

Book Reviews

David Churchill, Henry Yeomans, and Iain Channing, *Historical Criminology*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022; 220pp: ISBN 9780367185756, £96 (hbk) £26.39 (sbk and eBook).

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The steady growth of historical criminology as a field of research in the past decade is a promising development in the social sciences, and one which has the potential to significantly strengthen the relationship between criminologists and historians and reinvigorate the historical study of crime in the 21st century. While in the last quarter of the 20th century it was common for historians to downplay the importance of criminological thinking in the historical study of crime – with historians like Douglas Hay claiming, for instance, that “recent histories of crime and criminal law make little use of criminology, partly because it is notably indifferent to what interests historians most: cultural, political, and economic change”¹ – research conducted in recent years by criminologists working historically and scholars working in criminology departments more generally is becoming increasingly recognized as a valuable contribution to our understanding of past crime-related phenomena. To put it in a slightly different way, it is becoming increasingly clear that the ‘criminological study of the past’ is as valuable as the ‘historical study of crime’. In that regard, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing’s recently published *Historical Criminology* will likely be remembered in the future as a turning point. The book convincingly shows – contrary to commonly held beliefs about the disciplinary incompatibility of criminology and history – that criminology does, in fact, have much to

¹ D. Hay, ‘Crime and Justice in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century England’, *Crime and Justice*, 2 (1980) pp.45-84, p.45.

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offer to the historiography of crime and criminal justice and that historical thinking could easily become normalized within contemporary criminological research.

The book is meant to stimulate the criminological imagination, serving as an *invitation* to historical thinking in criminology for those who have overlooked the potential of historico-criminological inquiry but also as a *provocation* for seasoned historical researchers working on crime-related themes and criminologists working historically – “to push the boundaries of historical thinking in criminology” (p.16). Hoping to facilitate the embedding of historical perspectives into criminology and the cultivation of historical thinking in the discipline more broadly, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing have undertaken the important task of developing “a unified framework for historical research in criminology” (p.3). The authors recognize that the simple act of naming ‘historical criminology’ risks creating the impression that we are dealing with a new sub-discipline in criminology, but they immediately make clear that this would be a suboptimal way of thinking about historical criminology. Instead, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing propose that it is more fruitful to approach historical criminology as a *mode of inquiry*, or as “scholarship on crime, criminal justice, and related matters conducted with respect to historical time” (p.6). Historical criminology is “a way of orienting oneself in the study of crime and justice” (p.7) that pays respect to the multitude of qualities that characterize historical time, of which the authors prioritize the following; historical time as *i*) a time of change, *ii*) an eventful time, *iii*) a time of flow, *iv*) a tensed time, and *v*) an embodied time. In this context, historical thinking must be understood as a kind of *intellectual sensibility* toward the significance of historical time, or, as the authors put, it, a *disposition* rather than “a checklist of theoretical positions or methodological procedures” (p.20). When weaponized in an effort to study crime historically, what emerges from such an approach is an innovative way of studying crime and justice ‘in a historical way’ as well as a way of reflecting on the ‘historical reality’ of crime and justice.

In Chapter 1, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing show that thinking historically about phenomena means being attuned to dynamics of change and continuity, being attentive to the *long durée* and to the shaping of temporal passage, as well as being able to detect layers of historical time, developing a capacity to distinguish qualitative changes from quantitative ones, and being able to think in comparative terms. But the authors also show that studying historical time is more than a purely comparative effort; it needs to go a step beyond explaining difference and similarity and the never fully final character of historical transformations. It is about recognizing – through what the authors term ‘an eventful analytic’ that “orients us to the *conditions* and *consequences* of happenings” (p.32, italics in original) – the uniqueness of historical events, the individuality of time and place, the distinction between event and occurrence. Importantly, understanding temporality in an eventful way does not prevent us from also nurturing a historical consciousness of temporal flows and from inquiring into the emergence and unfolding of events in order to understand the immanence of change and see historical time as a time

of movement and passage. Similarly, it does not stop us from conceiving the past in terms of its *pastness* or even the future in terms of its *futurity*, to experience them in their tensed form. In fact, thinking about temporal dimensions and dynamics through tense makes it possible to expose “how the chronological placement of events may bely our temporal connections with them” (p.43), thus forcing us think carefully and critically about the links between our past, our present and our future. Lastly, developing an appreciation of historical time demands an appreciation of the concrete, of worldliness, as historical time is always a time of lived experience, embodied time, a time of historically specific things and beings.

