



## Urban Criminology: Thinking Beyond the Paradox

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### Abstract

Criminology has often taken the city as the de facto space of its intellectual project. Despite this, criminology *has never been urban*. Criminology has implicitly focused on problems of the city while rarely being *for* the city, in many cases contributing to the case *against* urban living. “Mainstream” formulations of the criminological project, in the forms of administrative and positivist approaches, have not been a friend to the city – especially to its more excluded, its deprived, and to communities experiencing enduring forms of discrimination. Indeed, many such urban communities have often been identified as forming the spatial and social constitution of the urban crime problem. Such a city-facing, yet anti-urban, criminology has been realised in rhetorical and discursive terms, but also in its state and policy formulations. Its most significant examples being defensible space, zero tolerance policing, and situational crime prevention. In this sense, the idea of an *urban* criminology has seemed paradoxical. We reflect here on a more critical and progressive engagement with crime in cities, suggesting the need for a robust and closer dialogue between critical urban studies and critical criminology.

## Introduction

Criminology often takes the city as its de facto space of engagement, but it has never been urban. By this we suggest that the city has often been recognised by criminologists as the setting for crime, be that “street” crime or “white-collar” crime; but, we suggest, criminology has rarely moved beyond thin portrayals of the city (and by default the “urban”) as a criminogenic space. As Pratt (2013, p. 28) puts it, the positing of space as (mere) context simply places analysis firmly in the normative empiricist camp, which often sees virtue in presenting things “as they are”. This leads to the “common-sense” assumption that because crime is most often found in the city, this “space” is an essential characteristic of the criminalised action in question (we conceive of urban crimes as “things”) and must somehow be responsible for its existence (the city or the urban causes crime). What “moving beyond” these thin portrayals entails is, we suggest, a radical perspective that demands rigorous social scientific research and analysis, but which is also “for”, or can be used in the service of open, yet safe and more equitable cities and urban spaces. The paradox of “urban criminology” is that even some variants of critical criminology, whilst clearly on the side of the victims of harm, do not recognise that reducing such harms often involves a reconstruction of urban space, be that safe housing, racist policing, infrastructure provision, addressing place-based stigma, access to public services, eradicating hunger, and so forth. The city is presented simply as the place where these things happen, rather than the place where things can (and must) be changed. Urban places are, after all, the products of complex social and political processes. Since 55% of the world’s population now live in urban spaces (projected to rise to 68% by 2050) (UN, 2018), it makes sense that critical criminology must also become “for” cities and “for” the urban. In this endeavour we should not be satisfied with technical quick fixes, such as situational crime prevention or neighbourhood watch, the kinds of property-protecting measures that dominated the community safety paradigm of the 1990s and 2000s (see Gilling, 2001; Hughes, 2007 for critical commentaries). A committed urban criminology should be normatively aligned with better and more just cities – which includes embracing political urban visions stressing desegregation, reductions in inequality, tax justice, or programmatic initiatives like “sanctuary cities” (Bauder, 2017) or “cities of refuge” (Derrida, 2001; Sennett, 1990) and investments in public housing and welfare provisions. And yet, we also observe that urban studies has often been reluctant to engage with “criminological” concerns such as harm and safety. In this sense, it is certainly not the case that urban studies is here to save criminology! As we have argued elsewhere (see Atkinson & Millington, 2018; Millington, 2020), Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the right to the city loses its punch in neoliberal times if it is not expanded to incorporate demands by city dwellers for a right to protection (a term deliberately preferred over more totalising notions such as “security” and “safety”) or if it fails to address inequalities in exposure to harm or risk. The risk of exposure and vulnerability caused by the lack of adequate protection from harms are emphasised in urban settings through movements like Black Lives Matter, in housing catastrophes (such as the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London), the destruction of homes through estate clearance, the aggressive policing of protest, and the gendered, classed, and ethnically stratified risks that emerged in the 2020 COVID pandemic. In all of this, the general lack of what might be termed a “left realism” in urban studies is as concerning to us as the historical omission of pro-urban accounts in criminology.

