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## **Urban policy, city control and social catharsis: The attack on social frailty as therapy**

### **Abstract**

Urban policies have increasingly been 'criminalised' as regeneration, public housing management and homelessness programmes have been aligned with the aims of criminal justice and anti-social behaviour measures. In this article policies that tackle problem places, people and behaviours are interpreted as expressions of social anger and fear that are made tangible via periodic attacks on social marginality. Case examples are offered in which urban policies appear as a kind of social catharsis, or exorcising of fear/anxiety. Such urban policies appear to construct social vulnerability as a threat that thereby helps to trigger interventions that might help realise goals of urban renewal and release from worries about criminality and urban-social decline. This model of control and policymaking is developed by drawing on the emotional energies at the heart of cultural criminology and critical perspectives taken from contemporary urban studies.

**Keywords:** cultural criminology, fear of crime, gentrification, revanchism, urban politics

### **Introduction**

'Man in black, What is your mission? To invade the favela and leave bodies on the ground.' (Chant by BOPE, Paramilitary wing of the Rio de Janeiro police)

Public policy, as collective action directed at common goals, has often been identified in broadly positive terms. Yet as criminologists are increasingly keen to state, the state may also enact socially damaging, punitive or violent interventions (Cohen, 2000). The central argument of this article is that many policy instruments are driven by the need in their architects and supporters to relieve the pressure of anxiety through aggression against the socially marginal and the spaces they inhabit. To this end, the paper charts a series of urban initiatives, arguing that they have the common objective of removing or eliminating unwanted or disorderly populations and districts. Such actions are rooted in resentment and fear directed at often politically scapegoated groups. Criminologists focusing on urban contexts have unpacked some of the ways frustrations with poverty and physical urban decay spurred projects focused on the aggressive erasure or re-making of cities (Hayward, 2004). Examples emerge in aspects of city governance that focus on the apparent improvement of the city and the implicit control or removal of social groups deemed to be impediments to such goals. Such programs include extensive rounds of state-aided gentrification (Slater, 2004), public and private housing demolition (Allen, 2008), and the control of anti-social behaviour by public housing landlords (Flint, 2006). Such examples highlight the implementation of supposedly benign state policies to re-make places and tame those labelled as deviant, dangerous or intransigent so as to produce renewed and better organised cities. This article is an attempt to make sense of these policies by probing the deeper question of how public sentiment is harnessed to political projects that challenge or attack social vulnerability in urban contexts.

The emotional landscape of urban life has been identified by Thrift as an important and under-studied aspect of city life: 'anger, fear, happiness and joy are continually on the boil,

rising here, subsiding there' (2004:57). Such concerns collide with the interests of cultural criminologists who have identified how the vicarious victimisation narrative proffered by the media, the processes of identity formation, and political polarisation are important drivers for many contemporary anti-crime policies (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2008; Wacquant, 2009). One key argument of this article is that many urban policy programs (state efforts at addressing unevenly distributed social problems and economic inequalities) in the UK and other Western countries can be interpreted as expressions of deep social anger and class resentments, rather than of ambitions to produce improved social and physical outcomes in cities. Such policies contribute as causes of a social catharsis that vents often prejudicial and ill-informed beliefs (such as that poor are essentially deviant or deserving of their condition or that migrants and minority ethnic groups are a threat to the dominant ideals or conditions of social life) about social groups labeled as oppositional to social, economic, and political goals (Young, 2007).

Hayward identifies in much contemporary urban life the anxiety of urban populations about crime, migration, and social change (Hayward, 2004). For Young, this anxiety is a kind of modern 'vertigo' in which daily social life is replete with anger, but also a sense of powerlessness that 'searches-out culprits and mobilises difference' (Young, 2007: 10). This anger stems from a wider anxiety generated by contemporary forms of work insecurity and social change that unsettle otherwise reassuring habits and continuities – a fear of social falling or abandonment in the face of rapid social change and increasing precariousness that form the basis of recent analyses of anger and labour market change today (Standing, 2011). The expansion of precariousness, to encompass others beyond the lowest paid or most marginal groups, suggests the possibility of plummeting from relative privilege into insecurity or hardship. Such anxieties add momentum and energy to public debates about removing threats via policies with inflated mandates for crime and social control (Garland, 2001; Simon, 2007).

