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BOOK REVIEW

Review of Jock Young, *The Criminological Imagination*

Cambridge, UK & Malden, USA: Polity, 2011. ISBN-13:978-0-7456-4106-5 (hardcover), ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4107-2 (paperback), 252 pages, $21.73 (paperback)

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Half a century ago, American sociologist C. Wright Mills pointed out that the "sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise" (Mills 1959:6). In his classic *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills identified in particular two factors endangering the sociological imagination in his times: grand theory and abstracted empiricism, both of which, he argued, made academics lose contact with social reality.

Five decades later, in the concluding piece of his trilogy,[1] *The Criminological Imagination*, Jock Young traces how abstracted empiricism has expanded on a level "which would have surely astonished Mills himself," and how in criminology "reality has been lost in a sea of statistical symbols and dubious analysis" (p.viii). Indeed, as Stan Cohen comments on the back cover of the book, "the terms 'criminology' and 'imagination' do not naturally belong together."

In this book, Young first identifies the rise of a new genre of criminological writing which, he argues, has stifled imagination in criminology since the mid-1980s and which has become dominant in contemporary mainstream criminology. He outlines a typical example:

> The introduction usually presents two theories in competition…followed by an extensive discussion of measures, the practicalities of measurement become more important than what is being measured, while the data themselves are usually outsourced from some past study, or bought in from a survey firm, an obligatory regression (sic) analysis follows, an erudite statistical equation is a definite plus, and then the usually inconclusive results are paraded before us (p.16).

Young goes further to criticize such positivist research, arguing "the more quasi-scientific the rhetoric, the more sophisticated the statistics, the more that they are distanced from what they are studying, the more secure they feel" (p.13).

For me, the most interesting part of Young's book is that his diagnosis of the problems in criminology are employed through his own sociological imagination, bearing in mind the

[1]The other two books are *The Exclusive Society* and *The Vertigo of Late Modernity*

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principles advocated by Mills to locate problems in their particular history and social structure. Young identifies four factors which he suggests kills criminological imagination in the United States, perhaps the global center of mainstream criminology: (1) the bedrock philosophy of pragmatism; (2) coercive interventions from government agencies; (3) bloated development of the criminal justice system encouraging research on the efficacy of very low-level administrative interventions; and (4) neo-liberal politics preferring affirmative rather than transformative policies (pp.21–23, 184).

For mainstream positivist criminology, Young underscores the problems of quantitative data in terms of representativeness, deceit, and interpretation (p.37). He argues that, while most researchers realize these problems, they "keep on skating on the thin ice" as they believe these problems would be solved when statistical techniques become more sophisticated and survey methods improve. However, Young argues, many research articles lose themselves in the statistics, "almost as if the innovation of technique, the equation, is the real focus" (p.47).

As a result of lacking criminological imagination, he stresses, (1) working class crime has been used to depict all criminality; (2) the depiction of crime in advanced industrial countries is used to describe crime in general; and (3) criminology has become Americanized (p.79). The result is "the tools of the trade become magically more important than reality itself … and the telescope becomes of greater importance than the sky" (p.viii).

Young highlights that the contemporary mainstream positivism approach of a scientific sociology of crime is particularly inadequate and impossible in late modernity, where people's uncertainty can easily be interpreted in terms of self-blame and individual failure (p.4), and both the causes of crime and the definitions of crime are under constant contest and change in a pluralist society (p.82). What we need, Young argues, is the context and narrative to make sense of numbers.

Yet Young's skills at deconstruction are matched by his skills at (re)construction. The alternative he offers is to bring culture back in (p.203) and make critical/cultural criminology the mainstream (p.222). Young argues that cultural criminology is of importance because it captures the phenomenology of crime—its adrenaline, its pleasure and panic, its excitement, and its anger, rage and humiliation, its desperation, and its edgework (p.84). In orthodox criminology, criminals are regarded as either being driven into crime by social and psychological deficits or making opportunistic choices in the marketplace of crime. They are either miserable or mundane. But Young argues that crime is an act of rule breaking involving a hostile attitude to rules, negative assessment of their justness and appropriateness, and a motivation to break them. From the perspective of cultural criminology, transgression is attractive. It is through rule-breaking that subcultural problems attempt solutions to their excluded situation (p.107). To achieve such a goal, Young further advocates ethnography as a tool heralding the "end of innocence", as this research method seeks to give voice to the voiceless, to probe deceit, and to set up a human relationship with the researched (pp.132, 140).

There is no doubt about the significance of Young's new contribution to the field. If Mills is a sociologists' sociologist, Young has successfully played his role as a sociologist of criminology. His warnings are of particular importance given the dominance of positivism in criminological writing. As Jeff Ferrell and his associates (2004:1–2) point out:

> The criminological production of numeric summaries, cross-correlations, statistical residues and second-hand data sets may serve the needs of crime control industry, the campaigns of politicians, or the careers of academic criminologists—*but let's no longer fool ourselves* (reviewer's emphasis) that they serve to make sense of crime and crime control, or move us toward social arrangements less poisoned by fear, violence and exploitation.

Although Young's analysis is mainly based on mainstream criminology in western societies, his warnings are also relevant in non-western contexts. For example, in Asia, criminology has started to take shape but is heavily influenced by American positivism. A cultural/critical criminology is more necessary than ever before in non-democratic societies like China where crime and its control are highly political.

Throughout the book, Young writes convincingly and eloquently, although sometimes he is repetitious. He is also a master of using metaphors in his very humorous writing style. For instance, he refers to the poor explanatory ability of much quantitative research as a "datasaur", a creature with a very small head (possessing only a smattering of theory), a long neck (eager on acquiring grants and databases), a huge belly (obsessed with regression analysis without realizing its limitations), and a little tail (drawing on inconclusive conclusions) (p.15). Researchers engaging the "datasaur" he dubs "fat cat[s]" (p.195). Although these metaphors are vivid and insightful, they might not find a receptive audience and may even seem insulting to some quantitative researchers. Young tries to be inclusive when he says "none of this is to eschew the quantitative" (p.224), but "fake" (p.17) or "poor" (p.224), scientificity which dominates criminology. However, such (equivocal) olive branches are overpowered by his overarching scepticism of natural science's view of society as "fundamentally flawed" (p.68).

If Young's diagnosis on why criminology is losing its imagination is correct, there is little evidence to show such situations are improving. On the contrary, the bureaucratization of research through Institutional Review Boards, one of factors making ethnographic work on crime and deviance almost impossible, is spreading all over the world. Therefore, how can we achieve such a goal?

Nevertheless, Young regards his writing successful if he can "create a moment of hesitation and contribute somewhat to the growing scepticism with regards to the widespread desire to quantify every aspect of the human condition" (p.ix). For such a purpose, he has my full support and I wish him great success, as he is a criminologist with an influence that made Rock (2007:736) observe "every time he changed his mind criminology underwent a paradigm shift".

References

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