A telling tale: a case of vigilantism and its aftermath in an English town

ABSTRACT

This paper considers one ‘vigilante’ episode in an English town in 1993 and its subsequent appearances in the press and in local ‘crime-talk’. In so doing it a) proposes as an alternative to most current constructions of ‘fear of crime’ an interpretive approach grounded in place; b) considers the intersections between the generic ‘law and order’ preoccupations of the national press and the salience in local knowledge of a particular sequence of events (and their consequences for their *dramatis personae*); c) raises conjecturally some preconditions favouring the adoption of the ‘vigilante’ option amongst available styles of security-seeking action. Theoretically, the paper demonstrates the relevance of locally-circulating stories of crime and low-level street disorder to the contemporary understanding of crime, place and community.

KEYWORDS: Youth; crime; vigilantism; mass media; narrative

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we comment upon an incident that took place on a council estate in a medium-sized English town on a June night in 1993. We recount this obscure episode because we think it helps to illuminate the place that crime – especially youth crime – occupies in the lived social relations and local ‘structures of feeling’ of that town, namely Macclesfield in Cheshire. We explore some of the variety and complexity of local responses to this sequence of events (laden as these are with passions, some of which are quite place-specific) without foreclosing the question of their larger implications. Indeed one wider aim of our work is to revise and extend the parameters of recent criminological and public debate about what has come – often too unquestioningly – to be called the ‘fear of crime’.

We suspect that ‘fear of crime’ research is most illuminating when it pays close attention to the ways in which crime works as a cultural theme and token of political exchange – an emphasis which in turn tends to complicate the boundary between ‘fear’ and other kinds of anxiety, or worry, or concern. For many in contemporary Britain, we propose, ‘crime’ is a topic
A telling tale that condenses some difficult-to-grasp, yet unsettling changes in the social and moral order – but demonstrating this means looking closely and in situ at crime-talk itself (cf. Sasson 1995). This is not to neglect the connections that exist between levels of anxiety and those of measurable risk. But it does mean recognizing that everyday talk about crime is usually also a device for registering and making sense of a variety of troubles: economic and social change and its attendant insecurities; stressed social relations of various kinds, especially – as in this case – between generations. If crime is indeed a resource for metaphors of change and trouble these are very much amongst the ‘metaphors we live by’ (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), and not something separate and apart from the texture of everyday life nor merely imposed from without by media manipulation. Talk of crime, and the passions and anxieties such talk discloses, speaks directly to people’s sense of the habitability of the place in which they live (and of its pasts, present and possible futures), and in turn of its place in its surrounding economic and cultural environments and hierarchies. As Mary Douglas observes: ‘This argument is not about the reality of the dangers, but about how they are politicized’ (1992: 29).

Macclesfield is a town of some 49,000 inhabitants on the edge of the Pennine uplands of east Cheshire and some 15 miles south of Manchester. Once a working-class mill town dominated by the silk industry, it has in the postwar period undergone a profound restructuring whose major outlines include a pronounced influx of middle-class commuters and the arrival from the 1960s onwards of the multinational pharmaceutical giants (especially Zeneca and Ciba-Geigy) which now dominate the local economy, together inevitably with their professional workforces. In common with many English towns it has a burgeoning service sector and an emerging focus on tourism and heritage. Macclesfield increasingly represents itself (for example in the publicity materials produced by the Local Authority) as a relatively affluent and desirable locality, if not quite a ‘boom town’. It is in these respects a survivor and, for no small number of its inhabitants, a beneficiary of the economic and demographic upheavals of the last three decades, though it retains its pockets of poverty and deprivation. It also experiences relatively low levels of recorded crime (some 16 times lower in fact than parts of the not so geographically distant Salford); though again, it has its crime ‘hot spots’ (Sherman et al. 1989) and is by no means free of crime-related conflicts and anxieties. In these respects, and without prejudice to its ‘typicality’, Macclesfield appears to lie in that region increasingly known, especially to journalists, as ‘Middle England’. We develop an account of Macclesfield residents’ disparate sensibilities towards crime and social order in part as a prism through which to see how the town’s economic and social restructuring has acted upon its lived social relations, especially people’s experiences of well-being and risk.

Here we develop this perspective through a reconstruction of the controversy that surrounded one particular event: the forceful and very public detention in June 1993 of a suspected teenage car thief by a group of local
residents on Macclesfield’s Weston estate. In recounting this tale, we are not claiming for it any unique significance (though it illustrates well two emergent themes of our research: crime-related conflict between generations, and a perceived lack of visible police protection). Nor are we claiming that it retains, some five years on, very great continuing local interest; for the most part and for most people it does not. This rather is one of many stories – albeit the most dramatic one – we might have told as an illustration of our concerns. Tales of drug use among Macclesfield youth, a spate of ‘car torchings’ in summer 1995 and accounts of Friday night violence in the town centre all also circulate and would have served in raising cognate issues.

