

# **On Researching Harm**

## **An Ultra-Realist Perspective**

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### *Abstract*

In this chapter the author argues that an antidote to the partial paralysis pervading the study of harm might be found in developing a more integrated approach between criminology and zemiology. Towards this end, the chapter outlines the emergent paradigm of ultra-realism and introduces it as a mediating third. In doing so, a number of salient obstacles that have hitherto served to problematize research on harm are discussed. With a view towards the potential implications for a less harmful society, the chapter considers the politics of harm and argues for the abandonment of reformist critique in favour of a return to depth critique. Finally, the chapter concludes on the potential of researching harm from an ultra-realist perspective.

*Key Words:* Criminology; integrated approach; social change; ultra-realism; zemiology

### *Introduction*

The concept of harm occupies an increasingly salient position within criminology's research agenda as a number of recent publications demonstrate (see for example Hall and Winlow 2015, 2018a; Kotzé 2019; Lloyd 2018a; Raymen 2019a; Smith and Raymen 2018). Receiving renewed interest following "criminology's zemiological audit" (Hall and Winlow 2018a: 123), and the subsequent zemiological turn within criminology (Raymen and Smith 2019a), scholars have harnessed the concept of harm to expose capitalism's inherently zemiogenic core (Hall et al. 2020). Accordingly, as Raymen (2019a: 134) points out, following Hillyard and colleagues (2004, 2007), the concept of harm may prove to be "one of the most potentially potent and transformative concepts currently available to the social sciences". Yet for all the traction gained since the start of the twenty-first century there are still a number of barriers that prevent us from actualising this potential. Perhaps chief amongst them is the lingering tendency to arbitrarily separate the study of 'crime' and 'harm' and perpetuate false alternatives between criminology and zemiology (Kotzé 2018). Not only is this conceptually inaccurate, but it is

empirically unproductive as it compounds rather than resolves the problem of researching harm.

This chapter builds upon the author's previous work (Kotzé 2018, 2019) which suggests that an antidote to the partial paralysis pervading the study of harm might be found in developing a more integrated approach between criminology and zemiology. Towards this end, the chapter draws on the new theoretical framework of ultra-realism to explore how this emergent paradigm can facilitate such an approach. In doing so the chapter hopes to demonstrate how ultra-realism can help us overcome many of the problems associated with researching harm.

### *Mediating the Other of the Real*

As I have already noted, there remains a debilitating tendency to arbitrarily separate the study of crime and harm by positioning criminology and zemiology as false alternatives (Kotzé 2018). Continuously misidentified and reduced to a series of simplistic signifiers, criminology and zemiology are often cast as inherently polarised and competing projects. Driven by a limited understanding of the Greek word *zemia* this casting has encouraged both analytical and empirical inertia, precluding a more holistic exploration of the multifaceted and often interconnected forms of legal and illegal harm that damage our planetary and social wellbeing (Kotzé 2018). Yet, “nowhere in *zemia*'s genealogy is there to be found any support for the imposition of artificial boundaries or false dichotomies between crime and harm, or between criminology and zemiology” (Kotzé 2018: 101-102). In fact, quite the opposite is true. A closer reading of *zemia* actually implies a more integrated approach. As we shall see a bit later on, ultra-realists tacitly employ this closer reading and consider criminology's *fundamental* question to be driven by a concern for the most pressing zemiological issues, both legal and illegal (Hall and Winlow 2015, 2018b).

Indeed, it can be argued that ultra-realism embodies the essence of a more integrated approach between criminology and zemiology precisely because it works to dispense with bouts of fierce ‘topical guardianship’ and harness the potential synergies that exist between them (Kotzé 2018). However, we must be cautious here. Whilst it is a mistake to draw artificial lines in the sand, it is equally erroneous to view criminology and zemiology naïvely as *collegial neighbours*. This is because the neighbour is always a stranger, and the stranger is always a kind of enemy (Eagleton 2009). Rather than simply assuming the form of the imaginary other

with whom a mirror like relationship is possible, the neighbour constitutes the “Other qua Real, the impossible Thing” with whom no symmetrical dialogue is possible (Žižek 2005: 143). The neighbour as the Thing means that beneath the surface “there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness” (Žižek 2005: 143). Therefore, by unreflectively viewing criminology and zemiology as neighbours in an attempt to avoid polarisation we risk exacerbating rather than alleviating existing tensions. So long as each remains to the other, the Other of the Real Thing, no reciprocal exchange is possible between them (Žižek 2005). Accordingly, whilst Hillyard and Tombs (2017) are unerringly correct in noting that more needs to be done in order to explore and establish the relationship between criminology and zemiology, this evidently requires the intervention of a pacifying mediator (Žižek 2005). That is to say, a third agency to which both defer.

