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**CRITIQUES OF PRESENTISM IN CRIMINOLOGY:**

**CHALLENGES AND PARADOXES**

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# **Abstract**

This article analyses recent critiques of *presentism* in criminology. Accusations of presentism in criminology are mainly of two kinds: those critiquing an insufficient interest in the study of criminology’s past and those critiquing an inadequate interest in the historical study of crime-related phenomena. The article identifies four *general* manifestations of presentism in contemporary criminology: presentism in criminology refers to *i)* a form of historical short-sightedness and a kind of harmful forgetfulness, *ii)* a way of burying the past, *iii)* a mode of being perpetually stuck in an eternal present, and *iv)* a failure to learn from the past. The article also discusses a variety of *technical* (i.e., historiographic) manifestations of criminological presentism that reveal some of the challenges and paradoxes inherent in the use of historical research in criminology.

**Keywords:** historical criminology; historical study of crime; historicism; history of criminology; presentism

**Introduction: Historical Criminology and the Soul of the Discipline**

Over the past twenty years or so, accusations of *presentism* have become one of the most prevalent criticisms of criminology. Taken collectively, such criticisms *i)* explicitly demonstrate that, traditionally, criminology has wilfully ignored the study of the past and *ii)* implicitly indicate that developing a *historical criminology* should be a priority for criminologists in the 21st century. While navigating these criticisms as part of the research process behind this article, it became clear that the question of presentism in criminology could not be summarised in a few words and deserved, instead, sustained discussions and debates. The primary aim of this article is to facilitate such discussions and debates. Far from offering a comprehensive take on criminology’s problematic relation to *historical consciousness* – that is, the capacity to link past, present, and future[[1]](#footnote-1) – the following considerations must be approached as preliminary attempts to delineate the problem of presentism in criminology, i.e., criminology’s lack of a *historical sense*. At the heart of such considerations is the realisation that the question of presentism in criminology is a question about *the soul* *of criminology*. This is because the birth of modern, Lombrosian criminology in the late-19th century was fundamentally an attempt to give life to a science of crime that mimicked the *natural* sciences rather than the *historical* sciences. Such naturalistic beginnings determined the content of much criminology for most of the discipline’s history. Over time, they led to the subsumption of the field of criminology by a sort of administrative, technocratic, correctional, and applied crime science concerned with the management of delinquency and the treatment of offenders and unconcerned by broader historical questions about crime and justice and about criminology’s own historical development.

Sociological advances in criminology throughout most of the 20th century, while effective in countering Lombroso’s individualistic and medico-pathological approach to the study of crime, did little to bring about a different state of affairs when it comes to the historicisation of criminology. In fact, the classical sociology of deviance and social control has been criticised *ad nauseam* for lacking ‘a sense of history’ and for being ‘historyless’, ‘ahistorical’, uninterested in the ‘social history’ of deviant behaviour, and capable only of producing formulations of ‘social control without history and politics’.[[2]](#footnote-2) When the social history of crime started to take shape in the 1970s, E.P. Thompson and other crime historians regularly lamented that criminology had evolved as a discipline with ‘an actively anti-historical bias’ and that this prevented criminologists from being natural allies in the historical study of crime.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is despite the fact that some advances in the use of historical research in criminology had by then already been made by scholars like Thorsten Sellin in the US and Leon Radzinowicz in Britain – probably because, by and large, these scholars’ works represented advances in the history of punishment and criminal law rather than the history of crime *per se*. As Roger Hood pointed out, when Radzinowicz announced the opening of the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge in 1959, journalists and other criminologists wondered why a legal historian should become a Professor of Criminology. By contrast, by the mid-1970s historical studies had become ‘almost *de rigueur* among modern sociologists of law and deviance’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Arguably, this is because criminology only started to gain a cohesive and coherent historical sense with the radicalisation of labelling theorists and the rise of critical criminology in the 1970s. During that decade, the labelling tradition was rebuilt on ‘a more politically and historically informed map’ and the traditionally ethnographic works of the sociology of deviance gave way to more historically-oriented works of labelling theory.[[5]](#footnote-5) In fact, some would argue that historical criminology is a progeny of the radical sociology of deviance of that decade, since it was this branch of knowledge that revealed the historicity of crime-related phenomena.[[6]](#footnote-6) Then, with the emergence of critical criminology, the historicity of crime and punishment became a recurring concern for radical deviancy theorists like Taylor, Walton, and Young.[[7]](#footnote-7) Indeed, it could be argued that critical criminology emerged to displace the traditionally positivistic, politically-neutral, and ahistorical concerns of mainstream criminology by locating the study of crime where it belongs – ‘in politics and history’.[[8]](#footnote-8) Critical advances in criminology from the 1970s onwards have led to sustained attacks against *ahistorical criminology* because early critical criminologists in the US and Britain started to systematically point out that history was ‘almost totally absent’ in criminological theory and that the development of critical lines of inquiry in criminology required a historical perspective.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In short, Tepperman’s claim that historical criminology fits well within the general framework of critical criminology is corroborated by historical evidence but can hardly be extended to criminology as a whole.[[10]](#footnote-10) Hence, the recent *historical turn* in criminology is part of a battle for the soul of criminology in the sense that it signals a renewal of critical criminology’s political, historically-informed, and hermeneutical challenge to mainstream criminology’s naturalistic, positivist, and correctional proclivities. The battle, which Mariana Valverde argued ‘has been lost’ by critical criminologists and won by mainstream administrative criminologists is, in fact, an on-going one and is currently raging between a critical and historically-situated criminological praxis *contra* a naively scientific and ahistorical search for the causes of crime and its remedies.[[11]](#footnote-11) As Zedner would put it, this is a battle between criminology’s ‘two irreconcilable conceptions of itself: roughly, criminology as an empirical, pragmatic, and purposive science versus criminology as a branch of critical social theory’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

To an extent, the critiques of presentism discussed in this article reflect this tension and highlight that historical criminology today is a contentious site of disciplinary restructuring at the intersection of criminology and history. Some criminologists are resorting to history to perfect and enhance the criminological enterprise, while others see in history an opportunity to critique the darker side of the discipline’s past and present. Some scholars are critical of criminology’s ahistorical tendencies because they tend to undermine the validity of criminological findings. Others see them as obstacles to a proper re-narrativisation of the injustices of the past as they relate to the history of criminology and criminal justice. Some treat the historical past as a source of disciplinary reflexivity and self-critique, others as a reservoir of raw historical data that can aid mainstream criminology’s scientific search for criminological truths. All the critiques discussed in what follows share a desire to expose the underdeveloped relationship of criminology with the study of the past, i.e., its presentism and lack of historical sense. As shown in this article, however, critiques of presentism in criminology today are developing primarily within a mainstream framework.

In the philosophy of time, presentism denotes the doctrine that the present is *all* that there is, that nothing exists except the present, or that ‘only the present is real’.[[13]](#footnote-13) The problem of presentism has a different meaning in historiography, where it is regarded as the fallacy of seeing the past through a contemporary lens and placing the present at the centre of historical analyses. Historiographic presentism is mostly an irrelevancy for mainstream criminology – though, as we shall see, those who critique philosophical presentism in criminology are often confronted by problems pertaining to presentism in historiography. What makes philosophical presentism – as opposed to historiographic presentism – a particularly pernicious problem in criminology is the fact that it leads criminologists to conceive of criminology as a *practice* *without a past* and of crime as an *ahistorical reality*. Presentism in criminology is centrally a derivation of the discipline’s correctional and applied tendencies. As long as criminologists take their primary task to be that of discovering the causes of crime and solving the crime problem, they will continue to see the study of the past as broadly irrelevant.Over 60 years ago, Jeffery made a similar argument about criminology’s disregard for the study of *law and society*.[[14]](#footnote-14) Since knowledge of law and society is generally unhelpful when it comes to reducing crime and reforming offenders, criminologists deem it inapplicable and find it, therefore, uninteresting.

