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Subject Area - Criminology Left Realism Critique

Left realism emerged as an influential theory during the 1980s. Its drive was partly dissatisfaction with the dominant criminological perspectives of the time and partially attributable to the prevailing political climate. This essay will outline the emergence of left realism as a means of explaining its main principles. The discussion will also engage with the criticisms of left realism and identify the criminological perspectives with which it conflicts.

An understanding of left realism cannot be gained without an awareness of the prevailing intellectual, ideological and political context that surrounded its emergence. Therefore, it is important to appreciate the background from which left realism emerged. In the period immediately preceding the genesis of left realism, the most prevalent and influential criminological perspectives were based largely upon Marxist theories based upon notions of 'utopianism' that were increasingly coming to be viewed as irrelevant in light of the political ethos of Margaret Thatcher's Britain (Jones: 2001, 245). In particular, left realists were extremely critical of the way that radical criminological theories presented a characterisation of criminals as 'political catalysts against bourgeois hegemony' and therefore to attempt to explain criminal behaviour in terms of it being a revolution against the injustices imposed upon the majority of the population by the ruling classes (Moore, 1991).

Radical criminological theory saw crime as a consequence of (real or imagined) economic deprivation and under-privilege. Left realists were opposed to this view which allocated responsibility for crime to the State, which was seen as an instrument of the ruling class designed to consolidate the position of the powerful and promote the interests of the rich and powerful, rather than with the individual offender. Left realists also objected to the characterisation of the offender as the 'victim' of the labelling process; a view which was popular with symbolic interactionists who were providing a popular alternative voice to the radical criminologists during the late 1970s and early 1980s:

For over two decades [criminology] has neglected the effect of crime upon the victim and concentrated on the impact of the of the state - through the process of labelling - on the criminal. It became an advocate for the indefensible: the criminal became the victim, the state the solitary focus of attention, while the real victim remained off-stage (Matthews and Young, 1986: iv).

The rejection by left realists of these constructions of the offender demonstrated one of their central beliefs which was that the offender should not be absolved of responsibility for his actions and that it was not appropriate to cast blame on either the institutional or structural nature of society as was the tendency of the radical and interactionist schools of criminological thought. Rather than concur with this characterisation, left realists saw criminals as well-socialised individuals who exercised conscious and rational choice in deciding to offend and who saw crime as a way of resolving their particular problems. For left realists, the problems that offenders were trying to solve came from the capitalist ideology that was predominant in 1980s society. Left realists saw this capitalism as producing egalitarian notions such as that of political equality and the deterioration of views that each individual had an immutable 'place' in the social hierarchy that was pre-determined at birth. With these views came feelings of deprivation amongst those who were not possessed of material wealth but who were desirous of the benefits that were enjoyed by other members of society. Left realists felt that these individuals would see criminal enterprise as a way of rectifying this perceived inequality and securing their access to the commodities of capitalist society which they craved (Hopkins Burke, 2005: 220).

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In this respect, left realism could be seen as promoting a return to traditional Marxist views whereby crime was seen as an individual response (by the offender) to structural inequalities created by those in power in society which actually was a counter-active diversion away from the real problems of the causes of these inequalities that could only be solved by political change. Left realism rejected the post-Marxist radical theories that characterised crime as a revolutionary endeavour. In their seminal work, Lea and Young (1984) depicted criminal behaviour as almost an amplification of capitalist normalcy. In other words, the dominant view in the 1980s was that of capitalistic self-advancement in which individual endeavours were rewarded with material gain. Lea and Young asserted that a significant percentage of criminals shared these beliefs and replicated what had become conventional social values based upon the value of individual (and self-interested) effort in a society based upon competition and motivated by material success. However, criminals did not channel their energy into legitimate pursuits such as the endeavour for advancement in employment or entrepreneurial success, preferring instead to pursue socially acceptable goals through illegitimate avenues (criminal activity). As such, left realism viewed crime as the expression of capitalist values but through non-conventional means.

