

# Against environmental criminology: designing out crime and the death of utopian visions

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## **Abstract**

While the 'preventive turn' and the 'rediscovery of the offence' in criminology should be reason for celebration, in reality the focus of much governmental and academic criminology has become increasingly narrow. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area known as environmental criminology. This paper argues that if criminology is serious about geo-spatial theories and governance of crime it must reengage with the fields of urban sociology, architecture, planning and design. Most importantly a theory of crime and space must incorporate theories of culture and society and embrace a new vision if it is to have relevance into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Crime, Criminology, Urban Sociology, Planning and Design

## **Introduction**

There was a time in the late sixties and early seventies when scholars – call them neo-utopian - imagined a society without crime – and indeed a society without the many elements of crime control such as police and prisons. While it would be easy to rehearse the traditions of neo-Marxist radical criminology and abolitionism let us step outside criminological traditions into the cultural realm with a contemporaneous example in the literary world. In Ursula Le Guin's 1974 classic science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*, crime does not exist on the revolutionary anarchist moon of Anarres. With no governmental structure, no laws, and a decentralized bureaucracy the protagonist Shevek is asked by his disbelieving hosts on the neighbouring planet of Urras 'what keeps people in order? Why don't they rob and murder each other?' He replies:

Nobody owns anything to rob. If you want things you take them from the depository. As for violence, well I don't know... would you murder me ordinarily? And if you felt like it would a law against it stop you? Coercion is the least effective way of obtaining order. (La Guin 1974:128)

However, the continuing revolutionary challenge for the Anarrasti people, with their decentralized bottom up systems of communal governance, were systems of bureaucracy which always threatened true freedom and often stood in the way of the creation of new knowledge. On Le Guin's Anarres the governance of crime, or indeed the non-governance of crime –was a social process. Utopias are hard to sustain.

The US experience of crime prevention through the 1960s and into the early 1970s might be very different to that on Anarres but we can identify a similar socio-political struggle. When then US Attorney General Robert Kennedy read Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin's criminological text *Delinquency and Opportunity* (1960) - which drew heavily on Robert Merton's (1938) theory of socio-cultural strain and its links to crime - he appointed Ohlin to help develop a federal policy on Juvenile Delinquency (Vold et al. 1998:169). Improved education, creation of work opportunities, organizing working class communities, providing services became part of the 'Great Society Program' and 'war on poverty' and part of the US Juvenile Delinquency Prevention and Control Act of 1961; a grand modernist (and positivist) social intervention *par excellence*. However, opposition to the program was massive, particularly from conservatives who railed against the expansion of the 'nanny state' into peoples' lives and the waste of taxpayers' money. With the election of Richard Nixon in the late 1960s the scheme was politically discredited and dismantled. The episode illustrates a chapter in the dismantling of a modernist criminological dream and with it many of the utopian pretensions of criminological thought; a failure of penal modernism (Garland 1995).

As sociologists we are well versed in the utopian dreams that haunt many a social theory and the oft-associated meta-narratives or teleological versions of progress. Sociology has a long tradition of criticising the existing social order. Likewise critical,

structural and liberal criminologies have firmly critiqued the criminogenic nature of their present. Peter Young has noted the importance of moments of ‘utopian thinking’ to the revitalisation of criminological thought. Young (1992:436) suggests:

There is a viable criminological project that has been deeply marked by Utopias. This counters a critique of the discipline that appears from time to time—the idea that criminology is complacent or can be understood primarily as a product of power, as an adjunct to the penal system.

Yet much contemporary mainstream criminology has become a largely conservative correctionist policy-science, reflecting something of the death, or at least the acknowledged mortality, of the modernist meta-narrative.

### **The failure of penal modernism and the preventative turn**

Consequently, we have witnessed over that last two and a half decades, at least in countries like Australia, New Zealand, the US and the UK what has been characterized as the ‘preventative turn’ in both governmental criminological discourse and in crime policy. The ‘nothing works’ pessimism of the mid 1970s which characterised the failure of penal modernism and broad welfarist social interventions was coupled with a ‘rediscovery of the offence’ and its situational and spatial characteristics (Crawford 1998:35) to recast crime policy. The preventative turn has amongst other things focused resources on the modest goal of reducing opportunities to offend through design, manipulation of specific environments, system management and the like and includes such approaches as CPTED, rational choice theory and routine activities theory; many of which contribute to the field known as ‘environmental criminology’.

As sociologists or criminologists one might think we should celebrate this new focus on prevention, this ‘preventative turn’. After all, haven’t critical criminologists and

sociologists of deviance long lamented the heavy hand of state centred crime control? However, while it is clear that the state has withdrawn from many traditional areas of governance over the past decades under what are crudely known as neo-liberal or advanced-liberal political rationalities, the problem is that the traditional coercive law and order function is not one of these; while there has been a 'preventative turn' there has simultaneously been a 'punitive turn'; a new punitivism (Pratt et al. 2005) and a culture of control (Garland 2001). Neo-liberal economic rationalities of crime prevention it appears sit, if slightly uncomfortably at times, along side neo-conservative politics or crime control in many advanced liberal states.

