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Cultural Criminology and the Politics of Meaning

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Abstract Cultural criminology focuses on situational, subcultural, and mediated constructions of meaning around issues of crime and crime control. In this sense cultural criminology is designed for critical engagement with the politics of meaning, and for critical intervention into those politics. Yet the broader enterprise of critical criminology engages with the politics of meaning as well; in confronting the power relations of justice and injustice, critical criminologists of all sorts investigate the social and cultural processes by which situations are defined, groups are categorized, and human consequences are understood. The divergence between cultural criminology and other critical criminologies, then, may be defined less by meaning than by the degree of methodological militancy with which meaning is pursued. In any case, this shared concern with the politics of meaning suggests a number of innovations and interventions that cultural criminologists and other critical criminologists might explore.

Over the first two decades of its existence cultural criminology has been defined in various ways. Critics have defined cultural criminology by those aspects of 'the cultural' that cultural criminological research puts into play, or by its alleged romanticization of criminals (O'Brien 2005; Hall and Winlow 2007). Other critics have argued that cultural criminology's invitational edge—its ready inclusion of young scholars, alternative scholarship, and activism—defines it as inappropriate intellectual evangelism (Carlen 2011). Still others have defined cultural criminology by its alleged lack of definition, more a 'theoretical soup;' (Spencer 2011: 198) or 'collection of individuals sharing some issues in common' (Webber 2007: 140) than a fully developed criminological perspective. Cultural criminologists like myself have attempted to deflect—or perhaps provoke—such criticism by refusing to define cultural criminology on the grounds of open-ended anarchist

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epistemology, or by similarly characterizing it only as a 'loose can[n]on' or a 'loose federation of outlaw intellectual critiques' (Ferrell 2007:99, 2010).

As I've reflected on cultural criminology's maturation, the critiques of it, and the larger history and nature of critical criminological itself, I've found myself more willing to define cultural criminology—at least along the lines of one particular intellectual and political focus. This is its focus on the human construction of meaning. Put differently, cultural criminology increasingly strikes me as an orientation designed especially for critical engagement with the politics of meaning surrounding crime and crime control, and for critical intervention into those politics.

Theatres of Meaning

Meaning might seem an oddly abstract focus for a critical criminological approach like cultural criminology, and so perhaps a useful starting point is the practical meaning of meaning. As I employ the concept here, 'meaning' refers to the contested social and cultural processes by which situations are defined, individuals and groups are categorized, and human consequences are understood. We glimpse meaning, and the contested politics of meaning, when minority neighborhoods announce accusations of discriminatory policing, and police officers respond that, for them, an individual's glancing at a trash can, looking in a window, or waiting for a bus can signify the sort of suspicious behavior that justifies a police stop (Goldstein 2013). We see meaning at issue in the courtroom dynamics by which a prosecutor compiles bits of evidence and argument into a comprehensive narrative of guilt, a defense attorney constructs from this same evidence a story of innocence misunderstood—and a judge works both to uphold and amend the law (Barrett 2013). We see the power of meaning sometimes by its absence—when, for example, the harms wrought by powerful individuals or groups are allowed to remain meaning-less as regards legal culpability or moral panic (Jenkins 1999). We find meaning being made when we listen to the shared argot of marginal groups, or notice the stylistic codes around which illicit subcultures organize and define themselves. And every day, in newspaper headlines and television news feeds, we see meaningful accounts of crime and criminal justice assigned to certain stories, and differently to others. In these cases meaning is neither some vague abstraction about implied intent, nor an interpretive nicety added on after the fact. Instead, meaning can be seen to be a constitutive element of human action and a foundation of human culture—an ongoing, everyday process of sense-making, symbolic communication, and contested understanding.

It is precisely this practical sense of meaning that formed the historical foundations of what became cultural criminology. From the 1950s through the 1970s in the United States, a variety of social theorists began to explore the meaningful dimensions of criminal and deviant actions. Subcultural theorists like Al Cohen (1955) suggested that the seemingly irrational behaviors of delinquents were in fact not irrational at all—they were instead meaningful if misguided responses to social inequality and social exclusion. In counterpoint, Sykes and Matza (1957) argued that much delinquent behavior was not defiantly subcultural, but instead drifting and episodic—and yet they still sought its meaning, this time finding it, ironically, in the values and contradictions of the conventional social order itself (Ferrell 2011). Most dramatically, labeling theorists like Howard Becker (1963) argued that deviant or criminal behavior was defined entirely by meaning—that is, by the power of legal authorities or moral entrepreneurs to construct behavior as deviant by imposing their own meanings onto it. In the United Kingdom, social theorists were

