The geographies and politics of fear

Peter Shirlow and Rachel Pain

Background

This special issue arose from a collective sense of disappointment and frustration with prominent academic and policy related debates around 'the fear of crime'. Since its 'discovery' in the 1970s and 80s, fear has remained an important and obvious theme for academic and government researchers, the media and politicians. There is no denying the substance of fear in terms of media coverage, political manipulation and public discourse. Fear, whether it is quelled or stimulated, provides the capacity to both control and manipulate a variety of social and political discourses. Like any word with such powerful connotations, fear is a term that is controlled via processes of legitimisation, exclusion and prescribed interpretation. It is a word which in wider political terms is licensed to those whose fears are 'legitimised' by dominant political and media structures. At the same time its use is denied to those in the ranks of the 'deviant' or 'transgressive'. As we will show, the fears of the marginalised and powerless are often relegated behind those who are, in reality, less vulnerable to crime.

This collection of papers examines recent evidence on the patterning of fear, documenting some of the ways in which fear reflects, reshapes and reinforces social structures and power relations, and emphasising explanations which focus on social, political, sexual, race and class inequalities. The papers also examine 'fearism'—the manufactured and contested nature and use of fear of crime. The contributors challenge the way 'fear of crime' is defined and used within hegemonic discourses for the purposes of political agendas. They also examine how, in connection, fear is constructed within a range of distinct spatial arenas.

In addressing these points, we argue that there are some evident deficiencies in the quality of much research which has been undertaken. The continued spread of myths and stereotypes by the media and through research has led to the failure by national and local policymakers to recognise and address the root causes of fear. We have been surprised by the paucity of academic work which focuses explicitly on the socio-political power relations involved in the fear of crime. The small number of exceptions which have forwarded critical and radical perspectives on fear have tended to be ignored by the mainstream. As we go on to argue below, most accounts of fear of crime developed by academics have been positivist, behaviouralist or individualistic, often with the aim of servicing policy, but rarely presenting a fundamental challenge to it. Politicizing fear of crime debates is important, then, not just to improve understanding of a large and complex field, but so that they can actively inform political responses more appropriately.

The collection also focuses on the geographical aspects of fear. The location and situation of fear of crime, and the ways it is patterned, reflected and reinforced by the particularities of place, has a central role in its close association with patterns of marginalisation and exclusion. Each of the papers explores different aspects of these geographies. Human geography is currently seeing a reinvigoration of long-standing calls for geographers to become involved in more critical action research, and engaging to a greater degree with tackling pressing social issues through research (Kitchen and Hubbard, 1999). This new impetus is an appropriate backdrop for the research on fear of many of the contributors, as the papers tackle a number of issues where inequality and oppression are at the forefront, such as women's experiences of domestic violence; the fears of marginalized groups of young people; ethnic, sectarian and homophobic violence.

In this introduction we begin with a discussion of what fear of crime is and where it came from. We describe the deficiencies of much research to date, and then outline a more critical perspective which focuses on the geographies and politics of fear as a framework for the papers which follow.

Fear of crime?

'Fear of crime' covers the wide range of emotional and practical responses to crime and disorder which individuals and communities make. Despite the attention it has received, the term remains contested, debated, even denied, and there are fundamental differences over methodologies, policies and explanations. 'Fear' has been constructed in particular ways around certain groups, and widely used to serve certain political interests.

In particular, in the popular imagination, fear of crime tends to be framed around a series of moral panics. Historically and in contemporary society, these have centred on the supposed threat to older people's safety (Cook and Skogan, 1990), on 'stranger danger' for children (Stanko, 1990; Valentine, 1996), on disorderly and dangerous young people (Pearson, 1983; Muncie, 1999), and on a range of outsider groups including racial minorities, travellers and homeless people. As we write, one of the most prominent moral panics in Britain, children's safety from abduction and abuse, has been rekindled following the murders of two schoolgirls in Soham, England in August 2002. To draw from just two news features appearing in the press following the arrest of a school caretaker and teaching assistant, a local mother was reported as saying that she now had to warn her children they could not trust teachers as well as strangers; while an electronic device for implanting in children's flesh, so that parents know where their child is at all times, was aired. The control and containment rather than the protection of children is the main effect of such moral panics, and one of the most visible contemporary impacts of fear. Such responses are damaging to children (Hillman et al, 1990; Furedi, 2001), and also fail to focus on the main risks to which they are exposed, as children are far more likely to be harmed by parents, guardians or other close relatives. Yet when we think of child abuse, folk devils like Myra Hindley and Paul Brady jump to the fore.

