

MERTON'S THEORY OF CRIME AND DIFFERENTIAL CLASS SYMBOLS OF SUCCESS

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Robert K. Merton's theory of social structure and anomie¹ has proven to be one of the most seminal contributions to criminological theorising. After decades of fruitful application in the area of juvenile delinquency, Merton's work has more recently provided a model for some of the more worthwhile analyses of corporate crime². The purpose of this paper is to re-examine within an international comparative framework the implications of Merton's theory for the question of whether a more egalitarian society might be a society with less crime.

THE THEORY

Merton's theory begins with the proposition that in any society there are a number of important cultural goals which provide a frame of aspirational reference. The most important of these goals in the United States (and other Western capitalist societies) is this-worldly material success. In addition to cultural goals which are held up as "worth striving for", there are defined legitimate institutionalised means for achieving the cultural goals. The legitimate means for achieving the cultural goal of material success are a good education, a good job, investment, and so on.

Merton asserts that when an individual has internalised a certain goal, and when the legitimate means for achieving that goal are blocked, the individual is under pressure to resort to illegitimate means to achieve the goal. The lower class child learns that he should strive for the cultural goal of material success, but legitimate means for achieving that goal are closed to him because he cannot do well at school, he does not have the "connections", the "polish", or the "presentability" to swing a good job, and he has no capital for investment. He is therefore in the market for an illegitimate means for achieving the cultural goal.

By reason of the central position it occupies in criminological thought, Merton's theory has inevit-

ably been the subject of many volumes of critical evaluation. It is not the purpose of this paper to re-view these critiques, but rather to focus upon an important part of the theory which has not been the subject of critical evaluation either by those who have used Merton's model or by those who have disparaged it.

DIFFERENTIAL CLASS SYMBOLS OF SUCCESS

A central assumption of the theory, which Merton makes quite explicit, is that for crime to result from blocked legitimate opportunities, the success-goal must be internalised by all classes in the society.

It is only when a system of cultural values extols, virtually above all else, certain *common* success-goals for the population at large while the social structure rigorously restricts or completely closes access to approved modes of reaching these goals for a *considerable part of the same population*, that deviant behaviour ensues on a large scale³.

In modern capitalist societies the mass media play an important role in ensuring this widespread diffusion throughout the class structure of the material success goal. Phillip Adams explains:

Telly is the most egalitarian of mediums, in that it transmits its plastic dreams to rich and poor alike. Thus admass fantasies intended for the penthouse finish up in the slums, and Raquel Welch works herself into a lather over Lux in houses that don't run to hot water. Glittering models ooze out of luxury limousines in homes where the kids shoes don't fit. And airlines offer the world to viewers who've forgotten their last holiday⁴.

Merton says that the explanatory power of the theory is contingent upon the existence in the society of *common* symbols of success which are shared by all social classes. In a society where success goals do not transcend class divisions, even though the poor may have legitimate access to pecuniary success blocked, they may accept this as inevitable and normal, and direct their aspirations toward more realistically attainable symbols of success which are discernably lower class. Thus, Merton tells us, "crude (and not necessarily reliable) crime statistics suggest that poverty is less highly correlated with

