For Ira and a life of the imagination

THE CRIMINOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

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Fifty years ago, C. Wright Mills published *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), a book which has both haunted and beguiled sociologists ever since. It is a volume resonant with forebodings as to what was happening to sociology, and predictions as to what might happen in the future. It has had a tremendous impact: most students of sociology have heard of it, although perhaps today few have read it. Warnings of the perils of Grand Theory and Abstracted Empiricism are deep in the consciousness of most academic sociologists – emerging every now and then as question marks set against their actual practice.

Mills was a sociologist’s sociologist, a man of energy and commitment, a ‘radical nomad’, in Tom Hayden’s words (2006). He was the constant advocate of ‘sociology as a vocation’, a man of political commitment and personal vulnerability, a passionate proponent of intellectual craftsmanship. He idealized such craftsmanship: the joy of writing, the excitement of weaving together theory and research, conceptually insightful and empirically grounded. Yet he was simultaneously a role model and a bitter critic of the way that craftsmanship and scholarship were being undermined; that the sociological imagination, so much needed, was being lost.

What was this imagination, and what was the necessity for it? Let us say from the start that, although many people are only too willing to endorse Mills’ advocacy of ‘imagination’ (indeed who wouldn’t?), it is rare that the actual nature of such imagination is understood, or the radical implications of his analysis. My aim in this book is to examine the way in which Mills’ predictions have panned out today, and to gauge the extent to which his warnings have been heeded. In doing so, I will tend to focus on criminology – as one of the most rapidly expanding parts of the social sciences – but not at all totally, as we shall see.
shortly. But let us first tease out the elements of Mills’ sociological imagination.

For Mills, the key nature of the sociological imagination was to situate human biography in history and in social structure. The role of such imagination was to bridge the gap between the inner life of human actors and the historical and social setting in which they find themselves. It is this fundamental triangle of the individual placed in a social structure at a particular place and time that is at the centre of Mills’ work. He dismisses the notion of the individual abstracted from society as either a creature of ahistorical reason or inner unruly forces. Rationality is shaped by society and setting, in our time, adaption to the rationality of the great bureaucracies may produce individuals who are like ‘cheerful robots’, their very rationality of career and lifestyle reflecting their profound alienation. Nor can we turn to some universal psychology to comprehend our predicament: It is true, as psychoanalysts continually point out, that people do often have ‘the increasing sense of being moved by obscure forces within themselves which they are unable to define’. But it is not true as Ernest Jones asserted, that ‘man’s chief enemy and danger is his own unruly nature and the dark forces pent up within him’. On the contrary: ‘man’s chief danger today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of production, its enveloping techniques of political domination, its international anarchy – in a word, its pervasive transformations of the very “nature” of man and the conditions and aims of his life’ (1959, pp. 20–1).

He talks of ‘the earthquakes’ of social change, and of widespread feelings of people feeling themselves adrift, of being unable to understand what is happening to them, of individualizing their problems, whether it be in employment, or marriage, or community. ‘Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps’, he writes at the beginning of The Sociological Imagination. And he continues:

They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel. (1959, p. 3)

They feel trapped, often disillusioned – they cannot make sense of their lives. It is absolutely no coincidence that, although Mills – true to his times – uses the masculine pronoun, almost at the same time Betty Friedan, in her pathbreaking book, The Feminine Mystique (1960), asked herself, almost guiltily, as she ferried the kids on the school run, to the play dates, to soccer and to the Guides: ‘Is this all there is?’ The sociological imagination proposed that sociology, if it is to be of any significance, must link the inner lives of people to the structures of power and ideology and the historical period in which they live – a project which Feminism so powerfully addressed in the process of making ‘the personal the political’ over the subsequent years. Indeed, any social analysis worth its salt must do this. ‘For that imagination’, as Mills put it:

is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another – from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being. (1959, p. 7).

Such a consciousness is not merely the province of some elite of public intellectuals, it is an insight which is glimpsed in the flux of rapid social change which makes up the modern world. For, if the downside of such a momentum is feelings of entrapment and alienation, the upside is an increased reflexivity, a dereification of the social world, and an awareness of the ever-present possibility of change.

In large part, contemporary man’s self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences. (1959, pp. 7–8)

Finally, out of this analysis emerges one of the most forceful distinctions of the sociological imagination: that between ‘the personal troubles of a milieu’ and ‘the public issues of social structure’. 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. But here too Mills moves backwards and forwards from the micro to the macro, from the local to the system as a whole, and back again:

Do not allow public issues as they are officially formulated, or troubles as they are privately felt, to determine the problems that you take up for study. Above all, do not give up your moral and political autonomy by accepting in somebody else’s terms the illiberal practicality of the bureaucratic ethos or the liberal practicality of the moral scatter. Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues – and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles – and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time. (1959, p. 226)