This article examines deceptive policies that obfuscate the deeper objective of removing the socially marginal or to destroy/remake the spaces they occupy, which are further seen as hindrances to the achievement of social, urban, and economic renewal. Certain policies act to designate these sites and groups as targets for the rage and scorn of diverse social groups who gradually perceive migrants, dilapidated spaces, areas of public housing and homeless street populations (among others) as beyond remediation without concerted action (Amster, 2008). Such policies are supported via an array of media reports and public policy goal-setting that portray such groups as dangerous, alien or as enemies to progress (Maruna et al., 2004). Such policies are cathartic in the sense that they recruit direct emotional energy toward renewal and release from fears and anxieties; supporting or voting for such programs may thus appear to offer a better future, free of the threats and impediments that the social detritus of neoliberal systems generates through its ordinary workings (Gough, Eisenschitz, and McCulloch, 2006). These policies are evident in the demolition and renewal of notable London public housing estates; the deportation of the French Roma population; the waves of destruction of Palestinian homes and livelihoods (Graham, 2009); death squads murdering street children in Latin America (Sluka, 2000); and the displacement of the urban poor through state-sponsored gentrification (Smith, 1996). These examples have a number of common features. Each takes as its target the politically weak, economically sidelined and socially different groups as manifest or latent targets.

Also, each seeks to discipline or remove what are seen as threatening groups or those deemed resistant to discipline and homogenization. Finally, such legislative political actors labour to justify their efforts and recruit support based upon a need to remake or renew urban spaces and identities. As Graham has argued, such policies are often inflected with military and market ontologies which rest:

‘...on the changing powers of states to attempt the violent reconfiguration, or even erasure of urban spaces. This operates either as a means to allay purported threats, or as a way of clearing new space for the exigencies of global-city formation, neoliberal production, or as urban *tabula rasa* necessary for the most profitable bubbles of real estate speculation. Central here are widespread invocations of exception and emergency in justifying such violent assaults, often against (demonized and fictionalized) urban, racial or class enemies’ (Graham, 2011: 12)

It is not sufficient to label cathartic policies as simply punitive reactions or ideologically driven; we must also understand how collective identity and anger are ignited and stoked by social inequality (Scheff and Retzinger, 1991). In addition, we require a vocabulary to articulate how and why political actions may be used to harness rage and vengeful social sentiment. Smith (1996) and Appadurai (2006) have moved toward such a vocabulary, hinged on class-based formations of sentiment and as projects of ethnic affiliation, respectively. Yet the growth in inequality has yielded urban systems with deepening divisions between the affluent and excluded, between respectable and dangerous that motivate politicians to respond to and drive public concerns. The political designation of social differences like poverty and ethnic identity as markers of danger, difference, and otherness is under-written by media discourses that further enable strategies for remodeling, cleansing, displacing and excluding those who are deemed to be worthless, intransigent, or criminal (Young, 1999).

Widespread commitments to neoliberal principles of market allocation and the use of austerity programs have eroded the municipal realm and led to a further re-sorting of cities via property markets (Ellison and Burrows, 2007) along with new foci for policing strategies (Atkinson and Helms, 2007). According to Wacquant (2008; 2009) and Wilson (1990, 1996), armies of reserve labour and welfare-dependent households in inner and outer cities are often experience concerted policy attention. Exotic and subterranean immorality, criminal industry and joblessness are identified in popular discourse as being located spatially and socially outside the boundaries of respectable society. This sense of division, of them and us, yields a more forceful politics, inflected by anger at the temerity of opposition, criminality, and deviation from constructions of prevailing norms.

These conditions appear to be tributaries that feed an angry social torrent (Sloterdijk, 2012) in which simplistic debates about poverty and criminality are further agitated by media systems that generate emotional, knee-jerk political decision-making (Simon, 2007; Altheide, 2001). Political action is accelerated by public demand for action and such media coverage. These emotional and technological drivers are important considerations for analysing the speed and intent of policymaking that seeks scapegoats as it becomes more deeply intertwined with widespread psychological impulses and needs. Scripts of

condemnation, such as the UK Prime Minister and Home Secretary's responses to the 2011 riots, shade key urban populations and spaces as antagonistic to respectable, included society and available as targets for forced reforms. Analyses of gentrification, indigenous urban policy in Australia, and the increased enmeshing of urban renewal and criminal justice policies are used here to help build an analysis of urban policy as an emotionally-inflected domain that is aggressively patrolled by its proxies in the form of policing agents, public landlords, social workers, wardens and others. In the final section, I discuss the prospects for reforming or softening these patterns of political action.

### **Civility and Anger in Political Life**

The idea that political, judicial, and civic life is founded upon disinterested forms of decision-making and fairness is an important development for understanding the nature of public life. Yet as writers like Sloterdijk (2010), Presdee (2000), and Wouters (2011) argue this tendency toward civility, civilisation and pacification is not assured. Contrary to the macroscopic assessment of Elias (Elias et al., 2000), civility and reductions in personal violence are subject to a high degree of variability. More importantly, those political, social and judicial elites whose mandate is predicated on benign care are completely capable of aggression themselves, or to take Sloterdijk's thesis seriously, capable of channelling of the rage undergirding the psychodynamics of everyday social life.

