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ECONOMICS AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

> The history of risk distribution shows that, like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern only inversely; wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. To that extent, risks seem to strengthen, not to abolish the class society. Poverty attracts an unfortunate abundance of risks. By contrast, the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety and freedom from risk.
>
> Ulrich Beck, 1992[1]

Introduction

It is taken as read that there is a clear link between crime and the economy. Some scholars have made more of economic factors than others, but nobody rejects the idea that there is some connection between them. If we look over the history of Criminology, we note the moral statisticians such as Quetelet, the Chicago School, strain theory, control theory, and latterly criminologists such as Steve Box, Chris Hale and Jock Young, all focus on the relationship between crime and the economy. Economics itself is a broad subject area, as the leading theorist of an economic approach to law, Judge Richard Posner, has argued.[2] This chapter will concentrate upon the classic positions that criminologists have adopted regarding economics and criminal activity. It also covers the economics of crime and punishment in terms of contemporary Economics.

Quetelet[3]

The Belgium astronomer and mathematician Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) looked at the location and instances of crime, and undertook crime mapping for the French government. While employed as a statistician, Quetelet had the task of providing some of the information which the French state required in order to plan and develop a coherent social policy. His work focused upon government statistics and it aimed at scientific rigour. Quetelet was a positivist in that he saw human behaviour as governed by scientifically verifiable laws. His methodology was derived

from the natural sciences, in which he had been trained. His observation that crime rates seemed to obey the same 'law-like' regularities that govern the natural world mark him out as a man of his time. Quetelet was engaged in work which had definite economic aspects to it, for example, measuring costs to the state.[4]

The French state under Napoleon wanted to *normalise* the 'dangerous classes' through moral rehabilitation, but this was seen as a failure by both politicians and the people. Theft and public order offences almost doubled between 1813 and 1820. There were huge numbers of poor people (*les misérables*) in the cities, notably Paris, who resorted to crime to make ends meet and who routinely rioted over the dreadful social conditions they had to endure. The initial response to this failure of rehabilitation policy was for the French state to commission a number of detailed studies and to build up a statistical picture of who made up the dangerous classes and why they were committing crimes against their fellow citizens. This apparent failure to *normalise* the dangerous classes through the Napoleonic system led directly to the so-called *scientific* route of managing the dangerous classes through the application of statistical techniques in the fields of crime control and prison policy. This entailed analysing such matters as parish records for births, baptisms, marriages and deaths as well as looking at data on poor relief, taxation, fire and general insurance claims and information concerning public health, especially rates of venereal disease, held at the local, regional and national level. The detailed records of the army on the background and general health of soldiers, along with court records and the files of the gendarmerie, were scrutinised in enormous detail. The population was analysed as never before and particular note was made of mortality, age, occupation, disease and levels of intelligence. For the first time the prisons were analysed by a variety of researchers, including those outside the government service, such as religious groups, who looked not only at prison incarceration rates but also such variables as diet and prison type. In the spirit of the time, no variable was excluded and no question ruled out. Indeed, the question of whether prison was itself a factor in recidivism, since it could lead to the moral degradation of prisoners, was also examined. In 1827 the first ever French national statistical tables on crime, *Le Compte général de l'administration de la justice criminelle en France*, were published. The *Compte* itself was restricted to the analysis of the various courts in the French system, with the addition of information on age, sex, occupation and educational attainment level, although this information was systematically added to in subsequent years. The Compte, as Piers Beirne has argued, was a decisive factor in the development of a positivistic criminology.[5]

This work led Quetelet to construe certain *faits sociaux* (social facts) that pertain to the aggregated nature of human conduct. From this work he derived his *homme moyen* (average man), which illustrated the utility and accuracy of the hypothesised average value over the larger number of empirical observations. The construction of the average man allowed for detailed comparison in predictive statistical work. Quetelet's first sustained work on criminal statistics was in an 1827 essay, which elaborated the relationship between crime and the severity of its punishment.[6]

Quetelet did not naïvely or uncritically go about his work and he was concerned with the limitations of the data he worked with, which was often not standardised or collected in a *scientific* way. He was especially taken with the total population question; put simply, understanding the *actual* number of offences and their ratio *vis-à-vis* the sum of recorded crimes. Quetelet discerned a constant relationship between notified crimes and their prosecution, based on the *Compte* data for 1833–39, and from that analysis and his statistical work, based additionally on a range of other judicial and official data, he inferred a constancy between the total population of crime and recorded crime. Quetelet was stuck by the recurring constancy of the data on crime, from the number of murders per year to the number of property crimes to the numbers of accused failing to appear in court. All of this suggested to Quetelet that, contrary to what had been assumed, and allowing for the vagaries of individual conduct, criminal behaviour, in an aggregate sense, was constant and seemed to obey certain general patterns, or laws.