exploring the ways in which shared styles operated as a form of symbolic discourse within and between marginal subcultures (Hebdige 1979), and accounting for the ways in which subcultural codes of honor could both resist and exacerbate marginality itself (Willis 1977). Moving the interactionist insights of labeling theory into larger realms of media discourse and political machination, British theorists were in turn outlining the dynamics by which legal and cultural authorities orchestrated the accepted meanings of crime and criminality. In this light, classic works of British critical criminology like *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen 2002 [1972]) and *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978) could be seen as, above all else, inquiries into the making and masking of meaning around crime and deviance. More generally—and most importantly for critical criminology and cultural criminology—both the US and British work from this period was re-conceptualizing power in terms of meaning: meaning deployed and contested, meaning assigned and undermined, in the battle over crime and justice (see Ferrell et al. 2008; Muncie 2010).

As later theorists began to combine this British and US work into a distinct cultural criminology, and to supplement it with insights from cultural studies, cultural geography, and social history (Ferrell and Sanders 1995; Ferrell 1999; Presdee 2000), they also continued to investigate the interplay of meaning, power, crime, and crime control. Some of this work built on earlier explorations by documenting, for example, the ways in which criminalized subcultures construct elaborate worlds of alternative meaning, or the ways in which control officers and criminals contest the meaning of everyday experience. Other work moved beyond the 'appreciative' criminology of progressive or oppositional subcultures to investigate the meaningful activities of regressively violent groups, or the ways in which social control operates as both performance and display in contemporary society. Emotions also emerged as a subject matter of cultural criminology, with the intent of making sense of emotions by situating them in the criminal event and in the wider culture as well. And throughout this work, cultural criminologists sought to refine the research methods necessary to take criminologists inside this range of meaningful activity. With the maturation of cultural criminology, these many substantive and conceptual concerns have coalesced around three dimensions of social and cultural life—that is, three theatres in which the meaning of crime and crime control is contested.

Situations

Meaning is made in many ways—but following the insights of symbolic interactionists, we know that one of the primary ways is through social interaction in the situations of everyday life. And if this is true for classroom discussions or bar conversations, it must be true—dramatically true—for criminal transactions as well. For Katz (1988), this understanding implies that criminology—even well-intentioned critical criminology—has long been constituted as a sort of backwards enterprise, exploring important background factors of ethnicity or social class but not the immediate foreground in which such factors come into play as the meaning of criminality is transacted. From Katz's view, this situational foreground is often one of flooding emotions and meanings made in the moment. Episodes of police brutality or domestic violence, for example, certainly correlate with patterns of ethnic discrimination and gendered power. Yet the immediate dynamics that drive them—and that therefore put such background patterns into play—often explode from linguistic confrontations, emotional sparks, and the dangerous ways that such episodes come to 'make sense' for those involved. From the view of cultural criminology, then, a critical criminology that seeks to understand such human transactions and to intervene in them must explore the situated 'seductions of crime' that emerge within them.

The cultural criminological concept of 'edgework' (Lyng 1990; Ferrell et al. 2001) is likewise designed to discover dynamics of social inequality and political economy in particular sorts of incendiary situations. Edgework denotes situations of voluntary risk taking where those involved match illicit and life-threatening risks with highly honed subcultural survival skills. Such is the transcendental nature of such situations that participants regularly talk about an addictive 'adrenalin rush' of excitement, and note emotions and experiences that are both ephemeral and ineffable. Yet for all its situated ephemerality, edgework also reflects—and resists—sustained patterns of power and inequality in late modern life. Caught in a world where hyper-surveillance and 'risk management' are pervasively deployed in the interest of social control, edgeworkers dare to reclaim the passion of risk; consigned to a vastly unequal service economy that produces mostly low-skill jobs and ongoing alienation, edgeworkers dare to craft skills that matter profoundly to them; confronted by the threat of further legal control, edgeworkers dare to invent still other skills to avoid apprehension. More broadly, the notion of edgework has come to suggest a range of meaningful activities—risky and illicit, yet skilled and situated—in resistance to various forms of physical or cultural domination, with recent edgework research exploring, for example, women's responses to intimate violence (Rajah 2007), pro-anorexia subcultures (Gailey 2009), and possibilities for progressive criminological pedagogy (Landry 2013).

