

THE STORY OF CRIME: BIOGRAPHY AND THE EXCAVATION OF TRANSGRESSION

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'Anti-social behaviour:: inertia, resistance and silence.' Jean Baudrillard (1990:10).

The history and dominant themes of cultural criminology have been discussed and rehearsed elsewhere, especially in the recent cultural criminology edition of *Theoretical Criminology* (Volume 8, Number 3, 2004). Here I want to concentrate on one particular recurring theme: the prioritizing of biographical accounts of everyday life - with their ability to produce superior descriptions and explanations of crime and transgression - over and against quantitative accounts of crime, criminality and criminalisation that re-produce numerical life rather than everyday life. Since the emergence of academic disciplines structured on 'rational' lines, there has been a seemingly irrevocable disjuncture between scientific knowledge and everyday experience, with the former dominating research into the latter. This quantitative rational scientific approach is epitomized by those government agencies that I have described elsewhere as 'fact factories' (Presdee: 2004), their role being the production of 'suitable' facts to support governments and their existing and future political agendas. But too much information is no information. The more facts we have the less we really know. Facts are in reality a form of disinformation, an obesity of the system that distorts rather than informs and gives shape. They become the 'sacred shit' of a rational society. (Baudrillard 1990:43)

But why this aversion to and wariness of institutional/political rational scientific research? Firstly I have a problem with its unquestioning sense of what crime is and is about. For administrative criminology, crime is unproblematic in that it is simply that which is described and measured. There is a certainty contained within this approach. After all you don't measure a room for a new carpet if you don't know the nature of its length, breadth and area. We measure what we know and know of. If we know of crime we can measure it, record it, quantify it. For administrative criminology, crime and disorder constitute taken for granted categories, unproblematic in their reality.

My second objection is quite simply the way that political parties have the ability to influence both what is researched and how it is researched through the mobilisation of their own power. The rational research methodology is employed precisely because it masks this process of mobilization. As Pfeffer (1981: 13) observed: 'The emphasis on rationality and efficiency and the de-emphasis on power and politics assures... (the general public)... that ... power... is indeed, being effectively and legitimately employed.'

These seemingly 'invisible' practices of power hidden within the seams of science create an ethos of the 'necessity' for and the 'naturalness' of a particular pattern of research - a pattern that reflects no more or less than the power and privilege contained within political processes. The result is a nurtured ignorance of the reality of 'real' life, 'lived' life, 'everyday' life. The aim of 'power driven research' then is to prevent people actually raising issues which politicians do not

want raised. It is the power to prevent issues actually reaching the agenda or the decisional arena and hence becoming matters of open dispute. It then becomes obvious to all, for example, that we need research into the 'evilness' of 'youth' rather than the oppression of young people; the evils of drink and drugs rather than why we take substances that might even include enjoyment and the excitement of transgression. As the process of political cleansing takes place so the 'political' is removed from the research process leaving, once again, everyday life problematised and pathologised, where people rather than the political process become the subject of research. Yet, from a political perspective, we are all acutely aware that nothing has really started simply because nothing has really come to an end. The political promises of progress, equality, and liberty are woven into the seams of history alongside the threads of failure.

It is Lukes' (1974: 24) 'third dimension of power' that is important here. As criminologists we need to consider 'the many ways in which potential issues are kept out of politics [and research] whether through the operation of social forces or through individuals' decisions. This moreover, can occur in the absence of actual observable conflict, which may have been successfully averted. though there remains here an implied reference to potential conflict.'

Contemporary 'spin' shows how power from time to time seeks to avoid resistance by either presenting 'facts' in certain ways or simply by not creating them.¹ It is the role of administrative criminology to help in this process. But the 'rational' research agenda has intrinsic problems in that the difference between rationality and irrationality is that the rational social world *must* make sense whilst the real world of everyday life rarely does. Quantitative research must in the end 'add up' and show clearly and conclusively what is going on and what is to be done. As Scott Lasch remarks:

In a society that has reduced reason to mere calculation, reason can impose no limits on the pursuit of pleasure- on the immediate gratification of every desire no matter how perverse, insane, criminal or merely immoral. For the standards that would condemn crime or cruelty derive from religion, compassion, or the kind of reason that rejects purely instrumental applications and none of these outmoded forms of thought or feeling has any logical place in a society based on commodity production (1979: 69).

