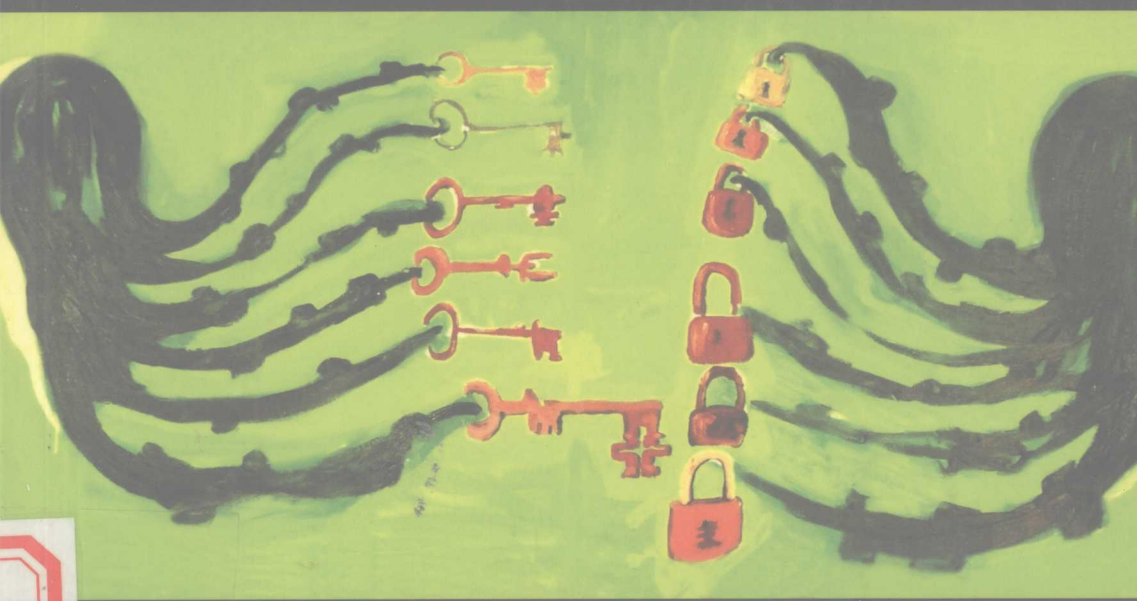
Inventing Fear of Crime

Criminology and the politics of anxiety



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the dinosaur replies, 'I don't really go out in the dark to the park.' But perhaps it's time to move on, I might get stuck in a rut. And anyway, the thought of writing a children's book terrifies me, they are always the most insightful and rigorous of critics.

Murray Lee

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> There is an almost endless number of still-to-be written histories of concept formation in criminology: Concepts that were invented in this culture, by thinkers in those strata, in that period of time, for these reasons, and with those effects. (Beirne 1993: 9)

This is a book about a concept, its formation and its effects. The concept under discussion here is fear of crime.[1] This is a history of how fear of crime has been problematised and pathologised, how it has assumed an empirical validity and a social scientific respectability, and how it became normalised as a socio-cultural term used to describe an element of life experience in late modernity. Piers Beirne notes in the introduction to his book *Inventing Criminology: Essays on the Rise of Homo Criminalis* (1993), from which I have paraphrased the title of this book, that there are an almost endless number of histories of criminological concepts to be written. This book constitutes one such history.

Over the past four decades the fear of crime has become an increasingly significant concern for criminologists, victimologists, policy-makers, politicians, policing organisations, the media and the general public.[2] Indeed, fear of crime has been identified by researchers as being responsible for an ever-increasing number of social maladies.[3] Growing interest in the fear of crime 'problem' from policy-makers across the political spectrum (Reiner *et al.* 2000) has led to an extraordinary proliferation of research and literature in this field with one team of researchers even humorously suggesting that fear of crime has become bigger than General Motors (Ditton *et al.* 1999a).

For example, it is now possible for government criminologists using data from the British Crime Survey (BCS) to state that:

> The BCS shows ... the level of worry about violent crime has also increased, whereas worry about car crime has remained stable ... The proportion of adults who have a high level of worry about violent crime increased from 16 per cent to 17 per cent. (Povey *et al.* 2005: 8)

Similarly, research conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology could claim that 13 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women felt somewhat unsafe 'walking alone in the local area after dark' (Johnson 2005: 45). Again in the USA the Bureau of Justice Statistics could report that 38 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women said that there was somewhere within one mile of their home where they would not walk alone at night (US Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006). The picture is similar in New Zealand, where

