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IAN LOADER AND RICHARD SPARKS, *Public Criminology? (Key Ideas in Criminology Series)*. London: Routledge, 2010, pp. 196, ISBN 9780415445504, £29.99 (pbk).

Written during a period of burgeoning interest in normative questions about the public role(s) and function(s) of social scientific research in the twenty-first century, *Public Criminology?* by Ian Loader and Richard Sparks presents a welcome contribution to contemporary debates concerning the possible and desirable interactions between academic knowledge and public engagement (including discussions of what is entailed by the latter term in the first place), focusing specifically on the production, consumption of criminological knowledge in a contemporary context.

Best described as a sociological analysis of criminological public engagement rather than a championing of a particular form of any such engagement, *Public Criminology?* is animated by a concern to bring some kind of harmony to a discipline marked by internal conflict and division as criminologists seek to negotiate the delicate path between intellectual autonomy and critical rigour, and political relevance and policy engagement, particularly in what is described as the 'hot climate' of contemporary public discourse around crime and penal policymaking in the twenty-first century. As such, *Public Criminology?* reflects an attempt to critically question the role of criminology in conceptualising and realising in practical institutional terms a collective 'public good', questioning amongst other things the extent to which, and ways in which, criminological knowledge can be considered to be 'for' the public good.

The book is organised into five chapters, preceded by an introduction. In the introduction, the authors outline the focus of the text and its underlying aims as being 'to begin to *examine* those ways in which criminologists, and those who produce knowledge about crime and its control under allied banners, have sought, and might in future seek, to engage with and influence public responses to crime' (p. 2). They also use the introduction to offer an exploration and explanation of their choice of title for the text, suggesting the invocation of the term 'public' serves the dual purpose of both begging the question as to whom criminological knowledge is produced *for*, whilst also indicating a normative interest in the role criminological knowledge might play in constituting the 'public good' in contemporary society.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of the status of criminology in the contemporary climate, highlighting the juxtaposition of an increasing recognition of criminology as an academic discipline with its waning influence within the political and policymaking spheres. It outlines various responses by criminologists to overcoming the increasing division between the production of academic knowledge and realising its practical influence, identifying five models of criminological engagement within this climate, characterising key ways in which the public role of criminology has typically been interpreted and embodied by various criminological actors: (i) the *scientific expert*; (ii) the *policy advisor*; (iii) the *observer turned player*; (iv) the *social movement theorist/activist*;

and (v) the *lonely prophet*, each with their own advantages and, as noted by the authors, pitfalls.

Chapter 2 situates this current climate of public criminological engagement and the authors' own interest in 'public' criminology within the broader context of increasing debates surrounding the role of (social) scientific knowledge in the 21st century, exploring, in particular, Michael Burawoy's work on 'Public Sociology'. As the authors note, where once academic expertise and scientific knowledge provided the 'gold-standard' of knowledge, beyond contestation and reproach by a public audience, increasingly the contemporary social world demands growing accountability to, and consultation with, public audiences in the production and application of academic knowledge. Thus, the focus of the chapter is to situate their argument within a broader acknowledgement of the 'strained and complex' relationship 'between scientific knowledge and social action' in contemporary society (p. 57).

In Chapters 3 and 4, the authors provide a sociological analysis of contemporary criminological engagement, seeking 'to offer some contextual reconstructions of how criminological ideas have engaged with changing environments of action' (p. 58). Chapter 3 analyses the production and utilisation of criminology in a contemporary context whereby 'crime' constitutes a 'hot' topic within public and political discourse. In particular, it outlines how criminologists have variously responded to the increasing politicisation of the topic of crime by predominantly either seeking to 'insulate' criminological research from public discourse around crime; or have embraced the heating up of the topic of crime as a site for potential site for emancipation, with the role of criminology being to engage with public discourse and challenge existing policies and structures of power and control. Chapter 4 then provides a more detailed exploration of the various 'cooling devices' deployed by criminologists in order to insulate criminological research from public discourse in a context of the increasing *politicization* of issues around crime. The authors identify and focus upon four such cooling devices: (i) 'affirming legality and justice'; (ii) 'discovering what works'; (iii) 'inventing technique(s)'; and (iv) '(re)insulating penal policy' and critically reflect on the advantages and limitations of each of these respectively.

Through this analysis, the authors ultimately reject attempts to insulate criminological knowledge from public and political discourse whilst recognising the important lessons they contain for thinking about establishing meaningful engagement by criminologists in contemporary public life. They conclude by suggesting that, rather than seeking to insulate criminological knowledge from political discourse, the aim for criminologists in the twenty-first century is to consider how criminological knowledge can meaningfully contribute to 'shaping public responses to problems that ought to be recognised and affirmed as inescapably political' (p. 114).

Taking this premise as its starting point, Chapter 5 presents perhaps the heart of Loader and Sparks' argument and gives an insight into their own envisaged style of criminological engagement: that of the criminologist as '*democratic under-labourer*' (p. 124). Outlining what, precisely, is meant by this vision of

criminology (summarised in the phrase 'intellectual ambition, political humility' (p. 132)), Chapter 5 concludes with a series of imaginary conversations between proponents of the different models of criminological engagement identified in Chapter 1 and the proposed criminologist as democratic under-labourer.

Through these conversations, the authors identify potential responses by the different criminological approaches to their own proposed model of engagement and offer defences to potential critiques they may face from different quarters. Suggesting the role of the democratic under-labourer serves to foster dialogue between the different models of criminological engagement, the book concludes with a consideration of how, through this approach, criminological might more effectively engage in public and political life in practical terms.

