

# POLICY ESSAY

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## PUBLIC CRIMINOLOGIES

### What is to be done with public criminology?

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Christopher Uggen and Michelle Inderbitzen's (2010, this issue) article on "Public Criminologies" is timely and important. The issues it deals with concerning the place and purpose of criminology—indeed, the social sciences generally—in civil society and public policy formation are of long-standing interest and great significance today. The question of the civic missions of the social sciences has exercised and vexed their practitioners ever since their foundation (e.g., Gans, 1989; Wright Mills, 1959). It also has been dusted down and addressed anew in the debate prompted by Michael Burawoy's (2005) effort to articulate and defend "public sociology"—a debate that, as Uggen and Inderbitzen well illustrate, now has found its way into criminology. But these issues have a particularly long provenance and a special purchase in criminology, a field constituted around a social problem and of acute interest to governments, justice practitioners, and citizens alike. It is simply a social fact that criminology historically has tended to attract to its ranks individuals who combine intellectual curiosity and a thirst for knowledge with a reformist ambition of some kind (to prevent crime, rehabilitate offenders, improve the quality of justice, or in some allied way, alleviate avoidable human suffering). It is thus hardly surprising to find the dilemmas raised by the public sociology debate receiving the kind of extended airing inside criminology that Uggen and Inderbitzen have given them or that the general question of how criminological knowledge can (more) effectively inform public policy on crime and justice is just now attracting rather a lot of interest (Clear, 2010).

We are broadly welcoming of the idea of criminology as a field of engaged social inquiry and think much can be gained from sustained reflection on how criminologists can intervene best in societal conversations and social action around their subject matter. Indeed, we recently have completed a book dealing with these very questions (Loader and Sparks, 2010). But such

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willingness to embrace criminology's public purpose should not, and need not, come at the expense of continuing to exercise a critically reflexive orientation toward the issues at stake. What matters is not just getting on and *doing* something called public criminology (whatever that might turn out to mean) or encouraging and organizing others in the field to do the same. It is equally important to think sociologically *about* the phenomenon of "public criminology" and the range of questions that circulate around it. It is this broad spirit—one seeking to appraise the risks and opportunities that attend the idea of public criminology—that informs our reaction to Uggen and Inderbitzen's (2010) spirited and engaging article. One looming risk, as we see it, is of turning inward and becoming mired in discussions that only ever are going to be of much interest to criminologists (how ironic it would be if a debate about *public* criminology ended up taking this form). The chief opportunity is to think afresh, in the altered contexts of the present, about how best to make intelligible and coherent the idea of criminology as a civic enterprise.

### Turning Inward: On a Division of Public Criminology and Related Dangers

The idea of public criminology has surfaced of late in several places, of which Uggen and Inderbitzen's (2010) article is but the latest.<sup>1</sup> In the United States and in the United Kingdom, it has been the subject of articles (Groombridge, 2007), the rousing conclusions of two recent books (Carrabine, Iganski, Lee, Plummer, and South, 2008: 452–454; Hughes, 2007: ch. 8), and a special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* (Chancer and McLaughlin, 2007). This attention has been a response in part to the aforementioned debate on public sociology on which Uggen and Inderbitzen and many other recent contributors explicitly draw. But it also clearly is animated by a concern that the field of criminology has in recent years been a "successful failure" (Loader and Sparks, 2010: ch. 1). The worry expressed by this term is that the flourishing of criminology when measured using the standard yardsticks of jobs, degree programs, conferences, journals, publications, prizes, and so on has coincided with a waning of influence over crime and penal policy that has come in recent decades to be driven more by popular emotion and political calculation than by reason and evidence. The flurry of interest in public criminology, one feels, is driven by a desire to address this situation and lay renewed claim to the field's social relevance.

This context of emergence helps to account for some typical features of how the idea of public criminology is discussed. First of all, contributors to the debate generally have been making an explicit case *for* something called public criminology, and Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010) are certainly no exception to this trend. In many respects, nothing is wrong with such advocacy, and much about the case being made is attractive. However, it does run the risk of

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1. Although to be fair, their article first was presented in 2006 and has been available ever since on the public criminology blog that Uggen hosts—see [publiccriminology.blogspot.com/](http://publiccriminology.blogspot.com/). One should note that the term "public criminology" was championed—even prior to Burawoy's intervention—by Carrabine, Lee, and South (2000), and that it connects with and takes up themes that Gregg Barak and others have been developing for some time in their work on "newsmaking criminology" (Barak, 1988, 2007). We also have made several previous attempts to address the issues at stake (Garland and Sparks, 2000; Loader, 1997; Loader and Sparks, 1993, 2004).

exhortation and sermonizing when what is called for is more patient analysis of why criminological engagement matters and what the obstacles and opportunities involved look like. Such exhortation also might invite a kind of prickly defensiveness among readers who feel (rightly or otherwise) that their preferred way of doing criminology is being called into question as well as unleashing a bid to defend “professional” criminology of the kind that has predominated in the critical debate prompted in sociology by Michael Burawoy (see, among many, Tittle, 2005; Turner, 2005).

