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Socialist humanism and the problem of crime

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

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

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

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

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

My central assumption throughout is the interconnection between the inner peace of the individual and the outer peace of the world. The two develop and occur together. The struggle is to create a humane existence, and such

an existence comes only as we act peacefully toward ourselves and one another.

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

The relativity of things human

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

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

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

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

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

saving grace, is to be compassionate beings, in all humility. Whatever may be known is known in love. Not in manipulation and control, not in the advancement of a separate self and a career, but in the care for one another. That is reality enough.

In these times, the only approach to reality – and to truth – that makes sense is one that is existentially grounded. We remind ourselves, again and again, that any construction – as with all knowledge and understanding – occurs only in the context of personal experience. Jean-Paul Sartre (1992, p. 58) observed that any notion of truth that is abstract and removed from the struggle of everyday life is but a form of ignorance and bad faith. The truth that comes from our intersubjective struggle to be human – a truth however relative and lacking of the absolute – is the real truth. And our thinking and our writing, as critical criminologists, are an intimate part of the struggle for existence.

But this is not to say that we humans do not desire certainty, do not seek the absolute. The absurdity of our human condition is that we have the mind to ask about reality and truth, but we do not have the innate capacity to answer the questions. Existentialism offers us the courage to entertain the ambiguity of our existence. To have what the novelist Milan Kundera (1988, p. 7) calls "the wisdom of uncertainty." Without such wisdom, we humans create worlds that are cruel and oppressive. Kundera observes: "Man desires a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished, for he has an innate and irrepressible desire to judge before he understands. Religions and ideologies are founded on this desire." We humans have, as Kundera notes again, "an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge." To this I would add that in our time (in our epoch) the law, the modern legal system with its criminal justice apparatus, is a result of our inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human. In the absence of God, the law has become Supreme Judge. There must be another way to live. But first we would have to accept the human condition. To accept what Kundera (1984) referred to on another occasion, in the very title of his novel, as *the unbearable lightness of being*. As existentialists, we are learning – and living – the nature of our being.

To have or to be

An understanding of our being, and how we might realize that being, is enhanced by exploring once again the writings of Erich Fromm. Although several books of Fromm's writings have been published posthumously (1992; 1994), Fromm's last book was *To Have or to Be?*, published in 1976. Before he died in 1980, he (1978, p. 220) noted that he was working on a sequel, a book

on "a godless religion." It was to be a study of religious experience in which the concept of a supreme being, a god, is "unnecessary and undesirable." The pursual of a nontheistic perspective is reflected also in Fromm's study of Zen Buddhism in the 1960s (see Funk 1982; Fromm 1992). Throughout his life of eighty years, Fromm proclaimed the central importance of the human being – and the human spirit – in the creation of a better world.

In 1965, Fromm edited a collection of international essays, titled *Socialist Humanism*. Introducing the book, Fromm (1965, pp. vii–xiii) outlined his basic vision. Humanism, in simplist terms, he said, is the belief in the unity of the human race, and the potential of human beings to be perfected by their own efforts. Socialist humanism is human development in relation to the full development of society. It is the ending of the epoch of prehistory, as Karl Marx had noted, and the opening of the epoch of human history. For Fromm, as well as for Marx, human history is to go beyond a theistic belief in the existence of God, and beyond the ethic of consumption that dominates capitalism. One other premise was common to the essays in *Socialist Humanism*, and it was the "conviction that the urgent task for mankind today is the establishment of peace" (p. xii). Peace and the realization of the human project go together; they are one and the same.

In the introduction of *To Have or to Be?*, Fromm discusses the two main premises of capitalism, in addition to the economic contradictions, as the sources for the failure of the great promise of unlimited progress. First, there is *radical hedonism*, seeking the maximum pleasure, trying to satisfy the desire to possess. And second, *egotism*, selfishness and greed. The remainder of the book is a rich, erudite, and compassionate examination of our contemporary human condition.

The crucial problem, Fromm observes, is that capitalism promotes the *having* mode of existence over the *being* mode. He writes (p. 3): "In a culture in which the supreme goal is to have – and to have more and more – and in which one can speak of someone as 'being worth a million dollars,' how can there be an alternative between having and being? On the contrary, it would seem that the very essence of being is having; that if one *has* nothing, one *is* nothing." The imperative is to create individuals and societies based on the being mode of existence.

For Fromm, ultimately, love is the essence of being human. His most popular book is *The Art of Loving*, published in 1956, and reprinted several times since. Love opens us to the fullness of our being. "Love is an activity, not a passive affect; it is 'standing in,' not 'falling for.' In the most general way, the active character of love can be described by stating that love is primarily *giving*, not receiving" (Fromm 1989, p. 20).

