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Deviant Knowledge

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Deviant knowledge

Deborah Drake and Reece Walters

The ability to openly challenge and express criticism of governing authorities is a cornerstone of progressive democratic societies. To 'speak truth to power' generates accountability and transparency where elected and appointed officials, and their governing rationalities and ideologies, are questioned and held accountable. Critical voices of dissent are often marginalized, suppressed and threatened, however. Recent international headlines – such as 'World press freedoms have deteriorated... warning of a new era of propaganda' (Reporters without Borders 2016); 'Art is under Threat: Oppression against Freedom of Expression is Dangerously High' (Freemuse 2016); and 'The demise of academic freedom. When politically correct "speech police" are given the upper hand' (Walpin 2015) – all attest to the ways that democratic freedoms in speech and artistic expression are under attack and subjected to systematic censorship and erosion. Such attacks on thought and expression have been witnessed in various historical regimes underpinned by a politics of intolerance and fear. More recently, the post-9/11 period has seen commentators critical of the 'war on terror' silenced and neutralized and their comments 'dismissed as traitorous acts of sedition' (Walters 2003:132–4).

For some commentators, the demise of civil liberties is associated with heightened terrorist threats and the perceived need to regulate and monitor 'offensive speech'. For Schoenwald (2001), the 'authoritarian ascendancy' or the 'rise of modern American conservatism' has had a pervasive influence on media, global economics, political party politics and the production of knowledge. Therefore, to offend with words or creative expression is seen as a catalyst that may incite radical fundamentalism and disrupt the social order. This position is examined comprehensively in Mike Hume's influential book *Trigger Warning*, where he argues that:

Everybody in Western public life claims to support free speech in principle. Yet in practice free speech is on the endangered list. Freedom of expression today is like one of those exotic animals that everybody says they love, but that still appear to be heading inexorably towards extinction. Everywhere from the internet to the universities, from football to the theatrical stage, from out on the streets to inside our own minds, we are allowing the hard-won right to freedom of expression to be reined in and undermined. (Hume 2015:12)

If academics, journalists, artists and other critical commentators are prevented from openly challenging and critiquing governing authorities, then how are the ruling elites held accountable for their decisions, policies and actions? Along these lines – how are notions of democracy, human rights, social justice and humanitarianism advanced and progressed for the global good? If, as Hume argues, free speech is becoming constructed as a form of 'extremism' – as a danger to social and political stability – then those who exercise democratic rights to critical free speech also become demarcated as 'extremists' or 'deviants', and the words and values they disseminate are indeed forms of 'deviant knowledge'. Institutional and anti-institutional violence. Moreover, what is to be gained by suppressing and regulating those who question the status quo and advance alternative and unorthodox non-state narratives? Those with political and financial power will aim to minimize and suppress, and distort truth and knowledge in the process. There are numerous historical examples of totalitarian and dictatorial regimes that have acted in this way. The justifications for mediating and synthesizing truth are

often entangled in the narratives of the 'dangerous other' or the new terrorist threat. Such threats are often amplified, however, and used to legitimate censorship for a perceived greater good – at the expense of robust and transparent public discourse.

Within criminology, deviant knowledge seeks to promote critical voices and challenge the priorities and policies of conservative and socially unjust state and corporate enterprises. It is a project of resistance and dissent: one that promotes critique, challenges political power and certain concepts of social order; and one that pursues truth from a position of intellectual autonomy and as both critic and conscience of society (Scraton 2001; Walters 2003). It is a term that originates with the writings of Manfred Brusten, who described the ways in which deviant knowledge (criminological discourses that challenged the existing political and social order) was being systematically neutralized, marginalized and 'policed' by what he called offensive and defensive controls of criminological research (see Walters 2003; Brusten 1981).

Scraton (2001) argues that deviant voices are found in critical criminological narratives that must serve contemporary society as a form of 'knowledges of resistance'. Such knowledges, he argues, cannot be generated under government or corporate contract, where they are often silenced or neutralized. They require criminologists to stand outside the often lucrative and profitable domains of commercial criminology and actively assert a position of resistance. Correspondingly, Christie's (1973) quarrelling society thesis serves to remind us that effective and productive policy often emerges from the contestations and struggles between individuals, governments, interest groups and communities when debating responses to complex social problems. It is the contestations of those unafraid to challenge and critique governing authorities that provoke and stimulate creative and socially progressive social policy (Drake and Walters 2015). Christie argued that the post-World War II era created a period of 'intellectual tranquillity' that was counterproductive and regressive. It was a time that exacerbated the decline in social quarrelling, the political and social conflicts, contestations and turmoil involving widespread citizen participation that sparked intellectual innovation, creativity and social change. Central to Christie's argument is that a society is not living unless it engages in healthy quarrelling and intellectual conflict.

In a similar vein, Stan Cohen advocated the need for deviant criminological knowledges in *States of Denial* as a way to avoid the risk of 'intellectual denial', where:

well-functioning minds become closed, and the gaze is averted from the uglier parts of their ideological blueprints and experiments. Or they allow themselves – for tangible rewards or an eagerness to please the powerful – to be duped into pseudo-stupidity. These shameful records of collusion go way back. (Cohen 2001:280)

In sum, if academics are to become mere information gatherers for government – and not prepared, or encouraged, to critique the role of the state, or challenge new modes of conservative governance, or address questions relating to social and political order in fear of losing contracts – then the academic criminologist is reduced to a co-conspirator in the policing of knowledge.

The promotion of new narratives in cultural criminology, green criminology and other critical criminologies – and with their attention to patriarchy and power, human rights and transnational justice, as well as state and corporate crime – provides important voices of resistance against embedded criminology. If criminology is to survive and be more relevant, it

must embrace diverse knowledges of resistance – indeed, criminology must become a knowledge of resistance (see Walters 2003). This calls for a politics of engagement that is often prohibited by the proscriptive and regulated culture of government and corporate-led research that many academics are seduced by in the name of income-generation or evidence-based decision-making.

The ongoing development and diversity of critical criminological narratives sparks optimism. This – combined with the increasingly large and vocal number of social movements – suggests that people are hungry for critical voices: voices that represent the struggles of everyday lived experiences and that systematically challenge the increasingly untruthful and abusive powers that govern us. The critical voice is constantly under threat and engaging in critical scholarship can be a bruising experience. In an environment where income-generation dominates the academic agenda; where government bodies are purchasing and shaping university courses to meet their needs; where corporations are funding academic projects and personnel to maximize their profits; where corporate-style conferences discourage robust and critical dialogue; and where public servants more and more determine and regulate the type and nature of academic scholarship – it is high time to be buccaneers and to resist existing trends. Just as C. Wright Mills' *The Sociological Imagination* challenged the 'inhibitions, obscurities and trivialities' of mainstream social science, it is vital that a critical 'deviant' criminology continues to challenge mainstream discourses on crime and criminal justice in the construction of a criminological imagination.

To be critical in an academic context does not mean restricting one's research and scholarly activities to debates within an intellectual discipline. It also involves questioning the paradigms within which the discipline sits – the assumptions, concepts and categories through which it frames its concerns – and the methods by which it seeks to arrive at an understanding of the world. To be a critical criminological scholar who produces deviant knowledge(s) is to look beyond official crime statistics and criminal justice policies and practices that are constructed through seemingly unquestionable mechanisms of state governance and control. It means challenging knowledge(s) about crime and criminal justice that might seem unquestionable. It also means upholding the values of free speech – taking risks and holding those in power to account when others will not.

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