



# Bourdieu's Five Lessons for Criminology

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**Abstract** Drawing on a close reading of Pierre Bourdieu's works, I offer five lessons for a science of crime and punishment: (1) always historicize; (2) dissect symbolic categories; (3) produce embodied accounts; (4) avoid state thought; and (5) embrace commitment. I offer illustrative examples and demonstrate the practical implications of Bourdieu's ideas, and I apply the lessons to a critique of orthodox criminology.

**Keywords** Critical criminology · Embodiment · Historicization · Pierre Bourdieu · State theory

## Introduction

Criminology has been remarkably slow to absorb Bourdieu's ideas. This is partly explicable by Bourdieu's own relative lack of engagement with crime and punishment, albeit with some notable exceptions (e.g. Bourdieu 1987, 2014; Bourdieu et al. 1999). Bourdieu also represents a continental European moment in the social sciences: trained at the *École Normale Supérieure* in the 1950s and steeped in the Heideggerian–Husserlian–Hegelian traditions of postwar French philosophy, Bourdieu's approach may appear abstruse to contemporary researchers engaged in essentially practical studies of relatively circumscribed empirical domains. Most criminologists simply lack the philosophical training required to appropriate fully Bourdieu's critical-reflexive agenda. Notwithstanding, a Bourdieusian movement has gained ground within criminology in recent years.

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Criminologists and penologists are putting Bourdieu to work, mobilizing and deploying concepts such as the field (Shammass and Sandberg 2016), social capital (Ilan 2013), cultural capital (Sandberg 2008), and habitus (Fleetwood 2016; Sandberg and Fleetwood 2016; Ugwudike 2017) to solve real research puzzles. However, this nascent tendency in criminology must recognize the crucial role played by the positionality and posture of Bourdieu towards the *craft* of research: while Bourdieu's favoured concepts (habitus, forms of capital, field theory, etc.) and methods (multiple correspondence analysis, discursive interviewing, and participant observation) are important, what gives rise to a distinctly Bourdieusian social science is the stance adopted in Bourdieu's works *vis-à-vis* social reality and scientific practice. This posture or attitude is developed below in the form of five key lessons: (1) always historicize; (2) dissect symbolic categories; (3) produce embodied accounts; (4) avoid state thought; and (5) embrace commitment.

Bourdieu did not write extensively on those empirical issues that vex criminologists and take up their research efforts. On occasion, his writings did touch on topics directly relevant to professional students of crime and punishment. For the most part, however, Bourdieu was preoccupied by social phenomena only circuitously related to the immediate concerns of criminology—inequality, the state, embodiment, and social domination, to name but a few themes in Bourdieu's sprawling oeuvre. One exception to this tendency was the collaborative volume, *The Weight of the World*, published to public acclaim in France in 1993, which tackled such issues as urban malaise, street crime, and policing strategies (Bourdieu et al. 1999). It was inspired by Bourdieu's desire to portray suffering in all its depth and richness—this 'naively ethical feeling' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 202) that the state's withdrawal from the duty of decommodification was embroiled in the production of social misery, connected Bourdieu's critical investigations of education, culture, and consumption to a broader theoretical framework for counteracting social domination through a systematic exposition of social suffering (*souffrance sociale*).

This conceptual move was presaged by Bourdieu's turn to political activism in a post-Reaganite–Thatcherite era of heightened neoliberalism. Abandoning the ideal of 'pure' science for a committed sociology of practice, Bourdieu formed links with social movements, such as trade unions opposed to the flexibilization of the labour market, and José Bové's agricultural workers' movement that opposed the machinations of the Washington Consensus. Through such actions, Bourdieu increasingly attacked the spread of neoliberal policies, including notions like 'zero tolerance', which was included in a critique of neoliberal rhetoric that Bourdieu thought amounted to nothing less than a 'new planetary vulgate' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, p. 2). In short, Bourdieu attempted to counteract the establishment of a novel political economy premised on a deregulated state and the accelerating commodification of daily life in place of a protective and generous (Keynesian) welfare state. Bourdieu also attempted to construct a more participatory and democratic social order that aimed to forge a space where ordinary citizens could overtake the instruments of decision-making. Even if Bourdieu did not write about crime and punishment *directly*, his state-centred analyses (e.g. Bourdieu 2014) were always *indirectly* related to various social pathologies—and therefore, tangentially,

revolved around crime and delinquency broadly conceived. With the neoliberal retooling of the state, Bourdieu thought violence and crime would become more probable: the sort of crime found in large American cities was one of the 'concrete consequences of a total retreat of the state', Bourdieu (2008, p. 202) claimed. A 'minimal state' was a state of dangerousness, a lack of limitation on violence, 'a war of all against all, such as previously existed only in the imagination of Hobbes' (Bourdieu 2008, pp. 202–203).

Bourdieu's orientation towards social suffering, understood as those harms, injuries, and travails so often ignored in the cost–benefit analyses of the post-universalizing era of welfare capitalism: Bourdieu elevated social suffering to a position of prominence in his sociological investigations in the 1990s because it promised to render social life more fully: 'If our technocrats took up the habit of bringing suffering in all its forms—economic and otherwise—into the national accounts, they would discover that the saving they thought they were achieving was often a very bad calculation' (Bourdieu 2008, p. 204). This, then, was the unifying signifier that synthesized half a century of epistemic interventions, critical inquiries, and political actions: social suffering, a primary marker of social domination, was the common thread that unified politics and science, journalism and sociology, that brought together the various social-scientific subdisciplines into a symphonic unity.