The civility manifest in public life may conceal the demands of respectable society and an angry working-class keen to face down the dangerous others mobilised by public politics. This is evidenced in peaceful suburbs as well as neighbourhoods stressed by criminality that call for increased safety and for policing agencies to tackle anti-social behaviour by removing social detritus from public view. Likewise, politicians are commanded to 'do something' about the incursion of public or mixed-income housing and to reduce the tax and fiscal burden of public programs. From such bases, we may identify the aggressive core of many public policies as vehicles by which social difference, scapegoated groups, and dangerous spaces can be attacked. Civility may be a mask concealing the truer face of middle and working-class rage, manipulated and misdirected working class resentment that nevertheless seeks to tame public spaces (Atkinson, 2003), welfare costs, and migration. Neil Smith captures this backlash well with the depiction of a revanchist or vengeful urbanism (1996) placed at the centre of his analysis of New York political life in the mid-nineties where:

'antiurbanism represents a reaction against the supposed "theft" of the city, a desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighbourhood security. More than anything the revanchist city expresses a race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites who are suddenly stuck in place by a ravaged property market, the threat and reality of unemployment, the decimation of social services, and the emergence of minority and immigrant groups, as well as women, as powerful urban actors. It portends a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants...screamingly affirmed by television programming.' (Smith, 1996: 211)

For Smith, the examples of state-led gentrification, anti-homeless ordinances, and aggressive forms of community policing reflect the anger and fears of majority groups who reject progressive social programmes or nuanced understandings of social problems. As both Garland (2001) and Young (1999) have argued, complex social forces are rendered simple so the excluded can be attacked as outsiders, deviants, and criminals undeserving of support. Within contemporary urbanism, neoliberalism exacerbates the production of an urban poor at the margins of work, the welfare dependent, welfare excluded, criminal and incarcerated (Wacquant, 2009). Instead of a concern about the social costs of poverty (crime, rising health expenditures and education), there exists a shift toward technologies and policies that make it tenable to refuse the costs and intrusions of deprivation – public austerity programmes, tax cuts, gated communities and SUVs, for example. These attempts at evading the consequences of rising inequality form the basis of a number of recent, dismal readings of contemporary politics that identify the decreasing influence of ideas about a public realm and social justice as well as a widening gulf between rich and poor (Judt, 2010; Harvey, 2010; Hutton, 2010) even as the costs of inequality are more clearly identified (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010; Dorling, 2014).

### **The centrality of anger and fear in policymaking**

If action against excluded and vulnerable groups has been a growing trend, one way of understanding these shifts is to conceive of policy-making as a process through which social anger and resentments are focused and projected onto externalised and threatening groups. We can turn to theorists like Ost (2004), whose analysis reveals the hidden centrality of such anger within political life. For Ost, capturing what he terms ‘economic anger’ is an essential means of attracting support through the creation of emotional connections:

‘anger is not something that only occasionally bursts onto the political scene, but is central to ‘normal’ politics as well. Anger is central to politics both as a diffuse, untargeted sentiment citizens experience, usually economically, and as the emotion political organizers need to capture and channel, which they do by offering up an ‘enemy’ they identify as the source of the problem.’ (Ost, 2004: 229)

Where Marx had identified capital as ‘congealed labour’, for Ost, political stability is viewed as ‘congealed anger’ in which the process of recruitment to political causes feeds and transmutes a diffuse social fury into projects that target ‘others’. Politics not angry only when elites ‘shout’ (Ost argues that ‘the chief work of the elite is to eschew gloating’ p.236), but negativity is built into ordinary political life as a means of garnering support. In Ost’s analysis, anger stems from discontent created by capitalism and inequality, through which politicians seek to recruit political capital and selectively spew this force onto the objects supposedly generating these powerful emotions – the nonconformist or those otherwise perceived to be troublesome by the community at large. Ost gives the examples of angry protests in the late 1960s by US civil rights campaigners as well as the way the Republican party slowly won over the Democratic Southern states by mobilizing white anger against civil rights – seeking voters on the basis of emotional identities rather than rational self-interest: ‘The chief axis of distinction is not what you’re for but what you’re against. Who or what is responsible for the ills, lacks, and grievances?’ (Ost, 2004: 238)

Drawing on the work of Carl Schmitt, Ost sees the perpetual creation of binary friend/enemy distinctions as one of the main tasks of political life. Through these efforts it is not necessary to destroy the enemy, but rather to note that that enemy could destroy the self (the resonance with contemporary international politics is notable). For criminologists like Young (1999), these processes are at the heart of the demonization and othering of social groups perceived to be threatening and disorderly, locating such processes more generally within urban life. An age of anxiety left few clear guides to social action or safety and only a worsening social inequality that resulted in a perpetuation of crime, its increasingly 'disorderliness' (the rise of anti-social behaviour as itself a crime), and the merger of general disorder into the category of crime.