The position being advanced here is that ultra-realism can act as this mediating third. The extant literature certainly demonstrates that ultra-realism is fully capable of mediating this relationship, and in doing so facilitate a more integrated approach between criminology and zemiology. Indeed, the very ‘ingredients’ that comprise the new ultra-realist position actually necessitate a reconnection between crime and harm (Kotzé 2019). The position’s chief architects make it clear that ultra-realism is committed to confronting “neoliberal capitalism’s worldwide zemiological environment full in the face” and exposing its various criminogenic effects (Hall and Winlow 2018b: 54). They acknowledge that restricting our object of research to legally defined ‘crime’ is both inhibiting and unhelpful (Hall and Winlow 2018b). However, it is also acknowledged that some ‘crime’ does in fact represent an experience of real harm (Winlow and Hall 2016). Fundamentally, then, ultra-realists argue that we “should include but also transcend current legal definitions of ‘crime’...without assuming that all current legal definitions have no relation to real harm” (Hall and Winlow 2015: 89-90). Lloyd (2018a: 5) drives the point home particularly well by noting that:

...from an ultra-realist perspective, the negative motivation to harm accounts for the systemic violence of capitalist political economy while the positive motivation to harm fills a crucial gap that elucidates the subject’s willingness to inflict harm on others.

In other words, the fundamental harm at the capitalist system’s generative core has the probabilistic causal tendency to precipitate harmful events and absences that fall on *either* side of the legal divide (Hall and Winlow 2018a; Lloyd 2018a). This is a crucial consideration when defining the legitimate object of study for harm research precisely because, as Hillyard et al. (2004: 2) have already pointed out, “it makes no sense to separate out harms, which can be

defined as criminal, from all other types of harm”. Accordingly, ultra-realism is capable of acting as a suitable mediating third precisely because its adherents observe this central premise, ‘crime’ and ‘harm’ “can *always* be looked at in the same analytical frame” (Smith and Raymen 2018: 65, original emphasis). Ultra-realism, as the underlying framework that supports a more integrated approach, thus centralises both ‘crime’ and ‘harm’ in such a way that reflects an understanding of the centrality of *both* these concepts to criminology *and* zemiology (see Kotzé 2018).

For some, this amounts to an attempt at harmonisation which Copson (2018) argues actually risks impoverishing both criminology and zemiology as much as drives for polarisation does. Copson’s concern here is that collapsing one perspective into the other serves to deny meaningful debate in relation to how social problems may be effectively recognised and addressed. However, Copson (2018) appears to confuse harmonisation with what Archer (1995) calls ‘elisionism’. Whereas harmonisation involves a process of *collating* parallel narratives, elisionism is characterised by the *conflation* of two elements in an attempt to create ‘one new thing’, and in doing so negates any kind of dialectic between the two (Porpora 2007). By collating the parallel narratives of criminology and zemiology via the intervention of the mediating third, we may actually promote rather than negate dialectical debate precisely because the presence of the pacifying mediator *makes* reciprocal exchange possible (Žižek 2005). In this way, Copson (2018) arguably misidentifies the risk inasmuch as harmonisation may prove less problematic than either polarisation or the temptation to misidentify criminology and zemiology as neighbours qua imaginary other. Indeed, it is a commitment to the latter position more so than attempts at harmonisation that risk stalling the dialectic because, as Žižek (2005) points out, no unmediated reciprocal exchange is possible with the Other of the Real which lies beneath this misidentification.

What this brief discussion has hopefully demonstrated is that ultra-realism can function as the theoretical and empirical framework supporting a more integrated approach towards the study of crime and harm by reviving rather than stalling the dialectic between criminology and zemiology. Movement towards such an approach is salient for research on legal and illegal harm because it helps to overcome the initial barrier of false dichotomies and artificial disciplinary boundaries brought about by what Copson (2018: 52) astutely identifies as “academic identity politics”. Moreover, in its capacity as the fundamental third, ultra-realism can help us address a range of other issues that serve to problematize research on harm and

impede its potential utility. Accordingly, it is to a discussion of some of these broader issues that this chapter will now turn.

