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Published online: 17 Nov 2021.

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Building on the shoulders of Bhaskar and Matthews: a critical realist criminology

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ABSTRACT

Building on the insights of the late Roy Bhaskar and the late Roger Matthews, as well as some recent developments in ultra-realist criminology, this article introduces and delineates some core intellectual contours of a Critical Realist Criminology (CRC) based on the principles of:

(1) The 'emergent,' stratified ontology of crime and of the offender;
(2) the full critical realist account of the dialectics of being and becoming, including the spiritual turn in critical realism, applied to processes of criminal justice and reform;
(3) maximal inclusion of diverse theoretical research positions and the primacy of ontology in methodological selection;
(4) a 'serious' critical relationship of criminologists with professionals, institutions and policy-makers of criminal justice.

These principles are directed at developing a criminology that 'underlabours' the recovery of human flourishing for the victims and perpetrators of crime and for society at large, including in-depth inquiry into what counts as crime and the purposes of incarceration.

Introduction

The late Roger Matthews called for a *Beyond 'so what?' Criminology* inspired by the philosophy and social theory of critical realism. Matthews critiqued powerfully the paralysing irrealism of 'nothing works' liberal pessimism, the political naivety of positivism and the moral and methodological duplicity of extreme relativism in order to clear the way for a critical realism that links theory, method and intervention and releases the emancipatory potential of criminology (Matthews 2009).

His was a call for what critical realists call 'underlabouring' after John Locke: clearing away the conceptual obstacles that lie in the way of useful knowledge in any particular

field (Bhaskar 1975). Matthews understood that the dialectical ideas of Bhaskar need to be applied to the study of criminal justice so that the pulse of freedom (Bhaskar 2008) can set up the conditions of human flourishing for the victims and perpetrators of crime.

In particular, Matthews drew upon the social scientific philosophy of Roy Bhaskar to argue that a critical realist criminology would stand for:

(1) a realist understanding between the relationship of agency and structure, which, in Bhaskar's words, avoids both the errors of voluntarism that agents create society and the errors of reification that society exists independently of agents(Bhaskar 1979);
(2) the methodological primacy of ontology in that the nature of the objects of research and of research questions rather than researchers' epistemological predilections for qualitative or quantitative research should determine criminological methodology;
(3) the emancipatory potential of robustly theorized criminological knowledge that would do away with voyeuristic 'so what'? criminology.

In the memory and spirit of Matthews and Bhaskar that well-theorized scholarship should be directed at the promotion of human flourishing, this paper builds upon these trail-blazing insights by considering how the full range of the philosophy of critical realism, including dialectical critical realism and the philosophy of metaReality, might 'underlabour' the theoretical re-invigoration of realist criminology.

This paper makes the case for a Critical Realist Criminology based upon the following principles:

(1) the 'emergent,' stratified ontology of crime and of the offender;
(2) the full critical realist account of the dialectic of being, including releasing the human tendency to positive transformative change, self-realization and other-regarding transcendence in penal settings;
(3) maximal inclusion of diverse theoretical positions as they are relevant to the objects of criminological study, coupled with a porous, open approach to methodology by which methods are determined by the nature of the object of criminological study, not the epistemological predilections of researchers.
(4) a 'serious' critical relationship of criminologists with professionals, institutions of criminal justice and policy-makers through which micro- evidence-led interventions and improvements for all parties in criminal justice are desirable and matter, as well as imaginative proposals for macro-transformation and reform.

The paper aims to introduce these critical realist principles to criminologists and introduce existing realist notions in criminology to critical realists to stimulate a new field of critical realist thought.

Realisms in criminology – left; right; ultra-

Realism in social science has tended to be associated with systematic empirical observation of social realities and relationships - through quantitative methods to identify patterns in populations and their behaviours and qualitative methods to understand the experiences and causes behind those patterns of behaviour. Unlike deep constructionists,

realists of different types have also tended to posit the real, existence of the object of social scientific research independent or relatively independent from its research subject. Nevertheless, realist positions in criminology have also emerged in specific political environments and taken on particular political angles.

Left realism

The first meaningful and sustained interpretation of criminological realism owes its genesis to the British Left movement prompted by the National Deviancy Conference in 1968 (Cohen 1988). The birth of a radical or Neo-Marxist criminology developed by Ian Taylor, Paul Walton and Jock Young in 1973 challenged positivistic and 'correctionist criminology' whilst drawing significantly upon the Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Taylor, Walton, and Young 1973). By the early 1980s, the New Criminology had met with criticism for its utopian vision of crime-free societies, naïve anti-empiricism and the abolitionist position (Matthews and Young 1992; Sumner 1994; Watts, Bessant, and Hill 2008).

By the late 1980s, one of the founders of Radical Criminology, Jock Young, highlighted an aetiological crisis based on the assumption that improving living conditions for populations would decrease crime when the reverse had been witnessed in the UK. Similarly, a rise in prisons and policing had not lowered crime rates. According to Young there was an urgent need for criminology to address matters of *crime causation* based on an empirically informed view of local crime which factored in the impact of crime upon victims (Newburn 2013).

For Young, crime was better understood as a relationship between the police or other agents of social control, the offender, the public and the victim which he termed the 'Square of Crime.' Interactions between these four points of the square were responsible for crime rates, whilst neglecting any point would result in inadequate attempts to explain the offending (Young 1992). The approach was driven by a desire to capture realistic measurements of crime which he observed tended to disproportionately afflict the most vulnerable and socio-economically marginalized populations in British society. As a result there was a tendency to concentrate upon notions of 'fear of crime' prompting criticisms about the degree to which fear could be empirically measured (Sparks 1992). Further criticism was levelled at Left Realism's omission of political dimensions of crime control, neglect of corporate crime and overemphasis upon crimes of the poor (Newburn 2013). Furthermore, the Square of Crime conceived offenders and victims in distinct categories despite well-established awareness amongst victimologists about the blurring between them; particularly with regards to sexual crimes such as prostitution and human trafficking (Duncan and DeHart 2019).

