

 Open access • Journal Article • DOI:10.1177/1748895818812995

Historical context and the criminological imagination: Towards a three-dimensional criminology — [Source link](#)

Henry Yeomans

Institutions: University of Leeds

Published on: 01 Sep 2019 - Criminology & Criminal Justice (SAGE Publications)

Topics: Context (language use)

Related papers:

- [Criminology in the United States](#)
- [Developing a criminological imagination](#)
- [Contemporary Critical Criminology](#)
- [The Place of Environmental Criminology within Criminological Thought](#)
- [Historical criminology and the explanatory power of the past](#)

Share this paper:    

View more about this paper here: <https://typeset.io/papers/historical-context-and-the-criminological-imagination-240oam4iy>



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Historical context and the criminological imagination: Towards a three-dimensional criminology*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/137251/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Yeomans, H orcid.org/0000-0001-7095-1141 (2019) Historical context and the criminological imagination: Towards a three-dimensional criminology. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 19 (4). pp. 456-474. ISSN 1748-8958

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895818812995>

© The Author(s) 2018. This is an author produced version of a paper published in *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Historical Context and the Criminological Imagination: Towards a Three Dimensional Criminology

Dr Henry Yeomans

University of Leeds

h.p.yeomans@leeds.ac.uk

0113 3434556

School of Law, University of Leeds, Leeds, UK, LS2 9JT

Henry Yeomans is Associate Professor in Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of Leeds. He is an inter-disciplinary researcher specialising in the historical development of alcohol regulation. He has been awarded the SLSA's *Socio-Legal Theory and History Prize* (2015) and the *Sage Prize for Innovation and Excellence* (2012).

Word count: 9090.

Historical Context and the Criminological Imagination: Towards a Three Dimensional Criminology

Abstract

It is widely claimed that criminologists should exercise a 'criminological imagination' by connecting individual experiences of crime to social structures and historical context. Despite such claims, criminology is often guilty of a 'presentism' that sees the past neglected, ignored or misunderstood. So why and how should criminological research be contextualised historically? This article identifies and examines the functions and forms of historical research within criminology. The article's significance rests partly in the formulation of an original matrix of forms and functions and its practical utility as a framework for supporting historical contextualization. Additionally, it is ultimately intended that this framework will help construct a more historically-sensitive criminology, as attuned to historical context as it is to individual lives and social structures. The creation of this three-dimensional criminology would entail a fuller realisation of the criminological imagination, thus significantly enhancing the analytical and socially transformative properties of criminological research broadly.

Keywords: Context, Criminological Imagination, History, Historical Criminology.

1. Introduction

Criminology is often characterised by preoccupation with the present and limited consideration of the past (Lawrence, 2012; Churchill et al, 2017). Much criminological enquiry seems to proceed on the basis that the sort of harms, injustices and wrongs that are taken as problematic in contemporary society are new, worsening or somehow different to the social problems that have existed in the past (Rock, 2005). The causes of these contemporary problems are frequently located within recent historical developments such as the apparent hegemony of neo-liberalism, the arrival of post-political society or the seemingly unprecedented social conditions taken as symptomatic of late modernity or postmodernity (Savage, 2009; Churchill, this volume). Furthermore, social responses to these problems are often said to embody fundamentally new strategies that mark out the present governance of crime as either more controlling, more punitive or more de-regulated than in the past. In some instances, criminologists go so far as to demand new theories, concepts and methods as existing ones are no longer believed to be capable of making sense of a social reality that is radically different from the one in which they were created (e.g. Garland and Sparks, 2000; Hall and Winlow, 2012). This tendency to position the present as both unique and uniquely problematic is termed “presentism” (Farrall et al, 2009: 80; Inglis, 2014: 100). It elevates contemporary phenomena above any historical antecedent and thus negates consideration of a longer-term perspective. The result of this presentism is that, as Frank Williams puts it, many criminologists are “likely to see historical context as perhaps mildly interesting, but not relevant to modern society” (2015: 70).

The sentiment that ‘we live in new and peculiar times’ is not confined to criminology. Wider public and political debates about crime frequently identify

novel or worsening problems, indicative of a wider crisis or moral decay, that are divorcing society from an age of order and stability that is presumed to have existed at some point in the past (Pearson, 1983; 2002; Yeomans, 2014a). An assertion of the uniqueness of the present has, furthermore, been identified as characteristic of much classical (Davis, 1986) and recent sociology (Savage, 2009; Inglis, 2014). Wherever it is found, presentism is problematic. Firstly, the emphasis on the novelty of the present may be inconsistent with the actualities of the past (Braithwaite, 2003). Secondly, there may be instances in which the object of study is indeed peculiar to the present but this characterisation can only be held valid once it has been demonstrated with reference to the past (e.g. Yar, 2005). Thirdly, whatever the extent of similarity and difference that exists between present and past, the use of the past serves a range of useful analytical and critical functions which enhance social scientific understandings of the present (Lawrence, this volume). Failure to adequately consider the past thus has a detrimental, limiting effect on criminology.

So how should criminologists engage with the past? Historical research can add various things to understandings of the present; for example, it can contribute to explanations of some contemporary conditions or support cultural memory of historical experiences that continue to hold relevance today. Pursuing such ends through empirical research requires a detailed knowledge of the content, approaches and methods that constitute historical studies. But, of course, criminology takes crime and social responses to crime in contemporary society as its principal subject matter and largely involves social science research methods. It follows that, while some engagement with the past is necessary, criminologists cannot all be expected to empirically pursue historical explanation or memorialising, undertake primary historical research or show an expert grasp of existing historical research. A potential solution to this

quandary is provided within a burst of recent scholarship on the 'criminological imagination' (e.g. Barton et al, 2007; Young 2011; Frauley, 2015a). Borrowing from C. Wright Mills (1959), the criminological imagination affords a crucial position to historical context as part of a trinity of factors, alongside personal biography and social structures, that provide the foundations upon which meaningful and socially beneficial research is based. Although historical context is routinely included as one of the three components of the criminological imagination, the means through which criminologists can and should engage with the past are not well explained in this literature. More widely, working with history is not necessarily straightforward for criminologists. Social sciences have shared a fraught relationship with the discipline of history (Burke, 1992; King, 1999; Lawrence, 2012) and historians have often criticised social scientists' treatment of history for being brief in scope, selective in coverage or for failing to recognise the nuance and complexity of the past (e.g. King 1999; Berridge, 2016). So, despite general consensus on its importance, it is not clear how historical contextualization might be achieved in practice.

