

# **History as Activism: Critical Uses of History at the Berkeley School of Criminology in the 1970s**

## **Abstract**

Works of historical criminology do not have to be disinterested studies of past crime-related phenomena. Instead, they can represent practical attempts to intervene in the politics of crime and justice in the present. This article takes this claim to a critical conclusion; historical research in criminology can function as a weapon in contemporary political struggles and a way of injecting radical politics into criminological studies. To demonstrate this point, the article scrutinises the ways in which early critical criminologists in the US engaged in historical research as a way of doing politics and activism. To such criminologists, doing historical research was a form of praxis. Focusing on the works produced at the Berkeley School of Criminology in the 1970s, the article shows that the nurture of a historical interest was deemed to be a vital step in the development of a critical paradigm within American criminology.

*Keywords: activism; Berkeley School of Criminology; critical criminology; historical criminology; history of criminology*

## **Radicalism at Berkeley: Between History and Activism**

It is widely recognised that the early critical criminology that developed in the US in the 1970s was as much an activist movement as it was an intellectual endeavour. Not much scholarship, however, has been devoted to the study of how historical research served as a conduit to link the activist and the academic sides of early critical criminology in the US. Early critical criminologists in the US were interested in radical politics, grassroots and social movements, and civil and human rights. On the surface, it would have been perfectly justifiable for a casual observer in the 1970s to believe that they were fully absorbed in the politics of their present. Yet, the very same scholars and activists produced an abundance of historical studies of policing and repressive police tactics, colonial policies, institutionalised racism, the political economy of illicit drug markets, and much more. As Cardarelli and Hicks (1993) noted, this had to do, in part, with disciplinary and methodological shifts and rearrangements. As they put it, the rejection of both classical and positivist paradigms forced early critical criminologists in

the US to embark on “a search for theoretical structures to support the call for a more humanistic and historical criminology” (1993, p.519). But a careful analysis of the various uses of history made by early critical criminologists in the US reveals that, to them, history was more than a method; they took historical research to be a political tool – a way of doing activism.

This article elaborates on this point through an exploration of the efforts made by early critical criminologists at the Berkeley School of Criminology in the 1970s to connect historical scholarship and political activism. The article opens with some brief considerations about the history of the Berkeley School of Criminology and the broader political climate of the 1960s and 1970s in the US. Next, the question of why radical critique in criminology often connected with activism via historiographical detours is addressed – in other words, why early critical criminologists at the Berkeley School thought it appropriate to carry out historical studies when their ultimate goal was to give life to an activist criminology. The article then proceeds to explore the use of historical research in the works of both doctoral students and educators from the Berkeley School to show that historical research was an integral part of the critical project in the American criminology of the 1970s.

### *A Short History of American Radicalism in the 1970s*

The origins of American critical criminology at the Berkeley School of Criminology reveal that the emergence of a critical analysis in the American criminology of the 1970s was thought to be conditional upon an emphatic weaponisation of historical lines of research. The history of the Berkeley School has been extensively scrutinised as part of a conscious attempt to reconstruct the historical development of critical criminology (see Michalowski, 1996; Shank, 1999; Schwendinger, Schwendinger and Lynch, 2002; Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 2013, 2014; Stein, 2014; Koehler, 2015; Myers and Goddard, 2018; Barak, 2020). Here, only some salient points will be highlighted. Founded in 1949 to train police officers, the School progressively moved away from the provision of vocational training and towards more academic research. By the end of the 1960s, the School had ceased to be “a career academy for professional managers of the criminal justice system” (Schauffler and Hannigan, 1974, p.42) and had become the heart of criminological radicalism in the country.

Far from being a criminological exception, such a progressive repositioning was in line with the spirit of the age. The socio-historical forces at work in the 1960s and 1970s – the growth of

a counter-culture and the creation of alternative institutions like free universities, the ghetto revolts and rise of political protest and various social movements, the end of the great post-war economic boom of 1945-1973, and severe penal crises in various countries, just to name a few – created a storm of social, political, and economic anxieties that made themselves felt in almost every segment of society. That such forces would have an influence on academia, then, is not at all surprising. That said, it is somewhat startling that criminology, which had always been “one of the most conservative and firmly regulated academic disciplines” in the country and which, prior to the 1960s, was “little more than a technocratic instrument of state rule” (Platt, 1988, p.127), underwent a momentous transformation so as to accommodate the critical attitudes of the time.

