Nils Christie: On the Periphery but in the Centre

SANDRA WALKATE*

Nils Christie’s contribution to criminology and victimology has been profound. This article traces the roots of contemporary concerns with critical and cultural victimology to his work. Alongside this his insightful comments on public criminology also have some resonance with current victimological pre-occupations. It is evident from this analysis that without his voice some of the contemporary concerns of critically informed and engaged victimology would be absent, for which we owe him a huge debt.

**Key words:** Nils Christie, critical victimology, engaged victimology, witnessing.

Introduction

The unexpected death of Nils Christie came as a shock not only to his family and his local colleagues but also to those across the globe who were influenced either directly or indirectly by his critical thinking. He wrote on many aspects of crime, victimhood, penal policy, criminal justice policy, and victim movements. In many ways his work and reflections defy analytical categorisation. A good deal of this work is in English, much more is in his native Norwegian and he made a number of contributions to Temida focusing on his concern with atrocities and the possibilities for reconciliation. In what follows I make no claims for a complete and detailed knowledge of his wide ranging influence. Here I offer a partial, and probably partisan, account of his influence on victimology from my personal perspective as just one way of add-

* Dr Sandra Walkate is full professor at Eleanor Rathbone Chair of Sociology, University of Liverpool, United Kingdom, and conjoint professor of criminology at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. E-mail: S.L.Walkate@liverpool.ac.uk.
ing to the tributes that have already been made about this remarkable man’s extensive contribution to knowledge and practice. In doing so I am situating Christie’s work within the wider setting of a critical victimology/criminology and will explore this along two dimensions: as setting the agenda for a critical-cultural victimology and as setting the agenda for an engaged victimology. Whilst these themes are inevitably inter-connected they will be discussed in turn before offering an overall assessment of his contribution to this wider volume of work. However, first of all, I offer a note on my use of the term ‘critical’.

**Nils Christie: A critical thinker**

In many ways it is evident that Christie was a critical thinker par excellence. His seminal chapter on the ‘ideal victim’ published in 1986, arguably the platform from which much critical victimological work has been generated, captures the essence of his approach. However, the nature of his approach was not to be critical for its own sake but to always offer the opportunity for thinking, and thereby responding, otherwise to the problems that crime and criminal victimisation posed. He put to the front and centre the capacity for human imagination: an imagination that could result in thinking and behaving otherwise. This position is reflected in all of his work from that on drugs, to the question of penal reform to his concerns about victim movements. One place in which it is well captured is in his 1997 article published in *Theoretical Criminology* entitled “Four blocks against insight: Notes on the oversocialisation of criminologists”. Here he takes issue with the criminological failure to embrace personal experience, to reflect on what it is that we and higher education ‘do’ to our students, the eagerness of the state for us to provide answers to their questions, and finally, the readily available but pre-processed records on which much criminological work is based. These ‘blocks’, he suggests, have the cumulative effect of much criminological work producing findings about ‘trivialities’ in which the capacity for alternative interpretations are lost. He states:

“...independent interpretation is of particular importance in studies of deviance and social control. In this area it is normal that there are conflicts around which meaning the phenomena are to be given. A core area in criminology is
therefore by necessity the close observation of the meaning-creating process.”

The denial of the processes he outlines is to be found in the blocks to insight: the marginalisation of personal experience, treating students as empty vessels to be filled, and the challenges posed by the expectations associated with the public role of the discipline. Noting that the discipline was growing, not only as a result of the increasing demands of the state but also of those within higher education itself, Christie’s position was not to abandon engagement with the expectations being made of the discipline but to “stick to our point of departure; acts - not crimes - are the basic material for our activities” (Christie, 1997: 22). Taking these observations as the starting point, the pursuit of this point of departure, its contribution to, and legacy for, the disciplines of criminology/victimology, is taken up in the themes that follow.

