

A Review of *Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason*

By

**Loretta J. Capeheart
Northeastern Illinois University**

Book: *Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason*

Author: Biko Agozino

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Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason by Biko Agozino delivers on its title in offering a critique of imperialist reason and an alternative counter-colonial criminology. Agozino is thorough in his approach and persuasive in his argument throughout the text. The thirteen substantive chapters along with the introduction and conclusions cover a variety of current imperialist theoretical conceptions, critiques of these, and alternatives to them.

Agozino clearly indicates his hypothesis in the introduction to the text. It is his contention that criminology thrives in the colonizing world and does not exist in the colonized world because of the colonial/imperialist interests served by the discipline. The chapters that follow describe the major theoretical constructs along with the interests served by each. As the author shows, even those attempting alternative and/or critical forms of criminology often fail to overcome the imperial biases of the discipline.

In the first chapter, the author examines the historical development of Euro-American theories of justice to illustrate their origins and affects. The positivistic traditions are considered. Included are the non-critical Weberian view of bureaucracy, the biological determinist analyses of Lombroso, and Durkheim's ideas regarding the collective conscience. The chapter further illustrates the impact of these traditions upon the development of sociological explanations of crime, which failed to examine the underlying assumptions of these classics. As Agozino points out, bureaucracies and the collective conscience are both guided, developed, and utilized by the powerful and specifically by imperialist forces against the less powerful. Individualistic explanations, such as those of Lombroso, are also privileged in criminology eschewing the import of organized injustices imposed by elites. Attention is also given to the problems inherent in the historical and continued informing of the jurisdiction of crime and punishment by these theoretical tendencies.

Chapters two and three examine the labeling and radical perspectives. Each chapter first offers a brief description of the development of these lines of thought including their historical contexts. Critiques of each perspective follow. Labeling theory is critiqued for merely examining the impact of labeling upon individuals and failure to examine the source of labels and laws. The radical/critical perspective is described as

emerging to offer these analyses. Among the critiques of critical criminology is its continued blindness to its imperialist assumptions despite attempts to include race, class, and gender considerations. Counter-colonial criminology is offered as a progressive form of critical criminology. According to Agozino, this formulation must begin with an analysis of the criminal nature of colonialism and imperialism. This analysis would include a historical account of these crimes and their impact upon the development of criminology within the crime producing nations and the impact of these nations' crimes upon the rest of the world.

Chapters four and five offer a review and critique of feminist perspectives. The feminist perspectives reviewed include feminist empiricism, standpoint feminism, and postmodern feminism. A brief summary of each tradition is offered along with consideration for the limits of each including their often complicit acceptance of (or limited critique of) the colonial/imperialist enterprise.

Chapter five is specifically concerned with the metaphor of lesbian rape. The author explicitly requests critique of this chapter because it has apparently been judged offensive resulting in its rejection from at least one conference. I did not find the use of the metaphor or the treatment of the topic within the chapter offensive. I did, however, find this chapter particularly lacking in constructive analysis. The descriptions of the uses of metaphor and arguments for their appropriateness in many cases were convincing. However, the analysis did not extend beyond the metaphor to explicitly implicate the perpetrators for their crimes. The author did implicate imperialist and colonialist countries for their "rape" of others as well as supremacists and misogynists for rapes internal to the imperialist or colonialist countries. The accepting of a gender assignment to a country as feminine and the lack of critical analysis of the internalized misogyny apparent within lesbian rapists is largely unexamined in the chapter. Although there is cursory consideration of the development of violence within oppressed populations, a further explication would clarify the author's argument and intent regarding the use of the metaphor.

Poststructuralism and positivism within criminological theory is the topic of Chapter six. This chapter offers some of the analyses lacking in Chapter five. While not explicitly addressing lesbian rape in this section, the author does address the complications and power relations evident in the construction of femininity. Also addressed are the basic assumptions and limits of the poststructural theorists. Advances toward a counter-cultural criminology include theories that incorporate within their analyses of crime abuses of power and other conduct not typically labeled or prosecuted as criminal including human rights abuses.

The structure of criminological theory is critiqued for its fairy tale qualities in Chapter seven. This chapter is particularly creative in its analysis of criminological thought. Claims of facts and knowledge within the positivist tradition are reviewed in the first section of the chapter and then juxtaposed with the criminological content of fairy tales. The chapter includes an analysis of constitutive criminology arguing that this particular line of reasoning requires an interdependence of fact and fiction. In

conclusion the author suggests a critical stance toward both the accounting for criminal behaviors through fictionalization and knowledge claimed within the criminological literature.

