REVIEW ESSAY: LEFT REALISM AND CRIMINOLOGY

WHAT IS TO BE DONE ABOUT LAW AND ORDER?
by J. Lea and J. Young
Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984
Paperback: $9.95

LOSING THE FIGHT AGAINST CRIME
by R. Kinsey, J. Lea and J. Young
Paperback: $9.95

CONFRONTING CRIME
edited by R. Mathews and J. Young
Sage, London, 1986
Paper text edn: $16.50

THE ISLINGTON CRIME SURVEY
by T. Jones, B. Maclean and J. Young
Gower, Aldershot, 1986
Paper text edn: $9.90

Introduction

These four books, together with a variety of other publications and activities, constitute a theoretical and political intervention into British criminology of considerable significance. Most commonly known as left realism or radical realism, it represents an attempt to develop a political criminology on the left which takes crime problems seriously and offers a programme of reforms that are both progressive and realisable in Britain in the 1980s.
This review is less concerned with the fine details of left realist criminology than with a critical analysis of its general trajectory and theoretical and political underpinnings. Some of the more specific matters have been dealt with elsewhere (see Hogg 1988).

Some of the criticisms made here of left approaches to law and order are in general terms akin to those made by the late Peter Sedgwick of anti-psychiatry and its political effects. Resisting the view that participation in debates about the provision of mental health services amounted to complicity in state social control, he argued:

My case points not to the technologising of illness, to the medicalisation of moral values, ... but, on the contrary, to the politicisation of medical goals. I am arguing that without the concept of illness ... we shall be unable to make demands on the health service facilities of the society we live in (1982:40).

He emphasises how important this is at a time when a massive attack is being mounted against public expenditures on the health services in Britain. In the face of this, he argues, the anti-psychiatrists offer no political direction or strategy:

Mental illness, like mental health, is a fundamentally critical concept: or can be made into one provided that those who use it are prepared to place demands and pressures on the existing organisation of society. In trying to remove and reduce the concept of mental illness, the revisionist theorists have made it that bit harder for a powerful campaign of reform in mental health services to get off the ground. The revisionists have thought themselves, and their public, into a state of complete inertia. They can expose the hypocrisies and annotate the tragedies of official psychiatry, but the concepts which they have developed enable them to engage in no public action grander than that of wringing their hands (1982:41).

It is in this same sense that the effects of crime and demands for law and order should be engaged rather than dissolved or displaced onto claims that they are merely effects of larger social forces.

**Radical Criminology and Marxism**

Debates within radical criminology, like debates within other areas of radical social theory, have to a considerable extent since the seventies been preoccupied with the problem and effects of economic reductionism or, to use a more inclusive term, theoretical essentialism. Barry Hindess has defined essentialism as follows:

Essentialism ... refers to a mode of analysis in which social phenomena are analysed not in terms of their specific
conditions of existence and their effects with regard to other social relations and practices but rather as the more or less adequate expression of an essence (Hindess 1977:95).

Within variants of marxist social theory this essence is the capitalist economic structure. Capitalist society is treated as a social totality governed by general principles of organisation. To one degree or another, the social relations of capitalism (politics, law, culture, etc.) are explained within marxism as the necessary and essential effects of the capitalist economy. One of the most familiar effects of such a theory is to draw a distinction between political strategies and demands that attack the fundamental structure of capitalist society and those that only seek to reform parts of it whilst leaving the structure intact.

Although it is a familiar pastime of anti-marxists to attack such forms of reductionism, this is hardly a problem that is confined to radical social theory. Less totalising theories within the social sciences are just as prone to essentialisms of various kinds. One form of essentialism that has long characterised criminology flows from the legacy of positivism and relates to the taken-for-granted status of the concepts of “crime” and “criminality”. “Crime” has no necessary or essential reference point of a behavioural or other kind. Whilst it is usually formally considered in terms of the shifting legal definitions of the state, it is fair to say that crime is constituted as an object in a range of discourses – popular, fictional, administrative, psychological, etc. as well as strictly legal. Whilst this is widely accepted now, its implications for criminology are not always so clearly appreciated – for example, that it disrupts any notion of criminology as a unified discipline or discourse or as a vehicle for applying a general body of theory (e.g. marxism) to the object “crime”.

