

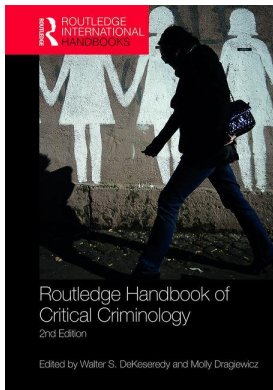
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Ultra-realism

Steve Hall and Simon Winlow

Introduction

Ultra-realism is one of the first new western criminological paradigms to emerge in the 21st century. It offers a unique perspective on contemporary subjectivity in its socioeconomic context (see Hall & Winlow, 2015; Ellis, 2015; Raymen, 2015; Smith & Raymen, 2016; Wakeman, 2017). Ultra-realists argue that criminology must return to its fundamental question: why do some individuals and groups risk harm to others as they pursue their instrumental and expressive interests rather than seek solidarity with one another? To answer this question, ultra-realism seeks to conceptualise subjectivity in ways that move beyond existing assumptions of innate selfishness, repressed goodness, social learning, flexible socio-linguistic construction or ideology as positive hegemony.

If criminology wishes to retain its status as a respected social scientific discipline it must renew its efforts to dig below empirical description, normative discussions of rules and ‘criminalisation’, and crude social-structural comparisons of relative harms to construct convincing explanations of today’s mutating forms of crime and harm. To do this the discipline requires a new philosophical basis, theoretical framework and research programme. The 20th-century’s intellectual tug of war between left-liberalism (progressivism) and right-liberalism (neoliberalism) – both in their own way hostile to traditional conservative and socialist discourses and successful in rendering them both redundant – is producing few results. Liberalism’s political, cultural and socioeconomic body is dying. The broad liberal project has been palpably unable to control rampant global financial capitalism or organise equitable social relations. The divisive identity politics that now dominates liberalism’s intellectual and political worlds has failed the men and women of the multi-ethnic working class. Ultra-realists claim that it is the liberal left’s failure rather than neoliberalism’s success that has precipitated a dangerous drift to the right and far right across Europe and the United States (Winlow, Hall & Treadwell, 2017).

Leaving the well-documented intellectual failures of conservative and neoclassical criminology aside, the theoretical concepts and frameworks leftist criminology commonly uses to explain phenomena, which have been produced by seminal 19th- and 20th-century thinkers, are founded upon the intellectual paradigms that underpin this failed ‘progressive’ political project. Any social scientific discipline that restricts itself to this orthodox thinking risks

political irrelevance in what appears to be a very difficult future (Streeck, 2016). Criminology must heed this warning and begin to reconstruct its mode of explanation by rethinking the hitherto crudely polarised ontological and ethical assumptions that underlie its mainstream ways of thinking about essential issues such as authority, freedom, subjectivity, the role of collective politics and the nature and causes of harm. It must also once again open its mind to the possibility that general and wide-ranging theories of crime can be constructed, not as closed explanatory systems but as the suppliers of new concepts and hypotheses for new research programmes. Many traditional thinkers believed that these grand theories are indeed possible, whereas today's liberal pluralists and postmodernists tend to assume that they are forever inadequate and blind to what they imagine to be the boundless pluralism of western societies. Ultra-realists are happy to admit that we can't be sure until we try harder and improve our ability to engage with and represent the real world. Even if the postmodernists are right to assume that grand theories fail to capture the social world's inherent diversity and uncertainty, the exploratory impetus generated by the attempt to develop such theories will certainly reveal hidden experiences and knowledge, and open up a space in which new perspectives, concepts and understandings can be constructed.

Criminological closure

Ultra-realism remains on the critical side of the fence but responds to the inadequacy of social constructionism, post-structuralism and intersectionality that over the past 50 years have fragmented criminology into a matrix of closed positions – now commonly derided in broad intellectual life as 'echo-chambers' – that are all resistant to criticisms of their fundamental domain assumptions. Such closure and standstill does not require a descent into the strong idealist form of relativism but simply a separatist and defensive form of perspectivism. This does not deny the objective world or our ability to have some knowledge of it but simply resists the possibility that new or even substantially modified perspectives might have something significantly more useful to offer. Ultra-realists argue that criminology must summon up the courage to construct and eventually synthesise new perspectives, but this is not the standard move to replace 'privileged' perspectives with 'suppressed knowledges'. What were once 'suppressed knowledges' have already been brought to light to occupy newly 'privileged' positions in the sub-dominant liberal-progressive paradigm, which have subsequently become closed and protected from critique (see Hall & Winlow, 2015).

