

Realist Criminology

Adam Edwards reviews Roger Matthews' latest book

In an earlier state of the art review of thinking about crime and control, *Against Criminology*, Stan Cohen identified the subject's 'three orders of reality...first, the "thing" itself (crime and the apparatus for its control); second, research and speculation about this thing (description, classification, causal theory, normative and technical solutions to crime as a "problem"); and third, reflection about the nature of the whole enterprise itself' (1988). In these terms, Roger Matthews' *Realist Criminology* provides a third order reflection on the criminological enterprise to date. He distinguishes realism from the 'four intersecting lines of force' that have hitherto driven the subject. These are: the positivist search for causal explanations of crime and control; administrative concerns with the management, if not reduction, of crime and its associated risks; theories of deviance from social norms that construct crime; and finally the influence of the classical social thought of Marx, Durkheim and Foucault on macro-theories of crime and social change.

Cohen engaged in third order reflection to contest any canonical view of what constitutes criminology and to question its existence as a coherent intellectual project. Matthews' account, however, imports concepts from critical realism, a particular school of thought in the current philosophy of the social sciences, to redefine the purpose of the criminological enterprise, rescuing 'it' from internal disputes amongst varieties of thinking which he defines as 'liberal' and 'administrative', and to reassert its social and political relevance for public debate. In summary, the ambition of the text 'involves transposing many of the ideas and insights of critical realism into the criminological enterprise...to fashion a fairly fundamental critique and rethink of the direction of criminology itself'. A book of such ambition warrants the kind of detailed response it is sure to provoke from its many targets of opprobrium but for the purposes of this modest review section, its principal insights can be summarised using Cohen's panoramic distinctions.

The thing itself

The quintessential contribution of *Realist Criminology* is to reassert causal explanation as the rationale for criminology as a distinctive and coherent intellectual project. In support of this, the book provides an exposition of familiar criticisms of the positivist search for 'independent' variables that reduce the causes of crime to the biology, personalities and/or social contexts of offenders – including the recent renaissance

of experimental criminology. It also entails a critique of the principal response to the failure of this positivist project and the subsequent aetiological crisis of criminology, specifically the abandonment of causal explanation by administrative thinkers disinterested in 'dispositional' accounts of crime and committed to the situational management of its harmful effects. Varieties of 'liberal' thought are also challenged for circumventing explanations of crime, switching the analytical focus to changes in the social reaction to 'problematic situations', or else deriving crime and control from alleged macro-social and political forces such as 'governing through crime' and 'punitive populism'.

Realist Criminology reasserts causal explanation by importing a very different concept of causation to that advocated by criminological positivists and their critics. In place of the 'successionist' concept of causation, derived in part from the philosopher David Hume, in which x (e.g. family breakdown) is thought to cause y (e.g. juvenile offending) in so far as this relationship is repeatedly, 'successively', observed, Matthews advocates the realist concept of the multi-faceted, 'concrete', quality of social relations such as crime, where y (e.g.

juvenile offending) is regarded as a unity of diverse determinations ($a + b + c + d + \dots + n$: family breakdown + school exclusion + subculture + boredom + ... n) as they configure in particular places and moments. The shift from a successionist to a concrete concept of causation has the potential to revitalise both the second and third orders of criminology as a subject.

This would, therefore, improve its explanatory potential and, consequently, its practical adequacy as knowledge that can better understand the real harms associated with particular crimes and inform progressive interventions to reduce their effects.

Implications for research and speculation

If, however, the concrete concept of causation avoids the crude reductionism of successionist accounts, for example by revealing the interplay of family breakdown, school exclusion and boredom in juvenile offending amongst certain groups of young people in specific neighbourhoods at particular moments, it also opens up the problem of ascertaining the relevance of these and other possible determinations. Where does the identification, or 'abstraction', of determinations begin and end?