Second, a tendency exists to import uncritically into criminology Burawoy’s four-fold typology of “professional,” “policy,” “critical,” and “public” sociologies. In their essay, Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010) proceed largely along these lines, setting out what the equivalent criminologies would look like and even giving each an allotted task—“assembling social facts and situating crime in disciplinary knowledge” (professional criminology), “evaluating social interventions” (policy criminology), “reconsidering rule making” (critical criminology), and “evaluating and reframing cultural images of the criminal” (public criminology). This way of proceeding is not, in our judgment, terribly helpful, and Uggen and Inderbitzen implicitly seem to realize the dangers of this typology and go on to describe how each of the four criminologies fruitfully might overlap. The dangers have to do with placing (even forcing) authors or works into different boxes, of encouraging the view that each stance is a mutually exclusive criminological identity, and of suggesting that “public criminology” is a distinct position that criminologists might or might not choose to adopt. These are outcomes that it is wise to avoid. Although Uggen and Inderbitzen have moderated the dangers involved here by transmuted the fractious typology into a more harmonious division of labor, this arrangement does not in itself overcome the problems associated with thinking about these issues “typologically” in the first place.

In this context, it is worth recalling that the call to practice something called public criminology is raised from within a field that for a long time has been and remains internally diverse, fragmented, and often fractious (Ericson and Carriere, 1994). Criminology is a field of inquiry marked by a disputatious plurality of theoretical assumptions and perspectives, by affiliations to different surrounding disciplines, by a wide range of objects of interest and enquiry, by competing methodologies and ways of knowing, and by a range of different styles of criminological engagement. Uggen and Inderbitzen’s (2010) article confirms this very point, making reference not only to the aforementioned professional, policy, critical, and public criminologies but also to “convict,” “administrative,” “airport,” and “antiseptic” criminology. The salient differences of focus and purpose in the field are given institutional expression in the American Society of Criminology’s (ASC) aptly named *divisions* of corrections and sentencing, critical criminology, international criminology, people and color, women and crime, and now experimental criminology. Cognate differentiations are found in the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (which has nine “sections”) and the European Society of Criminology (with nine “working groups”).

Of course, nothing is very unusual or surprising about the range of groups, organizations, networks, conferences, and journals that now make up the field of criminology; they are valuable, even indispensable, to the production and discussion of knowledge. Nonetheless a potential

pathology persists in all this. As criminology expands and fragments, and the fragments come to exist in a state of passive toleration, it runs the risk of “fixing” these divisions as if they were settled or “natural” and hence of either leaving intact or underscrutinized the mainstream “core” (the one that does not require its own division) or denying that the field has any core concerns or agreed upon body of knowledge at all. It risks positing these various subfields as incommensurable, hermetically sealed clusters of activity that have nothing to learn from each other and between which criminological practitioners (and prospective users of their knowledge) must simply choose. The result, at least potentially, is a series of criminologies that pass like ships in the night—an outcome that might cocoon discrete approaches to, or areas of, criminological inquiry from wider currents of thought and criticism as well as undermine the field’s legitimacy and overall sense of public purpose.

Given this institutional backdrop, and the enthusiasms of some of its adherents, public criminology clearly is at risk of becoming the latest shiny criminological brand, a perspective within the field that seduces and attracts some to its creed while being ignored or derided by others. One even can imagine—heaven forbid—it taking institutional shape as a new ASC division! Uggen and Inderbitzen’s (2010) contribution is at its least persuasive when it leans in this direction. They write, for example, of the “distinctiveness” of public criminology and of the things that “public criminologists” can and should do. They argue that public criminology is an “ideal and practice” based on “personal conviction and sacrifice,” suggest that more scholars might choose to pursue public criminology and evince the hope that “the field” will continue to expand.