Given this, new technologies of prevention generally co-exist with the repressive law and order policies and politics which have seen massively increasing prison populations, an actuarial focus on minority or other 'risky' groups (Freely and Simon 1992), a reduction of judicial discretion (three strikes, tight bail laws and truth in sentencing legislation), and the increasing criminalization of 'others' such as asylum seekers and the like (Grewcock 2007). Garland has identified the emergence of what he calls the 'criminologies of everyday life' – more specifically the criminologies of the 'self' and the criminologies of the 'other'. As he puts it adaptations have occurred in which the state recognizes the limits of its sovereignty, that it no longer has a monopoly over crime control. But it is not a simple decentring of control. Rather, the state apparatus grows and the criminal justice system becomes part of 'a wide control complex of partnerships, private security and local authorities' (Garland cited in Young 2002). Additionally, we are all expected to become our own criminologist and harden our potential crime targets (self or property). We do so by excluding the risky 'other' from particular situations or environments. While Garland is at pains to note that the modernist welfarist projects of criminology are not dead, he suggests the

modernist dream of criminology to socially engineer crime out has been supplemented with a much more modest late-modern rationality that sees high crime rates as normal, and the role of criminology to intervene in localized ‘situations’ – criminologist as system engineer rather than social engineer. For the most part governments and a large proportion of mainstream criminology has embraced an ethos of ‘what works’ and ‘evidence based’ interventions that are disinterested in causation and content with correctionism (Young 1999) and which reinforce and give legitimacy to these *criminologies of everyday life*.

Nowhere is this more evident than the area that has become known as ‘environmental criminology’ which Bottoms and Wiles (2002:620) define as; ‘the study of crime, criminality, and victimisation as they relate, first, to particular *places* and, secondly, to the way that individuals and organisations shape their activities *spatially*, and in doing so are in turn influenced by *place-based* or *spatial* factors”. While it would be reductive to suggest that there is a singular form of environmental criminology, most of the literature in this field remains theoretically shallow and empirically narrow. It is no surprise that the most common place-based form of intervention – crime prevention through environment design (CPTED) – often imagines the potential offender as a simple rationally calculating individual whose behaviour can be influenced by a range of ‘target hardening’, ‘access control’, and ‘territorial reinforcement’ measures. And while CPTED’s other key pillar ‘natural surveillance’ sometimes gets a look in the form of ‘sight lines’ and street view windows, just as often the outcome of a CPTED audit is the not so natural surveillance of CCTV; a technology that as Norris and McCahill (2006) explain, is a good fit with both the old and new penology. The ‘rediscovery of the offence’ has largely seen it isolated from its social context.

The 'routine activities' and 'situation crime prevention' and 'rational choice' theory from which much CPTED is derived are even more bereft of depth. Marcus Felson's *Crime and Everyday Life* (2002) laments – drawing disingenuously from Jane Jacobs (1961) classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* – the development of suburban life and the increase of 'suitable targets' of crime and the decrease of 'suitable guardians'. For Felson automobility and the development of what he terms a 'metro-reef' have been 'criminokinetic' (1987). He explains the large increases in burglary rates in the United States in the 1960's and 1970's back to three key factors acting together; the development of suburban life; the increase of lightweight electronic goods homes (televisions, video recorders etc) which increases the temptation and opportunities for theft; and increased participation in the workforce of women left empty houses which could be easily burgled. Felson (2002:35) is quite specific as to crime causation: 'Opportunity is the root cause of crime'.

Yet, unlike Jacobs who argues for the mixed use of zoning and the heavy use of sidewalks to increase 'natural surveillance', Felson sees salvation in the 'metroquilt'; the development of new largely privatised 'facilities' that don't rely on public policing and services. In short the very same market-based machine that Jacobs would have suggested destroyed great cities through poor development and planning would eventually come to our salvation. One could argue however, that at least Felson has a vision, and some kind of theory of space and development – however much one might disagree with it. Much situational crime prevention lacks even this. While Felson 'depathologises' crime, 'normalising the crimino-genic situation' (Hayward 2004:104), Kelling and Wilson (1982) place the blame for offending on neighbourhood disorder and Clarke and Cornish (1986) reduce offending down to the utilitarian pleasure and pain principle, a cost benefit analysis – the criminal as *homo*

*economous*. The ‘rational choice’ ‘opportunity’ perspective suggests that crime generally (including violence and sex offences) is ‘purposive behaviour designed to benefit the offender’ (Cornish and Clarke 1986).

And while such thinking can be historically traced to a Thatcherite and Reaganite political context where ‘there is no society’, and a the ‘nothing works’ (Martinson 1974) rebuttal of penal modernism already discussed, the failure of environmental criminology also needs to be placed in the context of the great planning and architectural failures of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The failure of the modernist city**

The lack of ambition of environmental criminology begins with the undeniable historical fact that it was also born of the failures of modernist planning. We need only detour briefly into the work of perhaps the two most influential architects and planners of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier, to illustrate both the foibles of the modernist dream, and why much environmental criminology was a reaction to it.