Writers like Garland (2002) argue that rising crime in 1960s Western societies was important because it also touched the lives of higher income groups. This meant that a diffuse social anger lay not only in the inequality between classes, but also in the perceived theft of privilege and safety from the affluent and middle-classes. This connects well with Smith's ideas about urban revanchism and its roots in a gender-class-race terror underpinning a vengeful attack on the socially vulnerable. Such processes also appear to be generated by the geo-demographic position of social groups in the city. As Young notes (1999), gentrification increased the distance between high-income groups and 'problem people', which further intensified feelings of insecurity. On a related point, commentators suggested policies like the 'bedroom tax' (which reduced housing welfare entitlements to those 'under-occupying' their dwelling) were intended to mollify the middle-classes by helping to price-out the poor from high market value areas.

Young (1999) saw in contemporary social politics a condition akin to 'social bulimia' in which targeted groups (urban gangs, minority groups, anti-social youth) were either 'ingested' by incarceration or the less stringent ties of the criminal justice system, or vomited out and cordoned away from respectable, sanitized society in distant or enclosed public housing estates as modes of social risk management. Social geographies associated with risk produce what Young sees as an intricate map of no-go areas and avoidance behaviours, including self-imposed curfews or disaffiliation from public spaces. No doubt these patterns also create feelings of irritation and frustration at the inability of citizens to enjoy the right to live and move about unimpeded by fear or victimisation (Blomley, 2011, Herbert, 2008). For Maruna et al (2004), these processes are part of a broader attempt to destroy our own 'shadow', disowning those unfortunate enough to be superfluous to the economic system and whose subsequent abject position justifies further denials of sustenance by welfare and housing systems.

Hate, anger, pleasure and fear appear as the critical components of contemporary culture captured in Presdee's (2000) analysis. This helps explain how social anxiety and fury reviewed could be part of a wider culture of humiliation, featuring media saturation of social harms as a daily reality – hate, scapegoating and criminality are now major focal points. For Presdee, crime and harm are not phenomena that are somehow 'out there'; rather, they are deeply woven into the cultural formats of which we are both witnesses and producers (such as phone video clips, Youtube or, reality cop shows). Presdee's emphases on the rise of humiliation in popular culture and the obsession with reality T.V. (e.g., UK

Channel 4's *Benefit Street*) illuminates the need for catharsis and illustrates why the socially precarious are attacked. People are drawn to the guilty, voyeuristic pleasure of observing the fate of others, but also need the kind of psychological release from anger and frustration that comes from a therapeutic encounter. Widespread social fear and anger, a culture of spite, and the nexus of media and political systems combine to produce a system with vicious politics:

'Even if they want to, politicians cannot simply base urban policy on what 'experts' define as scientifically evaluated best practice about what policies do and do not work. They also have to consider the raw play of power and the rhetorical pressing of buttons that evoke the darker human emotions, particularly of anger, resentment, jealousy, insecurity and fear of all those who are seen as invaders of the familiar spaces of what is considered to be homeland...In these circumstances, visions of controlled, sanitised, safe spaces for consumption and other pleasures enjoy wide appeal across the social spectrum. Recent images of urban renaissance in this sense join a long lineage attempting to tame the chaotic, vivacity of city life.' (Stenson, 2007: 37)

For Breuer and Freud, the cathartic method allows a patient to relive traumatic events and to achieve a purging, therapeutic effect. Emotions spill out and neuroses are relieved. It seems useful to regard this pattern of emotional frustration and its subsequent release through therapeutic work as a metaphor for the kind of emotional processing conducted by political actors and institutions. The kind of impulsive, political aggression and knee-jerk reactions can be read as a deep social need for release from frustrations and fears. Class-political revenges of this kind rely on depictions of the victimisation of respectable society so that punitive policies can be justified by political entrepreneurs (Tilly, 2003). The democratisation of anxiety has resulted in deepening and more generalized worries about the risks present in late (Beck et al., 1994), anxiety-provoking, indeterminate modernity (Bauman, 2006), all of which produce deeper forms of social unease. Lipovetsky argues:

'A sense of insecurity has invaded all minds; health has imposed itself as a mass obsession; terrorism, catastrophes and epidemics are regularly front-page news...The only real question now is that of protection, security and the defence of social benefits...The climate of the first period has faded, giving way to a now ubiquitous demand for protection.' (2005: 39)

Because these demands appear to generate a hardening of dispositions toward the excluded and dispossessed as well as collectively resourced municipal functions and provisions (Judt, 2010), we can identify cathartic policies and actions where they satisfy the following conditions:

- i. They respond to patterns of frustration and obstruction (the need to regenerate a particular locality; the use of disproportionate police force);
- ii. Their policy objects are poorer, socially 'othered' or vulnerable outcasts who are portrayed as intransigent, irreconcilably different or sources of social anxiety (migrants to British cities, the singling out of the Roma population as a source of crime in Italian cities, the targeting of anti-social youth);



- iii. The sense that policies will offer relief from public anger and worry (e.g., stop and search policing as a means of combatting knife or drug crime, the use of identity cards as a means of keeping out 'illegal' immigrants in the UK, the construction of the 'peace wall' across the occupied settlements of the west bank in Israel).

