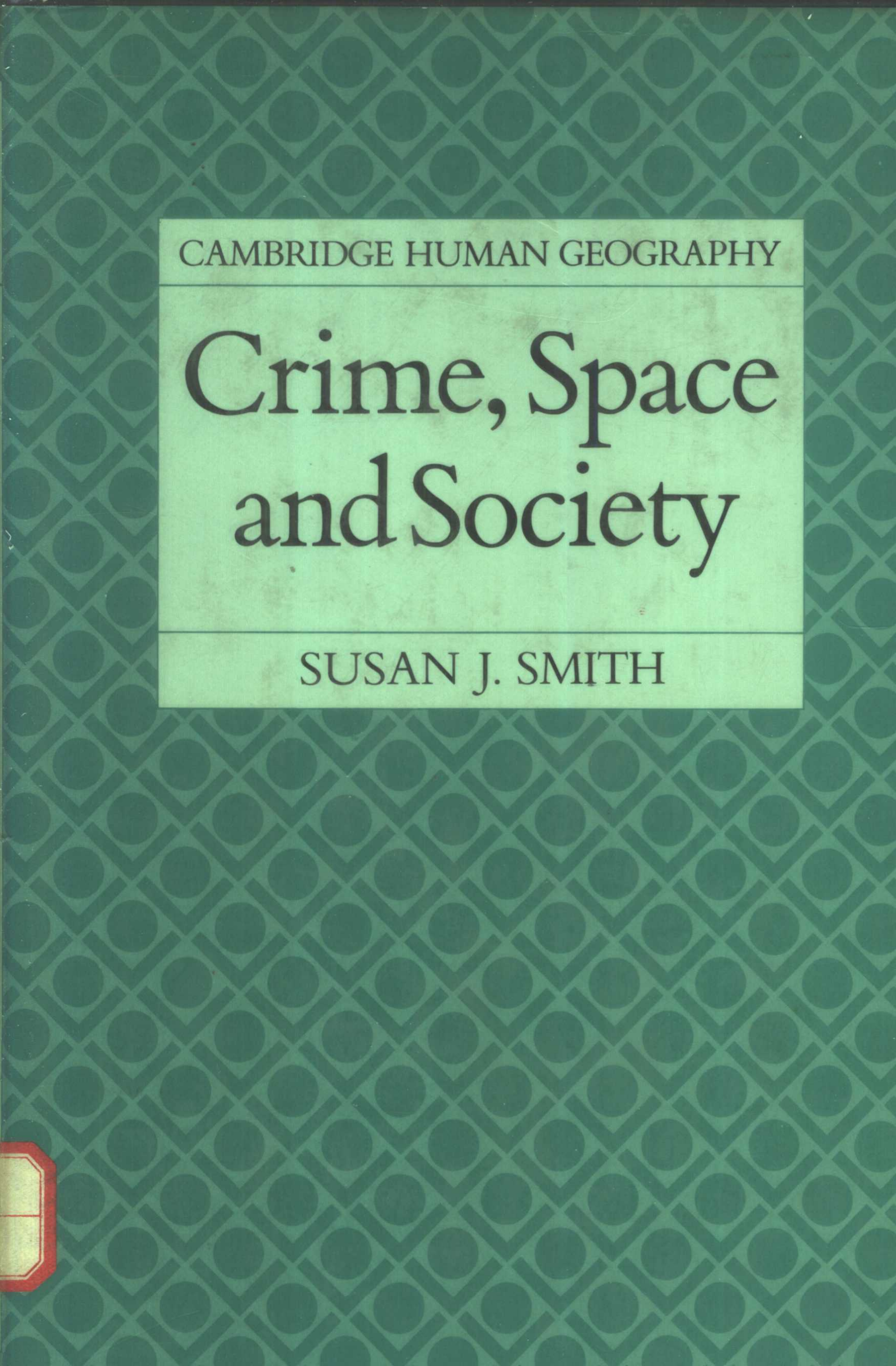

CAMBRIDGE HUMAN GEOGRAPHY

Crime, Space and Society

SUSAN J. SMITH

CRIME, SPACE AND SOCIETY

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Preface

This book was conceived as an attempt to integrate theoretically the study of crime with recent developments in our understanding of social organisation and change. Criminological research has tended (in practice if not by design) to abstract crime from its broader social context. A magnificent fund of knowledge has been created, but contemporary social theory has often developed in advance of, or in isolation from, shifts in criminological thought. Based on the groundwork of others, my aim is to introduce a much broader perspective on crime. I view it as one facet in a wider structure of social relations. As such, crime, like any other form of human interchange, can be understood in terms of the differential distribution of rewards and life chances in society, and in terms of the rules of social reproduction which sustain inequality.

Many commentators acknowledge that the nature of deviance has varied historically, but few explore locational variations in its meaning, causes and consequences. I shall argue that the impact and social significance of crime *does* vary locationally, even within a single nation or region. It varies not only because the environmental opportunities for crime and the economic circumstances of potential offenders vary in space, but also because crime and the fear of crime are bound up with the distribution of power and its realisation in the form of social relations amongst differently positioned social and economic groups.

For reasons amplified in the text, this book focusses on crime in Britain's inner cities generally, and on a case study in Birmingham in particular. Reflecting the extent and persistence of social and residential segregation in this country, the inner cities are areas in which the effects of crime and the quality of race relations intermingle, and much of my theoretical argument attempts to explain why this is so.

I would like to explain my use of the terms 'race' and 'culture', and my avoidance of the term 'ethnicity' in this volume. 'Race' refers to a *social* category, based on perceptions of physical differences between groups of people. The notion of race in a genetic sense is not legitimated by modern biological science, and its use in this context is racist. 'Race' is a valid object of enquiry only in so far as racist discourse and thought persist to give conceptions of racial difference their contemporary social (political and economic) significance. Part of my concern in this book is to account for the continuing significance of racial differences in the form of local social relations.

