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# Beyond 'so what?' criminology

## *Rediscovering realism*

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### Abstract

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There has been a growing concern about the lack of policy relevance of criminology in recent years. Two influential responses to this dilemma have been presented. On one hand, it has been argued that academic criminologists should become more active in mobilizing points of consensus about what works, while on the other hand it has been suggested that there should be a division of labour among academics and that the subject be broken down into public, professional, policy and critical criminologies. This article argues that neither of these responses are tenable and instead calls for an approach that links theory, method and intervention with the aim of developing a coherent critical realist approach that is able to go beyond the existing forms of 'so what?' criminology.

### Key Words

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administrative criminology • critical criminology • empiricism  
• intervention • liberalism • public criminology • realism

### Introduction

There is, it would seem, an inverse relationship between the expansion of academic criminology and its policy relevance. Despite the growing numbers of criminology students and courses in many countries, and the millions of pounds and dollars spent on criminological research academic criminology appears to be becoming more marginalized and irrelevant. Elliot Currie (2007), for example, has recently called for a more

public criminology that can make a more worthwhile contribution to crime related issues in order to resist and potentially reverse what he sees as the development of spiralling punitive and regressive policies. Currie argues that there is considerable knowledge about what works to reduce crime and that there is a broad level of consensus regarding the causes of crime and violence and the limited ability of incarceration to reduce crime. He advocates more active engagement in public debate and the possible development of advocacy organizations to disseminate criminological knowledge. In this way he suggests we might move beyond what he refers to as 'so what?' criminology, by which he means those highly technical and dauntingly quantitative studies that focus on trivial issues, are conceptually weak or present their findings in impenetrable language.

Similar concerns have been presented by Michael Burawoy (2004) in relation to sociology. He suggests that there are, or should be, four interdependent sociologies that can mobilize different forms of knowledge and focus on different levels of sociological enquiry. The growing interest in public sociologies, he maintains, marks an increasing gap between the ethos of sociologists and the social, political and economic tendencies of wider society. Thus:

Public sociology aims to enrich the public debate about moral and political issues by infusing them with sociological theory and research. It has to be distinguished from policy, professional and critical sociologies. Together, these four interdependent sociologies enter into relations of domination and subordination, forming a disciplinary division of labour that varies among academic institutions as well as over time, both within and between nations. Applying the same disciplinary matrix to other social sciences suggests sociology's specific contribution lies in its relation to civil society, and, thus, in its defence of human interests against the encroachment of states and markets.

(Burawoy, 2004: 1603)

In this classic liberal formulation which sees the fundamental role of sociology to protect human interests against the State and market, Burawoy suggests that the way forward is to distinguish public sociology from policy sociology, because the latter 'focuses on solutions to specific problems defined by clients'(p. 6). Professional sociology, he claims, provides legitimacy and expertise while critical sociology is designed to 'push forward the frontiers and at the same time question its foundations'(p. 7). Although Burawoy indicates that these four strands or 'cells' of sociology might overlap he suggests that most sociologists should concentrate their efforts in one type of sociology (Burawoy, 2005).

However, the fragmentation of sociology or criminology into four cells or strands does not solve the problem but rather exacerbates it. It is precisely the inability to join up these different aspects of social inquiry that lies at the heart of the problem. The division of labour that identifies some people as 'theorists' and others as researchers or activists involves the breakdown of the relation between theory and practice which in turn serves to undermine the policy relevance and coherence of the subject.

At the same time the solution to the issue of policy relevance of sociology or criminology cannot be found in mobilizing the fragile consensus that exists in these subject areas. There may be a few areas of agreement in criminology and while most would agree that prison has a limited effect on crime rates, there is little agreement about what forms of punishment should be used instead of prison and many argue that so-called 'alternatives to custody' can create more problems than they solve (Cohen, 1985).

Other criminologists have claimed that its limited policy relevance is a function of the general lack of methodological rigour. Thus, James Austin (2003) has argued that much research is of little value because of conceptual imprecision and methodological deficiencies. From a different vantage point Jock Young (2004) has criticized the fetish of numbers, the deficiency of standard survey methods and the limitations of the 'numbers game' in criminology which serves to reduce the richness, vitality and excitement of the subject to a series of dry numerical calculations that manufacture a spurious precision.

The discussion about criminological methods is important and there is no doubt that much criminological research is flawed by the use of inadequate methods. However, this is not just a technical issue about the appropriateness or value of different techniques, but also a debate about the 'problem of method'. It is not simply a question of better sampling, statistical manipulation or improved questionnaire design as many of the standard text books on criminological research suggest, but a more philosophical question about how the social world can be best appropriated and understood.

Another major theme which runs through commentaries of the limited policy relevance of criminology centres around increased dominance of government funding and the narrow and constrained nature of this form of research. Reese Walters (2003) has questioned how 'market led criminology' which focuses on risk management, privatization and cost-effectiveness has influenced the production of criminological knowledge. Government funded forms of 'administrative criminology', he suggests are not interested in generating critical and reflexive research and have in recent years come to undermine and sideline critical criminological inquiry. There can be little doubt that the changing nature of the academy coupled with the increasingly narrow focus of much government sponsored research has produced a growing body of largely a-theoretical research with a limited policy edge. Consequently, much 'administrative criminology' tends to involve policy driven evidence rather than evidence driven policy.

