Breaking the cycle of growing criminality

Scientists generally agree nowadays that 'criminality' and other social problems are constructed. They are not 'objective' in the sense that there is only one way of defining them (Hilgartner & Bosk 1988, Spector & Kitsuse 1977, Spector & Kitsuse 1973). To understand this construction we have to consider a great variety of risk factors and social processes (Hopkins 2009, Lilly & Ball 2007, Sutherland 1992). These may be divided into three types: factors related to (changes of) social behavior, factors related to (public) perceptions en factors related to political answers or interventions (Estrada 1997). Let us give an few examples to illustrate this division.

    Criminologists have elaborated a long list of risk factors that may contribute to the emergence of criminal an anti-social behaviors. Among them are personal characteristics, difficulties at home, resistance to teachers and school, use of alcohol and drugs, having criminal friends, living in deteriorated neighborhoods etc. (Loeber & Farrington 1998). In fact the development of criminal behavior in a specific age group (e.g. youngsters), a specific area (e.g. 'hot spots') or social class (e.g. ethnic minorities) can be understood from the way in which an number of these risk factors are accumulated and interact (Van den Brink 2001, Van den Brink 2007).

    However, the public perception of these criminal groups and behaviors also play an important role here (Blumer 1971). For instance: the increase of violence at home as demonstrated in criminal statistics or priorities of the police may be explained by the emergence of new sensibilities and/or standards of civilized behavior in modern society. Feelings of unsafety may grow as the mass media are paying more and more attention to the misbehavior of youngsters (Van den Brink 2009). Even scientific researchers, trying to understand all kinds of social problems and defining new types of 'deviant behavior', may have an influence on the public appreciation (Manis 1974).

    Sooner or later the appreciation of the general public will have an effect on policymakers. 'Hot topics' such as sexual harassment, terrorist activities or the use of drugs by youngsters may appear on the public agenda (Meade 2000, Snow & Benford 1992). For a long time these topics were mainly used by rightwing politicians, pleading for 'authority', 'strong leaders', or the restoration of 'social order'. Interestingly, nowadays these priorities are accepted also by the political centre and even by a number of leftwing parties. The repressive approach is on the public agenda again in a great deal of Europe.

As scientists we have to take these political answers seriously without believing that they will provide a solution for criminality as a social problem. We even have to consider the possibility that a more repressive approach as defended by politicians of professionals in the police, judges, media etc. will provoke **more** anti-social behaviors (Van den Brink 2010c). Perhaps the social integration of ethnic groups is not helped very much if they are criminalized in the media. It might be that the feeling of unsafety in certain urban areas will grow if a policy of zero-tolerance is implemented (Van den Brink 2010b). Being tough on drugs might contribute to a criminalization of recreactive behavior (Jensen & Gerber 1993). Formulated in a more theoretical way, we could suppose that there is a cyclical process in which antisocial behaviors, negative public perceptions and 'strong' political answers are reinforcing each other, leading to the construction of 'increased criminality' as a social problem. In fact we try to develop a new theoretical approach in which processes on the objective, the subjective and the political level are overdetermined.

Figure 1
Cycle of growing criminality: three fields reinforcing each other
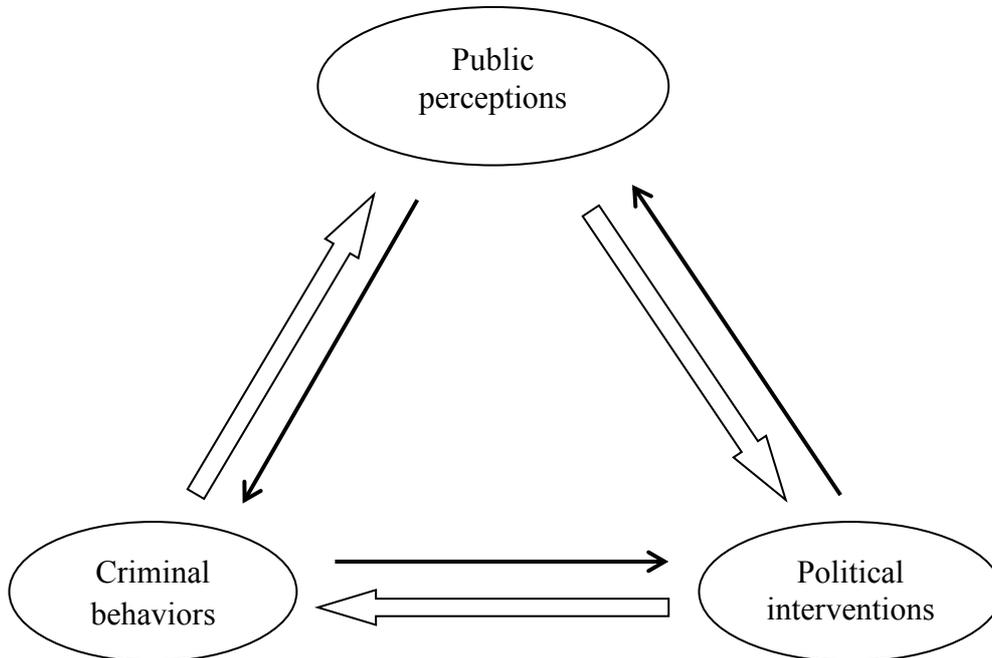
This approach is illustrated in Figure 1. The real process is more complicated and characterized by all kinds of interactions. The main advantage of this scheme is that it may help us to organize our comparative research. As European countries are characterized by many thousands differences, we have to select the most relevant ones (Lindgren 2005). Following our cyclical model we propose to compare European societies in three respects, looking for differences in a) criminal behavior, b) public perceptions en c) answers of policy-makers. In the end one would like to understand the very complicated interaction of these differences and their effects. But first we want to produce a number of 'national profiles', based on the three fields sketched above.