Quetelet had a definite view of human nature and he assumed that crime was dependent upon an individual's willingness to commit it. Hitherto certain groups, such as the poor, young men, the unemployed and the ill-educated, were said to commit a disproportionate number of crimes. However, Quetelet showed that the correlation did not hold true and that some of the poorest regions of France were the ones with the lowest crime rates. Far more important was the inequality of wealth distributed between persons and the propensity of individuals to commit crime, which was related to issues concerning moral instruction and opportunity. This analysis increasingly pushed Quetelet towards the determination of crime causation, something he had been initially reluctant to study. He came up with a tripartite typology of causation which included *accidental causation*, *variable causation*, and *constant causation*. Quetelet believed that the last category was the most important factor in determining causation. However, these three categories all relate to Quetelet's conception of the average man, and not to any sociology of causation. Moreover, Quetelet ascribed a fixed level of determination to all three types of causation which, especially when combined with the overwhelming influence of age, sex, occupation and religion, ensured constancy to crime rates.

The *homme moyen* (average man) is also the moderate man who tends to the mean in statistical terms. The average man's moderate life owes more to Aristotle than any notion of a person found in modern philosophical or political thought. Moreover, the notion of the average man, who always chooses the moderate path and who always avoids excess, would appear to be a rare anthropological creature in the era of late capitalism. The average man was also contrasted to other groups, such as gypsies, who, Quetelet argued, had an increased propensity to commit crime (and here Quetelet fails to escape the racism of his age). Quetelet was, from the 1840s onwards, increasingly drawn to biological metaphors, notably around the supposed 'contagion of crime'. He even anticipated Lombroso by factoring in such variables as head measurements in his analysis. Quetelet made explicit reference to the fact that the scientifically measured proportions of the body related to crime rates and that both were social facts. In

this way Quetelet was increasingly drawn into using the concept of deviation, though, as Colin Sumner has pointed out, this is a statistical deviation and not the sociological deviation which Durkheim originated and which came to prominence in the twentieth century.[7]

Quetelet went beyond the narrow parameters of statistical analysis in his recommendations for government. He argued that the state should rigorously apply the criminal code and focus police attention towards known criminal minorities, and this included consistent sentencing. He also argued that the state should focus upon the higher moral, intellectual and scientific elements of modern civilisation and promote social stability. He understood that crime was a constant feature of all societies, but he also realised that the state could both exacerbate and ameliorate the conditions which gave rise to it. This social understanding of crime was a major departure from the notions of a freely acting and wicked criminal, which pervaded public discourse in France.

Quetelet was soon overtaken by the giant figures of Durkheim, Marx and Weber, but his contribution is immense nonetheless. His work suggested that crime was the result of social factors, not moral or evil, and in identifying regularities in the statistical record he opened up the possibility of a modern sociological explanation of crime. In these ways his work was progressive. However, Emile Durkheim, who praised Quetelet's focus upon the existence of certain regularities and observable statistical features of the social world, also criticised his use of the average man on the grounds that merely to point to a phenomenon is not to understand that phenomenon. Durkheim specifically cited the phenomenon of suicide, as a case where a given suicide rate does not presuppose that persons, in general, are exposed to the likelihood of committing suicide, and that to argue otherwise is fallacious. Durkheim also took issue with Quetelet's conception of 'normal'. The sociologist Durkheim understood that what was normal always related to a given social institution and a given level of development, whereas Quetelet derived what was normal from the abstraction of statistical analysis and the development of the average man. Quetelet resisted the pathologising of individuals and instead pointed towards the *social* causes of crime. He was the first in a long line of people who understood crime in terms of its economic costs. Crime saps the productive power of the economy, costs the state in terms of policing and prison provision, and undermines social solidarity.

