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Criminology in a Controlled Climate: Reflections on learning and teaching in Hong Kong

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Since Michael Burawoy's influential address to the American Sociological Association in 2004, debate in the social sciences has become increasingly animated by questions relating to the role of academic labour in public life. For Burawoy, sociology is defined by four discrete yet connected intellectual endeavours – professional, critical, policy and public – which compose a healthy diversity of approach. Of these, however, Burawoy argues that public sociology – which 'transcends the academy' (2005) – is at once the most vital but least considered iteration of the sociological imagination (Mills 1959). These entreaties have proven both timely and influential, sparking a series of debates across a range of disciplines. Within the field of criminology, for example, debates relating to public criminology (Loader and Sparks 2011) have drawn attention to the tension between critical criminological scholarship and proximity to government, as well as the broader academic and political context in which such debates take place (Wacquant 2011). As Loader and Sparks (2011) argue, the role of criminological knowledge may differ according to 'hot' or 'cool' political climates, in which issues of crime and justice are more or less politically sensitive or publicly scrutinised.

In August 2011, I arrived in Hong Kong. It felt like criminology in an exceptionally hot climate: it was 33 degrees Celsius, with at least 97% humidity. The streets were crowded with people and new and unfamiliar smells. I had a little teaching experience but knew nothing about the city that I would call home for the next four years; and still less about how to translate my interests in youth, crime and culture into classes that would engage students. It was exciting and bewildering and overwhelming. As time went on, however, I began to see that the political temperature did not equate with the heat of the street. In fact, in the Loader and Sparks sense, criminology in Hong Kong by and large operated in a relatively cool climate. Crime rates are comparatively low, and issues of crime and justice are seldom politicised. Indeed, due to Hong Kong's unique constitutional arrangement, there are relatively few opportunities for direct involvement in policy or public life; decisions are taken away from the heat, in a process that some scholars term 'penal elitism' (Adorjan and Chui 2013). Being away from the 'heat' has other origins as well as Lee and Laidler (2013) point to the importance of the colonial legacy in understanding the distinctive nature of crime and its control in Hong

Kong. Against this historical backdrop, research access to criminal justice institutions occur is regulated, and comparatively few civil society groups work specifically on criminal justice issues. It may be more accurate to describe criminology in Hong Kong as operating in a controlled climate. Much like the ubiquitous air-conditioning units that pockmark the city's skyscrapers, the political climate in Hong Kong is regulated to prevent excessive heat.

In this short essay, I will elaborate on some of the ways in which I sought to engage in public criminology in this controlled climate. Primarily, this involved an approach to teaching and learning that problematised concepts, ideas and theories developed within the context of the United States and Europe, and correspondingly encouraged new forms of 'home-grown' knowledge about crime and justice in Hong Kong. In contributing to the critical pedagogy of the Master of Social Sciences in Criminology programme – which has for thirty years sought to cultivate critical, independent scholarship among criminal justice practitioners in Hong Kong – I had the opportunity to contribute, in a small way, to the growth of a grounded Hong Kong criminology. In what follows, I introduce some of the work that I supervised, and draw out some principles that might be helpful to others, grouped under the headings of teaching, coordination, and supervision.

Teaching

Education becomes a series of dialogues on the terrain of sociology that we foster—a dialogue between ourselves and students, between students and their own experiences, among students themselves, and finally a dialogue of students with publics beyond the university. (Burawoy 2005: 9)

Just before starting my appointment at the University of Hong Kong, my grandfather – a minister, scholar and activist – told me a story. In a class on Marxist theology, he noticed that students were drawn from a range of countries where Marxist ideas were being put into practice. On the spot, he decided to use this as the focal point of the class – for the eleven weeks that followed, each class began with a session of students' sharing their varied experiences of Marxist politics in practice. The principles that underpin this approach – student-led learning, practical application of concepts, and flexible pedagogy – kept coming back during my time in Hong Kong. This approach was very much in the

spirit of 'public sociology' advocated by Michael Burawoy – encouraging a critical, questioning, and independent approach to learning by creating spaces for self-directed scholarship.

