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CRIME, SPACE AND SOCIETY

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To my parents
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I am indebted to many individuals in a variety of agencies who allowed me access to their crime data. Particular thanks are due to Chief Superintendent Tony Butler of the West Midlands Police, and to Mike Hough, who introduced me to the first British Crime Survey. A congenial and constructive research environment provided by colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, and at Brunel University, was much appreciated. I am especially grateful for three months as an Urban Studies Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, which provided me with ideas, friendship and much-needed writing time. Some of my original research was carried out under the supervision of Clyde Mitchell and Ceri Peach in Oxford. Their help and support has been invaluable. Finally, I should like to thank Mike Summerfield for his patience and encouragement.

Preface

This book was conceived as an attempt to integrate theoretically the study of crime with recent developments in our understanding of social organisation and change. Criminological research has tended (in practice if not by design) to abstract crime from its broader social context. A magnificent fund of knowledge has been created, but contemporary social theory has often developed in advance of, or in isolation from, shifts in criminological thought. Based on the groundwork of others, my aim is to introduce a much broader perspective on crime. I view it as one facet in a wider structure of social relations. As such, crime, like any other form of human interchange, can be understood in terms of the differential distribution of rewards and life chances in society, and in terms of the rules of social reproduction which sustain inequality.

Many commentators acknowledge that the nature of deviance has varied historically, but few explore locational variations in its meaning, causes and consequences. I shall argue that the impact and social significance of crime does vary locationally, even within a single nation or region. It varies not only because the environmental opportunities for crime and the economic circumstances of potential offenders vary in space, but also because crime and the fear of crime are bound up with the distribution of power and its realisation in the form of social relations amongst differently positioned social and economic groups.

For reasons amplified in the text, this book focusses on crime in Britain’s inner cities generally, and on a case study in Birmingham in particular. Reflecting the extent and persistence of social and residential segregation in this country, the inner cities are areas in which the effects of crime and the quality of race relations intermingle, and much of my theoretical argument attempts to explain why this is so.

I would like to explain my use of the terms ‘race’ and ‘culture’, and my avoidance of the term ‘ethnicity’ in this volume. ‘Race’ refers to a
social category, based on perceptions of physical differences between groups of people. The notion of race in a genetic sense is not legitimated by modern biological science, and its use in this context is racist. ‘Race’ is a valid object of enquiry only in so far as racist discourse and thought persist to give conceptions of racial difference their contemporary social (political and economic) significance. Part of my concern in this book is to account for the continuing significance of racial differences in the form of local social relations.

‘Culture’ is regarded as a system of shared meanings shaped by a group’s history and its material conditions of existence. I reject idealist interpretations of culture as the pregiven ‘informing spirit’ of a way of life, preferring to regard it as a signifying system, expressing shared experiences and aspirations. I suspect that this definition of culture leaves ‘ethnicity’ redundant (when it refers to linguistic or religious minorities) or racist (when it describes cultural groups defined in terms of racial criteria). My suspicion has prompted me to avoid the appellation ‘ethnic’ (though I have used it without such reservations in earlier publications) for the time being.

This book draws together the very diverse interests which a geographical education has allowed me. Such eclecticism is not favoured by the specialisation that has accompanied an academic division of labour, but it encourages the openness and scepticism that feeds research. I have tried, therefore, to be wide-ranging in exploring the relationships between crime and society, although I often reject comprehensiveness in favour of theoretical coherence (particularly when considering the role of crime in the reproduction of local social relations). My success in combining speculative social theory with statements on public policy has been variable. The technical interests of planners sit uneasily with the practical and critical interests of professional academia. Nevertheless, the theoretical concerns of chapters 5 and 7 complement some of the more descriptive and policy orientated chapters which precede them; and the practical recommendations of chapter 6, although political in implication, are faithful to a wide range of empirical evidence. I do not pretend, then, to offer any grand theory of crime and society. What I suggest is a broader view of criminological research than has hitherto been usual: one that is in tune with recent developments in geography and sociology; and one whose scope I can only begin to explore in the chapters which follow.

May 1985

SUSAN J. SMITH