The political struggles led by the New Left and the student movement, the civil rights movements and their combined efforts to overcome oppression, racism, sexism, and classism, the anti-war movements and rise of widespread cynicism concerning the institutions of government following the Vietnam war, Third World liberation struggles and anti-imperialist movements that challenged Western domination globally – all such developments in politics and civil society helped transform the Berkeley School of Criminology into a space of critical criminological reflection and practice. The School became an intellectual site of radical critique as well as an activist centre where erudite critique met the needs of the masses and where ‘a people’s criminology’ became possible. Notwithstanding the turbulent and highly politicised atmosphere of the late-1960s and early-1970s, however, radicalism in criminology at Berkeley never became the predominant intellectual force in the School. As Platt and Shank (1976, p.1) made clear, critical impulses were “never supported by a majority of the faculty at Berkeley”.

Nonetheless, in the first half of the 1970s, the School was at the centre of some key developments in the early history of critical criminology in the US. The Union of Radical Criminologists (URC) was formed at the Berkeley School of Criminology in the summer of 1972. In the fall of the same year, Barry Krisberg, Tony Platt, and Paul Takagi redesigned the course ‘Criminology 100 A-B’ – traditionally a mainstream introduction to criminology – to make it the first ever critical criminology curriculum to be taught to undergraduate students in the US. The Center for Research on Criminal Justice was initiated by the URC and other partners in 1973, and the launch of *Crime and Social Justice* – “the first radical criminology journal in the United States” (Shank, 1999, p.114) – occurred in 1974. None of these ‘radical’ developments were unique to the academic study of crime. Rather, they reflected the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s.

From the late-1960s to the mid-1970s, for example, the establishment of ‘radical unions’ of professionals became a norm in almost every major professional and academic field (see Jansen, 1979). The Union for Radical Political Economists (2006) was founded in 1968 to apply a political economic analysis of capitalist oppression and exploitation and a leftist critique of social problems that could inform progressive social policies rooted in socialist ideals. The Union of Radical Sociologists was established in 1969 to study and support movements for radical social change in the US and abroad (Szymanski, 1970). The Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians’ Organization (MARHO) was founded in 1973 to popularise emerging radical perspectives on the study of history (Brier, 1977), a task that MARHO has accomplished since 1974 through a combination of three primary activities: forums, conferences, and the publication of the *Radical History Review* – “the first journal devoted exclusively to radical history” in the US (Wiener, 1989, p.427). What needs explaining, then, is not much the fact that elements of the criminological community in the US underwent some sort of radicalisation, but why such a radicalisation was understood by many to depend on the effective weaponisation of historical research.

### *History as Weapon: The Link between Historical Research and Criminological Activism*

Historical research was not unanimously considered to be ‘the only way’ to build a critical core in the American criminology of the 1970s. The theoretical basis of early critical criminology in the US was not ‘undisciplinary’. Rather, it was built on an eclectic foundation that borrowed from and combined “muckraking journalism, civil libertarian and neo-Marxist critiques of the state, the sociology of deviance, and revisionist history” (Platt, 2014, p.3). History was just one piece of the puzzle – but it was an important piece and, for many, the most important one. That said, the emerging critical cohort at the Berkeley School of Criminology is generally deemed to have been made up by ‘radicals’ not because they were writing ‘histories’ but because they were causing trouble, i.e., because of factors such as members’ opposition to the war in Vietnam, advocacy for major prison reforms, support for civil rights, and collaboration with the Black Panthers and other community groups fighting to curb police brutality (Schwendinger, Schwendinger and Lynch, 2002, p.41). What defined critical criminology in the US more than anything else is that its birth gave life to an activist movement and not to some kind of novel historiographic program. What distinguished the critical criminology of the 1970s from earlier varieties of criminological inquiry was “its pursuit of an *activist* criminology

that could address the role of macro-social forces such as capitalism, racism, sexism, and neo-colonialism as causes of crime and impediments to justice” (Michalowski, 1996, p.11, italics in original). Again, this was perfectly in line with the spirit of the time.

In 1974, for instance, MARHO, as an association of openly partisan historians willing to make their profession a participant in struggles for liberation, defined its mission in diametrical opposition to that of traditional professional associations – whose job had always been to protect the interests of professionals themselves. MARHO’s purpose was to subvert such interests, “to destroy professionalism” (Merrill, 1989, p.487) so that historians would stop acting as guardians of the *status quo* and endeavoured to become agents of transformation instead. As the title of the Schwendingers’ (1970) seminal text in American critical criminology ‘Defenders of Order or Guardians of Human Rights?’ suggests, something very similar was happening in criminology in the early 1970s. Critical criminology at Berkeley, Shank (1999, p.116) tells us, emerged “to challenge the traditional guardians of order and to begin the work of transforming the self-crippled discourse of technicians”. Yet, this raises an important question: if early critical criminologists were interested in activism and in rejecting their traditional professional duty – that is, the duty to be ‘guardians of order’ – why doing historical work? If early critical criminologists in the US can be described as “*radical democrats* who shared the same hatred of the Vietnam war, political repression, police brutality and social inequality” (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 2013, p.149, italics in original), why writing history instead of focusing exclusively on inciting direct political action? Why writing “historical studies of the convict lease system...the origins of the police, the changes in the juvenile justice system, and the expansion of criminal justice institutions” (Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 2013, p.149)?

