

Cultural Criminology

By Keith Hayward

Definition

Cultural criminology is a theoretical, methodological and interventionist approach to the study of crime that places criminality and its control in the context of culture; that is, it views crime and the agencies and institutions of crime control as cultural products - as creative constructs. As such they must be read in terms of the meanings they carry. Furthermore, cultural criminology seeks to highlight the interaction between two key elements: the relationship between constructions upwards and constructions downwards. Its focus is always upon the continuous generation of meaning around interaction; rules created, rules broken, a constant interplay of moral entrepreneurship, political innovation and transgression.

Discussion

Although cultural criminology is a fairly recent development (dating from the mid-1990s; see Ferrell and Sanders 1995), it actually draws heavily on a rich tradition of sociologically-inspired criminological work, from the early sub-cultural and naturalistic ideas of the Chicago School, to the more politically-charged theoretical analyses associated with the critical criminology of the 1970s. However, while it is undoubtedly the case that many of the key themes and ideas associated with cultural criminology have been voiced elsewhere in the criminological tradition, it is clear that this dynamic body of work offers something new – primarily in the way it seeks to reflect the peculiarities and particularities of the *late modern socio-cultural milieu*.

With its focus on situated meaning, youth culture, identity, space, style, and media culture, along with its commitment to understand and account for the ongoing transformations and fluctuations associated with hypercapitalism, cultural criminology is an attempt to create a 'post' or 'late' modern theory of crime. Here criminal behaviour is reinterpreted as a technique for resolving certain psychic and emotional conflicts that are in turn viewed as being indelibly linked to various features of contemporary life (see e.g. Hayward (2004) on the relationship between consumerism and certain forms of 'expressive criminality'). In other words, cultural criminology seeks to fuse a 'phenomenology of transgression' with a sociological analysis of late modern culture. It is an approach, therefore, that is increasingly seen by many as extremely useful in helping us to understand various forms of youth criminality, including vandalism, the theft and destruction of cars, fire-starting, mugging, hoax emergency service call-outs, peer group violence and other forms of street delinquency that have much to do with self expression and the exertion of control in neighbourhoods where, frequently, traditional avenues for youthful stimulation and endeavour have long since evaporated.

Such complex foci require the utilization of a wide-ranging set of analytical tools. No surprise, then, that cultural criminology is stridently interdisciplinary, interfacing not just with criminology, sociology and criminal/youth justice studies, but with perspectives and methodologies drawn from *inter alia* cultural, media and urban studies, philosophy, postmodern critical theory, cultural geography, anthropology, social movement studies and other 'action'

research approaches. To quote Jeff Ferrell, cultural criminology's goal is to be 'less a definitive paradigm' than an 'array of diverse perspectives' (Ferrell 1999: 396). The strength of the 'cultural approach', then, is the way it tackles the subject of crime and criminalization from a variety of new perspectives and academic disciplines. In effect, its remit is to keep 'turning the kaleidoscope' on the way we think about crime, and importantly, the legal and societal responses to it.

Key texts and sources

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Source: *The Dictionary of Youth Justice* (2007), edited by Barry Goldson (Cullompton; Willan)