# Educating the Criminology Vanguard

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## Introduction

My aim in these reflections is to offer a personal account of my efforts to bridge the divide between the academic entrenchment of a 'critical criminology' and the teaching of its precepts to the daily purveyors of social order least inclined to accept them – those in the law enforcement and corrections community. In portraying this dilemma, I will briefly report on an early positive inspiration on the theoretical side, followed by a disappointing negative one on the applied side. My experience, telling but by no means unique, illustrates the pedagogical challenge lodged in attempts to instill a holistic conception of social justice in the occupational firmament of agents of social control.

## Unearthing a 'critical criminology' perspective

The positive inspiration occurred when I delivered a paper at the 1974 meetings of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association.[1] At the time, I was one of several sociologists across Canada struggling to clarify the substance of a critical criminology and to debunk the conventional crime prevention approach. I had burrowed through a large number of Canadian texts and articles in the Criminology field, as well as a considerable amount of work authored by U.S. scholars and practitioners, but only in a few instances[2] could I taste the kernels of a critical approach. On the evening before my presentation, an old friend from my graduate days at Yale – Menno Boldt – lent me a copy of Taylor, Walton

and Young's just available text, *The New Criminology* (1973), which I hastily skimmed, leaving me in a miasma of mortification. How did I manage to overlook the ground-breaking research leading up to this forceful prolegomenon on the very approach I strove to articulate? In a nervous flap I presented my own undeniably skeletal paper the next day to a good-sided audience in one of the criminology panels. The paper sparked some discussion, and one of the listeners, an elderly gentleman, commented that he found my paper interesting and that he liked the approach I was trying to carve out. It shook my ageist stereotype to later learn that my surprise defender was none other than Coral Wesley Topping, then 87 years old, and one of the pioneer penologists in Canadian Criminology[3] – the only sociologist at the University of British Columbia (UBC) from 1929 until his retirement in 1954.

Buoyed by the outcome of that meeting, I went to a session later that day at which Ian Taylor (who I then realized had quietly attended my own presentation) was chastening a young and fervid Canadian ethnomethodologist. When the session ended, I commended Taylor on his great book, and a few years later I had the opportunity to host his visiting professorship at UBC. He remained a friend and an important intellectual influence until his all too early demise in 2001. Between Topping's encouragement and first salutations with Taylor, I felt energized to explore the new horizons that I envisaged for Canadian criminology, a quest that I carried on for much of my academic career in what I still believe, in the face of inimical circumstances, were not misspent years.

## The UBC Criminology Certificate Program

The 'negative' inspiration that ultimately cast doubt on my hopes for the progressive possibilities embedded in the critical approach slowly formed over an extended period of time, actually starting a few years before the Topping-Taylor encounters when, in 1969, I allied with the UBC School of Continuing Education to develop a Criminology Certificate Program for the benefit of service personnel in law enforce-

ment, corrections, and related occupational fields.[4] The overarching (and retrospectively naïve) objective of the program (under development since 1967) was to educate these largely rank-and-file personnel so as to reduce the total volume of crime and to control delinquent/criminal behavior in humane ways. These aims were buttressed by the assumption that Canadian society was on the brink of radical changes in dealing with offenders.[5] The program was designed to be less technical and more 'liberal' in intent, and inter-disciplinary in content. The evening series of classes was expected to broaden individual outlooks through confrontation, exchange, and communication. Though generally comparable to university credit courses, the evening Certificate classes were not accorded university credit, on the somewhat dubious argument that the entrance standard for the Certificate program was below that of the rest of the university; but it was expected that the various agencies and institutions from which the students came would recognize the educational value of the certificate program as reflected in promotions and salary increases for its graduates. The program filled out and was well-subscribed by 1971, the year in which it obtained formal approval from the UBC Senate.

The course program, which began in the fall of 1969, required students to take six one semester courses (each involving approximately sixty hours of class time), including three required courses (marked with an asterisk) from the following list:

> Contemporary Issues in Law and Society*; Deviance and Criminal Behaviour*; Political Science*; The Criminal Justice System; Collective Behaviour; Abnormal Psychology; Interpersonal Relations; Theory and Methods of Correction; and Confrontation and Social Order in Literature.