### *Ultra-Realism qua Third*

Ultra-realism is undoubtedly becoming increasingly popular and has recently formed the basis of a number of scholarly endeavours, including the development of a deviant leisure perspective (Hayward and Smith 2017; Kotzé 2018). However, for those unfamiliar with ultra-realism, it may be instructive to offer here a very brief outline. Ultra-realism is a complex theoretical framework and empirical project that ultimately seeks to dig beneath the surface-level description of abstracted empiricism in order to shed light on experiential lived realities of crime and harm (Hall and Winlow 2018b). It is useful to think of this complex paradigm in terms of the constituent components, or ‘key ingredients’, which comprise it (see Kotzé 2019). Although space precludes a detailed exposition of these here, suffice to say that “at the core of ultra-realism lies an original account of contemporary subjectivity as it acts in its socioeconomic context” (Winlow and Hall 2019: 26).

Whereas conventional readings of subjectivity often cast the subject as either inherently good or evil, ultra-realism eschews belief in a natural human essence (Lloyd 2018b). Drawing upon a transcendental materialist interpretation of subjectivity (see Johnston 2008), ultra-realism views the subject as a non-essential void capable of both good and evil (Lloyd 2018a, 2018b). In contrast to traditional philosophy’s view of the relation between the material and the ideal-symbolic, this new perspective views the former as permanently malleable and the latter as rigid and durable (Kotzé 2019; Winlow and Hall 2013). In somewhat simplified terms, whilst the ideological sociosymbolic system is characterised by an enduring rigidity, our material body is malleable and specifically hardwired for a certain degree of dysfunctionality (Johnston 2008; Winlow and Hall 2013). Evolution has equipped us with a plastic brain which is capable of shaping and reshaping itself in relation to our worldly experiences (Johnston 2008). As we interact with the social world around us our neuronal substrates receive experiential feedback, which then modulates changes to both the structure and functionality of the brain (Wakeman 2018; see also Kotzé 2019). Accordingly, the brain is literally “sculpted by the contents of experience” (Johnston 2008: 203). Human subjectivity therefore arises from a material starting point, but then *transcends* this material origin as the subject interacts with the social world and is therefore irreducible to its initial materiality (Lloyd 2018a).

If the non-essential subject is shaped by the experiences of the social and material reality of the world, it is important for us to understand the context of that world. More to the point, we must try to understand the causative effects of depth structures, specifically of political economy and ideology (Lloyd 2018b). For this task, ultra-realism draws upon its influential antecedent critical realism. According to critical realism, there are three layers or ‘domains’ of reality; the real, the actual and the empirical. The domain of the real refers to the underlying generative mechanisms, structures and relations which possess the *probabilistic* causal power to produce phenomena in the actual domain (Kotzé 2019). The actual domain refers to what eventuates when the probabilistic causal tendencies which reside in the real are enacted, shaping experience at the empirical level (Kotzé 2019; Winlow 2019). These experiences are encountered either directly or indirectly by individuals in the empirical domain. Even this rudimentary exposition makes it clear why ultra-realism places so much emphasis upon creating causal chains that connect all three domains of reality. Winlow (2019: 54) sums this up nicely by noting that:

Rather than simply describe harms, these harms must be identified as the outcomes of actual social processes, which in turn must be attached to the generative mechanisms that, ultimately, produce the various harms experienced by ordinary people.

Such emphasis further affirms ultra-realism’s utility as a mediating third. Here we find a commitment to investigating both the negative *and* positive motivation to harm which manifests in *both* legal and illegal forms (Hall and Winlow 2015).

The generative mechanisms that Winlow (2019) refers to reflect a negative motivation to harm which can perhaps be considered a product of what Žižek (2009) calls systemic violence. This is the violence that is inherent to the social conditions associated with the *smooth* functioning of global capitalism, which automatically creates “excluded and dispensable individuals from the homeless to the unemployed” (Žižek 2009: 12). These are striking examples of what we might term legal harm. The crucial point, however, is that these products of systemic violence are intimately connected to various forms of illegal harm, which in some cases emanate from a positive motivation to harm. That is to say, from a subjective enactment of what ultra-realists call ‘special liberty’, which is essentially an anti-ethos that emboldens the subject to risk harm to others in the pursuit of self-interest to which they feel entitled (Hall and Winlow 2015; Lloyd 2018a). Thus, as I have noted elsewhere (Kotzé 2018: 97), “‘crime’ and ‘harm’ are interactive and integrative bilateral processes”. When determining the ‘proper’ object of study for research on harm we must therefore consider the interrelationship between

negative and positive motivations that produce both legal and illegal harms. We must be animated by a concern for both the systemic harms inflicted on communities and the subjective harms committed by individuals on others (Lloyd 2018a). The importance of this for researching harm cannot be overstated.