This article seeks to counter the shortcomings of presentism by advancing understandings of how the neglected third dimension of the criminological imagination, historical context, can be attended to. The word 'context' derives from the Latin *contextus* which means joining together (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992). It refers to the circumstances or situation in which something happens, the social conditions that frame an event or object and offer a resource for the interpretation of its meaning (Goodwin and Duranti, 1992; Scheff, 2005). This article explores historical contextualization by identifying the analytical functions through which historical research can link together past and present and thus add meaning to criminological assessments of the present. Additionally, it links these functions to forms of historical

research that are differentiated according to how each situates the present in time. In doing this, the article lays out a practical approach for historically contextualizing criminological research. Ultimately, by fostering further engagement with the past, the article aims to advance the criminological imagination and thus enhance the analytical and socially transformative properties of criminological research.

2. The Criminological Imagination

In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills famously argued that society should be viewed through a triangular prism of personal biography, social structure and historical context. If individual lives can be structurally and historically situated, then the sociological imagination can help people see “what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society” (Mills, 1959: 7). Mills contends that ‘private troubles’ will thus be re-interpreted as ‘public issues’ in a manner that produces both more meaningful analysis as well as the potential for tangible and positive social change. He further emphasises the specific necessity of a historical perspective in producing such outcomes, insisting that “every social science – or better, every well-considered social study – requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials” (Mills, 1959: 145).¹ Engagement with history is therefore an integral component of the analytical and transformative potency of the sociological imagination.

¹ His *bete noires*, ‘abstracted empiricism’ and ‘grand theory’, are also criticised for failing to adequately consider historical change (Mills, 1959: 25-75).

Mills' sociological imagination has been translated into the notion of a 'criminological imagination'. This term has been used to describe the attributes that criminology is seen to be lacking at certain points in time (Williams, 1984; Whitehead, 1985) and to denote a praise-worthy quality that certain pieces of academic research possess (Barton et al, 2007; Redmon 2015) or some groups of people (usually students) should develop (Carrabine et al, 2004). Some more elaborate attempts to apply Mills' conceptual framework to criminology have also been made. Most famously, Jock Young (2011) used Mills as a platform from which to launch a scathing attack on the alleged deficiencies of positivist criminology and outline how a renewed concentration on connecting personal biography to social and historical contexts is required to reinvigorate the subject area. There has also been a flurry of relevant recent publications (e.g. Redmon, 2015; Fraser and Hagedorn, 2016). Notably, Jon Frauley's (2015) edited collection features a range of interesting contributions addressing this topic. Frauley's own chapter builds on Mills' exhortation that the researcher should let their mind "become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible" (Mills, 1959: 214). He argues that exercising a criminological imagination requires that criminologists adopt multiple perspectives on their objects of study, shifting backwards and forwards between, for instance, the personal and remote, the micro and the macro or the theoretical and the empirical. Criminology should thus be "refractive" (Frauley, 2015a: 21); it should harness the multi-perspectivalism of social life in order to produce fuller, sharper analyses that make visible the links between individual lives, social structures and historical context. In so doing, Frauley argues, it may achieve the analytical and transformative functions that Mills envisaged.

The basic usefulness of the criminological imagination is broadly accepted. Young's book, for example, was criticised for a number of reasons

(e.g. Currie, 2012; Moran, 2014) but there was little, if any, comment on the fundamental proposition that linking personal biography, social factors and historical context is integral to how criminology should be conducted. Perhaps it is self-evident that criminology must connect individual lives to their social context. But the presentism already identified within some criminological research indicates that contextualising crime and justice historically is not so straightforward. Even in some of the studies which extol the virtues of the criminological imagination, the role of history is mentioned only briefly (e.g. Frauley, 2015b; Redmon, 2015). Indeed, Nelken's contribution to Frauley's edited collection goes as far as actually removing history from Mills' work by stating that "When C. Wright Mills wrote about the sociological imagination he was mainly concerned with recognizing connections between individual biography ('personal troubles') and social structure" (2015: 255). In other work in this area, the position of the present within time is attended to, but only insofar as the social problems being described are taken as symptomatic of a contemporary era that is separate or different to what came before. Young's *Criminological Imagination* provides a case in point; contemporary society is only contextualised historically through its consistent characterisation as an era of late modernity typified by conditions of fragmentation, insecurity and flux that render it distinct from a hypothesised past which, in a contentious but unsubstantiated phrase, is described as "reasonably static" (Young, 2011: 82). Of course, the objects of criminological study can indeed be sometimes bound up with recent social changes. But without a more developed explanation of why this is the case, without some more concerted effort to situate the present in time by engaging with historical evidence, the result for Young and others is simply the reproduction of dubious presentist sentiments about the novelty of whatever contemporary phenomenon is under investigation.

So, the widely acknowledged centrality of historical context to the criminological imagination does not consistently result in the production of research which actually demonstrates cognisance of the connections between past and present. As in the example of Young's work, this failure to adequately locate personal biography in historical as well as social context weakens criminological analysis. With a view to helping engender a fuller realisation of the criminological imagination, the next section will identify the main analytical functions that historical research can fulfil within criminology.

