

Prefiguring a better politics of crime: The practice of democratic under-labouring

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In *Public Criminology?* Richard Sparks and I argued that criminological interventions in public life are best interpreted as efforts to forge what we called ‘a better politics of crime’. We also offered a sketch of our preferred – democratic and egalitarian – vision of such a politics. How though are we to best make sense of, and develop, that project in the febrile political climate of today?

To pose this question is to be confronted by this predicament. On the one hand, ‘crime’ has slipped from the prominent place it once occupied in British political culture and no longer has the salience it assumed during the ‘law and order’ years of Thatcher and Major, and then Tony Blair. To be sure, specific problems mobilize opinion, grab headlines, rouse emotions, and prompt calls for action - knife violence, stop and search, sexual assault, hate-crime, and so on. A debate about police resources bubbles away, threatening to boil over. New challenges – from child sexual exploitation to internet fraud – vie for attention and resources. But crime is today less often mobilised by politicians seeking office or by governments to shore-up their legitimacy. Nor does crime serve as a condensing symbol of unsettling social change in anything like the manner it did during 1980s and 1990s (cf. Girling et al., 2000). It doesn’t dominate elections, loom large in legislative programmes, or colonize public discourse. Crime, in short, is no longer an organizing principle of political authority and social relations.

On the other hand, many observed properties of the ‘law and order’ era have today become features of political life *tout court*. Populism is not just a driver of penal politics; it is on the rise in political movements and rhetoric across the democratic world. Calls for tough action and authoritarian solutions are no longer limited to crime; ‘strongman’ leaders are being elected across the world, and political scientists uncover disturbing evidence of democratic ‘deconsolidation’ (Foa and Mounk, 2017). Scepticism towards experts, and the trashing of ‘liberal elites’, is no longer a local distaste targeted at judges, the Parole Board, or criminologists; it has become a structuring feature of politics marked by fake news, post-truth and tribal epistemology (we have our facts, you have yours). ‘Fear of crime’ may have receded as an object of enquiry and policy; but fear and its attendant emotions – anxiety, resentment, anger, blame, hostility – have found new referents (notably migrants) and are ripe for political exploitation. Democratic life today ‘appears increasingly unstable, riven with mistrust and mutual intolerance, fuelled by wild accusations and online bullying’ (Runciman, 2018: 1-2). It is largely free of inclusive, reasoned, ideas-based engagement with public problems.

There are several ways criminologists can respond to this situation. One temptation is to take advantage of the space created by the reduced politicization of crime and labour quietly and patiently in the service of more evidence-based and humane criminal justice. Much work of this kind is being done in sentencing, prisons and re-settlement, for example. An alternative is to cast an eye at the Brexit - and Trump - dominated political landscape and retreat to the default criminological position of gloom-laden critique. Criminologists have, after all, been engaged for some time with problems that are animated by anger-fuelled populism and authoritarian rhetoric. I want to offer here the outlines of a third more hopeful option: one that I am currently developing into a book (Loader, forthcoming). That option entails embracing (rather than resisting) the intertwining of crime and politics and moving criminology into sustained dialogue with political ideas. It seeks - via close, critical engagement with a range of political ideologies - resources for building what today can seem like a remote, even utopian prospect: a democratic and egalitarian politics of crime.

In *Public Criminology?* Richard Sparks and I offered a comparative sociology of criminological engagement with public life. We outlined several styles of such engagement – those we named the scientific expert, policy advisor, observer-turned-player, social movement activist and lonely prophet – and assessed their virtues and limits as modes of contributing to a better politics of crime. Seeking to retain the value of each of them, we made a case for criminology's role as a 'democratic under-labourer' – deploying its theories, methods, empirical findings, collective wisdom and ways of seeing to raise the quality of political argument about crime and contribute to a more inclusive and deliberative politics of the criminal question.

I now want to extend this idea of democratic under-labouring. The task is no longer mapping and appraising styles of criminological engagement – the question of *how* to disseminate criminology and engage its publics. Rather, I am concerned with the substantive issues and conflicts that structure criminological and public discourse on crime, with the *stuff* that actors who assemble around crime are disputing. I ask how advocates of competing ideological formations (conservatism, liberalism, social democracy, populism, cosmopolitanism, various strands of identity politics, and so on) might each conceive of the idea of a better politics of crime. The aim is to arrive at a fuller understanding of what is at stake politically when crime is under discussion and why the crime question is so difficult to cabin within the domain of 'what works'.

Public Criminology? floated the idea that the democratic under-labourer operates as a 'diplomat' shuttling between camps with the aim of 'mediating criminological difference' (Loader and Sparks, 2010: 144). I now envisage the diplomatic task being to shuttle through and between the range of ideological traditions that struggle to determine how crime is thought about and acted upon, seeking to obtain a clear understanding of their take on how crime is best governed: the preferred vision of order and its sources, how legitimate authority is understood, how the role and limits of the state, market and community are cashed out, and so on. But like any diplomat, the democratic under-labourer practises in the service of some wider goal: in this case that of a more inclusive and deeper democracy. In this regard, the methodology

of interpretation deployed is pre-figurative. The practice of deep dialogical engagement with competing ideologies has built into it a substantive part of what I imagine a better politics of crime to entail. Democratic under-labouring is in this respect not simply a method. It is a political ethic committed to the following three virtues.

