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Special Issue Editorial: Outlooks for Criminology in North Rhine-Westphalia

In North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), criminology is at home in a wide variety of settings. The relevant research not only takes place at universities and institutions of higher education, conducted by professors in criminology or related fields, but also in public sector research centres linked to the police or the judiciary. For some time, there have been discussions about the long-term viability of such structures within NRW and beyond, as well as their relevance, especially with regard to training the criminological researchers of tomorrow.

One way to assess the current situation is to compare it with the *Freiburger Memorandum zur Lage der Kriminologie in Deutschland* (Freiburg Memorandum on the current state of criminology in Germany; Albrecht et al., 2012), which was written exactly ten years ago and is, at least, widely recognised as a starting point for discussions concerning criminology in Germany. The memorandum paints a largely bleak picture, stating that structural deficiencies pose a serious threat to German criminology (Albrecht et al. 2012, p. 385). The authors also took a particularly pessimistic view of prospects for young researchers. Among the specific problems identified at the time were fears over a lack of, or drop in, compatibility with Anglo-American criminology, dwindling dialogue between criminologists based in the social sciences and those in law faculties, the risk posed by an exodus of knowledge and staff to non-university institutions, commissioned research taking the place of foundational research and, as a consequence, issues concerning the training and recruitment of junior researchers.

The current state of criminology in NRW, which might also be considered to be representative of criminology across the whole of Germany, can be interpreted, and indeed discussed, from a wide range of standpoints, as the event described in this issue's article by Bode et al. demonstrates. It is certainly true that, in terms of research output, criminology in NRW is currently highly diverse. The issues examined range from traditional criminological research subjects, e.g. juvenile law and its effects, research into penal systems and the impact of punitive measures as well as into juvenile crime and relevant developmental theories, to lesser explored areas, for instance corruption and corporate crime, and contemporary phenomena and topics, e.g. radicalisation and cybercrime. Moreover, both aetiological and critical approaches can be observed. Some research states a clear objective to further develop criminological and criminal-sociological theories. In terms of methodology, there is evidence of pragmatic methods appropriate to the research subject, although many researchers are eager to use certain methodological approaches and have become experts in these areas. However, some criminological research also has a bearing on methodology development. In addition, criminological research in North Rhine-Westphalia is conducted by representatives of various academic disciplines working either solely within their field or on interdisciplinary projects. The gamut ranges from law faculties, sociology, education and psychology to fields such as geography and data science,

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although the latter disciplines are increasingly present in practice-based or public sector research centres. How free researchers are to choose their topic depends on the respective university, institution of higher education or research centre. However, a key issue for early career criminologists is also job security, which regularly tends to be much higher in public sector institutions than in university-based criminology, where funding often depends on the respective project.

In NRW, criminology qualifications are offered in a range of disciplines and cover various breadths and depths of learning. For instance, an entire master's degree in Criminology, Criminalistics and Police Science is offered at Ruhr University Bochum, and criminology (or topics highly relevant to criminology) can be studied as core or elective subjects as part of various degree courses or during practice-based training to become a social worker or a police officer. In terms of teaching criminology, not only are different types of content taught, but there are also differences in the extent to which researchers are involved in lecturing. While criminologists working in public administration are rarely required to teach, the teaching obligations of university researchers, university professors and academic staff at institutions of higher education can differ considerably, which has an impact, not least on the amount of time they can dedicate to criminological research.

At least one potential parameter regularly put forward by those wishing to arrange this array of research topics, disciplines and teaching into a logical system is the distinction between university-based criminology and a more practice-based approach. However, this categorisation, which is perceived and problematised to varying degrees, could serve to highlight the various divisions that exist within criminology. It is thus even possible to consider it a hindrance to addressing the problems discussed in the *Freiburger Memorandum*. Doing away with the dichotomisation of criminology's two 'worlds' will help put many – although not all – of the field's problematic aspects into perspective. A certain level of pessimism or optimism regarding the future of criminology (in NRW) is inherent to many general views, and the coming together of these varying perspectives at the conference examined in this special issue offered an excellent opportunity for discussion (see Bode et al. in this issue).

It can be said, also with regard to the *Freiburger Memorandum*, that criminological *research* in NRW is in part compatible with Anglo-American criminology. This may not be true for the entire spectrum of criminological research in Germany and NRW, not least because certain criminological issues are best suited for discussion in German-speaking countries. But here it is important to consider whether it is possible to look beyond the idea that Anglo-American criminology should be regarded as one unique benchmark for criminological research, i.e. a broader perspective should be taken. One area worth examining in this context is relevant police research, where the constructive interaction between academic-based research and practice has a considerably longer history and a more established tradition of mutual recognition, all while sidestepping the risk that the research in question can and must be denied academic freedom or have its basic scientific insights challenged as a result. Based on this premise, the dichotomy between university-based and non-university research – or even research conducted by public authorities – which the *Freiburger Memorandum* describes as problematic, could at least partially be resolved, as could the distinct separation between commissioned and foundational research. Even if it is impossible to fully bridge this divide – an objective that is generally not considered desirable in any case – one does not need to automatically exclude the other, provided there is a certain degree of openness on the part of both university-based researchers and the (usually public sector-based) contracting authorities. Such an approach would then make trans- and interdisciplinarity the norm rather than the exception. The *Freiburger Memorandum*'s feared segregation of criminologists based in the social sciences from

those in law faculties could also be effectively countered through lived research practice. In effect, this 'hybrid' state is already present to some extent in criminological research practice in NRW. Cooperation between researchers at universities, higher education institutions and in the public sector suggests this is the case, as does the increasingly significant expansion of criminological research at higher education institutions and in local authorities that draws on theoretical references. The latter is predominantly driven by university-educated criminologists, some of whom would have been young researchers when the *Memorandum* was written, and whose futures were predicted to be so bleak.

However, the outlook with regard to *educating* the researchers of tomorrow suggests an urgent need for action, and this should not be overlooked, as discussions at the NRW network conference showed. The risk is especially acute with regard to the academic qualifications of future generations of criminologists – and that includes researchers who will go on to work at higher education and non-university institutions– *after* their initial degree. The disappearance of several relevant professorships in recent years means there are no longer enough senior academics to ensure that theses and qualifications for senior lecturing posts are adequately supervised and reviewed. As a consequence, future undergraduate academic qualifications are immediately under threat, but there is also a risk that the academics of tomorrow will not appear in sufficient numbers to ensure the continuation of hybrid criminological research practice.

Solutions to these problems need to be found soon. For the time being, it is vital that the status of criminology at universities must, at the very least, be maintained and, ideally, elevated. This impacts not only criminology as a branch of penology, but also professorships in the social sciences that focus on social sciences-based criminology or deviant behaviour. Yet here too it is worth considering new structures and partnerships. This could allow third-party funded research and increased (supplementary) PhD student supervision at institutions of higher education. For this to be possible, more time and the relevant legal provisions to award doctorates need to be provided to professors employed at such institutions along with greater collaboration with university institutions, potentially expanding into areas outside of subjects traditionally linked to criminology (for instance, professorships in social science methods). Public sector criminological research could help ensure access to enough qualified staff by allowing employees adequate time to pursue the relevant qualifications and giving them the opportunity to climb the career ladder from the comfort of a permanent position. In addition to administrative challenges, the barriers here are, in part, the old divisions between universities, higher education institutions and (more) practice-based organisations. In terms of the acute problems facing criminology, it is undoubtedly time for all actors involved to work towards finding effective solutions. To this end, an institutionalised framework and other support are being provided by the 'Criminology in North Rhine-Westphalia' network.

References

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