Urban Criminology – Criminology of the Urban

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Introduction

European urban sociology has associated the city and urbanisation with crime since its own inception in the age of the Industrial Revolution. Thinkers such as Durkheim, Simmel, and Laborit associated urban life – and industrialisation and the capitalist order – with anomie, detachment, aggressiveness, and thus violence and crime. These sociological ideas of the city as being conducive to crime (e.g. because of its size, growth, or socio-economic characteristics) are still very much present in modern thought, with repercussions, among others, for crime control responses in an age that has been described as "urban" (Brenner & Schmid, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2006). Criminology has often relied on more simplistic understandings of the relation between (urban) space and crime, either understanding space as a mere locus where criminal activity takes place or even ignoring its crucial importance in the understanding of (deviant) human behaviour. Complex issues of spatiality and territoriality have often been reduced to locations and spatial correlations, which do not help much in grasping the complex interrelations among social, cultural, political, economic, and spatial phenomena. At the same time, concepts – including crime and criminalisation – produced on the basis of the experiences of Western cities in the age of industrialisation have been used and abused to explain phenomena in other places of the world, thus failing to grasp the geographical nature of social phenomena and attributing simplistic labels ("violent", "feral", "chaotic") to cities of the Global South (see, for example, Norton, 2003). Recently, however, in line with critiques of the concept of the urban age (Brenner & Schmid, 2013), appeals have been made to overcome the simplistic association of crime with the *locus* of the city and to rather unravel the role of the process of capitalist urbanisation in producing violence

and criminalisation (Pavoni & Tulumello, 2020).

There is a wide scope, therefore, for working toward the construction of an urban criminology (cf. Atkinson & Millington, 2018, this issue) capable of reflecting on the specific – historical, political, economic, sociocultural – ideas, phenomena, and processes that associate the urban with crime and violence.

This special issue of *Criminological Encounters* aims to take some further steps toward the construction of such a criminological perspective by inviting empirical and theoretical articles with the ambition of going beyond linear associations between (urban) space and crime/violence. In the next section, then, we move to highlighting some of the ideas that "emerge" from a reflection on urban criminology, within and beyond the scope of the articles of this issue, and in particular on the conceptualisation of the "urban" and of "criminology" in "urban criminology", plus an opening toward a research agenda for urban criminology amid and after a pandemic. In the following and last section, we provide a short description of the texts in this Special Issue.

Towards Urban Criminology: Emerging Issues

The urban in urban criminology.

> Despite the predominant and often implicit backdrop of the city in many accounts of crime, the general relation between urban social life and crime is often not examined with significant scrutiny in much criminology (Atkinson & Millington, 2018, p. 14).

Pushed by the emergence and consolidation of southern critique inspired by post- and decolonial perspectives, urban studies have recently been characterised by fierce discussions concerning the possibility of building a truly "global" field. Within this field, much discussion has been sparked by the theses on planetary urbanisation put forward by Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (see, for instance, a special issue of *Environment and Planning D* (36[3], 2018), which collected a number of critiques and rejoinders). Whatever perspective one adopts on the theses, we want to stress here an aspect that is extremely relevant for conceptualising the "urban" of urban criminology. We refer to one of the earlier pieces of Brenner and Schmid's theorisation (2013), their critique of the "urban age" thesis. Their conceptual and methodological critique of the understanding of the "urban" as a place seen in opposition to the "rural" can easily be extended to the long-standing tendency, in mainstream criminology and Western urban sociology, to understand the city as the locus where crime takes place and, at the same time, the socio-spatial condition that is conducive to crime. Paraphrasing an argument made elsewhere with regard to the "urban" in urban violence (Pavoni & Tulumello, 2020), we find it more productive to see the urban through a double lens: the background against which crime "in the city" is made manifest and the process that is constitutive of crime. This move has several theoretical and epistemological implications for working toward an urban criminology (cf. Atkinson & Millington, this issue; Bannister & O'Sullivan, this issue). Above all, it suggests going beyond (mostly quantitative) comparisons of crime rates among cities or between cities and rural places, and rather fostering the exploration of the ways through which the process of urbanisation is part and parcel of the (re)production of crime and criminalisation.