It is helpful, therefore, to understand both the positive and negative motivation to harm as products of our dominant sociosymbolic order, which, in its current configuration, has a tendency to generate particularly harmful subjectivities. Indeed, as Lloyd (2018a) points out, the active solicitation by the subject into the prevailing norms, values and dispositions oriented towards competitive individualism, self-interest, envy, anxiety and greed means that the motivation to act will manifest in particular ways. Such as, for example, a willingness to inflict harm on others in the pursuit of self-interest. By understanding the interrelationship between the configuration of the current sociosymbolic order and subjective motivation, we can begin to bring subjective manifestations of crime and harm into focus as symptoms of capitalism's systemically zemiological environment (Hall and Winlow 2018b). Ultra-realists are committed to exploring and explaining this zemiological field and its multifaceted complexity, a commitment that demands a return to reality and the drive to represent it truthfully (Winlow 2019). By now it is perhaps clear how ultra-realism can facilitate a more integrated approach towards the study of crime and harm by acting as a mediating third. Its contemporary account of subjectivity and the way in which this relates to the broader socioeconomic context of neoliberalism enables ultra-realism to comfortably explore both systemic and singular harms. That is to say, the systemic yet often legal harms perpetrated by those "'up there' in the corridors of power in business and post-political administration" as well as the subjective or singular, and often illegal, harms perpetrated 'down there' by those who "take advantage of the system's disrupted spaces" (Hall and Winlow 2015: 108-109). In this way, ultra-realism qua third has a crucial role to play in helping to formulate an antidote to the partial paralysis pervading the study of harm. However, if the antidote is to prove potent enough we must also consider the ontological, methodological and political difficulties of researching harm.

### The Issue of Defining Harm

Research on harm has grappled with clarifying its object of study since its inception. Indeed, Yar (2012: 59) notes that the concept of harm is beset with ambiguities and a lack of specificity that leaves the concept devoid of "the very same ontological reality that is postulated as grounds

for rejecting the concept of crime”. The initial problem facing the study of harm is therefore one of definition, or more specifically, the absence of a shared consensus of what makes something harmful (Yar 2012). This lack of consensual specificity makes identifying what the focus of harm research should be rather difficult, as without a firm conceptual basis from which to start one is left skirting the borders between the overly nebulous and the overly restrictive (Hall 2015).

Finding ‘harm’s’ ontological reality has therefore animated a number of scholars to attempt to provide the concept of harm with a firm ontological anchorage grounded in the reality of our times (Kotzé 2019). Initial forays into needs-based perspectives seemed a reasonable starting place since it quite uncontentiously implied that harm resulted from a denial or non-fulfilment of basic needs essential for human well-being (Pemberton 2007). Taking this a step further, Yar (2012) utilises Axel Honneth’s (1996) recognition-theoretic to try and remedy ‘harm’s’ ontological deficit. Here three dimensions of need are identified as essential conditions of human integrity and well-being; these are love, rights and esteem. Accordingly, social harm for Yar (2012: 59, original emphasis) “can be understood to comprise nothing other than *the inter-subjective experience of being refused recognition with respect to any or all of these dimensions of need*”. This initial grounding of the concept of harm in the refusal of recognition arguably begins to offer us some conceptual clarity and perhaps offers a crucial step in the right direction towards unifying ‘harm’ as a working category (Hall 2015).

