

Do economic theories of crime explain the causes of criminality in the United Kingdom in the present day?

by Stuart Clubb

Economic theories of crime have long been put forward in an attempt to explain the causes of criminality¹. They undertake to explain crime in terms of economic reasons as well as in terms of the structuring of society. Two of the most prolific of these theories look at the country of America and present differing explanations of the causes of crime in this country. Robert Merton² seeks to explain crime in terms of a 'strain to anomie' while Elliott Currie³ sees crime as a product of the factors associated with 'market society'. However, although these theories may concentrate specifically on America they are of general application and, therefore, one can consider whether or not they explain the causes of criminality in the UK in the present day.

Robert Merton's theory was based on his examination of 1930s` America and the values and goals prevalent in American society at that time. He sought to explain crime in terms of the lack of balance between what he saw as the '*culturally approved goals*' and the '*institutionally approved means of achieving these goals*'. Merton said that where there was an equal emphasis on both aspects society would remain stable, but when the emphasis became uneven society became unsettled resulting in a 'strain to anomie'⁴.

In the context of America in the 1930s, the idea of the 'American Dream' and the importance of monetary wealth and material gain were heavily promoted. This goal was given far greater emphasis than the limited means of achieving it, with the result that there was a great pressure and strain on people to realise the 'dream' by whatever means necessary - whether legitimate or illegitimate. Merton then went on to identify five different reactions to this strain:

¹Quetelet and Guerry`s analysis of 19th century France being one of the, if not the, first.

²Robert Merton, 'Social Structure and Anomie' contained within Cressey & Ward, 'Delinquency, Crime and Social Process'

³Elliott Currie, 'Market, Crime and Community', 1997 Theoretical Criminology, pp147-169

⁴a 'strain to anomie' being a strain to normlessness.

- (i) - conformists to the goals and the institutionally accepted means;
- (ii) - innovators who accept the goals of society but not the institutionally accepted means;
- (iii) - ritualists who have abandoned the goals but who place excessive emphasis on the means;
- (iv) - retreatists who reject both the goals and the means; and
- (v) - rebellion - whereby you similarly reject the goals and the means *but* then attempt to replace them with alternatives.

The main category which Merton was concerned with as an explanation of crime was ‘innovation’. Innovation can be used to explain criminals who acquire wealth through illegal means and indeed from this Merton came to the conclusion that because it is “*among the lower classes that legitimate means for achieving financial success are most restricted...this explains why the poor commit the most crimes*”⁵.

However, the question remains as to how good an explanation of crime this theory is in the context of the UK today. Merton stated that the dominant goal in society was wealth and this is a fundamental lynchpin in his anomie theory. Does this apply to the UK? Is it the case that monetary success is the dominant goal in the UK? One could certainly look to the lottery and its’ claims that ‘everyone could be a winner’ and that it ‘could be you’ to point to a preoccupation with money, but there is clearly not a ‘UK Dream’ to the extent prevalent in 1930s America. Merton’s theory fails to account for other goals which could be held in society, such as ones family, happiness and health as well as ones job⁶. It certainly cannot be said that people involved in the nursing and charity sector have wealth as their main goal, and therefore one can see that Merton’s theory doesn’t explain this and as a result is particularly dismissive of other goals.

⁵Jones, Stephen, ‘Criminology’, p.143, 1998, Butterworths

⁶Downes & Rock, ‘Understanding Deviance’, p.128, suggests that it could be “*mainly a means to quite different goals, such as family support and well-being*”.

Where perhaps the main strength of Merton's theory lies is in its explanation of crimes for economic gain and 'white collar crime'. Box and Passas both considered that white collar crime is particularly well explained in that it can "*be viewed as an 'innovative' response by sections of the business world to the 'strain' of having to maintain profit levels in a difficult economic climate*". Indeed, this applies equally well to Britain, especially in light of the competitive market created by Thatcher in the '80s. However, where Merton's theory succeeds in explaining crime for economic gain, it fails in its explanation of other types of crime which are widespread in the UK. These crimes include crimes of violence such as rape and murder. Although some violent crimes are undoubtedly committed for economic gain⁸ the majority are not and Merton does not consider this in his theory.

Similarly, Merton's anomie theory makes no inroads in explaining juvenile or group crime in this, or any other country. When children start committing crimes they do not typically do this alone. Juvenile crime is normally committed in gangs with a great deal of emphasis on peer pressure. Albert Cohen pointed out this flaw by criticising "*Merton's theory for seemingly being inapplicable both to juvenile or group crime*". Merton therefore does not consider the influence of cultural or environmental factors in the causes of crime. Indeed, he doesn't seek to explain why people in similar situations respond in different ways, negating the importance of both the family and peer group. In this sense he sees crime as an individual response and as a result it is very deterministic in its explanation.

