



Pat Carlen and Leandro Ayres França (eds): *Alternative Criminologies*

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Some of the Dionysian tribes described by Ruth Benedict (1934) in *Patterns of Culture* celebrated heroism only when warriors managed to win a battle in which they deliberately put themselves in a disadvantaged position: for example, if they fought with one arm only, having tied the other behind their backs. Helped by peyote, the combatants, in fact, fought against *their own limits*, pursuing a psychic state that would lead to a deep religious experience. I do not know many criminologists who use peyote or mescal, nor have I met colleagues whose career is guided by numinous intent. In this pungent collection of essays edited by Pat Carlen and Leandro Ayres França, criminologists seem to belong to a similar Dionysian tribe, inhabiting a pueblo under siege and impelled to defend themselves from the onslaught of overwhelming enemies.

Alternative Criminologies celebrates an array of diverse perspectives, focusing on cutting-edge topics while showing how creativity and sensitivity to problematic social issues can bring an academic discipline into unpredictable labyrinths of knowledge. In the opening chapter, “Alternative Criminologies: An Introduction,” Pat Carlen rightly notes that criminology absorbs concepts from jurisprudence, law, mathematics, and sociology, as well as from anthropology and psychology. Criminology is also inspired by cultural studies, feminism, history, politics, and urban geography, while placing increasing emphasis on aesthetics, cinema, emotions, fiction, and imagination. Carlen warns that without a nuanced definition of “alternative criminologies,” the term could well apply to reactionary counter-reformers who advocate savage punishments and gross violations of human rights. Hence, Carlen draws a distinction between *conservative* and *critical* alternative criminologies. The aim of the latter is said to be the deconstruction of “the meanings of crime and criminal justice so as to expose the relationships between social structural inequalities, criminal justice, laws and human identities” (p. 4). Critical alternative criminologies, in brief, do not simply pursue competing interpretations of criminal justice; they work primarily for the democratic achievement of social justice.

The twenty-seven chapters included in this book further this critical alternative criminological approach, while addressing old and new areas in which the discipline engages:

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aspects of culture, consumerism, cybercrime, environmental or green concerns, fear of crime, feminist analysis, the market, punishment, political economy, queering, and sexuality. More specifically, among the issues and areas addressed are the death penalty, hate crime, media, risk, terrorism, violence against women, war crimes and atrocities, and white-collar crime. All the authors are well-known academics, too numerous for me to mention them: apologies. It is curious, however, that this “creative fragmentation” is deemed proof of an enrichment of the discipline, as it could also be regarded as an effort by criminologists to hastily, if not narcissistically, create new schools of thought. This notwithstanding, all contributors to this volume have worked and continue to strive toward the potential improvement of social justice, particularly when their analyses and practical suggestions are received by practitioners and law makers. This may reveal success as well as failure, however. In other words, it may show that the distance between conservative and radical criminologists may be contracting less because mainstream practitioners and policy makers are fascinated by critical criminologists than because the latter are coopted into (or seduced by) mainstream theories and strategies. This possibility is pursued in the concluding chapter to this outstanding collection.

“Alternative Criminologies, Academic Markets and Corporatism in Universities,” by Pat Carlen and Jo Phoenix, concludes this edited volume with a bang. Indeed, readers might be advised to *begin* reading the entire volume with this chapter and then proceed through the rest. And it is here where the Dionysian metaphor becomes fitting. We are reminded that the academic ideal of open scientific inquiry is threatened by the marketization of research, the corporatism of universities, and the obsession with quotation metrics by publishers: “Research is governed by academic managers according to the interests of the university as determined by government and markets” (p. 452). The National Research Assessment Exercises ignore innovative projects, while paying exclusive attention to the sums that fund them. The impact of creativity is impossible to gauge, while that of statistics can be, rightly or wrongly, assessed inaccurately. Theoretical research based on politically contentious questions, as a consequence, is discouraged, as are all projects regarded as irrelevant to the policy concerns of current governments. Moreover, success in securing large grants may induce loyalty toward funding bodies and governments with a view to securing more of such grants. Publishers, in their turn, tend to exert a form of “citation coercion,” which consists of persuading authors to refer to articles and authors published previously in their journals so as to raise their impact factor. In my own experience, citation coercion is also exercised by reviewers who want their name quoted before declaring the articles they review “acceptable.” And yet, in this hostile environment, the strength, originality, and power of critique do emerge: “though under attack, often inhibited and occasionally silenced, the human capacity for critique can never be destroyed” (p. 469). Granted: few scholars would disagree.

I wonder, however, what anthropological observations would Ruth Benedict formulate if she had a chance to study this variegated group of scholars. Would she be surprised by the different forms of independence or resistance to mainstreaming that the group displays or would she declare that the criminological tribe is slowly moving from the Dionysian toward an Apollonian community, where limits are respected and wisdom is achieved through quietism and accommodation?

Reference

Benedict, R. (1934). *Patterns of culture*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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