If Bourdieu's multifaceted body of work is worth dwelling on, it is because it offers a series of instruments and concepts that, when used properly, prevent the commission of multiple fallacies and errors of thought in research practice—errors and fallacies that, moreover, abound in the contemporary production of criminological knowledge. Below, Bourdieu's theoretical work applied to criminology is proffered in the form of five condensed lessons, elucidated by way of theoretical implications and illustrative examples.

## Lesson One: Always Historicize

First, criminologists should *always historicize* their objects of study. Only by showing how phenomena are situated in a historical context—how they are shot through with the accumulation of historic events—can one initiate the long and painstaking process of denaturalizing the socially given, uncovering the layers of contingency and construction that coalesce to produce pre-fabricated, ready-made objects that social-scientific analysts are liable to accept in their given state.

The attempt to 'historiciz[e] reason' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 94, 41n) was a central theme in Bourdieu's work. Bourdieu's position is a broadly Hegelian one; stated simply, for Hegel, 'a thing is the thing that it is [...] as a consequence of the set of relations in which that thing is positioned' (Fritzmann 2014, p. 12). This relationalist view is Bourdieu's position as well. On Bourdieu's view, few of the human sciences have succeeded in historicizing reason proper. Historians are to be censured for writing in an 'ahistorical' manner and for their 'dehistoricized usage of the concepts they use to think of the past' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 94). Philosophers, in their readings of the canonical masters, often effect a 'dehistoricization through eternalization' by engaging in 'atemporal' readings of key works

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 153). Literary writers are only comprehensible when their practices are situated in a particular field—that is, a semi-autonomous space of agents competing to capture profits specific to that space and who are simultaneously transformed by living out their lives in that space (see Hilgers and Mangez 2015; Shammaas and Sandberg 2016)—a concept that in itself thinks historically (Bourdieu 1995). Social scientists, too, are historical creatures, inculcated with specific practices and acting as bearers of particularized modes of knowledge (Bourdieu 2004).

In the realm of social science, Bourdieu's 'radical historicization' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 189, 145n) was premised on two insights. First, reason itself is only exercised in a historical condition, thereby becoming ineluctably embedded in a particular condition of science or space of scientific practices, which mandates a reflexive 'science of science', or, more specifically, a 'sociology of sociology' (Bourdieu 2004); that is, an investigation into the conditions of scientific production and how the makers of this knowledge are themselves produced. Second, the objects of social science are themselves historical: institutions do not arise out of thin air, and it is the historical constitution of the subject—through the intertwining of societal history and personal history—that gives rise to particular actions in society. Historicity makes itself felt in both the production of the analyst and the analysand, the scientist and empirical object—and so must be brought into the analysis.

Unfortunately, orthodox criminologists are adept at ignoring this lesson, if they were ever taught it. Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) influential 'self-control theory' decontextualizes and universalizes the very concept of crime, attempting to construct, in circular fashion, a 'definition of crime consistent with the phenomenon itself' (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 3), in which the *positive* (societal) definition of crime is ignored in favour of a retreat into *natural law*. Crime, here, is arbitrarily defined as 'acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest' (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, p. 15), which is a definitional act of scientific violence necessitated by an attempt to construct a 'general theory of crime' founded on a universal cogito, a socially denuded agent stripped of contextual attachments, or the individual as an ahistorical being. This artificial subject, suspended in a non-social void, is assumed to act in violation of a socially unreal definition owing to an absence of 'self-control', defined as the capacity to hold personal impulses in check.

The problems with this approach are multiple. First, Durkheim emphasized that the social definition of crime—inherently non-universal because it arises out of a particular configuration of social space—must be the basis for a properly sociological analysis of offending: to take any other definition as one's outset means that the mechanisms one uncovers have no intrinsic connection with events in social reality, the *explanandum* being little more than a posited artificiality that is not coterminous with crime in its actuality. Second, the institutional process by which a legal definition of crime comes to be enacted—police strategizing, prosecutorial actions, and judicial decision-making, to name but a few relevant stages, is entirely ignored in this asocial account. It ignores what one might term the *political economy of punishment*; the dense network of logics, practices, institutions, and agents that coproduce the translation of vaguely felt social mores into a clear-cut *practice* of legal punishment. A universalizing theory cannot ignore these

particularities because these particularities are inherently embedded in the proper sociological *explanandum* as it actually comes to exist in social reality. Finally, it relies on an individualizing, moralizing, astructural, not to say actively *anti-structural* vision of social action. One sympathetic supporter of self-control theory should be lauded for a credulous encapsulation of the central image of the offender underpinning this theory of criminality, positing 'an egocentric, poorly tempered individual who perhaps above all other factors demands immediate returns from social interactions and has neither the wherewithal nor the skill set to wait for longer returns' (DeLisi 2013, p. 265). This is merely the most forthright expression of a victim-blaming, individualizing, moralizing conceptual vocabulary that is characteristic of various 'developmental' approaches to crime and punishment, which unashamedly universalizes where it ought to excavate the empirical object in all its embedded particularity.

