Sociological Theories - Functionalism

Assessment Criterion	Content	Amplification
AC2.3 *You should be able to -* Describe Sociological Theories of Criminality	Sociological Theories ● **Social Structure** ● Interactionism ● Realism	You should have knowledge and understanding of: ✓ Marxism ✓ **Functionalism** ✓ Labelling ✓ Left and Right Realism

FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalism is one of the key sociological perspective. Institutions in society such as the family, education, the media, etc, have clear social functions. More surprisingly, things such as crime can also be seen to be functional when looked at in the right way.

That's right, crime has function and can be good for society!

SOCIAL CHANGE IS A FUNCTION OF CRIME AND DEVIANCE

Functionalists argue that all societies need some change to remain healthy and stable. Durkheim (1897) suggested that deviance was important in allowing **social change** to occur. Durkheim suggested crime and deviance had an **optimal level**; too high and societies would descend into a state known as **anomie** (literally without norms), and if it was too low, they would become stale and incapable of change. Durkheim argued that deviant behaviour is seldom welcomed by society when it first appears. However, over time the 'deviants' may come to be seen as **visionaries** or **innovators**; for example, suffragettes and abolitionists are seen is very different light today, than the way they were regarded in their time.

ROBERT MERTON'S STRAIN THEORY

American society was, according to Merton, was based on the **American Dream.** This is the idea that success in life is achieved through hard work and not through luck or inherited wealth. Any person no matter where they start can attain wealth, status and happiness; the American places no limits on what a man or woman can achieve in life.

This dream is normally attained through socially approved mechanisms, i.e., education and employment. However, many people end up in dead end, boring jobs with low pay and prospects. When this happens, they experience a sense of '**strain**'. Merton (1938) outlined a number of responses people can make to these blocked opportunities.

Suffragists attend a meeting of the National Women's Party of America wearing their prison uniforms

OTHER FINCTIONS OF CRIME

Crime acts as a **safety valve** – Davies (1967) argued deviance acted as a safety valve for society. He gives the example of prostitution, suggesting that it has the positive function of releasing men's sexual tension.

Crime is important for **boundary maintenance**, it reminds people of what is right, and what is wrong. Most people will agree on this so crime helps to bind us together.

Crime and deviance act as a **warning light**, Cohen argues that deviance indicates that an institution is not working; e.g. high truancy rates may indicate problems with the education system

Merton identified a number of distinct responses to this sense of strain:

- **Conformity** - most cope with their disappointment by accepting their lot. They continue to dream about the goal of material success and conform to the accepted means of achieving that goal, i.e., by working hard.

- **Rebellion** - rebel and seek to replace the shared goals with alternative, often opposing goals and values. They set about achieving them by revolutionary means, e.g., via terrorism.

- **Retreatism** - drop out of mainstream society and therefore reject both the wider goals of 'conventional' society and the means of achieving those goals, e.g., the drug addict, vagrants, hippies, new-age travellers.

- **Ritualism** - describes the attitude of people who have lost sight of the goals but plod on in meaningless jobs, working hard but never really thinking about what they are trying to achieve.

- **Innovation** - reject the conventional means of acquiring wealth and adopt non-conventional and sometimes illegal means, i.e., they turn to crime. Note that this group still accepts the wider goals of society, it is the conventional means of achieving those goals that they reject.