3. Functions of Historical Research within Criminology

So what does criminology stand to gain from fuller engagement with historical research? This section synthesises and advances a body of scholarship on the functions of historical research. As well as reiterating some of Mills' central points, it draws on literature on the value of history per se as well as the specific value of history within criminology and/or other social sciences. This varied literature is used to help itemise the functions of historical research and specifically identify how these can help link past to present, thus supporting the criminological imagination.

3.1. Background to the Present

The most elementary use of history within criminology is to provide information on what came before the present. Whatever object of study a criminologist might examine in the present, it is almost certain to have also existed, in some form or degree, in the past. The history of crime and social responses to crime usefully explores the nature and extent of crime problems experienced in the past and the form that social responses to crime took at different points in time. In exploring what the present succeeded, it often shows that specific

contemporary problems have, in some form or degree, existed at many points in the past too. A sound knowledge of such historical parallels or antecedents may be useful for enabling researchers to debunk contemporary myths (Tosh and Lang, 2006: 22), defuse ongoing moral panics (Cox, 2012) or otherwise have a “cooling” effect on public or political debates (Loader and Sparks, 2011: 83). But, with or without such direct implications for the present, historical research almost invariably provides the sort of background information on preceding periods of time that helps to frame the present in time. To borrow a phrase from Flaatten and Ystehede, historical research can thus provide “prologue to the present” (Flaatten and Ystehede, 2014: 137).

3.2. Origins of Present Phenomena

As well as providing historical background, learning about the past can allow direct connections to be drawn between then and now. This often occurs when historical research is used to identify the origins of contemporary phenomena. For example, Knepper and Scicluna (2010) use archival study of female imprisonment in Malta to demonstrate that the social practices of penal welfarism are, although often understood as twentieth century inventions driven by the growth of science, actually older and partly religiously-inspired. Penal beliefs and practices are thus afforded a temporal profile; they are no longer just things that exist, but things that have existed for a certain period of time and which came to exist in a particular historical context and/or for a particular set of reasons. As Mills explains, engaging with history in this way enables social scientists to ask, not just “what?”, but also “from what?” (1959: 143-164). Moreover, identifying the origins of contemporary phenomena might allow for the building of theory that can then be applied in other contexts. Cox (2012)

argues that historical research on Western countries enables the development of theories of the 'invention' of juvenile delinquency that can be used to help make sense of the ongoing 'invention' of juvenile delinquency in some non-Western countries. Identifying the historical origins of current phenomena may thus enable the development of theoretical inferences that support the analysis of contemporary social issues within and beyond the national or cultural context in which the historical origins are located.

3.3. Characterising Features of the Present

Whatever is being studied, historical research will almost inevitably allow further instances of this phenomena to be analysed. Some social phenomena require historical study because they are sufficiently rare that they can only be studied in the past. Other topics do not necessitate historical study with quite the same force but, nevertheless, adopting a historical perspective means that researchers are not limited to recent examples and have a much expanded pool of evidence to analyse (see Mills, 1959: 195-226; Calhoun, 1996; Sewell, 1996; Cox, 2012). Importantly, these broadened empirical horizons facilitate better understandings of the features or characteristics of their objects of study. Mills asserts that studying the same phenomenon in different periods assists in grasping its contemporary meaning (1959: 146-150). It makes it possible to identify the similarities and differences between manifestations of the same phenomena in different situations. In turn, this enables researchers to ascertain the degree of generality or particularity that a certain phenomenon possesses. Is the object of study unique to the present? Or is it part of a general social condition that is common or constant within large periods of time? Answering such questions enables the meaning of a phenomenon and its implications for the present to be better elucidated; in Durkheimian terms, it helps distinguish

the socially normal from the pathological. Moreover, as Cox (2012) argues, such historical enquiries can also be revealing with regards to establishing 'what works?'. Comparing the outcomes of policies and practices in different situations can be highly pertinent to effectiveness and can thus support recommendations for contemporary reform. But, whether a phenomenon is found to be normal or pathological and effective or ineffective, the over-arching function of historical research being exercised is a capacity to draw on an extended pool of evidence, taken from differing contexts, in order to produce more meaningful and useful conclusions.

3.4. Illuminating Processes of Change Underpinning the Present

While being rooted in some appreciation that history is animated by both continuity and change, the three functions of historical research covered thus far depict the past as something fairly static. It is a sealed block called background that is placed prior to the present; it is a fixed place containing the origins of some aspect of the present; it is an unmoving reservoir of evidence that can be tapped to help cultivate understandings of the present. The fourth function that historical research can fulfil within criminology is, in contrast, predicated upon an appreciation of history as dynamic. Tosh and Lang (2006: 1-28) emphasise that history can usefully be viewed as process; or, more accurately, a set of processes constituted by some pace and degree of change ranging from rapid to glacial, radical to incremental. It follows that history should not be studied through cross-sectional snapshots of specific, self-contained points in time because, if the snapshots cannot be connected together, then the nature of historical change, as well its causes and consequences, can only be partially comprehended. Historical research should instead provide moving

pictures that illustrate how relevant societal processes have unfolded through time.

This dynamic view of history has two principal utilities for criminology. Firstly, it enables the consideration of change itself. While continuity is a regular and important feature of history, as Tosh and Lang (2006: 12) stress, nothing stays the same permanently. This means that everything that (socially) exists today results from some dynamic process of change that began in the past. This situation militates against any tendency to sharply separate past and present; for instance, the contemporary shape of a government policy to counter a type of crime will inevitably have been moulded by earlier policies and the current level of a type of crime is part of a longer-term trend. Moreover, as well as undermining distinctions between past and present, this line of thinking brings the future into the present too, as contemporary society is instrumental to the construction of the future. The present is constituted by change just as the past is; it is a shifting configuration of events and processes, some of which will ultimately impact upon the near and distant future. In this sense, where we may go next is every bit as bound up with the past as where we are now. Considering the present as historically situated also means considering the future as shaped by things that have happened as well as things that are happening now. This heuristic facet is what Mills was referring to when he asserted that historical research allows us to ask, not just “from what?” but also “to what?” (1959: 151).