In many cases, these policies lead to cycles of further regressive actions and reforms that are more likely to prevent the ultimate resolution of fear and anxiety since they tend to worsen the conditions that generate those problems, as in the example of politically vilifying urban youth in the Parisian banlieues and those in London after the 2011 riot, rather than investing in work opportunity and diversionary programs. Despite this self-defeating character of aggressive urban polices, there is a worrying tendency for them to be used as springboards for tough, punitive action, as the following case studies illustrate.

### **Case studies in urban catharsis**

A series of more specific examples of the deployment of public anger through urban policy are now considered here as bundles of action that seek to dispossess those who threaten urban safety and a revitalised economic prosperity through aggressive criminal justice policies, housing policies and other related forms of creative destruction in urban contexts (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

#### ***Revanchism and gentrification***

For Neil Smith (1996), housing strategies, investments and policing decisions in New York city were part of an emotional backlash against the poor and marginal. The actions of the local state within a broader political-economy sought the displacement of the poor and the visible homeless in order to invigorate the city's economy in their wake. Smith's description of these programmes roots these efforts in feelings of vulnerability by the city's elite, vented by plans to revitalise and gentrify the urban core while displacing the homeless and low-income households, thus realising both financial and social goals by inflating real estate values and clearing away poverty to the margins of the city, and by extension, its cost.

As Clark (2005) argues, these actions were preceded historically by urban renewal--dislocation engineered by privileged elites in the past. As he observes, these battles did not begin with the coining of the word 'gentrification' by Ruth Glass in 1964; earlier waves of urban renaissance in eighteenth century Southern Europe exposed elite reactions to the problems of urban congestion and criminality. These programs expressed both anger and frustration at the emergence of urban problems that impinged on local social elites. The rise of revolutionary power in cities like Paris suggested the need to truncate more direct threats of this kind. Haussman's re-modelling of central Paris is well-known to have been spurred by the public aim of improving health and circulation, but had the more obvious effect of clearing a dangerous revolutionary and criminal class by building wide streets to prevent occupation and barricading. As Blomley notes, such revitalization and the displacement of the socially marginal continues in contemporary acts of renewal:

'Motivated by a class-based "revanchism", public space has also been subject to intensified surveillance and policing as the streets and parks of the city have become

occupied by those evicted or squeezed from urban private space. Expressed through a variety of legal interventions targeted at the poor and homeless...and justified by an increasingly shrill language of “zero-tolerance,” “compassion fatigue,” and straightforward class hatred, this “public” policing has its roots, some argue, in anxieties over private property, especially relating to gentrification.’ (Blomley, 2004: 31)

Smith uses the idea of a modern, urban form of revanchism as an interpretive framework to understand the social, political and economic transformations coalescing in mid-nineties New York. As he (Smith, 2002) argues, not only has gentrification become generalised as a series of local policy frameworks, this conception of unchecked political hostility has also become extremely apposite to an appreciation of broader changes affecting other cities, countries, and political projects globally. Operating through the housing market (gentrification and the take-over of working class neighbourhoods by the privileged), policing (zero tolerance policing) and welfare retrenchment, this form of political action has been applied by social scientists in other North American (Slater, 2004, Wyly and Hammel, 2005), British (Atkinson, 2003), and Western European (Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008) contexts, among others. In short, there appears to be much more to say about a vengeful politics that now appear more as a feature of urban social and political life today than was even supposed by Smith when he first proposed his thesis.

As Blomley argues, in many cases the imperative driving such renewal is the economic and moral re-making of the city through the assertion of specific property relations that privilege a logic of ‘highest and best use’ to which gentrification is currently applied as state sponsored policy in many cities. The core rationale connecting these disparate actions in contemporary urbanism is the attempt to commodify central city spaces that promote circuits of capital accumulation through property, rather than the deadweight expenditures of social programs, like housing and welfare. As Blomley argues, this idea of a highest and best use in planning has an almost ontological position in language dictating the re-shaping of the city. It represents:

‘not just a prediction, it is a prescription – highest and *best* use, in other words. The highest and best use of urban land is a moral imperative and a necessary expectation. It is inevitable, natural, and beneficial...abandoning a logic of community and neighbourhood’ (Blomley, 2003: 84).