**Setting the agenda for a critical-cultural victimology**

His seminal work on the ‘ideal victim’ focused minds on “who – when hit by crime – most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (Christie, 1986a: 18). In other words, he was concerned with the victim as a public status. Not victimhood as a quality or characteristic of an individual but how victims are ascribed victim status. He goes on to give an example of such a victim which he recognises, as he says in his own words, as being ‘from my culture’ (Christie, 1986a: 18) (the importance of his awareness of his geographical and cultural location is returned to below). Importantly, the victims of which Christie speaks cannot be counted. Thus, offering an early insight into the problems associated with the growing pre-occupation with criminal victimisation survey becoming evident during the 1980s. Moreover, in this essay he goes on to explore some features of the process of victim status in which he is acutely aware that the relationship between being recognised as a victim (being heard) yet simultaneously being “weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests” (Christie, 1986a: 21) was neither simple nor straightforward. Interestingly, van Wijk (2013) has tested the utility of the notion of the ‘ideal victim’ for international crimes and sensitises us to a very similar issue. Van Wijk argues that a similar process of recog-
nition is evident before victims of international crimes are acknowledged and responded to (van Wijk, 2013). Thus, he posits that, in order for these victims to achieve victim status, certain conditions need to be met: the conflict must not be complex, must be unique, must be short, and must be well-timed with the role of the media being particularly pertinent to understanding its successful acquisition. Thus, Christie’s concept of the powerful influence of notions of the ‘ideal victim’ cut across a range of different kinds of criminal victimisations. Herein lies the essence of a critical victimology.

Critical victimology has been differently interpreted by different people (Holstein, Miller, 1990; Miers, 1990; Fattah, 1992; Mawby, Walklate, 1994). Influenced by the questions raised by feminist informed work and the theorising of Giddens (1984) the critical victimology favoured by this author endeavours to understand the victim as a product of the interaction between the cultural and the ideological under particular socio-economic circumstances. This critical victimology takes the power of the state seriously as a self-interested arbiter of who might count as a victim, whether or not we see or do not see them as such, and is also sensitive to the view that these processes may vary across time and space. Consequently, it places some significance on the power of the victim label, in and of itself, as a unifying device, and frequently used as a uniform concept, for the ideological purposes of the state. So used it is a concept that has inclusive and exclusive properties which means that at an individual level who counts as a victim, and whose voice counts as a victim, can change in the light of ideological processes. Embedded in this position are the critical questions rooted in Christie’s (1986a) delineation of the ideal victim. Thus this critical victimology asks questions about the term ‘victim’ itself and the circumstances in which it is applied. Within this framework who becomes a victim and who might embrace a victim identity (Rock, 2002) or indeed who might resist such an identity (Walklate, 2011) is neither simple nor straightforward and cannot be read from the patterns of criminal victimisation found in criminal victimisation survey data. Following Christie (1986a), the victims of this critical victimology cannot be counted. Whilst this version of victimology is not without its critics (see, for example Spalek 2006: 45), Christie’s (1986a) ‘ideal victim’ lies at its heart.

Importantly Christie’s (1986a) concept of the ideal victim opened up the role that notions of ‘innocence’, ‘legitimacy’, and ‘deserving’ play in the process of acknowledging and assigning the victim label. Following his critical
imagination and placing the notions of innocence, legitimacy and deserving front and centre, Carrabine et al. (2004) identified what they termed a ‘hierarchy of victimisation’. At the bottom of this hierarchy would be the homeless, the street prostitute, and the drug addict. These victims are certainly not innocent or deserving (possibly because of their own role in their ‘victimisation’) neither are they considered to have a legitimate claims to that status (probably for the same reason). Conversely, at the top of this hierarchy would be the elderly person robbed in their own home, the child abused by their parent, and perhaps increasingly an elderly person abused by their children. In other words, those individuals/groups who have been subjected to processes in which they have not made choices. They are innocent, legitimate and deserving. This hierarchy also reflects other presumptions, particularly about vulnerability. For example, the elderly and/or children are presumed to be vulnerable (physically weak/fragile and relatively powerless) as a result of their age. This is not the place to debate the accuracy of such presumptions, though my guess is that Christie would certainly encourage a critical examination of them, even if only because our own experiences as human beings tells us that making such universal assumptions are problematic. More specifically such assumptions add weight to a critique of the constrained and curtailed visions of victimhood that result: who can and who cannot be a victim. Arguably, such assumptions frequently cast aside those suffering from a range of mental illnesses, not of their choosing, but nonetheless resulting in problematic behaviour that might challenge the assignation of victim status (a particular area of concern Christie had). Nonetheless this hierarchy of victimisation can be applied in different contexts (as illustrated by the work of van Wijk, 2013), and can be used to facilitate an understanding of the ways in which its shape and form changes over time. Some groups and/or individuals acquire victim status and others lose it. McGarry and Walklate, for example, make the case for soldiers being recognised as victims in the U. K. as a result of the illegal engagement in conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003-2014: a group for whom the victim label was previously considered anathema (McGarry, Walklate, 2011). In addition Aradau deploys the idea of a ‘politics of pity’ to make sense of the ways in which trafficked women came to be constructed as victims rather than women seeking work in order for their abuse to be recognised in terms of policy (Aradau, 2004). On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the political complexities lying behind the mass vic-
timisations in Dafur clearly inhibited international recognition of those experiences as genocide (Hagan, Rymond-Richmond, 2009). In all of these examples, being acknowledged as a victim is a complex process and all of these examples owe a debt to Christie’s critical analysis of the ‘ideal victim’. Moreover, they all also indicate a role for geography and culture in making sense of these processes. These concerns also find a presence in Christie’s work and feature in the emergent strand of a cultural victimology that mirrors similar developments within criminology.