The challenge of disciplinary fragmentation and of overcoming academic “defensible spaces” may be addressed by focusing on the city as a political, economic, social, and cultural site in which complex forces are enmeshed within distinctive spatial configurations and concentrations (Merrifield, 2014; Simone & Pieterse, 2018). Much crime and social harm is urban in its roots and impacts. The urban is now understood as an explosive and extending environment that manifests so much that is so wrong and damaging about capitalist and market-oriented societies, despite acknowledgement that cities are, at the same time, the sites where often political resistance and mitigation against harm takes place (Brenner, 2013). As Short (2006) explains, the modern city embodies one of the key paradoxes of the capitalist mode of production: its bringing together of dissenters who might, one day, combine to conspire against it. Drawing on the agenda we laid out in *Urban Criminology* (Atkinson and Millington, 2018), we consider the need for dialogue between critical variants of both urban studies and criminology. We suggest that sympathetic and emphatic deliberation between these disciplines is required to open-up the “thinking space” required to generate policy to face down and empower the

disenfranchised, the excluded and “risky” populations who bear the brunt of the harm and violence of contemporary “explosive” urbanisation. Indeed, critical accounts of urban life have allowed us to understand that city-located economies and polities that are generative of forms of exclusion, symbolic violence, poverty, and multiple forms of criminal opportunity are also entwined with the “successful” technological, social, and economic modes of life found and celebrated in dynamic urban settings.

One of our core contentions is that to truly understand crime in cities we need to work as urbanists, to see crime as not simply occurring in, but as *constituted* within, urban environments, in milieux that are dynamic, changing, and *changeable*. As Weizman (2012, p. 5) puts it, “[t]he mundane elements of planning and architecture have become tactical tools [in warfare] and the means of dispossession”, but of course, cities can also be changed in more progressive ways. Many of the key forces and influences that generate urban crime problems can be located in the geographies and differing tenurial systems of housing allocation, urban policy programmes, wavering commitments to inclusion, and enduring structural forms of disenfranchisement. In this sense, understanding the urban-crime nexus requires contributions built from the purview of urban and housing studies, as well as within the remit of critical criminology itself. In a time of rapid, planetary urbanisation (an urban milieu that some argue now includes spaces such as the Mediterranean (Brenner & Katsikis, 2013) as well as apparently “untouched” or non-urban spaces), where changing geographies of human settlement contribute to the exploitation, neglect, and harm of citizens (and non- or “shadow” citizens), it seems timely that a stronger dialogue between disciplines might emerge at our current conjuncture. As such, we do not envisage that success in this venture will be judged by the emergence of a new subdiscipline called “urban criminology” or by work that proclaims itself with such a label, but rather through interdisciplinary work. Such work already includes Graham’s (2016) study of verticality in cities, Weizman’s (2012) critical analysis of Israel’s architectural apparatus of control in Palestine, Sassen’s (2014) account of land grabs, disposessions, and expulsions, Ho’s (2009) ethnography of Wall Street, Davis and Wiener’s (2020) painstaking treatise on Los Angeles in the 1960s, and Young’s (2013) critique of the relationship between street art and law, to name but a few.

### What Kind of Criminology is an Urban Criminology?

In historical terms, criminology has not been an ally of the city. Instead, it has made regular contributions to an anti-urban political and cultural current that is intolerant of disorder, and which sees diversity as a signifier of risk and danger, while at the same time imagining (and sometimes promoting) “defensible” single-use environments, ethnic homogeneity, and low population densities as relatively non-criminogenic. It is in the name of “security” that urban protestors are removed from the public realm by coercive policing apparatuses, that the homeless are designed out, or that black people are harassed, even killed, by police. To socio-legal and control systems we can add a wide range of physical and spatial systems of partition and neo-apartheid modes driven by status display and crime control – gated compounds masquerading as homes or settlements have sprung up, dividing urban populations from one another (Atkinson & Blandy, 2016; Caldeira, 2000; Garrett, 2020) and preventing organic and political forms of solidarity associated with the very best examples of urban life (Harvey, 2012; Merrifield, 2014). Simultaneously, the urban poor and minorities have received little in the way of protection as inequalities widen (Simone, 2004), while bankers and financiers are given approval to act with impunity and safety regulations are swept aside in market-driven bonfires of red tape (Cooper & Whyte, 2018). Time and again criminology has sided with, or been co-opted by, the market – with real estate agents and actuaries – and repressive modes of urban governance compliant with market actors (Garmany & Galdeano, 2018; Smith, 1996), both of which are designed to wrestle the city away from poorer and more vulnerable populations.

