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Future Perspectives on Crime History as “Connected History”

Barry Godfrey

It is difficult to image an “unconnected history”. A strange beast indeed would be a piece of historical research that did not reference other scholars, different periods of history, or congruent disciplinary perspectives: this would be so odd, in fact, that we might hardly regard such a piece of work as worth reading. This essay, then, does not focus on the validity of connected histories, so much as the levels of connectivity, the mechanisms by which we have joined together our research to make it stronger, and what more we can achieve, particularly within the arena of shared data. Indeed, it is possible that crime history is uniquely positioned to take advantage of the new revolution in the use of “Big Data”. The interrogation of individual or connected digital data sets by historians within a cross-national or cross-temporal framework, or by historians with different theoretical perspectives, could position crime historians at the forefront of a new “history from below” paradigm.

Historians of crime may consider themselves at the centre of a nexus of a set of “connected histories” of power. The criminal justice system is commonly understood as a brokering system for power relations to express themselves and be utilised and experienced by various groups; and crime historians examine how, and with what results, power is experienced by those who wield it, and those who suffer from it. The topics covered by the crime history community are many and various, and they are not limited to national jurisdictions, but cross borders to become international, cross-national, and in some cases, truly global studies. As Douki and Minard noted in 2007, “‘Global history’, ‘circulation’, and ‘connection’ are all themes that exert an unquestionable appeal today”¹; an appeal which stretches across to “comparative history”, “*histoire croisée*”, and “transnational history” in a continuing and developing process. Although they did not say this as directly as this – Douki and Minard could have added that global history *means* connected history, which in turn *means* better history. Sociologists have also intimated the same thing about their discipline².

However, there are concentrations of interest around certain countries. There are hundreds of publications on the United Kingdom, on (particularly) Northern Europe, and on the United States, produced each year. Most crime history is written in English, so the contribution of this journal is a valuable and necessary corrective to this Anglo-centric dominance, but one of only a few; and the majority of historians still work solely on the country of their birth. For example, the statistical analysis of the directories published by the Institute of Modern and Contemporary History (IHMC-CNRS) for early modern and modern history in 1991 and 2000 reveal that the

¹ Douki and Minard (2007, p.7 and p.25).

² Bhabra (2010).

vast majority of modern French historians worked solely on French history, with only a minority working on the history of other countries (see Table below).

**Répertoire des historiens français de la période moderne et contemporaine.
Annuaire 2000³**

Year	1991	2000
Total active	1235	2090
Active researches indexed by country		
United States	76	77
Russia and Slavic nations	53	29
Scandinavia	19	10
China	13	19
Japan	14	15
Pacific/Oceania	8	5

In addition to a certain apparent chauvinism amongst historians, we could add that there are few studies of South America, or India, and not nearly as many crime histories of Asian countries as we would like (hardly any of China for example). There are notable exceptions of course, such the work of Dikötter and Muhlhahn, for example⁴. However, the existing historiography is tiny given the geographical and historical scale of China, and so is the level of interconnectivity between Western and Chinese scholars⁵. The story of the criminalisation of Chinese migrants in Europe and the United States also has a similarly small number of publications dedicated to the subject⁶. Being a former colony seems to help. Potter and Saha argued that “Imperial [*sic*] historians might gain more by thinking in terms of ‘connected history’, than by working unquestioningly within a Global history framework with its attendant and potentially distorting preoccupation with the idea of globalization. Connected histories of empire grounded in specific places and concerned with particular individuals might help us avoid the simplifications encouraged by the planetary scale of analysis that absorbs many Global historians”⁷. They have a point – it is certainly easier, if

³ Roche (2000). Roche critiqued the way that the data was constructed, making a more geographically nuanced analysis difficult. Nevertheless, it is useful data.

⁴ Dikötter (2001); Muhlhahn (2009).

⁵ On this, see Lin and Palmer (2016).

⁶ Although, there are some exceptions. See, for example, Pfaelzer (2007); Auerbach (2009).

⁷ Potter and Saha (2015, p.2), see Subrahmanyam (2011).

you are French, or Spanish, or English, to carry out comparative research on different countries if you choose former colonies where the bureaucratic and criminal justice systems are familiar. Imperial connections tend to push us towards the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the age of Empire, and again there is a preponderance of research conducted on that (admittedly long) period of history. The twentieth-century is not as well served⁸, and therefore the potential for connecting some histories, some countries, and some historical topics is better than it is for others.

