

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Book Review

Steve Hall and Simon Winlow (2015) *Revitalising Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism*. London: Routledge.

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This compact book is part of the Routledge Series, 'New Directions in Critical Criminology', edited by Walter DeKeseredy. Both Steve Hall and Simon Winlow are co-directors of the Teesside Centre for Realist Criminology, a centre which has become noted in the UK and elsewhere for its successful conferences and critical engagement with the domain assumptions of the discipline. Emanating from the vibrant work of this centre, this book offers a whirlwind tour of the current state of post-war criminology and endeavours to suggest that the time is now right for what the authors call an 'ultra-realist' criminology. In making this call it is fair to say that they make no claims that this version of criminology will address all the discipline's contemporary ills but they are concerned to 'present a stripped-down synopsis' of 'the foundations of a new theoretical framework' (p. 2). The terrain covered in the 154 pages of this book is vast and it would be easy to become distracted by the conflation and elisions made within it as the authors move assertively towards their goal. It is not my desire in this review to engage in that level of critique. Anyone intending to use this book as a reference point can explore such specifics for themselves. My intention here is to consider more generally the discontent with the current state of criminology expressed by these authors and to offer some thoughts on the extent to which their expressed agenda has the capacity, albeit tentative, to move the discipline forward.

On their opening page the authors state quite clearly that their audience is 'Western criminology'. So my first question is: whose criminology is this? Is this the criminology of the Northern hemisphere associated with Northern theorising so eloquently unpacked by Connell (2007), or so deeply engrained with the conceptual agendas outlined by Keim (2010)? Or indeed, is it, the kind of criminology informed by the social science so fundamentally critiqued by de Sousa Santos (2014)? I think it is both, though none of these commentators are referenced in this book with the exception of Connell's work on masculinities. Yet there are strong similarities between these critiques on the dominance of American liberalism and, latterly, the wider embrace of neo-liberalism, which informs them and the backcloth against which the critique presented in this book is written. These similarities are of prescient concern for the discipline and without doubt it is this kind of criminology which is in need of a fundamental overhaul (as Young 2011, also argued). This is particularly the case as the influence of such

Western (read Northern) theorising creeps into the reach of the discipline across the globe illustrated in its presence in Asia and China for example. As intimated above, the influence of this kind of criminology concerns many different voices within the discipline not just those emanating from Teesside. The question remains as to the extent to which the agenda made possible by ultra-realism offers a response to these concerns.

Ultra-realism as posited in this book is a project in the making. Most of the book is taken up by predominantly negative appraisal of what has gone before: criminology's failure to grasp the fluidity of current times, the anxiety it breeds, the complexities of the harms generated, and the innovative imaginings of crime and harm at every level. Harm is introduced here deliberately since part of this project is concerned with re-embracing zemiology. The particular target centred is left realism and critical criminology, though other versions of criminology do not escape attention. For example, their concern to critique the 'crime decline' debate is, in my view, well-founded, particularly their observations in respect of the social survey business. Nonetheless whether that, in and of itself, logically entails revisiting the harm agenda is a moot point. In particular, Hall and Winlow suggest replacing the social survey database with 'international ultra-realist ethnographic networks' (p. 131) and a 'collective theory project based on the principles provided by transcendental materialism' (p. 132). This is where I reach a problem. I am hugely sympathetic to the first part of this agenda but am puzzled by how this tallies with the second. If criminology is to lose its Western liberal chains, does transcendental materialism provide a way to do this? Recently de Sousa Santos (2014) has called for 'a sociology of absences'. This sociology 'is a transgressive sociology because it violates the positivistic principle that consists of reducing reality to what exists and to what can be analysed with the methodological and analytical instruments of the conventional social sciences' (de Sousa Santos 2014: 172). If this is applied to criminology, it demands two imaginations: the epistemological and the democratic. These principles ask that we think about knowledge, and the knowledge production process, as diverse, complex and relational, something that feminist-informed work has been doing for quite some time, including within areas of substantive criminological concern. It is also a matter of 'admitting that there is not one single linear road leading to knowledge about the social world and that detours, shortcuts, excursions and roundtrips are an integral and imaginative part of the development of scientific knowledge' (Jacobsen et al. 2014: 11). If this is the kind of epistemological and democratic imagination implied by transcendental materialism then it certainly does open an interesting and challenging conversation. My worry is that here we are being offered an exchange of one way of doing business for another. Moreover, the kind of thinking that underpins this choice has the potential to be as equally dogmatic and lacking in the fluidity, geographical and ethnically informed nuances necessary for the discipline to lose its shackles of liberalism.

Having made these observations, I could of course be wrong. This is not an easy book to read despite the authors' desire to produce something otherwise. It covers a wide range of material and demands a good deal of reflection to make sense of that material. Nevertheless, it has the potential to set up an important debate for the discipline. My worry is that readers of different persuasions will become irritated by the historiographical claims about the discipline made within it. Yes, indeed, the devil can be in the detail and there is no doubt that some of the detail is glossed over or misrepresented in this book. However, for the discipline, the devil might be in becoming distracted by the detail as presented here, thereby failing to look to the bigger questions that Hall and Winlow are asking us to consider. It is important that we do.

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