An interest in tackling the problem of crime without reference to context or a critical sociological framing of motives and conditions has yielded situational crime specialists and facial recognition technologies, as well as ideas of moral communitarianism. All of these have militated against the possibility of more equal, dynamic, transformative, and transgressive potentials of urban life (Bridge,

2005; Lees, 2004). We might suggest that criminology's interest in the city has often appeared in the form of neo-Haussmannisation, meaning not only the development of new techniques of confinement and dispossession but also the development of ideas, governing principles, and specialist forms of knowledge that can be utilised in attempts to clear sites and groups associated with disorder, or to quickly isolate incidents and forms of insurrection (Merrifield, 2014).

Early invocations of cultural criminology apart, criminology has seemed interested in the city only to the extent that it might be tamed, pacified, and reformed. Mainstream criminology may be seen as a response, issued via a mix of cartographic, ethnographic, and technocratic modes, to the city's continual search to govern and impose order. This inbuilt reflex can be traced back not only to the Chicago school but also Charles Booth's colour-coded maps of the streets of nineteenth-century London (Osborne & Rose, 2004), laden with assumptions about social value, spatial relegation, and control. It has too often risked becoming complicit in apparatuses seeking to produce timid, anxious, and gentrified cities, often without understanding or recognising how its systems of housing, welfare architectures, urban policies, and changing economies have generated the spatial and social inequalities and divisions generative of the risks to which many criminologists have responded. This relation is most evident in the fetish for identifying crime "hot spot" policing (Sanders & Sheptycki, 2017) that extricates geography from its social and economic determinants and leads to a redistribution of policing resources and justifies the increased surveillance and monitoring of specific urban populations.

Urbanists have intuitively sensed the anti-urbanism of criminology, which is why they have tended to avoid contact with the rising dominance of administrative, calculative, and quantitative modes of criminological enterprise (Young, 2011). There is also the enormous influence upon urban studies of Henri Lefebvre to consider, a French Marxist sociologist with disdain for the free market, the state, and the police and an advocate of spontaneity, self-determination, and freeing the city from bureaucratic controls to flourish as a collectively produced work of art (see, for example, Purcell, 2014). The tension between the seemingly anti-urban obsession with "social organisation" and order and a pro-urban admiration for creativity, density, disorder, and social mixing has made it difficult to reconcile criminology with urban studies.

Humanity enters its first urban age with an increasing realisation of the systemic mash-up of harm, inequalities, and the regressive consequences of our environmental limits, economically compelled to seek endless capital accumulation and the widespread symbolic and interpersonal violence generated by inequality. How can we tread the spaces of apparently prosaic forms of violence and harm, while also recognising these wider contexts and systems within which the city is nested? In this short contribution, we return to what we identified as a potentially fruitful dialogue between urban studies and criminology (Atkinson & Millington, 2018), pointing to where critical variants of these traditions have offered theoretical tools, empirical advances, and socially relevant provocations that might spur a more critical understanding of the relationship between urban environments, crime, and harm and promote more equal, inclusive, and protected forms of urbanity.

### **Look up: City Economies, Harm, and Elites**

One key locus of crime, harm, and social damage resides in the elite pinnacle of cities. One of the signal changes in the social sciences over the past decade has been a re-energised engagement with the role and effects of social elites. At least one aspect of this looking "up" has been the identification of intensely problematic criminal and harmful practices, often within ostensibly respectable sections of the political and economic structures of urban life. Areas in which these practices are particularly clear lie in the areas of finance and organised criminal practices focused on the disposal of criminal assets via laundering, the blurring of the so-called "upperworlds" and "underworlds" of urban economies (Galeotti, 2014). In the area of finance, we have begun to open our eyes to the enormous scale and human cost of finance crime. These include not only examples of "rogue" bankers and other individuals engaged in creative or more obviously criminal practices. In addition, we know that the systems and institutional landscape of many urban centres are derived from an engagement with

criminal and para-criminal practices (Platt, 2015) that are often masked by disinterested regulation by a more or less complicit state (Christensen, Shaxson, & Wigan, 2016).

