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Debates & Controversies

Editorial note:

The following is a special section for a debate between Wood, Anderson & Richards – and Raymen & Kuldova.

As a journal of intellectual freedom *CT&T* recognizes that intellectual freedom often involves debates and controversies, and part of our response is to ensure there is a place for such debates and controversies to occur. We provide the space and trust our readers to make up their own minds as to what is offered. This also means, as a journal, *CT&T* is not aligning itself with either side of this debate.

Article 1: Prefatory Note by Raymen

The article below is a response from myself and Tereza Kuldova to Wood, Anderson and Richards' article 'Breaking Down the Pseudo-Pacification process: Eight Critiques of Ultra-Realist Crime Causation Theory', which was published in the *British Journal of Criminology (BJC)* (Wood, Anderson & Richards 2020). As the title of their article indicates, this was a critique of the fledgling theoretical framework of ultra-realism. While we disagreed with the content of Wood et. al's critique and their approach, we nevertheless applaud that such critique is offered in print through the proper channels of a peer-reviewed academic journal. In doing so, it affords the advocates of ultra-realism's theoretical framework, such as ourselves, the opportunity to properly respond. Or so we had hoped.

We recently submitted the response article below to the *BJC* for consideration for publication. We were informed by the editor-in-chief that the entire editorial board made the unanimous decision not to send the response article out for peer-review and that it would not be considered for publication by the *BJC*. The reasons provided were multiple. Firstly, that while the *BJC* is not averse to response pieces *per se*, they do expect them to have a significant impact on the field. While we agree with this principle in many respects, this same principle did not appear to apply to the original article to which we were responding. Wood et al's article offers no new theory, data, or novel alternative perspective through which we can make sense of the growing criminological problems which afflict our world. It was simply a critique which, as our article painstakingly dissects, is built upon inaccuracies, mischaracterisations and the omission of key concepts and features which make up ultra-realism's existing theoretical framework. The editorial board of the *BJC* could not even make the case that Wood et. al are offering a critique of one of the central theoretical pillars of current criminological thought, the dismantling of which would transform the way in which a substantial proportion of the discipline thinks about and explains current criminological problems. While it is growing in popularity, ultra-realism is not a dominant theoretical perspective within the field of

criminology. It is a theoretical perspective born in 2015. It remains largely absent from textbooks and curricula, and is still peripheral even to critical criminology, which in itself is peripheral to the mainstream of our discipline. Consequently, Wood et. al's article fails to satisfy both of the main criteria for publication in the *BJC*, stated plainly on their website. Namely, 'the degree to which the article contributes new knowledge to an understanding of crime and society; [and] the overall quality of the argument and its presentation'

(<https://academic.oup.com/bjc/pages/About>). We felt that these features of the original article would at least warrant our response being sent out to peer-review as well. Instead, the editorial board have rejected our response by invoking criteria which were not applied to Wood et. al's original article.

Moreover, there is precedent for a response article such as this in *The British Journal of Criminology*. In 2004, Jock Young offered a response article titled 'Crime and the Dialectics of Inclusion/Exclusion: Some Comments on Yar and Penna', which addressed Yar and Penna's critiques of his book, *The Exclusive Society*. A powerful and interesting response in itself, the response did not have a 'transformative effect' on the field, as response pieces of this nature rarely do. Nevertheless, Young's response was still published by the *BJC*, and we are disappointed that we have not been afforded the same courtesy.

The second reason provided was that our response was dismissive of Wood et. al's original article. To us, such an argument is nonsensical. How can an article which spends nearly 10,000 words offering a detailed response to Wood et. al be characterised as 'dismissive' of them? Arguably, it is precisely the opposite of dismissive. By engaging with Wood et. al's critique so thoroughly, it signals that we deem it worthy of consideration and commentary. It is worthy of response precisely because it highlights common misconceptions about ultra-realist criminological theory which must be rectified if these ideas are to be properly understood, applied and dialectically critiqued and improved upon.

The third and final reason provided was that the tone was unduly hostile. Readers can decide for themselves on the legitimacy of this claim. We, however, can only disagree. Our claims in the article below are strictly factual. We are concerned with outlining what Wood et al. have said ultra-realism argues and then clarifying what ultra-realist criminologists have *actually* claimed and argued. The writing may not be appreciative in its tone, but this is to be expected in a response piece, and there is nothing that we believe can be construed as slanderous within the pages of the article. Some readers may disagree. But even if the claim that the tone is unduly hostile had merit, this surely could have been raised in the peer-review process and rectified, rather than used as justification for outright rejection. We raised all of these points with the editorial board at the *BJC* and asked them to reconsider sending the article out for peer-review. They politely declined.

It matters not whether one agrees or disagrees with the arguments put forward by ultra-realism. We reiterate in the article itself that we are in no way interested in establishing a new intellectual conformity around these ideas which places limits on the thinkable and the speakable. On the contrary, we are invested in challenging the current climate in which dominant intellectual, political and philosophical positions are doggedly defended and reproduced in an atmosphere of evangelical reverence and censorship, irrespective of their (in)ability to explain or address our current challenges. Regardless of your opinion of ultra-realism, it is a theoretical perspective that, while marginal, is nevertheless gaining increasing interest and using its innovative theoretical, methodological and epistemological framework to generate novel insights and explanations of the truly monumental challenges facing the world in the 21st century. In denying the opportunity for this paper to even be peer-reviewed—let alone published—the *BJC* is effectively closing down the debate on a burgeoning theoretical perspective and allowing a critique which many informed observers would regard as inaccurate to pass without the possibility for response.

We therefore felt compelled to find a reputable home for the article so that it was available to read for those who are interested in such theoretical debates, and who still believe in the goods *internal* to the practice of academic enquiry. Goods such as open, reasonable and dialectical argumentation which seeks to produce new ideas and ever-improved ways of making sense of our world. It is saddening that the forums which were originally formed to be the vanguard of such principles, now appear increasingly to be among their chief opponents. We are grateful that *Continental Thought & Theory* is not such an opponent. We hope that readers look at both Wood et. al's original article in the *British Journal of Criminology* and our response in conjunction with one another. In doing so, perhaps readers can keep these principles alive by establishing lines of critique and developing new arguments and improvements which, had we not shared this response, would have otherwise gone unformulated.

Lastly, we would like to thank the editors of Continental Thought & Theory once more for providing the opportunity to have this crucial debate published here. Wood, Anderson, and Richards were offered—and accepted—the opportunity to respond to our article that appears below, and we were similarly offered the chance to write a further, final response. We respectfully declined this opportunity. Dialectical debate and disagreement in pursuit of new truth is what we have always wanted—as we state explicitly in our response. However, upon reading Wood et. al's response, it seemed clear that rather than dialectically engaging with our original response which exposed the flaws and flagrant inaccuracies of their original critique, Wood et. al simply reasserted those very same arguments and inaccuracies which had already been dismantled and exposed. Therefore, we declined the opportunity to have the final word, since we feel our original response below is sufficient to deal with both Wood et. al's original critique and their subsequent response to our article.

