

A criminological role model: Lessons in resisting punitiveness

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I'm not sure exactly when I first met Sonja, but doubtless it was in the context of an annual meeting of the European Society of Criminology, perhaps in Amsterdam in 2004. Sonja was, of course, a founding member of the society in 2000 and, in 2004-05, she served as its President. I do have a very clear memory of tracking down Sonja at the swelteringly hot Bologna conference in September 2007, accompanied by Gwen Robinson and Pepe Cid, and enlisting her support for the development of a new Working Group of the European Society of Criminology (ESC) focused on Community Sanctions and Measures. Sonja duly presented the opening paper at the Working Group's inaugural meeting in Barcelona in April 2008, on 'The Culture of Control in Europe'.

These early encounters with Sonja firmly established my admiration for her and her work – an admiration that has, of course, only deepened over the years. They also introduced me to two of her finest qualities. The first of these is generosity. Although community sanctions and measures were not a core focus of her own research, recognising our enthusiasm (and despite little evidence of our abilities!), she was prepared to invest time and effort in supporting us as more junior colleagues, and to support our initiative. Crucially, this generosity was combined with a second quality. This is harder to sum up perhaps, but it relates to the very rare ability that Sonja possesses of thinking about criminology and criminal justice in ways which are simultaneously broad *and* deep. The breadth that I refer to here spans not just different aspects of criminal justice processes, but also different criminal justice systems in different places and times. Thus, Sonja's breadth of knowledge allowed her to see that the gap that we had identified in penological scholarship on community sanctions mattered. But equally importantly, her depth enabled her to suggest conceptual 'clews' (or lines of

inquiry) that, in turn, inspired us to do 'deeper' work than perhaps we could have imagined for ourselves.

In other words, Sonja's initial contributions to the fledgling working group played a vital part in helping us aspire to develop a critical and comparative penology of community sanctions. Rather than succumbing to the very Anglophone question, 'Does probation work?', Sonja's interventions encouraged our attention towards much more fundamental questions about community sanctions: How had they emerged and why had they developed in the different ways that they had in different places? How might we understand their purposes and functions and the processes associated with their legitimation? How were they constructed and experienced in practice? How might they best be reformed, and in line with which values?

It is no coincidence, of course, that I mention here the problems of succumbing to the preoccupations with 'effectiveness' that once typified English-language work on probation. Although it was Kristel Beyens, I think, that first alerted me (gently, I should add) to the dangers of dwelling in the often narrow and self-referential tunnel of 'Anglo-Saxon criminology', it was the existence of the ESC and its working groups and conferences that offered my escape route, and it was Sonja's Barcelona paper, later published as 'Resisting punitiveness in Europe' (Snacken, 2010), that provided the map that I've been trying to follow since. Like many Anglophone European criminologists of my generation, I owe Sonja (and other ESC pioneers) a very large debt.

I think it's true to say that the paper that Sonja presented in Barcelona evolved into 'Resisting punitiveness in Europe', which was published in *Theoretical Criminology* two years later (Snacken, 2010). Crucially, at the time of its publication, many 'Punishment and Society' scholars remained justifiably enamoured of David Garland's (2001) magisterial 'The Culture of Control': Its account of how broader economic, social and cultural pressures associated with late modernity and globalisation had re-shaped the field of crime control remains highly influential. Others favoured Loic Wacquant's (2009) analysis in 'Punishing the Poor', which blamed neo-liberalism for the emergence of a 'penal state' that divested from welfare and invested instead in policing and punishment as its primary means of managing and containing marginalised and impoverished populations. Sonja insisted that such accounts needed to be complemented or challenged by analyses that paid proper attention to differences *between* nation-states subject to broadly similar economic, social and cultural pressures. To avoid a kind of sociological over-determinism, a much more fine-grained analysis was required of the *diverse* relationships in different places between penal

systems, welfare regimes, democratic structures and processes, and legal-cultural values. As I noted above, Sonja was and is one of the few scholars who possessed both the breadth of knowledge and the intellectual depth required to make such comparisons.