However, as a number of ultra-realists have identified, there are some issues with grounding the concept of harm using the Hegelian notion of social recognition. Chief amongst them is the fact that our current socio-economic context precludes us from using this concept inline with Hegel’s original formulation (Hall 2015). This is because the original conditions of social interdependency which framed the master-slave dialectic have been dramatically altered (Hall 2015; Kotzé 2019). In simple terms, capitalists no longer require the mass of labourers they once did because, as Žižek (2011) points out, the global economy now requires only 20% of the world’s population to perform all necessary work, rendering the other 80% permanently surplus to capitalist requirement. And so, social recognition is no longer compulsory and has become little more than an arbitrary choice loosely associated with the preservation of *negative rights* (Hall 2015; Kotzé 2019). Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere (Kotzé 2019) the revival of inter-subjective recognition is not sufficient to alleviate the myriad social harms of the zemiological field. Rather, this must be accompanied by a renewed emphasis upon *positive rights*. That is to say, attention needs to be directed towards “providing the socio-structural



conditions conducive to the exercise of one's social recognition" (Kotzé 2019: 78). However, this requires nothing short of a new sociosymbolic order framed around values of mutuality, love, fairness, co-operation and respect (Lloyd 2018a).

The emphasis placed on the creation of a *new* sociosymbolic order is crucial here, because, as Raymen and Smith (2019b) rightly point out, drives to affirm a commitment towards the implementation of positive rights *within* the existing order simply amount to a slightly more ambitious brand of negative rights. In practice, this equates to what Whitehead (2018: 92) refers to as "tinkering at the edges", a tweak here and nudge there that provide the appearance of change so that nothing actually has to change. Firmly rooted in the circuitry of liberal-postmodernism where notions of the 'good' are privately defined in the absence of any final adjudicating authority (Raymen 2019a), even positive rights have the potential to manifest into harmful practices in the name of competitive self-interest (Lloyd 2018a). Within the culture of emotivism we now inhabit, "moral and evaluative judgments reflect nothing more than the expressions of individuals' myriad arbitrary interests and preferences" (Raymen 2019a: 140). In the absence of a shared concept of 'the Good', the liberal-postmodern subject is free to engage in a manipulative clash of wills with others in an attempt to elevate their privately defined conceptions of the 'good life' as they pursue their private interests and preferences (Raymen 2019a). Far from amounting to some ethical responsibility for the other, such interests and preferences are attuned to the highly competitive and destructive logic of the market (Lloyd 2018a). Accordingly, the locus of harm does not necessarily exist in the denial of positive or negative rights that impede human flourishing. Rather, it is the absence of a shared conception of 'the Good' – and the concomitant freedom to enact privately defined notions of the 'good life', which simply accord to the values of the dominant sociosymbolic order – that constitutes this hitherto elusive locus.

What continues to impede research on harm is thus a continued misidentification of harm's initial locus. Whilst much harm research "remains trapped within the confines of liberalism's ideological understanding of freedom" (Raymen 2019a: 148-149), ultra-realism reverses conventional readings of the ontology of harm. Inline with what has already been discussed, ultra-realists contend that harm is *not* a product of widening social inequality. Instead, social inequality is a product of the liberal-postmodern subject's willingness to inflict harm on others as they attempt to elevate the self above all others in the competitive yet hyper-conformist drive for distinction (Hall and Winlow 2018b). From this perspective, then, Raymen's (2019a) contention that we must abandon attempts to define social harm as an *a*

*priori* concept rooted in the transgression of liberal freedoms is perhaps less contentious than it may first appear (Raymen and Smith 2019a). The ultra-realist twist in approaching the ontology of harm is therefore to “pursue a notion of ‘the Good’ from which an understanding of social harm can be derived” (Raymen and Smith 2019a: 122). This pursuit in and of itself is not necessarily novel, yet what sets it apart is that it has untethered itself from liberalism’s ideological understanding of freedom and reconnected with teleological ethics (see MacIntyre 2011).

Space precludes a detailed synopsis of this developing theory of ‘the Good’, but suffice to say that the absence of a shared conception of ‘the Good’ is conducive to harm in a number of interconnecting ways. Amongst these, Raymen and Smith (2019a) identify the stagnation of current conceptions of harm rooted in the presence of things as they are. That is to say, couched in terms of promoting both negative and positive rights *within* the dominant sociosymbolic order. Harm research couched in these terms remains oriented towards plastering over cracks in the system rather than shacking its fundamental foundations. As we shall see in the penultimate section, far from constituting any deliberate political strategy of subversion (Copson 2018), this simply amounts to hyper-conformity. Similarly, Raymen and Smith (2019a: 123) also identify the way in which the pluralistic individualism associated with liberal-postmodernism “combines with the competitive individualism of consumer capitalism to cultivate subjectivities willing to harm others in the pursuit of their own desires”. Within this context, perpetrators of both legal and illegal harm are able to either fetishistically disavow the harms they inflict on others or simply do not experience their actions as harmful (Raymen and Smith 2019a). After all, such harmful practices conform to, rather than deviate from, liberal-capitalism’s Symbolic Law (Hall and Winlow 2015).