The current discipline is a moribund hierarchy in which 'seminal' thinkers from the past have been consecrated despite their intellectual failings and time-limited views. In the past, alternative thinkers who were an uncomfortable fit in dominant neoliberal or sub-dominant liberal-progressive perspectives were often rejected for rather nebulous and mysterious reasons, a practice we see continuing today (Hall, 2012a). In this denominational church-like climate too much new theory and research, much of it put forward by younger academics to challenge existing perspectives, is either ignored, misinterpreted or distorted and recuperated. New thinking that directly threatens underlying core assumptions and is potentially fit for purpose in the 21st century is constantly starved of fuel or, should it get its engines started, shot up on the runway by dominant forces.

To move forward, criminology must escape the truncated parameters imposed on the intellectual world by dominant right-wing liberalism and sub-dominant left-wing liberalism, political groups that limit criminological thought to their own agendas and degenerative research programmes. Post-war paradigms constructed within these parameters – such as strain theory, labelling theory, sub-cultural theory, radical feminism, risk theory and so on – are of little use to

us as we try to explain the phenomena and underlying dynamic processes that constitute today's advanced capitalist world. Today's criminologists continue to produce excellent and very revealing research, but the discipline's theoretical dimension is failing to keep up with it and perform its two major functions: 1) to supply researchers with advanced concepts that can inspire new research projects, and 2) provide researchers with satisfactory theoretical frameworks for their findings. This failure leaves research marooned in the superficial empirical dimension and hostage to positivism and its dominant method of mathematical testing.

Criminology's current theoretical frameworks are both separatist and stagnant because they are anchored in various traditional western political philosophies. Each philosophical position is founded on ontological and ethical assumptions about the dynamics of history, the nature of human subjectivity, the role of the state and politics in human life and the nature of harm. The domain assumptions taken by criminological theories from these philosophical positions are complex and varied (see Hall & Winlow, 2015, chap. 5 for a more detailed discussion). However, this complexity is underpinned by a basic tripartite division in the ontology of the subject, between:

- 1 The potentially dangerous 'beast within' that requires constant repression, guidance and discipline in order to function as a civilised, sociable and cooperative being.
- 2 The creative, autonomous and moral agent despoiled by repressive forms of institutionalised collective politics and moral authority.
- 3 The dialectical subject that both responds to and reproduces, either consciously or unconsciously, its material and ideological circumstances and has the potential to overturn them by means of collective politics.

Dominant conservative and neoclassical liberal frameworks accept the first ontological model of the subject. Sub-dominant left-liberal frameworks rely on the second model of the rational, communicative, creative and flexible human being. The third model of the dialectical subject was used by the traditional Marxist and Marxist-Freudian models, whereas traditional Freudian models were more closely related to the conservative position. These three basic ontological positions are informed at an even deeper level by their preferred models of political and social organisation – traditional conservative, liberal-democratic reformist and revolutionary-transformative, which would suggest that they are little more than convenient models of subjectivity constructed to justify preferred political and socioeconomic arrangements. Each position automatically rejects models that contradict its basic assumptions. For ultra-realists, these convenient off-the-peg ontologies of the subject are inadequate. Social science in general and criminology in particular need to key into and contribute to the development of reflexive models of subjectivity, a task that demands the rejection of traditional models of convenience and a move to contemporary explorations of advanced thinking in cognate fields ranging from neuroscience to philosophy.

In the post-war period, when politics took flight from failed Leninist revolutions and repressive forms of conservative moral authority, fundamental aspects of the third position were incorporated and neutralised by the first and second positions. In this climate of political catastrophism (Hall, 2012a), which gave rise to *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2009) – the ideological first principle that no alternative to liberal-capitalism will ever be possible – the original conservative/socialist dichotomy was truncated in intellectual and political life.

The new restricted parameters were represented by the Liberal Progressive Social Administration (LPSA) on the centre-left and the Conservative Classical Liberal Alliance (CCLA) on the centre-right. Neither position is political in any traditional sense of the word but merely a biopolitical mode of managing neoliberal capitalism and its socio-cultural consequences.