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Clarifying ultra-realism: A response to Wood et al.

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Introduction

Ongoing critique and reconstruction are integral to all academic disciplines. The absence of informed critique and continuous adherence to dominant theoretical models leads our disciplines to ossify and stagnate. However, if critique is to play a dialectical role, it must be informed and honest, and it must accurately represent its object. In this respect, Wood et al.'s attempted critique of ultra-realism fails to contribute anything of value to our discipline. The ultra-realism Wood, Anderson and Richards (2020) seem determined to bring down before it gains more altitude is, to us, totally unrecognisable. It bears no relation to the body of theory and research that many scholars have worked to develop over the preceding five years. In the face of misrepresentation and misunderstanding so complete that it approaches totality, the goal of the present article is, first and foremost, to identify and rectify these errors, and explain how they are based on a series of glaring omissions of what competent commentators regard as ultra-realism's key concepts, texts and basic features. Of course, it is difficult to cover every

concept contained in a particular theoretical perspective within the confines of one journal article, even when that article is devoted to abstract critique and provides no new theory or data. However, in the case of Wood et al.'s article, the concepts, texts and key features omitted are not peripheral but fundamental to ultra-realism.

We will approach this response by examining each of Wood et al.'s major criticisms, revealing their numerous errors and mischaracterisations. To correct them, we will also clarify precisely what ultra-realists have proposed and suggest once again how these proposals might assist us in getting to grips with at least some of today's criminological issues. However, it will also be suggested that the unacknowledged goal of Wood et al.'s paper is to insist that political centrism and mid-twentieth century social constructionism together represent the permanent horizon of politics and of the knowable world. Truth be told, ultra-realism is a rather modest school of criminological theorising. Rather than defend early ideas, many authors working from an ultra-realist perspective have expressed the hope that new and better accounts of crime, deviance, and harm will continue to emerge. It should also be noted that ultra-realism is a marginal and, for the moment at least, not particularly influential school of criminological theorising. It is largely absent from many mainstream textbooks and curricula, and its proponents tend not to work in elite universities or form part of any established intellectual elite. It therefore seems necessary to ask why ultra-realism has attracted such a vociferous critique and why these critics refuse to follow the convention of proposing an alternative framework that provides a more convincing means of capturing, explaining and responding to key trends in contemporary social reality. The absence of such an alternative and the rather animated tone of Wood et al.'s piece could suggest that they regard ultra-realism as a genuine challenge to the current social constructionist status quo. It is telling that the claims underpinning their various lines of attack are starkly paradoxical and do not lend themselves to the construction of a coherent intellectual position. The general tenor of Wood et al.'s paper tells their readership that ultra-realism is wrong, and everything that ultra-realists have ever said is wrong. How ultra-realists might mend their ways and become right is, for Wood et al., of no concern at all.

While Wood et al.'s critique emerges from a range of rather disparate intellectual locations, their position seems to rest on progressive liberalism and its underlying politics. For Wood et al., any attempt to move beyond this horizon represents a dangerous intellectual radicalism that threatens to disrupt the political, social and cultural systems of the extreme centre (Ali, 2015). From this view, all structural accounts of the economy are 'reductionist' and all accounts of subjectivity that appear to challenge the staid repertoire of liberal philosophy are, Wood et al. claim, 'simplistic'. Liberal social constructionism becomes the limit of criminological imagination. Perhaps criminologists who have invested their efforts and achieved well-established positions in what was once regarded as the radical alternative to positivism are threatened by ultra-realism's very straightforward proposal that the time has come once more for the discipline to move on. Rather than kowtow to the doctrinal instruction of those who seek to defend and lazily reproduce the intellectual systems that have dominated the social sciences for so long, we must be willing to think and act differently. While Wood et al. discourage us from straying too far from the liberal centre, ultra-realists extend a warm welcome to all researchers – postgraduate, early-career, and established – who look at the world and

the dominant theoretical models in the social sciences that attempt to explain it and hope for something better.

Those working from an ultra-realist perspective do not aspire to create a new intellectual uniformity or a new *doxa* that places limits on the thinkable and the speakable. We only aspire to move forward and open up new debates in a spirit of enquiry free from existing dogma. We welcome critique of our work, as all academics should. Critiques which assist the development and refining of our theoretical perspective are most welcome, but alternative frameworks must also be encouraged. This is because ultra-realism is a live and adaptive theoretical *framework*, rather than a closed theory of crime and harm. In this sense, even the title of Wood et al.'s paper— '*Breaking Down the Pseudo-Pacification process: Eight Critiques of Ultra-Realist Crime Causation Theory*' is wrong. Ultra-realism does not offer a theory of direct crime causation. Rather, it simply hopes to investigate and shed light upon those contexts that make crime, violence and harm more likely. Unlike many of the dominant schools of thought in the social sciences, the core aspects of ultra-realist theory are not learnt by rote to be repeated in an atmosphere of Ecclesiastical reverence. Ultra-realists merely insist that any critique accurately depicts our concepts, theories and claims, and remains faithful to the principle of moving our collective knowledge of crime and harm forward. All criminologists committed to the wellbeing and continued development of our discipline must surely agree with this unwritten rule.

The Eight Critiques of Ultra-Realism

Wood et al.'s article revolves around what they claim to be eight critiques of ultra-realist criminological theory. However, on closer inspection they seem to be eight critiques of Hall's (2012) concepts of the 'pseudo-pacification process' and, to a lesser extent, 'special liberty'. If we set aside the fact that Hall conceived these two concepts well before the birth of ultra-realism, and that Wood et al. mistakenly present these concepts as the entirety of ultra-realism's explanatory framework, it seems that these eight critiques can be broadly grouped into three main areas of contention. The first area of contention addresses ultra-realist accounts of subjectivity. Wood et al. claim that these accounts are littered with inconsistencies. Specifically, they argue that ultra-realism and the pseudo-pacification process 'naturalise' violent drives and present a 'hydraulic' model of the psyche, which sets up a 'zero-sum' game between physical aggression and socio-symbolic competition in a manner which makes the relationship between the pseudo-pacification process and special liberty internally incoherent. The second area of contention is based on the understanding that ultra-realism is a 'monocausal' 'direct expression' theory which focuses exclusively upon how crime is a direct and unmediated product of political economic changes in labour markets and capitalist 'values' and is therefore dismissive of gender norms and social reproduction as 'epiphenomenal' to political economy. The third area of contention springs from the idea that ultra-realism's theoretical framework denies individual subjects any agency to shape the structural or cultural environments in which they live.