If situations shaped by criminal seductions and edgework suggest a cultural criminological fascination with the drama of criminality, a final dimension of situated meaning suggests a quotidian counterpoint: situations so mundane, so predictably routine, as to be all but unnoticeable. These are the situations where strategies of crime control have been embedded into everyday environments, and ideologies of social control encoded in everyday experience. These are day-to-day environments shaped by 'situational crime prevention' or 'crime prevention through environmental design'—environments in which unnoticeable features like hedge rows, park benches, and office windows are designed to manipulate human behavior and control that which is defined as deviant. In these circumstances cultural criminologists seek to penetrate the facades of 'civility' or 'urban development' behind which such control strategies are hidden; to decode the hidden meanings of hedge rows and park benches; and so to expose the ways in which power and ideology operate at the level of everyday life. It is from this perspective that cultural criminologists have also launched attacks on the broken windows 'theory' of crime and crime prevention. As an authoritarian, anti-critical criminology, broken windows theory simply assumes the everyday meaning of broken windows and street beggars; imposes on them a set of ideological interpretations; and then uses this framework to justify the discriminatory policing of marginal urban populations (Ferrell et al. 2008).

Subcultures

As already suggested, cultural criminology has continued, and perhaps helped revitalize, the criminological tradition of investigating subcultures as collectivities of alternative meaning. In so doing cultural criminological research has expanded not only the range of subcultures under study but the sense of what processes constitute an illicit subculture. Hamm's (1997, 2013) ongoing subcultural research has revealed the intricacies by which militant or terrorist undergrounds construct accounts of domination and their opposition to it—including the ways this process can emerge out the experience of legal harassment or imprisonment. The interplay of oppositional subcultural identity and legal authority has likewise been explored in studies of street-level organizations, policing, and US

deportation policy (Brotherton and Barrios 2004), and in research into the concurrent expansion of drug testing and the illicit market in drug-testing avoidance (Tunnell 2004). Countering common conceptions of criminal subcultures—and the assumptions embedded in the broken windows model—Snyder's (2009) research has documented a different link between subculture and market: the process by which the skills of an illicit street subculture can translate over time into legitimate commerce and legitimate meanings. Other cultural criminological research into subcultures has taken a different direction—a direction in which illicit subcultures are shaped not by unity and proximity but by forced dislocation, spatial drift, and episodic engagement (Ferrell 2012a). Throughout these various forms of subcultural research, a common theme has also emerged: the attempt to situate subculture, crime and crime control within the particular contours of the late modern world.

Media and Popular Culture

This late modern world is increasingly shaped by a swirl of information and entertainment that flows through 24-hour-a-day global media; this swirl of mediated communication in many ways defines political life, sets public agendas, mobilizes social movements—and constructs the meaning of crime and crime control. As most any issue of the journal *Crime, Media, Culture* shows (see also Greer 2010), cultural criminologists take this mediated flow to be an appropriate—today, an essential—subject matter of criminology, and so set about to study public anti-crime campaigns, media constructions of high-profile criminality, gendered patterns of everyday crime reporting, and other interplays between media and crime. With the explosion in digital media, this interplay increasingly emerges outside traditional media channels as well, and so cultural criminologists also examine subjects like the do-it-yourself media strategies of illicit social movements and the video productions of street gangs. In this sense it is not only that the mainstream media construct the meaning of crime and criminality for media consumers; it is also that criminals and those criminalized construct their own meanings by their use of decentralized media.

Much work in cultural criminology also looks at the emergence of meaning within the broader realm of popular culture. This work ranges across the many dimensions of popular culture and crime, from comic book ideologies of justice (Phillips and Strobl 2013) and video game links to militarism, to advertising's promotion of automotive criminality (Muzzatti 2010) and punishment remade as popular culture (Brown 2009). Another body of scholarship examines the culture of late modern consumerism itself—that is, the panoply of meanings and emotions deployed in conjunction with a consumerist economy—and its links to crime and social harm. Hayward's (2004) work focuses on the interplay of crime and consumerism within urban environments; other work explores the ways in which consumerist culture generates both waste and illicit worlds organized around this waste (Ferrell 2006). Notable here is the recent development of a 'green-cultural criminology' (Brisman and South 2013; Ferrell 2013a) within the larger emergence of a global green criminology. While seeking to explore the links between (popular) culture and environmental harm, this approach more broadly seeks a reconceptualization of environmental harm itself.

