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CRIMINOLOGY AT THE CROSSROADS

George B. Vold

The author, who is Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, has contributed previous articles to this *Journal* as well as to other periodicals in the social science field. He has recently completed a term as President of the Midwest Sociological Society. The following article is in substantial part the Presidential Address delivered before that Society's 1950 Annual Meeting. Professor Vold's analysis seems appropriate for publication in this University Centennial Volume—
EDITOR.

I

The middle of the century is a natural crossroads as we reckon time. The traveler coming to a crossroads needs to look around and choose his direction of further travel. This is the way, also, with universities on their recurring anniversaries. Neither the traveler nor the institution dare assume uncritically that he will get to his destination merely by continuing to go on as before he came to the intersection.

It is this thought, rather than that of imminent crisis, that lies back of the analysis that will be attempted in this paper. There is need for criminology to take stock of its present position and to consider the direction in which it needs to move in the future.

Criminology has shared the same confusions and uncertainties in trying to find explanations for crime that have beset all related fields in the so-called behavior sciences. In this it shares the common fate of all applied fields and tends to become a "me too" science, applying the concepts of other fields ready made to the perplexing problems of accounting for criminal behavior.

Every idea, notion, or nostrum in medicine, psychiatry, psychology, sociology, economics, or religion that in any way could be pointed to as in some way related to crime has had its followers and advocates insisting that it was important in crime causation. The fact of sin, the loss of religious faith, "bumps on the head" *a la* the phrenologists, feeble-mindedness, physical types, moral imbecility, emotional disturbance, infantilism, frustration, birth trauma, masochistic death wishes, and so on indefinitely, all are ideas or concepts seriously used in past or present attempts to explain crime, or as justifications for programs alleged to be useful in controlling crime. Were criminologists more generally acquainted with the concepts and theories of nuclear physics, there is little doubt but that we should soon find criminological theories articulated in terms of atomic fission and making some use of the celebrated formula of Einstein on the relationships existing among Energy, Mass, and Motion.

II

Before attempting to describe the new horizons (in the language of the title of a currently popular textbook in criminology) that may be seen from the crossroads where we now are, it is in order to review briefly a few gleanings from the road over which we have come.

Steeped in the general background of Western Europe's cultural heritage, which includes a generous mixture of demonology and intellectualism, modern attempting-to-be scientific criminology has consistently concerned itself with the exploration, and elaboration of criminal type theories. The interpretation of the nature of man as grounded in intelligence and reasoning, and therefore subject to his own direct control, is the common background of all the social sciences, as well as of the earlier schools of philosophy and psychology.

In criminology, the formulations that flow from this interpretation of the nature of man are usually called the "classical school." According to its convenient formula, man can control his conduct by taking thought and exercising his power of will and mind. This means that human behavior, including criminal behavior, is conceived of as being basically self-generated, self-directed, and self-controlled. Penology (the treatment of crime), under such ideas of crime causation, becomes a series of efforts to get the criminal, and the potentially criminal, to exercise their power of self-control—that is, get them to will to do right rather than wrong. The principal external instrument available to bring about a change in will, and thus a change in behavior, is the fear of punishment. The criminal codes of Europe and America have sought to implement this view of criminal behavior in the historic institutions of judicial procedure and sanctions.

The break with the classical view of human behavior comes as a natural consequence of the increasingly general acceptance of the idea of evolution, and the growing practice of identifying man with the rest of biological life in nature. Physiology, anatomy, medicine, psychiatry, and to some extent psychology, have all moved in the direction of this change in emphasis and perspective.

In criminology this view is often called the "positive school." One may quarrel with the use of the word "positive," or otherwise reject various specific connotations of the term, but one must not lose sight of the significance of the shift in emphasis from attention to self-motivated, self-directed behavior to the attempt to find differentiating characteristics that would mark off the criminal from the non-criminal. Any significant combination of traits or characteristics that could be used

to differentiate criminals from non-criminals would as a matter of course become the principal element in a "criminal type."

Four basic kinds of criminal types, with a great many specific elaborations, or subtypes, may be distinguished quite readily as the principal object of attention or concern in criminological research. Each is worth a word of comment in passing.

(1). First, as a matter of history, was the quest for a physical criminal type. An extension of the then popular "science" of phrenology to the realm of crime, it had a tremendous vogue for forty or fifty years before Lombroso added the further idea that this type was an evolutionary throw-back to earlier stages of development. Except for Professor Hooton and a few of his followers, no one today takes seriously the proposition that there are demonstrable physical differences between those who commit crime and those who do not. It is important to note, however, in passing, that the physical type idea was abandoned only as systematic measurement and the use of control group comparisons were applied to the problem.

