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Keeping It Real: Dick Hobbs's legacy of classic ethnography and the new ultra-realist agenda

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When the real world out there enters one of its periodic convulsions, and the faddish ways of seeing it which have dominated a particular era become exhausted and begin to lose their credibility, the real world appears *more real* than it has done in the preceding years. It looms large in our consciousness and demands that we return to it. In such periods of intervallic confusion – which always follow in the immediate aftermath of a major tectonic shift - only the more rigorous, revealing and properly contextualised examples of our representational work will survive. The work of Dick Hobbs, from its early days of exploring in the East End of London (Hobbs, 1988) to his late attempt to grapple with the Hydra of global ‘organised’ crime and its ‘glocal’ nodes (Hobbs, 1998), stands out in this category. Dick Hobbs is of course known for his detailed ethnographic work and his enduring concern with the connections that exist between crime, political economy and working-class culture. Here, we discuss Dick’s contribution to urban ethnography and the power of his descriptive account of working-class life, but we also suggest that his work will continue to act as one of the main sources of inspiration for the new ultra-realist programme in criminological research and theory.

Having known and worked with Dick Hobbs for over three decades, it seems to us that in most of his work he was very keen to expose the vast chasm between the fleeting fragments of reality about which we can claim to have knowledge and the socially constructed fantasies that litter the pavements of both popular culture and academia. Dick utilised symbolic interactionism early on his career but he quickly moved beyond this tradition to develop a gritty realist approach that cut underneath the symbolic interactionist concerns with the conversational self and the structures of symbolic definitional power. He sought explanations of cultures, emotions and subjectivities in the socioeconomic and geographical contexts in which ordinary people spend the bulk of their lives. It is this realist turn that we want to focus upon and present as the pinnacle of Dick’s work. At a time when left idealism was dominant and in career terms it was dangerous to move beyond weak social constructivism, Dick forged ahead to reveal uncomfortable truths about working-class culture, crime and business. At the very moment cultural theorists were instructing legions of eager graduate students to regard all

representations of reality as mere social constructs, outcomes of the ability of powerful groups to utilise language in order to construct a narrative that can pass for truth, Dick presented to the pious liberal philanthropists of the university mainstream an image of reality that was authentic and born of an intimate relationship with the research field. His descriptive ethnographic work immediately grabbed us and demanded we pay attention. Here was a world that we both knew well, a world in which working-class conservatism exists in abundance, a world of shady business and occasional violence, a world of proletarian entrepreneurs on the look-out for a deal, a world of belly laughs, hangovers and short-termism, but also of a world of danger, sadness and retreat. It was the kind of depiction of working-class life that only a true native can produce.

Dick developed a hugely successful career, but he did this against the odds. The liberal mainstream never really forgave him for moving beyond language and representation, or for ignoring the injunction to portray the working class as a collection of beautiful souls fighting the good fight against capitalist authoritarianism. In our view, if Dick had discovered cultural resistance to capitalism in working-class neighbourhoods, rather than the working class's incorporation into capitalist dreams and adoption of capitalist dynamics, he would have found himself at the very top of the discipline in Britain far sooner, and his stay there would have lasted far longer. Too often his work was treated as an entertaining curiosity. As the liberal elite that dominates our discipline remained keen to bolster the myth of diversity in university life, Dick was figuratively assigned a pigeonhole and invited in. He was one of very few genuinely working-class sociologists working at an elite university during the nineteen eighties. His career and reputation developed, but he was never really invited into the inner sanctum, and his work did not receive the broad recognition that contributors to this collection are certain it deserved.

Dick has now retired from the fray of British university life. No longer is he surrounded by the ideological policing, blatant careerism and competitive instrumentalism that afflict our institutions. He will, thankfully, no longer have to cope with petty bureaucracy and the increasingly desperate scramble for research funding. He will no longer have to work in a discipline dominated by the liberal middle classes, who have little knowledge or understanding of the reality experienced by the vast majority of people, and, since the arrival of the cultural/linguistic turn, even shy away from the broader political and economic contexts in which it is embedded. No longer will he have to comment on new ethnographic work conducted

in marginalised social locations by well-meaning elites keen to spend a few weeks among the proles of the revanchist city. He can watch the descent of the university from the side lines, secure in the knowledge that he made a huge contribution to our understanding of the British working classes and their involvement in crime and deviancy. Our great hope is that, in retirement, his work will attract the attention of a new generation of social scientists keen to throw off the shackles of the cultural turn in order to explore the real world and its manifold pathologies.

