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The Roots of Danger Elliott Currie

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In this short, pithy and reader-friendly book Elliott Currie explores the vast and complex subject of global violence. Currie's perspective on violence is genuinely global, although he does focus disproportionately on violence in the USA, because, with its relatively high homicide rate, he sees the country as an aberration in the industrially developed liberal-democratic world. The broad perspective he offers here is something of a rare find these days. In the aftermath of the cultural and postmodernist turns the emphasis now tends to be on micro-sociology and local space contextualised in the matrix of intersectional relations. As such, the book is a consummate primer for students at all undergraduate levels, as well as researchers, policymakers and interested lay readers approaching the subject for the first time. Of course Currie has along track record and has published work that explores this subject and others in far more detail and with far more sophistication. However, this highly condensed book was intended as a keynote primer and it does the job very well indeed, covering so many of the bases and providing interested readers with a number of platforms from which they can launch themselves into more detailed further research. The inclusion of this book – an update of the original version published by Prentice Hall in 2009 – in the 'keynotes in criminology and criminal justice' series was a very good choice by series editor Henry Pontell.

It's very interesting that Currie begins his book with a homage to British criminologist Ian Taylor. In his own work Taylor also offered broad approaches to criminology and, like Currie, offered a multi-dimensional analysis that included the contextual conditions that make so many lives crime-prone alongside the usual exploration of social reaction and the ethics and politics of the criminal justice system. It's rather noteworthy that Currie, Taylor and a number of other theorists of generative contexts have been omitted from a recent 4-volume edited collection of articles from the journal *Theoretical Criminology* (Bosworth, 2016). The collection, heavily skewed towards work on prisons and criminal justice, is indicative of the intellectual cul-de-sac into which criminology has been driven. Social reaction theory has become so dominant on the 'critical' side of the criminological fence that more important work on the contexts – social, psychological, cultural, economic and historical – which generate crime and harm has languished in relative neglect.

Talking about probabilistic conditions and causes of crime and harm is often met with sneers from social reaction theorists, many of whom seem to have a rather impoverished notion of what 'realism' actually means. Currie is of course inclined to the school of left realism, but, unlike some left realists who trod a more pragmatic administrative path, he has retained a great

deal of aetiological depth in his work. As he said in the past (Currie, 1985), it's just as important to understand in depth and detail the 'conveyor belt' that dumps so many people into the clutches of the criminal justice system as it is to criticise the system itself. This conveyor belt cannot be explained simply and solely as a process of 'criminalisation'. The dominance of social reaction theory and the relative neglect of theories that focus on socio-generative and psycho-generative conditions serve criminology badly, not least because this one-dimensionality creates a vacuum into which the explanatory schemas and political solutions of the right can flow unopposed. In the educational field, works that cover both dimensions, which for simplicity's sake – acknowledging that there is some interaction between the two but also acknowledging that this interaction is not the whole story – we might call generative and reactive, are invaluable for students. I can vouch for this personally. During my time as a 'volume teacher' in British universities my students often found Currie's work a breath of fresh air after the more decontextualized schools of social reaction theory had during the course of some modules been remorselessly rammed down their throats.

An example of right wing politicians' ability to move in and fill the vacuum created by the liberal-left's one-dimensionality and marginalisation of reality is there for all to see in a recent TV interview with former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani http://gothamist.com/2016/07/10/rudy_giuliani_says_the_black_kid_wh.php. The consummate ease with which this 'old pro' of the centre-right batted away criticism of the police exposed the weakness at the core of the liberal centre-left's discourse. *The Gothamist* accused Giuliani of the 'racist belittling' of those who protest against police brutality and berated the interviewer for failing to press him on the fact that black people are disproportionately brutalised. Had the interviewer done this, however, it would have made little difference. Constructing a strong populist argument, Giuliani pointed out that many urban areas have black police chiefs and mayors, and 50 per cent of victims of police killings are white and Hispanic. The killer blow was his airing of the fact that 75 per cent of victims and perpetrators of murder are African-American. A more prescient criticism is that Giuliani, the interviewer and *The Gothamist* failed to mention the underlying structural reasons for high rates of crime and violence in specific US locales – globalisation, deindustrialisation, underfunded welfare, the unforgiving logic of aggressive cut-throat competition at the dynamic core of economy and culture, and so on.....

