

Challenging academic complicity in the eco-social destruction inherent in policing: a call for saboteur criminology

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Abstract

Building on insights from critical/green criminology, political ecology, and green anarchism, and drawing on own empirical research (previously reported elsewhere, for example, Brock, 2020; Brock and Dunlap, 2018; Brock et al, 2023; 2026; Stephens-Griffin, 2020; 2021; 2022b) and experience of the policing of ecological resistance and animal liberation, this article makes two core arguments. First, we suggest that policing is not just socially but *ecologically* harmful, enforcing and defending degradation, extraction, and climate collapse. We illustrate our argument firstly with a case study of policing of (illegal) hunting and hunt sabotage, showing the inadequacy of ‘crime’ as a framework and pointing to the power and politics involved. Mainstream criminology pays insufficient attention to the ecological harms of policing, and reproduces the same statism and anthropocentrism that underlie and legitimise policing. Secondly, to disrupt this complicity of criminology (and academia more widely), we propose ‘saboteur criminology’; an approach that radically rethinks how we engage with police and the criminal justice system, committed to direct action and to supporting and joining those who do ‘whatever it takes’ to stop and reverse ecological harm. Drawing on Aalders and Kioko (2025) and our own work (Brock et al, 2026), we argue for understanding sabotage as **world making**; as legitimate political strategy and important liberation practice. Saboteur criminology makes space within and outside academia, to challenge and disrupt. This involves moving beyond reformist approaches which seek to produce ‘better’ forms of policing, recognising that reforms merely reinforce the legitimacy of these repressive institutions, perpetuating their harms. Instead, saboteur criminology takes seriously abolitionist alternatives for socially and ecologically just futures.

Introduction

Policing in contemporary (post)colonial Britain is in crisis. The Casey report found the Metropolitan Police to be ‘broken and rotten, suffering collapsing public trust and ... guilty of institutional racism, misogyny and homophobia’ (Dodd, 2023: para 1). Discrimination is ‘tolerated ... and has become baked into the system’ (Casey, 2023: 16). While not ‘anti-police’, Casey inadvertently supports a view that many have long held: that the sacred principle of ‘policing by consent’ is a myth (Gilmore and Tufail, 2015; Scraton, 2015). Instead, policing is about control and maintaining a particular social order (Neocleous, 2014; 2021), domestically and internationally (Bell, 2013; Elliott-Cooper, 2021). As Cuneen (2023: 170) argues, ‘the foundations of the contemporary institutions of policing are found in the interplay between the centre and the periphery of the colonial experience’, a phenomenon first articulated by Césaire (1950/2000) as an imperial ‘boomerang’. Violence, corruption, oppression, harm are therefore features, not bugs, of policing. Meanwhile, we witness catastrophic global climate breakdown (IPCC, 2023), biological annihilation, and mass extinction (Ceballos et al, 2017), driven by industrial capitalist expansion, land-use change, extraction, and pollution. We see the collapse of wildlife globally (Bar-On et al, 2018), and an interplay of ecological crises that disproportionately affect those who are already most marginalised – especially in the Global South. Actuaries warn that while three degrees of heating by 2050 could conceivably lead to four billion deaths globally, yet we currently have no realistic plan to avoid this (Laville, 2025). Instead, governments continue to license new oil and gas exploration projects, permit coal mines, build new roads, and expand

airports (all ‘legal’), while pumping resources into repressing and criminalising ecological resistance.

Despite harsh criminalisation, policing, and violence against environmental defenders at the hands of corporations and state actors globally – 2,253 murdered between 2012 and 2024 alone, many more abused, assaulted, intimidated, and otherwise harmed (Global Witness, 2025a) – people continue to defend their territories, habitats, and livelihoods. In response to growing climate mobilising in Britain, new policing and public order laws have seen harsher criminalisation of dissent, imprisonment, and long punitive processes (Siddique, 2024). Climate activists are charged at three times the rate of far-right agitators, with nearly 7,000 climate protesters arrested between 2019 and 2025 (Global Witness, 2025b). In the absence of meaningful commitments from politicians or power holders, policing represents the frontline when it comes to snuffing out the popular resistance which might divert us from the path of ecological catastrophe.

Policing is thus integral to the imposition and enforcement of ecological and social harm and injustice (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022; 2024; Stephens-Griffin and Brock, 2025; Dunlap and Brock, 2022; Brock and Stephens-Griffin, forthcoming). While not usually acknowledged, the struggles against policing and for ecological justice are intimately entwined (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022), especially when understood in terms of historical continuities of colonial extraction and infrastructural violence. Domestically and abroad, policing and militarisation protect the infrastructures and extractive projects that maintain the flows of ‘resources’, pollution, and degradation. Across the globe, policing not only targets those who pose obstacles to growth, productivism, and capitalist modernity – environmental defenders who resist the imposition of industrial (mega)projects, destruction of ecosystems, and infrastructural colonisation (Dunlap, 2020; 2022; Brock, 2024) – but disproportionately impacts already marginalised people. While we see this in the killing of forest defenders in the Amazon or the disappearance of resistance leaders in Indonesian oil palm plantations, here we focus on the relationship between policing and ecological degradation in the imperial core, the heart of industrialism and modernity. Although the violence and harm tend to be less visible and ‘bloody’ on British soil, the same dynamics are at play.