Nevertheless, Left Realism proved influential upon the New Labour political movement in the 1990s as reflected in the introduction of controversial legislation such as the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998. The Act emphasized statutory partnerships between local authorities and the police, inter alia, introducing anti-social behaviour orders and removing the rebuttable presumption of innocence for children aged 10–14 (doli incapax). Moreover, Left Realism enjoys sustained academic influence in recognition of the power of unfair social structures and noxious environments to generate the conditions of crime. Furthermore, it highlights the persistent reality that both the perpetrators and victims

of crime are to be found disproportionately amongst the poor, socio-economically mar-ginalized and politically oppressed (Matthews and Young 1992).

Right realism

In response to the focus of Left Realists on the most vulnerable and socio-economically marginalized populations in British society and the effects of inequitable social structures in generating and perpetuating crime, Right Realism in criminology, which was also borne out of the overtly political circumstances of a resurgent Right, sought to re-establish the generative locus of crime in facets of individual agency, such as flawed individual decision-making. The Thatcher administration in the UK (1979-1990) and Reagan Presidency (1981-1989) in the US signalled an end to socio-democratic consensus-based capitalism in these nations which were replaced by neo-liberalism and economic models favouring free markets and de-regulation. The period was marked by increasing crime rates and clashes between the state and workers' trade unions following economic decline in traditional industries such as mining and ship-building.

The political climate enabled the resurrection of Utilitarian Neo-Classical perspectives that asserted the causes of crime rested with rational free-thinking actors who chose to commit crime, the reality of which was evidenced in official crime statistics. The earliest Right Realist scholarship came from controversial American scholars such as James Q. Wilson, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (Wilson 1975; Herrnstein and Murray 1994). The controversy centres upon Right Realist assertions that causes of crime are genetic or biological, found within the 'underclass' owing to faulty socialization or the result of irrationality (Newburn 2013).

Right Realists have tended to assert that there are limits to whether crime can be solved by governments so it is more a matter of control and punishment of the criminal underclass. Crimes of the powerful, such as white collar fraud or corporate manslaughter were neglected by Right Realists along with structural causes for deprivation and crime.

Right and Left Realist criminology shares some common ground such as the acceptance of legal definitions of crime, an acceptance to differing degrees of the role of rational agency in perpetration of criminal acts, the fear of crime being rational and their rejection of utopianism. However, they represent fundamentally opposing perspectives in terms of their ideas about crime reduction policy. Whilst Right Realism prioritizes order and crime control via deterrence and retribution; Left Realism advocates social justice via pro-grammes of crime prevention that alter known criminogenic environments (Muncie 2015).

Ultra-realism

The perceived inadequacies of Realist criminology, particularly its *a priori* retention of exclusively legal definitions of crime, and the rise of neo-liberalism prompted the birth of Ultra-Realism (UR) as conceived by British scholars Steve Hall and Simon Winlow (Winlow and Hall 2016).

Ultra-Realism is allied to the broader Critical Criminology perspective examining matters such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, media, the state and capitalism. However, it is also critical of the discipline of Criminology which they argue needs to develop beyond empirical description, criminalization and normative discussions of

rules. They argue there is a pressing need for a theory and research agenda which addresses the vacuum created by the neutralization of traditional socialist discourses in Britain by progressivism and neo-Liberalism. The significant political shift to the right and far right in Europe and the USA is a result of divisive identity politics and the failure of both left and right-liberalism to address the needs of a multi-ethnic working class (Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell 2017; Winlow and Hall 2019).

For Winlow and Hall, criminology as a discipline is driven by a tripartite division in the ontology of the subject. The first is epitomized by a 'beast within' narrative requiring constant repression or guidance or discipline in order for civilized, sociable and cooperative existence. The second, concerns the creative, autonomous and moral agent 'despoiled by repressive forms of institutionalized collective politics and moral authority.' The third is the dialectical subject which responds to and reproduces material and ideological circumstances, with the potential to overturn them by means of a collective politics (Hall and Winlow 2015, 4).

According to UR the conservative and neoclassical liberal frameworks accept the first ontological model whilst sub-dominant left-liberalist frameworks rely on the second. The scholars assert that the third approach was adopted by Marxist and Marxist-Freudian models (Hall and Winlow 2015).

Importantly, UR also asserts value-free empirical social science is a myth alerting criminologists to become aware of the inherent political agendas influencing what should or can be researched.

Criminologists are encouraged to develop reflexive models of subjectivity incorporating novel developments in applied sciences such as neuro-criminology. There is also a need, according to UR, for criminologists to focus their research upon silent majority populations who have limited influence upon political agendas. This re-focus extends to neglected scholars pushed out by the dominance of 'seminal' yet outdated thinkers in the criminological academy (Hall and Winlow 2015). UR draws particularly from the perspectives of Lacan (2007/1966), Žižek (2001; 2006) and the psychoanalytical approach advocated by Johnston (2014) (Wood 2019).

A particular strength of the UR perspective is its support of the notion of social harm or zemiological impact of crime and deviance and its identification of the limits of exclusively legal notions of crime. This has influenced productive scholarship on issues such as environmental harm and masculinities and violence (Treadwell and Garland 2011; Ellis 2015; Smith and Raymen 2018; Hall and Winlow 2015).