In the late sixties a selfconsciously radical, political project in criminology emerged in Britain and the USA (a little later in Australia), directed against the pragmatic and administrative criminology that had hitherto dominated. It reproduced in varying forms the essentialism of the marxism which informed it.

Some radical criminologists in the USA appropriated marxism to produce what is perhaps best thought of as a radical conflict theory of crime (Chambliss 1976, and the early Quinney). In the marxist version of such theories the contradiction between social classes in the economic structure of society is argued to be manifest in a direct way at every level of society. Thus the law, and criminal law in particular, is held to be an instrument of class rule, wielded by the ruling class against the working class as a repressive instrument of social control.

It is difficult to sustain the view, however, that economic classes are polarised around the criminal law and state social control in societies
such as North America, Britain and Australia. As Jock Young pointed out in his major essay "Working Class Criminology":

However much the new deviancy theorist talked of diversity and dissensus in society, the ineluctable reality of a considerable consensus over certain matters could not be wished away. This was particularly noticeable, moreover, in the widespread and uniform social reaction against various forms of deviancy (and, especially, against crimes against the person and certain crimes against property) (1975:71).

In that essay Young both acknowledges that much crime is intra-class in nature and demonstrates how the working class does have a real stake in social order, albeit, according to him, bourgeois state ideology and practice organises working class demands and concerns in such a way as to deflect attention from the "real" sources of crime and the "real interests" of the class in a transformation of the social order.

These appropriations of marxism in criminology have been subjected to fairly severe attack by other marxists concerned to defend the conceptual integrity of marxist theory against pragmatic and empiricist deviations. This assault began (ironically enough given his later alleged revisionism) with an essay by Paul Hirst (1975) which all but swept the carpet from under the new criminology. (Further critiques of a similar nature are to be found in Bankowski, Mungham and Young 1977, Sumner 1976 and O'Malley 1987.) These more rigorous readings of the pertinence of marxism to the study of crime emphasised that as crime was itself merely an ideological artifact, a product of state legal and policing practices, it had no privileged status within the corpus of marxist theory, but rather was subsumed within its general concepts - those of forces and relations of production, accumulation, state, ideology, etc. Crime was not an autonomous and unified entity or object within which class contradictions were condensed and expressed in any direct sense, but rather it was dispersed across and within the different levels of the marxist totality. There could be no marxist theory of crime as such. Some aspects of the phenomena grouped under the label crime at any given time might relate to economic production and distribution, conditions of wage labour, state practices or ideology, etc. In each case it would be appropriate to conceptualise and analyse the concrete instance in the relevant marxist terms. Marxism had nothing to say about crime-in-general though. The most sophisticated example of such a concrete analysis of crime-related issues and events in which the object "crime" is reconceptualised in marxist terms is the study of mugging in Britain by Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and others and published as Policing the Crisis (1978).

I would argue that these forms of analysis within marxism, despite their explicit anti-reductionism, do not ultimately avoid the effects of essentialism. The point of such criticism is not to score cheap

theoretical points. Rather, it is to emphasise that the objective of socialist theory is to serve and inform socialist politics. To varying degrees such analyses obscure the political tasks that confront socialists on the law and order question rather than elucidating them.

In recent times much socialist theoretical work has emphasised the limitations of orthodox marxism as a political theory which of itself is adequate to address the conditions of modern capitalism and serve as a guide to socialist politics (see generally the work of Hirst and Hindess, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe 1985). These engagements with marxism by no means share a common theoretical position, but throw into doubt different aspects of marxist theory. What they do share is a rejection of totalising theory of all kinds, be it marxist or not, as necessarily essentialist. Politics and the theories appropriate to informing it are conceived in more pluralistic terms – as consisting of a diversity of overlapping projects with no necessary unity, manifest or latent; with no privileged sites of struggle (production); with no vanguard elements (party or working class). Political strategy and effects are consequently unable to be read off from some general theory of capitalist society.

