

# Criticisms made of left realism by other left wing approaches



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This essay will focus on Left Realism and how some of their beliefs can be criticised by other left wing approaches. As there are many different left wing approaches that can criticise left realism, and there are only 2, 000 words available for this essay, only three left wing approaches will be focused on. They are the new criminology, radical criminology, and the Birmingham School.

Left Realists were of the belief that all research and efforts previously were pointless because none pointed towards an answer to what causes crime. Left Realists believed that the state of criminology was one of abject failure and there was nothing criminologists could say to the community about the causes of crime (Laufer and Adler, 1990, p. 163). As Hagan (2010, p. 185) notes Left Realists also accepted that crime does exist so it was pointless trying to deconstruct the term crime.

As Muncie (2009, p. 150) correctly identified The Left Realism principles are based on democratic socialism which addresses social inequality. They focus on left wing political analysis and synthesises established theories to achieve a fully social theory of crime . It s perceived as a response to the partiality of focus of existing theories and the Theoretical synthesis of sub-cultural & labelling theories. Although the approach is left wing it s not over the top as they still consider Marginalisation and emphasise failure among young people.

It s also concerned with the square of crime, it appreciates a complex process of action and reaction between the offender, victims, the state and society. To control crime from a realist perspective involves intervention at

each part of the square of crime: at the level of the factors which give rise to the putative offender (such as structural unemployment), the informal system (such as lack of public mobilisation), the victim (such as inadequate target hardening) and the formal system (such as ineffective policing) (Waltlake, 2005, p. 87).

In terms of effective policing Jock Young (1997, p. 492) noted It is not the Thin Blue Line, but the social bricks & mortar of civil society which are the major bulwarks against crime. Good jobs with a discernable future, housing estates tenants can be proud of, community facilities which enhance a sense of cohesion & belonging, a reduction in unfair inequalities, all create a society which is more cohesive & less criminogenic . This emphasises the Left Realist belief that it s necessary for policy makers to be focuses on social crime prevention strategies.

Left Realism approach concerns Left Realist Criminologists that were originally Marxist Criminologists who turned their back on their radicalist approach for what they considered a more realistic approach (Clinard & Meier, 2008, p. 80), but the Criminologists who didn t turn there back on Marxist beliefs still offer good critique for left realism. For example as Steinhart (1985, p. 327-34) noted there has been criticism of left realist criminology on the specific grounds of its apparent acceptance of popular fear of crime and its subsequent adoption of a crime control strategy: a criticism that is mounted from a perspective which continues to insist on the exagurated character of popular fears and which also insists on viewing the widely reported increased fear or crime as an ideological displacement of the on going increases in other personal troubles (unemployment, race, conflict, <https://assignbuster.com/criticisms-made-of-left-realism-by-other-left-wing-approaches/>

tensions between the sexes in late capitalist societies , etc). In addition, some of the best critique offered for left realism comes from the left wing approach that left realism itself set out to criticise. Some of the best left wing approaches that offer critique for the left realism perspective include New Criminology, Critical Criminology and The Birmingham School despite of their individual differences.

Left Realism accused approaches such as New Criminology of being too idealistic . Left Realists began to take the term crime largely at face value. Thus, in moving away from the left idealist emphasis on the social construction of crime. However as Newburn (2007) identified left realists arguably have gone too far in accepting standard definitions of crime as if they were self-evidently meaningful. Maybe attempts by New Criminologists to deconstruct criminological theories in an attempt to construct a social theory of crime (Lilly, Ball and Cullen, 2010, p. 212) or critical criminology s overriding aim to deconstruct the privileged meanings and discourses which frame the reality of crime (Anthony and Cunneen, 2008, p. 2) may be more appropriate.

The Radical Left has been accused by left realist criminologists of being negativistic and being too concerned with deconstructing social order. It tended to romanticise crime and crime was conceived of as an expression of class struggle. This is demonstrated by The New criminology s approach that sought to show that the law was used as an instrument of the ruling class (Muncie, 2006, p. 65) and The Birmingham School offered analysis of class and class conflict and its concern with youth styles and resistance

(McGuigan, 2005, p. 179) which are two thoughts that left realist  
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criminologists ignored. However Left Realism's belief on crime being intra class and its inability to focus on the issue of class can be used as a criticism. As Wadsworth (1989) suggests: Its over-concentration on crime and victimization within poor communities, and its failure to focus on crimes of the powerful and, related to this, its over-reliance on the local crime survey. In addition Wadsworth is not the only Criminologist to have noticed this, as Pearce and Tombs (1992) both noted: Through its failure to focus on corporate and organised crime, left realism is accused by some of having an incomplete aetiology a model of crime causation that even if it helps explain volume crimes such as burglary, is of limited utility in the task of explaining crimes of the elites.

Left Realism also accused approaches such as New Criminology, Radical Criminology and The Birmingham School of offering little in terms of policy relevance. When speaking of policy relevance, in reference to government thinking it's also worth noting that whilst left realist's John Lea and Jock Young's book *What is to Be Done about Law and Order* (1993) has been rumoured to be influential on Tony Blair prior and at the beginning of Labour's reign in government (Gomm, 2008, p. 335) due to Tony Blair's opinion that there was a need to reengage with political debate and the acceptance that crime shouldn't be deconstructed. However as it's worth noting Newburn (2007, p. 269) noted over time the Labour government shifted progressively from a position that was reasonably sympathetic to left realist thinking to one that was much more comfortable with right realist theory. So therefore when discussing government thinking it's worth noting that in today's current climate, Left Realism seems to offer just as much terms of policy

relevance as New Criminology, Radical Criminology and The Birmingham School.