'Culture' is regarded as a system of shared meanings shaped by a group's history and its material conditions of existence. I reject idealist interpretations of culture as the pregiven 'informing spirit' of a way of life, preferring to regard it as a signifying system, expressing shared experiences and aspirations. I suspect that this definition of culture leaves 'ethnicity' redundant (when it refers to linguistic or religious minorities) or racist (when it describes cultural groups defined in terms of racial criteria). My suspicion has prompted me to avoid the appelation 'ethnic' (though I have used it without such reservations in earlier publications) for the time being.

This book draws together the very diverse interests which a geographical education has allowed me. Such eclecticism is not favoured by the specialisation that has accompanied an academic division of labour, but it encourages the openness and scepticism that feeds research. I have tried, therefore, to be wide-ranging in exploring the relationships between crime and society, although I often reject comprehensiveness in favour of theoretical coherence (particularly when considering the role of crime in the reproduction of local social relations). My success in combining speculative social theory with statements on public policy has been variable. The technical interests of planners sit uneasily with the practical and critical interests of professional academia. Nevertheless, the theoretical concerns of chapters 5 and 7 complement some of the more descriptive and policy orientated chapters which precede them; and the practical recommendations of chapter 6, although political in implication, are faithful to a wide range of empirical evidence. I do not pretend, then, to offer any grand theory of crime and society. What I suggest is a broader view of criminological research than has hitherto been usual: one that is in tune with recent developments in geography and sociology; and one whose scope I can only begin to explore in the chapters which follow.

May 1985 SUSAN J. SMITH

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1

An introduction to criminological research

This book is not a conventional geography of crime. It does not thoroughly review the spatial organisation of criminal behaviour, the properties of defensible space or the distribution of victims. These important areas of analysis are well represented in the literature. My aim is to use them as the basis of an attempt to link the study of crime with the study of society, theoretically informed by a geographical perspective, in so far as this draws time and space into an appreciation of the structure of social relations.