A general theory of crime—modelled on a form of social physics—remains a conceptual impossibility in the sociology of illegality because crime does not itself exist in generality: it only exists in a situated and specific space of practices suffused with historical contingency. Actions come to be classified as criminal in historically determinate ways and in ways shaped by already-existing relations in social space; the very notion of 'crime' changes meaning over time and across space. In Hanoverian London, the authorities paid rewards out for every 'rogue or vagabond' brought before a City magistrate in order to 'deal with the number of ballad singers, mainly women', responsible for spreading propaganda inimical to the government, and disreputable persons were increasingly constructed as problems by social elites (Beattie 2001, p. 154). In Victorian England, criminals were construed against the backdrop of rising anxieties about public disorder, fuelled by 'new fears that had crystallized around the images of savagery and social demoralization' (Wiener 1990, p. 49). During the Jim Crow era in Mississippi, black males were punished severely for organizing sharecroppers, killing horses, and engaging in cultural practices reclassified as sacrilegious 'magic' by the authorities, actions that were brutally policed and punished as 'transgressions of caste' (McMillen 1990, p. 236). And yet Gottfredson and Hirschi's 'general theory' would study them all as so many 'offenders', 'persisters' and 'desisters', under the flawed influence of a false universality.

The bureaucratic field is a powerful historicizing factor in matters of crime and punishment: it enacts legislation, creates regulations, oversees court decisions and, strategically, resources of surveillance. In the United States, this is most clearly evidenced by penal expansionism (Wacquant 2009) at a time of rapidly declining crime rates (Zimring 2007). While much of the Western world was in the throes of the war on drugs in the 1980s, statistics released after the collapse of the USSR showed that in the Soviet Union, only 1–2% of crimes were ever classified as drug-related (Butler 1992, p. 154). A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (1990) survey showed that Russia (then the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, or RSFSR) experienced some 21,971 drug crimes in 1986 while Australia, with around one-ninth of the population, recorded nearly thrice the number of drug offences in *absolute* terms: some 62,333 drug crimes that same year. Sweden, a society with a tiny fraction of the population of Russia, recorded almost twice the

number of drug crimes as Russia in 1986. Such disparities very probably reflect differences in state strategies of categorization and prosecution. It is impossible to understand such phenomena stripped of institutional accounts. Understanding Sweden's drug offenders would require studying the turn from rehabilitationist 'harm reduction' in the 1960s and 1970s to 'zero tolerance' and 'punitive prohibition' policies in the following decades (Bewley-Taylor 2012, p. 62). To study 'crime' and 'offenders' is therefore simultaneously to study shifting historical webs of social relations.

Such a perspective squarely contradicts the tacit assumptions of dominant approaches in contemporary studies of deviance, including the 'life-course' school of criminology. Sampson and Laub (2003) present a curiously timeless analysis, shorn of institutions, of a historically situated sample first constructed by the Gluecks: 500 male 'nondelinquents' and 500 male 'delinquents' born between 1924 and 1932 in central Boston. The authors present 'individual risk factors' as key ingredients in the production of crime, all the while neglecting the very configurations of social space that produce the definitions of crime. Even amateur historians would recognize that the cohorts' years of birth warrant at the very least a passing mention to that deepest crisis of the US economy in the twentieth century, the Great Depression, resulting in double-digit unemployment, widespread poverty, and generous public spending through the expansive and de-commodifying welfare state of the New Deal. Surely these factors must have had a profound effect on the life-chances and 'criminality' of the Gluecks' original sample of men, as must the peculiarities inherent in the ways in which delinquency was defined in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States. But these issues are curiously absent from Sampson and Laub's quest for decontextualized and ahistorical 'risk factors'.

Life-course criminology has a curious tendency to suspend offenders in abstraction, decoupling them from their material-symbolic environs. Tellingly, their grounding in an actually existing social reality is held forth as a *flaw* to be minimized or eradicated, as when Carlsson (2012, p. 931) observes that 'the obvious limitation of the sample... [is that] the study is based on Stockholm-born, lower-class males only' and the 'men are in their 60s', making it difficult to project findings to 'the lives and narratives of younger offenders'. Such factors might be considered not as limitations but *essential components* of a study of crime. Understanding what makes people commit and stop committing crimes demands paying close attention to the *circumstances* of their lives in the fullest sense. Understanding criminal offending among males in their 60s from lower-class origins in the capital of Sweden would require studying the contours of social democracy, the historic origins of the de-commodifying Nordic welfare states, the condition of Nordic penal exceptionalism, police strategizing, the state of labour markets and universal educational opportunities, to name but a few relevant domains and practices: in short, the condition of a series of fields that envelop and enmesh the individual. By removing the properties of the phenomenon in situ one yields, paradoxically, a study that is non-generalizable and yet also generates a 'false universalization' that arises from bracketing off all historical context (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999). The suggested tension between situated lives and abstracted generalization, which Carlsson (2012, p. 933) briefly describes in

concluding remarks as the 'intersection of biography and structure in practice' and the 'interactional process between the individual and his or her environment', threatens to undermine the durability of the life-course enterprise because to take social space seriously is to accept the untenable nature of the proposition that 'desistance' is a property of the universal *cogito*.

Admittedly, criminological research has at times shown itself capable of historicization. Garland's (2001) work on the history of penal regime change traces the evolution of punishment in the *longue durée*, arguing that the shift from penal modernism (or 'penal-welfarism') to its late-modern crisis is only comprehensible when viewed in conjunction with the dissolution of a particular brand of social democracy in the postwar era. 'Penal-welfarism drew support from...a particular form of state and a particular structure of class relations', Garland (2001, p. 44) notes; a statement emblematic of the political economy approach to punishment. Wacquant (2009) historicizes the rise of 'hyperincarceration' in the United States by tracing the close alignment between neoliberal politics and harsh punishment from the mid-1970s until the present day. Whitman (2003) emphasizes the role of status gradations in producing differential punitive outcomes on either side of the Atlantic. One may quibble with the *explicantia* selected by these various scholars in accounting for the historical trajectories of one of the central objects of criminological research, but they all demonstrate that a science of crime and punishment as it is practiced today is aware of the importance of embedding objects in rich historical, structural, and figurational accounts. The problem, then, is not so much that critical criminology is unaware of the importance of historicization. Instead, it is perhaps in the domain of administrative, official, or neoliberal criminology that the charge of dehistoricization is most persuasive. Against the historical myopia and structural amnesia evidenced by academics closely aligned with the criminal justice field or by researchers and practitioners within the field of crime control, Bourdieu's radical historicism offers a solid position from which these flaws can be critiqued and corrected.