Both positions came to dominate the social sciences, commissioning empirical studies designed to maintain political parameters and discourage depth thinking (see Hall & Winlow, 2015). Because crime is an important political football – perhaps slightly less so now that the enthusiastic broadcasting of the statistical ‘crime decline’ has maintained a temporary calming effect – criminological research was placed under strict control. Critical thought did occasionally extend beyond these parameters, but it was never allowed to establish credibility in the mainstream discipline. However, the current drift to a right-wing politics that seems to be reaching beyond these safe parameters indicates that many people who occupy a precarious socioeconomic position in the United States and Europe have had enough of the ignorance and contempt the CCLA and LPSA seem to have for their real everyday experiences. They also suspect that these two political groups are concealing truths that exist outside their parameters of approved knowledge. Patience is being worn down by the chronic inability of political institutions to regulate the destructive processual and structural pressures that neoliberalism has brought to bear down on them (Winlow et al., 2017). The voluminous conceptual work of thinkers ignored or marginalised for decades by social science – Jean Baudrillard, Russell Jacoby, Paul Virilio, Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, Nancy Fraser, Slavoj Žižek, Adrian Johnston, Wolfgang Streeck, Jean-Pierre Dupuy to mention but a few – is now revealing itself to be far more prescient than the work of ‘approved’ liberal thinkers (see Winlow & Hall, 2013).

The ultra-realist project is based on a rejection of these narrow political and intellectual parameters. Criminologists must revisit the experiential realities of everyday life with a revisionist enthusiasm which rejects the confirmation bias that sustains current political orthodoxies and their associated theoretical frameworks. Researchers can then reject the intermediary filtering of obsolete theoretical frameworks – with their pre-packaged assumptions of crime as resistance, harmless, masculine, evil or whatever – to begin the process of relocating their ‘data’ in the broad structures and processes of neoliberal capitalism and its attendant culture of consumerism and hyper-individualism. In a climate of free and open enquiry, researchers will also be able to reconsider some concepts and frameworks previously rejected by the dominant conservative and sub-dominant left-liberal positions. To prevent too many babies being thrown out with the bathwater, revived and reformulated extant concepts can be synthesised with new concepts in a thorough revisionist process that will allow criminological theory to renew itself and literally begin from the beginning as it revisits fundamental epistemological, ontological and ethical questions essential to theory construction. This is a huge task. The sooner we get on with it the better.

Ultra-realism does not claim to be the theory that fell to earth. It is partially influenced by some previous criminological schools of thought, such as victimology, feminism and left realism, all of which attempted to make significant breaks from existing frameworks and advocated the return to reality. However, whilst ultra-realism retains their spirit it also seeks to break away from their theoretical frameworks. Those they offer are largely restricted to intersectional power relations. Furthermore, we cannot simply theorise perpetrators exclusively through the eyes of victims because the latter – even if they are intimate partners – do not necessarily have a full understanding of the contexts in which the perpetrators’ lives are located. We must look at third parties, biographies, cultures, histories and socioeconomic contexts, which echoes the suggestion from the ‘new criminologists’ (Taylor, Walton & Young, 1973) to explore ‘structure, culture and biography’. However, if we are to make the necessary connections we need to look beyond approved thinkers and frameworks to locate and apply more refined concepts.

For instance, the more traditional radical feminist analyses are too restricted to female victimhood in domestic circumstances, and, by their own admission, theoretically unsophisticated (Heidensohn, 2012), constantly falling back on the approved explanation of violent actions as expressions of the patriarchal form of social power. The domestic violence issue is far more

complex (Dutton & Nichols, 2005), and other forms of street violence more complex still (Ellis, 2015). The same critique can be levelled at all standpoint positions on the criminological spectrum. Criminology cannot simply sit back and watch approvingly as various standpoint positions choose concrete universals in their own inimitably biased and one-dimensional ways to support their own identitarian politics. Nor should the discipline demand that these positions immediately dissolve themselves. The way forward is free and open debate as a principle that must be established throughout the whole process of funding, research, publication and education.