The most direct answer to these questions can be found in the writings of Tony Platt, who arrived at Berkeley in 1963 to do graduate work. At the time, Platt (2008, p.123) tells us, the university “was becoming a site of political struggles – about free speech, the ‘military-industrial complex’, affirmative action, and the third wave of feminism”. Historical critiques inspired by ‘the new revisionism’ of Gabriel Kolko, William Appleman Williams, and James Weinstein, by the Marxist historiography of Rusche and Kirchheimer and – a bit later – by Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, became tools used by criminologists of a critical kind to practice a different kind of criminology. This was a more politically involved criminology that could be put at the service not of the state but of the people, i.e., an activist criminology, a grassroots criminology, a bottom-up, working-class, and truly leftist criminology. This faith in

the active role of history which is often found in the writings of early critical criminologists was clearly a derivation of their Marxist sensibilities. Yet, as Platt makes clear, Marxism is not the whole story:

In my formative years, we paid serious attention to historical analysis... This was in part because the historical method was so central to Marxism; but also because the anti-war and civil rights, and later, feminist movements compelled us to investigate the historical roots of American militarism, imperialism, racism, and sexism. (Platt, 2008, p.126)

Early critical criminologists in the US believed that any serious attempt to challenge the injustices of contemporary society had to be able to grasp their historical origins and historical development.

The struggle against imperialism, militarism, racism, sexism, and so on, must be fought both at the level of direct political action and at the level of indirect historical revisionism. For early critical criminologists, then, resorting to history was a sort of political strategy, a means of better understanding the political field in which they were operating as activists and engaged intellectuals. As Brady (1975, p.78) put it, the point was to exploit academic training to fulfil “the promise of people’s criminology as practice”, that is, to do criminology as a way of better understanding the state, politics, and justice and to devise more effective “strategies for reform and revolution”. Criminology was seen as a tactical site where historical analyses of politics, law, crime, and justice could be developed and where hope for political action and radical social change could be nurtured. Criminology was meant to show that change was possible and to help “break the popular fatalism which feeds on the notion that things are as they are because, ‘they have always been so’” (1975, p.78). Thus, early critical criminologists at Berkeley took advantage of their “training in social-historical analysis” (1975, p.78) as a way of becoming better activists and more informed policy critics and analysts.

Hence, in a paper published in the ‘Struggles for Justice’ section of the very first issue of *Crime and Social Justice* and titled ‘Praxis’, Platt (1974a, p.34) complains that the struggles for justice of the 1970s were taking place “in isolation from and ignorance of earlier forms of resistance”. Blaming this lack of historical consciousness on factors such as “the hegemony of liberal historicism in academia” and its tendencies to generate “a void which disconnects us from our historical roots” (1974a, p.34), Platt reminds his readership that *Crime and Social Justice* was particularly keen to publish work that could help to develop “a sense of political continuity with earlier struggles against the State apparatus, to better understand strategies of resistance, and to relate the lessons of past to present experiences” (1974a, p.35). In Platt’s view, then, the use of historical research in criminology is tied to a fundamental requirement of academic and

civic praxis: that of engaging in broader intellectual and practical projects aimed at connecting historical memory and political agency – at linking history and activism. To put it bluntly: for early critical criminologists like Platt, history was not a method but a weapon. Historical research was a political tool to eschew professionalism and embrace activism in criminology. Back in the days of the Berkeley School of Criminology, historical research was, to many criminologists, a form of praxis.

### **The Uses of History at the Berkeley School of Criminology**

Contrary to Wolfgang's accusation that the writings of early critical criminologists in the US were "ahistorical as well as anti-scientific and anti-rational" (quoted in Platt, 1974, p.8), the position advanced by American critical criminologists in the 1970s was one openly informed by an urgent sense that historical research was essential to the development of a critical social science. A graduate student in history at the University of California at Berkeley in the mid-1970s arguably expressed this thought in its simplest and most basic form: "In the process of developing a radical criminology we have realized that such an analysis requires an historical perspective" (Shapiro, 1974, p.94). The perspective advocated by the radical wing of the Berkeley School of Criminology asserted quite unequivocally that "crime is not an inevitable manifestation of human nature, but rather a product of historical circumstances and therefore and eradicable social phenomenon" (Schauffler, 1974, p.58). As one member of the URC and graduate student of the Berkeley School understood, a defining trait of critical criminology in its early stages of development in the US was its emphasis on "the need for historical specificity in radical scholarship" (Marzotto, 1974a, p.118). Perspectives in criminology are critical insofar as they pay attention to "the origins and development" of injustices and practices of repression, exploitation, and corruption, and it is the fact that such perspectives help us understand "the historical development of the criminal justice system and its relationship to economic and political conditions" that makes them invaluable (Marzotto, 1974b, p.57).

