Left Realism: Key Ideas and Criticisms

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Crime and Deviance

Left Realism: Key Ideas and Criticisms

Left Realism is one of the major criminological theories at A-level and, for this reason, it's one that students need to know well. The following, therefore, is a basic overview of Left Realism's key ideas: from how they conceptualise crime through to what they see as the main problem of crime and possible solutions to how crime can be researched and explained. The overview concludes with a couple of criticisms you may not have encountered before…

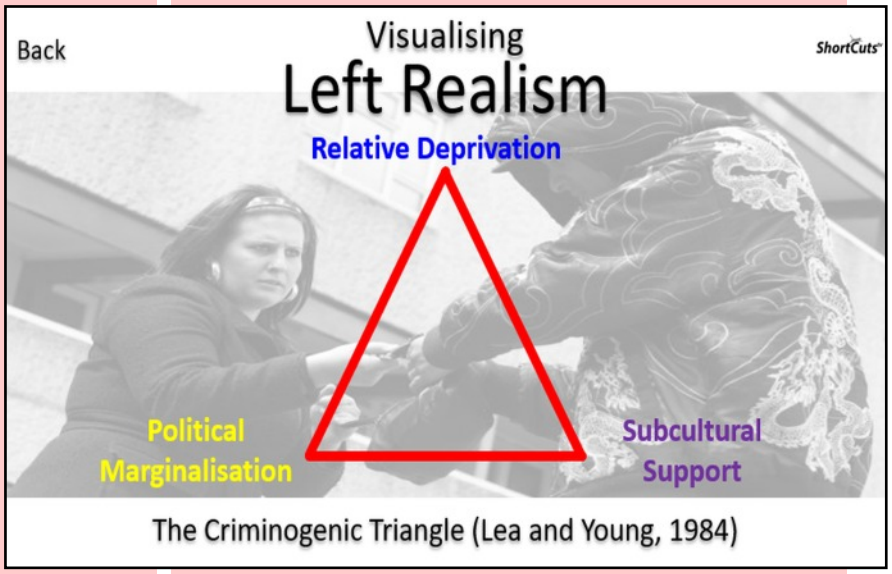
Key Concepts

There are three key concepts students need to know and understand:

1. The *aetiological crisis* of explanation: *aetiology* refers to the idea of *first* or *primary causes,* a classic example in relation to crime being the conventional left / liberal criminological view that economic conditions, such as poverty and deprivation, are *the* key cause of crime. The problem for Left Realists such as Lea and Young was that while economic conditions clearly played some role in crime, the empirical evidence produced by crime statistics and rates showed that during the 20th century crime in Western societies appeared to rise regardless of macro economic conditions. It rose, in other words, during both economic upturns ("booms") *and* downturns ("busts"). This being the case, Left Realism argues we need a more-sophisticated way to explain crime based around:

2. The Criminological Triangle (Relative (economic) deprivation, political marginality and subculture). The idea, in basic terms, that decisions to commit crimes result from a combination of circumstances - economic, political and cultural - such that criminality is highly-likely if three conditions are met: the individual feels relatively deprived as compared to others in a similar social position, they believe their legitimate concerns and expectations are being ignored (political marginalisation) and they are in contact - in real and / or cyberspace - with others who share these characteristics (subculture).

3. The Square of Crime: the focus here is on how different types of social relationship (between police and public, offender and victim, and so forth) create different social reactions and, more importantly, different (policy) solutions to the problem of crime.



The Criminogenic Triangle (Lea and Young, 1984)

Young (1997), for example, sketches the broad relationships involved in the understanding of social reactions to crime and conformity in terms the 'square of crime', where social reactions are mediated through a range of different interdependent relationships, such as between the police and offenders – how, for example, the police view 'potential and actual offenders' - or how the general public view the police: if the public have a generally positive view of the police, for example, they are more-likely to be cooperative and supportive of them, which in turn makes it easier for the police to do their job and makes them more-effective in their role.

