime control through social development are offered as competitive platforms from which to advance critique of barbaric right-wing crime-control policies.

Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in cage
(Smashing Pumpkins 1996)

North American #1 billboard release entitled ‘bullet with butterfly wings’ – reflecting the frantic predicament and despondent consciousness of America’s new generation of convicts: generation X.

This essay is intended as a review of the impact of the ‘new right’ on criminological and criminal justice policy discourse in Canada, the United States, and England. I argue there is very little that is new about conservatism within criminological inquiry, other than its new-found ability to garner populist support among the working class. I trace the evolution of neconservative crime control policy to the Enlightenment break with ancient notions of justice. I also briefly overview the relative success of socially-conscious policy makers, criminologists, and politicians to combat the onslaught of neoconservative sentiment in England, Canada, and the United States.

Mark Twain is often quoted as saying that when the end of the world was nigh he was heading for Cincinnati, as it would be two more years before such news ever reached that metropolis. Martin Schwartz (1996) has recently observed that
Criminological inquiry often shares that Queen City quality: we tend to hear about breakthrough ideas like Marxist, feminist, and postmodernist analyses well after the rest of the academic world. When it comes to the politics of crime control, however, critical criminologists have not been so 'delinquent' in their response.

Conservative thought has preoccupied criminological discourse since the mid-eighteenth century (e.g. Beccaria 1764; Bentham 1776) but in the 1970s, neoconservatism enjoyed a dramatic rejuvenation. Since that time, critical criminologists have remained vigilant against a neoconservative onslaught that first materialized in the United States, traveled to England, and has now hit home in Canada. This essay is a report from the front.

In any attempted analysis of theoretical developments one must first ask, is theorizing progressive? Or, at least, define what one means when they discuss elements of theoretical change. Although postmodern thinkers might take umbrage at my claim (and I would cleverly muster postmodernity's own truth-claiming relativism to give my assertions their legitimacy and grounding), I believe, as Wagner (1984: 8) does, that 'cumulative theoretical growth is possible and that it occurs with some frequency in contemporary sociology.' Second, theorizing about justice, much like theorizing about any social phenomenon, can be said to revolve around meta-theoretical claims. These meta-theoretical claims are essentially 'orienting strategies' (Wagner 1984) that make assertions about the very nature of sociology or social inquiry. Meta-theoretical statements identify what is worthy of investigation and how one is to go about investigating it. As Wagner (1984) points out, orienting strategies are essentially untestable because they are not open to empirical rigor — they are philosophical (and by necessity) tautological, conceptual schemes. What exists, therefore, are a set of epistemological formulae applied to elements of the same particular phenomenon that compete for empirical support, using differing methods of substantiation. Despite this seeming detent, orienting strategies continue to fall by the wayside as new ones spring up with fresh foci of 'intellectual,' and perhaps more importantly, political support.

Indeed, meta-theorizing such as this is rampant, rich, and necessary if the 'social sciences' are to grow. Oakeshott (1993) notes that society has been said to essentially encompass the study of many different 'fundamental' elements. To Aristotle, there is no society without friendship; for Balfour the key is loyalty; to Hegel and Fukuyama it is all about pride; Marx says society is composed of political economy and class; Arnold laments for perfection; while Oakeshott believes there can be no society without love and sociality. Finally, one can add Socrates' thesis that society is about justice. Of course, society is entirely about none of these things.

SKEWING 'JUSTICE'

In 1517, Martin Luther's 95 theses, hammered onto the castle door in Wittenberg, laid the foundation for a new Protestantism that would proclaim individual salvation possible through external rewards. The first manifestations of modernist thought — that breed of individualism borne out of the ashes of church tyranny in Enlightenment Europe — had a profound effect on the logic of inquiries into deviance. In the midst of major shifts in the size and shape of Europe's population, the transformation of feudal economy into early forms of capitalism, and the