All these critiques are invalid. They are based upon a series of stark mischaracterisations and omissions of key aspects of ultra-realist theory, which in turn leads to an overall misrepresentation of the perspective it offers. For example, in attempting to outline ultra-realist accounts of violence, Wood et al. focus on a single

article written by Hall and published in 1997, a full eighteen years before the birth of ultra-realism, and a magazine article, written by Hall and Winlow in 2003 to stimulate debate amongst 'A' Level and first-year undergraduate students. They could have quite easily consulted the rapidly growing post-2015 ultra-realist literature on male violence, which draws upon voluminous ethnographic data and directly addresses the very problems that concern Wood et al. Why should ultra-realist researchers producing sophisticated empirical and theoretical work today face such a broad-based dismissal of their collective research output when critics have chosen to focus on minor works written long before the establishment of the movement?

Overall, Wood et al.'s critique suggests a deep attachment to philosophical liberalism and its preoccupation with autonomy, choice, decision-making and identity formation. Behind the rhetoric is a highly conventional call to acknowledge yet simultaneously downplay and marginalise accounts of the crime problem that address external contexts such as political economy and human biology. Yet again, criminologists and students are encouraged to restrict themselves to the usual 'low-hanging fruit' of sociocultural values, norms and practices, which as always are presented as relatively autonomous and ultimately pliable. The core message is that misguided people make bad decisions because they are attached to negative values, norms and practices. These misguided people can become good people if they ditch their prior attachments and embrace the positive values, norms and practices of progressive liberalism, which imagines itself to be the cradle of the future's benign subjectivity. It is not too difficult to understand why an idealist movement that has identified itself and its subversion of most things traditional as the only possible hope for the future might regard any form of ontologically and epistemologically potent realism as a threat. Throughout their whole critique it is palpable that Wood et al. hope to encourage interested readers to disengage from this fledgling and therefore vulnerable new realist framework and return to what they see as *the* established path to a better future.

Response 1: Ultra-Realism 'naturalises' violent drives and offers a 'hydraulic model' of the psyche

Perhaps the most significant categorical error in Wood et al.'s analysis is their suggestion that ultra-realism and the pseudo-pacification process 'naturalise' violent drives and present a 'hydraulic model' of the psyche in which there is 'a set amount of 'libidinal' energy that can be moved around, channelled or blocked, but not diminished or fundamentally transformed' (2020: 10). Wood et al.'s simplified 'hydraulic' interpretation of the pseudo-pacification process is that capitalism is to the human being's violent drives what the dam is to the current of a river. It can redirect the flow of the river, slow it down or distribute its energy and force, but the flow of the river will never stop. This is precisely the misreading of Hall's theory that Kotzé (2019: 27-28) has explicitly warned against, and we address this critique first because it arguably constitutes *the* original error that feeds Wood et al.'s subsequent misunderstandings.

In order to claim that the pseudo-pacification process naturalises violent drives and offers a 'hydraulic' model of the psyche – a phrase that is completely absent from all ultra-realist texts – Wood et al. had to ignore the two crucial and interrelated aspects of the pseudo-pacification process. First, they fail to pay sufficient attention to ultra-

realism's transcendental materialist conception of subjectivity (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Johnston, 2008). Wood et al.'s truncated discussion of this complex philosophical and psychoanalytic landscape, which addresses the terror of the Real and human subjectivity as a movement from a state of nature to a state of culture, results in a simplistic caricature that bears little relation to the original works of Lacan, Žižek and Johnston. Second, Wood et al. ignore Hall's account of the historical processes and contexts that gave rise to and sustained the pseudo-pacification process from the Middle Ages to the present day. Together, these two elements form the bedrock of Hall's explanation of the general decline in violence and the concomitant rise of acquisitive crime and legal-yet-harmful economic, social and cultural practices. Their absence from Wood et al.'s critique results in readers getting nothing but a series of decontextualized quotes which misrepresent the overall structure and the central conceptual components of Hall's theory.

The gravity of Wood et al.'s misrepresentation makes it necessary to explain as clearly as possible some of the basic tenets of transcendental materialist subjectivity and how they inform the theory of the pseudo-pacification process. At the core of ultra-realism's theoretical framework is an original account of subjectivity as it acts and emerges within its socio-economic context (Hall and Winlow, 2015). This account of subjectivity refuses to follow the established social scientific path of simply ignoring the thorny issue of biology, but it also works with a post-Freudian account of the unconscious. Ultra-realists accept that we are, first and foremost, organic 'things.' Our subjectivity ontogenetically emerges from corporeal experience. While Wood et al. appear to think that biological impulses and primal drives can be thought of only as social constructs, ultra-realists suggest that human subjectivity inevitably references bodily experience, the symbolic processes that have emerged to interpret bodily experience and the mental processes that have emerged to control and direct our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage with the world around us (Johnston, 2008). Consequently, ultra-realism's account of subjectivity does not adhere to the old philosophical trope that posits a natural essence of innate goodness or innate selfishness acting as a driving life-force at the core of subjectivity, one which is entirely separate from and pre-exists the subject's entry into the social world. Such tropes lie unacknowledged at the core of much criminological theory, which often views this natural essence as either corrupted by the social world or in need of firm control and discipline or deterrence from socially undesirable behaviours.

Ultra-realism, by contrast, draws on transcendental materialism's philosophical realism to argue that what lies at the original material-corporeal core of subjectivity is a *void* – a fundamental lack, absence and subsequent anxiety. This is the Lacanian Real, a realm of unnameable *conflicting* drives and internal and external stimuli which cannot be symbolised and of which we cannot, initially, make cognitive sense. Transcendental materialism argues that this absence of symbolic meaning, a state without culture in which we exist from birth, is not a site of original freedom as it is presented in standard liberal discourse, but a profoundly traumatic experience (Žižek, 2000). Desperate to escape the 'terror of the Real', this original sense of lack and anxiety drives the subject outwards to actively solicit the coherence of the symbolic order's relatively rigid ideological systems and sets of symbols, customs and codes (Hall, 2012), which pre-exist the subject and can 'fill up' the void of subjectivity by providing a frame of reference with

which the subject can identify, orient itself, and make coherent sense of its life (Winlow and Hall, 2013).

