
But What Did We Learn? Searching for Meaning in the Age of Trumpism

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[Former New York Police Commissioner Michael Murphy] wasted no breath on amenities, nor on homage to civil liberties. Reflecting the change in public mood, he excoriated the Warren Court for hampering law enforcement while "vicious beasts" were loose on the streets. He protested that police were being forced to fight by the Marquis of Queensbury Rules, "while the criminals are permitted to gouge and bite" (Cipes, 1966).

"When you see these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon. You just see them thrown in – rough. I said, 'Please don't be too nice'...Like, don't hit their head and they've just killed somebody, don't hit their head. I said, 'You can take the hand away, OK?'" (Eversley, quoting Donald Trump, 2017).

In its November 1964 issue, Harper's Magazine published a now-classic article by Richard Hofstadter, the doyen of United States intellectual history. First presented at Oxford's Herbert Spencer Lecture a year prior, *The Paranoid Style of American Politics* remains a remarkable piece that, in Hofstadter's words, speaks to an "old and recurrent phenomenon in our public life which has been frequently linked with movements of suspicious discontent" (1964: 77). While the piece emerged out of the explosive, emotionally heightened mid-1960s, hot on the heels of that year's 'Freedom Summer', it was not liberalism that animated Hofstadter's study. Rather, the anxiety and discontent he spoke of emerged out of an increasingly aggressive strain of conservatism. The New Right of the 1960s carried with it a sense of national declension and a feeling that the tethers of traditional social, cultural, and legal moorings were snapping under the strain of societal change. In characterizing the zeitgeist of the political right, Hofstadter described a group of Americans who felt that the nation had fallen under the control of "a network of Communist agents, just as in the old days it was infiltrated by Jesuit agents" (ibid). The mid-1960s saw a Deep State

paranoia for the pre-Internet age, one in which Americans believed “the whole apparatus of education, religion, the press, and the mass media is engaged in a common effort to paralyze the resistance of loyal Americans” (ibid: 82)

In the same month *The Paranoid Style of American Politics* reached newsstands, Americans faced a Presidential election that effectively represented the cultural schisms of the moment. Earlier that year, in the midst of national debates over police brutality and anti-integrationist violence throughout the country, Arizona Governor Barry Goldwater emerged as the Republican Party nominee for President, trading on an anti-statist campaign platform that sought to dismantle many of the Democratic Party’s recent nation-building projects, including that year’s Civil Rights Act. Goldwater’s hostility to liberal politics electrified a significant portion of the party base, leading Hofstadter to note “how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority” (ibid:77). This rightward shift was of major concern to party moderates, however. Civil rights pioneer Jackie Robinson, a lifelong Republican, wrote in his 1967 autobiography that, “during my life, I have had a few nightmares which happened to me while I was wide awake. One of them was the National Republican Convention in San Francisco, which produced the greatest disaster the Republican Party has ever known—Nominee Barry Goldwater,” and saying of his time at the convention “I now believe I know how it felt to be a Jew in Hitler’s Germany” (Delmont, 2016).

Goldwater lost that November’s election in decisive fashion, but the nomination of such a polarizing figure struck a chord with American crime historians and historical criminologists. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, scholars such as Jack Kenny Williams, William Chambliss, and Joseph Gusfield showed increasing interest in the roles of policing, courts, and incarceration in upholding classed, gendered, and racialized forms of social control throughout history, discussions that seemed especially pertinent in the wake of Goldwater’s “crime in the streets”-focused Presidential campaign. In the wake of the 1964 election, now-classic monographs such as Kai Erikson’s *Wayward Puritans* (1966), Roger Lane’s *Policing the City: Boston 1822-1885* (1968), David Lewis’s *From Newgate to Dannemora* (1965), Anthony Platt’s *The Child Savers* (1969), and Hugh Graham and Ted Gurr’s edited

collection *Violence in America: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (1969) explored critical questions relating to how, why, and for whose benefit society has historically developed modes of crime control. This is not to say that historians and criminologists looked to Goldwater and consciously thought to interrogate the past through the lens of the New Right. The weight of national political events seem to have promoted certain critical questions that came to characterize the field throughout the latter-half of the 1960s. Living in a country divided over civil rights and political revanchism, it seems that scholars felt compelled to conduct research on mob violence, rough justice, and the constructed nature of social deviance. Such works stand as testaments to the ways in which political realities shape the feelings and interests of those who practice the craft of historical criminology.