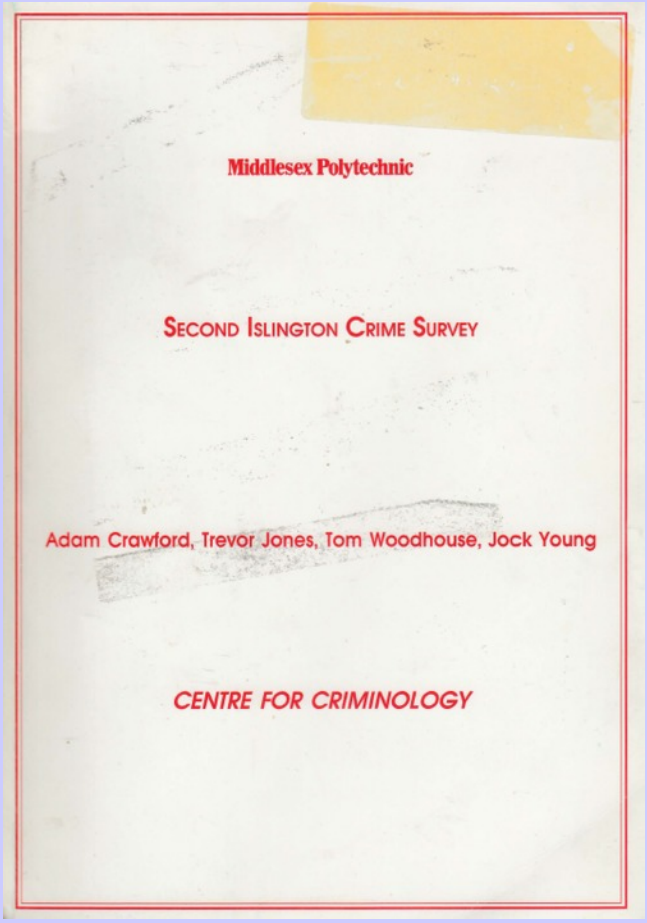
The Problem of Crime?

Unlike most theories of crime, the key point here is that crime is not simply a problem of a particular social class or social group: crime can and does occur right across the social structure of society, although the “crimes of the poor” are invariably different to the “crimes of the rich”.

This is where the concept of relative deprivation is pivotal because it suggests a condition that can affect all social classes / groups - although it remains true that the majority of crimes, particularly the low-level street-type, are carried-out by young, working class, males.

How to Research Crime?

The main type of research method used was the victim survey, such as the Islington Crime surveys. Established in the mid-1980’s, these were tightly-drawn local surveys that focused on concepts like victimization and the fear of crime coupled with empirical data demonstrating the range and extent of street crime in a specific area.



Solutions to the Problem?

Policy solutions to crime are framed in terms of three major areas:

1. Economic: This involves attempts to reduce economic deprivation, both real and relative. There is, as you might expect, a certain vagueness about how this can be achieved, but it might include things like improving the educational provision and prospects of the poorest and most vulnerable, direct economic support for families, various types of job creation, training and the like.

2. Cultural/ideological involves improving our understanding of the causes of offending, the role and relationship of the police and public, and so forth. More-specifically there should be democratic policing or “policing with the consent of the policed”, as opposed to various forms of military-style policing found, for example, in numerous American towns and cities.

Militaristic policing, designed primarily to maintain order, contributes to the creation of crime because the police come to be seen as an “occupying force” in many communities and this type of relationship breaks an important dimension of the square of crime: it leads to low levels of trust and cooperation between the police and those policed which, in turn, leads to lower crime clear-up rates.

3. Political, in terms of, for example, how crime is punished: Norway has developed a very different system of punishment to countries like Britain and America - and claims far lower levels of recidivism (a return to criminal behaviour once a sentence has been served). A further political aspect relates to the general climate within which offenders and victims operate, such as levels of police and public tolerance of criminal behaviour. England, for example, has a range of strong Environmental Protection laws that are increasingly lightly applied, even in the most serious cases of industrial pollution.

Types of Crime Explained?

Although one of the strengths of Left Realism is its theoretical ability to explain a wide range of crime - from low-level street crime to high-level fraud - across a range of boundaries (such as class, age, gender and ethnicity), the main initial concern of early Left Realism was working-class street crime and it's intra-group character. That is, the claim that the majority of crime tended to be committed by working class individuals against other working class individuals, something that distinguished Left Realism from Radical Criminology through its recognition that the victims of crime were, by-and-large, ordinary working-class people.