In a sense Lasch alludes here to the lack of compassion in calculative research approaches, and how such methods are unable to either grasp or understand crime or the causes of crime. This is a methodology where lived experience becomes 'pathologised' or 'marginalised' by the official accounts of crime. For most state researchers (but by no means all) there exists a 'poverty and marginality of experience to which they have no access, structures of feeling that they have not lived within (and would not like to live within). They are caught then

¹ For a recent example of this practice at work within British criminological research see Tombs and Whyte (2003).

in a terrible exclusion from the experiences of others.' (Steedman 1986, p17; Ferrell 1997)

This exclusion of the researcher is a form of revenge by the researched, personal compensation for their exclusion from mainstream society. It is a refusal to 'give up' easily one's life for analysis in order that political cures can be administered. The desires that are part of us all lie buried deep within everyday consciousness not readily available for measuring and monitoring. Yet these emotions are essential elements in understanding the story of crime, they need to be excavated and explored in a way that does not denigrate the lived experiences, the emotional and social responses of the human beings that make up what we call 'society'. E.P. Thompson (1976: 110) once pleaded elegantly for politicians to stop 'dispensing the potions of analysis to cure the maladies of desire' when he observed that 'the motions of desire may be legible in the text of necessity and may then become subject to rational explanations and criticism. But such criticism can scarcely touch these motions at their heart.'

Indeed it is the sheer stunning theatre of rationality in such research that in the end seems obscene. An excrescence of facts descends on social science burying everyday life. As Baudrillard remarked, in typical style:

the rational systems of morality, value, science, reason, command only the linear evolution of societies, their visible history. But the deeper energy that pushes even these things forward comes from elsewhere. From prestige, challenge, from all the seductive or antagonistic impulses, including suicidal ones, which have nothing to do with a social morality or a morality of history of progress (1990: 72-3)

How best, then, to 'excavate' what Gramsci called the 'précis of the past,' the narratives of everyday life? (Gramsci 1971: 353) We are all the products of everyday life and as such we all have everyday stories. Our identity expressed in the notion of 'I am' contains, as John Berger (1980: 379) memorably pointed out, all our histories, all our biographies, all that have made us what we are. In this sense we are living histories that can be excavated both by ourselves and by others. Elsewhere he commented that everyday life often contained the 'endless longing of the underprivileged that history and life be different from what it has been and what it still is.' He went on to say that much of life is 'concerned with loneliness' and the 'contemplation of time passing without meaning' (ibid: 90-1). This 'unbearable lightness of meaning' that characterizes contemporary life leads politicians to make meaning from administration and order, priests from spiritualism, and the dominated from consumption and hedonism. Contrary to Berger's approach the everyday is not devoid of meaning making, quite the opposite, indeed it is the very place where a sense of popular history is carved and constructed through everyday experience, something clearly recognized within other cultures where 'wisdom' is seen as more valuable than 'knowledge'. Our 'excavations' of everyday life seek to recognize that experience and wisdom can tell us more than official research understandings of life experiences. These experiences lie not just in language but, as Collins suggests, in the created cultural artifacts of social groups.

Experience as a criterion of meaning with practical images as its symbolic vehicle is a fundamental epistemological tenet in African-American thought systems. (Collins1990:209)

It is here in the hazy ephemeral 'being' of everyday life, where 'all that is solid melts into air', that social excavation must take place as we concern ourselves with social lives already formed. In a sense we have arrived too late to know and are left with attempts to excavate that which has already happened. Now we must be involved in the appropriation of the social where we examine both our own past and the past of others. When we look at ourselves, our own creations, it is with the 'seeing' of 'one stranger on another'. We can examine our own histories through our own biographies, but it is not enough to 'speak' history, we must historicise, analyse, that which we describe. (Auto)biography is the raw material, our raw material, it cannot stand on its own, it needs to be 'worked on'.