As an introduction, a critique of the history of the analysis of deviance serves to illustrate the extent to which criminological knowledge has expressed the interests held by analysts (both tacitly and self-consciously) during specific historical periods in particular national contexts. This provides some insight into the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of approaches to criminological enquiry; it also provides a touchstone against which to appreciate the different combinations of perspectives adopted in subsequent chapters. The introduction is organised in sympathy with Habermas's (1968) account of knowledge as constituted (only) through human interests. I acknowledge that many have quibbled with his view, but find it nonetheless illuminating in its interpretation of criminological research over the last century and a half.

Habermas formulated his theory of knowledge-constitutive interests from a concern that scientific (positivistic) knowledge tends, in seeking out the 'laws' of society, to misrepresent as natural and eternal that which is historically specific and alterable. Such knowledge, he argues, can only perpetuate the status quo and all relations of domination and subordination based upon it. Habermas's theory challenges what he terms the 'false objectivism' of positivistic science, arguing that the object domain of forms of knowledge, and the criteria by which such knowledge is validated, are constituted by human interests. These interests define the limits of the possible applications of the knowledge to which they give rise

(Keat 1981: 66). Habermas identifies three knowledge-constitutive interests, which he links with the human projects of communication or interaction, labour and domination. He describes the interests as practical, technical and emancipatory (respectively) and argues that they are expressed through three distinct domains of enquiry – historical-hermeneutic science, empirical-analytical science and critical theory.

The discussion below begins by exploring the empirical-analytical perspective which has dominated most spatial studies of crime. The approach gained ascendency in the affluent 1960s, accompanying increasing crime rates and a rediscovery of the problems of the inner city. A quantitative, positivistic criminology developed, aiming to predict and control the level of crime in modern democracies. This technical interest manifested itself in a variety of perspectives fundamentally informed by the philosophical presuppositions of direct or naive realism.* These perspectives range from biological definitions of criminal 'types' to a host of multivariate areal and ecological analyses of crime; from functionalist analyses of deviance to deterministic interpretations of the relationship between crime and environment. Direct realism takes crime rates as 'given', in that they are regarded as an empirical rather than a theoretical problem. Consequently, the empirical-analytical tradition contains 'a moral imperative which gears academic analysis to the eradication of crime', although it creates an intellectual climate in which 'a critique of law or law enforcement has been effectively denied' (Lowman 1982: 310). Additionally, the approach has allowed analysts to perform their tasks in contexts far removed from the subjective lifeworlds of those practising and affected by crime.

Fortunately, as the chapter goes on to show, there are long periods in the history of criminological enquiry during which an oral tradition has prevailed. Life histories and vivid ethnographic descriptions bear witness to academia's attempts to understand and communicate the essence of deviant behaviour to a broad readership. This kind of experiential knowledge, grounded in the methods of historical-hermeneutic science, is constituted by what Habermas terms a practical interest in intersubjectivity. Through this medium, a world of traditional or 'folk' meanings may be disclosed and imparted to those unable or disinclined to participate in it themselves.

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* This philosophy assumes that the objects of enquiry exist independently of an observer, and that the reality of these objects is at least partially present in their appearance (i.e. in the analyst's experience of them). Johnston (1980) bases his discussion of human geography on the presuppositions of direct realism.

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Most recently, various 'radical' criminologies have emerged. Notwithstanding the diversity of these critical approaches, they have in common the view that crime is inseparable from the institutionalised norms it violates, and they share the aim of making explicit, and of questioning, the values embedded within such norms. The interest here is emancipatory: critical criminology forms part of a self-reflective movement towards a more rational society based on explanatory understanding rather than on interpretative or causal analysis. This is the third theme explored below.

