

# Advances in the Identification of Space As a Structuring Factor of Social Reality

Leandro Ramos

Universidad Nacional de Colombia

The way in which space determines the appearance, reproduction, or dissemination of violence and participates in the formation of offenders is becoming increasingly clear. Likewise, it has become much easier to determine the way in which property offenders, in particular, tend to use the specific characteristics of space to commit their acts. In addition, studies on public policies and interventions aimed at reducing crime that contemplate the possibility of redeeming spaces usually include additional evidence regarding the relevance of space in understanding the nature of the infringement of the law.

Perhaps we are on the verge of achieving a theoretical synthesis capable of definitively establishing space as a fundamental structure of social reality, together with society, the economy, culture, politics, and demography. We can no longer ignore the spatialization of social reality. It could even be said that we are getting close to acknowledging the theoretical existence of both a general and a particular dimension of space. According to the former, space would structure reality at two levels: first, by integrating the other structural properties of the population (for example, poverty, low levels of labor ratings, and racial segregation in the same locations) and, second, by developing predominant geographical form; that is, urban residential, urban commercial, or rural—if we take into account the predominant ones.

Such a structural integration based on predominant, nonspecific geographical forms can be achieved only by space, because it is able to create those moods often described by philosophers and writers. Simmel (2007: 26), for example, states that "...the mood of a landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any one of them. In a way that is difficult to specify, each component partakes in it, but a mood prevails which is neither external to these constituents, nor is it composed of them."

It is no coincidence that the different forms of interpersonal, group, and collective violence appear most frequently in the low-income, urban, residential areas of both developed and developing countries, and that most property offenders reside in these areas. Nor is it a coincidence that residents in these areas feature significantly homogeneous ratings with respect to the indicators for each social structure. Furthermore, the activities of these individuals tend to limit themselves to

these same places, where the occupation density and the physical structure of the homes and public spaces force people into permanent and prolonged interactions that lead to the consolidation of behavior patterns, including those associated with crime.

On the other hand, the particular dimension of space guides our analysis toward the physical, observable form in which space is organized as a place: use of the land, architecture, public space, furniture, lighting and its operating conditions, and so on, as well as toward the routine occupations according to types of population, not just criminals, in these places.

In fact, the construction of space as that place produced by environmental criminology through its different theories has allowed criminologists to escape the spiral of macrosocial or micro-psychological structural causality in which they were frequently entangled. The current increased capacity to make multiple new, extremely accurate, and simultaneous empirical characterizations of criminal acts and criminals, guided or obtained to a great extent thanks to spatial data analysis, is the basis for this breakthrough that has contributed gradually to the rediscovery of space as a fundamental structure of social reality and a facilitator of modalities of crime.

Undoubtedly, the formulation of public policies and the actions of law enforcement agencies aimed at crime reduction have benefited from this new representation of space. In finding greater theoretical and empirical support for the fact that law enforcement agencies' increasingly place-based strategies do not produce merely precarious, superficial, or cosmetic changes but also affect the opportunities for the appearance of crime, public actions can also claim that the implementation of their strategies is structuring a new space that contributes to blocking the appearance, reproduction, and dissemination of offenders and offenses.

The current issue of *Cityscape* constitutes a pertinent and updated contribution to this process of theoretical and empirical development of a renewed understanding of the dimensions of space. The conceptual and methodological turn (that is, the Risk Terrain Model) proposed by Caplan, in his effort to address how specific places are more closely associated with criminal activities, is very interesting. His thesis that the spatial influence of criminogenic features enables occurrences and determines the seriousness and longevity of crime problems makes it possible to go beyond the mere identification of hot spots, while opening a work agenda that will make it possible to determine accurately how the combination of physical form and occupation patterns facilitates opportunities for the perpetration of certain crimes.

The articles by Cahill, Lens et al., and Jones and Paulsen, which analyze or evaluate the physical reconstruction of public, low-income, homogeneous residential complexes (through the HOPE VI Program) or the relocation of residents to other neighborhoods (through the Housing Choice Voucher Program), as well as their effects on the reduction of crime or of the exposure of these households to crime, could be more optimistic in the light of the evidence they obtained. After all, no counter-evidence exists in the articles that shows the transformations of these places or the relocation of households have increased crime in the zones to which people were relocated or that crime has shifted significantly to neighboring areas.

Overall, the articles seem to lose sight of the fact that the characteristics of these residential complexes have structured the formation of criminals and created spaces favorable for the perpetration of crime in the context of a decades-long process. The shape that the general and particular

dimensions of space have acquired in these residential complexes has fostered crime. Therefore, the breakup of the homogeneity of social reality through the reconstruction of the physical form or the structure of social interactions requires the establishment of longer time periods to obtain valid results that are capable of determining whether the criminality that was slowly fostered is gradually deactivated.

The study carried out by Harris et al. provides support for this perspective. The author states that residential segregation acts in such a way as to reinforce concentrated disadvantage, which is related to criminal specialization, which, in turn, is influenced by peer contagion. Perhaps it would be useful to underline the fact that this type of peer contagion can occur only in the context of a space that intensifies interactions and consolidates patterns of behavior.

Finally, although O'Leary refers only briefly to the fact that offenders are more likely to offend in an area where they previously resided than in other comparable areas, I believe that, in fact, this point constitutes one of the most important aspects of the type of studies he carries out. Perhaps it will be possible to answer the question posed by variations between distance and direction in criminal distance decay models when the familiarity of the criminal with the target-place is made operational, which, in turn, might transform the target-anchor point relation into a logical expression of that familiarity.

## **Author**

Leandro Ramos is an associate researcher at the Institute of Urban Studies, Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

## **Reference**

Simmel, Georg. 2007 (1913). "The Philosophy of Landscape," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24 (7–8): 20–29.