It also distinguished itself from something like Interactionism and Labelling Theory by arguing that we needed to confront the inescapable fact that those committing crimes were, in the main, young, male and working class. There was, for example, no great mass of undetected middle class crime, crimes of the elderly and so forth.

Criticism?

1. Although, at the time, the focus on the poor and disadvantaged working class as both perpetrators and, most-importantly, victims was arguably a reasonable one, things have moved-on with the extensive development of different forms of cybercrime.

While this isn't to say low-level forms of street crime are now irrelevant or inconsequential - far from it - but rather that the criminal opportunities, particularly for what might formerly have been considered middle-class types of fraud, opened-up online have changed the criminal landscape in ways that could not have been reasonably foreseen at the end of the last century.

2. What was considered, at the time, to be a "realistic" approach to crime lead to a highly male-centric approach to understanding both perpetrators and victims.

3. One of the strengths of Left Realism was that it offered a multi-dimensional view of crime and its causes: while it clearly recognised the role played by economic factors such as poverty and deprivation, these were not the sole causes for the deceptively simple reason that not everyone in similar economic circumstances turned to crime. Criminality, in this respect, was the result of a combination of factors, economic (relative deprivation), political (marginalisation) and cultural (subculture) that constituted a multi-dimensional approach to understand crime and criminality.

While this was a theoretical advance on monocausal forms of crime theorising, these elements have tended to escape critical examination in two ways:

Firstly, although each of these concepts has a certain plausibility as factors in criminal behaviour they are difficult to measure:

- Individually: it's not clear, for example, if they are categories that can be objectively operationalised or simply subjective criteria relating to people's individual feelings and beliefs. Problems with the former include how to accurately measure these categories empirically, while adopting the latter position makes it deceptively easy to "predict the past". This involves looking at evidence of criminal involvement and "working backwards" to show how perpetrators are relatively deprived, politically marginalised and supported by a subcultural group.

- Collectively: we don't know the relative importance of each in the crime equation. Is relative deprivation, for example, the most important feature underpinning criminality, with marginalisation and subculture relative minor features? Alternatively, must all three categories feature equally in any equation - and, in either case, how could we measure this?

Secondly, Webber (*Youth Crime and Relative Deprivation*, 2003) argues Left Realism misinterpreted the concept of relative deprivation, seeing it in terms of the idea lower-class individuals or groups generally compare their lives to those of other, less deprived, individuals or groups and feel aggrieved by the position in which they find themselves. This, in turn, breeds a political disenchantment with a system that has failed them and, where this sense of grievance is shared in some way with other, similarly-positioned, individuals, motivates them to engage in various forms of criminality as a means of trying to redress the situation.

Webber's observational and interview research in "*Brushingwood*", a pseudonymous outer-London town, suggests young people don't necessarily experience relative deprivation in a way that promotes criminality. He argued, for example, "*The young people articulated their aspirations to good careers, but more than this expected to reach these goals. They had bought into the ideology of the 'good job', all that was needed was to listen and encourage the aspiration*".

