The Spectacle of the False Flag

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Criminology is a strange discipline. For an area of study focused overwhelmingly, obsessively even, on state activity, criminology has perhaps as much as any social science, outside of psychology, completely and utterly undertheorized the state. The character of the state is largely misunderstood or only slightly understood within criminology (even as the criminology of figures like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Nicos Poulantzas, who wrote much on law and the state, remain mostly unread by criminologists). Too often the state is simply taken for granted without real critical analysis. It is accepted straightforwardly, unproblematically, as the legitimate social authority, the social arbitrator.

Where critical approaches to the state are pursued there has been a tendency toward instrumentality or uniformity in discussing and explaining state activities. That is, the state is typically portrayed as a rather direct expression of the repressive needs of capital as a whole. And this, again, is the case only in critical approaches in which the state is interrogated or even problematized at
all, most criminology taking the state, its legitimacy if not its neutrality, for granted.

Philosophically inclined criminologists like Bruce Arrigo have remarked on the underdeveloped nature of criminological theory in general. So this under-theorization of the state is part of a larger problem in criminology. Arrigo suggests a philosophical turn in criminology that could engage with philosophical works, particularly the critical philosophies of the post-1968 period in social thought. For too much of criminology it is as if the waves of post-68 social theorizing (and associated contemporary developments) never happened.

Thankfully we have trailblazers like Eric Wilson who on the one hand seek to broaden the theoretical and political horizons of criminology while on the other giving a more nuanced and deeper reading of the state and the relations and practices that animate it. Wilson is too perceptive, his work too subtle to present a uniform view of the liberal democratic state. Wilson offers a presentation of state operations of power as conflictual, contradictory, competing, confused. His is a robust conception of power that is rarely encountered in criminology.

Wilson goes outside the theoretical bounds of what is typically in criminological thought. He makes use of insights from Guy Debord’s works on social spectacle to re-read literature on deep state practice and its (spectacular) false flag representations. Wilson, following Debord, moves away from notions of static, uniform power.

Wilson’s work, in addition to shifting thinking about the liberal democratic state, challenges us to rethink the subject(s) of criminology. This is a step, on one hand, toward rethinking criminology as analysis of states and state criminality. More than that, it challenges us to move be-
yond analyses of the simple or naïve view of states.

In a sense Wilson’s book in Spectacle(s) of the False Flag(s) is solidly in the tradition of C. Wright Mills works like The Power Elite and White Collar (other offerings that are too little read by criminologists). In Mills’ work the hidden or shadow networks are presented as the fabric of the modern state—always in action behind the screen (or wishful dream) of the formal democratic institutions of government. Mills work makes clear that ruling groups centered in the state often have driven interests—moving and shifting specific alliances as interests shift and specific players gain or lose influence.

Criminology needs works like this to develop its focus on state relations, networks of (counter)governance. Criminology has a long way to go to be adequately or effectively attuned to deep state relations. Whether from critical or uncritical, heterodox or orthodox perspectives, our understandings of the state have, for the most part been too superficial, too shallow. In place of simple instrumentality we may speak of instrumentalities, often competing and contradictory if converging at important points.

Clandestinity is the health of the state. Yet it is rarely understood or acknowledged as such. A critical criminology, let alone a radical one, must offer more insightful, nuanced, informed readings of the complexities of the state as the object of crime par excellence. One can envision future criminological undertakings that apply such parapolitical spectacular analyses to issues of state-corporate crime, transnational crime, or security studies as only a few examples. In this understanding, criminality, far from being a distortion of state practice is the
character of state practice (with the state as fragmented and uneven).

The current work is an important step along these paths. It offers an example for all of criminology to approach. It hints at the possibility of a new criminology, a parapolitical criminology that looks beyond the surface of the spectacle that has so hypnotized and distracted mainstream and orthodox criminology.

It is work that carries certain risks. Thus, a final note on conspiracy. Even the threat of being labeled conspiracy theory can dissuade serious researchers from pursuing topics of great importance. This is, of course, partly how power operates to silence or defuse criticism. We know—intuitively—that conspiracies exist, yet we shrink from naming them as such. We need to conceptualize conspiracy not as strange, atypical event, but conspiracy as a manifestation of everyday pursuits of often mundane design. This is what Wilson does. This and much more.

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