



Shock and Awe: On Progressive Minimalism and Retreatism, and the New Ultra-Realism

Simon Winlow¹ · Steve Hall²

Published online: 20 March 2019
© The Author(s) 2019

Abstract

In this article, we respond to DeKeseredy and Schwartz's (2013) article, "Confronting Progressive Retreatism and Minimalism: The Role of a New Left Realist Approach." In that 2013 piece, the authors contend that many critical scholars are "retreating" from the crucial challenges of our time, and that many more are "minimizing" their critique and truncating the breadth of their critical scholarship. Given the tragedies that await us in the near future, we argue that it is vital that critical criminologists recognize the importance of their mission, ditch redundant theoretical frameworks, and focus again on the realities of global capitalism. We argue that critical criminologists can rejuvenate this crucial area of study by adopting the new ultra-realism.

The State We're In

Since the Enlightenment, generations of westerners have been encouraged to believe that liberalism is carrying our societies away from the barbarism of the past towards a hazy civilizational ideal that lies somewhere in the future. Early liberalism—tied as it was to freedom, "rationality," skepticism, and the sanctity of the individual—cast aside medieval myths and enabled the democratic politics, free thought and scientific advancement that, we imagined, would drive perpetual improvement and enrich the lives of all. With every passing year, new truths were revealed to us. Injustices were identified and corrected. Hunger and poverty, if they had not already been extinguished, were promised to soon disappear. Bigotry and intolerance were dragged out of their dark holes and exposed to the harsh glare of liberal modernization, where, we were told, they would inevitably wither and die.

Liberals throughout the modern era never claimed that social life was perfect, but they asserted that conditions were always improving, and that those incremental improvements were set to continue. More and more people were able to consume beyond need. Progressive liberal governments had put an end to early capitalism's untrammelled barbarism.

✉ Simon Winlow
simon.winlow@northumbria.ac.uk

Steve Hall
stevhall29@btinternet.com

¹ Northumbria University, Newcastle, England, UK

² Newcastle, England, UK

Ignorance and blind prejudice would soon succumb to the democratic soft power and boundless magnanimity of liberalism's rolling revolution. There could be no going back. The road ahead was clear.

In the shadow of the pressing problems we face today, however, it is liberalism's unbri-dled optimism and blind faith that appear anachronistic. It is the liberal center that eschews manifold evidence of its own failure, seeking instead the comfort of its spangled mythology. Convinced that their own ideology was not ideology at all, and certain of the inherent nobility of their project, many of liberalism's key protagonists, in both politics and academia, turned away from reality and its pathologies.

This retreat is unacceptable. We must be brave enough to consciously accept what we all know to be true: the high point of liberalism is well behind us. We are heading downhill fast, and we have been for quite some time. Because years of declining lifestyles and prolonged disinvestment in frontline welfare services failed to intrude upon the genteel environs of the political class and the professional liberal commentariat, however, not much was said about this downhill trajectory. Now the true extent of our troubles is becoming hard to ignore (Klein 2015). Forms of clearly identifiable social suffering are now so stark and voluminous that we can no longer believe they will be managed out of existence by the next center-left government. Those days are gone. The lethargy and decrepitude of the liberal center—and its inability to equip us with a surety of mission or any serviceable solutions to the problems we face—make it abundantly clear that its time is over. The liberal reign of two centuries is limping to an ignominious end. We need a new politics. We need a new economic model. We need to begin from the beginning again.

Readers of this journal will know that we are in the early stages of what will be a prolonged and destructive ecological crisis (see Ruggiero and South 2013; Davies et al. this issue). The signs of real ecological change, acknowledged by the experts for some time (Brisman and South 2014), are now recognizable to ordinary men and women across the west. If we are to have any hope at all of avoiding the worst effects of climate change, we need to struggle free from the cynicism, resignation and short-termism that currently structure the environmental strategies of mainstream political parties. It is obvious that we need new ideas, genuine leadership, concerted political action and a commitment to forging global accord if we are to avoid the historic tragedy that awaits us just a little further along the road.

Extensive social problems are following closely behind the ecological disasters of climate change, pollution, rising sea levels and extreme weather events. Climate migration, for example, exacerbated by the fallout from failed military interventions, is already a problem of huge scale and complexity (e.g., Brisman et al. 2018a, b). The influx of migrants to mainland Europe in recent years has hardened attitudes towards multiculturalism and diversity, and this is especially true among those sections of the population who have suffered most as a result of neoliberal economic restructuring (Winlow et al. 2017). Some European nations are already moving beyond the basic parameters set by parliamentary capitalism. Our economies are more unjust than at any point in living memory (Winlow and Hall 2013). The gap between rich and poor is now as wide as it was during the brutal years of early industrialism (Piketty 2014). The crumbling decrepitude of the neoliberal order and the first signs of declining self-confidence amongst its political class give shape to the anger, tension and antagonism that typify the contemporary political landscape. Many millions across Europe, frustrated by the degradation of their lifestyles and the refusal of a duplicitous political class to abandon the worn-out neoliberal playbook and concern itself again with the regulation of capital and the economic well-being of the people, are returning slowly to the political field. The political

class's inability to stop celebrating a system during its sharp decline is eroding its credibility in the eyes of those who are first to suffer its degradations.

In the absence of an organized, intelligent and determined left committed to economic justice, however, there are no guarantees that the silent majority (Baudrillard 2007) will follow a leftist path away from neoliberalism's decaying shell. The terrible injustices of neoliberal globalism have fuelled a resurgence of ethnocentric nationalism (see Winlow et al. 2017, 2018). Throughout much of the post-World War II era, as liberal societies became more democratic and inclusive, we remained confident that the politics of fascism could never return. Few are confident in this belief now. Nationalist political parties, drawing upon widespread social anxieties and framing them in the traditional narrative of a polluted and disintegrating *volk*, have already made progress throughout Europe. The certainties of liberalism's recent past are crumbling.

