

BOOK REVIEW

Ivo Aertsen and Brunilda Pali (eds), *Critical restorative justice*. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017, 352pp., ISBN: 978-1-50990-664-2 (hbk).

The book *Critical restorative justice* was published at the end of 2017, following a workshop questioning the theories of restorative justice (RJ) using the tradition of critical thought. The editors of the book are Ivo Aertsen and Brunilda Pali, both from the Leuven Institute of Criminology at the Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium, which has contributed significantly to developing the field of RJ.

RJ has established itself as a school of knowledge and practice in the last few decades in the area of crime and harms. RJ has now reached a point where it needs reflection about its actual relevance for meeting the challenges of today's global and local societies, the political and economic problems and, most of all, the needs of the people it strives to serve.

As a developing school of thought and practice, there is a continuing need to keep a critical point of view so as to prevent RJ from causing systematic revictimisation and subordination as a new control in disguise. This specialisation has to keep account of the self-awareness and the responsiveness for which it calls. It has to *question the questions* and discuss openly whether RJ provides a new form of authentic interaction and quality of democratic interpersonal communication. RJ questions itself whether this is a 'culture of readiness to constantly learn from the otherness of the other' (127), as described by Leo Van Garsse in the book, or just another form of fundamental social control in what Ronnie Lippens describes here as politics based on the 'image of consumer-sovereign victimhood in the late modern, consumerist, non-communicative' culture.

Doing what the field of RJ preaches, by being responsive, self-critical and self-reflective, is the challenge this book took upon itself. The challenge is apparent, as the idea of RJ originates in some radical and critical perspectives about the legal/justice systems. These assumptions might falsely result in overlooking the risk of RJ itself becoming systematised and oppressive. Such falsifications might compromise some of the unique virtues this field calls for, that lead to more humane, caring and just methods of dealing with the feelings raising from the harms. The question is, whether this book succeeded in doing so.

Unlike past critical writings from scholars questioning the very idea of RJ, legal scholars and criminologists who were from closely related fields of research, this book is a mutual effort of scholars within the field of RJ that provides a closer look at both the limits and the possibilities that the field unfolds. This allows a deeper insight and inspection into the field. The editors gathered an international collection of writings from both well-established researchers in the field of RJ such as Lode Walgrave, Christa Pelikan, George Pavlich, Anthony Pemberton, Daniela Bolivar, Borbala Fellegi and more, RJ practitioners, and some young, ambitious and open-minded writers. The authors are mainly from European Union countries or are affiliated to the Eurocentric school of RJ research. However, the contribution by Harry Blagg is vital to provide a balanced view. Each

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of the eighteen articles in this collection attempts to make use of critical theories as tools to question the various aspects of RJ's theorisation or practice.

The critical approaches that are applied in this document vary from the deconstructionism of concepts inherent to the RJ debate to a poststructuralist call to reinclude the good *Old Goffman* in questioning the truth and authenticity of the micro-level interactions in the analysis of RJ meetings (a contribution by Ida Helen Asmussen is worth reading).

Some of the topics that are deconstructed in this book are democratic decision making, democratic citizenship, procedural justice, empowerment, sovereignty of victims and control society.

An important critical post-colonialist view provided by Harry Blagg crystallises how the current forms of RJ do not meet the needs of justice from an indigenious perspective. The use of critical cultural perspectives and intercultural relativism to analyse RJ processes provides limited accessibility to the process for minority groups such as the Romani people in Hungary.

By using Michel Foucault's perspective of historical and critical ontology, Giuseppe Maglione problematises the prevailing discourse and power-knowledge relations embedded in RJ, and their emergence and transformation in a wider context of sociopolitical technologies of power.

The editors carefully structured the book into three sections in an effort to *bridge theoretical gaps, apply analytical tools to evidence and practice and undertake philosophical explorations of RJ*. Each of the three sections attempts to present the reader with some essential tools to critically assess RJ. These tools consist of

- a data relevant to the understanding of the current situation in the field, the assumptions and the theories of RJ;
- b various prominent critical theories which can be applied while inspecting RJ;
- c various analytical tools and perspectives to assess the suitability and sustainability of RJ; and
- d some creative philosophical exercises to explore the shortcomings as well as the advantages of the field.

The authors go in depth to analyse some of the core aspects of the RJ processes. They question the roles of the facilitators and professionals as well as the type of training they should receive. They search the actual possibility of RJ to empower, to enable the individuals make choices, which are free from the limits set by socio-cultural constructions and release them from the social injustices created by local normative concepts.

The writers raise a doubt about the actual possibility or need to conduct a direct dialogue within certain cultural or structural settings, or in this age of digital communications and anonymous societies. They question the ability of the RJ processes to accommodate special needs of people. The authors reflect upon the place of RJ within existing legal traditions and systems and the actual alternative it offers. They challenge some myths and realities regarding the development of RJ and its ability to respond to various kinds of harms. Within and by using these themes, the authors raise some of the central debates pertaining to RJ. The book provides the reader with some opportunities to judge for oneself some of the

risks that RJ has to mitigate so that it does not become another systematic subordination method to silence the individual's truth, reality and voice.

The collection of contributions provides an international and interdisciplinary view of RJ, which allows the reader to explore the richness of the field. It is mostly a theory-based study, yet it consists of some empirical evidence from the field. It refers the reader to the leading evidence-based studies in RJ and provides a balanced view of this area of knowledge.

After reading this book it has become apparent to me that in this original work the editors and writers have supplied us with an up-to-date, relevant and useful document that will hopefully guide future practitioners, policymakers and academics through the RJ process with vigilance and clarity. It provides a critical view of RJ, reminding us that it is not the absolute remedy for all social conflicts.

My hope is that this book will be regarded as a relevant and essential source of reference to study RJ critically. I will surely recommend it for my students. The book, in my opinion, has outlined the challenges of critical RJ very well and provides the reader with much knowledge and food for thought.

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