Any critique of UR must acknowledge it is a rapidly developing contemporary project. Nevertheless, it has made some bold theoretical claims which have met with a range of criticisms. First, whilst scholars accept the indictment that criminology has failed to keep pace with rapidly shifting social and political environments there is less agreement about what UR suggests should replace social survey data bases. Hall and Winlow advocate ethnographic networks as a solution but this runs the risk of being equally dogmatic (Walklate 2016; Hall and Winlow 2015). Left Realists also have taken issue with Ultra-Realism's accusation that they ignored the need for wider local intervention and local democracy arguing UR fails to provide a meaningful political strategy to challenge the shortcomings of left liberalism (Lea 2016). A recent critique of UR by Mark A. Wood, at the University of Melbourne, identifies three of its main shortcomings (Wood 2019, 95):

(a) its construction of a reductive totalizing discourse where all crime can be traced back to a political economic center;

(b) its failure to offer a truly stratified account of the criminogenic conditions that produce crime; and

(c) its inability to escape the epistemic subjectivism of its key theoretical influences

Despite the criticisms, the UR paradigm has served to focus contemporary criminological scholarship to reinvigorate the debate about what constitutes crime within the broader idea of social harm. It serves to highlight the proximity between economic conditions, crime and harm within Western societies accepting of minimal regulation of capitalism.

Critical realism

As their names suggest Left and Right Realisms were overtly linked to Left-wing and Right-wing political agendas and Ultra-Realism has developed in response to neo-liberal political agendas. These Realisms have tended to articulate political and macro-theoretical proposals and agendas rather than advance methodological or social scientific propositions. Part of the contribution that can be made by critical realism to criminology as a discipline lies precisely in the origins of critical realism as a philosophy of science rather than as political philosophy whose original concern was the necessary conditions for knowledge of the natural (Bhaskar 1975) and social (Bhaskar 1979) worlds.

Original critical realism (OCR): the primacy of ontology

As a philosophy of science, the primary function of critical realism is twofold: the re-vin-dication of ontology (the philosophical study of being) from its reduction to epistemology (the philosophical study of knowing/knowledge) and the establishment of a new ontol-ogy of deep structures, causal mechanisms and real change. Also, right from its inception, the driver of critical realist philosophy was the aspiration to 'under-labour' (Locke 1689 cited in Bhaskar 2002a, 2002b) for other sciences, disciplines and human projects, e.g. those oriented towards human well-being or emancipation, by bringing conceptual clarity, especially by clearing away erroneous and redundant philosophical ideas.

Emergence

Central to the critical realist vindication of the science of being (ontology) at the original stage of critical realism (OCR) were two related ideas: (1) that reality is 'stratified' and 'emergent' and (2) that most events (outside the laboratory) occur in 'open systems.' To say that reality is 'stratified' and 'emergent' is to say that phenomena at one level of reality are scientifically to be explained in terms of structures or mechanisms located at a deeper level that generate or produce these phenomena. To say that most events occur in 'open systems' is to say that they are determined by and, therefore, require expla-nation in terms of a multiplicity of such structures and mechanisms.

For example, the development of physics has gradually revealed a multi-tiered stratifi-cation of material being: all matter is constituted by atoms and molecules, which are con-stituted by protons and neutrons, which are constituted by quarks, etc. However, reality is

not only stratified but also *emergent* (Bhaskar 1975, 119) from more basic levels of being through to more complex forms which are irreducible to the more basic levels (Bhaskar 2002a). To give a simple example of the principle of *emergence* in the natural world, water (H_2O) is dependent on the 'lower order' existence of hydrogen and oxygen atoms and yet has causal properties and a relationship to the rest of living things that are irreducible to hydrogen and oxygen (Smith 2010).

Emergence in the human and social worlds typically comprises stratified, laminated, articulated layers of being that are closely connected but also differentiated one from another (Bhaskar 2002a). Thus, for example, the physical/sub-atomic, biological, psycho-logical, social, geo-political, ecological, cosmological facets of human being are all con-nected and inter-related, but also taxonomically and causally irreducible to one another.

To put this more concretely, the mind at the psychological level is dependent on the chemistry of the body at the level of biology; it could not operate without it. But the mind as cause or category is not reducible to chemical reactions and the physical activity of neurones at the chemical level.

To couch this idea of emergence in legal terms, 'intent' as existential cause and a legal category cannot be reduced either causally or taxonomically to chemical reactions in the brain – the law would be a nonsense if this were the case – nevertheless 'intent' is depen-dent on those chemical reactions.

Articulation and 'knock-on' effects

The metaphor of 'articulation' is also useful for understanding the function of emergence in the human and social worlds. It suggests that changes at one level may have either intended or unintended 'knock-on' effects at a different level or levels of being.

For example, when applied to the context on crime, the constraints of urban geogra-phies at the level I of the Physical may have 'knock-on' effects on a young person's health at the level II of the Biological, by restricting the opportunities for exercise, which may have 'knock-on' effects on that person's Education at level IV, which may have 'knock-on' effects on his/her Employment and other life chances at level V, as well as increasing the socio-cultural likelihood of his/her involvement in criminal gangs at level VI.

Knock-on effects also reverberate through multiple levels of emergence. For example, in the prison context the loss of adult responsibility due to repeated imprisonment at Level III of Psychology may increase a person's reliance on criminal gangs at level VI.

Towards a critical realist ontology of offender

As part of this Critical Realist ontology of emergence with 'knock-on' effects, Irfan and Wilkinson (2020) have also applied the idea of emergence to develop an ontology of the offender (Muslim or otherwise) as a 'totality' who has ontological existence at a variety of stratified, emergent levels of agentic, cultural and structural being. In their account, these emergent dimensions are:

  I. Biological Dimension, including sex-gender;
 II. Psychological/identity-related Dimension, including the desire of validation in the peer-group and different types of hegemonic gender identities;

III. Educational Dimension, including the effects of upbringing, formal and semi-formal schooling, and/or the absence of these things;
IV. Socio-economic Dimension, including the determining factors of poverty and (un)-employment;
V. Socio-cultural (including moral and political) Dimension, including language and cultural habits and related social belongings;
VI. Spiritual-religious Dimension, including the influence of belief systems (religious or otherwise) or the absence of them;
VII. Geo-political Dimension, including the global geo-political environment and the engagement of national and local government with an offender's community.

