

CHAPTER 11

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SOCIOLOGICAL AND CRIMINOLOGICAL EXPLANATIONS OF TERRORISM

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INTRODUCTION

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THEORY is an integral part of the scientific exploration of terrorism as it is any phenomenon. A well-defined and articulated theory enables prejudices, superstitions, and unquestioned assumptions to be exposed and criticized, surmounting foundational barriers for scientific progress (Benton and Craib 2010). As researchers approach “everything in the light of a preconceived theory” (Popper 1970, 52), they are better able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their ideas and ask more precise research questions. Yet, theoretical explanations of terrorism in the social sciences have been lambasted for being weak. They are criticized for being regularly based on assumptions that were never made explicit nor empirically observable, let alone testable (Lum et al. 2006a; Morris 2015). Indeed, Crenshaw (1981, 380) lamented that “even the most persuasive of statements about terrorism are not cast in the form of testable propositions.” This lack of focus is attributed in part to the dominance of historical and non-systematic explorations of terrorism by scholars and within society more broadly (Gupta 2008), when instead, the terrorism studies should be guided by theoretical reasoning that can explain many different actions across a broad range of cultural and social settings. To remedy this, attempts have recently been made across different disciplines to apply existing theories of crime and social action to terrorism.

Much of the empirical work testing the dominant theories of terrorism has been advanced to dispel the notion that terrorism is random, or merely an expression of personal “deep emotional distress” (Gupta 2008, 14). Although it has long been held that

background conditions may encourage resistance to a state through acts of terrorism (Crenshaw 1981), repeatable and systematically collected evidence is required to examine whether these theories have any empirical basis to explain and predict phenomena such as terrorism (Akers and Sellers 2008). Overcoming difficulties in capturing comparable observations across nations and socio-cultural contexts (Schmid and Jongman 1988; Silke 2001), the rise of systematically collected datasets has created opportunities to empirically evaluate a number of prominent criminological and sociological theories. With the parallel rise of advanced statistical methods that are also able to better account for theoretical assumptions (Nagin and Land 1993; Anselin 1995; Dugan 2011), opportunities to test theories of terrorism across a variety of social contexts have expanded markedly over the past few decades (see LaFree and Dugan 2015).

The availability of these datasets and advanced analytic techniques has helped scholars advance and refine many theories of terrorism and dispel some of the weaker ones. Indeed, politically popular and intuitively plausible theories derived from a limited number of biographies that argued that terrorism is driven by personal narcissism and paranoia (Morf 1970; Sageman 2004) are unsupported by today's higher empirical standards (Victoroff 2005). Tests of prominent criminological and sociological theories on the other hand have provided compelling evidence that terrorism may be a function of rational decision-making or societal pressures across numerous contexts (Morris 2015). Drawing upon long-standing empirical support explaining and predicting other forms of illicit behavior, many of these theories have been adapted to study terrorism, revealing important empirical insights. This chapter presents some of the major theoretical attempts to apply criminological and sociological theories to the study of terrorism, and evaluates some of the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts.

CRIMINOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

Understanding and predicting terrorism is now a major political issue and a growing focus across many disciplines. Indeed, LaFree and Dugan (2015) note that this increased attention on terrorism by criminologists is evidenced by major increases in federal funding for terrorism research by the Department of Justice, terrorism articles published in reputable criminological journals, and papers submitted to prominent criminological conferences. This growing volume of empirical and theoretical attention is a relatively new phenomenon however as Lum et al. (2006b) report that prior to 2001 relatively little attention was paid to terrorism in most disciplines. Further, Silke (2001,12) equated the quality of terrorism research prior to 2001 to “fast-food”—“quick, cheap, ready-to-hand, and nutritionally dubious.” Including the initial boom in articles published in 2001 and 2002, only 3 percent of all terrorism articles used empirically based research, with approximately 96 percent being “thought pieces” (Lum et al. 2006b, 8). As more scholars

across disciplines began to study terrorism, they brought their disciplinary strengths to the topic. Criminologists and sociologists brought a greater empirical commitment to testing and understanding terrorism, with approximately 60 percent of articles in criminological journals containing “statistical analysis” (Silke 2001).

