CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.20

Interview with Ruth Jamieson

Ruth Jamieson
Queen's University Belfast, School of Law

Teresa Degenhardt
Queen's University Belfast
t.degenhardt@qub.ac.uk

Teresa Degenhardt: So, thank you very much for this interview, Ruth. We are very excited to have your contribution to the journal. Let me first ask you a very broad question on your interest on the study of war. Can you tell us how you became interested in the study of war, even though your background is in criminology? Well, that's a two-parter.

Ruth Jamieson: I think there is an autobiographical element to it. I was born in 1947, coincidentally the same year as Primo Levi published *If This Is a Man*. Even though this was during the post-war into the Cold War period, the war was all around us when I was growing up. People just referred to it [WW2] as 'the war'. They didn't say World War II; they said THE WAR. It had had a profound impact on many people's lives. I was aware, even as a child, of relatives or neighbours who had lost fathers, brothers, sons, or been separated from them for years, or had themselves witnessed terrible things, had been injured, been prisoners of war or had been displaced or persecuted. You were aware of their suffering even as a child. People did not talk about it much but they did find things to joke about in that way that humour often disguises pain. I remember a story about a woman in our town who had gone to the cinema and she saw her son in a newsreel about the Normandy landings. She had not seen him since he had been sent overseas at the beginning of the war. She kept sitting in the cinema every single day that particular newsreel was shown so she could see her son in case she never saw him alive again. The story points obliquely to more recent examples of the power of politicised mothers war and dictatorship, like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina or the mothers of the 'zinky boys' shipped home from the Soviet-Afghan war.

I think my awareness of war was also rooted in a more immediate personal experience. When I was about four or five years old there was a brief period when I had to go to an Army hospital for treatment every week. There were always veterans in the outpatient receptions area. This was the early 1950s. Many of these men were amputees or had other terrible visible injuries. As a child, I was afraid of them, but, at the same time, I also had a sense of their pain… they were just trying to be friendly to a child, trying to cheer me up. I knew intuitively that I should try to connect with them, not recoil. I found it hard and felt guilty that I wasn't very good at it. So those were formative childhood experiences shaped by biography and history. That's one thing.

You mentioned my background being in criminology. Actually, I only studied criminology as a mature student. Before that I worked as social worker and then as a civil servant in the Department of Justice in Canada on access to justice issues. That experience gave me some familiarity with how governments develop social and justice policy and all the contestation and deliberation involved in that process. When I came to do postgraduate study, it wasn't that odd for me to want to look at the government policy on welfare and social regulation in wartime. I was particularly interested in gender and governmentalities. I guess what I would say is that I never saw myself then as any kind of an '-ologist'. I was just interested in states of exception and social life. If I were to style myself anything then I suppose I would have called myself a sociologist. I didn't really identify with criminology as a discipline to begin with. I guess I would say that. I don't know if that's an answer to your question or not.

TD: Thank you very much for that. What obstacles, if any, did you have to overcome in the work on war within the discipline?

RJ: This follows on from what I just said about my undergraduate degree being in sociology. I first studied criminology as a mature student. For my M.Phil. I had to submit a research proposal outlining what I wanted to do for my dissertation and I proposed to look at gender and social regulation in wartime Britain. I was interested in the relationship between welfare, governmentality and states of emergency. I was told that it wasn't criminology and I could not do it. That was 1987. I am grateful to Colin Sumner for intervening on my behalf so that I could do it. I found the subject engrossing and just carried on doing it. When other academics asked me what I was working on and I told them the response I usually got a blank look. I got tired of hearing people say, "That's not criminology." So, I decided to make the case for why we needed a criminology of war. I did that at a 1996 conference in Manchester on European Criminology organized by Ian Taylor, Nigel South and Vincenzo Ruggiero. I was lucky to meet a number of people who had been thinking about war, e.g., Heinz Steinert and Vesna Nikolić-Ristanović. That was when I first aired the idea I suppose. But to be clear, I don't present myself as some lone crusading Joan of Arc of the criminology of war because I did get encouragement, a lot of encouragement from Vincenzo Ruggiero, Nigel South, David Nelken, Jock Young and my partner [Ian Taylor] too. Stan Cohen also supported the work though we did have some challenging conversations about whether a criminology of war rubric was more restrictive

than a human rights one. My position was that a human rights perspective cannot capture the materiality and transnationality of war, the operation of war markets, profiteering or even ordinary people's venality – all those sort of dirty money relationships feeding off war. We agreed to disagree. Another factor was that my partner was a criminologist and I wanted to do something completely different from what he did, to plough my own furrow. I wanted to define my own intellectual space. That was a secondary reason, along with the more personal influences I mentioned earlier. I do think that because positivism and the idea of objectivity are so strong in criminology, many people act as if part of what we do is not autobiographical or personal, but I think it often is. At least one's commitment is.