In the area of laundering, the role of offshore financial centres has been more clearly identified via the serial leaking of documents that show, among other things, that the real estate of cities like Lisbon, London, New York, Vancouver, Mexico City, and many others is also implicated in such processes and transactions. What do these examples show us? One answer is to offer a more critical framing of the formal economic base and its co-location within the statecraft of many cities as the urban centres of national economies. Another response is to refocus not only upon fundamental criminological questions regarding what is to be defined as criminal, but also upon explaining how the practices of elites and finance proliferate forms of human harm within and beyond these cities.

What are the key implications of “looking up” for our understanding of how harm is produced by, within, and beyond the urban arena? For now, we might point to examples such as the loss of critical tax revenues, the diversion of interests away from poverty, and the resourcing of critical social infrastructure in ways hinted at by earlier treatments, as “the social” is evacuated or compressed by the regularised ignorance of elites to the plight of those defunded in this way. Urban life in its more complex and advanced capitalist variants offers a denuded social support system that generates localised harm and violence in deinstitutionalised urban settings, and this includes austerity regime defunding of policing and support in many marginalised neighbourhoods and urban communities. This echoes the emphasis placed by Sassen (2014) on the disconnect between global cities and their (i) residents and (ii) national hinterlands. In this sense, the city is often dominated by the interests of its finance-focused urban economies, and these economic forms are profoundly generative of the kinds of harm stemming from inequality.

And yet, an immediate concern would also be the need to respond to the spectacular forms of crime in cities globally. This might be the extreme violence of South African cities, the homicides of the urban US, the femicides of Mexican cities, or the knife crime of London and elsewhere. Yet such spectacles bely the much deeper operation of our political and economic systems, forces that shape and perpetuate these and other forms of crime and harm, whilst simultaneously producing spaces in which such acts flourish or even become a necessity to survive. It is all too easy to think that such problems manifest themselves in “bad people”, and thus can be tackled through the removal or intense surveillance of individuals. But why are so many “bad people” concentrated in these most deprived urban areas (and why are many others who do bad things ignored where they are drawn from the economic mainstream of finance)? Why do urban middle classes form part of the bedrock of drug consumption and yet the focus of the police and politicians is on drug supply (such as the focus in the UK on “county lines” trading), and where do we fit the shysters, fraudsters, and enormous grand thefts of finance, laundering, and other modes of economic and elite crime? One effective way into such observations and problems would be to suggest the need for accounts, explanations, and responses that see cities as formations of global, national, and local forces where harm, damage to bodies, minds, and neglect of potentially nurturing environments such as the home or school are concentrated. This avoids the approaches to the city that tend to fragment urban reality by isolating phenomena in the city (such as crime or policing), but which ignore the city (and/or urbanisation) itself (see Brenner, 2019). There is also a requirement within such an epistemology to engage the systemic roots of violence and harm so that victims of systems as well as individual acts can be both inoculated against and healed of the dangers that haunt, lurk, or explode in urban settings around the world.

### **Policing Space/New Modes of Social Control**

Park, Burgess and McKenzie’s (1925) iconic concentric zone diagram proposes a connection between the city and social disorganisation that is stubborn and has proved difficult to controvert. The further one ventures from the central city and its immigrant working-class districts the less likely one is to encounter crime and disorder, or at least so the story goes. This diagram, enormously influential and still widely taught today, bears close resemblance to Engel’s more radical, yet less well-known description

of industrial Manchester in the nineteenth century (see Engels, 2009, pp. 57–59). Yet whereas Engels saw the cause of fighting, drinking, etc. as social relations that are themselves products of industrial (capitalist) urbanisation, Park and Burgess preferred to explain the existence of social disorganisation as a product of the “natural area”. Liberal and radical traditions of “urban criminology” have broadly agreed on the ecology and the empirical patterning of urban disorder but disagreed on the cause (and therefore on appropriate responses, with “liberals” and “realists” favouring immediate “piecemeal” solutions and left-wing “idealists” planning more wholesale transformations of the entire social edifice). The earliest solution to “social disorganisation” in cities was the introduction of professional police. Since then, managerial solutions – which followed the realisation that professional police forces alone could not be responsible for maintaining order – have relied on *informal* modes of social control (neighbourhood watch and antisocial behaviour legislation), designed to improve the strength of community feeling and/or perceptions of “collective efficacy” (Sampson, 2012), in addition to situational methods of crime prevention, such as target hardening and the deployment of defensible space strategies, especially in relation to housing and property.

