

CRIME AND SOCIETY SERIES

STREET CRIME

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Street Crime

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To Adam and Lucie

*And England still hath bin a fruitfull Land
Of valiant thieues, that durst bid true men stand.*

John Taylor, the Water Poet, 1662

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Introduction

It was a cold wet Friday evening somewhere back in the winter of 1988. That was the day I became a victim of a street robbery. I was living at the time in Brixton and the robbery took place along one of the many small backstreets that lead off from Brixton Hill. It happened as I was returning home having visited a local shop where I had purchased a few goods. These I had stored in a small rucksack.

I had almost reached Brixton Hill when I became aware of the presence of a group of young men congregating on the pavement some 50 metres ahead of me. Though, to be fair, the idea of young men congregating together was nothing new – this was, after all, an area with a vibrant street culture – there was, nevertheless, something about the behaviour of this group that caught my attention. It might have been something about the way in which they were observing me, but I think it was more to do with the fact that the road I was walking along was not a place where young men typically congregated.

With alarm bells ringing away, I resolved to avoid the group by turning into a small side street while also quickening my pace. As I turned, however, so did the group. I ran and they ran after me – only, I'm afraid, a lot faster. Unable to escape, I stopped and confronted them. Unfortunately it was not the most propitious of locations – a small lane off the main road in darkness. Things were not looking good. There were six of them aged, I guess, between fifteen and eighteen. Two members of the group were clearly older than the others and these were also the most aggressive and active in what followed. One of them pulled a knife which he held to my throat. He looking unswervingly at my face and emanated what I can only describe as a sense of barely controlled aggression. The

other did the talking: 'Empty yo fucking pockets ... I said empty yo fucking pockets if you don't want to get hurt.' I complied but had nothing to show because I did not have what they wanted. The talker was not impressed 'Where's yo fucking cash, where's yo wallet ... don't fuck with us.'

Despite the presence of the knife and the calculated display of aggression, I felt strangely calm. I knew intuitively that if I said the wrong thing or acted in the wrong way I would get hurt. They were capable of violence. I also sensed, however, that they were not going to hurt me unless I provoked them into doing so. I remonstrated with them that I was a student, I had no money and that all I had was some shopping which I needed. The holes in the pockets of the old trench coat I was wearing provided evidential support for my case. I was not, I was trying to suggest, a suitable target. On the contrary, I tried to suggest, and with some honesty, that I was poor with nothing worth stealing. Convinced I had nothing of value, they eventually left me alone and made off. They also took my rucksack. This was, I felt, taking things too far. The bag after all contained some beer, and one thing I knew with total certainty was that when I finally returned home I would need a strong drink. So I followed them and remonstrated. For some entirely obscure reason they listened. One of the younger men grabbed my bag and left it on the road for me to pick up.

It was only after I returned to my flat that the full impact of what had happened began to hit home. At first I felt an overwhelming sense of joy that nothing had been taken and that what they had taken they had returned. This emotion was, however, quickly replaced by a far stronger one: righteous indignation about what had occurred. The event had shaken me up. It was not fair and I should not have been a victim. I slept badly that night and, truth to tell, my sleeping pattern was severely disturbed for the next few weeks. Dark murderous thoughts entered my mind and I experienced great difficulty in displacing them. My routine activity also changed. I became far more suspicious of all groups of young men. I also kept wondering what I would do should I happen to come across the group that had attacked me.

Did I call the police? I thought about it, but in the end I decided not to. What, I rationalised to myself, was there to report? Anyway, what at the end of the day could or would be done? I hadn't been hurt in any physical sense and nothing had been taken. My putative muggers had even returned to me the goods they had taken. And then just what could I say? I realised early on that I would not recognize my protagonists even if I did happen to see them. Young, black and male – the usual suspects, nothing behind or beyond the stereotype. This was Brixton after all. My

attack would not even make the grade of a recorded offence. Like so many others, it would be left to a memory that would fade over time.

It did. I had not been injured and simply got on with my life. But I was lucky. Many other people I knew had been a victim of street crime, and as this book was being written many more people were becoming victims of what the media was representing as an unprecedented increase in this crime category. Muggers, the papers appeared to suggest, were once more on the move and the good society was once again under threat. Ominously, the spectre of the black mugger reappeared and Brixton once again hit the news as the capital's street-crime hot spot.

Following tracks already beaten out by previous Conservative administrations, the Labour government under Tony Blair responded by readying itself for war. The chief of the Law Lords, Justice Woolf, demanded yet more imprisonment for street robbers, most of whom were already being jailed when caught anyway. This was an intervention that slipped seamlessly into the clarion call for 'zero tolerance' routinely made by a tabloid media that had worked itself into a frenzy of moral indignation and rage.