The Master of Social Sciences (Criminology) at the University of Hong Kong is a highly successful taught postgraduate programme, with a yearly intake of forty students drawn from a range of practitioner backgrounds; in particular police, correctional services, and social work. The programme has run very successfully for nearly thirty years. Not long after starting, a requirement for a compulsory dissertation was re-introduced. Prior to this development, dissertations were completed only on an individual basis as a graduation requirement in the early years, subsequently as an elective and only then by the most able students. Now all students would be required to complete a dissertation, and a decision had been made that this would be group-based for part-time students. While this represented a challenge, I felt strongly that the diversity of the student cohort was a real asset, and that learning from one another, dividing work, and collaboration would ultimately lead to both better work and better collective work.

The first step in creating this collective dynamic was in the redesign of the methodological training the students received. While remaining rooted in the history and philosophy of criminological research methods, students were equipped with the skills necessary to carry out an independent research project. This was no mean feat, given that a majority of the class have had no social science training prior to taking the class. Alongside a grounding in the principles and philosophy of methodology, the course aimed to take students – from a standing start – to the completion of a fully elaborated research project: devising a research topic, carrying out a literature review, presenting a research proposal, designing an interview schedule, carrying out an interview, transcribing and analysing the data, and writing up a research report.

The first stage of this process was group-formation. In the first week of class, students were asked to specify three preferred research interests from a list, which covered the range of potential supervision topics. This information were then used to divide the class into groups, mostly according to first or second preference, but bearing in mind the importance of balance. For this reason, effort was made to include a mixture of professional and academic backgrounds in each group to ensure students could learn effectively from one another. While this was not always straightforward, with

personality differences and hierarchies from disciplinary forces causing some difficulty, by and large this process worked effectively.

The second stage was developing a research topic and question. Students would be assigned a core reading in their broad topic, and asked to read two or three additional sources. Each group-member would then write a short summary of these sources – which could be based on statistical, policy-related or media-based, as well as academic research – and suggest a potential research topic from this basis. These summaries would then be shared within the group, and submitted to me as a whole. This ensured that students had a shared baseline of understanding of the broad topic, as well as a cumulative knowledge of a range of sources. I read across the summaries and questions, and suggested a specific topic that covered the range of interests in the group whilst also being approximately the right scope for a small-scale study. Students then gave an assessed presentation of a research proposal that drew together their topic-related knowledge with the methods literature covered in class.

The third stage involved developing this research proposal into a micro-study, involving an individual interview with a classmate. The class worked individually to convert their research questions into an interview project, including an interview schedule and informed consent form along with practical issues like finding a suitable venue for the interview. The interviews were short (20-30 minutes) and carried out during class-time. Students were then required to transcribe, analyse, and write up the interview along with reflections on the interview process. By the end of the class, each student had end-to-end experience of the various stages of a research project, as well as developing some specialist knowledge on a suitable topic. Many students remained in the same groups, researching the same topics, when decisions for the dissertation were taken in the subsequent semester.

The process was challenging in many ways. Inevitably, students found difficulties in thinking outside of their practitioner experience – in the first instance, most students would suggest research topics very close to their own professional expertise. The value of working in groups composed of students from a cross-section of backgrounds, in this sense, encouraged students to think reflexively about their own knowledge and recognise the value of alternative approaches. There were, of course, instances where

this was impossible. The course ran during the Occupy Movement,¹ and in one particularly memorable class there were eight absences – four were absent for emergency police duties, four to be involved in the protest. These differences, however, made for a learning environment that was as much about encouraging critical thought as about criminological research. In thirty years the Masters programme has worked with in the region of five hundred public service workers – in prisons, police, social work, customs, and immigration – that have been exposed to a criminological imagination that seeks to critically analyse the complex meanings of crime and justice in Hong Kong. As Burawoy argues, ‘students are our first public and, moreover, they take sociology to other publics, what we might call secondary publics ... Just as students may initially resist our messages only later to be gripped by them, so the same can be true beyond the academy’ (Burawoy 2005: 322).

