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Discourse – Practice – Crime

This issue, featuring a wide range of perspectives on the discourse and practice surrounding ‘crime’, was inspired by the first meeting of the ‘Criminology in North Rhine-Westphalia’ network, which we organised at the University of Siegen between 27 and 29 March 2019.

The network was founded in 2017 by criminology researchers with the aim of forging a link between diverse activities taking place not only at universities and places of higher education but in practice, be it in the fields of criminology, criminal psychology, or the sociology of deviant behaviour, social problems and social control. A secondary objective was also to enhance the visibility of these disciplines. We hope to encourage exchange between researchers, instructors and practitioners and this meeting in particular offered us the opportunity to hear about the research of our younger academic colleagues. One of our motives was to foster innovative ideas within the scope of interdisciplinary exchange. After all, as John Braithwaite succinctly highlighted, “Our undergraduate classes are more intellectually engaging than most of the work published in our journals” (2011, ix). Despite the occasionally high volume of publications, it is still rare to find truly innovative research. This is linked to a myriad of structural issues.

We wish to highlight only three: (1) Research in private-sector funded projects faces narrow time constraints. In such cases, researchers are subject to job-related restrictions that have been ratcheted up by Germany’s academic employment law and increase the pressure to publish. Furthermore, particularly in criminology-related subject areas, we can observe (2) that the political and moral dimension of crime/criminalisation is being repeatedly reproduced without a comprehensive understanding of its mechanisms of construction, and (3), in reference to Wehrheim (2018), a normative logic based on hindering instead of investigating and understanding is becoming increasingly prevalent. Given the extensive funding policy of Germany and the EU with regard to security research, this approach is being encouraged instead of allowing a substantial analysis of its fundamental elements to take place.

Of course, there are no ad hoc solutions here. But it is possible to acknowledge the potential that exists – and that is precisely something we wish to encourage with our network, e.g. with a plurality of approaches. It is the social sciences in particular that offer a multitude of diverse methodological avenues that are there to be explored and discussed. In doing so, we can enrich the dialogue between the disciplines. Plurality should also be reflected in the diversity of research topics, expanding its scope beyond external funding logic. This requires autonomy from those interested in exploiting security policy for their own gain: research and teaching are, first and foremost, independent. At the same time, dialogue with partners in practice and research participants often forms the basis of research. Their needs should be taken into account but they should not set the pace for researchers. And, particularly in criminological research, which is tasked with ‘diagnosing’ the problems and challenges facing actors in society, we should not lose sight of how issues are produced. After all, the question of how a phenomenon is spread is invariably linked to how it comes about – or as academic researcher Hans Jörg Rheinberger

(1997) suggests: the being of a research topic corresponds with what it will become. Here the approach should be to create a framework of 'slow' research where questions can be gradually developed. Here too a research network can offer structures that would enable long-term co-operation. As part of this, we should be concerned with nurturing a constructive culture of error; as Merton argues (1967, p. 4), it is intuitive leaps into the dark, false starts or supposed mistakes, the loose ends and fortunate accidents, that encourage discussion – not faultless lectures and texts.

In this respect, we feel the following articles offer an impetus that operates on different levels when addressing the constitution of crime: micro, meso and macro; situational and discursive; meaning- and practice-based. Discourses, for example, are arenas where significance can be apportioned and stances taken. When Clarke (2005, 2012) referred to the postmodern turn, she showed how discourses are reflected in social situations. This is where they are shaped, and they in turn shape situations. Actors are the first to make changes and actions are completed in respect of a 'matter of concern', which allows anticipation and retrospection and offers initial indications of the interconnected nature of event and process.

Here practices are at the heart of social situations as further connections always become apparent in concrete actions taking place in situ. References are made, certain issues are brought forward while others are held back. Such ways of thinking in practice have been tied into processes and/or discourses: it is the task of research to investigate these links. Crime as a means of breaking with social rules and their standards refers back to the relevant framework conditions that are key for the constitution of deviant behaviour.

Juvenile delinquency is once such area of research that translates criminological discourse into a security architecture for society and thus into specific practices. In a piece titled 'Know Your Enemy', Dirk Lampe investigates the understanding of prevention among practitioners in the field of juvenile delinquency. Anke Stallwitz's article, on the other hand, takes a look at violence against women on the Stockholm drug scene. Her research examines the forms and functions of violence and points to the interconnectedness between peer research projects and the opportunities for intervention available to criminological research. Similar to the construction of juvenile delinquency, radicalisation is also a social problem that casts those affected as 'problematic'. Katharina Leimbach looks at how professionals first construct their clients as 'radicals' and at how categorisations are made in an institutional setting.

We then present two articles that examine penal institutions as a space for political education. In her paper, Lisa Schneider includes the legal, pedagogical and creative aspects of educational activities. Anne Kaplan, Klara Verlinden and Sabrina Wittig focus their attention on sexual education within the prison context. Alongside these enforcement contexts, the repressive organs of a 'security society' (Singelstein/Stolle) also include citizen policing groups and the police force itself. In her paper, Frauke Reichl subsequently offers a theoretical approach on how to understand civilian actors taking on the role of the police, while Laila Abdul-Rahman, Hannah Espín Grau and Tobias Singelstein present methodically researched considerations on the investigation of police violence in Germany. This edition of the journal concludes with an article by Laura Gammon, which gives a summary of one of the most controversial sanctions that exists in juvenile law: the detention of juveniles. Despite being an instrument of criminal policy, little attention is paid to this sanction with regard to the perspective of its target group. The author addresses this gap and outlines areas for more research. The wide variety of research topics that appear in this issue illustrate the plurality of criminological research that we mentioned at the outset. We hope you find this an inspiring read.

References

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