

# Sociological Theories of Criminality

| LO1 – DESCRIBE SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF CRIMINALITY   |  |  |
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| Assessment Criterion  | Content  | Amplification  |
| <b>AC2.3</b><br><br><i>You should be able to -</i><br><br>Describe Sociological Theories of Criminality | <b>Sociological Theories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social Structure</li> <li>• Interactionism</li> <li>• Realism</li> </ul> | <b>You should have knowledge and understanding of:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Marxism</li> <li>✓ Functionalism</li> <li>✓ Labelling</li> <li>✓ Left and Right Realism</li> </ul> |

**Capitalism** – is an economic system in which private individuals or businesses own capital goods. Ownership of the means of production (a countries trade and industry) is by a small number of people, these are the ruling or upper class. Everyone else must sell their labour, these are the 'proletariat' or the working class. Marxist do not approve of this system and believe it must be overthrown through revolution.

## Social Structure Theories

This theory assumes that crime results from disadvantage which is inherent within the capitalist system. Crime is caused by economic factors such as poverty and a poor environment. Crime is committed by 'marginalised' (poorer) groups such as the working class and ethnic minority groups because these groups are more likely to experience unemployment, poor housing, poorly paid or boring jobs. There are various social structure theories of crime among the best know are those of Karl Marx 'class conflict explanation' and Robert Merton's 'strain theory'.

**Marxism** is a social, political, and economic philosophy named after Karl Marx. It examines the effect of capitalism on labour, productivity, and economic development and argues for a worker revolution to overturn capitalism in favour of communism.

## Marxists Explanations of Crime

Marxist's see crime as inevitable in a capitalist society as most of the structures of society exist to exploit the working class '**proletariat**' and to benefit the middle and upper classes ('**bourgeoisie**'). This is true of many of the institutions of society such as the education system, the police, the justice systems and even the law.

### Marxist Views on Crime

- **White Collar Crime** - is not treated as seriously as it should be. Crimes that cost the taxpayer millions of pounds, or cause massive environmental damage are routinely ignored because these are the crimes of the ruling classes. On the other hand, more minor crimes such as street robbery or shoplifting attract severe prison sentences because they are committed by the working classes and other marginalised groups.
- **The Criminal Justice Systems and Policing** - Marxist argue that the police favour the ruling class. Working class people and minority groups are over-represented in the crime statistics because the police focus on these groups, while ignoring more powerful and affluent groups, ignoring their crimes. This is made worse by the criminal justice system which routinely gives stiffer sentences to people from a working-class background, seeing the minor crimes of working class people as more serious than the crime of the rich.



**Activity 1:** Answer the following questions:

What is meant by the terms 'the **bourgeoisie**' and the **proletariat**?

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According to Marx what is the cause of crime in **capitalist** system

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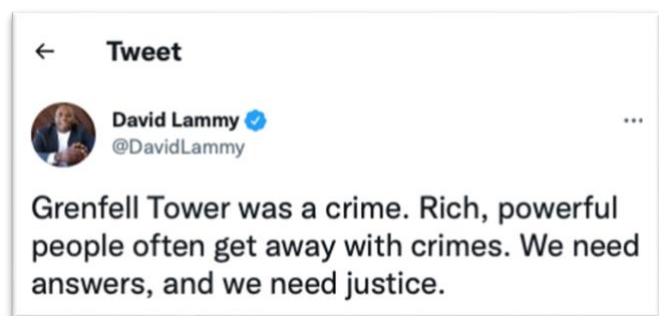
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**Activity 2:** Research the Grenfell Tower

- Where was this, when did it happen?
- How many people were killed in the fire, what background did many of the victims come from?
- Why do some people claim it was a crime?
- What is happening to the people thought to be responsible for the fire?



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## 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 dream 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 even worse prospects. When this happens, they experience a sense of '**strain**'. Merton (1938) outlined several responses people can make to these **blocked opportunities**.



Robert Merton – Devised Strain Theory

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

- 1) **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.
- 2) **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.
- 3) **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.
- 4) **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.
- 5) **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.

**The American Dream** - is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone.



**Activity 3:** Answer the following questions:

Outline Robert Merton's theory of crime – make sure you include some or all of the following terms – American Dream, blocked opportunities and strain

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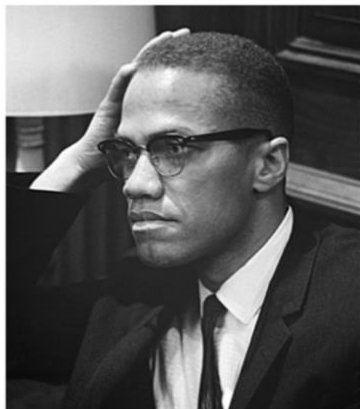
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## EVALUATION – SOCIAL STRUCTURE THEORIES

### MARX'S CLASS CONFLICT THEORY



A key strength of Marxism is that it provides an explanation for crime that covers all social classes and a wide range of offences.