The Chicago School

The Chicago School looked at the relationship between crime and its location. It is an ecological theory which seeks to establish the links between different areas of a city, social disorganisation and criminal activity. Chris Hale has summed up the Chicago School's work by highlighting the underlying economic issues at play: 'Where unemployment is high or economic prospects are poor it will be difficult to muster the necessary resources to combat social disorganization and

maintain informal social control. Hence ... deteriorating economic conditions will lead to increasing levels of crime.'[8] Chris Hale is surely right to stress the essentially economic basis of the Chicago School's work.

The first Department of Sociology was established at the University of Chicago in 1892. Chicago had grown spectacularly from being a modest town of under, 5,000 people in the 1830s to being a city of over 2 million people before the First World War. By 1930 Chicago's population had exceeded 3 million people. Not only had Chicago grown in scale but it was a very diverse city, even by American standards, and contained a great range of immigrant groups (notably Irish, Italian and Polish populations, as well as Jews from all over Eastern Europe fleeing persecution in Tsarist Russia, notably in Ukraine, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire[9]) as well as an influx of African-Americans who left the southern states, which had been part of the Confederacy, in large numbers from the 1870s onwards. Chicago was also a city characterised by a great deal of deprivation, crime and social disorganisation. Little wonder that the sociologists of the University of Chicago would make their city, and the sociological dynamics of the crime within it, the objects of their study. The Chicagoans would focus upon the concept of social disorganisation, undertake fieldwork and map the city in terms of its development and the distribution of crimes across its geography. The work of sociologists such as Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay, working at the University of Chicago, mainly in the period from the 1920s to the early 1940s, constituted what has become known as the Chicago School, and their work has had an enormous influence upon Criminology, and Social Policy more generally.

The Chicagoans knew of the work of Quetelet, and they certainly used official statistics in their work, but they were influenced far more by the work of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). Durkheim's work on social solidarity had highlighted the fact that whenever family and community bonds are weak, then crime tends to be higher.[10] Durkheim had conceived two forms of society: one form of society based upon *mechanical solidarity*, which exhibited a strong sense of homogeneity and which was small-scale, possessed repressive laws, was religiously-based and had an expanded role for the family and the collective conscience of the community; and another form of society, *organic solidarity*, which was marked by heterogeneity and which was large-scale, had restitutive laws, was secular, tended towards anomie and had an elaborated division of labour.[11] The Chicagoans emphasised the social nature of crime, rather than understanding crime in terms of a person's life history or personal psychology. They saw the Chicago of their time as exhibiting many of the problems typical of a society based upon organic solidarity, with its elaborated division of labour and lack of shared values, compared to simpler societies based upon mechanical solidarity. As sociologists they linked crime to broader social issues, specifically the level of social disorganisation. The Chicagoans analysed the modern city as expanding outwards in concentric circles from an inner-city business district. Next to the inner-city business district is the zone of transition, which is the place in the city where new immigrants, or new arrivals from other parts of America, settle because it is both inexpensive and close to where they work – the inner-city business district. Beyond the zone of transition

are more settled and homogeneous working-class communities, middle-class neighbourhoods and, at the outer edge, the richer suburbs. The zone of transition, then, is the poorest area economically. The culture of the zone of transition arose out of its location. It was rundown and poor. The Chicagoans saw a pattern emerging whereby new arrivals to Chicago would initially move in to the zone of transition and then move out to a better neighbourhood in due course, which approximates to the American Dream of self-betterment. However, the pathological nature of the zone of transition was established by the Chicago School. The zone of transition is a place which tends to have all sorts of social problems associated with it in terms of having a poor record in health, housing, education and high crime rates. The zone of transition lacks the proper set of relationships necessary for community life to flourish, due to the fragmented nature of the people who live there. The people who live in the zone of transition have nothing much in common with each other and no shared history or common social values. It is a place where traditional norms and values are lost or forgotten.

The Chicagoans saw the heterogeneous population that lived in the zone of transition as giving rise to an impersonal environment marked by a lack of shared norms about how to live, which in turn facilitated criminal behaviour. It attracted little inward investment and was generally unattractive, possessing few facilities. The Chicagoans saw this as pointing to the fact that delinquency and crime were not located in individuals or racial groups, but rather were understood as the outcomes of the zone of transition itself, which they understood as intrinsically criminogenic. Crime is related to environmental factors that are external to individuals, although the social disorganisation of the zone of transition further allows delinquent behaviour to flourish, as criminal conventions are transmitted by young people to each other through gangs, in lieu of the positive integrative bonds of the more affluent or socially stable neighbourhoods. So whereas, for example, the *shtetl* (the Yiddish word for a Jewish village in Eastern Europe[12]) had been poor, it was nonetheless socially integrated through strong bonds of family, religion, tradition and work. The zone of transition, on the other hand, had few of these bonds of attachment, was socially disorganised and was characterised by high crime rates.