The course offerings underwent minor changes up to 1974, but never changed from the predominance of intellectual over vocational emphases. The introductory course in the program—Contemporary Issues in Law and Society—offered every other year to attract about 30 new students, raised

a number of themes (explored more intensively in other courses of the program) under the topical rubric of "Youth, Dissent, and Social Disorder." Assigned readings featured controversial analyses[6] and literature designed to provoke discussion, promote engagement with marginalist perspectives, and evoke honest reactions, fracturing hierarchically molded caution. [7] In essence, the bulk of the teaching was intended to take the system to task rather than tinker with its parts. Much of the topical focus was on white-collar, corporate, political and organized crime, rather than the relatively trivial conventional and public order crimes. Problems of etiology and criminogenesis were highlighted in contrast to the narrower conceptual confines of a crime-prevention perspective. Two years after the program was in full flower, the problems started to roll in.

**Phasing Out the Program**

After a few cycles of the program, certain problems became evident. Graduates of the program (39 by 1974) returned to their agencies with new ideas but found that their superiors, who had not enrolled in the Certificate program, were not as amenable to changing viewpoints and resisted innovative schemes. Consequent morale problems ensued in the lower echelons, while agency supervisors feared that the program was producing "Hamlets" who could no longer perform their required duties. If there was to be a certificate program for their subordinates, they wanted a program determined by the priorities of the agencies, with a re-balancing of 'education' and 'training' components. Paradoxically, the agencies also wished to enhance their professional status, so they gradually incorporated the B.A. as a minimum standard for many positions previously requiring only a high school diploma. Unsurprisingly, students already within or considering entry into the UBC certificate program now felt it represented a dead end since course completions did not lead to B.A. accreditation and commensurate salary increases and promotions; thus, the concerns about professional stagnation and the non-portability of course credits soon made the Cer-

tificate program patently unattractive to agency personnel. In 1974, the UBC Centre for Continuing Education adapted to the transferability and portability demands by converting the Certificate program to Independent Study, hiring course authors and tutors rather than instructors. With no actual classes, however, students in the program were now isolated solitudes and the formerly touted communicative virtues of the program were lost. The revised program soon faded and was terminated in 1982, giving way to the proliferation of criminal justice programs sprouting in colleges across the province, including the Department of Criminology established at Simon Fraser University in 1974, the new professional training ground and brain-centre of undergraduate and graduate Criminology programs for Western Canada.[8]

Another factor in the transformation of the UBC Certificate program to guided independent study and its subsequent demise was the internal conflict developing between some of its core teaching faculty. At one tumultuous meeting in 1974 called by the Dean of Arts and prompted by some agency criticism of the ostensibly 'radical' goals of the program, one member of the teaching staff from the Law Faculty launched an aggressive attack on the 'progressive' mandate of the program, which he regarded as ideologically biased and therefore inappropriate. The caustic exchanges triggered by this charge rent the coherence of the program and impelled the Dean to endorse the less contentious alternative of correspondence course study. Between agency gripes, student credit-demands, the rapid growth of Criminology programs, and ideological parrying between Certificate faculty, the evening class format closed down after just five years, and with it a rare opportunity to inculcate a criminology vanguard with a perceptive grasp of the inextricable links between law, crime, and social change.

## Sparse Alternatives

Disappointed in the failure of the Certificate experiment, I shifted my focus to developing critical criminology course

offerings within the UBC undergraduate and graduate Sociology programs, where there was still an opportunity for questioning and dialogue, and for importing guest speakers rooted in the community. Moreover, since entry criteria into the law enforcement and corrections field had been upgraded—often requiring a B.A. degree—university programs were now the logical catchment area in which to impart a critical perspective. [9] After three more decades in the orbits of critical criminology and social movements, I officially retired in 2003, devoting my time exclusively to research and writing. But after a ten-year hiatus, I returned to teach a fourth–year Genocide and Reparations course in my home department these last two years. Although students seemed absorbed in the course (as measured largely by their steady attendance) and rated it highly (among the 50% who bother to fill out the voluntary course evaluation form), I was surprised by their overall passivity compared to classes ten to twenty years earlier. I pondered the reasons for their comparative quiescence, eventually discounting idiosyncratic interpretations,[10] and came to the sad conclusion that, given the increasingly competitive job market, not to mention the burden of repaying student loans in the face of rising tuition, students were preoccupied with grades and prospective jobs to the detriment of knowledge as a satisfying if not sufficient end. This was ironically reminiscent of the students in the Certificate program who prioritized their professional advancement over knowledge gained in the course. Another factor that had a strangely mummifying effect on the students was their attachment to and reliance on cell phones and laptops that typically restricted communication to themselves and their electronic devices, cutting them off from each other and the communicative channels of attitudinal change.[11] I surmised that a third and possibly more cogent explanation for the classroom tenor had something to do with the general absence of a countervailing perspective. Feminism and racism were still in vogue, but classism, a less easily deflected challenge to the status quo, was anything but a conspicuous analytic trope in student introspection.[12]

Without a postulated ideological alternative, no matter how hypothetical, the students could not be faulted for blithely "going through the motions" en route to a comfortably secure life.

