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What is This?
Don’t look up, don’t look down: Liberal criminology’s fear of the supreme and the subterranean

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Abstract
Criminology is ideally placed to examine the late-capitalist subjectivities now appearing before us in stark relief as the current economic crises deepen. However, to do so it must come of age as a producer discipline, exporting and exchanging its empirical findings and theoretical formulations with its former parent disciplines on equal terms. Only then can it equip itself to analyse the reality of a present and a future characterised by inevitable socioeconomic turmoil, and thus make a full and active contribution to intellectual and political life. To do this effectively criminology must first throw off the repressive control of post-war catastrophism, which, ironically, fixed criminology’s gaze on systems of social control and neglected that which elicits the perceived need for control.

Keywords
barbarism, catastrophism, objectless anxiety, pseudo-pacification, special liberty, symbolic inefficiency

Introduction: Neoliberalism in Crisis
The current politico-economic context in which today’s forms of crime, punishment and criminological discourse are embedded is complex, but hopefully the following brief sketch will highlight some major contextual issues. The long recession that began in the 1970s was the first sign that the liberal-capitalist economy was moving into a phase of unprecedented difficulty. By the 1980s, despite substantial rises in productivity, the real wages of western industrial workers began to flatline and decline after consistently rising throughout the 20th century (Wolff, 2010). After the success of a mass-mediated political campaign that portrayed western industry as uncompetitive, large sectors of the West were deindustrialised. Production centres were moved abroad, at first to the Far East, where costs were significantly lower (Harvey, 2005; Glyn, 2006). Deindustrialisation was at its most intense in the heavy industrial heartlands of Britain and the
USA. In the wake of deindustrialisation the neoliberal strategy implemented to rescue these nations from an ignominious and socio-politically volatile fall from grace was based on the recirculation of capital from the oil-rich Middle East and the rapidly industrialising Far East back through western regions to develop service and retail industries (Graeber, 2011; Harvey, 2011). The financial and corporate elite once again increased their wealth, while workers, disempowered by the decline of their unions and dispirited in the shadow of mass unemployment, were forced to become accustomed to a more precarious existence in an unstable economy and a revived competitive-individualist culture (Hall and Winlow, 2005; Standing, 2011). As surplus capital accumulated in the form of liquid assets owned and controlled by the wealthy elite, it sought new consumer markets, and greater speculative risks were taken by bankers issuing credit on the back of markets that were rising yet resting on precarious ground in the real economy. In the 1990s a classic bubble economy was inflated before the very eyes of an economically ill-educated population whose memories of the Great Depression and its primary cause – speculation – had faded.

As these real markets began to falter – especially the vital housing market – the resultant toxic assets in derivatives markets were irresponsibly hidden in overrated packages of debt obligations by bonus-hungry traders working on behalf of the new global rentier class and the pension funds alike (Keen, 2011; Rasmus, 2010). When the sophisticated but overextended risk-calculation machinery on which the financial industry depends malfunctioned to allow the over-accumulation of toxic assets, the bubble inevitably burst, leading to the ‘credit crunch’ in 2008. Everyday working and taxpaying people were forced to fund the bailouts required to save the whole banking system from insolvency, but the expected recovery in real economic growth that was needed to generate the wages required to fund the funders came only in fits and starts, and markets worldwide became volatile and unpredictable. Even neoclassical economists realised that the growth required to jump-start western economies back into life was not forthcoming; at the time of writing the global average rate of compound growth in the real economy – on whose rising markets the financial shadow-economy is entirely dependent – is threatening to sink below the minimum 3% per annum threshold preferred by investors (Harvey, 2011). Forecasts are bleak; even in the new industrial powerhouse of China, growth is decelerating. Hamstrung by large deficits and unable to deploy the traditional Keynesian mechanism of capital exchange controls in combination with demand management, the neo-Keynesian method of encouraging governments to print money, boost employment and raise more taxes to create market demand and encourage lending as a means of pump-priming economies seemed to lose its efficacy. The patient refused to recover to full fitness and, as toxicity filtered through to states and bond markets, western nations now live in the shadow of increasing deficits, sovereign debt crises, crippling austerity cuts and, in some cases, insolvency and default.

In a globally interlinked economy characterised by neoliberal economic restructuring, this crisis is impacting on all nations. The patient is on permanent life support, and neither Keynesian growth-driven solutions nor neoliberal austerity can cure it. Some analysts are now beginning to realise that the liberal-capitalist system is running into serious structural difficulties beyond the traditional business cycle, and those who deny it are burying their heads in the sand (Heinberg, 2011). This is not a dystopian vision predicated on some outlandish millenarian ‘end-time’ discourse but a simple, honest appraisal of the current state of affairs; no endgame, no final catastrophe extinguishing a doomed race in melodramatic B-movie style, just constant, grinding economic contraction and instability and social disruption, which in some locations is right now
being experienced in quite extreme forms (Davis, 2006; Žižek, 2010). The aetiological roots of these difficulties are not primarily social or ‘intersectional’, nor the product of some suppositious unravelling of the forces and structures of ‘modernity’, but of a historical stage reached in the economic and material basis of human life. Put simply, the liberal-capitalist system is not reaching the ‘end of growth’ per se, in the sense of an abrupt plummet into a vortex, but gradually approaching the objective material limit to its capacity to generate the compound rate of growth required to pay back the bank loans that create and circulate the money required to sustain current global levels of consumption. It might well be the case that workers in the developing world will never attain the material standard of living once enjoyed by the former European and US industrial proletariat in the middle decades of the 20th century (Heinberg, 2011). Should the capitalist system persist in its current neoliberal form, nor will they ever attain a comparable degree of socioeconomic stability and security.