Coordination

Not long after introducing these changes, I took on the role of coordinator for the new group-based dissertation, which enabled me to oversee the subsequent development of dissertations at a programme level. This involved, in collaboration with colleagues, the creation of a system of monitoring and supervision that was structured yet flexible. The principles of group-based learning and shared knowledge were important, but undergirded with clear practical expectations and cumulative forms of assessment. The challenge was to devise a means of grading the work in a way that emphasised both *process* and *product*, that encouraged collective responsibility, and that incentivised leadership.

The initial ideas and group-formation were developed in the methods class in the first semester. Early in the second semester, students would be given a deadline to suggest a broad area (e.g. ‘Youth and Delinquency’), a specific topic (e.g. ‘cyber-bullying’), and a list of group-members. In assigning supervisors, emphasis was placed on ‘fit’ with the research interests, along with a distribution of responsibilities between junior and senior colleagues. Students would then be asked to sign up to a set of responsibilities for the research, to ensure reasonable expectations, then begin to work

¹ The Occupy Movement, or ‘Umbrella Movement’, involved the occupation of three major intersections in Hong Kong, and its peak brought over 100,000 to the streets. See Fraser (2015).

with supervisors over the course of the semester. Students would, in addition, pursue the theoretical implications of their topic through coursework in a class on criminological theory. The culmination of this class was a research proposal and ethics form, to be submitted before the end of the semester, with the intention that fieldwork be carried out during the summer break. In this way the dissertation was hard-wired into cumulative forms of assessment on core courses.

Thereafter, the process of researching, analysing and writing the dissertation was monitored by individual supervisors. By and large students carried out interviews, observations or other data-collection during summer (June to August); conducted analysis during first semester (September to December); and completed writing during second semester (January to April). To reflect this workflow, a series of deadlines were set – in September, January, and May – to assess progression. Students submitted reports on individual contribution, incorporating both peer and self-assessment, as well as group progress. These progress reports were graded and assessed by supervisors, then shared at a collective meeting of supervisors. This allowed for discussion of difficult cases and ensured equivalence of grading. For example, if individual students were not contributing to the group, this forum allowed for discussion of potential remedies. These progress reports, each worth part of the overall assessed grade, constituted an important means of assessing individual contribution. To incentivise both individual and collective responsibility, however, the final dissertation was graded collectively, with each student receiving the same grade,. Through these modes of assessment the intention was to equally balance the individual and the collective to encourage students to think about their personal strengths and weaknesses, and how both could be incorporated in group-work to ensure a cohesive end-result.

The dissertation proved to be an invaluable platform to consolidate and develop the collective work on research methods. Despite significant obstacles to facilitating and assessing collective work – not least ensuring equivalent input to the group – I believe that the experience fostered a greater degree of interdependence and pooled understanding, improving the overall standard of work significantly. The most able students from these projects have since gone on to apply for MPhil and PhD programmes in Hong Kong and overseas, marking out a clear pattern of critical scholarship emanating from the programme.

Supervision

During my period of involvement in the dissertation programme, I worked with three groups across a range of topics: on cyber-bullying, graffiti, and tattoo subcultures. Each group carried out substantial empirical fieldwork – mostly in the form of interviews, focus groups and observations – and produced written dissertations of a very high standard. Each group was resourceful, flexible, and conscientious in moving from initial research idea to fully elaborated project – a process made all the more impressive due to the fact that all were working full-time in demanding jobs during the dissertation process. In what follows I will describe some of the ways in which this group-work functioned, and reflect on some lessons that might be drawn for effective supervision of similar projects.

