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Response to Crewe and Hall

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I appreciate the comments offered by Don Crewe and Steve Hall, and I'm grateful to the Journal for the opportunity to respond to them.

If I'm reading Don Crewe's remarks correctly, the gist of them is that he takes me to task for constructing a category of violence that doesn't exist in the real world but only in my modernist, rational, and (gasp!) humanist brain, and that consequently itself does violence to a more complex and individualized reality. I don't buy it.

I'm as much a believer in the power of social construction as the next fellow, and had several noted theorists in that vein as my teachers when I was first studying these issues. But I've always thought that there is a clear and very important difference between understanding the inherent arbitrariness of the categories we come up with to describe social phenomena—and the sometimes destructive power that our definitions can have in shaping the world—versus denying the existence or significance of the underlying reality that we're trying to uncover. And I fear that Don Crewe's perspective here obscures that difference.

Is slavery violence? Sure it is, and there has been an explosion of historical research in the last several years that has shown us in great detail just how multifaceted and pervasive the violence of slavery was. But the reality of the violence of slavery—or of corporate neglect of workplace safety, or of police shootings of unarmed civilians—doesn't negate the reality of young men shooting each other in the streets of Baltimore or of men forcing sex on women in Manchester. Whatever we choose to call these phenomena, they are indeed “out there,” and the pain, fear, and often death that they cause remains. If we want to see that suffering and harm reduced, we need to be able to understand where it comes from. And I don't think you can understand where it comes from if you simply define violence as a social construction—or as “universal,” as Crewe seems to do.

Crewe does a service by reminding us that there are many forms of violation of others, of which only some come regularly into the purview of criminology. But a look at the list of some of them that he provides suggests part of the problem with the kind of extreme

social constructionism he appears to espouse. A list that lumps together illegal parking and playing music too loud on the one hand, with promoting climate change or trafficking in people on the other—not to mention drive-by shootings or gang rape—boggles the mind. Really? Is Crew suggesting that all of these are of comparable human significance? Or that we can meaningfully understand them through the same causal lenses, or address them through similar forms of social action?

Some forms of harm may indeed be “universal.” But gun violence, for example, is not. And understanding why it isn’t—why people in Copenhagen don’t kill each other with guns on anything remotely resembling the level that they do in St. Louis—requires acknowledging precisely the ways in which the problem is specific to some places and not others. We can argue about the source of these differences. But to refuse to explore them is to opt out of serious engagement with the quest to mitigate human suffering.

And it’s hard to see in Crew’s conclusion anything other than a kind of opting out. In the face of various forms of violence—some of which Crew acknowledges to be “nastier” than others—he gives us little guidance for action beyond the admonition to “bear witness” to it. Exactly what this might mean in practice is more than a little murky. Crew insists that it doesn’t mean “merely watching,” and promises that if we “watch” through the right philosophical lens, we “will know more precisely what to do.” But what that tells me about how to keep those kids in St. Louis from dying frankly eludes me.

If we are serious about taking on the job of keeping people from needless injury and death, we will need a criminology that is able and willing to look hard at the conditions that help to pitch some people in some places into great risk of death and injury—and that doesn’t flinch from confronting the less than pretty consequences of those conditions or from doing the hard work of coming up with progressive and achievable solutions. Steve Hall, with Simon Winlow and other colleagues, has been one of the world’s foremost practitioners of that kind of criminology for many years, and so I am more than pleased—though not at all surprised—that he “gets” what this small book was trying to do.

Hall’s comments about the effects of the recent dominance of a kind of “liberal idealist” approach to crime and punishment on the left are especially important—and especially urgent in the face of recent political developments in both the United States and the United Kingdom (and many other countries as well). With the ascendancy of the political Right, we’ve seen the resurgence of a familiar rhetoric of “law and order”—familiar because we’ve been here before.

In the United States, the failure of an essentially idealist liberal world-view to acknowledge, let alone confront, a rising concern over “crime in the streets” in the 1960s helped to elect a conservative president—Richard Nixon—and to usher in the hard punitive thrust that gave us the unparalleled disaster of mass incarceration. As Hall’s discussion of the Giuliani interview suggests, here we go again. Worries about violent crime in the cities reemerged during the Presidential campaigns in 2016, and—in a replay of half a century before—American liberals essentially handed the issue to the Right.

When Donald Trump thundered against violence in America’s urban ghettos, liberals responded not with a progressive analysis of the roots of the problem and progressive proposals to fix it, but by denying that the problem existed. Many Americans felt that on this score, as on many others, liberals and Democrats weren’t listening to their concerns and were hopelessly out of touch with reality. And they were not entirely wrong. Not for the first

time, many of them voted for a president, and a party, whose responses to that very real problem of urban violence might not have made much sense, but at least appeared to take the problem seriously.

This kind of default is especially worrisome because we could be in for some very rough times ahead. As Hall points out, there are massive and unfavorable changes on the horizon in much of the developed world—notably a deepening crisis of work and livelihood generated by both technological shifts and the imperatives of a socioeconomic order geared to short-term profit over long-run sustainability and human welfare. And though it's always tricky to predict the effects of such changes on crime, the tentative prognosis is not good. If we see rising (or even stable) levels of violence down the road, in the context of diminished opportunities and permanently shrunken public supports, we could well also see a public demand for harsh measures of social control that far-right governments will be only too happy to provide. It's by no means a certainty, but it's an ugly and dismaying possibility. A criminology that ignores the reality of crime through timidity or ideological resistance will offer no defense against that possibility. A criminology that takes seriously Steve Hall's call for a focus on "generative" conditions and bold solutions might not by itself be enough to deflect that future—but it's an indispensable start.