Underlying the current socioeconomic and political turmoil is the bald fact that reserves of the types of portable, compact, high-energy fossil fuels on which capitalism depends – with a historically unprecedented growth rate that has increased the GDP of industrial economies by up to thirty-two times since the early 19th century – are entering a phase of gradual depletion. Oil, with its petroleum derivatives the most useful of all, is now past its peak, which is reflected in its rising price. No replacement energy source of similar low cost, portability and compactness, with anywhere near as high an energy-to-mass ratio, will be available in the foreseeable future. Supplies of fresh water and minerals are also depleting, and food prices are rising. To cut a long story short, the next phase in human history is not Armageddon, but a gradual, enforced downsizing of the global economy and ‘standards of living’ calibrated by high levels of material consumption (Heinberg, 2011). As countryside regions are turned over to commercial agriculture and workers are herded into urban areas to chase scarce jobs, and as climate change causes water shortages and transnational population migration, a fundamental malfunction has appeared in the global financial system. In the capitalist era, banks largely won the battle against sovereign states over the entitlement to create money, the vast bulk of which is lent into existence not by fiat but as credit, which is invested in the ability of the economy to grow and individuals, businesses and states to pay back loans (Graeber, 2011; Rasmus, 2010). These loans, translated into the technical euphemism of ‘debt obligations’, are subsequently traded in financial derivatives markets as assets, along with related insurance packages, which guarantee creditors income streams consisting of interest, thus encouraging more credit to be issued. The problem is that the supply of money is ultimately dependent on growth and rising markets in the real economy; therefore, even if an economy is functioning reasonably well in the production of goods and services to meet needs in a ‘steady state’, the money supply will contract sharply, because, with no guarantee of the required growth in the near future, fewer investment risks will be taken and less credit will be issued. Put simply, the logic of the current neoliberal-capitalist system is propelling us headlong into a future in which a declining amount of money will be available for large post-agricultural populations that are entirely dependent on permutations of wages and state benefits.

After a decade of social unrest and a ‘crime explosion’ (Reiner, 2007) during the deindustrialisation process in the 1980s, a combination of the subjectifying power of ideology, the seductions and distractions of consumer culture and the retreat of militant factions of the left succeeded in moving the pseudo-pacification process up a gear to rebalance the tension between stimulation and pacification and placate an electorally significant majority of the western population (Hall,
20012; Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008). General crime rates fell in Britain and the USA from the mid-1990s, but imprisonment rates continued to rise, modes of surveillance proliferated and rates of violent crime remained high (Hall and McLean, 2009; Reiner, 2007). Now that the economic bubble has burst and austerity measures are forced on populations by bankers and neoliberal governments, criminal markets are once again becoming more active across the western world, including the formerly stable and notably less criminogenic Eurozone. In many less developed economies, lawless paraspaces have appeared where pure markets have replaced traditional ethico-social and political systems (Glenny, 2008). In the coming decades we face the enforced contraction of the global capitalist economy, mass unemployment and a shrinking supply of money to pay wages, raise taxes and provide welfare benefits. Consequently, we also face the prospect of waves of social unrest, the significant expansion of criminal markets in an informal shadow-economy, and reactionary authoritarian responses.

Liberalism’s Catastrophist Doctrine

What useful intellectual tools do we have to hand as we face this crisis and its criminological forms? A brief trawl through the theory textbooks will demonstrate that criminology has never been less than creative in its production of intellectual tools in the fields of research and theory. The problem is, however, that its general aetiological direction has been strictly controlled by the negativistic nature of post-war social science in general, which was founded on the ‘fear of fear’, or, to be more precise, the fear of the potential consequences of the politics of fear (see Hall, 2012). The politics of fear is an ancient concept, but it assumed its greatest importance in intellectual culture in the wake of Nazism and Stalinism. For Alain Badiou (2007), these murderous catastrophes, echoed again in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Cambodian Killing Fields, marked the end of the final phase of a tripartite Lacanian historical process. Where dreams of New Jerusalem were born in the Imaginary of 18th-century radical movements, and found their ideological frameworks in the Symbolic Order produced in 19th-century intellectual movements – especially Marxism – in the 20th century the endeavour, driven by the politicised ‘passion for the real’, to manifest these dreams ended in Stalinist and Maoist terror. The bitter lesson to be learned from these tragedies reverberated across the globe; any Promethean attempt to establish the moral and sociable individual, a fair socioeconomic order, a rich culture and benign democratic governance by means of the violent overthrow of the old order will deliver only something far worse.