Realism – the heart of Hobbs’ oeuvre

Dick would be the first to admit that he was never one for philosophy, especially the arcane metaphysical obscurantism of the great continental philosophers. He was too grounded in an analysis of everyday experience to waste time on such indulgences. However, he knew very well that cognate disciplines are interconnected whether their specialist practitioners like it or not, so it would not come as too much of a surprise to him that he presaged the current realist turn, now developing into *speculative realism* in continental philosophy. Or at least he presaged a particular strand of it – not the Latourian-influenced object-orientated ontology of Graham Harman but, to us, the more credible and tractable strand of Žižek-inspired transcendental materialism championed by Adrian Johnston (Johnston, 2008; see also Hall, 2012). In this short chapter there is no space to present a summary of this complex position, but suffice it is to say that its thesis on how the subject postpones moral agency and political struggle as it becomes caught up in prevailing ideologies and practices has furnished us with an ontological platform for the ultra-realist agenda proposed by us in the field of criminological theory (Hall and Winlow, 2015; see also Raymen, 2015). Speculative realism enjoins us to move beyond phenomenology, to escape the fetid atmosphere of endless, misleading and often pointless intersubjective to-and-froing in the interpretive field and head back out into the *great outdoors* (see Meillassoux, 2009) of the current capitalist world, with its proliferating material objects, abstract financial system, ubiquitous markets and apologetically cynical humans trying each day with every fibre of their being to avoid the snakes and climb the ladders.

In his ethnographic work Dick has always headed for the *great outdoors* (ibid.), yet he didn’t need the headache-inducing metaphysics of new realist philosophy to persuade him. ‘Instinct’ is not the sort of word we are encouraged to use in the social constructionist ghetto in which we have voluntarily trapped ourselves, but it does seem that something unarticulated was driving him out there. Sheer curiosity, perhaps – well known as the lifeblood of philosophy and

science, but perhaps not encouraged to circulate too freely these days. Whatever it was, the *great outdoors* is where he was comfortable, not trapped in the internal struggle to achieve moral and ideological purity in a politically neutralised and increasingly insular and unworldly liberal academia. Too much energy is currently devoted to the production of ethically pristine and ideologically sound ideas that are too beautiful to represent the world outside with any integrity or clarity. Thus we constantly fail to capture the disintegrating world of late capitalism with its surreal complexity, and therefore fail in our efforts to construct a reliable platform, as an assemblage of experiences and parallax views, on which we can build convincing theory.

Dick always showed a healthy disrespect for an academic world currently dominated by a rather traditional middle-class liberal agenda replete with its myriad turd-polishing activities. Western intellectuals have largely accepted the dominance of the market in every dimension of our lives (see Winlow and Hall, 2013). To many of them, telling truths about its consequences as inevitable if not always predictable products of its internal logic seems pointless. As long as we have known him he showed a keen awareness of the Darwinian competition for status and money that is disavowed and masked by faux-radicalism and some of the most comically transparent hypocrisy one could find. He was consistently critical of liberal societies' theatrical benevolence, which in basic socioeconomic terms is always *ex post facto* and never structured into the icy logic of the business transactions that dominate our everyday lives. Dick was aware that the market was eating away and replacing all alternative human institutions, a vital insight he shared with the new Mertonians and social democrats (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2000; Reiner, 2007).