The second principal benefit derived from adopting this historical perspective is an improved understanding of social structures or social relations. E.P. Thompson once argued that class is a relationship that is formed and exists in time; it consequently possesses “a fluency which evades analysis

if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure” (1991: 8). He further critiqued sociological attempts to study class at one point in time:

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but the way the machine works once it is set in motion – not this and that interest, but the friction of interests – the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise (1978: 85).

Thompson thus asserts that, as a dynamic social structure, class must be studied through time. Mills made a similar point about social structures broadly (1959: 149-150) and Abrams extended Thompson’s point “from class to most other supposed social entities” (1982: xii). It is certainly compelling to suggest, within criminology, class is not the only important social entity that must be viewed historically. Othering, criminalisation and regulation, for instance, are also dynamic social relations, under-girded by the exercise of political power, through which certain social groups or actors interact with, or relate to, each other. As such, ‘stopping the time machine’ to examine one of these things in a single historical moment can offer only a limited view. These social entities form through time and exist in time, and hence are more clearly discerned when we view their manifestations in society over years, decades or centuries.

Viewing history as moving pictures, rather than snapshots of fixed points or delineated chunks of time, thus creates sharper and fuller analytical perspectives. Furthermore, by enabling the consideration of change itself and

transforming capacity to analyse important and fluent social entities, historical research can foster knowledge and understanding that connects the past to the present. The identification and explanation of processes fills the gap between then and now (Tosh and Lang, 2006: 9-12). As such, criminological analyses of contemporary society are inadequate if they lack an appreciation of the dynamic processes of historical change that animate the present.

3.5. Relativising the Present

The fifth function of historical research within criminology is not necessarily separate to the first four functions and might be better understood as a sort of meta-function resulting from the exercise of one or more of the other functions. It refers to a form of historical consciousness in which the present is essentially relativized. This can be explained by considering two realisations that commonly result from historical research.

The first realisation involves the de-familiarisation of the present. Historical study is commonly credited with the facility to highlight difference (Tosh and Lang, 2006: 1-27). The sheer range of historical experience means that many studies of the past quickly introduce criminological researchers to “views from unfamiliar places” (Knepper and Scicluna, 2010: 408). Whether we are looking at the popularity of duelling as a form of conflict resolution for large parts of European history (Spierenburg, 2008) or the permissibility of the trade in many psychoactive substances in the nineteenth century (Berridge, 2013), history provides a breath-taking “inventory of alternatives” (Tosh and Lang, 2006: 32) to the present. Acclimatisation to this giddy sweep of historical difference typically undermines any sense that there might be features of social reality which are constant or universal. The present becomes seen as one of an

infinite variety of presents that have existed through time. Accepting this point means creating some perceptive detachment between the researcher and their contemporaneous social reality. When returning from the past to the present, researchers may find that contemporary ontological or epistemological phenomena that had once seemed natural or normal now appear as “denaturalized” (Calhoun, 1998: 849), unusual or specific to our time. This defamiliarisation with the present opens up new critical capacities for questioning and scrutinising taken-for-granted aspects of contemporary society.

The second important realisation is the contingency of the present upon the past. The capacity of historical research to, in particular, locate the origins of present phenomena and illuminate dynamic processes of change generally engenders an acceptance that the present was not inevitable. Teleological views of history are now generally unfashionable and it is more usual for the past to be interpreted as a sequential configuration of events and processes that produces certain outcomes (Sewell, 1996; Calhoun, 1998: 849-850). The outcomes, however, might have been different if these events and processes had not occurred or occurred in a different sequence, or if different events and processes had also occurred. The existence of the present as we know it is thus contingent upon the occurrence of a historically-specific configuration of events and processes (see Sewell, 1996). The present thus appears, not just as one of an infinite number of actual historical presents, but also as one of a range of presents that might have come to exist in the contemporary period. A sensitisation to such subjunctive realities is a further aid to critical thinking as analysis can be informed by what might have been, as well as what is and what was. Importantly, by making it easier to envisage different and potentially more desirable versions of the present, grasping the contingency of the present upon the past can enhance the prospects of research affecting positive social

change. By enhancing critique of the present and facilitating the imagining of alternatives, the relativizing function of historical research is integral to the analytical and transformative properties of the criminological imagination.

3.6. Summary

There are, therefore, multiple functions that historical research can fulfil within criminology. These functions help to identify meaningful connections between past and present that allow the contemporary period to be historically contextualised. Importantly, the functions of historical research here identified enable the identification of certain questions that can be asked of historical research in order to help situate criminological objects of study in time. Specifically, historical contextualization can be pursued through the posing of the following questions: What came before the contemporary manifestation of the phenomenon in question? When and why did this phenomenon come into existence historically? How is it similar or different in its characteristics to what came before? How and why has the phenomenon in question changed through time? Are there alternatives to how this phenomenon exists in the present and, if so, what are they?

4. Forms of Historical Research

To further develop this framework for historical contextualization, this section identifies three forms of historical research and delineates them according to how each situates the present in time. By this means of delineation, there are other forms of historical research. It is not claimed that the three forms of historical research presented here are the only ways in which research might situate the present in time; it is contended that they provide perspectives that

are most relevant to the task of historical contextualisation. Examples of research are given for illustrative purposes, but the typology here presented is derived from reflections upon a much broader body of historical research from history and social science.

