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Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory

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Taking Stock: The Status of Criminological Theory is the most recent volume in the Transaction series *Advances in Criminological Theory*. Like other volumes in the series, this edited collection is intended to provide the reader with a “state of the art” understanding of significant theoretical and empirical issues. However, when compared to some other volumes in that series, the scope of *Taking Stock* is considerably broader. This it turns out is both a strength and a weakness of the collection.

As the title suggests, *Taking Stock* offers an assessment of those explanations which dominate contemporary criminology. With respect to each specific topic covered in the 15 chapters, the scholarship is impressive, and the scope comprehensive. Moreover, while this is not meant primarily as a pedagogic tool, the form of argument and the writing style make the material accessible to graduate - and even advanced undergraduate - readers. The lengthy, general introduction by the volume editors usefully defines points of convergence and divergence across the range of theoretical accounts covered in the volume.

These theories are assessed with reference to two kinds of criteria. The first concerns the degree to which a given perspective is supported by a judicious and critical reading of relevant research. Second, the effort is made in each case to offer informed speculation about the future utility and promise of the perspective in question. These criteria thus allow for both a theoretical review and a theoretical agenda. However, these criteria also suggest some potential problems.

With respect to the empirical assessments, it is recognized that these perspectives differ markedly regarding the quantity and quality of relevant research evidence. As a consequence, the most instructive chapters are those which speak to theoretical traditions built on extensive empirical foundations. This includes, most notably, the life course chapters by Moffitt, Farrington and Laub et al. and the chapters dealing with strain (Agnew), control (Gottfredson) and social learning (Akers and Jensen). In addition, the use of meta-analyses in the chapters on deterrence (Pratt et al.) and correctional treatment (Gendreau et al.) suggests an opportunity for especially rigorous assessment.

While each chapter speaks to the potential of the perspective in question, it is important to note, as the editors of the volume remind us, that scholars are in general very reluctant to let a theory go, whatever the empirical evidence might say. The chapter by Pratt et al. on deterrence is a good case in point. The authors’ review convincingly reveals that the effects of deterrence variables are moderate to weak and often missing in multivariate analyses. Yet as they correctly point out, deterrence theorists will be more likely to search for contexts in which these effects are maximized than to kill the theory off. As a general consequence, the exhaustive reviews by the contributors do not reduce our theoretical options. Perhaps criminology is doomed to be multi-paradigmatic. One is reminded of the suggestion made several years ago by Thomas Bernard that journals should require theorists to state clearly the nature of the empirical findings that could be taken as proof that a given theory is incorrect.

The cynic might ask about the degree of objectivity that we can expect when the champions of particular theories are the ones who are asked to take stock. Admittedly, in one sense it is peculiar that a chapter by Laub, Sampson (and Sweeten) is entitled “Assessing Sampson and Laub’s Life-

Course Theory of Crime”. At the same time, it is the architects of these theories who are in the best position to explain their empirical status and assess their future import.

In a sense the book is a kind of celebration of explanatory diversity. A theoretically vibrant discipline, we are told, is preferable to one mired in theoretical doldrums. This vibrancy, as the authors acknowledge, required them to make some very difficult choices regarding what should and what should not be included in such a volume. While any decisions of this type would create discontent among those who think that certain perspectives are given too much or too little attention, some choices seem to invite particular scrutiny.

While the chapter on segregation and race/ethnic inequality by Peterson et al. is informative, its place in the current volume is less than obvious. Because their arguments locate explanations of crime within the social ecology of contemporary American cities, the generalizability of these accounts is somewhat limited. Moreover, segregation and racial inequality are subjects about which one theorizes rather than theories in and of themselves.

While so-called radical or critical theory is often given only token treatment in volumes of this sort, *Taking Stock* includes three such chapters. A discussion in the chapter by Lynch et al. of the effects of environmental toxins suggests an intriguing degree of complementarity between more radical theories and more traditional empirical approaches. The worst fit might involve the chapter on “peacemaking” by Fuller and Wozniak. The emphasis on “self love”, nonviolence, social justice and inclusion implies theoretical themes very different from those around which the rest of the book is organized. An understandable lack of empirical evidence relevant to peacemaking leads the authors to operationalize elements of this complex theoretical framework in terms of very traditional questions about the effectiveness of punishment.

With respect to omissions, it is unfortunate that very little attention is directed toward an assessment of routine activities or other theoretical models which focus on crimes as events. Consistent with biases in the discipline, the perspective of the volume is very much offender-centered and the problems of criminology are very much understood as the problem of criminality. Rather than read these biases and omissions as limitations of the current volume, it would be more helpful to think about them as signaling a need to “take stock” across the wider range of criminological problem areas and to do so in regular and frequent fashion.

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