In his contribution to a Review Symposium of ‘Public Criminology’ (Loader, Sparks 2010), entitled “Reflections from the Periphery” Christie starts by saying: “Reading books and articles from Britain, I am sometimes feeling like one of those barbarians from the far North” (Christie, 2011: 707). This appreciation of the importance of the geographical and cultural location of his engagement with the issues that concerned him runs through his work. Another example is to be found in his thoughtful assessment on the problems and possibilities for mediation in the Basque country (Christie, 2013: 16). These observations signal the threads within Christie’s work that are connected with an emergent cultural victimology. This cultural victimology parallels the already existing cultural criminology. That criminology is characterised by the ways in which media representations of crime convey meanings and values for those involved in crime and crime control (Ferrell, 2006) with Young adding: “Cultural criminology is of importance because it captures the phenomenology of crime – its adrenaline, its pleasure and panic, its excitement, and its anger, rage, and humiliation, its desperation and its edgework.” (Young, 2004: 1).

The connections here with Christie’s persistent and determined demand that criminology focus attention on the meaning attached to acts, is transparent. We have already observed the importance he attached to personal experience as a source of knowledge enabling sense to be made of crime and criminal victimisation. However he was also concerned with the drama that crime entailed. In his article “Crime Control as Drama” (Christie, 1986b), he explores the dramatic analogy to its fullest extent asking the reader to consider the penal system as a screen play and to analyse how it does its work in relation to the criteria one might apply to a play. He concludes this analysis by suggesting that in the search for principles that might underpin a penal system: “Maybe there are no better allies than Shakespeare and his co-work-
ers” (Christie, 1986b: 8). In concert with cultural criminology then we can infer from this observation that criminology cannot be a science in the positivistic sense: there are no rigid lines to be drawn between the expert and the criminal or between crime and normality. Indeed, in a later contribution he describes criminologists as ‘cultural workers’ (Christie, 2011: 209) with “such a designation bring(ing) us to the company of novelists, poets, literary critiques – roles preoccupied with gaining access to the life of others and thereby ourselves” (Christie, 2011: 209).

For victimology this turn to the cultural has (at least) two aspects. First, a focus of attention on how individual and/or collective experiences of victimisation and its aftermath are shared with family, friends, or symbolised more publicly (like for example in the roadside shrine or in the ‘on the scene’ reportage and/or other public media). Second, the ways in which grief, loss, and trauma are mapped through the criminal justice process (Mythen, 2007; Ferrell et al., 2008). These concerns are rather newer to the field of victimology than criminology, though there have been some tentative developments of this kind of work (see for example, Walklate et al., 2011; Howie, 2012; Walklate et al., 2014). This agenda carries implications for how we do victimological work (discussed below) and what kind of concepts might inform that work. This kind of cultural work within victimology foreground suffering and pain, which as Carrabine has observed, carry with them their own problems not least of which that “human suffering should not be reduced to a set of aesthetic concerns, but is fundamentally bound up with the politics of testimony and memory” (Carrabine, 2012: 467). If we add ‘trauma’ to this list then arguably cultural victimology has the capacity to offer something both creative and critical to the study of victims. Importantly, at every juncture in this public nature of suffering some voices are heard and others are silenced (as intimated in van Wijk’s, 2013, discussion of the ideal victim of international crimes) and silencing can frame events in particular ways excluding other ways of thinking about them (Mathieson, 2004). The presence and impact of these suffering voices is something that Christie was extremely sensitive to, especially in relation to the burgeoning presence of the victim movement.