This article is not based directly on empirical data, but our argument is informed by own empirical research on – and experiences of – the repression of ecological resistance and animal liberation in the UK (Brock and Dunlap, 2018; Brock, 2020; 2024; Stephens-Griffin, 2020; 2021; 2022a; 2022b; Stephens-Griffin et al, 2021; Brock and Goodey, 2022; Graham et al, 2022; Brock et al, 2023; 2026). While we draw on a range of literatures, such an argument can never remain purely theoretical, and must be grounded in relationships and experiences on the ground. While not citing directly, we thus draw on and are informed by many years of working with, and as part of ecological resistance movements, illustrating the entanglement of theory and practice and the importance of prefiguration. This article is particularly inspired by our recent work on hunt sabotage and animal liberation, which led us to argue for the constructive future-making dimension of sabotage (Brock et al, 2026) explored here.

Grounded in this work, we argue that criminologists must take the ecological and social harm and injustice that policing enforces seriously. While we rightly often challenge anthropocentric and politically-constructed categories of crime or legality, all too often unquestioned in academia and beyond, as criminologists, we must also do more to acknowledge and resist the discipline’s own active complicity in maintaining the harms of policing. We must join the many activists and increasing number of scholars embracing the radical possibilities of abolition. We argue

that tinkering around the edges of policing with reforms is inadequate. Instead, we should look towards anti-carcer abolitionist alternatives.

Inspired by hunt saboteurs and others who take action in defence of ecologies, we advocate for ‘saboteur criminology’, committed to direct action and abolitionist alternatives. We do not use ‘sabotage’ as a metaphor, but see it as a literal, embodied politics of refusal and connection building, working to dismantle harmful infrastructures, whether material, institutional, or intellectual (Brock et al, 2026). We aim to explicate this, primarily through a focus on policing as a facet of criminal justice. Mainstream criminology has been relatively reluctant to open abolitionist conversations compared to disciplines like history and geography (Brown and Schept, 2017). Critical criminologists challenge the carceral (Garland, 2001) and colonial (Agozino, 2003; Cuneen, 2023) heart of criminology as the ‘science of oppression’ (Lynch, 2000). Those engaging in abolitionist/ecological struggle therefore need to think about the ways in which criminology’s oppressive tendencies can be sabotaged. This article builds on a growing and varied body of work within and adjacent to criminology which engages directly with policing-abolition debates (for example, Vitale, 2017; McDowell and Fernandez, 2018; Duff, 2021; Elliott-Cooper, 2021; Ryan, 2023), while acknowledging its continuing human-centric outlook (Brisman and South, 2020). One aim of this article is therefore to offer an ecological perspective on policing, and to help bring critical criminology into closer conversation with policing-abolitionist political-ecology scholarship that critically investigates the link between ecology, power, and policing.

To do so, we start by outlining our critique of the anthropocentric and statist foundations of criminology, before moving on to conceptualising policing and abolition in ecological terms. We then introduce our case study, which shows how harsh policing targets those who sabotage (illegal) hunting while failing to prevent harm to nonhuman animals. Finally, we offer saboteur criminology as a challenge and alternative to mainstream criminology.

Enforcing ecological social harm and injustice: challenging statism and anthropocentrism in criminology and beyond

Critiques of the statist tendencies of mainstream criminology are nothing new (Cohen, 1988). From its tendency toward accepting narrow state definitions of ‘crime’ and unquestioning commitments to ‘crime control’ (Christie, 1993); to its willingness to be used as a technocratic tool of the carceral state (Young, 1986); to its reluctance to acknowledge its own colonial roots (Agozino, 2003) or the state itself as a harmful/ criminal actor (Green and Ward, 2004) – the discipline’s statist tendencies and narrow ‘crime’ focus have been the subject of critical scholarship for decades (Cohen, 1988). Drawing on scholarship in critical/green criminology, green anarchism, and political ecology, we embrace critical criminological theoretical approaches that eschew this narrow focus on individualised, illegal acts (that is, typical ‘crime’) which supports statist conceptualisations of justice and safety. The essence of such approaches is distilled in Hillyard and Tombs’ (2004: 11) assertion that ‘crime has no ontological reality’. In other words, the category of ‘crime’ is a construct, codified by political elites, enacted through nation states, rooted in normative value judgements focused predominantly on carceral notions of social control (Canning and Tombs, 2021). Constructs of crime inevitably vary across cultures, time and space and so crime is better understood as an instrument of the interests of the powerful in society, used to preserve and protect their status (Reiman and Leighton, 2020). Crime, as a social, cultural, legal, political

construct, knowingly and transparently ‘excludes many serious harms’ (Hillard and Tombs, 2004: 13), while including activities that don’t cause any harm.

Rejecting this, many critical criminologists study harms ‘outside and beyond the context of crime’ (Canning and Tombs, 2021: 65), highlighting the environmental harm (White, 2014), ecocide (Whyte, 2020), border violence (Iliadou, 2023), corporate harm (Tombs and Whyte, 2015), torture (Canning, 2026), occupational death and injury (Tombs and Whyte, 2013) and more, that are fundamental to the contemporary political economic system. They focus on diverse forms of social and structural harm, which are often legal, socially accepted, protected by policing institutions (for example, police, militaries, private security), and yet have deleterious effects. Critical analyses of such harm and its enablers can thus lead one to challenge state and corporate power behind such projects, and the way they are enforced. Such analyses illustrate the ecological destruction *inherent in policing*, or that *policing protects* – by allowing and enforcing habitat destruction, toxification, pollution, animal exploitation, extraction, and so on.