As highlighted by Tony Platt in an interview with Elliott Currie, while critical criminologists at Berkeley were producing historically-informed work, mainstream criminologists in the rest of the country were, for the most, "constructing useless prediction tables" (Currie, 1973a, p.20). It was critical scholars like Platt who made clear that there was a serious problem with an ahistorical criminology. When asked about the sort of radical research that would help

overcome criminology's limitations during an interview for *Issues in Criminology*, Platt said: "We need careful and thorough historical research. We know very little about the historical development of the courts, police, and prisons in the United States" (Currie, 1973a, p.30). At the same time, Platt emphasised that criminologists should not do historical research in order to avoid investigating and examining problematic aspects of contemporary society, and that criminologists had a duty to take a critical stance toward the study of crime control in the present. As he put it: "criminologists should spend more time trying to analyze government policies and less time helping to implement them" (Currie, 1973a, p.30).

To the question "what does it mean to be a radical criminologist?", Platt gave an answer that attests to the historically-informed character of the critical spirit animating American critical criminology in the 1970s:

First, we need to develop a deep understanding of what criminology has been in the past. We are just beginning to realize that criminology has serviced domestic repression in the same way that economics, political science, and anthropology have greased the wheels and even manufactured some of the important parts of modern imperialism...The modern criminal justice system – juvenile court, probation, parole, indeterminate sentencing, the rehabilitative ideal, half-way houses, etc. – was built with the active involvement of criminology. Given the ways in which this system has been used to repress and maintain the powerlessness of poor people, workers, people of color, and young people, it is not too far-fetched to characterize many criminologists as domestic war criminals...The new criminology must understand and reject the role we have played historically as architects of repression. (Currie, 1973a, p.28)

In the eyes of early critical criminologists in the US, doing historical research in criminology was not a matter of "aesthetic preference" – i.e., a matter of what form of knowledge one likes or wishes to produce – but a matter of "practical priorities" (Currie, 1973a, p.31). The critical role of history in criminology, Platt argued, consists in helping identify past errors in order to avoid them in the future, better diagnose the malaises of the contemporary world so as to correct them, and, ultimately, bring about radical change. But the use of history in critical criminology should not be reduced to an exclusively practical operation and Platt himself noted that there is an additional critical rationale for keeping history and criminology united rather than separate.

Critical criminologists in the 1970s believed that the disciplinary boundaries that insulated criminology from other forms of knowledge were ideological tools of the liberal establishment utilised to create a productive but ultimately false division of cognitive and intellectual labour. Critical criminologists ought to demystify such an ideological process and resist the disciplinary requirements of a false division of labour that makes crime the object of study of criminologists, society of sociologists, the economy of economists, politics of political



scientists, and so on (Marzotto, Platt and Snare, 1975). Critical criminologists analyse crime ‘holistically’, that is, by combining the examination of political economy, history, and international perspective (1975, p.43). This explains why a significant body of research privileging a historical point of view was produced at Berkeley in the first half of the 1970s – some noticeable examples are ‘The Etiology of Female Crime: A Review of the Literature’ (Klein, 1973), ‘Towards a Theoretical Orientation for Understanding Sexism’ (Grabiner and Cooper, 1973), ‘The Eugenics Movement: Some Insight into the Institutionalization of Racism’ (Fong and Johnson, 1974), ‘At Hard Labor: Rediscovering the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Prison’ (Miller, 1974), ‘The Triumph of Benevolence: The Origins of the Juvenile Justice System in the United States’ (Platt, 1974c), and ‘Channeling Lawyers: The Careers of Public Defenders’ (Platt and Pollock, 1974). Moreover, as shown in the next section, a significant number of doctoral theses produced by students of the Berkeley School in the 1970s had a clear focus on historical questions.

### *Critical Uses of History in the Works of Doctoral Students at the Berkeley School*

Platt’s (1969a) *The Child Savers* was written as a dissertation at the Berkeley School of Criminology between 1965 and 1966 and is a critique of what was, at the time of the text’s publication, the canonical interpretation of the history of the American youth justice system. *The Child Savers* challenged the prevailing wisdom about the ‘enlightened’ character of the child-saving movement that emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to alleviate the misery that unfettered capitalism had unleashed on American urban centres. Platt realised that contemporary criminal justice and crime control originate in penal and juridical reforms of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and that studying that historical period is essential to understanding present-day programs and developments (1969b). Platt’s arguments are difficult to articulate in just a few words but a quick summary of his key points – together with some more recent observations on juvenile justice history – can be found in Platt’s ‘The Child Savers Reconsidered’ (2008).