Dick was able to accept this rather daunting reality of late-capitalism *as it is*, in the cold light of day rather than the dense fog of defunct and deplorable ideology. One of the reasons he was able to make this vital move back to the real was his rejection of the extremes of the Thompsonite (1996) romance of timeless dissent, resistance and political agency. This myth is prevalent – one might say dominant – on the radical side of criminology's fence. In place of what has proven itself to be a politically and intellectually debilitating romance (see Winlow et al., 2015) he substituted a keen eye for rich description of those people who were determined to survive and prosper in the conditions that late capitalism continues to lay down for them on ever more unforgiving terms. His work showed the absence of politics in these environments, and as such it is significantly more valuable because it prevents the false hope that in the long run produces nothing at all, and shows us – whether intentionally or unintentionally, it does not

matter – how much work, and precisely what sort of work, politics has to do in order to return to a transformative mode.

One real transformative social process of which Dick was aware was the transition from the proletarian to the mobile entrepreneurial worker, which helped to loosen the sociocultural bonds that once promised political solidarity but never delivered. He expended a considerable amount of energy charting shifts in working-class criminal enterprise throughout history (see for example, Hobbs, 1988, 2013). His work made it quite clear that this was not something that suddenly appeared out of the wreckage of Western industrial life but a tradition that in the post-industrial period spread more virulently and became more visible than it had been during the industrial period. His work was replete with sharp detail and analysis. To label Dick Hobbs an apolitical cynic, which one or two occasionally did under their breath, would be to shoot the messenger, a foolish move that betrays a far deeper cynicism based on the avoidance of any honest inquiry into the deep causes behind the bad news that the messenger brings. Without the understanding that such honest inquiry brings no real effective politics will ever return in our lifetime. The understanding that Dick's work brought to us was based on the resilience of the human being forced into circumstances he did not choose, combined with a deep understanding of the extent of the difficulties working-class people face and the tendency for so many to conform to prevailing ideology. Better that those of us intent on political transformation know what we are up against than continue to be trapped in an imaginary realm replete with forces of organic resistance that do not exist in any effective, substantive form (Hall and Winlow, 2007).

Dick's ethnographic work was served by an insatiable curiosity and a keen eye for the details of how cultures emerge in specific environments that are not of the subject's choosing. However, his work was not sullied by the sort of Kantian disinterestedness that often characterises the work of ethnographers steeped in the anthropological tradition. He was painfully aware of how difficult it is for a community to survive in the midst of a capitalist world that sanctifies nothing other than the commodity and prioritises and enforces its own fundamental exchange relation in most human transactions. The combination of curiosity and empathy allowed him to pick out the sort of fine details that others miss, details which prove essential for a convincing analysis that provides insights into the relationships between structural conditions, meaning, the human actor and its motivations and daily practices. A lot of political work coming online these days is being far more honest and outspoken about the

daunting issue of why the majority have acquiesced to a system that makes their lives far more difficult than they could be. Dick Hobbs helps us to answer that crucial question, and in the future, when current ideological dogmas dissipate and we can return to the task of explaining the world as it is and how it might be made better in tangible ways, it will prove to be invaluable.

In Dick's work we can often find the sort of brutal honesty that might make some of us flinch, or make others despair, but one thing we never find is stigmatisation. Following the legacy of the original Chicago School ethnographers, whatever condemnation or questioning might be warranted is always balanced by empathy and appreciation. We are dealing with human beings whose practices do not always reflect their ethical being, and, even where this might be the case, could have been very different human beings in different circumstances. This balance helps us to understand just how flawed many of social science's concepts actually are, and it is achieved by combining selected Geertzian methodological principles with a far keener awareness and understanding that Geertz and his followers had of the underlying economic conditions and logic that the less well-connected and educationally loaded precariat are forced to confront every day.

What he opens up is the working-class world after deindustrialisation, but with none of the optimistic platitudes supplied by the community development industry – the threat of poverty and insignificance combines with cynicism and loss of solidarity to lumber the working class with a debilitating load to bear. He shares a deep sense of absence with the likes of Elliott Currie (2008), an understanding that sometimes evades middle-class liberal commentators whose lives have certainly changed but have not undergone the profoundly disruptive transformations that have resonated throughout the economic, social and cultural dimensions of working-class life. Thus Dick furnished sociology with an essential and truthful working-class perspective in rich detail, complete with a well-developed analytical context. It should be central to the social scientific endeavour, but it is too often marginalised by a dominant Panglossian current that picks out aspects of progress but ignores the huge pile of socioeconomic and cultural wreckage in which large numbers of people are trapped and have little choice but to eke out a living and forge an identity. This is wilful ignorance of course, because nobody – least of all a professional social analyst – with even minimally functioning senses and sensibilities could fail to notice this very large elephant in the room.