If cultural criminology has been of some use in conceptualizing and investigating these three theatres of meaning—situations, subcultures, and media/popular culture—perhaps its greater contribution has come in theorizing their interconnections. Some of these interconnections have already been suggested: edgework as both immediate experience and lived resistance to larger social forces; everyday situations encoded with grand ideologies

of social control; illicit subcultures intertwined with market forces and social media. More broadly, cultural criminologists have attempted to theorize the ongoing flow of meaning back and forth between everyday situations, the transactions of illicit subcultures and marginalized groups, and the impositions of cultural and legal authorities (Ferrell 1992; Young 2003). From this work have emerged the concepts of media loops and media spirals (Ferrell et al. 2008). These concepts propose that, at times, the meaning of crime is constructed within mediated universes, with media productions re-incorporating and referencing one another. Yet other times, and increasingly, these multi-mediated constructions leak out into social life itself, embedding mediated meanings in everyday experience and creating situations in which crime and the mediated image of crime become indistinguishable.

Cultural Criminology, Critical Criminology and the Politics of Meaning

Having argued that cultural criminology constitutes a distinct type of critical criminology due to its focus on the meaning of crime, I'd now like to argue the opposite: that both historically and in its contemporary manifestations, the larger project of critical criminology has likewise been defined by its engagement with the politics of meaning. This is by no means an attempt at colonization—not, that is, some grandiose attempt to claim that all of critical criminology can be subsumed under the logic of cultural criminology. Actually it's quite the opposite: a claim that the roots of cultural criminology were there all along in the broad enterprise of critical criminology, and continue to be there, not only in the specific US and British antecedents already noted, but in the critical ethos of critical criminology itself. In making this argument, I'll not undertake a systematic survey of critical criminology past and present; I'll only highlight some examples that have over the years suggested to me an ongoing conversation between cultural criminology and other critical criminologies. For those critical approaches that I may omit, I offer my apologies, and an invitation to join the conversation.

Certainly one of the central foundations of critical criminology has been a Marxist, or more broadly conflict-oriented, analysis of crime and justice. This approach is sometimes taken to be a hard-nosed economic critique of crime and its causes, with issues of culture, ideology, and meaning relegated to a secondary, super-structural position. In reality, it strikes me that Marxist or conflict-oriented approaches have offered from the first a searing cultural assault on the accepted meanings of crime, law and justice (Ferrell 2007). To propose that the law operates as the hammer of the ruling class is not only to link law and economy, but to put forth a challenge—a challenge to conventionally constructed understandings of law. It is to suggest that, in its formation and in its everyday practice, the law means not justice but the perpetuation of injustice and the protection of privilege. This Marxist critique also confronts the elaborate ideologies by which law and criminal justice are defined as forces of social containment and social good, and at its best inaugurates a praxis for undermining the meanings that such ideologies promote. Further, this view of law and criminal justice promotes a reconsideration of the past and its ideological edifices as well. Are we to understand vagrancy laws as protecting the agreed upon social order from ne'er-do-wells, or as protecting the shifting interests of the ruling powers (Chambliss 1960)? Was the emergent juvenile justice system in fact designed for the betterment of children, or for controlling marginal populations and socializing immigrant children into dominant work and gender roles (Platt 1977)?

This critical reappraisal of law and justice continues in two contemporary approaches. Convict criminology has been invaluable in giving voice to those imprisoned by various wars on drugs and crime, and so in transforming the silenced objects of criminal justice into the critical conscience of criminology (Richards and Ross 2001; Ross and Richards 2002). In this liberatory work convict criminology has also had the effect—the quite intentional effect—of subverting the conventional meaning and practice of criminal justice. The very presence of ex-convict scholars within academic criminology exacts a lovely sort of intellectual retribution, giving lie to stereotypical constructions of criminals, prisoners, and punishment. In addition, their inside-out critique of the criminal justice system brings with it a hard-earned epistemic authenticity that further undermines the truth claims of Justice Department statistics or recidivism rates. Convict criminology, then, 'challenges the way in which crime and correctional problems are traditionally represented and discussed by researchers, policy makers, and politicians….[it]also challenges commonly held beliefs; thus, it is coterminous with many of the epistemological approaches found in critical criminology, which tries to deconstruct myths and look for deeper meanings' (Jones et al. 2009: 152, 156). Deeper meanings are likewise at issue for peacemaking criminology, which undertakes a similarly thoroughgoing critique, if in a different philosophical pitch. For peacemaking criminologists the goal of this critique is not simply a critical re-evaluation of criminal justice, but ultimately a profound reconceptualization of justice itself. As they argue, any approach that links justice to violence or punishment has already undermined justice itself, in both its meaning and its practice. And so, radically reimagining the meaning of justice along the lines of Buddhist, Gandhian, indigenous, and socialist humanist philosophies, peacemaking criminologists conceive of justice as a process designed to 'heal rifts in the social fabric and weave all members back into accepted, responsible, safe social relations' (Pepinsky and Quinney 1997: 109; see http://pepinsky.blogspot.com/).