We could, for example, plot the interconnections between the huge number of published studies of crime, punishment, and policing. The operation of “policing” is particular to national and also to local contexts, but broadly we understand that policing usually relates to street-level bureaucracy (the keeping of order) and crime-control (the detection of crime and the apprehension of offenders). Punishment, whether it is sending offenders to places they do not want to be (the transportation networks that grew like spider-webs across the world) or confining transgressors to a designated space for a determined period of time (the birth of the prison), both of these phenomena are understandable to scholars of most periods and nations⁹. Gender, perhaps the most important lens through which crime has been viewed in the last thirty years, is similarly easily understood – historically men have usually controlled (and mainly benefited) from the operation of power in the criminal justice system, and women have not. The *lingua franca* of gendered power relations, and class relations, has provided an opportunity for crime historians to connect their studies to each other, and also to other scholars outside of the historical community. Gender history, in particular, has been a focus for researchers from different disciplinary areas (women’s studies, media studies, sociology, criminology, English literature, psychology, and so on). Conversations between historians and other scholars have been very fruitful, but it is not just in the area of gender studies that connections have been made.

As a community, crime historians are promiscuous. Our work speaks to historians of gender, poverty, class, and so on, and we also work across the boundaries of contiguous disciplines such as geography, sociology, archeology, English literature, criminology, and so on¹⁰. We work with museums to foster public history¹¹ and some work with the media to still further extend our audience to a general public who appreciate the translation of rigorous academic research into entertaining popular history. All of this activity and collaboration has brought us to a point when we can use the term “connected history”. Indeed, we use that phrase *a lot* and without a great deal of clarity. In this article, however, I want to disrupt this a little, and examine one of the most crucial aspect of our “connections” – the data we use, and how we use our data.

⁸ Again, there are exceptions, see Cox (2003), Emsley (2011), but I think the general point holds true.

⁹ See, for example, the research project “The Carceral Archipelago: Transnational Circulations in Global Perspective, 1415-1960” (<http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/history/research/grants/CArchipelago>). See also, Foucault (1975); Spierenburg, (2005).

¹⁰ Douki and Minard (2007).

¹¹ See, <http://www.gmmg.org.uk/our-connected-history/>.

THE MECHANISMS OF CONNECTION

Natural scientists use primary data collected by other scientists, to re-analyse statistical, medical, or scientific data to replicate results, or to test and develop hypothesis using secondary analysis. Social scientists, to some extent, have done the same. For example, Eisner re-used published research from many studies of levels of prosecuted violence¹². His meta-analysis produced strong conclusions about the decline in violence across Europe. Research funders encourage the re-use of data, and have devised schemes to prod historians in this direction¹³. However, rather than taking quantitative or qualitative data already collected earlier by other historians or research teams, historians tend to construct their own data sets, keep them (on their office or their home PCs; sometimes in boxes under their beds...) but rarely share them. This is despite the call for historians to re-use data wherever possible. Nearly a thousand crime data sets have been deposited in UK Data Archive (out of a total of 7,000). Over 350 of those contain data useful to crime historians, but how many have been used by anyone other than their depositors? From data on sex crimes in medieval Geneva to a large database on everybody accused of witchcraft in Scotland, to a collection of newspaper reports of child sexual abuse in the 20th century, we have a vast amount of invaluable data “unconnected” to the historians who could make the most use of it¹⁴. Since archival research is expensive and time-consuming to conduct, the sensible thing would be to share our data. However, we rarely do use deposited data because we lack a repository that seems to suit our community; and because individual researchers have constructed each data set for their own purposes. Since historians are shy of revealing our methods, it is hard to unravel data-sets even when they *are* shared¹⁵. There have been some successes in sharing data online with “dating sites” bringing together lots of historical data-sets which researchers can be directed towards. The most well-constructed of these is the “Connected Histories” website which provides a bridge to a range of digital resources relating to early modern and nineteenth century Britain¹⁶. Another similarly titled website provides information on what they consider the best history blogs on the internet¹⁷, and others provide information on available data on particular crimes¹⁸.

We meet at conferences, we read each other’s work, we blog, we twitter and so on, lots and lots of connections being made between crime history scholars all the time and all over the world. As a community, however, our attempts to share data alongside ideas and theories have been slow and partial. We are about to be overtaken

¹² Eisner (2001).

¹³ See, for example, this current call from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/funding-opportunities/secondary-data-analysis-initiative-sdai-open-call/>.

¹⁴ On sex crimes in Geneva, see <https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=4364&type=Dta%20catalogue>; on witchcraft in Scotland see (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=4667&type=Data%20catalogue>); on child sexual abuse in the UK see (<https://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/catalogue/?sn=852098&type=Data%20catalogue>).

¹⁵ Godfrey (2011).

¹⁶ <http://www.connectedhistories.org/Default.aspx>.

¹⁷ <https://origins.osu.edu/connecting-history>.