The debt in this text to Burawoy's (2005) influential work on 'public sociology' as energising such discussion is both clear and acknowledged by the authors. As the authors rightly point out, the question of '*what criminology is for*' (p. 17), has animated criminology since its inception and is reflected in competing paradigms of criminological research and engagement throughout its history. However, questions regarding the normative status of criminology have received renewed and reinvigorated interest in the contemporary context, partly reflecting the background conditions in which criminology is operating within contemporary society and, specifically, the increasing politicisation of issues of crime and punishment.

The central impulse of this book critiques the tendency towards entrenched identities and positions which have characterised the discipline of criminology and which threaten both its intellectual goals and political impact. In particular, the authors highlight a number of key tensions within the contemporary criminological and penal-policymaking terrain which exacerbate this problem, not least the contemporary production and utilisation of criminological knowledge in what is termed a 'hot climate'.

Crime today, the authors suggest, constitutes a heavily politicised topic and a key tool in electioneering. As such, public understandings of crime and justice are increasingly informed by mass media accounts and 'public opinion' from which criminological actors are either marginalised or experience pressure to develop policies that reinforce such perceptions, rather than actively challenge them. In so doing, however, such policies serve to construct the problem of crime and its solution in particular ways, with the result that alternative modes of thought and patterns of understanding and engagement are further jettisoned.

Thus, we witness an increasing polarisation within criminology between those approaches which seek to normatively question and critically reflect on this 'heating up' of crime and penal-policymaking, at the risk of losing relevance and legitimacy, and hence impact, on penal policymaking; and those which seek to 'cool' it down, by using academic knowledge and research to try to engage with the 'crime problem' as identified within public discourse, at the risk of sacrificing the critical, reflexive and visionary impulse that lies at the heart of the criminological enterprise.

Faced with a discipline increasingly divided and struggling to negotiate the terrain between normative theorising and political relevance, the solution to this tension, Loader and Sparks aver, lies in a sixth vision of criminological engagement, which they term the *democratic under-labourer*. Taking this term from Locke, rather than cleaving to entrenched identities and reactionary positions, the task of *democratic under-labouring* is 'to mediate criminological difference' (p. 144) through respectful, if nonetheless critical and reflexive, engagement with the plurality of perspectives that form the broad discipline of criminology, in order to foster a 'better politics of crime and its regulation' (p. 144).

Arguably, through *Public Criminology?*, the authors are striving to engage in a form of *praxis* in that the text itself presents an attempt at *democratic under-labouring*. Its purpose is to inform debate without prescribing change, and thereby to offer a reinvigorated vision of public criminology without decreeing it; to reflexively engage in the constitution of criminological knowledge in the 21st century; and to reflect critically on the production and utilisation of such knowledge, not for its own sake, but to encourage more deliberation and dialogue, communication and cohesion, on such matters.

There is no doubt that the role of the democratic under-labourer seems an attractive one for creating harmony and dialogue between currently divided, divisive positions within criminology. However, one wonders if the danger of such an open approach lies in the risk of lapsing into relativism or naïve optimism regarding the best way of engaging criminology in public life; the question remains as to how it can be enacted in practice. On the one hand, as indicated above, this text seems itself to constitute a form of *praxis*: an embodiment of the kind of position being described and hoped for. On the other hand, the reader is perhaps left wondering how, other than through this one text, the kind of public criminology anticipated might be realised. The danger is that the normative call for democratic under-labouring might simply fall on deaf ears, or become just one more specialism in an already-fractured discipline. Whilst a charitable interpretation suggests that, in the early stages of the development of ideas, it is important to lay the theoretical groundwork before initiating change, the somewhat tentative and suggestive rather than assertive tone adopted in this text leaves the reader questioning where the impetus for such a change might come from. For those working criminologists who are currently negotiating the competing demands of intellectual curiosity with public engagement, or with fulfilling their intellectual aspirations with carving out a career, it is all too easy for this text to become consigned to a particular corner of academic interest without extending its reach further.

This is undoubtedly an interesting text, which would be of particular interest to advanced level undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as established academics. It would be of particular interest and use to those interested in ideas of public sociology and the contemporary role(s) of public knowledge. However, given the ideals of fostering dialogue amongst those engaged in questions of crime and justice more broadly expressed in the book, it is interesting to reflect on the context of its own production and situatedness in a particular academic

terrain. This is quite clearly an academic text, aimed at a largely academic audience and one might question the extent to which it can reach audiences (e.g. policymaking criminologists) outwith the academy, but with whom, the authors argue, we must equally seek to engage.

The question now must be how can we translate this vision of public criminology into a practical reality, and perhaps even (reflecting the democratic aims of this text) *should we?* And this, perhaps, is where the real contribution of the text lies. It necessarily requires criminologists to consider normative questions regarding the role and function of criminology both as it is and as we might desire it to be. It requires us to consider the extent to which academic criminology is marginalised from public discussion and criminal justice policy debate and to consider the costs and benefits of such marginalisation. Equally, it requires us to consider the means by which we might engage with public policymaking whilst retaining our intellectual autonomy. Through the figure of the democratic under-labourer, it offers (without necessarily prescribing) one solution as to how different criminological knowledges might engage with one another, in so doing, constituting publics, informing policy, and realising a dialogic, respectful criminological practice.

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Reference

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