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Crimewarps: The Future of Crime in America

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CRIMEWARPS: THE FUTURE OF CRIME IN AMERICA. By *Georgette Bennett*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday. 1987. Pp. xix, 435. \$19.95.

Crimewarps presents an interesting prediction of the future of crime in America through the year 2050. Georgette Bennett¹ explains that our notions about crime determine our sense of safety in every facet of our lives — but our notions are often distorted by myths which we read and hear. Therefore, Dr. Bennett asserts, “we need to understand the state of crime today and what it tells us about the time to come” (p. xiii).

A “crimewarp,” explains Dr. Bennett, consists of “the bends in today’s trends that will affect the way we live tomorrow” (p. xiii). Trends in demographics, economics, religion, politics, technology, education, biology, law, and values compose the changing social forces

1. Georgette Bennett is a criminologist and sociologist. She formerly worked as a network correspondent for NBC News and a talk show host on public television. Presently, while living in New York City, she serves as an associate of the Center for Policy Research and the Center for Investigative Reporting.

which shape criminal behavior.² *Crimewarps* is predicated on the assumption that criminals will take advantage of the opportunities manifested by changed societal conditions.

Crimewarps is well written and clearly organized. It contains many interesting and provocative predictions, especially Dr. Bennett's alarming chapter on America's vulnerability to computer crime. To the detriment of *Crimewarps*, some of Dr. Bennett's conclusions seem dubious due to lean factual support and tenuous analyses. This absence of foundational strength may cause an exacting reader to strip *Crimewarps* of all merit. However, a less-demanding reader with an interest in criminal behavior vis-à-vis society will probably enjoy Dr. Bennett's journalistic use of terminology, colorful anecdotes, and current events in her effort to delineate the nature of crime in the future.

Dr. Bennett identifies six crimewarps — each a result of major social change. In Crimewarp I, *The New Criminals*, Dr. Bennett focuses on the emerging roles of women, teenagers, and senior citizens as criminals. In *The March of Crime*, Crimewarp II, Dr. Bennett analyzes crime in a geographical context. She predicts, in general, safer cities at the expense of a more menacing countryside, as crime shifts from the frostbelt to the sunbelt. In Crimewarp III, *Ring Around the White Collar*, Dr. Bennett predicts that the advent of an increasingly computer-dependent society will invite an onslaught of "impersonal, far-reaching white-collar crimes" (p.xiv). Despite our society's deeply-rooted Puritan ethic, in Crimewarp IV, *The Politics of Pleasure*, Dr. Bennett foretells that a more tolerant American society will result in the legalization of several vice crimes such as drug abuse, homosexuality, prostitution, and gambling. In Crimewarp V, *The Ups and Downs of Big Brother*, Dr. Bennett predicts that the combination of technology, self-help, private police, and architectural design³ will displace traditional crime-fighting techniques. Finally, in Crimewarp

2. Crime is not static; rather, it changes as social forces change. Dr. Bennett writes, "Crime is simply a form of behavior that reflects myriad intersecting forces." P. xiv. Dr. Bennett's conception of crime and its causes should be contrasted with other theories (something she neglects to do). For instance, in L.TAYLOR, *BORN TO CRIME: THE GENETIC CAUSES OF CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR* (1984), the author outlines a view of crime which emphasizes genetic reasons for criminal behavior rather than environmental and social forces.

3. Dr. Bennett uses the term, "defensible space", to describe an approach to crime prevention which uses environmental design as a means to abate crime. "Defensible space . . . [is] based on a simple syllogism: Crime is a form of behavior. Space is the arena within which all human behavior takes place. Therefore, changes in the design of space will produce changes in crime." P. 293. To control crime, design changes should emphasize natural surveillance and "territoriality." Dr. Bennett explains that isolated, unwatched spots are likely targets of criminals. By designing neighborhoods and shops so that they are open to the public view and close to areas of activity, society will be less vulnerable to crime. In addition, a sense of territoriality should be created so that the increasingly mobile street criminal will be more easily noticed by passers-by. For instance, Dr. Bennett contends that by "privatizing" neighborhoods with cul-de-sacs, fenced-in yards, and one-way streets, we will make it more likely that intruders will be "immediately spotted and concerned residents [will be] put on the alert." P. 294. "In the future," Dr. Bennett predicts, "architecture will make or break our efforts to control the streets." P. 291.