(2). Negative results in the research on physical criminal type led not to the abandonment of the type theories but in change in emphasis from physical type to mental type. Goring himself made that transition, as well as the whole next generation of psychologists who happily asserted that the basic characteristic of the criminal type was inferiority of intelligence, if not outright feeble-mindedness. Goddard and many other mental testers were misled by the fact that they had measurements for all kinds of criminals, but, until World War I gave them a Draft Army sample, they had no information on a comparable group of non-criminal adults. As soon as research methodology matured sufficiently so that validated measurements could be taken of criminals and comparable groups of non-criminals, concern with the feeble-minded, or with low intelligence as the type, takes on less and less significance in research in criminology.

(3). With decreasing emphasis on low intelligence or feeble-mindedness as the mental type characteristic of the criminal, the trend has been to shift to yet another type, that of the emotionally disordered as the focus for theory and research. One of the favorite terms used in this connection is that of "psychopathy," or "psychopathic personality." Instead of "deviant physique" or "deviant intelligence" it is now "deviant," or "disordered," or "psychopathic" personality that holds the center of the stage in the currently popular type theories.

An obvious advantage of this as a type characteristic is the difficulty of measurement and the absence of uniform standards of comparisons as

between the criminal and the non-criminal. Until it is possible to measure differences in personality make-up accurately, consistently, and in a meaningful manner, either as to kind or as to degree, it will be possible to assert without successful contradiction that personality deviation constitutes the basic element in the criminal type. Case histories of all kinds, (psychiatric, psychological, sociological) can be quoted to support almost any interpretation of personality characteristics that the investigator happens to prefer.

Results from the comparative studies using standardized tests and scales, such as they are, of groups of criminals with what are assumed to be comparable groups of non-criminals have produced to date no very consistent or impressive substantiation of the type theory. A recent article¹ reports results on 113 instances of such measured comparisons involving the use of 30 different standardized scales. In only 47 instances (42 percent of all instances) was there evidence of differentiation and many of these were so near chance expectancy that the net effect of all efforts points to the general conclusion that so far no consistent or stable differences have been determined. This latest summary of the results of personality testing in this field suggests the conclusion that under conditions of careful and measured comparisons, the notion of deviant personality type is likely to go the way of the other type theories.

(4) One other kind of type theory needs to be noticed since it has given impetus to many studies and considerable discussion, namely, the proposition that the criminal type is characteristically one of social and economic disadvantage. In other words, criminals are assumed to be essentially like other people except they have never had the same opportunities and advantages as the non-criminal. Expressions of this notion run all the way from sob-sister journalism through the arguments of organized political and ideological "party-line" writers to the conclusions of serious students trying to do serious objective studies.

Present results from serious research are not entirely conclusive but the essential points of critical comparison are clear. When really comparable groups of criminals and non-criminals are compared, are there consistent, differentiating, differences between the two in terms of environmental opportunities and advantages? None has so far been well established. Low income people are sometimes criminals, but they are also the principal component of the law-abiding population. It has not been established that their involvement with crime in proportion to numbers is notably larger than that among those of higher income

1. Karl F. Schuessler and Donald R. Cressey, "Personality Characteristics of Criminals." *American Journal of Sociology*, March, 1950, pp. 476-484.

brackets who seem to avoid trouble. The fact must be noted, on the other hand, that there is a significant number of those of high, or moderately high income, and of respectable occupational level who run afoul of the law—bankers, lawyers, doctors, school teachers, preachers, as well as highly skilled laborers.

In this, as in the other type areas, it is true that the more carefully conducted studies have generally demonstrated less likelihood of significant differentiation than some of the earlier ones seemed to indicate.

Perhaps most significant of all for the view that expects a rising standard of living to result in less and less criminality is a brief backward glance at the last 50 to 75 years of American history. In the course of those years, we have experienced a real decrease in illiteracy; child labor has been eliminated to a large extent; levels of income have gone up very considerably; leisure has increased; hours of work are shorter and the machine has taken over much of the backbreaking drudgery of ordinary work. It is probably true that America has gone farther than any other nation in achieving a high standard of living, both material and non-material. But as far as is known, there has been no corresponding drop in crime rates, nor any decrease in the sordidness or comprehensiveness of our crime phenomena.

We have better educated criminals than we used to have, criminals who understand complicated machines and know how to operate them, who enjoy leisure, and who feel defrauded if not surrounded in prison with approximately the same standards of luxury to which they have become accustomed. But there is nothing to indicate a depressing effect of this high standard of living on criminality in our society, nor does the high standard of living maintained in many of our penal institutions offer any particular likelihood of low recidivism rates.

III.

So much for the past. What paths lie before us as we face the second half of the century? Some trends seem clear and relatively self-evident. With reference to others one can only hazard a guess. These latter are typically of the kind to which the old adage applies—fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

One of the clear trends that lies before us, now as we stand at the crossroads of the century, is the evident fact that criminological research of the future patterned on that of the past fifty years may be expected to give only somewhat more accurate information in fields where the main outline has already come into view. Such research should not be expected to provide much that is particularly new or surprising by way

of uncovering unsuspected relations between factors or elements involved in the causes or in the treatment of crime.