The cultural field is riven with incessant wars. Aggressive multipolar identitarianism seems to have defeated and replaced the traditional leftist drive to build politically-centered solidarities capable of addressing the inherent harms of global capitalism. Even in the academy, traditional socialism's absolute faith in the moral rectitude of universalism—a universalism in which all people, regardless of their personal characteristics, are included, valued and treated equally in a shared political project that seeks to improve the lives of all—tends to be dismissed as an anachronism (Winlow 2012). The academic left now appears to be concerned principally with challenging cultural prejudices, and much less interested in ideological critique or understanding the deleterious outcomes of “free-market thinking” in global financial institutions and political elites (Slobodian 2018). The drive for cultural justice, energized by neoliberalism's promise to enable marginalized groups to climb faster towards its upper strata of wealth and power (Lilla 2018), seems to have replaced the traditional drive for economic justice, inclusion and equality. Rather than establish common ground and identify mutual interests, today's factionalized left eschews the traditional unifying category of social class and focuses on “calling out” the “privilege of the other.” Immersed in this cultural warzone, the left disregards political economy and, where it talks about capitalism at all, regards it as a *fait accompli*. It is a left doomed to failure.

To be sure, the capitalist class is happy to allow and, where it can, even *encourage* these cultural wars (Heath and Potter 2006; Frank 1998). It has already profited handsomely from disunity. The failure of both the *academic left* to focus on the true causes of harm and the *political left* to construct a new economic model capable of attracting popular support has ensured that capital is free to continue its destructive dance. Many millions of working-class voters, averse to the contemporary liberal-left's new forms of weird, capricious identitarianism—and concerned mostly with job insecurity and rapidly declining lifestyles—are withdrawing their support from mainstream leftist political parties devoid of a plan to address widespread suffering and tainted by their prolonged commitment to the neoliberal status quo. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the traditional relationship between the multi-ethnic working class and the post-60s “new left” is on the brink of collapse. This liberal left now dominates the leftist mainstream. The European working class's aversion to the liberal left increases the likelihood that an increasing number will begin to heed the siren call of the nationalist right, who take working-class concerns about the erosion of culture seriously and at least promise to protect jobs. The left's inventive new tribalism and disregard for economic analysis are not solely responsible for the continued primacy of an exhausted neoliberal project, but any attempt to understand the left's current position of continuous abject failure must begin with an honest and reflexive acknowledgement of the mistakes and wrong turns that litter our recent history (Winlow et al. 2018).

In fact, our young people, even those born into relatively affluent sections of the working and middle classes, face the very real prospect of rapid downward mobility. Of course, some still possess the optimism of youth, but many are fully conscious of the precariousness of their positions in society. Those we see every day in lecture halls and seminar rooms will graduate with huge debts and confront a radically transformed and competitive job market in which secure, tenured employment that pays enough to buy a home and raise a family is extremely rare. The situation across southern Europe is particularly stark (Winlow et al. 2015). The liberal myth of incremental social improvement—which has been so successful for so long—simply cannot be sustained. The masses see degradation and diminishment rather than gradual improvement, and they no longer believe the staid rhetoric of centrist politicians who promise that a return to growth is just around the corner. Only the super-rich, and those who take on the role of defending their interests in the hope of one day being admitted to their hallowed ranks, are experiencing “improvement.”

Our current position is depressingly clear. The traditional entitlements of the past have been withdrawn. Capitalism’s ethos of aggressive competition has colonized almost every facet of life. The traditional social insulation that provided some protection from capitalism’s raw profit-seeking has been stripped away. Every social service, every institution, every organic community, everything that once seemed stable and reliable now seems to be on the verge of collapse as it is colonized by market logic. Once, working-class parents could look to the future with optimism, firm in the belief that their children would do better (Winlow and Hall 2006). No more. Stable and secure employment is now a relic of the past (Lloyd 2012, 2013, 2018). Liberal intellectuals, who continue to peddle the myth of incremental progress (see, e.g., Pinker 2011), reveal themselves as shameless ideologues dedicated to the reproduction of a social and economic system that decades ago ceased to work for the majority. The “gilets jaunes”—the yellow vests or yellow jackets movement that took to the streets in mid-November 2018—are the condottieri of an increasingly cynical western population who are refusing to be the subjects of this narrative.

Change will soon be upon us, whether we like it or not. If we leave things as they are, if we risk nothing and do nothing, social and ecological tragedies await. Now, as in the post-1968 epoch that gave shape to early left realism, the fundamental realist question is: how can we intervene in the present, and how deep down through the sedimentary layers of social reality does our intervention we need to go in order to create a society of reasonably peaceful and civilized coexistence, free from the panoply of harms and pathologies we see around us every day? It is not utopian to believe that we can build a better society or that we can construct an economic system that includes and values all. It is not utopian to suggest that the interests of our financialized credit-based economies can be subordinated to the interests of the population, and it is not utopian to suggest that we can act now to alleviate the huge pressures and problems that will befall future generations. Rather, it is utopian to suggest that we can continue in the present manner and avoid tragedy. It is utopian to believe that the market can be shamed into abandoning aggressive profiteering. It is utopian to believe that the deep-lying problems that have given shape to the unfolding urban crisis can be solved with small-scale policy initiatives. And it is utopian to believe that our politicians will, in the years to come, take the necessary action to prevent catastrophe. Deep down, we all know this, but what we refuse to acknowledge is the naïve utopianism of the belief that leftists already have all the answers, and that any day now millions of ordinary men and women will rally to our cause, even if we could identify clearly what our cause actually is.

In the following sections, we respond to and build upon the claims made by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) in their thoughtful article, and suggest a number of ways in which

criminologists can respond intellectually to the problems we have described above. What we need now is a new academic and political realism that looks coldly at the world and its problems, sizing them up carefully, drawing on the best and most up-to-date empirical data, before intervening with a view to setting us on a new course. The Anthropocene epoch demands that we throw off the shackles of interpretativism and return to reality. With that in mind, we begin to explore the new ultra-realism, focusing in particular on its intellectual roots, its account of reality, and the model of subjectivity that is centrally placed within its framework.