There is evidently still much work to be done in developing a theory of ‘the Good’, but this initial ultra-realist pursuit has already done much to help us identify the locus of harm. From here, we can begin to orient research on harm towards this locus and focus our empirical lens upon both the negative and positive motivation to harm. Indeed, as Lloyd (2018a) rightly points out, research on harm must make the willingness to act its object of analysis.

### Methodological Challenges

The methodological challenges associated with researching harm are numerous. Beyond the difficulties of identifying and refining the research focus, the conventional pool of strategies,

designs, and methods that tend to be favoured by large funding bodies are seldom appropriate for researching harm. This is partly because the area of inquiry is quite often associated with exploring the causative nature of *absences* rather than discrete incidents or events capable of being remedied by minor policy tweaks. The issue is further compounded by the unsettled conceptual condition of the subject itself. From an empirical point of view, the collection of unanimously relevant data on harm is arguably almost completely precluded by the lack of consensus around what actually constitutes harm. As alluded to previously, this is symptomatic of the pluralistic individualism associated with the broader culture of emotivism (Raymen 2019a). What this means in practice is that whilst the ultra-realist schema provides for the researcher a degree of conceptual clarity, the concept of harm retains its amorphous texture in the minds of those with whom we research harm.

Let us look at an example that is particularly illustrative here. Human overpopulation continues to threaten the very viability of our planetary well-being. However, if we were to argue that we could begin to mitigate this by limiting or capping the number of offspring one produces (Davis et al. 2019), we are likely to be met with staunch resistance since this is thought to impinge upon the freedoms of the sovereign individual. This is captured particularly well in Ron Howard's (2017) film adaptation of author Dan Brown's *Inferno*, where the chief antagonist decries our reluctance to act now to save our future, "...outrages! Violation of my rights, invasion of my privacy, don't tell me what to do'. And still, we keep attacking our own environment". To give another example, despite structurally induced unemployment constituting a particularly pervasive form of systemic violence, even some of those who find themselves in this difficult position "wouldn't class unemployment as being harmed" (Kotzé 2019: 106). This certainly demonstrates the contested nature of the field of study with which harm research concerns itself.

Ultra-realism can help us navigate this tricky methodological terrain. Whilst its empirical project is, relatively speaking, still in its infancy, it can draw generously from the methodological moorings of its influential antecedent critical realism (Kotzé 2019). Indeed, methods such as in-depth qualitative interviews that are conceptually informed by the critical/ultra-realist schema have the potential to generate a plethora of rich data, from avowed zemiological experiences to tacit and even fetishistically disavowed knowledge of both legal and illegal harms (Kotzé 2019). Because there is a disjuncture between what critical realists call the intransitive and transitive objects of science, our knowledge of the world is somewhat partial and fallible (Sayer 2000). That is to say that whilst there is a real world 'out there' that

exists independently of what we know about it, it is possible to gain some knowledge of this world even if that knowledge is not always correct. However, not all knowledge is equally fallible (Danermark et al. 2002). Indeed, as previously noted, individuals with whom we research harm may have and act upon partial and fallible views of zemiological experiences and their wider contexts. Views which, equipped with conceptually advanced qualitative methods, we can begin to unpack and help subjective experience to see outside of itself (Hall et al. 2020; see also Kotzé 2019). Collaboratively, then, these direct or indirect empirical experiences can be connected to their fundamental causes located in the real (Winlow and Hall 2019).

At the core of ultra-realism's empirical project is a commitment to dig beneath the surface of abstracted empiricism and relativist emotivism to identify and bring into shaper relief what Hegel called the 'concrete universal' (Winlow and Hall 2016). That is to say, "the small components of the totality that can be taken to be representative of the totality itself" (Winlow 2019: 54). As we have seen, individuals encounter a myriad of zemiological experiences as concrete universals but cannot always connect these subjective experiences to the external structures and processes that produce them (Hall et al. 2020). The aim, therefore, is to produce knowledge of experiential events and absences that connect all three domains of reality by investigating zemiological experiences and identifying conceptual concrete universals, which are generalizable at the theoretical or analytical level (Hall et al. 2020; Hall and Winlow 2018b). To do this, Hall and Winlow (2018b) suggest establishing networks of ethnographic researchers committed to generating rich and conceptually advanced qualitative data from multiple positions.

