

# What is 'Historical Criminology'? Thinking Historically about Crime and Justice

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Criminology comes in many shapes and sizes. There is comparative criminology, critical criminology, feminist criminology, realist criminology and cultural criminology, to name but a few. Recent years have seen increasing reference to a further variety – 'historical criminology' (see, amongst others, Bosworth 2001; Godfrey et al 2008; Knepper and Scicluna 2010; Flaatten and Ystehede 2014; Deflem 2015). Increasing resort to this phrase does not signal a major epistemological advance within our field: there is a long tradition of historical work in criminology, besides established bodies of historical scholarship on crime and justice arising from other disciplines (see Knepper 2016; Lawrence 2016). But use of the phrase does seem to indicate that those pursuing historical research are increasingly reflexive about articulating their place in the broader field of criminology. Given this, the moment seems ripe for somewhat broader reflection upon – and critical enquiry into – the scope, purpose and value of historical research in criminology, with a view to instilling a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of its potential. A clearer sense of what historical criminology is – along with its characteristic emphases and omissions – should help to specify and maximise the contribution of historical research to criminology. In other words, the time seems right to put 'historical criminology' on a surer footing – to outline what it might mean, and to explicate what it might do for our understanding of crime and justice.

To some, the meaning of 'historical criminology' might seem rather obvious: many would doubtless suggest that it refers to works of criminology centred on, or concerned with, the past. To my mind, this definition should be firmly resisted. Yoking historical criminology to study of the past raises several difficulties. First, there is no clear dividing line between past and present. Most works of criminology communicate data gathered previous to writing, and so in some sense 'past' (rather than, for example, speculations concerning the future). Yet most works of criminology are not overly historical. Second, many historical studies in criminology are concerned mainly not to understand the past, but to use traces of the past to comprehend and critique the present situation – most obviously (though by no means exclusively) those studies styled as 'histories of the present' (Garland 2014). Third, it is perfectly possible to study the past ahistorically – by neglecting to establish the context of a particular episode, for example, or by explaining past events with reference to subsequent developments. For these reasons, eliding 'the historical' with 'study of the past' is an unpromising point of departure for developing historical criminology.

The basic error at work here is the temptation to define historical criminology according to particular subject matter ('the past'). Historical criminology is not like police studies or victimology – it has no topical domain of its own. Instead, it is more fruitful to consider historical criminology as a mode of enquiry – an approach rather than a specialism, a disposition rather than a sub-discipline. In this vein, some scholars have

suggested that historical criminology is – or ought to be – distinguished by use of particular research methods. Thus, Mathieu Deflem (2015) has advocated understanding and advancing ‘historical criminology’ as the application of comparative historical analysis (derived from classical sociology) to criminology. Alternatively, Paul Knepper has strongly recommended that historical criminology embrace the archival craft of the historian: ‘[w]e need document analysis, in the traditional sense...the way forward [for historical criminology] requires an affirmation of traditional, conventional historical research’ (Knepper 2016: 233). Both socio-historical comparisons and empirical documentary enquiry have much to recommend them. However, given that historical work in criminology draws upon a wide range of scholarly practices and traditions, it is inevitably somewhat partisan to single out one as definitive of historical criminology. I would suggest that the advancement of historical criminology lies not in the exclusive embrace of any given method or programme, but in the assembly of a shared conceptual framework through which to make sense of and evaluate diverse historical perspectives on crime and justice.

It seems to me that the most fruitful way to illuminate and advance historical criminology is to ask what it means to *think historically* about crime and justice (Churchill 2018). By posing this question, we might avoid identifying historical criminology with a particular research method or theoretical stable. What, then, might it mean to think historically? There is insufficient space here to respond fully – yet one might argue that the essence of historical enquiry is a specific engagement with time. A wide range of researchers deal with time – from the time of the experimental scientist’s stopwatch to the temporal difference encountered by the anthropologist (Fabian 1983). To think historically, though, might mean to confront a particular kind of time – *historical time*. Historical time is a time that passes – a time of flows and transitions – and its passage fires historical enquiry. It is the time of events and processes – of contingent and consequential happenings (see Sewell 2005; Abbott 2016). It is the time of (potential) change – of transformative ruptures, incremental shifts and enduring continuities (see Corfield 2007). It is the time of tenses – pasts, presents and futures (and past pasts, past presents, past futures, etc. – Luhmann 1976). Lastly, it is an embodied time – a time of things (events, processes, lifecycles, periods, etc.), a belonging-in-time – not an ‘empty’ time which stands apart from social life. To think historically, I suggest, is to think in, with and through time conceived in these specific ways. It is a disposition – on occasion, a determination – to cast things in a certain light: to illuminate particularities amongst what is general; to reveal movement and flux where others see stasis and stability; to spotlight the significance of timing – coincidences, intervals and delays; and to see prospects for knowing and understanding as bound up with the passage of time.

It follows that historical criminology might be enriched and advanced by engaging more deeply, explicitly and creatively with concepts of historical time in criminological research (Churchill 2018). What, concretely, might this entail? Again, there is space here for just a few suggestions. First, it might lead to closer attention to questions of periodisation – to questions of division between one historical time and other. For instance, what counts as ‘contemporary’ (and what as ‘historic’) in criminological research? How does this vary across different research topics, or different national contexts? Which aspects of crime and justice are privileged by these periodising frames, and which are marginalised? Second – and relatedly – it might involve probing how the passing of time affects assessments of research data. How useful are data

from different points in time in assessing current issues in crime and justice? Is the newest data always most relevant (Lawrence 2018)? What do the answers to such questions imply about what we expect of crime and justice in the future? Third, it might promote attention to 'the past in the present' – how relations to the past inform and shape today's challenges in crime and justice. How do divergent understandings of history mediate conflicts in settings of transitional justice (Bevernage 2010)? Do victims, criminal justice agencies and others consider the 'historic' quality of non-recent offences in different ways? Fourth, it might pose more direct questions about futures in crime and justice. How have notions of urban order changed over time (Churchill et al 2017)? How do different institutions and groups articulate the future of crime, security and justice? How do contemporary security and criminal justice agencies attempt to govern the future (Zedner 2007)? Even this suggestive list of questions makes clear how historical criminology could embrace much more than conventional studies of crime and justice in the past.

The arrival of the term 'historical criminology' is to be welcomed – not so much in itself, but for the opportunity it affords us to address directly what it means to think historically about crime and justice, and why we might wish to do so. Like all approaches, historical criminology has its characteristic strengths and shortcomings. Yet if it is to join fully in the 'rendezvous discipline' of criminology, then it would be aided by a clearer statement of its conceptual foundations. I have argued that a rich and nuanced understanding of historical time should be central to this project. Historical criminology should not take its place as a specialist sub-field, absorbed with study of the past – however absorbing such study can be. Instead, it should aspire to infuse work across the field of criminology with the insights of historical thinking. If historical criminology approaches to this objective, then criminology as a whole will be much the richer for it.

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