Let us pause for a moment and think of the relevance of this analysis for today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The speed of change has considerably heightened; there is, in Todd Gitlin’s phrase, ‘a new velocity of experience ... a new vertigo’ (1980, p. 233). I have charted such feelings of dizziness, of instability, in The Vertigo of Late Modernity (2007): a world characterized by instability in all the three spheres of work, family and community, of economic uncertainty where reward appears arbitrary, random, and where all measures of distributive justice seem askew. A new world where self-development, self-invention and identity become a prime goal, yet where all the props of identity in the three spheres become more insubstantial and phantasmagoric, and the shock of pluralism is hastened by the forces of globalization. In short, a late modern social order where there is a chaos of reward and of identity. Here, too, people face an existential quandary: their uncertainty can easily be interpreted in terms of self-blame and individual failure, yet the widespread nature of economic and cultural instability and its daily dissemination in the global media, facilitate feelings of connectedness and of recognizing the parallel nature of the human condition, despite a plurality of social worlds and values. So that, if one response to uncertainty is the construction of hardened identities based on religion, nation, race or gender – the creation of barriers of difference by othering all that is outside of our chosen camp – the other is to deconstruct such cultures, to welcome human creativity and celebrate difference. Surely, in a late modern world of heightened insecurities and competing fundamentalisms, the necessity for a sociological imagination becomes that much greater? Witness the need to link the local to the global, to situate, for example, terrorism – religious fundamentalism, poverty, AIDS, crime, heroin addiction – in personal biography, historical context and social structure. To connect together personal troubles in various parts of the world with collective issues across the globe, to make the personal political.

But let us return to Mills’ discussion of the response of sociology to such a challenge, when he was writing in the middle of the twentieth century. His assessment of the situation is famously sceptical and acerbic. He identifies two diametrically opposed tendencies in the academic sociology of the time, both of which lose contact with social reality. Whereas the sociological imagination involves the movement from the local milieu to the total system and back again, one tendency – Abstracted Empiricism – concentrates solely on the local yet as we shall see in a strange and distant way, and the other – Grand Theory – focuses on the system, while both manage to abstract themselves from their objects of study.

Let us take Grand Theory first. Mills famously begins his demolition with a translation of sections of Talcott Parsons’ The Social System (1951). He takes a slab of verbiage from the text and translates it in a few words into plain English. What is of interest here is the banality of much of what is being said once the dense prose is radically pruned, and how glaring omissions – such as the nature of power and its legitimation – are more easily overlooked. But what makes for a narrative so opaque and turned in on itself, written in a style which is almost defensive, having what Mills calls a ‘protective advantage’? It certainly is conservative in its implications, but it is not so in a proselytizing fashion. The vitriol poured upon Parsons at the time, by scholars of the left, manifestly overestimated his influence. Indeed The Social System seems purposely written for a small scholarly audience of academics and students. It is rather like the language of the mediaeval alchemist, designed to pass on an esoteric knowledge, cautious and intricate, hidden under a carapace of scholarship and learning. It is abstracted from history and social structure, distanced from social reality, thus Mills writes:

history can be altogether abandoned: the systematic theory of the nature of man and of society all too readily becomes an elaborate and arid formalism in which the splitting of Concepts and their endless rearrangement becomes the central endeavour. (1959, p. 23)
He distinguishes semantics and syntax: semantics are words about reality, syntax are words in relation to each other. 'Grand Theory', he writes, is 'drunk on syntax, blind to semantics' (1959, p. 34). Thus typologies have a reality of their own, concepts chatter with each other, the academician ponders over subdivisions without questioning what is being divided. All of us working in sociology (or any of the social sciences or humanities for that matter) know of the extraordinary solipsism of the academy. It is seen in debates which are almost entirely self-referential, it is encountered in obfuscation and erudite vacuity, it seems to thrive on splitting hairs and dancing on pins: it is the reason, for example, why commentaries on Durkheim are invariably more complex than reading Durkheim himself, and how the latter-day Foucauldians have taken an outrageous and iconoclastic thinker and turned his writings into some sort of Talmudic parody of contested interpretation. In his appendix on intellectual craftsmanship, Mills caustically warns us against: 'using unintelligibility as a means of evading the making of judgments upon society – and as a means of escaping your readers' judgments on your own work' (1959, p. 224). And earlier in The Sociological Imagination he points in the most scathing terms to those intellectuals who stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the world outside of the academy. American democracy, he notes, may not (at this moment in the 1950s) have a plethora of movements and progressive parties, but at least there is the form of democracy, the legal possibility of free speech and public criticism. The contrast was with the Soviet Union at that time. Thus, he writes:

We ought not to minimize the enormous value and the considerable opportunity these circumstances make available. We should learn their value from the fact of their absence in the Soviet world, and from the kind of struggle the intellectuals of that world are up against. [And, he adds scornfully:] We should also learn that whereas there many intellectuals are physically crushed, here many morally crush themselves. (1959, p. 191)

In this book I will be on the lookout for evidence of the persistence of Grand Theory, the dissociation of concepts from reality. It reappears, we shall see, sometimes with totally different political valences, and it crosses over into new shapes and forms. But let us, now, look at Mills' second violation of the sociological imagination: Abstracted Empiricism. Here the structure fades out of sight, history is banished from thought, and the myopic eye of the researcher focuses on the immediate. For, if in Grand Theory the concepts dissociate from reality, become 'The Concept' and the concepts proceed to talk together, in Abstracted Empiricism the methods detach from reality, method becomes methodology, and 'the method' becomes absorbed in itself.

Let us sum up Mills' argument with regard to imagination. He insists on the need to see the individual in the context of the social structure and place this in historical period; he demands an analysis which moves from the macro to the micro and back again; he points to the gross inequities of our time in terms of the domination of a political elite in an intensely divided class society; he sees the sociological imagination not just as an attribute of the highly trained sociologists (indeed often the reverse) but as a world view which can arise out of the individual's attempts to make sense of a dizzying world; he sees two particular tendencies in academic sociology as directly obfuscating such an imagination; and last but not least he ties this imagination to transformative politics directed at attending to the gross economic and political inequities of the social order. The irony is, as Erich Goode (2008) has trenchantly pointed out, that mainstream sociology has trumpeted Mills' notion of the sociological imagination in every introductory textbook but has dropped the transformative politics which are so central to understanding Mills' mission. Furthermore, his methodological critique, so close to his politics has been likewise ignored. Indeed, abstracted empiricism has become the dominant tendency in sociology.