Why Realism?

Before we begin, it seems necessary to make a few observations about critical criminology. There is little sense of forward motion in this wing of our discipline. We continue to produce outstanding empirical accounts of social problems and the control apparatus (see, e.g., Raymen 2018; Raymen and Smith 2015; Hall and Antonopoulos 2016; Lloyd 2018; Kotze 2019; Briggs 2017; Ellis 2015), but we appear to be wedded to a range of outdated theoretical frameworks that can tell us little of consequence about our unique and troubled conjuncture. It is hard to identify genuine intellectual progress in contemporary criminology. It exists, to be sure, but when it crops up, it tends to be marginalized.

There are numerous, interconnected reasons for this, but it is clear that the now thoroughly corporatized university, private and public funding agencies, and the dominant intellectual elite mold an environment of increasing intellectual conformity. Contemporary liberalism—a combination of economic neoliberalism and self-styled cultural progressivism—continues its reign. Subtle inducements and occasional threats ensure that we do not abandon the blunt intellectual tools bequeathed to us by the faux-radicals of the postmodern cultural turn. Nor should we stray too far from orthodox critique. We can suggest changes to the system, but we cannot suggest the abandonment of the system and the establishment of something else in its place. Even now, during an era in which horror stacks on top of horror, there is huge pressure upon us to withhold the call for radical structural change and instead issue the call for piecemeal policy change. Many feel compelled to identify the green shoots of progressive social renewal in the dust of a decaying global neoliberal order (see, e.g., Clement 2016; Millington 2016). Many others continue to project their yearnings for a genuine political opposition onto the entirely apolitical activities of everyday young people (see, e.g., Ferrell 2018). Our compulsion to repress our awareness of the true scale of neoliberalism's negative outcomes—while we cling to the naïve faith that the political elite will take notice of our carefully gathered empirical evidence and accept our critical analyses before acting accordingly—is closely connected to one of the most important features of post-war capitalism's colossal and variegated ideological output: the injunction to accept that all that might exist beyond the borders of liberal capitalism and its inclusive electoral system is brutality, repression and tyranny. If you are unhappy with the system in any way, we are told, engage with it. Vote. Join a political party. Become an activist and say you are against something, or even *for something*, as long as it is not connected to political economy. Campaign for change. Seek reform as much as you like. But *never abandon the system*. This would lead to totalitarianism. Thus, very subtly, limits are placed upon our imagination. Our political ambitions are truncated. Indeed, as DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013) note, many on the academic left find themselves with the difficult choice of advocating policies they know will never be considered or watering down their policy

proposals until they stand a chance of being selected by a policy elite dedicated to cutting state funding to the bone. The aggressive ideological dismissal of all known alternatives to capitalism eventually leads us to a point at which it becomes impossible to imagine a positive alternative to it. As Jameson (1992) said many years ago, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (see also Žižek 2009; Winlow et al. 2015). We can seek to reform capitalism, but never must we seek to replace it.

In Britain, it is incredibly difficult for genuine radicals to win research funding. Grants tend to be given to criminologists who display resolute faith in parliamentary capitalism and the ability of the neoliberal state to solve social problems with carefully calibrated social policy interventions (see also Walters 2003). We are free to identify problems, and we are free to criticize existing policies, but it is considered very bad form indeed to offer a deep structural critique of our socio-economic system in one's final report. Doing so is unlikely to lead to further funding. We must not dig too deeply into reality as we contextualize our data, and we must identify only mid-range proximal rather than fundamental causes. It is also very difficult for genuine radicals to publish their work in core journals. The peer review system is contaminated by petty tribalism and grubby score-settling. Gatekeepers invested in the intellectual status quo do not take kindly to criticism of the status quo, which is taken as a personal insult and a threat to their precious beliefs. We can suggest that existing theoretical frameworks can be adjusted or perhaps even merged with other frameworks, but we cannot suggest that these frameworks are no longer capable of yielding any genuine insight into the manifold problems that litter our societies. Even now, amid the wreckage of neoliberalism's long-running war against the poor and otherwise disadvantaged, as ethnocentric nationalism returns and the signs of future catastrophes come into view, many of us continue to wax poetic about the inherent rebelliousness and progressive sensibilities of marginalized social groups (see, e.g., Millington 2016) or the political power of personal enjoyment (see, e.g., Dimou and Ilan 2018). We continue to be more concerned with the politics of social reaction than the actual causes of harm, and more interested in continuing to note the right-wing media's tendency to distort reality than account for our willingness to inflict suffering upon one another. As things get worse, we continue to believe in the post-1960s cultural politics that have failed to make them better.

At the core of ultra-realism lies an original account of contemporary subjectivity as it acts in its socioeconomic context (see Hall 2012; Hall and Winlow 2015, 2017; Winlow and Hall 2013; see also Ellis 2015; Lloyd 2018; Raymen 2018). For ultra-realists, many of the twentieth century's key theoretical paradigms are flawed not simply at the level of analysis, but at the foundational level. Authors working within these paradigms brush over, simplify and misconstrue the complexity of human subjectivity. Consequently, they are unable to identify the fundamental forces that drive individuals to act in ways that harm others and our shared environments. Most of these paradigms derive from an unacknowledged commitment to the old philosophical tropes of innate goodness and selfishness. For example, many of the theories that are assembled under the umbrella of "left idealism" assume that the subject is rational, essentially good and willing to struggle for freedom against the various repressive agencies of the state and the market. Left idealism's traditional political and intellectual opponents tend to assume the opposite. Conservative criminologists (see, e.g., Hirschi 1969) develop their analyses from the basic assumption that the individual is dangerous and potentially evil and therefore must be controlled and civilized by modern social and governmental institutions. To complicate matters, right-wing liberals—those who subscribe to the doctrine of market, hope to reduce the size of the state and the burden of taxation but who believe absolutely in the ability of the human subject to engage rationally with the world and determine his or her own identity and behavior—tend