As shown in the following pages, some critiques of criminological presentism suffer from a surprising paradox: they are themselves, in a sense, presentist. Instead of being animated by a desire to move away from criminology’s correctional and applied tendencies, they are primarily driven by a hope that the past may have something relevant to teach to today’s criminologists about solving the crime problem. Instead of calling for a *critical historical criminology*, they often gravitate around the idea that historical knowledge can make contemporary criminology a more complete science of a natural kind and a more rigorous and objective theoretical enterprise. In short, they tend to subordinate past to present – and such a subordination is a defining feature of presentism whether philosophically or historiographically defined. The critiques of presentism analysed in this article mainly take two forms. First, there are critiques of presentism lamenting that criminology does not take its historical development seriously enough – i.e., that it tends to forget about its own past. Presentism in criminology is here associated with an attention deficit towardthe study of *the history of criminology*. Second, there are critiques that point to a deficit in criminology’s ability to historicise crime-related phenomena. In this instance, presentism in criminology is said to prevent the genuine development of a historical analysis of crime. This second group of critiques takes presentism to be an obstacle to the flourishing of *a criminological study of the past* rather than an impediment to a proper understanding of criminology’s own past. Both classes of critique are heavily inspired by three Presidential Addresses delivered to the American Society of Criminology (ASC) by John H. Laub, Gary Lafree, and Robert J. Bursik between 2003 and 2009. The next section briefly reviews such addresses with an eye to appreciating how presentism is understood and critiqued by prominent scholars such as Laub, Lafree, and Bursik. The article then goes on to identify both general (philosophical) and technical (historiographic) manifestations of criminological presentism to reveal challenges and paradoxes in contemporary criminological engagements with historical research.

**Critiques of Presentism in Presidential Addresses to the ASC**

Most critiques of presentism in criminology seem to have been triggered by three presidential addresses to the ASC from the first decade of the 2000s and in particular by Laub’s 2003 Presidential Address delivered on the 21st of November at the 55th annual meeting of the ASC in Denver, Colorado.[[15]](#footnote-15) In his Presidential Address, Laub lamented that ‘the field of criminology lacks a sense of its own history’:

There is a “presentism” in our field that I find contrary to the spirit of a healthy, intellectually vibrant enterprise such as criminology. It seems to me “new” developments in our field are constantly offered in an environment characterized by a collective amnesia. As we enter the new millennium, we can rectify this by taking our past more seriously so that we will be better able to create our future.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Laub’s critique of criminology’s lack of interest in its own history was far from a novelty. Already in the mid- to late-1980s, scholars like David Garland and Paul Rock made clear that criminology was plagued by an inability to think historically about its own development and consolidation as a social science. Criminologists, Garland argued, have failed ‘to reflect critically upon their own practice’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Rock similarly claimed that criminologists ‘do not seem to know their past’ and tend to ‘construct a history out of fragments of polemic, gossip, myth and old analysis’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Moreover, Rock’s claim that ‘criminology needs a written record of its own development’ has been recognised at least since the mid-1930s, when debates about the early history of criminology started to attract some attention thanks to the publication of Bonger’s *An Introduction to Criminology* and of Lindesmith and Levin’s polemic against the Lombrosian origins of the discipline – both of which took discussions of criminology’s development ‘into the field of history’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Some concerted attempts to write the intellectual history of criminology were then made in the mid-20th century by George Vold, Hermann Mannheim, and a few others.[[20]](#footnote-20) Quite frankly, then, Laub should be lauded not for being a pacesetter but for rephrasing an old concern in a way that resonates with contemporary criminologists. In fact, in less than half a decade, two other presidential addresses to the ASC raised similar concerns about criminology’s presentism.

Three years after Laub’s Presidential Address, Gary Lafree complained in his ASC 2006 Presidential Address that ‘our field still seems to be characterised by a widespread ahistoricism’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Stressing the importance of history for understanding the contemporary world, Lafree evoked a play by William Faulkner in which one of the characters says ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’. Lafree went on to note that ‘history has often been dead for criminologists’ and that our thinking about crime is trapped in a ‘permanent present’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Lafree identified three key reasons why historical analysis is valuable and should be taken more seriously by criminologists. Historical analysis *i)* contributes to theoretical criminology by providing insights that cannot be obtained through cross-sectional studies, *ii)* helps criminologists recognise the dominant assumptions of their field, and *iii)* reminds criminologists that crime-related events are situated in specific historical times and that historical changes have an impact on such events. Lafree asked: ‘Given the demonstrable importance of historical approaches, why have we been so slow to adopt them?’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Methodological and analytic challenges have prevented criminologists from adopting historical analysis but, more than anything else, Lafree blamed the discipline’s generalised inattentiveness to the historical past. The antidote to criminology’s presentism and ahistoricism, Laub argued in a paper on the legacy of Sutherland and the soul of criminology, is the development of a historical consciousness – because ‘without history we have no bearings’, because history is ‘an antidote to the hubris of the present’, and because ‘without history we are faced with an uncertain future’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Laub went as far as articulating an ‘historical mission for criminology’:

So what is the historical mission for criminology? …the task would be: to examine important events of the past with painstaking care and the greatest possible objectivity, to seek a reasoned explanation for them based on the fullest and fairest possible examination of the evidence in order to preserve their memory and to use them to establish such uniformities as may exist in human events, and then to apply the resulting understanding to improve the judgement and wisdom of people who must deal with similar problems in the future.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In his 2008 Presidential Address to the ASC, Robert Bursik echoed many of the concerns about an ahistorical criminology raised by Laub and Lafree in previous addresses. In particular, he condemned criminology’s *newness fetish*:

The central proposition of this address is that many of us have a “newness fetish”, which is driven by a belief that criminology has generated bodies of theory and research of steadily increasing quality and creativity over time…[T]he conclusions drawn by even the best contemporary researchers not only may not be as novel as many of us assume, but also they may be more contextually limited in the scope of their conclusions than need be because of a failure to consider similar work conducted in earlier historical eras…This comment is not simply a call for an increased appreciation of the historical development of our field, although that is valuable in its own right. My aim here is far more modest: a demonstration of the ways in which a broader awareness and inclusivity of past work can significantly enhance the richness of our current efforts.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In their own ways, Laub, Lafree, and Bursik highlighted the problem of criminology’s presentism. Laub emphasised criminology’s lack of interest in its own history, Lafree underlined its neglect of historical analysis, and Bursik stressed criminology’s failure to value academic works produced in earlier historical periods. These are arguably the three dominant forms that presentism takes today in criminology, preventing the development of a fully historical criminology.