This does not involve abandoning general social objectives or principles, but it does require that social analysis always consider them alongside other considerations and objectives which encompass a recognition of the real constraints imposed by prevailing conditions. It entails a recognition that such conditions, and society itself, are only “finitely modifiable” at any given time. The terrain of politics is not of our own making or choosing.

What characterises this terrain at the present time is above all else diversity and difference in terms of the political issues and forces in contention. Politically the project of socialist politics associated with the marxist tradition, and indeed the social democratic tradition as well, has fragmented and a proliferation of social antagonisms has come to mark the politics of late twentieth century capitalist societies. Marxism and social democracy have both adhered to conceptions of politics organised around the centrality of the working class as the vehicle of social change. Of course, in practice it has never been the class which has functioned as the agent of change, but only ever political parties, trade unions, etc. And as Hirst points out, it could never be otherwise: classes are not political actors, but are definable only by reference to economic relations of production. Attempts to posit some necessary relationship between the two levels have dogged left politics since the last century.

These traditions of theorising, whatever their substantial differences and variants, entail the assumption that economic classes share in common certain necessary and objective interests which exist prior to, and independently of, their representation in particular political organisations, movements, etc. The performance of such organisations can then be assessed in relation to the supposed interests of the class.
Within such a schema political analysis and evaluation has often tended to degenerate into a familiar pattern: of accusations of treachery or reformism on the part of the leadership or party and endless debates about whether parties, such as the ALP, are socialist or not, i.e. whether they do or can ever represent "the true interests" of the working class. This serves to reduce political analysis to sloganising and a constant competition on the part of parties and individuals to out-credential each other in terms of criteria which are ultimately indeterminate. Policy debate and formation cease to be organised around political calculation as to desirable and realisable goals in the light of prevailing conditions and the means of their realisation and become an exercise in expressing "the correct line".

The other assumption present in left politics is that despite what the available evidence (voting, public opinion polling, etc.) suggests about the (diverse) attitudes of those who compose the working class to a variety of issues, there is a latent socialist consciousness lurking within the class waiting to be aroused and crystallised around a radical programme. This is another expression of the notion that classes share certain necessary and objectively identifiable interests which are in a sense a more real, more fundamental, basis for conducting political analysis regardless of whether there is any evidence that these interests are actually recognised by persons composing the relevant classes. This serves to insulate socialists from the real problems of confronting popular resistance to socialist and even liberal progressive ideas and it ultimately also leads to political arrogance, elitism and substitutionism. The crime issue might be regarded as a prime illustration of this problem.

Some of these problems have been highlighted by the emergence of new political movements - of women, gays, ethnic and racial minorities, students, environmentalists, tenants, welfare claimants, prisoners, mental patients, urban social movements etc. Such movements emerged and organised around a variety of issues which were not straightforwardly definable in class terms, which were more focused in their concerns and which often cut across the assumed allegiances and shared interests bounded by class position. Attempts to construe them in class terms run up against the problems of positing a necessary relationship between economic relations and politics discussed above, only more obviously. Such attempts have tended to be elaborated politically in terms of the potential for a system of alliances involving such movements and traditional political organisations. This has similarly often taken the form of attributing common and necessary (anti-capitalist) interests to such movements and hence a latent unity amongst them which is also shared by the working class. Again this obscures the precise nature of the political objectives and differences that are at issue across this broad array of people and movements.
Law and Order Politics in Australia

These developments are pertinent to law and order politics in a number of ways. Many of these movements have directly intervened in various law and order issues. Feminists have squarely and consistently raised the issue of male violence and campaigned around a range of related issues, including criminal procedure, social provision in respect of victims, pornography, etc. They have also established their own network of services for victims and developed alternative modes of support (collective, anti-bureaucratic) through rape crisis centres, women's refuges, etc. Prisoner and ex-prisoner organisations have campaigned around the reform of the penal system and in some cases also developed alternative services for ex-prisoners and prisoners' families. Ethnic, racial and sexual minority organisations have highlighted discrimination in the criminal justice system, manifested in both systematic harassment and brutality and also the selective withholding of police protection.

