



The Crimes of the Powerful are Under the Investigative Radars

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Editorial

We know a great deal about the crimes of the powerless in comparison to what we know about the crimes of the powerful. The former crimes are, for example, catalogued in statistics collected annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States and by similar agencies in other developed nations. We also know that the data gathered are widely dispersed by the mass media. In contrast, the latter crimes are neither calculated by governmental agencies nor are they routinely reported on in the mass media. Even though most criminologists are well aware that the average person is increasingly at greater risk for and more likely to experience harm and injury from the latter criminals than the former criminals, the asymmetrical relationship continues between our knowledge of the crimes of the powerful and our knowledge of the crimes of the powerless for a myriad of related reasons.

The crimes of the powerful are typically committed by well-established private and/or public organizations in violation of the rights of workers, women, children, taxpayers, consumers, marketplaces, political and eco-systems and/or against the interests of equity and religiosity, ethnicity and race, and gender and sexuality. These crimes of the powerful also refer to those less commonly practiced forms of injury such as those involving torture or various kinds of genocide. These human rights violations are typically known as the internationally sanctioned crimes of war and/or crimes against humanity and the peace. In a nutshell, the crimes of the powerful concern a wide array of actions that are executed illegally as well as a wide array of non-actions that fail to sustain legally bound obligations.

What limited data, information, and knowledge that we have about the crimes of the powerful come from private or non-governmental researchers, typically affiliated with institutions of higher education. Though published in scholarly journals and elsewhere, their findings are rarely reported in the mass media. As a result, these asymmetrical relations of the visibility of the less harmful crimes of the powerless and the invisibility of the more harmful crimes of the powerful have more or less persisted unchanged since Edwin Sutherland in 1939 first introduced the concept of the crimes of respectable people. To this very day, the crimes committed by private business organizations or corporations and state institutions still linger under the investigative radars of criminologists, sociologists, and other students of power.

In addition, these crimes of the powerful have always been able to avoid or escape notice, stigmatization, and criminalization not only because of a serious lack of criminological investigation, but also because of political alliances, legal negotiations, and economic justifications that undermine the moralizations of these offensive behaviors. In other words, the societal reactions to elite offenses and the ideological rationalizations by some state actors and other

defenders of the criminological status quo, in effect, help simultaneously to conventionalize these crimes and to deny the victimization status of those people who are harmed or injured by these offenses. For example, this is true whether we are discussing those folks responsible for the victimization of people from institutionalized tax fraud or from the emissions of CO₂

In the case of the latter, a growing number of criminologists, including the former President of the American Society of Criminology (2012), Robert Agnew, argue that the “crimes of climate change” are globally positioning the human species for the risks of extinction. Hyperbole or not, these types of crimes of the powerful are far more dangerous and threatening to the well-being of human civilization than are the relatively minor crimes of the powerless.

In general, the various crimes of the powerful, including corporate crimes, crimes of globalization, environmental crimes, financial crimes, organized crimes, state crimes, and state-corporate crimes, are below the sociological and criminological radars, resulting in a dearth of scholarship in these areas. The lack of investigation into these crimes of the powerful was documented most recently in “White Collar Crime Representation in the Criminological Literature Revisited, 2001-2010,” published by the Western Criminology Review in 2013 [14 (2): 3-19]. In the study, McGurrin, Jarrell, Jahn, and Cochrane examined the 15 leading criminology and criminal justice (CCJ) journals, the 13 best-selling CCJ textbooks, and 37 of 38 CCJ doctoral programs in the United States.

Their findings reveal that “despite two corporate crime waves in the first decade of the 21st century, including the financial frauds that contributed to the largest economic recession since the Great Depression, white collar crime continues to be underrepresented in CCJ journals, textbooks, and doctoral programs,” indicating that little has “changed since Lynch et al.’s (2004) study” (p.9). Specifically, the researchers found that when compared with street crime: only 6.3 percent of 4,878 journal articles focused on white collar crime, only 5.7 percent of the 5,953 pages of textbook content addressed white collar crime (up slightly from 4.5 percent found by Lynch et al.), and that less than half (48%) of the doctoral programs even offered a single course on white collar crime (not to mention a concentration, specialty, or track).

Since people everywhere are at risk of harm or injury from the crimes of powerful, the time is well past due for citizens and politicians of the world in general and for criminologists in particular to stop denying and ignoring these crimes and their extensive victimization. Instead, it is time to place both of these front and center for all to see, so that we can better understand the workings of these crimes so that we may develop strategies and policies aimed at both

resisting these crimes and reducing their devastating and widespread harm, injury, and victimization.