Another influential address to the ASC that raised similar concerns about criminology’s presentism and that is worth mentioning in this context is Nicole Rafter’s 2009 Sutherland Address. In line with Laub, Rafter’s main concern lied with criminology’s lack of interest in its own past and, more specifically, with its inability to see itself as belonging to a *tradition*. Rafter described criminology’s disregard for its own history as follows:

We have little awareness of criminology’s development and almost no monuments or touchstones that can help us recollect our past and establish a sense of tradition. Where we need words, we have silence. Where we need traditions, we have forgetfulness. Where we need reflexivity, we have ignorance. What we need is a history – or rather, histories – of our science.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The presentism and widespread ahistoricism highlighted by Laub and others in their addresses to the ASC should not be regarded as a problem unique to American criminology. Rock, for instance, addressed many of the same themes and concerns in his analysis of *chronocentrism* – or the ‘almost certainly untenable but powerful doctrine that what is current must somehow be superior to what went before’ – in British criminology.[[28]](#footnote-28) British criminologists, Rock found, are equally guilty of disavowing the past and quickly forgetting writings that are older than fifteen years or so. Historical continuities are wilfully ignored by scholars who have convinced themselves that ‘we live in new times’ that demand ‘new concepts and theories’. Nor should it be assumed that presentism is a problem unique to the discipline of criminology. In the late-1980s, for instance, Norbert Elias accused sociology of presentism in his ‘The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present’. Elias contended that the retreat of sociologists into the present and their flight from the past became a dominant trend in sociology around the mid-20th century.[[29]](#footnote-29) The same point had already been made a few years earlier by Theda Skocpol. Skocpol noted that though classical sociology emerged as ‘a historically grounded and oriented enterprise’, sociology’s historical sensibilities ‘were partially eclipsed’ during the institutionalisation of the discipline in the mid-20th century.[[30]](#footnote-30) Similar criticisms continue to be made today, with Inglis arguing less than a decade ago that ‘[r]ather than being characterized by a condition where profound historical knowledge fundamentally underpins the sociological gaze, in sociology today presentism rules’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Inspired by Laub, Lafree, Bursik, Rafter, Rock, and others, a number of criminologists have attempted to come to grips with the problem of presentism, ahistoricism, and chronocentrism in criminology. The next section offers an overview of some of the most prevalent takes on the question of presentism in criminology today.

**General takes on presentism in criminology**

Presentism in criminology is often approached as a problematic intellectual attitude signalling a lack of interest in the past of the discipline and in the continuing relevance of certain scholarly traditions within it. Put simply, presentism is understood as a form of *historical short-sightedness* and as a kind of *harmful forgetfulness*. Hence, Ranasinghe excavates criminology’s intellectual past through a historical focus on the development of ‘broken windows’ theory and identifies criminology’s presentism, chronocentrism, and newness fetish as the main barriers that works on the history of criminology ought to overcome.[[32]](#footnote-32) In a study about the pioneering research on global crime and the traffic in women conducted in the 1920s and 1930s by the League of Nations, Knepper claims that criminologists ‘tend to think of scientific understanding as work completed in the last decade or so rather than as a tradition of inquiry extending over the past century’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Welsh and Pfeffer use a socio-historical approach to examine the development of the concept of crime prevention in a US context throughout the 20th century.[[34]](#footnote-34) Noting that not enough research has been conducted on the history of crime prevention in the US, Welsh and Pfeffer stress the importance of charting such a history for the development of effective crime prevention strategies in the present. In their view, presentism in contemporary criminological scholarship refers to a lack of interest in the early stages of criminological theorising and to a failure to take seriously the history of the discipline.

Kitossa argues that research on policing is impoverished by its presentism, in the sense that it ignores the extensive tradition of critical work on policing that goes back to at least the 1960s.[[35]](#footnote-35) In their analysis of the historical resurgence of classical thought in criminology, Paternoster and Fisher accuse criminologists of presentism and of ignoring Edmund Burke’s advice about the role of history in *instructing* the present.[[36]](#footnote-36) Paternoster and Fisher stress a number of factors that point to the importance of gaining an understanding of a discipline’s past: *i)* past knowledge, findings, and discoveries can help scholars and researchers to better judge and assess knowledge, findings, and discoveries in the present, *ii)* the trials and errors of the past can inform present disciplinary choices, and *iii)* knowing the history of one’s craft can infuse scholarship with humility because it forces academics to recognise how indebted they are to their predecessors and how little uniqueness actually lies in their present works.

A clear example of how presentism masks the debt owed to intellectual ancestors in the social sciences is found in Wacquant’s review of Loader and Sparks’ *Public Criminology.*[[37]](#footnote-37) Wacquant begins his review by complaining about the book’s ‘presentist slant’. He chastises Loader and Sparks for dragging their readers ‘through the swamp of the recent American controversy over “public sociology”’ and admits that, when he first heard of the book, his immediate reaction was to say ‘Not again!’.[[38]](#footnote-38) The point is that *Public Criminology* deals with questions posed already by Marquis of Condorcet, Auguste Comte, and Emile Durkheim – important and yet old questions about the relationship between social knowledge, public action, and justice – and yet focuses on recent scholarly debates about the sociology of the chair. This shows how presentism can lead scholars astray, tempting them to reinvent the wheel and to waste time rehearsing, with slight modifications, the academic scripts of their intellectual ancestors. But there is more; presentism, paradoxically, also distracts and keeps criminologists from focusing on what should really matter to them in the present. As Wacquant points out, criminologists are wasting time debating whether or not a publicly engaged criminology is needed instead of investing time in the advancement of ‘a civic social science of justice’.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The fact that Loader and Sparks felt compelled to make a contribution to a contemporary debate about public sociology at a time when such a topic was hotly debated by sociologists and other social scientists is not particularly telling *per se*. In an analysis of the social forces that shape criminological knowledge and research, Savelsberg and Flood demonstrated the primary of *period effects* on the topics, theories, and data used by criminologists.[[40]](#footnote-40) Put differently, the historical moment in which criminologists do research has an impact on the kind of research that they do, as predicted by ‘the presentist position in the sociology of knowledge that stresses that knowledge is guided by current day interests’.[[41]](#footnote-41) In that regard, it could be argued that Loader and Sparks were simply following one of the trends of the moment.Yet, that is precisely what some critics of criminological presentism seem to find problematic; as long as scholarly efforts in criminology are guided by present concerns and by new developments, criminologists become unable to transcend the temporality of the *here and now* and to appreciate the intricate ways in which historical time blends with the present moment – or, as Faulkner would put it, to see that the past never dies.

Presentism can denote a rather unproblematic lack of temporal depth combined with a focus on short-term dynamics in a given piece of research – as in Brands, Schwanen and van Aalst’s study of fear of crime in the night-time economy.[[42]](#footnote-42) Oftentimes, however, presentism is symptomatic of more sinister political inclinations. Some critiques of criminological presentism, for example, take such a phenomenon to represent not simply a lack of historical interest or a lacking historical sense but also a way of obscuring the darker sides of history and their legacies. Here, presentism is seen as *a way of burying the past*. Hence, Rodríguez calls for a historically situated abolitionist praxis that executes one of its primary pedagogical functions by engaging in the ‘scholarly dismantling of the “presentist” and deeply ahistorical understanding of policing and prisons’ that pervades the fields of criminology and criminal justice.[[43]](#footnote-43) To expose the troubled history of policing and prison is a way of conducting a sort of political excavation into a reality that has been purposefully hidden, a way of launching an inquiry into the past so as to dig up buried truths – or, as Foucault would put it, *subjugated knowledges*.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In the field of transitional justice, Balint and Evans claim that the presentist concerns at work in this field of justice – with its ‘mandates for truth commissions and trials that cover quite short timeframes’ – tend to elide ‘the complex impacts of colonial pasts’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Aas attributes criminological theory’s lack of scrutiny of colonialism to ‘a general myopia and lack of historic interest within the discipline’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Instead of reckoning with the past, criminologists keep it buried with the help of a clever presentist technique: that of ‘surfing on the surface of the present’. A more complex presentist technique is identified by Khan and Machado, who show that postcolonial racial surveillance in crime control contexts is sustained by a scientific objectification of race that relies on ahistorical empiricism and ‘historical presentism’ – both of which serve the purpose of removing racial logics from their colonial past and hiding historically-grounded logics of coloniality.[[47]](#footnote-47)

A similar dynamic was observed in the field of terrorism studies. Here, critiques of presentism are intertwined with critiques of ‘abstracted empiricism’ and presentism is looked upon as a dubious scientistic strategy that ‘elevates ahistorical understanding to scientific preeminence’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Sire, for instance, warned that 20th century attempts to conceptualise terrorism saw a ‘depoliticisation and a growing tendency to *presentism* (concepts no longer referring to an alternative future but rather describing an ever-expanding present)’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Terrorism, a concept that used to be conceived in terms of possible revolutionary futures, is now seen through a dangerous presentist lens that objectifies it ‘as a mere *method* and a *crime*, hence as a very *present* and persistent threat’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The inherent assumption of terrorism studies, Millington argued, is that ‘terrorism is an objective phenomenon that can be observed in any time and place if only we have the right tools to do so’.[[51]](#footnote-51) This leads scholars to analyse terrorism in an anachronistic manner and to use modern-day definitions of terrorism to characterise various practices from the distant past – in a belief that terrorism existed ‘before even the word itself was spoken’.[[52]](#footnote-52) The historical study of terrorism should not be aimed at discovering the eternal essence of terrorism, Millington claimed, but rather at understanding how historical actors themselves understood the phenomenon in their own times.

