**Reflections on C³ series – # 1 Approaching Interdisciplinary Thinking**

In June of 1998 I had the opportunity to participate in a workshop at the European University Institute located in the Tuscan Hills just outside Florence. At that time, I was working on an ethnographic study of transnational policing in the English Channel region and only beginning to properly understand my topic. My research aimed to disclose the transnational practices of police agencies.　The idea was to combine the methodological approach developed by sociologists of the police organization together with that of the sociologists of the global system and pioneer the empirical study of policework in a global context. Because I was approaching the project coming out of the disciplinary tradition of Anglo-American criminology, which had only considered policing in the domestic setting, the idea seemed entirely novel to me.

To my consternation, I discovered that political scientists had already begun to study international police co-operation. They were concerned to understand the implications of international policing for the sovereign nation-state. But I was thinking about transnational networks of social interaction involving police and the people they designated as criminal actors.  It was difficult to reconcile the theoretical language and concerns expressed by sociologists and political scientists studying a common problem. Complicating the picture, the evolution of supranational governance in the European Union invited consideration by socio-legal theorists concerned with the integration of policing across its territory. Legal scholars thought of policing in terms of the 'rule of law', but thinking as a sociologist of policework who researched their discretionary practices that notion seemed naïve and in need of unpacking.  Approaching the end of the millennium, sociological theory had been superseded by social theory and there was a great deal of confusion about how to conceptualize the technologically evolving, globally networked society. The turbulence of manifold disciplinary enquiry indicated almost everyone was interested to challenge conventional wisdom, perceive the world through a fresh lens, question the status quo, interrogate assumptions, and envision the future.

In my explorations I was discovering a lot about the transnational practices of police agents working to patrol and secure a territory spanning across the Channel to include the south coast of England, Belgium, the Netherlands and the northeast corner of France. However, caught in the crosscurrents of so many competing theoretical idioms, it was challenging to find a way to talk about them that was understandable to a general audience. Making matters even more difficult, the research involved operational police practices and the conditions of my security clearance put strict limits on what could be said in a public forum.[1]

The workshop was primarily concerned with migration issues in the European Union at a time before 'border criminology' and the study of 'crimmigration' had developed as distinctive sub-disciplines with their own theoretical jargon. I was on a panel which had several other early career-stage researchers one of whom said to me after the session: 'you have a *lot* of interesting ideas'. It was an insult disguised as a compliment and it came from a young American devoted to French postmodern thought. I saw a person who had a poor grasp of French, European and world history, who read works by Foucault, Derrida, Bordieu *et al* only in translation, and who wanted to achieve wisdom by a theoretical bypass. But the barb still stung. I was tongue tied and felt a fool.

Sometime later, perusing the bookshelves in the Edinburgh University law library, I happened upon Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. In it, Berlin observed that thinkers could be classed in one of two categories. Hedgehogs view the world through the lens of a single defining idea. Foxes draw on a variety of experiences and think that the world cannot be reduced to one idea. Berlin also said that a distinguished few intellectuals, Leo Tolstoy was his prime example, were a bit of both. Perhaps it is a sign of neurotic grandiosity, but I wanted to be just that sort of hybrid. As a sociological field researcher, my aim was to gain a wide variety of experiences from as many different little social worlds as was possible. Thinking as an historian and philosopher, I wanted to be able to encapsulate them with an idea that addressed the human experience.

More than two decades later – after a long career researching and writing, pondering, prognosticating and publishing, all while anxiously angsting over petty existential concerns – I finally produced a book to capture that ambition and so supersede everything that came before it. *Conflict, Crime and Criminology; An Interdisciplinary Approach* (John Wiley and Sons, 2026) is an interdisciplinary effort to relay a lot of interesting ideas and achieve an overarching *Gestalt*. What are those ideas? And what is the big idea?
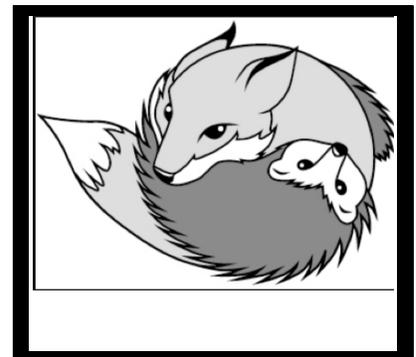


I reason that conflict is the defining characteristic of the human experience. Perhaps it is because my life's work was spent in the domain of criminology – where strife, violence, thievery, fraud, corruption and malice born out of a culture of malignant narcissism are the basic concerns – but I have formed an holistic frame of thought, a window onto the world, which has it that where there is conflict, there is power; where there is power, there is control; where there is control, there is criminality. In other words, the topics found in the domain of criminology are not narrow concerns. They show symptoms that offer clues about self and society writ large.
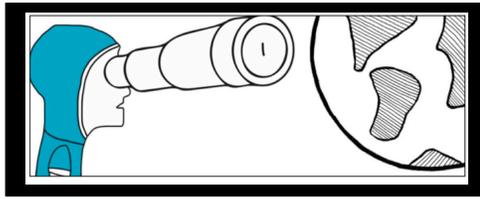
A distinction between multidisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity has been made. The first is like a thought salad. The second is like an idea sandwich. The third is like a theoretical soup purée. Which term is preferred is a matter of personal choice. As one of my High School history teachers, who read Classics at Cambridge, might have put it: *de gustibus non disputandum est*. That is, in matters of taste there is no dispute. I choose the middle option because, to me, the first one implies there can be no integrated and coherent view and the third suggests an attempt to transcend, and thereby traduce, the master disciplines.