Currie’s (1973b) *Managing the Minds of Men: The Reformatory Movement, 1865-1920*, Boostrom’s (1974) *The Personalization of Evil: The Emergence of American Criminology, 1865-1910*, and Rustigan’s (1974) *Toward a Reinterpretation of the Origins of the Classical School of Criminology in England* offered critical assessments of and made some important contributions to the intellectual history of criminology – a field that, as Snodgrass (1972, p.2)

noted in his own doctoral thesis *The American Criminological Tradition*, had been “sorrowfully neglected” until the 1970s. As he put it: “Unjudgmental and noncommittal, historical criminology is often a series of excerpts between quotation marks” (Snodgrass, 1972, p.2). Studying the intellectual history of a discipline is seldomly an attempt to divorce oneself from contemporary events and simply get lost in excavations of the past. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to regard the above-mentioned dissertations by Currie, Boostrom, and Rustigan as disinterested studies of the history of criminology. Virtually all of the historically-oriented dissertations published by graduates at the Berkeley School of Criminology in the 1970s had a focus on hotly debated topics from that period. In the case of Currie, Boostrom, and Rustigan, the heart of the matter was the scope and function of criminology itself – its rationale and historical mission. Borrowing from Foucault (2007, pp.136-137), we could say that the question that these authors were asking is the following: “what are we and what are we today?”.

Barak (1974) looked at the origins of the US public defender system in his dissertation *In Defense of the Poor: The Emergence of the Public Defender System in the United States (1900-1920)*. Barak argued that the historical establishment of the public defender was not motivated by progressive and humanitarian efforts to reform criminal justice. In a subsequent publication titled ‘In Defense of the Rich: The Emergence of the Public Defender’ (1975), Barak accused social scientists of showing little interest in the study of how historical trends contribute to shaping the present. The origins of modern criminal justice – Barak argued – are duly disregarded by most scholars in the field. The origins and early history of the public defender system are mostly ignored in the analysis of liberal academics, and studies that look at the administration of criminal law and criminal justice tend to treat of such topics “ahistorically” (1975, p.3). In Barak’s view, it was the duty of critical scholars to address this issue and take criminology one step forward by carrying out historical analyses of crime and criminal justice. In fact, he claimed that it is “only through the use of an historical perspective” (1975, p.2) that the functioning and development of criminal justice and criminal law can be properly understood. Activists and reformers who wish to bring about change in criminal justice, then, have no choice but to study its history: historical research and effective praxis are inseparable.

Clements’ (1975) *The San Francisco Maritime and General Strikes of 1934 and the Dynamics of Repression* also shows quite convincingly that historical works in criminology are often motivated by a desire to make better sense of contemporary events and to intervene in the politics of the present. Clements’ dissertation was intended to show how repression was used “in one particular historical instance” (1975, p.1) – i.e., the San Francisco maritime and general

strikes of 1934 – but her interest was not purely historical. Clements’ central objective was to actually use this case study to produce some generalisations about the general dynamics of repression – something she had already attempted in a previously published work (1971). Clements became interested in repression because of “the politics of confrontation” (1975, p.vii) she came to witness first-hand and experience in person while at Berkeley. The coercive abuse of authority displayed in the countless acts of repression she witnessed on campus made her question her commitment to study criminology – a field whose practitioners contribute to the refinement of the very repressive law enforcement techniques that disquieted her. Yet, she persevered and sought to find answers about the anatomy of repression and social control through a careful study of historical events.

Grabiner’s (1976) dissertation *Woman’s Suffrage and Social Control* also focused on repression – this time on the repressive police tactics and social control measures used against militant suffragettes – and Keller’s (1974) *Levels of Sanctioning Behavior on Indian Reservations in the Great Plains Area* is a historical police study examining some of the ways in which police force has been used and misused against Native Americans. Fujimoto (1975) problematised the relationship between socio-economic status and crime in his *Social Class and Crime: The Case of the Japanese-Americans*, a dissertation offering a historical account of and a theoretical explanation for the exceptionally low crime rates among Japanese-Americans. Lastly, Mark (1978) looked at the origins of drug prohibition in the US in his *Political, Economic and Racial Influences on America’s First Drug Laws*. What explains the explicitly historical focus found in doctoral theses written by criminology students at Berkeley in the 1970s? In part, such a focus is explained by the fact that, during that decade, criminology students at Berkeley were being taught a kind of critical criminology that was historical at its core.