## Conclusion

Of course I am speculating to a degree, but after fifty years as an educator, I have reason to trust my experience and intuitions. I can say with some confidence that the current pressures on both students and faculty to comply with the demands of the existing order make "educating the criminology vanguard" a more precarious undertaking as higher education strains to uphold the parameters of 'respectable' critique. And given the inexorable commercialization of knowledge, I do not see this trend changing in the near future. What all this signifies, for me, is that the spearheads of social change and legal reform are more likely to come from independent mass movements still capable of mobilization, than from educational and political institutions where moneyed interests increasingly prevail.

## Endnotes

1 "Criminology and Sociology: Where the Boys are." Learned Societies, CSAA, Toronto, June, 1974.

2 Notably, in Donald Taft's concept of a "criminogenic culture" cf. his Criminology: a Cultural Interpretation, rev. ed. MacMillan Company, 1950. Even the Berkeley School of Criminology (1950-1976) did not begin publishing critical work until the early '70s, initially conforming to a technocratic law-and-order mandate, and then shifting to a more scholarly liberal orientation before its final years as a hotbed of radicalism, which brought about its arbitrary closure.

3 Topping's work is still more than a matter of historical

interest. Cf., Canadian Penal Institutions, 1929, Toronto: Ryerson and "The Rise of the New Penology in British Columbia, Canada," 1955, British Journal of Delinquency, 5:180-190.

4 Until the mid-70s, the only university based program available in B.C. was the Certificate in Criminology at UBC.

5 A view consistent with government-issued reports; e.g., Report of the Canadian Committee on Corrections, Roger Ouimet, Chairman, March 31st, 1969, Queen's Printer, Ottawa.

6 For example, the first reading list of this course included books by Jerry Farber, The Student as Nigger, Contact Books, 1969; Jerry Rubin, Do it!, Ballantine Books, N.Y., 1970; Mark Gerzon, The Whole World is Watching, Paperback Library, 1970; and Charles Reich, The Greening of America, Bantam Books, 1971. This was not standard reading fare for most of these students. The faculty lectures in the course were no less controversial, but succeeded in eliciting strong reactions that sometimes produced a more contemplative mood.

7 Encouraging students to state their views in the mixed classroom clientele was always a problem, given the professional constraints and fears of possible internal surveillance. In one of the courses I taught in the program –Interpersonal Relations – I adopted a non-directive pedagogical stance crucial to enabling the students to learn about group process by becoming a group. When the course was over, a few of the students told me that their hesitation to speak was owing to their concern that my teaching tactic might have been a method for inducing them to "reveal state secrets".

8 Predictably, a proposal that the Criminology program at SFU come under the aegis of its notoriously radical Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology Department was sternly rejected by the law enforcement agencies. UBC was considered as a possible location for the new department, but the Law Faculty looked askance at "cops on campus," and the UBC School of Social Work was unwilling to sacrifice its foothold on Criminology courses. The UBC Anthropology and Sociology Department, which had once

housed Criminology before it shifted to the School of Social Work, excised it in 1959 on the grounds that it was "too applied". Cf. "Recovering the Early History of Canadian Criminology at the University of British Columbia – 1951 to 1959," Gary Parkinson, 2007, unpublished paper, 25 pp.

9 Additionally, a number of my graduate students obtained faculty positions in the SFU Department of Criminology (with later expansion, named the SFU School of Criminology) and in the various college programs, a development that promised an expansion of the criminology vanguard.

10 Querying my colleagues, I determined that it was not my advanced age or the higher numbers of Asiatic students that accounted for the passivity, since I was informed that the compliant more business-like manner of students was ubiquitous.

11 I privately admonished two students for fixating on their laptops and disengaging from class discussion, but they protested that they were in fact searching for more information relating to my lecture remarks. That this was an essentially false and untimely swelling of intellectual empowerment did not register with them.

12 The student mood, I suspect, is reinforced by the ideological timidity of much of the faculty who are increasingly circumspect about the mere mention of Marxism, the bête noir of the funding agencies.