4.1. Narrative Historical Research

Much of the rich literature on the history of crime and criminal justice examines a particular phenomenon in a specific location during a bounded period of time. Such scholarship derives mainly from the discipline of history and, characteristically, places a particular value on the appreciation of the specificities of time and place (Burke, 1992). As Knepper and Scicluna explain, these scholars are principally “concerned with what has happened for its own sake; they want to understand what people at an earlier point in time thought or did” (2010: 408). This form of research may provide information which casts new light on some aspect of the present, such as the origins of current phenomena, and may, as in Thompson’s analyses of class, advance understandings of some process of historical change in a manner that will prompt new reflections on the present. But the absence of such an outcome does not, for its proponents, nullify the purpose of doing narrative historical research; instrumentally useful lessons for the present are by-products of the more important attempt to understand some aspect of the past. For narrative historians, it is perfectly legitimate to seek to understand the past for the past’s sake; the object of study is thus located *in time* by an empirical focus that is entirely on the past. The present is situated as something separate, albeit not necessarily detached or unrelated, to this past.

It should be stressed that the term ‘narrative history’ is not used pejoratively here and its practice can be intensely analytical (Calhoun, 1998; Roth, 2013). For example, John Carter Wood’s (2012) research on police-public relations in the 1920s does not reflect explicitly on implications for the present; rather he provides an analysis of an earlier instance of the sort of phenomenon that continues to interest criminologists today. Narrative historical research is thus “history of the past” (Braithwaite, 2003: 8) and so, for a present-oriented subject like criminology, it mainly provides information on what happened before the period that it is seeking to explain; or, in other words, on the story so far. While it can improve knowledge of the origins of current phenomena and ongoing processes of social change, narrative historical research functions primarily to provide the background to the present.

4.2. Comparative Historical Research

Comparative historical research, in contrast, makes understanding the present an explicit and central objective. It entails researchers conducting simultaneous analyses of the same phenomena in the present and at least one further period of time. These periods do not need to precede or succeed each other; case studies can be employed that are decades or centuries apart. Analysis is thus *across time*; the comparative perspective juxtaposes the present with a period or periods of the recent or distant past. Understanding the present is important in this field, but comparing past and present can serve to deepen understandings of both. For this reason, comparative historical research can be found within social sciences and history.²

² Within the discipline of history, comparative research can also entail the comparison of two or more historical periods. Discussion here is confined to comparisons between past and present

Charles Critcher's (2011) comparison of public reactions to excessive drinking in the 2000s and the first half of the eighteenth century is a good example of this comparative approach. The inclusion of a historical comparator means that Critcher's article does provide some historical background to the present, albeit pertaining to a specific period. However, the article is mainly concerned with identifying the similarities and differences between the construction of drink problems in the eighteenth century and the present. Critcher concludes by emphasising that, in both eras he studies, public reactions to excessive drinking were clearly shaped by moral, political and economic factors as well as, or instead of, any genuine appreciation of the scale or effects of excessive drinking (2011: 185-187). It is not contended that the existence of this configuration of historical factors in the former period had any direct bearing on the latter period. The two periods are posited as causally unrelated (Critcher, 2011: 172) and it is inferred that similarities observed in unrelated periods of time may indicate the presence of general conditions conducive to the occurrence of a strong public reaction to excessive drinking. Through this identification of similarities and differences across time, comparative research enables features of contemporary society to be characterised as general or particular.

In some instances, comparative research contributes directly to the relativisation of the present. Rowbotham et al's (2003) comparison of the trial and punishment of the killers of James Bulger in 1993 with a similar prosecution for 'child-on-child' murder in 1861 found that, despite the two incidents sharing many similar features, the 1861 perpetrators were treated more leniently by the

because, as such research explicitly involves using the past to reflect on the present, it is more directly relevant to historical contextualization within criminology.

court. Rowbotham et al connect these divergent outcomes to a stronger Victorian faith in rehabilitation and thus conclude that a punitive response, even to particularly shocking crimes, is not inevitable. Current social conditions are thus one point in a spectrum of historical possibilities (and are subject to change).

4.3. Formative Historical Research

Formative historical research is again focused explicitly on extending understandings of the present. However, unlike comparative historical research, formative historical research takes a current phenomenon and seeks to explain how it has come into being *through time*. These studies typically concentrate on long periods of time that have preceded the present and, because they have culminated in the present, are taken to house within them the evidence necessary to explain how contemporary social conditions have come to exist. Both the recent and distant past will often be included within this formative perspective. For example, Yeomans' (2014a) examination of how the contemporary manner in which alcohol is understood and regulated in England and Wales has developed through time provided a formative complement to Critcher's comparative study. It similarly begins in the eighteenth century and ends in the 2000s; but it also includes extensive analysis of developments across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In formative historical research, the present is therefore situated as the outcome of a 'long sweep' of history.

Because of the over-riding ambition of explaining the present, formative historical research is more common within social science than history. Prominent examples include the genealogical research of Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault, 1991) and many who have been inspired by his work. Garland

explains how these 'histories of the present' trace "how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten" (Garland, 2014: 372). Formative research, therefore, functions especially well with regards to identifying the origins of contemporary phenomena. It might also provide background to the present and, because of its long-term timeframe, may include useful analyses of processes of change. The end result of this is often findings that do something to relativise the present. For example, Seddon's (2016) work on the genealogy of 'drugs' as a concept argues convincingly that the contemporary prohibition of various drugs, in the UK and elsewhere, is founded on the invention of the concept of 'drugs' in the early twentieth century. This invention resulted from the confluence of a range of social processes and, as such, the labels we attach to different psychoactive substances in the present are not "settled or universal but rather are historically and culturally contingent" (Seddon, 2016: 394). It follows that, as it has in the past, the prospect of developing new ways of regulating drugs in the future is thus linked to the possibility of developing new ways of thinking about drugs.

It is worth stressing that there are forms of formative historical research that do not follow a Foucauldian approach. Eisner's work on the history of violence, for example, uses quantitative analysis of homicide rates across hundreds of years, as well as Norbert Elias' concept of the civilising process, to examine the origins of the current (low) homicide rates in Western societies and the historic processes that have produced them (e.g. Eisner, 2001). Whatever the theoretical underpinnings, the crucial feature of formative historical research is that analyses of the 'long sweep' of history position the present as the outcome of certain long-term historical processes.