On its own, the liberal-left's repetitive criticism of unfair intersectional power relations and authoritarian social reaction tells us little about the underlying generative conditions that produce such tragic outcomes for black people and all the additional victims and perpetrators from the other ethnic groups that populate violent high-crime locales. Where these conditions are given some attention, they tend to be depicted as amenable to light-touch social policy measures. It is vitally important to fight the ugly combination of racism and authoritarian reaction as it toxifies everyday life, but, at the same time, the battle must be fought intellectually and politically at the core of the deep structural and cultural generative conditions that make the USA a more violent nation than any other in the industrially developed world. There are deep, complex reasons behind violence. Elliott Currie does criminology a great service by bringing back into play the neglected concepts of context, probability and causality operating at the deep structural and generative level, and an even greater service by highlighting them in a condensed student-friendly text that alerts the reader to their vital importance.

The 'realism' that Currie advocates is not the cynical pragmatism of our postmodern social managers, the realpolitik of right-wing militarism or the conservatives' dismal ontological view of the human being as an innately wicked sinner. On the contrary, in this book he emphasises the huge variability in the rates of violence and homicide across the world, but he also correlates this variability with deep qualitative differences in culture, social relations and modes of politico-economic organisation. This gives us cause for optimism, but a qualified optimism that must take generative conditions into account far more than has been the norm in most schools of post-war criminology. Currie has from the beginning of his career advocated a left realist approach to crime and criminal justice. This was evident in his early critique of *The New Criminology* (1973) as it demonstrated the naïve romanticism that became dominant in criminology.

Where traditional criminology regarded deviance as innately pathological, Taylor, Walton and Young regard it as essentially healthy. Neither approach seriously attempts to analyse the sources and consequences and political significance of particular kinds of deviance within the framework of an articulate set of political and moral values (1974: 139)

Before even Jock Young, Currie was aware that 'left idealism' did not take the real consequences of crime seriously enough. It was trapped in the cult of hard-line social constructionism and averse to what arch-constructionist Stanley Cohen dismissively called the 'reality instructors' (see Hall, 2012). Of course this situation was made worse by postmodernism's wanton through-the-looking-glass disruption of the efficiency of meaning. Currie brings the whole thing down to earth and contextualises criminology's objects in real processes. Critical realists have argued that social structures and processes are not simply theoretical concepts but – even though they are ideologically reproduced – systems of demands and constraints that operate actively in everyday life in the real world and lock individuals in relations of conformist interdependency. Currie's work has always focused on this reality, highlighting core systemic processes such as deindustrialisation and depoliticisation and their consequences such as community breakdown and the drift of more individuals into burgeoning criminal markets. In a culture of unforgiving competitive individualism, which Currie (1997) sees as 'Darwinian', the less entrepreneurial and socially connected members of the former industrial working class have been disproportionately affected by these processes.

Violence is one of the deleterious consequences of these processes. Some areas partially recovered from deindustrialisation, whereas some most emphatically did not and continued as the sites for burgeoning criminal markets. Under-qualified former workers, out-competed by those amongst them who had the acumen, the inclination and above all the luck to become socially mobile, were trapped in parlous situations. All variants of conservative or liberal governance proved ineffective in the political attempt to address the destructive social and personal effects of neoliberal globalisation. After 1971 the withdrawal of Keynesian capital exchange controls, the globalisation of finance capital, the reversal of the global flows of trade and capital, the expansion of credit-card consumerism and the commodification of most aspects of human interaction constituted a huge macro-economic shift, the most audacious in economic history (Varoufakis, 2011). National governments could no longer control their risk- and debt-laden economies or the social consequences of unpredictable fluctuations in the global economy.

