



Critical Teaching Column

Black Lives Matter, Police Violence and the Criminological Imagination

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“Without such an imagination, the focus on the local milieu and the obfuscation of the wider structure, personal troubles remain as they are—personal, individual, isolated pains often tinged with self-blame and doubt, with imaginative help, the personal troubles of the many become collective issues: the personal becomes the political.”

Jock Young, *The Criminological Imagination* (2011)

As someone who found their way to the fields of criminology and criminal justice by way of sociology, it was delightful to hear Jock Young profess the importance of extending C. Wright Mills’ “sociological imagination” to our work. Mills explained the imperative of illustrating how personal troubles can be symptomatic of public issues with the example of unemployment. Essentially, he pointed out that if one person is unemployed it is easy to explain this as a result of something personal, perhaps a poor work ethic or laziness. On the other hand, if a million people are unemployed this argument becomes tenuous, almost absurd. Here, the sociological imagination allows for one to recognize the systemic nature of the problem and the broader social forces at work. Critical criminologists have long been working toward elucidating this side of crime and justice issues. Lately, I have been attempting to make the connection for upper-level undergraduate Criminal Justice and Police Studies students using recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, Baltimore, Maryland and beyond.

For several semesters now, nearly all of my students are aware of the killing of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson of the Ferguson Police Department. I am a white male as are most of my students. The vast majority had never heard of Ferguson, Missouri prior to this incident and therefore have based their opinions on the place, and its people, based upon very limited information. Many, if not most, come to class with preconceived ideas about what happened between Michael Brown and Darren Wilson. Some are more informed than others. Nearly all believe that the protests and the riots that occurred in the aftermath were entirely in response to the killing of Michael Brown. Quite a few side strongly with Officer Wilson and believe the killing to have been justified and many more tend to view the resulting protest (and particularly the associated property damage) as unjustified and irrational. Some have formed negative opinions of the Black Lives Matter movement based upon limited and biased media and social media reports. Using a clip from John Oliver’s HBO show *Last Week Tonight* as a spoonful of sugar and the Department of Justice (DOJ) report on Ferguson as medicine, I have had great

success with awakening the criminological imagination, and even the criminological verstehen, of these students.

The course begins with a pair of foundational readings on the history of US policing: Kelling and Moore's (1988) "The Evolving Strategy of Policing" and Williams and Murphy's (1990) "The Evolving Strategy of Police: A Minority View". The revelation that the first formal policing organizations in the United States were slave patrols is always an "a-ha" moment as is the recognition of the role of police in maintaining segregation. Early on they are asked the question: "whose law?" Also, "whose order?" By the time we make our way into Bull Connor's Birmingham, the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense they report starting to understand the racial disparities related to perceptions of police and policing. Still, this is "ancient history" in the minds of most of the traditional students. But, the killings of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray and others are much more recent and relevant. They want to know why these events resulted in the unrest and protest seen both in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland.

This is where the personal troubles of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray become public issues. There are so many materials available it is difficult to decide what to use. I offer them a packet of readings (included in references) that provide some insight. A brief interview from Moyers and Company with Richard Rothstein entitled "How a Century of Racist Policies Made Ferguson Into a Pocket of Concentrated Despair" explains problems with the culture of poverty thesis and instead provides a political-economic explanation for the ghettos of St. Louis. An Atlantic article titled "The Brutality of Police Culture in Baltimore" provides evidence that Freddie Gray is only the latest victim in Baltimore. Finally, a POLITICO piece, "The Man Who Foresaw Baltimore" goes back in time to the Kerner Commission report from 1967 that warned how "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." The readings put these more recent events into a broader historical context and prepare the class for a more macro-level discussion of the events in Ferguson and Baltimore.

Sometimes a little humor can go a long way toward creating the necessary climate to discuss such heavy topics. Fortunately for criminologists, John Oliver's HBO show "Last Week Tonight" has provided plenty. Two relevant bits include his reporting on the militarized response to Ferguson protests (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUdHIatS36A>) as well as a piece on municipal violations (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UjpmT5noto>). After viewing these, students are assigned the DOJ report on the investigation of the Ferguson Police Department. The assignment requires them to simply read the Executive Summary of the report, but most students report an inability to stop there. Even those who feel compelled to report that they still believe Officer Wilson was justified in his killing of Michael Brown come back to class shocked and outraged at what they've read. Between the racial bias and the reliance on Ferguson PD to fund the rest of the municipal government with arrests, fines and fees, there is more than enough disturbance to fuel a vigorous class discussion. Even the most resistant to conversations on race and racism recognize that the killing of Michael Brown (Freddie Gray, etc.) is simply the proverbial "spark that started a fire". Likewise, that the Black Lives Matter movement is not a result of a few isolated incidents, but instead a response to systemic, public issues.

This recognition and this exercise have allowed me to save a great deal of time otherwise spent combatting the “not ALL police” critique. In the past, resistance to any discussion of police issues has been fast and furious primarily relying upon the idea of a few bad apples. Providing the class with enough historical context to understand how widely individual experiences may vary according to time and place seems to mitigate this tendency considerably. This also creates a convenient segue into the distinctions between individual police misconduct, corruption and brutality and institutional systemic varieties of the same problems. Young (2011) illustrated the sociological imagination, and by extension the criminological imagination, as “this fundamental triangle of the individual placed in a social structure at a particular place and time” (p. 2). Without a doubt, asking students in my class to consider these intersections has made my work in my particular place and time much more fruitful.

If you have had similar (or different) experiences in the classroom or have any questions or suggestions on how to improve upon this set of assignments, I would love to hear from you at carl.root@eku.edu

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