Ultra-realists are also keen to apply left realism's principle of digging underneath discourse and language in the process of theory construction. Crime is not simply a social construct used by right-wing politicians to justify an authoritarian state. It is defined as an act that breaks rules, but, no matter how criminal acts are defined or redefined, they often inflict harm on individuals, their environments and their fragile social systems (Reiner, 2016). There is a pressing need to establish an ongoing zemiological discussion at the core of the discipline, which extends beyond premature typologies and 'harm indexes' to revisit the aetiological, ontological and ethical roots of the concept (Yar, 2012). Left realism failed to engage with the concept of harm, relied on legal definitions of crime, produced little qualitative research, ignored subjectivity, aetiology and the concrete universal, and neglected consumer culture as a criminogenic environment. It left too many stones unturned at the fundamental philosophical and theoretical levels for ultra-realists to regard themselves as heirs to its legacy. Ultra-realism seeks to revisit these fundamentals. In its early stages, some of its advocates are exploring the possibilities offered by current forms of Lacanian psychoanalysis updated by the latest neuroscientific research (Hall, 2012a; Winlow, 2014; Wakeman, 2017), but of course ultra-realism is a reflexive project and has no intention of designating this as a protected species. It does demand, however, that any conceptual framework to be adopted and developed must undercut failed idealist/constructivist/linguistic frameworks to deal with dynamics external to the individual and the internal and contextual materiality of subjectivity that underpins its sociosymbolic dimension.

Criminology must break free from the restrictive parameters imposed upon its theoretical project by the cynical pragmatism of the CCLA, which dominates in the governmental policy field, and the LPSA, which dominates in academia. The former, driven by a deep fear of the *barbarism of disorder*, has rejected its traditional conservative social integration programme to pursue deterrence and incapacitation policies that have been temporarily effective but ultimately harmful. The latter, driven by an equally deep fear of the *barbarism of order*, restricts itself to the 'avoidance of mistreatment' (Badiou, 2001), or the maintenance of the individual's negative liberty. The LPSA, despite its pious proclamation of 'equality', has been extremely circumspect about the realisation of positive liberty, or the politically organised conditions in which vital social, psychological and material needs can be met (Winlow, Hall, Treadwell & Briggs, 2015). Such narrow parameters have contributed to political failure, the alienation of populations across Europe and the USA and the recent drift to the far right (Winlow et al., 2017). A criminological project restricted by the systematic exclusion of what these truncated political groups do not like – extreme phenomena, unconscious desires, drives, pessimism, structural analyses, deep political intervention and so on (see Hall and Winlow, 2015) – cannot remain relevant as a genuine producer and disseminator of knowledge in our increasingly unstable future.

The influence of zemiology

We know that the term crime is a socio-legal construct that has no ontological basis, but some criminologists are now realising that we cannot restrict our study to acts defined as criminal. Postmodernism was the last in a procession of post-war schools of thought to lead us to an

imaginary place as far from reality as possible by insisting that we focus on ‘crime’ as a pure linguistic-idealist act driven by the authoritarian desire to criminalise ‘otherness’. This was part of a general intellectual flight from both reality and the practice of substantive political transformation in the wake of the horrors Stalin and Mao inflicted on their own people (Heath & Potter, 2006; Jacoby, 2007). A powerful wave of liberal intellectuals expanded and narrativised this experiential fear to a general abstract fear of modernity itself, which led some influential figures to reject truth, objectivity and universalism. The result was the normalisation of the principles of extreme relativism and pluralism, and the celebration of each ‘sub-cultural’ group’s supposedly unique norms and values. It is not difficult to see how this led to the intellectual neglect of objective harm, a concept that was virtually criticised out of existence across the social sciences from relativist and autonomist viewpoints. Critical criminology, arguing from a more structural viewpoint, offered a utilitarian calculation and comparative assessment of harms, which produced the cliché that the crimes of the powerful cause more harm than the crimes of the powerless. Liberal-postmodern criminology’s pluralistic relativism and critical criminology’s structural relativism diminished the impact of myriad harms experienced by a variety of victims, which eroded the discipline’s credibility amongst all social groups apart from liberals educated to think in this way. This neglect, disseminated by liberal politics and media, was particularly galling to the working classes across the United States and Europe, who thought that nobody on the left-liberal side of the fence believed them or cared about their everyday experiences. The relativistic disregard of everyday experiential harms and their contexts of insecurity, burgeoning criminal markets and communal decline caused by deindustrialisation was a catastrophic error that backfired and contributed to what every liberal wanted to avoid – the recent drift to the far right (Winlow et al., 2017).

Harm is usually defined as an action that leaves whatever it impacts upon 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 in relation to the incidents they attempt to represent. By developing a core-periphery model of harm (Hall, 2012a) ultra-realism has set out to establish some theoretical principles about the study of the relationships between experiential harm and definitions of crime. By developing an advanced conception of trauma (Winlow, 2014; Ellis, 2015), it also sets out to understand the genesis and reproduction of harmful ‘hardened subjectivities’ (Crank & Jacoby, 2015). In a defensive manoeuvre over the past few years when its credibility was waning, postmodernism, in its ‘affirmative’ variant, acknowledged a thin core of universally harmful crime, but more recent research into contemporary criminality reveals that this allegedly thin core is actually quite thick – at least as thick as the periphery of less harmful crimes (Hall, 2012a).