Another contemporary fear prominent across the western media in recent months relates to attacks by terror groups such as Al-Qaida. Concern about attacks on London has brought the global events of September the 11th much closer to home—for example the fear of smallpox being unleashed on the British public by some shadowy terror group has produced a currency of fear concerning the availability of vaccines. Related sensational headlines tend to obscure rational debate, for example on what violence is, and why the reproduction of violence produces suicide bombers and organisations which endorse ambiguous violent acts which have no obvious political platform. There is no doubting that what makes individuals within violent organisations feel invulnerable is that they embrace their very own destruction. Death, in such circumstances, is a weapon within which fear is divorced from symbolic intent—if you detach yourself from fear then you can have some control over those who fear you most.

At present it seems that few western minds can understand why particular forms of group based violence are based upon mobilising despair as a political weapon as opposed to utilising hope as a political programme. Acts such as the Bali bombing demonstrate a post-colonial capacity to gain power through stimulating western fears. There is a collective responsibility to understand that the west, via political, economic and cultural control, is implicated in the processes by which the fears and despairs of non-westerners are transformed into violent acts. Yet such understanding is obscured partly by growing fearfulness and its deployment by western regimes.

This is just one example of ways in which 'fear' is appropriated by powerful groups. Others have charted the ways in which governments use discourses of fear of crime as a means of control and containment, particularly through punitive crime control policies (Garland, 1996). For Cook and Skogan (1990) in the US, fear of crime against older people was a useful device to drum up public support for crime control policies. For Ditton et al (1998), 'fear of crime' is largely an artefact of survey methodologies, which once invented, fed off itself and served many purposes. Clear benefits arise from the focusing of fear of crime on groups marked out as different and deviant. Drawing attention to this point, for the contributors to this collection, is one of the key objectives in politicizing fear of crime debates. Many of the papers aim to reveal the deployment of fear, and offer a more finely grained exploration of the ways it affects people and places.

When we talk about fear of crime, then, we need to begin from the understanding that fear is not known, nor wholly measurable. It can not simply be dismissed as an irrational response to a negligible threat, as several of the papers make clear by examining the 'real' risks (as far as these can be known) which many groups of people are exposed to. Nor is fear of crime limited to particular spaces and places; as geographers have argued, night time streets and parks deserve far less attention than they presently receive from crime analysts and commentators on fear. Fear of crime is diverse, dynamic and open to interpretation.

Fear of crime research: past collusion, future prospects

Public discussions, and many academic studies of fear of crime, frame it in sharp contrast to this understanding. Much previous writing and research on fear has taken place within academic criminology. As Walklate (1997) has argued, the positivist approach to knowledge production which dominates in this discipline relates to the modernist project with which they are engaged, in particular the imperative of feeding crime prevention policy with usable information. The corporatization of universities (see Castree and Sparke, 2000) is increasingly pushing academics across the social sciences to seek funding from contract research, which is more likely to be uncritical of public organisations and policies.

This background meant that a particular approach to the fear of crime developed and was reinforced early on. Social and political explanations tended to be eschewed; the fear of crime was individualised and even pathologised as a problem of individual frailty, attitude or demeanour. Surveys appearing to show that there was far more fear than actual victimisation in society, and that its patterning diverged from actual victimisation, encouraged these perspectives (e.g. Hough and Mayhew, 1983). Unsurprisingly, early 'solutions' to the newly discovered problem of fear focused on victims—so women should exercise care and avoid certain areas and provocative behaviours, older people should fit stronger locks and be less trusting of strangers. This reflected a broader ideological shift to victim-centred crime prevention during the 1970s in the US, and the 1980s in Britain, with the responsibility for crime and its prevention moving away from police, government or notions of society. In the reassurances of politicians and police literature during this period, social and political stereotypes (as well as myths about the patterning and causation of fear) were reinforced (Stanko, 1987; Walklate, 1989).