It is clear, for instance, that expanding and extending the best we now have in penal institutions so that the general minimum standards will equal or exceed the best we know today cannot be expected to accomplish any general rehabilitation of prison or reformatory inmates. Expanding vocational and trade training in reformatories, for example, may be an excellent idea for its own sake but it should not be thought of as a device that will accomplish large-scale rehabilitation as a matter of course and thus ultimately reduce or eliminate crime from our society. Some of our reformatories have for years operated vocational training programs that compare very well with such schools in civilian society. Some are probably actually better equipped, and at least as well staffed (notably in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts), as their civilian counterparts.

We have had, according to present lights, a number of excellent inmate rehabilitation programs in operation in a number of institutions in the United States for many years. The over-all effects are presumably desirable, yet it must be remembered that recidivism rates for these institutions and for the states supporting them are such that no one may assume that rehabilitation is achieved more or less automatically as a by-product of a good institutional program. The general seriousness of the recidivism problem is highlighted by the follow-up studies of the Gluecks.² Many of the claims to great accomplishment in institutions are based on inferences supported by little genuine follow-up information. In many cases the easiest way to feel sure of success is to have no supply of systematic information about failure.

Another aspect of the future that seems clear from our present perspective is that both criminology and penology has been too preoccupied with the hospital analogy, namely, that the criminal is a sick person who needs to be treated for his individual ailments and that therefore the penal institution should be patterned after the hospital to treat the sick. True and accurate as this analogy may be in some cases, it is still far from an adequate conception of the nature of the problem. Somewhere in our thinking and in our practice, as well as in our research, we must find a way to take account of the fact that a considerable area of criminality is a by-product of political and social conflict and in no sense involves sick or deviant personalities.

During the war years recently past, we incarcerated several thousands

2. See Glueck, Sheldon and Eleanor, *After-Conduct of Discharged Offenders*. Macmillan, London, 1945, for latest statement of "follow-up" results.

of conscientious objectors in our federal prisons. They had been convicted of offenses duly adjudicated under our law and in our regular courts. By now most of these people, if not all of them, have been released. It is improbable that more than a handful of the thousands so confined ever were "rehabilitated" or "reformed" in the sense of abandoning their old "criminal" intellectual and spiritual orientation. The reason is clear enough. They viewed themselves not as criminals but as unfortunate victims of superior force. They were more like prisoners of war than like inmates of a psychiatric ward. The "enemy" held them captive in prison, but they did not therefore take over the way of life of their captors.

There is, unfortunately, every reason to believe that many people committed to prisons for what the law calls crime feel and act in a manner much more nearly analogous to the conscientious objector than to a hospital patient. Thieves, burglars, or sex offenders, to say nothing of the embezzlers or the perpetrators of fraud, are often quite as well satisfied with their manner of life as the conscientious objectors were and are. In that situation, no rehabilitation should be expected to take place. In many cases this would be a much more accurate description of the social relations in a prison or a reformatory than any analogy of hospital and patient.

In thinking about criminological research for the future, it must be recognized that besides studies organized to clarify certain questions or problems suggested by past research on individual types, we must also consider the more difficult problem of how to do research on the often violent social and economic conflicts immediately related to much of our crime and corruption. How does a criminologist do scientifically adequate research on the problem of the relations between the underworld and the upper world like the present situation in Kansas City? Up to the present, so-called scientific and academic criminology has contributed very little to the measurement or analysis of that kind of crime phenomena. Newspaper writers and police reporters have actually done much more than the criminologists in giving the country some impression of how a gambling syndicate works, or why a city vice ring may be more important business than a relatively large local industry. Yet information in this field is still largely a matter of rumor and hear-say. Surely better information is a necessary condition for more effective control.

IV.

In conclusion, one or two principal ideas should be restated. The crossroads of criminology at the mid-century indicate clearly that the

past fifty years of research and discussion have laid down the principal outlines of conventional research methodology as well as provided a limited type of answer to many problems. Further work along the lines already developed is needed to clarify and make more exact information on many problems where we now have only tentative answers.

We need also to face realistically the problem posed by the organized crime syndicate which sometimes operates as one of the important business and pressure groups of the community. The challenge is not so much that of the need for technical research methods and personnel to investigate individual personality problems—it is rather the challenge of battle, a battle of survival between one way of life and another.

In the coming struggle for power between the upper world of the essentially law abiding and the underworld of syndicates, rackets, and special privilege, let there be no doubt as to which side will have the support of professional criminologists everywhere. As individuals and as groups, let us accept the challenge of that battle!