The legal systems that policing enforces actively contribute to ecological degradation: prioritising property rights and economic growth over human/nonhuman health. Questions as to who counts as a victim of ‘crime’ continually shift and change subject to power relations – take for instance the legality of slavery until 1833, or marital rape until 1992, in Britain. Yet, critical criminologists have often been reluctant to acknowledge the deep-seated anthropocentrism foundational to social science (Cudworth, 2015; Stephens-Griffin and Griffin, 2021; Peggs, 2023). Green criminology has therefore been vital in challenging anthropocentric notions of crime and justice (Nurse and Wyatt, 2021) and rejecting the traditional exclusion of nonhumans and ecosystems (Beirne, 1999; Fitzgerald and Pellow, 2014; Sollund, 2015).

Elsewhere, Critical Animal Studies (CAS) has helped reveal animal exploitation as fundamentally connected to socially and ecologically-harmful structures and arrangements like patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism and neocolonialism (Pellow, 2014). Similarly, feminist political ecologists explicitly challenge human-nature dichotomies, arguing for an understanding of nature as the product of human and nonhuman power relations and as hybrid socio-natural systems with blurred boundaries (Rocheleau et al, 1996). Social ecologists also challenge the ‘exceptionalism’ that sees human society as existing beyond nature/nonhumans; human society is instead a component of natural ecology. (Bookchin, 2007).

Having established the need to challenge anthropocentrism and statism, we now explore what this means for our analysis of policing. This goes beyond the argument that ‘policing also harms ecosystems and nonhuman animals’. Instead, drawing on empirical work previously reported elsewhere (Brock and Dunlap, 2018; Brock, 2020; 2024; Brock and Goodey, 2022; Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022; 2024; Dunlap and Brock, 2022; Brock et al, 2023; 2026; Stephens-Griffin and Brock, 2025), we argue that policing enforces a social ecological order that is destructive and harmful to human and nonhuman inhabitants. Just as approaches that focus on politically-constructed, human-centric categories of crime will always miss important forms of social harm, so too are approaches grounded in an assumed insuperable separation between society and ecology, humans and nonhumans, destined to miss the full picture of the harm and violence inherent in policing itself. We start by introducing our focus on policing, before illustrating our argument with a case study on the policing of hunt sabotage.

Policing, abolition, and ecology

‘Policing’ refers to the politics, technologies and tactics associated with maintaining and exercising the police power, in the name of maintaining a particular social and economic order (Neocleous, 2021). According to the US-based Critical Resistance movement, ‘[p]olicing is a social relationship made up of a set of practices that are empowered by the state to enforce law and social control through the use of force’ (Critical Resistance, nd). Rather than defeating the enemy, the aim of policing is the ‘constitution of order’, so police power is in ‘constant war against the ‘enemies of order’’ (Neocleous, 2014: 14). Drawing on this, we examine policing as a carceral logic of power that informs politics, technologies, and tactics to enforce and defend a deeply destructive *ecological* social order (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022). This includes militarism, which shapes that order both domestically and abroad. Policing is the foundation of state power, and part of the ‘permanent war’ (Dunlap, 2014) that organises and spreads ‘a system of production and consumption that channels desires, dehumanizes, and divides people as “resources” to be integrated and managed into the working order of the global industrial system’ (Dunlap and Brock, 2022: 5–6).

Policing is rooted in colonialism and emerges from a long complex history of enslavement, domestication, exploitation, and extraction of humans, nonhumans, and ecologies. States, police forces, and militaries are central to contemporary (neo) colonialism, so decolonisation and abolition go hand in hand (Cuneen, 2023). But it’s not just ‘the police’; a focus on policing allows us to understand ‘the important role of actors and institutions that existed long before the formalization of policing powers in police forces or even militaries: for example, Catholic priests who were integral to the domestication of peasants during Roman imperial rule’ (Dunlap and Brock, 2022: 14), or contemporary examples including the welfare state, universities, and private militias. We adopt an anticolonial lens which recognises colonial legacies and ways these shape power, politics, and ecologies (Ferdinand, 2021); and a global lens that helps us understand the imperial nature of British policing, its development, and contemporary manifestations. Colonisation ‘abroad’ grew out of internal colonisation and state building; colonial conquest and extraction co-developed with, required, and facilitated the imposition of social order ‘at home’, including the continued domestication and displacement of peasants, disciplining and coercing them to sell their labour power and work in factories, facilitating industrialisation. These processes fundamentally (re)shaped human and nonhuman habitats and societies (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, forthcoming).