We want to argue that stories of these kinds (and the conjunctions of place and event they entail) are one of the means by which people routinely come to acquire a sense, not only of crime, but also of the place in which they live – its habitability, its inward tensions and divisions and its future prospects. And we suggest that analysis of the current cultural and political salience of crime and public order issues would consequently do well to pay attention to such stories and the frames of meaning within which they are transmitted, received and reproduced.

A VIGILANTISM STORY

Built in 1947, the Weston estate lies on Macclesfield’s western fringes. Unlike so many other English council estates, and indeed some within Macclesfield itself, the Weston feels an integral part of the surrounding town. Transposed into, say, Manchester or Salford, it would be considered ‘good stock’ in a ‘good area’. One of five council-built estates in Macclesfield, the Weston comprises a mix of semi-detached houses and terraced bungalows, though some private housing is also currently being built on the estate. The area is served on its eastern edge by a Post Office and a ‘Co-op Late Shop’, and by a parade of shops on Earlsway, the area’s main thoroughfare. These include a grocer’s shop, hairdresser, chemist, chip shop and off-licence and stand adjacent to the community centre and pub.

These shops have been for some time (and were in the summer months of 1993) a favoured meeting place for groups of local teenagers, sometimes numbering as many as fifty. The youths claim they had nowhere else to go and that anyway they caused little trouble, though even Mark Cooper – the teenager at the centre of this tale – concedes that their numbers may have been intimidating. A proportion of local residents certainly did feel threatened. Some voiced an unwillingness to use the shops unless they had to. Others mobilized the police and the youths were frequently being ‘spoken to’ or ‘moved on’ by officers. That summer this evident local anxiety coincided with felt concern among residents about a proliferation of car crime on the estate, for which local teenagers were again the prime suspects. In either case, visible police protection was believed to be lacking. The local
‘beat bobby’ was said rarely to be seen and in the eyes of older residents the police appeared to hold little or no fear for the local youths. Car thieves were either not being arrested or being treated with apparent (and unjustifiable) leniency by the courts.

Mark Cooper was one among the group of teenagers who routinely congregated at the shops on Earlsway. It is unclear (and is destined to remain so) whether prior to June 1993 he had achieved any great local notoriety above and beyond that, though he was later to become publicly identified by at least some residents as a ‘ringleader’. He was certainly – in that damning phrase – ‘known to the police’ prior to June 1993. The then divisional superintendent (in a later interview with us) described Mark Cooper as a ‘thorn in our side’ who was being ‘locked up continuously’. He also thought that Cooper had been consciously targeted by the residents.

Oh they were specifically looking for him. I mean they knew he was the ringleader and I think the final straw was that he damaged somebody’s car at the local pub and they decided that one night they would sort it out themselves.

This stands in sharp contrast to the position of the local youth service who vociferously took up Mark Cooper’s case. They believed that Cooper was at best the vigilantes’ third or fourth ‘choice’, a view shared by the victim himself.

I knew that something was going to happen someday, between some of the residents and us lot, but I didn’t know anything like that was going to happen, they were going to tie anybody up, especially me. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The precise events of the fateful night are a matter of some dispute. The following however is relatively uncontested: that at shortly after midnight Mark Cooper was found in the chip shop on Earlsway by a group of some 15 to 20 local residents (both men and women) who had just left the nearby pub (Mark Cooper claims he was assaulted in the chip shop – ‘one of them smashed me face on the counter, cut all me eye open’ – and that he agreed to leave the shop only after the group threatened to burn it down). He was then stripped naked, handcuffed to a nearby lamp-post, doused in anti-freeze and photographed by – and with – his assailants. Cooper additionally claims that petrol was poured on him, lighted matches thrown at him, and a car driven at him; the police merely reported that he was ‘sprayed in a rather tender area with de-icer’. He was left tethered to the post for 40 minutes before being cut free by a friend. The alleged vigilantes were later arrested but no prosecutions were ever mounted.

Over the coming three weeks the incident was prominently covered by the local press. It first surfaced – at the initiation of Mark Cooper and his family – in the *Macclesfield Express Advertiser* the following Wednesday (16 June) under the frontpage headline ‘Stripped, beaten, tied up, by the vigilantes’. The accompanying story largely confined itself to Cooper’s
allegations, coupling this only with supporting testimony from a friend of
the victim (‘They blame us for everything that happens on this estate’) and
two statements from the police urging people not to take the law into their
own hands. This was to be the only such story that so unambiguously took
Cooper’s side and one of the few to code the event as ‘crime’.