It might be that more extensive and convincing criminological engagement with politics and civil society requires impetus and organization of this kind. But there are nonetheless problems with articulating the case in this way. It seems to us that “public criminology” makes the most sense as an umbrella under which it becomes possible to reexamine and foster serious consideration of a set of puzzles and predicaments that vex many criminologists today, from whatever perspective they approach the study of crime and justice. Foremost among these issues are questions of how to reconcile autonomy with engagement and knowledge production with social relevance as well as how and where to make intelligible contributions to public conversations about crime. Such questions no longer admit easy answers in contexts in which the whole climate of policy formation has “heated up,” and reason and evidence competes with—and often loses out to—the clarion calls of a 24/7 media, the righteous anger of victims and those who claim to represent them, and the imperatives of political competition and expediency (Loader and Sparks, 2010: ch. 3). As such, they call for fresh thinking and debate about criminology and its public roles, not for something called public criminology to become a new specialist branch of criminological activity.

One virtue of Todd R. Clear’s recent ASC Presidential Address was that it recognized and addressed relevant issues in something approaching this way—as dilemmas for all those who study crime and justice, whether as criminologists or under some allied banner, not just for a committed band of “public” ones (Clear, 2010). Clear raises some important questions about

the opportunities for public engagement that confront criminology under the Obama Administration and how they might best be understood and grasped. He cautions criminologists to be wary of the conservative implications of demands for evidence and argues for a capacious conception of what can count as such.<sup>2</sup> He defends the value of basic research in underpinning what he calls “criminologically justifiable action” (Clear, 2010: 14) and makes clear that these matters deal with the collective organization of the field rather than simply with the preferences of individual criminologists.<sup>3</sup> He also raises for consideration the thorny question of whether the ASC, qua ASC, should seek to participate in policy-making arenas and even assume public postures on issues such as mass incarceration.

We have no definitive answers to the questions that Clear poses, nor do we have the space to develop them here. But perhaps the answers one arrives at are less crucial than the extent to which relevant issues are taken up and discussed, the spirit in which such discussion is conducted, and the institutional spaces we create in which to develop it. These issues, as we have indicated, can give rise to a parochial conversation that attracts much interest among criminologists but is scarcely likely to hold the attention of anyone else. They also can become—for want of a better word—“managerialized.” This situation is happening in current state-issued strictures about research “Impact” in the United Kingdom,<sup>4</sup> and looms in the wings whenever this subject is reduced to one of creating incentive structures for academics that recognize and reward public engagement. Or one can use public criminology as a springboard for thinking sociologically about the relationship between criminology and its “publics” and about how to make the idea of criminology as a civic enterprise intelligible and convincing in the altered conditions of the present. It is this latter project with which we have been engaged of late.

### **Reaching Outward: On Criminology as a Civic Enterprise**

The overarching “alteration” in the conditions in which criminologists seek to intervene has to do with a “heating up” of public discourse and social action in relation to crime. This term signifies that crime in many, but by no means all, contemporary democracies in recent years has become a prominent token of electoral competition and that governmental reactions to it are swayed heavily by political calculation and expediency. In this hotter climate, crime policy increasingly comes under the influence of mass media and “public opinion” and at the mercy

2. U.S. criminologists might learn something here from the enthusiasm with which many British criminologists greeted the election of Tony Blair in 1997 and what they thought was the advent of an era of “evidence-based policy.” The subsequent involvement of criminologists in seeking to give practical effect to this aspiration ended for several participants in frustration (see, e.g., Hope, 2004). In our view, the British experience underscores the importance of Clear’s constructively sceptical orientation toward the promise of evidence-based crime policy.
3. One might ask in this context whether professional criminology in the United States is well placed to rise to the challenges that Clear outlines. This issue is partly a matter of the narrow horizons and content of graduate education (a point that Burawoy made powerfully in relation to sociology) and partly about the effects of a system of tenure that seems designed—if we might venture an outsiders’ opinion—to stifle creativity, risk-taking, and public engagement.
4. For more on this situation, see [hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/impact/](http://hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/impact/).

of ill-informed and sometimes actively whipped-up popular emotion. The result is a policy environment that is volatile and unstable, one in which it becomes difficult to make reason and evidence the drivers of what is said and done (Loader and Sparks, 2010: ch. 3). These are, as we noted, the background conditions that have stirred interest in the whole question of public criminology.