Abolitionist scholarship documents and theorises the harm caused by policing, showing institutional racism and sexism, misogyny, and white supremacy, and illustrating the role of policing in upholding a colonial capitalist system (Davis, 2003; Critical Resistance, 2008; Maher, 2021; Purnell, 2021; Kaba and Ritchi, 2022; Cuneen, 2023). Crucially though, such approaches are not just about taking away, but about building. Gilmore (2022) views abolition as a process of creating new infrastructures of freedom; building a world where prisons are no longer needed. She demonstrates carcerality as being deeply entwined with place, beyond the physical buildings and structures of criminal justice, but expanding to housing, education and lived environments – our relationship to land is shaped by policing (from plantations to coal mines). Policing is embedded in everyday life, by teachers, healthcare professionals, civil servants, and many others forced to take part in surveillance and enforcement of the law. Removing police alone will not change this. Similarly, Davis (2005) emphasises the productive and prefigurative dimensions of abolition.

Drawing on the work of Du Bois, she argues that the goal of abolition is not simply to abolish police, but to imagine and build a society where the functions of policing in responding to harm and crisis can be handled in community-led, non-punitive ways. True freedom from carcerality rests in the total reconstruction of society (Davis, 2005). Maher (2021) has demonstrated the ways that forms of police abolitionism and grassroots, community-centred alternatives to policing already function in practice in various contexts globally, as Rojava, Kurdistan, or Chiapas, Mexico, illustrate. Indeed, community-based mechanisms for addressing conflict far predate and precede prisons and policing as we know them today.¹

What is less well-established is the *ecological* harm inherent in policing; not just the massive ecological ‘bootprint’ of military and policing operations (Dunlap and Brock, 2022), but its function as protecting and enforcing ecologically-degrading projects and infrastructures. Braz and Gilmore (2006) demonstrate the ways policing, prisons, and pollution are entangled and racially constituted in the US. Environmental justice campaigners and abolitionists both use the concept of ‘toxicity’ in their campaigning (Thompson, 2018: 9). Yet social scientists have been slow in recognising their entanglement. Ecocide and ecological catastrophe do not passively occur without resistance but are in fact enforced and facilitated globally by policing actors. The harm and violence inherent in policing are integral to upholding a particular *extractive ecological* social order (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022; 2024). Different (geo)political ecology lenses can show us the ecological dimensions of this ‘project’ beyond the ecological footprint of policing already mentioned: the enforcement of climate breakdown, for instance by enforcing fossil capitalism, and the use of ecological degradation as a ‘weapon of war’ (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022; forthcoming). Ecological harm is often a deliberate policing and military strategy, as seen in the destruction of marshlands (Ahram, 2015), killing of buffaloes (Moloney and Chambliss, 2014), Russian state bombing of dams in Ukraine (Yermak and Wallstrom, 2023), and the Israeli state’s genocide in Palestine, which has also decimated ecosystems (Ahmed et al, 2024). These examples illustrate that social and ecological health are deeply entwined, and that policing serves to enforce harm.

The ecological entanglement of policing: policing hunt sabotage, facilitating foxhunting

Here we show how the policing of foxhunting and hunt sabotage facilitates harm and death of nonhuman animals by protecting (often illegal) hunting. The case demonstrates that policing not only protects, but in fact drives and enforces ecological harm, demonstrating what Hillyard and Tombs (2004: 11) call ‘the myth of crime’. It reveals the ways that power, politics, and ideology steer policing, avoiding popular mythologies around ‘policing by consent’ and ‘crime control’.

Foxhunting is a form of hunting popular in Britain where hunters on horseback use a pack of foxhounds to track, chase, and kill wild foxes (Davanna, 2024; Brock et al, 2026). Pursuit of the fox can cover vast areas of countryside, during which hounds are controlled by the ‘hunter’ [sic] using voice commands and horn calls to direct the pack to find and kill the fox (Brock et al, 2026). Trained foxhounds pick up the scent of a fox, chasing and killing it; a terrifying pursuit, followed by an agonising death as foxes are torn apart. Foxhounds are bred for stamina, enabling

¹ Thanks to reviewer two for this important point!

them to hunt for long distances, rather than for speed, where they might quickly outrun and kill the fox, undermining the ‘sporting’ element (Brock et al, 2026). Proponents of hunting are keen to espouse it as a tradition benefiting rural life. But in addition to the painful death of foxes, foxhunting has negative ecological consequences including disturbance of habitats and other (protected and endangered) wildlife, during the hunt and through contaminated foxhound faeces, for instance (Casamitjana, 2017), and well-documented negative impacts on often isolated rural communities who experience intimidation, fear, damage to land and property, traffic offences, verbal and sometimes physical abuse, and the killing of pets by foxhounds (Milbourne, 2003; Black, 2024).

Foxhunting faces significant public opposition in Britain (Ipsos, 2017). The hunting of wild mammals was banned in Britain under the Hunting Act 2004, but loopholes enable hunting to continue, specifically through ‘trail hunting’ (Casamitjana, 2017; LACS, 2018; Graham et al, 2022), where, instead of chasing a wild fox a trail is laid for foxhounds to follow. This acts as a smoke-screen, granting hunters plausible deniability, while foxhounds chase and kill any wild foxes they inevitably encounter, thus illegal foxhunting continues (Casamitjana, 2015). In 2022–23, 46% of all registered ‘trail hunts’ were caught chasing or killing foxes (Black, 2024). Illegal foxhunting remains extremely commonplace, with thousands of cases occurring every year (Casamitjana, 2015; Allen, 2017; Cox and Donovan, 2020; Black, 2024).