At roughly the same time as the rise of Stalinism, however, the collapse of the unstable capitalist market economy into worldwide depression and war set the conditions for the rise of Nazism, a movement even more horrific. At this point political thought shifted abruptly into a mode of catastrophism, politics’ objectified fear of the inevitably deleterious consequences of its own actions. This, however, combined with the extant fear of losing the existing momentum generated by liberalism’s flight from ancient tyranny and economic instability to enter a negative double bind, an intellectual prison from which it has never escaped; to avoid manifested Evil it must obey the simultaneous injunctions not to transform the world and not to keep it exactly as it is. The post-war world was therefore one of social democratic compromise, an attempt to create by means of piecemeal reform a more leisurely and less dangerous form of incremental progress. We had learnt that regressive politics and the breakdown of impatient progressive politics are two different routes to the same destination of totalitarian violence. The New Left was born in the
1950s when, even after Nikita Krushchev had revealed Stalinist repression in detail and renounced it, Soviet armed forces continued to crush dissent in its satellite states. In the immediate wake of totalitarian horrors the ‘barbarism of order’ became the principal object of fear and philosophical reflection for the European émigrés to Britain and the USA who had witnessed its consequences first-hand. Western philosophy was now driven by clearly objectified fear, and set about rewriting the philosophical agenda around the core issue of negative human rights. Thus, as importer disciplines, the social sciences were supplied with a new remit that shifted the emphasis from the analysis of social systems and the human condition to the protection of the individual from any form of collective power. This is quite understandable; it is foolish to imagine that in the aftermath of such unmitigated catastrophes it could have been any other way.

Western philosophy had a new heart and soul, ineluctably and totally liberal. However, because these modernist political catastrophes were such proximal events, the barbarism of order dominated the full spectrum of our vision and memory. Thus the barbarism of disorder, the human condition’s other terrifying extremity, became a distant memory; who could remember the 12th-century Anarchy, feudal brigandage or the crime explosions of industrial capitalism’s early urbanisation processes? Liberalism is far enough removed from its own brutal past (see Lusordo, 2011; Seymour, 2008) to escape the grasp of memory and once again claim the moral high ground while its own inimitable barbarism of order is relegated to the margins of discourse alongside the barbarism of disorder. Where these two orders of barbarism are remembered, excused or romanticised, it is by representations whose connection to reality is very difficult to test or dispute in any convincing way; consequently, very few people care about them. Besides, from the 1920s the mass media were developing the ideological power to romanticise the barbarism of disorder as and when it made brief appearances; for instance, the US gangsterism that pervaded the antebellum, Prohibition and Depression years and increased the homicide rate to around 10 per 100,000 in 1933 (Hall and McLean, 2009). However, the dominance of catastrophist ideology ensured that the barbarism of collectivist order became the principal object of fear. At the time it became fashionable to say that liberal-capitalism is imperfect but the least worst of all possible options.

As the stereotyped, demonised and pathologised ‘other’ – the folk-devil as the eternal victim of collectivist brutality – was introduced into the philosophical discourse, it established itself as a motif in liberal thought. The protection of the human rights of the other-as-victim – the poor, immigrants, ethnic minorities, prisoners and so on – now became the principal task to which philosophy and the social sciences were recruited. However, liberalism is not a homogeneous movement, and our constantly objectified and commemorated fear of the collectivist catastrophes opened the door to it as a whole; alongside the liberal left the classical-liberal right also slipped through, promising a future of prosperity and freedom enabled by deregulated markets. Classical liberalism’s free-market and libertarian individualist doctrines – which were known then to constitute the socially destructive element of capitalism’s overall process of creative destruction (see Schumpeter, 2010) – were at first marginalised by the post-war social democratic movement, whose fear of regressive or revolutionary collectivism was tempered by an intellectual awareness that what lay behind the rise of Nazism, and continued to justify Stalinism in the minds of some intellectuals, was the tendency of capitalism to collapse into socially destructive epic recessions and depressions. The barbarism of disorder that grew amid a rapid economic downturn had, in a Germany humiliated by defeat in war and bankrupted by reparations, created the conditions for the rise of one of history’s most barbarous orders as a reaction to the objectless fear and insecurity.
that permeated the whole population. The post-war political class established social democracy as a middle way, a new phase of the pseudo-pacification process in which the destructive element of the capitalist dynamic could be harnessed, controlled and compensated by Keynesian economic management and social-liberal welfarism; liberty and collectivism, and libido and control, were to exist in a new form of productive and civilised harmony. However, the proximity of the recent political catastrophes meant that the collectivist element of the compromise still aroused the most suspicion and fear, and attracted the most vigilant monitoring. Thus the project moved forward with a commitment to collectivist control and redistributionist welfare that was significantly weaker than its commitment to liberty, free markets and the unleashed libido.

This imbalance of fear fuelled a subtle mode of intellectual repression. Thinking was ordered to take a cold shower to dampen down the fire of Ethical Realism and revolutionary fervour, and to abandon intellectual representations of the ‘class struggle’ and the ‘class enemy’. In this political blind-spot the traditional plutocratic elite – the bankers and business operators who survived the Great Depression and began to grow richer as the assets they had acquired in the fire-sale that always accompanies economic downturns were liquefied and invested in the post-war productive boom – began clawing their way back to prominence. Championed from the very beginning of the post-war period by the likes of Hayek, von Mises and Rand (Weiss, 2012), cautiously welcomed back to the table by tremulous liberals such as Popper and Berlin (Hall, 2012) and glorified by a mass media apparatus they owned and controlled, their influence grew in economics, politics and cultural life. When the Keynesian economic project entered choppy waters in the 1970s, the classical-liberal right returned in Britain and the USA, in what was little less than a coup d’État and a Restoration (Badiou, 2007), to establish the current neoliberal continuum. Weakened by its imbalanced compromise with liberalism, and sufficiently naïve to misjudge the extent to which the classical-liberal variant of conservatism is ingrained in Anglo-American culture and to overlook the infiltration of right-wing libertarianism and commercialism into the bogus ‘cultural revolution’ of the 1960s (see Heath and Potter, 2006), the liberal left took a thumping defeat in the 1980s. It has never recovered, and it now remains marginalised, restricted to the performance of its current role as a complaints bureau for those whose rights are already under threat and whose opportunities for economic participation in capitalist markets have already been diminished, where once its political role was to create a set of socioeconomic relations in which these forms of subjugation could not occur in the first place.