Dick is one of the few sociologists to admit that the allure of consumer culture can more often than not displace the general conditions of alienation and apathy that exist amongst many of the deproletarianised working class. Even the more experienced and celebrated leftist intellectuals tend to distinguish categories of alienation, apathy and consumer incorporation and thus fail to see the reproductive relations between them (see, for example, Lea, 2015). The orthodox and post-structural left in general (see, for example, Hall, 1988) seems to be unaware of consumerism's ability to act as a surrogate symbolic order, filling the vacuum left by the disappearance of traditional working-class culture and political organisation in the post-political world and laying down the master signifier of symbolically competitive, hyper-individualised late-modern subjectivities. However, many amongst the new generation of sociologists and criminologists are beginning to acknowledge this difficult issue and produce a growing corpus of sophisticated analyses (see Hayward, 2012; Smith, 2014; Buccellato and Reid, 2014; Miles, 2014; Horsley, 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Raymen, 2015), which of course bodes very well for the future. The nuances of this relation were beautifully captured in Dick's final book, *Lush Life* (2015), in which he marshalled a large amount of highly detailed data to quite firmly implant excessive consumer desire amongst the primary motivations to acquisitive crime.

Today's structural conditions are not a direct cause of crime. Crime is not new but a tradition embedded in the conditions and the mentalities of the past. For Dick, who left behind the worst excesses of social constructionism but retained the functional core to criticize truly inappropriate ideas, 'organized crime' was a flawed concept we should leave behind. The concept was constructed by political and media institutions as an 'other', something alien to our own way of life. Dick was not blind to this fundamental ideological manoeuvre, which attempted to remove everything bad about our own way of life before projecting it onto something else – something dark, mysterious, predatory and threatening, something which should be met with repression. He also drew attention to the deeply xenophobic and racist connotations of such a way of thinking about the world (see for example Hobbs and Antonopoulos, 2013). However, defying the Derridean injunction not to reconstruct what has been deconstructed, and immediately reverting back to realism, Dick became one of the leading voices behind the sociological reconceptualization of contemporary criminal activity as loose, fluid networks of entrepreneurial individuals.

Throughout his career Dick was a consummate chronicler and analyst of the complex mutation and normalisation of illegal markets and criminal activities in the wreckage of industrialism. At a deeper level he revealed the logical and subjective sources of (dis)organized crime in our own way of life, the dark heart of capitalism that destroys communities, solidarity and its own thin moral crust in its remorseless quest for commodification and profit. His work revealed in great detail a dynamic logic that determines everyday practice and a subjectivity which internalises and eventually solicits this logic, a subjectivity which desires its symbolic rewards and seeks them out with perhaps not quite as much care for the well-being of others that was once expected in many working-class communities. This economic logic itself is not a strict determinant, and of course individuals are not mere dupes, but, in the current post-industrial consumer-capitalist period of our history, it seems able to cultivate and solicit the subjective pleasure that individuals seek as they are incorporated into its shifting constellation of symbols and sensations. Hobbs was more aware of this than many others who still cling on to romantic notions of resilient subjective autonomy and organic resistance.

Whereas some rather purist commentators on the left defend the timeless virtues of the working class no matter what, and commentators on the right are all too keen to condemn large sections of the working class as feckless and immoral, Dick was aware of the connections between the 'upperworld' and the 'underworld'. Specific individuals operating in both of these positions in the social structure seem to be driven by variations of the same predatory logic that energises the capitalist system as a whole and drives it forward. In fact he was one of the first criminologists to understand the rather grim reality that crime and its motivations transgressed norms and laws, but not this central logic and subjective desire (see Hall et al., 2008). He never used the term 'pseudo-pacification' (see Hall, 2012), but throughout his career he was describing and analysing the forms, practices and consequences of this socioeconomic and historical process in great detail.