These dimensions are observed in their cohort of Muslim offenders to have 'knock-on' effects both 'up' and 'down' emergent levels.

Towards a 'stratified' ontology of crime: the empirical, the actual and the real

In a Critical Realist Criminology, idea of emergence and the ontology of stratification in being can also be used to broaden exclusively legal understands of crime in a way that builds on the aspirations of the ultra-realist project and factors-in zemiological criticisms of criminology as reifying crime.

In their understanding of being and its effects in world, critical realists distinguish the levels of the Real from the Actual and the Empirical. The 'Real' refers to objects, their structures or natures and their causal powers, i.e. capacity – both realized and unrealized – to effect change in the world and liabilities, i.e. what objects suffer passively from causes. The 'Actual' refers to what happens when these powers and liabilities are activated and produce change. The 'Empirical' is the subset of the real and the actual that is experienced by actors (Joseph and Roberts 2004).

In a Critical Realist Criminology, this ontology can be applied to generate a broad and deep construal of crime.

At the level of the Empirical, therefore, crime exists legalistically as the act and experience of breaking the law in any given jurisdiction and may result in a criminal prosecution, conviction and incarceration.

At the level of the Actual, crime is the jurisprudential and moral construal of what constitutes a legal wrong and the processes by which crime thus construed is prosecuted. If crime is prosecuted wrongly or construed unfairly, then the law is experienced as injustice; if it is prosecuted correctly and fairly then the law is experienced as just (with degrees of in-between-ness).

At the level of the Real, the law in any given jurisdiction or field may or may not be aligned with more universal notions of fairness, human rights and other moral rights and wrongs, e.g. environmental wrongs, that may or may not be represented at the level of the Actual as the law.

Thus, for example, in totalitarian states such as Nazi Germany or Apartheid South Africa a complete disconnect between basic universal rights and justice at the level of the Real with the process of law at the level of the Actual and experience of it at the level of the Empirical resulted in the corruption and injustice of a whole legal system. Justice occurs by degrees as these three realms become more closely aligned and the breadth of right and wrong at the

level of the Real finds expression as law and crime (or the absence thereof) at the levels of the Actual and Empirical. Thus, this tri-partite ontology of crime derived from critical realism factors in both zemiological criticisms of criminology as reifying crime whilst holding on to the reality (and demi-reality) of crime as a negative lived experience that may often violate basic human rights and agreed standards of fairness.

Dialectical critical realism: absences and presences

As well as the idea of an emergent, stratified ontology of crime and the offender, which as Wood (2019) noted has hitherto been missing in criminological Realism, it is axiomatic to this paper that the factors that generate criminality will take place in a range of laminated 'knock-on' dimensions through the interaction of both absences and presences of both agency and structure. Thus, the next contribution of CRC will be factoring in the role of absence in the dialectics of change.

According to dialectical critical realist thinkers, absence, negativity and change are essential parts of the duality of presence and absence in being (Norrie 2009). For example, silence is the pre-condition of speech, rests are indispensable to musical sound and, as we know from natural science, empty space is a determining feature of solid objects.

In criminal law, the absence of an alibi may be an indication of guilt and the absence of action may constitute an *actus reus* (guilty act) when the law imposes a duty to act and the defendant is in breach of that duty.

Real determinate absence

Crucially, absence has also been understood by critical realist thinkers as 'real determinate absence.' (Norrie 2009). Absence is not indeterminate nothingness; it is causally efficacious, effecting real natural and social outcomes. Clearly, natural absences can effect social outcomes: for example, the absence of natural resources, such as water, can provoke war as it did in Syria in 2012. However, social and intellectual absences can also effect natural outcomes: for example, inadequate civic education and unemployment in Amazonian countries can contribute to environmental degradation and species loss (Wilkinson 2015a, 2015b). Such absences experienced as indicative that something is wrong, also contain within them the potential to be positively transformative.

For example, the absence of justice at a collective ethno-cultural level may temporarily lead to rioting and civil and criminal unrest but it can also, in sympathetic political circumstances, lead to the drafting of fairer legislation and the improvement of the life-chances of marginal or oppressed groups, as was seen with the ending of apartheid in South Africa (1990-1993) and to a lesser extent with anti-discrimination measures taken after the race riots of the early 1980s in Britain. In this latter case, the absence of justice at the normative level VII had a knock-on positive transformative effects at the level VI of socio-culture by giving rise to the ideas and social phenomena related with multi-culturalism and at the level VI by opening up more equal employment opportunities.

The removal of absence, therefore, is conducive to the development of greater epistemological consistency and ontological wholeness. Thus, the role of absence in a dialectic of social or natural transformation can be described as follows:

> Absence (e.g. omission) → incompleteness → inconsistency (contradiction, etc.,) → transcendence → to a more comprehensive and inclusive totality. (Bhaskar 2000, 55)

According to critical realist thinkers, this process of the dialectical 'absenting of absence' is part of the process of overcoming hiatuses and obstacles to greater ontological wholeness or totality of being which critical realist thinkers call 'totality'. A totality is a whole compromised of a variety of emergent, inter-related dimensions including elements that are both present and absent. Every person, including those convicted of crime, are such totalities (Smith 2010). Indeed, people convicted of crime tend to have experienced multiple absences of parenting, education, employment and purpose, which according to DCR also leaves them more prone to change. We illustrate this dialectic below with the example of the civil rights activist, Malcolm X.