A limitation is that while it is overly focussed on the issue of social class but largely ignores other non-class inequalities such as, gender or ethnicity.



### MERTON'S STRAIN THEORY



Merton seems to ignore people who are doing well financially but quietly commit crime in the background, for example white-collar criminals. These people presumably do not experience strain but still commit crime.





## Functionalist Approaches to Crime

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 in very different light today, than the way they were regarded in their time.

**Functionalism** is one of the key sociological perspectives. 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!



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

**Anomie** is a state of normlessness a lack cohesion and solidarity that often accompanies rapid social change. Anomie is one cause of deviance: if people are not properly socialised into the shared norms and values of society, or if a society is changing so much that it was unclear what the shared norms and values were, then deviance (and hence crime) was much more likely. Durkheim thought that anomie was much more likely in modern industrial societies than in preindustrial societies.

### OTHER FUNCTIONS 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 something is not working; e.g. high rates of crime in a particular ethnic group is a good indication of alienation in that group.

**Activity 5:** Explain how crime and deviance AND social change are linked – key terms – anomie, optimal level of crime and deviance, social change, deviants, visionaries, and innovators

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In the space below draw a mind map showing the key concepts of functionalist explanations of crime –

KEY WORDS - Anomie – Social Change - Boundary Maintenance - Safety Valve - Warning Light – - Deviants – Visionaries - Innovators

## EVALUATION – DURKHEIMS FUNCTIONALIST THEORY



Durkheim shows us that crime has a number of benefits for society and that a society that didn't have crime, probably wouldn't have much of a future, as crime and deviance are important drivers of social change. Durkheim also suggests other functions of crime such as reinforcing the boundaries between right and wrong and enhancing social cohesion, as people unite against wrongdoers



Durkheim suggests societies need crime but how much crime does a society need? It's simply not possible to know what is the 'right' level of crime.





# Interactionism

Interactionism is a sociological theory that emphasises the interactions between people rather over the importance of big institutions of society such as the class, education, or political systems. Put simply interactionism emphasises the small scale over the big. Two very important ideas that came out of interactionism is **labelling theory** and **self-fulfilling prophecy**.

## Labelling Theory

**Howard Becker** (1963) argues that there is no such thing as a deviant or criminal act, an act only become deviant or criminal when the groups which have the power to label it as deviant or criminal, do so and set about controlling it. This theory works well with social structure theories. In a capitalist society the ruling class set the rules for the working classes, and in a racist society, minority ethnic groups are judged and labelled according to the standards of the dominant ethnic group.

## LABELLING AND DIFFERENTIAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Interactionists argue that agencies such as are more likely to 'label' some groups as criminal. This means they are more likely to devote police time and attention on these groups and communities. This in turn means that these individual from communities will become over-represented in law enforcement actions such stop and search, arrest and ultimately conviction for criminal offences. Put simply if the police go looking for criminality, they will find it. been branded with a similar label.

## Primary, Secondary, and Master Status

The interactionist sociologist Edwin Lemert distinguishes between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance involves acts of minor deviance, such as avoiding paying fares on public transport or keeping money from being over-changed in the supermarket, nearly everyone does these acts from time to time and usually they do not attract a label. Secondary deviance on the other hand results from being labelled. Once caught and charged the person becomes defined by their deviance, it becomes a master status, all other statuses a person might have (e.g., father, son, neighbour etc) that person might have, are judged against this label. The person may find it hard to escape their status, so much so that they begin to accept it and so begins the **self-fulfilling prophecy**.

Becker was interested in explaining why people choose to label some people as deviant, and not others. Take the act of killing someone - homicide. In the vast majority of cases this would be labelled as murder and highly deviant. However, in a war killing is normalised and a may be labelled heroic. However, if the combatant doing the killing is not a member of a formal army, then they will likely be labelled a terrorist and, once again, be deviant. There may be no consensus over the application of the label because "one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter".

Another important concept associated with labelling is '**self-fulfilling prophecy**'. It is suggested that when a label is applied to an individual for example, mad, bad or criminal - their behaviour will become consistent with that label - this is the **Self-fulfilling Prophecy**. A label once applied may increase the chances of offending by isolating the individual from society and encouraging friends and family to reject them. The 'deviant' may consequently seek comfort, sympathy, normality and status in a '**subculture**' of others who have

Boris Johnson and Former Prime Minister David Cameron were both members of the Bullingdon Club. This was a notorious student group being associated with a wide range of illegal behaviour, this behaviour was not subject to the same social control and punishment that it would have attracted had they been poor people rioting, rather than rich people "letting off steam".