4.4. Towards a Three-Dimensional Criminology

As well as identifying a group of contextualising questions derived from the functions that historical research can fulfil within criminology, this article has also identified the forms of historical research within which the answers to these contextualising questions are likely to be found. This set of relationships between questions, functions and forms is summarised in table 1. In each row, a contextualising question is associated with the function of historical research that will answer it as well as the form of historical research that is likely to be the principal or potential source of the answer. This matrix is offered as a framework for historical contextualization in criminology. It might feasibly assist historical researchers in designing their methodologies, but the task of mapping out these forms and functions of historical research has been undertaken primarily with the aim of facilitating an enhanced historical contextualization of criminological research.

Table 1: Historically Contextualising Criminological Work

Question	Answer	Principal Source	Potential Source
What came before the contemporary manifestation of the phenomenon in question?	Background	Narrative	Formative Comparative
When and why did the phenomenon come into existence historically?	Origins	Formative	Narrative

How is it similar/different to what came before?	Characteristics	Comparative	Formative
How and why has the phenomenon in question changed through time?	Dynamics of change (e.g. structures, relations, processes etc).	Formative	Narrative
Are there alternatives to how this phenomenon exists in the present and, if so, what are they?	Present as relative or contingent	Comparative (present as relative)	Formative (present as contingent)

It is important to stress that historical research is unlikely to provide answers to contextualising questions in a straightforward, uncontested way. The past does not yield answers that can be proven or universally agreed to be right or wrong any more readily than the present does. Indeed, even some of the more positivist historians recognise that, beyond a narrow set of information that can be empirically verified and broadly agreed to be 'true', there is deep and legitimate debate about a range of important issues, such as the cause and meaning of these 'truths' (see Hobsbawm, 1997: 164-185). Such debates are often manifested in the divergences between different historiographical schools of thought. The history of crime and criminal justice is constituted by a variety of approaches, such as social history and legal history, and has historically been shaped by the political standpoints of Whigs, Marxists and Feminists, to name but a few. Studying the past, therefore, can be contentious and politically charged. Furthermore, some of the criticisms that historians level at

criminologists' use of the past reinforce this point by highlighting tendencies to be selective with evidence or overly-concerned with theory at the expense of rigorous archival research (King, 1999; Berridge, 2016). These issues of partisanship and partiality are too broad to be resolved here. But it seems sensible to advise that criminologists approach historical research in much the same way as they would another field of social science. They should anticipate and recognise the contestability of historical knowledge, paying heed to the political, ideological or theoretical principles that can underpin it and seeking to conduct their own research with integrity.³ While it is a challenge, the contestability of historical accounts and the politics of 'doing history' are not reasons to be dissuaded from engaging with the past.

Importantly, successful historical contextualization stands to enhance the criminological imagination. Returning to the example of violence (mentioned earlier) should help illustrate this point. The occurrence of violence is often understood with reference to individual factors, such as the biological or psychological characteristics of offenders (e.g. Raine, 2013). There is a separate literature which instead places emphasis upon the criminogenic potential of various social conditions, such as poverty or deprivation (e.g. Anderson, 2000). The body of historical research on violence, however, offers different perspectives. It includes narrative and comparative research as well as a fascinating range of formative studies which show that current levels of violence are the latest iteration of a much longer-term process of decline (e.g. Gurr, 1981; Eisner, 2001; Spierenberg, 2008). Elias' civilising process is the most popular explanation for these long-term trends in violence. It is described

³ There are historiographical guides that can help with this undertaking (e.g. Lawrence, 2016; Knepper, 2016).

as a “social constraint towards self-constraint” (Elias, 1994: 56) which, driven by the rise of centralised states and the growth of commerce, compelled people to restrain certain impulses, including violence and aggression, from the late medieval period onwards. The deployment of this socio-psychological theory as an explanation for the long-term decline in violence confronts any temptation to over-emphasise the salience of individual factors in explaining violence, or indeed any inclination to position individual and social causes of crime as opposing or separate. Consideration of background, origins, characteristics, change and alternatives gives rise to a perspective in which both sets of factors appear to interact with and affect each other in ways that shift and develop through time. As such, violent behaviour is not a problem that can be located solely within the mind or body of individual perpetrators but a social problem – or, to borrow Mills’ vocabulary – a public issue that is situated at “the intersection of biography and history within society” (Mills, 1959: 7).

Adopting this perspective means moving away from a two-dimensional analysis of individual and social factors. The sets of discrete, interacting factors that make up the individual and social dimensions of crime problems are situated within historical context and views on the present are re-framed accordingly. This may result in the identification of a wider set of causal or explanatory factors; for example, in the case of violence, it may be that state formation in the late Middle Ages is just as important as inner city deprivation in explaining homicide rates in Western societies. The knowledge that contemporary Western homicide rates are comparatively low, or that some extreme forms of violence were largely acceptable in most Western societies until well into the modern historical period (e.g. duelling), may also result in a ‘cooling’ effect on public or academic debates that lessens or modifies anxieties about the health of society today. Moreover, if the ‘civilising process’ has led us

to where we are now, the present and future can be freshly considered by asking whether the civilising process is still in operation and/or whether it might be engineered or acted upon in some way so as to maximise certain future societal wellbeing. It is wise not to over-state this last point; predicting and shaping the future are intensely difficult and there is also dispute about whether the civilising process is really an adequate explanation of long-term changes in violence (e.g. Thome, 2001). Furthermore, the connection between a person having the analytical realisation that something is a 'public issue' and that person actively seeking to do something politically about this issue is not as straightforward as Mills presumes (Burawoy, 2008). Nevertheless, it remains plausible that, in some circumstances, the proper exercise of the criminological imagination may give rise to positive social change as envisaged by Mills. The main point to emphasise here is that the possibility of such an outcome relies heavily on analyses situating individual and social dimensions of crime problems within historical context. This contextualization adds a third dimension to criminological analysis. It re-frames views of the past, present and future, giving rise to new insights and new possibilities.