## Lesson Two: Dissect Symbolic Categories

Second, criminological investigations should begin by conducting a sociology of the category, a point repeatedly emphasized in Jock Young's (2011) work on the 'criminological imagination'. Bourdieu's sociology concerns itself centrally with the production and circulation of categories, understood as *symbolic representations* of entities and phenomena in social life or *principles of vision and division*—ways of seeing and acting—that provide the perceptual basis for material action. Categories are modes of seeing. But modes of seeing also become ways of acting. They are among the prime movers of social action—the fuel that fires social dynamics—and are among the central stakes (*enjeux*) of agonistic struggles ongoing within particular fields: agents contest the right to define what should count as dominant categories.

Studies of the political economy of punishment are often studies of categories, being concerned with societally structured ways of perceiving and acting upon



offenders. Wacquant's (2009, pp. 209–242) social anatomy of the category of the 'sex offender' and its entanglement in hyperincarceration is a paradigmatic example of how symbolic representations come to mobilize material action, and how understanding the latter without dissecting the former is a conceptual impossibility. Pratt's (2008) work on 'penal exceptionalism' demonstrates how the relatively low incidence of punishment in the Scandinavian societies is propelled by a category of the offender that is expressly not ejected from a relatively egalitarian community. Beckett and Herbert (2010) show how a policy of urban exclusion and 'banishment' orders is made possible by the production of a category of undesirables and disreputables, capturing impoverished and stigmatized minorities, vagrants, drifters, drug users, and the homeless.

There are, however, those who perform a sociology *in the aegis* of the category rather than performing a sociology *of* the category, that is, studying phenomena that are suffused with categorial traces while failing to take heed of the process of production of categories. Such studies are liable to commit the fallacy of *substantializing* entities that are manufactured by dominant social agents, turning their objects of study into naturally occurring substances, while denying their embeddedness in a process that manufactures particular representations. Substantialization is the cornerstone of *sociodicy*, that is, a naturalization of the present order, a 'legitimation of the social order such as it is' (Bourdieu 2014, p. 160). To Bourdieu, a proper understanding of categories is a necessary step in a sociology deserving of its name; a failure to recognize the efficacy of categories is the very basis of sociodicy.<sup>1</sup>

Consider an example from parole hearings in California. Here 'lifers'—prisoners with indeterminate sentences that include the theoretical possibility of incarceration for life—must demonstrate to the parole board that they no longer pose a threat to the world outside. Self-prostration has become one of the primary (unconscious) linguistic-behavioural strategies adopted in demonstrating 'insight' into one's former vices and deficiencies. When asked to describe himself at the time of the commission of his 'life crime' (the crime for which he was serving an indeterminate life sentence), one inmate said, 'I was cruel, I was careless, I didn't care about anybody. I didn't care about myself. I was reckless. I was a monster back then.' When asked by the parole board to specify these 'broad terms' in greater detail, the inmate recounted a list of depravities: he was angry, cared about no-one but a close family relative, and was addicted to drugs. 'I guess you could say I was a parasite.' However, these self-flagellating manoeuvres must be performed with great care, for if the inmate emphasizes their defects too emphatically, they are liable to be perceived as presenting 'continued dangerousness': excessive prostration before the board is either indicative of a diminished self-worth (considered a risk factor) or creates the impression of an essential, incorrigible wickedness that is not amenable to therapeutic interventions. One inmate was asked to explain why he had committed one of his crimes, to which he replied self-effacingly, 'Because I was a piece of shit.' This fired up the parole commissioner, who reacted with indignant,

<sup>1</sup> One might summarize this view with two condensed formulas: (1) acategorial = substantialization = naturalization = sociodicy; and (2) categorial = relationalism = denaturalization = sociology.



paternalistic rage: 'No, we're not going to call you a piece of shit in this room. [...] We don't use those words against people.' A sociological analysis of parole hearings must anatomize the central symbolic categories of insight and dangerousness, exploring their internal constitution and role in structuring the life chances of inmates partaking in these bureaucratic spectacles. The individualizing-moralizing categories of California parole boards simultaneously reflect, fuel, and feed off the anti-historicist, substantializing categories deployed by orthodox criminology: the parole board's tendency to reduce all explanatory justifications to the level of the individual offender partakes of the same ideological moment as that of self-control theorists that deny the structuring import of extra-individual properties.

### Lesson Three: Produce Embodied Accounts

Third, social agents are corporeal agents: the locus of social action is not the rational-calculating brain but an embodied being, a 'sensate, suffering, skilled, sedimented, and situated, corporeal creature', in Wacquant's (2015, p. 2) terse formula. This has important implications for those students of 'rehabilitation' who have failed to realize that what these programmes must actually do is *rehabituate* the offender; that is, instil a new habitus, a new mode of 'corporeal reason', to use Hardt's (2007) pointed term, a move that itself faces a challenge of extreme statistical improbability. Bourdieu likens the attainment of a new habitus to a 'second birth'. To take an example from academe: the economist Paul Samuelson (1997, p. 159) famously noted that economics advances 'funeral by funeral'; the implication being that scientific commitments are so ingrained and embodied that only mortality can clear the stage for new modes of embodied belief to establish themselves.