For Mills the central philosophical tenet of abstracted empiricists is their claim that their investigations are 'science'. Indeed, Mills is perhaps the first to depict such physics envy among sociologists. Thus, he writes:

Probably no one familiar with its practitioners would care to deny that many of them are dominated by concern with their own scientific status; their most cherished professional self-image is that of the natural scientist. In their arguments about various philosophical issues of social science, one of their invariable points is that they are 'natural scientists', or at least that they 'represent the viewpoint of natural science'. In the discourse of the more sophisticated, or in the presence of some smiling and exalted physicist, the self-image is more likely to be shortened to merely 'scientist'. (1959, p. 56)

In his critique of positivism, Mills points to the rise of a new stratum of technical functionaries, and the decline of the scholar as intellectual craftsman engaged directly in research where theory and research constantly interact and develop. This bureaucratization of research involves costly research projects, extensive research teams, large surveys and databases. The aim is to collect, in an unreflective way, findings – like building blocks – which supposedly automatically gain the larger picture. The research administrator no longer has direct contact with the data, the interviews are carried out on his or her behalf by semi-skilled interviewers with little training, or indeed insight. Precision is seen to be truth:
Those in the grip of the methodological inhibition often refuse to say anything unless it has been through the fine little mill of the Statistical Ritual. It is usual to say that what they produce is true even if unimportant. I do not agree with this; more and more I wonder how true it is. I wonder how much exactitude, or even pseudo-precision, is here confused with 'truth'; and how much abstracted empiricism is taken as the only 'empirical' manner of work. If you have ever seriously studied, for a year or two, some thousand hour-long interviews, carefully coded and punched, you will have begun to see how very malleable the realm of 'fact' may really be. Moreover, as for 'importance', surely it is important when some of the most energetic minds among us use themselves up in the study of details because The Method to which they are dogmatically committed does not allow them to study anything else. Much of such work, I am now convinced, has become the mere following of a ritual ... (1959, p. 72)

And as for the new social scientists entering the profession, the apprenticeship dumbs curiosity and dims the imagination. Here his condemnation is complete:

I have seldom seen one of these young men, once he is well caught up, in a condition of genuine intellectual puzzlement. And I have never seen any passionate curiosity about a great problem, the sort of curiosity that compels the mind to travel anywhere and by any means, to re-make itself if necessary, in order to find out. These young men are less restless than methodical; less imaginative than patient; above all, they are dogmatic - in all the historical and theological meanings of the term. Some of this is of course merely part of the sorry intellectual condition of so many students now in American colleges and universities, but I do believe it is more evident among the research technicians of abstracted empiricism.

They have taken up social research as a career; they have come early to an extreme specialization, and they have acquired an indifference or a contempt for 'social philosophy' - which means to them 'writing books out of other books' or 'merely speculating'. Listening to their conversations, trying to gauge the quality of their curiosity, one finds a deadly limitation of mind. The social worlds about which so many scholars feel ignorant do not puzzle them.

Much of the propaganda force of bureaucratic social science is due to its philosophical claims to Scientific Method; much of its power to recruit is due to the relative ease of training individuals and setting them to work in a career with a future. In both instances explicitly coded methods, readily available to the technician, are the major keys to success ... But once a young man has spent three or four years at this sort of thing, you cannot really talk to him about the problems of studying modern society. His position and career, his ambition and his very self-esteem, are based in large part upon this one perspective, this one vocabulary, this one set of techniques. In truth, he does not know anything else. (1959, pp. 105–6)

I have quoted extensively from this passage because I want to underscore the direction and acerbity of Mills' critique. Over the last half century, C. Wright Mills has become something of an icon and, like all icons, he has become all things to all people. Nobody quarrels with the need for imagination - like integrity, or objectivity - it's everyone's favourite, no one denies the need to relate the micro to the macro level (although this is most frequently interpreted in the most stolid and least humanistic manner), everyone likes the distinction between personal problems and public issues (yet, as we shall see, the thrust of the analysis is towards the personal and the individual). But what seems to be missing in the legacy of Mills is the critique of what is going on within the social sciences. For people will applaud imagination, yet fail to address that which systematically undermines it. They will make a nod of obeisance to the work of Mills, yet ignore what is happening in front of their eyes. Let us leave this for the moment and end this chapter with Mills' injunction about intellectual craftsmanship, which sums up his position:

Be a good craftsman: Avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and to use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand opposed to the ascendency of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society. (1959, p. 225)

Now let us fast forward from the 1950s to where we are now; the beginning of the twenty-first century, and judge what has happened...
\[ Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Time}_i + \beta_2 \text{Time}_i^2 + \sum_{k=3}^{10} \beta_k \text{QT}_{k,i} + \beta_6 \text{Unemp}_i \]
\[ + \sum_{k=7}^{27} \beta_k \text{Risk}_{k,i} + \beta_{13} \text{Nuisance}_i + \beta_{12} \text{Close}_i + \beta_{15} \text{Dosage}_i \]
\[ + \sum_{k=14}^{28} \beta_k \text{Duration}_{k,i} + \sum_{k=29}^{53} \beta_k (\text{Risk}_{k,i} \times \text{Duration}_{k,i}) + \sum_{k=54}^{89} \beta_k (\text{Dosage}_i \times \text{Duration}_{k,i}) \]