Chapter 2 proceeds to tease out the implications that the proposed ways of thinking about historical time – in terms of change, eventfulness, flow, tense, and embodiment – have for criminological research. The focus of the chapter is mostly on the methodological implications of change, eventfulness and flow and the main point of attack is the social-scientific study of motion, historical movement, and temporal change. Starting from a critique of “criminology’s unease with the historical” (p.54), its “historical amnesia” (p.55), and its inattentiveness to the importance of charting the movement of crime-related phenomena through time, the chapter aims to facilitate the construction of methodological strategies that make use of “temporal units as a criminological toolbox” (p.53) and to show that criminology would benefit from the utilization on enhanced ‘diachronic perspectives’. The temporal units of criminological analysis covered in Chapter 2 are the following: the trend, the life course, the event, the recurrence, and the inheritance. While the focus on historical time in Chapter 1 makes that chapter inevitably historiographic and historiological in orientation, Chapter 2 is where it becomes increasingly obvious how a criminology that takes seriously historical time and temporal units of analysis can enhance its analytic scope through the integration of methodological techniques that rely on diachronic perspectives. Such perspectives enable criminologists to see the value that resides in ‘taking the long view’, the importance of ‘looking for sequences’, the benefits that arise from ‘filling in the gaps’, and the positive results that can be achieved by ‘harnessing complexity’.

Interestingly, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing claim at the end of Chapter 2 that, though their discussion points in the direction of “a more historical empirical research programme for criminology” (p.87), they do not interpret their effort as “an exhortation for all criminologists to adopt historical methods” (p.88). This is probably a subtler way of making a point that is first made in the introduction and then repeated in the conclusion of the book; as the authors understand it, historical criminology is not a synonym for a criminology that makes use of traditional historiographic methods. It is not a criminology that *abandons* its traditional approaches. Instead, it is a criminology that takes seriously the possibility of engaging with historical time. This might seem like a reasonable strategy to present historical criminology as a new and independent form of inquiry but also, at the same time, a *non-antagonistic* enterprise. But it could be argued that a lack of conviction when it comes to articulating and advertising the advantages of a given emerging line of investigation or analytic posture – in this case, the advantages of ‘the

historical' in the study of crime – is what often subsumes emerging trends in criminology into what Pat Carlen calls the “discursive abyss” of criminology, the abyss that ultimately makes it irrelevant whether scholars “style themselves critical, cultural, public, Marxist, feminist and/or...whatever”.² How to make sure that historical criminology does not become just another ‘whatever’ in criminology? Does historical criminology really have such a strong *raison d’être* that it will resist criminology’s attempt to turn it into another one of its subordinate sub-fields? I shall return to such questions towards the end of the review.

Churchill, Yeomans and Channing argue at the start of Chapter 3 that historical inquiry can help answer some of the traditional questions of criminology – first among them ‘why do people break or obey the law?’ – but also that the reason for this is not immediately obvious. Chapter 3 is therefore intended to address the ways in which historical thinking can aid criminology in developing an effective conceptual and theoretical consciousness. By emphasizing that concepts and theories are themselves historical phenomena, the chapter endeavors to demonstrate the benefits of thinking about concepts of criminological relevance without abstracting them from the historical process. Churchill, Yeomans and Channing use three main concepts – the descent of ‘drugs’, the recovery of ‘police’, the process of terror – to show that criminological concepts possess their own historicity and dynamism. Here, the examples used are somewhat anecdotal, and a more sustained historicization of criminological thinking patterns would have helped make a more convincing argument about the historicity of some of the key terms and concepts found in the criminological arsenal of ideas. The chapter then moves on to elaborate on the ways in which criminological theory intersects with historical thinking. The focus is now on historical theorization and its applications – developing theories based on historical primary sources and archival materials, engaging in some sort of theoretical excavation *a la* Foucault, using literary and statistical material from the past to develop theoretical and conceptual insights about crime-related phenomena, doing historical research across historical distance to achieve a degree of detachment from the present and be able to “exoticize the domestic” (p.111), and more. A central theme found at work at this stage of the book is the unity of the historical and the theoretical – the need to see history through the lens of theory and to do theory with the aid of history.