A related point was raised by Robert et al., who problematised the possibility of measuring crime and recidivism in absolute terms.[[53]](#footnote-53) Since definitions of crime shift over time, and since normative standards change and criminalisation practices change accordingly, current definitions of crime should not be relied on to analyse past crime and recidivism trends. Doing so would lead to ‘the bias of presentism, of using current-day standards, ideas and perspectives and projecting them onto the past – the fallacy of *nunc pro tunc* [now for then]’.[[54]](#footnote-54) In this case as in terrorism studies, presentism also symbolises an additional tendency – that of confusing past and present. Presentism can represent a confusion of epochs, an inability to see the idiosyncrasies of the past and, therefore, *a mode of being perpetually stuck in an eternal present*. A good example of this is also found in desistance research. Farrall, Godfrey and Cox noted that most studies of desistance have focused on individuals who lived most of their lives in the second half of the 20th century.[[55]](#footnote-55) Because of this, the field of desistance studies is ‘largely the study of desistance in the *contemporary* age’ rather than the study of desistance over the *longue durée*.[[56]](#footnote-56) To address this issue, Farrall, Godfrey and Cox carried out a study of desistance in the late-19th and early-20th century in order to reveal the role of historically-embedded structures in processes of criminal reform.

By ignoring the way in which processes of desistance worked in earlier historical periods, Farrall, Godfrey and Cox argued, contemporary criminologists become vulnerable to presentism. As they put it, criminologists put themselves at risk of developing ‘a body of knowledge which is systematically biased towards the present’ and which ‘may lead us along theoretical and policy lines which are based on inaccurate assessments of the processes we seek to understand’.[[57]](#footnote-57) About a decade later, Rocque noted that little had changed in desistance studies and that only a few exceptions to what Laub calls ‘criminology’s presentism’ could be detected in the field.[[58]](#footnote-58) He argued that ‘the historical contextuality of desistance theories or perspectives’ needs to be carefully investigated in view of the fact that ‘one of the pillars of the life-course approach is that history matters’.[[59]](#footnote-59) History and context matter and, by paying more attention to historical data, criminologists might be able to ascertain whether the predictors of desistance are historically contingent. Presentism, then, also symbolises *a failure to learn from the past*. The field of violence studies is a good example of this manifestation of presentism.

Forde claimed that criminal justice is plagued by problems of presentism and ahistoricism and that, in the field of violence prevention, ‘the reality is that we can learn from our mistakes’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Forde’s assumption seems to be that if the nature of violence and its patterns is properly understood through careful historical analysis, then violence may be more successfully prevented and controlled in the present. In this view, the past is a reservoir of useful lessons and facts with a practical value for the present. This is where things get messy and complicated and where the paradox inherent in many critiques of criminological presentism makes itself manifest. To study violence historically in order to come up with better solutions to the problem of violence in the present is precisely the kind of presentist attitude that many historians find problematic. Though some historians have actually been popularising this kind of approach at least since the late-1990s, hoping to persuade historians to ‘study violence in the past’ in order to ‘control it in the present’, this is widely regarded by historians as a problematic historiographic approach.[[61]](#footnote-61) The historian’s default historiographic position in this context should be *to historicise violence for its own sake*. As Dwyer put it: ‘Historicizing violence can be an end in itself’.[[62]](#footnote-62) This is historicism, and historicism is exactly what presentism is not.[[63]](#footnote-63)

By studying historical manifestations of violence with a view to addressing the problem of violence in the present, criminologists risk engaging in a presentist exercise. Paradoxically, then, some critics of philosophical presentism in criminology are – knowingly or unknowingly – advocating historiographic presentism in criminology. As the next section makes clear, this is particularly evident in the kind of use of history in criminology advocated by Bursik to combat the discipline’s newness fetish, i.e., making use of criminological works from the past to enhance theoretical and policy efforts in the present. These, then, are some of the manifestations of criminological presentism that emerge from a quick survey of the relevant literature. Presentism is *i)* a form of historical short-sightedness and a kind of harmful forgetfulness, *ii)* a way of burying the past, *iii)* a mode of being perpetually stuck in an eternal present, and *iv)* a failure to learn from the past. Each manifestation adds to the workload of historical criminology in its own way. At the same time, from a criminological point of view it is not entirely clear why these manifestations of criminological presentism should be regarded as intrinsically problematic. If anything, each requires adequate justification. For once it is taken for granted that criminology is the study of crime and its control, it is certainly not a given that historical qualities and activities such as *i)* an active historical memory, *ii)* deep excavations into the past, *iii)* a capacity to link past and present and to connect history and memory, and *iv)* historical pedagogy have something significant to add to such an endeavour.

The idea that historical pedagogy cannot contribute much to criminological theory and practice may be dubious and controversial for some, for it seems counterintuitive to argue that learning from history is not, by definition, useful to theoretical and practical advances in the social sciences. The problem is that such a view of history as ‘useful for the present’ is based on a faulty understanding of the ancient maxim that *historia magistra vitae* (history is life’s teacher). We do not learn from history as such but *from historians* and those who narrate past events, so the real question concerns the kinds of useful facts that criminologists and other social scientists can learn from those who study the past professionally, write history, and preserve the memories of the past. By and large, modern historians take historiography to be an exercise of learning *about* the past and not of learning *from* the past. The pedagogic value of history, then, presents criminologists with a challenge and a paradox. Criminologists are essentially turning to history as a way of overcoming their discipline’s generalised presentism and ahistoricism. Yet, in doing so, they are putting themselves at risk of succumbing to a different sort of presentism – namely, the historiographic fallacy of subordinating past to present and of caring for the past only insofar as it tells us something useful for the present.

The next section engages with the works of scholars who warned against the pitfalls of historiographic presentism in criminology and contrasts them with the stance of others who do not seem to be particularly troubled by presentist uses of historical research in criminology. As it will become clear by the end of this article, such comparative exercises can help further elucidate some of the paradoxes and ambivalences that characterise the discourse of presentism in criminology today.

**Technical takes on Presentism in Criminology**

Many of those who experimented with historical research in criminology have realised that the use of historical material and sources in criminology is problematic because the disciplinary tendencies of criminology are presentist by design. As Lawrence put it: ‘If criminologists on occasion work from historical sources and make no attempt to link this work explicitly to the concerns of the present, they are effectively acting primarily as historians’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Unlike historians, criminologists who venture into the archives are often motivated by a desire to make better sense of present-day events and trends. This makes criminologists working historically prone to accusations of historiographic presentism. This is paradoxical because, in point of fact, these are the criminologists who are making the most explicit efforts to resist their discipline’s presentist tendencies. This does not mean, however, that criminologists with an interest in history are oblivious to the dangers of historiographic presentism. In fact, many of them take the avoidance of presentism to be a mandatory methodological precaution guided by a proper understanding of historiographic norms.