> ... more than two-thirds (68%) of the women (compared with a third of the men) said that they did not walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark, and almost three-quarters (72%) of those aged 60 and over said they did not walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark, compared with over a third (37%) of those aged 17 to 24, more than two-fifths (44%) of those aged 15 and 16 and almost a half of those aged 40 to 59 (46%) and of those aged 25 to 39 (47%). There was a little difference on this dimension between New Zealand European/European and Pacific participants (51% and 48% respectively said that they did not walk alone in their neighbourhood after dark). (Morris *et al.* 2003: 216)

Examining the plethora of data being produced about fear of crime one could conclude that there has all but developed a fear of crime industry. This industry does not just include academic researchers, government criminologists and policy-makers, but also private security providers, insurers, and other public and private institutions and functionaries. To get some perspective on the rapidity of the growth in interest in crime fear we need only follow the ever-expanding paper – and increasingly cyber – trail. Chris Hale in 1996 noted that over 200 reports on the subject were available and a more recent online search by Ditton and Farrall (2000a) located 837 entries. I repeated the exercise in researching this book and dragged up 242,000 fear of crime entries using the Google search engine. Not only has the amount of information about fear of crime expanded at a staggering rate, but it is also being democratised. Fear of crime, as a concept used to explain a range of psychological and/or social reactions to the perceived or

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symbolic threat of crime, is no longer, if it ever was, simply a domain of academic or government criminologists and other social scientists. Fear of crime is now a 'prominent cultural theme' (Garland 2001: 10).

Today local and national newspapers conduct fear of crime surveys, politicians comment on the problem of crime fear, and then use it in their campaigns, and many policing organisations are committed to reducing the fear of crime amongst other terms of reference. The UK Home Office even publishes an online 'fear of crime toolbox' aimed at helping to reduce crime fear in communities (UK Home Office 2006). This also provides instructions on how to conduct local fear of crime audits and surveys, making the governance of crime fear a local government responsibility. A UK-based women's website hosts a 'fear of crime quiz' that assesses whether the participant overestimates UK crime rates and so overestimates their risk of victimisation.[4] If we believe all the surveying and quantifying, fear of crime is almost everywhere and affects almost everyone – although, we are told, to wildly varying degrees. Firstly, the previously victimised are said to be more fearful of crime.[5] Secondly, women are apparently more fearful than men despite lower levels of victimisation.[6] Thirdly, the elderly report fear of crime more than younger people who, likewise, are ironically more at risk.[7]

This recurring theme of lower risk/higher fear has been termed the fear/risk paradox. The implication is that fear of crime operates quite independently of crime itself (Maxfield 1984). Specifically, there is seemingly no identifiable statistical relationship between those who are the most at risk of becoming victims of crime, and those who report being the most fearful (Hough and Mayhew 1983). As I will suggest in later chapters there are complex reasons for this discovery. In light of such findings there has been an ongoing debate as to whether the fear of crime is a rational or irrational fear.

While currently the UK perhaps leads the way in the preoccupation with crime fear as a problematisation for government and object of enquiry, the problem of and focus on fear of crime seems to know no geo-spatial boundary. Fear of crime research has proliferated in the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and has more recently been expanding in popularity in Europe.

What of the socio-cultural context of this expansion? Generally, we are increasingly said to live in what Barry Glassner (1999) has called a 'culture of fear', and in socio-spatial realms that Mike Davis (1998) has termed the 'ecologies of fear'. Fears apparently abound in relation to our children, schools, paedophiles, terrorism, HIV-AIDS, asylum seekers, food, global warming, water supply, meteorites, earthquakes, volcanos, tsunamis, bird flu and, of course, the seemingly perennial fear of the late modern Western world, fear of crime. Recent decades

have witnessed the growth in gated communities, private security, security hardware and software, and of course prison populations. Risk theorists such as Ulrich Beck (1992) have suggested that we live in a 'risk society' in which we organise our lives around the distribution of 'bads' as opposed to the industrial world that was organised around the distribution of goods. Here the anxiety produced by probabilistic calculation – increasingly our own but also those of the experts – implores us to follow the path of least riskiness (see also Giddens 1990). We seek out information on the distribution of risks and their probability, and organise our lives accordingly. However, as Glassner and others have argued, the risks or 'bads' that concern us most are often – on any objective measure – the wrong ones. David Garland suggests that the 're-dramatisation of crime' has led policy-makers to shift their emotional temperature 'from cold to hot' and that this is partially responsible for the growth of what he terms a 'culture of control' where political populism jostles for legitimacy with new administrative measures that rationalise and define down the goals of police and other state organisations (Garland 2001).