Since the 1960s, hunt saboteurs (‘hunt sabs’) have engaged in organised direct action to disrupt hunting and protect wildlife. In doing so, they prevent harm enacted against foxes, ecosystems, and rural communities. Anti-hunt activists are routinely subject to physical violence from hunters and their supporters, with 211 different instances of hunt violence documented in 2022–23 (Black, 2024). Davanna (2024) collates myriad recent examples of verbal abuse and intimidation, strangling, punching, assault with blunt objects, theft of recording equipment/destruction of evidence, and even reported attacks on homes (Brock et al, 2026). These violent practices are longstanding, with instances of stabbings, the weaponisation of vehicles and horses, and the tragic deaths of two hunt sabs in the 1990s (Davanna, 2024). Davanna (2024) argues that due to police bias and classism, foxhunting fits within historical patterns of ‘under-criminalisation’ of the powerful and wealthy. Mirroring the lack of interest police have in stopping illegal hunting is the disproportionate focus on hunt saboteurs, who frequently find themselves targeted by the police (Evelyn, 2022; NetPol, 2023).

In addition, hunt sabs often report racist and sexist abuse from hunt supporters (Davanna, 2024). England is known as the historic home of foxhunting, with the practice said to have existed, in different forms, for hundreds of years (Marvin, 2007). As such, those who seek to defend the practice often do so using nationalistic appeals to tradition, heritage, and English identity (Egan, 2014). Adherents of the practice are typically drawn from rural, upper-class backgrounds, and English fox hunting has been described as a ‘ritual of social class’, contributing to mythologies surrounding aristocratic life and rural society (Howe, 1981: 278). Hunters often enjoy greater levels of social, political, and cultural capital than the average person, and have historically had more access to the corridors of power to exert their influence (Monbiot, 2004). Indeed, elite politicians in Britain often count foxhunting among their hobbies (Egret, 2024). While foxhunting can be understood as simply a cruel hobby of the rich and the powerful, the dynamics of foxhunting mirror the historical continuities of ecological and class relations in Britain, where royals and aristocrats violently seized dominion over the commons. The same dynamics that allowed enclosure in Britain (transferring wealth from the people to a wealthy elite, which continues to-

day) paved the way for industrialism and provided the economic and financial ballast to British colonialism abroad.

Foxhunting helps demonstrate how policing protects elite interests causing ecological harm. The evidence shows that policing of foxhunting is not about crime, as ‘hunting crimes’ (like most wildlife crimes) largely go unprosecuted, nor about *ineffective* policing, or a *failure of policing*; aberrations that can be addressed through new legislation to remove loopholes (for example, the ban on trail hunting) or ‘harsher’ criminalisation. Policing functions as it has always done – enforcing certain laws vociferously, while largely ignoring others – not to mention the apparent complicity of police and politicians in protecting the ‘smokescreen’ of trail hunting (Dalton, 2022). Structural and institutional dynamics see wildlife crime and harms against animals continually deprioritised, while also allowing for an increasingly fervent political policing focus on criminalisation of animal/environmental defenders. The Hunt Saboteurs Association itself is currently a core participant in the Undercover Policing Inquiry, having been repeatedly targeted by undercover police infiltrators over decades, before and after the ‘ban’ (Stephens-Griffin, 2021; UCPI, 2026). This speaks to the core functions of policing as protecting existing power arrangements, enforcing hierarchies and political ecological relationships. Through strident policing of animal defenders, and by not policing illegal fox hunts, policing protects the right to kill for pleasure/‘sport’, reinforces the property status of (wild) animals, and defends habitat degradation, while exerting physical and other harm against those who protect ecosystems and nonhuman lives. The category of ‘crime’ is frequently irrelevant, as some crimes are ignored and practices that circumvent criminalisation are often allowed and encouraged. Grassroots efforts to sabotage nominally ‘illegal’ activities are met with harsh repression and prosecution from the police (Davanna, 2024). In the end, policing helps maintain the right to harm nonhuman lives and ecosystems, to uphold human supremacy, and reproduce political and class privilege. It illustrates how power functions and how ecological harm is enforced on foxes, hounds, and humans. Hunt sabs do not wait for the police to enforce laws, they physically intervene to protect foxes themselves, at great personal risk. In doing so, they continue to save lives, not just *more effectively* than the police, but *in spite* of policing.

Looking at hunt sabotage provides a potential vision of a grassroots abolitionist approach to the socio-ecological harms of hunting as protected and enforced by policing (Brock et al, 2026). Foxhunting demonstrates the powerful role sabotage can play in disrupting harm, something that we feel should be brought to bear upon criminology itself, which often does not question policing and its statist foundations, despite these social ecological entanglements and harms.

Forget reformism, embrace abolition: towards a saboteur criminology

There’s a temptation to say that police reform can solve this. Train the police. Reprioritise. Close legal loopholes. However, while this may produce some beneficial effects, reform cannot address the eco-social harms fundamental to policing. Mainstream criminology serves to reinforce these, through its support for carcerality and state power, and by derailing radical change with endless reformist debates (Cuneen, 2023). It is therefore helpful to think creatively about the ways that criminology itself could be sabotaged, to radically rethink how we engage with police and the criminal justice system altogether. This means having the courage to move beyond re-

formist approaches which seek to produce ‘better’ forms of policing, and instead take abolitionist alternatives seriously, committing to supporting and joining those who do ‘whatever it takes’ to stop and reverse ecological harm. We call this a commitment to ‘saboteur criminology’.