The spiritual turn: meta-reality

Furthermore, Bhaskarian critical realism has recognized that the totality of human being includes the spiritual dimension which he addressed through the 'spiritual turn' of the philosophy of meta-Reality. The philosophy of meta-Reality has been critiqued as a 'wrong' departure from the Marxist roots of critical realism (Creaven 2009). In fact, as Hartwig (2015, 339) has rightly observed, 'the fundamental drive of the system [of critical realism] as a whole is spiritual in the sense of transcending dualism and oppositionality, that is, achieving union or identity in a total context.'

In a Critical Realist Criminology the spiritual dimension delineated by the philosophy of meta-Reality is vital because it posits the idea that the potential for the self-realization of the Ground-state, of loving relationships and the discovery of *dharma* – a deep purpose connected to the realization of the Ground-state – is inherent in all human beings, including those convicted of crimes who have been construed as 'different.'

Second, the meta-Real turn acknowledges that, even when religious or spiritual ideas are false, misguided or even dangerous, as they often are, they exist as demi-realities (Bhaskar 2002a) that generate experienced outcomes in the world for better and for worse. This is especially the case in an environment such as prisons, which, as the name penitentiary suggests, were specifically conceived in the nineteenth century as spaces that promoted spiritual reflection and moral reform and which remain sites of intense religious reflection and change (Wilkinson et al. 2021).

In this spiritual dimension, a Critical Realist Criminology would take the notion of a restorative prison as an axiomatic ideal in which the offender should be presented with opportunities 'to develop socially as a person with deeper moral insight of who they are and what they do […] in which offenders […] develop human capacities for emotional attention to others (Norrie 2019, 3).'

In a genuinely restorative justice, offenders would be enabled to access such transformative experiences of transcendence as in the case with the gangster turned novelist and sculptor, Jimmy Boyle, who, at the Special Unit at Barlinnie Prison in Glasgow, Scotland 'moved from being governed by feelings of hate in a persecutory prison environment to feelings of love, changing him into a mature, socially aware, and critical person, because of experiencing life in a restorative prison setting (Norrie 2019, 4 referring to Boyle 2016).'

The dialectic of penology and rehabilitation

As well as the emergent, stratified ontology of the offender at Bhaskarian 1M (First Moment of the dialectic of being) we may observe how aptly the dialectical process of transformation and change suggested by dialectical critical realism can be applied to describe and inspire a new Dialectic of Penology and Rehabilitation.

At the Level 1 M – first moment – of differentiation, a Critical Realist Criminology would understand that the criminal and by extension the Criminal Justice System is characterized by 'difference.'

Criminals are characterized by radical, constructed difference from other humans-in-society. The act of committing what society construes legally and morally as a crime at the level of the Actual (see above) marks offenders out and, upon imprisonment, physically separates criminals off.

Criminals thus construed are different from other citizens. Moreover, in the process of becoming differentiated, they also cause the differentiation of other types of people, such as the victim, and a whole series of differentiated 'knock-on' professionals in the hierarchies of the criminal justice system – police-officers, judges, lawyers – all of whom are differentiated from other people by dint of the criminal's act of committing or trying to commit a crime.

At the Level 2 – Absence – of the critical realist dialectic, the socio-legal differentiation of the prisoner creates circumstances of 'absence.' For the incarcerated prisoner this absence is characterized by:

- The loss of freedom
- The loss of goods and services
- The loss of regular contact with family and friends
- The loss of status
- The loss of sexual expression

The punishment or pains of imprisonment are conceived and experienced as a powerful cluster of ontological absences which are designed to be generative of transformative change (Sykes 1958; Goffman 1961). For Sykes (1958) the relationships and identities formed inside prison were a response to the unique losses and deprivations of the prison environment, this is usually referred to as the 'deprivation' model for understanding transformations associated with imprisonment. Goffman's work on asylums echoed this idea, he also focused on the processes of mortification of the self that take place in prisons as being the key pivot for the changes and adaptations that prisoners experience.

Crewe (2011) also suggests that the changes experienced by individuals in prison are influenced by the norms, *deprivations* and absences of the prison environment as well as the values, cultures and lifestyle of the prisoner before he entered prison. Moreover, the pains of modern day imprisonment are different to the prisons that the classical prison ethnographies were describing (Crewe 2011). Current day prison regimes are not as physically brutal as the prisons studied in classic prison ethnographies, but they exercise control through a different set of absences and mechanisms such as the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme and constant risk assessments as well as reform programmes with which offenders have to engage. These new mechanisms have created a new layer of ontological insecurity amongst prisoners and a deeper experience of the loss of freedom.

From a critical realist perspective, the losses of imprisonment create the conditions of transformative change which can be resisted, ignored and subverted by prisoners (Symkovych 2020) and/or abused, misunderstood or neglected by those in authority (Arrigo and Bullock 2008). Hiatus, split, demi-reality[1] and the ego, structured into punitive prison cultures, prevent the conditions of positive change from taking effect, especially, for example, when they are construed by those in authority over offenders to be the ends in themselves. When the purpose of these absences is lost or ignored, transformative change is thwarted and or morphs into its opposite – oppression.

Third level – totality

Nevertheless, according to CRC, these conditions of absence *can be,* although they often are not*,* powerfully generative of a greater totality (Wilkinson et al. 2021). By making offenders aware of what they are missing, the impulse to a responsible freedom and realized wholeness can be awakened, as in the case of Jimmy Boyle (Boyle 2016) and the possibility of restorative interventions made, so that even little gains on the path to reform can be important. For example, the recent research programme into Islamic conversion in prison found that in conditions of caring and informed prison chaplaincy, when set within a general prison culture of politeness and respect, terrorist offenders were liable to mobilize creative and restorative facets of their faith. They increasingly drew upon transcendent values of caring and sharing with others in order to reconnect with work and education (Wilkinson et al. 2021).