### *Critical Uses of History in the Works of Educators at the Berkeley School*

As previously mentioned, in 1972 Barry Krisberg, Tony Platt, and Paul Takagi designed the first critical criminology curriculum to be ever taught to undergraduate students in a higher education institution – Criminology 100 A-B. The first component of the curriculum, Crim. 100A, was not hyper-focused on historical matters but it did contain elements of historical relevance. It covered a great variety of theoretical and conceptual themes, from general debates on the definition of crime to specific manifestations of crimes of imperialism, capitalism,

racism, sexism, and crimes of the state. The second component, Crim. 100B, however, focused on questions around social control, the criminal justice system, racial oppression, class struggle, and Americanisation, and had a significant historical focus on the Progressive Era (1880-1920). This is mostly due to the fact that such a historical period was crucial for the consolidation of criminal justice and the welfare state in the US. Moreover, external speakers would regularly be invited to the School to give talks and contribute to the curriculum and some of them, like Elliott Currie, were engaging in historical research on the reformatory movement and other areas of historical interest such as witchcraft and social control in Renaissance Europe (1968). In general terms, it is fair to say that the curriculum developed by Krisberg, Platt, and Takagi regularly emphasised the “economic, political and social relations that determined the historical development of crime and criminal justice” (Schwendinger, Schwendinger and Lynch, 2002, p.42). At a pragmatic level, this had to do with the fact that, in the 1970s, Krisberg, Platt, and Takagi were themselves conducting “basic historical research” (Krisberg, Platt and Takagi, 1974, p.64) to better understand the American past and its implications for contemporary criminal justice.

A systematic review of Krisberg, Platt, and Takagi’s written works from the 1970s would unequivocally reveal a shared interest in history – but such a task would be too time-consuming and we can here focus, instead, on a limited exploration of Krisberg’s and Takagi’s works. Tony Platt’s *oeuvre* is too extensive to be reviewed in its entirety but it suffices to say that it is heavily historical in orientation. In fact, Platt is arguably one of the criminologists who has done the most to vocally denounce mainstream criminology’s lack of historical perspective. As Platt (1974b) noted in his reflections on the prospects for a critical criminology in the US in the 1970s, the American criminology of that period was obsessed with behaviourism, pragmatism and social engineering and totally neglected historical analysis. He claimed that “the field of criminology is long overdue for serious historical scholarship” and that critical criminologists had recognised this deficiency and had begun “to develop a historical analysis in our writings and courses” (1974b, p.6). Platt understood the curative and emancipatory qualities of historical analysis. To him, studying history was a way of nurturing a therapeutic attitude toward the present condition, a way of staying hopeful even when the prospects for radical change seem to be absent, a way of not giving up in times of crisis or, as Angela Davis would put it, a way of refusing “to attribute any kind of permanency to that which is” (University of California Television, 2008, p.n/a).

Like Platt, Krisberg and Takagi understood that knowledge of the past had to play a role in analytic deconstructions of the social problems of the 1970s. As an example, Krisberg's most well-known work – *Children of Ishmael: Critical Perspectives on Juvenile Justice* – is a historical account of the youth justice system (Krisberg and Austin, 1978) and his most-cited work on the dialectics of criminal justice reform makes systematic use of historical contextualisation (Austin and Krisberg, 1981). In *Children of Ishmael*, Krisberg and Austin reconstructed the historical emergence of delinquency as a social problem by relating it to the development of capitalism, processes of urbanisation and proletarianisation, and the creation of surplus populations of youths. As Michalowski (1979, p.580) noted in his review of various works of critical criminology from the second half of the 1970s – Quinney's *Class, State and Crime*, Pearce's *Crimes of the Powerful*, Scull's *Decarceration*, Del Martin's *Battered Wives*, Krisberg and Austin's *Children of Ishmael*, and Galliher and McCartney's *Criminology: Power, Crime and Criminal Law* – these works “represent a significant step beyond legalistic and ahistorical criminology”.

Krisberg was also aware of disciplinary debates regarding the role of history in criminology, as seen in a review of Roger Hood's *Crime, Criminology and Public Policy* where Krisberg praised Hood's text for being a clear counter-example to the typically “ahistorical, provincial, deficient” ‘old criminology’ (1976, p.423). What is more, his *Crime and Privilege: Toward a New Criminology* (1975) – a text calling for a criminology centred around social justice themes – exposes the ideological biases of the ‘old’ criminology in various historical periods, includes a chapter *a la* Rusche and Kirkheimer on the history of penal sanctions, and relies heavily on Wright Mills' insights on the sociological and political relevance of history. A paper in which Krisberg revisits Mills' notion of the sociological imagination – ‘The Sociological Imagination Revisited’ (1974) – plainly shows Krisberg's attentiveness to history and his desire to link historical research and political action.