Research in human geography and related environmental disciplines has not always done much better. A 2001 review issue of *Urban Studies* on fear of crime in cities placed most emphasis on crime control, law enforcement and environmental interventions. In their introduction the authors draw on the rather limited three-fold explanation for fear of crime in Hale's (1996) earlier, well-cited literature review—fear as a product of victimisation, fear as a product of individual ability to exercise control and prevent victimisation, and fear as a product of environment. All three explanations tend towards the individualistic and deterministic, and miss discussions about the social structures and power relations which surround offenders, victims and those who fear crime. Indeed the emphasis on the role of the built environment continues to constitute the most popular 'geographies' of fear, in recent years reflected in increasing amounts of money spent on CCTV and other tools for the management of public spaces. Serious questions exist over the exclusionary consequences on certain social groups, as well as their efficacy in reducing fear of crime among vulnerable populations (Fyfe and Bannister, 1996; Koskela and Pain, 2000).

Meanwhile, myths around the fear of crime are still widely reflected in policy arena—about women and older people as hapless and vulnerable in public spaces; about men as fearless and unaffected; about young, homeless and ethnic minority people as threat, rather than threatened; and discourses of violence which cast working class people as deviant and marginal. A growing body of research suggests that these stereotypes are belied by reality—women, children and older people are more at risk in the home from domestic abuse and express high levels of fear in this previously ignored sphere, when questioning is more sensitive. Young men do not always embrace risk with bravado, but are sometimes severely affected by threat of violence; older people are less affected by fear of crime than other age groups; in both cases it is often poverty and marginalisation which fuels fear where it is experienced. Those demonised in fearist discourses, for example homeless people, are in fact more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime. But most policymakers have steadfastly ignored such findings.

England and Wales have recently seen a move from overtly 'victim-centred' crime prevention targeted at the individual, to an emphasis on 'community safety'. One promising change, from a geographical perspective, has been the collection of local information about crime and fear. Inevitably, though, the 'community' consulted and represented usually fails to include the most marginalized and vulnerable, who are most at risk both from fear and from stereotypes about their offending behaviour. The main thrust of interest in fear of crime continues to be to serve the needs of policy makers for information. Here as elsewhere in British social policy, an audit culture has been put in place where the imperative underlying the collection of information is to show that fear has fallen.

In the research arena, too, the quality of methodologies plays a crucial role in shaping the debate over what fear of crime is. Unsophisticated quantitative tools of data collection are still frequently used to measure fear of crime, despite arguments that they are inappropriate for investigating something as subjective, qualified and situational as fear (Hollway and Jefferson, 1997; Sparks, 1992). The more sensitive qualitative methodologies used by many of the authors in this collection are important in developing more detailed understandings of fear of crime, and in challenging long-standing myths about the people and places it affects the most seriously. A precedent for this work exists in the small but notable body of work which has exposed 'hidden' fear of crime within certain social groups, communities and places—for example among women (Stanko, 1990), gay men and lesbians (Namaste, 1996), disabled people (Pain, 1997), within poor communities (Evans et al, 1996), and children and young people (Anderson et al, 1994). Many of the papers in this special issue take this theme forward.

Another promising area of developing work, providing another theme on which this present collection is hinged, concerns the deconstruction of 'fear of crime'. These are accounts which question the construction and use of fear of crime, often for political purposes as we suggested earlier. Much of this literature has been stimulated by writing on the 'risk society' in the west in the late twentieth century (e.g. Beck, 1992), and the notion that we are increasingly worrying about very little, at great cost to our ability to live freely (Furedi, 2001). Others stress the ways in which government use discourses of fear as a means of control and containment, while for others, fear of crime is constructed as a social problem through the talk of citizens (Sasson, 1995; Taylor, 1995). However, while some of this work points again to more pressing issues of fear and victimisation, there is a danger, which we believe has been exacerbated by the cultural turn in the social sciences which focused greater attention on discourse, meaning and signification than on material issues. In analysing fear as a cultural phenomenon, we should not draw attention away from its socio-political context. The headline-grabbing middle class fears of the suburbs can often be dismissed; but there are many places where fear is justified, well founded, and strongly implicated in patterns of social exclusion.