Left Realism has also come under attack because it reverts back to accepting crime victim police as unproblematic features (Waltlake, 2007, p. 78). Furthermore Left realism was more committed to social democratic reform rather than socialist politics. This emphasises one of the main principles of left realism; the belief in a 'joined up' approach to tackling the problems of crime. However, this belief could be accused of 'borrowing' from a range of sociological explanations of crime. These reasons suggest that there may be nothing new about left realism, but may just be a number of established criminological principles taken from a particular ideological perspective (Downes and Rock, 2003, p. 292). In fact, as these two examples show, instead of being a progressive theory, it may be a theory that demonstrates regression in comparison to an approach such as new criminology where new criminologists concern capitalism to being causes of problems such as crime , victim and the police . (Lilly, Ball & Cullen, 2010, p. 186).

In addition this is not the only demonstration of regression being displayed left realists. Their failure to focus sufficiently on the political and ideological sources of crime and it s control is another example of regression. Stan Cohen (1986, cited by ), for example, argued that left realists have retreated far from the theoretical gains of 20 years ago. Their regression into the assumptions of the standard criminal law model of social control criminalization and punishment is premature .

Furthermore left realism says very little about domestic abuse. Approaches such as The New Criminology, Critical Criminology and The Birmingham School however add more focus around domestic abuse, and as a result arguably focus more around reasons, which suggest that they offer a better explanation for crime.

In addition Left Realism confirms the black population as particularly criminal which ignores the historical, economic & political contexts in which immigration developed. There has also been a quite angry series of critical responses to left realist criminology from scholars and activists in Britain who are identified with the vanguard organizations of the black underclass, and for whom left realist criminology from scholars and activists in Britain who are identified with the vanguard organizations of the black underclass, and for whom left realist criminology is understood, overwhelmingly, as an outrageous accommodation to the law and order policies of a racist authoritarian state (Gilroy and Sim, 1985, cited by Scraton, 1987, p. 210). This increases the belief that Left Realism is not a theory that can be associated with progression of the Radical Left beliefs. Especially against the beliefs of New Criminology, Critical Criminology or The Birmingham School which all discourage the use of racial stereotyping.

Left Realism also comes under attack due to the theory having no statistical evidence to support the theory. Critical Criminology can offer a criticism towards left realism due to the approaches close concern with crime statistics. As noted by Hudson (2000, p. 177) The object of investigation is the cluster of theories, policies, legislation, media treatments, roles & institutions that are concerned with crime, & with the control & punishment

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of crime. This material is the object of study, not part of the explanation . This is another example where Left Realism arguably fails to produce a theory that concerns progression.

The relationship that Left Realism has with the offender and the victim can also be criticised heavily by Left Wing Approaches. As Ruggiero (1992) identified: left realism contains an assumption that the power relationship between offender and victim is always one in which the former is more powerful than the latter . This one-sided approach is another critique that suggests why it s hard to acknowledge Left Realism as a theory that concerns progression.

Furthermore, as Newburn correctly identified (2007, p. 269): Left Realism generally rejects the possibility that some working-class criminal activity may be understood as a means of managing and coping with the limited opportunities allowed by current social arrangements . Other Left Wing Approaches support this notion such as Critical Criminology due to its aims to achieve Social, rather than criminal, justice by achieving structural changes that transform the social structure (Anthony and Cunneen, 2008, p. 186). Furthermore, New Criminology arguably takes in to consideration that criminal activity may be a means of managing and coping with limited opportunities and this may be due to, as identified by Carlen and Collisson (1980, p. 150), it advocates a form of radical politics seeking social justice. While Birmingham School takes in to consideration the possibility as it can be interoperated that youthful deviance is most profoundly lodged in the refusal to accept the opportunities that capitalist communities has restricted them



too. In this instance all three left wing approaches touched in this essay potentially offer valid critique towards left realism.

Another criticism offered by Taylor (1992, p. 95) is that the evidence presented in the various victimization studies conducted by left realists has more to do with patterns of victimization and of fear than it has to do with any detailed answers to crime and social order. There is no really creative attempt in the survey work on the left realists to investigate ways and means of combating crime, or of restoring some sense of order.

Therefore in summary, although Left Realists original intention was to progress from Left Wing Approaches. It is debatable whether any progress has been made due to the critique towards Left Realism that can be offered by left wing approaches. This is for reasons such as its focus on fear of crime, its failure to acknowledge that crime may need to be deconstructed, its failure to focus on crimes of the powerful, its lack of impact on current political affairs, its acceptance of big issues (ie, crime and police) being unproblematic features, its failure to focus on political and ideological sources of crime, its lack of interest in domestic abuse, its racial stereotyping, its lack of statistical evidence to support the theory, the relationship between the offender and the victim, its rejection that criminal activity may be a way of coping with limited opportunities allowed by current social arrangements and its victimization studies failing to provide an answer to crime and social order.