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Book Review

Victoria Canning and Steve Tombs (2021) *From Social Harm to Zemiology: A Critical Introduction*. Routledge

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As a PhD researcher trying to break into the academic field of criminology, I often find myself wondering if and how I fit into the discipline. My research focuses on environmental and social harms rather than crimes per se and draws on work across the social sciences and humanities, and I often find myself justifying my work as criminological for people in and outside academia. Despite this, I am not entirely sure my research is criminological, nor if I want it to be. This is a challenge that I believe will resonate with many aspiring, critical researchers. Yet, if we were to break free of criminology's disciplinary boundaries, where would it leave us? Zemiology is one potential answer to this question, providing an alternative to research based on state-led definitions of harm. In this brief review, I consider Canning and Tombs' most recent contribution to zemiology and its implications for critical and less human-centred approaches to harm.

Zemiology was developed in the 1990s following discussions about how social harms could replace criminology's focus on state-led definitions of crime and justice. These conversations included a range of perspectives that sought to examine social harms, either within or *beyond* criminology, by challenging inadequate and repressive categories such as crime, criminals and the law. *Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously* (Hillyard et al. 2004), an edited collection, marked the establishment of zemiology: a discipline that takes social harm, rather than crime, as its explanandum. Thus, zemiology contends with a broader range of harms, including non-criminalised structural, institutional, economic, physical and psychological harms. Yet, confusion remains as to how zemiology should be understood as separate from social harm approaches, and various criminological texts tend to equate zemiology with social harm, which already resides within the discipline of criminology (Tombs 2018: 12, 18).

From Social Harm to Zemiology, by Canning and Tombs (2021), offers an excellent resource for clarifying these confusions. Primarily written for university students, practitioners and campaigners, the book is, overall, an accessible introduction to zemiology, outlining various foundational and critical ideas that

have given rise to zemiology, with a central focus on zemiology in practice. Although the book does not contribute many new concepts or ideas to zemiology, it does attempt to clarify the difference in approach between zemiology and social harm by proposing that zemiology should be understood as severing the ties with crime and criminal justice in its approach to harm. However, this leaves me wondering whether this is enough of a distinction since, as the authors themselves assert, various critical criminologists already engage in work on harms that fall outside of punishable offences, and so do scholars across the social sciences.

Owing to my interest in environmental harm, I find myself particularly interested in the sections discussing environmental harms and harms that arise as a result of human interactions with the 'natural' environment. Such mentions give me hope that zemiology might better encompass my research since it indicates intentions for zemiology to move beyond anthropocentric and speciesist approaches. White (2013) has noted that zemiology's social harm approach is well suited for green criminological analyses of harms to the environment, and Canning and Tombs exemplify various ways that human activities negatively influence the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems. However, while the authors extend their attention to harms to non-human animals, they exclude more in-depth considerations of harms to ecosystems and biodiversity more broadly.

Nonetheless, the focus on humans throughout the book seems radically contradictory to a less human-centric approach. As they go on to examine the ontological bases of harm, the authors conclude that zemiology tends to focus on human needs approaches to harm. Although the authors recognise the lack of consensus 'on the essence of social harm', they conclude that 'there is some agreement that social harm is related to the denial of human needs, albeit that there is no simple theory of needs by which these, or the harmful denial of them, can be recognised' (Canning and Tombs 2021: 107). This devotion to human needs and the absence or lack of such needs is hard to couple with a less human-centric approach. That is, the view of harms to the environment (the ecosystem and biodiversity more broadly) as intrinsically harmful.

The last two chapters prove an important contribution to the 'doing' of zemiology and how it can form part of social justice activism. The authors highlight the ethical and political aims of zemiology as exposing harms and contributing towards social change and harm reduction. In addition, the authors maintain that there should be a focus on how language can be employed to constructs 'truths' that harm and the role of language in uncovering and resisting power structures that construct and sustain such harms. However, with language in mind, we must consider how anthropocentric language comes to construct truths around hierarchies of harm to humans and the more-than-human world. Arguably, the most pressing issues facing the world today are human harms to the environment: that is, anthropogenic climate change. Although the book contributes with important work of broadening definitions of harm, unfortunately, the book's language and emphasis on human needs echo criminology's instrumental relationship between humanity and nature. As Ruggiero and South note, 'reflecting society generally, criminology tends to be anthropocentric, positioning and privileging human beings as the central and most significant species' (2013: 363).

An *ecocentric* perspective, for example, would instead consider humans as intimately 'interconnected with the rest of the natural world' (Brisman and South 2018: 5). That is, as a part of nature, our destiny and health are entangled with that of the world and the ecosystem at large. A clearer break with criminology and social harm perspectives would be achieved by transitioning beyond human needs and harms towards more flexible and instable ontological understandings of harm (e.g., Lundberg 2020). Drawing on 'more-than-human' philosophies that emphasise 'what *exceeds* rather than what comes *after* the human' (Whatmore 2004: 1361, emphasis in original) could shift the focus away from human centrality and set zemiology up for a more distinctive and inclusive perspective on harm.

Notwithstanding this critique, Canning and Tombs provide an excellent and accessible introduction to zemiology that begins to resolve contradictions in the literature. The authors bring light to a

comprehensive set of harms—in their discussion and by more detailed examples separated into information boxes throughout the book—including, to some extent, harms to the environment and non-human species. Finally, the authors outline various aspects of zemiology in practice, making it a good starting point for both research and activism aimed towards social change.

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