Fromm then observes that love is difficult to find and to practice in contemporary society. Love disintegrates in such a world. He (p. 75) opens his chapter "Love and Its Disintegration in Contemporary Western Society" with the following observation:

> If love is a capacity of the mature, productive character, it follows that the capacity to love in an individual living in any given culture depends on the influence this culture has on the character of the average person. If we speak about love in contemporary Western culture, we mean to ask whether the social structure of Western civilization and the spirit resulting from it are conducive to the development of love. To raise the question is to answer it in the negative. No objective observer or our Western life can doubt that love – brotherly love, motherly love, and erotic love – is a relatively rare phenomenon, and that its place is taken by a number of forms of pseudo-love which are in reality so many forms of the disintegration of love.

The basis of peacemaking criminology is compassion and love. A love that not only allows us to identify ourselves with others, but allows us to know that we are one with another, that we are one. Such love makes a different world, a world without crime.

Everything is everything else

Erich Fromm's interest in Buddhism began as early as the mid-1920s. Decades later, at the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, Fromm studied intensively the works of D.T. Suzuki. His contact with Suzuki resulted in several writings and collaborations (1960a; 1960b). Fromm's critique of irrational authority and his preference for rational insight combined with mysticism were significantly shaped by his experience with Zen Buddhism (see Funk 1982, pp. 88–128).

Zen Buddhism is essentially existential and humanistic. In the moment, here and now, we humans experience the wonder of our existence. The ultimate, even the very notion of the ultimate, cannot be known by discursive thought. We are left with living our lives daily. Awareness, found in the practice of meditation, a concentration in the moment, is the focus of life (see Fromm 1992, pp. 31–54). There is a sense of the interconnectedness of all things, and a compassion for all that exists.

We are interrelated – "not just people, but animals too, and stones, clouds, trees" (Aitken 1984, p. 10). We are an integral part of everything. Nothing exists by itself; nothing has a separate existence, a separate self. As Thich

Nhat Hanh (1988, pp. 51–52) writes: "In the light of emptiness, everything is everything else, we inter-are, everyone is responsible for everything that happens in life." As human beings we are intimately connected to one another, in all the joy and all the suffering of the world. As human beings we are of nature, we are nature, one with the world. The truth is our interbeing, beyond the dualistic thinking of the Western mind.

Thus, we are aware of the impermanence, the emptiness, of the world. And peace comes in the awareness of impermanence – and interrelatedness. One of my favorite observations on such awareness, and the relation of this awareness to peace, is from Stephen Batchelor's book (1983, pp. 105–106) *Alone With Others*, subtitled *An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. Batchelor writes: "Lasting and stable peace of mind is achieved not through discovering the permanence of anything, but through fully accepting the impermanent *as* impermanent and ceasing to insist that it is otherwise. Likewise, genuine contentment is found in realizing that what one previously assumed to be capable of providing satisfaction is actually unable to do so." He concludes: "As the new vision unfolds, our basic anxiety and our sense of meaninglessness are dissolved in the growing awareness of the profound mystery of interrelatedness that permeates all phenomena."

Such awareness is not merely another form of *having*, a having of more knowledge. Rather, it is in the sphere of *knowing*. Fromm (1976, p. 28) writes in *To Have or to Be?*:

> Our understanding of the quality of knowing in the being mode of existence can be enhanced by the insights of such thinkers as the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, Master Eckhart, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx. In their view, knowing begins with the awareness of the deceptiveness of our common sense perceptions, in the sense that our picture of physical reality does not correspond to what is "really real" and, mainly, in the sense that most people are half-awake, half-dreaming, and are unaware that most of what they hold to be true and self-evident is illusion produced by the suggestive influence of the social world in which they live. Knowing, then, begins with the shattering of illusions, with *dis*illusionment (*Enttäuschung*). Knowing means to penetrate through the surface, in order to arrive at the roots, and hence the causes; knowing means to "see" reality in its nakedness. Knowing does not mean to be in possession of the truth; it means to penetrate the surface and to strive critically and actively in order to approach truth ever more closely.

The being mode of knowing allows us, as Fromm (1992, pp. 117–120) also observed, to go beyond ourselves, outside the ego. We turn to others.

The implications for peacemaking are evident. Directly following Thich Nhat Hanh's (1988, pp. 51–52) line that "everything is everything else" and that "everyone is responsible for everything that happens in life" is the following, simple observation: "When you produce peace and happiness in yourself, you begin to realize peace for the whole world."

Where does this lead in our criminology? The objective is clear: to be kind to one another, to transcend the barriers that separate us from one another, and to live everyday life with a sense of interdependence. Returning to the source, as in the Zen search for the ox (see Sekida 1975, pp. 223–237), we go to town, enter the marketplace, with helping hands. Criminology is our service.

Peace is the way

Social action – our service – comes out of the informed heart, out of the clear and enlightened mind. We act with an understanding of our own suffering and the suffering of others. If human actions are not rooted in compassion, these actions will not contribute to a compassionate and peaceful world. "If we cannot move beyond inner discord, how can we help find a way to social harmony? If we ourselves cannot know peace, be peaceful, how will our acts disarm hatred and violence?" (Dass and Gorman 1985, p. 185). The means cannot be different from the ends; peace can come only out of peace. "There is no way to peace," said A.J. Muste. "Peace is the way."