Fourth dimension – transformative Praxis

Once the aspiration to greater totality is made individually, the transformation of society on the Wings and outside it on release is made possible. The case of the black civil rights activist Malcolm X provides the opportunity to exemplify this Dialectic of Transformative Change in the penal context:

The case of Malcolm X

The story that Malcolm (1964/1998) tells in his autobiography, starts with his transition from Malcolm Little, the intelligent boy growing up in Mason, Michigan; to 'Detroit Red,' a drug-dealing hustler, and thief; to Malcolm X, the self-educated Black Muslim minister of the Nation of Islam and a loyal follower of Elijah Muhammad; to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, the self-actualized follower of Islam, who moved away from the 'white man–devil' doctrine to focus on changing the world-wide system of privilege and oppression of all marginalized groups. Malcolm X's political and spiritual transformations are intertwined and closely linked to the social, cultural, criminal, political and institutional absences and presences in his life. Applying our critical realist framework to the biography of Malcolm X, we outline the ways in which attitudes and events in laminated social, cultural, political and institutional dimensions at different dialectical moments played an important role in his trajectory into and then out of crime and onwards for his political and spiritual development.

1M – difference

Level I and Level II – absence of a stable family structure due to experiences of racist targeting and violence

At the level 1M – First Moment- at the Biological Dimension (I) and Psychological-Identity Related Dimension (II), the significant features of Malcom Little's (X) early childhood were the absence of key relationships and extreme socio-economic hardship due to racist targeting by a White supremacist group. These early childhood experiences of racist violence and discrimination are considered central to his later spiritual and political transformation (Goldman 1974; LaMothe 2011).

Malcolm's father was a Baptist minister and a supporter of Marcus Garvey, who supported the idea of black social and economic independence, a pan-African identity and African- American's return to Africa. Due to this Malcolm's family was targeted by the Black Legion a white supremacist organization in the USA. A fire in his childhood home and his father's death in a tramcar accident are both attributed to the Black Legion. However, both the fire at his house and his father's death were declared as accidents by law enforcement and no one was prosecuted. Malcolm was six at the time of his father's death, his family fell into severe poverty after this. A few years later, when Malcolm was thirteen, his mother had a mental breakdown and was interred in an asylum, Malcolm and his siblings were separated and went to different foster families meaning that the loss of a father generated the fragmentation and loss of his whole family as a unified structure.

The early experience of severe economic hardship and the loss of both parents due to racist violence was further exacerbated by Malcolm's experience in school. Despite the traumatic events of his early childhood, Malcolm was a very gifted student. Another key incident in his life occurred in school; where a teacher discouraged Malcolm from pursuing a career as a lawyer suggesting that he choose a profession which was suitable for blacks such a carpentry.

This experience of racial discrimination entwined with low teacher expectations, which is typical of the BAME experience of state education (Irfan and Wilkinson 2020) led to Malcolm disengaging from school, he did not complete his schooling and his adolescence was spent in Harlem and Boston hustling, gambling and taking drugs such as cocaine and marijuana. During this phase of his life he was known as Detroit Red.

Malcolm was arrested for larceny and he received an eight-year sentence for burglary. This sentence was particularly severe, as prison terms for burglary at the time were for two years. However, Malcolm was working in collusion with a white female friend and the judge took exception to this and gave him a particularly harsh sentence.

The knock-on effect of these early experiences of being let down by procedural justice, in which his family felt unprotected in the face of White Supremacist violence, his experiences of discrimination in school and later during his arrest and conviction, was a complete loss of Malcolm's trust in the political system in the USA (LaMothe 2011). Malcolm's early experiences at level 1M were also 'determinate' in leading him to enter into the differentiated state of non-identity with the rest of society as a convicted criminal and to being separated off through imprisonment.

Imprisonment – the dialectic of rehabilitation

Stage 2E – Absence and the removal of absence

As outlined earlier, from a CR perspective the particular absences associated with imprisonment *can,* although they all too often do not, provide an environment which can lead to reflection and transformation. In prison, Malcolm experienced absence as both destructive and creative. For the first part of his sentence, Malcolm revolted against the prison system and was known as 'Satan' due to his complete disregard for rules. However, it was during this sentence and in particular contingent upon the removal and loss of his drugs habit that Malcolm reformed and moved away from crime. This change was influenced by his decision to join the Nation of Islam.

In prison, Malcolm was introduced to the Nation of Islam, by his brother Reginald. In a letter Reginald wrote to Malcolm he advised him to give up alcohol and pork and told him he had found a way of liberating him from prison. He also shared one of the core beliefs of the Nation of Islam which was that 'White people are the devil.' The combined focus of a powerfully articulated message of black pride, coupled with strict requirements for discipline and moral behaviour, resonated with Malcolm and he joined the movement, converted to the Nation of Islam and became a follower of Elijah Mohammad.

After joining the Nation of Islam, Malcolm became known for his asceticism, the Nation of Islam imposed a strict code of conduct on its adherents, this included no drinking, smoking or drugs, no sexual licence or dating, no movies, dancing or ballgames, rising early morning and not eating more than one meal a day (Goldman 1974; Andrews 2017). Malcolm adhered to this in prison and maintained a very strict code of moral conduct until the end of his life (Goldman 1974).

Along with this, absence of the distractions of his previous criminal lifestyle in prison provided Malcolm with the time and opportunity to read. He spent his time in prison learning and reading as much as he could about the Nation of Islam, black history, philosophy, literature and language. Malcolm also discovered his quick wit at improvization and verbal sparring in a prison debating society. This quick wit and knack for improvization became his trademark and after his release from prison, he became a leader within the Nation of Islam and was a spokesperson for the movement, appearing frequently on television, in newspaper interviews, radio programmes and in live audiences.