Currie's book begins with an injunction to refocus our intellectual gaze on the cold-hard reality that exists as a manifestation of the global capitalist system. This echoes the latest *speculative realist* turn in continental European philosophy, which enjoins us to get to grips with the cold light of day, the real consequences of our activity in the Anthropocene era (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). Violence is a social issue that must be contextualised in the reality of our times. Currie's argument is neither deterministic nor in denial of human agency, but its probabilistic tone is backed up by a wealth of uncomfortable facts. For instance, homicides are disproportionately high amongst young black American people cast into the impossible circumstances by the economic forces described above and by historical racial discrimination. The rate of serious injuries is far higher – for every death 100 end up in hospital. After the loudly trumpeted statistical 'crime decline' – which in the UK has been cancelled out by the recent inclusion of statistics related to burgeoning cybercrime – homicide is on the rise again despite the forty-year intensification of the security apparatus. Currie argues we have become complacent and accustomed to violence, and, furthermore, especially complacent about violence in the communities that have suffered most. The fear of violence is active in the organisation of social space, and not all of that fear is media-induced, but, in the worst affected locales, experiential and rational. Currie makes the point that the USA has the worst record of the industrially developed world, but still it does not compare with some of the regions in Central America or Africa that are suffering from extreme forms of instability, poverty and social inequality

However, despite Currie's willingness to grasp of the nettle of social reality in the advanced capitalist world, his message is underpinned by optimism. Just as the pessimism of a realist is often deeper than that of an idealist, the same is true for the realist's optimism. The global variations in violence tell us that violence is by no means an inevitable feature of humanity. If the rate of violence has been lowered in some places it can also be lowered in others where it is currently too high. In this book Currie does not focus on corporate and state violence, which some might see as an omission, but instead looks at the types of everyday serious violence that indicate the quality of interpersonal relations – murder, rape, robbery and serious assault. He reminds us that these harmful crimes occurs in specific contexts that are usually accompanied by harsh punitive regimes. Violence and harsh punishment combine to ruin lives and hamper social and economic development.

In a notably polite and relaxed manner Currie challenges many of the domain assumptions of the conservative and left-liberal schools of criminology. Principally, he seeks to explain the global variations in rates of violence on the basis of evidence. This is perhaps my only serious gripe. If he were to enter the empirical field and the statistical apparatus armed with some more contemporary and penetrative ideas – such as perhaps pseudo-pacification (Hall, 2014) and trauma (Winlow, 2014; Ellis, 2016) rather than strain – the explanations he draws from the evidence could become more powerful. However, at the heart of his challenge is his determination to maintain the tradition of seeking out reasons, rather than indulging in the standard pious diatribe against violence and punishment from the beautiful souls who want to abolish everything nasty and every nasty reaction to all these nasty things – oh, the sheer horror of it all! – before they understand why all this nastiness exists and what reproduces it. This tactic, of course, neither furthers our understanding of violence nor helps the cause of the eventual reduction of violence and supersession of authoritarian governance.

Arguing against the cult of wanting to abolish everything, Currie warns us that hastily dismantling institutions that might help to reduce violence will simply make matters worse. He is right, of course, but perhaps he could have emphasised the likelihood that abolishing vital institutions would make already fearful people even more fearful and provoke further reaction of an intensity hitherto unseen in the modern world. However, the stake Currie drives into the heart of the standard left-idealist discourse, which is still mired in outdated moral panic theory (see Hall, 2012), is his cool but insistent point that, on the whole, violence is in fact understated rather than sensationalised by media and government, although of course specific incidents can be sensationalised for specific micro-political purposes. His analysis of the insurmountable problems with police and victim survey data, and his recognition that, because usually there is a reasonable fit between rates of homicide and general violence, medical and homicide data are more reliable for comparative purposes provide the empirical platform for this fundamental challenge.

Currie's broad global survey of victims and perpetrators and the spaces in which they interact provides an empirical platform for his discussion of potential explanations. Again, I must emphasise that this text is a primer for students, researchers and policymakers, so he keeps his theorising as straightforward as possible. Having said that, Currie has never been one to try to knock the theoretical ball out of the park with every piece he publishes. In previous work aimed at the academic audience, and therefore more detailed and sophisticated than this particular work (for example Currie, 1985; 1997), he has rationalised his intention to restrict himself to what he calls the 'mid-range', where he believes that criminological theories most effectively influence the vital policies that might improve individuals' everyday lives. There is a slight contradiction here. He seems to be aware of the fact that micro-interventions aimed exclusively at individuals are powerless against the immense reproductive forces he describes, and he often quite clearly claims that these forces run very deep in the economic, social and cultural dimensions. Perhaps he is simply being pragmatic in a nation – and increasingly a world – where deep political intervention on the left side of fence seems to be a thing of the past. Nevertheless, in this book he moves on to delineate these mid-range theoretical explanations, initially bifurcating them into the categories of those that don't work and those that do.