First and foremost, I felt it important to have regular meetings with groups. To motivate group-members, check in on progress, and give appropriate steering, I felt it was invaluable to meet in person. This, however, required flexibility on my part due to the working restrictions of students – I took to meeting groups in a Starbucks in Central Hong Kong on suitable evenings. Supervision meetings were relatively flexible and open-ended, but with clear objectives. In this sense supervision can be compared to a semi-structured interview that has a set of guiding ideas, but is guided by the research encounter as it unfolds. This means that there are many routes to the same goal: of equipping students with a critical mind-set and set of scholarly tools with which to make sense of the world. However it was always crucial to maintain a clear set of deadlines, expectations and onward plans to ensure progression to the completed dissertation.

Secondly, I felt that reliability and consistency were very important. Groupwork is stressful and difficult, particularly when group-members are living in different parts of the city and juggling different commitments. As well as being flexible, therefore, I also felt it important to maintain a steady, structured and consistent approach to supervision. Of course this meant things like showing up on time, being well-prepared, and knowing what I was talking about (more or less). But it also meant being predictable and transparent in approaches to things like grading, assessment and discipline; being approachable, in person or via email, and responding quickly and concisely to inquiries. It also meant setting expectations for feedback and response

times, and making sure that there was a shared knowledge of holidays, breaks and busy periods between the group such that these could be accommodated.

Within this loose structure, students flourished. Groupwork enabled student strengths to complement one another, and I encouraged students with aptitudes in certain areas – be it fieldwork, time-management, leadership, or writing – to take on that role within the group. Where I felt students were not taking on their fair share, I would speak to them specifically and inform them of that fact. On the other side, where I felt students were taking on too much, I would encourage others to take over the role. From this perspective the progress reports were an invaluable way of incentivising changes in the working of the group, as they allowed an opportunity to intervene where there was an uneven distribution of labour. This (r)evolving approach to leadership enabled a collective responsibility and individual role-taking that I felt was conducive to developing good scholarship.

Overall, I felt that my role was to monitor and guide, rather than tell. The underpinning principle – to ‘grow’ new empirical and theoretical knowledge of crime and justice in Hong Kong – necessitated a healthy degree of humility. However replete we are with knowledge and learning; however many books or articles we have published; however many times we have taught the same class; we can never know it all, and students constantly surprise and inspire us. Supervision is a learning experience for teachers as much as it is for students. Staying humble, I think, keeps us grounded and engaged. The actual projects I supervised, and the students I worked with, were a real inspiration. The first used interviews and focus-groups with school-teachers to compare traditional bullying with ‘cyber-bullying’, and made some real empirical advances. The second used visual methods, observations, and interviews to uncover the graffiti underworld in Hong Kong, and made a significant theoretical contribution – a version of this work is included in this collection. The third drew on qualitative methods and cultural criminology to disentangle the relationships between tattooing and deviance in Hong Kong. All, in their own way, demonstrated the particularities of studying crime, culture and justice in Hong Kong: of creative research in a controlled climate.

Conclusion

Four years to the day after arriving, in 2015 I left Hong Kong to take up a new appointment overseas. I'd got used to the heat, the smells, the sounds, and the people; though it was at times was still bewildering and exciting and overwhelming. In the period in between I moved from uncertainty to confidence in my role, which I came to view as a bridge between scholarly traditions from overseas and cultural knowledge of Hong Kong. In the process, my hope is that in some small way – either through teaching, coordination, or supervision – I helped nurture the first shoots of a grounded Hong Kong criminology that will grow and flourish in the years to come. In this regard, there's a line in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys* that I always remember. The character, a schoolteacher, is instructing a group of young men on literature and life and tells them: 'pass it on boys, pass it on.' The implication being – whatever you learn, give it away. Learning is a bright red thread that connects past with present and present with future. It isn't something to be hoarded but shared – not stored but pooled. Whatever you learn, give it away – and you will be repaid. Like the character in Alan Bennett's play, I hope that I passed something on, which will now be taken up by the next generation of students and scholars. Pass it on, boys and girls, pass it on.

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