This equation is taken from an article in the journal Criminology on the effectiveness of police raids on reducing drug dealing around nuisance bars; 'Estimating Intervention Effects in Varying Risk Settings: Do Police Raids Reduce Illegal Drug Dealing at Nuisance Bars?', Criminology 41(2) pp. 257–292, May 2003, by J. Cohen, W. Gorr and P. Singh. The key to the equation is as follows:

- \( Y_{it} \) = number of drug-related 911 calls in target area 'i' at time 't';
- \( \text{Time}_i \) = index of months 't' from 1 to 36 (January 1990 = 1);
- \( \text{QT}_{2,i} \) = 1 if month is March, April or May and = 0 otherwise;
- \( \text{QT}_{3,i} \) = 1 if month is June, July or August and = 0 otherwise;
- \( \text{QT}_{4,i} \) = 1 if month is September, October or November and = 0 otherwise;
- \( \text{Unemp}_i \) = citywide unemployment rate in month 't';
- \( \text{Risk}_{k,i} \) = risk factor score 'k' in study area 'i' (k = 7 for land-use risk in target area 'i', k = 8 for guardianship risk in target area 'i'; k = 9 for land-use risk in buffer area surrounding target area 'i', k = 10 for guardianship risk in buffer area surrounding target area 'i');

- \( \text{Nuisance}_i \) = 1 if target area 'i' contains any nuisance bars and = 0 otherwise;
- \( \text{Close}_i \) = 1 if target area 'i' contains any closed nuisance bars at time 't' and = 0 otherwise;
- \( \text{Dosage}_i \) = number of police raids in target area 'i' at time 't';
- \( \text{Duration}_{k,i} \) = 1 if target area 'i' at time 't' is the kth month in an observation sequence and = 0 otherwise (k = 14 to 17 for Pre months 1 to 4 before an enforcement period, k = 18 to 23 for Enforcement months 1 to 6 during an enforcement period, k = 24 to 27 for After months 1 to 4 following an enforcement period);
- \( \text{Interaction}_{k,i} \) = product of \( \text{Pre}_i \), Enforcement\( _{k,i} \), and After\( _{k,i} \); duration months times; k = 28 to 41 for land-use risk in target area, k = 42 to 55 for guardianship risk in target area, k = 56 to 69 for land-use risk in buffer area, k = 70 to 83 for guardianship risk in buffer area, and k = 84 to 89 for dosage level.' (2003, p. 275)

Note the delightful quasi-scientific usage of 'dosage' for the number of police raids. The findings, incidentally, were 'that police intervention suppresses levels of drug dealing during periods of active enforcement but the effects largely disappear when the intervention is withdrawn' (2003, p. 257). No comment.

I was sitting in the library of John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, on 10th Avenue, browsing through the journals. I turn to Criminology, perhaps the most prestigious journal of world criminology, when an article catches my eye or, at least, an equation does. (I have reproduced it above.) It is cutting edge stuff, although not at all atypical of its contents, and its authors are well-published and respected.

The article simply fascinates me. The confetti of Greek letters, beta, lambda, epsilon, the masquerade of science, the strange litany of indicators: Time, Unemp, Risk, Nuisance, Close, Dosage and Duration seems in a different universe from the louche bars, dope smokers, snitches and police harassment of downtown Pittsburgh. It is, of course, a full-blown example of abstracted empiricism. In 1954 Mills wrote: 'Sociology, judging by the books of its practitioners, is a strange field of learning. In the libraries of the professors you will find books containing announcements like this: \( p(= p_{ij}) \)' (1963, p. 68 [1954]). I don't know what he would have made of the full-on rhetoric of a modern day behavioural equation. Here the data mysteriously detach themselves from their
subject matter and lose all context in an abstraction of reality, existing in some cyber-universe of computer and database which only very elliptically touches the rich social tapestry of bars, drug takers and the squads that pursue them. A few weeks previously I had read a fascinating PhD dissertation by Mitch Librett entitled 'The Spoils of War: Divergent Lifeworlds and Identity Formation Among Undercover/Vice Cops in the 'Burbs' (2005). Librett, himself an undercover cop during his ethnographic research, obviously lives in a totally different world to Cohen, Gorr and Singh. Yet his contact with the drug scene was daily and intimate, while their relationship was one of distance; indeed I strongly suspect that their sense of their own objectivity stemmed very largely from this fact of hiatus. Thus, paradoxically, the less their contact with the subject matter the more knowledgeable they feel.

If one looks closer at the article, the more mysterious it becomes, for there is not just distance here, there is a strange tunnel vision. The theory behind the article is a poor atrophied thing, a smattering of deterrence theory, the assumption of rational choice, a smidgeon of routine activities theory. The explanatory narrative is appallingly thin: a series of observations characterized by their obviousness are straight-facedly referenced as if to build a case: bars are an attractive setting where buyers and sellers can meet, displacement may occur to other nearby drug markets, while routine activities theory 'provides a useful theoretical framework for considering why bars are expected to be suitable places for drug dealing' (2003, p. 258). Whole swathes of theory and controversy are simply not mentioned: that the war against drugs is the most massive and global manifestation of the failure of deterrence is not touched upon, that drug busts are frequently racist in their targets is not referred to, that such strategies may be counterproductive is not glimpsed as a possibility, that police corruption and connivance is commonplace and can easily undermine the simple equation of quantity of police busts ('treatment' in the text) set against the amount of illicit activity goes under their radar. This is a study of deviant behaviour without deviance.

