

Rethinking the Left's Approach to Crime



In 1994, Pamela Donovan and I wrote an article for the journal *Social Justice* called “A Mass Psychology of Punishment: Crime and the Futility of Rationally Based Approaches.” We argued that the crime issue had become in that decade—as mass incarceration grew exponentially, and while rates of violence were steadily and contradictorily declining—a key psychosocial mechanism that facilitated redirecting and displacing anger at broad inequalities felt by lower- and middle-class people, among others, onto “criminals” (who were more than likely in the cultural imagination to be minorities, men, and poor). Moreover, she and I insisted, rationalistic arguments aimed at stopping the Leviathan prison-building escalation merely through logical appeals to quantitative data and policy papers were having little effect: There was something unwittingly, unconsciously pleasurable about an issue that allowed, and had become a vehicle for, strong emotions’ expression *en masse*.

Our conclusion? For the U.S. left—social democrats and democratic socialists alike—crime could neither be ignored nor treated as a political afterthought. Quite the contrary: Its emotional valence from the 1980s through the present may have been a *sine qua non* for conservative hegemony taking persistent hold, including through the allegedly progressive but ironically “tough on crime” Clinton years, when the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act became the largest crime bill in American history, authorizing the hiring of 100,000 police officers and setting aside \$9.7 billion for prison building in its name. Crime and the left should have become symbiotically integrated both in theory and activism—but did that happen?

Looking back on my years as a sociology graduate student at the Graduate Center of CUNY evokes the 1990s again. I was a co-organizer of the Socialist Scholars Conference—now the Left Forum—a yearly event at which American lefties were and are able to pretend, for a few days at least, that socialism in the United States was and is an acceptable rather than a still chronically stigmatized term of our cultural vocabulary. I was already interested in criminology, deviance, and law as academic subjects and, of course, as complicated real-world issues, and would note to friends and colleagues that out of well over 100 panels occurring annually at the SSC, most years few if any centered on the subject of crime.

Fast forward to 2014, to the most recent Left Forum. The situation had changed: The program featured at least ten panels on crime, aside from my own panel on which this “Crime and the Left” *New Politics* symposium is based. Strikingly, though, the presentations on the other panels did not focus on the issue of *crime* itself but rather, and to a one, on *criminal justice* issues. Speakers did not focus so much on the etiology and intricate causality of crime but rather on reactions to crime that have been part of the punitive turn in the United States, that sharp 1980s-to-the-present 180-degree veering away from rehabilitative notions still ostensibly circulating in the 1960s and 1970s toward the present dominance of more repressive policies and ideas.

Trying to stave off or reverse the conservative tide on crime has long been a concern of progressive criminologists. For instance, Elliott Currie’s *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge* was brave, if Pyrrhic, in endeavoring to reach larger audiences through “public sociological” writing, offering rationalistic argumentation at its best. Now in 2014, though, progressives mostly focus on the rampant ills of the American system of punishment. The United States famously remains an advanced industrial outlier regarding capital punishment with (to other nations) incredible rates of

incarceration. Notorious too is that, in addition to 2.2 million people in jails and prisons, another 5 million are under criminal justice supervision in the form of probation or parole. A dire problem indeed, one easily and deservedly targeted for redress by activists and lefties of different stripes and tenets—but still, why so little discussion of *crime itself*?

Why the Marginalizing of Crime by a Marginalized Left?

One would be hard pressed to develop a course on crime and the left, U.S. or otherwise, that relied largely for its syllabus on the writings of Marx. Marx's work is peppered with occasional references to crime, but predominantly as an ugly by-product of the immiseration that capitalism systemically wrought in a *lumpenproletariat* with no real option for survival but illegal, often violent acts. Contemporary scholars from David Greenberg (see, for example, *Crime and Capitalism*) to Richard Quinlan, William Chambliss, and Jeffrey Reiman, among others, have developed what is often referred to and taught as "Marxist criminology." It is an orientation, though, more likely to be derivative than independently expanding upon basic tenets of Marx's own theoretical lexicon. Nor had crime *sui generis* been accorded much independent attention by socialism/communism's founders, which means that the issue of crime was too simply reduced to one of class.

But a pair of other explanations for the marginalization of the crime issue on the left is at least as, if not more, germane. A fiercely divisive debate that took place among radical British criminologists in the 1970s and 1980s—between so-called "left idealists" and "left realists"—had a parallel in left thinking about crime in the United States, though the connection was unwitting and not necessarily labeled as such. In the UK, scholars like Jock Young and John Lea held in *What Is to Be Done About Law and Order?* (1984) that the "real" concerns of working class people who feared and were often victimized by crime needed to be taken seriously by

socialists, even as left idealists countered by focusing on race and class discriminations affecting how crime was defined and toward whom criminal justice measures were aimed. For the latter focus, the view echoing across the ocean among proponents of a U.S.-style "idealist" left was that crime had been created by, and was the fault of, capitalism; it was a "meta" phenomenon socially constructed so as to deflect attention from corporate and other crimes of the rich and powerful, and inseparable from a system that is racist and classist to its core.