This deep status of property relations is such that gentrifiers, city policy elites, and many displacees see the value of space not in its habitability, but rather as a commodity. Urban policy, planning and local economic development programs often cast particular social groups and spaces as threats to reform, progress, and prosperity. In political and media treatments of run-down neighbourhoods or homeless street populations, narrative devices are regularly used to define them as blockages, a potential thwarting of ambitions to mend and improve the fortunes of the city and contributing citizens. Much of the vision applied to particular urban places and communities suggests a similar logic of frustration at their deviation (for example, King’s Cross in London; Times Square in New York, and the Indigenous area of Redfern in Sydney), heralded by Smith as a kind of writing-out of those who lack rights to the city: ‘we can expect a deepening villainization of working-class,

minority, homeless and many immigrant residents of the city, through interlocking scripts of violence, drugs and crime.’ (Smith, 1996:230)

### ***Anti-homeless policies***

The idea of the creative city as a space of attraction for talent, innovation, and tolerance has been a central influence of much urban policy over the past fifteen years or so. Yet as Peck (2005) argues, the pursuit of skilled labour has often been responsible for zero-tolerance policing and other forms of social hostility. For all the apparent holes in Florida’s arguments (2002; 2005), many cities still promote forms of urban liveability to draw mobile talent. For Peck, such policies occur within neo-liberal modes of urban governance that forcibly reconstruct cities as sites of purity in the eyes of incoming professionals and capital investment. Far from being about tolerance, the global scramble to manufacture creative cities for a peripatetic worker-elite has generated a new economic rationality that is used to capture economic investment via the dislocation of local others – down and outs, the homeless, and other visible harbingers of ‘disorder’ who are conflated with criminality as a means of legitimating strong, erasing action (Amster, 2008). Thus the congealed anger of urban governance helps to fertilise policies reflected in the emerging environment:

‘by town planning, by road networks which divide cities, by the gating of private estates, by the blocking off of areas from easy access, but above all by money...and whether it involves private or public police, is aimed at removing uncertainties, of sweeping the streets clean of alcoholics, beggars, the mentally ill and those who congregate in groups.’ (Young, 1999: 19)

Figure 1 about here

Efforts to erase and overwrite this social detritus, as with Mike Davis’ picture of a ‘bum-proof’ bench in *City of Quartz* (1991) (see Figure 1), provide insight into the ultimate ends of many contemporary urban interventions – the systematic surveillance, displacement, and continuous circulation (Wacquant, 2002) of those deemed at any one policy moment to be the ‘others’ in the prevailing media-political system. Caught between park benches segmented to make sleep impossible, private pavements managed by private improvement districts, and the withdrawal of social services and residential facilities, the kind of capitalism in which these groups flourish now seeks to cut its side of the social contract while blaming the downtrodden for sealing their own fate and legitimating punitive forceful action. This has produced interstitial and low-value urban spaces (ironically championed by Florida as places of embryonic creativity) where some sanctuary might be found, but have been largely overtaken and scarified by capital investment in what Ritzer has described as the globalization of nothing (Ritzer, 2007). This creates vast tracts of franchise capitalism and indistinct places divorced from human need, while poorer groups are cordoned-off and away from the fearful gaze of respectable groups.

### ***Indigenous policy***

Blomley’s (2003) analysis of urban aboriginal populations highlights how local rights to occupy urban space encounter periodic challenges and confrontations. In Canada, Blomley

has recorded the effect of recent colonisation on an extensive displacement, yet in Australia these processes arguably remain in progress. The targeting of Aboriginal communities has been particularly apparent under successive Australian Federal governments, but are increasingly so in the current round of welfare reforms that have made urban life intolerable (Atkinson et al., 2010). Initiatives directed at public drinking, homelessness, and the forcible repatriation of transgressors to originating communities demonstrate a particularly vicious form of what Mitchell describes as the annihilation of space by law (1997). These themes of indigenous urban life, regeneration, and political hostility are unpacked in this case study.

The use of punitive policy measures in the pursuit of social betterment such as the reduction of public street drinking or anti-social behaviour function as proxies for the de facto targeting of urban Aboriginal society. While the Federal immigration minister has openly discussed the unsustainability of remote Aboriginal settlements, the inner-city Aboriginal population is packaged as an idle and intransigent problem, singled-out through continued iterations of socio-legal attempts at disruption. The withdrawal of welfare payments to the parents of truant children, seen as money for 'sitting down' in the national/Murdoch press, has been directed exclusively at particular Aboriginal communities. On the other hand, problems of direct health harm, like petrol sniffing by young fatalistic Aborigines, incur immense pressure to stir Federal and State government action. Relevant here are the impressions of an indigenous counter culture of urban Australians used to justify both punitive policing programmes and attempts at displacement in order to raise the real estate value of the land they occupy (in areas like central Sydney).