Therefore, transcendental materialism — and by extension, ultra-realism — argues that human subjects are *hard-wired for plasticity* (Johnston, 2008). We are extremely adaptable, capable of fitting into radically different social, cultural and economic conditions. Drives, desires, and the anxieties at the core of the subject are always in tension with one another, and always accessible to the symbolism of the external world. Certain drives can become prominent while others remain dormant as they are stimulated in different ways by the pre-existing symbolic order. As Hall and Winlow (2015) argue, these symbolic orders can be conservative, hierarchical and regressive, or they can be reflexive, progressive and egalitarian if they leave sufficient space in which the subject can freely move. The key, as Raymen (2019) has suggested, is that for the subject driven to avoid a traumatic encounter with the Lacanian Real, *any symbolic order is better than no symbolic order at all*. This feature of subjectivity is also what differentiates ultra-realism from Bhaskar's (2008) critical realism. While influential for ultra-realism in some qualified ways, Bhaskar's critical realism continued to posit the existence of an eternal moral essence in the subject, which exists in timeless opposition to the corrupting influences of society's cultural, political-economic and ideological systems. As Hall and Winlow (2015) have emphasised:

As a first step towards a philosophical basis for ultra-realist criminology, we have to admit that Bhaskar's naturalistic metaphor doesn't quite work. There is no natural human essence of love and creativity to be released into the air, but there is [...] a potential for it to be cultivated in a nurturing society. For Lacan and Žižek, the human essence is a non-essential void of conflicting drives, not some sort of naturalistic and inexhaustible Bergsonian 'life-force' (see Hall, 2012c). We can be loving and creative, but we can also be hateful and prejudiced, or apathetic, nihilistic and devoid of care. The core of the human being is far more contingent and flexible at the basic material level than any naturalistic or transcendental idealist metaphor can represent, therefore the symbolic environment is important (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 109).

Clearly, such a model of subjectivity exists in direct contradistinction to Wood et al.'s claim that ultra-realism naturalises violent drives through a 'hydraulic' model of the psyche. The claim that there is no single predominant drive — such as violence — that functions as a natural driving essence of subjectivity, but instead an array of *unnameable* and *conflicting* drives and a profound absence of symbolism which generates a primary anxiety that can be stimulated in various ways by different symbolic orders, is in itself sufficient to invalidate Wood et al.'s critique. However, because they have chosen to ignore the full historical narrative and context underpinning Hall's theory of the pseudo-pacification process and its relationship to this conceptualisation of subjectivity, we must also address this further misunderstanding.

Hall's account of the pseudo-pacification process — which is indeed concerned with the pacification of physical violence and capitalism's ability to harness symbolic violence and the broad implications of this process for society and culture — does not rest

solely on the rise and success of market ideology. The process is also driven forward by the stimulation of *individualised* desires for wealth and commodities amongst a commercial class that became increasingly powerful and influential. This, Hall argues, depended upon the disruption of solidarity, altruism, and relatively orderly and secure – but not necessarily benign – social relations that were prevalent *within* the defensive units of community and family, and the gradual relocation of their norms and values from the generative core to the regulatory periphery of social life. Historical research by Ward-Perkins (2005), Maddern (1992) and Dyer (2000) offers copious empirical evidence to suggest that after the fall of the Roman Empire, England did indeed become a largely ungoverned ‘paraspace’ replete with violence. The wholesale separation of economy and household had not yet fully taken place and, crucially, property was *collectively* owned by the entire family unit and inheritance was shared, rather than owned by and bequeathed to individuals (MacFarlane, 1978). In this period, land was the principal object of economic value and desire, while family and community – and their protection through communal altruism, solidarity and, if necessary, violence – were the principal sites of identification, security, honour, and social reputation (Hall, 2020).

The introduction of the laws of primogeniture and entail throughout the social structure in England changed this situation considerably. In both law and practice, land came to be regarded as the property of an individual, to be inherited by individuals. Land and property were frequently sold outside of the family for economic gain (MacFarlane, 1978). This legally and culturally driven dissolution of the family, inherently sexist as it favoured sons, created a more insecure and uncertain existence for children. Those last in line or out of favour with their parents could be cast out of the geographically bound productive-defensive unit of family, land and community and into the competitive marketplace. At this point in Hall’s analysis, the role of psychoanalytic theory coalesces with the historical narrative. Ultra-realists tend to argue that at the core of subjectivity lies nothing other than a powerful, structuring absence that inspires deep anxiety. The legally and culturally driven dissolution of the family/community unit meant that it ceased to be the basis of our identity, subjectivity, honour, and existential security. This abiding sense of loss became the *objet petit a*, the unnameable lost object of desire which propelled the subject to look outwards toward the nascent economic markets for a replacement; it propelled the subject to pursue material wealth and socio-symbolic status as a precarious and individualised form of security, which, for those determined to be successful in gradually pacified environments, required the culturo-legal formation and normalisation of intensely competitive, aggressive but non-violent subjectivities:

The legally-driven splitting of the family, and with it the geographically bound ethnic community, corresponds with the splitting of the individual ego and the redirection of its identification processes, from the family and community outward to the world of the commercial market in which offspring were forced to engage in pacified economic competition against each other as their traditional mode of security and status was disrupted. (Hall, 2014: 17-18)

We can now see quite clearly that, according to Hall’s pseudo-pacification process, the increasing competitive individualism and pursuit of wealth and material security in the economic and socio-cultural spheres was not a ‘hydraulic’ redirection of violent drives into pseudo-pacified forms of socio-symbolic and economic activity. It was a

conversion, but one of amorphous libidinal energy in which complex, conflicting drives, desires and symbols were reconfigured as they faced a future in the new and uncertain context of a burgeoning urban market economy. Certainly, reform of the criminal justice system and the introduction of communal policing measures from the late thirteenth century endeavoured to pacify the localised violence which limited broader economic growth in order to increase confidence and encourage participation in the nascent proto-capitalist markets. But the original *source* of the individualised desire for wealth and new commodities and the emergence of competitive-individualist subjectivities initially sprang from the psycho-social stimulation of the lack and anxiety at the core of subjectivity through legal changes in property ownership and their corresponding impact upon a wider social, cultural and economic context that was undergoing an epochal shift; not the simple 'rechannelling' of violent drives inherent in the subject.

Restricted by a *deaptive* symbolic order (Johnston, 2008), the subject who chose to seek success had to *flexibly adapt* to new circumstances and identify with the emerging principles and requirements of the new order. The alternative was to risk socioeconomic failure or a traumatic re-encounter with the Real and the emergence of a radical subjectivity at odds with – but not necessarily progressive or politically resistant to – the rapidly establishing normative order (Hall 2012). This reflects the fundamental plasticity of human subjectivity and the *necessity* of this plasticity for the emergence of a diverse range of pseudo-pacified competitive-individualist subjects in a specific historical period which, even today, we have not entirely left behind. Contrary to Wood et al.'s claim, this demonstrates that there is no internal contradiction between the pseudo-pacification process' model of subjectivity and ultra-realism's emphasis upon neuroplasticity.

