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Telling and showing with criminology

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“Tell all the truth but tell it slant”, Emily Dickinson

A lot of academic writing tends to take the short form of essays, journal articles and research reviews. It is factual and expository and the more we work as academics the more familiar with it we become. One of the potentials I see in convict criminology is to de-familiarise criminological writing by including more personal experience. This is not because experience of imprisonment qualifies convict criminologists to speak with more authority or insight than anyone else, or necessarily provides them with unique skills in ‘telling it like it is’. I don’t think I would want to be operated on by a heart surgeon whose only qualification was that they’d had a heart attack, but close and intimate first-hand experience of criminal justice can provide opportunities to give criminology a bit of a slant, to make it strange and fresh again. I think it can do this by shifting the balance from ‘telling’ to ‘showing’: ‘don’t tell me the moon is shining’ said Anton Chekov, ‘show me the glint of light on broken glass’. The difference may account for the relative fortunes to be made, respectively, from crime writing and criminological writing - two very different ways of telling stories.

The best stories, fact or fiction, are experienced and remembered for the way they affected us. There are no guaranteed formulas for registering criminological stories in the imagination so that they are experienced more fully, and there are probably many more ways of failing badly and embarrassingly than there are of ways of succeeding, but in a book on convict criminology to be published by Policy Press in 2016 I intend to try. Each chapter of *Convict Criminology: A Personal Introduction* begins with a short vignette in which I assemble various experiences that led me to convict criminology. One goes something like this:

Gross moral turpitude, criminology and other stories

When Oscar Wilde first went to the USA in 1882 he was asked at Customs if he had anything to declare and he allegedly replied ‘Nothing but my genius’. It wouldn’t be quite as simple as that for a convict criminologist, even if they were to be as extraordinarily wonderful as Wilde. Several months before my first trip to the USA to attend the American Society of Criminology annual conference in Atlanta, Georgia, I submitted my application for a visa to the US Embassy in London. It was July 2007. Not content with the usual Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) enhanced disclosure form, the embassy required me to pay for its own independent procedure commissioned through the Metropolitan Police. I duly complied and the completed documentation earned me an invitation to an interview at the Embassy.

For most other members of the British contingent of criminologists who travel to the USA for such an occasion, the procedure is relatively straightforward. The visa waiver agreement allows them to sweep through customs and immigration, passport in hand, and declaring their genius only if they see fit.

I fretted about the interview, and fantasised gloomily about the bright lights that would be shone in my face, the traps and trick questions I might stumble into. What was the test? How could I pass? I recalled the story told to me by a friend, a political activist, who had travelled to Los Angeles

in the early 1980s for a conference, only to be stopped at customs after she told them that she worked for the London Underground. She was held for several hours while they searched their database of subversive organisations with that recklessly frank piece of information. They had associated London's subway system with the Weather Underground, a rare species of left wing revolutionary organisation in the US, sometimes referred to as The Weathermen, to confuse British customs presumably.

The US Embassy is an imposing building, and at the time of my visit, ringed with concrete, anti-attack bollards. Like at an airport, there were complex electronic screens to pass through, involving the removal of shoes, belts and all electronica. After two hours sitting in a large and orderly waiting hall, my number was called and I approached a booth expecting to be taken down a corridor and into the room where the bright lights and men in suits would be waiting. A small, inoffensively dressed woman smiled at me through a glass grill and greeted me politely, confirmed my details and asked if I still took drugs. 'No, of course not' I dissembled weakly, suppressing the impulse to wink or elaborate criminologically. 'I see' she said, 'you've got various convictions but they are all a long time ago, so I don't see that it should be a problem, but all this information will be passed back to the Department of Homeland Security. They will make the decision, and your passport will be returned with the visa, if appropriate'. She didn't exactly say 'Thank you. Have a Nice day', and neither did I but it was all very civil.

I waited, and waited, and at the beginning of October, three weeks before I was due to fly out my passport was returned to me with a visa and letter saying that despite my conviction for 'crimes of gross moral turpitude' I was welcome to visit the USA. I had to look up 'turpitude' in the dictionary. 'Depravity'. 'Vileness'. That's laying it on a bit thick, I thought. These Americans!

Disembarking into Atlanta airport's arrivals lounge my partners in criminology went one way, the visa waiver way, and I went another, and it was quite a revelation. On my own, I was escorted to a large waiting room and my excitement at arriving in America flattened as I sat among a motley collection of the distressed, the displaced and the anxious waiting for my number to be called by the man in uniform at the counter. A young woman was involved in a lengthy argumentative discussion with one of the officers about the expired dates in her paperwork. I was tired, and nervous but I didn't seem to be in as bad shape as most of the people in the room. The uncertainty, the insecurity, was palpable and I felt it catching at me. What if my papers weren't in order and they take me away? What does that even mean? How have I never been in a situation where I've asked myself that question? Another heated discussion broke out further down the counter. It occurred to me that this bordered on what French migration and human rights activists refer to as the condition of 'les sans papiers' - to be 'without papers' is to be, at any moment, without status, a nobody with nowhere to go. Utterly contingent. Ontological insecurity, I realise, can be a lot more than that awful feeling I get the night after I've had too much to drink. It's structural not chemical.

My number is called and I feel nervous even as I try to act confident and relaxed. The man at the counter is not so nice. 'What's this conference then?' he asks. 'The American Society of Criminology' I say, hoping he doesn't ask more questions, 'why' questions. 'Uhuh' he looks at me, pauses for dramatic effect, and says 'ok, all done here'. I rejoin my British criminology colleagues who have been waiting patiently for me to reappear. I am in the USA, land of the free, home of the brave and Convict Criminology.

The next year I make the mistake of thinking of returning to the American Society of Criminology conference, and that my application will be more straightforward. I apply earlier, in June, but for reasons I cannot fathom and am not entitled to an explanation for, the process is far more protracted, though I am told I will not need to be interviewed. My passport with obligingly agreed visa is returned in the first week of December, a month after the conference, and long after I have cancelled flights, registrations and accommodation.

It's seriously small beer compared to the profound and devastating insecurities endured by the 'sans papiers', migrant labourers and refugees. There is no equivalence with their experiences but the

experience is educational nonetheless. My passport is not quite up to the mark. Those criminal convictions never fully erased. I think as a young man my recklessness was at least in part a testing of my various privileges; middleclass-ness, whiteness, masculinity - just how durable could they be? The sociologist in me tells me one thing. My PhD says she's right. My convictions tell another story. One I try to tell.

References

Earle, R. (Forthcoming 2016) *Convict Criminology: A Personal Introduction*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