In the first category he locates explanations based on evolution and genetics, simply because there is no evidence of genetic patterns in the data on violence. The empirical links

between race and violence have nothing to do with either genetic or cultural traits but are wholly dependent on discrimination and the position black people occupy in the social structure, and indeed how they are treated in a society that still demonstrates a significant residue of racism in all aspects of its institutions, relations and everyday interactions. Leniency in criminal justice is also a poor explanation simply because higher rates of violence tends to correlate with the normalisation of cultural and institutional practices of harsh punishment

Diversity also fails as an explanation. Currie reminds us that high rates of crime and violence correlate with disadvantage, discrimination and harsh treatment, not difference. This is especially true where systematic discrimination over time results in the ghettoization of ethnic groups in locales of permanent disadvantage, or what Ian Taylor once called 'permanent recession'. More equal countries, he stresses, cope far better with diversity. Anti-modernist discourses that identify prosperity and modernity as the culprits also fall when faced with the empirical evidence. Although the opposite tends to be the case, Currie warns us that some types of prosperity, specifically those that exist in conjunction with a reasonable measure of equality and stability, work to reduce violence.

Having dismissed faulty explanations he moves on to list explanations that, the evidence would suggest, do actually work to reduce violence. He begins with the important point that criminology ritually over-emphasises the fact that most people don't respond violently to stressful conditions, but rarely gets round to explaining why some do. Currie is far too polite to say that this is the beautiful but timorous beastie of liberal criminology, with its head buried in myths of permanent progress and faulty symbolic interactionist claims of labelling as causative, fearfully refusing to do its job, but I'm not so polite so I'll say it here. The ability of the efficiently socialised majority to resist pressures doesn't mean that the pressures are not 'real' in the sense that they cause deleterious effects on the social fabric, and, for the most vulnerable, the most (understandably) cynical and the most impulsive alike, on the individual psyche. Currie, like the critical realists and the new ultra-realists (see Hall and Winlow, 2015), conceptualises the neoliberal system as a set of gridlocked constraints and possibilities with a supporting mass-mediated ideology that operate in reality and shape human feelings, interpretations and actions in the real world. Thankfully, he does not fall into the idealist trap by way of conceptualising the system as a concept. Policies can help to change the probabilistic conditions laid down by the system, and, as such, they are far more effective than focusing on individuals. For instance, as I have argued myself (Hall and McLean, 2009), the homicide rate plummeted in the USA in 1937 as Roosevelt's second-wave New Deal, which of course was packed to the gunnells with Currie's mid-range policy interventions, gave ordinary people hope for the future, restored their faith in politics and paved the way to help them out of criminal markets into education and work. Personally, I would like to see interventions deeper than those Currie advocates, but I am the first to admit that, relatively speaking, mid-range interventions work better and produce broader and more durable effects than those targeted exclusively at individuals.

Currie's condensed and very clearly argued work reminds us that inequality occupies prime position on the list of contextual explanations. He cites the example of Brazil as the most extreme – in the country's poor areas, being a victim of murder is 100 times more likely than the national average. Near-absolute poverty and minimal opportunities can make crime a rational option. Even in less extreme cases, relative poverty can be causative when combined with consumer culture's valuation of the social symbolism carried by what should be everyday functional products. Children exposed to the practical value of crime and, in the absence of the purpose and self-esteem provided by productive work, the status of criminals can often use violence as a means of social climbing, economic acquisition or protection – violence has never been anything less than multi-functional. This search for alternative sources of income, status and respect in the world of criminal markets and violence simply exacerbates the anger, alienation, disaffection and disaffiliation already felt by those cast out into marginal work and born in decaying communities. It has to be said that Currie doesn't speculate on the problems we have in store for us as unemployment and under-employment become normalised across the globe in an increasingly automated and virtualised mode of production, but their gravity is implied by what he reveals about the present.