Ironically, long-standing urban aboriginal communities represent a gift--devalorising choice segments of centrally located urban real-estate, creating significant rent gaps. The market intransigence of the Indigenous population has resulted in outrage embedded in policies that make more likely the regeneration of Redfern, an extensively Aboriginal area in Sydney. As property values and rents escalate stratospherically, the apparent illogicality of Indigenous residents as a 'freely' occupying group is viewed by some as increasingly untenable. Yet it is also the broad socio-spatial concealment of Aboriginal problems from white Australia that exacerbates the sense of otherness of these problems, fuelling Liberal party rhetoric on unsustainable communities as it diminishes any prospect of social empathy through local contact while fuelling anxiety and punitive discretionary urban policies and practices towards the community (Atkinson, Taylor and Walter, 2010).

### ***Housing market renewal***

In the UK and US, market confidence is often seen as the saviour for problems of low-demand and high crime urban areas. Housing programs like HOPE VI (US) and the Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders areas (UK) have promoted homeownership and clearance as the means by which faith in the city and a growing commodification of city space can be achieved. Through a process of demolition (more than 10,000 homes to date, DCLG data) and subsequent community displacement and renewal, this programme has had a significant impact on the seven large areas in northern cities in the UK. As analysts like Cameron (Cameron, 2003) have argued, these visions tended to exclude low-income residents. Like urban indigenous Australians, existing residents helped to devalue and

devalorise these areas and as a reward, have been scripted out of their future. Following Smith's logic of uneven development and rent gaps, the forced nomadism of poor groups in the city will also 'help' to devalue other areas in order to make them ripe for cheap investment in the future.

In the case of the HMRPs, it is no longer acceptable for such neighbourhoods and their residents to escape a logic of place-based commodification. This is reflected in the kind of strong paternalism marking recent urban policies that have moved away from models of community consultation in the pursuit of a singular vision for these neighbourhoods. This vision must not be frustrated by engagement with a population largely conceived as tenurially (renting from the state) and socially deviant. Emerging evidence suggests that homelessness has increased in the areas where the Pathfinders have operated. As Atkinson indicated (2004), the market renewal of the Pathfinders is attached to a geography of low demand housing largely made-up of social, rented dwellings. Thus a major aspect of the implementation of the Pathfinders is to identify strategies and solutions to commodify these neighbourhoods so that capital over-accumulation, particularly from household and investment finance elsewhere, can be brought into play in these spaces. Fuelled by privately directed mandates and significant public monies (approaching £1bn), the sense of liberation at these clearances among their private policy directors is palpable in the accompanying strategic documentation.

### ***Urban policing and criminality***

Urban policy has now merged with other state objectives, particularly those focusing on criminal matters (Atkinson and Helms, 2007). As Atkinson and Helms describe it, this criminalisation of urban policy evinces the infusion of political anger directed at sink estates and problem people like migrants and welfare recipients, even while these spaces and groups are the most likely to be victims of crime. Within the national politics of the UK, a range of political programs have been initiated because of the belief that an ordinary, decent society has been held hostage by an unruly minority whose behaviour ranges from anti-social behaviour and minor criminality to physical and verbal abuse (Flint, 2006). Such anxieties found their apotheosis in political diagnoses of the UK urban riots of August, 2011. The whiplash response of the right of centre coalition government was to quickly assert the role of organised gangs and straight criminality with little or no evidence. These rationales were given without reference to the context of the unrest--grossly unequal cities and publicly degraded services, symbolically appropriated by gentrification and the loss of employment and affordable housing. Little was said concerning the role of discretionary policing in the form of stop and search policies, the deep resentment fomenting over time, and the racially charged interaction between police and minority-ethnic young men in these areas.

The socio-legal aspects of urban policy burgeoned with the growth under the UK New Labour project of ASBOs, the four hundred Child Curfew Zones in England, and new Business Improvement Districts. ASBOs have been targeted with discretion by city regimes against prostitutes, travellers and young teenagers (often publicly named and shamed) and often driven by central government politicians seeking punitive and effective sanctions against particular groups and communities cast as major threats to public order or quality of

life. There is little doubt that anti-social behaviour is a major problem, often in precisely those locales where fractured social cohesion has resulted from profound economic stress and decline. Yet such civil remedies have become powerful tools that feed on local anger at particular social groups seen as problems, their troubled personal and local histories ignored.