The different forms of historical research that have been outlined here can also advance Frauley's idea of a "refractive criminology". Frauley's call for criminologists to make their minds into moving prisms is explained with reference to the utility of switching regularly between different perspectives. On the basis of this paper, it can be added that researchers should also seek to make their minds prisms that move within time. Understanding the narrative of events prior to the present, comparing the present to the past and examining how the present came into being historically all entail researchers adopting a fruitful multiplicity of historical perspectives that alter our views of the present. By revealing historical origins or a fuller grasp of characteristics, these

perspectives can add depth and contrast to our views of current phenomena. By highlighting background and process, they can depict the movements that have led to the objects of interest being positioned as they are in the contemporary picture. By relativising the present, they can show what the next frame of history might look like. As such, the call for a multi-perspectival “refractive criminology” must be met, not just through the reinvigoration of efforts to connect the individual and social dimensions of the criminological imagination, but through the development of a fully three-dimensional, historically-informed criminology.

5. Conclusion

This article began by outlining how criminology is often limited by its preoccupation with the present. With a view to countering this presentism and bridging the gap between criminology and historical research, it went on to develop the concept of the criminological imagination by examining how criminologists can contextualise their work historically. It has reviewed the functions of historical research in order to identify how the past can be linked to the present; it has used these functions to formulate questions that can usefully be asked in order to contextualise criminological work historically; and it has delineated three forms of historical research that are likely to supply the answers to the contextualising questions. The article, therefore, is partly a call to criminologists to broaden their temporal horizons, to engage more pro-actively with historical research and to explore historical perspectives that help to situate the present in time. Importantly, it also provides a practical framework to support the task of historical contextualization. Some of the distance between criminology and history as academic enterprises will no doubt remain; and it is worth reiterating here that the point is not that all criminologists should do

historical research. Instead, by identifying the forms and functions of historical research and the relationships between them, the article has sought to lay out a clearer, more navigable route to engaging with historical research.

Understandings of the criminological imagination have thus been advanced in a manner intended support future research. It is common for criminologists to examine crime problems with reference to the personal and social dimensions of the criminological imagination. If it becomes equally usual for criminologists to pay greater and more constructive attention to historical context, then a truly three-dimensional criminology can be created that is better placed to foster the sort of analytical and transformative research promised by the notion of the criminological imagination. Further research may well be needed to achieve such a goal. The historical study of crime and criminal justice has recently proliferated within criminology, sociology and history (Yeomans, 2014b). However, meta-studies of content, detailed scrutiny of methods and developed consideration of historically-based theories are only just beginning to be made. This article has used the notion of the criminological imagination to explore how studying the past can benefit criminology and the other articles in this themed section make important contributions towards the creation of a more fruitful relationship between criminology and history. But, to put things into historical context, we do seem to be at the beginning of a rather long road. It is hoped that this article can help to provide both the impetus and tools that are needed to eventually arrive at a more historically informed criminology.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Churchill, Paul Lawrence and Adam Burgess for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I would like to thank the various people who have given me feedback after presentations or advice during conversations. These include, but are not limited to, Sarah Wilson, Bob Shoemaker, Mark Roodhouse, Kisby Dickinson, Elliott Keech, Roger Baxter, Kim Stevenson and Iain Channing. I would also like to thank the journal's anonymous reviewers for their constructive reviews.

Bibliography

- Abrams P (1982) *Historical Sociology*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Anderson E (2000) *Code of the Street*. London: Norton and Company.
- Barton A, Corteen K, Scott D and Whyte D (eds)(2007) *Expanding the Criminal Imagination*. London: Routledge.
- Berridge V (2013) *Demons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Berridge V (2016) History and the Future: Looking back to look forward?. *International Journal of Drug Policy* 37: 117-121.
- Braithwaite J (2003) What's wrong with the sociology of punishment?. *Theoretical Criminology* 7(1): 5-28.
- Burawoy M (2008) Intellectuals and their Publics: Bourdieu and Mills. Available at: <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/Bourdieu/Lecture%206.pdf> (accessed 16 August 2016).
- Burke P (1992) *History and Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Calhoun C (1996) The Rise and Domestication of Historical Sociology. In McDonald TJ (ed) *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 305-338.

Calhoun C (1998) Explanation in Historical Sociology: Narrative, General Theory, and Historically Specific Theory. *American Journal of Sociology* 104(3): 846-871.

Carrabine E, Iganski P, Lee M, Plummer K and South N (2004) *Criminology*. London: Routledge.

Churchill D, Crawford A and Barker A (forthcoming) Thinking Forward Through the Past: Prospecting for Urban Order in (Victorian) Public Parks. *Theoretical Criminology*. Epub ahead of print 8 June 2017.
DOI:10.1177/1362480617713986.

Churchill D (2018) History, Periodisation and the Character of Contemporary Crime Control. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (this issue).

Critcher C (2011) Drunken Antics: The Gin Craze, Binge Drinking and the Political Economy of Moral Regulation. In Hier S (ed) *Moral Panic and the Politics of Anxiety*. London: Routledge, pp.171-189.

Cox P (2012) History and Global Criminology: (Re)Inventing Delinquency in Vietnam. *British Journal of Criminology* 52(1), 17-31.

Currie E (2012) A Symposium of Reviews of *The Criminological Imagination* by Jock Young. *British Journal of Criminology* 52(2): 428-431.

Davis MS (1986) "That's Classic!" The Phenomenology and Rhetoric of Successful Social Theories. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 16(3): 285-301.

Eisner M (2001) Modernization, Self-Control and Lethal Violence: The Long-Term Dynamics of European Homicide Rates in Theoretical Perspective. *British Journal of Criminology* 41(4): 618-638.