It is fairly obvious that the arguments and objectives of these organisations are often at odds. The demands of some feminist organisations for the removal of procedural safeguards for suspects in some areas, for increased powers of police intervention in relation to violence against women, for more draconian penalties for convicted rapists, for censorship of various kinds, etc. are absolutely at odds with many of the assumptions and objectives of other organisations and movements, civil libertarians, ex-prisoners, etc. and the anti-statism of much of the traditional left. Of course, there are diverse views about such issues within movements and organisations as well as between them. However, the extent and nature of many of these differences tend to be avoided or fudged, especially in more orthodox left analyses which see in such developments the opportunity for building a broad alliance across a range of what are presumed to be anti-capitalist social movements.

More recently, we have witnessed the growth of a whole new set of movements and organisations in relation to crime, including victim organisations, Neighbourhood Watch, etc. These developments have I think to be considered against the backdrop of the relative neglect of crime related issues, as with related environmental issues, by the major political parties (and left political organisations). It would be wrong to underestimate the potential political significance of these movements which in one way or another involve an enormous and growing number of people.

To illustrate the point let us take the development of Neighbourhood Watch in NSW initiated by the police force in NSW in March, 1985. By the end of the 1985-86 financial year 685 schemes had been established encompassing 548,000 homes. In the last year the number of homes covered has almost doubled. Much of the initiative for establishing and running these schemes rests on the public. Whatever precise significance is to be given to this development, it is not possible to ignore the extent and depth of local feeling about crime-related issues that it reflects.
Related forms of citizen involvement in community policing (such as the Safety House Committee) are also indicative of widespread concern about crime and personal security, as is the growth of local victim movements in Australia along lines already familiar in the USA (Elias 1986:180-81; Whitrod 1987:296).

An increased interest in crime-related issues has also been shown by some trade unions in recent years, especially those such as bank employees unions whose members are directly affected in their work situations. They have campaigned around firearms legislation, bail provisions, penalty structures, etc. as well as security in the workplace.

There is also a wealth of survey and opinion poll evidence indicating the depth and extent of feeling about crime and in some cases the material effects it has on the lives of many sections of the population. A Gallup poll conducted throughout Australia in 1986 (by McNair Anderson) found that violent crime was the issue that concerned most Australians, ahead of unemployment, health care and inflation. The results of such polls conducted over the last ten years indicate that violent crime has consistently attracted the concern of more Australians than most other public issues.

A recent survey conducted by the Women's Coordination Unit of the NSW Premier's Department asked respondents about their perceived personal safety in four different situations - when at home alone during the day, when at home alone at night, when alone on the streets in the local area at night, travelling alone on public transport at night. A majority of women said that they felt under "some threat" or "definite threat" in all these situations. In relation to travel on public transport alone at night only 4% said they felt no threat, whilst 83% said they felt under definite threat. Interestingly, a majority of male respondents said that they felt under at least some threat in respect of all the situations other than being alone at home during the day. And a majority (53%) said they felt under a definite threat travelling alone on public transport at night.

A survey of rail travellers resident in the western suburbs of Sydney found that one in six reported being a victim of violence or other crime on the railway system. Many of the respondents, whether victims or not, said they refrained from using the trains during off peak evening periods in consequence (Sydney Morning Herald 4 August 1987).

There is an abundance of further evidence, local and overseas, supporting these findings as to the levels, social distribution and effects of fear of crime in the community (see Clarke 1983; Skogan and Maxfield 1981; Braithwaite, Biles and Whitrod 1982; Maxfield 1982). Fear of crime does circumscribe the mobility of some groups considerably, reducing their participation in the public life of their communities. For some groups in some circumstances it can virtually impose a curfew as discussed in one
of the books under review (Jones et al.: 166-70). The common tendency to point out in response to such evidence that perceptions do not accord with actual objective risks does not meet the issue. Some groups may experience less victimisation because their greater fear of crime leads them to adopt avoidance strategies. More importantly, different groups are not equally vulnerable. The capacity to resist and/or withstand the effects of crime is obviously highly structured around factors such as age and gender. Whilst the media and other sources might play an important role in deepening (often unnecessarily) fears of crime, media blaming is a wholly unsatisfactory response to this issue, as is the making of fine statistical calculations as to the objective risks of victimisation of different groups. There is a need to meet directly the issue of security with practical strategies. Levels of violence and the threat of violence against women in particular are pervasive in this society and are expressed in myriad symbolic as well as directly physical ways. Felt insecurities are a material force influencing people's personal behaviour and hence general patterns of social interaction and institutional life.