Themes of anger and action through policy and policing can also be seen in Caldeira's empirical analysis of crime and punishment in *City of Walls* (2000). There she finds that many of the most punitive personalities are located in the deprived ghettos of Rio, where support for anything less than the full punishment of criminals is seen as untenable. Many of Caldeira's interviewees support the use of the death penalty and absence of rights for criminals who are seen as less than human, a monolithic mass of beasts who create an economic burden that is intolerable, more so given their crimes. In this emotional context, revenge is exacted through police mandated to use violence. They fear setting any boundaries that might protect criminals and render the poor more vulnerable. The conception and pursuit of truth through pain is linked by Caldeira to Western religious and political traditions, but also to a socio-economic context in which incredible inequalities both devalue and endanger the poor. This devaluation of life suggests not only a means by which prisoners and criminals' rights are ignored by poor groups. Justice is seen as an elite privilege, mocking the potential rights of common citizens. Here social rights (and secondarily political rights) are historically far more legitimated than individual and civil rights, so that violence and 'interventions in the body' are broadly tolerated, leading to support for strongly punitive sanctions:

'People who attack human rights...articulate a discourse and a politics that bypass the legal order, and they think of punishment as inflicting suffering on the body. Their reference, therefore, is the universe of private, immediate, and usually very physical revenge. This universe offers a specific conception of the body, and especially of the infliction of pain as a means to moral and social development. This conception applies not only to criminals but to many spheres of Brazilian life.' (Caldeira, 2000: 356)

## **Conclusion**

Many urban policy initiatives speak of a broad socio-political transformation by which a line has been drawn under progressive policies and a fury is discharged against those deemed to be the barriers against city renewal and social wholeness. These processes are relevant to criminology because they offer a deepened understanding of the means by which harms are understood within political systems and acted upon in relation to keen senses of social difference that are themselves socially and spatially structured. Rage can be located in a complex interplay of contemporary politics, accelerated media systems, public resentments and deep anxieties generated by the economic imperatives and harms created by contemporary and historical forms of capitalism played-out in the urban domain. In many such contexts, we can locate spaces and spatially delimited social groups that are considered hindrances to the ambitions of bureaucrats and politicians, and these are the socio-spatial targets of cathartic policies.

The contemporary social politics of the global West has found new depths through the splicing of instinctual needs into policy devices that treat particular groups and spaces through exceptional means (the designation of emergency conditions that facilitate extraordinary policy measures), ostensibly in the name of releasing social and economic projects for a greater good. Ironically, the rise of affluence has generated self-perceptions of vulnerability amongst elites, given the apparent unpredictability and danger attached to those left outside the gilded bubble blown by internationalised finance and service-driven economies. Cathartic policing and renewal have become attached to these social groups and the spaces they inhabit, in projects that seek firm resolutions to the frictions and externalities generated by growing inequality. This occurs by hiding poverty in containers (such as prisons and ghettos) or alternatively through forms of housing displacement and even the literal destruction of life through urban warfare and extra-judicial killings in the most extreme examples (such as Latin America).

Both anger and fear are recruited by political actors, by media and entertainment machines within which fantasies of total control have not only become significant themes, but which also encapsulate public desires for security and punishment. These constellations of powerful, instinctual social forces form the conditions by which cathartic modes of public policy and intervention become realisable objectives. Therefore, the definition and affirmation of social in-groups and political constituencies come together either as a sense of national identity (scaled around a drive to destroy those who are against 'us' as a state) or a social politics of privilege and ambition (drawn around social cleavages of class and affluence and a disorderly and dangerous urban underclass). Yet at both scales, the effect is similar--the generation of direct and unimpeded public actions that seek to neutralise or destroy hindrances in diverse forms.

In this environment, there is no place for understanding. To do so is to blur the binary options on the table – with us/ against us, criminal/ citizen, respectable / disorderly. Such simplicity also provides the anxious with comfort when faced with complexity, history, and the possibility for human empathy. It thereby becomes important that articulations of policy are capable of bolstering monolithic in-group identities so that the dehumanised, extra-legal, or exceptional status of groups and spaces can be more clearly identified and then tackled. In such circumstances, the vengeful actions of the state in its various forms and partnerships take on powerful acts of transcendence by which individual social actors achieve collective retribution.

These observations help us to understand how urban and national political life generates further harms for those already excluded and ostracised. In this context we might well ask if optimism is logical. In suggesting that policy can act as a collective release focused on vocal concerns linked to social difference, disorder, crime, and decaying spaces, it is unclear how to break the current downward spiral. There is a deep momentum to socio-political life that is driven not only by desires for political power, but also because this circuit of institutional life operates within a transformed media landscape, driving fear and compressed reactions to complex political problems. Spatially targeted policies founded on these emotions connect effectively with individualised experiences of slight or injury, but also achieve a mandate precisely because they connect with intuitive, gut reactions to a broad range of

socially complex problems. The political or civic project that can effectively challenge these embedded forces is difficult to imagine.

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Figure 1: 'Bum-proof' walls. Shower-rail preventing homeless overnight street presence, Osaka (Source: Author)