The contrast with that week’s local freesheet the Macclesfield Messenger
was stark. Their report (18 June) recounted how a group of ‘irate residents’ had
‘humiliated’ the ‘ringleader’ of a group of local troublemakers. It gave full
voice to the anxieties of the Weston’s adult population and described the
‘pranksters’ (the word ‘vigilante’ did not appear) as having ‘left the youth
quivering with fear when they drove a car towards him at high speed’. This
prompted an angry letter (published on 9 July) from a member of the local
youth work team, pointing out that such activities would not have been
referred to as ‘pranks’ had they been carried out by local teenagers.

The Messenger’s story set the tone for much of the reporting that followed,
both local and national. The Macclesfield Express the following week located
the event firmly in the midst of an estate gripped by crime. ‘We’ve had
enough say residents’ its headline proclaimed, ‘Weston residents want an
end to violence and terror on the estate’. The report – again on the front
and inside pages – went on to detail the experiences and frustrations of
local residents, the landlord of the pub prominent among them: ‘Every
member of my staff has had their car damaged and kids, elderly people and
women are terrorized’, he claimed. Three letters appearing under such
titles as ‘Sick of Trouble’ and ‘About Time’ lent their support to the vigi-
lantes. The police promised the ‘firmest possible action’ against those who
disrupt the lives of the ‘law-abiding majority’, but again pleaded for people
not to take matters into their own hands. Mark Cooper’s voice had disap-
peared entirely.

By the following week the story had become of national interest. (It was
subsequently reported in the regional Manchester Evening News and North-
West Echo and News, the Daily Mirror and Daily Star, and The Times and the
Guardian; Mark Cooper made television appearances on Good Morning
Britain and the Judy Finnegan Show.) The event had also been raised in
Parliament and under the headline ‘Commons Told of Responsible Folk’,
the Macclesfield Express (30 June) reported remarks by Nicholas Winterton,
the local Conservative MP. He informed the House of Commons that the
vigilantes were ‘sensible people’ unfortunately forced to take the law into
their own hands. He continued: ‘They were dealing with a persistent young
juvenile offender who has appeared before the courts on many occasions
but who has been released back into the community.’ He then called for
‘adequate’ sentences for such offenders, ‘in order to prevent people from
being forced to take the law into their own hands.’ The story reported
Weston residents ‘flocking’ to the newly established police surgery,
together with letters bemoaning crime levels on the estate and, in one
instance, thanking the vigilantes. It also noted that a press conference the
Cooper family attempted to hold had been aborted when they found the local community centre locked. The family complained of harassment.

Its dramatic appeal notwithstanding, it is unlikely that so transitory an episode in so quiet a town would usually have merited much of a mention in the regional and national media. This however was 1993. As is only too well known, in February of that year toddler James Bulger was murdered by two 10-year-old boys, having been abducted from a Bootle shopping centre. The case sparked intense concern and vehement public debate, not only over its own dismaying details, but also about what the Daily Express chose to call ‘Lawless Britain’ (Hay 1995). The ‘lawless’ theme was to continue into and throughout the summer months, during which time two issues were linked prominently together in the national press: (i) the apparent loss of faith in ‘the justice system’ among large swathes of the population, and (ii) the evident willingness of increasing numbers of people either to take the law into their own hands, or condone those who do so. Thus on 30 August – under the lead headline ‘Public loses confidence in the rule of law’ – the Daily Telegraph reported a Gallup poll showing that 75 per cent of those interviewed believed that ‘vigilante’ action was justified. The following day – alongside a prominent picture of private security officers from ‘SAS Patrol’ operating in Bristol – The Independent led with ‘Spread of vigilantes alarms police’, in which it reported that the nation’s police forces were to be surveyed about the spread of vigilante activity. That anxious summer was drawn to a fitting conclusion at the Conservative Party conference in October, where Home Secretary Michael Howard announced his 27-point-plan to crackdown on crime.