The geographies and politics of fear: an agenda

In terms of a theoretical agenda, the papers in this special issue centre on two main themes which we now summarise. The first of these is the central position of the *politics* of fear in analysis. Fear is politically constructed and deployed at different levels, for example in territorial politics, so that fear creates and reinforces divisions between nations and communities. It is clear too in the social politics of gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, ability and class; and in the development of 'criminologies of the other', the association of danger with 'the threatening outcast, the fearsome stranger, the excluded and the embittered' (Garland 1996: p. 461). Here the relationships of fear of crime with different social identities should be viewed not in isolation, but as interwoven, as is demonstrated in Shirlow's discussion of ethno-sectarianism. As we have discussed, fear is woven into public discourses, whether in the shape of politicians using the stereotype of the hapless elderly victim, or official 'safety campaigns' which have a long history of feeding and shaping the nature of people's fears (a point made by Moran et al. regarding gay information campaigns). In policy making as elsewhere, fear of crime is used in the exercise of power, but rarely in a way that challenges hegemonic power.

Fear also has a role in the politics of resistance. Individuals, groups and communities employ many different strategies in response to fear. Some of these may be reactionary, defensive, and damaging to at least some members of communities, as has been suggested in relation to Neighbourhood Watch and similar forms of voluntary action in Britain (Walklate, 1989; Yarwood and Edwards, 1995). This can also be seen in recent protests against paedophiles on some estates, though we should be careful in making outsider statements of what 'appropriate' responses are. Other responses challenge rather than reinforce fear, and fear can work in positive and less socially divisive ways in bringing people together to fight injustice and hate crimes —for example the neighbourhoods where communities have protested about attacks on asylum seekers and Muslims.

The second theme tying together the papers is their emphasis on exploring and developing new *geographies* of fear of crime. As we outlined earlier, by far the most popular of the perspectives examining the spaces and places of fear has been those investigating the impact of different built environments. This perspective is largely absent from this collection. Nor do the contributors dwell for long on the mapping of fear, an increasingly popular approach given the powerful tools (such as Geographical Information Systems) at geographers' disposal. Instead, the papers are focused on the ways in which space and place are active in the construction of fear, and the role that fear of crime plays in increasingly exclusive communities, cities and societies. The social differentiation of fear is closely reflected in experiences of public spaces, private spaces, national and local territories and environments; the geographies of fear are clearly bound together with the politics of marginalisation and dispossession.

The papers give attention to the ways in which fear is constructed in different spaces at different scales—from the body (the focus of much crime), the household (where most violence takes place), the locality and the nation state, to global processes such as migration and conflict which give 'fear' new forms. At all these scales, space is demarcated along lines of social identity, be it class, race, ethnicity, sexuality or religion. We would argue that as these divisions widen, new forms of fear are being identified in new places, as we can see currently with sectarian and racist violence. A central concern is how powerful groups use this association between fear and place in order to dominate via the threat of violence, harassment, surveillance and other means of exerting power over the spaces of others.

Challenges to stereotypes about who the fearful are, and their responses to the perceived threat, run through this collection of papers. Webster's analysis focuses on white as well as Asian victims of racial violence. Groups of young people commonly seen as threatening or deviant appear in Pain's paper as most fearful of violence. Moran et al's research suggests that some 'gay' areas can be experienced as more frightening for gay men and lesbians than 'non-gay' areas, while for Warrington the home is the site of most fear for many women who are affected by violence. In the emphasis on power and its abuse, it is also important to recognise that fear and risk can be pleasurable for some groups in certain places. This realisation has been key to explaining patterns of gendered fear, particularly the role of different masculinities (Walklate, 1997), and has relevance to debates over the fears of children and young people (Muncie, 1999). Such new understandings do not mean rejecting earlier ideas, but underline again the need to weave more complex accounts of the politics of fear and their geographies. Fear of crime has different forms, and impacts in different ways according to locality and situation. Places are a unique blend of historical, political, social and economic circumstances, and patterns of fear reflect this. Thus fear is not reducible to generalisations, but needs to be viewed as situated, complex, and often multiply caused.