From the 1960s, capitalism’s post-war reconstructive dynamism combined with the mass-mediated consumer spectacle to capture the hearts of western populations and corrode from the inside the historically brief and unfinished project of politically inspired social solidarity. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the combined leftist and rightist forces of catastrophism declared the ‘end of history’, bringing closure not just to the solidarity project but to the metaphysics of its underlying collectivist-universalist discourse. For a brief moment in history, mainstream liberals really did believe that they had defeated not only the barbarism of order but its underlying ideological principles and methods of cultural reproduction; all that was required was vigilance and enough resolve to maintain the progressive momentum of gradual reform. However, despite its origins in real experience and its undeniable probity, in this current era of late capitalism, with neoliberalism in disarray and economies plunging towards depression and permanent contraction, unreconstituted catastrophism is now a paralysing toxin. Its antagonism to collectivist politics and deep transformation of economic organisation means that, despite its protestations to the
contrary and its spectacular championing of the underdog, it now colludes by default in the attenuation of everything, even human rights, especially those associated with social needs. The practice of individualised and legalised human rights has now abandoned its vision of the ‘good’, of Adorno’s (1967, 1968) nurturing society, the establishment and reproduction of the practical and social conditions in which each human being can flourish and reach her full creative potential. For sure, the principal demand of the human rights discourse, the ‘avoidance of mistreatment’ (Badiou, 2002), represents a crucial minimal baseline, but as such it lacks ambition, censors positive thought and adds weight to neoliberalism’s fundamental ideological domain assumption that deep political intervention in underlying socioeconomic structures and processes leads to economic inefficiency and totalitarian government (Žižek, 2011).

Thus left-liberalism joins neoliberalism in averting its eyes from the localised wastelands of socioeconomic destruction caused by the relentless restructuring of the global economy and the subsequent economic crises (Hall et al., 2008). It is down here in these vortices that criminal entrepreneurship flourishes among a powerful and influential minority, intimidating and exploiting the majority, corroding social relations and, as it recruits too many young people (see Pitts, 2008), threatening to subvert the cultural values that had begun to establish themselves during high industrialism’s solidarity project (Reiner, 2007). The duplication of neoliberalism’s imbalanced global power relation between the interconnected kleptocratic minority and the precarious majority – in the West a politically inert mass characterised by atomisation, incoherence, incorporation, apathy and reticence – in small locales reminds us of just how complex, durable and currently inaccessible capitalism’s organic cell-like reproductive mechanism is when compared to the simplistic class, ethnicity, gender and citizenship relations that constitute sociology’s current ‘intersectional’ heuristic model. While the power relations within and between the latter can be calibrated and marginally improved in terms of simple fairness, the former’s cell-like organic complexity presents us with problems that seem to defy our current modes of understanding and political practice (Hall, 2012). The exploitative ‘them’, who keep the exploited ‘us’ in what seems like a permanent state of political paralysis, seem to occupy a complex configuration of strategic positions and maintain a shifting network of corrupt relations and lucrative practices throughout the social order. The institutionalised conflict of the post-war settlement era that stabilised the relation between clearly demarcated classes (see Wieviorka, 2009) was replaced by neoliberalism’s fluid milieu of competitive individualism and social mobility which, at the same time as it polarised incomes, fragmented the previously structural class relation and implanted its miniature relational and subjective forms in an assortment of micro-communities. The micro-power relation that the symbolic interactionists, sub-culturalists and Foucauldians posited as the bedrock of society was in fact the politically defused detritus of the effective politico-economic and ideological strategy of social fragmentation and atomisation. The chances of politically inspired structural violence were indeed reduced, but the ever-present dynamic force of pseudo-pacification simply allowed more intensive social competition to grow in the atomised mass. This resulted in increased activity in criminal markets and sporadic outbreaks of politically inarticulate violence such as murders, gang-fights and riots, all of which, despite the intermission of the ‘crime drop’ in the 1990s, have increased in the USA and UK since the neoliberal project established itself (Reiner, 2007). The barbarism of disorder, reduced to a negligible presence during the post-war solidarity project, was making a return in fragmented forms in neoliberalism’s localised wastelands, drawing back onto the stage like a long-lost pantomime villain the barbarism of order; imprisonment rates,
surveillance, militarised policing, military ‘interventions’ abroad and the shadowy activities of the
depth security state all increased and expanded. Liberalism had once again failed to deliver its old
Kantian promise of ‘perpetual peace’ at the end of history.