Drawing on Aalders and Kioko (2025) and our own work (Brock et al, 2026), we see sabotage as *world making*; as legitimate political strategy and important liberation practice. Rather than being purely *destructive*, we understand sabotage – of harmful infrastructures, such as fossil-fuel infrastructures that maintain fossil capitalism and climate collapse, or traps and other hunting infrastructures that hold in place human supremacy – as *productive* and *prefigurative*, making new worlds and building new relationships. Sabotage can be an unmediated expression of legitimate dissent, insurrectionary joy and rage (Brock et al, 2026). Inspired by hunt saboteurs and animal liberationists, we envisage saboteur criminology as *prefigurative*; imagining and working towards a different world, as abolitionists teach us (Davis, 2005; Gilmore, 2022); creating freer spaces within and outside academia. Saboteur criminology’s aims are thus twofold: to disrupt criminology’s complicity with the status quo – and academic complicity in colonial, statist and anthropocentric systems more generally – and to present and inspire alternative ways of ‘doing’ criminology.

Monbiot (2023) argues that sabotage risks provoking violence against ecological defenders, citing armed far-right militias in the US and Colombian death squads as serious risks to safety. While understandable, such arguments risk implicitly blaming far-right ascendancy – which is happening with or without environmental resistance – on environmental defenders, justifying passivity. It is vital we act strategically, but the stakes are too high to abandon sabotage as a tactic entirely.

We return, then, to ‘the myth of crime’ (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004), as illustrated in the example of foxhunting. Cohen (1988: 25) credits abolitionist criminology for ‘refusing to accept criminal law as a form of social control, or ‘crime’ as a concept to define undesirable behaviour’, differentiating it starkly from other (conservative, liberal, managerial, socialist) criminological traditions, with zemiological scholarship pushing such thinking further (Canning and Tombs, 2021). Drawing on these traditions, and taking inspiration from hunt sabotage, saboteur criminology represents not just an alternative way of *doing* criminology, but a means by which we can disrupt criminology’s complicity with business as usual. It prefigures an alternative vision of criminology which is not beholden to the state’s definition of crime and its mechanisms for social control. Adopting such an approach is not only right but necessary in the face of the ecocidal injustice we face today. Saboteur criminology rests on three core principles: a) a critique of the myth of ‘objectivity’ in the face of ecological social injustice; b) a challenge to ‘reformism’ to address ecological crises; and c) the embrace of direct action, ecological self-defence, and practical solidarity. We now discuss each principle in turn.

Objectivity is a harmful myth

Critiques of ‘objectivity’ are a core tenet of critical social-science scholarship (cf. Marx, 1845; Becker, 1967; Freire, 1970). Far from being ‘neutral’, historically, positivist science played an important role in justifying racist, sexist, and other oppressive modes of thinking, colonial expansion, statism, extractivism, and violence, and has provided sources of power from which a white, Western, male elite has dominated people all over the world, especially since the industrial era (Adas, 1989). This colonial expansion has involved the exploitation and extraction of humans

and nonhumans, often under the name of agricultural improvement, efficient land use, and food (yield) security, as we continue to see today.

In a criminological context, claims of ‘objectivity’ frequently obscure an unquestioned ideological commitment to and reliance on carceral, authoritarian responses to social problems. The idea that ‘prisons are necessary’ has achieved an unchallengeable hegemonic status (Ryan and Sim, 2007). The same point can be made about policing (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022). In criminology, research and scholarship on policing and prisons abound, but frequently rest on an unchallenged assumption that police/prisons *must* exist. The normativity of this position is obscured under a banner of objectivity. It is a historical fact that prisons and policing as we know them are not preexisting social arrangements, they reflect specific contextual social-political commitments. Outside of abolitionist traditions, acknowledgment of this, let alone working against prisons/policing, is rare.

Agozino (2020) highlights a fundamental problem with faux neutrality in criminology and challenges it through what he calls a ‘liberation criminology’ approach. He argues that racist-imperialist-patriarchal oppression must not be studied ‘objectively’ without a commitment to actively ending it. This means rejecting endless phrase-mongering and demonstrating a true commitment to action (Agozino, 2020). While his concept of ‘committed objectivity’ suggests that criminologists can be objective *and* committed, he conceptualises objectivity as rigour, honesty, and fairness, rather than ‘neutrality’; his critique of neutrality resembles our focus on objectivity. Yet, we foreground *sabotage* to highlight the productive and future-making potential we have explored, and to highlight the need to disrupt and actively *sabotage* mainstream criminology.