The Chicago School undoubtedly made a huge contribution to the development of sociological and criminological theory as well as to the development of an innovative fieldwork methodology. However, by overwhelmingly concentrating upon the ecology of the city, they also made several errors. In emphasising ecology, they had a tendency in their work to see the relationship between crime and the physical organisation of the city as a *natural* one and they failed to note deeper issues related to class and the distribution of resources. This implied naturalism has been termed the 'ecological fallacy', i.e. the idea that individual criminal behaviour can be entirely explained by environmental, or contextual, factors. The notion that crime and delinquency are themselves socially constructed was missed entirely by the Chicagoans. The fact that both the statistics on crime and the attribution of what counts as criminal or delinquent is largely a matter of convention was never properly acknowledged in the work of the Chicago School. Victims were almost entirely neglected. Moreover, the concentration upon

the zone of transition as the criminogenic part of the city tended to overemphasise the criminality of the working class and reinforce negative stereotypes about the poor, immigrants and those living in the most economically deprived areas of the city. Amazingly, the Chicago School undertook no research into organised crime, although Al Capone and his mob were located in Chicago. More worryingly, the work of the Chicago School has fed into long-term political, economic and social policy responses to crime, which have tended, to this day, to ally crime with designated areas. Middle-class crimes, such as mortgage fraud, domestic violence and institutional corruption, still feature less in policing and social policy discussions than social disorganisation. Political discussions about crime are still dominated by talk of social inclusion and designing out crime.[13] Our political deliberations about the nature of contemporary crime still largely flow from an analysis about the nature of the inner city, which the Chicagoans of the 1920s and 1940s would recognise.

Strain Theory

Robert K. Merton's 'strain theory' followed the Chicago School in arguing that the reasons for urban crime being concentrated among members of certain groups was 'not because the human beings comprising them are compounded of distinctive biological tendencies but because they are responding normally to the social situation in which they find themselves'.[14] He emphasised the relationship between *culture* and social structure far more than anyone had done previously. Merton's primary aim was to discover how social structures exert a definite pressure on individuals to engage in non-conforming, rather than conforming, conduct. He drew a distinction between culturally defined goals, which he saw as desirable, and the legitimate means of achieving those goals. Whenever goals and means are harmoniously integrated the result is a well-regulated society. 'Strain' is said to occur where there is a disjuncture between culturally defined goals and the institutionalised means of obtaining them. American society, argued Merton, overemphasised the goal of monetary success, relative to other goals. Following Durkheim, he argued that the relationship between culturally defined goals and the legitimate means of achieving them led to anomie because the American economic system had built-in insatiability, in terms of the material aspirations it raised.[15] In other words, anomie occurs within the social structure itself and is, in turn, a measure of the gap between goals and means in society. Strain theory, in this regard, is a theory with definite economic overtones.

Before developing Merton's ideas it is useful to set out his table, which clearly demonstrates his ideas concerning modes of adaptation in relation to the anomie which arises in the social structure. Merton saw individuals as adopting these five strategies in relation to their social and economic circumstances, though he did not properly elaborate why individuals favour one mode of adaptation over another.

Table 2.1 Merton's Typology of Modes of Individual Adaptation

Modes of adaptation	Cultural goals	Institutional means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	–
Ritualism	–	+
Retreatism	–	–
Rebellion	+/–	+/–

(+) = acceptance
(–) = rejection
(+/–) = substitution of new values

Conformity
This is what happens in a stable society when all cultural goals and the institutionalised means of achieving them are in harmony.

Innovation
This is what happens when individuals have internalised the cultural goal but lack the institutionalised means of achieving it. This is especially the case in a system which emphasises economically-based goals. Innovators are people who substitute their own values in order to achieve their cultural goal.[16]

Ritualism
This is what happens when individuals reduce the scale of their cultural goals in order to make achieving them more realistic. The example Merton gave was of the person who gives up the goal of obtaining a house or new car but who nonetheless goes to work every day and acts out striving for economic success, such as with the lower middle classes.[17]

Retreatism
This is what happens when individuals reject both cultural goals and institutionalised means. It is associated with tramps, alcoholics, drug addicts and psychotics.[18] It is noteworthy that Merton did not see drug addiction and life on the streets as causing anomie, but rather than being a result of it.