Our aim in taking a biographical and auto-biographical approach is to take the defiance, the anger, the resentment, the loneliness, the love, the fun, the warmth of individual lives and attempt not to celebrate it but to recognize it as real, as real history, as lived life that will stand as history longer than all the facts created and concocted by all the contemporary alchemists of numerical life who suck the human from life leaving behind the residual numerical skeleton of humanity.

Biography takes that hidden within more traditional academic discourses and brings it to life. If the self is intrinsically social then writing about the 'self' is a sociological act, an interrogating of the 'truths' of experience. As C. Wright Mills (1959: 8) maintained 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise.' And I believe it is ours too.

We need both an honesty in what we write and a sociological imagination. Those who transgress are not 'present' in the official 'vocabularies' of crime which have already been appropriated by ideology. The official languages of crime condemn the criminal before trial and our aim must be to re-insert the subject into the discourses of crime. Crime itself is constructed deep in the cracks that make up everyday life. (Auto)-biography transforms lived life into a linguistic form that becomes the object of study and once again the subject and the object are as one.

Those actions that make life bearable, that are oppositional, resistant to the dominant culture and its moralities are now able to be 'put' before us. People –our subjects- are not simply the 'blind' result of economic relations. In negotiating social structures they both interpret their lives and invest meaning in their lives. Yet there are no unlimited options for them, there are only so many possibilities open to them, including crime and transgression. In this way they act both individually yet within a collective, a class.

We can, then, bring into the light the lived process of increasing isolation and deepening poverty with its first forms of lived resistance. Vice and transgression have an energy that perverts reality, creating the spectacle of debauchery (anarchic life) that shatters Platonic life. Here is the anarchic

carnival of everyday life where 'joy and the fulfillment of desires prevail over toil' (Lefebvre, 1971: 16) After all the 'fun' of gambling is more powerful than work with its promise of 'release' from poverty and failure.

We need always to remind ourselves that we are not 'pieces of nature' but that we have 'become' who we are and therefore are subject to change. In allowing the stories of life to include the minutest of details; in investing all stories with the description of truth; in not being judgmental and finally in not allowing pre-existing prejudice to interfere with the stories we gather; then, and only then, will we begin to fully understand the story of crime. With excavation we begin to understand how crime comes into being, the causes of crime and the creation of the criminal whilst appreciating more that crime can only be created through social relations made within a dominant culture and determined by a dominant morality.

That is we will see the 'humanness' of the crime story if we let people write and tell their stories without hindrance. In the past this approach was seen as the domain of the 'analyst' using the Freudian notion that every life, every existence, has a story. Now it must become the domain of the criminologist! Empathy can be an obstacle to knowledge, to knowing and understanding the 'social dressage' of life and how we come to behave properly or not within our social position. Yet we need to examine the emotional world of the everyday as a means perhaps of achieving change. It is at times a harrowing experience just listening but listen we must. We need to work out the ways in which we and others construct ourselves in the active creative process of producing our identities, to see how we create our own chains, our own constrictions. Then and only then will we be able to see the 'hidden injuries of class'.

What, then, is the meaning, the 'point' of the crime story? Does it talk of 'things' or 'relationships,' 'success' or 'drama'? We never forget that all sections and segments of society have emotions: they hurt, they hate, they envy, they love, they feel anxious; their stories of transgression are full of the emotions of everyday lives lived within the structures of loss, envy, and the sheer celebration of their place in society.