Chapter 4 moves from considerations about how to think historically in criminology to considerations about how to think historically about the present. The authors draw on Husserl, Koselleck, Raynold Williams and Harry Harootunian to construct a ‘thick’ image of the present and show that “the thickness of the present...matters across the landscape of crime and justice” (p.147). Chapter 4 is both the most enjoyable to read and arguably the richest in terms of what historical thinking can contribute to criminology. This is because the chapter – which is entitled ‘Pasts and Futures’ – shows unequivocally that

² P. Carlen, *A Criminological Imagination: Essays on Justice, Punishment, Discourse* (Routledge 2016) p. xxi.

historical criminology is not defined by its method but by its attitude, in particular, the need for a historical consciousness – which is, by definition, a capacity to link past, present and future – and the historical imagination.³ The chapter covers a lot of ground, starting from a fascinating engagement with the theme of ‘fixing the past’ and progressively advancing a reflexive discussion of collective memory, the Whig interpretation of history, critical histories of crime, negative memory, the traumatic presence of the past and the collective experience of trauma – with an emphasis on genocide and atrocities – and hauntology, ‘ripperology’, the mechanics of presence, governing difficult pasts in the present, official denials of historic horrors and truth commissions, dealing with the ‘ongoingness’ of events, the mobilization of memory ‘from below’, persistent ‘historical wounds’, and much more. The focus then shifts onto the future, the most interesting section being the one that contrasts ‘reformist’ and ‘abolitionist’ futures (pp.137-138). As Churchill, Yeomans and Channing put it, “reformers and abolitionists are distinguished by a basic difference in the kind of futures they envision and seek to enact” (p.138).

If Chapter 1 is the most informative from a historiographic perspective, and Chapter 4 is the most captivating from a personal point of view, the Conclusion remains the most intriguing section because it helps us imagine the possible futures of historical criminology. Churchill, Yeomans and Channing outline ten possible characterizations of historical criminology. First, we have the dominant characterization found in the book, i.e., historical criminology as epistemological standpoint and ontological position that takes seriously historical time, and a related characterization of historical criminology as core approach, or “an approach based around historical time and a resulting set of epistemological and ontological commitments” (p.150). Then we have a characterization of historical criminology as an attempt at de-centering the present, or an attempt to push criminology to look “beyond the contemporary” (p.152), followed by a characterization of historical criminology as attempt at reducing the tensions between ‘the general and the particular’ via the study of change and continuity. The fifth characterization is that of historical criminology as an approach to study ‘a world in motion’ – that is, to study “the flow of crime, deviance, order, justice, security and other things as evinced through the often delicate interplay of change and continuity over spans of time” (p.154).

The remaining five characterizations are not based on the content of *Historical Criminology* but rather reflect “some important issues that lay outside of the scope of [the] book” (p.148). The first of the remaining five characterizations is about ‘historical reflexivity in teaching and learning’ and alludes to the importance of embedding historical awareness in criminological teaching through contextualization, historical comparisons, and other means of delivering “core criminological content in a more historical way” (p.156). The seventh characterization refers to ‘historical alternatives and pathways to reform’ and is probably the most problematic characterization detailed by Churchill,

³ J. Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*. (Berghahn Books, 2005).

Yeomans and Channing in their book, as it presents historical criminology as a form of *applied history* that illuminates past barriers to reform and envisions alternatives for the future. This characterization of historical criminology is arguably at the heart of Paul Knepper's *futurist* approach to the criminological study of the past:

'Historical criminology' has emerged with the new social history, but its practitioners are not really interested in the past. It is less than history in the sense that the aim is not to find out what happened, but to produce practical knowledge for understanding the problem of crime in society. Criminologists do not try to understand the past for its own sake, but the future. Historical criminology wants to create models that explain the past well enough that they can be projected into the future and guide policy decisions in the present.⁴ (Knepper, 2016, pp.2-3)

The eighth characterization of historical criminology, which is about 'historical evocation as public engagement', seems to be meant to work *in tandem* with some of the variants of 'public criminology', as it aims to incorporate historical thinking into "efforts to engage the public in research on crime and social responses to crime" (p.162). The ninth characterization concerns 'the politics of memory'. Here, historical criminology is once again harmonized with its public function, as it constitutes an approach that challenges certain narratives or myths from the past, interrogates dominant assumptions from previous epochs, corrects and informs collective memory, and so on, thus performing "the functions of the 'democratic under-labourer' that [is] central to criminology's public role" (p.163).