Deflem, for instance, offered a discussion of the criminological sociology of Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) and, in order to avoid ‘a presentist analysis’, restricted such a discussion to a substantive engagement with Tönnies’ work and a comparison with the works of his contemporaries.[[65]](#footnote-65) At the end of his review of Tönnies’ works, Deflem stated the following:

Of course, with this review I do not wish to suggest that Tönnies’ work can be useful for contemporary research on crime. I did not mean to distil from Tönnies’ work “useful bits of lore” in terms of his criminological research agenda…but have instead worked towards contextualizing his work, in theoretical, methodological, empirical and policy respects, in terms of its relationship to other similar projects in criminological sociology in Tönnies’ days.[[66]](#footnote-66)

An equally anti-presentist approach is defended by Beirne in his studies on Jean-Gabriel Tarde (1843-1904). In a paper presented at the 1986 annual meetings of the ASC, Beirne critiqued scholarship on the early history of criminology for its presentist tendencies.[[67]](#footnote-67) With respect to an understanding of the contributions of Tarde to criminology, Beirne claimed that ‘the identification of Tarde’s criminology has been notoriously susceptible to the tendency to reconstitute past intellectual history according to the dominant concerns and perspectives of the present’.[[68]](#footnote-68) Instead of trying to appreciate Tarde’s penal philosophy in its own terms, scholarship superimposes its own current research interests on it and, therefore, distorts its original meaning. This is a classical instantiation of presentism that goes back at least to the times of John Stuart Mill, who saw it as a chief characteristic of the Western historiography of the 18th century. According to Mill, the defining character of such a historiography is:

to transport present feelings and notions back into the past, and refer all ages and forms of human life to the standard of that in which the writer himself lives. Whatever cannot be translated into the language of their own time, whatever they cannot represent to themselves by some fancied modern equivalent, is nothing to them, calls up no ideas in their minds at all. They cannot imagine any thing different from their own everyday experience…they antedate not only modern ideas, but the essential characters of the modern mind; and imagine their ancestors to be very like their next neighbours…If an historian of this stamp takes a side in controversy, and passes judgment upon actions or personages that have figured in history, he applies to them in the crudest form the canons of some modern party or creed.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Following in the footsteps of Mill’s critique of presentism, scholars such as Deflem and Beirne warn that criminologists who study the past must do so in a way that takes cognisance of the uniqueness of different historical periods, placing phenomena, texts, and events from the past in their proper historical context and – crucially – paying tribute to their *historicity* without asking what we might learn from them.

Even Laub himself claimed in an analysis of the ‘Sutherland-Glueck debate’ that, since the Gluecks could not have possibly known *the implications* of their work for contemporary criminology, one ought to resist the temptation of assessing the value of their work according to present-day standards and be content with a more limited assessment of the *validity* of their methods. To speak of the Gluecks’ *contributions* to present research is ‘to commit the error of “presentism”’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Similarly, Valverde accused contemporary biosocial criminologists of reading Lombroso’s work through a presentist lens that portrays him as ‘a positivistic biomedical researcher who was just not very good at his job’.[[71]](#footnote-71) Valverde invites criminologists to put Lombroso ‘back in his own intellectual context’. Eager to see continuities between their own work and the legacy of Lombroso, contemporary biosocial criminologists are, according to Valverde, falling prey to historiographic presentism and are distorting the discipline’s understanding of its own past as a result. In the case of biosocial criminology, then, presentism retains its predominant form of *Whig history* heavily critiqued by L. Namier and H. Butterfield. This is the kind of teleological historiography that glorifies scientific development and celebrates the inevitability of progress, that emphasises similarities and deemphasises differences between past and present, and that fails to see historical development ‘as anything other than a continuous process moving linearly and purposefully towards the present’.[[72]](#footnote-72) We shall return to the perceived dangers of Whiggism at a later stage.

Though Deflem, Beirne, and Valverde raise valuable points about the need to be cautious when studying and retelling the history of our discipline, it is worthwhile asking whether criminologists are entitled to approach the history of criminology from an angle different from the one generally used by historians. Various authors have argued that works of historical criminology are present-oriented *by default* and that it makes little sense for criminologists to do historical research simply to know what happened in the past.[[73]](#footnote-73) Deflem himself claimed that ‘historical criminology is not merely a criminology of the past’.[[74]](#footnote-74) The question, then, is whether the history of criminology should be an area of interest to historical criminologists at all. Should we leave the task of writing our past to professional historians, since they are more qualified than anybody else to distinguish between the historical past and what Heller calls ‘the past of our present’?[[75]](#footnote-75) This proposal sounds inadequate because it inevitably contributes criminology’s newness fetish and inattentiveness to past works condemned by Bursik. Even if one concedes that criminologists can still *research* criminological classics and the works and lives of pioneers in criminology but should, for the sake of professionalism, avoid *writing about them*, it is easy to see why some of us sense a feeling of disciplinary authoritarianism at the idea and would be inclined to reject such a strict disciplinary compartmentalisation.

In that regard, it is important to note that some historical criminologists do not seem to be particularly troubled by the historiographic challenges that emerge when divorcing the intellectual works of earlier criminologists from the historical contexts that produced them. For however counterintuitive this may sound, some would argue that this is in fact one of the main tasks of historical criminology. Take Knepper’s contribution to Jacques and Schofield’s edited collection on *Jeremy Bentham on Police: The Unknown Story and What it Means for Criminology* – an appropriately presentist title.[[76]](#footnote-76) Knepper explicitly claimed that historical criminology aims not at ‘assessing a theory in the context in which it was written, but rather its contribution to ongoing work that we refer to as theoretical criminology’.[[77]](#footnote-77) By looking back at Bentham ‘with knowledge of the present’, Knepper further claimed, ‘we can see how his views contribute to our own time’.[[78]](#footnote-78) This is an unquestionably presentist approach, and one that has generally been condemned by scholars who have written on how to interpret the past intellectual works of pioneers in the social sciences.[[79]](#footnote-79) Elsewhere, Knepper asserted that the reading of archival documents allows for a specific historical era to be perceived ‘as an historical experience that continues into the present’ and that ‘this long-term view is more useful for theorizing than the “newest” data’.[[80]](#footnote-80) Such an approach to the study of criminological texts from the past is in clear tension with the one advocated by Deflem, Beirne, and Valverde.

Avoidance of historiographic presentism in criminology is broadly understood by some to be a methodological precaution needed to properly understand not just works from the past – such as those of Tönnies, Tarde, or Lombroso – but the past itself. For instance, scholars have warned about the risks of historiographic presentism in legislative evaluations and about the ways in which presentism can compromise our understanding of the past of criminal law and criminal justice. In his comments on the rationale behind the *Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974*, Henley accused 21st century interpretations and evaluation of the *Act* of falling ‘into the trap of “presentism” – a form of bias which introduces present ideas and values into the interpretation of historical events’.[[81]](#footnote-81) By looking at a piece of legislation from the 1970s through a 21st century lens, there is a danger of misinterpreting the *Act* as part of a raft of *public protection measures* informed by a heightened cultural sensitivity to *risk* when this is not what led to the drafting of the original bill. In fact, concerns with public protection did not play a central role in the debates which circulated around the time the legislation was passed. Similarly, Kilcommins’ focus is on the *Criminal Justice Act* of 1972 and the way in which it has been interpreted through a presentist and ahistorical framework.[[82]](#footnote-82) Kilcommins understands presentism as the practice ‘of projecting modern ways of thinking backwards in time’ and as ‘a narcissistic form of historiography’ that prevents scholars from appreciating the historicity of the *Act.* According to Kilcommins, presentist readings of the *Act* obfuscate the fact that its conditions of possibility are to be found in the historical specificities of the modern penal and social complex.[[83]](#footnote-83)