Ciudad Juárez: Criminality and the Advanced Capitalist
Paraspace
This failure allowed the return of the psychosocial forces of the disavowed obscene Real (Hall,
2012; Žižek, 2008), which now operate freely in deregulated spaces throughout neoliberalism’s
social structure, from its supreme heights to its subterranean basement. The result is a precarious
society of pseudo-pacified enemies whose competitive activity is kept in check by the reproduction
of legal rules and socially acceptable strategic normative practices (Hall et al., 2008; Moxon, 2011).
Neoliberalism disrupted the maintenance of the low crime rates that Britain had seen since the
1850s (Reiner, 2007). Post-war consumer culture loosened the strategic normative practices that
had contained its vital libidinal drive, which in turn was further stimulated as a strict requirement to
provide an energy source of sufficient intensity to fuel a partially deindustrialised economy
dependent on increased consumption. The ‘subterranean enemy’, abruptly robbed of its traditional
collectivising political institutions, mythology and identity, which had threatened the capitalist elite
enough to demand major concessions (see Wieviorka, 2009), responded by fragmenting and
atomising. This, tacitly celebrated by the liberal-postmodernist left, carved out a symbolically
inefficient space in which a powerful minority of narcissistic and depoliticised subjects battled for
symbols of distinction in a surrogate social order staged by mass-mediated consumer culture. Thus
the narcissistic ‘undertaker’, the criminal entrepreneur (see Hall, 2012), started to operate quite
successfully in locales of permanent recession (Taylor, 1999; Winlow, 2001). The immediate material
and symbolic success enabled by crime acted as an attractor for the recruitment of other young
people into criminal markets in those locales worst affected by rapid deindustrialisation, where
new, temporary micro-communal hierarchies were established (Pitts, 2008).

‘Glocal’ connections between the supreme and the subterranean were also established, as the
subterranean entrepreneur provided new local markets for global trafficking. The expansion of
the huge ‘gross criminal product’ (Cribb, 2009) in the global economy – somewhere in the region
of $3 trillion of profits per annum diverted through tax havens into the financial industry as liquid
assets (Shaxson, 2011) – has now radically altered the relationship between states and successful
criminal entrepreneurs. The relation of power and dependency is now reversed, and not only is
the state’s ability to control crime compromised, but to attempt to do so beyond the tokenism
required for the management of its public image is no longer in its fiscal interests. The ‘culture of
control’ is targeted, alongside the intellectually neglected ‘culture of seduction’, exclusively on the
‘lower’ classes, not just as a reactionary expression of ‘class struggle’ but because to target
powerful criminals who are now major investors in precarious sovereign bond markets simply
would be to defy late capitalism’s socioeconomic logic. The successful criminals among the
plutocratic elite have achieved a true position of special liberty beyond democratic government.

The supreme and the subterranean are connected by the common purpose of achieving special
liberty in spaces beneath any symbolic order founded on Ethical Realism. Special liberty is an
ultimate space of libidinal freedom beyond Berlin’s negative and positive liberty (Hall, 2012), a
space where each individual’s envy, ambition, prejudice and hatred can be played out with impunity (Agamben, 2005; Žižek, 2008). In such spaces late-capitalist subjectivity and deregulated post-political economy present us with extreme examples of the breakdown of pseudo-pacification, the dark side of liberal individualism. Actions performed in the course of achieving special liberty justify, among populations in a condition of objectless anxiety, the expansion of measures of extreme control needed to pacify an over-stimulated libido that operates with a modified super-ego. It is the evacuation of the traditional super-ego and its replacement by the super-ego injunction to enjoy that presents us with the problem. The redundant biopower regime that governed the productive era has been replaced by a regime of psychopower (Stiegler, 2011). This shadowed the biopower regime throughout capitalist history, playing the more active part in the constitution of desire and subjectivity by orientating it towards commodities as socio-symbolic objects, but it has now come to the fore in late capitalism’s libidinal economy. It has relied on the destruction of the desire stimulated by the transcendental imagination, and its ability to constitute its own objects of desire (Badiou, 2007; Stiegler, 2011), and the destruction of the high-modernist symbolic order that once gave such objects transcendental meaning and allowed political organisation around them. Now, however, the transcendental imagination is short-circuited by a pervasive mass-media industry while political symbolism is derided and rendered anachronistic by the supercilious ‘coolness’ of post-political discourse (Hall et al., 2008).

This has been a very convenient move for the post-war liberal-right and liberal-left, who sought to abandon revolutionary socialist or deep regulatory social-democratic politics and replace them with post-political pluralism (ibid.). The dream was that we had reached a plateau in the history of liberalism, a stable capitalist economy – no more boom and bust! – overseen by fair democratic governance protecting rights and encouraging multicultural tolerance and harmony. The liberal-postmodernist left’s claim that equality, or even ‘new life’ in global circuits of communication (Lash, 1990; see Dean, 2009, for a critique), can be achieved in the structures of the current system nourishes today’s revived dominant ideology. However, the capitulation of both right- and left-liberalism to the triumph of market capitalism is now the focus of new and excoriating critique among critical philosophers and theorists. Perhaps the most succinct is Mark Fisher (2009), whose concept of capitalist realism perfectly captures the current Zeitgeist; all parties, from corrupt politicians and businessmen to bored further education students and street criminals, now accept that there is no alternative but to live their lives in the reality made and reproduced every day by the active agents of neoliberalism and its totalising market economy. This is where subjectivity is being forged and reproduced, in a new libidinal consumer economy that centralises in culture the anti-values of systemic disposability and infidelity, which is reflected in the financial economy, creating a detachment from objects of desire that allows a pure drive-based addiction to an endless procession of new objects. Ethics and politics are thus incorporated alongside consumption in a dualistic pharmacological form that is both toxic and curative, and subjectivity moves beyond mere passive, apolitical stupefaction to an active, drive-based and desublimated form of ‘systemic beastliness’ (Stiegler, 2011: 160), seeking a constant curative fix that cannot perform its task.

