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**Jock Young. *The Criminological Imagination*. Polity Press, Malden, MA, 2011, 252pp.**

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Jock Young's *The Criminological Imagination* is the last in a trilogy of books that explore the nature of othering in the contemporary world. Where the first of these, *The Exclusive Society* (1999), examined the mechanisms of exclusion in late modern society and the second, *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (2007), traced these very exclusions to the insecurities which bedevil our time, this final book aims to highlight how the forms of othering described in the first two books are paralleled within the social sciences. In so doing, Young offers a full-frontal jeremiad against a positivist criminology that covers its lack of imagination, relevance or inspiration with sophistry disguised as arcane mathematics and disingenuous realist pragmatism. What is needed instead, Young argues, is a critical criminology able to offer us the tools with which to understand our lives and the world in which we live, an ideal only achievable through navigating between the Scylla of Abstracted Empiricism and the Charybdis of Grand Theory.

In the process Young writes a book that will prove essential reading for students and scholars interested in expanding the scope of criminology, and indeed the social sciences, to include a broader inquiry into the nature of human existence. However if readers approach the text as a comprehensive attempt to explain crime patterns or an analysis of the efficacy of security techniques, they may be disappointed. For this is a book not so much *of* criminological discourse but *about* it. In fact one might be tempted to describe its point of departure as an opening volley in a nascent *anthropology of criminology*. Ultimately, this ingenious shift in perspective serves as the book's greatest strength at the same time that it moors it in an entirely new set of difficulties.

The first part of the book consists of a masterful, vamping evisceration of the type of positivist quantitative criminology that, in Young's estimation, lacks imagination, curiosity and a full sense of human lives at the same time that it smugly offers meaningless research whose inutility and inanity is hid only by the extraordinary efforts undertaken to obfuscate the basis of their claims. The highlight of this romp is a *tour de force* deconstruction of an article taken from the flagship journal *Criminology* (Cohen, Gorr, and Singh 2003), in which Young demonstrates the layers of pseudo-scientific technical babble cloaking a "dense text and thin narrative" that is so "fragile and unsubstantial" that, at base, its central discovery is that public-initiated 911 drug related calls originating from bars tend to decrease during the

time that police are actively raiding that bar. Novel insight into the human condition this is not.

Young's interest, however, is less "with the article's explanation, but the explanation of the article" (13). He wants to understand a criminological milieu in which "the more quasi-scientific the rhetoric, the more sophisticated the statistics, *the more they are distanced from what they are studying*, the more secure they feel" (13) so that such researchers strive to construct "universal generalizations independent of people, structure, history and place" (14). In this sense, Cohen, Gorr and Singh's article is only an illustrative instance of a broader state of criminological affairs; an exemplar of a persistent problem in the social sciences today: hubristic positivism driven by a nomothetic impulse that effaces culture, power, history and human creativity and refuses to adopt a critical stance towards one's own conceptual edifices. Young traces this widespread quasi-fetishistic impulse everywhere from the work of sexologists on rape to criminological explanations for the drop in New York crime rates, all the while contrasting such conceptual myopia with a critical cultural criminology that understands statistics are themselves social constructions, that deviance is not an inherent quality, that meaning is dependent on social context, that human subjects are creative actors, that explanation must be set within a broader context of social relations, and that attempts at social control occur in within a context of contestation, diversity and unequal power relations.

Nor do qualitative methods, even in their "purest" form as ethnography, offer an automatic corrective to the problems of imagination as Young sees them. He argues that "classical" approaches to urban ethnography rely on a combination of narrative misdirection and theoretical ghettoization that produces domestic others, relocated from distant exotic locales to inner cities. Not only does this parallel many of the same problems discussed *vis-à-vis* quantitative work, it particularly masks the central role of power relations in constructing scientific knowledge. The method does hold special promise, however. This is especially true for the tradition of critical ethnography, itself a type of "ethnography of ethnography" (109) that focuses sharply on the very shortcomings laid bare in his survey of quantitative research: issues of representativeness, of masquerading and deceit in research, of translating between everyday vernaculars and scientific ones in a way that avoids epistemological violence, and, most importantly of refusing the positivist impetus to deny a relationship between the researcher and her object of study. To develop the implications of such an approach, Young turns to the relatively arcane and often misunderstood debates surrounding the nature of ethnographic representation that have been occurring within cultural anthropology since the 1980s, arguing that it offers the potential to combine empirical research and contextualizing theory without succumbing to the pathologies of either pole in the dyad.

While turning to cultural anthropology as an inspiration is one of the most surprising and useful choices Young makes in the book, in doing so he also assumes its unresolved problems. Foremost is the very problem of "relation" he hopes to correct; for despite Young's insistence, recognizing that one (or many) strain(s) of

social science refuse to address a problem does not mean that you have resolved it yourself. For example, the work of Marcus and Fischer (1986) serves as one of Young's inspirations for a critical ethnography, but Marcus' latter work (1998) pushes ethnographers to broaden how we think of "relationship" in ethnography beyond contemporaneity in a socio-political order (*pace* the "late modernity" to which Young often turns to for explanation) to the "cognitive" or conceptual complicities of anthropological work; what Paul Rabinow calls "concept work" (2011). By this, such anthropologists mean for us to reflexively examine our very conceptual work as activities shaped by and shaping our world; in other words as itself a form of relation.

It is this dimension of "complicity" that Young too often ignores. As a result, the shallow sense of "relation" embodied in this text throws into relief that a truly critical ethnography is more than novel mode of narration in the first person or making reference to a singular and all encompassing epoch. For one, a singular context such as "late modernity" based on the standard categories of sociological analysis is insufficient for understanding the very creative human diversity Young wishes to achieve. Second, merely writing in the first person or relying upon a distinctively ironic and cutting narrative voice is not the same thing as putting one's own intellectual work within the same frame as those you are studying (in this case, criminologists themselves). This is why the "of/about" distinction also becomes a problem: while the move to set oneself "outside" criminology in order to talk about it from on high can offer momentary insight, the conceptual distinction cannot hold any more than other forms of orientalism. In this way, Young's representational mode tends too often to the detached "about"; obfuscating the ways in which his perspective is shaped in dialog with, and is therefore "of" the perplexities he describes. One might have hoped that Young learned from his critical ethnographer inspirations the importance of situating one's own scholarly project as necessary partial and incomplete, with its own particular prerogatives, perspectives and blind spots. Such an admission would not have devalued an analysis of the kind Young proffers here, but rather asserted its utility by submitting oneself to it.

## References

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