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An introduction to criminological research

This book is not a conventional geography of crime. It does not thoroughly review the spatial organisation of criminal behaviour, the properties of defensible space or the distribution of victims. These important areas of analysis are well represented in the literature. My aim is to use them as the basis of an attempt to link the study of crime with the study of society, theoretically informed by a geographical perspective, in so far as this draws time and space into an appreciation of the structure of social relations.

As an introduction, a critique of the history of the analysis of deviance serves to illustrate the extent to which criminological knowledge has expressed the interests held by analysts (both tacitly and self-consciously) during specific historical periods in particular national contexts. This provides some insight into the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of approaches to criminological enquiry; it also provides a touchstone against which to appreciate the different combinations of perspectives adopted in subsequent chapters. The introduction is organised in sympathy with Habermas’s (1968) account of knowledge as constituted (only) through human interests. I acknowledge that many have quibbled with his view, but find it nonetheless illuminating in its interpretation of criminological research over the last century and a half.

Habermas formulated his theory of knowledge-constitutive interests from a concern that scientific (positivistic) knowledge tends, in seeking out the 'laws' of society, to misrepresent as natural and eternal that which is historically specific and alterable. Such knowledge, he argues, can only perpetuate the status quo and all relations of domination and subordination based upon it. Habermas’s theory challenges what he terms the ‘false objectivism’ of positivistic science, arguing that the object domain of forms of knowledge, and the criteria by which such knowledge is validated, are constituted by human interests. These interests define the limits of the possible applications of the knowledge to which they give rise.
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(Keat 1981: 66). Habermas identifies three knowledge-constitutive interests, which he links with the human projects of communication or interaction, labour and domination. He describes the interests as practical, technical and emancipatory (respectively) and argues that they are expressed through three distinct domains of enquiry – historical-hermeneutic science, empirical-analytical science and critical theory.

The discussion below begins by exploring the empirical-analytical perspective which has dominated most spatial studies of crime. The approach gained ascendancy in the affluent 1960s, accompanying increasing crime rates and a rediscovery of the problems of the inner city. A quantitative, positivistic criminology developed, aiming to predict and control the level of crime in modern democracies. This technical interest manifest itself in a variety of perspectives fundamentally informed by the philosophical presuppositions of direct or naive realism.* These perspectives range from biological definitions of criminal ‘types’ to a host of multivariate areal and ecological analyses of crime; from functionalist analyses of deviance to deterministic interpretations of the relationship between crime and environment. Direct realism takes crime rates as ‘given’, in that they are regarded as an empirical rather than a theoretical problem. Consequently, the empirical-analytical tradition contains ‘a moral imperative which gears academic analysis to the eradication of crime’, although it creates an intellectual climate in which ‘a critique of law or law enforcement has been effectively denied’ (Lowman 1982: 310). Additionally, the approach has allowed analysts to perform their tasks in contexts far removed from the subjective lifeworlds of those practising and affected by crime.

Fortunately, as the chapter goes on to show, there are long periods in the history of criminological enquiry during which an oral tradition has prevailed. Life histories and vivid ethnographic descriptions bear witness to academia’s attempts to understand and communicate the essence of deviant behaviour to a broad readership. This kind of experiential knowledge, grounded in the methods of historical-hermeneutic science, is constituted by what Habermas terms a practical interest in intersubjectivity. Through this medium, a world of traditional or ‘folk’ meanings may be disclosed and imparted to those unable or disinclined to participate in it themselves.

* This philosophy assumes that the objects of enquiry exist independently of an observer, and that the reality of these objects is at least partially present in their appearance (i.e. in the analyst’s experience of them). Johnston (1980) bases his discussion of human geography on the presuppositions of direct realism.
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Most recently, various ‘radical’ criminologies have emerged. Notwithstanding the diversity of these critical approaches, they have in common the view that crime is inseparable from the institutionalised norms it violates, and they share the aim of making explicit, and of questioning, the values embedded within such norms. The interest here is emancipatory: critical criminology forms part of a self-reflective movement towards a more rational society based on explanatory understanding rather than on interpretative or causal analysis. This is the third theme explored below.