It was against this background, the latest in a long line of moral panics about street robbery, that I found myself commissioned by Government Office for London to study rising street crime in the area where it appeared to be the highest. Ironically, this was in Brixton, my one-time home and the place where my own victimisation had occurred many years before. This book came out of that experience.

Given the prominence of robbery in urban street life and the social attention routinely brought to bear upon it by the media and populist politicians, it came as something of a surprise to find that, as an offence, little had been written about it and the people who were or who had been perpetrating it. Indeed, with the exception of Stuart Hall *et al.*'s seminal work on 'mugging' written in the 1970s, almost nothing had been substantively written about the subject. And even taking into account Hall *et al.*'s work, *Policing the Crisis* was principally written as a critical exercise in documenting the social response to street robbery – not attending to the task of explaining it. This absence of discussion, particularly on the part of more critical traditions in criminology helped frame the principal themes of this book. These will be directed at providing a historical context in which to situate contemporary concerns about street robbery; reviewing how different traditions in criminology have sought to account for the problem; and by developing a framework of analysis I will subsequently apply to explain street crime's contemporary rise in British society.

In the remainder of this introduction I have two aims. First, to define

more specifically the objective of this enquiry: what is street crime and how for the purpose of analysis should we define it? Second, to examine how I will approach this objective by describing the structure of the book as well as indicating the broad parameters of my argument.

At first sight, the term 'street crime' appears a relatively obvious and straightforward crime category. One that, taken at face value, should embrace all crimes perpetrated in publicly shared space. And it is true that in some cases this omnibus meaning of the word is indeed deployed by various policy makers – not to say academics. For example, in recent Home Office advice circulated to local crime-reduction partnerships in London, the term street crime is used in ways that include street robbery but which also make reference to gun crime. In a far more systematic attempt to get to grips with the meaning of 'street crime', Les Johnson has produced a comprehensive analysis of the various offences that could be included in the term (Johnson 1998). This omnibus use of the term, however, is not the way it is deployed by the police, who code it in ways that impose a far more prescriptive meaning. As an offence, street crime is used to:

describe the offences of robbery, attempted robbery and snatch theft from the person irrespective of location. 'Snatch thefts' refer to those incidents where an offender snatches property away from the victim, the force being applied to the property as opposed to the person, and the victim being immediately aware of what has happened (Smith 2003).

What unifies all forms of street robbery is that it occurs in public space and involves the illegal appropriation of the goods or property a victim or group of victims may be carrying. Other offences that may occur on the street, for instance public disorder offences such as assault, are coded in different offence categories and are not labelled as street robbery despite occurring in the context of the street. While this may appear an arbitrary way of coding reality, there is, in effect, a kind of rationale to it. All the offences that fall within the remit of its official police definition of street crime have an exclusive focus on a form of acquisitive crime conducted in a street context. While violence or the threat of violence may well be used, it is worth noting that this may not be the case as, for example, with pickpocketing.

Official definitions, it must be emphasized, do not exhaust the meanings associated with the term street crime. In public and in particular media parlance, street crime is often associated with the term 'mugging', which is not a formal offence category. Nor is it a term

routinely deployed by crime-prevention agencies, not least because of the highly racialized context in which it has been traditionally evoked by elements in the mass media.¹ Finally, while 'mugging' might well be the term preferred by the mass media, it should be noted that it is not the term used on the street by young people actively involved in street robbery. In this context, what the police refer to as street crime is most often termed 'jacking'. For the purpose of this analysis, 'street robbery' will be my preferred term. This choice is determined not only because it facilitates analysis, but also because it avoids other unfortunate connotations with which the term is too often associated by using the more generic expression 'street crime', which is far broader and looser.

While individuals may well perpetrate street robbery alone, this offence is often conducted in the context of a group. Roles within the group can also be distinguished, with some engaging directly in the task of robbery itself while other members stand guard as sentinels, ever vigilant for law-enforcement activity. Even in the context of a collective attack, it could also be noted (as I observed from my own experience) that different people may play different roles. One person, for example, may work to distract the victim, while someone else carries out the actual robbery. Weight of numbers may also be used to produce the requisite level of intimidation necessary to persuade victims to give up their material possessions.