Many people working in criminology think of it as a rendezvous subject. Its domain is a meeting place where scholars from many disciplines (sociology, psychology, law, history, geography, etc.) come together to share theories and research. The challenge is to discuss, and not speak past each other, in other words fashion a meaningful dialogue. The point is to develop a way of talking based in open-minded curiosity which grants space to all these different ways of looking at the world and thereby benefit from their various viewpoints. The difficulty is that specialists tend to develop their own jargon, the situation degenerates into one not unlike the rendezvous at the mythical Tower of Babel, and dialogue becomes impossible. This needs to end. Working alongside the social sciences and humanities generally, criminologists can contribute to drawing a bigger picture.

Because we do not experience and talk about the world in quite the same way does not mean we are condemned to not meet in the same world at all. In fact, unless you are a solipsist, it is obvious we all inhabit one and the same conflicted world. *Conflict, Crime and Criminology* presents an interdisciplinary approach connecting individuals' psychosocial conflicts, cultural and subcultural conflict, social organizational and political-economic institutional conflicts, and international geopolitical conflict conspiring to drive history as it is happening in the present. The abiding motif is conflict which embroils everyone regardless of racial, gender or class position. The approach is practically demonstrated through exploring a variety of topics and issues: drugs and crime; gender and violence; crime and media; organized crime and corruption; gun-crime; technopolicing and surveillance; war crime and human rights violation; crimes against the environment. These enquiries practically demonstrate that collective activities involving countless conflicts arising from the actions of all people all at once is the motor of history and the origin of criminality.

These explorations all share the common concern to understand conflict, power, control and criminality. They show a bigger picture that illustrates a global drift towards technological authoritarianism and challenges the notion that great individuals – no matter how megalomanic and powerful – drive social change. Historically existing society is contingent, chaotic and unpredictable and the place of peoples in it presents moral and ethical dilemmas that criminologists struggle to define and cannot prevent.
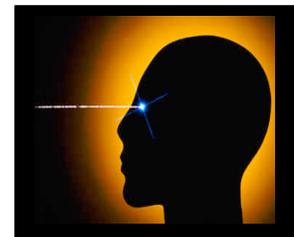
There are a lot of ideas in *Conflict, Crime and Criminology*. Alongside thinking about criminality, it considers the relationship between media, technology and communication. It grapples with ideas concerning connections between conceptual language, consciousness and culture. It contains theories about law and money. And asks questions about the predicament of peoples in an international state-system marked by transnational processes which connect and divide global society.

What criminologists call folk devils are personifications of evil and moral panics occur when they are projected as direct threats to society and need to be controlled. People define things as evil, that is as crimes, because of purported good intentions to eradicate problems and make the world a better place. However, following philosophical criminologist James Hardie-Bick, "our heroic intentions to fight and oppose evil often have the paradoxical effect of bringing more suffering, terror, fear and violence into the world".[2] The conclusion is almost inescapable. We have met the enemy, and it is us. This is a radical big idea because it challenges individuals to de-heroize and de-mythologize their self-understanding, to look inwardly to find the fundamental source of problems in the world, rather than pointing fingers outwardly at the demonizable 'Other' who must be exorcized from, or controlled and subordinated to, the moral and cultural order in an interminable power struggle that inevitably engenders conflict.

An interdisciplinary approach concerned with conflict, crime and criminology suggests there is an ethical alternative to amusing ourselves to death in a culture of narcissism, but you will have to read the book before you can understand it. I hope that you do.

[1] See for example: Sheptycki, James (1998) 'The Global Cops Cometh; Reflections on Transnationalisation, Knowledge Work and Police Subculture', *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 1, pp. 57-74; Sheptycki, James (1998) 'Policing, Postmodernity and Transnationalisation' *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 485-503; Sheptycki, James (1998) 'Reflections on the Transnationalisation of Policing; The Case of the RCMP and Serial Killers' *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, Vol. 26, pp. 17-34; Sheptycki, James (1998) 'Police Co-operation in the English Channel Region 1968-1996', *European Journal of Crime, Criminal Law and Criminal Justice,* 1998, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 216-236; Sheptycki, James (2019) 'Technopoly and Policing Practice: critical reflections on innovations in police control technology' *European Law Enforcement Bulletin*, CEPOL, European Agency for Law Enforcement Training, Budapest: Hungary, Issue 19 Winter/Spring; Sheptycki, James (2018) 'What is Police Research Good For? – Reflections on the moral economy of police research' *European Journal of Policing Studies*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 16-35; Sheptycki, James (2017) 'The Police Intelligence Division-of-Labour' *Policing and Society* Vol. 27 No. 6, pp. 620-635; Sheptycki, James (2017) 'Policing, crime and 'big data'; towards a critique of the moral economy of stochastic governance' (with Carrie B. Sanders) in *Crime, Law and Social Change,* 2017 Vol. 68 Nos. 1-2, pp. 1-15 DOI 10.1007/s10611-016-9678-7 2017

[2] Hardie-Bick, James (2012) 'Transcendence, Symbolic Immortality and Evil, *Human Studies*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 415-428; Lippens, Ronnie (2015) 'Escape from Evil? Notes on Capacity, Tragedy, Coding and Non-Destructive Immortality Projects'. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 862-873

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