

# Historical criminology: the interdisciplinary divergence and convergence

## Abstract

Historical criminology involves the application of theories, methodology, concepts, and perspectives from the discipline of history to the study of crime and criminal justice. From the historian's perspective, historical criminology can therefore pass for applied history, the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges (crime) and choices (criminal justice) by analyzing historical patterns and analogues. Nonetheless, some writers have attempted to fault this intersection of what they regard as two distinct disciplines; while others even go further to question the rationality of applying historical methodology to provide perspective and find clues about current crime trends and criminal justice. The present article examines the divergence and convergence that has characterized the intellectual traffic between the two fields of sociology (sociological criminology) and history (penology history), which has ultimately resulted in an inter-discipline called historical criminology. The article contends that future collaboration between the two fields of study matters a great deal; and highlights some of the arenas for effectively fostering and harnessing the potentials of such alignment.

**Keywords:** historical, criminology, interdisciplinary, divergence, convergence, penology, collaborative

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## Introduction

Interdisciplinary research and practice has now become an imperative and challenging approach of advancing knowledge and innovations. This technique involves a fusion of two or more academic and professional disciplines and synthesizing them with the aim of enriching overall research and development outcome, as well as overcoming the deficit of traditional mono-disciplinary pedagogy. Interdisciplinary activities therefore encourage scholars and practitioners to think across traditional boundaries imposed by their disciplines' methodology and perspectives in order to achieve innovations for solving societal problems. As the fields of sociology and history, more narrowly, sociological criminology and penology history, developed into professionalized disciplines in the past decades; there have been calls for interdisciplinary alignment between members of and spotlights of the two disciplines. Such calls, termed by Paul Lawrence as 'manifestos of collaboration'<sup>1</sup> have been heard from authors like Davies and Pearson (1999); Emsley and Robert (1990); Lévy and Robert (1984), among others. In recent times, a number of writers have reflected on the gains that historians and criminologists stand to derive from each other's research data and findings, while the initial disciplinary apathy which accentuated divergence between the two disciplines have now eroded. There has also been a rise in the level of inter-domain penetration. While more criminologists have now recognized the need to interrogate the past in their explanation of current crime trend and criminal justice systems, penology historians have also come to appreciate the imperative of leaning on current criminological findings in their normative attempt to link the past with the future.

## The divergence

The divergence between the fields of history and criminology can be traced to the disciplinary apathy that fell out from the post second world war era in Great Britain. On the part of the historians, this period

witnessed an increase disdain of sociological criminology as being fundamentally detached from the empirical methodology on which typical British historiography was based. Sociological criminologist were indicted of excessively employing general theoretical prisms in their explanation of the causes and consequences of crime in the society; while historians on the other hand abhorred any attempt to explain historical changes in terms of general governing patterns. Historians Morris and Hobsbawm for instance, in their work, *Past and Present*, noted that 'one need not deny that theories may throw some light on limited aspects of the subject; but they must be severely kept in their very modest place.'<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Hobsbawm later stressed again how sociologists, including criminologists, remained too interested in the general over the particular.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, President of the Royal Historical Society, Geoffrey Elton, lamented in the later part of the 1970s the manner in which criminologists and other social scientists were so mired in their tradition of established tenets that 'they simply have no means of grasping that there are valid forms of knowledge which achieve their ends in other ways'.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, criminologists, in the early years of the development of their discipline (also the period following World War II) tended to loathe the use of historical methodology. Most criminology academics and practitioners felt they had little or nothing to learn from historical hindsight, arguing that their domain lay in the present, and the future to a considerable extent. Contending in this direction, Ernest Gellner appeared not to be mincing words when he declared that 'in transitional situations ... men learn nothing from history: they cannot. They have to invent sociology instead.'<sup>5</sup> These sorts of divergent debates over idiopathic vs homothetic methods characterized the disciplinary crossroads of criminology and history until recently. Such attitudes can largely be ascribed to the struggle for the professionalization of the disciplines, which led to emphasis on recognition earned through perception of contemporary significance and utility of the said discipline.