If criminologists want to increase the policy relevance of their work it is unlikely to be achieved by mobilizing the limited and largely superficial consensus that currently exists in the subject, or dividing criminology into different sub sets. Rather we need to engage in theoretically informed interventions employing an appropriate methodology. Thus the development of a criminology that is policy relevant necessarily involves the mobilization of the 'holy trinity' that incorporates theory, method and practice. Realist criminologists, in line with other radical and critical thinkers, have historically argued for an approach that links theory to practice (Young, 1992). However, it is becoming

increasingly recognized among critical realists that the method of analysis is an essential component linking theory to effective intervention.

The growing concerns about the policy relevance of criminology can be seen in part as a function of the demise of conservative criminology, which was extremely influential in the 1980s, and early 1990s and typically called for tougher punishments to deal with wilful lawbreakers (Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985; Murray, 1990; Herrnstein and Murray, 1994; Cullen et al., 1997). In this period much of the liberal response centred around rejecting or opposing conservative policies, while emphasizing what are considered to be more benign policies such as welfare, education and more informal strategies to deal with offenders. The demise of conservative criminology has created something of a policy vacuum and given liberals little to object to or debate with. Consequently, liberalism in its three major forms—humanist, radical and pessimist—has moved from a debate with ‘get tough’ conservatives to complaining about manipulative politicians who play the ‘law and order’ card, or gullible publics who are charged with becoming more intolerant and punitive (Bottoms, 1995; Pratt et al., 2005; Simon, 2007). The problem with many of these ‘feel good’ policies is that they are often out of sync with the lived reality of crime and fail to connect with changing public attitudes, particularly those of the working class. Over the same period, however, a growing body of work associated with critical realism has emerged to challenge this liberal consensus and developed an alternative approach. An impressive array of realist literature has begun to address issues such as race, class, the State, political theory, as well developing an influential set of publications on methods of social research (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Archer et al., 1998; Carter, 2000; Fleetwood and Ackroyd, 2004; Manicas, 2006).

In this article the aim is to incorporate some of the insights and approaches developed by critical realists into a re-fashioned realist criminology. In doing so the objective is to advocate the development of a criminology that prioritizes the role of theory. In examining the primary role of theory reference will be made to certain organizing concepts such as class, the State and structure, since they are key categories of analysis but appear to have a diminishing currency in academic criminology. Coupled with these reflections on theory there will be some discussion of the methodological approach that has been developed by critical realists, which stand in contrast to the forms of positivism and empiricism that are prevalent in criminology. Finally the article will briefly discuss the nature of intervention and the process of policy engagement.

### **Theorizing crime and punishment**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the criminological literature is how the notion of ‘crime’ is dealt with. On one side there are a large number of criminologists that adopt a predominantly common sense taken-for-granted approach and present crime as an unproblematic given, or simply equate

crime with a particular act. On the other hand there are those who overly problematize crime and argue that it is a concept that has no 'ontological reality' and tend to gravitate either towards relativism or rampant idealism claiming that the concept of crime is simply a matter of subjective interpretation, or political manipulation (Hulsman, 1986; Muncie, 1996). In many respects the inability to theorize 'crime' in a meaningful way is indicative of a lack of understanding about the role of social categories and the processes associated with their development and interpretation. Understanding the significance of social categories and the processes of classification is fundamental to all forms of social scientific investigation. As Andrew Sayer (2000: 19, emphasis added) has pointed out a key part of this investigation involves the process of abstraction:

We therefore have to rely on abstraction and careful conceptualisation, in attempting to abstract the various components or influences in our heads, and only when we have done this and considered how they combine and interact can we expect to return to the concrete, many sided object and make sense of it. Much rests on the nature of our abstractions, that is, our conceptions of particular one-sided components of the concrete object; if they divide what is in practice indivisible, or if they conflate what are different and separable components, then problems are likely to result. So much depends on the modes of abstraction we use, the way of carving up and defining our objects of study. *Unfortunately the bulk of the methodological literature on social science completely ignores this fundamental issue, as if it were simply a matter of intuition.*

The most common approach to the problematization of the concept 'crime' is social constructionism, which emphasizes the role of human agency and that of language and discourse. Social constructionism has become associated with the more critically orientated criminologies that argue that crime cannot be reduced to behaviour and that it is the product of negotiation and labelling through which people are 'criminalized'. There is of course an element of truth to what has been depicted as the 'soft' version of social constructionism, which argues that the social world is a socially constructed phenomenon involving complex and contested meanings, values and interpretations. However, many criminologists take the logic of this position to a more extreme form and claim that crime is an arbitrary and fictional construct.

While realists would concur with 'soft' version of social constructionism they would reject the more extreme version (Houston, 2001). For realists crime like other social constructs takes on a reality and objectivity that is independent of the researcher. If the social world were merely the product of our own construction it would presumably have a high degree of transparency. Concepts like crime, however, are not reducible to our individual conceptions because they largely predate our apprehension of them. Thus, recognizing the socially constructed nature of crime does not make it discursively revisable (Sayer, 2000).

Even in cases where the researcher influences the meaning or significance of an object it does not mean that the researcher has 'constructed' this object.