Certainly, some currents of criminological research have engaged with the corporeal dimensions of offending behaviour and punitive experience (e.g. Dayan 2011; Dilts 2014). Cultural criminology has expressed a deep interest in the affective dimensions of criminality (Ferrell et al. 2008, pp. 64–74; Ugwudike 2015, pp. 203–221). Scholars of punishment have shown an interest in penal subjectivity, elevating the experience of pain to one of the central stakes in the normative foundations of legal punishment (Hayes 2017). Ethnographers of urban crime and deviance have shown the ways in which criminal offending is integrated into the corporeal being of the offender (Ferrell and Hamm 1998). However, the specifically Bourdieusian contribution is to provide a coherent philosophical underpinning to the reorientation of the scholarly gaze towards bodily dispositions, emblemized in the concept of *habitus*, and to self-consciously push embodiment to the very forefront of the research agenda.

In 2014 Lutfi Bin Ali, an Italian citizen born in Tunisia who had been held at the US detention camp at Guantánamo Bay for nearly a decade-and-a-half, was released from the custody of the US Department of Defense (Walker 2016). Bin Ali spent 13 years at Camp Delta before the US Department of Defense concluded that 'based on the detainee's health status, intelligence value and risk level', he was to be 'released or transferred to the control of another country for continued detention'

(Wikileaks 2016). A reporter from *The Guardian* interviewed Bin Ali after his transfer to a remote region of Kazakhstan, where he had been required to live as part of his release conditions. Bin Ali provided a stark account of his new existence: upon arriving in the former Soviet republic, ‘still in Guantánamo flip-flops, because none of the shoes they had were big enough’, he discovered that ‘it was minus 30 outside’ and that he was to be housed in a dusty, desolate village near a former Soviet nuclear testing site. Now in his early 50s, with no passport, only Kazakhstani identification papers stating (erroneously) that he was ‘a person seeking refugee status’, lacking contact with a local population who feared a man long branded a ‘terrorist’, and denied permission from local authorities to pursue his life-long dream of opening a restaurant, Bin Ali was trapped in the stasis of a purgatorial quasi-prison. Shockingly, considering a future in isolation, without hope and stranded on the steppes of Kazakhstan, he seemed to long for his old life in Camp Delta: ‘At least in Guantánamo there were people to talk to. Here I have nobody.’

The following year, Albert Woodfox, an inmate who had spent 43 years in solitary confinement in the US state of Louisiana, was released from the Louisiana State Penitentiary, perhaps better known as ‘Angola’ (Pilkington 2016). Woodfox spoke of a life passed largely bereft of human interaction. Reporting on a series of mind-numbing details of daily life (‘the absence of human touch, the panic attacks and bouts of claustrophobia, the way they chained him even during the 1 hour a day he was allowed outside the cell’), a reporter noted that perhaps the most surprising aspect of Woodfox’s recollections was how, two months after his release, the former Angola prisoner still seemed to yearn for his former existence. When asked whether he missed the confines of his old cell life, he exclaimed, ‘Oh yeah! Yeah!’ He continued:

You know, human beings... they feel more comfortable in areas they are secure. In a cell you have a routine, you pretty much know what is going to happen, when it’s going to happen, but in society it’s difficult, it’s looser. So there are moments when, yeah, I wish I was back in the security of a cell.

These vignettes are suggestive of the forceful manner by which social agents come to be stamped with the imprimatur of a disciplinary state and turned into bearers of a specifically *carceral habitus*, a set of corporeal dispositions characteristic of those having passed through institutions of legal punishment. Bin Ali and Woodfox had been rehabilitated, acclimated to the harsh realities and close constraints of discipline and punishment and, if adjusting to life outside Guantánamo and Angola was proving so difficult, it was because they were faced with the imperative of adopting a new habitus, an improbable retooling of the body for new uses. Little wonder, then, that their statements should be so surprising, nay, even shocking, to those accustomed to the orthodoxies of liberal theory, positing a human instinct for liberty: for those who have not been stamped with a carceral habitus cannot really understand what the world looks like from its viewpoint, equipped, in Hobbes’ (1968, p. 81) phrase, with the ‘springs and wheels’ of a distinct bodily relationship to the world. But one can try.

A reconstructed sociology of punishment should anatomize the formation of a carceral habitus. These dispositions are among the primary mechanisms by which

former inmates are prevented from participating in conventional social life, including the labour market. This is why all manner of integrative policies aimed at the *formal* dimension of the former convict's life chances—such as the 'ban the box' initiative in the United States, aimed at preventing (federal) employers from inquiring about an applicant's criminal record—while important in their own right, do not strike at the dispositional dimension of the former convict's being-in-the-world, which ensures that the 'mark of a criminal record,' to use Pager's (2003) term, is not so much a technical-bureaucratic sign as a set of interactional stigmata borne by the body and evidenced by a set of devalorized gestures, postures, mannerisms, and utterances.