TD: Can you please reflect on what has changed since then, both in terms of maybe contemporary conflicts, and the way in which we discuss them?

RJ: I think that in the mid-90s there was beginning to be a greater awareness of armed conflict and international humanitarian law after the war in the Balkans, the Rwandan genocide, not just in criminology but among ordinary people. I think those conflicts reminded people that war was still with us and had not gone away. The fact that there was an international effort to prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide suggested that positive change and affirmation of humanitarian values was underway. People had started to pay more attention to armed conflict, especially feminist victimologists. The conduct of war in Iraq produced many criminological issues. We became more aware of war and also more aware that the nature of war had changed. There were now more asymmetrical, hybrid wars with more non-state actors involved, more private military companies and irregular combatants, more use of technology, changes that were mixed, uneven and incomplete. There were ever more flagrant breaches of international humanitarian law, quite open breaches, things like targeted assassinations using drones. After the assassination of Osama bin Laden, suddenly it became okay to just kill your perceived enemies pre-emptively. I think at this particular moment in time more people are aware of the problem of impunity, and particularly the abandonment of commitment to international criminal justice by major powers, like the United States. It is doubly disillusioning because the Americans were so central to the creation of the Nuremberg Tribunal and also the International Criminal Court (ICC). Walking away from the ICC and the international normative order we took for granted feels like a subversion of the whole project. I think people are very aware of that particularly in terms of unfolding events in Gaza, Ukraine and elsewhere. It's easier to talk about war within a criminological framework now, because it's so omnipresent and so appalling. It's out there in a more an obvious now than it was the 80s and early 90s.

TD: You mentioned before the issue of gender in war; can you elaborate a little bit more about this aspect that has been quite important in your work?

RJ: I was interested in looking at an historical example of how the gender order and modes of governmentality changed in a war emergency and how much ideological work went into exhorting people to a certain 'exceptional' version of gender and its differentiated hierarchies of masculinity and femininity. In Second World War Britain women were defined in terms of men in general and their men in particular along with other racial, class or national categories of identity. Deconstructing that ideological work through the lens of intersectionality was a good way to see a how different aspects of identity, like nationality or loyalties interplay with sex or gender and how they become more salient in different contexts. Dubravka Zarkov's work (2001) on the representation victimization in the Balkans or the Rwandan genocide is a good example of that sort of analysis. Are you a Tutsi first and then a woman? How does that work? The salience of ethnic or nationality categories becomes acute in a state of warfare. In terms of sexual violence and victimization, you may be victimized because you're a man or a woman. Or you may be victimized in a specific culturally symbolic way because you're a particular type of man or woman, e.g., a Croatian woman or a Muslim woman. Intersectionality is a really good way of teasing out that specificity.

I looked at the Second World War in Britain. It was fascinating to trace the way the Army Welfare interventions into the private lives of soldiers and their wives worked out in both policy and practice along intersectional gender, race and class lines. The British Government set up an Army Welfare organisation staffed by 'suitable' volunteers to address the needs of soldiers and their families. Over time its activities became more focussed on the issue of marital infidelity and women Army Welfare officers were sent out to check up and report back on the behaviour of soldiers' wives. This semi-detached mode of state intrusion into private lives operated on a certain social logic which I termed 'the etiquette of intrusion'.

Here a middle-class woman could interfere in the private life of a working-class woman, but it would never work the other way around. One government committee discussed the question of British Army welfare practice in India. The minutes of the meeting noted that a white, British woman acting as an army welfare officer in India could intrude in the private life of Indian soldier's wife, it would not work the other way around. Social hierarchies of dominance and difference came clearly into play in terms of these forms of social control and regulation.

