

It's the political economy, stupid!

A neo-Clintonian criminology

Robert Reiner examines the origins of the study of political economy.

In *Visions of Social Control*, (Cohen 1985: 236) Stan Cohen quotes a parable from Saul Alinsky, the radical American community organiser. A fisherman sees a body floating down stream and jumps in to rescue it. The same happens a few minutes later, and then again, and again. When a tenth body floats down, the fisherman leaves it and runs upstream, to find out how to stop these people getting into the water in the first place.

This dilemma, realism versus root causes, is a perpetual, tragic tension in social science and policy. Since the 1970s a realist focus on 'what works?' in criminal justice has largely bracketed-off broader dimensions of analysis such as political economy. This article will analyse what is meant by political economy, and offer a rapid tour of its ebb and flow in criminology, demonstrating its continuing significance.

What is political economy?

Economics as a discipline emerged out of political economy in the late nineteenth century, but has become quite distinct from it. The most famous work of eighteenth century political economy, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776), was a broad analysis of material prosperity, inseparable from Smith's moral philosophy. 'Economics' abstracts the economic - the processes of production and distribution of valued goods - from wider social, political and cultural dimensions. It now purports to be an apolitical, value-free, 'scientific' enterprise, analysing the 'economic' using primarily mathematical models based on highly simplified axioms about human motivation, decision-making, and social organisation.

During the nineteenth century other social science disciplines emerged out of the broad discourses of political economy and philosophy: political science, sociology, psychology - and indeed criminology. This paralleled the growing separation of what came to be seen as different social and institutional fields: 'private' and 'public'; 'civil society' and 'state'; 'the economy' and 'the polity'; 'criminal' and 'civil' law. 'Political economy' embedded the 'economic' in this wider network of political, social and cultural processes.

Political economy and criminological theory

Political economy has been an important influence in

modern attempts to understand crime and its control (Reiner 2007a pp. 345-355). The eighteenth century criminologies *avant la lettre*, the 'classical' school of criminal law and the 'science of police', were closely linked to political economy. Their eclipse by the later nineteenth century 'science of the criminal', was claimed as a gain in 'scientific' rigour, but at the price of obscuring the political, economic and ethical dimensions of crime and welfare.

In the early twentieth century there were scattered attempts to develop Marxist political economies of crime and punishment, the most significant being the attempt to develop a systematic Marxist analysis of crime by Willem Bongers, a Dutch professor (Bongers 1916). To Bongers the main way in which capitalism was related to crime was through its perpetuation of a moral climate of egoism, at all levels of society. In terms that anticipated Merton's analysis of anomie (Merton 1938), Bongers talked of the stimulation of material desires by modern marketing, explaining not only proletarian crime but also crimes of the powerful.

Merton's anomie theory remains the most influential formulation of a political economy of crime. Most accounts portray it as 'strain' theory: a society that *culturally* encourages common material aspirations by a mythology of meritocracy, against a *structural* reality of unequal opportunities, which generates anomic pressures and deviant reactions. More fundamentally, however, anomie is due to the nature of aspirations in particular cultures. A highly materialistic culture - especially one that defines success almost exclusively in monetary terms - is prone to problems of moral regulation and crime, at *all* levels. This is not an economically determinist account; the cultural meaning of material factors like poverty or inequality is crucial. Whatever its strengths, however, Merton's social democratic critique of unbridled capitalism was too cautious for 1970s radical criminology, too radical for post-1980s neo-liberalism, and too structuralist for the followers of Foucault and post-modernists.

The criminological perspective most explicitly rooted in political economy is the 'fully social theory of deviance' sketched in *The New Criminology* (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973: 268-280), stressing the interdependence of macro, meso, and micro processes. Most research studies inevitably focus on a narrower range of phenomena, but the checklist

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of elements for a ‘fully social theory’ is a reminder of the wider contexts that deviance and control are embedded in. This was illustrated by *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1978), which focused on a particular robbery in Birmingham at the same time as a wide-ranging analysis of British economic, political, social and cultural history since World War II, charting the deeper concerns that ‘mugging’ represented, and the impact of transformations in the political economy on black young men in particular.

Realism, romanticism and root causes

Political economy has been sidelined in the last 30 years by a number of ‘turns’ in intellectual, cultural and political life, caught in a pincer movement from right and left, denying the reality of ‘society’, or at any rate structural causes and grand narratives. This began with the right-wing ‘realist’ critique, initiated most noisily by James Q. Wilson’s polemic against ‘root cause’ perspectives (Wilson 1975: xv). Left-thinking realists also claimed that rising crime in a more ‘affluent society’ constituted an ‘aetiological crisis’ for social democratic criminology. Mainstream criminology has become dominated by pragmatic concern with immediately practical policies. Causal explanation concentrated on the individual and situational which are more amenable to policy interventions, and do not raise questions of wider social justice. Whilst realism ousted political economy, it has been associated with a revival of neo-classical perspectives based on economic models, such as rational choice theory. More recently, ‘cultural criminologists’ have claimed that political economy cannot comprehend the subjective seductions of deviance.

In the 1980s these critiques were buttressed by a belief that econometric evidence called into question any postulated relationships between crime and economic factors. More recent studies, however, have shown that economic factors are now closely related to crime trends and patterns, due to the extent and impact of unemployment, poverty and inequality following the collapse of the post-war Keynesian, welfare state compromise, and the social tsunami of neo-liberalism. Historical and comparative studies also demonstrate that political economy shapes patterns of crime and of crime control policy, with a major contrast between social democracies and neo-liberalism (Reiner 2007a and b).

Political economy represents a holistic approach, encompassing the dialectical complexity of interactions between macro structures and individual actions. As Weber put it long ago, explanation has to be both ‘causally adequate’ and ‘adequate at the level of meaning’. Verstehen and structural analysis are complementary not contradictory. And understanding is not incompatible with ethical or policy concerns. All possible avenues of immediate crime reduction, victim support, or penal reform must be explored. Nonetheless, a heart of darkness pervades neo-

liberal as distinct from social democratic political economies: more serious violence and more cruel punishment. Short-term pain and symptom relief are helpful and ethical, but only provided they do not become a futile struggle to hold down the lid on what remain ‘root causes’.

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