One cannot determine a priori the contents of the carceral habitus, engaging in pure theorization *in abstracto*, from the comfortable repose of armchair speculation; a habitus is not a 'universal and unhistorical subject', to borrow Foucault's remarks on the universal Cartesian ego, which is a category so general that it is 'everyone, anywhere at any moment' (Foucault 2001, p. 335).<sup>2</sup> Rather, the proper terrain for excavating the carceral habitus is the site of punishment itself—the individuals and institutions subjected to punishment. It is a concept that prevents the fallacy of false universality; that is, the projection of particular knowledge in the form of generalized universality, characteristic in particular of studies of prison life based in leading nations (what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) termed the 'cunning of imperialist reason') that take a definite empirical locale, equipped with a definite political-economic regime, as the tacit or explicit premise for theorizing the social world. The *carceral habitus* must be specified in theoretical terms that balance between permeability and closure: it must be narrow enough to be useful as a conceptual tool and wide enough to possess applicability to a sufficient range of empirical domains. A carceral habitus has four fundamental properties.

First, it is *non-universal*. The carceral habitus varies at different levels of social magnification. As Bourdieu points out, habitus-formations can congeal and coalesce at a variety of magnitudinal levels: institutional, occupational, local, regional, national, civilizational, and so on. And so, too, there may be a specific carceral habitus that obtains—that is massaged, manipulated, and manufactured—in particular wings or units, correctional facilities, state prison systems, and nationally-bounded political economies of punishment. Second, it is *durable*. The *carceral habitus* lasts, once stamped it gains a life of its own, a solidity and objectivity that is not easily undone or remade. It is the durability of the carceral habitus that accounts for the difficulties confronting ex-cons and former inmates in adjusting to the expectations of social life, including familial relations and life as a wage-labourer. Typically, penal institutions instil categories, dispositions, and affective structures that are at odds with life in the outside-world. What is required is *not rehabilitation but habituation*, a remaking of the habitus, a transformation that is made all the more improbable by the very durability of the corporeal self. Third, it is *dispositional*. The carceral habitus generates activity according to a

<sup>2</sup> It would be preferable to maintain the indefinite form: *a habitus*, not *the habitus*. To speak or write with the definite article runs the risk of universalizing a concept that thinks historically. The indefinite article, on the other hand, connotes contingency and particularity. For stylistic reasons, however, it is not always desirable to maintain this strict usage.

probabilistic tendency to commit to particular courses of action, a set of ‘incorporated dispositions, or more precisely the body schema’ that is ‘capable of orienting practices in a way that is at once unconscious and systematic’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 10). It is contrasted with strategic, rational, calculating models of human action that rely on hyperagentic agents capable of precisely evaluating utility-driven costs and benefits of differential courses of action. Finally, it is *state-centric*. The state is the prime mover of social life, on Bourdieu’s (2014) account. The ‘search for the place where the true identity of social agents is defined’ when conducted by sociologists will lead to a ‘central place where the resources of legitimate authority are concentrated’, and this place, Bourdieu (2014, p. 68) writes, ‘is the state’. The state is the entity that gets the social game off the ground: even apparently state-less markets are in actuality suffused with the values, operations, preferences, policies, and interests of the state (Bourdieu 2005). Certainly the *penal field*—the set of individuals and institutions tasked with enacting punitive practices (see Goodman, Page and Phelps 2015)—is a space that is almost entirely traversed by the operant state, a state that modifies behaviour by its continuous activities.

The concept has existed in one form or another for a long time in the sociology of the prison. Clemmer’s (1940) notion of ‘prisonization’ and Sykes’ (1958) concepts of ‘inmate roles’ are tangential to the substantive orientation of the concept of a carceral habitus, even if the former is over-universalizing, positing that processes of adaptation to prison environs are identical across the domain of diverse penal institutions, while the latter is marred by structural-functionalist commitments, imagining human action to be restricted to the unfolding of unitary and static categories of behaviour. Pratt (2002) idiosyncratically skews the concept towards the level of macroscopic social structures, writing of a discernible ‘shift in the carceral habitus’ of entire societies, by which Pratt means the average social attitudes towards crime and punishment in nation-states; in this way, Pratt blocks off any attempts to deploy the concept to understand the ground-level unfolding of prison life itself; a result of a scholastic view from afar that fails to engage durably and intimately with the everyday operations of carceral life.

More useful is Caputo-Levine’s (2014) notion of a ‘carceral habitus’, understood as a bodily set of dispositions encapsulated by the notion of a ‘yard face’, a bearing-in-the-world allowing inmates to navigate hyperviolent and hypermasculine penal institutions (and which, negatively, carry over into extra-penal interactions, causing all manner of troubles in everyday situations and relations to employers, friends, and family). But Caputo-Levine also commits the paramount mistake of overuniversalizing the partial experiences of a single, singular correctional facility in the United States, determining at the level of theory what should be left to empirical specification: ‘The carceral habitus enables the inmate to respond in the same manner to the high levels of interpersonal violence that are present within the prison’ (Caputo-Levine 2014). Clearly, if the carceral habitus is to be so narrowly understood, it fails to make sense of social action in penal domains lacking those attributes, such as the more pacified, irenic prison regimes existing in northern Europe, to take but one example. A carceral habitus need not contain a ‘hyper-sensitivity to physical space’ stemming from ‘the danger of interpersonal violence’ (Caputo-Levine 2014, p. 11), for the simple reason that not all penal institutions are

sites of extreme bodily danger: some inscribe symbolic structures of extreme docility, encouraging inmates to become pliable bearers of institutional discourses of pacification and passivity.

