Socialist humanism and the problem of crime

Thinking about Erich Fromm in the development of critical/peacemaking criminology

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Abstract. Crime is understood as a problem of human existence. Assumed is the intersubjectivity of social reality, and the need for an interdisciplinary and integrative approach to criminology. Along the way, a consideration of (1) the relativity of things human, (2) the modes of having and being in contemporary society, (3) the interdependence of all things, and (4) the way of peace. The ideas of Erich Fromm are germane to our thinking in the development of a peacemaking criminology.

What is important in the study of crime is everything that happens before crime occurs. The question of what precedes crime is far more significant to our understanding than the act of crime itself. Crime is the reflection of something larger and deeper.

As a critical criminologist, I find it ever more difficult to witness crime or to think about crime. Instead, I envision a world without crime. And that vision comes from imagining a world that would not produce crime. To be critical, to be a critical criminologist, is to imagine what might be possible in this human existence.

The ground upon which we stand may be named. As with all naming, words simplify the complexity of reality but point the direction of our attentions. I now use these words to describe my grounding: humanist, existential, Buddhist, pacifist, and socialist. I assume the intersubjectivity of social reality, and my approach is interdisciplinary and integrative. Thus my turn of late, in search of support and elaboration, to the life and work of Erich Fromm. Our thoughts about crime, and our actions of peacemaking, are furthered by Fromm’s socialist humanism.

My central assumption throughout is the interconnection between the inner peace of the individual and the outer peace of the world. The two develop and occur together. The struggle is to create a humane existence, and such
an existence comes only as we act peacefully toward ourselves and one another.

Great care, then, is taken in our response to crime. Our actions – our social policies – are to be consistent with our understanding of crime. And let it be maintained that the realization of peace in our own everyday lives is the best social policy. This is positive peacemaking in criminology and criminal justice.

The relativity of things human

We begin necessarily with an understanding of human existence. All things human (and otherwise) change. Nothing remains the same. There is no permanent substance to anything. In the flux of change and impermanence, in this human world, we mortals can cling to nothing. Cling to naught is our earthly imperative.

What then is real? What can be perceived as real? Simply to ask is to realize that reality is ontologically existential. All human perception is intersubjective, a creation of the lived experience. At the beginning of my book *The Social Reality of Crime* (1970, p. 4), I had written that “we have no reason to believe in the objective existence of anything.” To this day I am happy to be counted among the existentialists.

As to the problem of what is real, and how reality may be known, the matter goes far beyond the traditional debate over the objective and the subjective. It has to do, rather, with the human mind’s inability to think and to see beyond its own innate construction. How can we know for certain of the existence of anything, including existence itself? The mind is the grand piano which provides the space for the mice – our thoughts – to play. We humans cannot step outside of our existence. And we cannot know, in the larger scheme of things, or non-things, if the grand piano is other than a dream. The dream of a cosmic dreamer. Why not?

It is not for us to know that which cannot be known. To have such knowledge is not to be human. The simple teaching of Buddhism (Seung 1982): “Only don’t know.” We have the mind to ask questions of the reality of our existence, universal and otherwise, but we do not have the capacity to answer with objectivity and certainty. As Albert Camus (1955) noted: “The absurd is the essential concept and the first truth.” Entirely reasonable, then, is our perpetual ambivalence, or uncertainty, and our fear of life and death. Humility, mixed with wonder, makes more sense than the continuous pursual of scientific knowledge.

We stand before the mystery of existence. Our understanding is in the recognition of our common inability to know for certain. Our fate, and our