In commenting on the dilemmas faced by such movements he was full of praise for the efforts being made to ensure victims were heard in the penal process but at the same time also wary of the unintended consequences of this. He goes on to say:
“Victim movements might, through their present strength and insistence on rights for the victims, damage the beautiful instruments available in traditional penal law and courts. Penal law might lose balance. If so, we lose penal law. Victim power amplified with state power would indeed become a strong driving force towards a more punitive society.” (Christie 2010: 118).

In foreground the suffering of victims, the biographical stories of others, or indeed the possibilities of competing versions of these same stories, run the risk of being excluded or at a minimum downgraded. Indeed in a conference presentation in 2008, the questions implied by his critique of victim movements were posed in a much more pointed way: Are we all victims now? Does everyone need support? Are there circumstances in which support might be damaging? Who is included and excluded in the availability of support? Hard questions indeed for societies in which a culture of narcissism has prevailed and all experiences are deemed equally demanding of a response (Lasch, 1979).

However, not all societies have evolved in the same way in terms of this victim culture. The specificity of culture, and the need to appreciate the local context of the meanings attached to acts, is also strongly present in Christie’s work. His desire to constantly remind the reader of his Norwegian heritage, and the nature and role of community belonging derived from that heritage, is prescient (hence there is a reference to the ‘periphery’ in the title of this paper). As an example, the discussion generated in the special issue of Restorative Justice: An International Journal, published in 2013, stands as testimony to this. His ‘Words on words’, written in the classical, critical style that he made his own, is a thought provoking offering on what words mean and under what conditions. It also asks the reader to consider the possibility that there may be very few words that can carry the same meaning in different contexts and, by implication, questions whether or not criminologist should even be searching for such universalities. Here again we are offered conflict as a concept that might do just as good work as any other for helping people resolve their problems (Christie, 1977). This short article is responded to by a number of commentators. However, the observations made by Braithwaite draw out the domain assumptions framing this debate (Braithwaite, 2013). These words are western words. This is one of Christie’s implicit messages. The cultural context that has generated much criminological and victimological con-
ceptual thinking has been Westo-centric. As Braithwaite (2013: 21) observes: “That leads to seeing all the concepts in the Christie paper – offender, mediation, justice, restoration, reconciliation – as from the North and West. Most of us live in the South and East” (Braithwaite, 2013: 21). This is a profound comment indeed, presaging as it does, the emergence of a Southern criminology (Carrington et al., 2016) which undoubtedly Christie’s centring of meaning and place (culture and geography) has played its part in contributing to (hence there is reference to the centre in this title of this paper). An appreciation of this contribution, in itself affords some insight into his vision of the public criminologist, what I have chosen here to refer to as an agenda for an engaged victimology.

**Setting an agenda for an engaged victimology**

In some ways Christie’s vision of the public criminologist (and by implication a public victimologist) is fairly straightforward. In his own words, “I never thought of myself as a ‘public criminologist’. I was one. But I don’t like the term – it makes artificial what was experienced as natural” (Christie, 2011: 707). For him, he alongside others like himself was there: part of the fabric of the life they were destined to make sense of. Not separate from the world but part of it and this being part of it carried with it responsibilities. In many ways the same kind of responsibilities possessed by all other citizens: to be engaged, to debate, to praise, to criticise. In this same article he goes on to suggest that being “protected in our ivory towers” also protects “against gaining access to the variety of like experiences, reflections and insights gained through exposure to life conditions outside those towers” (Christie, 2011: 708). With the most important role for the critical academic being to translate those life conditions but not “as assistants to the system obliged to control” (Christie, 2011: 708).