Historical Criminology in the Age of Trump

Much as the crime historians of the 1960s could not avoid confronting the New Right, it is difficult for contemporary American social scientists to avoid the reverberations of Trumpism. Invoking the spectre of shadowy, often ill-defined 'anti-American' or 'globalist' forces, Trump has repeatedly referred to himself as the 'Law and Order' President and characterized Democrats as 'the party of crime', going to great lengths to express his admiration for police, his distaste for undocumented immigrants and the Black Lives Matter movement, and his belief in the swift and decisive repression of groups he has deemed dangerous or harmful to America. These practices have only further polarized national discussions relating to race and racism, crime, violence, and social control, bringing to mind the heated debates over nativism, racism, anti-Communism, and homophobia that have animated much of American domestic policy. Ultimately, two overarching questions seem to persist throughout much of American historical criminology since 2018: 'Is the present-day discourse and practice of criminal justice better, worse, or consistent with the past?' and 'When it comes to criminal justice discourse and practice, has the United States entered a new epoch'?

While the idea of national declension may feel pertinent during a period of political tumult, historical criminologists have consistently opposed the idea that the present - despite Donald Trump's continuous shattering of political norms - is demonstrably

worse than the past. This is partly due to the subjectivity of the question, but also to the fact that most of the pressing criminal justice crises of the moment, such as racial profiling, mass imprisonment, and intrusive state surveillance, emerged long before Donald Trump entered national politics. Paul Bleakley (2020) has offered fascinating insights into the way that the 'aggrieved whiteness' identity politics of the modern alt-right are not unique to the age of Twitter, exploring the ways in which the movement shares elements of groupthink mentality and indoctrination strategies with the far-left Weatherman movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly, a study by Lilley, Leon, and Bowler (2019) employed archival data from the New York State Reformatory for Women to show the extraordinary consistency of Americans' highly racialized and moralistic attitudes toward prostitution since the Progressive Era. Rocque and Duwe (2018) have even challenged the notion of rampage shootings as a particularly recent phenomenon, locating the antecedents of the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando back to the mid-1960s.

One of the more powerful historical criminology monographs of the Trump era, especially in regards to discussions of political and cultural continuity, is Jeffrey Adler's *Murder in New Orleans: The Creation of Jim Crow Policing* (2019). Despite its period-specific title, Adler has produced a work that effectively unpacks critical elements of present-day policing debates through an investigation of New Orleans' adjustment to broad demographic and economic changes throughout the early twentieth century. He paints a fascinating portrait of the early history of police militarization in the South, discussing the Crescent City's purchase of motorcycles and submachine guns, the rise of "shoot to kill" policies, and officers' disproportionate tendencies to kill Black suspects. Nearly a century later, the tragic deaths of George Floyd, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and many others remind us that Adler's story remains ongoing. Scott Phillips (2020) also contributes to the history of police and their firearms, explaining that the adoption of increasingly powerful weapons is not simply a technical or practical matter, but is part of a broad cultural shift that has found American police increasingly acting, dressing, and behaving as "warriors," despite that being "antithetical to the notion of community policing and [threatening] police legitimacy" (p2). Speaking directly to the events that unfolded in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, Phillips grounds discussions of police militarization in trends that extend back to the nineteenth century.