Rather than seek to offer some explanation of the nature and level of public concern over crime, either in terms which relate it to the actual incidence of criminal behaviour or locate it in ideological displacement mechanisms, a more important question is just what are its political and social implications. This issue has been ignored or only selectively addressed by left criminologists, political parties, etc. Whilst some sections of the population, notably feminists and other women's groups, have organised around many of these issues and directly influenced, or in many cases, actually set the political reform agendas, a large part of the public concern about crime discussed above consists of relatively dispersed, localised and unorganised bodies of opinion, gleaned through surveys and practical developments such as Neighbourhood Watch. These movements of people would seem for the most part to remain relatively untouched by the major political organisations and social movements. The major political parties, despite a constant barrage of rhetoric around law and order, take a more or less bipartisan approach to the issues, backing and filling on matters as they arise in the public arena. There is little evidence of informed debate within the parties, of any concern to develop coherent programmes and strategies to meet popular concerns.

One important political factor which distinguishes many of these movements from the critical criminologies of the sixties and seventies is their explicit orientation to the state and demand for more, not less, state intervention. Related to this, they demonstrate a number of clear links with other areas of collective consumption, such as housing, public transport and access to recreational facilities, although the focus of concern tends to be on criminal justice measures.

It seems to me that there is an enormous potential for this body of disparate opinion and popular concern to be politically harnessed in a
conservative direction. Whilst the (new) right in Australia has shifted the policy agenda to the right, especially as regards the economy, it has I believe substantially failed to create a popular base for itself and to make its programmes and ideologies palatable to large sections of the population. It has failed to do what Stuart Hall identifies as one of the major achievements of the Thatcherite right in Britain: to translate its policies and ideology into a popular idiom. Crime and the multitude of themes it connotes and condenses has been a critical dimension of the ideological success of the new right in Britain. Hall has in a number of papers demonstrated how the conservatives in Britain have succeeded in connecting right wing, authoritarian policies to everyday life, the felt anxieties of people that cut across class and other social divisions. Thatcherism has managed to take issues like state welfarism, trade union power, race, street crime etc. and draw them together into a generalised threat to "the British way of life" (Hall 1980, 1983; see also Taylor 1981; Kettle 1983).

The concentration on economic management and renewal, organised within a largely corporatist framework, which characterises Australian party and electoral politics at present largely vacates the space of popular politics. Allied, as it is on the left, to strong labourist traditions defensive of the position of males in the labour force, it ensures that a large number of groups outside, or on the fringes of, the relations of production are politically marginalised. These include women, Aborigines, pensioners and the unemployed. Also included are certain middle strata and petit bourgeois who are alienated from both big business and the unions. These are amongst the groups who, in different ways, are most affected by the most visible forms of crime (such as burglary, robbery, car theft, assaults, etc.). These forms of crime are disproportionately directed against the poorest and most powerless in society, who in turn are least able to mitigate its effects upon them. Crime can operate as a potent metaphor for a powerlessness more generally experienced by such groups. It is not difficult to see how crime might provide some of the ideological cement for an authoritarian populist politics which links a number of issues - welfare, the tax backlash, union bashing, etc. - in which the free market and economic liberty are coupled with legal discipline and the strong state. New right commentators have said little about law and order as an issue, although some are certainly aware of the populist potential in relation to issues such as harsher penalties.

It is in the context of the effective political monopolisation of law and order as an issue by the Tories in Britain that one response has been the development of a left realist criminology.
Left Realism in Britain

Left realism seeks to offer an alternative programme for the reconstruction of social order to that of the Tory government and their right wing intellectual supporters. The left realist position has been most thoroughly elaborated by Jock Young, John Lea, Richard Kinsey and their associates in a stream of articles and books published over the last three years (see Lea and Young 1984; Kinsey, Lea and Young 1986; Young and Mathews 1986). A crucial early and more qualified outline of this project is to be found in Ian Taylor’s book *Law and Order: Arguments for Socialism* (1981). Left realism has developed as more than simply a theoretical enterprise. The local victim survey has been embraced as the most appropriate method of inquiry and analysis and two major local victim surveys have been carried out to date, one in Merseyside and the other in the inner London borough of Islington. Both have been funded by local councils indicating the growing political alliance between left realist criminologists and sections of the British Labour Party (see Kinsey, Lea and Young 1986; Jones, Maclean and Young 1986).