Habermas's thesis leaves many questions unanswered and poses a philosophical problem in that it fails to specify the *origins* of the three sets of interests. But the issue of whether they arise from the material conditions of society (which Habermas does not favour), or from something intrinsic to human nature or the mind, is largely beyond the scope of this book. Those who wish to explore such questions further are referred to McCarthy's (1978) detailed critique of Habermas's ideas, and to the work of Apel (1981), who has begun to construct a firmer philosophical basis for these ideas by re-examining Charles Peirce's pragmatic theory of truth.

Habermas's scheme, then, is neither complete, nor unassailable as a theory of knowledge. What it does offer is an intellectual framework in which the forms of knowledge or domains of enquiry that have so far been pursued in criminological research can be identified in terms of the human interests they embody. Interests other than the three identified by Habermas might be possible, but this trichotomous distinction is sufficient to guide the following selective account of the recent history of criminological thought.

The empirical-analytical tradition

A technical interest in crime control was first systematically evinced in the work of the so-called 'cartographic criminologists' of nineteenth-century Europe. Scholars such as Alison (1840), Fletcher (1849), Glyde (1856), Guerry (1833), Quetelet (1842) and Rawson (1839) sought to match spatial (usually regional) patterns of crime and offender rates with variations in 'moral' statistics (including literacy, population density, wealth, occupation, nationality and the home environment) and with physical phenomena (such as climate).

Guerry, aided by the geographer Adriano Balbi, noted that offender rates in France between 1825 and 1830 were related to criminals' age and sex, and to season. He tested three popular explanations of crime (based on the criminogenic effects of poverty, poor education and high population density) and found them all wanting. Rawson subsequently concentrated on the role of employment, dividing England into agricultural, manufacturing, mining and metropolitan areas and tracing out the links between urban industrialism and crime rates. Quetelet went a step further, arguing, in a similar vein to many modern analysts, that there could be no simple relationship between crime and wealth in France or England, but that high crime rates would occur where economic inequalities were most marked within small areas (i.e. where both the opportunities for crime and the predisposition to offend were present). Others, again pre-empting the thrust of modern studies, focussed on the relationship over time between changes in crime rates and fluctuations in business cycles. Clay (1855), for example, showed that in nineteenth-century England times of economic hardship tended to be accompanied by an increase in crime.

The nineteenth-century studies are summarised in greater detail by Morris (1957: 37–64) and by Phillips (1972). In favouring socio-economic explanations of the crime rate these early works usually provided a more rational and objective basis for pioneer reformism than did preceding biblical notions of good and evil. Retrospectively, their findings also seem more enlightened than Lombroso's biological theories of criminality that succeeded them. Yet, despite their initial appeal, nineteenth-century ecological and sociological initiatives in the study of crime *were* soon eclipsed by theories favouring biological/physiological explanations for individuals' criminality (a demise discussed in some detail by Morris (1957)).

Europe's empirical-analytical tradition was rediscovered in early twentieth-century Chicago. Ogburn and Thomas (1922), for instance, correlated business cycles with convictions over a fifty-year period between 1870 and 1920. The greatest strides, however, were made by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, who pursued the spatial study of crime at an intra-urban scale. They aimed to locate the origins and correlates of deviance with a view to reforming the adverse social and environmental conditions of crime-prone neighbourhoods. These authors stressed that their approach to crime was strictly sociological, 'an attempt to relate behavior to the social and cultural setting in which it arises' (Shaw 1929: 9, see also Shaw and McKay 1931, 1942); and this had a striking geographical dimension, undetected in earlier research informing the psychological and biological theories which linked crime with individual pathology.