Yet criminology and sociology were latecomers to terrorism research. As recently as 2004, authors in volume 5 of *Sociology of Crime, Law and Deviance* (Deflem 2004) pointed out that sociologists and criminologists have offered very little theoretical guidance to explain terrorist violence (Black 2004; Rosenfeld 2004; Deflem 2004). Documenting theoretical approaches to terrorism since these conclusions, this chapter presents some of the distinct contributions that criminology and sociology have offered to better understand terrorism and the efforts to stop it.

This chapter presents some of the major theoretical contributions to terrorism research by sociologists and criminologists. We begin by introducing theories that have sought to explain the origins and motivations for terrorism. We then turn to the theoretical underpinnings that more directly inform efforts to prevent or stop terrorism. This chapter concludes by reviewing the insights uncovered by these theoretically driven empirical studies.

THEORIES ON TERRORISM ORIGINS AND MOTIVATIONS

Sociologists and criminologists have introduced many theories to explain why people engage in particular behaviors. They have been advanced in order to “transform [the] mass of raw sensory data into understanding, explanations, and recipes for appropriate action” (Pfohl 1985, 9–10), and have been developed under the assumption that it is necessary to understand the reasons for engaging in terrorism in order to influence its occurrence. This section presents three theoretical attempts by criminologists and sociologists to understand why people choose to engage in terrorism.

Theories of Rational Choice and Deterrence

Theories arguing that human behavior is function of rational decision-making have permeated the social sciences for centuries, and can be traced back beyond the seminal works of Beccaria (1764) and Bentham (1781). Rational choice theories assume that humans are self-interested beings with free will, and who seek to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. As such, individuals will engage in crime or other socially deviant behavior when the expected utility from committing this act is positive, meaning that the expected benefits are higher than the risks (Becker 1968). Often simplified as individuals basing decisions upon the likely costs and benefits, the nature and outcomes of

these decisions vary greatly across situations and offenses (Clarke and Cornish 1985; Loewenstein 1996). Further, perceptions of risks and rewards are more important than objective probabilities of punishment for actual decision-making (Nagin 1998, 2013). As such, Simon (1982) famously argues that instead of assuming pure rationality, the social sciences should investigate “bounded rationality,” whereby individuals settle for solutions that appear “good enough” instead of actually maximizing their utility (Berrebi 2009: 170).

Rational choice theory and its assumptions form the basis for many criminological theories including control, opportunity, and most commonly for terrorism, deterrence. Following the assumptions of rational choice, deterrence theory argues for an inverse relationship between the certainty, severity, and celerity of punishment and crime (Beccaria 1764). Deterrence can be general by preventing would-be offenders from offending; or it can be specific by stopping perpetrators from reoffending. At this point only a handful of studies have tested the effects of general deterrence on terrorism. General deterrence is typically measured as salient threats of punishment, which are historically and politically popular responses to terrorist threats. Yet, the deterrence perspective has been theoretically criticized for its inability to anticipate the different utility structures and reactions of terrorists (Victoroff 2005), which may explain its lack of empirical support. Dugan et al. (2005) look for empirical evidence of general deterrence through the introduction of metal detectors and security personnel at airports and found a reduced risk for transportation motivated hijackings, but none for terrorism-motivated hijackings. Other studies found outcomes that contradict the predictions of deterrence, as policies aimed to deter terrorism were associated with subsequent increases through possible backlash effects (LaFree et al. 2009; Carson 2014). Indeed, of the six UK strategies aimed at reducing political violence in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1992, only Operation Motorman, which deployed more than 30,000 armed service personnel, was associated with a reduced risk of terrorist violence (LaFree et al. 2009).

While these findings contradict deterrence, they would be consistent with rational choice theory if increases in the certainty, severity, and celerity of punishment are less important to some potential terrorists than the expected benefits of violence. Dugan and Chenoweth (2012) explore this further in context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict between 1987 and 2004. They assessed whether deterring terrorism through repression or rewarding abstinence through conciliation would have stronger reductions in Palestinian terrorism. The findings showed that across political periods repressive actions by Israel were either unrelated or related to increases in subsequent terrorism; and conciliatory actions were generally related to decreases in terrorism (Dugan and Chenoweth 2012). This suggests that governments can influence terrorist decision-making through more than just the presence or absence of punishment. Further, because the findings varied across different tactical periods, this study provides evidence that other social and political contextual factors influence terrorist decisions rather than just the nature of punishment and policy.