The absences associated with imprisonment and the opportunity to educate himself on black empowerment as well as the strict asceticism advocated by the Nation, provided Malcolm with a structure to flourish outside prison and the safety and security of belonging to a 'nation.' The changes that he experienced in prison in conditions of absence and loss drew him epistemologically towards self-understanding and ontologically by degrees towards a greater totality of being.

Third level (3L) – totality, partial totality and sub-totality

For his time in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X is remembered both as a 'bogeyman' (Goldman 1974) representing the unremitting and unexpressed rage of African Americans, as well as a 'fiery demagogue with no practical programme' (Andrews 2017, 18).

From a CR perspective, Malcolm's transformation from Detroit Red to a follower of the Nation of Islam represents a shift towards a 'sub-totality'(Bhaskar 2008) as the teachings of

the Nation of Islam are controversial due to their core belief that the white race represents the 'devil' and that God is black.

The Nation stood in opposition to the Civil Rights movement in the USA at the time; the integrationist emphasis of the Civil Rights movement and their focus on the political inclusion of African-Americans in the political structures of the USA, contrasted with the Nations belief in the supremacy of the black race and their rejection of engaging with politics (Goldman 1974).

From a dialectical critical realist perspective, the separation or exclusion of a group from the total collective suggests that it is a 'sub-totality.' In this way, the totality of the Nation of Islam as a context of human flourishing turned out to be a 'sub- totality' characterized by the demi-real exclusion of all non-blacks from the Muslim community and the sub-humanizing of whites as a group. These teachings deviate from traditional Islam and are in contradiction to traditional orthodox Muslim ideals.

Fourth dimension (4D) – personal and social transformation leading to greater totality

Malcolm experienced a further transformation after prison and left behind the separatist teachings of the Nation of Islam and moved towards a more serious practice of religion. Although Malcolm was a committed member of the Nation of Islam for a significant period, he became disillusioned with the leader Elijah Mohammad after he discovered that Elijah Muhammad had acted in direct contravention to his own teachings on sexual asceticism by fathering a number of children with under-aged girls outside marriage. This loss of trust and recognition that the Nation of Islam was a sub-totality meant that he sought spiritual direction elsewhere.

A key influence was a meeting with a Muslim religious scholar, Dr Mahmoud Youssef Shawarbi and a trip to Makkah for Hajj. The diverse racial mix of Muslims performing Hajj and more detailed engagement with teachings of universal brotherhood within mainstream Islam proved a turning point in Malcolm's life. After this meeting and his experiences of Hajj, Malcolm converted to *Sunni* Islam, and changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (meaning Malcolm – Malik – who is from the tribe of Shabazz and has made the Hajj). He revised his views of the Manichaean divide between the white and black races along with this he started to consider developing a serious plan for political action.

After his conversion to *Sunni* Islam Malcolm became more serious in pursuing transformative political action to end the political and social marginalization of African Americans. He started to engage with the integrationist Civil Rights movement in the USA. He also laid the foundations of a political organization, called the Organization of Afro-American Unity which would advocate for the rights of African Americans. Although Malcolm retained his focus on ending the social and political marginalization of African American's in the USA, he suggested that the role of the organization would be to support black solidarity so that it would lead to honest white–black brotherhood (Andrews 2017).

Malcolm was murdered by members of the Nation of Islam on 21 February 1965. Both Malcolm's concern with developing a global movement to counter inequality and his moral asceticism are enduring parts of his spiritual legacy. In critical realist terms, the separatist sub-totality of the Nation of Islam could not sustain the emergence of Malcom into the greater totality of Islam. In a meta-Real sense, Malcolm's death was an

act of transcendent self-sacrifice which he knew was likely, but, in the name of peace and emancipation, was willing to embrace.

Contra the critique of ultra-realism

Malcolm X's life illustrated that the fact that the pulse of freedom as delineated by dialectical critical realism can, under the correct circumstances of determined agency and compassionate penal structure, lead to the closer alignment of an offender with the ground-state – the underlying universal that Bhaskar posited as the necessary pre-existent of all differentiated forms of being. This potential of experienced agency coming into alignment with the ground-state (Bhaskar 2000) is also illustrated by Jimmy Boyle's journey from gangster to novelist (Boyle 2016) and sculptor Chris Wilson's journey from a convicted murderer to a successful author, community activist and entrepreneur (Wilson and Witter 2019).

The dialectical critical realist account belies Hall and Winslow's critique that critical realism's mistake is to single out subjectivity as the naturally ethical and creative agent (Winlow and Hall 2016). Bhaskar and other critical realists do not make this naïve mistake.

A Critical Realist Criminology identifies subjectivity as *the potentially ethical and creative agent.* The existence of the Ground-state means that every being contains the *potential* to self-realization and that it is a dialectical tendency in being to move towards it, but multiple blocks and negative absences in a variety of dimensions may prevent the dialectic from being fully or even slightly realized. In the examples, of self-realization given above, the stories of Malcolm X, Jimmy Boyle and Chris Wilson are notable exceptions to the rule of recidivism in the UK and the USA. This shows the dire need for an emancipatory and hopeful penology set against the backdrop of current ultra-punitive imprisonment, especially in Britain and the USA (Howard 2017), in which the rehabilitative aspirations of enlightened prison professionals are too often undermined by policy-makers and their political masters pandering to voting publics (McLennan-Murray 2020), who are themselves forgetful of the fact that today's offenders are tomorrow's neighbours and returning citizens.