As Canning and Tombs (2021: 147) observe, ‘criminal justice processes are mechanisms for pain delivery – that is, they are sites and forms of harmful practices in themselves, a point which is now so well- documented even in critical criminology that it hardly bears reiterating’. There is no ‘neutral’ position to take. Saboteur criminology is therefore committed to liberatory research principles. It rejects academic extractivism, seeking to work *with* and *for* participants (for example, environmental defenders), as opposed to using them as repositories from which to siphon data and advance academic careers, while offering little to nothing in return. These hierarchical and parasitic research dynamics have long since been critiqued by research ‘subjects’ and critical scholars. Agozino (2020) is clear in the need for criminology to radically rethink such relationships. Conventional research, he argues, has always been packaged with the dirty baggage of colonialism. To move beyond this, we must reject our own supposed positioning as ‘elite scholars’ and instead ‘approach the community with the humility that recognizes that data are gifts given to us by willing participants’ (Agozino, 2020: 95). This echoes arguments by the Autonomous Geographies Collective (2010: 246): ‘too many academics are happy to build their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed’ without joining them in their struggles. In practical terms this means research *with* movements/marginalised people, not researching movements/ marginalised people. It means researching upwards (Geenen and Verweijen, 2017), and identifying, acknowledging, and researching myriad harms that emanate *from above*, as opposed to the traditional focus on harms *from below*.

It should come as no surprise that this includes harm to nonhumans and ecosystems; and exploitation for data or academic extractivism involves nonhumans too – from a rejection of vivisection to academic partnerships with fossil capitalist organisations or police. In short, we reject ‘objectivity’ in scholarship as much as we reject ‘objectivity’ in the face of ecocide/ecological breakdown.

Reform is a dead end

Reform – whether in relation to policing, industrial production, policy making, or planning law – will not produce the drastic changes needed to address harm or avert ecological catastrophe. The state cannot address ecological and social problems, as these are rooted in the irrationalities that justify its existence. We have seen how ineffective reform is in other contexts. As Lo (2024: 7) argues, ‘arguments for a repurposed wielding of state power are inadequate due to the revolving door of the corporation and government’. Just like reforms for ‘better’ training are unable to tackle racialised and sexualised police violence (Lai and Lisnek, 2023), they cannot tackle ecological problems and frequently reinforce ecological harm: corporate power and the extractivist, accumulationist, growthist foundations of capitalism are always protected and prioritised above those of the planet (Lo, 2024).

Reformism tends to treat instances of injustice and discrimination as inadvertent and lamentable side effects, rather than a fundamental function of policing (McElhone et al, 2023). We have witnessed what McElhone and colleagues (2023) have described as a ‘reform merry-go-round’, whereby instances of police abuse are met with an expansion of state-police bureaucracy without ever addressing the core problem – that policing exists to maintain and reinforce particular interests that are antithetic to ecological and social health (Brock and Stephens-Griffin, 2022). As McElhone and colleagues argue, ‘[b]y not fully grappling with the role of police in protecting wealth and reinforcing class order, and in failing to critique the concepts of crime and public order, [reformist] proposals shore up the ideological function of police, while masquerading under the guise of novel, “practical” solutions’ (2023: 280).

Liberal reforms often expand carcerality (Garland, 2001), and prison reform movements have unintentionally ‘helped to reproduce the dominant discourses that prison is the *natural* response to crime and deviance’ (Ryan and Sim, 2007: 701). Cohen (1979: 347) famously called this ‘net-widening’, describing the tendency for supposed ‘alternatives’ to become ‘new programs which supplement the existing system or else expand it by attracting new populations’.

Acknowledging this does not preclude support for any reform in any contexts. Many abolitionists support ‘non-reformist reforms’ (Gorz, 1968) that challenge and undermine, rather than ‘improve’ or strengthen carceral systems. A reformist response might direct resources into police training, a non-reformist reform might suggest diverting resources away from policing, into non-police-based intervention/ prevention services (Lamble, 2022). Non-reformist reforms result in material changes that lead towards decarceration. Critical Resistance (2020: nd) suggest asking: ‘Do suggested reforms offer a pathway to ‘less’ carcerality or the illusion of ‘nicer’ carcerality?’

In contrast to various realist criminological traditions, we wish to make the case for unapologetic idealism in relation to matters of the ecological social harm and the state, and to echo Davis’ (2005) call for a productive reconstruction of society, where the functions of policing are handled by communities themselves. Policing as we know it upholds ecocide, and so abolition is part of the fight against it, as much as it is about building a world without the need for these institutions; one that is grounded in different relationships to people and the land. This involves the support of those who defend the land and alternative relationships to it and each other. Dunlap (2020; 2021) argues that within academia, insurrectionary struggles are frequently relegated to history, assimilated into the more politically-safe label of ‘social movements’, or distanced through emphasising Indigenous groups and struggles in faraway lands. We must resist this tendency. Globally, resistance to ecocidal, neocolonial extractivism necessitates radical abolitionist

alternatives to policing. As Tuck and Yang (2012: 1) argue ‘decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools’. Our rejection of reforms entails a commitment to thinking beyond the existence of carceral institutions and logics, an acknowledgement of their connection to colonial and ecological harms globally.

Direct action, self defence, and practical solidarity

Saboteur criminology is committed to direct action in defence of the planet and its inhabitants, and especially to meaningfully supporting those who are targeted by the state when they defend ecosystems and attack the infrastructures that degrade them. Police have long since divided and categorised activists based on arbitrary markers of acceptability (Jackson et al, 2018). Anyone who acts beyond the increasingly-narrow confines of acceptability becomes a focus subject for ever more strident repression and criminalisation (Siddique, 2024). Increasingly, even non-violent, non-disruptive forms of ‘protest’ are criminalised in the UK (Brown et al, 2025). Saboteur criminology not only condemns the repression of resistance, but actively supports direct action and community self-defence, entailing a commitment to provide practical solidarity to those subject to this repression, whether through legal support, publicity, prisoner letter writing, financial support, solidarity actions, or otherwise.