Looking back, this "realist" versus "idealist" divide became counter-productively polarized, since valid points were made on both sides. Of course, crime in working class, poor, and racialized communities (and also among the more well-to-do) truly affects people's lives and can arouse not unreasonable fears; then, too, crime disproportionately victimizes the poor and minorities. And of course it is also the case that corporate and other crimes of the wealthy and powerful are treated in the United States far more leniently with few exceptions, and the "system" overall is dreadfully discriminatory along class and racial lines (as Jeffrey Reiman has effectively pointed out in the many editions of his popular-with-criminology-students *When the Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*).

But here's the rub: In the United States, the seeming dominance of idealist-reminiscent positions (as in my conference examples above) meant that, in the 1970s and 1980s, for a leftist to touch the crime issue—let alone prioritize it—was to risk being accused of racism and classism. This was precisely the uncomfortable situation Jock Young found himself in when former colleagues turned angrily on British left realists for their apparently conservative new thinking about crime. Better, perhaps, to stay away from the issue altogether.

A third reason for the marginalized left itself to marginalize

the issue of crime has been that developing a complex and “realist” position on crime (especially interpersonal crimes and “street crimes,” from domestic violence and rape to assault, robbery, homicide—again, all too often frightening to imagine and/or brutally real), was likely to raise, in one form or another, fraught issues of individual responsibility. Yet, arguably, a sophisticated theory of crime—one that would be worth its salt to and for the U.S. left—would have to be (and would have had to have been) sufficiently multidimensional so as to specify a) structural class and racialized disparities that insidiously skew the social/sociological backgrounds of both perpetrators and victims; b) considerations of how crime is regularly defined in a way that lets corporate and political entities off the hook (and by what institutions and agents within them); *and also* (not instead) c) how, commonsensically, something must be going on that explains, at the level of individual psychology and biography, why some people rather than others of a certain group engage in both street and suite/office/political brands of crime and violence.

Of course, it is precisely individual responsibility that is associated with conservative, rightward-leaning views on crime (take, as one of many classic U.S. examples, James Q. Wilson’s *Thinking About Crime*), thereby, by extension, causing any discussion of individual agency to seem anathema for a progressive/leftist/socialist to focus upon, even if in the cause of offering an appropriately complex theory for specifically *left* “thinking about crime.” Note therefore, in returning to the 2014 Left Forum as opposed to Socialist Forums of the late 1980s and 1990s, two relationships of *continuity* appear. First, in both periods, crime itself (as opposed to criminal justice *reactions* to crime) has been overlooked; and, secondly, a leftist’s political righteousness on this issue is preserved (earlier and later) as racialized and capitalist injustices are foregrounded and questions of individual responsibility are relatively downplayed or

omitted. In other words, what appears as a change in left attitudes to crime from past to present—that is, current (and valid) concerns about the massive moral and policy problem of mass incarceration, and the racism of criminal justice policy issues like stop and frisk—is actually fairly consistent, still failing to address or politicize how closely the persistence of growing class inequalities and *crime itself* may be, and have become, interrelated over the last fifty years. Little has altered about what might incur the kind of uncomfortable anger from colleagues and friends that a left realist like Jock Young had to endure for some years when he was shunned. For that matter, little has changed that might make it “safer” for an American politician to stand up and discuss “causes of crime”—vis-à-vis the necessarily multidimensional position I am advocating here—without having good reason to fear for his or her job and re-election. But why does any of this matter?

So What if the Left Overlooks Crime?

It seems hard not to surmise that into the vacuum on the crime issue thereby created by the left—and consequent upon this trio of reasons—a conservative, largely Republican right was able to insert itself with greater ease than might have happened had the left unabashedly offered up a fuller and more sophisticated take on crime (that is, had it/we become less afraid of sounding right-wing itself/ourselves). And capitalize on the crime issue the U.S. right certainly did—on a grand scale—in several ways. For one, political traction on crime may have been unintentionally facilitated for the right insofar as the left’s omission of any psychological or psychosocial dimensions to the crime issue sounded like a form of denial, thereby making appeals based *only* on individual responsibility appealing by contrast. Thus, for example, two things may have been the case: No doubt presidential hopeful Michael Dukakis was politically bullied at the infamous debate where he was asked, in reference to escaped parolee Willie

Horton, what *he* would do if someone raped *his* wife. Simultaneously, though, a progressive/Democratic position was not in the cultural air that would assist him in saying *both* that his own anger would make him want to proverbially “beat the shit” out of the offender *and* that by no means, though, was this good reason to go back to mindlessly punitive criminal justice policies that overall made no public safety, logical, or human(istic) sense. Of course Dukakis—as, on the crime issue, progressives and the left—lost.