Conclusion

We conclude in contrast to recent quantitative surveys which show fear of crime is beginning to 'fall', at least in Britain (Mirrlees-Black and Allen, 1998). To accept this is to treat fear as little more than a statistical artefact. We would argue that as society becomes more complex and more divided, with greater social exclusion and injustice for some, fear of crime presents an increasing array of issues with a more diverse range of impacts. This collection of papers is intended to reflect related interesting recent work which has a strongly political orientation and implication, including critiques informed by radical perspectives including socialist, feminist, anti-racist and queer theory.

References

Beck, U. (1992) *The risk society.* Sage, London.

Castree, N. and Sparke, M. (2000) 'Professional geography and the corporatization of the University'. *Antipode* 32 (3): 222-9.

Cook, F. L. and Skogan, W. G. (1990) 'Agenda setting and the rise and fall of policy issues: the case of criminal victimization of the elderly'. *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy* 8: 395-415.

Ditton, J., Farrall, S., Bannister, J. and Gilchrist, E. (1998) 'Measuring fear of crime'. *Criminal Justice Matters* 31, Spring: 10-12.

Evans, K., Fraser, P. and Walklate, S. 1996: 'Whom can you trust? The politics of 'grassing' on an inner city housing estate'. *Sociological Review* 44 (3): 359-80.

Furedi, F. (2001) *Paranoid parenting: abandon your anxieties and be a good parent.* Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Fyfe, N. R. and Bannister, J. (1996) *City Watching: closed circuit television surveillance in public spaces*. *Area* 28(1): 37-46.

Garland, D. (1996) 'The limits of the sovereign state: strategies of crime control in contemporary society'. *British Journal of Criminology* 36 (4): 445-71.

Hale, C. (1996): Fear of crime: a review of the literature. *International Review of Victimology* 4: 79-150.

Hillman, M. Adams, J. and Whitelegg, J. (1990) 'One false move: a study of children's independent mobility'. Policy Studies Institute, London.

Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (1997) 'The risk society in an age of anxiety: situating fear of crime'. *British Journal of Sociology* 48 (2): 255-66.

Hough, M. and Mayhew, P. (1983) 'British Crime Survey: first report'. HMSO: London.

Kitchen, R. and Hubbard, P. (1999) 'Research, action and 'critical' geographies'. *Area*, 31 (3): 195-8.

Koskela, H. and Pain, R. (2000): 'Revisiting fear and place: women's fear of attack and the built environment'. *Geoforum* 31(2): 269-80.

Mirrlees-Black, C and Allen, J (1998) *Concern about crime: findings from the 1998 British Crime Survey.* Research Findings No. 83, Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. Home Office, London.

Muncie, J. (1999) *Youth and Crime*. Sage, London.

Namaste, K. (1996) 'Genderbashing: sexuality, gender, and the regulation of public space'. *Environment and Planning D*, 14: 221-40.

Pain, R. H. (1997) 'Social geographies of women's fear of crime'. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22 (2): 231-44.

Pearson, G. (1983) *Hooligan: a history of respectable fears.* Macmillan, London.

Sasson, T. (1995) *Crime talk: how citizens construct a social problem.* Aldine de Gruyter: New York.

Sparks, R. (1992) 'Reason and unreason in 'left realism': some problems in the constitution of the fear of crime'. In Matthews, R. and Young, J., (eds), *Issues in realist criminology.* Sage, London: 119-35.

Stanko, E. A. (1987) 'Typical violence, normal precaution: men, women and interpersonal violence in England, Wales, Scotland and the USA'. In Hanmer, J. and Maynard, M., (eds), *Women, violence and social control.* Macmillan, London: 122-34.

Stanko, E. (1990) *Everyday violence: women's and men's experience of personal danger.* Pandora, London.

Taylor, I. (1995) 'Private homes and public others: an analysis of talk about crime in suburban South Manchester in the mid-1990s'. *British Journal of Criminology* 35 (2): 263-85.

Valentine, G. (1996) 'Angels and devils: Moral landscapes of childhood'. *Environment and Planning D*: *Society and Space* 14 (5): 581-599.

Walklate, S. (1997) 'Risk and criminal victimisation: a modernist dilemma?' *British Journal of Criminology*, 37 (1) 35-45.

Yarwood, R. and Edwards, B. (1995): 'Voluntary action in rural areas: the case of Neighbourhood Watch'. *Journal of Rural Studies* 11 (4): 447-59.