As Matthews notes, the realist response is that causal explanation is inexhaustible, not least because social life is an 'open system' and not a controllable laboratory, and

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is therefore necessarily inexact. However, as Amartya Sen has argued, it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong. Critical realism is a 'fallible' philosophy in that it acknowledges its own capacity to be wrong. The very process of building and adapting theory through trial and error in the abstraction of multiple causes and the analysis of their coming together to produce concrete problems of crime and control in particular contexts is preferable, however, to the 'chaotic conceptualisation' of social relations which he believes dominates contemporary criminology. Rather than asserting and testing favoured independent variables, hard conceptual labour is required in abstracting the various determinations of particular crimes, 'in thought', as a precursor to explaining their concrete manifestation and, in the doing of this, adapting our understanding of the crime in question.

Realists' approach

It follows from this more fallible and adaptive approach that realists are methodological pluralists. Instead of privileging certain designs for deducing crime, for example from the outcomes of experimentation, or inducing crime through the insights of ethnography, realists admit the use of a plethora of research designs so long as they contribute to the adaptation and refinement of concrete conceptions of crime. This process of abstraction is often referred to as the 'retroduction' of social relations to distinguish the logic of realist research from both the hypothetico-deductive testing of theory or the inductive process of theory-building. Crucially, it is in this sense that realists distinguish the 'thing itself', crime and the apparatus of control, from research and speculation about this thing. The difference between the thing and speculation about it is in the quality of the retroduction. Critical realists refer to criteria of judgemental rationalism in distinguishing the capacity of one account to better explain social relations than rival accounts. This presumes, of course, there is a social reality that is independent of research and speculation against which the fallibility of rival accounts can be judged.

Reflections on the criminological enterprise

Matthews identifies 'left realism' as a preferential foundation for retroducing the causes of crime and so, in the terms of this book, defining the future trajectory of criminology. This is argued through reference to some of the principal arguments animating contemporary criminology in western liberal democracies. These include, most prominently: the instrumental and expressive rationality of 'offending' behaviour; reasons for the alleged 'crime drop'; the 'myth of punitiveness', and the proposition that these societies are increasingly 'governed through crime'. A common theme, in

Matthews' amalgam of critical realism as a philosophy of explanation, and left realism as a substantive theory of crime causation, is to criticise rival accounts in these key arguments for their partial and 'one-sided' qualities.

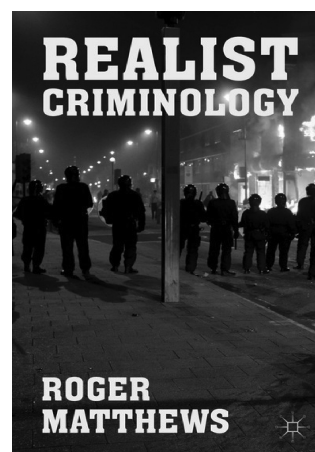
Certain tendencies, such as cost-benefit calculations to offend or conversely the expressive search for exhilaration through 'edgework' are over-generalised by their proponents to explain or contest crime *per se*. Other tendencies, toward increased imprisonment or the political predominance of the crime problem prevalent in particular places and periods, are similarly over-generalised to depict entire eras or epochs of control such as the 'punitive turn' and ignore countervailing tendencies, for example toward prevention of harms and the progressive regulation of mundane work, consumption and leisure routines.

Particular criticism is reserved for the over-generalisations of liberal criminology. Matthews argues this has cultivated an intellectually and politically debilitating rejection of the progressive role that state intervention can play in reducing the harms of criminal victimisation, especially amongst relatively weak and vulnerable populations. Conversely, it is argued that a left

realism bolstered by the philosophical insights of critical realism can better articulate the relationship of theory, method and practice in supporting progressive state intervention.

This assertive vision of the criminological enterprise is sure to stimulate further argument; both over the transposition of critical realism into contemporary criminology and its use to advance the primacy of left realist theories of crime and control. A particular source of argument is liable to be the role of collaborative and deliberative research in retroducing the multiple causes of particular crimes. ■

It is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong



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Reference

Cohen, S. (1988), *Against Criminology*, New Brunswick: Transaction Books.