Amongst the most important tenets of the new realism in Britain are the following:

1. Crime is a major social problem, especially personal violence and property crime, and it is a problem of growing proportions;

2. Official crime statistics considerably understate the problem due to the levels of unreported crime, which is in large part a result of public alienation and frustration with the ineffectiveness of criminal justice agencies, especially the police (Jones *et al.* 1986; Kinsey 1986);

3. Most personal crime (robbery, assault, burglary, etc.) is intra-class and disproportionately afflicts the poor and their neighbourhoods, thus compounding the inequalities and exploitation they already experience;

4. The police are both extremely inefficient at dealing with inner city crime and endemically hostile and discriminatory with regard to the inner city populace (especially youth and ethnic minorities);

5. The mutual antagonism between police and local communities sets in train a vicious circle of non-cooperation whereby alienated communities do not report crimes to the police and do not pass on much-needed information to them, thus forcing police into more proactive and discriminatory strategies of crime control (such as systematic stop and search and targeting of whole social categories of people thought to be crime-prone), which in turn alienates the community even further, who respond by further withholding cooperation, and so it goes on;
(6) the inner city working class communities are deeply concerned about local crime, want effective policies to control it and see the police as central to crime control;

(7) effective policing requires that the police concentrate on those crimes that the public sees as most serious, that they relinquish those heavy proactive policing methods that alienate their most important resource, the local community itself, and that they are placed under local democratic control through elected local police authorities.

Many of these propositions find empirical support in the surveys carried out to date. They confirm in far more concrete, localised and detailed terms the findings of many other surveys of opinion which indicate that crime is an issue of deep concern amongst the general public. This is no less the case in Australia, as has already been indicated.

On the one hand, many of the arguments of the new realists appear to be important advances on the traditional abstentionism of left and liberal commentators and organisations on issues of crime and law and order. On the other hand, many people may be left thinking, with Geoff Mungham, why was it necessary for radical criminology to spend nearly two decades travelling a route that seems to have led back to something like the orthodoxy of post war liberal criminology in Britain, which has its Australian equivalents in the work of people like Gordon Hawkins and Duncan Chappell, the new director of the Australian Institute of Criminology (Mungham 1984:372). So what, if anything, is different about left realism and why should we take any notice of it in Australia?

Liberal criminology has always tended to see itself as engaged in an essentially scientific exercise, largely value free and dictated by the authoritative specification of social problems, primarily by agencies of state and other political élites. Popular feeling about crime has been taken-for-granted as the consensual backdrop to the work of criminology. It has not been romanticised or rationalised away as it has by many radicals, but nor has it really been taken seriously as a variable factor in the essentially political processes and struggles that fashion debates, attitudes and responses around crime issues. Defining and responding to crime were essentially things to be left to the experts and the relevant specialist bureaucracies.

Abandoning the radical tendency to simply invert this picture, left realists have argued that popular experiences of and attitudes to crime must be taken seriously as an arena of political practice with far-reaching implications for the organisation of the state. Central to this is a socialist strategy which places the democratisation of state apparatuses, and other areas of social and economic life, at the forefront. Responding to crime becomes not a technocratic but a political exercise. In general terms, this appears to me to be the direction in which a radical political
criminology should go. However, there are a number of serious problems with left realism as it has been elaborated in Britain.

"Crime" as a Unifier

The most fundamental problem in the realist theory, programme and methodology lies in the suspension of any critical judgment about the concept of "crime" itself. This is not a theoretical luxury, but a strategic silence with important political effects. It is also closely related to the "paramount" significance given to victim surveys (Young 1986:28).