Admittedly, historical criminologists have rarely discussed the President by name, responding to the challenges posed by Trumpism via subtext or through careful connections between past and present. But concerns about the issues central to the Trump Administration's engagement with crime and deviance - racial injustice, gender inequality, the substandard treatment of detained undocumented immigrants, and excessive violence in policing - are ubiquitous within historical criminology and direct much of the recent literature. What scholars have found is that, for the most part, while the temperature of American federal politics may be at its hottest-ever point, the criminological crises of the present seem in line with the broader trajectory of American history. If anything, the present is unfortunately too familiar and, in their social history of New York's Rikers' Island jail, Jayne Mooney and Jarrod Shanahan (2020) valuably note that the ubiquity of oppression and violence in American society have made certain crises utterly banal, even in a period of time that feels to many completely unmoored from normality. Mooney and Shanahan call for a "moment of aporia, when the status quo loses its self-evident legitimacy, and hegemonic accounts of reality are demoted to so many options, standing as equivalent (at best) alongside radical solutions to social problems" (p299). But what if we have already moved into this new episteme?

Have We Broken From the Past?

Given that the President's divisive and baldly hostile rhetoric have challenged longstanding notions of suitable political discourse, one might be forgiven for assuming that Americans have entered a new political epoch. The country's journalistic commentariat seem to have leapt on the idea of a new political normal, with the conservative New York Times opinionist David Brooks (2016) invoking Thomas Kuhn by referring to Trump as a 'model crisis' for the Republican Party, someone whose inevitable failure would signify a 'revolutionary phase' for American conservatives, launching the ideology into a new age. While the future is not yet written, and Brooks may ultimately be correct, American historical criminologists have found little of substance in such notions of paradigmatic change when it comes to criminal justice.

Christopher Seeds' (2019) recent discussion of the history of life imprisonment without parole (LWOP) is an outstanding example of the way in which American historical criminologists have reframed the seemingly exceptional politics of the present as totally ordinary. Seeds argues that LWOP, a cruel and ineffective punishment, is not unique to the modern era, showing "how lifetime punishments took shape and operated in five classic penological paradigms". Sentences that outlast a defendant's lifespan have, in recent centuries, been "more than merely present in these political projects and penal schemes, [as] perpetual confinement was integral, embodying the principles of each approach and at times acting as a hinge upon which the system of punishment depended" (p306). By confronting the reader with an unexpected historical reality, Seeds' findings push scholars to reimagine the uniqueness of sentencing attitudes in the late twentieth century. Similarly, Xenakis and Cheliotis (2018) challenge common academic assumptions regarding the broader economic impulses driving American carceral trends. Drawing on two decades of scholarship that largely situates neoliberalism as either the driving force behind, or the backdrop of, American mass imprisonment, the authors question neoliberalism's assumed direct importance in shaping policy. Speaking to scholars' "typically opaque treatment of the intersections between neoliberalism and imprisonment," Xenakis and Cheliotis do not argue against the notion's importance per se, but instead "cast doubt over the pertinence of neoliberalism as an organising concept for analysis of emergent penal currents" (p187).

Ashley Rubin (2018) has perhaps offered the most effective, and anti-epochal, case for seeing the criminological present as sharing continuity with the past, no matter how remarkable the present may seem. Building on Goodman, Page, and Phelps' (2016) agonistic interpretation of American penal development, Rubin's article contends that even a paradigmatic shift in criminological practice has a prehistory, an "ideational period in which an idea is created at the margins of criminal justice before manifesting on a wider scale" (p192). Rubin notes, for instance, that the 'proto-prisons' of the 1790s had themselves developed over the course of at least a century and slowly evolved in fits and starts, only gradually taking on their now-recognizable form. This is an important insight as we look back at Donald Trump's influence on the field of criminal justice, as it reminds us that today's politics are inextricably linked to those of the past.

As remarkable as they may seem, the Trump years have likely not changed the character or the nature of American criminological exploration in a foundational sense. And for his part, Richard Hofstadter would surely have seen Trumpism as totally predictable, emerging out of the same instincts in American reactionary politics that, over the past three centuries, have framed Communists, Masons, Jesuits, and Illuminists as imminent threats to the nation and which remain part of a cultural script as old as the Republic itself.

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