The politics and problematisation of fear of crime

While being a problem for government, fear of crime has also become political. It is now seen by many researchers and policy-makers as being as serious a problem as crime itself (Hale 1996; van Dijk and Mayhew 1992; Wilson and Kelling 1982) and just as, if not more, debilitating (Braithwaite *et al.* 1982). Walklate (1995) suggests that in the 1980s the 'process of invoking the imagery of the crime victim' became the basis for policy formation, thus increasing the political and theoretical debates around fear of crime and indeed interest in research into the subject. This is echoed by Williams *et al.* (2000) who suggest that criminologists have also come to recognise that victimisation is an important 'dependent variable' in their field of expertise. However, the fear of crime literature has extended well beyond being simply an element of the study of victimisation: fear of crime has itself become an independent field with its own body of expert knowledge. Indeed, this body of knowledge has gradually expanded to include research into almost every conceivable socio-economic group, gender category, ethnic origin, sub-culture and age group we might like to imagine. No 'variable' has been left wanting. If the imagery of the victim has expanded such that in the eyes of many researchers and policy-makers we are all imagined as potential victims, to paraphrase Alison Young (1996), the corollary is that we are now also potential fearers.

Fear of crime literature and the research that has driven it has developed from numerous, and often competing, ideological and theoretical positions. Significantly, debate has raged around what fear of crime might actually be,[8] how it might be measured,[9] what its causes might be, and how it might be remedied. Indeed, there has been a broad range of theoretical and methodological approaches applied to these problems. In the search for causation alone an increasingly long and complex list of variables has emerged, from the psychological to the social, the economic to the geographical and the symbolic to the real. To suggest that there has been methodological confusion over how to measure fear of crime is an understatement. Maxfield (1984) has suggested that there are two reasons why it is important to think critically about how fear of crime is to be measured. Firstly, criminologists have long argued about *how* it should be measured and what types of fear might be worth measuring. Secondly, at the level of public policy it is important to understand *relative* levels of fear in terms of where and how policy might be directed. Surveys asking respondents about 'fear for personal safety on neighbourhood streets [are] not well suited to access anxiety about burglary or other household crimes' (Maxfield 1984: 6).

Hale argues that the confusion over measurement is in part a result of a lack of a specific definition of what the fear of crime might actually be. He suggests that many of the debates about the rationality of fear are due in part to the lack of clarity in being able to distinguish between 'risk evaluation, worry and fear' (Hale 1996: 84). Williams *et al.* (2000) argue that the term fear of crime remains vague and that it is perhaps preferable to substitute the concept of 'worry'. Ditton *et al.* (1999a) argue that although numeric historical measures of fear of crime have been increasingly refined, conceptual development has stagnated. On a more optimistic note, Ditton *et al.* also suggest that in more recent times because of the consistency of the instrument operationalised in the British and Welsh crime surveys, and indeed their Scottish equivalents, these now constitute a unique data source. They argue that the retention of identical survey questions in successive sweeps and across geographic borders means it is now possible to speak with confidence about trends over time. However, the question of what these trends are measures *of* remains unclear. All this has driven Farrall *et al.* (1997: 676) to suggest that:

> ... the results of fear of crime surveys appear to be a function of the way the topic is researched, rather than the way it is. The traditional methods used are methods which seem consistently to over-emphasise the levels and extent of the fear of crime. It seems

> that levels of fear of crime and, to a lesser extent, of victimisation itself, have been hugely overestimated.[10]

Sparks (1992) has suggested that the fear of crime has not only become the focus for 'empirical disagreements' but has 'assumed a heavy polemic charge' in both political and theoretical disputes. Weatherburn *et al.* (1996:1) argue that:

> public opinion about the risk of criminal victimisation is probably more influential in shaping state government spending priorities in law and order than the actual risk. If public concern about crime is driven by an exaggerated assessment of the risks of victimisation then strategies need to be in place to address the problem.

Thus, crime fear can shape the way we treat crime and those we criminalise; it can have effects on the machinations of the justice system. Ditton *et al.* (1999a) argue that the recognition that the fear of crime had political power was almost instant following the first National American Crime Survey.

Some researchers suggest that what people fear most is the 'shadowy stranger', the unpredictable and unknowable criminal other, whose victims are randomly selected for no apparent reason other than their availability and vulnerability (Bauman 1993; Young 1996). Such conceptualisations have indirectly, and perhaps unintendedly, fuelled the rational/irrational fears debate, especially given the statistical reality that most serious offences occur within the walls of the family home and among friends, acquaintances and family members. As Shapland and Vagg (cited in Pratt 1997: 151) note:

> It would seem that the kinds of images evoked by the question of fear of crime are not the typical or known, but generally the unusual and unknown ... those that were fearful seemed fearful of everywhere beyond the view of their own windows.