These observations, taken together with his comments on the importance of accessing and understanding life experiences (using our own stories, and those of others to make sense of the world), are clearly suggestive of an engaged role, very different from and distant from the role assumed by more positivistic orientations found within both criminology and victimology. This position reflects some parallels with that of Quinney who advocated a role
for the criminologist as witness (Quinney, 1998). Taking this one step further Spencer has also made the case for a victimology that bears witness to the ‘event’ of victimisation of the self, the harms experienced by others, and the process of witnessing as a practice (Spencer, 2010). We have advocated elsewhere for a similar view of victimological work that distinguishes between ‘witnessing’ what we ‘see’, and ‘bearing witness’ to see beyond what we ‘see’:

“It is important to set apart the complexities of the ‘witness’ from the simple onlooker. That is to differentiate ‘witnessing’ from ‘bearing witness’. The former is what we ‘see’ (such as the symbolic and figurative observations of victims and their experiences), and the latter involves ‘seeing beyond what we see’ (including the State’s political reaction to victimising events such as terrorist attacks). In doing so ‘witnessing’ becomes an integral methodological tool for a visual victimology.” (Walklate et al., 2014: 265).

Moreover, witnessing, in the form outlined above, is not just a methodological tool; it is who we are and what we do. Witnessing may not have been a term used by Christie (though I cannot be certain on that). It was, however, something that he clearly did. This is exemplified in his analysis of the aftereffects of the events in Oslo and Utoya in July 2011. In reflecting on the possibilities for restoration after atrocities he emphasises:

“I believe that the more we are enabled to see each other as fellow human beings, the more we are controlled by that knowledge, and by the whole set of norms ingrained in us throughout life on how to behave towards people of all sorts, from babies to old folks. To see the other is to be captured in the web of norms that makes us human. The closer we come to another person, the stronger stand the inhibitions against handling that person in ways seen as unacceptable within the culture where we belong. To accomplish this is to me the great challenge for most sorts of crime-preventive work.” (Christie, 2014: 53-54).

In witnessing atrocity then, it is ever more important not to lose sight of “each other as members of the same society” (Christie, 2014: 54). To see the killer as one of us can be one of the biggest challenges, he suggests for crime prevention. A challenge that it may still be possible to face in a small society by Norway: a bigger challenge for some contemporary global preoccupations with crime and victimisation. For Christie “we need proximity to poets to find our way to other human beings” (Christie, 2011: 710).

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Concluding thoughts

The critical vision of the man from the ‘far North’ has had a profound influence on a wide range of topics within criminology. This is without doubt. His influence has been equally profound within victimology a taste of which has been offered here. Without his input it would be unlikely that contemporary debates would now recognise that the concept of victim is not uniform, neither is it a unifying concept (despite ideological and political efforts otherwise). It is also important to note that without his work, victimhood as an experience, would now not be recognised as a highly different and differentiation experience. Victimhood too is neither uniform nor unifying. The key dangers in denying human agency, the capacity for people to do and think otherwise, is central to Christie’s work and influence. Moreover, by implication, he presaged the dangers of failing to recognise the influence and dominance of Westo-centric thinking and concepts on criminology and victimology. Here too, there are other ways of thinking and doing: of not presuming that there is only one way to knowledge, particularly that there is not only way of responding to the pain of crime. In his words, “we know from personal life experiences in addition to scientific research, that the closer we come to people who have broken the law, the less attractive the delivery of pain becomes as an appropriate response” (Christie, 2016: 200). We owe a debt to Christie for the ongoing capacity to ask questions such as these and to propose different answers on the delivery of justice. He may have possibly been geographical on the periphery but intellectually he was always in the centre. Thank you, Nils.

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**SANDRA WALKATE**

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**Nils Christie: Na periferiji, ali u centru**

Nils Christie je ostvario veliki doprinos u kriminologiji i viktimologiji. Ovaj članak analizira doprinos Nilsa Christie-a uključivanju savremenih tema u predmet bavljenja kritičke viktimologije i viktimologije kulture. Njegovi pronicljivi komentari o javnoj kriminologiji imaju odjeka u savremenim viktimološkim preokupacijama. Iz analize date u ovom radu je evidentno da bez njegovog glasa, neka savremena pitanja ne bi bila predmet bavljenja kritički orijentisane i društveno angažovane viktimologije, zbog čega mu mnogo dugujemo.

**Ključne reči:** Nils Christie, kritička viktimologija, angažovana viktimologija, sbedočenje.