Of course, others – like Marie Gottschalk, Vanessa Barker, Nicola Lacey, David Downes and Tapio Lappi-Seppälä – had offered similar arguments and some had done sophisticated comparative work, but Sonja's work did not stop at offering a crucial critique of overly-generalised theorising. To borrow a phrase from Ian Loader and Richard Sparks (2012), she has always been determined to pursue penological research that goes 'beyond lamentation'. For her, a much closer examination of what produces and restrains particular forms of penalty is required not just to ensure a more accurate diagnosis of contemporary penal problems; it is required in order to better guide real-world reform efforts. The clue was in the paper's title; her goal was to enable us to better understand what might help us *resist* punitiveness.

Of course, in that project of resistance, *European* values and perspectives have always been a *leitmotif* of Sonja's work. But again, this is not just a matter of analysis. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that – both in her European activism and in her own magisterial contribution (with Dirk van Zyl Smit, 2009) 'Principles of European Prison Law and Policy' – Sonja has been profoundly influential in defining and refining European values, at least as they relate to the penal sphere.

My assessment in this respect is based not just on reading Sonja's work. I have been fortunate on a couple of occasions to witness and learn from her first-hand. The first of these experiences related to a conference celebrating ten years of the Maisons de Justice in Belgium. I had been invited to speak at that conference and, along with other speakers and organisers, was also invited to dinner with the then Justice Minister. It was easy to see – in the interactions around that table (and in the conference in general) – how respected Sonja was by academics, politicians, policymakers and practitioners alike; and it was easy to see why. She carried her expertise lightly and intervened judiciously. But there was obvious authority and influence in her ability to translate -- not so much between languages as between academic, policy and practice discourses.

Not long after that, Sonja and I acted as scientific advisors to the Belgian Presidency of the European Union (in 2010-11). Our advice related to the implementation of the Framework Decision 2008/947 on the transfer of probation measures. I will spare readers the technicalities of this instrument and of the processes associated with seeking to guide its implementation. Suffice it to say that, in reviewing and analysing not just the Framework

Decision itself but also dozens of country responses about it, it was both a huge relief and an education to work with someone so competent and confident in undertaking the complex and challenging work of thinking through how a Framework Decision might best be interpreted and implemented in line with existing European norms and standards.

While working to inform and influence the implementation of a Framework Decision might seem like a highly specialised and perhaps narrow activity, it is an excellent example of the hard work associated with the kind of critical but engaged penology that Sonja has lived and breathed for decades. I think no one could or would ever describe her work as less than critical but, in contrast to some versions of ‘critical criminology’, Sonja’s absolutely refuses to settle for sniping from the side-lines, pending the seemingly distant prospect of socio-structural change. Instead, Sonja has ‘rolled up her sleeves’ and engaged strategically and energetically in the messy work of contesting penal values and norms; both in Belgium and across Europe.

For all these reasons, it should be obvious by now why I think of Sonja not just as a hugely impressive scholar, but also as a role model, and a friend. Returning to the qualities with which I started, Sonja has often put her time, remarkable talents and redoubtable energies at the disposal of others, whether in policy, practice or the academy. I know now – being a little further on in my own career – that this kind of generosity does not come without a cost. I hope however, that – as she reads this collection and perhaps also as she ponders the state of European criminology – Sonja will feel that the price has been worth paying.

By helping so many others develop not just as scholars but also as activists both within our own countries and internationally, she has done a huge amount to create and sustain the criminological capacity in Europe. In her own work, she has helped us understand much more clearly not just why penal systems are as they are but also how they can be better than they are – and what ‘better’ means in this context. In other words, in her own outstanding scholarship, in her critical engagement with penalty, and in her support for the development of others, Sonja has made an outstanding contribution to resisting punitiveness in Europe, and beyond.

References

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