Executive lawlessness and struggles for democracy are the topics of Chapter eight. This chapter is particularly relevant to the genus of a counter-colonial criminology. As the author illustrates in this chapter, states that perpetrate crimes against their own citizens or against other states (or their citizens) must be held accountable to these activities. How this accountability occurs depends greatly upon the structure of the state. True democracies (not necessarily all states that allow equal voting rights) that offer the appropriate structures for redress will be held accountable through these structures in an orderly fashion, while those lacking democratic structures of accountability will suffer another fate. Hegemony and force are also presented as barriers to justice. Organized violence through the imposition of law and order is particularly critiqued and examined within a historical frame. As the author points out, the rhetoric of justice is often used as an oppressive device by the criminal state against citizens and other nations. These crimes include the international debt structures that keep both the nations and peoples of the developing world in subservient and substandard conditions.

African literature is examined in Chapter nine through a Marxist lens with particular attention to primitive accumulation. Through this analysis, the crimes of capitalism in its primitive forms of slavery and other forced labor relations are exposed and centralized. Further, the complicity of the state in these criminal enterprises of early capitalism is the focus of attention. This, according to the author, is imperative to regaining the left perspective of left realist criminology and to placing attention on the criminal activities of the powerful, rather than continuing the conservative model of examining the crimes of the poor and working class to the exclusion of the wealthy. As Agozino points out, it is the erroneous assumption by many critical criminologists that a socialist society would be a crime free utopia that limits their analysis and critique of capitalism and the complicit capitalist state.

Chapter ten asks that we consider committed objectivity when approaching questions of race, class, and/or gender in research. The author distinguishes between commitment and objectivity and shows that both are possible, and perhaps desirable, within the social sciences. Commitment refers to the researchers engaged interest in solidarity with the oppressed. As Agozino suggests, engaging in research in order to represent the oppressed is less desirable than doing so to align with the oppressed. He further examines the relationship between objectivity and perspective finding that objectivity is itself a perspective. Given this, he argues that complete objectivity is not only impossible, but also not desirable. Research takes on a perspective with the questions asked, the methods chosen, the subjects engaged, the researchers engaged, and the tools used as well as other concerns. To pretend otherwise is not only a fallacy, but one which in its desire to remain apolitical will likely obscure or avoid important topics. Within this chapter the author also clarifies his ideas regarding the identity of the researcher. The race, class, and gender of the researcher may offer a particular commitment and/or objectivity to a piece of research. However, Agozino argues that this

does not require the exclusivity of women researching women or the poor researching the poor or other pairings of researcher to subject by identity.

A critique of the scientific method employed within criminal justice is offered in Chapter eleven. This chapter is specifically concerned with capital cases. *McClesky v. Kemp* is analyzed in detail, while the cases of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Ken Saro-Wiwa are comparatively reviewed. The death penalty is presented as clearly lacking the standards of validity and reliability. Validity is shown to be lacking with the statistics regarding convicted innocents. Reliability is shown to be lacking with the inconsistency (especially with regard to race) with which the penalty is applied to those convicted. In this chapter, the author challenges criminologists and criminal justices researchers to apply the scientific method to the death penalty in support of abolition of this form of punishment.

Chapter twelve examines the debate surrounding the institutionalization of racism within the justice system. The author argues that sexism and classism must be included within the analysis of the justice system to assure that the institution and its impact are fully understood. He further contends that this discussion and debate must be public in nature in order that citizens understand the concepts under debate and the impact of racism, sexism, and/or classism within the justice system. A search for the manifestations of racism, sexism, and/or classism is suggested in order for solutions to be developed in an inclusive democratic manner. The diversity of theoretical perspectives of use to this project are then examined, with the suggestion that while many perspectives are useful, no one perspective provides a complete analysis on its own.

The policing of Peter Tosh is the subject of Chapter thirteen, which illustrates the dark and light figures inherent in crime records. As Agozino shows, these records are too often accepted within the criminological community with little critique beyond the existence of the dark figure. This critique itself is typically limited to the unreported crimes of the poor and working class with little, if any, attention given to the lack of reporting/recognition of the crimes of the powerful. The Peter Tosh example is instructive on both the over lighting of some crimes and the lack of recognition/report of other crimes. Those exposed to much light include crimes committed by the poor, the working class, activists, and others lacking power. Those left in the dark are typically committed by the police, the middle class, the wealthy, and others in power and/or supportive of the power structure.

