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PUBLIC CRIMINOLOGY]

**ENGAGING AND DEBATING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC
CRIMINOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION**

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In his 2004 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy implored sociologists to engage “publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern” (2004: 5) and to “promote dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope” (Burawoy et al., 2004: 104). This edited volume is dedicated to discussing, debating and illustrating how academic research can contribute to public discourse, understanding and action in regards to crime and its control. Specifically, the issue provides empirical accounts of the ways in which academic research can: i) evaluate and reframe cultural images of crime and criminals, ii) evaluate and assess rule making and breaking, and, iii) evaluate and critique the justice system.

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Burowoy's public sociology has been described as "advocacy on behalf of 'the public', against trends of exclusion and injustice, and for human rights and social justice." (Carlen *et al.*, 2000: 206). Public sociology builds upon C. Wright Mills' (1959: 226) conception of the sociological imagination, which required sociologists to situate human biography in history and in social structure to understand how personal troubles are connected to public issues. Mills encouraged researchers to actively link the micro to the macro and to recognize that if sociology is "to be of any significance, [it] must link the inner lives of people to the structures of power and ideology and the historical period in which they live" (Young, 2012: 3). Mills' sociological imagination, therefore, draws an important distinction between 'personal troubles of a milieu' and the 'public issues of social structure' (1959). Without a sociological imagination, personal troubles remain that—"personal, individual and isolated pains often tinged with self-blame and doubt, with imaginative help, the personal troubles of the many become collective issues: the personal becomes the political" (Young, 2012: 4).

Criminologists employing a "criminological" imagination have been able to draw attention to harm and inequity (Young, 2012). For example, Jeff Ferrell (in this issue) links the personal challenges individuals face in regard to finding permanent work and housing as resulting from broader societal and economic structures. The changing structure of society, he argues, has led to the further marginalization and criminalization of the underclass. Specifically the political and economic changes in North America are casting people *adrift*. Thus, the changing structure of North American society has forced people into non-stop dispersion; rendering *drift* a contemporary crisis.

For academics to move beyond merely identifying harm to *using* their research to address or change the identified harms requires a "political imagination" (Burowoy, 2012). For Burawoy (2012), a "political imagination de-

depends on an organic connection between sociologists and their publics... [and] ... is an essential intervention, necessary to save the university under siege from state and market” (2012: x-xi). In this regard, a political imagination requires researchers to move beyond strictly conducting university funded research to, instead, build and extend relations with the communities they are studying in order to address and fight social inequality and harm. As Barak (2007) explains, “working with those in the ‘struggles for justice’ allows ...criminologists to help shape the ‘progressive’ discourse, language and representation of crime and justice, and ultimately the policies that are adopted and acquiesced to by societies in their ‘fights’ against crime and injustice” (205). Both Andrew Hathaway and Patricia Erickson’s commentaries (in this issue) on the regulation of cannabis in Canada highlight the importance of academic research for informing policy development, but also the challenge academics face in the political arena. For example, Andrew Hathaway’s provides a reflexive critique of his own challenges in influencing Canadian drug policies. In this account, he explores how public policy discussions concerning drug use have progressed little, and considers the federal government’s commitment to upholding prohibition despite contradictory research evidence suggesting that the time has come to end the war on drugs. In this commentary, Hathaway discusses the challenges of academic research informing public policy and, in the process, identifies broader issues facing public criminology.

There are few topics of greater public concern than crime, criminality and crime control. Media accounts of crime can spark “moral panic” (Becker, 1967), and “as a consequence, people often have stronger opinions on crime and justice than on much of the subject matter of sociology, economics and political science” (Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2010: 730). For example, Brennan, Chesney-Lind, Vandenberg and Wulf-Ludden’s article in this

issue on media portrayals of female drug offenders draws important attention to the role media may play in the dramatic and persistent racial/ethnic disparities that pervade the American criminal justice system. Further, Christopher Schneider's article, on the use of social media (in his case facebook) during the 2011 Vancouver riots illuminates the importance of media in public understanding of crime and its control. In this account, Schneider illustrates how social media was used to (1) document the events as they unfolded and (2) shape the outcome of how the riot was defined and interpreted in news media reports.

As a result of the emotionally charged discourse concerning crime and its control (Garland 2001: 10) "legislators and politicians...have replaced academics and researchers in influencing media reports and criminal justice policy" (Uggen and Inderbitzin, 2010: 730). This 'perceived failure' in criminology to influence social policy has led to a growing interest in public criminology where academics can attempt to shape "the ways in which crime has been apprehended and governed" (Loader and Sparks, 2011: 7) and to promote the development of "sound policy and averting moral panics precipitated by extreme rare cases" (Uggen and Inderbitzen, 2010: 738). For example, Bernard Schissel's article (in this issue) on human rights, children, and youth highlights the need for criminologists to broaden their mandate and speak to issues of social justice prior to addressing issues of crime and justice.

Public criminology, we believe, provides a vital opportunity for researchers to counter the current political climate of anti-intellectualism, which has emerged in recent years. Anti-intellectualism is characterized by mistrust and derision aimed at intellectuals, scholars, and scientists and the argument that the majority of research is of no practical importance. This contempt for intellectuals and for scientific research and a reliance on ideologically driven policy is perhaps best reflected in the recent words of the Canadian Prime Minister when responding to reports of a

foiled terrorist attack on Via Rail in the spring of 2013. On Monday, April 22nd, 2013 police arrested two men alleged to have Al-Queda connections and support who planned to plant bombs on a Canada's Via Rail train traveling between Toronto and New York. This arrest came shortly after two bombs exploded near the finish line at the Boston Marathon on April 15th, 2013 killing and wounding several people. During an interview on CBC with Peter Mansbridge, Justin Trudeau, the leader of the Liberal Party, was asked how he would respond to the Boston bombing if he were the Prime Minister. Mr Trudeau stated that he would begin by offering his condolences to those affected by the bombing and then he would begin by looking for the root causes of terrorism because until one dealt with root causes one could not deal with the question of why individuals become involved in terrorist activities. Prime Minister Stephen Harper quickly attacked Mr Trudeau's comment and stated:

Our security agencies work with each other and with others around the globe to track people who are threats to Canada and to watch threats that evolve. *I think though, this is not a time to commit sociology.* Global terrorist attacks, people who have agendas of violence that are deep and abiding, are a threat to all the values that our society stands for and I don't think we want to convey any view to the Canadian public other than condemnation of this kind of violence, contemplation of this violence and our utter determination through our laws and through our activities to do everything we can to prevent it (Cohen, 2013, emphasis added).

In order to consider how we, as academics, could engage the public in our work as a means of countering the pervasive climate of anti-intellectualism, we developed a public criminology course at our university with the aim of bringing important social, political and personal matters in

discussion with multiple publics³ (Sanders & Eisler, 2014).

In our minds, public criminology is about the “construction of and participation in more and more public spaces of critical intervention”...as Castree (2006: 408) puts it, “Lots of small contributions matter as much as a few big ones.” (Oslender, 2007: 112). By engaging multiple publics in dialogues on important social and criminological issues, we hoped to counter what Oslender refers to as the “all pervasive, penetrating power of 24/7 media” and its use by political actors to construct social problems and create social and criminal justice policies based on ideological foundations and not methodologically solid research (2007: 101). The articles and commentaries included in this special issue were part of our departmental engagement in public criminology. These readings showcase the work of a number of scholars whose empirical research provides critical evidence that is vital to a better understanding of criminals, crime and its control.

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