The paper represents Krisberg's (1974) tribute to Mills as practitioner of a moral and potentially liberating social science as well as radical father of the academic New Left of his time. Krisberg (1974, p.148) emphasises Mills' postulation of a relationship between ‘history’ and ‘biography’ as “the moral task of the social sciences”, or the idea that the task of the social scientist is to link the forms that suffering and harm take in the present with the broader historical forces that bolster them. This is in no way a conventional historiographic exercise, for the social science envisioned by Mills relied on a weaponisation of ‘new history’ and not traditionalist historiography. The point of developing a sociological imagination is precisely

that of avoiding both “the ahistorical ideology of corporate liberals” who practice a sort of ‘abstracted empiricism’ devoid of historical character and the traditional posture of historians who are “only historians” (1974, p.150). To appreciate history as “*a vital part of social inquiry*” (1974, p.150, italics in original) is to understand that “the concern for history must be tied to a commitment to change in the present” (1974, p.150) and to realise that history must be constantly studied anew in order to “effect change in the present” (1974, p.151). Clearly, then, Krisberg had a favourable view of research that is – in his own words – “oriented toward change and rooted in history” (1974, p.153). In other words, research has a terminus in praxis and informs activism with the aid of historical knowledge.

Just like Krisberg, Takagi had an interest in history even though history was not the only item in his academic repertoire. He was an involved intellectual with a practical interest in the functioning of corrections and a consultant for the criminal justice system who helped train police officers in the treatment of racial minorities. But he was also a co-teacher in the first Asian American history course introduced at Berkeley in 1969, and he published a great deal of historically-informed research. In addition to research on the criminal justice system, political attitudes, and racial discrimination, he published historical research on the history of penal and correctional institutions, and he openly incentivised his students and alumni to write historical works (see for instance Miller, 1980). His ‘The Walnut Street Jail’ (1975) offered a historical account of the origins of the state prison in the US arguing that the state carceral system emerged in response to politico-economic issues and called for a re-examination of the factors and forces that led to the institutionalisation of penal reforms. The following year, Takagi published an evaluation of the historical literature on penal reform and historical works on punishment to further investigate the historical question of “why some penal reforms came to be institutionalized while others were rejected” (1976, p.60).

These were themes that, as a professor at the Berkeley School of Criminology, Takagi had been exploring since at least the late-1960s. In 1974, it was already his fifth year teaching a course on the origins and historical development of the modern correctional system that, among other topics, covered the industrial revolution and the origins of the modern system of incarceration, punishment in the American South in pre-industrial times, and the rise of scientific penology and the rehabilitative ideal. It was a careful study of the history of punishment that led Takagi to conclude that the commonly accepted rationale for punishment – i.e., a combination of deterrence, treatment, and social defence – actually masked a desire for social revenge on one hand and the need for socially useful labour on the other. And it was historical inquiry, again,

that helped him find the conviction that the penal system had little to do with justice and a lot to do with class. A careful historical reconstruction of penality and punitive power eventually led Takagi to conclude that penal reforms are fundamentally a function of political economy (Takagi, 1974).

Takagi's work on American culture, race, and crime is also heavily informed by a historical perspective. 'The Myth of Assimilation in American Life' (1973, p.194), for instance, starts with a critique of "the ahistorical analysis that characterizes much of the research on Asian American experiences". Similarly, in 'Behind the Gilded Ghetto: An Analysis of Race, Class and Crime in Chinatown', Takagi and Platt (1978) take a historical approach to understand crime in Chinatown in their own days and argue that studying the historical development of that community was essential to understanding its contemporary characteristics and configurations. They start with an analysis of the Chinese population in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century California and proceed to reconstruct and discuss the urbanisation of the Chinese people and the proletarianisation of work in Chinatown. Then they compare past and present trends in crimes committed by Chinese people, discuss law enforcement, gangs, and the Cold War period, and end with an account of resistance struggles organised by the Chinese youth movement in response to the economic deterioration of Chinatown. As they put it, Chinatown "is a recent phenomenon and we need a historical analysis in order to understand its development" (1978, p.3). The same overarching point is then further explored in a later study on race, crime, and social policy where Takagi (1981, p.54) argues that social research on American culture, social structures, and minority groups "calls for an analysis of history, politics, and economies".