VI, *Paying the Tab for the Bill of Rights*, Dr. Bennett claims that the perennial trade-off between civil liberties and law-and-order will be skewed towards the latter, as a conservative judiciary causes our civil liberties to suffer.

Dr. Bennett's self-proclaimed purpose for writing *Crimewarps* is to identify those crimes that are growing and also those that are declining. Her technique is logical and straightforward. She states a proposition and then presents statistics, anecdotes, and social science analyses in support. Unfortunately, Dr. Bennett's analyses are sometimes too narrow in scope. This is perhaps an unavoidable deficiency, given Dr. Bennett's thesis that crime is a result of "myriad intersecting forces" (p. xiv). It is a difficult task indeed to incorporate every social factor which may influence criminal behavior. Nonetheless, this lack of breadth in Dr. Bennett's analyses serves to weaken the credibility of her conclusions.

For example, she proposes that the rate of conventional crime will continue to drop through the year 2050. She reasons:

Most street criminals are young, with ages fourteen to twenty-four being the most dangerous years. By the time they reach their twenty-fifth birthday, most of the hell-raising is over. Come the year 2000, more than three-quarters of the population will have cleared the crime-prone age barrier. Today only 60 percent have crossed that threshold. . . . *The rate of conventional crime will drop as the median age rises.* [p. 2; emphasis in original]

However, by the same token, Dr. Bennett continues, "[a]s the population ages, we can expect more . . . [w]hite-collar crimes [which] are usually committed by older, 'respectable' criminals against older, more affluent victims. . . . [S]ince this part of the population is growing, we can expect the rate of white-collar crime to grow too" (pp. 2-3).

With respect to Dr. Bennett's conclusion that conventional crime will drop, her analysis turns on the assumption that the "hell-raising" period will not eclipse the twenty-five-year-old age barrier. However, this assumption seems unjustified insofar as people over the age of twenty-five in the future may act differently from the twenty-five-year-olds of today due to changed societal conditions. A plausible counter-analysis suggests this result. For instance, if unemployment positively correlates with criminal activity,⁴ then the fact that fourteen to twenty-four-year-olds are crime-prone in the present would be expected, given the high rate of teen unemployment today. In the future, as the median age of the population rises, so will the median age of the unemployed. Because of American society's deference to the seniority system, it will be the youngest ranks of working-age adults who will experience unemployment in the future. Thus, it is possible

4. This is an assumption which Dr. Bennett would ostensibly support, as she refers to an "intimate link" between idleness and juvenile crime. P. 8.

that as the median age of the unemployed increases, a crime-prone segment of American society could emerge, with a significant number of its members over the age of twenty-five. Accordingly, despite the aging population, the rate of conventional crime could remain the same or even increase, depending on the unemployment rate.⁵ Here, Dr. Bennett fails to consider whether unemployment will affect the criminal behavior of people over the age of twenty-five. This is merely one example of where Dr. Bennett fails to account for the "myriad intersecting forces" which form criminal behavior. One of the most provocative parts of *Crimewarps* is Dr. Bennett's discussion of America's vulnerability to computer crime. She exposes our economic dependency on computers and shows how utterly defenseless we are against computer criminals. Dr. Bennett warns that "[t]he ubiquitous computer has created a crimewarp that's free of geographical constraints. Experts agree that computer crime . . . will be the single greatest crime generator we face in the future. The new criminals will include computer operators, programmers, tape librarians, and electronic engineers" (p. 4; emphasis in original).

