

Developing Cultural Criminology: Theory & Practice in Papua New Guinea

Editor: Cyndi Banks

Published by The Institute of Criminology, Sydney (2000).

ISBN: 1 86487 321 3

pp: 252 plus iv

Reviewed by Dr. Tess Newton Cain

This book is No. 13 in the Sydney Institute of Criminology Monograph Series. There are several titles in this series that are ‘non-mainstream’ in their approach but this is the first title whose focus is located in the Pacific island region, making it a welcome addition to the stable.

This is an edited collection bringing together work by nine authors (including Stanley Cohen and Marilyn Strathern, who wrote the preface and introduction respectively). All of the authors of the substantive chapters have a long-standing association with Papua New Guinea, with several of them having worked under the aegis of the National Research Institute in Port Moresby.

Cohen’s preface poses a significant theoretical challenge and it is interesting to judge the book according to how it addresses the tensions that he raises. At the level of ‘knowledge’ he recognises that the tensions between specificity or ‘local’ knowledge and a more general or global approach are ones that can be explored productively, indeed criminology must be ‘cultural’ if it is to be ‘respectable’ (p.1) However, he raises the caveat that criminologists, once they move from the area of ideas to that of ideology should maintain a perspective that incorporates some ‘general’ knowledge no matter how specific or singular the case study may be. He goes further in stating:

When we move, though, from the more intellectual to the more ideological terrain, I am not quite so open-minded – let alone as sympathetic as most of the contributors are – to the case for cultural specificity. I do believe that the idea (and ideal) of core and universal human rights is the last meta-narrative still alive – and that it deserves defending against the excesses of post modernist rhetoric (p.2).

Whilst Cohen’s position is not one that may attract widespread sympathy it is one that I found myself returning to during the course of reading the book and one with which I continue to agree.

Having aligned myself, ideologically, with Cohen, the impact is that some of the material in this book proves unsatisfactory on that level for failing to address this significant challenge that he has posed. There is no meta-narrative to this collection and whilst it is probably the case that many meta-narratives are inappropriate within the context of Papua New Guinea, it is hard to see that the human rights perspective is one that should be discarded or disregarded in any context, this one included.

Anthropology as a discipline exerts a significant influence within this collection. Four of the authors are described by reference to their anthropological credentials and others whose disciplines have not been

identified may also consider themselves as anthropologists to some degree or another. Anthropology has been, and to a large extent continues to be, one of the most significant disciplines involved in bringing the Pacific to the rest of the world. The material that is presented here continues a well-established tradition of providing insight into the lives of people living in Papua New Guinea from an impressive array of angles and viewpoints. A wide range of subject matter is covered, including the relationship between crime and the state (Dinnen, chapter 2), the particularities of violence in a Melanesian context (Banks, chapter 3), marijuana cultivation, distribution and possession (Ivarature, chapter 4), surveillance and discipline in the prison system (Reed, chapter 5), 'raskolling' (Sykes, chapter 6), the rise of street begging in Port Moresby (Sikani, chapter 7) and differing responses to dispute resolution (Crook, chapter 8).

The material is presented in such a way that it goes beyond a mere reporting of what happens in particular situations and communities. It relates issues of crime, disorder and social dysfunction to wider issues of politics, economics, environment and statehood. Each of these are contentious in whatever context and the authors succeed in exemplifying the particular contentions that arise in the specific socio-political environment that is Papua New Guinea. For example, Dinnen documents the comparative success of 'informal' responses to violence, some of which are initiated by the perpetrators of crime, when compared with the lack of 'institutional capacity' on the part of those agencies tasked with executing state responses to raskolism and other criminal activities (chapter 3). Elsewhere, Ivarature's empirical study of the cultivation, distribution and possession of marijuana (spak brus) leads him to the conclusion that rather than relying solely on law and order responses to this particular form of deviance, the government should be exploring ways of developing alternative economic activity, particularly, in the Highlands, in order to provide a viable alternative of generating income rather than becoming involved in the illicit spak brus economy. The recurring emphasis on the interplay between political structures, cultural imperatives and economic thrusts and constraints within the context of crime and responses to crime is one of the strongest points of this collection.

This collection of criminological work is striking in its ambiguity towards theoretical discussion. In chapter 1, Banks reviews existing theoretical approaches that have been developed within the study of 'Third World Criminology' identifying two main branches: modernisation theory and underdevelopment theory. Banks discounts both of these strands on the basis that:

...existing 'Third World criminology theory' is western based in its focus on internal or external causal factors and is drawn from western conceptions of the relationship between the individual and the State. Modernisation and underdevelopment theories take no meaningful account of culture and I will alter argue that the distinctiveness of conceptions of 'offence' and 'justice' which naturally flow from those cultural notions, produce culturally constructed definitions and conceptions and must be accounted for in any theory of crime in developing countries (p.25).

Instead, she favours an approach based in 'specificity'. Elsewhere, one or two authors do attempt to ground their work within recognised theoretical frameworks. For example, in chapter 5, Reed applies Foucauldian ideas of discipline and surveillance to his observations of the environment of Bomana, the largest prison in Papua New Guinea. Although this is one of the shorter chapters in the book, Reed maintains the Foucauldian perspective throughout his observations. For example, he notes:

Inmates are impressed by the capacity of discipline and law to obviate division and reveal a single, concentrated image. Outside, they say, there are many different languages and customs, and as a consequence, people lead separate lives. However, in Bomana, inmates must leave these customs behind and instead obey the orders and instructions of warders... Regardless of where they are from or what gang they belong to, under the work of penal law and discipline they become one (p.164).

Similarly, in chapter 6, Sykes views the culturally specific phenomenon of 'raskolling' through the broader theoretical prism of schismogenesis, 'that is, the practices which create groups through

differentiation of persons from each other' (p.174). This informs her 'contestatory model of sociality' (p.175) which leads her to the conclusion that by engaging in acts of violence, the young males of Papua New Guinea are not seeking to destroy social relations but to 'transform' them (p.174).

So, it is too simplistic to say that there is no theory in this collection. However, what is lacking is any attempt to integrate the discussions about the criminology of Papua New Guinea into the global context of modern criminological debate. Specificity taken too far can lead to a situation where those lacking the specific 'local' knowledge are denied the opportunity to contribute their 'general' knowledge within the context of a more wide-ranging debate.

The book is laid out well and although footnotes are always preferable to endnotes, at least these endnotes come at the end of each chapter making them relatively easy to navigate. Each chapter is followed by a specific list of references thus obviating the need for a bibliography. However, an index would be a useful addition. Those with a legal background may find it somewhat irritating that primary legal sources are not cited fully. For example, Sikani refers to the Vagrancy Act and the Child Welfare Act (pp.198-9) without identifying the year of enactment or the chapter number in either case. Elsewhere Banks refers to cases from the National Court without providing the name of the case or a legal citation (e.g. pp. 90-1). A further minor irritation is the frequent use of the term 'Melanesian' despite the fact that all of the research that forms the basis of these contributions was conducted in Papua New Guinea. It is somewhat ironic, especially to those of us who live elsewhere in Melanesia, to see the capture of this term in a book that proclaims itself wedded to the concept of specificity.

This book will be of interest to those concerned with issues of crime, disorder and social development elsewhere in the Pacific. Although there is no denying the singularity of the crime situation in Papua New Guinea, a collection such as this provides a valuable demonstration of the complexities involved in a truly rigorous dissection of the place of crime in the societies of the Pacific island region.

© University of the South Pacific 1998-2006