Most of the article is on research design and methodology, graphs abound, and although the narrative itself is very simple: what effect does policing (independent variable) have on drug dealing (dependent variable), the text becomes more and more convoluted. Let me give you just a short taste – not too much or you will probably feel tempted to close the pages of the book:

To control for potential bias from unmeasured differences among the bars, the estimating equation is expanded to include separate main and interaction effects for Long Enforcement and Short Enforcement nuisance-bars. Tables 7a and 7b report the OLS parameter estimates for this modified model. Most of the effects estimated for all bars emerge only for the Long Enforcement bars (Table 7a), and very few interaction effects are evident for the Short Enforcement bars (Table 7b). In the only substantial change from the model in Table 5, the main effect of Dosage loses significance in Table 7. Increasingly stronger suppression effects during successive months of enforcement periods persist among the bars that experience at least one enforcement period lasting at least 5 months, but are not evident among the short-enforcement bars.

Likewise the interactions between Enforcement Month and Dosage from Table 5 continue in Long Enforcement, but not in Short Enforcement bars. Also the interactions between Risk and Enforcement Month from Table 5 remain significant for Long-Enforcement bars in Table 7. These net effects (figures not presented) for Long-Enforcement bars are similar to those found in model 1, and no similar decreases in drug calls occur among the Short-Enforcement bars. Persistence of these results after we introduce additional controls for unobserved heterogeneity provides further evidence in support of increasing suppression effects on drug dealing activities with increasing duration of enforcement. (2003, pp. 286-9)

You have to dig deeper into the article to discover what is happening: it is a dense text and a desperately thin narrative. Yet when you do, the base seems terribly fragile and unsubstantial. The dependent variable, for example, is measured by the number of public-initiated 911 drug-related calls to the police – a fairly shaky indicator if you were to ask me. The very fact that in high drug-use areas you may get less likelihood of phoning the police and vice versa is scarcely touched upon. One gets the feeling that the authors are at least subliminally aware that they are skating on thin ice, but that the more quasi-scientific the rhetoric, the more sophisticated the statistics, the more that they are distanced from what they are studying, the more secure they feel.

My fascination is not with the actual article, whose explanatory power is perhaps unsurprisingly very limited, but how one explains the occurrence of the article itself. What concerns me is not the article's explanation, but the explanation of the article. How, indeed, does such a strange formulation of human behaviour occur in such secure and auspicious parts of the academy – particularly in this age of late modernity where human behaviour, far from pursuing some deterministic logic and mathematical trajectory, has an ever-increasing accent on creativity and self-invention?

Where does this fit Mills' predictions? One suspects that in this new statistically sophisticated Abstracted Empiricism, 'method' has become, as Mills put it, 'methodology', and methodology begins to take on all the verbiage of Grand Theory. Indeed, as theory itself atrophies, methodology and the complexities of statistical manipulation become a substitute
for theory. And what of Mills’ three guidelines of the imagination? The individual with his or her narrative, in a social structure situated at some time and place in history. Here, alas, there is no history: the scenario depicted is an empty stage upon which the actors – police and drug dealers – appear from out of nowhere. They have no past, and their future is a mundane world structured by the push of deterrence or the lack of it. The war against drugs, the most poignant overarching history, is not even mentioned – the history of the area, the vicissitudes of employment, of neighbourhoo, of poverty, ethnic identity, migration and adaption not even hinted at. As far as the police are concerned, we have no knowledge of overall police policy, the history of police–public relations and, going down the structure, anything about the particular police department or, more specifically, no inkling of the goings on in the drug squad – the temptations and discontent, the pride and privations of the officers concerned. Indeed the officers are caricatured as ‘doses’ in the formula or at best act out orders like robots in an equation. As for the drug dealers themselves they are creatures of calculation and opportunity, they exist in a wafer-thin narrative. They may well be drug users themselves, but we do not know that; why, we don’t even know what drug they are using. They may know members of the drug squad, sometimes over-well, they may probably have suffered the privations of prison; the raids may anger them and reinforce their subculture, be part of a long drawn out battle, evoke anger, resistance, treachery. They may even know of the raids in advance; we just don’t know. But there are, of course, reasons for this. For what the researchers are looking for are universal generalizations independent of people, structure, history and place: the very opposite of Mills’ admonitions. What they are seeking is the nomothetic, the scientific, a social world circumscribed by law-like generalizations, just like the natural world. It is the dream of the new orthodoxy within much of the social sciences, a positivism which looks to natural science and to econometrics. Let us contrast this for one moment with Philippe Bourgeois’ wonderful study of crack dealers in East Harlem, In Search of Respect (1995), which arose out of the emerging tradition of critical anthropology. Here we have a rich narrative and biography, a history of immigration set in the context of the decline of manufacturing industry in Manhattan from the 1980s onwards. All of this has as a backcloth the American Dream and the loss of respect among second generation Puerto Rican immigrants living in the sullen and violent streets of East Harlem. The actors are profane, lusty, angry; they have love lives, quarrels, take and enjoy drugs, cannot quite make out why Philippe, a white middle-class man from the Upper Eastside, who speaks as though he were on television, is studying them. They reflect on him, he reflects on them. They are real people not numbers on a computer; they search for respect, for the American Dream, in a world where there are precious few means of success available to them; they improvise through drug dealing, they create a structure, a subcultural world which both frees them and imprisons them. There is plenty of reflexivity there; Philippe frowns at their sexism and violence, Primo and Caesar smile at his naivety and prudishness. One has, indeed, entered a totally different world to that of lambda, epsilon, doses of police and bad bars to be treated.

