

Sociological Theories of Crime & Deviance (5)

Neo-Marxist Critical Criminology

Neo-Marxists are sociologists who have been influenced by many of the ideas put forward by **traditional Marxism**, but they combine these with ideas from other approaches such as **social action theory**, particularly **labelling theory**.

The '**New Criminology**' of **Taylor, Walton and Young** is the most well-known example of neo-Marxism. This generally agrees with the traditional Marxist analysis of the relationship between crime and capitalism. For example, Taylor et al agree with traditional Marxists that:

- **Capitalist society is based on exploitation and class conflict and characterised by extreme inequalities of wealth and power.** Understanding this say Marxists is the key to understanding crime.
- **The state makes and enforces laws in the interests of the capitalist class and criminalises members of the working-class.**

However, neo-Marxists are critical of traditional Marxism which they argue is too **deterministic**, e.g. traditional Marxists tend to see the working class as the **passive victims of capitalism who are driven to criminality by factors beyond their control**, i.e. class inequality. **It sees workers as driven to commit crime out of economic necessity. Neo-Marxists reject these ideas.**

Instead, neo-Marxists take a more '**voluntarist**' view. They believe that individuals have **free will** and that **criminal choices are more voluntary** than traditional Marxists believe. They see **crime as meaningful action** and **criminal actions as the result of a conscious choice made by individuals**. Neo-Marxists insist **that the working-class and members of ethnic minority groups interpret their experience of capitalism and its constraints and make choices about how to react**. Crime, therefore, from this perspective has a number of characteristics;

- It is a **deliberate and conscious reaction to how the powerless interpret their position within the capitalist system.**

- **Crime is political** – it is generally the reaction of the poor and powerless to injustice, exploitation and alienation, e.g. crimes against property such as theft and burglary aim to redistribute wealth, vandalism is a symbolic attack on society's obsession with property and drug use is a rejection or contempt for the material values of capitalism.
- **Criminals are not the passive victims of capitalism** – they are actively struggling to alter capitalism and to change society for the better. From this perspective, crime is a political and even revolutionary act. For example, as stated in an earlier guide, people who take part in 'riots' are often protesting at some abuse of power such as police brutality or government apathy towards their community. They consequently see themselves as taking part in **political 'uprisings' rather than engaging in criminal activity**.
- **The ruling class is aware of the revolutionary potential of working-class crime and has taken steps to control it** – state apparatuses such as the police target working-class areas whilst the State has introduced 'repressive' laws such as the Criminal Justice Acts to control the 'problem' population.

Stuart Hall claims that **moral panics about potentially disruptive groups such as the young and ethnic minorities** are often created by the **mass media** working on behalf of the State in order to **divide and rule a potentially troublesome working-class**.

The neo-Marxist 'fully social theory of deviance'

Taylor et al aimed to create what they call a '**fully social theory of deviance**' - a **comprehensive understanding of crime and deviance** that would help to change society for the better. In their view, a complete theory of deviance should have **six** characteristics.

1. It should consider that crime and deviance comes about because of the **unequal distribution of wealth and power** in capitalist society.
2. The **social or economic context** in which the criminal or deviant act occurs needs to be considered.
3. In order to understand the criminal or deviant act, its **meaning** needs to be understood, e.g. **was it a form of rebellion against capitalism?**

4. The **societal or social reaction** to the deviant or criminal act needs to be understood, e.g. **how do social groups like the community, the family and the police react to the deviance?**
5. The relationship between **power and criminality** needs to be understood. For example - **Who makes the law? Who decides what should be labelled deviant or criminal? Why are some acts treated more harshly than others?**
6. The relationship between **labelling and the deviant** needs to be understood, e.g. **why does labelling lead to deviance amplification (more deviance) in some cases but not others?**

Evaluation of the New Criminology

On the positive side, this view of crime makes a great deal of sense in regard to crimes which are **overtly political** such as those which may result from **confrontation with the police at political demonstrations, breaking into laboratories and rescuing animals, sabotaging hunts or the Oxford-Cambridge boat race, terrorism, squatting, the suffragettes** etc. However, Taylor et al's approach can be criticised on several grounds:

- (a) Feminists criticise it for being '**gender-blind**'. It focuses excessively on male criminality and consequently **ignores female criminality**.
- (b) Left Realists criticise it for **over-romanticising working-class criminals** as '**Robin Hoods**' who are fighting capitalism by stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. The reality of crime is that **most victims of working-class crime and black crime are themselves working class and black respectively rather than middle-class or upper-class**. It is suggested that Taylor et al **do not take the effects of this type of crime on working-class victims seriously**.
- (c) It is also difficult to imagine a **political motive underpinning crimes such as burglary and domestic assault**. Moreover, **serious violent crimes such as murder, rape and child abuse rarely have a political motive**.

Roger Hopkins Burke (2005) concludes that critical criminology is too general to explain crime and too idealistic to be useful in practically tackling it.