## The convergence

From the late 1790s, a new atmosphere of convergence developed between the two disciplines of sociological criminology and applied penology history, ultimately leading to a melting point- historical criminology. Historians and criminologist alike began to recognize the need for interdisciplinary collaboration as they encountered new debates and problems in their respective disciplines that required borrowing a leaf from the others. In that atmosphere of convergence, Anthony Giddens espoused that there was ‘no logical or even methodological distinctions between the social sciences and history appropriately conceived’.<sup>6</sup> Peter Burke’s *Sociology and History* collaborated Giddens while acknowledging that although ‘sociologists and historians are not always the best of neighbor’s, they still had some knowledge to derive from each other.’<sup>7</sup> Philip Abrams was another writer during this period who also argued for ‘an emerging common mode of practical explanation’ between the two disciplines.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, subsequent criminologists began to develop a strong historical leaning and marked interest in historical methodology and perspectives, especially on their writing about criminal justice policies and institutions. Leon Radzinowicz stands out influential in this regard. Radzinowicz succinctly underscored the relevance of ample historical knowledge in grasping the evolution and course of criminal legislations in England.<sup>9</sup> Thus, modern academic criminologists began to accommodate the use of historical data to elucidate the present and recommend future criminal justice policies. Besides Radzinowicz, Mannheim and Grünhut were other modern criminologists who showed interest in historical criminology. While Mannheim focused on the historical philosophy of penalty; Grünhut concentrated on the history of the criminal law. The latter’s 1948 piece, *Penal Reform*, was practically nothing but a historical comparison of penal ideas.<sup>10</sup> Thus emerged the popular notion that debates on contemporary penal policy and institutions are better grounded by a reflection of the historical circumstances out of which they were established. Others who also had significant influence on historical criminology included Michel Foucault, Marie-Christine Lep, Ann-Louise Shapiro and Lizzie Seal.

## Why collaboration matters

In cultivating a collaborative rhetoric for the historian and the criminologist, academics and practitioners in both disciplines stand to gain a lot. To begin with, there are observable areas of research that overlap both crime history and sociological criminology, particularly studies such as Manuel Eisner’s and Hans van Hofer’s,<sup>11</sup> which explored trends in crime chronologically. Such overlap of historical methodology and criminological models in a single volume tend to blur the divergence between the two disciplines even further; so much, so that classification of such works either as historical or criminological becomes difficult, except one considers the authors training background. Some criminologists use historical methods and sources quite effectively, just as there are evidently some historians whose works on crime history that can be considered, de facto, criminology (some even possess undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in criminology). Furthermore, another merit of alignment between sociological criminology and criminal justice history can be linked to the concerns of the two disciplines. From the pioneer years of their discipline through to the contemporary era, criminologists have often identified an intention of their discipline to understand the present circumstances of crime and criminal justice as well as reflect upon future criminal justice policies and opinions. Perhaps, this claim to present-future dialogue domain is

what led Loader and Sparks to proclaim in 2011 that, ‘criminologists are typically drawn to their chosen field of enquiry at least in part by a reformist impulse’.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Scores of historians have also ventured to tread in the present-future dialogue domain. Criminal justice historians in particular have markedly tried to incorporate their interpretation of the past into explanations of crime and criminal justice systems in the present, and as well make explicit predictions and recommendations about the future.<sup>13</sup> This is summed in John Seely’s dictum that ‘history... should pursue a practical object... it should not only gratify the reader’s curiosity, but modify his view of the present and his forecast of the future’.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since the historian and the criminologist are primarily concerned with understanding the present in order to shape the future, the former through the study of the past and the later through the study of the present itself; then the essence of collaboration cannot be overstressed. Clearly, there is possibility for healthier convergence between the historian and the criminologist in the area of creation, sourcing and interpretation of data about the cause; course and cost of crime in society. Historical data can come in handy in the criminologist’s attempt to trace the origin of crime in order to tackle it from the root. In fact, historical data can also aid the criminologist dissection of social vices variables, their continuity and the changes they have undergone overtime. Correspondingly, criminological data can also come in handy for the historian in his attempt to link the past with the present. Thus, both the historian and the criminologist share some primary and secondary sources of data. Overall, the tasks of the contemporary penology historian and that of the sociological criminologist are harmonious.<sup>15</sup> Both academics and practitioners in the two disciplines aim to examine the cause, course and cost of crime in the past and present and to recommend knowledgeable crime control strategies<sup>16</sup> and criminal justice policies for the future. Even though, there were apparent divergence in the initial years of these disciplines, the current trend and prospects of convergence between the two disciplines underscores the need for an applied penology history as a feasible interdisciplinary project in historical criminology, which would recognize the distinct contributions that each discipline has to offer. Considering all things, historical criminology offers an avenue for practical, real world uses of the past in resolving society’s problems. Historical criminology therefore pass for applied history and public sociology, and should be promoted through interdisciplinary collaboration in order to provide perspective and stimulate cross-border thinking about crime in the society as well as to suggest possible curbing strategies.

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None

## Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflicts of interest.

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