What does it mean, though, for criminology to make intelligible contributions to public debate and policy formation in this more politicized environment—an environment in which *all* knowledge claims potentially also become politicized and controversial, all the more so when they address major cleavages of world view and ideological commitment (as criminology typically does)?<sup>5</sup> Our argument, which is elaborated more fully elsewhere (Loader and Sparks, 2010: ch. 5), is that we best can give coherence to criminology's civic purpose by understanding its role as one of seeking to foster and sustain better politics of crime and its regulation—or what we term *democratic underlaboring*.<sup>6</sup> Let us try to explain what we mean by this.

One common response from within criminology to the heating up of crime and penal policy is to try to “cool things down.” One suspects that part of what Todd R. Clear finds attractive about “today’s ‘evidentiary’ moment in time” (Clear, 2010: 2) is that it offers the opportunity, after several decades of politically driven and often ill-informed crime policy, to move things in a more rational direction. This direction is made more explicit in his concept of “*criminologically* justifiable action” (Clear, 2010: 14; emphasis added). In a similar spirit, Ugen and Inderbitzen (2010) argue that one of the tasks of a public criminology is “to challenge false statements, question shoddy evidence, and debunk harmful myths and scare tactics.” This concept is hardly new but rather expresses a criminological default position. To be a criminologist, to an important degree, is to have committed oneself already to the idea that crime problems can and should be subjected to reason, method, evidence, analysis, and knowledge and to have taken a stand against, or at least assumed some distance from, lay opinion and political judgment. It is thus often to have placed oneself on a collision course with social and political actors who advance their crime and justice projects in ignorance (willful or otherwise) of criminology's hard-earned lessons. Today, however, some criminologists aim to make a virtue of this underlying circumstance. Experimental criminologists defend and use a rigorous method for determining “what works, what doesn't work and what's promising” in crime prevention at least partly to expose politicians who waste tax dollars on programs driven not by evidence but by political and populist considerations (Sherman, Farrington, Welsh, and MacKenzie, 2002). They and others have in addition proposed creating institutions that can “reinsulate” crime policy from the “heat” of political combat and mass-mediated public demands. The hope is

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5. See, on this, Weingart (1999).

6. This role of underlaborer is, of course, an antique one having been formulated originally by John Locke (1975 [1690]: 10) to describe the task of philosophy as “clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the Rubbish” vis à vis scientific knowledge. The revised term, democratic underlaboring, is borrowed from Swift and White (2008), who use it to describe the relation of political theory to real politics.

that in such institutions, scientific expertise and a calm bureaucratic ethos will deliver policy and practice that is underpinned by a reliable criminological evidence base (Sherman, 2009; see also Zimring and Johnson, 2006).

For us, limits as well as strengths are attached to this conception of criminology's civic role—limits that have to do with an inability to *explain* how criminological knowledge in fact fares in settings of contemporary policy formation and what often seems like an undefended desire to somehow *replace* politics with what Bruno Latour calls “calculative devices” (Latour, 2004). Instead, we think much can be gained not from treating criminology as an antidote to democratic politics but from trying to think afresh about criminology's relation to the present pathologies and unrealized promise of modern politics. In the former case, this mentality means trying to make good on the rather remote and thin understanding that criminology too often has of the world of practical affairs by fostering a better appreciation of the forces that shape the treatment of crime in the contemporary public sphere and the reasons why (social) scientific knowledge about crime does or does not get taken up and used in political debate and governmental action.<sup>7</sup> This process, in turn, means acquiring the will and the necessary tools to develop understanding of the “circumstances of politics” (Waldron, 1999: 106) and cultivating a “qualified tolerance” toward those who practice politics as a vocation (Swift and White, 2008: 64). This idea does not, however, mean reconciling oneself to the status quo. In the latter case, reappraisal means reconnecting with and developing those strands of thought that have insisted that crime is “political” (Taylor, Walton, and Young, 1973) and making explicit the connections that inescapably exist between crime and its control and the repertoire of ideas (order, justice, authority, legitimacy, freedom, rights, etc.) and traditions (liberalism, but also conservatism, social democracy, feminism, republicanism, environmentalism, etc.) that comprise modern political thought. It involves folding into our understanding of criminological research and public engagement the fact that any discussion of the criminal question encodes in miniature a set of claims about the nature of the good society, and any attempt to answer it, however apparently “dry,” technical, or limited in scope, carries and projects a possible world, a desirable state of affairs that a political or criminological actor wishes to usher into existence.