The aim of critical criminology is in part to assess the practical adequacy or objectivity of different social constructions and this task assumes a degree of objectivity of the social phenomenon in question. Indeed, some social constructionists argue that certain social constructions such as 'crime' and 'race' are mistaken or unrealistic but in doing so they draw on the realist assumption that there is something independent of our constructions about which we can be mistaken. The idealist version of social constructionism however, assumes that anything can be socially constructed as if by exercise of collective wishful thinking, and that our capabilities and susceptibilities are themselves voluntaristically constructed. From this perspective concepts of oppression, exploitation or abuse are incomprehensible because the damage involved is only seen to exist in the mind of the beholder(s).

In accepting the soft or weak version of social constructionism realists have made an important but largely unrecognized contribution to constructionist thinking in the form of the 'square of crime'. Although lip service is occasionally paid to the 'square of crime' with its emphasis on the four main components involved in the construction of crime—the offender, the victim, the State and the public—most then proceed to treat 'crime' as a given and only refer to one dimension of the square. Some of the more imaginative approaches, however, will incorporate two dimensions, and there are a few exceptional contributions that take account of three of the dimensions. However, it is extremely rare to find an approach that examines the changing nature of crime by incorporating all four dimensions into the analysis (see Lea, 1992; Matthews and Young, 1992).

The importance of identifying these dimensions is to remind ourselves that 'crime' is neither a 'top down' construction imposed by the criminal justice system or a 'bottom up' process involving certain 'acts' or 'behaviour' or changing levels of tolerance, but a complex relation between these different determinants. Crime therefore is not reducible to an act nor is it simply the product of social reaction. Crime, as realist criminologists have consistently pointed out is the product of a process of action and reaction. Therefore, trying to explain crime in terms of particular types of behaviour or forms of motivation, on one hand, or the responses of victims on the other will involve, at best, one-sided and partial explanations. The example of the 'square of crime' and the critique of the strong, idealist form of social constructionism underlines why we need theory to explain why appearances assume the form they do. The role of theory is to reveal the underlying processes or determinants on which the complex realities of everyday life are built. Thus social theory is a primary concern of critical realism, but it has to be useful and useable. It is not an end in itself.

There are in criminology and sociology a number of fundamental organizing concepts that provide the conceptual frameworks through which we make sense of the social world. These categories have an independence from individual perceptions and have an objectivity and materiality that provides an ongoing point of reference for collective understanding. Three such concepts are social class, the State and social structure. These will be

examined in turn not only because these concepts have a basic organizing role in criminology and sociology but also because they appear to have fallen into increasing disuse in the recent period.

## Social class

What we know about the patterning and distribution of crime and victimization and the deployment of criminal justice sanctions is that it is heavily skewed along the lines of social class, race, gender age and location. However, there is some debate about the relative significance of these determinants (Maguire, 1997). Although the issue of class was identified as central to the explanation of crime in a number of major studies produced in the 1970s and 1980s, increasingly the considerations of the relation between social class and crime have been overshadowed by discussions of other determinants on the implicit or explicit assumption that the influence of class has become less significant in contemporary society (see Haylett, 2001; McDowell, 2006). This is a strange assumption in a world in which social divisions and inequalities in many countries are becoming more pronounced and in which levels of poverty and deprivation remain high. There have undoubtedly been significant changes historically in class relations and perceptions of social class, but it remains the case that class continues to be one of the most important explanatory concepts for understanding the nature of crime and punishment.

As Foucault (1977) has argued the 'problem of crime' was historically constructed as a conflict between the respectable and non-respectable working classes. The 'dangerous classes' of the 19th century were synonymous with the 'criminal classes'. It was the working class and poorer communities that were policed most actively in this period and this remains largely the case today. At the same time the majority of judges, particularly the most senior judges, are drawn disproportionately from the upper middle classes. The police, on the other hand, tend to be drawn from a relatively narrow band of the respectable working class, while the vast majority of those convicted for 'normal' or 'social' crime come from marginalized populations. In the same way imprisonment, the dominant form of punishment for the last 200 years, is a sanction reserved almost exclusively for the 'lower' classes (Reiman, 2004).

One of the central propositions of realist criminology has been that crime is essentially an intra-class rather than inter-class phenomenon. That is, crime is not about the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor but of redistribution of goods between sections of the poor and working class. The victims of crime are predominantly those who are most accessible and vulnerable (Sparks, 1981). Much 'social' crime is largely parasitic and is experienced as an additional burden among groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Among such groups victimization is concentrated and compounded, with high levels of both repeat and multiple victimization (Young, 1988; Trickett et al., 1995; Tseloni and Pease, 2005).



The problematic nature of class becomes particularly pronounced if we look at some recent contributions by leading American criminologists. Although the USA is one of the most class divided and segregated countries in the world, there is a great reticence among politicians and academics to analyse crime and other social processes in terms of class. Instead, they prefer to focus on racial divisions. However, despite the racial diversity in the USA, the issue of race is mainly seen as an issue of 'blacks' and 'whites'. This monochromatic criminology rather than critically unpack the concept of race reinforces the ideology that the problem of crime is not only a 'race' issue, but predominantly a 'black' issue. Even substantive ethnic groups like Hispanics who have a significant relation to crime and punishment in the USA, and are soon to be the second largest ethnic group in the USA, are hardly referred to in the criminological literature. We can see the working out of this monochromatic criminology in the widely circulated and referenced works of radical liberals like Michael Tonry and Loïc Wacquant.

