Building Complex Temporal Explanations of Crime

History, Institutions and Agency

Stephen Farrall

Critical Criminological Perspectives

The Palgrave Critical Criminological Perspectives book series aims to showcase the importance of critical criminological thinking when examining problems of crime, social harm and criminal and social justice. Critical perspectives have been instrumental in creating new research agendas and areas of criminological interest. By challenging state defined concepts of crime and rejecting positive analyses of criminality, critical criminological approaches continually push the boundaries and scope of criminology, creating new areas of focus and developing new ways of thinking about, and responding to, issues of social concern at local, national and global levels. Recent years have witnessed a flourishing of critical criminological narratives and this series seeks to capture the original and innovative ways that these discourses are engaging with contemporary issues of crime and justice. For further information on the series and to submit a proposal for consideration, please get in touch with the Editor: Josephine Taylor, Josephine.Taylor@palgrave.com.

More information about this series at
http://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/14932

Stephen Farrall

Building Complex Temporal Explanations of Crime

History, Institutions and Agency

palgrave
macmillan

Stephen Farrall
University of Derby
Sheffield, UK

For Katie, Maddie and Tom.

Acknowledgments

Praise For *Building Complex Temporal Explanations of Crime*

"'The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living', claimed Marx in 1852. Stephen Farrall does not think of the relations between past and present in such drastic or fateful terms. Yet he is equally concerned with the laminations of past influences on our present culture and conduct. Farrall has a rare capacity to connect quantitative observations of crime and control with an historical sensibility, and with problems of social, sociological and political theory. For these reasons Farrall is able in this book to offer refreshing new perspectives on levels of explanation in thinking about crime, and to make the topic of complexity seem not only accessible but invigorating. Farrall encourages us to feel that we too can and should reach for solutions that are at once 'historical, spatial, economic, cultural and agentic'."

—Richard Sparks, *School of Law, Univ of Edinburgh*

CONTENTS

About the Author

Stephen Farrall is Research Chair in Criminology in the College of Business, Law and the Social Sciences at the University of Derby, where he has worked since 2019. Prior to this, he was Professor of Criminology and Deputy Chair of the School of Law at the University of Sheffield (2007–2018), Research Fellow and Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Criminology at Keele University, and Research Officer in the Centre for Criminological Research at the University of Oxford, where he also completed his D.Phil. His research has often focused on the unfolding over time of processes relating to crime and justice, and he has held research grants from the Economic and Social Research Council, Leverhulme Trust and Ministry of Justice. His most recent publications include papers on Thatcherite values and behaviours in the journals *Political Studies* and *British Politics*, and *Respectable Citizens—Shady Practices: The Economic Morality of the Middle Classes,* (2020, Oxford University Press, with Susanne Karstedt), and which won the American Society of Criminology's Division of White Collar and Corporate Crime's Outstanding Book Award, 2020.

LIST OF FIGURES

List of Tables

Introduction: Why Do We Need to Build Complex, Temporal Explanations?

For some years now, I have been involved in a number of projects which—in one way or another—have sought to explain some aspect of crime through various lens. Aside from being about crime or responses to it, these projects have all sought to understand the ways in which a number of processes and influences have operated together, and, crucially, over time. These processes, which I and my colleagues sought to disentangle from one another, involved individuals and their decision-making, formal organisations (such as courts, probation services, political parties and the such like), institutions (such as families, ways of doing things), legal structures and other power making or shaping bodies (such as parliaments, laws or formalised policies which structure governance systems such as the welfare system). And each, in various ways, required us to think in some depth about two things; one was *change* (be it social change, individual-level change, organisational change or institutional change), and the other was *time*.

Time is one of those variables which is inherently easy to measure. We have seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years and so on with which to group bundles of time together and to make time 'visible' for analysis. We have also developed a whole range of research designs to 'trap' time and to make it help with our explanatory work. Longitudinal research, before and after studies, follow-ups and historical research

	Time Frame of Outcome(s)	
	Short	Long
Short	*A*	*C*
Long	*B*	*D*

Time Frame of Cause(s)

Fig. 1.1 Varying time frames of causes and outcomes

are all attempts to trace the ways in which things are different between what we might simply call 't1' and 't2'. Of course, we have learnt to pull a similar trick with space; we know that processes might operate differently between two different places. We don't expect that any two cities will be exactly the same and we have become accustomed to referring to local cultures, features of the architecture or layout of the cities being compared, or characteristics of the residents who live there. But, I would contend, we have not advanced our thinking about time and temporal changes to quite the same degree.

