

**Victoria Cannings, Greg Martin and Steve Tombs (eds.), *The Emerald International Handbook of Activist Criminology*, Emerald: Bingley, 2023, 450 pp., £135 (hbk).**

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What is ‘activist criminology’? Several contributors to this valuable collection adopt Joanne Belknap’s definition in her 2014 Presidential Address to the American Society of Criminology: ‘criminologists engaging in social and/or legal justice at individual, organizational, and/or policy levels, which goes beyond typical research, teaching, and service.’ In their chapter in this volume, Belknap and Alejandra Portillos introduce a definition of ‘Activist Criminology Methods’ with three components: ‘(1) including the public; (2) using *reflexivity*; and (3) ensuring the findings are communicated to the public and, ideally, used to create change’ (p. 27).

What is surprising about this definition is how uncontroversial it is. Perhaps I have a distorted view because I work in a law school and know an unrepresentative sample of criminologists, but I wonder how many readers of this journal will dispute that those three components are desirable characteristics of criminological (or socio-legal) research. Does anyone seriously believe in value-free criminology (‘I study rape and murder, but of course I’m not for or against them’)? Are we all activist criminologists, then – even if, as Onwubiko Agozino suggests in his Foreword, ‘most criminologists are conservative activists’ (p. xxvi)? Clearly not, on Belknap’s first definition, as activism has to go beyond what academics typically do. But what counts as activism seems to be partly a question of degree and partly one of political orientation, in the sense that all the contributors have heeded Barbara Hudson’s call to take ‘the side of the powerless, the marginalised and the excluded’ (quoted at p. 51).

This handbook has 29 chapters, the first being the editors’ introduction (which includes an admirably candid discussion of some differences of view among the editors), and the remainder being divided into five parts.

The first part begins with Belknap and Portillos’ chapter quoted above, and also includes Keir Irwin-Rogers’ attractive proposal for a ‘Janus-faced’ criminology capable of addressing the usual audiences for administrative criminology (including the Conservative government) alongside the grassroots engagement sought by activist criminology. Will Jackson, Will McGowan and Emma Murray contribute the first of several chapters exploring the potential of the arts for activist interventions. Ayse Sargin, in a chapter focussing on environmental activism in Turkey, makes important points about social movements as sources of knowledge. Greg Martin discusses the media and media research, and this Part concludes with Rachel Seoighe’s lyrical paean to hope in activist criminology.

Part Two is ostensibly concerned with historical perspectives, but oddly includes Alejandro Forero-Cuéllar and Iñaki Rivera-Beiras’s discussion of torture and institutional violence in Spain, which is all too contemporary. It is also a little odd that this chapter is the only one to discuss, in passing, the Scandinavian abolitionist campaigns of the 1970s, though Thomas Mathiesen’s work with these groups, and the resulting theoretical work which David Rodriguez Goyes briefly mentions in his chapter on genocide in Colombia, are surely seminal in the development of activist criminology. Other chapters in Part Two discuss the British prisoner rebellions of the same period, and aspects of the history of criminology in Brazil and Nigeria.

The seven chapters in Part Three explore various ‘Sites of Activism and Resistance’ including theatre in prison; critical pedagogy as a response to indigenous genocide in Colombia; worker resistance in Norway; the ‘civic monitoring’ of environmental harms in Italy (returning to the theme of the epistemic role of social movements); resistance to the criminalisation of people rescuing migrants at sea; challenges to the incarceration of First Nations people in Australia and Canada; and public inquiries into child sexual abuse in Australia.

Rather than mentioning all the six chapters on ‘Practice-based Interventions’ that make up Part Four, I’ll single out one that provides a particularly good illustration of some of the themes of the book. This is Ilaria Aversa’s chapter on ‘sport-based interventions’ in Italy, which discusses the author’s work with a centre which provided sports facilities and coached men’s and women’s football teams for migrants, alongside educational programmes and legal advice. Initially Aversa found it difficult to arrange interviews because, she concluded, her ‘impartial’ stance contributed to club members’ suspicions about her motives. Then she discovered that the centre’s teams were being excluded from league competitions by an arcane rule under which migrant accommodation centres did not constitute valid residential addresses. By participating in a successful campaign to change the rule, Aversa was able to work with the migrant footballers to present their experiences of Italian bureaucracy, and thus acquire the testimony about the workings of the bureaucracy that she had largely failed to obtain by more conventional interviews. Doing research *with* rather than *on* a marginalised population proved to be a successful epistemic strategy as well as a contribution to activism.

There is a certain irony here in that while Aversa inveighs against the neoliberal university, she was based at an English university and thus subject to the REF (Research Excellence Framework) with its demand for evidence of ‘impact’ beyond the academy. Changing a rule of the Italian football league looks as if it would make a neat ‘impact case study’ and be just what a neoliberal university needs! Similarly, the various artistic and media-related projects discussed in the book look like good ways of generating ‘impact’ even without achieving legal or regulatory change. While the impact agenda clearly favours administrative criminology which can claim credit for short term changes in practice, it seems a reasonable hypothesis that it also favours certain kinds of activist criminology, at least in comparison to the 1970s-style critical criminology which, as Becka Hudson’s chapter suggests (pp. 406-7) was done by activists but was not ‘activist criminology’. One can also hypothesise that to ‘succeed’ according to neoliberal standards, the activist criminologist must either identify a quickly winnable battle like that of the football clubs or adopt expressive forms of intervention such as exhibitions and theatrical performances. Something like Jodie M Dewey’s proposals in Chapter 24 for introducing anti-racist pedagogical principles into US police training might be less likely to tick the box.

Turning to Part Five we find a series of chapters (including Hudson’s mentioned above) which address the ‘trials and tribulations’ of activist criminology within the university. Here again the neoliberal university is a natural target for the contributors’ indignation. Aidan O’Sullivan provides a useful discussion of teaching activist criminology, particularly in a university with a relatively large proportion of working class students. He acknowledges that it cannot be assumed that the students will share the activist tutor’s politics, and suggests that activism can include working for charities as well as social movement. The final chapter, by Liv Gaborit, ends on a rather depressing note as she leaves academia to find a less constrained way of struggling against the terrible oppression in Myanmar. While I can well

understand her frustration, I believe that groups of academics like the International State Crime Initiative<sup>1</sup> can make meaningful contributions to exposing the Myanmar regime from within academia.

Overall, this is a book of consistently high quality that provides much food for thought as well as a useful pedagogical resource.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.statecrime.org](http://www.statecrime.org). The reviewer is a Co-Director of ISCI.