The concentric Chicago School image of the city has also been vigorously challenged by recent discussions of planetary urbanisation. While it is welcome that the scale, networks, and infrastructures of contemporary expansive urbanisation are being recognised, even across oceans, mountain ranges, and deserts, one aspect that has been lost in this shift in focus, or rather scale, is the dialectic between order and disorder that urbanisation inevitably brings. This is linked to how urbanisation, since it inevitably pulls together a diverse variety of peoples, practices, and objects, always provides a problem for authorities who must decide whom or what to exclude or expel. The city is a problem, a mess, “a permanent incitement to government” (Rose, 2000). Neil Brenner’s (2013) *Theses on Urbanization* is now a seminal text for understanding planetary urbanisation, and while it acknowledges (1) how the urban is inherently a contradictory site of regulation/contestation (*ibid.*, p. 95) and (2) the terrain for socio-political mobilisation in ways that are analogous to the role of the factory during the industrial epoch (*ibid.*, p. 88), this work does not go far enough in suggesting how economic and infrastructural struggles are also linked to moral and legal questions, or how the flows that are pointed to as evidence of networked urbanisation are almost always accompanied by illicit flows of people, commodities, or information that require a political response, or that there are blockages to these flows, such as inequalities in access to justice, that damage residents and the city itself (by compromising all that the city could or should be).

It is possible for residents of cities and other urban environments to benefit from non-racist, consensual, liberal policing; to nurture non-exclusive forms of belonging and neighbourliness and networks of mutual care and cooperation; and to utilise mobile technologies to create genuinely “smart cities” that promote democracy, inclusion, well-being, and safety (see, for example, Lancione, 2016; Roy, 2011; Vacchelli & Kofman, 2017). There are examples of these advances, even in cities where neoliberal ideology has dominated. However, more is needed than a culture change. Inequalities and the political and economic need to manage the social unruly and harmful consequences of disparities drive the predominance of exclusionary measures that diminish the social and cultural life of cities.

### **Exclusions, Expulsions, and New Forms of Inequality**

Our final point in searching to expand the range and remit of a more urbanised criminology is to point towards the kinds of intersecting forms of exclusion and indeed expulsion marking many urban centres globally. As Sassen (2001, 2008, 2014) has argued, the idea of the city becoming disaffiliated from a body politic or civic constitution does not fully capture the new kinds of complexity and range of forces generating containment but also processes of removal and banishment. Here students of gentrification might point to the harm of displacement generated not only by forms of market expulsion, but also by newer forms of state dismantling and eviction that can be seen in cities that are apparently *unlike* each other such as London, Harare, Manila, and New York (Cooper, Hubbard and Lees, 2020). The common thread to these processes is the strengthening of market orientations and allocation

systems by national governments, the commodification of housing, and wider processes of financialisation that look to draw in increasing rents while denigrating and dislocating those without homes or papers, and/or those who are seen as criminal or deviant.

Another “new” form of harm and exclusion that seems relevant to the quest to understand how cities function as spaces of harm relates to the enmeshed ways in which gender and sexuality become shifting codes and contested fields in the urban arena. The #metoo moment and movement, women’s strikes, and interweaving of social media within the urban arena have highlighted the prevalence of gendered violence, aggression, and perhaps a kind of revanchist masculinity that suggest the need for concerted action and more nimble engagement on these issues by criminologists and urbanists.