In contrast to Merton's anomie theory, Currie's 'market society' theory looks at explaining violent crime in terms of market societies and the increase of free market values. In order to examine this theory one must look at what Currie defines a market society to be. In his article, "Market, Crime and Community" he defines it as a "*civilization in which the pursuit of*

⁷as discussed in Jones, p.148

⁸such as the murder of 'rich relatives' for inheritance purposes

⁹Jones, p.156

*personal economic gain becomes increasingly the dominant organizing principle of social life*¹⁰. His argument is that these societies (and he uses the US as his main example) foster violent crime. He sees seven closely intertwined elements of a market society which work together in breeding this crime. In outline these factors are that:

- (i) - market societies destroy livelihoods and jobs;
- (ii) - they deliberately create inequality and material deprivation;
- (iii) - they weaken other public supports against crime, such as after school care and child care facilities;
- (iv) - they erode informal networks of public support, such as community facilities;
- (v) - they promote a culture of brutal competition, i.e.. ‘dog eat dog’ attitudes;
- (vi) - in a market society, the result is a deregulation of the technology of violence; and
- (vii) - alternative political institutions and structures are weakened.

Currie sees the USA as having become a ‘market society’ and fears “*a deeply troubling scenario if the rest of the industrial world continues to move down the ‘free-market’ road*”¹¹. He acknowledges that the beginnings of such a trend can be seen in Britain¹² and it can therefore be considered how successful this theory is in explaining crime and consequently whether it explains crime in this country.

It is important here to emphasise the fact that Currie sees his theory as only explaining violent crimes as he makes no attempt to relate his theory to property crimes or crimes for economic gain. This, however, is perhaps a modest understatement on Currie’s part as his theory does appear to explain other types of crime as well. Ian Taylor feels that many of the intertwined factors associated with market societies “*are also evident in the continuing acceleration of property crime and violence in many inner-city areas and council estates in Britain in the early*

¹⁰Currie, p.151

¹¹ibid. p.167

¹²ibid.

1990s". He then goes on to say that "*they may find expression...in the explosion in the number and variety of forms of fraud and market crime coming to public attention*"¹³. It can therefore be described as a more comprehensive theory than Currie gives it credit for.

Currie's theory is particularly strong in that it gives us a good explanation of youth crime. Several of the factors which he cites as encouraging crime can be seen to tie in with the increase in juvenile delinquency. Free market ideology destroys jobs and livelihoods with the result that "*the long-term absence of opportunities for stable and rewarding work, especially for the young, breeds alienation*"¹⁴. It also encourages the erosion of community facilities for the young, such as recreation programmes, libraries and movie theatres¹⁵. Similarly, the lack of alternative means of political institutions breeds frustration and eventually rebellion with the young rebelling against society.

However, this theory is not without its weaknesses. Perhaps the main flaw is that Currie doesn't give us a 'common denominator' with which to explain crime, preferring instead to give us seven factors which if present to 'some extent' in society can encourage crime. Although Currie does try to account for this by placing these factors under the umbrella title of 'market society', it does appear to be a very general explanation of crime. Currie's theory also seems to predict far more crime than there actually is. Similar to Merton, he says the strain of market society 'pushes' people into crime and it is therefore quite deterministic.

It is also questionable whether some of the factors which Currie cites as fostering crime apply to the UK. Although free market ideologies were particularly dominant during the Thatcher era¹⁶ (and indeed crime levels were also high during this period), it does not follow that all the

¹³Taylor, Ian, 'The Political Economy of Crime' p.504, as contained in 'the Oxford Handbook of Criminology', 1994.

¹⁴Currie, p.155

¹⁵ibid. p.161

¹⁶this is seen in the policy of privatisation, competitive tendering, and the introduction of NHS trusts.

factors associated with such an ideology are similarly present. With notable exceptions, such as Easterhouse, it cannot be said that community facilities such as cinemas and leisure facilities have in general been eroded. Perhaps most obviously, one cannot say that there has been a deregulation of the technology of violence in the UK. In light of Dunblane Britain has in fact gone in the opposite direction and has tightened up its` regulations on weapons.

It can therefore be seen that although Currie`s theory does successfully explain some forms of crime, it cannot be said that Britain is a `market society` to the extent described by Currie and consequently this theory is not wholly applicable to the UK.

In conclusion, economic theories of crime do offer some insight into the causes of criminality. Merton's anomie theory and Currie`s market society theory can both be said to successfully explain the causes of some types of crime. However, they can only explain some types of crime and as a result are inadequate in giving a full explanation of crime. These theories were also developed in America with a view to explaining crime in the USA. Social and economic differences abound between the two countries and as a result their applicability to modern day Britain is limited. It is only if one accounts for these social and economic disparities that one can say that these theories have any modern day relevance to Britain.