

CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY

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Cultural criminology explores the many ways in which cultural dynamics intertwine with the practices of crime and crime control in contemporary society; put differently, cultural criminology emphasizes the centrality of meaning and representation in the construction of crime as momentary event, subcultural endeavor, and social issue. From this view, the appropriate subject matter of criminology transcends traditional notions of crime and crime causation to include images of illicit behavior and symbolic displays of law enforcement; popular culture constructions of crime and criminal action; and the shared emotions that animate criminal events, perceptions of criminal threat, and public efforts at crime control. This wider cultural focus, cultural criminologists argue, allows scholars and the public alike to better understand crime as meaningful human activity, and to penetrate more deeply the contested politics of crime control.

At a fundamental level cultural criminology in this way integrates the insights of sociological criminology with the orientations toward image and style offered by the field of cultural studies. Within this broad confluence of the criminological and the cultural, though, cultural criminology has emerged from a rather more complex co-evolution of sociology, criminology, and cultural analysis. A fundamental starting point in this emergence is the work of scholars associated with the Birmingham School of cultural studies, the National Deviancy Conference, and the “new criminology” in Great Britain during the 1970s. Reconceptualizing the nature of contemporary power, these scholars explored the cultural and ideological dimensions of social class, examined leisure worlds and illicit subcultures as sites of stylized resistance and alternative meaning, and investigated the mediated ideologies driving social and legal control. Around this same time, American sociology provided a second starting point for what was to become cultural criminology: the symbolic interactionist approach to crime and deviance. As conceptualized in labeling theory and embodied in the naturalistic case study, this interactionist model likewise highlighted the contested construction of meaning around issues of crime and deviance, and in this sense explored the situated politics of even the most common of crimes.

As these two orientations co-evolved—with American interactionists and ethnographers providing phenomenological inspiration for British scholars, and British cultural theorists and “new criminologists” offering American scholars sophisticated critiques of legal and ideological control—the trans-Atlantic foundations for today’s cultural criminology were laid. With the rapid growth of punitive criminal justice systems in the United States and Great Britain during subsequent decades, and the concomitant ascendance of an administrative “criminal justice” in place of a critical sociological criminology, however, little was immediately built from these foundations. It was not until 1995, with the publication of Ferrell and Sander’s *Cultural Criminology*, that a distinct cultural criminology began to emerge. While drawing on earlier British and American conceptualizations, cultural criminologists now began to integrate into their work the sensibilities of postmodernism and deconstruction as well; elaborating on the

‘symbolic’ in symbolic interaction, they began to explore the looping circulation of images, the representational hall of mirrors, that increasingly define the reality of crime and justice. In an echo of earlier trans-Atlantic conversations, contemporary cultural criminology by intention also emerged as an integration of scholarly work from Great Britain, the United States, and beyond (see for example *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*; Ferrell et al, 2004; Hayward and Young, 2004; *Theoretical Criminology*, 2004).

In the same way that cultural criminology’s theoretical frames have developed from its cultural, critical, and interactionist foundations, its methods have emerged from its roots in naturalistic case study. While cultural criminology incorporates a variety of methods—among them textual, semiotic, and visual analysis—some of the more prominent work in cultural criminology has been characterized by forms of extreme ethnography. Immersing themselves in illicit subcultures, attempting at times to “become the subject matter,” constructing at other times auto-ethnographies of their own lives, cultural criminologists have embraced ethnographic method as an avenue into the situated meaning and subtle symbolism constructed within criminal subcultures and events. In part this approach has been underpinned by cultural criminology’s conceptualization of illicit subcultures as collectivities of shared meaning and perception, linked by elaborate symbolic codes as much as by calculated criminal endeavor. Yet it has also been founded in a particular etiology of crime that points, at least in part, to crime’s origins inside the immediacy of the criminal event, and to the shared experiences and emotions that develop within moments of criminality and crime control (Lyng, 1990; Katz, 1988). For cultural criminologists, the primacy of criminal subcultures, criminal events, and the meanings and emotions they spawn confirms the importance of methods that can move criminologists inside them; in the same way this focus reconfirms the value of a Weberian, *verstehen*-oriented criminology and sociology.