Let Me Introduce You to the Datasaur

The datasaur, Empiricus Abstractus, is a creature with a very small head, a long neck, a huge belly and a little tail. His head has only a smattering of theory, he knows that he must move constantly but is not sure where he is going, he rarely looks at any detail of the actual terrain on which he travels, his neck peers upwards as he moves from grant to grant, from database to database, his belly is huge and distended with the intricate intestine of regression analysis, he eats ravenously but rarely thinks about the actual process of statistical digestion, his tail is small, slight and inconclusive.

Recently there has been a series of articles which question the capability of statistical modelling in the explanation and prediction of crime rates. Foremost of these is the work of David Weisburd and Alex Piquero (2008), of particular pertinence because their doubts and criticisms are from two scholars prominent among the ranks of quantitative researchers. They examine the level of explanatory power measured as the level of variance by the multivariate models used in the journal Criminology between 1968 and 2005. Their findings are astonishing: the average predictive capacity of the models is under 40 per cent with 60 per cent of crime unexplained; indeed one-quarter of the studies explain less than 20 per cent and one-tenth at less than 10 per cent. They add that it is worth noting that each model included control variables such as age and gender as well as the variables associated with the theory being tested, so that there is a built-in over-estimation of their level of prediction. Further, that there has been a decline in the variance explained over time which, as they put it, raises ‘serious questions for criminologists. In short, criminology does not appear to be following a strictly science-based model over time, one centred on improvement’ (2007, p. 31). They sum up their analysis by the query: ‘Are low levels explained by variance due to inadequate theory, poor data and measurement, or is there some more general principle operating that limits our ability to explain crime?’(2007, p. 9). My answer to this, as I have sought to demonstrate in this book, is that they are absolutely right on all three levels of deficiency.
Eminently forthright are the acerbic commentaries of Ted Goertzel (2002, 2004; Goertzel and Goertzel, 2008) a writer who excels in pointing to the Emperor’s new clothes. His main point is that the acid test of statistical modelling is prediction, yet what actually happens is that researchers take past events and constantly readjust their model until it fits the data. He focuses on multiple regression research into the deterrent effect of the death penalty on homicide, where scholars make various mysterious yet definitive forecasts of the effect of one execution on the number of future murders. Some say eight murders are deterred per execution, some say three, some say five, and some say none at all. He notes how the data are severely limited and hopelessly inadequate, the data chosen are selected to fit the favoured model and the model is finessed and meticulously adjusted to fit the data. One person’s model is used to falsify another person's model. Goertzel additionally examines a series of celebrated findings in the areas of the effects of guns, legalized abortion and imprisonment on crime rates. All have the same failings; all are welcomed as truth if they confirm the preconceived beliefs of the assessor. He concludes by citing the distinguished quantitative sociologist David Freeman, who wrote: ‘I do not think regression can carry much of the burden in a causal argument. Nor do regression equations by themselves give much help in controlling for confounding variables’. (1999, p. 292). And he adds the appropriate remark of Richard Berk that Freeman’s contention: ‘will be very difficult for most quantitative sociologists to accept. It goes to the heart of their empirical enterprise and in so doing puts entire professional careers in jeopardy’ (1999, p. 315).

Perhaps I should not say this – and certainly not so early on – but the title of this book, The Criminological Imagination, is something of a misnomer. Not ‘imagination’ because I have a lot to say about imagination, and the lack of it, but ‘criminological’. For I will certainly not concern myself solely with crime and criminological matters. Indeed my argument pivots around strange findings in the sociology of sex and, on the way, we will encounter examples from anthropology, cultural studies and general sociology. Of course Mills himself had his doubts about titles: ‘I hope my colleagues’, he writes, ‘will accept the term “sociological imagination”’. Political scientists who have read my manuscript suggest “the political imagination”, anthropologists “the anthropological imagination” – and so on.’ But, he adds: ‘The term matters less than the idea . . .’ (1959, p. 15, n. 2). So be it.

I will be concerned both with quantitative and qualitative studies taking a critical eye both to survey work and ethnography. Thus we will examine the famous and acrimonious debate over what Margaret Mead actually encountered in Samoa, as well as looking at the work of the Birmingham School, and more recent ethnography. I think I shall make it clear that the problems of social scientific investigation are not confined to criminology nor that the magic wand of ethnography will transport us easily away from the deep-seated problems of quantitative research. Nor should it be thought that criminology is alone in the social sciences with the affliction; sociology also suffers from this blight, one has only to look, say, at The American Sociological Review, or The American Journal of Sociology to see similar manifestations of the positivistic method. Let me give an example from a while back, from an article in The American Journal of Sociology by Eugene Kanin, a pioneer in the study of date rape. I quote it not merely because it is unintentionally amusing, but because it succinctly places reality in a subaltern position to method:
The levels of erotic intimacy were telescoped into three categories – (1) necking and petting above the waist, (2) petting below the waist, and (3) attempted intercourse and attempted intercourse with violence – in order to satisfy requirements for chi-square. (1957, p. 198 n. 2)