### Lesson Four: Avoid State Thought

Fourth, criminologists risk operating as uncritical *state thinkers*, bearers of those 'categories of state thought that the state has produced and inculcated in each one of us' (Bourdieu 2014, p. 108).<sup>3</sup> If criminologists are particularly exposed to this risk, it is because the objects of criminological knowledge are fundamentally constituted by the operations of the state. To Bourdieu, the state is primarily a symbolic agent, the producer of particular cognitive categories, 'principles of vision and division, principles of viewing things, systems of classification' that allow it to exercise an 'effect of symbolic imposition that is absolutely without any equivalent' (Bourdieu 2014, p. 114). This effect, moreover, tends to become so naturalized that it is extremely difficult to perceive that one has been made the subject of such a process. The state protects itself from 'scientific questioning' by becoming a form of second nature: it 'thinks itself through those who attempt to think it', and effecting a 'rupture with state-thought' is consequently both difficult and necessary (Bourdieu 1998, pp. 36–37).

For criminologists, there are multiple problems on this account. First, the state is an interested party: it generates funding—the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), an agency of the Department of Justice in the United States, provided nearly a quarter of a billion dollars for 'criminal justice' research and training in 2015 alone, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of scholarship on crime and punishment (National Institute of Justice 2015). The state is a stakeholder in the training of future criminologists because it will likely employ a large proportion of those who have obtained a criminological training. Second, the proper domain of criminology vacillates between underspecification and excessive determination. On the one hand, if criminology takes as its objects of study those things defined as criminal, i.e. violating positive law, the discipline risks falling into the trap of accepting contingent categories that are the product of agonistic relations of social domination—and thereby failing to develop a properly autonomous science of society. On the other hand, if it attempts to develop an object of study independent from state operations, as with the 'zemiological' study of 'social harms' (Hillyard and Tombs 2004) or the disciplinary reorientation envisioned by the 'constitutive criminology' of Henry and Milovanovic (1999, p. 7) to study 'harm resulting from humans investing energy in harm-producing relations of power', the claims to a distinctive domain of criminological knowledge collapses, effecting in its place a merger with (sections of) psychology, political science, sociology, and moral philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu borrows the terms 'state thinker' and 'state thought' from the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's (1992) *Old Masters* where the protagonist observes (with typical Bernhardian hyperbole) that 'wherever we look we see only state children, state workers, state officials, state pensioners, state dead...The state produces and permits only state people, that is the truth.'

Emblematic of the statist orientation of some criminological researchers, Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2011) lament the failure of criminologists to exploit Nordic ‘registry data’ on criminal offenders—essentially, vast databases on all individuals convicted of criminal offences, including information on employment, education history, family background, and more—used by the state to coordinate its programmes and policies. Admittedly, registry data does promise to be a rich source of information on crime and punishment in countries like Denmark, Norway and Sweden, but they simultaneously reveal the risks involved in overtaking data produced by the state for its purposes, which necessarily do not overlap with the aims of (critical) social science. Asking questions from registry data is to take for granted the officially sanctioned definitions of criminal actions or risk accepting the equivalence between state-registered crime and its ‘real’ incidence. Presciently, Christie (1997) criticized ‘oversocialized’ criminologists for readily accepting the procedures and problems of the state. ‘The problem in modern research is not that we are denied access to the official files’, Christie (1997, p. 19) wrote, but rather that ‘we are given too easy access [...] to data already processed by the authorities, data already given their certified meaning’.

### Lesson Five: Embrace Commitment

Fifth, scientific researchers must abandon the outmoded ideal of an uncommitted, ‘pure’ science, a *postureless posture*, premised on the notion of a scientific practice seemingly devoid of commitment. The choice to abstain from choice is also a choice; in the case of scientific production, it has impactful effects on the trajectories of social space, even as these effects are disavowed by scholars trapped in the unattainable purity of scholastic theoreticism.

On Bourdieu’s view, scholars have a duty to act as intellectuals, that is, to engage in ‘political actions’ outside the semi-autonomous field of academic production (Bourdieu 1991). This duty arises out of the fact that scholars possess specialized training and knowledge; they possess leisure—the word ‘scholar’, as Bourdieu repeatedly points out (e.g. Bourdieu 1990, p. 27; 1998, p. 128; 2014, p. 75), is derived from the ancient Greek *skholē*, meaning leisure, a withdrawal from the world of pressing business—and this relative freedom gives rise to an ethical imperative. The axiomatic principle on which this imperative rests is the posited duty to reduce social domination, a duty that applies all the more to those who enjoy the time, training, relative autonomy, and symbolic capacities needed to effectively counteract domination. Thus Bourdieu (2008, p. 380) asks rhetorically whether scholars who possess the sort of scientific knowledge enabling them to anticipate the deleterious effects of political changes ‘can and should remain silent, or whether this does not involve a kind of failure to assist persons in danger’. If neoliberalism is a social disaster waiting to happen, Bourdieu suggests, it would be *unethical* to assert the scientific prerogative of observing and recording events as they unfold, or even evaluating negative effects in their aftermath: ‘Do those who believe they understand these calamities in advance not have a duty to overcome the reserve that

scientists generally impose on themselves?' (Bourdieu 2008, p. 380) His answer is unequivocal and, unusually for Bourdieu, aimed directly at criminological inquiry:

The dichotomy between scholarship and commitment reassures the scholar of [their] good conscience, as [they] receive the approval of the scientific community. It's as if scientists saw themselves as doubly scientific because they did nothing with their science. If applied to biologists, this would be criminal. But it is just as serious if applied to criminologists. This reserve, this flight into purity, has very serious social consequences. (Bourdieu 2008, pp. 380–381)