In some spaces created by neoliberal economic restructuring, the toxicity of late capitalism’s psychopower regime and its drive to special liberty are manifested in spectacular forms. In the Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez, Nazario Moreno González, the leader of crime group La Familia, asserts his group’s ‘divine right’ to eliminate enemies whenever they pose a threat to the group’s lucrative economic activities (Vulliamy, 2010). This is a classic cultural product of the
violent and regressive forces roused and harnessed by the pseudo-pacification process as they leak beyond normative restraints that have been eroded in regions of socioeconomic disruption. During the neoliberal era many Mexican-based companies began to bank offshore and outsource industrial jobs, which resulted in significant reductions in employment, small business opportunities, inland revenue and public services. This disruption inflicted severe damage on both legitimate economic prospects and mechanisms of ethico-cultural and social reproduction. Drug and arms distribution markets moved into the ensuing vacuum, and expanded rapidly in such towns because they lie in an ideal position of proximity to the United States border, with good land, sea and air connections to Latin American production centres. The United States is of course the drug producers’ largest single market. Drugs go north and, in exchange, guns and money come south. González was one among a select few who achieved success by becoming an extreme and ruthless variant of Sombart’s (1998) ‘undertaker’ – one who achieves success in burgeoning markets by simply doing what needs to be done with minimal hesitation or trepidation – and began to play an influential role in the local social hierarchy, attracting the admiration of many younger Mexicans. In such elite criminal strata in deregulated paraspaces, individuals can quickly achieve the position of special liberty (Hall, 2012).

Ciudad Juarez has for a number of years returned one of the world’s highest murder rates. For Vulliamy, its drug markets, turf wars and punishment killings represent the future, as under-socialised and economically disenfranchised individuals are simply thrown into deregulated markets whose successful operators control negligent, corrupt and supine governments. The central criminological question is whether the form of subjectivity represented by González and other drug-market ‘undertakers’ will become a dominant norm as an inevitably contracting neoliberal economy creates mass unemployment and crushes traditional identities while parading the spectacular lifestyles of the mega-rich in front of the population; in the midst of all this poverty and disruption Mexico is also the home of the world’s richest man, telecommunications multi-billionaire Carlos Slim. For Žižek (2010), however, this breakdown of sociability is not a dystopian fantasy set in the future; it is already here, as Vulliamy probably knows, in myriad locales devastated by the unforgiving logic of neoliberal economic restructuring and feeling the pinch of the early stages of the coming economic contraction that is now being unmistakably signalled in the financial markets. In Mexico, Vulliamy could not detect any sign of movement in the politics of the right or left. The tradition of politics stretching back to classical Greece and beyond, and the socio-cultural forms with their roots in Catholicism and tribal customs, had among younger generations been virtually vaporised and superseded by a pure unregulated market, a total colonisation of life that is unavoidably criminogenic. These hostile forms of unregulated business and post-social interaction are thus, for Vulliamy, the terrifyingly regressive manifestations of a postmoral, postpolitical and postideological world, a pure market.

Liberalism Backfires: Capitalist Restoration and Post-politics
This post-moral, post-political situation looks likely to continue and spread during the period of inevitable economic contraction in a neoliberal context. However, Vulliamy’s notion of ‘postideological’ is problematic, because both the drive to special liberty and the attempt to deny its obscenity are essential aspects of liberal-capitalist ideology (see Winlow and Hall, 2011; Žižek, 2008). The principal strategy behind liberalism’s post-war success has to been to ensure that the
most potentially dangerous objects of fear are thoroughly disavowed and therefore hidden and outlawed from intellectual, political and public discourses. By now a veteran and highly efficient ideological machine, liberalism has learned over a long period of time to layer potential objects of fear over each other in such a way that the least dangerous conceal the most dangerous; ‘dangerous’ in the political sense of being likely to invoke some sort of uprising, reactionary or otherwise, among the masses. Here we bear witness to a clever tripartite symbolic reversal. Liberal discourse drags to the forefront the barbarism of order – the tyranny of the state – which, on its own, is the least dangerous because it cannot exist in any functional form without the plutocrats’ finance and active agency (Hall and Winlow, 2003). This obscures the second layer, the potential for the return of the barbarism of disorder, that which has been historically repressed by the modernist state and its rule of law, the anarchic free-for-all of hostile, ambitious individuals who seek the special liberty that fired the ambitions of those such as González, Escobar, Thaçi, Skilling or Madoff. These two layers obscure the real ‘heart of darkness’, the active core of the capitalist system, its obscene Real, which generates and diffuses actively unethical and criminal subjectivities throughout the social order, with the most successful operating in the shadowy corporate ‘deep state’, the inner business-governmental core of the plutocratic elite itself. With Straussian silence and confidentiality, this elite presides over an economic system that is highly destructive of the ‘commons’, and whose periodic ‘black holes’ of financial collapse and economic depression have been proven beyond any doubt to be capable of inflicting upon us the most catastrophic of all the forms of barbarism, where the violence of an imposed reactionary order combines with the chaotic disorder of those who secure special liberty within it. The true horror of Nazism was its genocidal violence combined with the sheer unpredictability of a leadership existing in a narcissistic state of exception, specially liberated from all rational and ethical restraints to play out their obscene drives in reality.