I think states of emergency are moments of transparency where it is easier to trace how ideology works; there's so much extra effort expended encouraging people to adhere to certain practices or forms of identity, or censuring people that don't or won't. Discourses on men who are conscientious objectors to military service are a good example. Conscientious objectors might be represented as un-men, or feminized men or disloyal, unpatriotic, and so on, yet those discourses may change as war goes on. So, in the First World War, conscientious objectors were represented that way but as people became more attuned to realities of warfare, conscientious objectors were more likely to be seen as having morale courage for standing on principle. States of exception are not static.

TD: Thank you. The next question relates to a claim you made in your work. You've argued that you did not care about the criminology of war, and you've also kind of mentioned that earlier. Could you share your reflection on the limits of the disciplinary boundaries in researching war or violent conflict?

RJ: Well, I'll try to clarify. I *do* care about the criminology of war, but I'm more interested in work on war actually getting done than debates about disciplinary boundaries. Basically, I think people get too hung up on disciplinary boundaries. And I suppose I am guilty of it myself, because I did argue for the criminology of war. I wanted to encourage people to explore the subject and also wanted to rebut the idea that studying the war/crime nexus had nothing to offer 'proper' criminology. Ultimately, I just wanted people to be able to do the work because I think it enriches criminology.

Thinking more about this, I admit that the boundaries of criminology do count at practical level. All Western states have criminal justice systems and need ways of informing their criminal justice policies and practices. It is inevitable that much of criminological research have a domestic focus, e.g., on policing, probation, prisons etc. Most funding for criminological research comes from the government and government funding priorities work like a sort of centrifuge. The questions of probation, imprisonment, etc., are propelled to the centre and all the other issues are flung out to the margins by this centrifugal force. Non-domestic questions of international criminology, criminology war, environmental crime – all that tends to flung to the edges in terms of funding. Perhaps that's one reason people are preoccupied with disciplinary boundaries.

I do care about a criminology war, but I think all of criminology, not just criminology concerned with war can be enriched by interdisciplinarity. It would be really worthwhile for criminologists to consider concepts generated by scholars concerned with war and its effects who work in other disciplines. Thinking of some examples of that interdisciplinarity – take Jonathan Shay's notion of 'moral injury' developed in his work with Vietnam War veterans. Or Michael Rothberg's concept of 'implicated subject' developed out of Holocaust studies which offers a more nuanced consideration of criminal responsibility that goes beyond the victim-perpetrator-bystander triangle that underpins so much of our victimological and transitional justice writing. Anthropology also has a lot to offer criminology in terms of reflexivity in research methods and ethics. For example, anthropologists working in conflict zones have talked about the problem of 'seduction' in the research process. Criminologists need to think about that too. I was conscious of that when doing research in Northern Ireland, where one often has to go through local gatekeepers who may attempt to manipulate the researchers' perspectives and control the information that is conveyed. So, that's another one. Then, lastly for me, historical context is fundamental to criminological thinking because there are so many resonances and continuities between war, crime and colonialism and oppression. Judith Butler's elaboration (2004) of Agamben's work (1995) on the concept of 'bare life' is a good example of philosophy providing us with a vocabulary and conceptual framework for thinking about what is being done in Gaza now. All these different ideas from other disciplines underscore the need for criminology, including domestic criminology, to be open to interdisciplinarity.

TD: So many very useful points to think about for future research. You've published widely on topics such as state crimes, political prisoners, blame and victimhood and gender dynamics in the context of war.

Much of your work has focused on Northern Ireland, a conflict that officially ended in 1998. In what ways was Northern Ireland important in your writing and your development as a scholar?

RJ: Well, I think you live in Northern Ireland, too.

TD: Yes.

RJ: I guess the first thing I would mention is Gramsci's notion of war as a parenthesis; I think it was in The Prison Notebooks… it's just one of those tantalizing throwaway comments that he doesn't really elaborate on. He talks about war or military government being a parenthesis wherein normal social relations of domination are suspended for the duration of the war and then apparently things revert to the status quo ante. I'm not convinced that is true. The conflict in Northern Ireland didn't really end in 1998 in the sense that, yes, there was a ceasefire and a new structure for power sharing. But the political conflict, grievance and contestation is definitely not over and the *effects* of the violence and counterinsurgency measures taken to deal with it are not over. The effects of war reach well into peace. They are intergenerational. You realise how much fear and suffering people experienced. I found the immediacy and complexity of people's lived experience really enlightening, both in terms of people I met through research and also friendships. Another thing that permeates public life is the politicisation of victimhood and the concentration of blame on one specific group of people [paramilitaries] allowing most others consider themselves blameless (Steinert's point). The issue was compelling because virtually all justice initiatives taken by the Stormont government are contested through that lens of victimhood and blame.