The need to avoid historiographic presentism in the criminological study of the past has also been pointed out by scholars who noticed that presentism poses a problem of anachronism with regards to the use of appropriate semantics and terminology. The language, vocabulary, speech modalities, and discursive regimes of the past are not the same as those of the present. Using present-day terms to describe events and occurrences from a distant historical period, then, can lead scholars to provide historical descriptions that rely on terms that did not exist at the time.Block chastised this sort of linguistic presentism in her studies of rape laws in 19th century America.[[84]](#footnote-84) Those who study 19th century explanations of rape will not find modern-day notions like ‘rapist’ and ‘sexual offender’ because such notions did not exist back then: ‘There were no “rapists” or “sexual offenders” in the 19th century. Men “outraged” women, they did not “sexually assault” them’.[[85]](#footnote-85) It was only through the medicalisation of rape language that occurred in the 20th century that terms like ‘rapist’ and ‘sex offender’ started to linguistically partake in the social construction of sexual offending. Hence,using such termsto characterise what was going on in earlier historical periods is, according to Block, presentist and anachronistic.

Hetherington noticed something similar in her analysis of Russian criminologists’ attempts to put an end to the international traffic of pornography in the 1880s.[[86]](#footnote-86) The use of 21st century labels like ‘transnational’ or ‘cross-border’ crime, she argued, should be avoided in such a context because they are anachronistic, whereas ‘international’ crime is preferable because it is the label that was used at the time. Likewise, Meier discussed the problem of linguistic anachronism and presentism in relation to the study of anti-social behaviour in Victorian Britain.[[87]](#footnote-87) Meier offered a generally positive review of Pickard’s *Anti-Social Behaviour in Britain: Victorian and Contemporary Perspectives* but warned its readers that the book is ‘littered with contemporary criminal justice acronyms including ABC, ASBO, CBO, CPI, CRASBO, FBO, FIP, ISO, and PND’.[[88]](#footnote-88) Using contemporary terminology – or, as Meier put it, ‘presentist jargon’ – to describe Victorian behaviour is problematic because it risks obscuring important historical differences relating to the ways in which people in the past defined and understood what it meant to be social and anti-social.

When it comes to defining the boundaries of proper historiographic language, however, it might be the case that *meaning* matters more than *terminology*. In other words, it is not particularly relevant whether we use terms like ‘risk’, ‘sex offender’, ‘transnational’, or ‘ASBO’ to make sense of a past that did not know or use such terms. Rather, what matters is that we do not introduce entire classes of meaning into explanations of past periods in which they were non-existent. Lucien Febvre – arguably the most influential social historian of the French tradition and founder of the *Annales d’histoire sociale* – made this clear in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, a magisterial work of religious and intellectual history where Febvre attacks the view that the word ‘atheism’ could be used to describe unbelief in the 16th century. The book centres on the figure of François Rabelais (1494-1553), prominent Renaissance Frenchman with humanist and anticlerical leanings whom literary historian Abel Lefranc famously described as a radical atheist in disguise in a Church-dominated world. The aim of Febvre’s book is not so much to demolish the claim that Rabelais was a covert atheist and a freethinker ahead of his time but rather to show that it would be *anachronistic* to make of Rabelais a non-believer in disguise, like Abel Lefranc did, because ‘no thought of any kind – however pure and disinterested, is unaffected by the climate of a period’.[[89]](#footnote-89) To claim that Rabelais was an atheist is, in Febvre’s view, to catch hold of him in isolation from his contemporaries and his times, and this is not how historians proceed when studying the past.

Lefranc’s error in claiming that Rabelais was an atheist consisted in reading his works in a way that ‘fits in with the direction of one of our own modes of feeling’ and, on that basis, concluding that Rabelais ‘fits under one of the rubrics we use today for classifying those who do or do not think like us in matters of religion’.[[90]](#footnote-90) Put differently, Lefranc brought to bear on Rabelais’ texts ‘our ideas, our feelings, the fruits of our scientific enquiries, our political experiences, and our social achievements’.[[91]](#footnote-91) Hence, by implying that there existed such a thing as atheism at the times of Rabelais, Lefranc was guilty of presentism. He projected ‘the present, that is our present, into the past’ and thus committed ‘the worst sort of anachronism, and the most insidious and harmful of all’ – or, as Bloch would put it, ‘the most unpardonable of sins in a time-science’.[[92]](#footnote-92) As Rancière suggests, anachronism – ‘the mistake against history par excellence’ – is conventionally understood as constituting a confusion of epochs; accusations of anachronism are claims that X could not have existed at a given date.[[93]](#footnote-93) Accordingly, Febvre did not argue that Rabelais was not an atheist but that it was not possible for him to be a non-believer because his epoch did not allow for unbelief:

To speak of rationalism and free thought when we are dealing with an age when the most intelligent of men, the most learned, and the most daring were truly incapable of finding any support either in philosophy or science against a religion whose dominance was universal is to speak of an illusion. More precisely, it is to perpetrate, *under the cover of fine-sounding words and an impressive vocabulary*, the most serious and most ridiculous of all anachronisms; in the realm of ideas it is like giving Diogenes an umbrella and Mars a machine gun.[[94]](#footnote-94)

The *logos* of historical narratives matters not only because of the anachronistic meanings it can convey but also because such anachronistic and presentist meanings can be indicative of more fundamental misunderstandings about the very *mentalités* of an age, its *zeitgeist*, its underlying structures of knowledge and understanding, its *episteme*.

In some instances, historiographic presentism is taken to designate a lack of professionalism, that is, a conscious historiographic stance that partly sacrifices historical accuracy and detail for the sake of making one’s observations relevant to present-day debates. But this is not always the case and, at times, presentist attempts to reflect on contemporary events by resort to historical analysis are lauded as acts of caring and ways of showing concern for the present. Here are some examples reflecting such an ambivalent take on historiographic presentism in criminology. In her review of Adam J. Hirsch’s *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America*, Cocker praised Hirsch for not letting his historical narrative be tainted by the need to address present debates about prison and incarceration.[[95]](#footnote-95) In particular, Cocker stated that ‘unlike historians of crime whose work is informed by dismay at contemporary twentieth-century penal institutions, Hirsch’s concerns struck this reader as academic rather than presentist’.[[96]](#footnote-96) In sharp contrast,Walker applauded Clayton James Mosher’s *Discrimination and Denial: Systemic Racism in Ontario’s Legal and Criminal Justice Systems, 1892–1961* for taking as its jumping-off point contemporary incidents and events that led to a surge in interest in public debate on race, crime, and immigration.[[97]](#footnote-97) Though conventional historians often dismiss historical accounts that borrow from Foucault a desire to write *histories of the present* because of their presentism, Walker pointed out that sociohistorical inquiry ‘is precisely born out of a desire to shed light on current debates by using the insights of the past’.[[98]](#footnote-98)