From the perspectives of rational choice theory, if terrorists behave rationally, knowledge of their beliefs and preferences should help us understand and better predict their behavior. However, if they are irrational—as some might argue—their behavior

cannot be explained through rational-choice models, and no systematic trends based on these models should be observed or sought. The presence of observable trends within the studies mentioned suggests at least some rational component to terrorist decision making, however more research is needed. These findings suggest that terrorism is a strategic choice based upon social conditions and perceived consequences, yet even strict deterrence theories could still hold value and tests of specific and perceptual deterrence have yet to be pursued.

Social Disorganization

Since the work of Quetelet (1831) and Guerry (1833) in the nineteenth century, it has been well understood that crime is not randomly distributed across space. Instead, scholars turned to social disorganization theories that posit that crime, like all other behavior, is a social product as opposed to a function of differences across people (Shaw 1930). In particular, the Chicago School of Social Ecology advanced theories of social disorganization to argue that the city, and more specifically, its slums, contained criminogenic forces that lead to crime (see Park 1936). Within these areas, social forces such as ethnic heterogeneity, poverty, and rapid urban growth are seen to undermine community ties, resulting in social disorganization, which subsequently leads to crime (Shaw 1930).

Criticized as being too subjective to be generalized to other societies and potentially suffering from ecological fallacies (Clinard 1957), many updated versions of this theory have since been offered (see Kasarda and Janowitz 1974; Kornhauser 1978; Sampson et al. 1997). Social disorganization theory now asserts that variation in informal social control at the community level explains variation in crime rates across neighborhoods (Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). Acting through the inability of communities to self-regulate, realize shared values, and solve commonly experienced problems (Kornhauser 1978; Sampson et al. 1997), contemporary theories of social disorganization posit that crime should be highest in communities that are unable to coordinate in these ways.

When applied to the study of terrorism, social disorganization theories predict that more terrorism should be perpetrated by those who live in communities characterized by population heterogeneity, residential instability, and concentrated disadvantage (Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson et al. 1999). LaFree and Bersani (2014) test this using data from the US between 1990 and 2011, and find that terrorism has an identifiable geographic pattern that is consistent with some of the predictions of social disorganization theory. While this pattern is necessary, it is insufficient to confidently conclude that social disorganization predicts terrorism, as the patterns are also consistent with the predictions of opportunity theories such as routine activities (Morris 2015). As terrorists may be drawn to symbolic targets within wealthy locations (LaFree and Bersani 2014), it is important to discern whether these sites are selected because of their ineffective informal social control mechanisms (social disorganization) or because they are perceived to be attractive targets (rational choice). Consequently, without knowing the underlying

mechanisms that link location to terrorism, it remains to be seen which theoretical perspective drives the relationship.

LaFree and Bersani's (2014) findings do, however, suggest that both residential mobility and population heterogeneity also predicted the location of US terrorist attacks, partially addressing this mechanism problem. Coupled with the observation that terrorist attacks were less common in counties with high levels of concentrated disadvantage however (LaFree and Bersani 2014), it does appear that any links between social disorganization and terrorism may differ from other crime types. Although providing more robust evidence for social disorganization theories, Freilich et al. (2015) acknowledge that population heterogeneity could also support backlash theories, highlighting the difficulty in empirically distinguishing this theoretical tradition from rival theories. Examining the impact of state instability as a proxy for social disorganization Fahey and LaFree (2015) also suggest that across nations social disorganization is associated with increased terrorism. Echoing some of these arguments, however, political instability as a cause for terrorism is consistent with theories other than social disorganization; and as Fahey and LaFree (2015) note their macro approach was unable to distinguish between social disorganization and resource mobilization theories. Concordantly, while there is a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that social disorganization is associated with terrorism, research thus far has yet to conclusively isolate the mechanisms that could drive the impact of social disorganization on terrorism.