Rebellion
This is what happens when individuals outside the social structure devise their own social structure and attendant cultural goals and institutionalised means, and it presupposes a rejection of the cultural goals and institutionalised means that apply in a typical liberal society.[19]

Merton did not attempt a general theory of all crime: what his strain theory amounts to is an elaborated theory of anomie, based upon observations drawn from his experience of life in America in the 1930s and 1940s. Durkheim had argued that rapid social change loosens the social bonds that regulate people and that this may lead to the listlessness and dissatisfaction which causes suicide and other social problems, such as crime.[20] Merton followed Durkheim but switched his focus from the moral regulation of individuals to the demoralisation that necessarily follows when individuals seek personal affirmation in material success. Where Durkheim had focused upon rapid social change, Merton focused upon the strains of succeeding in a materialist culture. Merton, unfortunately, follows the Chicago School in as much as his typology of modes of adaptation tends to suggest that crime is associated with poorer people, since they

have fewer institutional means to achieve their cultural goals. Merton understands criminality as a response to variable and external structural conditions and in this way he also follows the Chicago School.

Merton's work has had an enormous influence upon generations of policy-makers who took the solution to the problem of crime to be the establishment of anti-poverty programmes and legislation to increase the equality of opportunity, notably in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the USA and the Wilson and Callaghan administrations in the UK. His work is still acknowledged by contemporary criminologists, notably, Lea and Young[21] and Messner and Rosenfeld, who have revisited Merton's structural themes. Messner and Rosenfeld have stated that '[a]nomie theory comes closest ... to providing a compelling account of the American crime problem'.[22] However, it is fair to say that Merton has been less influential since the great onslaught represented by the *New Criminology* in the 1970s, which characterised his work as being too wedded to social democratic themes.[23] He has been criticised by feminists, such as Eileen Leonard, who have argued that strain theory is a theory about male crime and neglects female socialisation, which has historically been oriented to the family rather than to the wider material culture.[24] Albert Cohen criticised Merton's approach, which looks at individuals and neglects the wider process of social control and the interactions between control agents, such as the police, and 'deviants'.[25] Sumner argued that Merton was 'taking the cause, motive and effect for granted as scripted moments in the historic defeat of Evil by the forces of Good'.[26] Yet for all the criticisms levelled against Merton's strain theory, the issues thrown up by the role of culture, the need to attain material success and the impact of structural forces upon individuals remain with us as perennial themes in Criminology.

Control Theory

Control theory gives us an explanatory model which places its emphasis upon the 'control' of individuals rather than upon the structural forces which bear upon individuals. The main proponent of control theory is Travis Hirschi, who wrote the classic *Causes of Delinquency* in 1969.[27] The aim of control theory is to show how institutions like the family, school and participation in community activities can prevent criminal behaviour. Again, note should be made of the debt to Emile Durkheim's work, notably in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1933), which stressed the importance of social integration and solidarity to individuals in curtailing criminal behaviour and deviance. Bob Roshier set out Hirschi's four bonds:

> He proposes four bonds: attachment (the extent to which individuals have close emotional ties to other people); commitment (the extent to which they see conventional behaviour, for example at school, as offering immediate or long-term rewards); involvement (the extent to which their time is taken up with conventional activities); belief (the extent to which their beliefs about what is permissible or not coincide with conventional ones).[28]

This four-part scheme was derived from Hirschi's empirical self-report study, and while it aims at scientific neutrality, it actually fails to incorporate an economic aspect. As Chris Hale, when citing Box, has noted:

> ... economic recession and unemployment might be expected to weaken social bonds and hence lead to increased levels of crime. ... Unemployment and increasingly inequality are not likely to improve family relationships. Rather they will produce increased tension, anger and sullenness against society that may be transferred onto the family leading to its breakdown. ... With more unemployment, shorter working hours and more part-time work, people will have less involvement in conventional activity and social bond theory would suggest crime would increase.[29]

Once again, therefore, we note that the real world of economics creates the reality which criminologists observe. It is not possible to do Criminology and ignore the economic context of criminal activity.[30]

The Legacy of Steve Box

The late Steve Box is one of the most important British criminologists of the post-war era. A Marxist himself, he established a structural relationship with capitalist economies and criminality, notably in times of economic recession, using advanced statistical techniques. Box's influence upon British Criminology cannot be underestimated, and after the publication of his *Recession, Crime and Punishment* in 1987 it was increasingly seen as necessary to link any theoretical criminological analysis with both a rigorous basis in the statistical record and an analysis of the economic and political context of crime. In other words, after *Recession, Crime and Punishment*, British Criminology is characterised by the marriage of empirical and theoretical analysis.