Similarly radical reconceptualizations of crime and justice are undertaken by two other critical approaches—the first one obviously so, the second perhaps less so. With its focus on the cultural and linguistic construction of crime, postmodern/constitutive criminology is a critical enterprise founded in issues of meaning. First, this approach argues that there exists no reality of crime preceding its legal and linguistic construction; discursive categories and legal practices not only shape public perceptions, but constitute crime as meaningful activity in the first place. Not unlike labeling theory, 'the goal' then becomes 'working on the production of meaning in the area of crime'—meaning that is 'co-produced by those who engage in crime, those who try to control it, and those who study it' (DeKeseredy 2011: 49–50). To do this work, a second analytic move must be made—one like that which cultural criminologists employ in exploring everyday situations of crime control: deconstructing or decoding existing linguistic constructions so as to problematize their taken-for-granted acceptance and thereby expose their power. As Bruce Arrigo (2003: 48) says, deconstruction 'entails reading between the lines to ascertain the meanings (i.e., ideology) given preferred status in a particular language system.' Finally, postmodern and constitutive criminologists argue that criminologists, media workers and others must disseminate a 'replacement discourse' that can re-constitute the meaning of crime and justice in the interest of progressive social change (Henry and Milovanovic 1996).

A second critical approach has it seems to me been among the most successful in accomplishing just this task. This is feminist criminology. Certainly feminist criminology has exposed the gendered dynamics of crime and justice, and has confronted the social harms visited on women by way of these dynamics. In this work, though, feminist criminology has also constructed a deeper and more systematic critique of meaning—a critique

demanded by the very depths at which gendered assumptions are embedded in the everyday practice of crime and justice. As feminist criminologists have shown, confronting intimate partner violence against women necessitates confronting the ideologies that keep such violence invisible, and constructing domestic violence as a meaningful category of law and human experience. As recent legal changes have shown, confronting sexual assault demands deconstructing and reconstructing the assumptions encoded in the legal definition of rape. Likewise, confronting the public demonization of young women necessitates not only supporting young women's own efforts, but decoding the everyday meanings about them that are manufactured by crime statistics and the mass media (Chesney-Lind and Irwin 2008). Perhaps more than any other critical approach, feminist criminology has demonstrated that progressive scholarship and activism demands engagement with the existing politics of meaning. For feminist criminologists and other critical criminologists, imagining a better future begins with dismantling the meaningful limitations of the present.

If Meaning Matters so Does Method

If cultural criminology and other critical criminologies can be seen to share critical engagement with meaning as an essential arena of power and resistance, they perhaps diverge in another area: the degree of methodological militancy with which meaning is pursued. In this sense cultural criminology is indeed a militantly radical orientation, methodologically as well as politically—or, more to the point, precisely because cultural criminologists understand the methodological to be inherently political. Introducing an overview of 'contemporary critical criminological research,' Walter DeKeseredy (2011: 59) quotes Julie Stubbs' contention that, 'it is not the method that designates an approach as critical: critical researchers use a diverse range of methods….' This is certainly so; both cultural criminologists and critical criminologists productively employ a variety of methodological approaches in their research. Yet it is also the case that different methodological orientations do embody different sorts of politics—that is, differing assumptions about and avenues into knowledge, power, and social change. And when the issue under investigation is meaning—the tangled human process by which crime comes to be defined and redefined, understood and misunderstood—cultural criminologists argue that the politics of method comes to matter all the more.

Considering again the various critical criminologies and their attentiveness to meaning, any number of methods is suggested. Marxist criminologists might well utilize historical research to reconstruct the process by which legal statutes have come to reflect the interests of the powerful; they and postmodern/constitutive criminologists might also engage in close readings of legal or media texts, parsing their language in the interest of deconstructing their embedded ideological assumptions. Peacemaking criminologists would employ alternative justice systems to expose the violence inherent in the present system, or might document the peacemaking effects of mediation or conflict resolution strategies; feminist criminologists would listen to the accounts of young women caught up in the justice system, or like other critical criminologists, deconstruct media accounts or governmental statistics on female crime for their gendered underpinnings. All of these are appropriate and productive research strategies, and all of these are utilized by cultural criminologists as well. Yet more than other critical criminologists, it seems to me, cultural criminologists are often committed to going inside the social situations where meaning is made, inside the interactional 'immediacy of crime' (Ferrell 1997), with the intent of immersing themselves in meaning as an ongoing social and cultural process. Given this,

cultural criminology has come to privilege—and in some ways be defined by—ethnography. Paraphrasing Robert Park's well-worn advice, cultural criminologists tend to see the necessity of getting the seats of their pants dirty while attending the performances staged in the various theaters of meaning. Or as Paul Willis (1977:3–4) said in *Learning to Labour*:

> The qualitative methods, and participant observation, used in the research, and the ethnographic format of the presentation were dictated by my interest in 'the cultural'. These techniques are suited to record this level and have a sensitivity to meanings and values as well as an ability to represent and interpret symbolic articulations, practices and forms of cultural production. In particular the ethnographic account…can allow a degree of the activity, creativity, and human agency within the object of study to come through into the analysis and the reader's experience. This is vital to my purposes where I view the cultural, not simply as a set of transferred internal structures (as in the usual notions of socialization) nor as the passive result of the action of a dominant ideology downwards (as in certain kinds of Marxism), but at least in part as the product of collective human praxis.[1]

This commitment to ethnographic research doesn't preclude alternative approaches or methodological innovation, however. In fact, in the same way that cultural criminology has perhaps contributed to the revitalization of the ethnographic tradition in critical criminology, it has also worked to reinvent it. This reinvention has been necessitated by the variety of theatres in which meaning is constructed, and by the changing dynamics of the late modern period in which such theatres operate. To the extent that ephemeral, ineffable meanings emerge within criminal situations, for example, some sort of *instant ethnography* is required—ethnography attuned to catching momentary transactions and situating them within larger social forces. With illicit subcultures and illicit populations today cast adrift by contemporary circumstances and disconnected across spatial boundaries, some form of drifting or *liquid ethnography*—ethnography that is itself unstable and emergent—may be necessary. In a world where the meaning of crime increasingly emerges from media dynamics and televisual communication, forms of *visual ethnography* or *ethnographic content analysis* may best situate the researcher inside these cultural processes. As boundaries blur between scholarship and activism, between everyday life and ongoing research, *autoethnography* may in turn open new ways of understanding crime and its meanings (Altheide 1987; Ferrell et al. 2008; Ferrell 2012b). With this wide range of ethnographic practices, and especially with the emergence of innovative approaches like ethnographic content analysis and autoethnography, the particular nature of cultural criminology's commitment to ethnography becomes clear. For cultural criminologists, ethnography as traditionally practiced is neither the only nor the essential method. But an ethnographic *sensibility*—an epistemic openness and humility as regards others' understandings, an attentiveness to the ongoing social construction of meaning, and an immersion in the cultural processes by which meaning takes shape—is indeed essential, in whatever form it may take.

It is here that the politics of method emerge. For Paul Willis as for cultural criminologists, the commitment is not to any one set of methodological procedures, but rather to ways of investigating and knowing that incorporate a 'sensitivity to meanings and values,' a respect for 'collective human praxis,' and a methodology of attentiveness that subordinates the researcher's analytic assumptions to the situated construction of human meaning.

[1] Convict criminology is explicitly built from two traditions: 'critical criminology and qualitative/ethnographic methods' (Jones et al. 2009: 156).

We might describe these methodological politics as epistemically progressive, or phenomenologically inspired, or in peacemaking terms, socialist humanist. However we describe them, they rest on an affirmation that the particular meanings created by people and groups—by criminals, crime control agents, and others—matter to cultural and critical criminologists, and remain worthy of careful investigation. But if this is true, then a second commitment is required as well: a commitment to oppose those methods that, by dent of their own internal logic or their place in the power structure, violate such meanings and those that construct them in the interest of maintaining existing arrangements.

From the view of many cultural criminologists, there exist just such methods in contemporary criminology: the positivist methods that feed off survey research, data sets, and statistical manipulation. By their own necessary logic, surveys define a priori categories of abstracted meaning—meaning long removed from the social situations in which people negotiate understandings and emotions—and then require 'respondents' to conform their own memories and attitudes to these odd little abstractions. The 'data' from such surveys dehumanize those surveyed, draining them of their own meaningful experiences, and reducing their lives (or at least those small parts of their lives they care to report) to aggregated abstraction. Sold, reworked, re-aggregated, these data sets then become the basis for elaborate statistical manipulations—a process of incestuous intellectual obfuscation that further distances the practice of criminology from the praxis of everyday life. The results of this statistical manipulation next lead to 'discussions' and 'conclusions' regarding crime and criminals—discussions and conclusions defined, remarkably, by the researcher's statistically-based *imputation* of meaning to the lives, actions, and words of those studied. For many cultural criminologists, this approach is not simply one methodological choice among many. It is a methodological politics that misses human meaning entirely, imputing or imposing what it has in fact ignored, and so a methodological politics that maintains a top-down 'hierarchy of credibility' (Becker 1967) while undermining the progressive, humanistic agenda on which critical criminology is founded. This regressive methodological politics is redoubled by the role of such methods in both legitimating and insulating the existing power structure of criminology as a discipline and criminal justice as a state apparatus. Little wonder that cultural criminologists construct critiques of this approach under headings like 'Voodoo Criminology and the Numbers Game,' 'Amnesia and the Art of Skating on Thin Ice,' 'Kill Method,' and 'Manifesto for a Criminology beyond Method' (Young 2004, 2011:39–61; Ferrell 2009, 2013b). Such critiques are meant to shape a critical criminology of criminological method, and to provoke controversies that can open disciplinary space for methodological alternatives, on the grounds that the politics of method are indistinguishable from the politics of meaning—and from the politics of crime and social justice as well.