The potentiality of such a perspective can be made evident through the example of the field of (urban) research concerned with the nexus among crime, security, and processes like gentrification, touristification (Ojeda & Kieffer, 2020), and expansion of leisure and nightlife activities. Traditionally dominated by attempts to measure the effects of gentrification on crime rates (especially in North American cities), this field has recently seen the emergence of critical perspectives (e.g. Atkinson & Millington, 2018, pp. 248–253; Bloch & Meyer, 2019; De Koster, this issue; Di Bella, 2020; Meyer, 2020; Mireanu, 2018; Peyrefitte, this issue). In light of our reflections, this literature has taken steps towards an urban criminology of gentrification in two ways: on the one hand, by showing how crime is made manifest (most often through racialised lenses) by the drive to fill the rent gap – particularly in US versions of gentrification, the argument of crime becomes central to the rhetoric that fuels reinvestment in urban contexts previously characterised by disinvestment; and on the other hand, by exposing the patterns

through which urbanisation reproduces security and criminalisation – after reinvestment, as new social groups start to pour in, policing becomes part and parcel of gentrification.

A crucial component of this endeavour is that of decentring the production of urban and criminological theories by looking at "ordinary" (cf. Robinson, 2006) urban experiences, those of the Global South, and, more generally, those of places that have remained at the "borderlands" of theorisation (Sandercock, 1998) – to which this journal is, in general, particularly open and welcoming. With regard to experiences from the Global South, we should admit that, despite our call for papers, this has been only partially achieved in this issue: in Firmino and Augusto's critique regarding the absence of a southern perspective in Atkinson and Millington's *Urban Criminology* (2018) – a critique, it should be said, amid much praise of the book; and in Bannister and O'Sullivan's proposal for a "planetary" framework for urban criminology. We cannot, therefore, but hope that a "southern urban criminology" will be the object of further discussion, in this journal and beyond.

Criminology in urban criminology. Criminology was originally interested more in places than spaces of criminality and victimisation. Bottoms and Wiles (2002, p. 621), addressing the topic of environmental criminology, describe the distinction and the need for (environmental) criminology to engage with both in the following way:

> "Place" is not the same as "space". The former concept refers to a geographical location, with fairly definite boundaries, within which people may meet, engage in various activities, etc. "Space" is a much broader concept, but environmental criminologists are interested in it because some social activities have become quite markedly *spatially differentiated* (e.g. the "zoning" policies of some urban planners); on the other hand, modern transport and telecommunications allow for individuals (and organizations) to bridge spatial separation to a much greater extent than in previous generations [emphasis in the original].

Even though criminological scholars may enter the field of "the urban" through the doors of specifically criminological phenomena, such as crime and disorder or incivilities, considering their prevalence in the city, the "urbanity" element of such deviant conduct – including its spatiality – cannot be dismissed when trying to grasp more fully the causes, motivations and manifestations of the latter.

The criminological interest in the urban space has consequently been steadily increasing, although in somewhat different directions. "Socio-spatial criminology" now encompasses as much those who study criminal events (adopting, for example, "rational choice" or "routine activities" approaches) as those who focus on studying the social structures and social dynamics of neighbourhoods, and those with more ethnographic and "cultural criminology" approaches (Bottoms, 2012). While environmental criminology has traditionally centred on explaining the spatial distribution of offences and of offenders, its further evolution included the integration of considerations relating to social change and societal transformations of the late 20th century (Bottoms & Wiles, 2002). Newer criminological developments, moreover, accentuate the cultural and, even more recently, the sensory, aesthetic, and affective dimensions of urban space and its social control (e.g. Carrabine, 2012; García Ruiz & South, 2019; Hayward, 2009; Millie, 2019; Peršak & Di Ronco, forthcoming; Young, 2014). It has been recognised, for example, that cities have their own affective atmospheres and can thus be regarded in terms of moods or affects (Millie, 2019; Thrift, 2005). Given that contemporary urban orders are increasingly governed through space (Merry, 2004), not merely through penal law, perceptions of space – since it is often the latter that matter in terms of the social reaction to antisocial behaviour – have also become an object of criminological and criminal policy investigation in their own right (Peršak & Di Ronco, 2018).

The fact that urban space can be studied through all these various perspectives acknowledges the complexity of urban space: it represents a place where crime, disorder and their social control are exercised, as well as a cultural phenomenon, a site of creative resistance, and a sensory and affective landscape, to name but a few of its facets. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and the need to integrate different socio-spatial criminology strands.

Urban criminology amid and after a pandemic. While we have been preparing this special issue, the (urban) world has been hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, whose magnitude and impact are too large to be ignored. Although the essays collected here, based on earlier research, do not empirically engage with the pandemic, we cannot but close this section with two brief notes – through the ideas of density and movement – on the implications of the pandemic for the present and future of an urban criminology.