It has to be said that Dick was never too explicit about his theoretical frameworks, apart from early discussions of symbolic interactionism and his later move, in *Bad Business* (Hobbs, 1995), to a more Baumanesque framework, but his work was so rich with data and analysis that he didn't like to waste too much space discussing them. In conversations he often demonstrated that he was well aware of them, and his awareness of their limitations deterred him from carrying a torch for any particular theory. He found synthesis difficult and in many ways rather pointless because the proliferation of theories in criminology from various one-dimensional

political and cultural standpoints had created what he called an 'off-key karaoke' (Hobbs, 2013). He preferred to get away from this cacophonous noise and the fetid atmosphere of the karaoke joint, with its narcissistic punters pushing past each other to seek the limelight, to ground his thinking in the cold light of day. To us this was a good decision, which, had he not taken it, would have denied us all the legacy of rich data and analysis that will remain with the discipline for the foreseeable future.

This is not to say that Dick's work was atheoretical, though. As we have said, he had started with orthodox symbolic interactionism, but quickly recognised its limitations and moved quite organically through Bauman towards an unspoken critical realist approach, exploring below the superficial empirical level of phenomena through the actual level of events and interpretations to the real level of structures and processes, all the time making incisive connections between these levels. The richness of his data and the honesty of its presentation allowed him to make these intellectual connections in a convincing manner, which he did far more effectively than most other ethnographers. For this reason alone his work is a beacon for the younger generation to follow, not to mention a detailed picture of life out there for theorists to ponder as they select the corroborations and risk the falsifications that are necessary to construct more convincing explanations of the social world.

Above all, though, Dick's work provides us a seminal example of the sociological awareness of fluidity, mutation and the fleeting and often volatile collaborations that melt away as quickly as they come into being, often quicker than can be observed, certainly by a sociological discipline that too often seems to be reluctant to fund vital qualitative forays into the reality of our times. His work provides more evidence than we need to prove the assertion that the term 'crime' is conceptually confused and not statistically mappable. This is the sort of honesty and unflinching detail that should make administrative positivists and critical criminologists alike more wary than ever about resting analyses of the consequences of structural change and human agency on such a nebulous concept. Dick rarely discussed the notion of harm and the fledgling sub-discipline of zemiology, but his work can be used to put forward a strong case for criminology to challenge its current ontological assumptions and move onto this more fertile territory (see Hall and Winlow, 2015).

In fact, when pointing to the usefulness of Dick Hobbs' work for future criminology we can risk going a little further. Because he stuck to his guns throughout the procession of

philosophical and theoretical fads that have waylaid and distracted social science since the 1980s, he has bequeathed us with huge vat of rich empirical detail and sociological analysis, most of which – especially his mid-career and later work – was constructed in a way that was unaffected by the questionable concepts and ontological frameworks these fads foisted upon us. His work was rather like a lifeboat – durable enough to survive the storms and land its passengers alive on the shore. These passengers have vital stories to tell. Now, with a turn back to an unflinching realism in philosophy, which we hope will eventually – although we are under no illusion that in an intellectual world still trapped in the positivist and Kantian interpretivist paradigms this will be anything less than a tough struggle – inspire social science to move in the same direction.

For us, personally, as we try to break through the current meta-paradigm to argue the case for a new *ultra-realist* project that might move criminological theory forward (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Raymen, 2015), Dick's work will remain with us as a constant source of detail and analysis. Whether Dick will like this project or not we do not know, but we are sorry to tell him that, either way, he is partly to blame for it. Very briefly, though, the ultra-realist project rests on the ambition of:

[...] cutting through the prohibitions placed on research and theorization by criminology's current dominant and subdominant authorities – i.e. neoclassical realism and left idealism – ultra-realism can open up *parallax views*, or new perspectives from previously obscured angles that create changes in the observational positions and displacements of the objects in view. Both the powerful and the abject social classes experience important concrete universal truths in their social spaces; truths that have been denied prominent positions in criminology's research programmes and storehouse of knowledge. It is the task of ultra-realist criminological research and theorization to open up these spaces and throw some light on revealed truths as symptoms of underlying causes and contexts (Hall and Winlow, 2015:2).

