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Left realism

James Windle

Left Realism is an applied integrative theory. It is founded upon a social democratic position and draws from a range of sociological theories. It emerged during the late-1980s in response to the growing scholarly and policy influence of more conservative criminology.

Elliot Currie suggests that there are two variants of left realism. Original Left Realism (with capitals) was pioneered by Jock Young and colleagues. The second, which Currie calls 'plain left realism' (without capitals), shed some elements that were of its time and place (that is, in the United Kingdom in the late-1980s) and is a 'big tent' under which many criminologists meet, including those who may not identify with original Left Realism. Nonetheless, several common principles draw all left realists together: they take lived experiences seriously, acknowledge that crime affects some communities more than others and identify crime as an endemic product of inequality.

Traditionally associated with street crime in urban areas, Left Realism has been used by a small number of scholars to explore a range of rural issues. The theory has influenced, for example, James Windle's research on opium cultivation in Asia and farm theft in Ireland, and Walter DeKeseredy, Joseph Donnermeyer and Martin Schwartz's collaborative and individual work on sexual violence against women in rural areas, agricultural crime and rural drug markets. The latter's body of work advanced Left Realism by employing feminist and masculinity theories, areas original Left Realism failed to sufficiently engage.

The original Left Realists critiqued the critical criminology literature for dismissing that crime disproportionally affects the economically disadvantaged and socially excluded; ignoring issues which most concerned working-class people; romanticising crimes committed by the working-class; ignoring that most crime was inter-class; and dismissing people's experiences of crime by suggesting that fear was more prominent than actual victimisation. They also took critical criminologist's to task for refusing to work with the state.

Young summarised Left Realism as composed of five key principles. First, and most importantly, researchers, policymakers and practitioners must be 'faithful to the nature of crime'. That is, they must acknowledge the precise form that rural crime takes and where it takes place, grounded within political and economic context. This must involve all four dimensions of the 'Square of Crime'. As original Left Realism's core concept, the Square points to the need for all research, policy and practice to account for interactions between the state, offender, victim and community.

Second, much criminological theory focuses on one cause or two dimensions of the Square of Crime; however, most crimes have multiple causal factors operating at different levels and involving all dimension of the Square. Consequentially, integration of existing theories can be fruitful, although the original Left Realists favoured anomie-based subcultural theories. They would, for example, reject the proposition that absolute poverty explains cannabis farming, suggesting instead that cultivation represents a subcultural response to the strain of relative deprivation.

Third, communities experience crime and preventive measures differently. Consequently, blindly adopting theories developed in one context to explain phenomena in another will likely be unsuccessful. As Left Realism was originally developed in response to street crime in urban areas, applying it to rural crimes may appear contradictory. As an integrative theory it does, however, show much flexibility in its approach and calls for narrower geographical enquiries. For example, instead of administering generic national surveys of farmers' experience of fraud, Left Realists would focus on a smaller number of farming communities, while paying attention to the urban bias of existing theories used to explain the results.

Fourth, gauging lived realities requires that those most impacted by crime be consulted about policy and practice. Original Left Realism proposed that local victimisation surveys measure community opinions and the realities of crime (although contemporary left realists use a variety of data sources). Once the local reality of crime is understood, the state can allocate resources to where they are most needed and communities can use the data to lobby for themselves. Essentially, rural communities know what has happened and what they want done about it, so ask them. Left Realism is the criminological theory which best embodies the popular slogan 'Nothing About Us without Us'.

Fifth, original Left Realist's emphasised what Currie called social crime prevention over policing. This involves, for example, investing in social goods (health, housing, employment and so on) which can promote social control and have longer-term impacts than criminal justice approaches. Police and other agents of formal control are seen as necessary but should be used minimally and democratically (that is, police and community priorities should align). The nuance of Left Realism is apparent here. For example, disrupting trafficking networks may prevent heroin use or opium farming in the short-term but longer-term policies require altering the structural factors underlying reasons for using heroin use or cultivating opium (indeed, research shows that repressive interventions against drug crop farming can increase outputs and destabilise areas).

Herein lies an unresolved contradiction of Left Realism. It demands that communities are heard while its explicit social democratic position opposes strict law enforcement-based approaches. As many rural peoples support conservative policies over longer-term structural approaches, the principle of democratic policing may be untenable. Furthermore, communities often exhibit diverse views and the most vulnerable are often the least vocal, so gauging a community's position is itself difficult.

The greatest strength of both variants of left realisms are the rejection of simple explanations coupled with the realist amalgamation of theories and practices which acknowledges both short- and long-term solutions. The original Left Realists acknowledged that urban communities do not need abstract empiricism or theorising, they need to be heard and supported. The same is true for rural communities.

Suggested readings

Currie, E. (2010) 'Plain left realism: An appreciation, and some thoughts for the future', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 54(2): 111–124.

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