An important element of such a national profile are risk factors that may be established in a more or less objective may. For instance: the degree of cultural homogeneity, ethnic tensions, social exclusion of minorities in a certain society. But also risks related to the lifestyle of modern citizens such as use of drugs, looking for excitement, assertive attitudes and a high degree of spatial mobility (Van den Brink 2006). We also have to include the more of less 'classical factors' that may contribute to a certain level of criminal behavior such as joblessness, poverty, degree of illiteracy, low incomes, deprived urban areas etc. European statistics will help us in this respect as they have collected an huge number of indicators nowadays, making it possible to compare national societies in field number 1.

The second element of a national profile is related to differences in the public perception. We can compare countries on cultural dimensions such as masculinity/femininity of authoritarian/egalitarian, as for instance Hofstede did (Hofstede 2001). We know that 'criminal' or 'deviant' behavior is not always appreciated in the same way and that certain societies can accept much more deviancy than others (Sumner 2003). Of course we also have to look at the mass media and the way they are framing certain trends or incidents. Last but not least we should discover the public philosophy about 'causes' and 'responsibility' that has an important but often hidden influence on the way the general public reactive to a criminal act (Stone 1989).

The third element of the national profile is related to political and professionals interventions (Baumgartner et alia 2006, Bacchi 2000). As we all know, there are important differences in the style of policing between counties (Adang e.a. 2010, Van den Brink 2010a), as is demonstrated by the reaction of local authorities to urban riots (Paris, Utrecht, Malmö etc). We also have to consider the emergence of new methods of surveillance and control developing in many European cities (London Amsterdam) and possibly leading to a new culture of control (Western 2004). We cannot exclude the impact of certain political tendencies such as the emergence of rightwing populism in a number of European countries including France, Belgium Austria, The Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden.

Reducing the huge amount of possible data we should focus our research on a restricted number of cases. For instance two countries belonging to the Northwestern part of Europe in which an 'protestant' morale is predominant in the public domain (Sweden? The Netherlands?), two countries characterized by a 'catholic' public morale (France? Spain?) and two countries belonging to the Southeastern part characterized by a lower degree of modernization (Romania? Turkey?). Establishing national profiles we have to do more than grouping indicators together. We would like to understand how the above described cycle is working in these cases and what kind of social problems are resulting from it.

Apart from studying national profiles we also want to analyze a number of trends. Assuming the relevance of profiles and cyclical processes, we do **not assume** that they are lacking any change over time. In fact, the changes occurring in the three fields are very important to understand why certain phenomena, that have existed for a long time already, haven developed into 'a problem' during the last decades. In this respect we can rely on several sources that will allow us a better understanding of the direction in which the 'cycle of criminality' is heading.

Considering the first field we are mainly interested in the development of new forms of youth crime and of social circumstances that may contribute to it. Important developments in this respect are the use of drugs among youngsters, effects of economic crisis, growing ethnic segregation in urban neighborhoods, new types of hooliganism, opportunities created by new social media etc. Many of these tendencies can be described quantitatively but the main challenge will be to discover more general patterns developing in the national societies we want to focus on.

While changes in the first field of the 'cycle of criminality' have been the object of scientific research for a long time already, developments in de second field are more difficult to grasp (Good & Ben-Yehuda 1994). Nevertheless a number of promising source are at our disposal. Making use of the European Values Studies one could demonstrate that the appreciation of personal liberty has grown during the last two or three decades. Paradoxically, in the same time the tolerance for 'deviant' behavior in the public sphere has diminished considerably. As a result we can witness a hardening of the social climate, especially in the Northwestern part of Europe, leading to a neoconservative wave in the public domain.

In the third field we have to mention the work by Garland and others, arguing that the field of crime control has expanded in new directions (Garland 2001). We could add scientific contributions of Tops about the emergence of a new urban regime in which repressive policy and care are combined in a new way. We also should include the growing need for strong leadership, at least at a local scale, to compensate for the many problems related to the bureaucratic approach of welfare states. A critical review of policies to eliminate these problems, such as the implementation of New Public Management, seems necessary [Pollit].

In conclusion: what try to understand is the way in which the presupposed 'cycle of criminality' is functioning in several European societies, the elements that contribute to it and the tendencies that may explain why criminality has got such a prominent position in the public domain. To us, a better insight in these processes is not only relevant from a scientific point of view. We also hope to discover where and how the cycle of growing criminality can been slowed down, stopped or even been broken.

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