Direct action rejects ‘a politics which appeals to governments to modify their behaviour, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative’ (Graeber, 2011: para 3), including sabotage as active disruption of the status quo. It is prefigurative and means destroying what destroys us and our nonhuman cohabitants, building new and less exploitative and extractivist relationships. It can be seen in hunt saboteurs saving the lives of wild animals who would otherwise be agonisingly killed (Brock et al, 2026), land defenders who sabotage the machinery that destroys habitats, or antiwar activists who sabotage weapon manufacturing used for genocide. It can be a valid and necessary form of future making, through actively changing the materiality of the present and breaking with dependencies of the past (Aalders and Kioko, 2025; Brock et al, 2026). As academics, it requests political solidarity wherever possible; even in the face of threats to our careers.

Conclusion: ‘Accomplices not allies’

So what does this mean in practice? Building on rich traditions within critical criminology (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004; Saleh-Hannah et al, 2023), saboteur criminology entails a commitment to being accomplices, not allies to resistance struggle (Indigenous Action Media, 2014); focused on challenging myths of objectivity that support the status quo; moving beyond empty reformism; and forcefully demanding direct action in defence of the planet and all life on it.

It entails organising against academic relationships with arms companies, the military-industrial complex, and fossil capitalists, including an unequivocal commitment to meaningful divestment and boycott. Such partnerships demonstrate the ongoing complicity of criminology and academia in general in enforcing carceral power and colonialism (Agozino, 2003). But this should not engender defeatism. Recent successes, such as Trinity College Dublin agreeing to student demands (and sustained direct action) to divest from Israeli firms, show that change can be achieved (Carroll, 2024).

It also entails resistance to academic partnerships with the police and prisons, which see academics effectively working to ensure the smooth functioning of criminal justice ‘mechanisms of pain delivery’ (Canning and Tombs, 2021). The dire financial situation in British universities underscores the precarity of the academic workforce, and, on an individual level, for many it is a choice of working within these systems or being unemployed, as opposed to firmly-held belief in them. But criminology can do more to resist. This is not just about ‘divesting’ or ‘supporting those who do direct action’ but pushing beyond simple categorisations of ‘activism’ itself – which imply a division of labour separating ‘activist’ and ‘nonactivist’ scholars. Such distinctions conceal the reality that remaining silent in the face of injustice makes one complicit: as ‘activists for the status quo’ (Brock, 2019).

Saboteur criminology can be positioned within a critical tradition that is explicitly utopian, anti-statist, anticapitalist, and anticolonial. It seeks to dismantle the intellectual mechanisms of state-capitalist power and colonialism. That also means sabotaging deeply-embedded assumptions about the necessity of the state, policing, capitalism, criminalisation, and carceral/punitive responses to social problems, and acknowledging the interconnectivity of the social and the ecological. It entails sabotaging the belief in the state as ‘arbiter of justice’ (Dunlap, 2020) and the concept of ‘crime’ as relating to ‘safety’, dismantling the colonial-carceral foundations of criminology. It seeks to disrupt the idea that concepts like decolonisation can be defanged and separated from insurrectionary resistance struggles (Tuck and Yang, 2012). It means sabotaging the hierarchy of knowledge that excludes all other types of understanding the world, recognising the validity of alternative sources of knowledge and ways of knowing (Hickey, 2020). Further, saboteur criminology means sabotaging the very hierarchies that academia is built upon, especially in the classroom; highlighting the many commonalities between academia and oppressive hierarchies that marginalise humans, nonhumans, and ecosystems alike (Pellow, 2014). It means sabotaging embedded principles of self policing, which see academics line up to support (often white, middle class) ‘non-violent’ direct actionists, but who are quiet when it comes to supporting more combative resistance. Academia, and the discipline of criminology, are themselves sites of policing – shown in the policing of the boundaries of acceptable thought and working with the Home Office to enforce racist border regimes. The sector and institutions within it enforce their own hierarchies of credibility, which mirror broader power structures. Often those who sit outside of these accepted boundaries find themselves having to either sell out their principles or remain marginalised. Conversely, though accepted and encouraged, lucrative academic partnerships with the Home Office, Ministry of Defence, or police forces, are not ‘harm-less’ or ‘neutral’. Acknowledging this helps collapse the gap in our understanding between abolitionist thinking ‘out-there’ and ‘in-here’.

Advocating abolitionist ideas within academia, especially within criminology, is challenging where such interventions feel unwelcome. The idea that what exists now is what must always exist (albeit in a constantly tinkered-with form) is very difficult to overcome. And a world without police feels bizarre or frightening to many. But our collective future is bound up in imagining a different way of doing things, of building a future we want to live in, where the conditions which help create instances of social and ecological harm are addressed directly at their root. Reform may appear to slow our journey down, but often it bolsters the trajectory, and the destination remains the same. We therefore must commit to sabotaging the machinery that is driving us to ecological oblivion, resist the policing that protects it, and dare to imagine how we might finally move in a new direction.

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