Terrorism as a Reaction: Frustration Aggression, Relative Deprivation, and General Strain

Across the social sciences, a number of theories have argued that terrorism is a coping mechanism for dealing with grievances. Based upon the assumption that political violence violates socialized norms and that decision to use it is precipitated by other factors (Noricks 2009), sociological theories such as the frustration-aggression theory and relative deprivation have been offered to explain why terrorism is a reaction to previous events or conditions. Following the dictum that "violence is always a response to frustration" (Davies 1973, 251), the frustration-aggression hypothesis holds that terrorism occurs when politically motivated people "reach a point of no return" (Victoroff 2005, 19). Indeed, Pape (2003) argues that terrorism and especially suicide terrorism are high-cost and only make strategic sense when it is perceived that there are no other viable options. Yet, the rarity of terrorism in contrast to the vast majority of people who live in frustrating conditions undermines its predictive ability. Further, many terrorists come from privileged backgrounds despite expressing the frustration of the marginalized (Krueger and Malečková 2003), making it unlikely that frustration alone explains their motivation. As such, terrorism as a reaction solely to frustration appears to have little empirical support as a stand-alone theory of terrorism.

Building upon Gurr's (1970) assertion that rebellions occur when people are overwhelmed by their life circumstances, relative deprivation theories argue that economic disparities cause terrorism. This theory further argues that when this deprivation is

group-based, it could lead to collective actions that overtly question socially accepted beliefs and promote prejudice toward other groups (King and Taylor 2011). Such actions are exacerbated when globalization increases awareness of others' privilege, suggesting that both relative and absolute deprivation may increase terrorism among members of oppressed underclasses (King and Taylor 2011). Like frustration-aggression theory, little empirical evidence links absolute deprivation to terrorism (Krueger and Malečková 2003), and individual socio-economic variables have been found to be unrelated to extremist sentiments (Canetti and Pedahzur 2002). Consequently, at present it remains a fundamental issue for relative deprivation theories to predict whether members of a group will engage in terrorism and under what circumstances this will occur (King and Taylor 2011).

Following a parallel theoretical tradition and beginning with the work of Merton (1938), strain theories within criminology have been among the most prominent criminological theories of the past century. Strain theories argue that crime results from being structurally precluded from achieving the culturally approved means (e.g. a job and education) to gain culturally defined aspirations (e.g. the accumulation of wealth within the US) (Merton 1938). Reformulated and expanded under the banner of General Strain Theory (GST) by Agnew in 1992, strain theories now broadly hold that individuals are pressured into crime by the strains that they experience in their lives. Rather than being a function of utilitarian calculus, Agnew (1992, 2006) suggests that individuals engage in crime in reaction to the strains experienced from the loss of positive stimuli, the experience of negative stimuli, and the inability to achieve desired goals.

Addressing the inability for these theories to predict precisely who will and will not engage in criminal or terrorist coping, Agnew (2010, 131) argues that acts of terrorism are most likely to occur when people experience "collective strains" that are: high in magnitude, with civilians affected; unjust; and inflicted by substantially more powerful others. As "a range of factors condition" the effect of these strains, Agnew (2010, 131) argues that they will not always lead to terrorism, avoiding criticisms that GST would overpredict terrorism. Although this premise allows GST to avoid criticisms of this ilk, Agnew (2010, 149) notes that most empirical tests are too simplistic to adequately test GST as "they fail to measure the key dimensions of strain, including magnitude, injustice, and the nature of the source... these tests do not examine intervening mechanisms, the subjective interpretation of strain, or conditioning variables." Concordantly, until data are collected in a reliable manner that measure all of these factors, the empirical status of general strain theory for predicting terrorism will remain unknown.

THEORIES THAT INFORM EFFORTS TO PREVENT OR STOP TERRORISM

A second set of theories ignores the underlying reasons for engaging in terrorism and instead addresses ways to stop it. Indeed, Clarke and Newman (2006) argue that, regardless of the reasons that an individual or a group would wish to attack a government,

opportunities for terror should be identified and removed so that fewer attacks will succeed. Building upon the premise that is important to understand how crime is distributed across time, place, events, and people (see Hindelang et al. 1978), these theories have prioritized understanding the patterns of terrorism in order to better prevent it.