In Michael Tonry's (1995) book *Malign Neglect* we find a good example of the limits of radical liberalism. The general thesis is that the racial disproportionality in US prisons is largely a consequence of the 'war on drugs' that targeted the drug of choice of poor inner city African Americans—crack cocaine—while turning a virtual blind eye to the widespread use of powdered cocaine among the white suburban middle classes. The use of relatively long prison terms for dealing and using crack cocaine accounts, Tonry argues, for the significant increase in the number of African Americans behind bars and the consequent 'collateral damage' on black inner city neighbourhoods. While there is no doubt an element of truth in this explanation, the impact and significance of drugs is not reducible to their pharmacological properties. The widespread use of crack cocaine in the inner cities of the USA among the poor urban population did not have the same social significance and impact as the use of powdered cocaine in the white middle class suburbs. As Philip Bourgois (1996) has pointed out, crack cocaine in the USA had a devastating impact on the lives of inner city residents during the 1980s, destroying families and communities. Immediate and decisive measures were necessary if the devastating and destructive effects of the crack cocaine epidemic were to be addressed. It may have been that other measures could have been used instead of imprisonment, but as often happens in desperate times, liberals like Tonry were conspicuously silent. The tendency among radical liberals to see this as a process of 'criminalization' or the 'labelling' of the poor misses the point. Without firm and decisive intervention, these neighbourhoods would have been blighted and many lives lost or destroyed.

Loïc Wacquant also adopts a largely monochromatic vision of the issue of race and incarceration and although he cites Tonry's work approvingly and sees the increased racial disproportionality in US prisons being a consequence of the 'war on drugs'. Wacquant also sees the increased use of incarceration for poor blacks as a function of the decline of the Keynesian welfare state, on one hand, and an attempt to control spatially and neutralize

politically any threat posed by this group, on the other. For Wacquant prison serves as a functional replacement for the old style ghettos as a site of forced confinement (Wacquant, 2000, 2001, 2005). These processes, it is also suggested, are compounded by a growing punitiveness. In essence, Wacquant presents an 'hydraulic model' of prison expansion that sees the decline in the inclusionary strategies of welfare being functionally compensated for by increased use of incarceration.

No doubt there has been considerable evidence of prisons on both sides of the Atlantic being used as 'penal dustbins' with a growing number of the mentally ill, for example being confined in these institutions as the decarceration of mental hospitals takes place (Correctional Association of New York, 2003; Human Rights Watch, 2003). But why this dumping should fall disproportionately on blacks rather than other poor ethnic groups is not clear or for that matter why the prison, with all its costs and negative consequences, should become the preferred option. At best the decline of the Keynesian welfare state and changing forms of spatial control are a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the increased racial disproportionality in American prisons. Indeed it appears that rather than offering a convincing explanation of the disproportionate use of imprisonment for blacks and other ethnic minority groups, Wacquant's account is little more than an *ex post-facto* rationalization of events based on a crude form of functionalism. The significant increase in the use of incarceration for Hispanics in the USA would be difficult to explain in these terms as would the proliferation of alternatives to custody and the fact that the use of community-based alternatives of probation and parole have also increased three fold in the last 20 years in the USA. It is also the case that there has been an increase in the number of prisoners drawn from different ethnic minority groups in European prisons in recent years and arguments based on notions of surrogate ghettos and decline of welfare or the 'war on drugs' for that matter do not provide convincing explanations for this development (Tomasesvki, 1994).

Indeed, it has been suggested that the increased use of incarceration is neither fully attributable to the war on drugs, increased punitiveness, the demise of the Keynesian welfare state or the desire to confine forcibly large sections of the population to imprisonment. In fact these developments may not be reducible to the adoption of a conscious and deliberate policy of penal expansionism but may be a function as Marc Mauer (1999) has suggested of a high level of prosecutions among African Americans for violence and the continuation of criminal involvement past adolescence into adulthood. The increased use of imprisonment may also be bound up with the development of an autopoietic self-generating penal system (Matthews, 2003, 2005). If these forms of analysis are correct it would suggest that resolving the 'crisis of imprisonment' will require moving beyond the conspiratorial theories that blame the increased use of incarceration in different counties on 'populist punitiveness' and a shift away from the dominant forms of radical liberalism that want to claim the moral high ground but

are in fact not very well grounded at all. Significantly, it is nowadays difficult to find criminologists or policy makers, for that matter, that claim that 'prison works' and considerable efforts are being made in many countries to resist the pressure towards prison expansion, even if this resistance is based on issues of cost-effectiveness (see Jacobson, 2005).

## The State

An understanding of the State and its changing nature is central to any politically informed criminology. The State—or apparatus of government—is not only implicated in every aspect of our social lives but significantly maintains central responsibility for order in civil society. As David Matza (1969) pointed out many years ago, one of the most notable accomplishments of the criminological positivists was the separation of the study of crime from the workings and theory of the State.