Some sense of the importance attached to victim surveys by the new realists can be obtained from the following comments in the introduction to the Islington crime survey:

The question is how to develop policies which help protect women, ethnic minorities and the working class — those who suffer most from the impact of crime — who are the natural constituents of Labour, whilst refusing to accept the draconian policing policies and penal practice of the Tories. That is, how to develop policies which protect and give succour to the victims of crime, who are all the more affected because of their vulnerable position in the social structure, whilst controlling the urban offender who is himself often a product of the same oppressive circumstances. To do this demands humane policies which accurately reflect people's needs, which are guided by facts and which can be monitored effectively. All of this is provided by the local crime survey (Jones et al. 1986:6; emphasis added).

A closer examination of the realist surveys indicates that they have not been used to explore the range of possible meanings and articulations of the crime problem in local settings, but essentially to prove a series of general propositions about crime and policing. As Gilroy and Sim argue: "public concern about crime must be understood as the outcome of a political process. This necessitates breaking down the abstract, general category 'crime' into particular experiences, images and fear which correspond to city life" (1985:46).

Such criticism does not carry the implication that public fears about crime are simply irrational, or that they are products of media sensationalism, or even that they are in any way necessarily exaggerated. The experiences of, fears and concerns about, crime are real enough. The crucial issue is: what do they signify, how are they to be connected to other domains of experience and to alternative social practices and policies?
The available public discourses on crime elide a potential range of meanings and possible responses. There are few more loaded, persuasive and propagandistic terms than those, such as "violence", "vandalism", etc. which dominate the lexicon of crime. Eliciting popular opinion using such conceptual tools uncritically risks, at best, simply producing results that may be valid though trivial, or, at worst, concealing from view the most important strata of meaning. It has been the systematic and persistent way in which the available popular and official discourses of crime have, for example, failed to accommodate a recognition of the domestic nature of most violence that continue to foster the relative trivialisation of this issue alongside violence involving strangers.

To take a specific example from the realist surveys themselves. The Islington crime survey found a very high level of agreement that sexual assaults on women should be, along with certain other crimes, given priority in terms of police time and resources (1986:106-10). This prioritisation of crimes was consistent across all major social divisions, including class, gender, race, age, etc. However, does this really reflect a high level of consensus about the meanings of sexual assault? Is it consistent with what we know about patterns of sexual assault from other sources – the traditional treatment of sexual assault victims at the hands of the criminal process, including juries; the degree to which legal recognition of victimisation has depended, not on the actions of the alleged offender, but on the behaviour, demeanour, dress, reputation, etc. of the woman in question (see Wilson 1983:67-72); and the ways in which sexual harassment and violence against women is rationalised by its perpetrators and by agencies of control. Some elementary sociology of deviance has been shelved here – in particular, the work of Matza and Sykes on “techniques of neutralisation” (Matza and Sykes 1978).

The uncritical use of such general categories expunges the differences and divergences in meaning, intent and actual behaviour that arise as soon as we descend from the abstract to the context of situated and concrete judgements. A naive use of the survey method conceals the complexity of these problems behind a facade of consensus. And as Gilroy and Sim also point out: “The easy resort to crime as an abstraction increases rather than diminishes the distance which the left has to travel if it is to articulate a credible politics of everyday life. Local factors are central to the pattern of fear about crime. This is always discontinuous, fluid and specific” (1985:46).

This uncritical use of the concept “crime” suggests that other purposes may underlie the realist project or at least that it does not escape the effects of a certain essentialism – an essentialism that utilises crime as an ideological unifier: a mode for expressing the “real” and common interests of working class people, “the natural constituents of Labour”, as the earlier quote put it. The consensus of liberal criminology has been rediscovered, but with the added advantage that it is on the whole a progressive one. Thus, popular demands for policing, for social
order, etc. have superimposed upon them a set of latent interests in, and aspirations for, the socialist solutions through which such demands will be realised (see also Taylor 1981:101-5). Policies, such as the democratisation of policing, are thus articulated as the essential expression of a progressive consensus rather than in terms of the conditions required for their successful implementation (including political support) and their likely social effects (Hindess 1983:107-8). In short, the political problems of implementing progressive law and order policies are defined out of existence.