In theoretical terms, Box elaborated how crime should be seen as an inevitable consequence of the internal contradictions of any capitalist economy. In *Power, Crime and Mystification* he writes: '...the pursuit of fair profit, the generator of wealth and employment, the backbone on which social welfare is possible – can be viewed ... as the primary ethics for and of an industrial society and conformity to this neutralizes any obedience to the law merely because it happens to be the law'.[31] Box was also one the few criminologists in the 1980s who understood that white-collar crime was also implicated in the relationship between economic downturn. He wrote: ...financial performance was found to be associated with illegal behaviour ... firms in depressed industries as well as relatively poorly performing firms in all industries tend to violate the law to greater degrees'.[32]

However, Box is best known for his work on the relationship between the rate of crime and the level of unemployment, the U–C relationship. Box's analysis in *Recession, Crime and Punishment* reviewed 50 advanced econometric studies, of which 32 were cross-sectional and looked for a connection between the rate of crime and the level of unemployment at different times and in different places,

and 18 were traditional time-series studies that sought to measure the rate of crime and the level of unemployment, over a number of years, though only one used victimisation data. He found that 64 per cent of these studies showed a link between the rate of crime and the level of unemployment and the remaining studies did not. This was not considered *strong* evidence that the rate of crime and the level of unemployment are straightforwardly linked, especially since 36 per cent of the studies Box analysed showed a no correlation at all.[33] However, Box was alive to the flaws in the way data was collected and he noted the statistically problematic nature of comparing studies which relied on such different bases as officially recorded crime, arrest rates and conviction rates and unemployment, since each of these may give a different overall figure. Nonetheless, he concluded that there was a link between the rate of crime and the level of unemployment, though it was a weak one. (Of course, unemployment is now measured differently from how it was in the 1980s, and criminologists and statisticians are more aware of the complexities of it as a lagging indicator, i.e. they note a lapse between the onset of unemployment and its negative consequences.) Box did note that in one major study he reviewed, young people did not cite unemployment as important in their pattern of offending.[34] More significant though was Box's finding that there was a much stronger link between income inequality and the level of crime.[35]

Chris Hale, who wrote extensively with Steve Box and was his colleague at the University of Kent, is among the group of British criminologists who have carried on Box's analysis of data with an eye on the economic data and political conditions of the day. Hale has been at the forefront of a broader analysis of the labour market by criminologists, who have noted long-run changes in the British economy since 1946. These changes include a diminution of the manufacturing base of the economy and a move towards the service sector, an increased feminisation of the workplace and an increase in part-time, casual and temporary working.[36] Hale notes a dual labour market in operation in England and Wales. There are those workers in the primary economy who are highly skilled, enjoy full employment rights and good levels of remuneration and, on the other hand, there are those workers in the secondary economy who are low skilled, in insecure employment, enjoy few employment rights and receive low levels of remuneration. What Hale notes is a relationship between youth crime and the quality and quantity of work available to young people.[37] Subsequent studies have borne this out.[38]

> According to Hale: Wage inequality in the UK reached record highs for the twentieth century at the beginning of the 1990s. A key factor in this increased inequality was the rapid deterioration in the labour market position of less skilled workers at the bottom end of the wage distribution. The economic model of crime argues that individuals will choose between legal and illegal work on the basis of relative rewards. Many individuals find that, whilst in work, their jobs are insecure, low-paid, and low-skilled. Often they are in part-time or temporary work and they are on the economic and social margins. Many of the theoretical arguments ... for why unemployment and crime might be related apply equally well to low-wage, low-skill employment.[39]

It should be noted that Hale offers both an empirically-based critique and a politically and economically savvy account of inequality. Latterly, Hills and Stewart have underscored Hale's analysis that inequality remains endemic to the British economy.[40]

It is important to link the contemporary work of criminologists, such as Steve Box and Chris Hale, with earlier criminological writers, such as Merton. When we do that we note that the economic data does, in fact, support a link between unemployment, relative deprivation, insecure employment and crime. It might be as Reiner has suggested: 'The downplaying of economi "strain" factors in criminal justice policy discourse since the 1970s was due to shifts in dominant political and intellectual perspectives, not evidence that there are no significant correlates.'[41] In other words, strain theory is still an important tool for the criminologists to understand crime after all.