The conception of the State held by different criminologists tends to be a function of their political orientation and their conception of power. Whether the State is seen to be a neutral arbiter of the conflicts generated by the 'war of all against all', an agency for maintaining class relations or as a mechanism for protecting the liberty of its citizens, our view of the State provides the conceptual backdrop against which the issue of 'law and order' is conceived and policies proposed. These issues, in turn, raise questions about the relationship between the State and civil society and the proper form and limits of state action. Questions have also been raised in relation to privatization as an example of non-state developments that serve to expand the range and depth of intervention beyond the boundaries of state power (Crawford, 2006). However, what we have seen all too often is the *simultaneous* expansion of state control alongside forms of privatization, with 'privatized' agencies being directed and financed by the State. As we have seen in relation to prisons, the growth of 'private prisons' has not been associated with the decline in the number of state prisons. Similarly in relation to policing the growth of private security policing has occurred in the UK and the USA alongside the growth of public police.

A central feature of this discussion is the question of whether the State is becoming increasingly minimalist or whether it is becoming more intrusive and more punitive. Rose and Miller (1992) have argued that regulation and control increasingly lie 'beyond the State'. These arguments coincide with the claims that the State has come increasingly to relinquish its 'rowing' functions and concentrated its energies on 'steering'. The implication is that the State has withdrawn its practical involvement in providing and implementing services and has increasingly limited its role to the management of these services. However, the evidence is that rather than develop forms of minimal statism in relation to crime control, what we are seeing is the growth of an interventionist state, or more precisely, a state that is withdrawing in some areas while becoming much more interventionist in others.

In relation to 'law and order' in the UK, the British state has created over 1000 new criminal offences between 1997–2005 and 43 crime related pieces of legislation have been introduced over the same period.

The problem of the State and of political control has in recent years been recast in terms of governmentality, which offers a way of thinking through the strategies of governmental control and promises to move beyond a state–civil society dichotomy. However, in developing this form of analysis there is a danger of losing sight of the State and private forms of control and recasting the discussion such that state and non-state agencies are treated as undifferentiated forms of governance and the distinction between 'state' and 'non-state' is seen as a merely analytical distinction that can be dispensed with at will. As David Garland (1997) has argued, those agencies that are demarcated as state agencies are afforded special legal, economic and military powers and resources as well as a special form of authority. Although the literature on governmentality appears to present a more diverse critical form of analysis of the excesses of governmental power, it tends to focus on the programmes and rationalities as they arise.

The aim of a critical realism is to understand why certain control strategies are introduced, and to uncover their underlying vision and assumptions about crime and its control, in order to find out why certain controls work while others are failing. This necessarily involves an analysis of struggles and conflicts, shifts in the balance of power, changes of opinion and the formation of political alliances. This means that the analysis of the State needs to be broader than the type of analysis that is associated with governmentality, which tends to focus on the articulation of instrumental rationalities. Although there have been recent developments in social control that incorporate a range of spatial strategies that involve a significant blurring of state and civil distinctions, these 'post-disciplinary' developments are very much part of the state apparatus (Beckett and Herbert, 2008).

Alongside the developments of the national state and the changing nature of regulation has been the significant change in the role of the local state, particularly in the UK (Hancock, 2009). Often ignored in the analysis, the local state has become more directly involved in regulating crime and anti-social behaviour and the movement towards forms of multi-agency partnerships centred around the local state has dramatically affected the role of key agencies such as the police and probation as well as altering the configuration of powers between the national and local levels. An understanding of crime and control in contemporary society, therefore, requires an appreciation of the nature of the State, the changing relation between the State and civil society as well as the growing significance of the local state in relation to crime control.

## Structure

Social structures are not pre-given or directly observable. They are the product of human agents and act back on agents. As Anthony Giddens (1979: 5)

put it: 'structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices and "exists" in generating moments of this constitution'. Although Giddens has been criticized for portraying structure in cultural rather than material terms, he does recognize, in line with realists, that structures are associated with the production of rules and social norms and that these have demonstrable causal effects in the real world (Popora, 1998). Because structures cannot be perceived except through an examination of their effects the role of theory is to generate hypotheses about the nature of structures, while identifying their effects is an empirical question. The two core features of social structures, according to critical realism is that they are relational—they involve enduring relations between the structural position of actors—and that they possess ontological depth—their existence lies behind and affects manifest phenomena. Structures are both a medium and a product that serve to enable and to constrain. Although 'structures' can be conceived in a number of ways, once created, they remain independent of practices and the continuing practices can only be understood with reference to existing structures. These structures therefore become objects of theory and are subject to change (Manicas, 1998). Because social structures are not fixed objects they themselves are possible objects of transformation and so may only be relatively enduring (Bhaskar, 1989). Because social phenomena occur in open systems there are no social and psychological laws only tendencies. However individuals' attitudes and actions will be influenced by the social position that they occupy within these structures.