Opportunity Theories

Under the broad banner of opportunity theories, sociologists and criminologists have theoretically attempted to explain the distribution of crime within societies so that others could reduce episodes of occurrence.¹ Within this theoretical domain the notion of opportunity is crucial, as crime can only occur when motivated offenders are exposed to potential targets in the absence of capable guardians (Cohen and Felson 1979). Although opportunities for crime are ubiquitous, those such as Clarke and Cornish (1985) have sought to identify the attributes of events, places, and times that are conducive or resistant to crime. For example, Lynch (2011) notes that crime is more likely when targets are visible, attractive, and accessible, which suggests that interventions that inhibit these characteristics that could reduce the prevalence and the incidence of crime (Clarke 2003). Further, when we assume that offenders are rational actors, interventions that increase the potential costs, limit the potential benefits, reduce provocations, and reduce excuses should also limit the opportunities for crime (Clarke 2003). Although some argue that such interventions would only displace crime or lead criminals to adapt, consequently nullifying any changes in the overall crime rate, a growing body of research has found that crime does not displace, while the benefits of the intervention might diffuse to surrounding areas (Barr and Pease 1990; Guerette and Bowers 2009).

A specific strategy to reduce crime is situational crime prevention (SCP), which systematically analyzes the opportunities that terrorists exploit in order to block them (Clarke and Newman 2006). Clarke and Newman (2006) offer the following three steps for SCP. First, officials should identify and reinforce potential vulnerabilities and targets that could be exploited by terrorists. Second, they should anticipate likely adaptations to attacks as perpetrators attempt to circumvent reinforcements. Finally, all SCP measures must be implemented in partnership with both public and private agencies. Justified through such reasoning, Lynch (2011) observes an abundance of counter-terrorism measures that have now been implemented in order to restrict terrorism opportunities in accordance with these three principles.

Despite the widespread application of SCP, it is unclear how well opportunity theories can prospectively predict the locations in time and space for terrorism, and whether their interventions have a detectable impact on the incidence of terrorism. When we examine sites of past attacks, it appears that opportunity theories adequately predict the locations for terrorism. For example, in 2013 the Boston Marathon was clearly an attractive target that would rank highly in one or more of the criteria suggested by Clarke and Newman (2006); and indeed, it was attacked. Yet, there are hundreds of thousands of events annually that would also be identified as by Clarke and Newman as

attractive targets; and are untouched by terror. Only examining known terrorist incidents from this perspective however produces a high false positive rate (Dugan and Fisher 2015). As terrorism rarely occurs in some countries, it might take years before an attractive target is attacked, making it difficult to statistically conclude that prevention efforts are worthwhile (Lynch 2011). Indeed, this may be potentially responsible for the findings that the inclusion of metal detectors and security personnel at airports had no impact on terrorist-related hijackings observed by Dugan et al. (2005). Consequently, even though widespread policies following the priorities of these theories may not show an appreciable effect on terrorism at aggregated geographic levels, the implementation of SCP may still yield counter-terrorism benefits for specific vulnerable places (Morris 2015).

Diffusion of Innovations

Many of these attempts to apply criminological theories to terrorists have focused upon the similarities between other forms of crime and terrorism. Despite these similarities, the sociological theory of diffusion of innovations relies upon one important difference—terrorists seek publicity while traditional criminals go to great lengths to avoid detection. The linkage between seeking publicity and diffusion of innovations is relatively straightforward. In actively seeking attention, terrorists often strategically orchestrate strikes to draw considerable publicity and make people aware of their broader grievances. By operating in the public sphere and engaging with the government, organizations strategically operate in ways that anticipate or even incite government responses to their actions. Concordantly, organizations innovate in order to adapt to changing policy environments or to anticipate government responses.