Elias, N (1994) *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Farrall S, Godfrey B and Cox D (2009) The Role of Historically-Embedded Structures in Processes of Criminal Reform. *Theoretical Criminology* 13(1): 79-104.

Flaatten S and Ystehede PY (2014) What's Past is Prologue. *European Journal of Criminology* 11: 135-141.

Foucault M (1991) *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin.

- Fraser A and Hagedorn JM. (2016) Gangs and a Global Sociological Imagination. *Theoretical Criminology*. Epub ahead of print 4 August 2016. DOI: 10.1177/1362480616659129.
- Frauley J (2015a) For a Refractive Criminology: Against Science Machines and Cheerful Robots'. In Frauley J (ed) *C. Wright Mills and the Criminological Imagination*. Surrey: Ashgate, pp.21-58.
- Frauley J (2015b) C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination: Introductory Remarks. In Frauley J (ed) *C. Wright Mills and the Sociological Imagination*. Surrey: Ashgate, pp.1-17.
- Garland D and Sparks R (2000) Criminology, Social Theory and the Challenge of Our Times. *British Journal of Criminology* 40(2): 189-204.
- Garland D (2014) What is a "History of the Present"? On Foucault's Genealogies and their Critical Preconditions. *Punishment and Society* 16(4): 365-384.
- Goodwin C and Duranti A (1992) Rethinking Context: An Introduction. In Duranti A and Goodwin C (eds) *Rethinking Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.1-42.
- Gurr T (1981) Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence. *Crime and Justice* 3: 295-353.
- Hall S and Winlow S (2012) Introduction. In Hall S and Winlow S (eds) *New Directions in Criminological Theory*. London: Routledge, pp.1-15.
- Hobsbawm E (1997) *On History*. London: Abacus.
- Inglis D (2014) What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology. *Cultural Sociology* 8(1): 99-118.
- King P (1999) Locating Histories of Crime. *British Journal of Criminology* 39(1): 161-174.
- Knepper P and Scicluna S (2010) Historical Criminology and the Imprisonment of Women in 19th-century Malta. *Theoretical Criminology* 14(4): 407-424.
- Knepper P (2016) *Writing the History of Crime*. London: Bloomsbury.

- Lawrence P (2012) History, Criminology and the 'Use' of the Past. *Theoretical Criminology* 16(3): 313-328.
- Lawrence P (2016) The Historiography of Crime and Criminal Justice. In Knepper P and Johansen A (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Crime and Criminal Justice History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.17-37.
- Lawrence P (2018) Historical Criminology and the Explanatory Power of the Past. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (this issue).
- Loader I and Sparks R (2011) *Public Criminology?* Abingdon: Routledge.
- Mills CW (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moran K (2014) Doing Quantitative Work Differently: Jock Young's Criminological Imagination. *Theoretical Criminology* 18(4): 459-468.
- Nelken D (2015) Imagining Transnational Security Projects. In Frauley J (ed) *C. Wright Mills and the Criminological Imagination*. Surrey: Ashgate, pp.255-271.
- Pearson G (1983) *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Pearson G (2002) Youth Crime and Moral Decline: Permissiveness and Tradition. In Muncie J, Hughes G and MacLaughlin E (eds) *Youth Justice: Critical Readings*. London: Sage, pp.22-44.
- Raine A (2013) *The Anatomy of Violence*. London: Allen Lane.
- Redmon D (2015) Documentary Criminologies: Expanding the Criminological Imagination with "Mardi Gras – Made in China! As a Case Study. *Societies* 5,: 425-441.
- Rock P (2005) Chronocentrism and British Criminology. *British Journal of Sociology* 56(3): 473-491.
- Roth P (2008) Varieties and Vagaries of Historical Explanation. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2: 214-226.
- Rowbotham J, Stevenson K and Pegg S (2003) Children of Misfortune: Parallels in the Cases of Child Murderers Thompson and Venables, Barratt and Bradley. *Howard Journal* 42(2): 107-122.

- Savage M (2009) Against Epochalism: An Analysis of Conceptions of Change in British Sociology. *Cultural Sociology* 3(2): 217-238.
- Scheff T (2005) The Structure of Context: Deciphering Frame Analysis. *Sociological Theory* 23(4): 368-385.
- Seddon T (2016) Inventing Drugs: A Genealogy of a Regulatory Concept. *Journal of Law and Society* 43(3): 393-415.
- Sewell W (1996) Three Temporalities: Towards an Eventful Sociology. In McDonald TJ (ed) *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp.245-280.
- Spierenburg P (2008) *A History of Murder*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Thome H (2001) Explaining Long-Term Trends in Violent Crime. *Crime, History and Societies* 5(2): 69-86.
- Thompson EP (1991) *The Making of the English Working Class*. London: Penguin.
- Thompson EP (1978) *The Poverty of Theory*. London: Merlin Press.
- Wood JC (2012) Press, Politics and the "Police and Public" Debates in late 1920s Britain. *Crime, History and Societies* 16(1): 75-98.
- Whitehead J (1985) The Criminological Imagination: Another View. *Criminal Justice Review* 10(2): 22-26.
- Williams F (1984) The Demise of the Criminological Imagination: A Critique of Recent Criminology. *Justice Quarterly* 1(1): 91-106.
- Williams F (2015) The Demise of the Criminological Imagination: Thirty Years Later. In Frauley J (ed) *C. Wright Mills and the Criminological Imagination*. Surrey: Ashgate, pp.59-71.
- Yar M (2005) The Novelty of Cybercrime: An Assessment in Light of Routine Activity Theory. *European Journal of Criminology* 2(4): 407-427.
- Yeomans H (2014a) *Alcohol and Moral Regulation*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Yeomans H (2014b) Teaching and Learning in Crime and Criminal Justice History: An Overview. *Law, Crime and History* 4(1): 1-14.

Young J (2011) *The Criminological Imagination*. Cambridge: Polity Press.