Finestone's (1976) account of the Chicago School's epidemiological research draws out an important parallel with the earlier European studies: both discover an association in space between delinquency and economic indices. The consistency and significance of this link was to elude a generation of factorial ecologists before re-emerging in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, as the 1930s proceeded, the association became increasingly prominent in the writings of the Chicago criminologists. Whereas Shaw and McKay had originally interpreted delinquency in terms of cultural and social change, increased mobility and excessive 'disorganisation' (factors that had seemed to affect successive waves of European immigrants), as the depression worsened (and migration and residential mobility became sluggish) their interpretations increasingly rested on economic criteria:

> From an emphasis upon social change and social process they had moved to an emphasis upon social structure. From stress upon personal and primary group relationships – that is, upon the local milieu – they had moved to attribute priority to the impersonal pressures originating in the larger social systems. The conceptual primacy of local community was replaced by that of social class. (Finestone 1976: 93)

Shaw and McKay's widely quoted conclusion that crime and delinquency follow the physical structure and social organisation of the city stimulated an innovative approach to neighbourhood crime control in Chicago, and precipitated a long series of areal and ecological studies of crime in the academic literature. These have been condemned as atheoretic and positivistic, but the best are inspired by the sound philosophical presuppositions of direct realism.

Areal analyses of crime are concerned primarily with describing spatial distributions. A first stage in dealing with crime and criminals is to discover where they are. Most intra-urban research of this type has focussed on the location of offenders' homes, following the lead of Shaw and McKay (1942), who discovered an enduring tendency for known offenders to cluster within the inner city, and for offender residence rates to decrease outwards following the familiar distance decay curve. In Britain, too, Bagot (1941) found that the homes of convicted juvenile delinquents clustered disproportionately into three central wards of Liverpool on the banks of the river Mersey. Later, however, Morris (1957) observed in Croydon that offenders were also segregated in peripheral council-housing estates (a tendency also apparent from the mid-1950s in Hobart, Tasmania (Scott 1965)).

Timms (1965) sustained this areal tradition with a study in Luton, but perhaps the most thorough contemporary British studies of offender residence have been completed in Sheffield (Baldwin and Bottoms 1976; Bottoms and Xanthos 1981; Mawby 1979b), and in Cardiff (Evans 1980; Herbert 1976a). In Sheffield, the majority of offenders live between one and three miles from the city centre and cluster: (a) in the 'twilight' areas with high proportions of Irish and New Commonwealth immigrants; (b) in some enumeration districts adjacent to the main areas of heavy industry; and (c) on some council estates, especially those built in the inter-war years. In Cardiff, a similar pattern emerges of high offender rates in the inner-city terraces, the middle-ring rooming houses and suburban local authority estates. Here, the main aim of the areal analyses has been to preface a series of ecological and behavioural studies attempting to clarify the concept of 'delinquency areas'. However, the range of centrographic techniques employed by Rose and Deskins (1980), in their examination of offenders' and victims' residential patterns in Detroit, might anticipate the extended use of spatial statistics in the analysis of offender data (see also Stephenson 1980).

Simple areal analyses of *offences* have been less prominent in the literature. Harries (1973, 1974, 1976b, 1980) examined inter-city areal variations in North America, drawing attention particularly to the high incidence of violence (especially murder) in the south. Rengert and Müller (1972) traced the diffusion of drugs down the urban hierarchy in New York state; and there are also areal studies of prostitution, offering a novel view of the geographies of San Francisco and Nevada (Shumsky and Springer 1981; Symanski 1974). Phillips (1972) has probably produced one of the most detailed intra-urban areal studies of crime to date, in Minneapolis, where he identified a 'centralised' distribution of car theft, business robbery and business burglary, various 'ghettoised' clusters of assaults, property damage, street robbery and purse snatching, and a 'partially dispersed' pattern of residential burglary.

Ultimately, however, the depth of insight to be gleaned from areal studies is limited, since it is an approach which takes no account of population, land use or other features of the urban environment which affect the pattern of crime by constraining the distribution of opportunities. Far more interest within the empirical-analytical tradition has thus focussed on *ecological* analysis, which Herbert (1976a) defines as the correlation in space of areally aggregated crime rates and measurable indices of the social and physical environment.

