

TOWARD AN ENVIRONMENTAL VIEW OF INNER-CITY CRIME

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Susan Smith. *Crime, Space and Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). xii + 228 pp. Maps, bibliography, index.

Modern studies of the spatial patterns of crime have drawn much of their inspiration from the empirical tradition established by Shaw and McKay (1942). Theoretical principally in their kinship with the economic/ecological focus of the "Chicago School" of sociology, the Shaw-McKay studies carefully plotted crime locations and residences of criminals in relation to a model of urban functional land use. Their findings, and those of other investigators writing in the same tradition, show strong and lasting correlations among crime locations, offenders' residences, inner-city areas, nonwhite populations, and urban poverty. With its emphasis on simply locating criminals and their activity in urban space, this approach encourages a pathological view of the problem. Crime is observable wrong behavior and its spatial patterning an indictment of the inner city.

In recent decades, two conceptual frameworks have emerged to broaden the study of crime in its physical setting. The first explores social developments operating in the wider society that affect crime patterns across the geographical areas established by the ecologists (Byrne and Sampson, 1986: 5). This approach appeals especially to those scholars, including the Marxists, who view crime primarily as an outgrowth of inequities and class arrangements determined by supra-local structures. Crime, as do urban spatial arrangements themselves, reflects these structures (Harvey, 1973). The second point of view abandons the search for a true picture of observable deviance, including the so-called dark figure of real crime, and interprets criminal behavior as a function of the interaction between normative society and those whom society defines as deviant through the police, courts, and other devices. Criminal behavior is therefore ascriptive, and criminals themselves often victims, in this case of a labeling process (Glassner, 1982). Interactionist theory in sociology and social psychology comports with the powerful intellectual relativism of post-structuralism that has also led to the controversial rise of critical legal theory.

Smith brings the perspective of both social-area analysis and

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symbolic interactionism to this study of crime in contemporary Britain. She looks beyond ecological processes in illuminating and interpreting crime's spatial patterns, and focuses instead on broader social, political, and economic structures. Curiously, Smith never refers to the work of Harvey (1973), who provided a theoretical basis for merging the geographical and sociological imaginations in his study of social justice and urban planning almost fifteen years ago. Still, her effort is surely one of the more thoroughly conceptualized analyses of urban crime in its spatial setting, and its argument is compelling in its rich environmental explanation. The data base for *Crime, Space and Society* covers the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, with particular emphasis on the British Crime Survey of 1982 and Smith's own statistical and impressionistic research on crime in north central Birmingham in 1978-79. Though drawing freely from the broad literature on crime, Smith focuses on Britain in her reading and speaks openly to British policymakers.

Crime, Smith argues, is not a social problem that can analytically be added to or subtracted from the problematic conditions that make up the disadvantaged inner-city environment. Rather, it is a daily reality interwoven throughout that environment and giving it much of its distinguishing character. Offenders and their victims share the same neighborhoods. Smith views this nexus as a cultural expression of the unequal distribution of wealth and life chance that characterizes modern British society and is most acutely displayed in the complex central city. Her emphasis is on the structural conditions that facilitate offending rather than on personal disorders. Yet at the same time, she sees offenders as neither engaging in a pre-political form of rebellion nor simply the mass subjects of a labeling process. Rather, they are locked along with their victims in a spatial setting characterized by social tension, low self-esteem, fear, and opportunity for misbehavior. A vulnerability in the poor physical quality of buildings and dwellings invites crime in ways that offenders continue to exploit despite such preventive measures as alarm systems. Borrowing from the work of Lynch and others on the mental mapping of urbanites (Lynch, 1960; Horton and Reynolds, 1971), Smith describes criminals' worldview bound by the restrictions of their own familiarity with the city around them. They prey on their neighbors because they do not seem to know where else to go.

This all adds up to an environment burdened with risks, beyond those normally faced in urban life and realized through a lower-working-class lifestyle that, for example, prompts higher accident rates as well. In short, victimization broadly defined is a key component in the making of a disadvantaged area. Exactly how the working-class lifestyle creates risk, and what larger forces are at work to make the working class insensitive to that part of vulnerability that is of their own making, Smith leaves unan-

swered. Here she might have used profitably Lane's insightful study (1979) of accident and violent behavior in nineteenth century Philadelphia.

Recent scholarship has probably gone too far in disassociating neighborhood fears of crime from rates of actual victimization, and Smith joins the debate closer to the older position in her effort to study the effects of crime on the quality of neighborhood life. Nonetheless, labeling of crime areas in the media, and through rumor, gossip, and other forms of communication, creates images that do much to determine public fears. Any cohesion among the white community that might result from the consistent labeling of blacks as criminally-prone is mitigated by the damage done to broader neighborhood cohesion through everyday suspicions. Since the link between race and public fear is a contingency not only of social and economic factors but also of political ones tied to the place of minority groups in the power structure, then the fear of crime fundamentally "reflects the differential distribution of power in all its forms" (p. 131).

Therefore Smith believes, and quite correctly, that in the struggle against crime it behooves policymakers to shift money and energy away from policing and on to welfare agencies and other nonpolicing activities. Greater public involvement in municipally-supported voluntary neighborhood organizations, for example, could reduce the fears generated by feelings of powerlessness and build social cohesion. Smith fails to make clear how this involvement of the local population will deal effectively with problems fueled in part by the prejudices of that same population. Nonetheless, she must be given credit for tenaciously holding to her environmental view. The most effective and just way to combat crime, she argues, must transcend the idea that it is merely a police problem. Instead, policymakers must understand and address the structure of neighborhood life itself by reducing the relative risks of victimization that are an integral part of the economic and political marginality of the inner city.

Combining local-area study with concepts of deviance, Smith integrates the former with a broader view of the political economy, and the latter with an enhanced interactionist perspective. The end product is a more profound understanding of the interplay of forces creating a disadvantaged environment—not simply actual crime but also the fear and the responses to fear that add to the problematical life of an area. *Crime, Space and Society* is therefore an intelligent analysis of an important contemporary problem. Esoteric in its theoretical discussion and sometimes jargonish, however, it may also disappoint policymakers and others who could most gain from it. Despite Smith's desire to merge the ethnographic and statistical traditions, and despite her own personal experiences as a resident of north central Birmingham for two years, the study does not engage the reader. Persuasion will come

through the sheer weight of theoretical logic and scholarly exposition, not from a feel for neighborhood life conveyed through the timely use of descriptive narrative.

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