Once again I mention the continuing conundrum of celebration. What elements of biographical work, if any, should we celebrate? Should we, ought we, celebrate defiance in all its forms, even though it might be violent, racist, sexist? Should we, ought we, celebrate the immoral and the unethical just because it 'resists' overwhelming oppression? Is it the sheer joi de vie, against all odds that we want to applaud, those irrational and irresponsible acts that fly in the face of official rational life? Or is it the sheer sense of survival that we admire because it shows that, yes, there is life in many forms outside of the ordered banality of contemporary capitalism? For the excluded everyday life is characterized by an unarticulated form of social anarchy: yet surely they simply want to be included, part of a more equal and just society? Are we then in danger of living our own defiance through them, through those whose ethnographies we explore and use? In the end it is 'they' who celebrate that they feel alive through whatever transgressive acts become part of their everyday lives. We can only contemplate their celebration as being a necessary part of their everyday lives in

that there appears to be a need to celebrate transgression, defiance, resistance as an integral part of everyday life. Triumph over authority and authority's imperatives is part and parcel of everyday existence. Indeed crimes of excitement, like conspicuous consumption, need to be seen, to be public, in a sense to be very much 'in your face'.

There is, as Raymond Williams suggested, a connection between past and present that neither we, nor those on whom and with whom we work can escape. For example I cannot conveniently lose my working class upbringing and early adult life. It still structures my way of seeing and interpreting the world. As such my new world is very much influenced, even structured, by my old. The question is what do, I do with my past and what do we do with the stories and insights of the personal lives of others. The point of biographical work is in the interpretation of stories and in how we use them. We need to foreground them, historicise them, make them 'work' for those whose lives we have been privileged to be part of. Our role is not to celebrate but to excavate. Yet the process of excavation necessarily involves critique, and in the writing and publishing of what we find, do we not (once more) betray our subjects for whom I have already suggested we are attempting to work?

Why then do we need to know about the personal intricacies of everyday life? Simply put, because everyday life is essentially about lived loss...of what we thought we could have, could possess, could be, could experience. When a child is born we look for signs of 'intelligence' that tell us that she/he will be a doctor or lawyer. We cling hopelessly to the idea of a classless meritocracy. Slowly horizons narrow rather than widen as the realities of a powerless life, indeed dare we say a working class life, begin to be realized. From this point the culture of the excluded becomes the culture of exile. In contemporary life we can compare ourselves quickly with others thereby making the 'loss' clearer, more visible, more acute - felt more deeply than ever before. Previous working class communities provided an enclave that acted as a buffer to the outside world. In a more individualized world the 'loss' is more in focus. We are more 'shamed' than ever before, shamed by failure, by social position, by poverty, by being bad parents, by bad behaviour. Shame produces violence, destruction and social despair. Loss hurts- compensation culture results. Here is where we find the culture of binge drinking, of criminalized fun and enjoyment, a culture that has become defined (in the broadest of terms) as anti-social behaviour.

Loss is the denial of access to a choice of life: the denial of things - that is restrictions on consumption, what we can buy, have, own. It is the denial of emotions such as anger - anger over the very act of denial itself. Here anger must be managed rather than felt and acted upon. What is demanded is a resignation to what 'is' rather than revolt about loss and denial. In this way working class life is deemed (by the dominant culture) to be immature, child like, rather than, like a mature mind, being able to accept how things are.

But what are the responses of a life lived through denial? If we accept that the everyday experience of exclusion in itself promotes envy and that envy is the 'social and subjective sense of the impossible unfairness of things' (Steedman. 1986:111), then we begin to see that the crime story is a story of

unfulfilled lives and desires. The result is an anger, envy and desire for a life denied and for the things we do not possess and furthermore in this society should not have. Envy is an emotion that is no longer 'allowed', not acceptable, thereby transforming itself into the social actions of destruction and crime. Melanie Klein (1975: 306-7) argued that envy had not the sophistication of jealousy and that hatred comes of envy and exclusion, making reparation impossible--which is why social reparation to the oppressed through the work of social policy and social 'work' presents us in the end with no answers.

Now we can begin to see that crimes in everyday life are often about loss and wanting. The media daily reminds us of what we don't have, our loss, and in so doing accentuates our wants and desires, something which in turn feeds our state of envy. In the excavation of my own life, *The Muck of Ages*, I describe how crime and 'wanting', for me at least, came together.