However, and in some respects anticipating some of the issues to be touched upon in Chapter 3 (on **historical**[1] and **constructivist institutionalisms**), there are different time frames for temporal explanations which can be constructed. Pierson (2004: 81) introduces four of these, based on the time frame of the cause (long or short) and the time frame of the outcome(s) (again long or short). Pierson uses examples from the physical sciences (tornados, earthquakes and so on), but I have used different examples (Fig. 1.1).

Let us imagine various situations related to the cooking and consumption of food, not all of which go according to plan. In *A* (a short causal time frame with a short causal outcome) I am cooking a soup in a pan. Lifting the pan off the hob, I step on the cat and trip over, spilling the soup on the floor. The causal process was short (tripping over the cat) and the outcomes were almost immediate (spilt soup, scolded cat). In *B* (a long causal time frame with a short time frame for the outcome) I am cooking pasta. The pasta is boiling in a pan of water when the phone rings. I answer the phone, become distracted and return to the

[1] Words in bold are outlined in further detail in the glossary at the end of the book.

kitchen 40 minutes later to find the pan boiled dry and the pasta burnt on to the base of the saucepan. The causal process was long (the time I was talking on the phone) but the outcome was immediate (ruined pan and burnt pasta). When we turn to those processes with long-term outcomes, we have first C, a short-term causal process followed by a relatively long-term outcome. As an example of C, I have baked a casserole in the oven and pick it up to carry it to the table to serve. I have, however, forgotten to use oven gloves to protect my hands and severely burn these. The cause is short (picking up the casserole) and the outcomes are long term (burnt palms and fingers which take weeks to fully recover). In D I have decided to try to eat a balanced diet, avoid eating too much red meat and consume more fresh fruit and vegetables (a commitment which would need to last several years to have any lasting impact, a long causal time frame). As a result of committing to this over the course of several years, I live a longer life in better health than I would have had I eaten otherwise (an outcome with a long time frame). As well as the differences in the time frames of the causal processes and outcomes, there are other differences too. A is easy to predict at the outset of the process; as soon as the foot meets the cat, the trip is almost certain to happen. With D on the other hand, the diet will be associated with the longer life lived in better health, but is harder to predict; it only survives if I refrain from eating other 'sin' foods such as alcohol, chocolate and refined sugars and could in any case be disrupted by other events (even people in good health are involved in road accidents or fall over on the ice). But the overall message remains the same: assessing the speed and 'interruptability' of causal processes can require a great deal of unpacking. In short, as explanations become 'stretched' over longer periods of time, they tend to become more complex. As explanations become more complex, so we need to take greater care over how we construct, use and test them.

On another level, unpacking the ways in which the various causal influences operated in the empirical research projects I have been involved in has required me to draw upon ideas from a range of allied social sciences. At various points, I have drawn upon thinking from theories of **structuration** from sociology and social theory, theories of complexity from the physical sciences (but interpreted and remoulded by sociologists for the purposes of social science explanations), theories of institutions and institutional change from political scientists, theories of accident investigation and theories of realism drawn from evaluation studies. All of these I draw upon herein.

To varying degrees of success, all of these have helped me to think about the processes I was studying and to analyse the data I had about them. Yet many, I realised on reflection, were not commonly used by my colleagues in criminology. This struck me as curious. All of the theories which I had begged, borrowed and stolen from were attempts to grapple with the sorts of data and intellectual problems which many criminologists faced; problems of complex causation, in which non-linear processes are at play, or in which historical influences still have explanatory power, but which are often unacknowledged by the social actors being studied or the analysts themselves, or in which one needed to make some sort of effort to integrate individual-level actions, motivations and desires with macro-level processes and influences. A lot of criminology, it struck me, was bordering on being rather ahistorical. There are, of course, key exceptions to this, most notably the cohort of scholars who refer to themselves self-consciously as 'crime historians', and who have benefitted from training in historical thinking and methods of analysis.

Why Do We Need Complex Explanations?