# Realism

Realism is really two explanations of criminality, left realism and right realism. These two explanations share some similarities but there are important differences too. One thing they have in common is that they both think that they take a more realist approach to crime. Another similarity is that they both suggest strategies for solving the problems of crime.

## Right Realism

Right Realism considers crime from the perspective of **political conservatism**, which tends to take a negative view of human nature. Charles Murray (1990) argued some people in society were more predisposed to committing crime because of lower intelligence and inadequate socialisation. Murray talks about the development of an 'underclass' of people who grow up in single parent households, with absent fathers, without adequate role models, and in an intellectual poverty.

## RIGHT REALIST SOLUTIONS TO CRIME

- Right realist believe that human beings are **naturally selfish**, **individualistic** and **greedy**, will generally commit crime if it is in their interests. Rehabilitation of criminals is a 'soft' option - policies aimed at tackling crime by removing social and economic inequalities associated with poverty and unemployment have failed because they misunderstand the origins of crime.
- Right realist thinking on crime is influenced by the **broken windows** thesis. they tend to approve of, 'zero tolerance' policing, and believe the police should keep clear the streets of deviant elements. they are also strong supporters of control and surveillance measures such as cctv and id cards.
- Right realists think that the best way to reduce crime is not to change the criminal but to take practical measures to reduce opportunity (to '**build out**' crime), and make the situation more difficult for the criminal, i.e. to make sure that the costs of crime clearly outweigh the benefits.

### CHARLES MURRAY'S AND THE CRIMINAL UNDERCLASS - Murray (1990) suggests there

exists a distinct lower-class subculture, below the working class. People belonging to this subculture are likely to be long-term unemployed because they are 'work-shy' - they choose not to work. They prefer to be welfare-dependent, and to live off state benefits and supplement their income by being involved in criminality and the black economy. This subculture is hostile towards the police and authority in general. The subculture is generally lacking in moral values and especially commitment to marriage and family life.

**Activity 8:** Explain why right realist believe that people commit crime and outline their proposed solutions to the problem of crime

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## LEFT REALISM

Left realism analyse crime from a left-wing perspective. They agree with right realists that working class areas are crime hotspots but point out that the main victims of crime are the working class and ethnic minorities themselves. They also suggest that the police take crime in these areas less seriously than in middle or upper class (bourgeoise) areas.

## LEFT REALIST SOLUTIONS TO CRIME

- Left realists are positive about human nature and are strong supporters of attempts to rehabilitate offenders. They argue strongly in support of alternatives to prison, arguing that prison breaks the link between the offender and community, as such it serves to reinforce offending behaviour.
- Left realist believe that the community needs to be involved in tackling crime and are sceptical about 'deterrents' such as the increased use of CCTV and ID Cards. However, they are enthusiastic advocates of initiatives such as community policing and neighbourhood schemes.

## CRIME, RELATIVE DEPRIVATION &

**MARGINALISATION** - Murray (1990) suggests Left realists suggest that in a capitalist society we are surrounded by messages urging us on to acquire more and more stuff (consumerism). Despite society getting wealthier as a whole, working class youth will always have a sense of relative deprivation. In ethnic minorities this may be made worse by a belief that prejudice, and discrimination is holding them back. Left realist argue these groups become marginalised. Negative treatment by the police may result in further feelings of hostility and resentment which may spill over into confrontation. Some members of these groups may look to join subcultures to help them cope with the feelings of frustration and may become involved in criminal activities such as drug-pushing and street crimes such as mugging.

**Activity 9:** Explain why left realists believe that people commit crime and outline their proposed solutions to the problem of crime

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## EVALUATION – RIGHT REALIST EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME



Right realist propose stiffer sentences, more surveillance and zero tolerance as solutions to the problems of crime. In this sense they can be seen as far more practical than other theoretical approaches such as Marxism and labelling theory.



The New Right explanations for crime and deviance, shared by right realists, are disputed by some sociologists. For example, although children from lone-parent families are more likely to commit crimes than those from two-parent families (by 10-15%) they are more likely to commit low-level, anti-social behaviour rather than serious crime.

## EVALUATION – LEFT REALIST EXPLANATIONS OF CRIME



Shows us that relative deprivation and marginalisation are important in the factors in the backgrounds of both the perpetrators, and victims of crime.



Left-realism fails to explain why the majority of young people and ethnic minority youth in a given area are NOT drawn into criminality and offending. Crime pulls some people in but certainly not all - a good theory of crime must explain why some people resist crime.