Typologies of harm are of limited use. 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 integrate our findings and understandings in a new theoretical framework. Excellent research on harm’s various contexts – personal, social, environmental and so on – is constantly forthcoming in criminology, but the establishment of such a framework is work yet to be done. The concept of ‘lack of social recognition’ (Honneth, 1996), which comports with Bhaskar’s (1997) claim that absence is causative, presents us with a useful starting point. 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 labour and acquiescence forced the master to at least recognise 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 labour functionally redundant, we are witnessing the end of such traditional socioeconomic obligations (Winlow & Hall, 2013). This provides dominant actors in any position in the social structure with opportunities to exercise ‘special liberty’ (Hall, 2012a). This is a sense of entitlement felt by individuals as they pursue business, wealth and enjoyment. As capitalist history unfolded the obscene license of *special liberty* percolated down from aristocratic and bourgeois culture to popular culture, diffusing and normalising the subject’s sense of entitlement to risk harm to others in its attempts to gratify expressive or instrumental desires (Hall, 2012a; Horsley, 2014). It is 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 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 the object of its research and theorisation simply cannot do its job.

Ultra-realists use the concept of *special liberty* in the context of the severed master–slave relation to invert Honneth’s (1996) direction of causality. Harm is not a product of social inequality. Rather, social inequality is a consequence of the willingness of ruthless individuals and groups to perpetrate multiple harms as they out-compete, dispossess and politically disempower others 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 naturalisation but by a culture of hardened, domineering and ruthless pseudo-pacified subjectivity that has become normalised and successful throughout the history of the capitalist project. This competitive subjectivity, driven by the libidinal energy of obscene enjoyment into the competitive spaces opened up by the historical proliferation of competitive markets, is not unique to white upper-class males. Their wealth and power are the products of centuries of ruthless and successful accumulation, but competitive subjectivity is active throughout the social structure in a variety of pseudo-pacified micro-relations. Its ubiquitous, rhizomatic presence and enthusiastic adoption by so many opportunistic individuals permanently postpones the establishment of the long-term human solidarity that could restart genuine cultural and political opposition. For the moment we remain confined in the advanced capitalist culture of *amour propre* (Rousseau, 1990), where the competitive individual gauges her success relative to the downfall and subjugation of others. In this culture too many amongst the subjugated, as John Steinbeck once remarked, 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 should steal their enjoyment of the permanent dissatisfaction which they have won to keep their desires and energetic striving alive (see McGowan, 2016). However, the harms of securitisation 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, some of whom now look to a revived far right to solve their problems, demand that criminology revisit its fundamental assumptions with a view to 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 the production of knowledge. In such a competitive and insecure milieu, the motivation and the ability to risk harm to others in acts that further interests of the self is not exclusive to any specific social group, even those who have historically achieved more success in their endeavours.

Therefore ultra-realism's advocates argue that 21st-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-individualistic culture, its hardened subjectivity and its multiple harms. This restless way of life, based on *amour-propre* and structured in an unstable financialised economic system that devalues labour and sacrifices human lives on the altar of fiscal parsimony and capital accumulation, is becoming ever more *zemiogenic*. Re-arranging the intersectional deckchairs will make little overall difference to the ship's eventual fate. 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.

The influence of critical realism

Criminology's left-realist approach developed first in the UK and later in the USA in the 1980s as a response to left idealism's intellectual and political failings and right realism's success in influencing government policy. Whereas right realism ignored the crimes of the powerful and overstated and decontextualised the harm caused by street crime, left idealism virtually ignored the latter and passed it off as an ideological construct. Against the backdrop of the 'crime explosion' in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1980s (see Reiner, 2007) the dogmatic left-idealist stance had alienated leftist criminology from governments and the public alike. Left realism's principal message was to take the more harmful crimes seriously but to reject right realism's domain assumption of the individual's eternal propensity for 'evil', which justifies policies of repressive securitisation. Left realism was heavily influenced by feminist criminology's successful attempt to put the individual's experiential reality of harm back on the political and intellectual agendas. However, as we have seen, feminism pursued a very specific agenda focused on violence against women. Left realism, despite the efforts of some, such as Currie (1985), became bogged down in administrative pragmatism and ended up as an adjunct to ineffective 'third-way' politics. Despite these failings, feminism and left realism helped to stir criminology out of left idealism's social constructionist inertia, which reduced ontology and politics to a language game and reduced sociology and criminology to a branch of media studies. Ensuring progressive momentum was reduced to changing subjectivity through language. Current political events tell us quite clearly that this has failed.