A great deal of criminology either focuses on agents or structures, but only a limited number of criminologists examine both simultaneously and explore the ways in which human agents act upon and are constrained by structures and vice versa. As discussed in relation to social constructionism above, these structures are socially constructed but are not continually recreated from scratch. Rather, they take on an objective form that is in place for us before we engage in activity. As with language, it is socially constructed but exists independently of individuals and has established rules and meaning that both enable and constrain us. As Roy Bhaskar (1989: 3–4) has argued:

The existence of social structure is a necessary condition of any human activity. Society provides the means, media, rules and resources for everything we do ... It is the unmotivated condition for all our motivated productions. We do not create society—the error of voluntarism. But these structures that pre-exist us are only reproduced and transformed in our everyday activities; thus society does not exist independently of human agency—the error of reification.

These observations have some important implications for the structure–agency debate that has plagued the social sciences in general and criminology in particular. It suggests that any strict individual/society dichotomy is misplaced since society always pre-exists for individuals, and similarly that while individuals always have tacit knowledge and an understanding of the social structures in which they operate, this knowledge is always imperfect. Thus for realists individuals are not seen as 'dupes' of culture or politics and

unlike structuralists do not endorse the view that everything goes on 'behind their backs'. It is important to emphasize that human action can change society and is potentially liberating and able to refashion social relations in the direction of greater humanity, freedom and justice. One of the major attractions of criminology is the potential of making a positive contribution to these objectives.

One of the most significant developments in recent years has been the shift towards globalization. This change has, as a number of commentators pointed out, had a profound effect not only on international movements but also upon local relations. Consequently, sociologists have coined the term 'glocalization' to signify that change occurs at the local, national and international levels simultaneously (Ray, 2006). These changes have significantly affected the distribution of crime and patterns of victimization, while having a profound impact on social norms. Thus, globalization is more than economic phenomena. It affects social values and norms, aspirations and discontents as well as forms of transgression (Young, 2003).

It is important to explore the connections between global and local movements and the ways in which these changes impact upon crime and cultural phenomena. Thus those criminologies that only focus on the local, individual and situational aspects of crime represent an approach that is partial and one-sided. It also limits critique since much of that which needs to be explained or challenged is either taken as a given or placed outside the frame of analysis. Rational choice theory and routine activities theory provide good examples of this narrow approach. Although widely cited in the criminological literature they share with the conservative criminologists the view that identifying structural considerations and 'deep causes' is unnecessary and the problem of crime can be dealt with effectively by limiting opportunities and through the redesigning of space (Archer and Tritter, 2000; Hayward, 2007).

## On method

In much social science literature, methods are treated as a set of techniques and instruments that can be applied to social investigation. Social scientists often develop their own preferred techniques and define themselves as essentially quantitative, qualitative researchers or ethnographers or advocate some other approach. Research orientation in this way is seen to be independent of the object under investigation or the research questions posed. The main methodological aim is to sharpen up and refine research tools so that they can penetrate the object more deeply or measure it more accurately.

Critical realism, however, rejects a restricted approach to methods and is compatible with a relatively wide range of research methods, depending upon the object under study and what one wants to find out about it. If one wants to examine changes in the crime trends or the distribution of crime, quantitative methods can be appropriate. But if one wants to understand something about meanings, motivations, emotions and the like, then qualitative or

ethnographic methods may be more suitable. Realist criminology therefore rejects forms of 'cookbook criminology', which employ one favoured method in all situations or believe that one method is superior to all others. Often a combination of methods is required in order to identify trends, patterns and the meaning of the phenomena under study, on one hand, while a more detailed and focussed approach is necessary to understand the specific causal connections and dynamics on the other (see Sayer, 1992: ch. 9).

One of the most influential examples of 'cookbook criminology' is provided by Lawrence Sherman and his colleagues (2006). Although their work has the commendable aim of attempting to base policies on rigorous 'scientific' evidence, they employ a strict hierarchy of methods which they rank on a one to five scale with random control trials (RCT) being seen as the best option scoring a five while a quasi-experimental research design scores a two (see Tilley, 2001). These methods are ranked irrespective of the research question, or the object under study and the value of the research is assessed in terms of the type of method adopted rather than in relation to its implementation strategy or the context in which different crime policies are evaluated. Thus:

One of the questionable attributes of this project, however, concerns the decision to set the criteria for determining that a programme area 'works' at two level 3 studies indicating statistically significant findings of its effectiveness. On its face this does not seem to be a remarkably high threshold. We might expect much more from the multi-million dollar global criminological research enterprise than two methodologically sound studies showing positive results before we unequivocally conclude that an entire field of intervention works. As the editors put the matter, they chose not to use more demanding criteria of success because this 'would leave very little to say about crime prevention, based on existing science'. Actually, it would leave them with a tremendous amount to say, but it would almost all be bad news, as they would have to conclude on the basis of the existing evidence almost nothing works.

(Haggerty, 2008: 116)

Facts do not 'speak for themselves' and doing useful social research it is not only a process of collecting 'data' as the naïve realists claim. Because the social world is in a sense socially constructed, social scientific investigation necessarily involves an element of interpretation. Theory affects observation and the categories that we use to appropriate and understand the social world. Thus there is no theory-neutral observation and investigation. On the other hand, critical realists resist the claim of radical relativists who argue that truth is purely relative to one's perspective, worldview or paradigm.

In rejecting naïve realism, critical realism rejects the methodological approaches most commonly associated with these approaches—empiricism and positivism. Abstract empiricism is probably the most disabling methodology in social science in general and criminology in particular. It is disabling in the sense that it has a low explanatory value and therefore adds little to our understanding or to the development of useful interventions.

