

Making good

Jock Young

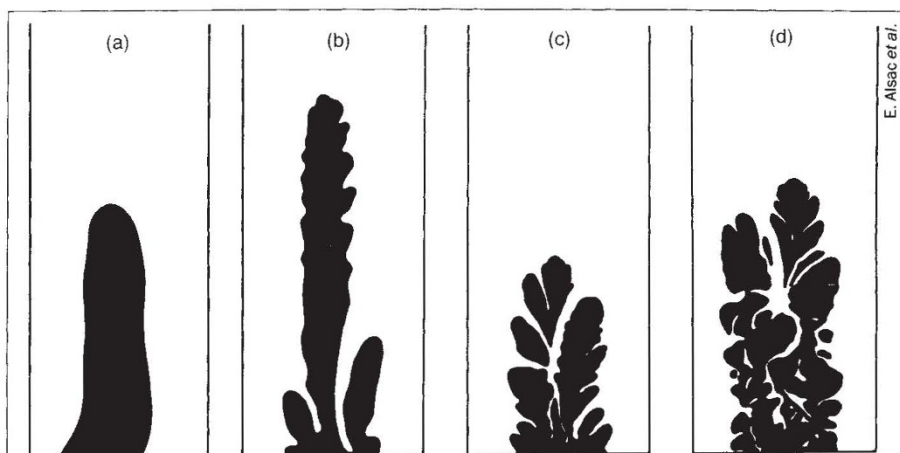
The Causes and Cures of Criminality. By Hans J. Eysenck and Gisli H. Gudjonsson. Plenum: 1989. Pp.309. \$41.40.

CRIMINOLOGY is an interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, demanding the integrated skills of the psychologist, sociologist, lawyer, human geographer and statistician. As Eysenck and Gudjonsson say, a "new wind is blowing through these fields, driving away the miasmas of ideological preconceptions and the critical biases" and "criminology is becoming a science, rather than being a football kicked about by ideological partisans of one persuasion or another". But they show little awareness of this new wave of thinking. Rather, they present us with the 'old wind' of psychological reductionism masquerading as a gust of innovation.

Crime involves an objective action and a subjective evaluation of that action as criminal. Over time, between different groups of people and in different countries, the evaluative element varies. What was considered the normal, perhaps necessary, chastisement of children in Victorian times, would be considered child abuse today. What is permissible physical punishment of children in Britain would be illegal in Scandinavia. This essential dyad — behaviour and the differential reaction to it — is simply ignored by the authors; it is as if criminal statistics had an independent existence outside of the members of the public, judiciary and police force, who, of course, necessarily exercise discretion in their adjudication. As a result, they present us with a graph of the rise in violent crime in Britain between 1970 and 1980 as if it were an objective piece of data.

This simple graph demands a complex of explanation involving an analysis of the causes of the changes in violent behaviour, in police-public relations (that is, willingness of people to report incidents) and in levels of tolerance of crime. Yet the authors present it as an indictment of 'current' sociological theories of crime, which they characterize as presuming an inverse linear relationship between absolute levels of wealth and the crime rate. But that is just what has not happened — crime rates have risen with the increase in wealth. True, such beliefs were current amongst positivist criminologists in the 1950s but it is remarkable that Eysenck and Gudjonsson should choose to take issue with already debunked theories.

The authors' distaste for subjective factors is further exemplified in their discussion of the relationship between relative deprivation — a key concept in criminology — and crime. Social dis-



Sticky fingers — instabilities in 'viscous fingering' processes can lead to a variety of patterns developing in the advancing medium. In the figure, the dark region is an air bubble which is being forced by low pressure into a dilute, aqueous colloidal suspension of clay. As the driving pressure increases, from left to right, interfacial instabilities cause disruption and break-up of the air 'finger'. The figure is taken from *The Fractal Approach to Heterogeneous Chemistry*, edited by David Avnir, published by John Wiley and Sons.

content, and in specified conditions crime, arises where there are perceived injustices in the distribution of wealth and status. The subjective perception of objective disparities often becomes greater when actual differences in wealth narrow. A caste society with wide differences of social position sanctified by tradition can exhibit little relative deprivation. In contrast, a society such as our own, which claims to be meritocratic and which has considerably less differentials of wealth, yet palpable injustices in reward, can generate extremely high levels of relative deprivation. Eysenck and Gudjonsson, with their obsession with the 'objective', present us with a graph indicating a narrowing of disparities accompanied by a rise of crime as if it were an indictment of relative deprivation theory.

Again, in their account of the relationship between individual constitutional and psychological differences, and the propensity to criminality, the authors persist in engaging in a reductionism which severely underestimates social and cultural factors. For example, marginalized groups of working-class youths react to exclusion from economic and social status by generating subcultures which emphasize hedonism, excitement and status achieved through aggression. It is, therefore, quite unremarkable that offenders score highly on psychological tests such as Eysenck's introversion-extraversion scale. For all of the questions enshrined in testing for high extraversion reflect precisely these values.

As far as constitutional factors are concerned, more muscular people (mesomorphs) are, of course, more likely to commit violence than fatter endomorphs; violence is a currency predicated on stronger individuals acting aggressively towards those who are weaker. The question is why certain mesomorphs in particular parts of the social structure, and in certain countries rather than others,

engage in violent behaviour. The repeated presentation of a correlation between the mesomorphy of offenders and crime just discovers the obvious and elevates it to the level of the causal.

As a sociologist, arguing against behaviourist dogma and psychological reductionism, I would not wish to deny the effects of individual differences, both of psychology and constitution. Too often our discipline has denied the individual. Yet Eysenck and Gudjonsson commit what Elliott Currie calls the 'fallacy of autonomy' — they reduce behaviour to individual free-floating traits and are unable to understand how the asocial is a product of the social.

The authors move from analysis of the cause of criminality to its cure. They point, quite correctly, to the absurd fashion in which governments throw money at the problem but rarely monitor the results. Yet when we come to Eysenck and Gudjonsson's prescriptions for reducing crime we find a catalogue of the commonplace — longer prison sentences for persistent offenders, increasing the likelihood of detection of crime, increasing prison accommodation, and greater discipline in the family and the school. The prescriptions are, as they put it, "very much in line with common sense". Yet such common sense notions have been tried *ad nauseam* and have palpably failed. A scientific criminology must be based on a realism that cuts through the gut reaction of punishment; that understands that the 'punitive obsession' itself is a product of an unequal society; and that seeks to generate solutions based on the social and individual causes of crime which are well researched and adequately monitored. □

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