This deeply grounded historical subjectivity is far more than the subject of language, discourse or even cultural practice. Instead, ultra-realism shows how the ongoing fuel for the reproduction of narcissistic and competitive-individualist subjectivities has been sustained by the simultaneous cultivation of (1) lack and *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012) through a variety of economic and socio-cultural processes – a key ultra-realist concept ignored by Wood et al.; (2) the *promise* of their eventual alleviation through economic and socio-symbolic competition in the market and other cultural spheres (McGowan, 2016); and (3) the negative ideology of *capitalist realism* (Fisher, 2009; see also Winlow et al, 2015). This last concept, central to ultra-realism's theoretical framework but omitted from Wood et al.'s critique, argues that when today's subject emerges into the world of liberal-postmodern capitalism, it does not encounter a coherent symbolic order based on *positive* beliefs, but a cynical symbolic order predicated on the negative ideological belief that nothing beyond the current system is possible. Operating seamlessly with liberal-postmodernism, contemporary societies in developed nations have largely dispensed with the belief that a fundamentally different social world is possible, and their influential figures have chosen to concede that our choices and the extent of our moral agency must operate within the constraints of the existing socio-economic system. Liberal-postmodernism's pervasive cynicism has largely prohibited our access to faith in politics, science, religion, morality, community or the traditional commitments and responsibilities of collective identity. It is a negative ideological system predicated on a belief in our own *non-belief* (Žižek, 2008; Pfaller, 2014), and upon the logic of disavowal. As Winlow (2012) points out, it does not even ask

us to *believe* in capitalism, but only to *refuse* the belief that anything beyond capitalism is possible and that what we currently have is the least worst of all options.

This cynicism, combined with liberalism's fetishization of the free individual's moral sovereignty, cultivates a broader culture of individualism which does not assuage but intensifies and over-stimulates the fundamental lack and anxiety at the core of subjectivity. As numerous ultra-realists have shown, consumer culture can very effectively translate such absence into desire for its sign-value system of commodities and culturally celebrated lifestyles, as individuals willingly engage in social practices and behaviours which are directly and indirectly harmful to other individuals, communities, the environment or even themselves as they seek to temporarily alleviate this *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012; Raymen and Smith, 2016). This refutes the 'temporal problem' that Wood et al. imagine themselves to have uncovered within the pseudo pacification process. They argue that:

[W]ithout naturalising aggressive drives, Hall's theory *can* explain the sublimation of interpersonal violence into socio-symbolic aggression among those living at the dawn of (neoliberal) capitalism. It *cannot*, however, explain the sublimation of interpersonal violence into socio-symbolic aggression among those born *into* capitalism without naturalising aggressive drives to interpersonal violence (p. 11).

However, it is precisely because ultra-realism *does not* naturalise violent drives or position them as the source of aggressive pseudo-pacified socio-symbolic competition that the pseudo-pacification process *can* explain the continued presence of competitive-individualism among those born into capitalism, specifically neoliberal capitalism.

Wood et al. also suggest that the pseudo-pacification process sets up a zero-sum game between physical aggression and socio-symbolic competition in a manner which renders its relationship with the concept of *special liberty* internally incoherent. Since this claim is based upon the now-debunked critique that ultra-realism presents a 'hydraulic' model of the psyche which 'naturalises' violent drives, dispensing with it is quite straightforward. The decline of interpersonal physical violence as a dominant norm is not the basis of the triumph of pseudo-pacified aggression. Such violence is still retained by 'undertakers' to be used in specific social-structural and temporal situations of direct conflict, while pseudo-pacified aggression is functionally normalised in situations of everyday competition. Each category contains numerous variations that can be harmful in their own ways. 'Special liberty' is a relatively unstructured sense of ethico-social entitlement invoked by those who are officially appointed or who unofficially appoint themselves as elite 'undertakers' whose ends justify their means, and who are prepared to act on those means by disavowing the knowledge that they will in all probability produce harmful consequences on the path to alleged longer-term beneficial ends, whether they be connected to self or social enrichment. There is nothing incoherent about that relatively straightforward concept, which can be drawn upon as both motivation and justification in situations where decisions are made to risk the consequences of harmful physical or symbolic aggression (see Tudor, 2018).

Response 2: Ultra-Realism is a 'monocausal' 'direct expression' theory and dismissive of gender norms and social reproduction

Perhaps the best way to begin a response to this section of Wood et al.'s critique is to state quite baldly that ultra-realism is not a crime causation theory; even the title of their critique is a misunderstanding. Ultra-realism has always emphasised that it offers a *probabilistic* theoretical framework founded on the principle of conditionality and tendencies, rather than direct causation. As Hall and Winlow (2015: 96, original emphasis) write, '[t]here are no universal laws, but under certain conditions there are *probabilistic tendencies*.' In their book *Revitalising Criminological Theory* Hall and Winlow (2015) use the term 'probabilistic' *nine times* to describe ultra-realism. Ultra-realism situates crime and harm within causative processes, but it does not reduce them to a singular causative process, talk about 'direct causation', or posit crime and harm as an unmediated expression of capitalism. Regrettably, it has become commonplace within the liberal-postmodernist social sciences to label all theoretical works that address political economy 'reductionist' (Winlow, 2012), but to suggest that ultra-realists identify capitalism as the sole cause of crime and harm is simply untrue.

Ultra-realists often problematise neoliberal capitalism and address what appear to be its negative effects. Given our current global situation, it seems impossible for any self-respecting social scientist not to engage in such discussions. However, this does not mean that ultra-realists identify capitalism or its neoliberal variant as *the* fundamental cause of everything that's wrong with the world. Rather, ultra-realism's epistemological framework connects negative events and outcomes, and the meanings and interpretations applied to those events and outcomes, to the contexts, structures and processes that frame them, before grappling with the underlying generative mechanisms that create and maintain those contexts, structures and processes. Even though Wood et al. largely ignore the empirical work carried out by ultra-realists, it will be obvious to anyone who has read ultra-realist texts that the theoretical work emerges *from* social research. Ultra-realist researchers tend to be ethnographers who have observed at close quarters the lives of those indebted to or rendered superfluous by our present socio-economic system (see for example Horsley, 2015; Ellis, 2016; Winlow et al, 2017; Briggs and Gamero, 2017; Lloyd, 2018; Kotzé, 2019; Kuldova 2019; Raymen, 2018; Raymen and Smith, 2017). It is difficult to ignore the effects of the transformation of labour markets in some of the regions we have researched, and it would be misguided to suggest that the negative effects we have witnessed are entirely disconnected from transformations in the realm of political economy. But, by the same token, the fact that only *some* of the individuals we encounter during our fieldwork are engaged in criminal activity has meant that it is equally clear to ultra-realist scholars that such tendencies and the forces that underpin them cannot be positioned as singular, deterministic 'causes' unmediated by other cultural issues and biographical events.