Liberalism’s principal move was towards a post-political era, with both left and right wings tacitly continuing to act as if the end of history had really arrived. Movement was feigned by an upsurge of Fabian protest and welfare administration, the substitute for real politics. This reached a peak as the post-structuralist and postmodernist movements entered the stage to deny truth and universal, objective meaning and ethics. For the Derridean deconstructionists nothing is sacred or true, and intellectual life must be a proactive process of ceaseless dissent, a permanent revolution in language and discourse, preventing any settlement on meaning and ethics and disrupting any focus that might threaten to clarify political or socioeconomic macro-systems. The search for psychosocial depth and the will to confront condensed macro-power would always lead to totalitarianism; best to deny the existence of both, forbid any search for their effects and look elsewhere. Criminology is at the intellectual forefront of this game because it exists on the cutting edge of the search for the obscene Real and its ethical condemnation; it is capable of constructing plausible representations of exactly what lies at the core of our way of life, about which we should be disgusted and politically exercised. However, in the first decade of the 21st century this liberal project backfired. Its inability to prevent the restoration of plutocratic power and stabilise the disintegrating finance-dependent global economy eroded its legitimacy. But, in the thrall of its own fearful catastrophism, it had also destroyed faith in any alternative means of politically organising socioeconomic relations. Thus it destroyed the left from the inside, making a far more complete job of it than neoliberalism could have done on its own, generating intellectual laziness, complacency, cynical pragmatism, pan-scepticism and an almost complete loss of faith on the part of those who might well have numbered amongst a politically militant and dangerous
left during the social democratic era. Despite their own spectacular failure in 2008, the neoliberal elite simply press on regardless, untroubled by an organised, militant opposition.

Criminology, Wherefore Art Thou?

Very good empirical research is being done (for example, Nordstrom, 2007; Winlow, 2001), but it is not filtering through to transform the underlying philosophical, theoretical and political dynamics of criminology’s overall intellectual project; it tends to be co-opted, ignored or dismissed. It sometimes seems that criminology prefers to remain in a subordinate position as an importer discipline that lacks the confidence to formulate its own major concepts and theories. Whenever criminologists do formulate interesting and valuable explanatory concepts they are largely ignored by a discipline that has since the 1960s mutated into ‘controlology’ (Ditton, 1979), with its gaze fixed almost exclusively – apart from a brief period where a virulent brand of radical feminism attempted to criminalise masculinity (see Carlen, 1988; Hall, 2002) – on the oppressive practices of the control apparatus. Yet, of all the social scientific disciplines, criminology is in a position to provide the most revealing empirical access to the new subjectivities, cultural forms and socioeconomic micro-communities that inhabit late capitalism’s wastelands and elite strata. One cannot help suspecting that liberal social science’s avoidance of detailed analyses of these emerging criminal forms is a means of covering up the abject failure of post-social-democratic politics. That things will get significantly worse in the worst affected locations during the coming period of long-term contraction is a safe bet. Nevertheless, liberal social science does not seem willing to pay too much attention to the early social effects of this historical transformation. Happy in its cosy post-war paradigm, which seeks out inequality and barbarism in the system but not of the system, most social scientists are reluctant to consider the empirical and theoretical beginnings of an alternative narrative that suits the times. Now that the recent seismic shift in the capitalist economy has imposed rapid change on us, whether we like it or not, the intellectual and political paradigms constructed in the catastrophist era with the specific purpose of deterring us from thinking about that type of rapid change are of little use to the intellectual analysis of the current crisis and its potential culturo-political responses, which will now take shape with very little influence from the left. Perhaps we need to revisit anthropology and philosophy to rethink the domain assumptions and seek new inspiration for theorisation and research. For instance, Graeber’s (2011) celebrated anthropological work presents us with the principle that a society that privileges its creditors over its debtors will, in spaces and periods where that inherently unjust and unstable relation experiences a crisis, degenerate into hostility. Is that not precisely what we face today?