In the research on ex-political prisoners I did with Adrian Grounds, there were many crossovers between the experience of war veterans and ex-paramilitary prisoners. Our findings on the effects of long-term imprisonment on political prisoners were useful counterpoint to thinking about 'ordinary' prisoners and those wrongfully imprisoned through miscarriages of justice. It really added another dimension to criminological thinking on the effects of imprisonment. I particularly enjoyed working with Adrian because our interests and backgrounds were complementary. He is a forensic psychiatrist and I approached the work from an army welfare perspective. I suppose the other thing I would say is that one of the things that people who have not been in Northern Ireland probably don't appreciate is how sophisticated the ordinary people are in terms understanding power and politics. It impacts on the whole research process from thinking about research ethics on harm and consent to power relationships in the research.

TD: Finally, what suggestion would you offer to new generations of researchers working on the topic of war in criminology, which is a very broad topic?

RJ: Firstly, just keep doing it. Ignore the noise from other people. Just ignore the noise about what is or isn't criminology and follow your own interests. You are a good example of that. You were interested in war as punishment, followed through with it and produced a great piece of work on it.

Secondly, be open to other disciplines and perspectives. Really open. So much of criminology is from a Western, Northern perspective. The global South has so much to contribute, especially about war and colonialism, we have to listen.

Thirdly, be aware of the pitfalls researching war from afar. Obviously, it is not always practical or possible to research in war zones so, of necessity, a lot of this work will be desk-based research. You have to be acutely aware of where your sources come from, evaluate how they were produced and for whom, how they're filtered through specific perspectives or are the product of censorship, spin or erasure.

Fourthly, one of the things that really struck me about Northern Ireland was how many resonances of colonial discourse and state practice there were during the Troubles. One obvious connection would be how counter insurgency measures the British Army developed in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising were adopted in Northern Ireland. The same applies to the emergency measures taken in Palestine, or those of the French in Algeria where local people are placed a position of extreme precarity outside the ordinary ambit of justice. It is arguable that there are contemporary echoes of this logic in domestic carceral settings and places of detention. There's that.

Lastly, read a lot, read widely, read history. I have the luxury of having more time to read now and I

just finished a book called 'Afterlives of the Terror' about how the Republic dealt with crimes committed during the Reign of Terror in revolutionary France. The post Terror tribunals adjudicated individual cases for reparation but also adopted the concept of community loss which I thought was quite interesting. It's just one example. It might be something people working on transitional justice might look at.

So, since you asked, I would say – ignore the noise about what is or isn't criminology; be open to ideas about war from other disciplines; be aware of connections between war and colonialism and make sure you do at least some of your reading outside criminology.

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (1995). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Stanford University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London & New York: Verso.

Jamieson, R. (1998).'Toward a Criminology of War in Europe'. In Ruggiero V., South, N. and I. Taylor (eds), *The New European Criminology: Crime and Social Order in Europe*. London Routledge.

Jamieson, R. and Grounds, A. (2002). No Sense of an Ending: The effects of long-term imprisonment amongst Republican prisoners and their families. Available at CAIN: Issues: Prison: Jamieson and Grounds (2002) No Sense of an Ending

Zarkov, D. (2001). The Body of the Other Man: Sexual Violence and the Construction of Masculinity, Sexuality and Ethnicity in the Croatian Media. In Moser, C.O.N. and F.C. Clark (eds*.), Victims, Perpetrators, or Actors*? London: Zed Books.

Ruth Jamieson, now retired, was a lecturer in criminology in the School of Law at Queen's University Belfast. She worked extensively on war and political conflict. The primary focus of her work was on gender and political imprisonment. She is recognised to be the first person to launch a call for a criminology of war.

Teresa Degenhardt is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Criminology at Queen's University Belfast. She is the author of the monograph *War as Protection and Punishment: armed international intervention at the 'end of history'* (Routledge, 2023), and is generally interested in processes of criminalization and securitization at transnational level.

How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):
Jamieson, R. (2025). Interview with Ruth Jamieson. [Interview by T. Degenhardt]. *Criminological Encounters.* 7(1). 209-215. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.20

© The author(s), 2025 | Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.