There is a rule in scientific explanation which is drummed into researchers; simple explanations are the best. The logic goes that if you can largely explain the outcome of interest with one or two variables, then why both adding the third, fourth and fifth? The third, fourth and fifth variables add little and serve only to clutter up the explanation, adding words and ideas where they are not needed. Known as **Ockham's Razor**, this logic seeks to create simple explanations of the physical and social worlds around us. Simple solutions are easy to explain to busy policy-makers, members of the public and to our colleagues. It is the same logic, which underpins the question often posed when training people to talk about their research findings: 'If you were on the news, and had 30 seconds to explain your research, what would you say?'. As straightforward as it is to be able to say, for example, that 'the industrial revolution is a major cause of climate change', this misses much of what does account for climate change. First of all, not every part of the world was involved in that thing we call the industrial revolution. Many parts of the world now refer to themselves as 'post-industrial', and some politicians remain sceptical of the idea of climate change, and seek to downplay or deny it.

Furthermore, the 'early days' industrial revolution was powered by renewable energy sources such as wind, water or animals. If you want to explain climate change, you need to build explanations, which are far from simple.

Look at a map of a city or town you know well. In some cases, the city or town centre will have lots of streets, arranged in a higgledy-piggledy fashion; streets may change direction suddenly, may change widths or come to abrupt ends. In other cases, the streets will form a grid; 90-degree right-angles and parallel lines dominate. Further out, some streets might be more densely packed, with schools, parks and other amenities littered within them. Prisons, large railways yards, big hospitals, major motorways or airports will be further out, but connected back into the centre from their peripheral positions. Now imagine walking from the centre to one of these peripheral locations; in the centre, you start near the buildings associated with governance (city halls, banks, police stations), large shopping stores and malls; walking out you pass offices, rail and road transportation systems, then housing (some in poor condition), then canals and, perhaps, disused factories, railway marshalling yards or other sites of 'heavy' production. Our cities—despite all their posh new technologies, integrated transportation hubs and swanky hotels—tell the tale of the past; of old streets first laid down on bare earth; of old, now outmoded, industries whose buildings and infrastructure scar the edges of our cities (or which have been rebuilt as 'posh' living quarters); of the housing, once built for the heroes of the industrial revolution to live in, but now, with the loss of such work, used as dormitories for the poor and dispossessed. Our cities bear the markings of the past two or three hundred years, at least, and their spatial variation makes present what is hard to see; time and its passing. To understand a large city and its spatial configuration of sites of production, consumption, control, service and movement requires us to understand its past, the forces which shaped it, and the ideas which were being used in its creation. The answer to the question 'why is there more crime in one urban neighbourhood than in another?' demands, then, answers which draw on historical, spatial, economic, cultural and agentic explanations.

In short, It too demands a *complex* answer.

But these answers aren't just complex in that they need a lot of explaining, they are complex in that they have multiple causal paths, are contingent on other outcomes, can bifurcate and causes can at times 'swap' their roles with some causes fading out and others becoming more dominant. In other words, their complexity also stretches *over time*. When

explanations start to stretch over time, we need to think about things like duration, speed, strength of relationships, delayed processes and residual or legacy affects.

This short book brings together some of the theories I have drawn upon in the hope that they may be further used by criminologists (and others) in their own analyses and thinking. The book seeks to explore the ways in which temporal processes can be tackled in criminological analyses in such a way that the inherently complex nature of what we study, and the existing theories of causation being tested, can be explored in greater depth and with greater rigour.

Outlining the Rest of the Book

Although it is probably fair to say that the chapters in the books could pretty much be read in any order the reader wished, I have tried to order them in a way, which means that some of my basic beliefs about the world are encountered first. The first chapter, then, is about complexity and about how one can use some of the ideas from theories of complexity to unpack processes, which criminologists might be interested in. This chapter explores some of the basic principles of complexity, and deals with how it might be examined in terms of the analyses of social systems, but also touches on how complexity might affect individuals and their life-courses. Following from this, in Chapter 3, I deal with one body of work, which was key in the projects I undertook (with a number of colleagues) to explore and assess the lasting legacy of Thatcherism for crime in Britain. This body of work has become to be known as historical institutionalism, and I incorporate within that chapter both some of the critiques of it (such as what is known as constructivist institutionalism) and some of the other ideas from political science which share key similarities (such as comparative historical analyses, process tracing and punctuated equilibrium). The ideas in this chapter are useful for studying processes of change in which ideas play a role in the eventual outcomes observed, and in which the changes affect organisations, institutions and individuals, but in which past decisions and social forms still affect the processes and outcomes. There are also some lessons for comparative analyses contained within it towards the end.