The Critique from the Left

There have been a number of attacks launched against left realism by other left critics, which also emphasise that the label “crime” conceals a diverse range of social phenomena, that the vast majority of potentially criminalised events are not in fact actually criminalised but are resolved in local and informal ways (Hulsman 1986). Some have even argued for the abandonment of the concept altogether in favour of the more neutral language of “troubles”, “conflicts”, etc. “It makes all the difference to frame the problems that are to be managed independently of criminal law and thus exclusionary terms and implications” (Steinert 1985:329).

Gilroy and Sim, who were quoted above, reject left realism in similar terms, pointing to “the existence of normative conceptions of crime and wrongdoing which compete for popular allegiance with those which originate in police practice”. They argue that it “is important to apply this insight and identify where such norms connect with a capacity for self-policing” (1985:50).

These critiques imply that there is something approaching a total disconnection between formal discourses on crime and localised concerns and responses; or that to the extent that any articulation exists, it is the effect of the external imposition of legal and state control on community problems. The presumed “real” interests of the community lie in eschewing state involvement as it necessarily embodies antithetical interests: those of capital, the ruling class, etc. The corollary of this is that strategies to deal with crime should be elaborated wholly autonomously of the state. This assumes that some authenticity resides in the immediate, often conflicting definitions and perceptions of local parties to a conflict that is absent from legal categories and that the former never incorporate elements of the latter.

For the left critics of realism, crime is simply an expression of the divisions wrought by capitalism which will disappear within forms of community self-management directed at displacing capitalist social relations. However, the use of labels which express the anti-statism of their users merely represents an inversion of legal ideology. It comes no closer to describing the specific terms of the relationship between working class communities and agencies of state, between legal and social
definitions of crime or between informal and formal measures of control. Gilroy and Sim, for example, completely ignore the apparent overlap between some rank and file police attitudes and some white male attitudes to certain forms of racial and sexual violence, which themselves operate as a source of demands on the state to provide genuine forms of protection within communities, to women and racial and sexual minorities in particular. The links between masculinity and violence, for example, about which the law and agencies of state are often ambivalent (Allen 1988), cannot be dismissed as somehow an inauthentic expression of class consciousness wrought by the divisive effects of capitalism (O'Donnell and Craney 1982). It is a vain expectation that women and other groups would abandon struggles and demands on these fronts in favour of the sole, vague and dubious promise of forms of community self-policing in circumstances where it is precisely such traditional informal modes of control and policing (by men over women) that are at issue (Girdler 1982:146). Again, this essentialism simply defines away major political problems and differences, by positing as necessarily and objectively given some shared interests of communities against the state, although such interests and commonality often do not appear to be recognised by the people in question.

Popular demands for policing are real, they give the lie to crudely instrumentalist conceptions of the state and they make it difficult to attribute progressive status to specific practices on the basis of an abstract dichotomy between state and civil society. The label "crime" does express real relationships which have no essentialist foundations in capitalist social relations. To eschew it is simply petty evasion of disagreeable political terrain. To accept and analyse its various uses does not necessarily imply that they are not entangled in other social relationships, or that they are immutable and unchanging.

Conclusion

This paper has been directed at a critical review of the debates around left realist criminology in Britain. Whilst supporting the general realist position and programme, it has been critical of what I take to be the inadequate break with past critical positions within radical criminology. The effect of this has been to over-simplify the political tasks that the realist project poses. Taking crime seriously from a left perspective is seen to be primarily a matter of formulating policies and strategies which express the true interests of the working class and other groups in socialist solutions to crime problems. These solutions are focused on democratisation of criminal justice, especially policing. Elsewhere I have argued that such a focus of itself is unlikely to produce effective crime control (Hogg 1988). The latter depends as much upon the reconstruction of social policy as it does on criminal justice policy, and within this process democratic control is merely one of the issues of importance (see Currie 1983). Quite apart from that, however, the general implication of this critique is that the left must concern itself
with specific, realisable policies for effective crime prevention and control and the conditions for their implementation by reform governments now. If crime problems are significantly reduced prior to the onset of socialism, then we can be thankful that when that time comes there will be more time to play.

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