In his review of Mike McConville and Chester L. Mirsky’s *Jury Trials and Plea Bargaining: A True History*, Farmer praised McConville and Mirsky for calling out the dangers of presentism that often characterise the work of scholars who see plea bargaining as an inevitable part of the modernisation process in criminal justice.[[99]](#footnote-99) Such accounts make the presentist error of ‘reading our present concerns into explanations of the past’ and, in so doing, tend to confuse temporal coincidences (between past and present) with continuity, thus risking ‘to flatten important differences in the culture of criminal justice at different times and periods’.[[100]](#footnote-100) Likewise, Curthoys critiqued *The History of Australian Corrections* by Sean O’Toole for its presentist interpretation of the history of the Australian correctional system.[[101]](#footnote-101) In Curthoys’ critique, presentist means both unacademic and teleological. O’Toole is accused of relying too heavily on works with little academic value, that is, works produced not for an academic audience but for professionals working in corrections. Because such works have been produced ‘for professional development purposes within government departments of corrective services’, they do not offer a dispassionate and detached interpretation of the history of Australian corrections.[[102]](#footnote-102) In other words, they are not scholarly but pragmatic. In Curthoys’ words, O’Toole’s bookseeks to explain ‘why correctional systems are as they are now, rather than seeking, as historians might do, to understand why they were as they were in the past’.[[103]](#footnote-103) This is arguably the essential distinction between a historicist and a presentist position in historical works of criminology: one aims to explain the past, the other to explain the present. The former is underpinned by a sober interest in learning *about* the past, whereas the latter is motivated by a practical interest to learn *from* the past something useful for or about the present.Needless to say, such a strict dichotomybetween past-oriented and present-oriented works carries its problems and limitations, but has been usefully applied to the historical study of crime to distinguish works of historical criminology from works of crime history.[[104]](#footnote-104)

Arguably, the most important part of Curthoys’ criticism is the bit that says ‘as historians might do’. Allegiance to historicism is the conventional historian’s ultimate duty – a point that made headlines recently following James H. Sweet’s presidential address to the American Historical Association, whose point of attack was the trend toward presentism in the historical profession.[[105]](#footnote-105) When scholars other than historians write history, or even when historians specialised in a given field write about a field other than their own, historians can get bitter. As an example, J. A. Sharpe – a prominent historian of early-modern England and a specialist in witchcraft, crime, and punishment – wrote a critical review of Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn’s *A Trial of Witches: A Seventeenth Century Witchcraft Prosecution*, calling the book ‘a disappointing exercise’ whose key problem is that ‘neither of the authors is a seventeenth-century historian’.[[106]](#footnote-106) Why is it a problem that the authors of the book are a criminology professor and a local historian rather than specialists in the area and historical period under scrutiny? Not because scholars from other fields should not interfere with the writing of history; Sharpe makes very clear at the end of the review that the contributions to the study of witchcraft in early modern England made by scholars other than historians should be welcomed. The problem is that a lack of historical knowledge and understanding of specific historical contexts tends to produce historical works that are ‘hampered by a lingering presentism’.[[107]](#footnote-107) Here, Sharpe conceives of presentism as a shortcoming in historical research rather than as a conscious historiographic stance. When one studies historical periods that one does not understand well enough, it is easy to succumb to an inability to keep *both eyes on the past* because, quite simply, one does not know where to look. As a result, one tends to write history – to borrow from Butterfield – *with one eye upon the present*.[[108]](#footnote-108)

The question of whether history can ever be written without keeping an eye upon the present has been subjected to extensive scrutiny by historians and philosophers of history. Notably, the attitude of those who write history with an eye upon the present has been said by Butterflied to be the essential prerequisite of Whig historiography. Butterfield regarded scholars engaged in historical research for purposes other than learning *about* the past as being engaged in fallacious historiographic exercises. Butterfield was particularly critical of the *Whig fallacy*, a phrase used to describe the approach of historians who tend to organise their schemes of history from the perspective of their own day. In Butterfield’s view, such (Whig) historians are not interested in accurately portraying what happened in the past. Rather, they write history to glorify the present – they study the past for the sake of the present and their historical narratives represent attempts to *hunt for the present in the past*. This way of writing history with an eye upon the present, Butterfield argued, is ‘the source of all sins and sophistries in history’ for it distorts historical events to fit one’s present views;[[109]](#footnote-109) it constitutes ‘a sublime and purposeful unhistoricity’ that allows historians to conveniently *choose a past* that suits their biases.[[110]](#footnote-110) For Butterfield, historical understanding is not achieved ‘by the subordination of the past to the present’ but rather ‘by our making the past our present and attempting to see life with the eyes of another century than our own’.[[111]](#footnote-111)

Interestingly, Butterfield understood that the present is the ‘inescapable’ starting point of all historical reflection.[[112]](#footnote-112) Indeed, it is on that basis that his criticisms of the Whig fallacy are said to carry historiographic weight. It is precisely in view of this realisation that it is sensible to argue that professional historians have a methodological responsibility to limit the interplay of past and present, to avoid making it a perpetual exercise to do history by reference to the present. In essence, Butterfield was simply defaulting to a conventional, historicist predisposition in Western historiography which has been in vogue since the times of Leopold von Ranke – the most influential of modern historians to insist that the correct historiographic posture to maintain when looking at the past is withholding judgment and simply observing it ‘in its essence’, ‘as it really was’, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. As many have long recognised, however, such an attempt to divorce the historical past from the politics of the present can lead to sterilisation in historiography. As Buss put it, Butterfield’s critique of Whig history’s presentism embodies ‘a position which attempts to eschew all value judgments from historical inquiry’, thus robbing history ‘of its critical function’ and ‘transforming it into an inconsequential, erudite historicism’ that deliberately ignores the present in order to study the past for its own sake.[[113]](#footnote-113) Butterfield’s historicist admonition of Whig historians amounts to a call for the adoption of a sort of Baconian inductive method in historiography, or a method that ‘attempts to investigate phenomena with an observant but empty mind’.[[114]](#footnote-114) But such a method has been justifiably accused of turning historiography into ‘a deadly, purely descriptive exercise of reporting facts’.[[115]](#footnote-115)

In this regard, many of the criticisms reviewed in this section – such as those of Cocker, Farmer, and Curthoys – are somewhat out of touch with historical epistemology. Once it is accepted that investigating historical phenomena with an empty mind is little more than a false hope – as Butterfield himself ultimately admitted – then it ought to be conceded that studying the past for its own sake and even doing so in the most rigorous past-oriented way remains an act carried out in the present and for the present. As Winsor suggests, the idea that the past can be studied for its own sake is ‘fantastic’ because it overlooks the epistemological reality that ‘writing history is an action that can only be undertaken by a living person’ and, therefore, that ‘some degree of presentism [is] impossible to avoid’.[[116]](#footnote-116) As Croce would put it, ‘[the] collecting of dead documents and writing down of empty histories is an act of life which serves life’ and, ultimately, contemporaneity is not ‘the characteristic of a class of histories’ but rather ‘an intrinsic character of every history’.[[117]](#footnote-117) Studying the past purely *under the aspect of its pastness* is still a contemporary act, and one which ought to be primarily oriented toward helping humankind add a temporal dimension to the awareness that it has of itself.[[118]](#footnote-118) Writing history is unavoidably *a mode of experience*, a mode of experiencing and performing the present. As Oakeshott would put it, history is a *modification* rather than an *extension* of present experience; the past is always present before it can ever become historical.[[119]](#footnote-119) In the last instance, then, critiques of historiographic presentism often endorse – either purposely or inadvertently – a questionable ideal of historical inquiry *qua* form of escapism engaged in by historians who wish to become *time-travellers* by venturing further and further back in distant times to the point of becoming *strangers* to their own days.