It should be clear by now, then, that an interest in history was a pervasive force within the radical wing at the Berkeley School and that such a historical interest was regarded as vital to the flourishing of an activist criminology in the US. However, there is scope for future research to investigate more thoroughly the modalities of historical research adopted by early critical criminologists at the Berkeley School – something that, for the sake of concision, could not be adequately examined in this article. In particular, the extent to which early critical criminologists engaged with conventional historical methods should be scrutinised more carefully to better appreciate the contribution of these scholars to historical criminology. It is clear, for instance, that Platt and colleagues were influenced by the primary research on the history of criminal law, criminal justice, and criminal courts pioneered by British Marxist historians like E. P. Thompson, George Rudé, and Eric Hobsbawm (see Platt, 1974b, p.6). At

the same time, early critical criminologists in the US did not seem to be particularly keen to let their works be defined by the use of certain historiographic techniques.

Those who advocate for historical criminology to seek a distinct identity through a careful selection of methodological choices – we could mention Deflem (2015), Knepper (2016, 2017), and Lawrence (2019), who advocate for the criminological use of comparative analysis, archival research, and long time-frame historical research methods respectively – will probably contend that such an emphasis on method is required if contemporary historical criminologists want to be successful at generating new and novel data. When looking at the uses of historical research found in the early writings of critical criminologists in the US, however, it appears that they were not particularly interested in giving life to a new disciplinary specialisation at the intersection of history and criminology. Rather, they pragmatically fused precepts of Marxist historiography, historical materialism, historical revisionism, and new history to challenge, reinterpret, and rewrite orthodox views of the history of crime and criminal justice. In that regard, they were simply extending the work of radical historians in the US who, starting in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had begun developing critiques of and interpretive alternatives to traditional accounts of American history (Wiener, 1989). Ultimately, they mostly did not concern themselves with particular applications of historiographic method but with historicising the social sciences and showing that history matters to criminology.

As Barak (2020, p.28) put it, early critical criminologists at the Berkeley School “were contending with the mostly ahistorical accounts of social science inquiry before the late 1960s” and their primary task was to make the social sciences more political by way of criticism as well as to make them more critical by way of historical research.

## **Conclusion**

Early critical criminology in the US took the form of an activist movement that denounced the traditional function of criminologists who either openly aspired to be or unconsciously acted as guardians of order and architects of repression. An important component of this critical project was the effective weaponisation of historical lines of research and the establishment of a symbiotic relationship between activism and historical scholarship. As Platt and colleagues put it, early critical criminologists in the US were “primarily engaged in gaining a historical understanding of crime and its control institutions...and placing the popular struggle against



crime in the context of the class struggle” (Dod, et al., 1976, p.2). To an extent, then, it could be argued that the historical focus found in the writings of early critical criminologists in the US played a role in the decision-making process that ultimately led to the shutdown of the Berkeley School of Criminology. If history is a weapon, then historical research poses a threat that must be either kept in check or suppressed altogether. One of the most prominent educators from the Berkeley School of Criminology in the 1970s, Marie-Andrée Bertrand, openly admitted this during an interview with Virginia Engquist Grabiner (1973, p.38): “Phasing out schools which develop a historical and critical perspective...[is one of the ways] by which the ‘provider’, the State, can coerce schools of criminology into training petty servile ‘professionals’”.

Doing historical research along critical lines can be a way of challenging mindless careerism and the mainstream academic professionalism that sustains the *status quo*. Writing critical histories can be an effective way of engaging in the sort of activist social science that can help us shape a different present and envision a better future. Interestingly, the announcement of the School’s closure in the late-1970s initially emboldened some of the critical criminologists who were engaged in the production of critical historical research:

The School of Criminology at the University of California, Berkeley, is currently destined for closure...The repressive tactics used against the school have only served to lend greater impetus to our determination to talk about the history of racial, sexual and class oppression in America (Fong and Johnson, 1974, pp.89-90).

That said, recent decades have witnessed a declining interest in the use of history in American critical criminology – something that Platt (2008) himself condemned about a decade and a half ago. He expressed concerns that contemporary American criminology is nowhere as attuned to history as it used to be at the time of the emergence of critical criminology in the country, lamenting that American criminology has been guilty of “turning away from the historical method as graduate schools promote empirical and policy studies of the here and now” (2008, p.126).

Bertrand’s warning was prescient and should make us pause and reflect: why have we not systematically developed a ‘critical historical criminology’ over the past four or five decades? Is lack of historical work in critical criminology a sign of the successes of mainstream criminology to keep our critical inclinations under control? In line with Platt, it should be hoped that “in the future we will see a revival of interest in historical analysis among students and intellectuals working in justice studies” (2008, p127). Hopefully, this article will help galvanise

an interest in historical research among critical criminologists and facilitate further research on the links between historical scholarship and criminological activism.

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