to disagree with right-wing conservatives, and often appear to endorse an interpretation of subjectivity that is more in keeping with their liberal cousins on the political left. For right-wing liberals, the individual is essentially a rational and self-interested hedonist who can be encouraged to make the right choices by a functional social order and the core institutions of a minimal state. Others see the self simply as an object created and directed by the immediate social environment (e.g., Shaw and McKay 1972; Sutherland et al. 1995), while still others position the individual as a flexible agent periodically transformed, oppressed or liberated by “narratives,” “discourse,” and the vicissitudes of power and language (e.g., Foucault 2000). Ultra-realists begin by dismissing these paradigms as moribund and intellectually flawed. Ultra-realists hope to rid themselves of any vestigial attachment to criminology’s dominant liberal and conservative intellectual traditions, in the hope that they might rethink subjectivity and the causal contexts of today’s manifold problems.

Ultra-realists refuse to engage in the standard practice of returning to established theories and core texts when a new social problem presents itself. The application of mid-twentieth century criminological theory to twenty-first century social problems assists us only rarely in the task of constructing adequate explanations for and responses to the panoply of problems experienced by diverse populations in the real world. In the present conjuncture, critical social scientists often appear to be working in the dark with blunt and obsolete tools. Many of social science’s key themes and theories make reference to a world that no longer exists. While we must retain and work with concepts and ideas that can help us to understand the problems we face, regardless of their disciplinary origin, we must also be brave enough to discard out-of-date ideas that may provide a little comfort and familiarity but do not help to explain the gradual breaking apart of modernity’s partial achievements and the subsequent social problems that rise like the sun with each new day.

Ultra-realists argue that we must recognize and acknowledge that many of the problems we face now are, in fact, genuinely new. Our social and political structures, our cultural life, the global economy and the natural environment have all changed enormously since criminology’s early days. We cannot simply draw upon established intellectual frameworks and expect new truths to be revealed. We must scour the social sciences, the humanities and the natural sciences for research and ideas that have the explanatory power to illuminate the problems we face now. We must also have the courage to produce new concepts and intellectual frameworks of our own. Criminology continues to think of itself as an importer discipline—one that borrows ideas, paradigms and typologies from other fields. But given the size and diversity of contemporary criminology, should not we now attempt to produce and *export* a few ideas? For years, criminology has, for the most part, utilized the tools handed to it by twentieth-century liberal sociology. These tools are no longer fit for purpose, however, and the intellectual frameworks currently in vogue in sociology fail to tell us anything of genuine importance about the decomposition of civil society and fail to assist us in thinking through what might become of our collective life in the years ahead. British sociology, in particular, seems to have abandoned any attempting at systemic explanation and now seems more interested in activism and “speaking up” for what it has identified as the history’s diverse victim groups.

Criminologists should now display the confidence needed to step out of sociology’s shadow and take the lead in explaining the problems of our time. Criminology cannot allow itself to be turned into yet another sterile social scientific faction, dismissive of new and challenging viewpoints, dedicated only to identifying populations who deserve sympathy, governmental assistance and the opportunity to improve their position within the system as it stands. It should go without saying that the social scientist’s job is not to promote a liberal worldview. Rather, it is our job to investigate the real world and construct honest

and objective accounts of it before explaining and contextualizing the problems we find there with as much creativity, imagination and rigorous and informed scholarly insight as we can muster.

Ultra-Realism and Harm

A first step towards renewed explanatory power is to push past liberal social science's love affair with agency, choice and progress and its concomitant reluctance to acknowledge neoliberalism's broad suite of harms. Harm is usually defined as an action that leaves whatever it impacts in a worse condition. How well legally-defined "crime" represents real harm varies and depends on how well specific rules and laws have been constructed relative to the incidents they attempt to represent. By developing a core-periphery model of harm (Hall 2012), ultra-realism has set out to establish some theoretical principles about the study of the relationships between experiential harm and definitions of crime. There is a pressing need for criminology to dig underneath orthodox interpretive theories to understand the external contexts, motivations, causes and consequences of harm, and to integrate our understandings in a theoretical framework. Criminology continues to produce excellent social research on harm's various contexts, but as a discipline, we have not yet established an adequate theoretical framework to push forward our understanding of today's world.

The concept of "lack of social recognition" (Honneth 1996), which comports with Bhaskar's (2008) claim that absence is causative, presents us with a useful theoretical basis for a renewed investigation of harm. This hypothetical absence would, of course, create an ethically deregulated social context in which abuse, neglect and harm on a variety of scales could be practiced and justified by dominant actors without guilt. Honneth (1996) claims that in the traditional Hegelian master-slave relation of imbalanced mutual interdependency, such an extreme hypothetical situation was prevented because the master was compelled to grant the slave a minimal degree of recognition and rights, which, hypothetically, can be fully established only in an equal democratic society. Ultra-realists argue that neoliberal capitalism has not progressed towards democracy and equality but towards a historically unique situation in which the master-slave relation has been virtually severed. Throughout history, the master's need for the slave's labor and acquiescence forced the master to at least recognize the slave's existence, functions, opinions and partial rights. In advanced capitalism, however, where automation and outsourcing in a competitive global market are rendering so many types of labor functionally redundant, we are witnessing the end of such traditional socioeconomic obligations (Winlow and Hall 2013). This provides dominant actors in any position in the social structure with opportunities to exercise what Hall (2012) has termed "special liberty"—a sense of entitlement felt by individuals to do whatever is necessary as they pursue business, enjoyment and wealth. It is driven by the obscene drives of narcissism and *jouissance*. As capitalist history has unfolded, it has percolated down from aristocratic and bourgeois culture to popular culture, normalizing a general sense of entitlement to risk harm to others in the subject's attempts to gratify expressive or instrumental desires (Hall 2012). It is now too easy for ambitious individuals to justify doing what they think is necessary, on or beyond the boundaries of ethics and law, to secure their own acquisitive or expressive interests, regardless of the welfare of others. The victims and potential victims of myriad harmful practices neglected or inadequately covered by the existing legal system now have very little regulatory or bargaining power in relation to their exploiters. In such a rapidly transforming socioeconomic and

cultural milieu, a criminological discipline restricted to legally defined “crime” as its object of research and theorization simply cannot do its job.

