

I.C.O.P.A. 1985

Abolition Conference
Presentation

Workshop #1: The Influence of the Press

Teaching Criminology: Crime News, Gangster Films,

and Cop Shows

Recently I have been teaching undergraduates in The Criminology Department of the University of Ottawa (Canada). One of the most serious teaching problems I have encountered has been the accumulated common-sense assumptions and common wisdom about criminal-justice which students bring with them. Everyone, it seems, has firm opinions about criminal-justice. Upon investigating the source of my students' opinions, I found that they were seldom grounded in real life experience. Rather, they were largely the product^{of} crime news and commentary, and television and cinema crime fiction. These were also the most common source of their interest in criminology. For example, the soap-opera romanticizations of police work in television series like Hill Street Blues and Cagney and Lacey have had a major impact on this generation. I have discovered that in this situation a major problem is getting beyond these entrenched common-sense wisdoms and the piecemeal nature of students' knowledge and thinking. The need

for "deconstruction" is, of course, not peculiar to criminology.

I have found that by focusing on the very sources of my students's ideas (e.g., television crime fiction) I was able to get them to scrutinize their own assumptions, and widen their frame of reference. A noticeable distance on crime news and the stereotypical imagery and ideological bias which underpins it was one result. This was evident in the autumn of 1984 when a nation-wide moral panic over the death of policemen occurred. It was a major ideological campaign; one which resurrected the issue of capital punishment and harden the lines of debate over criminal-justice generally (e.g., sentencing, parole). It set the tone, and shifted the ground for the newly elected conservative government's justice policy proposals. My students' response to this "panic" was enlightened scepticism. Their subsequent research projects on crime news and moral crusades (e.g., drunk driving campaign) often revealed a growing sense of distance. But it did more than this, for examining the production of crime news and moral panics led them to question the very information provided and its interpretation. Criminology students' usual disinterest in theory and analysis was overcome by the very nature of the questions they encountered and answers they sought. Questions about objectivity and bias in reporting led into questions

about the nature of reality and its interpretation. By discussing the ideology of crime news and the process of its production, they discovered their own common-sense assumptions and questioned its ideological base.

The creation of a dissonance between the assumptions students brought with them and what they were discovering (a crucial aspect of any "deconstruction" process) was greatly aided by our class discussions and lectures on crime fiction. I introduced this area through an historical examination of the changing imagery of crime, criminals, law enforcement, the containing social order, and the administration of justice in film and television. By starting in ^{this} the manner I was able to illustrate the historical relativity of this imagery and the need to examine the social content of its production. This led to the examination of the dominant social theory of the period in question (e.g., 1930's Juvenile Delinquent films and The Chicago "ecology" school), and a consideration of the intrusion of politics and moral crusades (e.g., Legion for Human Decency) into the production of crime fiction. Taking an historical perspective also had the benefit of showing the continuities and changes in the focus of our criminal-justice system and crusades. The most rewarding comments were from those students who found they no longer were just being "entertained" when

attending movies or watching television, but were now analysing the interpretations they were being given.

I was quite pleased by projects students undertook for this Research Methods course. I attribute their initial enthusiasm to their already considerable knowledge and interest in crime fiction, and my encouragement and challenge to analyse these materials. But, it was their struggle to come to grips with the "reality" of their favorite shows; to come to terms with the politics of their production and to identify their ideological disposition which combined to maintain that interest. Students were much more familiar with television "cops" shows and crime films than I was, yet, by widening the frame of reference for their examination, students were pushed to discover a new way of seeing them.

I hope to develop and extend this type of educational project in other directions, ones which students' enthusiasm leads me to believe are possible without great expense. One project would be to monitor local and national coverage of crime and news and commentary. Of particular interest would be the ongoing mapping of moral crusades and moral panics, dominating criminal-justice issues and the media's presentation of them, and the strategic presentation of highly sensationalized cases, such as that of the mass murderer

Clifford Olson. Such a project would be useful for mapping the political initiatives of various agents of social control (e.g. Chief of Police Association), and their programs. It would also serve as a warning system for identifying, developing campaigns. For example, one of the more interesting student projects was an investigation of "Crime Stoppers", a newly added program in the bulging Crime Prevention strategy that has been imported into Canada from the U.S.A. His analysis indicated that the use of the mass media, and the processes of the production of crime news were similar to that of the "Crime Stoppers" program. He argued that "Crime Stoppers", with its extended media network could be used to create moral panics as it is already heightening fears about crime. Equally interesting was the description of the creation and implementation of this new program in Ottawa. We now have a representative collection of publicity materials from the various sources and institutions involved, including interviews with major participants; since its inception. The long term analysis of the weekly "crimes showcased" is an interesting project for the future.

The ongoing monitoring of the changing imagery, themes and dominant issues in (electronic media) crime fiction also promises to be interesting and useful. Here I would focus on what current issues are reproduced and their ideological and

theoretical interpretation. If those television series and films are a major medium for constructing a hegemonic view of crime and criminal-justice, as I believe they are, then the mapping of the movement on this terrain is important for teaching and for wider ranging analytical work. Film studies are quite "trendy" in Canada at the moment, with a growing number of converts. Film Festivals - Gangster Films, Police Films or Prison Films - hold promise as a vehicle for attracting students and the general public. They can be easily organized (e.g., programs, commentaries) so that those aspects of concern to those arguing for alternatives to existing criminal-justice systems are highlighted and discussed.

In short, I have found that utilizing the source of most public opinion about criminal-justice (i.e., the mass media) as the focus for instruction, I have often been able to disrupt students' naive absorption of common sense wisdom and ideology and offset the influence of current ideological initiatives taking the form of moral crusades and moral panics. Furthermore, students' own interests become the basis for their entry into the consideration of the social and political context of criminal-justice.

Robert Gaucher
University of Ottawa