Criminal Circumstance: A Dynamic Multicontextual Criminal Opportunity Theory (review)

Vincent Sacco

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Anthony Smith D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, 182 pp.

This is an easy book to review. It will instantly take its place as the best general introduction to the subject. Still, it is worth underlining that the book has a particular character. It is less an attempt to reconstruct the social world of nationalism than an incisive, terminologically sophisticated analysis of the way in which a player assesses the state of play of the game to which he has contributed so much. Coverage of other positions is fair, interesting and very nearly exhaustive — albeit Smith really should take the work of David Laitin into account. If all this will attract readers, so too should the fact that Smith goes a little beyond the position that he has outlined in his recent spate of publications; differently put, we have in an encapsulated form Smith's fine tuning of his own theory. The ethno-symbolism he now espouses is solidly Durkheimian, with the nation seen as being nothing less than sacred. But Weber is with us too: ur-nationalism seems to be that of the Jews, with very great admiration being shown to *Ancient Judaism*.

McGill University John A. Hall

PamelaWilcox, Kenneth C. Land and Scott A. Hunt, *Criminal Circumstance: A Dynamic Multicontextual Criminal Opportunity Theory*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2003, 248 pp.

Since the late 1970s, the concept of opportunity has been regarded by most sociologists of crime and deviance as a valuable analytical tool. Early and formative contributions by Hindelang, Gottfredson and Garofalo, and by Cohen and Felson demonstrated that it was possible to understand crime in ways that did not restrict scholarly attention to the offender. From this first generation of opportunity theorists we learned that it was not just "types of persons" but also types of circumstances and temporal and spatial conditions which explained why, how, when and where crimes occur. In the intervening years, the influence of opportunity theory has been profound. However this influence has more often been empirical and programmatic than theoretical. An extremely large body of research evidence has accumulated with respect to the kinds of environmental and circumstantial factors which correlate with several types of crime and victimization. As well, crime prevention through environmental design, situational prevention and opportunity reduction have become standard tools among practitioners. In contrast, theoretical developments have occurred much more slowly. It is against this background that the publication of *Criminal Circumstance* by Wilcox, Land and Hunt needs to be assessed.

The authors propose to elaborate and to make systematic a theory of "criminal acts," which they define as actions that involve force, fraud, and/or activities prohibited by law. They argue that the volume and distribution of crime are best theorized in terms of "criminal opportunity contexts." In the tradition of opportunity theory (and in a way that departs significantly from most criminological explanation) the emphasis is on the study of acts and not the characteristics of offenders or victims. Within such a framework, criminal motivation, as a theoretical construct, ceases to be of significance.

In developing their argument, Wilcox and colleagues build upon two influential intellectual traditions — routine activities theory and social control-social disorganization theory. Both kinds of explanations, they maintain must be understood in terms of individual-level and environmental-level (e.g. neighbourhood, school or workplace) social process. In short, they theorize that the occurrence of criminal events is determined by both the individual level and collective convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets and a lack capable guardianship and by the influence of individual-level and environmental-level social-control and social disorganization.

For Wilcox, Land and Hunt, it is not the additive but the interactive effects of these processes which are of greatest interest. In other words, it is in the manner in which the effects at one level condition those at the other level that the complexities and subtleties of criminal opportunity are to be found. As the authors note, there already exists a substantial body of empirical research which shows the relevance of these interaction effects. Most commonly though, researchers have not predicted such effects but stumbled upon them. As a result, interpretations have been of the post hoc variety and the contributions to theory have been minimal.

The authors extend the discussion of opportunity theory beyond the problem of criminogensis to questions about fear and other public reactions to crime. They do so for two reasons. The first reflects their observation that the multi-level argument is consistent with a large number of empirical findings on the study of fear of crime and protective behaviours. The second reason has to do with the dynamic character of the explanation they are attempting to develop. Thus, while individual-level opportunity affects the chance of experiencing a crime, such experiences in turn affect routine activities and subsequent crime risks. As the authors argue, crime varies not only spatially but temporally and any comprehensive explanation must take account of both kinds of variation.

Wilcox and her colleagues provide useful guidance in their discussion of some of the empirical implications of the theoretical argument. They state that, without doubt, the most appropriate way to test this theory is through hierarchical regression modeling of longitudinal data derived from large samples of individuals nested in variable environments. However, they demonstrate that tests or elaborations of the arguments need not involve only this research ideal.

Much can be learned from cross-sectional surveys or from more qualitative techniques such as focus groups or qualitative interviewing. Ethnographic methods, for instance, can reveal a great deal about the physical character of neighbourhoods or about the rhythms, tempos or timing of routine activities.

With respect to public policy, the authors argue that prevention measures taken both at the individual and the environmental level are compatible with their theoretical position. Much more importantly though, they emphasize the interactive character of these policy approaches and the potential for multiplicative (as opposed to additive) policy benefits. In short, it is not enough to simply engage in both individual-level and aggregate-level crime prevention initiatives simultaneously. It is much more important to understand how processes at each level can condition and amplify the interventions taken at another level.

Throughout the discussion, the authors take great pain to show that their arguments are consistent with a large body of existing literature. Indeed, they maintain that *Criminal Circumstance* should not be read as a reaction against a moribund sociology of crime which has nothing to offer. Instead, they maintain, the book was made possible by the continuing vitality of important theoretical and empirical traditions. This self-assessment is refreshingly modest and highly appropriate. The most significant contributions of *Criminal Circumstance* is not that it offers us yet another "new"or "alternative" way of thinking about crime. Rather, its value derives from the careful way in which it makes systematic and rigorous an approach which has been shown to have powerful explanatory value. In mapping the complexity and broadening the scope of criminal opportunity explanations, the book makes a genuine contribution to an important theoretical perspective.

Queen's University Vincent F. Sacco