To think again and in these ways about the intersections between criminology and politics does not dispose of, or render secondary, the question of *knowledge* and its uses. Having indicated why criminologists might understand better the pathologies of modern politics and be clearer about the relationship of their work to its ideals and possibilities, another set of questions shuffles into view. As we have intimated, most individuals who spend their time or, in many instances, the greater part of their working lives, practicing criminology or an allied craft do so because they believe that acquiring knowledge about crime, or justice, or punishment has some value. It also seems safe to suppose that they think the knowledge they produce and disseminate has a quality—a methodological rigor, respect for evidence, or theoretical acuity that enables it to

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7. It usefully might take its cue here from some recent work within political science; see, for example, Miller (2008).

unearth things about the world or see that world in a revised light—that sets it apart from other claims about crime and its control, such as those claims circulated by politicians, journalists, bloggers, victims groups, offenders, police officers, campaigners, or simply citizens engaged in daily conversation. But what exactly is this “expertise” and what value and place does it have? Here the following questions begin to emerge: What contribution can criminological knowledge make to shaping responses to crime in a polity that acknowledges crime and punishment to be properly political issues? What in a democracy is the public value of criminology? What is the collective good that criminological enquiry seeks to promote (Kitcher, 2001)? What modes of intervention and what institutional arrangements best can realize that good?

To practice criminology as a democratic underlaborer is to be committed, first and foremost, to the generation of knowledge rather than (first and foremost) to scoring a point or winning a policy battle; if the distinction between criminologist and activist is to mean anything, then it must entail something of this kind. What then of the question of public intervention in disputes about crime? We have three points to make on this. We hope that many criminologists, of diverse persuasions, and certainly those who have thought most concertedly about these matters, such as Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010), would feel able to agree with most of these. The first is that engaging in public life—being “political” in some broad sense—does not mean reducing the question of crime to one of political preference, nor positing criminologists as quasi-politicians, nor celebrating folk wisdom over professional judgment and hard-won knowledge. Our task is to be bearers and interpreters of that knowledge and to bring it to bear on matters of public concern and dispute, hence, the importance of a scholarly “formative intention” (Collins and Evans, 2007). Second, this concept does not reduce what criminologists can bring to public debate to matters of evidence narrowly construed. It seems clear that academic criminologists enjoy a degree of freedom that many participants in political and professional struggles over crime and justice lack. They have a certain liberty to refuse to take the social world for granted or to accept received political “imperatives,” to provoke and unsettle, and to pose questions about our responses to crime that security-obsessed and ideology-lite political cultures increasingly seem to have forgotten how to ask. Being critical in *this* sense properly forms part of the social scientist’s DNA (cf. Ericson, 2005). It means that that they can and should bring to public discussion a skepticism that refuses to treat at face value the categories, assumptions, and self-understandings that make up prevailing “common sense” about crime and its control. It also enables them to theorize and set forth alternative institutional arrangements for thinking about and responding to crime and to forge connections with groups in civil society (and *not* simply government) who are seeking to advance a better, or alternative, justice policy. Third, in doing so, criminologists have to give up an illusion of mastery in which they somehow expect their knowledge to engineer outcomes, end political discussion, and trump the ill-informed concerns and perspectives of others. The public role of criminology involves generating controversy, opening up and extending debate, as well as challenging and provoking received public “opinion” and political postures, not closing such discourse down.



Democratic underlaboring is, then, a disposition and a practice whose formative intention is the production of rigorous knowledge but which understands itself as engaging with a field in which applications of that knowledge never reduce to simple and transparent calculations. Criminology inhabits and intervenes in a world composed not simply of “matters of fact” over which it can legislate, but also always one of disputed “matters of concern” (Latour, 2004) that it can, alongside the various “publics” who assemble around such matters, legitimately interpret and contest. The criminologist as a democratic underlaborer has a commitment both to generating and disseminating knowledge *and* to a more deliberative politics of big public questions such as the future of punishment and crime control. She is, as such, necessarily implicated in developing what has been called “argumentative” or “intelligent” rather than simply “evidence-based” public policy making.<sup>8</sup> The underlaboring conception of criminology is committed to participating within and to facilitating and extending institutional spaces that supplement representative politics with inclusive public deliberation about crime and justice matters, whether in local, state, or federal settings or across emergent transnational arenas. In this regard, the public value of criminology as democratic underlaboring lies not primarily in “cooling” down controversies about crime and social responses to it so much as in playing its part in figuring out ways to bring their “heat” within practices of democratic governance.

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8. These coinages are taken, respectively, from Hoppe (1999) and Sanderson (2009).

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