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## Book Review: "A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Criminology." (Ronnie Lippens)

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## **Book Review**

Lippens, Ronnie. 2009. *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Criminology*. London: Sage.

"A Very Short, Fairly Interesting, and Cheap Book About Studying Criminology" represents one of the newer texts in this series by Sage Publications, Ronnie Lippens has written an introductory yet refreshingly thought-provoking book about studying criminology. In the Preface, Lippens states that he intended to write the book primarily for students who are relatively new to criminology in order for them to develop better critical thinking skills. Yet he also expresses a "silently cherished hope that even the more advanced criminology student will be able to find, in this little book, reasons to review, adjust and perhaps modify their opinion or position on the issues of crime and crime control" (ix). For certain, if given the chance this little book could very well assist undergraduates, graduates, and seasoned criminologists to think more creatively and critically about the criminological project. A possibility all the more important and necessary in a context where an administrative, quantitative, and positivist criminology still exerts considerable, if not the dominant, influence in the academy.

How might this book facilitate creative thinking about crime and crime control?: By providing readers with a *philosophical introduction* to the study of criminology. As Lippens makes clear, this is not a standard criminology textbook or even an introduction to criminology. That is, rather than providing a systematic overview of the core criminological theories on the aetiology of crime, Lippens engages criminological concerns by introducing philosophical ideas and concepts, particularly that of Sarte's existentialism and Nietzsche's

"proto-existentialism." Lippens briefly defines existentialism as a project that asks "What does it mean to be a part of the human condition?" and "What are the fundamental, very basic features of human existence?" (6). Lippens argues, convincingly in this reviewer's opinion, that criminology is ultimately concerned first and foremost with the ways in which inclusion and exclusion are central parts of what it means to be human and hence foundational to any complex understanding of the politics and sensibilities of crime and social control. The narrative seems to speak directly to the reader – and in the process challenging them to critically reflect on their own positions of the inclusive and exclusive tendencies of criminology and criminal justice.

But before delving into the more abstractly philosophical, but again relatively accessible chapters, Lippens first clarifies "the broad outlines of this criminological landscape...What is criminology? What kind of questions do criminologists ask themselves?" (2). In Chapter 1 ("A Slightly Philosophical Introduction to the Study of Criminology?"), Lippens suggests that criminology, in the most fundamental ways, is concerned with the following intertwined questions: "'Why do definitions of crime change and vary across time and space?' and 'Why do particular behaviors and even whole groups or populations get to be criminalized in the first place?' and 'Why do people offend against norms, including legal norms such as the criminal law?' and 'What should we do with offenders or, more broadly, what should be done about crime?'" He explains how these primary questions center around two main issues: crime and crime control. On this point, Lippens underlines that conflict – between people, institutions, and ideas – is the thread that weaves crime and crime control together. Lippens suggests then that both the aetiology of crime and processes of criminalization must be seen as inherently relational. This point about the necessity of seeing crime and crime control as inherently intertwined is an important point of this philosophical introduction to criminology.

Following this introductory chapter (by far the most accessible), the remaining chapters situate the aetiology of crime and processes of criminalization within the language of existential philosophy. Specifically, readers are introduced to concepts such as will to power, becoming, master/slave morality, bad faith, life projects, indeterminacy and nothingness, and essence before existence, while linking them with more standard sociological terminology such as transgression and definition of the situation. Following the authors contention that crime and crime control must be thought intertwined, Chapter 2, "Transgression, Crime and Control (*on Human Life*)," begins the more formal philosophical treatment of criminology and it is this chapter I will focus the most on in the remainder of this review as it best explicates the broad, general existentialist framework set forth in this book.

Here crime and its control are conceptualized, principally with help from Nietzsche's anti-essentialist "proto-existentialism", as being the result of *will to power*. Challenging the Platonic view, it is suggested that there is no pure essence of stability and fixity that sits underneath the appearances of a chaotic and ever-changing world. The only essence to human being is that being is inherently full of movement, change, creativity – a sort of anti-essence essence. In other words, and as Lippens explains quite accessibly for many undergraduates yet without executing a violent reduction of this complexity, being, human being, is always in the process of becoming: "Life is always on its way. It never *is* as such. It is always on the move" (16). Nietzsche's concept will to power is "the fuel of life" that is "not necessarily good, or evil" and that is the force behind all human creation or becoming. Will to power is the process of creation and newness. Both crime and criminalization then come into existence through this potentially life-invigorating, but all too often life-denying will to power. Hence the conflict between different will to powers (deviant behavior and social reactions), or different trajectories of becoming is key to understanding crime and its

control: "All becoming, in a way, and this may sound like a cliché, implies transgression. Becoming is transgression of that which already exists" (34).