Things have changed quite drastically since the early days of classic American sociology. Just compare The American Sociological Review in the past and The American Sociological Review today. Consider ‘Social Structure and Anomie’, perhaps the most cited article in sociology, published by Merton in 1938. It is a brilliant article, I still read it with delight – it is surely intellectual craftsmanship that fits C. Wright Mills’ canon to perfection. It was written during the period when Merton shared many of Mills’ opinions on methods, on sociology and politics as well (Young, 2010). It talks of problems of the system and problems of the individual, it manifestly connects private troubles to public issues, it places the American Dream in the context of American history, it is comparative in that it hinges around the comparison with crime rates in Southeastern Europe; above all it is imaginatively conceptual, the famous forms of adaptation from conformist to ritualist, from retreatist to innovator. But would it be published today? One can imagine the letter from the editor, the reports from the peer reviewers: ‘Dr Merton talks interestingly about differential crime rates in the United States and Southeastern Europe, but where are the Gini Coefficients, where are the statistical tests, where are the formulae which systematically sum up his argument? Where is his evidence that the American Dream is “a sop for those who might rebel against the entire structure were this consoling hope removed”’ (1938, p. 679 n. 15) and, perhaps, isn’t this rather too political for a scientific article?’ But we need go no further because some of this work has already been done for us. For in fact, we can have a reasonably good idea what would be expected of Merton today when we read present day ‘clarifications’ of his work. Thus Eric P. Baumer in an article entitled ‘Untangling Research Puzzles in Merton’s Multilevel Anomie Theory’ ‘untangles’ Merton thus:

\[
Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Y_3 + \beta_2 Y_4 + \beta_3 Y_5 \gamma_3 \gamma_4 + \beta_4 Y_5 \gamma_4 \gamma_5 + \beta_5 Y_5 \gamma_4 \gamma_5 + \beta_6 \gamma_5 \gamma_4 \gamma_5 + \tau
\]

\[
\beta_0 = \gamma_0 + u_0
\]

\[
\beta_1 = \gamma_3 \gamma_4 + \gamma_3 \gamma_5 (X_2) + \gamma_3 \gamma_4 \gamma_5 (X_3) + \gamma_3 \gamma_4 \gamma_5 (Y_1) + u_1
\]

(2007, p82)

It is beyond me how such a fanciful elaboration aids the understanding of Merton’s lucid and parsimonious piece. There has to be a point where disentangling becomes mangleing, where one suspects some other motive, scientific and nomothetic, has taken over.

But still I come back to criminology, only in part because that is the area in which I have spent most of my academic life and feel most at home. More importantly it is because the tendencies of obsessive concern with natural scientific and statistical method, of numerical othering, of distancing from the subject matter, of bracketing off issues of power and inequality, of abstracted empiricism are more pronounced in criminology than elsewhere. And then there is the paradox: the criminological gaze is more exposed to problems of power, stigmatization, pluralism and the contest of values than perhaps any other area of the social sciences. Indeed, there is a certain privileged vantage point of criminology and the sociology of deviance of which it is part, for it is here that norms are formed and norms are broken, where norms are disputed and selectively enforced, where deviance is enacted and deviance concealed. Here nothing seems like it purports to be (a fact of tremendous importance in evaluating the interview, the questionnaire or the superficial first glance of ethnography) – and deviance seems to bubble below every crack and crevice of the taken-for-granted social structure. It is here, late at night, where the rule of law breaks down in the crack of the night stick, it is the traffic stop where its arrogant prejudice is caught for fleeting moments on video camera; it is the prison yard, in the arms of the law, where drugs, rape and violence are more prevalent than outside its walls. It is the hidden economy of factory and the street, the everyday corruption of politicians and the powerful. It is the place where nothing really looks like it should and where the world is not what it seems to be.

All of this would seem a marvellous starting point for a critical perspective to emerge. And indeed, during the 1960s and early 1970s, the new criminology and the sociology of deviance were very much to the centre of debate within sociology as a whole. This was the time of a cultural turn which resonated throughout the social sciences from anthropology through to labour history. Explicit in this endeavour was a stress on the interpretative rather than the mechanistic and the positivistic. Thus both a reduction of human action to a reflex of the material situation or a positivistic enactment of a pre-given culture was ruled out of court. Rather, an interpretative analysis focusing on the way in which human actors generate meaning becomes paramount. It was an exceptional period in the sociology of deviance consisting of two radical strands: subcultural and labelling; on the one hand the theories of Albert Cohen and Richard Cloward arising out of the inspirational work of Merton, at that time still influenced by Marx and a radical interpretation of Durkheim (see Young, 2010) and on the other the phenomenological tradition of Becker, Kitsuse and Lemert, supplemented by the social constructionist work of writers such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. I will expand on this later but suffice it to say that this scholarship was extraordinarily influential.
involving, as it did, the existential sense of freedom curtailed and constructed by the labels and essentialization of the powerful. Deviancy was a human creation, granted meaning; social control involved a denial of meaning and the imposition of a deterministic essence. By the mid 1980s such a humanistic sociology, buttressed by strong critiques of positivistic methods was a major force within criminology. Let me list briefly some of the theoretical insights and advances which were the common currency of the time:

- that statistics are social constructions
- that deviance is not a quality inherent in an act but a quality bestowed upon it
- that meaning is dependent on social context
- that the human subject is a creative actor albeit in circumstances beyond his or her control
- that explanation has to place the actor in a wider social structure and cannot remain on the level of the individual
- that we live in a pluralistic society of contested definitions of deviance and normality
- that agencies of social control attempt to maintain and enforce the definitions of the powerful.

Furthermore, the actual world around us has reinforced such insights. Mass immigration has brought pluralism to our streets, the mass media has brought it to our eyes and our ears while the late modern stress on creativity and lifestyle has mobilized a dazzling array of subcultures to intrigue or dismay us. The world changes fast, social definitions have no fixity, people’s lives are disembodied, they change jobs, communities, families more frequently, they constantly rewrite the narratives of their lives. We do not live in a world of solidity and essences however much we may hanker for them. None of this is conducive to the perspectives which would allow positivist views to survive easily, let alone thrive. Since then, however, there was been a considerable shift back to positivism. It is not that critical criminology has disappeared. Far from it: as we shall see, it flourishes, but positivism, once seemingly intellectually defeated, has crept back to the centre stage of syllabus and research agenda. The question which must be asked is how has such a revanchism come about given the privileged position of criminology? For it is confronted, smack in the face by power and prejudice, backed by an inspiring intellectual tradition revolving around social constructionism, and, to top it all, where we all engage every day in a late modern world which valorizes human individualism and creativity and is increasingly pluralistic in its values.