An example of oppositional lyrics would have well informed the debate offered in the form of a question at the end of chapter five. Chapter five dealt with the question of lesbian rape. The first question offered for discussion at the end of that chapter dealt with the controversy of female soldier complicity in the rape of women. Within that same chapter, the author did not discuss the lack of power held by soldiers. Instead, soldiers were presented as powerful agents of destruction and harm. While this is certainly true, soldiers are also subjects of direction and control from higher ranking officers and ultimately, the elite within the state that they serve. The lyrics offered in Chapter thirteen illustrate the common interest between the soldier and the object of military dominance. Further examination of this relationship would well serve both Chapters five and thirteen.

The author is not attempting to offer a full critique of military arrangements and possibilities for change. However, given the current overt military force used in service to imperialist interests, such a critique is sorely needed within the social sciences.

The text concludes with suggestions for going beyond criminological orientalism. Here the author reasserts his arguments concerning the need to overcome our current conceptions of criminology and to specifically reject the theories supportive of and/or complicit with the imperialist agenda. While I agree with this need, I disagree with his contention that criminologists are failing to respond to the current military actions (and other atrocities of imperialism) and that we are profiting in our silence. While as a discipline we are not as outspoken and active as we could be against the war, racism, sexism, class oppression, and other horrors of imperialism, many of us are acting, writing, and otherwise engaging against the status quo. Too few, no doubt, but all are not silent.

The majority of criminologists do not profit in their silence. Our silence only brings home the misery that has long been exported by our imperialist nations. Unlike our predecessors, most academics today are well within the bounds of the working class. Some have better job protections through tenure, some have decent wages and benefits. However, declining wages, increased costs of benefits, and increases in the use of adjunct faculty over tenure track faculty all collude to proletarianize the profession. Because the dollars that are now being spent to ravage the middle east are no longer available to education, Agozino might better call upon our direct interests to break our silence, rather than call upon our altruism. While some within the professoriate may be insulated from police brutality, that alone does not place us outside a shared interest with other wage laborers worldwide.

Also of concern to this reviewer is the authors' contention that imperialism originates within individuals and spreads globally. This argument seems contradictory to the bulk of the text, which calls upon individuals and groups of individuals to resist the imperialist form of criminology now seen as normative. A more consistent line of reasoning might be brought about through a Marxian analysis of consciousness. This would allow for a consistency of material realities created through the historical processes described by the author imposing upon criminologists and others in such a way that we have failed to recognize. The enlightenment that is offered by this text could then show the way forward for conscious criminologists and others. As suggested by the author, this way forward would include resistance to imperialism (in all of its forms). Insisting that imperialism is an individual attribute complicates the call to action and implicates victims in their own oppression.

Despite these theoretical differences, I found the text thoroughly engaging and important. In fact, it may be that my disagreements with the text are the foundation of its significance. Agozino continually calls for democratic processes. These proceedings require the sorts of information sharing, debate, and discussion that this text provides. The provision of information is obvious throughout the text. The debate offered is available to those reading the text closely and understanding that the author explicitly

calls for critique in some places and implicitly does so in others. An invitation to discussion and frame for such is offered through a sprinkling of questions (some within the chapters and some at the ending of chapters) written to allow for a range of response and consideration.

The text offers much needed information in the form of summaries of the prevailing criminological theories along with critiques of each. Further, the text includes analyses of colonial/imperialist reason within the discipline and offers alternative forms of knowledge. The text also provides a platform for intellectual democratic engagement and debate. The concluding calls for change within the discipline are refreshing and also sure to invoke discussion. For these reasons, the text is most appropriate for upper level and/or graduate courses.

Students who have read the original theoretical works will gain the most from the text. While the text is specifically targeting criminology, it is not limited to this discipline. The theories, arguments, and examples used throughout the text would well serve students in any of the social sciences. The text will also be useful to criminologists seeking scholarship critical of our current discourse and more so to those believing that our current “truths” are self-evident.

ENDNOTE

Correspondence concerning this review should be sent electronically to Loretta Capeheart at L-Capeheart@neu.edu.