Such an ideal of history was already conceivable at the times of Descartes and was addressed and critiqued by Collingwood in *The Idea of History*. There, Collingwood claimed that ‘the historian can genuinely see into the past only so far as he stands firmly rooted in the present’ and that the historian’s business ‘is not to leap clean out of his own period of history’ but rather ‘to be in every respect a man of his age and to see the past as it appears from the standpoint of that age’.[[120]](#footnote-120) A final manifestation of presentism reviewed in this article seems to align quite harmoniously with this Collingwoodian characterisation of historical practice. As conceived by Quinn, Canossini and Evans, presentism can complement sociological historicism in attempts to make sense of ‘the messiness of penal change’.[[121]](#footnote-121) This ‘productive’ kind of presentism ‘takes seriously how contemporary understandings inform our interpretation of the past’ and allows scholars to ‘read history backwards’. This is done not in order to achieve ‘a greater understanding of the present in light of the past, but of the past in light of the present’.[[122]](#footnote-122) This presentist approach is also reminiscent of Foucault’s genealogical method in *Discipline and Punish*, but in an inverted form, i.e., it subverts his provocative *dictum* that one can write *the history of the present* without writing ‘a history of the past in terms of the present’.[[123]](#footnote-123)

Thus, it could be argued that historiographic presentism in criminology is generally taken to be a problem relating to *i)* a failure to follow proper historiographic norms when studying texts, thinkers, and events from the past, *ii)* linguistic anachronism and the use of inappropriate terminology to describe and analyse the past, and the related historiographic imposition of presentist meanings, *iii)* a lack of professionalism found in works that sacrifice historical accuracy in exchange for contemporary relevance, and *iv)* a shortcoming in historical research precipitated either by an insufficient understanding of the past or by a propensity to see the historical past through lens of the living present. Some, however, understand historiographic presentism in positive and productive terms and claim that it should actually be endorsed – as seen in the case of Knepper, Walker, and Quinn, Canossini and Evans. Historiographic presentism can be a manifestation of sound and seemingly harmless academic impulses, such as seeing usefulness in history, seeing connections and continuity between past and present, seeing theoretical potential in academic works from the distant past, using the insights of the past to shed light on the present, and using the insights of the present to shed light on the past. While there seems to be a consensus that presentism (philosophically understood) is detrimental to the criminological enterprise, criminology’s relation to historiographic presentism is more ambiguous. In fact, as I argue elsewhere, it is reasonable to claim that historicism, and not presentism, is the primary obstacle to advances in historical criminology today.[[124]](#footnote-124) Such a claim can only be defended, however, if historical criminology is understood to be a present-centred academic attitude and activity interested in weaponising historical knowledge for practical purposes in criminology and criminal justice today.

As discerned from the above analysis of presentism in the criminological study of the past, there are clearly conflicting and ambivalent views regarding the uses of historical research in criminology. Some take the study of the past to be subordinate to the advancement of criminological aims and goals in the present. Others see value in studying the past for its own sake, without superimposing criminological reasons and research goals upon it. There is a sense in which these two attitudes toward the study of the past in criminology are actually complementary. Broader historiographic debates on the incompatibilities of historicism and presentism, however, suggest that the two are not always easy to reconcile. As Jack Hexter pointed out, the way professional historians have conventionally turned information about the past into *episteme* (knowledge) rather than *doxa* (opinion) is precisely by making sure that historiography has no practical application as its terminus.[[125]](#footnote-125) As historical criminologists and crime historians know well, this is the main reason why authors in the *revisionist* camp of the historical study of crime such as Rothman, Foucault, Ignatieff, Melossi and Pavarini, and others have been accused of politicising the past; these are writers who were guided in their historical explorations of crime and punishment by present concerns like the European penal crises of the late-1960s and, therefore, produced presentist accounts that distort the historical past for the sake of participating in contemporary political discourse. To put it bluntly, such writers are accused of *abusing* history, rewriting it from their present point of view and in the interest of some political cause.

Yet, history *is* constantly rewritten, and so the parameters that dictate whether historical writings are presentist or not are inevitably political rather than historiographic. Hayden White may be correct in asserting that ‘there is no such thing as politically innocent historiography’.[[126]](#footnote-126) A more interesting question, however, is whether there is a methodologically correct historiography. The critiques of presentism reviewed in this article suggest that, today, the politicisation of the historiography of crime and criminal justice is not seen as a particularly pernicious threat. Instead, the main concerns expressed by scholars critiquing presentism in criminology mostly relate to how to effectively make use of historical sources and historical data in ways that are analytically sound and useful, how to promote awareness of our discipline’s past, how to fight collective amnesia and nurture historical memory, how to faithfully reconstruct the historical past, and other matters that tend to be more practical and methodological than political. Further research in this area could explore the extent to which the contemporary criminologist’s engagement with historical research is motivated by stimuli that are primarily political or methodological in nature. For instance, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, Willem Bonger claimed in *Criminality and Economic Conditions* that, though the importance of historical research into crime cannot be denied, ‘the historic method never permits us to give the complete etiology of a social phenomenon, like criminality’.[[127]](#footnote-127) Bonger had good reasons to believe that studying crime historically is the right thing to do *politically* – simply by virtue of being a Marxist and a disciple of historical materialism. To him, the challenges facing a historical criminology were fundamentally methodological in scope.

21st century criminology seems to have moved away from Bonger’s conclusion, and today’s historical criminologists would happily maintain that the opposite of what Bonger believed is true; the causes of a social phenomenon like criminality cannot adequately be understood *unless* historical research is effectively incorporated into the study of crime to provide a more ‘complete’ picture of the problem under investigation. Have we reached such a conclusion because of methodological advances or due to a changing political climate? Are we doing history in criminology because it is technically, practically, and methodologically more feasible or because it is politically more appealing than it used to be? Understanding why attitudes toward historical research in criminology over the past 100 years have shifted will help criminologists clarify what sorts of roles can be reasonably expected to be played by various approaches to the study of the past.

**Conclusion**

As shown in the preceding analysis, the key problem highlighted in critiques of criminological presentism concerns a combination of two major shortcomings in contemporary criminology: first, that criminology as a discipline only knows itself as it exists in the present – as if it were born yesterday, as if it did not have a history – and, second, that criminologists tend to analyse crime and crime trends only in their present form, neglecting their past manifestations. Ultimately, accusations of presentism target the single idea that criminology is obsessed with the present and, therefore, repudiates history. Yet, an analysis of critiques of presentism in a variety of criminological research settings reveals a number of paradoxes and challenges. In particular, scholars endeavouring to resist criminological presentism often engage with historical research in a way that some historians would describe as presentist. This is a tension that can only be resolved through careful study and critical scrutiny of the interaction between criminology and historiography. On the one hand, modern historiography dictates that the presentist proclivity of looking at the past from a contemporary point of view must be resisted. On the other hand, it seems perfectly justifiable for criminologists and other social scientists to study the past with an eye upon the present because social scientists are centrally concerned with the study of contemporary social problems.

As I suggest elsewhere, a possible theoretical solution to this issue would be to distinguish between ‘presentism’ and ‘present-centredness’ and to make clear that criminologists working historically can write ‘histories of the present’ without being presentist – but developing such an argument here would take us beyond the scope of this article. In the last analysis, this article aimed to point out a theoretical problem rather than to offer specific solutions. That presentism and a pervasive bias toward the present remain significant problems in criminology is clearly demonstrated by a statement made by Sandra Walklate in her historical analysis of criminological and victimological debates from the 1980s onwards. Having pointed out her decision to conduct a ‘historical excavation’, she felt the need to say ‘I make no apologies for taking this approach’ – as if historical lines of inquiry were somehow an intellectual crime in criminology.[[128]](#footnote-128) While historical research in criminology should be incentivised – as Rafter explicitly stated in her 2009 Sutherland Address to the ASC – it would be an error to take the relativist position asserting that ‘all historical approaches in criminology are equal’. Instead of surrendering to the (adapted) Orwellian platitude that ‘some historical approaches in criminology are more equal than others’ or mindlessly favouring historical approaches over other methodologies, it should be recognised – as Paul Roberts does – that, to many contemporary criminologists, ‘it is not obvious why historical inquiry should merit any methodological priority’ over other methodological possibilities.[[129]](#footnote-129)

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