Raymen's (2019b) ethnographic study of parkour, deviance and leisure in the late-capitalist city and Ellis's (2016) ethnography of men, masculinities and violence are perhaps emblematic of this empirical commitment. These immersive studies certainly conform to conventional readings of the ethnographic approach in that they both contain many of the traditional hallmarks, such as prolonged stints of participant observation and a number of in-depth qualitative interviews (Bryman 2012; Hobbs 2006). However, this should not be taken to mean that ultra-realism's empirical project is confined to this particular reading of ethnography. On the contrary, some ultra-realist studies with harm as a salient focal point have adopted what might be described as a more 'loose' ethnographic approach (see Kotzé 2019; Lloyd 2018a). This 'looser' approach is much more in keeping with Caulfield and Hill's (2014) interpretation of ethnography as a broad approach to research that obtains detailed description

via in-depth, or what they also call ‘ethnographic’, qualitative interviews *and/or* observational techniques. From this point of view, either method can be used singularly or collaboratively to gain detailed description of aspects of the social world (Caulfield and Hill 2014). This is a salient point because as Hobbs (2006: 101, emphasis added) reminds us:

Description resides at the core of ethnography, *and however this description is constructed* it is the intense meaning of social life from the everyday perspective of group members that is sought.

Ethnography is thus an extremely broad church that can make use of a whole host of methods in numerous configurations to elicit rich description (Hobbes 2006). The crux of the matter is that the ethnographic backbone of ultra-realism’s empirical project should not to be understood as being synonymous with strict traditional readings of ethnography. That is, where the term is reserved only for studies where participant observation makes up a significant percentage of their methodological genome. Rather, it should be understood as much more free-flowing, concerned ultimately with explaining the world as it is and with brutal honesty (Hall and Winlow 2016). The fundamental upshot is that ultra-realism’s empirical project, with a ‘loose’ ethnographic approach at its core, can help us to navigate what is undoubtedly a tricky methodological terrain set against the backdrop of emotivism.

In its role as a mediating third, ultra-realism is evidently capable of helping us overcome some of the ontological and methodological challenges that have hitherto impeded research on harm. Yet there is still the issue of the politics of harm to consider if the ultra-realist antidote is to be effective at stimulating and mobilising the transformative potential of harm research. Accordingly, it is to this final obstacle that this chapter now turns.

### The Politics of Harm

If harm research is to stand any chance of seriously enacting its transformative potential it must move beyond the current tendency towards reformist critique and return to what ultra-realists call depth critique (Winlow 2019). Driven by the constant imperative to be ‘policy relevant’ (Winlow 2019), a great deal of harm research is oriented towards a bio-political commitment to engage in little more than piecemeal harm-minimisation (Raymen 2019a). Far from stimulating transformative potential, this sort of tinkering at the edges simply serves to maintain the pretence of democratic accountability (Winlow 2019). The zemiological conditions stimulated by capitalism continue to generate a plethora of legal and illegal harms,

not in spite of such critique, but precisely because such critique acts to provide only the appearance of change which simply allows the system to trundle on *unchanged*. This reformist critique is often predicated on the idea that “doing something is better than doing nothing” (Whitehead 2018: 91), yet, as has been demonstrated elsewhere, this logic is complicit in perpetuating rather than ameliorating harm (Kotzé 2020). Rather than identifying and tackling the locus of harm, a significant proportion of today’s harm research merely points, in a manner resembling simple gesture politics (Hall and Winlow 2015), towards the symptoms of capitalism’s smooth functioning.

We must dig deeper if we are to identify harm’s causal chain. Indeed, as Winlow and Hall (2016: 84) note, “we cannot begin to speak about the amelioration of harms without a realistic appraisal of our current situation and the forces and processes that underlie it”. Harm research must therefore be charged with providing agentic action with the knowledge-base required to realise its transformative potential (Winlow and Hall 2016). In other words, it must concern itself with developing knowledge of depth structures and generative processes rather than simply providing various interest-groups ideological ammunition with which to elevate ‘their harms’ above others on the zemiological scale (Hall et al. 2020). Extreme caution must be taken to avoid harm research simply becoming the stimulus for interpassive gestures that help shore-up the capitalist system rather than shake its foundations (Kotzé 2020). Admirable as they may first appear, espousals of policy tweaks here and there aimed at mitigating the worst excesses of our zemiogenic conditions simply provide the appearance that the system is being held to account and can slowly but surely be reformed (Winlow 2013). Quite simply, by engaging in reform critique rather than depth critique, harm research risks conveying that one may become an activist and engage in campaigns for change, actively seek reforms and feel free to think that *change* is possible, so long as we never abandon the *current* system (Winlow and Hall 2019). However, as ultra-realist research has demonstrated, moving beyond the current system towards a new sociosymbolic order is precisely what is needed.