Finally, historical criminology is presented as being 'facing towards futures', or as an enterprise that is as forward-looking as it is backward-looking and that seeks to make interventions in the future just like much contemporary criminology does. The differences between this final characterization and the earlier 'historical alternatives and pathways to reform' is not entirely clear but, hopefully, Churchill, Yeomans and Channing will have the opportunity to further elaborate on their eclectic vision regarding the possible directions that historical criminology might take in the near future. Overall, the text makes an important contribution to the historical study of crime and the criminological study of the past, and it will be interesting to analyze its reception among both criminologists and historians, as well as other participants in the historiography of crime and criminal justice. The text makes a number of valuable methodological points about the need to factor into criminological analyses considerations about the indispensability of periodization, questions about the duration and timeliness of phenomena under investigation, the importance of understanding historically situated experiences and the thickness of the present, and much more. *Historical Criminology* offers a much-needed intervention into a field that is growing by the day and whose future, however, remains uncertain – in part

⁴ P. Knepper, *Writing the History of Crime* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

because of the way in which it is practiced by many of its proponents in the present moment. It is this point that I wish to briefly discuss in this final part of the review.

I want to return to the question surrounding the framing of historical criminology in non-antagonistic terms and how to avoid the discursive abyss that threatens to turn historical criminology into yet another neglected specialism in criminology. The short answer is that historical criminologists must take up a fight. Eschewing oppositionism can lead to historical criminology becoming one of mainstream criminology's newly domesticated sub-fields. As a matter of fact, the authors of *Historical Criminology* themselves warn about such a possibility elsewhere in their contribution to a special issue in *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* on the relationship between the history of crime and criminal justice policy.⁵ They acknowledge that, though the emergence of historical sociology in the 1980s initially caused a general euphoria among sociologists, by the 1990s it was already being described as domesticated, marginalized and, ultimately, uninfluential. How does historical criminology avoid the same fate? According to Yeomans, Churchill and Channing, by developing "a stronger profile within criminology, while maintaining and deepening relations with history as well as other disciplines".⁶ This sounds like a sensible plan but it needs to be noticed that other emerging fields in the study of crime have opted for that very same approach and the results have, so far, been meagre and modest at best. 'Southern criminology', for instance, has in recent years emerged as one of the most auspicious developments in criminology, and some of its proponents have made it clear that criminologies of the Global South are *not* designed to supplant Northern criminology. Instead, Southern criminology's mission is that of de-colonizing and democratizing "the toolbox of available criminological concepts, theories and methods" and reorient, modify and augment – rather than denounce, oppose or displace – criminology in the process.⁷

Yet, as Brown provocatively asks: "Is Southern criminology anything new or different, or is it fundamentally but one more variant of criminology's oldest game, comparative or transnational observation?"⁸ According to Brown, for Southern criminology to bring about a different state of affairs in criminology, Southern criminologists cannot simply limit themselves to supplementing mainstream criminology with peripheral observations. Instead, they need to aim at fundamentally *changing the discipline as a whole*. Southern criminology – I would argue – ought to make it possible to *unthink criminology* as it is, to imagine a different criminology. It has to enable the flourishing of a criminology that does not resemble its historically Northern and Western

⁵ H. Yeomans, D. Churchill, and I. Channing, I. 'Conversations in a Crowded Room: An Assessment of the Contribution of Historical Research to Criminology', *The Howard Journal of Crime and Criminal Justice*, 59(3) (2020) pp.243-260.

⁶ Yeomans et al 'Conversations in a Crowded Room' at 254.

⁷ K. Carrington, B. Dixon, D. Fonseca, D. R. Goyes, J. Liu, and D. Zysman 'Criminologies of the Global South: Critical Reflections', *Critical Criminology*, 27 (1) (2019) pp.163-189, p3.