While some groups may exhibit multiple skills in the art and craft of street robbery, this is unlikely usually to be the case. Street crime is rather a job in which specialisms are more likely to be the norm. Different groups, in other words, will typically hone their robbery skills within one of the forms identified above. While the media often implicitly identify street robbery as a crime that can only be perpetrated by inherently vicious individuals designed that way by nature, what this image obscures is just how skilled an art successful street crime actually is. To put the message bluntly, to do it well you have to go through a learning process – it is not something that just happens. A pickpocket, for example, to be successful (i.e. undetected) must be able to master the sleight of hand of a conjurer. In the case of more violent street robbers, the ability to demonstrate violence as a competence is an absolute requirement. Knowing where potential victims can be found and identified, and how to avoid law-enforcement agencies are also essential skills. So is the knowledge necessary that will allow for the effective disposal of the goods acquired in and through street robbery. These are, moreover, learnt skills and, as with any skills, there are those who are more proficient than others. The least successful, like poor *Oliver Twist*, are those most likely to be caught.

Learning requires an apprenticeship, a process by which a nonpractitioner is equipped with skills that will enable them to become an active motivated offender. This in turn requires the existence of a culture where these deviant skills may be successfully transmitted and internalized. As we shall see in our historical survey, these cultures come in various shapes and forms. At its most basic, training can occur through the medium of observation and imitation. In its most developed form, training may well approximate the kind of learning environment you would find available in any legitimate trade – only the qualifications would be notable by their absence.

To explore the phenomenon of street crime, I have divided the book into three sections. In the first I contextualize the problem of street robbery by examining the history of the street robber as he has evolved and developed in British society since the Middle Ages. The underlying rationale informing this derives from the observation that, in our contemporary age of amnesia, it is all too easy to forget the past and lose sight of just how much it informs the present. The second section of the book critically explores the theories that have been proposed to explain the phenomenon of street robbery in recent years. In the third section I develop and apply my own theoretical framework to explain rising street robbery in contemporary society.

There are two chapters in the first part of the book. The first considers the history of the street robber; first in the incarnation of the medieval outlaw, and second as the highwayman of the seventeenth century. As this chapter will show, while we, and often for entirely justified reasons, view the street robber as a folk devil, this has by no means always been the case. Historical study shows that the street robber is a figure upon which a number of far more positive associations could also be projected, as the Robin Hood mythology of the fifteenth century and subsequent stories about the highwaymen of the seventeenth century testify. In the second chapter I consider the development of street robbery in the developing urban context. The chapter examines how the figure of the urban robber changes from age to age. It examines the 'canting' language associated with pickpocket slang, and studies the incredible variety of forms through which street robbery expressed itself in its urban setting. The chapter concludes by examining how, as a distinctly modern capitalist society developed, an array of forces coalesced in ways that would both lead to and produce the street robber as the anonymous folk devil we know today.

The second part considers how street robbery has been studied and, on the basis of a critique of these approaches, an alternative framework of

analysis is developed. Chapter 3 begins this process of examination by considering what we know about the street robber, his victim and recent changes in this offence category. As this chapter will establish, unlike most categories of crime, street robbery has risen. Though the rise has been very sharp, it is in metropolitan areas, particularly poor areas, that the rise has been most noticeable. Though older people can be both victims and offenders, the majority of offenders and victims are typically aged between 14 and 19.

In chapters 4 and 5 I examine the various theories – both academic and non-academic – that have been propounded to explain street robbery in the modern age. Though there are many ways of studying these accounts, I opt for a method that involves distinguishing them by reference to the political orientation of those who propound them. My rationale for doing this is simple: the explanations advanced allow themselves to be easily grouped in this way. There are, in other words, a set of common themes that unify the kind of explanations advanced by those associated with the political right, just as much as another set of common themes that unify those who advance their explanations within the political framework of the left.

In chapter 4 I consider explanations proposed by those beholden to a conservative agenda. For commentators who write in this tradition, street robbery is typically explained by reference to what I will define as a deficit model of offending behaviour. According to this model, robbery occurs because there is something defective about the offender or the cultural group into which he or she is born. These defects may arise because the individual is born with aberrant traits that predispose him or her towards crime; or can occur because of problematic socialization processes that are themselves a product of the underclass to which he or she is alleged to belong.

In chapter 5 the views of those who offer a more critical and left-of-centre position on street robbery are examined. Though some important work has certainly been produced, what remains striking is that, as a tradition, the left has been very hesitant about addressing street robbery with the kind of attention it has given to youth subcultures or the crimes of the powerful. When the left has examined street robbery, it has appeared in one of two ways. First, when it has been considered as an issue worth exploring, accounts have typically subsumed its study within wider theories of working class involvement in crime, which typically hinge on various conceptions of class disadvantage and its impact. Second, rather than study why offenders perpetrate street robbery, the onus has been placed on accounting for the social response the street robber generates.