Rationality and Economics

We can think of crime as a rational, choice and economic modellers as well as criminologists do this. Police departments, local government and the Home Office utilise rational choice theory, particularly when setting out policies on crime prevention. Rational choice theory initially started out in Economics and Political Science departments, but when it is applied to crime it has some interesting conclusions. Jock Young has called it 'administrative criminology'. In other words, he argues that it represents a form of criminology that concerns itself with crime prevention but not the deeper political, social and economic causes of crime.[42] Cultural criminologists, such as Mike Presdee and Jeff Ferrell, have argued for a form of criminological explanation which prioritises the celebratory nature of crime, transgression and the irrational aspects of law-breaking in contrast to the measured, choice-making individual chooser provided by rational choice theory.[43] Rational choice theory always starts from the assumption that people are rational and self-interested. So in the case of criminal activity, it argues that individuals are concerned to maximise their income so may choose work or crime depending on their ability to be successful in the labour market. It argues that individuals also weigh up their chances of getting caught. It is therefore interested in where crime is committed, since location will affect the likelihood of detection. Criminals are said to act as though they are assessing the marginal benefits of committing crime, taking into consideration the possible punishment. We can see immediately that this would appear to be more plausible when applied to premeditated crimes but less plausible when applied to spontaneous crimes.[44]

It is possible to treat crime mathematically and dispense with traditional criminological analysis, as Cooter and Ulen do.[45] For example, taking Cooter and Ulen's equations, if we used x to denote the seriousness of crime and y to denote to likely reward to the criminal, then we could assume that the reward is an increasing function of the seriousness of a crime:

$y = y(x)$

Then if the punishment is f for committing a crime of seriousness x, we could express that as:

$f = f(x)$

If we then expressed the probability p of being punished for committing a serious crime x as the function:

$p = p(x)$

we can then note that the expected punishment equals the product of the amount of punishment and its probability:

$p(x)f(x)$

Finally, we could conclude that rational criminals choose the seriousness of crime x to increase their reward, which is equal to the reward $y(x)$, minus the punishment expected:

$max\ y(x) - p(x)f(x)$

This simple set of equations presents us with a clearly mapped out model of criminal activity. These and other rational choice equations miss out a lot of what criminologists may think is essential to understanding the problems of crime and criminalisation, i.e. culture, class, social structure, gender, age, etc. However, though rational choice theory is not a complete theory of criminality, it nonetheless has been influential in developing a modelling culture among contemporary criminologists, and it has been widely used not only by the police and local and national government agencies but also by town planners and retailers.[46] It is essentially an account focused on the development of practical crime prevention programmes.

Main Summary Points

- Adolphe Quetelet understood crime systematically in terms of its economic costs. He saw that crime saps the productive power of the economy, costs the state in terms of policing and prison provision, and undermines social solidarity.
- The Chicago School showed how high unemployment or times of economic hardship for poorer people make combating social disorganisation and crime more difficult.
- Robert Merton's strain theory emphasises the relationship between *culture* and social structure. He draws a distinction between culturally defined goals, which he saw as desirable, and the legitimate means of achieving those goals. Whenever goals and means are harmoniously integrated the result is a well-regulated

society. 'Strain' is said to occur where there is a disjuncture between culturally defined goals and the institutionalised means of obtaining them. Strain theory, in this regard, is a theory with definite economic overtones.

- Rational choice theory works with the assumption that people are rational and self-interested. Therefore, in the case of criminal activity, it argues that individuals are concerned to maximise their income so may choose work or crime depending on their ability to be successful in the labour market. It argues that individuals rationally work out their chances of getting caught.

Questions

1. Does strain theory still offer the criminologist a way of understanding crime?
2. What connects the work of Quetelet and the work of modern criminologists?
3. Are Hirschi's bonds of attachment tied to the economic conditions alone?

Suggested Further Reading

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