Habermas’s thesis leaves many questions unanswered and poses a philosophical problem in that it fails to specify the origins of the three sets of interests. But the issue of whether they arise from the material conditions of society (which Habermas does not favour), or from something intrinsic to human nature or the mind, is largely beyond the scope of this book. Those who wish to explore such questions further are referred to McCarthy’s (1978) detailed critique of Habermas’s ideas, and to the work of Apel (1981), who has begun to construct a firmer philosophical basis for these ideas by re-examining Charles Peirce’s pragmatic theory of truth.

Habermas’s scheme, then, is neither complete, nor unassailable as a theory of knowledge. What it does offer is an intellectual framework in which the forms of knowledge or domains of enquiry that have so far been pursued in criminological research can be identified in terms of the human interests they embody. Interests other than the three identified by Habermas might be possible, but this trichotomous distinction is sufficient to guide the following selective account of the recent history of criminological thought.

The empirical-analytical tradition

A technical interest in crime control was first systematically evinced in the work of the so-called ‘cartographic criminologists’ of nineteenth-century Europe. Scholars such as Alison (1840), Fletcher (1849), Glyde (1856), Guerry (1833), Quetelet (1842) and Rawson (1839) sought to match spatial (usually regional) patterns of crime and offender rates with variations in ‘moral’ statistics (including literacy, population density, wealth, occupation, nationality and the home environment) and with physical phenomena (such as climate).

Guerry, aided by the geographer Adriano Balbi, noted that offender rates in France between 1825 and 1830 were related to criminals’ age
and sex, and to season. He tested three popular explanations of crime (based on the criminogenic effects of poverty, poor education and high population density) and found them all wanting. Rawson subsequently concentrated on the role of employment, dividing England into agricultural, manufacturing, mining and metropolitan areas and tracing out the links between urban industrialism and crime rates. Quetelet went a step further, arguing, in a similar vein to many modern analysts, that there could be no simple relationship between crime and wealth in France or England, but that high crime rates would occur where economic inequalities were most marked within small areas (i.e. where both the opportunities for crime and the predisposition to offend were present). Others, again pre-empting the thrust of modern studies, focussed on the relationship over time between changes in crime rates and fluctuations in business cycles. Clay (1855), for example, showed that in nineteenth-century England times of economic hardship tended to be accompanied by an increase in crime.

The nineteenth-century studies are summarised in greater detail by Morris (1957: 37–64) and by Phillips (1972). In favouring socio-economic explanations of the crime rate these early works usually provided a more rational and objective basis for pioneer reformism than did preceding biblical notions of good and evil. Retrospectively, their findings also seem more enlightened than Lombroso’s biological theories of criminality that succeeded them. Yet, despite their initial appeal, nineteenth-century ecological and sociological initiatives in the study of crime were soon eclipsed by theories favouring biological/physiological explanations for individuals’ criminality (a demise discussed in some detail by Morris (1957)).

Europe’s empirical-analytical tradition was rediscovered in early twentieth-century Chicago. Ogburn and Thomas (1922), for instance, correlated business cycles with convictions over a fifty-year period between 1870 and 1920. The greatest strides, however, were made by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, who pursued the spatial study of crime at an intra-urban scale. They aimed to locate the origins and correlates of deviance with a view to reforming the adverse social and environmental conditions of crime-prone neighbourhoods. These authors stressed that their approach to crime was strictly sociological, ‘an attempt to relate behavior to the social and cultural setting in which it arises’ (Shaw 1929: 9, see also Shaw and McKay 1931, 1942); and this had a striking geographical dimension, undetected in earlier research informing the psychological and biological theories which linked crime with individual pathology.
Finestone's (1976) account of the Chicago School's epidemiological research draws out an important parallel with the earlier European studies: both discover an association in space between delinquency and economic indices. The consistency and significance of this link was to elude a generation of factorial ecologists before re-emerging in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, as the 1930s proceeded, the association became increasingly prominent in the writings of the Chicago criminologists. Whereas Shaw and McKay had originally interpreted delinquency in terms of cultural and social change, increased mobility and excessive 'disorganisation' (factors that had seemed to affect successive waves of European immigrants), as the depression worsened (and migration and residential mobility became sluggish) their interpretations increasingly rested on economic criteria:

From an emphasis upon social change and social process they had moved to an emphasis upon social structure. From stress upon personal and primary group relationships – that is, upon the local milieu – they had moved to attribute priority to the impersonal pressures originating in the larger social systems. The conceptual primacy of local community was replaced by that of social class. (Finestone 1976: 93)

Shaw and McKay's widely quoted conclusion that crime and delinquency follow the physical structure and social organisation of the city stimulated an innovative approach to neighbourhood crime control in Chicago, and precipitated a long series of areal and ecological studies of crime in the academic literature. These have been condemned as atheoretic and positivistic, but the best are inspired by the sound philosophical presuppositions of direct realism.

Areal analyses of crime are concerned primarily with describing spatial distributions. A first stage in dealing with crime and criminals is to discover where they are. Most intra-urban research of this type has focussed on the location of offenders' homes, following the lead of Shaw and McKay (1942), who discovered an enduring tendency for known offenders to cluster within the inner city, and for offender residence rates to decrease outwards following the familiar distance decay curve. In Britain, too, Bagot (1941) found that the homes of convicted juvenile delinquents clustered disproportionately into three central wards of Liverpool on the banks of the river Mersey. Later, however, Morris (1957) observed in Croydon that offenders were also segregated in peripheral council-housing estates (a tendency also apparent from the mid-1950s in Hobart, Tasmania (Scott 1965)).

Timms (1965) sustained this areal tradition with a study in Luton,
but perhaps the most thorough contemporary British studies of
offender residence have been completed in Sheffield (Baldwin and
Bottoms 1976; Bottoms and Xanthos 1981; Mawby 1979b), and in
Cardiff (Evans 1980; Herbert 1976a). In Sheffield, the majority of
offenders live between one and three miles from the city centre and
cluster: (a) in the ‘twilight’ areas with high proportions of Irish and
New Commonwealth immigrants; (b) in some enumeration districts
adjacent to the main areas of heavy industry; and (c) on some council
estates, especially those built in the inter-war years. In Cardiff, a
similar pattern emerges of high offender rates in the inner-city
terraces, the middle-ring rooming houses and suburban local
authority estates. Here, the main aim of the areal analyses has been
to preface a series of ecological and behavioural studies attempting
to clarify the concept of ‘delinquency areas’. However, the range of
centrographic techniques employed by Rose and Deskins (1980), in
their examination of offenders’ and victims’ residential patterns in
Detroit, might anticipate the extended use of spatial statistics in the
analysis of offender data (see also Stephenson 1980).

Simple areal analyses of offences have been less prominent in the
areal variations in North America, drawing attention particularly to
the high incidence of violence (especially murder) in the south.
Rengert and Müller (1972) traced the diffusion of drugs down the
urban hierarchy in New York state; and there are also areal studies of
prostitution, offering a novel view of the geographies of San
Francisco and Nevada (Shumsky and Springer 1981; Symanski
1974). Phillips (1972) has probably produced one of the most
detailed intra-urban areal studies of crime to date, in Minneapolis,
where he identified a ‘centralised’ distribution of car theft, business
robbery and business burglary, various ‘ghettoised’ clusters of
assaults, property damage, street robbery and purse snatching, and a
‘partially dispersed’ pattern of residential burglary.