Those who research harm should not shrink from the task of exploring and explaining the world *as it is* and should certainly not feel “compelled to identify the green shoots of progressive social renewal in the dust of a decaying global neoliberal order” (Winlow and Hall 2019: 25). A misplaced commitment to this imperative constitutes one of the most salient impediments to the transformative potential of harm research. Indeed, harm should not be considered an aberration of the system that can be obviated by minor policy tweaks. Instead, it should be acknowledged that harm is “integrated in the system’s dynamic core and reproduced

in its conventional culture and subjectivity” (Hall 2015: 130). Ultra-realism can help us realise this acknowledgment and facilitate a return to depth critique, and in doing so refocus harm research towards an investigation of both the negative and positive motivation to harm. With this comes a reorientation of the politics of harm away from its contemporary concern for identifying policy tweaks that can be made *within* the system, towards identifying the means of creating a new sociosymbolic order. Whilst there is much to do in this respect, perhaps a good place to start is by removing the limits of what can be thought, researched and said that the imperative to be ‘policy relevant’ enforces on us (Winlow 2019).

### *Conclusion: Implications for a Less Harmful Society*

As this chapter has tried to demonstrate, ultra-realism gives us a firm footing for researching harm. In its capacity as a mediating third, ultra-realism facilitates a more integrated approach towards the study of crime and harm by reviving the dialectic between criminology and zemiology. Indeed, the core ingredients that comprise this emergent paradigm demand a reconnection between legal and illegal harm and therefore eschews the casting of criminology and zemiology as false alternatives. However, we must be equally cautious to avoid unreflectively viewing the two as collegial neighbours, that is to say as neighbours qua imaginary other, with whom unmediated dialogue is possible. As we have seen, this view risks exacerbating rather than ameliorating existing tensions. Such tensions must be assuaged if the transformative potential that resides within the concept of harm is to be fully realised, a task to which ultra-realism is evidently well-suited. Moreover, towards this end, ultra-realism provides both a theoretical and empirical framework that can help those interested in researching harm overcome various obstacles that have hitherto impeded the potential utility of harm research.

As Raymen (2019a) has already noted, this potential is incredibly important for the transformative potency of the social sciences. However, if harm research is to offer any meaningful implications for a less harmful society it must free itself from the contemporary commitment to reformist critique and return to depth critique. Far from constituting a deliberate political strategy of subversion, the former actually helps to fortify the current system’s zemiological tendencies by simply plastering over the cracks. Admirable as such ameliorative attempts might appear, they succeed only in providing the appearance of change which, as counterintuitive as it may seem, actually ensures that nothing will change precisely because it maintains the pretence of capitalism’s self-critique (Kotzé 2020). Ultra-realism may not be able

to open up an all-seeing God's eye view of the world (Hall and Winlow 2015), but it certainly can provide those interested in researching the multifaceted complexities of harm with the tools to help inform the creation of a less harmful society.

### *Further Reading*

- Boukli, A. and Kotzé, J. (eds) (2018) *Zemiology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.  
This edited collection is a useful source for those interested in exploring the complex relationship between crime and social harm, and between criminology and zemiology. Scholars of all levels are likely to find something of value in the original essays contained within this volume.
- Hall, S., Kuldova, T. and Horsley, M. (eds) (2020) *Crime, Harm and Consumerism*. London: Routledge.  
Principally aimed at exploring the relationship between crime, harm and consumer culture, this book is a must-read. The collection offers a number of original ideas and fresh perspectives, in addition to a number of informative case studies, that are certain to prove useful.
- Lloyd, A. (2018) *The Harms of Work: An Ultra-Realist Account of the Service Economy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.  
This is an excellent starting place for those interested in exploring the emergent ultra-realist paradigm and how it can be applied to harm research. Lloyd's work is both clear and accessible without shying away from engaging with difficult ideas and concepts crucial for understanding today's social world.



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