Most importantly, it separates theory and method and typically aims to compensate for weak conceptualization by promoting ever more 'sophisticated' statistical techniques. Unfortunately no amount of statistical manipulation can overcome conceptual deficiencies.

Empiricism is based on a doctrine that all knowledge derived from experience and that the 'facts' of the social world are self-evident and theory-neutral. Focusing on that which is observable and measurable it eschews notions of causation in favour of correlations, such that any two events or phenomena that regularly occur together are held to be related. Thus the emphasis is upon the regularity of association. In contrast to empiricism critical realism aims to distinguish between contingent and causal relations and between necessary and sufficient conditions. Correlations are at best guides to the possible causal relations involved. At worst correlations suggest or claim causal links that do not in fact exist and this therefore can lead to serious misunderstandings and errors.

When positivists and empiricists engage in discussions of causality they tend to employ successionist accounts of causation which are based on the gathering of data to identify repeated occurrences. However, what causes something to happen has nothing to do with the number of times we have observed it happening. Realists in contrast aim to identify generative causes and place great emphasis on identifying the processes involved, how they work and how they have been activated and under what conditions (Sayer, 2000). Some causal powers can produce different outcomes and sometimes the same outcome can be produced by a variety of causal powers. Thus, in different contexts different causal mechanisms can have different outcomes.

Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (1997) have criticized the familiar 'what works' mantra from a realist perspective and argued that the question is misleading because it implies that interventions 'work' irrespective of the subjects they are deemed to work on and the contexts in which they are used. Thus they argue, the issue is not so much about 'what works' in the abstract, but more about how different types of people co-operate with certain interventionist programmes and *choose* to make them work. Programmes only 'work' with and through their subjects' liabilities and propensities. They are effective inasmuch as they promote opportunities that facilitate the subjects' capacity for change.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) have also provided an incisive critique of the use of quasi-experimental method. The limitations of quasi-experimental method based on successionist notions of causation are evident in many areas of criminological research and evaluation. Often it is assumed that more police or different styles of policing will reduce crime or fear of crime, or that certain crime prevention initiatives will work in all situations. However:

There is nothing about police patrols, which intrinsically reduces fear of crime. There is nothing about educational programs which intrinsically reduces offender reconviction. So too there is nothing about CCTV in car parks which intrinsically inhibits car crime. Whilst it may appear to offer a



technical solution, CCTV certainly does not create a physical barrier making cars impenetrable. A moment's thought has us realize, therefore that the cameras must work by instigating a chain of reasoning and reaction. Realist evaluation is all about turning this moment's thought into a comprehensive theory of mechanisms through which CCTV may enter the potential criminal's mind, and the context needed if these powers are to be realized.

(Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 78)

Thus the aim of investigation and evaluation is to identify the mechanisms that could potentially produce the observed outcomes. If CCTV is introduced in a car park and the rate of car theft is reduced, it could be because potential offenders are deterred, more are caught and prosecuted, more people might use a car park thus making it safer or the increased publicity associated with the introduction of cameras may serve to deter or deflect potential criminals. From a realist perspective all these hypotheses need to be examined and assessed while it is recognized that the context—the size, location, design and the like—or the deployment of CCTV will influence the outcome. For these reasons, Pawson and Tilley talk in terms of cause, mechanisms and contexts as a basis for developing a realist evaluation. Thus for critical realists the most important aspects of research are the focus on *specificity*, *process* and *context*.

Undertaking social research and evaluation is a challenging task, which goes far beyond the mastery of specific techniques and takes us into the murky waters of epistemology and ontology. The limited policy relevance of much criminological research derives from its often a-theoretical or poorly conceptualized nature, a fetish with numbers and statistics that are often employed as a substitute for clear concepts and categorization and ultimately serve to circumvent the search for causal explanations and a proper understanding of the processes and relations involved. The major failing of the research currently conducted in criminology—particularly by abstract empiricists and positivists—is the equivocal nature of the conclusions and the tendency for findings to be non-cumulative (Ackroyd, 2004).

## Intervention

For critical realists interventions are not just the implementation of strategies or practices, but involve the operationalization of theories and hypotheses about what might work. Once implemented these interventions require careful evaluation in order to identify the causal mechanisms in play. Interventions can fail at any one of a number of stages and one of the central tasks of evaluation is to identify points of failure. Interventions involve the encapsulation of a sequence of theories and since active interventions are delivered to active subjects they are open to interpretation and revision at every stage of the process (Pawson, 2006).

Critical realism is orientated towards a modernist problematic and believes that social reforms should be based upon the application of reliable knowledge. That is, it stands in opposition to those forms of relativism and impossibilism

that claim that effecting social change through the application of knowledge and understanding makes no real difference or that 'nothing works' (Matthews and Young, 1992). It is also opposed to the forms of idealism that claim that piecemeal social change is irrelevant and that only a major transformation of the social structure is worthwhile. For realists even small gains are gains, and it is recognized that piecemeal reforms often lead to further reforms.