A return to empiricism is not enough to reset the programme. If messing around with structures of language has had little effect, revealing truth – if indeed empiricism can be said to perform this function – and speaking it to power has also fallen flat. Power already knows the truth; it just doesn't care. Ultra-realism's political agenda is driven by the need to connect the popular will to substantive political and cultural interventions in the deep recesses of the capitalist system. Criminology has become an apologist for *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2009), the negative ideological first principle that no alternative is possible. The cultural normalisation of capitalist realism has not simply established the idea of 'revolution' as an impossibility in the popular imagination but even what were once regarded as standard social-democratic structural reforms (Winlow & Hall, 2013). Of all the social scientific disciplines, criminology is now the least likely to have an input into the debate on alternative futures, even though the reduction of social hostility and multiple harms sits alongside the fight against poverty, exploitation, insecurity and oligarchic state repression as one of the more powerful motives for genuine transformation. Behind the ultra-realist

wish to establish a new paradigm is the principle that the pragmatic investigation of what *can* be done must be replaced by the realistic investigation of what *must* be done to effect long-term transformation of the system in such a way as to reduce its propensity for multiple harms.

However, ultra-realism seeks to avoid right-wing realism, which is not realism at all but the cynical pragmatism of a generalised *realpolitik*. Ultra-realism is partially influenced by critical realism's ontological and epistemological model. Critical realists locate an ontological realism below interpretation, moral agency and language in society's intransitive dimension, what we might call the 'deep system' of structures and dynamic processes that produce very real consequences, all of which can be detected and understood as probabilistic tendencies and patterns, not iron laws. For instance, the crime explosion in the UK and USA during the 1980s correlated very strongly with deindustrialisation, depoliticisation and the diffusion of consumer culture. Critical realists argue that it is inadequate to understand meaning and action as autonomous because meaning is influenced and action is controlled and enforced in a gridlocked system of imperatives and interdependencies, a totality of system dynamics, social relations, tendencies, events and experiences. We are free to talk and act, but only in a very limited sphere, not at the deepest level where the power of politics, militarism and investment operate within the confines of an accountant's abstract logic to decide whether whole communities – and, in some cases, whole regions or nations – are built or destroyed. Here we find the decisions that affect the life chances of millions.

Alongside this ontological model, critical realism also offers criminology a sophisticated epistemological schema. There are three layers of reality and variations of our ability to know about it:

- 1 Empirical – representative knowledge of events and their patterns.
- 2 Actual – events and subjective experiences.
- 3 Real – underlying generative mechanisms that probabilistically cause events.

For critical realists, positivism is descriptive and correlational. It simply cannot reveal enough about the world. Interpretivism is interminably wrapped up in the subjective and cultural construction of meanings that can never be firmly established or regarded as consistently representative of the actual and the real. If we conceptualise crimes as events and their harms as subjective experiences, ultra-realist criminology's first task is to forge feasible connections between the empirical and actual levels. Of course, because crime carries penalties, most events are concealed, which is why criminologists cannot rely on quantitative methods and need the penetrative ethnographic method practiced by researchers who are capable of revealing selected parts of the 'dark figure' of crime. Statistics and surveys are of very limited use and too susceptible to political manipulation by governments, interest groups and both mainstream and new synoptic media.

Socioeconomic structures and processes are not simply theoretical concepts but systems of real possibilities and constraints, which are experienced by us in our everyday lives as 'natural necessities' that allow or deny thought and action. Structures and processes are generative and degenerative mechanisms, creating and destroying our fundamental conditions of existence and causing sequences of events whose influence is so strong it can be granted a place in the causal chain. This chain links the real with the actual and the way people tend to act – in a way that often bypasses interpretive thought and stretches the boundaries of morality when alternative actions appear impossible or harmful to the self – as they experience these events. By invoking Hegel's concept of the *concrete universal* and constructing networks of ethnographic researchers, ultra-realist criminology can produce knowledge of experiential events and human responses that can be linked with real systems of possibilities and constraints, and from this begin a to build a theoretical framework for future research (Hall & Winlow, 2015).