¹⁸ See here, for example, the Ohio Violence Database <https://cjrc.osu.edu/research/interdisciplinary/hvd>.

by the huge avalanche of data which promises us nothing (for there is no agenda), threatens us with incomprehensible amounts of data which can never be understood in its entirety – but which may lead to some of the greatest connected histories of crime yet seen.

WELCOME TO THE SECOND DATA REVOLUTION

The 1990s saw something of a revolution in sources of empirical data. A new raft of archival data began to supplement the traditional sources of crime historians (indictments, criminal statistics, and so on) with court registers, coroner’s records, contemporary newspapers, divorce records, diaries and autobiographies. Thereafter there was an avalanche of digitally available crime (particularly court and prison) data. The Old Bailey Online project, originally funded in 2000 by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, contains details of nearly two hundred thousand criminal trials carried out at London’s Central Criminal Court between 1674 and 1913. Over a million defendants, victims, and witnesses can be found online, and searches can be carried out to identify particular offences, or particular punishments.

The Old Bailey data has now been connected to a raft of civil and criminal datasets (some existing and some newly digitized) in the Digital Panopticon, which brings together biographical and court-generated data on over 90,000 people prosecuted at the Old Bailey. Just one of the forty-five downloadable discrete datasets contained in the Digital Panopticon (Home Office files, MEPO 6) contains biographical (crimes committed, sentences served, places lived, and so on) and biometric details (tattoos, body markings, physical characteristics, heights, and so on) of over 130,000 habitual offenders. This dataset is connected to others to form a life-archive of thousands of people, revealing their movements, social characteristics, criminal careers, and family set-ups. So, this website on its own provides more than enough data to launch hundreds of enquiries, but even these data sets will seem tiny when historians of the future try and make sense of emerging data, for example, the ten million records that have been released by the “giant library” website *WikiLeaks* (some of which will pertain to international organized, environmental, and corporate, and governmental crimes)¹⁹.

The various brands included under the umbrella of Utah-based Ancestry.com LLC (Ancestry, AncestryDNA, AncestryHealth, AncestryProGenealogists, Archives.com, Family Tree Maker, Find a Grave, Fold3, Newspapers.com, and Rootsweb), and the UK-based Find My Past company together hold millions of bits of online data. In 2014, Ancestry had over sixteen billion historical records available to their two million customers worldwide. Both companies add new crime data-sets on a monthly basis, and together these two companies provide an amazing set of resources for crime historians: nearly one and a half million “hits” with the keyword “police”; 175 thousand “hits” for prisons or convicts; and a mere two-thousand hits for “crime”. Some of the record sets deposited online are very large. The South Australia Police Gazettes, 1862-1947, provide details of the names of police officers, victims of crime and missing persons, wanted offenders, and recently-released prisoners (over

¹⁹ <https://wikileaks.org/What-is-Wikileaks.html>.

700,000 records). The biographical data on offenders and prisoners includes name, aliases, age, height, hair and eye color, distinguishing features, and sometimes the clothing they were dressed in, or the possessions they held when arrested/released. The smaller but still considerable *New York, Governor's Registers of Commitments to Prisons, 1842-1908* (15,000 records) contains the name of the convict, date of sentence, the court and judge who heard the case, and the crime and sentence imposed.

Some record sets, by comparison, are small, and have been compiled and assembled by voluntary organisations or by individual scholars. For example, in 1953, May Wilson McBee compiled the Natchez Court Records 1767-1805, a small but interesting collection of the decisions of a small community in Mississippi which is now available through Ancestry. The individual data-sets which form this archive risk remaining as digital orphans, unless historians of the future can determine common standards and platforms in order that data can speak to data. There are other risks. The online collections are largely un-curated and there are gaps (driven by the genealogical market, the collections favour name-rich datasets), there is an over-representation of the "Global North", and the fact that both *Ancestry* and *Find My Past* are subscription sites. Professional academics will probably find their subs paid for by their institutional libraries so the costs are not much of an issue – but lay-historians and students may need to have deep pockets in order to fully access the digital archives.

Together, however, these records from the United Kingdom, Australia, North America, and various European countries form a vast and dazzling archive on policing, punishment, and offenders. Too vast maybe? Too dazzling? How can historians make sense of all of this data? How do we find singularities within the mass of connections with which to examine our topics – be they class, gender, or any of the traditional meat and drink of social historians (and therefore of crime historians)?

