Heroin policy and deficit models
The limits of Left Realism

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Abstract. This paper critically assesses Left Realist approaches to understanding heroin use and to formulating policies with which to deal with heroin use as a social problem. It criticises the epistemological foundation of Left Realism, querying especially its prioritizing of inner city residents’ experiences. Dorn and South’s Left Realist account of heroin use and their formulation of an appropriate policy are then argued to have fundamental weaknesses as a result of their Left Realist assumptions. The paper then attempts to indicate some alternative paradigms for interpreting drug use, developing especially a focus on theorizing demand, and suggests alternative policy directions which emerge from this.

Introduction

"Left Realism" is said to be capable of replacing a more theoretical but allegedly more unrealistic, romantic and impractical position held by Left criminologists in earlier years. Among its central virtues are held to be that it speaks more directly to the real concerns of the working class and thus provides a more sensible and practical basis upon which to pursue a progressive political agenda for criminological issues. Moreover, its adherents claim to address policy issues more closely than their critical forebears, attempting to present reforms which are attainable in the short and medium term, rather than in the mythological time of revolutionary reconstruction. The central criticism made by its opponents, predictably, is that it represents a sellout to conservative criminal justice policy, giving a progressive gloss to the justification of punitive sanctioning, police repression and even institutionalised racism.

Often, the critique of Left Realism has been accurate and biting, but in a very large measure it has been responded to by its opponents at a rather general level.\textsuperscript{1} The central aim of this paper is to bring such critical examination down to the level of specific policy formation which Left Realism takes as its home ground. After preliminary examination of important methodological issues the paper will examine the response of Left Realist advocates to demands for the formation of a progressive drug policy. The topic poses an odd
problem, because despite its prominence in popular concern, few of those who strongly advocate the Left Realist position have tackled the issue of drug use. The two principal exceptions to this are Nicholas Dorn and Nigel South, who have written extensively on drug issues.² Broadly speaking, Dorn and South’s position is to argue in characteristic Left Realist fashion that legalization options traditionally posed by the ‘romantic’ critical criminologies of the past two decades are out of step with the times. That is, they do not form an option that any major political party would currently advocate, and are not supported by many who have first-hand experience of drug problems (users, their friends and relatives, street workers and so on).³ Our selection of the work of Dorn and South to represent Left Realism in this domain is also based on a high regard for the work, which clearly is neither superficial nor poorly informed. Nonetheless, we see them as falling into certain pitfalls in policy formation and selection, pitfalls that are themselves characteristic of the Left Realist position rather than idiosyncratic to these authors.

The foundations of Left Realist knowledge

The most fundamental tenet of a realist criminology is to be faithful to the phenomenon which it is studying. That is to be true to the actual shape of the phenomenon and forces which have brought it into being and which will transform it over time.⁴ At first sight this account of Left Realist epistemology represents itself as a rather crass empiricism espousing presuppositionless knowledge, a view supported by the confidence with which the rest of criminology is dismissed as “a babble of paradigms united around a shared inability to get to grips with the phenomenon of crime”.⁵ The Left Realists argue that they have managed to escape this cacophony and be “faithful to the phenomenon” — a claim made long before by interactionist criminologists in exactly the same terms — by giving theoretical and analytical priority to the experiences and perceptions of those defined as victims of crime.⁶ For interactionists this involves participant observation among the criminalised underdogs of society. For Left Realists it involves questionnaire and related victimology research which taps working class accounts of crime, police and criminal justice.

For interactionists, the close identification with the subjective perceptions of underdogs created critical problems, for it began to appear that the underdogs defined reality and the sociologists merely recorded the given truths. Moreover, critiques of “bottom-up” history and theory created difficulties for interactionists, for the underdogs often lacked strategic knowledges — resulting in a sociological focus on the actions of low-level “zookeepers” of deviance. It