First, as some of the places hit the earliest had been major cities like Wuhan and New York, in March and April many claimed that "density" was crucial to the spread of the virus and some proclaimed that COVID-19 will bring about the death of the city, as we know it (e.g. Tavernise & Mervosh, 2020). As it happens, density has been shown not to be associated with a wider spread of the illness (see, for example, Carozzi, Provenzano & Roth, 2020; Rolnik, 2020), and it has even been argued that urban density is "good for health" amid a pandemic (Adlakha & Sallis, 2020). And yet, arguments on urban density matter for urban criminology – on the one hand, because they show that the assumed association between "the city" and social and health ills is alive and kicking, and on the other, because density makes social, economic, and housing inequalities more visible and impactful during a pandemic. The policing and surveillance associated with governmental anti-COVID responses have been more concentrated in urban spaces, predicated on the assumed fact that, as cities are more densely populated, this makes it easier for the virus to spread, thereby increasing the need for control. However, the social, economic, and housing inequalities – which are most drastically experienced in the cities – also made it much more difficult (especially for those living in blocks of flats and social housing) to fully comply with restrictive governmental measures (e.g. not leaving one's apartment), rendering city dwellers more likely to incur penalties for their violation of rules.

Second, the pandemic and social responses have had fluid effects on the numbers and patterns of crime (as evident in the drop of street crime during lockdowns, but increased domestic violence and hate crime), as well as on the broader dynamics related to the ongoing restructuring of global capitalism and patterns of inequality, exclusion, and marginalisation – which, in turn, play a crucial role in crime and violence. In this sense, the pandemic can be seen as an accelerator of larger "movements" that are the bread and butter of (urban) criminology. Exposed existing and emerging inequalities, for example, reinvigorated social movements and spurred activism in fields such as criminal justice (such as Black Lives Matter and the decarceration movement) and housing (Accornero et al., 2020).

By reflecting on density and movements, we are reminded that cities are resilient and quick to adapt and respond to new challenges. It is our firm belief, moreover, that urban criminology will be able to embrace and explore the new or renewed social phenomena in the aftermath of COVID-19, as well as contributing to addressing those inequalities that this pandemic has made visible or deepened.

Contents of the Special Issue

This special issue is composed of two parts, one comprising three research articles and the other composed of a commentary, a book review essay, and an interview. It opens with an ambitious attempt, by Jon Bannister and Anthony O'Sullivan, to set out a conceptual framework for a "planetary" urban criminology. By adopting a multilevel and "explicitly urban" approach to crime, the article intends to provide an epistemological approach that is useful for articulating universal, regional, and specifically local ontological dimensions to crime. We are quite certain that this article will spark much discussion – for instance, in regard to the attempt to use a framework overly based on theories from the Global North (as the authors admit) to provide instruments that are useful in the Global South.

In the article that follows, Margo De Koster addresses the intersection of Antwerp's night spaces, young people, and their social control in the early twentieth century – the period of heightened anxiety about the urban night. Examining the actors and strategies involved in the everyday (formal and informal) control of urban young people's night-time undertakings as well as how young people experienced and avoided these controls to pursue their own agenda, she argues, first, that it was not the police but parents and relatives who were the main agents of control over young people's night-time

activities, and second, that nightlife was key to the formation of a "modern youth" culture, in which darkness was used mainly to escape from the everyday routine and experiment with new social and sexual codes.

Magali Peyrefitte's article, by contrast, inspects contemporary London, specifically the factors, actors, structures, and processes involved in its regeneration, intra-urban inequality, and social harms arising from it. She notes that the provision of London social housing is becoming progressively constrained under budget limitations and financial arrangements that stimulate the involvement of private actors in the housing management. She also critically examines the appropriateness of the suggested regeneration solutions to London, where its unprecedented extent of construction tends to aggravate inequalities that have long been overlooked, as the focus has been placed elsewhere.

Moving to the second part of the issue, we find a commentary by Rowland Atkinson and Gareth Millington, which moves beyond their recently published *Urban Criminology* (2018), followed by a review essay on the same book by Rodrigo Firmino and Acácio Augusto. Firmino and Augusto emphasise what they believe to be the main quality of the book, namely the capacity to work toward the construction of the urban as a social construct central to the (re)production of crime. Atkinson and Millington's essay, on the other hand, pushes further the critique of the historical capacity of criminology to "be urban", making a number of arguments for an even stronger dialogue between critical urban studies and critical criminology.

In the last paper of this issue, Ellen Van Damme interviews Jody Miller, whose work has been crucial for placing gender within urban criminology. Miller reconstructs her "discovery" of urban criminology and 25 years of effort to develop her work in a field that was, and still is, male dominated, both in terms of who does research and the research that is produced. She concludes with a call to new and future urban criminologists to "think about gender".

These texts, as a whole, offer a critical and imaginative reflection on the traditional and new research themes for the criminological study of the urban as well as an exciting outlook on the possible future paths of urban criminology.

Acknowledgements

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