Ultra-realists invert Honneth’s (1996) direction of causality (see Hall and Winlow 2015). While left realists tend to claim that harm is the product of inequality, the opposite is true. Social inequality is a structural consequence of the willingness of ruthless individuals and groups to perpetrate multiple harms as they out-compete, dispossess and politically disempower individuals to the extent that the latter can be coerced into a position of permanent insecurity and exploitation. Political and economic inequality is sustained and reproduced not simply by mediated hegemonic naturalization but by a culture of hardened, domineering and ruthless pseudo-pacified subjectivity that has become normalized and successful throughout the history of the capitalist project (Hall 2012). This competitive subjectivity, driven by the libidinal energy of obscene enjoyment, is not unique to white upper-class males, whose wealth and power are the products of centuries of ruthless and successful accumulation. It is active throughout the social structure in a variety of pseudo-pacified micro-relations. Its ubiquitous, rhizomatic presence and enthusiastic adoption by too many opportunistic individuals permanently postpones the formation of the sort of long-term working-class solidarity that could restart genuine cultural and political opposition. This is the advanced capitalist culture of *amour propre* (see Hall et al. 2008), where the competitive individual gauges her success relative to the downfall and subjugation of others. Too many amongst the subjugated, as John Steinbeck once claimed, do not see themselves as an exploited proletariat but “temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”

Such competitive individuals dominate in all aspects of culture and politics. They do not seek solidarity or social transformation but increased security, lest some undeserving soul steals their enjoyment of the permanent dissatisfaction that they have won for themselves. The harms of securitization, however, equal or perhaps even outweigh the harms of street crime and white-collar crime. Such a proliferation and broad diffusion of harms and hardened, yet insecure, subjectivities demand that criminology revisit its fundamental assumptions with a view to updating itself and placing itself on a firmer ontological platform. Simply locating domineering parties on the social axes supplied by intersectional identity politics has proven to be inadequate, perhaps even an obstacle to our further understanding. In such a competitive and insecure milieu, the motivation and the ability to risk harm to the other in acts of securing the interests of the self is not exclusive to a specific social group, even those who have been more successful in their endeavors.

Ultra-realists argue that twenty-first-century criminology should frame its analyses of harm in a coherent critique of the whole advanced capitalist way of life—its economic logic, its competitive-narcissistic culture, its subjectivities and its harms. Neoliberalism’s culture of competitive individualism is becoming ever more *zemiogenic*. It is now normal and entirely acceptable for individuals to risk inflicting various types of harm on others as they seek the personal security and enjoyment that are, of course, impossible in capitalism’s unstable system. As a first step towards theoretical reconstruction, criminology must look beyond the slippery socio-legal concept of crime towards the more ontologically grounded concept of harm.

Foundations

Ultra-realism has a range of diverse influences. From within the broad field of criminology, the subfields of feminism, left realism and victimology are notable. At various points in our discipline’s history, key authors and researchers working in these areas attempted

to break away from criminology's dominant explanatory frameworks and hoped to jolt the discipline out of its intellectual myopia and self-satisfied inertia and force it to look again at reality. Ultra-realism retains the drive to return to reality and to represent it truthfully, but in a standard dialectical manner, it hopes to advance the intellectual gains made by these authors and researchers, and, where necessary, reject entirely aspects of their work.

For example, modern victimology challenged social constructionist accounts of the crime problem and drew attention to the genuine harms experienced by victims. In a similar way, feminist accounts of male violence revealed the intellectual errors of left idealist accounts of the crime and criminalization. Early feminists unearthed a troubling reality, in which female victims suffered greatly, and the police and the criminal justice system—rather than unfairly labeling and punishing offenders—ignored, failed to protect, and stigmatized female victims of male violence. Ultra-realists acknowledge the contribution made by feminist scholars to the advancement of criminology, but they also claim that, as feminist accounts of female crime and victimhood were integrated in the discipline's mainstream, the field of feminist criminology became rather doctrinaire and theoretically one-dimensional. Much feminist criminology continues to focus on violence against women, especially in the domestic sphere. Thus, the complex causes of male violence are reduced and simplified as mere context-specific expressions of historical patriarchy. This explanation for male violence is reproduced endlessly, and few scholars working in this tradition appear willing to deviate from it. Ultra-realists (e.g., Hall 2012; Winlow and Hall 2009; Ellis 2015; Ellis et al. 2017) have drawn on history, neuroscience, philosophy and psychoanalysis, as well as cultural studies, socio-economics and sociology, in their attempt to build new accounts of male violence that are more accurate and free from the kinds of sub-disciplinary protocols that have prevented feminist criminology moving forward.

Left realists, too, advocated a return to reality. They hoped to dig underneath discourse and language to produce theories that could capture and explain the significant crime problems that arose as Keynesian social democracy receded into history to be replaced by an anti-social neoliberal order that remains with us still. Left realists began their project by acknowledging that criminals often inflict real harm on individuals and our shared environments. While left liberal radicals might have liked to find an element of class antagonism in the behaviors and choices of lower-class criminals, the reality was—and is—very different. Working-class criminals for the most part victimize members *of their own communities*. Left realism's intellectual intervention shed some light on the reality of crime and improved our discipline significantly. As time passed, however, it became clear that left realists were unwilling to abandon idealism entirely. "Moral panics," a concept rooted clearly in idealism and the denial of our ability to represent reality with any accuracy (see Horsley 2017), lingered (see, e.g., Young 2009). Contemporary left realist accounts of riots and forms of political protest also remained unswervingly idealist. Corrosive self-interest and predatory violence, left realists acknowledged, are often an everyday feature of low-income neighborhoods. Left realists also claimed, however, that underneath this predatory activity, progressive politics exists in marginalized communities as a timeless fact of life, erupting into carnivalesque violence if the state allows the profit motive to disturb the raw but functional cultural life of the people (see Fitzgibbon 2017; Lea 2013). Lea (2013) even went so far as to suggest that contemporary rioters understood the totality of global capitalism and that their actions should be viewed as a direct, if rather uncoordinated, attempt to topple capital from its lofty perch. More importantly, despite the apparent radicalism of the left realist approach, key authors believed that capitalism was the best of all available economic systems, and that any conceivable alternative to it would lead inevitably to widespread destitution and, in all probability, industrial-scale slaughter (see Lea and Young