Interventions and Significations

For critical and cultural criminologists, the necessity of methodological attentiveness to various theatres of meaning is complemented by another imperative: intervention in these theatres of meaning on the side of social justice and progressive social change. Across the range of critical criminological activism these interventions take many forms, from union and community organizing to advocacy on behalf of criminalized groups and social justice campaigns. In whatever critical criminologists do, though, it strikes me that we are if nothing else well-practiced cultural workers; after all, our careers in teaching and scholarship are founded in a particular facility at offering critical interpretations and creating

persuasive forms of communication. Put differently, our scholarly careers require that we be skilled not only at ferreting out encoded ideologies and exposing hidden meanings, but at producing our own critical meanings and alternative understandings in the classroom and on the printed page. Thinking about our work in this way, drawing on and expanding the skills that make it possible, we can imagine any number of possibilities for critical intervention in the politics of meaning.

Situations

In the same way that we pay attention to the dynamics by which the meaning of crime and crime control is negotiated in others' everyday lives, we can productively notice the dynamics by which this process unfolds in the situations that make up our own lives as well. Bringing an ethnographic/autoethnographic sensibility to bear, we can usefully politicize our own lives by critically examining the meanings that shape them. In this sense every traffic ticket, every encounter with a police officer or airport security screener, every court case or legal dispute opens a window into the ongoing construction of crime and justice—if only we can learn to be attentive to them. In this sense also, every such situation offers an opportunity for critical intervention—that is, for converting the mundane meanings of everyday crime and crime control into a meaningful analysis of larger criminological issues. This is certainly the case in dramatic situations where a criminologist is made the butt of police brutality (Root et al. 2013), for example, or comes to be arrested in the course of field research (Ferrell 1997). But significantly, it is as much so the case when no punches are thrown or arrests made. Just as critical criminologists have made important contributions by investigating the power relations by which the social harms of economic or state elites are *not* constructed as criminal, we can usefully investigate, write, and teach about the relations through which crime is not constructed in our own lives. If I know that young Black men are regularly stopped and searched on the street, but I haven't been stopped for years, by what valences of my own power and privilege is this so? If for many people the sight of a police car invokes apprehension, but for me it suggests a sense of safety, what do these divergent meanings reveal about my own participation in everyday inequalities of ethnicity, social class, age, and location?[2]

Notice that these sorts of critical intellectual interventions into our own everyday situations offer in turn two distinct advantages: they require no research grants or research leaves, and they transform the always-useful awareness of our own privilege into critical criminological analysis (Ferrell 2012b). A similarly accessible sort of critical intervention is suggested by the other set of situational meanings discussed previously: the pervasive encoding of surveillance technologies and social control ideologies into the built environments of everyday life. We can confront and expose these insidious systems of control by writing and teaching about them; I would suggest we can also confront and expose them through individual or collective civil disobedience against them. Groups like Food Not Bombs have responded to statutes prohibiting the feeding of the homeless in public spaces by feeding the homeless in public spaces; critical criminologists have organized sit-ins in the middle of sidewalks governed by discriminatory no-sitting ordinances (Amster 2008), and have staged student flash mobs as pedagogic performances in regulated public space (Landry 2013). Such interventions seem near-perfect examples of Marxian praxis or

[2] I use these examples hypothetically. As a long-time street researcher and everyday street-level trash picker, I am regularly stopped by police officers and security guards; for me an approaching police car does indeed invoke apprehension, not appreciation.

anarchist direct action; they accomplish practical, progressive goals while at the same time forcing into view the hidden meanings and legal inequities of the social control mechanisms that would prevent them. Put in different terms—the terms of The Situationists—they seem just the sorts of situated interventions to promote a progressive revolution of everyday life (Vaneigem 2001 [1967]).