Ultimately, however, the depth of insight to be gleaned from areal
studies is limited, since it is an approach which takes no account of
population, land use or other features of the urban environment
which affect the pattern of crime by constraining the distribution of
opportunities. Far more interest within the empirical-analytical
tradition has thus focussed on ecological analysis, which Herbert
(1976a) defines as the correlation in space of areally aggregated
crime rates and measurable indices of the social and physical
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Historically, four broadly distinct phases in the ecological analysis of crime can be discerned. The first two movements have already been mentioned. They are Europe's nineteenth-century 'cartographic criminology' and the pioneering intra-urban studies of deviance completed in early twentieth-century Chicago. Amongst more recent developments, it is relevant to distinguish the theoretically weak factorial ecologies of the 1960s from the more rigorous econometric studies of the last decade.

During the 1960s, a variety of numerically sophisticated but theoretically weak factorial ecologies was published, exploring the empirical associations between crime rates and socio-economic indicators. Despite authors' intentions, the practical application of results has often been limited, since many studies were crudely positivistic and held few insights for planners and policy-makers. It would therefore be superfluous to itemise and evaluate the results of every application of social-area analysis, factor analysis, principal-components analysis and related techniques for comparing the incidence of crime with that of other social phenomena, particularly since a number of critical reviews already exist. Gordon's (1967) discussion of papers by Lander (1954) and Chilton (1964), for instance, serves to illustrate some methodological pitfalls of multivariate techniques, while their theoretical shortcomings are amply documented in Baldwin's (1975) critique of ecological research in Britain. In this, and in other critical reviews Baldwin (1974a, 1979) is distressed by the blurred objectives of quantitative ecological analyses; by the fact that their conceptual difficulties and ambiguities are often overlooked; and by the tendency for results to be presented as if the use of technically sophisticated methods had obviated the need for careful explanations.

These reservations notwithstanding, the best of the studies, and the fruits of the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design movement (stimulated by the discovery of consistent empirical associations between crime and the built environment, and introduced more fully in chapter 3) provide a ready basis for the quick 'solutions' to the crime problem that modern politicians require. There are, moreover, three persistent, if controversial, themes that have endured throughout the stormy history of ecological analyses of urban crime. They are the quixotic condition of 'social disorganisation', the association between crime rates and various measures of density or crowding, and the elusive relationship between deviance and economy. The practical and theoretical
significance of these themes for future research is discussed in chapter 2.

The 1970s witnessed a more promising series of ecological studies of crime published by economists. They are usually based on North American data, and they draw attention to the relationship between crime rates and economic indicators at several spatial scales: the census tract (Beasley and Antunes 1974; Bechdolt 1975; Kvolseth 1977); the city or SMSA (Allison 1972; Flango and Sherbenous 1976; Hoch 1974; Phillips and Votey 1975); and the state (Nagel 1978). These studies are reviewed in detail by Berger (1980). The link they identify between crime rates and economic trends, and the implications of such a link for the monetarist economies of the 1980s, may be the most fruitful discovery of a generation of often inconclusive quantitative analyses.

For the most part, then, the empirical-analytical approach to criminological research takes as its task the statistical comparison of measurable crime patterns with the incidence of factors possibly associated with their genesis. In so far as strong association might be indicative of causality, the aim of such studies has been to find some basis for controlling the crime rate. Definitions of crime are usually taken from official statistics and treated as the starting point for analysis rather than as the end point of law-enforcement practices. Consequently, an understanding of the meaning of crime has rarely proved integral to research in this tradition.

The main thrust of today's spatial studies of crime, however, is indebted to the work of the Chicago School, and the spirit of the North American research was that of direct realism rather than atheoretic positivism (the distinction is clarified by Keat and Urry 1975: 9–40). The ecologists were not primarily concerned with causal connections between spatially coincident variables. Their aim was not to predict crime and delinquency by eliciting 'laws' which would link deviance with substandard housing, poverty, population change, foreign-born populations, cultural minorities, tuberculosis, mental disorder and the many other persistent crime correlates. It was, rather, to offer explanations for these enduring links. 'To explain things is not merely to show that they are instances of well-established regularities. Instead we [the realist] must discover the necessary connections between phenomena, by acquiring knowledge of the underlying structures and mechanisms at work' (Keat and Urry 1975: 5).