Lloyd Wright believed that the telephone and the automobile made old city planning redundant – overcrowded conglomerations would wither and decay (Le Gates and Stout 2003). Cities should be decentralised where family life would be insured by reversion to a form of rural stability with telecommunications and transportation ensuring a continued sense of community. This was a democratic vision: Each American citizen would get their acre of land and life would be a mix of intellectual and manual labour ensuring ‘human wholeness. As Lloyd Wright (203 *original 1935*) put it, three major inventions were already at work preempting broadacres, whether the powers that ‘over-build’ the old cities like it or not; the motor car; radio, television

and telegraph and electrical intercommunication ‘becoming complete’; and standardisation machine shop production (presumably what we know now as Fordism).

Alternatively, Le Corbusier’s design of a city for three million inhabitants was born of a modernist and minimalist intent and reflected his idea of housing as a ‘machine for the living’. This was to be as centralised and vertical as Lloyd Wrights was decentralist and horizontal. As Le Corbusier put it (2003; 320 *original 1922*), ‘the city of to-day can only increase in density at the expense of open spaces which are the lungs of the city. We must increase open spaces and diminish the distances covered. Therefore the city must be constructed vertically’. Le Corbusier believed in knocking down entire districts and rebuilding them from scratch – like his “Voisin” plan for the centre of Paris which characterised his grand schemes. He argued, ‘the city of today is dying because is it not geometrical. To build in the open would be to replace our present haphazard arrangements... unless we do there is no salvation. ...The result of true geometrical layout is repetition. The result of repetition is a standard, the perfect form’ (Le Corbusier 2003:323).

It’s reasonable to suggest that much mid 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture and planning constituted something of a mix of these two opposing styles and many of today’s social problems can be found in the socially engineered project high-rise or the far flung and socially excluded broadacre. And the street, so central to both designs, and yet in both something to remove from sight, to retreat from, became the site of fear and loathing; a ‘grey space’ (Jacobs 1961) to drive on in the safety of the car, not walk down. The new suburban decentralization and redeveloped vertical city block provided, in Felson’s terms, a huge range of new suitable targets, and in Clarke’s

terms, a new automobile set of routine activities through which to come across these targets.

Yet Jane Jacobs had made these same observations before many of these buildings were even constructed. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), she critiqued the Modernism of Le Corbusier and Lloyd Wright, and asserted that the publicly unowned spaces created by the 'city in the park' notion of Modernists was one of the main reasons for the rising crime rate. She argued instead for an 'eyes on the street' approach to town planning, and the resurrection of main public space precedents, such as streets and squares, in the design of cities. Jacobs notes (1961:65):

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvellous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of side-walk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes.

The demolition of the Le Corbusier inspired - Minoru Yamasaki designed – high modernist Pruitt-Igoe urban housing project in 1972 is often said to represent the death of modern architecture or the birth of post-modernism. Built only 20 years earlier the demise of this 33-building project signified not only the death of a certain democratic and utopian vision for public housing, it speaks to a new distrust of welfarist rationalities of government more generally.

## **Conclusion**

There are other surfaces of emergence for environmental criminology, but if we conceptualise its birth as historically coinciding with the distrust of penal modernism and the death of modernist planning and architecture perhaps we can grasp its modesty and conservatism. And while proponents like to trace its history back to the Chicago School of sociology (Bottoms and Wiles 2002), most contemporary

environmental criminology borrows little more than the concept of social ecology and the crime map from that tradition.

There are however other sources with which contemporary environmental criminology should engage. It's quite possible to conceptualise a post-modern spatial analysis that takes us much further than criminologist as system engineer. The recently resurrected work of de Certeau is one such source. As de Certeau has put it:

The concept city is decaying... perhaps cities are deteriorating along with the procedures that organised them... One can try another path: one that can analyse the ...singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was meant to administer or suppress.... (de Certeau 1984:95-96)

Environmental criminology seemingly learned little from de Certeau, nor indeed Jacobs or even the early work in the field of *defensible space* (Newman 1972). While the modernist meta-narrative died the void was not filled by a sophisticated post-modern or late-modern cross-disciplinary recognition of complexity – which Jacobs and de Certeau might have embraced. As Arrantes (1996:82) has put it:

The social places built in urban space are not simply juxtaposed to one another. They overlap, partly mixing with each other to form interstitial zones of transition”.... Their use does not fit exactly the categories ascribed and arranged by law, custom and social conventions.

While such views constitute thinking well short of clear utopias, they begin to communicate a social and theoretical complexity more far-reaching than the analysis of routine activities and situations. They suggest that a true criminology of space has to place criminogenic situations in a broad socio-spatial and cultural context. Who knows, perhaps in doing so we move forward towards another utopian moment.

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