It was in this climate that the attack on Mark Cooper was disembedded from the locality and rendered indicative of broader social preoccupations. At a regional level, both the Manchester Evening News (25 June) and the mass market Sunday tabloid the News and Echo (20 June) ran the story, its affective appeal heightened in each case by the (first) publication of the vigilantes’ photograph of the naked, trussed Cooper (it had not appeared at all in the local press). Under the headline, ‘VIGILANTES IN THE DOCK’, the Manchester Evening News ran three connected stories (concerning inter-generational tension on the Weston estate, the family’s unsuccessful press conference, and the exchanges in Parliament) that were anti-vigilante in tone. Unusually, it referred explicitly to Cooper as a ‘victim’. The same cannot be said of the News and Echo. Under the banner caption ‘PHOTO EXCLUSIVE ON THE DAY A TOWN FOUGHT BACK’, it displays a full half-page version of the (discretely ‘Censored’) photograph. The accompanying story – while giving Cooper and ‘his friends’ some space to mount a defence – affords clear prominence (in space and tone) to the concerns of anxious residents and permits the vigilantes to defend their actions (‘we didn’t want to hurt him, just humiliate him’). They use the opportunity – in a theme also picked up by the Daily Mirror (21 June) – to express their resentment at how Cooper had tried to portray himself as a victim.
'At the end of the day we could have knocked ten shades of s**t [sic] out of him.'
'But we didn’t.'
'Now he’s trying to set us up by running around with a patch on his nose so that it looks as though we punched him.'

Two themes stand out in the national press coverage of the story. All the national papers connect the incident with other such events that had recently taken place, with the News and Echo and the Guardian (22 June) travelling furthest down this road. Having informed its readers that the North was ‘buckling’ under ‘a soaring crime rate’, the News and Echo catalogue – for the most part approvingly – a host of recent vigilante activities from across the North of England. The paper goes on – plainly addressing its readers as frustrated but law-abiding citizens – to advise on the possibilities and pitfalls of defending oneself and one’s property, under the caption ‘HOW FAR YOU CAN GO’. The Guardian story also details the fate of those who have recently handed out what it calls ‘DIY punishment’, and connects the Cooper story – as did all the national press, without exception – with the campaign of the two Norfolk men (dubbed the ‘Norfolk 2’ by the tabloids) who earlier in the month had been sentenced to five years imprisonment for kidnapping a suspected thief (their sentences were subsequently reduced on appeal to six months).

A second theme found across the national press – it was shared by the Guardian, The Times (22 June), the Daily Mirror and Daily Star (21 June) – is a studied reluctance to code the vigilante attack as ‘crime’. With few exceptions, the press prefer to speak of Mark Cooper as having been humiliated or shamed rather than victimized. Even the Guardian, in an otherwise ‘balanced’ piece surveying the sharply divergent views of local residents refers to the ‘orchestrated humiliation’ of Mark Cooper. It then proceeds to describe what was alleged to have been a serious assault as a ‘scuffle’ in the chip shop, and speaks in a knock-about, jokey fashion of Cooper having been made ‘an involuntary tenant of lamp-post No. 20 for 35 chilly minutes’. In most of the coverage the crime story being told is one of troublesome youth pushing otherwise respectable people over the edge. And in the course of the telling Mark Cooper becomes the personal embodiment of a pressing local and national problem.

The following April this impression was further illustrated and buttressed, as Mark Cooper found himself once again in the midst of a national crime story, this time concerning ‘offenders on safari’. On 11 April 1994, he was convicted at Macclesfield magistrates’ court of tampering with a BMW and sentenced to do 80 hours community service. It emerged during the trial that Cooper had recently been sent by Macclesfield youth service on a 10-day ‘character-building’ ‘tall-ship’ sailing trip around the south coast, and that magistrates had relaxed his bail conditions in order for him to go (he had returned ‘sea sick’ after three days, something that further impugned his character in the eyes of the tabloid press). The local and
national press (including the *Sun, Daily Express, Telegraph* and *The Times*) again took up the story, now running this episode alongside the vigilante incident of the previous year. Two themes emerge. First, now that Mark Cooper had been officially designated an ‘offender’ the original vigilante action is seen as having been largely vindicated: they *did* after all get the right person. Secondly, the decisive action taken by local residents is contrasted favourably with the official response of ‘the justice system’. As the *Sun* (12 April) put it, taking the opportunity to reprint the notorious photograph: ‘Neighbours were so fed up with young thug they did THIS with him. The official punishment was a holiday.’

COMPETING LOCAL CONSTRUCTIONS

How though did these events come to be interpreted by different constituencies within Macclesfield? For Mark Cooper and his family the vigilante attack initiated a whole chain of events. Cooper alleges that over the coming weeks he was subject to a number of further attacks, both on the Weston and in the town centre, none of which received media attention. One of these involved his older brother, another was directed at his 70-year-old father. He and his family also report having received a series of abusive phone calls and hate mail. Cooper reflects on this period thus

Everywhere I went I was getting talked about, looked at. People know me, there’s a lot of people in Macclesfield. It was everywhere I went, I couldn’t go to town really, because I was getting looked at, talked about.

