CRIMINOLOGICAL ENCOUNTERS

Vol 7(1) 2025
ISSN 2506-7583
DOI 10.26395/CE.2025.1.01

Editorial: About the Possibility of Critical Spaces

Mattias De Backer
Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Mattias.De.Backer@vub.be

Lucas Melgaço
Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Lucas.Melgaco@vub.be

We are immensely proud to publish this special issue on the criminology of war, guest edited by Teresa Degenhardt and Hannah Wilkinson, probably the most lengthy and timely issue of *Criminological Encounters* thus far. In the editorial preface to the previous issue, we asked what critical criminologists can do to talk about war (De Backer et al. 2023)? Referencing Williams (2015), we argued that a criminology reproducing inequality and power imbalance is profoundly uncritical. For critical scholars, it is essential to focus on inequalities and power imbalance, for example, to study the events in Gaza and Sudan, to name them genocides as experts have done, in order to ask the fundamental questions: who allows such atrocities to take place? And who is benefiting from them? This, in turn, invites us to reflect on our own roles as social scientists, asking whether we are being vocal enough and whether we are doing enough to call out the culprits.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that these very questions sparked an intense debate in the 2025 Annual Conference of the European Society of Criminology between – mostly – young scholars in a precarious position championing a firm stand and other, often more senior, academics opposing such a position. While Fatsis (this issue) and Vasiliou et al. (2026) discuss what occurred *during* this turbulent discussion, and what has been the role of the Board of the European Society in that moment, in this preface we want to draw attention to the debate that took place *after* this turbulent General Assembly.

In the courtyard of the American College of Greece, the venue of that conference, a group of disillusioned scholars got together "to plot, plan, strategise, organise, and mobilise", to use American rapper and activist Killer Mike's call after the police killing of George Floyd. During the conversation in that courtyard, a need surfaced for a truly critical space within criminology and the analysis was made, at least by some of those present, that the European Society of Criminology was unfit for this purpose. People wondered: should we create our own critical space, or should we stay in the mainstream and combat prejudice, hypocrisy and other evils from within?

There are downsides to either position: critical spaces in the margins risk becoming obsolete and/or echo chambers of like-minded people, while in the mainstream, it may become increasingly impossible to *have* critical spaces, while at the same time making those voices in the mainstream look complicit and double-faced. Dalton (2016) provides an interesting answer, when discussing the locus of queer ideas within criminology: "perhaps the either/or position about inhabiting the margins and engaging with mainstream criminology is not as contradictory." He argues that the margins may be a suitable space to inhabit in order to *nurture* critical ideas: "having done so, one might then depart the margins to engage with mainstream criminology (…). Having achieved this objective, one must necessarily retreat back to the fringes of the discipline to ensure that the vitality of queer ideas continues to inform one's thinking" (p. 31).

Michel de Certeau (1984), in his essay *The practice of everyday life*, theorises this spatial metaphor of the centre and the margin in the dyad strategy-tactic, showing how power dynamics are spatialised, or how spaces are embedded in power dynamics. In his argument, the powerless usually do not have a space of their own. In fact, one is powerless *because* one does not have a place from which to operate. What he calls a tactic is an "action determined by the absence of a proper locus. (…) the space of a tactic is the space of the other. (…) It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy (…). It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep" (p. 37).

The space of the powerful, to tap into another metaphor, is the castle from which the king operates. The powerless are like poachers, catching hares on the king's estate but having no place of their own where they can retreat to grow stronger. Taking this metaphor back to the discussion about critical spaces in criminology, one can criticise Dalton's argument for being too romantic. Perhaps (re-)convening in the margins is not so much a matter of nurture, as it is an act of mere survival, since the poacher doesn't have a space to stockpile their winnings. Whatever the answer to that question, it invites us to investigate what key infrastructures are necessary to provide safe and critical spaces.

Engaging one last time with the metaphor of the poacher, one can observe that the crucial criterion appears to be *ownership* of space. The difference between survival and nurture is the deepfelt sense that one is at home, that one *belongs*, is safe from harm, and has a space of one's own. Perhaps in that

sense, and under that condition, Dalton is right. If and only if we can build places in the margins with enough autonomy, safety and self-governance, critical spaces can be spaces of nurture. To build such places, however, is an uphill battle, as most infrastructures and dynamics in the field are geared towards maintaining the status quo and protecting the powerful. To build critical spaces, we can only find shelter by investing in protective social groups willing to stick together in the professional context of a greedy institution, as Coser (1974) calls it. In the words of Francesca Albanese: we are frail and we are weak only if we are isolated.