But more than this: Once conservatives rushed into the void and made crime their own solely individualistic issue in the United States—almost a caricatural mirror image of the opposite over-simplification, namely, making crime *only* about societal class and racial injustices—then another opportunity arose and was seized upon. To wit: Crime was upheld as a symbolic cultural-and-psychic object onto which rage could be directed both about the awfulness of a given crime and about social injustices people were often experiencing well beyond it. Indeed, as Michael Jacobson notes in *Downsizing Prisons: How to Reduce Crime and End Mass Incarceration*, the crime issue has an almost unique ability to call forth the venting of passionate emotions amidst its discussion; he compares it with other forms of policymaking, say regarding health care or education, where “best practice” policy can be heard, and heeded, with far less intense objections raised than with crime. At the level of classical sociological theory, germane too is Emile Durkheim’s analysis of crime’s ability to unite people in righteous indignation against a concrete moral wrong that may have occurred but—as is more to this essay’s point—can easily generate and facilitate the expression of “surplus” passions too.

These last decades, from the 1980s through the present, have seen ups and downs of recession and recovery, busts and booms, but—with no doubt—steadily worsening inequalities between the rich and the poor, creating often unbearable hardships for the

latter as well as simmering, ongoing insecurities for huge numbers of middle class people as well. From the kind of long-range perspective that historians often bring to topics, one might even posit that indeed—without the crime issue and the “surplus” passions it aroused and permitted to be expressed—Republican hegemony from the 1980s through the present might have been difficult or even impossible to achieve. Where would Republicans at local, state, and national levels be without crime? It has not been their only issue, obviously, but it has surely been one of their most—if not their most—effectively emotive from the 1980s through the 1990s to the present (even as terrorism supplanted it from the early 2000s in public opinion, still the crime issue, and punishment, remains in the implicit and explicit backdrop of American politics). Katherine Beckett has made this case beautifully in *Making Crime Pay*—if one can use that adverb to describe how persuasively she shows media and politicians’ disproportionately focusing on “crime,” even as social and class inequalities were becoming ever more skewed over the past decades. Loic Wacquant, a sociologist who came to be associated with “criminology” at least as much from his feelings of theoretical necessity as academic proclivity, writes in *Punishing the Poor* about the enmeshing of the welfare state and the penal state. The decline of the former and the rise of the latter are interconnected, he insists—an argument that may work best at a cultural and ideological rather than strictly empirical level. Indeed in the United States—unlike in Europe—crime is used, culturally and politically, as a way to direct attention away from uncivilized tolerance of worsening poverty and inequality.

Again, though, why should the left care? My own sense is that, if there is validity in this argument that the crime issue has become a major fulcrum for redirecting passions, then a left reversal is called for by way of remedy. Let’s say class inequality was approached—as one additional mode of discussing it—through, rather than away from, the issue of crime. And

let's say Americans are asked whether we really wish to be rid of violent crime of the kinds that disproportionately plague people according to their class and racialized and gendered characteristics. Then a left insistence may be in order about how crimes of this kind are so closely related to community poverty and inequality as to bring a Swiftian, modest proposal to mind. What if poverty and inequality were noticeably decreased as part of a national effort to rid ourselves of crime (as well as, of course, poverty itself). Might not crime wither away? The left might pose a national experiment, a challenge indeed: If crime and inequality are related, then a host of jobs and housing and education and health programs in poor communities might do a great deal to eliminate violence. The only way to find out might be to see what happens if a current correlation—between the class and racial backgrounds of those in prisons, and of those in communities where violent crime still remains a scourge in people's lives—could no longer hold because discrimination had been relieved, or at the very least lessened from its starkly apparent levels.

Interestingly, arguing for reducing/eliminating crime *and* inequality may be possible on the American left in a way different from what happened in the UK. There, under Tony Blair's Labour Party politics, lefties were going to be "tough on crime and the causes of crime." But once in power, the "causes of crime" disappeared from Labour policies and rhetoric, which focused more on following the American punitive orientation than on inequality. In the United States, there is little to no structural possibility that a labor or socialist party will be holding government office any time soon—but our ability to influence political discourse and cultural consciousness, in and outside the academy, in and outside social movement activism, may, paradoxically, be at a propitious moment.

Does this mean, though, that violent crime—domestic violence, homicide in poor and richer communities, rape, robbery, and

assault—would not exist in an egalitarian society? Hardly. While addressing crime's social roots should and could reduce criminal behavior, unfortunately some individuals will continue for psychological reasons to pose anti-social problems for communities. To say otherwise is idealism of the kind astutely diagnosed by Marx—and regardless of whether he wrote directly about the issue. Thus, for the twenty-first-century U.S. left to rethink its approach to crime and not just to criminal justice will help not only with the specific problem of crime but with our ability to advance struggles for a better society overall. A multidimensional approach to crime, one that includes both social and psychic factors, inequality and responsibility, is consonant with rather than contradictory to the aims of democratic socialism.