This is precisely why ultra-realism has argued that male violence cannot be a *direct* and *unmediated* expression of 'traditional' or 'toxic' masculinity. Making this claim is not to 'deny the antecedent' and suggest that some of the less benign forms of socially reproduced masculinity have no role to play in crime and violence. It is simply to observe that because not all men are involved in violence, there must be something more complex going on which requires more sophisticated analyses that align with reality. Accounts of gender, class, culture and the intricacies of personal biographies have been at the very heart of ultra-realist scholars' work for two decades *prior* to the establishment of ultra-realism as a coherent body of criminological theory and remain

central to its present-day analyses of crime, violence and harm (Winlow, 2001; Hall, 2002; Hall et al. 2008; Ellis, 2016; Winlow, 2014). These issues are not treated as 'epiphenomenal' to political economy, as Wood et al. claim, but central to its reproduction. Ultra-realists have simply refused to elevate these cultural forces to a pedestal of some free-floating autonomous causative force unaffected by politics, economic change and the spectre of history. Extensive historical research on economic, socio-legal and cultural developments has suggested that gender norms *have* shifted in the historical context established by the capitalist project (Hall, 2012; Winlow, 2001) and specific correlations have suggested that they have not remained entirely autonomous and unaffected by this context. This is neither economic 'determinism' nor a 'marginalisation' or 'relegation' of gender; nor is it an elevation of political economy to a 'more important' rung on the analytical ladder. It is simply a call for a more comprehensive analytical *integration* – a work in progress that will not develop further unless open-minded scholars put various dogmas to one side and investigate the context.

From Wood et al.'s argument, it seems that ultra-realism's sin is not 'denying the antecedent' of gender, but of *problematizing all aetiological antecedents*, including those that progressive liberals hold dear. In this regard, Wood et al. appear to contradict themselves. They advocate 'indirect expression' theories. They suggest that ultra-realism must renounce the notion that crime is a *direct* expression of capitalism, which, as we have seen, it never endorsed. However, Wood et al. then proceed to critique ultra-realism for problematising the notion that crime and violence is a direct expression of a specific form of masculinity, asking for a deeper and more analytically integrated understanding of the relationship between masculinities and violence, one which takes into account the detailed micro context of personal biographies and the broader structural context of political economy and culture.

The desire for analytical integration is why ultra-realism has advocated the use of ethnographic methods throughout its development. As Hall et al (2008: xiii) have written, '[w]ithout data that represent faithfully the ongoing reality of life in advanced capitalism, even the best theoretical explanations can over time stagnate and degenerate into inter-textual abstraction.' Ethnography, therefore, is utilised by ultra-realists to capture and appreciate these contextual specificities by providing individual life-biographies and offering histories of place and culture in order to explain why *some* individuals in *particular* social, gendered, class-cultural and political-economic contexts, with *specific* events and traumas in their biographies, seem prone to specific types of criminality or harmful social practice. Wood et al.'s misreading of ultra-realism as a 'monocausal' theoretical framework leads them to view this as some contradiction at the heart of the ultra-realist project, requiring ultra-realism to be 'parasitic on the very 'culturalist' frameworks it critiques' (Wood et al., 2020: 8). Ultra-realists do not have to be 'parasitic' upon cultural analysis because they *are* cultural analysts; cultural analysts who simply insist on the contextualised integration of complex and variegated factors. Conveniently, the ultra-realist texts which most acutely represent such cultural analysis based on analytical integration of life biographies, personal traumas, local histories and gendered class-cultural contexts are either sparse or entirely absent from Wood et al.'s critique (see in particular Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2008; Kotzé, 2019; Raymen, 2018; Raymen and Smith, 2017; Smith, 2014; Yardley et al., 2019; Winlow, 2012, 2014).

This interest in the universal, the particular, and the specific is what led the likes of Winlow (2014) and Ellis (2016), in their studies of compulsively violent men, to position the issue of political economy deep in the analytical background as the wider contextual backdrop against which other factors operated. More prominent here were the forms of inter-generational trauma and abuse suffered at the hands of violent father figures, which hauntologically structured these individual's identities, their interactions with others, and their violence (see also Ellis et al, 2017). These forms of abuse were, to a certain extent, a warped product of class-cultural codes of masculinity which were once coded and functional in a political-economic order that no longer exists, but nevertheless deaptatively persist in the present day. Similarly, through ethnographic research on outlaw motorcycle clubs, Kuldova has outlined the various contexts which give rise to the desire for club membership and the willingness to act violently on the club's behalf. She accounts for the different elements of attraction that span from the personal to the structural, and for the strategies of recruitment and legitimization employed by outlaw motorcycle clubs in growing their membership and support base. While the club's attraction and appeal are particularly pronounced under certain socio-economic and political conditions, Kuldova simultaneously limits the scope of possibility for others. She offers no straightforward or causative answers. To the contrary, she reads the empirical material through a range of theories of the sublime and the sacred, of sovereignty, symbolic immortality, and sacrifice, all the while framed by ultra-realist perspectives in an attempt to break away from established and inadequate explanations (Kuldova 2019a). These studies are either scarcely discussed or entirely absent from Wood et. al's article. It is possible that they were simply unaware of this literature, but it is also possible that they chose to ignore it because it entirely invalidates their critique.

Quite clearly, therefore, ultra-realism does not critique cultural analysis *per se*. Rather, it critiques the almost exclusive dominance ascribed to cultural factors within liberal criminology and the extent to which culture has been imagined to be 'relatively' autonomous. Since the 1960s, the left's intelligentsia increasingly shifted away from questions of political economy and towards a decontextualized 'cultural politics of everyday life' (Wolin, 2010). They have played fast and loose with the imprecise term of 'relative' to the extent that it now verges on a cultural reductionism that dismisses any sustained discussion of political economy as simplistic orthodox 'Marxism'. Hence it charges anyone, even those involved in analytical *integration* rather than direct monocausality, with the crimes of 'determinism' and treating factors such as gender and other forms of social reproduction as inferior, less significant analytical categories.

For ultra-realists, the questions of crime and harm are never exclusively reducible to political economy. Neither does the analysis of criminological phenomena have to be principally about capitalism. The entire point of ultra-realism is to *avoid* crude and decontextualized monocausality irrespective of whether those supposed antecedent causes are located in political economy, gender and race relations, cultural norms, language, or biology. In our current moment, for example, the argument that climate change is rapidly becoming a probabilistic causative context in itself is becoming increasingly convincing. Existing research indicates that climate change is already a probabilistic context shaping emergent forms of violence, migration, xenophobia, poverty, acquisitive criminality, policing, securitisation and corporate harm throughout the world,

and does so along existing fault lines of gendered, racial and geo-political inequalities (Nixon, 2011; Parenti, 2011). As climate change intensifies, transforms, and shapes these emergent forms of crime and harm, it would be ludicrous to suggest that they are entirely reducible to political economy. But it would be equally ludicrous to discount the role of political economy and ideology in the creation of such harmful environmental change or the intervention sorely needed to arrest it.