The following April (as we have seen) he was convicted of his first car-related offence. In December 1994 he was sentenced to 19 months (of which he served nine) for assault following an incident after a disco at Macclesfield Rugby Club. In both cases Cooper and his family (his mother – while conceding he is ‘no angel’ – has been a tireless campaigner on his behalf) continue to protest his innocence. Almost alone within the town the family have constructed the whole story as one of victimization, first by the vigilantes, then at the hands of the police (Cooper has complained officially of police harassment). He reflected to us on the turn of events as follows

It was me past, past record, things I’ve done in the past that I should have got sent down for and I haven’t, I went down that time for it. But it was me past really that got me sent down, it was me past.

Macclesfield youth service was the only agency in the town to share the family’s perspective, and provide them with material support and assistance. The two youth workers most directly involved with the case strove to enable the family to ‘put their side of the story’, hence the aborted press conference. Not only did they represent Cooper’s interests directly (for example with the police), they also made efforts to get the event taken
seriously as a crime, and refused to accept the dominant representation of
the vigilantes as ‘respectable’ local residents. One consequence of this
public support (described as ‘life-saving’ by Mark Cooper’s mother) was
that the youth service – which had an already tense relationship with some
local tenants’ groups over the ‘control’ of youth clubs – attracted a welter
of local hostility. This included a number of abusive phone calls regarding
Cooper’s ‘tall ship’ trip and the following ‘letter’

Dont stick uP for scum liKe him. Your hOUse and Car Could be NEXT.
THINK on! . . . and Crew rob CARS smasH WINDOWs and beat peoPle
up. THe police CAN do NothiNg we will. His reign of TeRror is oVer.

The youth service view contrasted starkly with that of the local police. The
official police line had several strands. First, they promised firm action on
the estate itself, the clearest instance of which was the opening of a police
‘surgery’. Senior officers, secondly, made repeated pleas for restraint,
though these were often accompanied with expressions of sympathy for the
plight of local residents. Thirdly, the police clearly regarded the vigilantes
as decent people pushed over the edge. The local divisional superintendent
was quoted (by the Guardian) thus

This was a one-off action by some hard-working people who want to get
on with their lives and not be disturbed by anti-social idiots led by this
one man.

One consequence of Mark Cooper’s having been so publicly identified
as a local ‘folk devil’ was to enable both Weston residents and Cooper’s
peers to dissect his ‘character’. Local feeling differs here. According to
some, Mark Cooper was not unlike many teenagers on the Weston estate;
a run-of-the-mill ‘Lad’, alright on his own but troublesome once among his
peers; someone who had been unjustifiably identified by local gossip as
worse-than-all-the-rest

A: There was a lot of young people on that estate who I would classify
as worse behaved than him. Somehow they’d built all out of pro-
portion that he was the head, the boss, all this and that. It was all
bloody nonsense. He was a cocky little bugger, but that was all.
Alright, petty crime the same as a good majority of the young people
on the estate, but somehow he got built up as this icon of criminal
activity and all that.
B: A lot of it was gossip as well, a lot of story-telling.
A: Yes. Each time it gets told it gets embellished a little more, until he
becomes Dick Turpin or Jack the Ripper.

For others, though, he was worse-than-all-the-rest; a noted ‘ringleader’, a
‘big mouth’ who had long been asking for trouble. This certainly appears
to be the view of his contemporaries from another of the town’s council
estates
A: He’s a prick.
B: No one likes him. [...] 
IL: Why do you think these locals attacked him?
B: Because he’s a dick. He went on Weston blowing cars up for a laugh. That’s why he got fucking wasted.
A: It’s his own fault. [...] 
B: Everyone on the estate was sick of him. He was going round hammering kids.

This discussion illustrates a frequent theme in local residents’ responses to the attack: that Cooper had prompted the event and his ‘humiliation’ was justified. However, other interpretations were also apparent. Some believed that – irrespective of the rights and wrongs of the event – it had the effect of ‘quietening him down’. Others, by contrast, and these included members of the local tenants’ association, were concerned that the incident had given the estate an unwarranted ‘bad name’ by signifying that crime was somehow out of control. Some two years on (in July 1995) a well-attended public meeting about youth crime on the estate (prompted by a rumour that the tenants’ association were about to hire a private security firm) indicated that the frustrations which prompted the original vigilante incident had not abated.

Among those Macclesfield residents who had little or no knowledge of the Weston, four different ways of framing the event can be discerned (various combinations of which might be held by particular individuals). It was, first of all, often taken on trust by our focus group discussants that there must have been a ‘problem of youth’ on the estate, and that the vigilantes had got the right person. (Given that our respondents commonly decoded ‘crime’ as ‘youth crime’, and the existence of a number of well-known ‘hot spots’ in the town where groups of young people congregate, this is perhaps not surprising). Secondly, it is commonly taken as read that the police response to the plight of Weston residents must have been inadequate, this connecting with the often expressed feeling that the police have lately become increasingly and improperly remote from everyday life. The following exchange between two middle-class residents captures these positions well

A: He was incorrigible, the one that was causing all the trouble, he was just getting away with it. Local people know what’s going on, they know who it is. I’m not saying they were right to do what they did, but I think they . . .
B: If they don’t feel they’re getting the support, or not enough support from the police, perhaps it just eventually drives you to do it.