Maximal inclusion of diverse theoretical positions

A third core principle of a Critical Realist Criminology, consistent with the idea of the primacy of a stratified, 'emergent' ontology in a variety of laminated dimensions, is that the theoretical embrace of CRC will be as inclusive as possible. Such inclusivity recognizes the fact that diverse epistemological lenses are needed to bring different ontological dimensions of crime into focus. Therefore, CRC might in different circumstances draw upon:

(1) Critical Race Theory, in particular, notions of intersectionality (Scott 2010) and the recognition of the multiple, nuanced facets of individual identity that are often experienced as discriminatory;
(2) feminist understandings of gender performance and identity-construction and in seeking to address the marginal representation of women in criminological research (Schneuwly Puride et al. 2021);

(3) 'light' social constructionism (Matthews 2009) in the recognition of that the constructed ontology of the human institutions means that they are prone to transformative change;

(4) Marxist perspectives in the recognition that many institutional forms and practices in criminal justice are the product of lop-sided, class-based power relations in which those who control the means of production are also usually in control of the means to justice. These Marxist perspectives within a CRC study might dovetail with …

(5) green criminological perspectives in that the noxious effects of the activities and wealth-creation of the rich and powerful on the environment knock onto the lives and livelihoods of the poor and relatively powerless, especially in the Global South. Moreover, wrongs against the environment at the level of the Real are seldom addressed by the Law and often not construed as crime at the levels of the Actual and the Empirical. A critical realist criminology would encourage an in-depth engagement with a less anthropocentric consideration of the rights of nature *qua* nature rather than *qua* human resource.

The reason why all these theoretical positions might at different moments be embraced by CRC is that they are all 'serious' in their recognition that objects of study cannot not be extruded from the non-academic world and that thinking and knowing should be at the service of being and not the other way around.

A porous, open approach to methodology

This inclusive attitude to theory implies a porous, open approach to methodology by which methods are determined by the nature of the object of criminological study not the epistemological prejudices of researchers.

The other side of a criminological *research* theory that is committed to intervention and emancipation is that the quality of research knowledge must be sufficiently robust to sustain an empirical intervention. Matthews righty and hilariously highlights the difference between evidence-driven policy and policy-driven evidence. As a defence against policy-driven evidence, the primacy of ontology is the most important Critical Realist principle.

This means that for a Critical Realist Criminology the nature of the object of study and the research question(s) determines methods and not the other way round. For example, when considering Hate Crime, if the research question seeks to compare the number of criminal incidents in relation to the protected characteristics of a certain national group compared with another, then a quantitative method is the obvious methodological choice. However, the experiences of Hate Crimes and their knock-on effects in the lives of victims are best captured through qualitative means such as interviews and ethnography (Quraishi and Philburn 2015). If an object of study, such as religion in prison exists and has causes and consequences at micro-experiential, meso-structural and macro-national/cultural levels then a mixed-methods study is most authentically mandated, which can give an account of patterns, causes and experiences of different behaviours.

A 'serious' critical relationship of criminologists with professionals, institutions of criminal justice and policy-makers

Finally, and vitally, CRC would advocate a philosophically 'serious' critical relationship of criminologists with professionals, institutions of criminal justice and policy-makers through which small evidence-led interventions and improvements for all parties in criminal justice are desirable and matter.

A long-established rift within the discipline of Criminology centres upon differences between the function or ethical orientation of its scholarship. The challenge was framed by Howard Becker's important paper in 1967 which asked 'Whose side are we on?' prompting a discourse about values and the scholars' sympathies in criminological research (Becker 1967; Liebling 2001; Cowburn et al. 2013). In essence the discourse prompts crime researchers to be cognizant of the political contexts and ramifications of their research and goes to the very heart of the purpose of the discipline of criminology.

A Critical Realist Criminology would resist the function of the discipline of criminology simply to service criminal justice institutions or to make oppressive institutions run more efficiently. On the other hand, to disengage with those agents and institutions could serve to disconnect criminological scholarship from the very social and physical environments where the articulation of rights and their violation occurs. This disciplinary disconnection would be the essence of what critical realists call 'unserious' scholarship; scholarship which is existentially disconnected from its own stated field of inquiry.

As a basis for this 'serious' and collaborative relationship, a Critical Realist Criminology would treat the modern prison as a preferable to execution, physical torture, corporal punishment or transportation – its historical precedents – whilst not ignoring the fact that psychological harm can be as, if not more, difficult to heal than physical harm and the harsh reality that prison remains an often de-humanizing, and sometimes brutal and violent place which is often a revolving door to crime. In the current penal climate, Critical Realist Criminology must therefore also be committed to exploring:

(1) compassionate and effective alternatives to imprisonment that balance the rights of victims, society and offenders;
(2) how the emancipatory potential of prisons themselves can be realized in compassionate and effective ways. This must necessarily include rigorous inquiry into the purposes of imprisonment.

This is the basis of a philosophically 'serious' penology which accepts that research and research-based intervention in prison is necessary because prisons exist as the established mechanism of criminal justice of last resort, housing real human beings, all containing the capacity – however blocked – for self-realization and other-regarding love (Norrie 2019).

Summary

Building on the shoulders of Bhaskar and Matthews, this paper has introduced some core principles of a Critical Realist Criminology based upon:

(1) the emergent and stratified ontology of crime and the offender;

(2) the full CR account of the dialectic of being, including the possibility of transformative change and of self-realization for criminals and victims;

(3) maximal inclusion of different theoretical research positions coupled with a porous, open approach to methodology by which methods are determined by the nature of the object of criminological study not the epistemological prejudices of researchers;

(4) a 'serious' critical relationship with institutions of criminal justice and policy-makers that does not extrude criminological researchers from their own field of study and by which small evidence-led gains and improvements are desirable and matter.

A Critical Realist Criminology thus articulated would wish to steer criminology away from the voyeurism of non-intervention, unserious, abstracted (non-)relationships with legal professionals and the paralysing liberal pessimism of 'nothing works'(Howard 2017) and underlabour a criminology of hope, rehabilitation and, as necessary, structural reform.

Note

1. Demi-reality is a phenomenon which is false at the level of the Real reality but which is experienced as real at the level of the Empirical in the world, e.g. Nazism or the caste-system which are false but generate(d) powerful effects in peoples' lives.

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