It is for these reasons that ultra-realists are extremely careful in their use of language. We talk about causative *contexts* and *processes*, with an emphasis on the plural. Therefore, we would agree wholeheartedly with Wood et al.'s claim that criminology is better served by 'indirect expression' theories. We would simply argue that ultra-realism *already is* an indirect expression framework, but one that removes political economy from a list of 'factors' and establishes it as one of the main *contexts* (rather than causes). This context imposes limits on possibilities and social activity and possesses the concentrated political and cultural power to buy off and recruit any oppositional or even inquisitive movement that may emerge from plural fields of social activity (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Lloyd, 2018; Raymen, 2018; Winlow et al, 2015). Ultra-realism has focused heavily on the role neoliberal capitalism has played in creating a reproductive context and specific spaces in which the subject can justify and legitimise acting in harmful ways to satisfy desires. But this focus is merely the product of years of empirical research which has consistently indicated that the various culturally and spatially mediated practices that ultra-realists have examined in detail were also representative of the cynical and fatalistic context generated by the dominant ideology of capitalist realism. The absence and ideological preclusion of any alternative on the horizon engenders a *refusal to refuse* (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Across these diverse studies, many individuals expressed variants of the same fatalistic position; that if the existing system is the only game in town, then it is preferable to play the game as best they can with the tools available; whether they be violence, criminality, pseudo-pacified competition, exploitative economic practices, or the 'depressive hedonism' of consumer culture (Fisher, 2009; Tudor, 2018). In the absence of a viable alternative, to *refuse* the existing symbolic order would be to choose to risk a traumatic encounter with the Real and confront the void at the core of our subjectivity, something which, as transcendental materialism establishes, we are unconsciously driven to avoid. But the theoretical framework of ultra-realism itself is flexible and creative enough to assign the wider context of political economy greater or lesser analytical importance when appropriate to the reality of the topic, without entirely discarding consideration of its influence.

Response 3: Ultra-Realism denies the subject any agency to shape their social and cultural environment

The last point above leads onto a further critique which stems from a combination of Wood et al.'s now-refuted claims that ultra-realism is a 'monocausal' theory which 'naturalises' violent drives and is 'dismissive' of social reproduction. Namely, that ultra-realism denies subjects any agency to change or shape the social and cultural environment in which they live. Wood et al. falsely claim that ultra-realism advances an almost Marxian 'false consciousness' model, in which the subject is entirely socially determined and unwittingly perpetuates the existing ideology and social structure without any agency. On the contrary, ultra-realism has directly challenged and

repudiated the notion of false consciousness and the denial of subjective agency, drawing upon ideas such as the 'reversal of ideology' (Žižek, 1989), *fetishistic disavowal* (Žižek, 2008; see also Kuldova, 2019a) and the agentic 'chosen unconscious' (Hall and Winlow, 2015). These ideas appear throughout the ultra-realist literature yet are notable only for their absence in Wood et al.'s article.

Drawing upon these ideas, ultra-realists argue that many individuals are aware of the systemic forces and processes which *seem* to act independently of our knowledge and activity. We know of the harms they cause, and we understand how the accumulation of our own everyday economic and socio-cultural practices and desires contribute toward their social reproduction and, by extension, the harms and suffering in the world. However, this broad zemiological knowledge is continuously disavowed as the subject *chooses* to repress them into the unconscious (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 105). Do we not see this in our daily lives throughout the social structure? We *know* about the harms of carbon emissions and the detrimental impact of tourism upon climate change and the local environments of tourist destinations, yet many of us continue to jet off on luxury holidays each year (Smith, 2019). We *know* that the fashionable clothes and electronic commodities we desire are produced by poorly paid women and children from across the globe, labouring in sweatshops and mines under dangerous and exploitative conditions. But we nevertheless continue to shop and buy from designer and fast fashion retailers (Kuldova 2016, 2019b). As Hall and Winlow (2015: 105) have written, '[i]n this way individuals *choose* what to repress into their unconscious yet simultaneously *act out* every day to reproduce existing structures and cultures.' We know, but we don't want to know. Therefore, we act *as if* we don't know.

Ultra-realism, therefore, has been at pains to stress that harmful social, cultural and political-economic systems cannot be reproduced without this agentic intervention. This is explicitly mentioned in a number of publications. As Hall and Winlow (2015:110) write:

[A]lthough the forces and processes in the intransitive realm seem to act independently of our knowledge and activity, this realm is at the very deepest dynamic level a product of the historical accumulation of the systemic consequences of actions that are constantly and systematically *made unconscious*. In other words, we actually know quite a lot about the intransitive realm already and we have done for a long time. Each day we knowingly act to reproduce it, but we fetishistically deny this collusion and thus repress it into our unconscious. (original emphasis)

Elsewhere, in Lloyd's discussion of how ultra-realism approaches the question of social harm and inequality, he writes that, '[u]ltimately, where social harm theorists suggest that harm is a result of widening inequality, ultra-realism argues that *inequality stems from a willingness to inflict harm on others*' (Lloyd, 2018: 24 original emphasis). We can detect this emphasis upon agency more implicitly if we return to Hall's *Theorizing Crime and Deviance*, and his formulation of criminology's 'fundamental' aetiological question. The question, Hall argues, is 'why liberal-capitalist life constitutes and reproduces throughout its social structure conspicuous and influential subjectivities that reject solidarity for a form of competitive individualism, one which is willing to harm others as it furthers its own interests' (Hall 2012: 245). Hall's formulation of the aetiological question, specifically his emphasis upon the active *rejection* of solidarity,

embeds ultra-realism's emphasis upon conditionality and agentic *choice* within it—a choice between solidarity and collective political struggle on one hand and narcissistic competitive individualism, either violent or pseudo-pacified, on the other.

Ultra-realism, consequently, is *all about agency*, but an agency evaluated on its courage and ability to use collective politics to alter the conditions of its existence. Ultra-realism acknowledges that subjects can act autonomously and engage in collective political struggle to transform these circumstances. But in the absence of a viable and attractive alternative, the possibility of which is consistently doubted and precluded by both the pervasive cynicism of liberal-postmodernism's assault on belief and capitalist realism's negative ideology, ultra-realists simply observe that in the contemporary context individuals rarely do so (Treadwell et al, 2013; Winlow et al, 2015; 2017). This returns us once again to the influence of psychoanalytic theory and the traumatic void of the Real at the core of subjectivity. For ultra-realists, we are not the reluctant and unwitting subjects of ideology deprived of any agency. On the contrary, for ultra-realists we are agents who, in the absence of absent of what we perceive to be a preferable and viable alternative, *actively solicit* the existing symbolic order – of which traditionalism and progressivism are variants – to provide our lives with symbolic meaning, structure and comprehensibility, thus avoiding a traumatic encounter with the Real. This may be difficult to contemplate for a left-liberal criminology whose domain assumptions imagine the subject to be a naturally benign and progressive agent geared toward resistance. However, research by numerous academics has revealed that in the context of late-modern consumer capitalism actual resistance is in short supply, with a simulacrum of resistance operating as a vital feature of contemporary neoliberal ideology (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Kuldova, 2019a; Lloyd, 2018; Treadwell et al, 2013; Raymen, 2018; Winlow, 2012).