There is, thirdly, a marked tendency either to empathize on the basis of cognate experience with the residents’ anxieties and the actions that ensued, or to sympathize with them from afar. As one town centre resident put it: ‘I can understand a group of people getting so fed up that they
gang-up on him and do something. Everybody has got limits. It’s all very well if you live in other areas.’ One local headteacher saw the vigilantes’ actions as stemming from people’s investment in their locality.

There is a fierce pride in an awful lot of people, people who are not affluent, people who are not so well able to express their frustrations, but do have those frustrations because they feel that they are trying to do their best for their community.

This evident sympathy notwithstanding, there is, finally, a felt sense – especially among Macclesfield’s middle classes – that the vigilantes had somehow ‘gone too far’ – understanding without condoning was a common refrain. As a resident of the nearby affluent enclave of Prestbury put it: ‘I think that’s going a bit far. You have to let the law take over.’ The attendant concern here is with where such actions might lead; the plea for a reassertion of Law. If teenage crime and disorder is a sign of a world spun out of control, the anxiety about vigilantism is that it might send it spiralling still further.

If there isn’t a deterrent, if there isn’t law and order, you get anarchy. I think we are going down the road where people will take the law into their own hands, and then they can get their own person and they can do their own thing. But if you don’t feel protected you will.

THE TALE IS IN THE TELLING

Why have we thought it important to re-tell this rather sad and tawdry little story, now half-forgotten even in the town where the events happened? Several answers are possible. We will emphasize two for the present. First, this story demonstrates some characteristic aspects of ways in which knowledge about crime and social order is constructed and socially shared. Second, our version of the story reminds us of the significance of ‘place’ in understanding crime-related worry and anxiety. Finally we will suggest that these two dimensions of the topic are intimately connected.

We have repeatedly referred to the topics of this paper by the word ‘story’. But what are the implications of using this term? The notion of story presupposes events unfolding in time towards some conclusion. And the idea of telling a story commonly involves the enumeration of those events by a knowledgeable narrator, somewhat privileged with regard to the motivations and purposes of the actors, adopting certain stances of sympathy or blaming towards them and so on. Telling a story entails the imposition of some degree of order or intelligibility (if not coherence) upon events, and this reminds us how alien the notion of an uninterpreted fact is to human communication.

All of this seems obvious enough. But its relevance is still considerable. It says: people rarely discuss ‘crime’, still less ‘fear of crime’. Much as we
discuss 'the weather' rather than 'climate', we take our knowledge of crime for the most part in particularized, narrative form. One kind of question that arises from our research is how (or whether) local, concrete versions of crime events (what happened to me, you, my neighbour, your cousin; what it's like round here, over there) intersect with larger narratives at successively greater distance from the immediacy of personal experience (what's happening to this neighbourhood, our town, the youth of today, the nation). In brief, as soon as an event enters the domain of local public knowledge it is open to attributions of significance, and at least potentially the subject of competition for definition.

Thus what happened to one young man in Macclesfield on a June evening in 1993 entered a widening circle of discourse (local knowledge, mediated local knowledge, mediated national knowledge), and became a somewhat exemplary story. Having become newsworthy the event was lifted out of the dense tangle of particular local social relations which engendered it and made to stand for other more general preoccupations. For the national press it was an example of vigilantism; an example of pervasive disorder on council estates; an example of the lawlessness of the young, and so on. Best of all, it featured a young villain 'being made an example of'. It was newsworthy because it could be represented within these existing frames.

Locally, by extension, it signified the possibility of these same national ills coming to Macclesfield – a potentially serious breach in the town's fragile sense of insulation from the worst excesses of the present as these are suffered elsewhere. It was an important feature of the local significance of this story that it became, however briefly, a national news event. Not only did it momentarily threaten to tarnish the town's good name (which may be almost the same thing as its relative obscurity) but its press representation tended to fix its meanings and supply it with a certain stock of associations. For many of the participants in our focus groups the event was indicative not so much of how bad Macclesfield had become but rather of how troubling the world was; and now the world was beginning to impinge, even here.

Thus we return to the question of place. Arguably what we have documented here are some of the discursive aspects of a 'community crime career' (Bottoms and Wiles 1986). Such dynamics are part-and-parcel of the generation of reputations and place myths (Savage and Warde 1993) and in turn materially implicated in the polarization of urban fortunes (Logan and Molotch 1987) and the processes of neighbourhood change and decline (Skogan 1990).