Such innovation might account for some of recent salient terrorist behaviors, such as public beheadings. Other tactics seemed to have a broader strategic goal. For example, McCauley (2006) shows that some terrorist organizations have adopted “jujitsu” tactics in order to elicit harsh responses from the targeted government in order to sabotage its legitimacy (McCauley 2006). Further, Benjamin and Simon (2005) claim that this was Bin Laden’s intent on 9/11, provoking the US government to violently strike back against Muslims, creating new enemies of the US. Jackson (2005) explains that terrorist organizations are best able to adapt and survive when their tactical repertoire is broad, enabling them to survive interventions that would otherwise nullify their capabilities. This sort of adaptive response was apparent during the Palestinian Second Intifada after Israel built a security fence with checkpoints to impede suicide bombers (Jackson et al. 2007). Anticipating subsequent government responses, the Palestinians attacked the checkpoints directly, used women as bombers, and dressed militants in Israeli Defense Forces’ uniforms (Jackson et al. 2007). Further, instead of relying exclusively on penetrating the checkpoints, they also began to deploy rockets from Gaza into nearby Israeli cities, to build special ladders that avoided triggering the sensors at the top of the fence, and dug a network of tunnels in order to smuggle weapons, people, and goods in and out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Jackson et al. 2007).

New tactical ideas like these must come from somewhere, and the diffusion of innovations theory offers a plausible mechanism for how these ideas spread (see Horowitz 2010). Jackson (2005) explains that organizations can learn new tactics through direct experience in the field, from formal research and development units, or vicariously through the highly publicized activities of other terrorist organizations. In his famous book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, rural sociologist Everett Rogers describes hundreds of innovation studies and introduces a theory of how the adoption of innovating technologies diffuses across cultures (Rogers 1962). Rogers (1962) characterizes the diffusion of innovation process with an S-shaped curve, which demonstrates the cumulative adoption over time. The early adopters are at the bottom, followed by the early and late majority adopters, and then finally the laggards, or those who are last to adopt a new innovation.

LaFree et al. (2015) show how three terrorist tactical innovations in the late twentieth century appeared to have diffused across organizations over time. In July 1968, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) perpetrated the first politically motivated hijacking by diverting an El Al flight from its intended route to Tel Aviv, landing it in Algiers, and successfully demanding the release of all Palestinian prisoners (Hoffman 2006). After PFLP forced Israel to negotiate and consequently meet their demands, other terrorists began to hijack airplanes, resulting in increases in terrorist motivated aerial hijackings, suggesting that the innovation of aerial hijacking had diffused. LaFree et al. (2015) reaffirm this conclusion and similar ones for suicide attacks and attacks using chemical or biological weapons by presenting the cumulative number of organizations using those tactics over time (S-shaped curves). The shapes of those figures suggest that each tactical innovation is in different stages of the diffusion process, with suicide attacks having diffused more than the others. Aerial hijacking is likely in its later stages of the process and chemical and biological weapons are likely still only used by early adopters.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the observation that sociologists and criminologists have offered very little theoretical guidance for explaining terrorist violence (Black 2004; Rosenfeld 2004), many within these fields have sought to test how well sociological and criminological theories can predict and explain terrorism. Driven by the development of more advanced analytic techniques, it is clear that the empirical standard for studying terrorism has continued to climb since the observations of Silke (2001) and Lum et al. (2006a). This growing body of research has produced a number of important insights that have helped to further dispel and refine many of the intuitively popular explanations for terrorism. However, it is evident that the current state of criminological and sociological theory falls short of effectively predicting and explaining terrorism. Instead, they need to be refined by incorporating what is known about terrorism from other disciplines in order to better

measure and predict terrorists' responses to theoretically based interventions. Thus, one of the primary challenges facing the next wave of research will be to address and meet many of the more nuanced theoretical needs. Further, other prominent theories in sociology and criminology have yet to be applied to terrorism but could provide important insight into understanding terrorist behavior.

This chapter also revealed a number of difficulties associated with understanding and measuring counter-terrorism success. Probably the biggest challenge comes from the observation that the absence of terrorism cannot confirm counter-terrorism success (Lynch 2011). Detecting the impact of interventions remains a methodological challenge in places where terrorism is a rare occurrence. Yet, we anticipate that things will improve as methodological tools continue to be developed by social and statistical scientists that will make it more feasible to more precisely test existing theories on terrorism. Still, research over this past decade has held strongly to theoretical and empirical rigor, promising great dividends for understanding terrorism and advancing the fields of sociology and criminology more broadly.

NOTE

1. These theories include situational crime prevention, crime prevention through environmental design, routine activity theory, defensible space theory, opportunity-lifestyle theory, and a host of other environmental criminology theories.

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