1993; see also Matthews 2014). Once this basic feature of post-war capitalism's ideological project was accepted, left realism inevitably became yet another reformist movement that sought only to petition government to ameliorate social problems by redistributing wealth and providing adequate job opportunities and welfare systems.

Elements of radical thought were certainly present in the left realist project, but when it came to the crunch, most left realists were social democrats on economic issues and liberals on cultural issues. Rather than proposing forms of depth intervention that had the potential to cut problems off at their source, left realists hoped only to identify progressive and incremental social policies with the potential to reduce the suffering of marginalised populations. Ultimately, left realism failed to evolve and fell out of favor with younger criminologists keen on coming to grips with an increasingly unjust and harmful twenty-first century capitalist system. Left realism also ignored subjectivity, fudged around root causes, and failed to develop a critical account of criminogenic post-1968 consumer culture. While ultra-realists owe much to left realism's drive to take crime seriously, the differences between the two approaches are too great for ultra-realists to identify their project as a direct descendant of left realism. For ultra-realists, then, critical realism, and the work of Bhaskar (2008), in particular, offers a much more stable intellectual platform upon which to build. Ultra-realists, however, disagree with the transcendental aspect of Bhaskar's work that came increasingly to the fore towards the end of his life. Other critical realists, too, seem unable to truly dispense with the general idealist faith that we all possess the capacity to transcend structures, environments and our own biographies and sail off towards the heavens to live a moral life unimpeded by the horrors of the real world (e.g., Archer 2008).

From Critical Realism to Ultra-Realism

Critical realists begin by claiming that meaning and action are not genuinely autonomous. The meanings we ascribe to processes, events and our own biographies are inevitably influenced by the world around us and our experience of it, and our actions are, often unbeknownst to us, shaped by social relations, interdependencies, imperatives, events and experiences. These things form a totalizing system, and they cannot be easily disaggregated. They inform one another at a fundamental level. Our experiences, our sense of self, our faith in our own agency and so on are intertwined with and overlap other aspects of this totalizing system. Bhaskar pushes past liberal sociology's obsession with free-willed identity construction by identifying the "non-identity" that shapes our social experience. While liberals sing the lullaby of the self-created moral agent capable of changing his or her life at a whim, Bhaskar's point is to highlight the stark negativity and genuine contradictions that underpin the social world. Only knowledge of the structures and generative processes that shape our lives offers us the opportunity to understand and improve things, and only by orientating activities towards this totality can our actions be considered properly political (see Hall and Winlow 2015; Winlow et al. 2015).

So, critical realists believe that we possess the "freedom" to think and act, but they claim that this freedom occurs within a very limited sphere. Our choices are always tied to the options presented to us and to the various meanings ascribed to those options. We retain a degree of agency with regard to an array of everyday choices, but, crucially, we simply do not have the capacity to enact our "freedom" at a deeper level that shapes our experience of everyday reality. For example, we do not have the capacity to act at the level

where deep-state politics and the intricacies of the global investment banking system are reproduced. Despite the supposed liberties of parliamentary democracy, we are not invited to offer a view on a whole range of issues that affect our everyday lives. Nor are we able to make decisions that affect whole communities, whole societies, our entire economic system or the natural environment. We have no access to these realms of concentrated power, and they remain, for the most part, beyond our immediate comprehension. From this basic ontological model, critical realists develop an epistemological model that enables us to grasp, in a very straightforward manner, the processes and forces that shape our experience of reality:

1. Empirical level—the predominant space of social experience. Subjects interpret events using common forms of representative knowledge.
2. Actual level—the space of deep-lying social processes that shape experience at the empirical level.
3. Real level—the space of fundamental forces and generative mechanisms. The processes of the actual and the experiences of the empirical all have their roots in the real.

Placed within this context, and put very simply, ultra-realists believe that criminologists must attempt to create causal chains that connect the negativistic experiences of the empirical realm to their fundamental causes located in the real. Rather than simply describe harms, they must be identified as the outcomes of actual social processes, which, in turn, must be attached to underlying generative mechanisms. It is at this point that ultra-realism's theoretical project develops an empirical project to sit alongside it. Quantitative methodologies can occasionally reveal patterns and social trends at the empirical level, but if we are to take the next step of connecting empirically identifiable phenomena to complex social processes and root causes, we need qualitative methods capable of getting underneath basic patterns of social behavior to the motivations and justifications of criminal and non-criminal actors. Ultra-realists claim that establishing networks of ethnographic researchers can provide us with the data and analyses we need to push past mid-level theory and begin to come to grips with the forces that occupy the real. The first step is to identify what Hegel called the "concrete universal"—put simply, the small fragments of the totality that can be taken to be representative of the totality itself. Networks of ethnographers, working, for example, in high crime areas across the west, should be able to identify a concrete universal, present in each location, that represents the totality of the liberal capitalist system. The structures and dynamic processes of neoliberalism, for which market logic is the dominant organizing principle, have already hollowed out deindustrialized zones throughout Britain. It is now perfectly clear that this process has reshaped rates of crime, forms of crime and spurred the development of new criminal markets. It is not simply presence and action that are causative; so, too, are absence and inaction. The absence of hope, real politics, solidarity and stable and reasonably remunerative employment clearly inform social experience, and the absence of these things are connected to the onward march of neoliberal capitalism and its central principal of unequal exchange. Many individuals who live in marginalized social spaces have seen stable work and community life disappear and criminality and low-level disorder advance. Their experiences of decline and loss are examples of the historical concrete universals ultra-realists seek to investigate (see Winlow 2001; Winlow et al. 2017).