We think that some issues that continue to perplex researchers (such as the long-standing and largely unhelpful debate on the rationality or otherwise of 'fear of crime') become at least locally intelligible in light of a thicker contextual understanding of place. Amongst the challenging tasks for current and future work on crime-related anxiety therefore becomes that of disentangling which of the variable dimensions of fear, worry and
concern are indeed place-based and which stem from more generally applicable features of late-modern societies (their 'risk-profiles' as Giddens (1990) has it) and how these intersect. In this respect this little story encodes in miniature some of the most difficult issues in current social theory, namely those of the relations between locally lived experience and global change.

Plainly, even so comparatively small a place as Macclesfield is not one 'place' but several – a composite of social spheres separated by small distances but sometimes wide social gulfs. That these events occurred there was part of what constituted their newsworthiness, because they included elements both of topicality ('vigilantism', 'estates', the impunity of 'lawless youth') and of incongruity (in Macclesfield).\textsuperscript{13} It may be that these events served to underline the (perhaps increasing) isolation of the 'estates' from the rest of the town, and to confirm the view of more affluent residents that these were places to which one did not go. Indeed, some of the worries of the Weston residents may well have centred on the risk of contagion from the reputation of Cooper and his mates to that of the estate as a whole. Certainly, the narration of the incident came to offer a shorthand, later taken up elsewhere in public meetings and police consultative committees. Thus, at one of the latter a resident of the Westminster Road area (away on the other side of town) couched their problem with local youths in the following terms: 'It's got to the situation where it's turned into another Weston, people are that annoyed. Something wants doing.'

Perhaps then it is in exactly such places – on the fragile lower-borderline of respectability but still worth defending – and in such towns that one might expect to see the greatest intensity of such 'vigilante' episodes. If, as social geographers such as Massey (1984) insist, the constitution of 'place' consists in 'layers of investment', so vigilantist responses to trouble may powerfully express certain kinds of investment – psychic and emotional as well as financial. In the Californian cases famously outlined by Davis (1990), but in less flagrant ways elsewhere too, the use of guards, signs, cameras, walls and gates preserve the interior safety of the affluent corral against the incursions of a dangerous world – and thereby also maintain property values. In other cases, it is claimed (see Taub et al. 1984), there is a dialectic between incipient neighbourhood decline, the flight of the more advantaged and the collapse of local housing markets. On the Weston estate in 1993 exit was not a serious option for most residents. Few wanted to leave or knew where they would have gone. At the same time their newly owner-occupied council houses, however lovingly cherished and improved, were barely saleable. And strong local networks (centring in this case on the pub) made some sort of collective action feasible. Hence, 'fight' presented itself compellingly as a preferable option to 'flight'.

Macclesfield in general is no 'landscape of fear' (Tuan 1979). Indeed, a recent 'Quality of Life' survey by Cheshire County Council (1996) suggests that Macclesfield residents are amongst the least fearful even in that somewhat privileged county (yet neighbouring Congleton reports the highest
levels of concern about crime in the county, whilst apparently enjoying the lowest levels of victimization). Our research does not answer conclusively questions about how fearful Maxonians are, nor even how they came to acquire the fears that they may have. Rather we seek to illuminate how the terms in which they express their concerns – the persons and places that figure in their inventory of worries, the explanations and solutions that they propose – connect with their differing senses of what it means to live there now. Which aspects of their way of life do they seek to protect? Which do they regret or wish to change?

Herein lies the point of connection between the two emphases with which we have concluded – the narrative method and the sense of place. Mark Cooper’s story is one instance among others of ways in which controversies about crime, law and order function in everyday talk and are used to narrate residents’ visions of the past, present and future trajectories of their places and their fortunes in a wider world of prospects and insecurities.

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NOTES

1. This paper arises from a two-year study supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under its Crime and Social Order Research Programme (award no. L210252032). We wish to thank the Programme’s director, our colleague Tim Hope, for his continuing support. We are also grateful to Ronald Frankenberg, Susan Smith and two anonymous journal referees for their comments on an earlier draft.

2. It follows that we cannot accept an opposition between lay understandings of crime problems as either mere figments of imaginary threats (got up by the cynically alarmist media) or as the rationally derived outcome of direct experience. Yet some theoretical debate, especially around the interpretation of ‘fear’ as it emerges from victimization surveys, has threatened to solidify just this dualism. This is now changing. In common with others now working in the field we are attempting a more nuanced and better grounded understanding of crime-talk (cf. Taylor 1995; Taylor et al. 1996; Evans et al. 1996). We also draw upon earlier American ethnographies of crime and place (especially Merry 1981; Baumgartner 1988). It is also clear that quantitative work has become much more locally sensitive and interpretively cautious in its treatment of such issues as multiple victimization (Hope 1995; Trickett et al. 1995) and the socially uneven take-up of crime prevention initiatives (Hope 1997).