Criminological Encounters has tried since its inception to be this platform for critical exchange, by being radically open-access, not-for-profit and independent of the big scientific publishers, while not being linked to any of the discipline's networks and platforms. We have tried to build a more inclusive environment in academic publishing by giving reviewers a more rewarding role in the process by offering open review and the opportunity to publish a commentary on the manuscript they reviewed. We have also invited guest editors to reach out to practitioners in the field, in order to make debates in academia less privileged and more embedded in lived realities on the ground. We also invite various less classic formats, such as commentaries, opinion pieces and arts interventions. This interest to bring "other" voices to the debate is crucial for the project of the journal – that is one of the "encounters" that the name refers to.

But maybe most importantly, throughout the years we have developed a clear editorial vision concerning the work we publish. Issues in previous years have focused on critical pockets of criminological thought such as urban (Persak & Tulumello, 2020), green (Bombardi et al., 2022) or affective and sensory criminologies (Young et al., 2023), or have zoomed in on the work produced in peripheral and non-anglophone regions such as Latin America (Bailone et al., 2021).

We are happy to announce that also the next issue will continue down that same path. Lambros Fatsis and Karen Graham are preparing a special issue with the title "Towards an Anti-Racist Anti-Criminology," focusing on calls to decolonise academia and on Southern, postcolonial, or decolonial perspectives recently explored within criminology as well as in neighbouring disciplines in the social sciences. Yet, the new issue of *Criminological Encounters* will try to go one step further, to investigate how criminology can learn from non-disciplinary, and perhaps anti-criminological insights, inviting scholarship *on* rather than *within* criminology. The issue will also invite anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and antiracist work from beyond the academy: works of literature, film, music, prison memoirs, political and social commentary, or even flyers/posters from community organising initiatives, struggles and campaigns (past or present) are all welcome.

More details about this call will be announced shortly. For now, we sign with solidarity,

Mattias De Backer & Lucas Melgaço, editors.

Bibliography

Bailone, M., Carinhanha, A. M., & Lopes, C. da S. (2021). Editorial for the special issue: Criminology in Latin America: between cultural import and paths of decolonization. *Criminological Encounters*, *4*(1), 8-12.

Bombardi, L., Di Ronco, A., & Pali, B. (2022). Editorial for the special issue: Critical green criminology goes rural: Environmental crimes, harms and conflicts in rural areas and communities. *Criminological Encounters*, *5*(1), 9-17.

Coser, E. A. (1974). *Greedy Institutions: Patterns of Undivided Commitment*. The Free Press.

Dalton, D. (2016). Reflections on the Emergence, Efficacy, and Value of Queer Criminology. In *Queering Criminology* (pp. 15-35). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137513342_2

De Backer, M., Melgaço, L., & Volinz, L. (2023). War and criminology. *Criminological Encounters*, *6*(1), 5-8.

de Certeau, M. (1984). *The practice of everyday life (trans. S.F. Rendall)*. University of California Press.

Killer Mike (2020). Atlanta, mayor's press conference. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sG0yrng0eY4&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=MichaelDavidMurphy

Persak, N., & Tulumello, S. (2020). Urban criminology—Criminology of the urban. *Criminological Encounters*, *4*(1), 3-9.

Vasiliou, E., Pali, B., Volinz, L., Van Buggenhout, M., & De Backer, M. (2026). Criminology's Mechanisms of Complicity and Palestine, *Journal: Justice, Power and Resistance*. Forthcoming.

Williams, P. (2015). Criminalising the Other: Challenging the race-gang nexus. *Race & Class*, *56*(3), 18-35. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396814556221

Young, A., Rogers, J., & McClanahan, B. (2023). Affective and sensory criminologies. *Criminological Encounters*, *6*(1), Article 1.

Mattias De Backer is research professor at the Department of Criminology at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, co-coordinator of the Horizon Europe project GATHERINGS, co-editor of the open-access journal *Criminological Encounters*, co-director of the Urban and Spatial Criminology research lineand co-chair of the ESC Working Group on Space, Place and Crime. He holds degrees in Philosophy, Urban Studies and Criminology.

Lucas Melgaço is Associate Professor in the Department of Criminology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). His main scientific interests are in the domains of urban criminology, surveillance studies, policing and technology, public spaces and public order. He is co-editor of the journal *Criminological Encounters*.

How to cite this article (APA– 7th ed.):
De Backer, M. & Melgaço, L. (2025). About the possibility of critical spaces. *Criminological Encounters*. 7(1). 6-10. https://doi.org/10.26395/CE.2025.1.01

© The author(s), 2025 | Licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.