As in Mahatma Gandhi's *satyagraha*, the truth is revealed in the course of action. And, in turn, it is truth as presently conceived that guides our action. Gandhi's Hindu and Jainist based concept of *satyagraha* was derived from the Sanskrit word *Sat* for "it is" or "what is", things as they are. *Graha* is to grasp, to be firm. "Truth force" is the common translation of *satyagraha*. Gandhi often spoke of his inner voice, a still small voice that would be revealed in the preparedness of silence (see Erikson 1969, pp. 410–423).

Truthful action, for Gandhi, was guided by the idea of *ahisma*, the refusal to do harm. Oppression of all kinds is to be actively resisted, but without causing harm to others. In *An autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi (1957, p. 349) describes *ahimsa* as the refusal to do harm. Moreover, compassion and self-restraint grow in the effort not to harm.

Gandhi's insistence upon the truth is firmly within the tradition of socialist humanism. As Kevin Anderson (1991, pp. 14–29) has shown in his essay on Gandhian and Marxian humanism, both are a radical rejection of Western capitalist civilization. Both posit a future society free of alienation, and both share a confidence that human liberation is on the immediate historical agenda. In reconstructing criminology, we are informed by a socialist humanism.

Erich Fromm included in his 1965 collection of essays, *Socialist Humanism*, an essay on Gandhi by the Gandhian scholar and former secretary to Gandhi, N.K. Bose. In the essay, titled "Gandhi: Humanist and Socialist," Bose (p. 99) describes the *satyagrahi*, the one who practices *satyagraha*, as a person who lives "according to his own lights," one who opposes (does not cooperate with) what seems wrong, but also one who "attempts to accept whatever may be right and just" in the view of the opponent. Bose continues: "There is neither victory nor defeat, but an agreement to which both parties willingly subscribe, while institutions or practices proven wrong are destroyed during the conflict." A humane society is created in the course of individual and collective struggle.

To be remembered, all the while, is the single objective of peace. Whatever the technique, whatever the philosophy or theory, the movement toward peace is the proof of any thought or action. Erich Fromm spent a lifetime working in the movements for peace. He was a co-founder of SANE, an organization that sought to end the nuclear race and the war in Vietnam. Late in his life, Fromm worked on behalf of the 1968 presidential nomination campaign of Senator Eugene McCarthy. In the campaign, Fromm (1994, p. 96) wrote: "America stands today at the crossroads: It can go in the direction of continued war and violence, and further bureaucratization and automatization of man, or it can go in the direction of life, peace, and political and spiritual renewal." His call was to "walk the way toward life."

Our response to all that is human is for life, not death. What would a Gandhian philosophy of existence offer a criminologist, or any member of society, in reaction to crime? To work for the creation of a new society, certainly. But, immediately, the reaction would not be one of hate for the offender, nor a cry for punishment and death. In a reading of Gandhi, and a commentary on punishment, Erik Erikson (1969, pp. 412–413) writes the following:

> Gandhi reminds us that, since we can not possibly know the absolute truth, we are "therefore not competent to punish" – a most essential reminder, since man when tempted to violence always parades as another's policeman, convincing himself that whatever he is doing to another, that other "has it coming to him." Whoever acts on such righteousness, however, implicates himself in a mixture of pride and guilt which undermines his position psychologically and ethically. Against this typical cycle, Gandhi claimed that only the voluntary acceptance of self-suffering can reveal the truth latent in a conflict – and in the opponent.

Punishment is not the way of peace.

Responses to crime that are fueled by hate, rather than generated by love, are necessarily punitive. Such responses are a form of violence, a violence that can only beget further violence. Much of what is called "criminal justice" is a violent reaction to, or anticipation of, crime. The criminal justice system, with all of its procedures, is a form of *negative peace*. The purpose being to deter or process acts of crime through the threat and application of force.

Positive peace, on the other hand, is something other than the deterrence or punishment of crime. Positive peace is more than merely the absence of crime and violence – and of war. "It refers to a condition of society in which exploitation is minimized or eliminated altogether, and in which there is neither overt violence nor the more subtle phenomenon of structural violence" (Barash 1991, p. 8). Positive peace is the attention given to all those things, most of them structured in the society, that cause crime, that happen before crime occurs. Positive peace exists when the sources of crime – including poverty, inequality, racism, and alienation – are not present. There can be no peace – no positive peace – without social justice. Without social justice and without peace (personal and social), there is crime. And there is, as well, the violence of criminal justice.

The negative peacemaking of criminal justice keeps things as they are. Social policies and programs that are positive in nature – that focus on positive peacemaking – create something new. They eliminate the structural sources of violence and crime. A critical, peacemaking criminal is engaged in the work of positive peace.

Thus our socialist humanism, the attention given to everyday existence, love and compassion, and social justice. Our efforts are not so much out of resistance, as they are an affirmation of what we know about human existence. The way is simply that of peace in everyday life.

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