Subcultures

From the first cultural criminologists have explored the meaningful activities of marginalized or criminalized subcultures—but they have has as much so investigated and exposed the legal and media processes through which these activities are made to symbolize crime, threat, and violence. In this way cultural criminology has constituted an ongoing, intentional scholarly intervention into the discriminatory creation of folk devils and moral panics. Beyond this, though, there is the possibility of directly collaborative work, where cultural/critical criminologists and members of marginalized subcultures cooperate in repairing the damage done by officially imposed understandings. Along with documenting the lives of those labeled as gang members, researchers like Brotherton and Barrios (2004; Hamm et al. 2010) have immersed themselves in the legal and cultural dynamics of street politics, helping those involved to build alternative identities to those assigned by the criminal justice system, and along the way revealing larger patterns of global injustice. O'Neill (O'Neill and Seal 2012) and her associates have collaborated with demonized street sex workers to craft cultural productions that grant such workers agency while undermining conventional notions of threat and exclusion. As a scholar-activist, Kauzlarich (2012; 2014) has used the power of music as a songwriter and performer to critique social injustice, state crime, and corporate violence. In my own work, I increasingly collaborate with groups like Public Ad Campaign (http://daily.publicadcampaign.com/) Living Walls (http://livingwallsconference.com/), and the Underbelly Project (Ferrell 2013c) to blend art, activism, and scholarship in ways that create alternatives to official accounts of graffiti, street art, and public space. Hamm's (2013) work is founded in a different sort of collaboration; conducting ethnographic research inside prisons, he is able to correct the misperceptions—and perhaps even affect the misguided responses—of legal officials regarding those designated and imprisoned as terrorists. In turn, convict criminology quite intentionally functions, both by its very existence and by its scholarly orientation, as a collaborative endeavor among ex-convicts in rehabilitating the public image of those once imprisoned and in exposing the injustices behind their imprisonment. As cultural and critical criminologists, we well know the real and significant damage done by moral panics and associated campaigns of criminalization; these sorts of collaborative endeavors suggest ways that our own cultural work can contribute to some form of repair.

Media and Popular Culture

Both the pervasiveness of crime and justice narratives in the mainstream media and the recent proliferation of alternative and digital media highlight the importance of intervention into these channels of meaning. Along with reminding ourselves to write in ways that are both erudite and accessible, cultural and critical criminologists might well embrace further the visual image, which likewise offers the potential for both critical analysis and public engagement (Hayward and Presdee 2010; Tunnell 2011). There is of course also the moving image and its power to impart meaning; defining their work within the tradition of cultural criminology, independent filmmakers David Redmon and Ashley Sabin (Redmon

2005; Redmon and Sabin 2011) have produced a series of award-winning and widely-viewed documentaries that link everyday lives to issues of global capitalism, gender identity, and social harm. Other critical and cultural criminologists are now operating in other media-rich areas, giving TED talks, developing podcasts and websites (i.e., www.culturalcriminology.org, www.convictcriminology.org), and intentionally cultivating involvement with mainstream and alternative print and visual media. These examples imply that, in matters of meaning, cultural and critical criminology may operate best not as a social science, but as a poetic (Jacobsen 2013)—an enterprise attuned to elegance and engagement in its effort to disseminate a critical analysis of crime and justice.

In all of this I'm reminded of the African-American practice of signifying (Gates 1988; Potter 1995). Signifying suggests an especially fluid facility with meaning, an ability to communicate multiple meanings at once and to address them to multiple audiences. For African-Americans, this facility emerged as an essential survival skill amidst the predations of enslavement and racial bigotry; an ability to talk in ways that hid subversive understandings in the vocabulary of convention, to slip alternative meanings into the gaps of language and perception, meant that oppression could be at the same time accommodated as necessary and resisted as possible. As contemporary critical and cultural criminologists our privileges preclude any such stakes—but the lesson holds. Recognizing the politics of meaning and working to intervene in them, the question is not whether we will function as scholars or activists, whether we will examine our own lives or those of others, whether we will operate at the level of subculture or social media. The question is how we can best embody all of these endeavors as public intellectuals, moving fluidly within and between various theatres of meaning, comfortable with the multiple forms of understanding and communication that multiple audiences require. The question is how to make critical and cultural criminology meaningful in a world shaped by meaning—how to craft a criminology that through its mix of critique and compassion, scholarship and social engagement can confront the contemporary politics of meaning as they circulate in the realms of crime and justice.

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