To the terse slogan, 'Knowing is not enough', suggested by Žižek (2012, p. 983) and echoing Goethe, one might add: only to know—cognitively, discursively, and theoretically—practically guarantees the impossibility of producing comprehensive knowledge-accounts. What is more, commitment is *unavoidable* because all beings are inherently committed, and it is *necessary* because comprehensive accounts are only possible through an intimate knowing of the totality of social relations. 'The true is the whole', Hegel (1977, p. 11) wrote, and this whole or totality includes the situated being of the scientist. Commitment does not mean subordinating oneself to a political party, social group, or organization. On the contrary, the commitment of the scientific researcher is first and foremost directed at the right to asking autonomous questions—staking out the right to ask one's own questions. This is the opposite view of the idea that commitment entails subordination. It is all those commitment-averse committees, those subordinates of extrascientific reason, who have lost the right to ask their own questions.

Again, elements of critical criminology have adopted this perspective for a long time. Thus, feminist criminology, while certainly not a unified category (see e.g. Burgess-Proctor 2006), is broadly speaking motivated by a desire to demonstrate the ways in which women are confronted with modes of social domination peculiar to (intersectional) subordination of women in modern societies, to offer a critique of how these modes of domination are parsed through the criminal justice system, and to correct egregious injustices. Feminist criminology has always been conscious of the need to engage in activities beyond academia, to undertake 'activism on behalf of criminalized girls and women, the least powerful and most marginalized of all those we study', in Chesney-Lind's (2006, p. 21) terms. What Bourdieu's approach brings to the table is a unified theoretical approach, a common language—in short, a *system*. Systems are useful because they provide symbolic cover and lexical commonality; they are, in Warnock's (1959, p. 11) phrase, 'citadels, much shot at perhaps but never taken by storm', and therefore valuable to scholars who might otherwise lead a vulnerable, atomistic existence in a fragmented academy.

Admittedly, Bourdieu vacillates between a *commitment to commitment* and a *scientific elevation of scientific reason*: on the one hand, he recognizes that all scientific production takes place within a particular, situated field, and so there can be no 'pure' questions or non-heteronomous lines of inquiry. Research agendas are always embedded in a field and so are shaped by such factors as the prevalence of certain dominant ideas, the value-laden operations of funding bodies, and the miasmatic effects of a generalized spirit of the age in which one lives. All scientific



work therefore *emanates from a point* in a situated field and is *directed at a pre-populated field* that is already abundant with ideas, objects and agents. This position can be described as a radical historicist take on scientific production. On the other hand, Bourdieu also holds a belief in the possibility of a pure, autonomous science; a sociology standing outside social space, having undergone the purificatory rite of a reflexive sociology of sociology that would be capable of interrogating and repairing the (heteronomic) conditions of the production of scientific knowledge. The contradiction between radical historicism and scientific objectivism within Bourdieu's analytical framework was never finally resolved.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, criminology chases a moving target that must surely give rise to all sorts of untenable mental acrobatics to maintain its coherence. It is susceptible to an anti-sociological return to natural law. If the central point of a discipline is to study violations of human law (indeed, to explain how, why and under what conditions social agents violate laws), it would seem that objects of study would have to be dropped from one day to the next if human legislators decided that those objects would no longer properly speaking constitute violations of the law, or would have to take up new and 'unsatisfying' objects of research with the advent of novel laws, some of which might run counter to feelings of human decency, social progress, and so on. A few examples should suffice to show why this makes criminology a very strange discipline indeed. First, one might imagine a team of criminologists labouring in the Stalinist Soviet Union of the 1930s being enjoined to analyze and 'understand' why so many individuals became bearers of criminally 'bourgeois' modes of thought: to assess risk factors and develop actuarial instruments to prevent the rise of criminal, Western, bourgeois-capitalist values in the populace. How would criminology respond to this determination of its appropriate objects of study? Evidently, it would have no other recourse but to develop a metascientific ethics to challenge the state-driven imposition of particular categories of thought; indeed, this would be the only way to prevent criminology from being appropriated as an auxiliary science for the operators of Gulagism (or whatever other dominant ideology obtains in a given condition of the state). But it would have to do so in a way running counter to the foundational parameters of the discipline itself; what is more, owing to its isolation *by design* from philosophy or social science as such, it would lack the tools and instruments necessary to engage in this labour.

Admittedly, some, perhaps even all, of these lessons have at various times been understood and taken up by various (critical) strands of criminology. Left realism has been cognizant of the imperative to historicize its objects of inquiry, invoking the need to 'contextualize the moment and place its trajectory in time' (Young 1987, p. 337). Labelling theory highlighted the importance of breaking with state thought to comprehend how categorizing actions were imbricated in the 'process of making the criminal', according to one early statement of this view; a 'process of tagging, defining, identifying, segregating, describing, emphasizing, making conscious and self-conscious' that was centrally carried out by the state (Tannenbaum 1938,

pp. 19–20). However, the distinct advantage of absorbing these lessons through an integrated Bourdieusian social science is that this approach offers to unify divergent strands of critique hitherto only existent in fragmented form and provide a coherent rationale for the approach. Additionally, a Bourdieusian approach offers an interface compatible with a variety of other subdisciplinary studies: it offers a unifying language with which critical scholars across a variety of empirical domains—including those outside the proper scope of criminology—may communicate, thereby breaking down the ‘insularity of criminology’ diagnosed by Stanley Cohen (1969, p. 10) many years ago. In this sense, Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus offers us a metalanguage capable of prying open the stale hermeticism of disciplinary closure.

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