3. Naturally these contentions influence both our choice of site and of method. We explore these and the connections between our work and the preoccupations of current social theory with the transformations of place in late-modernity further elsewhere, see Girling et al. (1998).

4. The term ‘Middle England’ has become, more or less concurrently with the lifespan of our research, a routine trope of journalism and the object of competition between the main British political parties in their claims to represent its values and aspirations. The genealogy of this term remains to be written. However, it is worth noting that it is a usage that
expressly conjures its analogue ‘Middle America’. The latter term has been regarded by American political scientists since the late 1960s as connoting both a certain level of material affluence and a characteristic ‘cluster of fears’. On the invention of ‘Middle America’ see variously Hunter (1987), Ehrenreich (1990) and, polemically, Galbraith (1993); a more systematic sociological treatment can be found in Gans (1988). The term ‘Middle England’ must be thus used with some ironic caution – not least in the case of Macclesfield because it uneasily cross-cuts that other ideational division of the English social landscape, namely ‘the North-South divide’ (see e.g. Shields 1991).

5. In pursuit of these objectives we have conducted within Macclesfield what we now call an ‘ethnography of anxiety’. This has comprised the following modes of enquiry: an analysis of publicly available information on economic, social and demographic change within the town, and of patterns of crime and demands for policing; an analysis of local representations of crime-related matters in the local press and crime prevention literature; a series of focus group discussions with different sections of the local population; individual and group discussions with criminal justice professionals and other local interest groups and ‘opinion formers’; a small number of biographical interviews; and numerous hours devoted to informal conversations and observation, attending meetings, hanging around police stations and travelling in police cars.

6. We have agonized for some time over the use of real names, for both people and places, or pseudonyms in this research. As regards places, we have concluded that work which in any sense claims to illuminate – or at least be grounded in – the sense of place cannot credibly pseudonymize place-names without special and compelling reason to do so. As regards persons the arguments are rather different. Given that the story – complete with the central figure’s name – had already been splashed all over the press, and that he and his mother spoke to us in part so that we might air another and, they hoped, more passionate version of events (even if only in so obscure a location as a sociology journal), we for a long time proposed to use his real name, and had his permission to do so. In the end, however, caution, and a wish to prevent the story revisiting its real life character some five years on, prevailed. Mark Cooper is a pseudonym.

7. The shops continue to be regarded by the local police as of one the town’s ‘hot spots’, a place that generates frequent calls from residents about ‘nuisance youths’.

8. The qualifier ‘older’ is scarcely needed here as, in this story at least, the term ‘resident’ is invariably used in ways that exclude its signifying the young.

9. In these respects the incident meets all the criteria of ‘vigilantism’ recently set out by Johnston (1996): planning, premeditation and organization; private voluntary agency; autonomous citizenship; the use or threatened use of force; a reaction to crime or social deviance, and the seeking of personal or collective security.

10. The Messenger also carried on 9 July a ‘Special Report’ on the ‘problem’ of youths hanging around on Macclesfield’s housing estates. This quoted the owner of the ‘Spar’ on two such estates (Hurdsfield and Upton Priory) as saying: ‘If the police ignore estate shops like they did on the Weston, you are going to get the same problems on the Upton, Hurdsfield and the Moss eventually. These kids just get worse and worse.’

11. A letter to the paper that week complained that Cooper (‘notorious throughout Macclesfield’) had been ‘catapulted to mini-stardom’ by the media. It also suggested that the Macclesfield Express should no longer report the story as it had become national rather than local in scope.

12. Reports or discussions of vigilantism also appeared that summer in the Daily Telegraph (17 May and 15 June), the Guardian (17 March and 10 August), the Times (16 June) and the Independent on Sunday (13 June and 11 July).

13. It is intriguing to note here that as we were preparing this paper Barclaycard launched an advertising campaign which made prominent use of Macclesfield’s
name. In the ads two middle-class Englishmen in ties and blazers (one of them – the pompous one – played by Rowan Atkinson) are stuck without cash in a hot and dingy South-American pueblo. To the other’s suggestion that they get cash from an ATM the Atkinson character mistakenly scoffs: ‘Cash from your Barclay-card? You’re not in Macclesfield now, Bough!’ Roland Barthes, thou shouldst be living at this hour. Apparently Macclesfield is, for the ad-people, in opposition to this alien spot, comically homely.

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