The first is what I term – following Russell Muirhead (2010) – *ethical partisanship*. This builds upon what in *Public Criminology?* Richard Sparks and I called humility. We used humility to signal not timidity in claiming to know things about crime and its control, but a readiness to use that knowledge to enhance public discourse and policy-making rather than seeking to trump other considerations that legitimately bear on responses to crime. The aim of criminological engagement should, in other words, be to deepen public conversations about crime, not to foreclose them with expert-led calculation. The virtue I am seeking to practise extends this idea. It entails on the one hand a set of commitments: in the present case to a vision of crime governance that is inclusive, deliberative and egalitarian. It demands on the other hand, a stance of reflexive distance from one's own commitments, the capacity to realize that they may not have all the answers, that they are partial, revisable always capable of being improved via deep encounters with other ways of seeing. This is the disposition that Muirhead calls 'ethical partisanship'. It is a stance that combines and keeps in creative tension the desire to commit to a cause with a willingness to view that cause from a distance. It is a stance that is able to 'glimpse the reasonableness of opposing causes' (Muirhead, 2010: 151) and treat one's political adversaries as opponents to be engaged in dialogue not enemies to be defeated.

The second virtue of democratic under-labouring is *curiosity*. This requires a serious, sustained effort to engage with and listen to one's opponents and their visions of crime governance, not just talking to or at them about one's own vision. Practising such curiosity acts as a counter to the well-documented tendency of people to herd with the like-minded, to build and inhabit social and political echo chambers, to preach to the choir. This tendency – it has been found – increases among more educated (Mutz, 2006). It generates social fragmentation and polarization that is today exacerbated and cemented by social media. In her recent book, *Strangers in their own Land*, Arlie Hochschild sets out – as a committed liberal sociologist from Berkeley – to seek a deep appreciation of the social worlds and political commitments of conservative-minded (and mostly Trump-supporting) residents of Louisiana. Her ambition was to transcend the settled disposition to 'know' one's political opponents 'from the outside' and to jump the 'empathy walls' that stand 'an obstacle to deep understanding of another person' (2016: 5). Her concern was to learn about the 'deep story' that enables people to make sense of their lived experience and to disclose the 'feeling rules' (ibid: 15) that predispose us to show care and concern for certain people and issues, and deride, censure or oppose others.

My enquiry seeks to jump such 'empathy walls' at the level of ideas. This calls on us to break the habit of conferring with those with whom we share interests and broadly

agree, and avoiding engagement with alternate worldviews. It demands that we eschew the temptation to build straw versions of competing political arguments, to create a series of Aunt Sallys lined up only to be knocked down. It requires, instead, the interpretive reconstruction of best-case accounts of the range of ideological traditions that contest the crime question. The aim of such reconstructions is to grasp these traditions in the first instance from the inside and to appreciate their respective commitments and their cognitive value and emotional appeal. The aim is not to trash, but to be open to alternative ideas. Democratic under-labouring requires a practice of listening to others that seeks to understand alternative visions of crime governance and is open to the idea that one may learn from, and be surprised by, the encounter. The aim is to discover points of affinity and overlap, as well as to identify the lines of dispute and aversion.

The third virtue of democratic under-labouring one may call *civic care*. The aim of engaged dialogue is not the production of some cosy consensus, or conflict-effacing pluralism. The emerging vision of a better politics of crime is emphatically not an integrated amalgam of competing political traditions. Rather, the democratic under-labourer brings to the question of crime governance a critical disposition whose purpose is to discern what a better politics of crime looks like from the standpoint of competing ideologies and deepen understanding of why crime and its control matters politically. It is in this sense that democratic under-labouring entails care for, and a commitment to enhance, the fabric and quality of democracy. As Joshua Miller (2012: 402) puts it: 'citizens can care for existing democratic politics by engaging one another in reasonable debate, thereby forestalling sclerotic policies and dogmatic beliefs'. The civic ambition of such engagement is one that seeks a course between the idea that deliberative practice can and should result in consensus and the claim that such practice can do no better than be a site of agonistic contest. Rather, the purpose is to tease out and clarify what is at stake when social actors assemble around crime and its control and to thereby appraise the full ambit of political questions that are in play when crime is discussed and acted upon.

What I have sketched here is but one way to respond to the present conjuncture, and to frame and advance a better crime politics. Doing so, however, enables us to consider what it means, and why it matters, to practise criminology as a craft. We are called to reflect on the properly political nature of criminology's subject matter and invited to appraise the political ideas that shape crime and justice. We can also locate reasons to refuse the notion that crime can or should be de-politicized or reduced to questions of instrumental calculation. To think about crime is to get embroiled in disputes about alternative plausible worlds.

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