Probably the best example of the 'nothing works' position is the claim following the work of Robert Martinson (1974) that rehabilitation programmes have no effect on prisoners. Martinson's research, however, was based on a poor conceptualization and a weak methodology that lumped various rehabilitative programmes together in a way that obscured the beneficial effects of different programmes on different groups of people under different conditions. This is one of the predictable problems associated with meta-analysis (see Pawson, 2006). What was particularly significant about Martinson's work was that he himself did not claim that 'nothing works' and in fact wrote a corrective to the original report indicating that various programmes did work in different ways (Martinson, 1979). Despite this publication the 'nothing works' mantra has been endlessly repeated, particularly by liberal pessimists and abolitionists in order to underline the perceived failure of incarceration and to lend weight to the campaign for the greater use of community-based sanctions for convicted offenders. It largely escaped the attention of these critics of the rehabilitative ideal that the community-based facilities that they supported were actively using and developing various rehabilitative programmes, and these were widely seen as positive and useful interventions. The problem, however, with the wholesale rejection of the rehabilitative ideal in prisons was that it paved the way for a policy of warehousing, while reinforcing the conservative ideology that prisoners are inherently wicked and beyond reform. The 'nothing works' slogan also gave credence to the conservative assumption that increased repression and greater penal austerity will reduce crime (Cullen and Gilbert, 1982). Thus the work and interpretation of Martinson provides an example of how particular forms of conceptualization, linked to forms of meta-analysis, can lead to regressive and punitive policies.

There is, however, a more general problem of liberal pessimism that runs through criminology and goes beyond the claims that 'nothing works'. In some versions of this pessimism it is claimed that not only does nothing work but also that intervention often makes things worse. Consequently, some liberal pessimists claim that instead of trying to do more good that we should do less harm (Cohen, 1985; Matthews, 1987). Criminology, it should be noted, has a long history of pessimism and impossibilism. Issuing repeated warnings of the dangers of 'social control' and particularly by dwelling on the insecurities of late modernity tend to present dystopian images of the future. A great deal of future orientated criminology oscillates between outlining and identifying the growing insecurities and anxieties among the general population on one hand, while simultaneously claiming that these anxieties are manufactured by the State through the 'war against terror', the 'war on drugs' or by 'governing through crime' (Zedner, 2002; Simon, 2007). In emphasizing the growing

concerns with insecurity there is a tendency to downplay the ways in which social reforms have improved the quality of life for certain groups, reduced victimization and increased personal freedoms. This disproportionate focus of attention on the apparent widening and deepening of social control maybe explains why there is so little written on the most remarkable development within criminology in living memory—the crime drop (Zimring, 2007).

What is missing from the majority of texts on ‘social ‘control’ is a normative element about the desirability and feasibility of alternatives. The aim is not to develop a ‘value free’ approach (as if that were possible) but to establish values that are informed and can be justified. The critical realist project is closely tied to conceptions of emancipation and believes that there is no point in social science if it does not at least offer the possibility of some kind of social improvement (Bhaskar, 2002) and this may involve challenging and changing various (mis)conceptions or material conditions or both. The issues of crime and punishment are enormously contentious and therefore critique and debate should be central to the subject. The act of engaging in debate and critique presupposes change and the possibility of social improvement.

## Conclusion

In the course of this article it has been argued that a criminology that aims to become more policy relevant needs to link theory, method and policy in a coherent and consistent way. Critical realism stands in contrast to a number of different ‘isms’—including pragmatism, empiricism, relativism, idealism and impossibilism. It believes that social science in general and criminology in particular has an emancipatory potential and the task is to maximize this potential. It also recognizes that there are a significant number of people engaging in criminology who may not define or recognize themselves as ‘realists’ but who embody certain elements of the critical realist approach, and if nothing else are critical of the forms of liberalism that currently dominate academic criminology.

It has been suggested that realist criminology is in general critical of a number of emerging criminologies including ‘so what?’ criminology, which has little impact on policy development or much prospect of influencing social change. There is also what has been referred to as ‘monochromatic criminology’ that reduces racial diversity to a black/white opposition and which often inadvertently overly racializes social issues by adopting a narrow focus, which all too frequently overlooks the significance of social class. In relation to methods realists reject forms of ‘cookbook criminology’ that are tied to a specific method irrespective of the object under study, or the nature of the research question. In addition to these criminologies, Lucia Zedner (2002) has criticized what she refers to as ‘schizoid criminologies’ that present the complexity of the social world in forms of simple and at times crude oppositions such as old/new penology, and ‘criminologies of the self/other’. Such approaches Zedner argues lose sight of the complexity of crime control by creating unrealistic and untenable dichotomies.

There can be little doubt that over the last two decades criminology has become more fragmented and diverse and that there are a number of different criminologies, and anti-criminologies emerging. The question arises whether we should in conjunction with Richard Ericson and Kevin Carrier (1994) welcome this as a positive and largely inevitable development which reflects changes both in the academy and the wider 'risk society' or whether we should be more critical of some of the emerging criminologies and anti-criminologies. Critical realists have no problem with the erosion of disciplinary boundaries and in fact see one of the strengths of criminology arising from its interdisciplinary nature, but would certainly not welcome the proliferation of poorly conceived one-sided criminologies that make little or no contribution to progressive social reforms or promote the deepening divisions between those that see themselves as either theorists, researchers or activists.

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