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THE NEED FOR A EUROPEAN CRIMINOLOGY?

The question as to whether there is a need to emphasise a European crimi-
ology as a separate and special category, should partly be reformulated as to
whether there is a need for a special category relative to North Ameri-
can and especially US criminology. The answer is then yes and two differ-
ent but interrelated reasons could be given for that answer.

Firstly, in a contextual and historical analysis of crime and punishment
Europe is different from North America. The continents differ as to na-
tional and ethnic composition, welfare regimes, political systems, conflicts
and cultural traditions. Even though there are, of course, large similari-
ties, European criminology has been too reliant on theories and descrip-
tions that have been uncritically imported from the US.

Secondly, it is most important at present that Europe does not become
influenced by the US in the field of penal policy, with its zero tolerance,
its tenfold prison population, its boot camps, its prisoners in irons and its
death penalty. Too often politicians and journalists and even criminolo-
gists look to the US for solutions to ‘the crime problem’. It is especially
important in a politically enlarged Europe to set the penal standards ac-
cording to West European and not US norms. The case of the Russian pris-
ons and number of prisoners is a central issue here. Another case is the
death penalty which some of the former communist states were quick to
abolish in order to demonstrate their European belonging. The principles
and rules of the Council of Europe constitute here a common value ground
for the European states.

All this goes without saying that European criminology owes much to
US criminology, both in theory construction and in empirical research. A
pledge for a strengthening of European criminology is not to advocate iso-
lolation in relation to North America or to other non-European countries. A
more self-confident European criminology should be aware of the risk of
a criminological Festung Europa.

Some more positive reasons can also be given as to why a European crimi-
ology holds out the promise of fertile and politically relevant re-
search. The case for comparative research is one example. A prerequisite
for such research is a large enough number of units that differ but at the
same time do not differ too much. The units compared must be similar in
some respects or it will not be possible to isolate the variables that account
for the differences in crime and control.

Europe seems within its borders to contain both enough similarity as well as variance that could be exploited in comparisons. An example would be the clearly similar development of crime in different (West) European countries which can be contrasted to the partly different developments of penal policy, especially prison populations. Another example could be the varying drug policies in different European countries that at least in principle allows for comparisons. Such comparisons would be more difficult in the USA which although large and with many different states, is mainly dominated by one model for drug control.

Each European country also has its own contribution to comparative research. Some possible areas for Scandinavian criminology would be criminal statistics, alcohol and crime, and the relationship of crime and control to the welfare state. With a long tradition of official criminal statistics a large amount of research for descriptive, evaluative and theoretical purposes has been produced. Nordic criminal statistics have also been a quite early example of comparative research now being followed by attempts at European comparisons within the Council of Europe. Not least have historical time series been used for testing theories and hypotheses in the Nordic countries. This stress on history in criminology is central to Scandinavian criminology in general. And this is possibly an important trait typical for European criminology compared to that of America.

The Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of research on alcohol. The background is the temperance movement that was particularly strong in the northern countries in the ‘vodka belt’ and the official restrictive alcohol policies. The relationship between violence and total alcohol consumption has effectively been demonstrated in Scandinavian criminology. Together with other types of alcohol studies this Scandinavian tradition could possibly inspire research in other European countries.

The Scandinavian countries were long regarded as the welfare states par excellence. As such they have been ideologically much disputed in the area of crime and crime control. With a changing historic situation and a clear move towards the direction of a market society, the Scandinavian countries possibly constitute a particularly good case for studying the effects of these changes. This includes effects on crime of reduction in public spending, of fear of crime, of cultural understandings of crime, and of the political use of crime and crime control.

The Scandinavian countries differ presently from other European countries in that they show relatively stable or even decreasing prison populations. They were also first countries with strong prisoners’ movements that had a clear impact on politics. And this points to a possible distinctive mark about small nations that can be an advantage. The Scandinavian countries