Transcendental Materialism and Subjectivity

Critical realism offers a useful framework that encourages social scientists to once again dig beneath the empirical and the gestural. Its conceptualization of the relationship between nature, the individual and the social is problematic, however. The core concept of “analytic dualism” separates the individual moral agent from the system’s structures, dynamic processes, events and hegemonic ways of thinking and believing. This fallacy of the existence of the eternal moral agent set in opposition to history’s unfair socioeconomic systems has hampered our thinking for decades (see Winlow et al. 2015). We have discussed this problem at length elsewhere (see Hall 2012; Winlow and Hall 2013; Hall and Winlow 2015), but very basically, Bhaskar (2008) failed to apply his own theoretical principle of causative absence to the realm of subjectivity.

Transcendental materialism gets down to the task of theorizing the emergence and constitution of subjectivity rather than simply assuming it to be an eternal presence separated from the world to inhabit some sort of spiritual dimension. This new philosophical realism moves far beyond biological positivism’s crude ontology and etiology of genetic traits and the idealist notion of ultimate flexibility in the transcendental realm of ideas and language. Mead’s (2015) theory of the formation of the subject is obsolete because it considers only the subject’s conscious self-image seen through external others, not the formative emergence of the subject through unconscious desires, drives, experiences and the hunger for coherent symbolism. Post-structuralists, on the other hand, took Lacan’s metaphor literally as an ontological reality and overestimated the flexibility of unconscious desire in relation to symbolism. Lacan said that the unconscious was structured like a language, not that it is a language (see Hall et al. 2008).

Lacan reminded us that absence exists as an elemental force at the center of the emerging subject. For Johnston (2008), humans are hard-wired for plasticity at the material level of drives and desires. Material being is naturally and automatically transcendental. Emerging subjects are thrown outwards into rigid ideological systems that pre-exist them and have become *deaptative* in the sense that they no longer function to inform subjects and aid survival in the current environment. The current *deaptative* ideological order of symbols is based on the principle of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009)—the insistent doctrine that we have reached the endpoint of economic history and no alternative to liberal capitalism will ever be possible. The west’s dominant ideology, shared by liberal right and liberal left alike, instructs us that choice and moral agency must be prohibited at the deepest level of social and economic system dynamics. As liberal social scientists have argued for decades, western individuals have the ability to choose and display all sorts of diverse opinions about positive phenomena in the world (Abercrombie and Turner 1978). The vast majority, however, now share the politically decisive negative belief that most choices are possible except the collective choice to change the fundamental coordinates of our socioeconomic mode of existence.

Neoliberal capitalism’s accompanying consumer culture intensifies the subject’s sense of imminent social insignificance and a return to the terror of the Real (Hall et al. 2008). Consumerism does not appease but overstimulates a secondary form of objectless anxiety in the subject (Hall 2012), which means that the overdriven subject’s will to incorporate itself in the dominant symbolic order is resolute. The capitalist Imaginary functions as a powerful ideological context, shaping the desires and dreams that energize consumer culture and accelerate the circulation of commodities, but it systematically disrupts and prevents symbolic connections with economic, environmental and social realities. The

dominant negative ideology of capitalist realism has now reached a stage where it is the most potent causative and reproductive cultural force in all dimensions of life. It locks the individual into a fetishistically disavowed active engagement with the current neoliberal system's imperatives and ideological reproduction.

Conclusion

The complacent, gentrified world of middle-class liberal media and academia could neither predict nor explain the recent seismic political events across Europe and the United States, some of which are redolent of the political trajectory in 1930s Europe. Perhaps it is time to puncture this bubble of complacency with some “shock and awe” revelations of neoliberalism's current reality. The scale of the real problems we face, from global warming to social atomism, rising rates of violent crime and far-right reaction, means that sensationalism is not required. Huge socioeconomic problems in former manufacturing areas, and working-class subjective responses to them, has been systematically ignored or misunderstood, not only by the neoliberals but also by the liberal left, who purport to represent the interests of the disadvantaged. New research by ultra-realist criminologists (see Hall and Antonopoulos 2016; Kotze 2019) is exposing potentially fatal epistemological problems in the “international crime-decline” narrative (see Hall and Winlow 2015, Chapter 7, for details). The statistical industry's focus on traditional, legally-defined crime and its victims has meant that the crime-decline narrative is the product of ignoring harms and measuring obsolescence rather than the current events and subjective experiences that constitute the actual realm. The complacency and misunderstandings that have colonized and enervated liberalism's truncated political wing are being duplicated in its intellectual wing, and criminology is no exception. Ultra-realism enjoins us to struggle free from paralyzing twentieth-century paradigms and return to reality and free intellectual enquiry as a matter of political urgency. A multi-dimensional educational and theoretical milieu must be built with the intention of conducting research with no intellectual restrictions, no censorship at the point of publication, and no identitarian demarcations between “standpoint” interest groups. Until we begin to do this, we will not be educating young people in the realities of the world but simply affirming the soothing fantasies that reproduce the complacent, truncated politics that have quite recently been exposed as ineffective and obsolete in the advanced capitalist world.

OpenAccess This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Abercrombie, N., & Turner, B. (1978). The dominant ideology thesis. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 1(1), 149–170.
- Archer, M. (2008). *Being human*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (2007). *In the shadow of the silent majorities*. London: Semiotext.
- Bhaskar, R. (2008). *A realist theory of science*. London: Verso.
- Briggs, D. (2017). *Dead-end lives: Drugs and violence in the city shadows*. Bristol: Policy Press.