In chapter 6, *The Computer Catastrophe*, Dr. Bennett begins with five telling anecdotes about innocent persons and businesses victimized by computer criminals: she then delineates the nature of computerized crime. One case tells of how a computer programmer drained a family-owned business' bank account at a rate of \$1000 per day, resulting in financial ruin for the family. Computers are vulnerable on many fronts, Dr. Bennett explains. "Data diddling" (manipulation of file data) can be accomplished by any person with a minimal knowledge of computers, yet can cause catastrophic results for individuals and businesses (pp. 108-09). Computer output can be manipulated to facilitate fraudulent activities. Clerks can engage in "salami slicing" (diverting small amounts of money from several large accounts) with relative ease, given the highly decentralized and unsupervised nature of data systems (p. 110). In the future, our vulnerability to computer crime will grow as our "cashless society"⁶ witnesses a burgeoning number of people with the access and capability to manipulate electronic accounts.⁷

5. In the context of another discussion Dr. Bennett writes that "[a]ccording to Wharton Econometric Forecasting, the unemployment rate will drop to 5.3 percent over the next decades. P. 8. Under my counter-analysis, this suggests that the conventional crime rate will drop. However, the point remains that Dr. Bennett ignores the effect of unemployment in her analysis.

6. Dr. Bennett writes: "Interbank wire transfers, along with automatic teller machines and point-of-sale terminals, are spearheading an electronic revolution that is propelling us toward a cashless society. Far greater sums are available for theft than paper money ever provided." P. 117.

7. According to Dr. Bennett:

White-collar crimes . . . almost always involve deception by those in a position of trust, power, or influence. Perpetrators must be of an age and skill level that gives them access to such positions. In other words, they must be *mature, experienced, and educated* — the kind

Dr. Bennett's prognosis on the computer crime problem, however, is not entirely bleak. She maintains that as the government, businesses, and individuals become more security conscious, "[c]riminal entry will be restricted to the most professional who, unlike amateurs, tend to be selective rather than casual about their targets" (p. 114). Improved security devices and intensified legislation will shield us from tampering by amateurs.

Occasionally, *Crimewarps* strives to achieve too much. The book contains a plethora of predictions about the future of crime; conveniently, at the end of each chapter Dr. Bennett lists a series of concise predictions derived from the chapter's discussion. But while some of these conclusions flow naturally and are amply supported, others are bare assertions lacking foundational support or any analysis. Sometimes Dr. Bennett relies solely on her anecdotes to suggest a trend necessary to support her conclusion.

For example, Dr. Bennett writes: "The shift from smokestack to service economy will have the strongest impact on the working-class and lower middle-class sectors from which prostitutes are most often recruited. The need for economic supplements will induce more women to turn to part-time prostitution" (p. 173). Unfortunately, Dr. Bennett offers no substantial basis for this controversial prediction. She merely recites a few examples of women who have entered part-time prostitution to supplement their incomes, and asserts that the moral backlash against the sexual revolution may foreclose other sexual outlets, thereby increasing the demand for paid sex (p. 171). Dr. Bennett may ultimately be correct, but her analysis is far from compelling.

Another particularly unfounded prediction follows a chapter on gambling, *Upping the Ante on Gambling*, in *Crimewarp IV*. Dr. Bennett claims that "[t]he growing popularity of the VCR is helping to keep people at home. Time spent at home correlates with non-gambling. Therefore, the VCR will help to reduce gambling" (p. 210). This seems simplistic, at best. Any criticism of *Crimewarps* on this ground, however, must make note of what Dr. Bennett is attempting. *Crimewarps* is not a scientific work. Predicting the future inherently involves uncertainty and quasi-informed guesswork. Dr. Bennett can hardly be chastised for falling victim to the inevitable. If *Crimewarps* only contained highly probable and easily perceived predictions, then it would be of considerably less interest. Dr. Bennett should be applauded for her boldness — that is what makes the book interesting. Also, some deference should be paid and latitude granted to the intuition of a person whose entire career has, in one way or another, related

of person who dominates the burgeoning managerial, administrative, and professional segment of the labor market.

P. 104 (emphasis in original).

to crime analysis.⁸ Although *Crimewarps* is far from convincing, it is at least entertaining and makes for enjoyable reading.

— *Brandon D. Lawniczak*

8. Dr. Bennett describes her realm of experiences as follows:

I've spent most of my career dealing with criminals, victims, law enforcers, attorneys, prison officials, court personnel. I've taught thousands of college, graduate, and professional students; advised police commissioners; designed programs for federal, state, and city governments; counseled corporations. I've developed stories for "60 Minutes," "20/20," "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour"; worked crime beats for local news programs and covered the nation for NBC News.

P. xv.