For instance, at the broadest and deepest level, the structures and dynamic processes of neoliberalism, for which market logic is the dominant organising principle, have since the 1980s been hollowing out the vital socioeconomic conditions of existence in specific locales and regions. This process has impacted heavily on rates of crime, forms of crime and the growth of criminal markets. For critical realists, absence is also causative, and the specific absences found in these places – of politics, solidarity, investment, employment, hope and so on – are determined by market logic as it controls systems of real restraints and possibilities. It has created spaces of desperation and nihilism in which the criminogenic mentality of *special liberty* – the individual freed from social obligations and self-permitted to do what is contextually necessary to further personal interests – and its attendant harms can flourish (Hall, 2012a). The experiences of individuals as they have seen industry disappear and criminal markets burgeon in their locales are the historical concrete universals ultra-realists seek to investigate (see Winlow 2001), and events such as the English riots of 2011 represent the contemporary concrete universals that connect subjectivity with today's unstable service industries and post-political consumer culture (Treadwell, Briggs, Winlow & Hall, 2013).

Transcendental materialism

Critical realism offers a useful framework that encourages social scientists to once again dig beneath the empirical and the gestural. However, its conceptualisation of the relationship between nature, the individual and the social is problematic. 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 2012a; Winlow & Hall, 2013; Hall & Winlow, 2015), but very basically Bhaskar (1997) failed to apply his own theoretical principle of causative absence to the issue of subjectivity.

Transcendental materialism gets down to the task of theorising 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 unadulterated spiritual and ethical dimension. This new philosophical realism moves far beyond biological positivism's crude ontology and aetiology of genetic traits and transcendental idealism's notion of ultimate flexibility in the metaphysical realm of ideas and language. Mead's theory of the formation of the subject is obsolete because it theorises only the subject's conscious self-image seen through external others, not the formative emergence of the subject through its own unconscious drives, desires, experiences and 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. He said that the unconscious was *structured like* a language, not that it *is* a language (see Hall, Winlow & Ancrum, 2008).

Lacan reminded us that absence – in this case a symbolic void that drives the subject outwards to find the coherent symbolic order it desperately needs to appease the terror of the Real's unknown external and internal stimuli and move beyond the juvenile misidentifications of the Imaginary (see Johnston, 2008; Hall, 2012b) – exists as an elemental force at the centre 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 (ibid.). However, whereas past ideological systems have been based

on *positive beliefs*, when today's liberal-postmodern subject emerges to seek a coherent symbolic order it encounters a system founded on the fundamental *negative belief* that nothing beyond the current system is possible. This negative belief is not hegemonically reproduced solely by the dominant elite but also by the sub-dominant elite who have neutralised any genuine political opposition.

The current deaptive ideological order of symbols is based on *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2009), the negative principle that we have reached the endpoint of economic history and no alternative to liberal capitalism will ever be possible. Despite the neoliberal economy's descent into localised social and environmental catastrophes, capitalist realism decrees that any attempt to establish a new socioeconomic order will inevitably and immediately degenerate into brutal totalitarianism (Žižek, 2001). The west's dominant ideology, shared by the liberal right and liberal left, instructs us that choice and moral agency must be prohibited at the deepest level of socioeconomic system dynamics. As liberal social scientists have argued for decades, western individuals have all sorts of diverse opinions about positive phenomena in the world (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1980). However, the vast majority 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). Therefore it does not appease but over-stimulates the secondary form of *objectless anxiety* in the subject (Hall, 2012a), which means that the overdriven subject's will to compete against others and incorporate itself in the social order is resolute. The capitalist Imaginary functions as a powerful ideological context, shaping the desires and dreams that energise consumer culture and accelerate the circulation of commodities, but it systematically disrupts and prevents symbolic connections with social, economic and environmental 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 an active but fetishistically disavowed engagement with the current neoliberal system's logical imperatives.

The individual still has some choice over the specific mode of engagement, but the fatalism and cynicism we have found in our years of research with active criminals involved in volume crime and some forms of expressive violent crime seem to us to be rooted in extreme variants of *capitalist realism*. If capitalism is the only game in town, and not even the haziest adumbration of a realistic alternative can be seen on the horizon, many individuals choose to play the game in whatever way they can. Under the conditions that exist in economically abandoned, impoverished and hopeless locales – or indeed in the top strata where regulations are lax, tempting opportunities abound and the culture of *special liberty* (see Hall, 2012a) is normalised – the tendency to involvement in various forms of crime and violence is ratcheted up.