- Brisman, A., & South, N. (2014). *Green cultural criminology: Constructions of environmental harm, consumerism, and resistance to ecocide*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Brisman, A., South, N., & Walters, R. (2018a). Climate apartheid and environmental refugees. In K. Carrington, R. Hogg, J. Scott, & M. Sozzo (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook on criminology and the global south* (pp. 301–321). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brisman, A., South, N., & Walters, R. (2018b). Southernizing green criminology: Human dislocation, environmental injustice and climate apartheid. *Justice, Power and Resistance*, 2(1), 1–21.
- Clement, M. (2016). *A people's history of riots, protest and the law: The sound of the crowd*. London: Palgrave.
- DeKeseredy, W., & Schwartz, M. (2013). Confronting progressive retreatism and minimalism: The role of a new left realist approach. *Critical Criminology: An International Journal*, 21(3), 273–286.
- Dimou, E., & Ilan, J. (2018). Taking pleasure seriously: The political significance of subcultural practice. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(1), 1–18.
- Ellis, A. (2015). *Men, masculinities and violence*. London: Routledge.
- Ellis, A., Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2017). Throughout my life I've had people walk all over me: Trauma in the lives of violent men. *Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026117695486>.
- Ferrell, J. (2018). *Drift: Illicit mobility and uncertain knowledge*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist realism*. London: Zero.
- Fitzgibbon, W. (2017). Riots and protest in Europe. In S. Isaacs (Ed.), *European social problems* (pp. 110–125). London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (2000). *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1954–1984: Essential works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984* (Vol. 2), edited by J. D. Faubion, London: Penguin.
- Frank, T. (1998). *The conquest of cool*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, S. (2012). *Theorising crime and deviance: A new approach*. London: Sage.
- Hall, A., & Antonopoulos, G. (2016). *Fake meds online: The internet and the transnational market in illicit pharmaceuticals*. London: Palgrave.
- Hall, S., & Winlow, S. (2015). *Revitalizing criminological theory: Towards a new ultra-realism*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S., & Winlow, S. (2017). Ultra-realism. In W. S. DeKeseredy & M. Dragiewicz (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of critical criminology* (pp. 45–62). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Hall, S., Winlow, S., & Ancrum, C. (2008). *Criminal identities and consumer culture: Crime, exclusion and the new culture of narcissism*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan.
- Heath, J., & Potter, A. (2006). *The rebel sell*. London: Capstone.
- Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Honneth, A. (1996). *The struggle for recognition*. Oxford: Polity.
- Horsley, M. (2017). Forget 'moral panics'. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Criminology*, 9(2), 84–98.
- Jameson, F. (1992). *Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Johnston, A. (2008). *Žižek's ontology: A transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Klein, N. (2015). *This changes everything*. London: Penguin.
- Kotze, J. (2019). *The myth of the 'crime decline': Exploring change and continuity in crime and harm*. London: Routledge.
- Lea, J. (2013). Book review: Daniel Briggs (ed), *The English Riots of 2011: A summer of discontent*. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17(3), 417–419.
- Lea, J., & Young, J. (1993). *What is to be done about law and order?* London: Pluto.
- Lilla, M. (2018). *The once and future liberal*. London: Hurst.
- Lloyd, A. (2012). Working to live, not living to work: Work, leisure and youth identity among call centre workers in North East England. *Current Sociology*, 60(5), 619–635.
- Lloyd, A. (2013). *Labour markets and identity on the post-industrial assembly line*. London: Routledge.
- Lloyd, A. (2018). *The harms of work: An ultra-realist account of the service economy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Matthews, R. (2014). *Realist criminology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mead, G. H. (2015). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Millington, G. (2016). "I found the truth in foot locker": London 2011, urban culture, and the post-political city. *Antipode*, 48(3), 705–723.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature*. London: Penguin.
- Raymen, T. (2018). *Parkour, deviance and leisure in the late-capitalist city*. London: Emerald.

- Raymen, T., & Smith, O. (2015). What's deviance got to do with it? Black Friday sales, violence and hyper-conformity. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 56(2), 389–405.
- Ruggiero, V., & South, N. (2013). Green criminology and crimes of the economy: Theory, research and praxis. *Critical Criminology: An International Journal*, 21(3), 359–373.
- Shaw, C., & McKay, H. (1972). *Juvenile delinquency and urban areas* (Revised ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Slobodian, Q. (2018). *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sutherland, E., Cressey, D., & Luckenbill, D. (1995). The theory of differential association. In N. Herman (Ed.), *Deviance: A symbolic interactionist approach* (pp. 64–72). New York: Roman & Littlefield.
- Walters, R. (2003). *Deviant knowledge: Criminology, politics and policy*. Cullompton, Devon: Willan.
- Winlow, S. (2001). *Badfellas: Crime, tradition and new masculinities*. Oxford: Berg.
- Winlow, S. (2012). Is it ok to talk about capitalism again? Or, why criminology must take a leap of faith. In S. Winlow & R. Atkinson (Eds.), *New directions in crime and deviancy* (pp. 5–29). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2006). *Violent night: Urban leisure and contemporary culture*. Oxford: Berg.
- Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2009). Retaliate first: Memory, humiliation and male violence. *Crime Media Culture*, 5(3), 285–304.
- Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2013). *Rethinking social exclusion: The death of the social?* London: Sage.
- Winlow, S., Hall, S., Briggs, D., & Treadwell, J. (2015). *Riots and political protest: Notes from the post-political present*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Winlow, S., Hall, S., & Treadwell, J. (2017). *The rise of the right: English nationalism and the transformation of working-class politics*. Bristol: Policy.
- Winlow, S., Hall, S., & Treadwell, J. (2018). Why the left must change: Right-wing populism in context. In E. Currie & W. DeKeseredy (Eds.), *Progressive justice in an age of repression* (pp. 87–110). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Young, J. (2009). Moral panic: Its origins in resistance, resentment and the translation of fantasy into reality. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 49(1), 4–16.
- Žižek, S. (2009). *First as tragedy, then as farce*. London: Verso.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.