Somewhere, sometime, I started to steal; from my father, the paper shop, the church collection, Woolworth's, Ron next door. Suddenly, it seemed, I was aware of wanting and of being 'without' as advertising and consumerism, driven by the new post war wealth began to be part of my life.. When I was very young you either had or you didn't; not really conscious of needing possessions, but simply 'having' or 'not having', yet needing to 'have' to be 'part of', to join in. I wanted to possess, to be a consumer, to own, to escape into the world of the object. Possessing was visual, everyone could see what you were, what you owned: toys, clothes, school uniform, sports gear, food, even haircuts. (Presdee 1988)

Indeed, the excluded even steal in their dreams when, in a Freudian sense, they steal the parents they really want. The parents stolen in our dreams are always parents who have, who own, who live lives devoid of wanting (Steedman, 1986: 112). Everyday life in any segment of society is always 24/7, we cannot escape, it never goes away. It is there in our sleep and it is there waiting for us when we wake. Our identities come into being as we seek through culture to soften the chaffing of the chains of dominance. In this way our identities reflect either freedom or oppression.

I had always hoped that Peter Latham would become my friend, but he never did. He was everyone's favourite from the posh side of town and in the privacy of night I created a world where he and I were friends and he invited me to his home where we could have tea together, play together and engage in deep conversations about Latin and cricket and discuss going on holiday together. It was all there in my mind. What his home was like, his parents were like, his life was like. We were friends forever and when I wandered around the green on my own I talked to him and played with him, acting out our life together, oblivious to all outsiders. In reality in the classroom he treated me with indifference, taking my laughter and never repaying it, and try as I might he was never interested, he simply took my jokes and ran. (Presdee 1988)

But 'official' society denies us any response to our loss. Anger and envy, the emotions of loss, are, we are told, to be 'managed' and policed. Above all they

must be aimed, as Frank Furedi suggests, at the 'manipulation of people's feelings' which is 'frequently seen as the antidote to anti-social behaviour' (Furedi, 2004: 199). Now anger management is the response to a life of exclusion, a form of non-acceptance of and pathologisation of the excluded. It is the ultimate act of rendering justified anger as impotent. What we need is not 'things' but 'therapy'! Politicians promise policies that will deliver a benign feeling of therapeutic happiness they call the 'feel good' factor - or what I often call the 'happy as a pig in shit' approach to life. David Beckham has a personal trainer; the deprived a social worker, probation officer, non-school attendance officer.

The rules that come with the process of 'acquiring' and 'ownership', seemed more difficult to accept than those of time and place. Stealing time, although an offence, was easier to hide and explain, but stealing 'possessions' was more complex, for whereas stealing 'time' could get you the sack, stealing 'possessions' could get you gaol. But why was it that some people were allowed possessions and others not? Why did some have bikes and others not? Some big homes and others not? Increasingly as I got older, I became more sensitive about displaying myself and my everyday possessions that enabled people to, at a glance, 'place me'; know where I was from and so know when I was 'straying'; when I was out of my place. The accoutrements of class were becoming like a uniform, displaying my rank and position to everyone. I began to feel ashamed of my sewn-up canvas satchel from 'Woolies', that stood out from the shiny leather ones hanging on the backs of other desks. From my shame, slowly developed both defiance and aggression as I excessively and openly consumed, displaying my fragile and dishonest wealth to everyone; a rather disheveled and unkempt young boy growing fat and angry. As I put on weight, so I learned to push it around. I started to learn about violence as an answer to ridicule, and I started to glorify ugliness, learning how to disrupt the sensitivities of those from more sophisticated backgrounds. I learned that the fart and the fist were my only answer, they could take it or leave it. (Presdee 1988)

As criminologists we need to listen to the 'crime stories' of both others and ourselves and begin the long, difficult, but necessary task of 'working it out'. Rather than being judgmental and superior distant beings we need to recognize that we too respond in a human way to the many structures within which we live our lives as academics. We are not special, not separate, not different. We need to be close to all those living the crime story, including ourselves, and work it out together.

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