Historically, four broadly distinct phases in the ecological analysis of crime can be discerned. The first two movements have already been mentioned. They are Europe's nineteenth-century 'cartographic criminology' and the pioneering intra-urban studies of deviance completed in early twentieth-century Chicago. Amongst more recent developments, it is relevant to distinguish the theoretically weak factorial ecologies of the 1960s from the more rigorous econometric studies of the last decade.

During the 1960s, a variety of numerically sophisticated but theoretically weak factorial ecologies was published, exploring the empirical associations between crime rates and socio-economic indicators. Despite authors' intentions, the practical application of results has often been limited, since many studies were crudely positivistic and held few insights for planners and policy-makers. It would therefore be superfluous to itemise and evaluate the results of every application of social-area analysis, factor analysis, principal-components analysis and related techniques for comparing the incidence of crime with that of other social phenomena, particularly since a number of critical reviews already exist. Gordon's (1967) discussion of papers by Lander (1954) and Chilton (1964), for instance, serves to illustrate some methodological pitfalls of multivariate techniques, while their theoretical shortcomings are amply documented in Baldwin's (1975) critique of ecological research in Britain. In this, and in other critical reviews Baldwin (1974a, 1979) is distressed by the blurred objectives of quantitative ecological analyses; by the fact that their conceptual difficulties and ambiguities are often overlooked; and by the tendency for results to be presented as if the use of technically sophisticated methods had obviated the need for careful explanations.

These reservations notwithstanding, the best of the studies, and the fruits of the Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design movement (stimulated by the discovery of consistent empirical associations between crime and the built environment, and introduced more fully in chapter 3) provide a ready basis for the quick 'solutions' to the crime problem that modern politicians require. There are, moreover, three persistent, if controversial, themes that have endured throughout the stormy history of ecological analyses of urban crime. They are the quixotic condition of 'social disorganisation', the association between crime rates and various measures of density or crowding, and the elusive relationship between deviance and economy. The practical and theoretical significance of these themes for future research is discussed in chapter 2.

The 1970s witnessed a more promising series of ecological studies of crime published by economists. They are usually based on North American data, and they draw attention to the relationship between crime rates and economic indicators at several spatial scales: the census tract (Beasley and Antunes 1974; Bechdolt 1975; Kvolseth 1977); the city or SMSA (Allison 1972; Flango and Sherbenous 1976; Hoch 1974; Phillips and Votey 1975); and the state (Nagel 1978). These studies are reviewed in detail by Berger (1980). The link they identify between crime rates and economic trends, and the implications of such a link for the monetarist economies of the 1980s, may be the most fruitful discovery of a generation of often inconclusive quantitative analyses.

For the most part, then, the empirical-analytical approach to criminological research takes as its task the statistical comparison of measurable crime patterns with the incidence of factors possibly associated with their genesis. In so far as strong association might be indicative of causality, the aim of such studies has been to find some basis for controlling the crime rate. Definitions of crime are usually taken from official statistics and treated as the starting point for analysis rather than as the end point of law-enforcement practices. Consequently, an understanding of the *meaning* of crime has rarely proved integral to research in this tradition.

The main thrust of today's spatial studies of crime, however, is indebted to the work of the Chicago School, and the spirit of the North American research was that of direct realism rather than atheoretic positivism (the distinction is clarified by Keat and Urry 1975: 9–40). The ecologists were not primarily concerned with causal connections between spatially coincident variables. Their aim was not to predict crime and delinquency by eliciting 'laws' which would link deviance with substandard housing, poverty, population change, foreign-born populations, cultural minorities, tuberculosis, mental disorder and the many other persistent crime correlates. It was, rather, to offer *explanations* for these enduring links. 'To explain things is not merely to show that they are instances of well-established regularities. Instead we [the realist] must discover the necessary connections between phenomena, by acquiring knowledge of the underlying structures and mechanisms at work' (Keat and Urry 1975: 5).

In Chicago, this knowledge was secured through the use of life

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