In Chicago, this knowledge was secured through the use of life
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histories and participant observation in a research environment which refused to separate empirical-analytical techniques from the insights of oral-ethnographic study. Large-scale areal analyses were used instrumentally to illuminate high-delinquency areas; small-scale in-depth study explored, experienced and interpreted this localisation. But since the 1950s, the ecological and hermeneutic traditions have progressively been divorced. Rising crime rates, sensationalism in the mass media, and the elevation of law and order to an election issue in many countries, placed the emphasis of research firmly on crime control. This emphasis continues, and the popularity of empirical-analytical research seems assured. An appropriate form for such research, if it is to avoid theoretically weak positivism and capitalise on the strengths of direct realism, is discussed in chapter 2. The interpretative tradition survived, however, and since its contribution to the geography of crime has been so limited, its merits are worth considering at some length.

The oral-ethnographic tradition

Direct observations, life histories, unpublished documents and other first-hand data sources have fuelled enough research to produce an extensive and compelling literature grounded in the oral-ethnographic tradition. Fulfilling a communicative role and offering a vivid glimpse of the human consequences of crime and deviance, this tradition can be traced across three-and-a-half centuries. It provides an important commentary on the effects of socio-economic change on the structure of social relations, and it bears witness to the rich theoretical insight to be gained when the study of crime is integrated with a broader appreciation of the social context in which deviance arises.

Crime and the urban poor in nineteenth-century Britain

Friedrich Engels made an important statement about the experience of life in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain in The condition of the working class in England (1845). It is not an ethnographic document based on Engels’s own extensive experience (he had spent only twenty months as a visitor to the country when he wrote it), but it is sensitively compiled from contemporary reports, pamphlets and newspapers, and from the vivid impact of a personal acquaintance with the growing industrial cities of the north.

Engels interpreted crime as a rational reaction to relative depri-
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variation – a consequence of the unequal distribution of the material rewards of the industrial revolution:

The worker lived in poverty and want, and saw that other people were better off than he was. The worker was not sufficiently intelligent to appreciate why he, of all people, should be the one to suffer – for after all he contributed more to society than the idle rich, and sheer necessity drove him to steal in spite of his traditional respect for private property. (Engels 1845: 242)

Similarly,

Acts of violence committed by the working classes against the bourgeoisie and their henchmen are merely frank and undisguised retaliation for the thefts and treacheries perpetrated by the middle classes against the workers. (Engels 1845: 242)

Criminality was observed by Engels not only in the deprived working classes, but also among the ‘surplus population’ of casual workers, street sweepers, beggars, prostitutes and peddlars, who were provoked by their acute distress to wage open warfare against the bourgeoisie. While deviance could not be regarded as an organised or effective class action, part of the importance of crime for Engels is its potential for feeding into such actions. In this view, ‘the criminal is an unconscious and premature social rebel’ (Marcus 1974: 224).

That Engels chose to interpret his raw material, rather than merely describe it for the reader, is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength in that the author’s values are self-consciously exposed and unequivocal. As Henderson and Chaloner (1958: xxii) point out, ‘Engels cast himself in the role of counsel for the prosecution against capitalists. He did not pretend to be an impartial observer.’ It is clear what selective principles must have been invoked in compiling the work, and the value judgements that all writers must make are anything but tacit. The weakness of this approach is that the immediacy of first-hand experience can easily be displaced by the message of a specific interpretation of that experience. As a political treatise, The condition of the working class in England is a monumental work; as a source of intimate knowledge about the commonsense understandings of the people it is less illuminating than the subsequent writings of reformers such as Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth. In relating the incidence of crime to the growth of the working class, and in identifying a link between increasing crime rates and urban industrialism, Engels did, however, recognise the spatial dimension of crime, and in relating this to the process of economic development.