

BOOK REVIEWS.

Counter-Colonial Criminology: A Critique of Imperialist Reason
by Biko Agozino. London: Pluto Press, 2003.

Thomas S. Mosley
University of Maryland Eastern Shore

The development and maintenance of criminology—expressed as a “repressive technology,” and along with other constraining and dominant technologies, such as militaries, law enforcement institutions, and penal systems—has been the primary strategy of neo-colonial powers in their quest for control in underdeveloped nations and elsewhere. Biko Agozino extends this compelling argument in his laudable depiction of western imperialism and criminological thought. A primary question posed by Agozino concerns the unparalleled escalation of criminological-based technology in the West that is juxtaposed to its relative absence in impoverished Third World nations.

In a review of European legal philosophy, Agozino informs of the prevalence, potency, and practicality of European ideology, and articulates how its proliferation—along with the vulnerabilities of other social systems—has facilitated the hegemonic arrangement that Europe has secured in its relationships with lesser-empowered systems. He focuses particularly on the practice by Europeans of drawing on their social control doctrines as justification for using colonized peoples as laboratory experimental subjects.

Through an examination of the question of power and a refutation of the characterization of corruption as being unique, Agozino argues that there was significant defiance of colonial criminological ideology that followed wars against imperialist powers. As an enhancement to this general framework, he connects recently developed theoretical perspectives to progressive grassroots movements worldwide. Agozino also stresses how limitations inherent in the societal reaction view—which have generated various labels for the perspective—have thwarted attempts to move crime theories out of the domain of the colonialist paradigm.

Agozino contends that a highly divisive phenomenon and an impediment to the struggle against imperialist domination of criminological thought is the splintering of radical criminological theory into rivaling secondary camps. The historical foundations of these radical perspectives of critical social theory are traced, and each view is assessed in terms of its contributions to the development of criminological theory. Tying together colonialist and anti-colonialist principles and comparing the radical criminological paradigms to the major criminological paradigms, Agozino describes how the latter have become the standard.

Agozino argues that an emerging group of feminist scholars—not given to the criminologist label—questions the plausibility of critical criminology. Employing the tenets of diverse feminist perspectives—feminist empiricism, standpoint feminism, and

postmodern feminism among them—they have begun to resist, at the expense of sustained marginalization, the dominating theorizations of the crime perspective. Agozino suggests that it would be to the benefit of crime scholars, feminists and otherwise, to look in earnest at what feminist scholars bring to the discipline.

That feminist scholars are non-contributors to the discourse on the “colonial genealogy” of criminology implies, Agozino argues, a deficiency in the general suppositions of feminist criminology. To support his contention that gender analyses of criminology could be enhanced by being receptive to resistance movements to colonialism, he offers a critical assessment by allegorizing rape as a component of international relations.

Agozino illustrates how criminology-related poststructuralist perspectives are applicable to the study of criminology and how they have been influenced by colonialism. Using a post-colonialist literary approach in a critique of post-structuralism, he derides the theory’s relative absence of a critique of colonialism, and underscores its functional contributions.

Emphasizing two contemporary contrasting perspectives on the sociology of knowledge, Agozino demonstrates how the precepts of post-structuralism have supplemented the discipline of criminology. German social theorist, Jurgen Habermas purports that the philosophical principles inherent in modernism continue to maintain a pertinent position in the study of the sociology of law. French scholar, Jean Baudrillard argues on the other hand, however, that with regard to clarifying the vocational practices of criminologists, postmodernism has effectively supplanted modernism as the guiding apparatus.

Focusing on state crimes as obstacles to worldwide campaigns for social equality, Agozino scrutinizes the undeveloped character of state crime theories. In addition he provides explanations for “structural penology” for crime enacted by governments, including those that are in violation of human rights.

Illustrating what criminological theory has gained from the contributions of African scholars, Agozino reports that African literature—and particularly its radical component—has been quite instrumental to the development of criminology . He asserts that by scrutinizing radical theory from an African literary perspective, scholars could transform counter-colonial criminology into a very innovative component of the theoretical and methodological component of the overall discipline.

Agozino suggests that rather than accepting the premise that objectivity and commitment are diverging principle that are incompatible, and thus unsuitable as a methodological option for counter-colonial criminology, scholars would be better served by taking the position that counter-colonial criminology is both objective and committed. In accepting this condition, he underscores the relevance of race, class, and gender research and the importance of committed objectivity inherit in it.

Likewise, in another example, he shows the practicality of employing committed objectivity in making a systematic argument in opposition to capital punishment. His particular focus is on the death penalty in America, Africa, and in other regions of the world. To counter the efforts of criminologists who use science to formulate a mistake-free death penalty system, Agozino applies social scientific methodological principles to critique the work of such scholars.

Accentuating the abject state of people of African ancestry living inside the municipal colonies of imperialist powers, Agozino reiterates the importance of the application of the postcolonial approach to criminology. For example, he points to the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence and the nonchalant response to it on the part of the police. This, he explains, is substantiation that counter-colonial criminology is applicable to colonization in former localities as well as in former colonial nations.

In the final section on the situation of people of African descent who have come under the control of imperialism, Agozino cites African Caribbean customs and how popular culture has become a victim of despotic regulating practices. He cautions that the plight of Peter Tosh, who was killed because of his ties to crime, should put counter-colonial criminologists on guard of the imminent pitfalls that threaten them.

Finally, Agozino offers an analysis that focuses on the significance, or lack thereof, of criminology in combating global colonization. He illustrates how in former colonial locales, as well as in existing colonialist nations, colonial history has molded both explanations of crime as well as entire justice systems. Westerners plied their criminology in colonies before shifting them back to the West. Agozino argues, in effect, then, that colonization has had a profound impact in terms of shaping the criminology of the contemporary hegemonic western powers.