Importantly, Lippens warns readers that even though all social life is constituted by will to power, this constant becoming does not always "add" to life by producing radical originality and transformation. In fact, all too often will to power ends up creating and maintaining the status quo of conformity and injustice. Therefore, Lippens encourages students of crime to always ask questions about who has the power to *define the situation* as the standard by which to judge all other definitions. Lippens suggests, through Nietzsche, that society is founded upon a conflict between rulers (masters) and the ruled (slaves) where the masters promote a dominant will to power (mainstream morality) – the contemporary criminal justice system as well as most criminal acts – that attempt to suppress the creative becomings that transgress "normality," "truth," and commonsensical notions of right and wrong. In this sense "human, all too human" will to power largely results in the production of "crimes against life" such as the institutions of law, religion, and custom. In short, a slave morality that denies the creative potentialities of life by abiding by logics of the status quo that posit clear definitions of "right and wrong," "justice," and "truth." This is not to include only criminalization by excluding crime itself, rather Lippens is clear in arguing that acts labeled as crime largely subscribe to a slave morality as well and hence should not be quickly romanticized. Here humans with their all too human tendencies are throughout described as "herd-like" – which also produce positive effects, as Lippens points out on several occasions – but most often results in the production of conformity that stifles real creativity and transformation. Both crime and criminalization then are seen as, in most cases, as subscribing and reinforcing slave morality and already existing forms of life. They fail to produce real change and transformation.

In Chapter 3, "Understanding Crime (*on Human Existence*)," Lippens employs Sartre's famous dictum that *existence comes before essence* in order to argue that the order of things – specifically the structure of crime and criminalization – is always the result of indeterminate choice (and not simply the choice of rational choice theorists). Humans are not mere biological or physical or mechanical beings, but are rather reflective and interpretative beings that survey, deliberate, and act within contexts that provide endless possibilities of choices, albeit within language that is inherently reductive. Offenders are never predetermined to offend and likewise the way society reacts to offenders can be different from present reactions. In Chapter 4, "Controlling Crime (*on the Mastery of Others*)," the criminal justice system is explained as a project of control that attempts to fixate the indeterminacy and unlimited possibilities of becoming into a predictable and mechanical form of life. Mainstream crime control efforts are described as seeking the production of mechanical subjects that conform to the dominant definition of the situation, or the status quo. Here Lippens provides accessible discussions of Hobbes (*Leviathan*), Beccaria (rational calculation), Foucault (normalization and discipline), and even the ancient Confucian philosopher Hsun Tzu (order and hierarchy). Chapter 5, "The Resolution of Human Conflict (*on the Mastery of Self*)," Lippens provides a stimulating discussion on possibilities for changing the "crimes against life" of the current criminal justice system by engaging some of the ideas of Buddhism, peacemaking criminology, restorative justice, and abolitionist criminology. Chapter 6, "Criminological Knowledge (*on the Absurd*)," the shortest chapter of the book, more explicitly engages the notions of criminological truth and knowledge by constructing them as always partial, socially constructed, and hence always changeable.

From the beginning of the book to the last pages Lippens encourages the reader to challenge the simplicity of thinking that circulates in many political, media, and academic

discourses that constitutes status quo sensibilities of both crime and crime control. Lippens insists that human beings are too complex for mechanistic reasoning to hold much explanatory weight for better understanding “causes” of crime and processes of criminalization. He places his critical lens on both individual acts of crime while steadfastly encouraging readers to always treat reactions to crime as equally as important – a point that although not necessarily new – can never be repeated enough, especially to many that often take for granted official definitions of “crime.” In the “Afterthought” portion of the book, Lippens attempts to provide a brief summary of his complex existentialist argument: “Criminology, if one comes to think of it, is about the shifting boundaries between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’” (124). Although the “human, all too human” conflicts involved in the work of inclusion and exclusion is presented as the fundamental concern of the criminological project, there is a lack of discussion on the ways in which race, class, and gender are central to the materiality of who is “in” and “out.” It is this lack of an explicit and prolonged discussion on the common ways in which a hierarchy of value based on racial, classist, and sexist inequalities operates in the existentialism of inclusion and exclusion that is my biggest critique of the book. But with this critique notwithstanding, Lippens’ short philosophical introduction to studying criminology does offer undergraduates, graduates, and seasoned criminologists with a much needed treatment of criminology that eloquently and forcefully ask readers to call into question possibly their own “herd-like” ways of understanding the “right” and “wrong” of crime and social control.