The importance ultra-realism places on the causative power of what is *absent* (see Hall and Winlow, 2015) – and not just of what is present – provides additional evidence of its emphasis upon contextual conditionality and probabilistic tendencies rather than direct, unmediated causation. Ultra-realism, clearly, is not 'monocausal'. How could Wood et al. have overlooked these central ideas, consistently repeated throughout the ultra-realist literature? Treadwell et al.'s (2013) analysis of the 2011 England Riots offers a further example. The eventual consumerist and individualist form that the riots took was not, in the minds of these scholars, a foregone conclusion. True to ultra-realism's emphasis upon conditionality, Treadwell et al. openly acknowledged that the frustration, resentment, marginalisation, and keen sense of precariousness and lack that tormented their respondents *could* have gone in a different direction. The descent into the impotent destructiveness and individualistic consumerist looting which characterised those heady days in August 2011 was not solely determined by the *presence* of inequality, consumer capitalism, unemployment and austerity. Equally important was the *absence* of a political narrative and symbolism which could capture the imagination and unite rioters in a common political cause and struggle for a utopian vision of the future. They claim:

No unifying and readily communicable political symbolism is at hand to provide a means of grasping the reality of common stresses and dissatisfactions, or the enduring sense of precariousness and lack that frames the marginalized subject's sense of being-in-the-world. Instead, subjects are forced to stew over the bleak reality of their material

conditions and their durable but objectless sense of exploitation, irrelevance and anxiety in isolation. Unable to divest themselves of torment and nagging doubt, perpetually marginalized youth populations have become moody and vaguely 'pissed off' without ever fully understanding why. The end result [...] is the accumulation of deep-seated, inarticulate and destructive dissatisfactions amongst subjects who feel trapped in marginalized social spaces. Unable to either succeed as individuals or address their situation as a collective, destined only to fail while the mass media daily inflict upon them the symbolic violence of the magical success of consumer capitalism's winners, and unable properly to articulate and communicate the causes and contexts of their dissatisfactions, these young people had nowhere to take their anger and resentment but the shops (Treadwell et al, 2013: 1).

Agency and the conditional possibility of alternative social trends and outcomes are a central feature of ultra-realism. Ultra-realism's foremost concern is to shed light upon the reasons why the social, cultural, political and economic conditions in which we are living foster specific social responses in specific situations. Why, after forty years of deindustrialisation, neoliberalism and wage repression are we witnessing the return of far-right political sympathies and an active rejection of the political 'left' in the former heartlands of British socialism (Winlow et al, 2017)? Why are we witnessing rising acquisitive crime and violence in some of the most socio-economically deprived and marginalised corners of the UK, rather than solidarity, communalism or progressive politics (Kotzé, 2019)? Ultra-realism's acknowledgment of conditionality and alternative possibilities is simply ignored by Wood et al's caricature of ultra-realism.

Closing Remarks: Cynicism and exhaustion

Aside from their failure to accurately represent ultra-realism, what is most disappointing about Wood et al.'s critique is that they fail to identify something better. They refuse absolutely to pin their colours to the mast and tell us what they believe, and why their audience should follow them in believing in it. Their critique is simply a cynical dismissal. Why would they refuse to identify what they believe to be a better intellectual framework worthy of our attention and commitment? Rather than suggest what readers might want to believe in, they tell readers not to believe. Our disappointment with Wood et al.'s simplistic dismissal of ultra-realism is connected to this faithlessness and cynicism that are key cultural outcomes of the liberal postmodern era. Ultra-realists have talked about liberal-postmodern ideology in great detail, and it is fitting that in return the critique of ultra-realism contains no positive object of respect and belief. Don't believe the hype, their audience is told. All the claims made by ultra-realists are wrong. Like a police officer trying to disperse a crowd, the basic message of Wood et al.'s critique is 'there's nothing to see here', and so it is throughout our discipline today. Cynicism reigns. New theories are shot to pieces before they get off the runway. All we have are the obsolete tools bequeathed to us by the established canon of western criminology, and neither do we have much faith in those. All that we can do, it seems, is propose a slight adjustment here and there. Maybe we can take some elements of strain theory and combine them with some elements of labelling theory. Maybe we can adjust

the moral panic thesis to make it work in the post-truth era. But even when we engage in such processes, we do so tentatively, and in some instances almost apologetically, as if we were attempting to mitigate against the recriminations and slander we fear may follow. Sadly, many have retreated from the field in fear that their true intellectual or political commitments may offend what many believe to be the brittle sensibilities of their colleagues. Others water down their claims and hedge their bets, while others still retreat into empiricism and occasionally brazen careerism.

At the risk of speaking for others, we would nevertheless speculate that ultra-realists share the conviction that we need to believe again. Without belief, symbolic orders fall apart, our political systems atrophy, history stalls and academic disciplines become moribund. Ultra-realists do not ask that you believe in ultra-realism. We do not ask you to believe in our politics. We do not ask those who use ultra-realist concepts to intellectually 'identify' as ultra-realists. I am certain that many scholars who have used some of these concepts would balk at such a label; such critical distance is vital for ensuring that ultra-realism remains an open and adaptive theoretical framework rather than a dogmatic closed canon of ideas. We simply ask that you give ultra-realism a chance. Read the work free from prejudice and focus on the claims ultra-realists actually make rather than attempting to guess at what prejudicial 'dog-whistle' might lurk between the lines. Ultra-realism is a framework that we hope can be improved and adapted when exposed to new topics, contexts and criminological problems. Like many other early career researchers, the idea of robotically returning to the liberal canon when faced with a problem is entirely unpalatable. The world is changing, and we want to believe that something better can arise. However, we are absolutely sure that without belief and the investment of human energy it will not. We do not encourage unthinking belief, but to follow the current ideological injunction to cynically dismiss all truth claims and assume that every political or intellectual movement is inherently corrupted in some way leads our societies and our disciplines to ossify and stagnate. It is often said that we no longer have heroes in the west, and despite our cultural obsession with celebrity, many appear to be momentarily gratified when someone famous falls from grace. The cynical conclusion that everyone on high is fallible and no better than me; or worse, that anyone who tries to get ahead deserves to be taken down a peg or two, has a populist edge to it that many applaud. Ultra-realists refuse to be weighed down by cynicism. We want to believe – not in what we have done so far, but in the act of dialectically pursuing new ideas and ways of explaining the world. We don't claim that our programme is perfect. We simply want to produce and apply new ideas because that is what the situation demands, and we will congratulate and join with those from the next generation of scholars who push aside the centrist liberals that police the boundaries of acceptable knowledge to produce new and better theories that help us to understand what is going on in the world *right now*.

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