Ultra-realism in the cold light of day

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 USA, some of which are redolent of the political trajectory in 1930s Europe. Huge socioeconomic problems in former manufacturing areas, and working-class subjective responses to them, had been systematically ignored or misunderstood, not only by the dominant neoliberals but also by the sub-dominant liberal left who purport to represent the interests of the disadvantaged. New research by ultra-realist criminologists (see Hall & Antonopoulos, 2016; Kotze & Temple, 2014) is exposing potentially fatal epistemological problems in the 'international crime-decline' narrative (see Hall &

Winlow, 2015, chap. 7, for details). The statistical industry's focus on traditional legally-defined crime and its victims has meant that this narrative is the product of ignoring harms and measuring obsolescence rather than researching the current events and subjective experiences that constitute the realm of the 'actual'. The complacency and misunderstandings that have colonised and enervated liberalism's political wing are being duplicated in its intellectual wing, and criminology is no exception. Ultra-realism enjoins us to struggle free from paralysing 20th-century paradigms and return to reality and free intellectual enquiry as a matter of political urgency.

Ultra-realism is firm in its intent to confront neoliberal capitalism's worldwide zemiological environment full in the face. There is so much to do here. To mention but a few examples, Parenti (2011) exposes the criminogenic effects of global warming, drought, flash-flooding, neoliberal economic restructuring and cheap arms dumping on the escalation of ethnic tensions, crime, corruption and violence in the tropical convergence zone (see also Wiegratz, 2016). Crank and Jacoby (2015) reveal the process of *dual exploitation* as global warming, the mechanisation of agriculture and disinvestment in the real sustainable economy have created huge consumer markets of desperate people on all continents needing transport, food, clothes, shelter, medical supplies and other basic goods. In various chaotic regions proliferating criminal networks organise the supply of illicit goods and develop markets in sexual exploitation, slavery and various forms of trafficking.

If some sectors of the populations in former manufacturing regions of the old industrial world are becoming increasingly desperate, it is that much worse in the developing world's megacities. In the 1950s there were only two cities, New York and Tokyo, with more than 10 million inhabitants. Today there are 22, and by 2025 there will probably be 30 (Crank & Jacoby, 2015). These sprawling urban areas are statistical black holes for criminologists. They are rapidly altering the fabric of human life, replacing traditional intimate, grounded human communities with vast, impersonal, fluid urban networks socially structured by huge and increasing divisions in wealth and power. In the context of a culture of competitive individualism and *special liberty*, but in the absence of stable economies and nurturing states and social systems, these deep processes and structures at the level of the real promote criminality and violence rather than the politics of solidarity.

At the actual and empirical levels, we are witnessing the consequences of these processes right now. Anxious populations are supporting governments that promise state hardening, privatisation, securitisation, militarisation and strict border controls. Such shifting electoral support is the product of *cultural hardening*, constituted and reproduced by intensified exclusionary sentiments and *subjective hardening* as individuals become increasingly competitive and self-interested (Crank & Jacoby, 2015). These cultural currents are beginning to break down the pseudo-pacification process, which means that more individuals are likely to express anger and hostile competitive urges in physical rather than sublimated symbolic forms (Hall, 2012a).

These are just a few very brief examples of the criminogenic processes and unfolding events that ultra-realism seeks to investigate and bring to the foreground in criminology. Ultra-realists argue that criminology should encourage theory and research that can open up new or previously proscribed and obscured *parallax views* (see Žižek, 2006). By organising ethnographic networks and encouraging researchers to generate rich and conceptually advanced qualitative data that represent different subjective experiences of individuals and localised populations, views of harmful events from multiple observational positions can be used to displace standard views. These multiple views can then be placed in broader structural and processual contexts, not to confirm existing theoretical frameworks but to overcome their inadequate ontological domain assumptions, interest-group biases and restrictive political parameters in order that we can construct replacements. A multi-dimensional research, theory and educational milieu must be built

with the intention of conducting research with no intellectual restrictions, no censorship at the point of publication and none of the identitarian demarcations currently maintained by 'stand-point' interest-groups. Until we begin to do this, we are not educating young people in today's realities but simply affirming the soothing fantasies that reproduce the complacent, truncated politics which have quite recently been exposed as ineffective and obsolete in the troubled world of advanced capitalism.

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