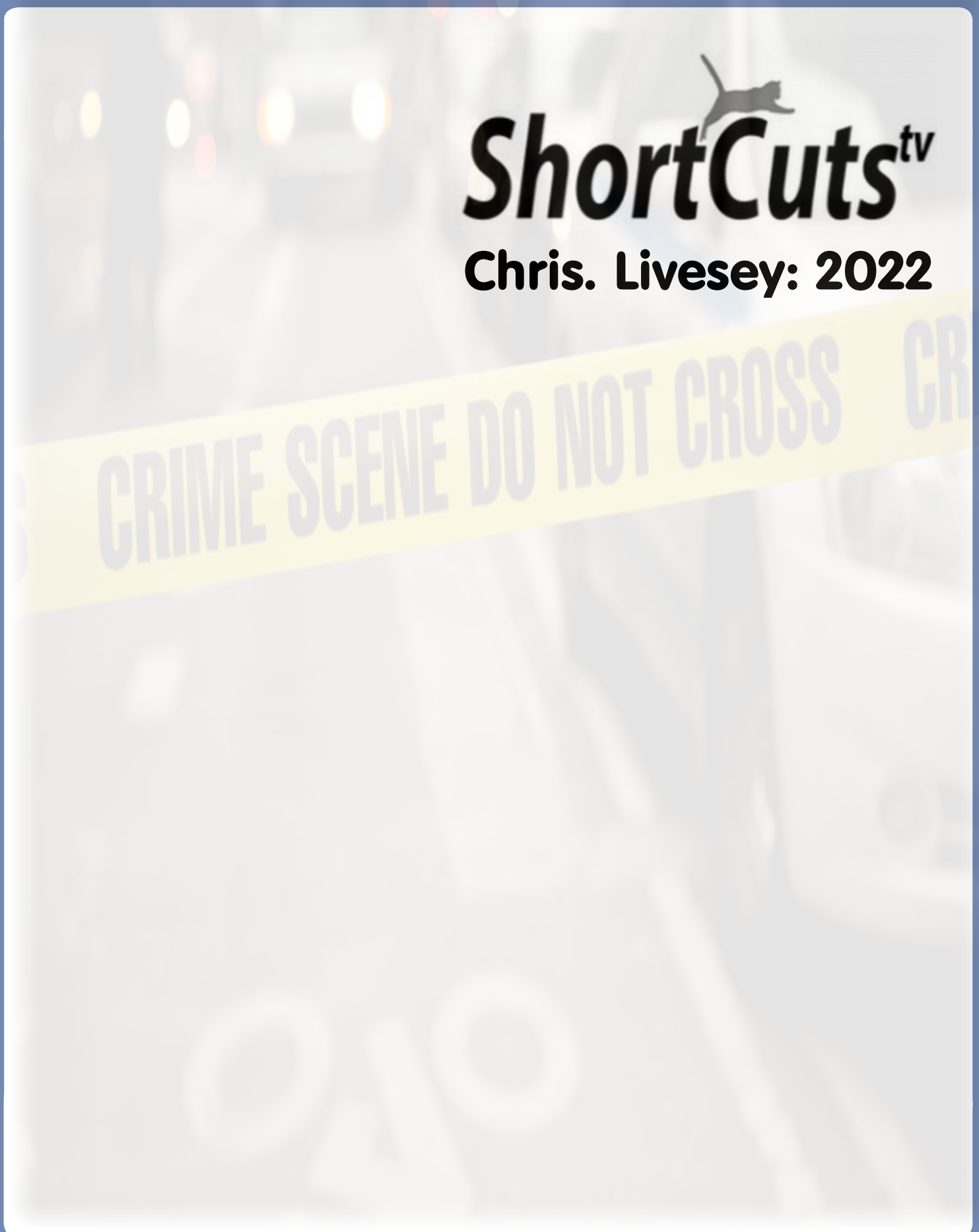
They were quite prepared, in other words, to work legitimately towards the various goals our society had set but their efforts were invariably blocked by the behaviour of control agencies such as teachers and the police. For the latter "the focus…was very much on youth as a problem. Consequently, the young people were discussed with reference to their disruptive behaviour, energies were directed towards the goal of crime control".

There was, Webber argued, "*no clear causal link between relative deprivation and crime*", precisely because "*Young people do not perceive deprivation in a straightforward way".*

Rather than seeing relative deprivation as something the individual internalises and, by so doing, acts-out ways of overcoming a sense of grievance through crime, Webber's research suggests the reverse. The operation of local control agencies, from schools to the police, act in ways to block deprived young people from achieving their career goals: from school teachers "predicting the criminal choices" of their pupils, to police and politicians viewing them as "thugs" and "yobs" whose behaviour must be closely patrolled and punished.

Relative deprivation, Webber suggests, only kicks-in *after* certain young people - *male, working-class* - are labelled in ways that serve to block legitimate routes to future success: "*in an ironic role-reversal it is the school predicting the criminal choices and [young people] who are struggling for the legitimate means*".

As he concludes, "*Relative deprivation is not about blocked aspiration, but where the expectation of gaining something is blocked (for example a good career, respect or consumer goods)*".



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