MAKING SENSE OF THE DATA

Historians have adopted a number of techniques to connect together data in a meaningful way. Some have gone global. There has been a recent rise in the number of publications exploring longitudinal and world-wide historical phenomena. Ambitious and expansive in their intellectual and geographic horizons, some crime historians have also tried to swallow the world. Emsley published an overview of crime in Europe, Claire Anderson's "Carceral Archipelago" is pan-continental; and comparative multi-national meta-studies (such as Eisner's intervention into debates on the impact of civilising processes on rates of violence in 2001) have been very influential²⁰. These kinds of global studies have become possible because of the international nature of available digital data. The potential digitisation of the colonial Blue Books by Pro-Quest (which is currently in planning stage) may give rise to unimagined levels of statistical data on prisons and crime for over a hundred and fifty-year period – nearly two-hundred years in the case of the West Indies.

The risk, of course, is that by expanding our gaze we could lose focus, and the better approach may be to slice through the huge amounts of data – to connect

²⁰ Emsley (2007). On the Carceral Archipelago project, see footnote 9 above. Eisner (2001).

histories in a very directed way by concentrating on a short period of time which is seen to be pivotal in cultural, political and economic terms (Burn’s *The Age of Equipoise*, for example)²¹. Some have isolated a year which is then used to connect events together to reveal a deeper more complex history²². Popular histories too have adopted this approach²³.

However, given the preponderance of available name-rich digital data, one of the most well-used techniques has been to connect all data relating to one person, or to construct a prosopography of particular groups of offenders. Rogers for example has joined together convict records and other civil records of male convicts who served time at Great Yarmouth in the 1830s and 1840s and were transported to Van Diemen’s Land. Her prosopographical approach “exposes patterns in employment, family and social networks that are not so readily apparent when reading fragmentary evidence of individual lives”²⁴. Following Godfrey, a new prosopographical study of children leaving institutional care and control in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries explores the longer-term prospects of hundreds of children and young people²⁵. Similarly Emma Watkins has combined criminal, civil, and convict records to look at the lives of children sent to Van Dieman’s Land in the convict era²⁶. The new wave of large-scale biographical or prosopographical research has been enabled by connecting digital data held in digital form. Given the possibilities offered by historical big data, and the growing debates about appropriate methods of using it to analyse data in meaningful ways, it is tempting to assume that we may be on the cusp of a new period of connected histories. But are we really?

CONNECTED HISTORIES?

Over time, as the sub-discipline has developed, crime historians have joined together to form groups with common interests – both the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) and the UK’s Social History conference have streams for crime historians. The British Crime Historians biennial symposium attracts over a hundred scholars who are organized into panels and sessions reflecting their own specific crime history interests. Smaller *ad hoc* workshops and symposia have connected historians who share particular concerns or theoretical perspectives. Sometimes the connections that are made at conferences come about in a haphazardly accidental manner, they certainly rely on geographical proximity, and the connections can tend to fall away over time. However, this messy, accidental, haphazard process seems to work to a certain point. The articles and books published by crime historians “speak” to and contribute towards debates within the broader historical community.

However, as stated at the outset of this essay, connected history can be further enhanced and strengthened (further “connected”) when common data platforms

²¹ Burn (2016).

²² Zamoyska (2005).

²³ Bryson (2014).

²⁴ Rogers (2015). See also Rogers (2017).

²⁵ Godfrey *et al.* (2007, 2010); Godfrey *et al.* (2017).

²⁶ Watkins (PhD in progress).

are developed, and when historians share their data (and the methods used to collect, process, and analyse it). Replicating research findings, finding alternative explanations, challenging existing theories by re-analysing the same data used for original studies, is likely greatly to strengthen historical research, make the research we produce better respected by the public, and by researchers in other disciplines. The last twenty years or so have seen us constantly expanding our gaze, from class, to gender, to the cultural turn, to biographical analysis, and now maybe to a return of quantitative history; and we have constantly added case study after case study of different cities, regions, nations, and colonies in order to reveal more and more stories, and data. We have spread far and wide in our efforts, and we have connected histories from different periods and geographical areas. I am not against this by any means, and have added to the pile in that regard. However, we must go deeper as well as wider. Layering study on study of the same topic (policing, punishment) using the same court, prison, newspaper, data. Constantly searching for data from different, new areas, cities, towns, is taking us away from developing new theories about crime history. As a community we may need to think more, and re-think more, about the data we already have, rather than simply collecting more and more, interesting and engaging as that is²⁷.

Taking that road is likely to take historians towards an even closer relationship with social scientists (who share similar methodologies to historians) and it is possible that this may lead to further expansive collaborations and connections with sociologists, geographers, and criminologists. If our network of connections does grow in that direction it may be that historians of crime can have an even great reach, and the possibility of intervening and shaping current policy debates. That may be some way off. For the moment, the “connectedness” of crime history is well-established, and contributes much towards our understandings of power and its operation in historical (and modern) society.

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²⁷ I realise I may not be making any friends in saying this.

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