In one respect, left realists agree with radical theorists in that it is common ground that 'crime is a reaction to an unjust society' (Lea and Young, 1984: 45). However, there is also disagreement in that, unlike radical criminologists, left realists do not believe that the criminal should not be blamed for responding by engaging in offending behaviour:

Crime is one form of egoistic response to deprivation. Its roots are in justice but its growth often perpetrates injustice (Lea and Young, 1984: 72)

This notion of crime as the illegitimate manifestation of capitalist values is one of the central principles of left realism. However, although crime is seen as a self-interested and individual enterprise, left realists also believe that crime is a group response rather than an individual decision. They believe that crime is an inevitable consequence of a social situation in which a particular group feels that it is subject to disadvantage such as in a situation whereby there is a common ideological drive to measure success in material goods but there exist barriers to the attainment of these goals for some members of society. In such a situation, particularly if there appears to be no way of circumventing the obstacles, crime is certain to result.

One of the key criticisms that has been levelled against left realist explanations of crime and criminality is that its focus on economic deprivation explains only economic crime but does nothing to account for the other manifestations of offending behaviour that are prevalent in society. Left realism is prepared to counter this criticism by drawing upon strain theory (Merton, 1968) to explain how the exclusion from legitimate economic opportunity may result in financial crime to rectify the situation or violent crime as a vent for frustration at the denial of a seemingly equitable access to benefits and resources. This actually consolidates one of the key principles of left realism in that reliance is placed upon subculture theories to support the argument of left realism that those who are excluded from the benefits of mainstream society develop their own cultures, norms and principles and operate within these. Inevitably, for those excluded from legitimate avenues of enterprise, this involves criminal behaviour (Young, 1975).

One of the central principles of left realism was a conceptualisation of crime that did not take an offender-centred view. Young proposed a 'square of crime' in which the four key components were the offender, the victim, the agencies of formal control (such as the police) and the agencies of informal control (such as other members of society). This was

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an important tenet of left realism because it challenged a major paradox within radical theories; that of the powerless working-class criminal driven to offending behaviour as a result of the oppression of the privileged classes. Lea and Young examined official crime statistics and victim report surveys (such as the British Crime Survey) and concluded that although members of the working class appear to commit a disproportionate amount of crime, they often target the other members of the working class as their victims. Left realism addressed the issue of the 'ordinary' victim of crime and thus changed the emphasis within criminological theory and, gradually, within the practices of the criminal justice system. In particular, the 'square of crime' ensured that crime prevention strategies were evolved which took account of the contributions of each of the four factors:

To control crime from a realist perspective involves intervention at each part of the square of crime: at the level of the factors which give rise to the putative offender (such as structural unemployment), the informal system (such as lack of public mobilisation), the victim (such as inadequate target hardening) and the formal system (such as ineffective policing) (Young, 1986: 41).

This emphasises one of the main principles of left realism; the belief in a 'joined up' approach to tackling the problems of crime. However, this 'multi-causal' approach that takes account of a variety of factors in explaining criminality could be accused of 'borrowing' from a range of sociological explanations of crime, such as strain and control theories, and amalgamating selected aspects of these and giving them a Marxist slant. It seems reasonable to state that there is nothing particularly new in left realism; it is a pragmatic restatement of a number of established criminological principles taken from a particular ideological perspective (Downes and Rock, 2003: 292).

However, left realism did become influential in raising awareness of the plight of victims of crime thus negating their invisibility and overcoming their marginalisation. Lea and Young's studies showed that official statistics gave an incomplete picture of the extent of victimisation and therefore presented an inaccurate impression of the nature and extent of criminal activity. For Lea and Young, victim studies gave a fair more comprehensive and accurate account of victimisation, firstly because they included information about crimes which had occurred but which victims may not have reported to the police and, secondly, because they were capable of analysis on the basis of geographic location thus giving a true impression of the localised nature of much criminal behaviour. One of the other most notable contributions of left realism to criminological theory that emerged from victim surveys is the recognition of 'fear of crime' as a significant social problem that is just as in need of resolution as actual crime .