We cannot approach the current crisis in a condition of internal censorship, where deep thinking about big issues is constantly marginalised and dismissed (Winlow, 2012). We are, after all, social scientists, not self-appointed censors on a zealous mission to quarantine any observation or thought that by the wildest stretch of the imagination might lead to the return of totalitarianism, liberalism’s symbol of ‘absolute evil’ (see Badiou, 2002). In this state of self-imposed intellectual paralysis, left-liberalism cannot detect the return of the obscene Real, the underlying drive in the pseudo-pacification process. It is this process’s current mode of operation – the super-ego injunction to ‘enjoy’ (Žižek, 2008) results in a partial loss of super-ego control (Stiegler, 2011) and over-stimulates the type of libidinal energy that fixates human beings on consumer capitalism’s hierarchal world of symbolic objects (Hall et al., 2008) – that creates a criminogenic climate in
which too many individuals are willing to risk inflicting various forms of harm on others in the
process of furthering the interests of the self. It is not just ideology but this criminogenic climate
and its real forms and practices, so pronounced in the elite strata where ideological exceptionalism
and special liberty justify harm, and at the bottom where socioeconomic devastation produces the
social vacuum into which criminal markets flow, which arouse among the ‘squeezed and
threatened middle’ regressive and dangerous popular sentiments for draconian forms of external
control. This is not the product of some suppositious urge to dominate and punish – tax-avoiding
neoliberals would rather reduce this costly exercise and rely on the system’s seductive capabilities –
but a populist reaction to widespread anxiety which, in liberalism’s post-political world, remains
objectless. Thus liberal catastrophism, the anti-aetiological and post-political supplement to
neoliberalism, defeats its own objective and contributes more than any other intellectual and political
discourse to the potential return in unpredictable forms of what it fears most and clumsily tries to
repress. One of the most pressing problems currently facing a discipline obsessed by its ‘public voice’
(see Loader and Sparks, 2010) is that the public, tired of being chastised and humiliated by the
automatic ‘moral panic’ platitude, have reached a point where, whenever a crime or a social harm
should occur, the last person they feel inclined to ask about its possible causes is a criminologist
(Gadd and Jefferson, 2007). It is difficult to underestimate the size of the vacuum this creates, which
simply begs the reactionary discourses of the right to pour into it, and the degree to which the
credibility of the left has been lost since the 1970s, especially among those who live in devastated
former industrial areas or satellite estates and suffer the dual harms of austerity imposed by the
plutocratic elite and intimidation from the operators of local criminal markets.

Criminology’s current condition is rather like watching an organism eat itself from the inside.
In our flight from a catastrophic past we have propelled ourselves into an era of symbolic
inefficiency; it is now impossible to symbolise the true, rational object of fear, not because the
object does not exist or because we lack the means of constructing a symbolic system fit for the
purpose, but because we are terrified of the potential political consequences of doing so. In a
culturally homogenising global capitalist economy, the new set of symbolic distinctions and
relations we face is the product of a hostile economised tribalism that establishes itself in a milieu
of apolitical conflict; new class formation intensifies as true politics and cultural differences are
lost. We try desperately to maintain our pseudo-pacified relations in an everyday life of grounded,
material enmity in an ultra-competitive world that is soon to face long-term economic contraction.
In this new continuum, in the wastelands underneath and the libertine zones above the middle-
class fantasy of a harmonious global cosmopolis, we now approach, to coin a phrase, a generic
global society of enemies, a homogenised economic and socio-symbolic system where apolitical
individuals are brought together in permanent competition. This gathering enmity is denied by the
overbearing domain assumption of pluralism, the doctrine that presents qualitative difference as
the bedrock of the social. There are, it insists, ‘great difficulties in determining whether there are
coherent interests among “the powerful” and, if so, what they are’ (Levi, 1987: 104). This
statement captures criminology’s variant of liberal-pluralism’s core belief, but it also gives the
game away; the act of banning all ‘reductionist’ depth-thinking in order to protect the ‘vulnerable’
from stereotypical labelling and pathologisation also protects the powerful from identification,
investigation, concerted ethical and sociological critique, political regulation and class struggle.
But of course ‘the powerful’ are no longer simply a rigid structural ‘ruling class’, but also all those
who are driven to join them by their toxic addiction to consumer culture’s symbolic objects, the
instant but temporary cure that lures individuals up a ladder to positions of social distinction that, if judged by the tenets of the Ethical Realism in whose destruction neoliberalism and liberal-postmodernism have colluded, could be recognised as essentially meaningless and valueless.

Liberal-pluralism and its postmodernist variants constitute a broad-spectrum atomising force, indiscriminate and politically destructive, protecting all forms of psychosocial motivation and action from serious depth critique and political regulation. It has nothing to offer apart from appeals to the moral agency of individuals. If this does not work, if indeed individuals have in the main been persuaded to disinvest and retract their libidinal energy from the social and the political, and have allowed their drives to overwhelm their transcendental desires and incorporate subjectivity in the addictive and inherently competitive surrogate social world of consumer culture, the intensity of social antagonism is ratcheted up in a dark subterranean vault underneath the radar of our current politics and intellectual culture. The resulting socioeconomic implosion, which has already happened and been shored up only by bailouts and enforced austerity, threatens to be of the magnitude that liberalism wishes to avoid, yet it continues to deny the warning signs. Because a reconstituted criminology could operate at the forefront of a new political project founded on Ethical Realism, digging up and exposing drives, practices and relations to concerted forms of ethical critique, it is the discipline most heavily policed by those who represent post-war catastrophism. Should criminology really flex its muscles to bring the ‘crimes of the capitalists’ to the forefront of popular culture and subject them to the level of condemnation currently reserved exclusively for totalitarianism, it would generate a shot of dialectical energy far too powerful for liberalism’s liking. Such flexing is disallowed, and therefore the ‘undertakers’, who operate throughout the social structure and risk the infliction of harm on the other as they seek to further their own acquisitive or expressive interests, escape legal sanctions, but, more importantly, they also escape the ‘social pressure’, comprised of ethical condemnation and political regulation, that would reconstitute the symbolic efficiency and transcendental desire of a new era of subjectivity and politics.

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References
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