Pratt (1997: 151) suggests that the 'threatening forces of modernity' and the neo-liberal ideal make the horizons of life seem infinite and more exciting than the limited possibilities of the 'welfare era'. However, it also creates new fears and uncertainties through the erosion of traditional support structures like the family. Dangerousness now has a freedom to roam and feed off our fears and insecurities (Pratt 1997).

Obviously, this book has a focus that extends well beyond fear of crime as it has generally been understood. If we are to understand the

birth of fear of crime as a concept we must understand the underlying conditions of this birth – its conditions or surfaces of emergence. To achieve this aim a variety of knowledge bases in which fear of crime has been historically enmeshed will be explored. Criminology as an academic discipline and an administrative enterprise of government has perhaps been the most influential of these bases of knowledge, although it is certainly not the only one. I will argue that shifts in criminological thought and the field of criminology have been vital to the invention of fear of crime the concept; a concept that has since reached far beyond the discipline.

Criminology, and criminological research more generally, has proliferated in the past 40 years. While Rock (1994) described the late 1960s/early 1970s as a 'big bang' period for criminology, Maguire (2002) has more recently noted the 'explosion' of academic activity and the 'boom' in criminological research of more recent years. Similarly, Radzinowicz's *Adventures in Criminology* (1999) clearly identifies this 40 or more years of expansion. This growth is illustrated in an increase in membership in criminological bureaucracies (Walters 2003), in the huge numbers of students choosing to do criminology undergraduate programmes and, importantly, by the entry of specialised forms of criminological knowledge into ever increasing domains of government. Significantly, criminology's expansion owes much to its growing array of objects and fields of inquiry, objects such as fear of crime and fields such as victimology. This expansion in objects of focus, and the development of conceptual tools to understand them, has allowed criminological knowledge into new domains of government. I will argue that interest in fear of crime research has constituted part of this disciplinary, or perhaps more post-disciplinary, growth (see also Jackson 2004). The problematisation of crime fear has provided new domains for research and has also been a conveniently attractive object of inquiry for the growing 'administrative criminology'. That is, the problematisation of crime fear has allowed many researchers in university departments and elsewhere to secure consultancy work in an environment where external funding is becoming a requirement both within and outside the discipline of criminology (see Walters 2003).

The term fear of crime is a recent invention. Ditton and Farrall (2000) suggest it was 'discovered' in 1967. Apart from a smattering of references I will explore later, it certainly did not have linguistic currency prior to 1965. Indeed, prior to the 1960s the historical ledger is conspicuously light on references to fear of crime. This absence is not just evident in the criminological archive, but in every relevant domain; social scientific, governmental, and popular media. This begets a number of conventional historical questions. Was fear of crime simply

not experienced or expressed prior to 1967? Was this fear of crime overlooked by social inquisitors and if so, why? Did we simply not have the tools to find or identify this apparently ubiquitous fear of crime? Did we previously name what we now know as fear of crime something entirely different? The following discussion is based on the premise that these questions are misguided and would only inform a partial, presentist, analysis. I suggest this for two reasons. First, it would seem incongruous to presuppose that populations did not harbour concerns about crime and victimisation prior to 1967. While fear of crime as a concept might not exist, and while fear of crime might not constitute a common discourse as such, many episodes of what we might now call fear of crime, albeit problematically as I have intimated, are easily identifiable in earlier periods. Second, to suggest that fear of crime is simply 'discovered' in the 1960s suggests the pre-existence of a phenomenon that continues in a-historical sameness. This privileges a teleological history of social scientific inquiry that imagines the progressive uncovering of the truth about the social world, the enlightenment myth of the march of scientific progress. It also essentialises fear of crime as if it had existed apart from and outside the social, cultural and historical conditions, institutions and interactions where it is apparently experienced and/or expressed. Rather, as I will suggest in later chapters, the modern (or late modern) concept we now call fear of crime is a product of particular socially, culturally and historically contingent assemblages of governmental and political rationality, and regimes of truth configured through social scientific knowledge and power. Further, that the conditions provided by these assemblages rendered fear of crime intelligible as a criminological problematisation, and that this intelligibility introduced it into a field of discursive possibilities. Fear of crime was not 'discovered' in 1965 or 1967. Rather, from about 1965 all the socio-political elements, paradigms of knowledge and truth, and anxieties fell into place that made fear of crime a social scientific concept and so a legitimate cultural theme.

Methods

The following chapters constitute an altogether different project from any of the research outlined above although they do take the arguments of some later critical research as a starting point (Sparks 1992; Stanko 2000; Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Ditton and Farrall 2000; Loader *et al.* 2000; Jackson 2004). This book is not interested in contributing new methodologies or new conceptual tools to the measurement of

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