In chapter 6 a framework for rethinking how to explain street robbery is developed. The errors of mono-causal explanations that attempt to define street crime by reference to one dominant factor are identified and the case is made for developing a more complex theoretical model. This is constructed around the epistemological assumption that street crime is a multidimensional problem that requires a multidimensional form of analysis; one in which a number of relevant factors need to be considered both individually and in relation to each other. By revising the routine activities approach developed by Felson and Cohen, a framework for examining street robbery is developed. Street robbery, I contend, can be explained by reference to the interrelation between three factors: (i) the availability and suitability of victims; (ii) the production of motivated offenders; and (iii) deficiencies inherent in the social control response.

In chapters 7, 8 and 9 this revised model is applied to account for the contemporary rise in street crime. Chapter 7 examines the factors that make victims both assessable and available for street robbers to prey upon. It does this by examining changes in the nature of the objects now routinely carried by the wider public. As this enquiry will show, in recent years more people have become more likely to possess the objects coveted by street robbers. This, I will show, has dramatically raised the aggregate pool of potential targets for street robbery. Not only are there more potential targets but the range of desirable goods possessed by potential victims are also relatively *assessable*, often *visible* and are characterized by low rates of *inertia*, all of which increase the ease with which they may be appropriated. This, I will argue, has occurred at the same time that the possibility of access to victims of other categories of crime has actually decreased.

This chapter will also show how target suitability and availability is also shaped by the kind of routine behaviours in which victims engage. Young people, who constitute the majority of street robbery victims, are not only more likely to carry the goods coveted by street robbers, but are also typically located in spatially compressed areas that leave them inherently vulnerable to victimization by motivated offenders they find difficulty in avoiding. Because young people routinely carry goods that can be easily appropriated, older forms of conflict in which young people engage (such as bullying) increasingly take the form of street robbery. This has the result, I will argue, of making it appear that young people are engaging in an alarming new crime wave rather than doing what they have always done in the context of a violent street culture. New patterns of economic development in high-crime areas also create, this chapter will show, the preconditions necessary for rising patterns of street robbery, and do so by attracting suitable victims into areas where suitably

motivated offenders are likely to dwell. This factor, I will suggest, can explain why some areas have disproportionately higher levels of street robbery than others.

Chapter 8 examines the forces that act to produce motivated offenders who are both willing and able to perpetrate acts of street crime. Rather than approach the study of offenders in terms which conceive them to be essentially different from the law-abiding citizenry, the chapter argues that the problem of offending is acutely bound up with the ways in which young people have been socialized. At stake here is their successful and ruthless socialization into the consumption norms of the free-market capitalist society. Drawing on the work of Merton, I then indicate how street crime occurs where the conditions for legal consumption avenues are denied. This, I will argue, is specifically a problem for the kind of communities over-represented among the population of offenders. In other words, multiply disadvantaged communities.

The chapter then examines the diverse processes of differential association that may help explain why only some disadvantaged people resolve thwarted consumption by engaging in street robbery. This investigation requires an examination of outlaw culture, the seductions and benefits that can accrue from engaging in it, and the relationship between offending behaviour and the construction of illegal opportunity structures in particular areas.

Chapter 9 considers how deficiencies in existing social control strategy have also worked to create a context in which street crime can flourish. It does this by examining, in turn, five current social control strategies. These include studying the impact of law enforcement; the role of the judicial system; the respective impact of situational and social crime prevention; and managerially driven attempts to improve system performance through integrating and coordinating community safety effect. As this chapter will show, each strategy alone and in conjunction with others failed to confront rising street robbery rates for a variety of reasons.

In the conclusion I develop my own political standpoint with regard to the issues this book has sought to highlight and discuss. Here I develop the case for seeing street robbery not as a problem society confronts and as an outside that must be beaten back, but as a problem of the kind of society in which we live today. A society that engineers dreams of material consumption among a population socialized to believe that this is what the good life must be, while simultaneously excluding vast swathes of it from the possibility of being able to gratify such dreams through legitimate consumption rituals. I conclude by examining the implications of this line of reasoning for how we respond to street

robbery before offering some more general advice in relation to the question 'What should be done?'.¹

Notes

- 1 The British Crime Survey marks an exception to this rule as it uses the term as a component of the BCS violence typology which it defines as 'a popular rather than a legal term, comprising robbery, attempted robbery, and snatch theft from the person'. See C. Kershaw *et al.* (2000).

Part I
A Short History of Street Robbery