The Hubris of Positivism

Criminology has moved into an age of immense methodological sophistication. Given the expertise of criminologists in measurement, research design, and analysis, all that would seem to be required to collect ‘large quantities of data on large representative samples of individuals’ (Nagin and Tremblay, 2005, p. 918). Nor must we wait for rigorous science to show itself. Of the 99 articles published in three volumes of *Criminology* (2001–4), 82% used statistical analysis of quantitative data, with 32% relying on nonlinear regression approaches, including HLM, trajectory analysis, negative binomial and tobit models (Bushway and Weisburd, 2006,1). (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 2008, p. 229)

Such an encroachment of positivistic method occurred, as my previous examples have illustrated, throughout sociology in general and were accurately predicted by Mills way back in the 1950s. But let me for a moment continue to concentrate on the forces impinging upon criminology, holding in mind that criminal justice studies represents one of the most fast-expanding sections of the social sciences and that there is a dramatically significant impact of positivist method and outlook in this area.

What is the reason for this revanchism? One does not have to look far to identify the external, material forces which have transformed criminology. First of all there is the extraordinary burgeoning of the criminal justice system, particularly, of course, in the United States, but also in the majority of Western countries. This has involved massive expenditure on prisons, police, treatment regimes and crime prevention devices, from CCTV to DNA testing. It has been vastly augmented by the ‘war’ against drugs and, more recently, against terrorism. The demand for consultancy and evaluative research has, therefore, rocketed. Parallel to this, university teaching of criminology to train personnel, both practitioners and researchers, has expanded exponentially so that criminal justice studies has become the largest sector of social science teaching. Students who once would have studied social policy and administration now study criminal justice — a clear consequence of the movement from welfare to criminal justice system interventions as the leading edge of social policy. Further, the restricted funding available for higher education has led to considerable pressure on faculty to bring in funding from research (see Robinson, 2001). The crime control industry has, therefore, come to exert, particularly in the United States, a near hegemonic influence upon large sections of academic criminology. The war against crime, drugs, terrorism, demands facts, numbers, quantitative incomes and outcomes — it does not demand debates as to the very nature of these battles, it does not want to question definition, rather it wants ‘hard’ facts and ‘concrete’
evidence. The social basis for positivism is thus assured. Couple this with the ascendency of neo-liberal thinking in the economic and political sphere, and the movement into a market society where market values have become the dominant ethos (Taylor, 1999; Hayward, 2004b) and you have the basis for the development of rational choice theory — a form, as I will argue later, of market positivism.

The response in the academy has been substantial and far-reaching. Research has begun to be dominated by statistical testing, theory has been downplayed, and 'soft' data eschewed (see Ferrell and Hamm, 1998). It takes a little reflection to realize that the dominant journal format of ill-developed theory, regression analysis and, usually, rather inconclusive results is, in fact, a relatively recent genre. Data which are in fact technically weak (because of the well-known difficulties inherent in the collection of statistics whether by the police, victimization studies, or self-report studies) and, which in any case, are by their very nature contested, blurred and ambiguous, and unsuited for quantification, are mindlessly churned through personal computers. The journals and the articles become myriad, yet their cogitation and pontification become more and more obscure — lost in a mess of figures, techno-speak and obfuscation. Meanwhile the ramifications within the academy involve a form of quasi-professionalization or bureaucratization. This is seen most blatantly in the PhD programmes. Here, induction into quantitative methodological techniques becomes a central part of academic training, qualitative methods take a more lowly position — and even here bizarre attempts are made to produce software which will enable the researcher to quantify the qualitative, to digitalize verstehen. Robert Park, you will remember, the great architect of the Chicago School admonished his students in 1927 to 'Go sit in the lounges of the luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedowns; sit in the Orchestral Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short go out and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.' Nowadays the distance between the world out there and the academy has become wider and wider. It is fenced in by numbers, sanitized by computer printouts. On top of this, the bureaucratization of the research process by overseeing academic committees has stultified the possible range and type of research. As Patricia and Peter Adler put it:

Between the iron cage of the Institutional Review Board and the gentle pulling and pushing of government funding, the discipline inevitably changes its form, its critical edge, and its direction.

But there is more to it than this, for the analysis so far is based on too much external pressure, financial or otherwise, as if this modern numerology were simply, and rather venally, coaxed out of the academy. But we must also, perhaps more importantly, explain the intellectual attractions of the scientific method. We must, in short, talk about conviction as much as about coercion.

I shall return to the attractions of positivism later in the book. But let me first note that the elective affinity between positivist criminology and the bureaucratic needs of the criminal justice system is not simply a question of the need for numbers and statistical functionaries willing to provide them. It is a question of shared notions of ontology and of social order, of world views which are coincident in their mapping of the social world and the place of the deviant within it, backed by common and more general anxieties with regard to social order. For the desire to place society in orderly and carefully delineated categories and the patterning of such order is not merely a useful accountability device for the criminal justice system on the part of managers (which it is), or a scholarly desire to classify and seek regularity in the social universe. It is much more than that.