By acknowledging the existence of victims of crime, left realists gave voice to notions of pre-emptive strategies to counteract attempts at criminal behaviour:

The organisation of communities in an attempt to pre-empt crime is of the utmost importance (Lea and Young, 1984: 267).

This emphasis on the community and its role and importance in combating crime typifies the principles of cohesion and inclusion that characterises left realism. At its core, left realism is seeking for 'realistic' strategies that will have a quantifiable impact upon crime (and fear of crime) within communities, especially amongst the poor and disadvantaged who are the most frequent victims of crime. This has been said to be a 'central component of contemporary left realism' (Matthews and Young, 1992: 2). Notwithstanding this emphasis on the prevention of crime, it is a fundamental principle

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of left realism that the attainment of justice is more important than controlling crime. As such, the police play a key role in maintaining social control by establishing, maintaining and nurturing good community relations so as not to alienate the populace to whom they should be fully accountable (Kinsey, Lea and Young, 1986).

Many of the criticisms levelled against left realists were voiced by the radical theorists of whom the left realists themselves were so critical. For example, Lea and Young criticised radical theorists for their 'excessive' concentration of corporate crime and their marginalisation of 'real' crime that affects 'ordinary' people even though they accept that corporate crime is worse than working-class crime. Radical theorists counter by questioning why Lea and Young are prepared to view working-class crime as more serious merely because it is what ordinary people fear. Surely, it is argued, the actuality of crime is more potent and more serious than the fear of falling victim to a crime that may never occur. Left realists have no effective rejoinder for this criticism, other than to draw attention to the way in which fear of crime can have a real and negative impact upon ordinary members of society, by preventing them from going about their ordinary business, for example, or avoiding particular activities or places (Young, 1999).

The multi-causal approach of left realism can also be criticised for failing to explain all forms of criminal behaviour.

Feminist criminological theorists have also been critical of left realism in its tackling both of female criminal behaviour and of its failure to explain crimes that are traditionally seen as targeting women, such as rape. Just as it could be criticised for failing to provide an adequate explanation of different types of criminal behaviour, left realism can be accused of an overly one-dimensional focus on young, male, working-class criminal behaviour to the detriment of offenders from other socio-demographic backgrounds. Female criminality is largely unaddressed and, moreover, exposes a central weakness in one of the key principles of left realism; the reliance on relative deprivation as an explanation of criminal behaviour. For example, Lea and Young assert that crime results from the exclusion of a particular group from legitimate opportunities for success and material gain. In light of this, it would be expected that female criminality, which was always extremely low, would decrease even further as women gained greater equality in the workplace as this would ensure that they were less excluded from legitimate avenues of success. However, the converse proved to be true and the greater prominence of women in the workplace was mirrored by a growth in female offending; an outcome that is directly contrary to the explanation of criminal behaviour propounded by left realists (Smart, 1989).

Equally, it is difficult to see how left realism can explain sexual crimes against women unless this falls within the same category as violent crimes that are the result of frustration following a failure to achieve legitimate success. This seems an extremely tenuous argument for such complex crimes and, in any case, left realists have tended not to engage with the issue of rape to any great degree thus the explanation remains speculative (Heidensohn, 1985).

Overall, it is clear that the emergence of left realism was both a product of the prevailing political climate and a strong influence on the social and political development of more cohesive approaches to crime control and prevention that drew together a range of 'players' in the criminal justice process rather than focusing exclusively on the offender. As a theoretical perspective, it expanded the focus of criminological enquiry and moved beyond the dominant ideology of the 1970s and early 1980s. As such, its contribution to criminological debate cannot be under-estimated. However, it can be criticised as a rather narrowly-focussed theory that fails to provide an adequate explanation of the full gamut of criminal behaviour. It has, however, provided a building block upon which other theories can build a broader and more wide-ranging explanation of criminality.

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