If such parlous socioeconomic situations are to prevail in the immediate future, strong social supports are essential. Currie points out that countries with effective and generous social services have lower levels of violence and homicide, therefore this must be added to the list of basic explanations. His claim that welfare helps to sustain a sense of social cohesion, attenuate social antagonism and promote the notion that at least somebody cares is debatable – indeed many find welfare dependency humiliating and hopeless, especially in the current mass-mediated cultural climate – but the evidence does suggest that it must somehow have a positive effect, even if that is simply the prevention of the descent into absolute poverty.

In economically marginal locales what Currie calls ‘strained’ families are more common, characterised by failure to socialise and higher rates of child abuse, and shot through with the debilitating and criminogenic sentiments of hopelessness, depression and anger. Countries with better support for families, Currie reveals, return notably lower rates of violence. The structure of the family is far less important than quality of relationships, and because public support counters poverty and disruption and maintains some of this quality, it can have undeniably positive effects. The problems experienced by families are compounded by cultural issues. A culture of harsh control, physical punishment, non-negotiable sexual entitlement and anti-educational values also breeds violence. Those who argue that criminality and violence are simply responses to structural oppression or ‘adolescent kicks’ are missing out on a complex suite of reproductive forces operating on the ground.

The harsh punishment regime that is so deleterious in the family can be extended to the broader institutional culture. Harsh and ineffective criminal justice systems backfire because they aggravate crime by promoting further marginal work and exclusion and hardening already resentful attitudes. Criminal gangs run oppressive inside some prisons and drugs circulate freely, further reproducing a criminogenic culture. The prisons acts as a harsh and ineffective substitute for underfunded and failing social services, including vital mental health services. Currie’s final explanation is easy access to firearms. US citizens own almost a third of the world’s firearms. He admits that some countries with high gun ownership display relatively low murder rates, but, in a competitive individualistic economy and an unequal society, guns provide a ‘lethalizing’ appendage to an aggressive culture and convert too many everyday altercations into fatalities.

In his concluding remarks Currie envisions two possible futures. The first is a possible future of care, security, justice, hope for the future, respect, and stable communities and (no matter what their relational constitution) families. The second is a violent future in which societies are insecure, unequal, harsh, punitive, negligent, individualistic and uncaring. In this future violence can be reduced only by increased securitisation and incarceration, creating a vortex of violence and repression. This is a future of heavy drinking, gun toting and illegal drug markets proliferating in an economy constantly disrupted by neoliberal restructuring and marketization, which of course will continue to exacerbate these problems. ‘Othering’ violence as it is concentrated in specific regions and locales will simply increase social division, suspicion and hostility, forcing the wealthy into gated communities, safe spaces whilst the rest, in a dystopian *Elysium* scenario, compete brutally for marginal work and criminal opportunities.

As I have said, this short book is not a *magnum opus* but a primer written in a pithy, no-nonsense and clear style. It is ideally pitched for students and lay readers for students, and an excellent choice for a keynote series. Of course it has its shortcomings, as all short books will inevitably have, but it is nevertheless comprehensive and suggests paths for further study. It is also a brave little book – Currie is not afraid to use the term ‘pathology’ without scapegoating specific individuals or social groups, and not afraid to suggest that liberal-capitalist systems are not wholly progressive but in many important dimensions destructive and regressive. Indeed he poses the grim possibility of regression, of going backwards rather than learning the lessons of our own past, which is now being borne out as nationalism once again rears its head across the western world as a solution to neoliberalism’s relentless disruption of people’s lives (see also Winlow and Hall, 2013). To me, Currie’s primer condenses a vast amount of data and theory and shouts out to criminology that it must return to the project of understanding reality, a position I have been advocating for a good while too. The neoliberal-capitalist system is not just a theoretical concept or a language-game but a process of restraints and demands that do not mechanically determine but in some places heavily influence action and its very real

consequences. Currie has for a long time been at the forefront of promoting this sort of non-conservative realist agenda, which of course threatens the established positions in the social constructionist and idealist paradigm. This important little book constructs a user-friendly platform on which any reader can give the realist project serious consideration.

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