Finally, we would point to the ways in which histories of exclusion around race, ethnicity, and religion are integral to understanding and countering social harm, especially when we consider resurgent forms of nationalism and everyday racism that require urban space for their operation. Cities are variably (and internally varyingly) sites of both progress *and* intolerance – they exhibit what Les Back (2003) refers to as a “metropolitan paradox” – that are connected to important shifts in national and urban economies, especially labour markets, alongside changing electoral political cycles in which left-progressive parties have become apparently delinked from working-class constituencies in city hinterlands, while ostensibly offering spaces of hope and relative enlightenment among metropolitan and cosmopolitan constituencies. If nothing else, these patchworks and new divisions only highlight uneven progress by the left or less than capitalist modes of social thinking and the ways in which austerity/market urban governance has ramped up the stakes of discussions about who belongs or not, who needs to be monitored, who needs to have their movement restricted, who *deserves* safe housing, and so forth. Moreover, the intensification of urbanisation globally is proclaimed as an economic engine and a success story that lifts many from poverty, yet we see persistent and new forms of violence, poor health, poverty, and social precarity as the hallmarks of many lives within cities today.

## Conclusion

What we describe as an *urban* criminology is, in reality, an epistemic position that privileges sites of human and infrastructural concentration, the sites where the majority of the world’s population now reside. These are the primary spaces in which harm is produced, encountered, and resisted or fought. We view such a project as a necessarily critical and thus a political endeavour in which the production of disparities, uneven geographies, and either stunted or accelerated developmental shifts (whether these relate to humans, to social groups, or to the spaces of settlements) need to be understood in order to be counteracted. A critical social science devoted to the harm and crimes located in and generated by a complex urban arena will generate the need to tease apart the systems and forces, whether economic, social, or political, that create the complex motors and gears by which such harm is produced.

All such concerns are made more fraught by the co-relation of human urban society in what Lefebvre presciently described as the implosion-explosion character of city life (Lefebvre, 2003), whereby cities gather, ingest, and channel immense resources to their centres, whilst expelling materials, groups, processes, practices, and industries to their hinterlands and beyond – creating in the process a vast polycentric and uneven complex of varying densities and uneven networks, but always taking a hierarchical form whereby some places and people “count” more than others. Of course, the “old” centres can be thought of in terms of resource-hoarding elites and middle classes (the spaces and groups more or less insulated from the current ravages of the COVID-19 virus), and as the epicentres of the “winners” in the global urban hierarchy. The degraded peripheries and new urban centres – often the sites to which precarious city residents are displaced – can, within the same process, take on the appearance and “social problems” of the twentieth-century inner city, even if they do not possess the symbolic political capital of these historic sites, places that have turned a “troubled” past to their advantage via various forms of heritage-led cultural regeneration/gentrification (Millington, 2011). The relation of the city to environmental conditions, to a planetary intensification and wider distribution

of human activity and the supply chains and relation to nature, can no longer be understood merely as background but rather as causal pathways and recursive systems producing intensifying or mollifying outcomes.

All of what we have said here requires analytical purchase on the attachment to markets in many urban societies globally. The primary examples of harm in urban settings today, whether violence or robbery, toxic masculinity, overly emphatic control regimes, grand forms of financial malpractice, or dispossession from homes, are rooted in material and economic conditions. In turn, urban economies are ultimately rooted in overarching political systems that create or deny resources for particular groups, that seek to police or ignore certain forms of criminal or harmful behaviour, or which make or abstain from interventions that generate unequal class, economic, and cultural positions for groups and urban communities. A safer, more equitable, city will always be one in which social institutions and investments are democratically administered and which balance out the violation of human need done by urban and national governments. The experience of COVID-19 has viciously exposed the lack of social capacity and fracture lines of harm and the lack of institutional and service capacity for excluded communities in urban areas around the world.

A safer city will be one in which economic operations are understood as being in the service of social need, rather than as abstract operations that cascade benefits to all (in rhetoric only). These are lofty assertions but they reside within a commitment to a critical criminology that locates progress, harm, equality, and democracy as urban issues. A criminology that is a better friend to the city, and those it isolates, excludes, damages, or suppresses, will require such principles to be enshrined in its approach. An urban criminology that moves beyond the paradoxical thinking that has dominated criminology thus far, preventing it from taking up *the cause* of the city, needs to be imagined as a political and economic programme offering a critical appraisal of the complex nature of city life and its contemporary (and historical) harm.

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