In this way ultra-realism seeks to answer the crucial Gramscian and Althusserian question and move beyond critical realism – which tends to separate the autonomous moral agent from the 'real' dimension of structures and processes – to theorise the subject's incorporation as a willing reproductive agent in the system, and its 'refusal to refuse'. As Thomas Raymen explains:

[...] ultra-realism as a theoretical position builds upon and moves beyond a left realist Mertonian position and draws upon Žižek's transcendental materialism to offer a more comprehensive conceptualization of harmful subjectivities and the tensions between psychosocial drives and cultural-economic conditions in liberal capitalism (Raymen, 2015)

We have to admit that no total 'God's eye view' of the world is possible, but neither should we adhere to the Kantian interpretivist injunction to remain trapped in the minds of others. This injunction has led to the subjective, cultural and epistemological separatism that postmodern culturalists have attempted to popularise. We are convinced that an assemblage of parallax views, enriched concepts, sophisticated theory and detailed observation and analysis of the *great outdoors* can move us forward as we try to connect the particular to the universal.

Dick Hobbs's work is saturated with such parallax views and concrete universals. This is not surprising, because it has always been driven by the avowed intent to get underneath orthodox perspectives and grapple with the complex realities of everyday life *as they are* in their social and economic contexts. It never presented the individual as a mere dupe of ideology, but neither does it swing the pendulum too far and naively separate the subject as a moral agent from the logic of practice demanded by the economic environments in which we are all compelled to live, and by the historical reproduction of cultural norms and subject positions that are not nearly as easy to discard as middle-class liberal thinkers might like to imagine. Above all, throughout his work he was at pains to remind us that when we abandon every dimension of human life to the brutal logic and unpredictable outcomes of the market, we should not be so naïve as to expect what the best of us wish for.

Before we finish this brief paper, we should perhaps offer a personal note of gratitude. Dick Hobbs acted as Winlow's PhD supervisor, and he worked with both Winlow and Hall on an ESRC project investigating Britain's burgeoning night-time economy and the occupational role of bouncers within it (Hobbs et al, 2003). On this project Hobbs and Hall also gave Winlow his first full-time academic job as a research assistant. Had Dick not chosen to take on the task of supervising Winlow's PhD, Winlow would have left academic life behind and drifted into god-knows-what. It is not too dramatic to say that Winlow is now a fully tenured and well-published academic specifically because Hobbs was willing to take a chance on a young

working-class lad who did not fit the standard academic stereotype and did not at that time carry with him the standard academic skills and cultural capital. Given that Winlow is every bit as rough around the edges as his mentor, this brief observation may further encourage the liberal mainstream's opprobrium and the tendency of many of them to dismiss Hobbs's oeuvre. Of course, we see things very differently. As we have suggested above, his work will remain of considerable utility for generations of scholars keen to understand the reality of working-class life. His enduring realism and commitment to depicting the world as it is have ensured that he leaves a truly important legacy. While some of our colleagues in sociology and criminology departments across the country might consider Hobbs rough, these characteristics represented his background and real world experiences, and he was not willing to abandon them in order to curry favour among our disciplinary elites. We fitted together well, and we owe him a lot.

Enjoy your retirement, Dick.

Steve Hall is Professor of Criminology at Teesside University and co-founder of the Teesside Centre for Realist Criminology. He is the author of *Theorizing Crime and Deviance* (Sage, 2012), and co-author of *Revitalizing Criminological Theory* (Routledge, 2015), *Riots and Political Protest* (Routledge, 2015), *Rethinking Social Exclusion* (Sage, 2013), *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture* (Routledge, 2008) and *Violent Night* (Berg, 2006). He is also the co-editor of *New Directions in Criminological Theory* (Routledge, 2012).

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