⁸ M. Brown, 'Southern Criminology in the Post-colony: More Than a 'Derivative Discourse'?', in K. Carrington, R. Hogg, J. Scott and M. Sozzo (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Criminology and the Global South* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) pp.83-104, p.85.

characteristics and that does not culminate in a new science of oppression, this time with a Southern face. Arguably, this will only be possible once Southern criminology abandons its current docility, for as long as its practitioners continue to define their craft as “a political, intellectual, and empirical journey of retrieval that eschews oppositionism”, Southern criminology will continue to be at risk of being subsumed into mainstream criminology’s discursive abyss.⁹ If the historical development of criminology can be said to have coincided with the emergence of scientific techniques of oppression and control that played a crucial role in the subjection of colonized and Indigenous peoples in the Global South and beyond, then Southern criminology has no choice but to be *against* criminology, to be an intellectual force willing *to undo and unthink* criminology.

A similar point can be made about historical criminology. If lack of historical consciousness and historical imagination is one of criminology’s original sins – indeed one of its natural proclivities and one of its key deficits and limitations from its inception – then historical criminology is not to be regarded simply as a way of enhancing conventional criminology but, crucially, as a way of *moving beyond it*, a way of transcending its presentism, a way of fighting its historical amnesia, a way of instigating a *historical turn* in criminology as a whole. David Matza once said that “a main defect of sociology and criminology is that they’re not historical. We’ve always admitted it, but we haven’t done anything about it”.¹⁰ The central question for a historical criminology that confronts an *ahistorical* criminology, then, is *what should be done about it?* My personal preference would be that of witnessing criminology *in toto* become fully historical. After all, an only partially historically-informed criminology that makes historical thinking a mere option for a small segment of its scholarly community is not that different from the state of affairs described and critiqued by Pratt in ‘Criminology and History: Understanding the Present’; history in criminology will likely remain *an esoteric luxury*.¹¹

As Churchill, Yeomans and Channing themselves note, historical thinking contributes to the theoretical and conceptual richness of criminology when it threatens “to shake the rather parochial, presentist foundations upon which much work in our field rests” (p.116). This is the spirit in which I would like to see historical criminology develop; critical and oppositional, not complacent and cooperative. In the words of Churchill, Yeomans and Channing, the contributions that historical thinking can make to criminology are often *disruptive* (p.116) and such a disruptiveness ought to be fully exploited by criminologists working historically to avoid the domestication of historical thinking in criminology. As someone with a passion for historical criminology, I say this with the attitude of an *internal critic* rather than an *external critic* as defined by Walzer.¹² Internal criticism stems from particular social connections and is neither intellectually nor

⁹ Carrington et al ‘Criminologies of the Global South’ p.166.

¹⁰ J. G. Weis, and D. Matza, ‘Dialogue with David Matza’, *Issues in Criminology*, 6 (1) (1971) pp.33-53, p.53.

¹¹ J. Pratt, ‘Criminology and History: Understanding the Present’, *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 8 (1) (1996) pp.60-76.

¹² M. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Harvard University Press, 1987).

emotionally detached. While the external critic is an outsider – a spectator, a total stranger, an estranged native – who engages in criticism as if it were *an act of war*, the internal critic argues constructively with his or her fellows, through dialogue and a politics of internal opposition. The internal critic is an insider, a local judge:

This critic is one of us. Perhaps he has travelled and studied abroad, but his appeal is to local principles; if he has picked up new ideas on his travels, he tries to connect them to the local culture, building on his own intimate knowledge; he is not intellectually detached. Nor is he emotionally detached; he doesn't wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise.¹³

The art of internal criticism demands nurturing a distinctive intellectual quality; that of 'not being fully involved' in the enterprise that is being criticized while feeling a personal connection to it. In other words, the internal critic needs to find a balance between opposition and enablement, between distance and attachment.

The common stance of internal critics is *commitment to the success of the enterprises they criticize*, and it is this personal stance that I wish to underline; I want to see historical criminology succeed, but I am not sure that it can succeed unless historical criminologists find the courage to challenge the existing order of things within criminology.

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¹³ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, p. 39.