Such experiences and emotions have also come into focus as part of cultural criminology’s emphasis on everyday existence as an essential arena of criminality and control. Cultural criminology highlights the currents of carnivalesque excitement, pleasure, and risk-taking that animate everyday life, but equally so the many capillaries of daily control designed to contain and commodify these experiential currents (Presdee, 2000). In fact, cultural criminologists argue, it is this very tension that accounts for various contemporary confluences of crime and culture: the aggressive policing of alternative subcultures and their styles; the mediated consumption of crime as commodified titillation and entertainment; and the shifting and always contested boundaries between art and pornography, music and political provocation, entertainment and aggression, crime and resistance. In all of these cases, cultural criminologists attempt to account for the political economy of crime by locating it inside the dynamics of the everyday, amidst the ambiguities of day-to-day transgression and control.

While exploring the everyday meanings of crime and control, cultural criminologists have in this way also endeavored to fix these situated meanings within larger historical patterns. In a contemporary world shaped by the endless circulation of images and symbols, for example, conventional dualities of the “real” and the “representational” seem to make less and less sense—and so cultural criminology emphasizes the permeability of images as they flow between the mass media, criminal subcultures, and crime control agencies, and likewise the essential role of image and

ideology in constructing crime control policies and practices. Following this line of analysis, cultural criminology suggests that everyday criminal justice has now become in many ways a matter of orchestrated public display, and an ongoing policing of public perceptions regarding issues of crime and threat. Shifts such as this are in turn seen to reflect still other dimensions of contemporary life, among them the emergence of a globalized economy of image and consumption, the tension between late modern patterns of social inclusion and exclusion, and the uncertain dynamics of personal and cultural identity within these arrangements (Young, 2003). In this context cultural criminologists highlight especially the importance of the global city to the understanding of crime and crime control. With its contested cultural spaces of consumption and display, its amalgam of illicit subcultural dynamics, and its spatial and symbolic practices of everyday policing, the city seems an essential embodiment of contemporary social and cultural trends.

Throughout this range of substantive and theoretical work cultural criminologists have quite explicitly challenged the conventional practices of criminology and criminal justice on two fronts. A first challenge has been issued in the area of style. Turning their cultural critique to the practice of contemporary criminology and criminal justice, cultural criminologists have noted there a style of writing wanting in elegance and engagement, and a social science culture of detached obfuscation operating so as to maintain a façade of objective neutrality. In response, cultural criminologists have noted the slippery politics of such representational codes—codes that have functioned, in both the historical emergence of criminology and the contemporary ascendance of criminal justice, as cultural displays masking intellectual alliances with political and economic power. Relatedly, cultural criminologists have noted the role of this arid criminological culture in sanitizing what would otherwise seem among the most engaging of subject matters: crime, violence, guilt, transgression. In this context cultural criminologists have sought to revitalize the enterprise of criminology, and to restore something of its humanistic orientation, through styles of research and presentation designed for engagement and effect. Along with the texture and nuance offered by ethnographic research, these have included the development of biographical and autobiographical writing styles, the incorporation of evocative vignettes drawn from popular culture, and the inclusion of visual materials and visual analysis. While better communicating the everyday importance of crime and crime control, cultural criminologists argue, such styles also offer a more honest accounting of criminologists' involvement with the politics of crime and crime control.

Cultural criminology's second challenge has occurred in the realms of theory and method. Cultural criminologists argue that survey research methods and quantitative data analysis—dominant modes of research within the objectivist culture of criminology and criminal justice—remain dominant not because of their innate scholarly merit, but due in large part to their utility in generating the sort of distilled data necessary for the administration of the criminal justice system. In fact, cultural criminologists contend, such modes of research remain useful in this context precisely because they are meaningless; that is, because they drain from crime its situated meaning and seductive symbolism, leaving behind only the residues of statistical analysis. Likewise, rational choice theory and similar criminological theories founded on assumptions of instrumental rationality miss, from the view of cultural criminology, the very essence of much everyday

criminality: pleasure, excitement, anger, and risk. As with other reductionist approaches, such theories may buttress calls for individual responsibility and punitive justice, and in this sense may find a home within the current practice of criminal justice--but they can hardly account for the inherent sensuality, ambiguity, and irrationality of crime itself.

Emerging from the alternative and critical criminologies of the 1970s, cultural criminology in these ways provides, by practice and intention, a contemporary alternative criminology, and a cultural critique of contemporary crime control arrangements. With its interdisciplinary foundations and emphasis on meaning, mediated representation, and style, it may also hold out the possibility of significantly expanding the analytic range and substantive scope of future criminological scholarship.

SEE ALSO: Birmingham School; British cultural studies; conflict theory and crime and delinquency; culture; deviance and the media; labeling theory; qualitative methods; subcultures, deviant; symbolic interaction

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