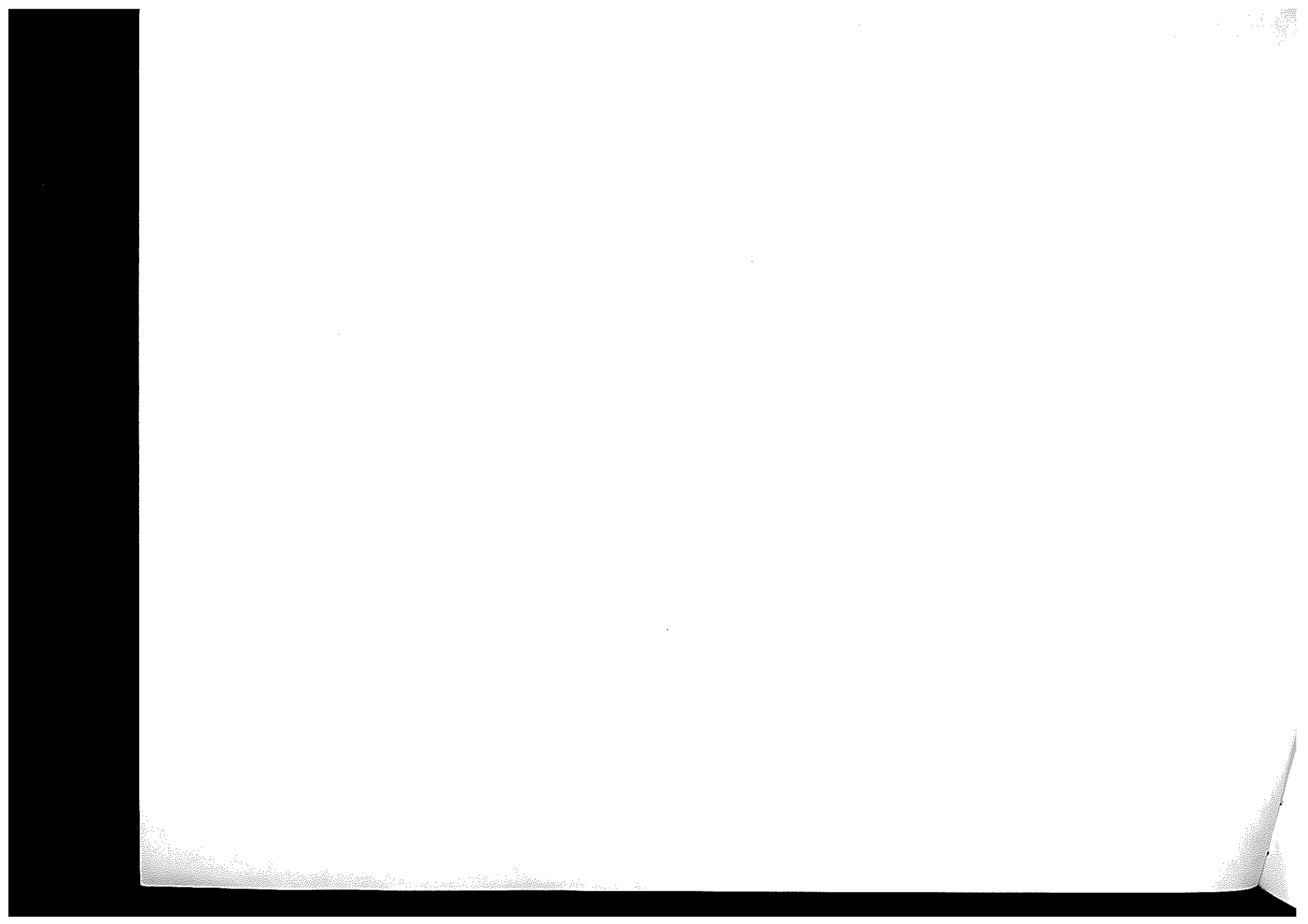
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¹ R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York, Free Press, 1968, chapter 6.

² See, for example, E. Gross, Organizations as Criminal Actors. In *Two Faces of Deviance: Crimes of the Powerful and Powerless* (O.R. Wilson and J. Braithwaite, Eds.). Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1979.

³ Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

⁴ P. Adams, *The Australian*, 12 Septembre, 1968.



crime in southeastern Europe than in the United States".⁵ In making this assertion Merton neither specifies the countries he is talking about, the sources of his crime statistics, nor the evidence that in these countries the poor have different symbols of success than the rich.

Merton hammers this point further in a footnote where he approvingly quotes Sorokin:

not everywhere nor always do the poor show a greater proportion of crime... many poorer countries have had less crime than the richer countries... The economic improvement in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the beginning of the twentieth, has not been followed by a decrease in crime.⁶

The Sorokin statement perpetrates the common confusion of failing to distinguish the amount of wealth from the distribution of wealth. Size of the cake is conceptually quite different from how equally the slices are cut. Clearly, there are all sorts of reasons why rising affluence could be associated with rising crime — urbanisation, normative conflict between old and new standards resulting in moral confusion, heightened illegitimate opportunities for property offences, increased geographical mobility and residential dislocation, the desintegration of traditional kinship controls, to name a few. Merton's theory is not about the consequences of some nations having more pecuniary success than others, nor is it about one nation being more affluent at one point in its history when compared with another period; it is about some classes within a single society having more pecuniary success than others. The criminogenic consequences of the have-nots comparing their relative position with that of the haves can be equally real in societies with many different aggregate levels of affluence.

When one surveys the evidence on the effects of the distribution of wealth (as opposed to the amount of wealth) one is inclined to disagree with what seems like the very safe assertion that "not everywhere nor always do the poor show a greater proportion of crime". In another work⁷ the present author has reviewed the results of almost 300 empirical studies on the association between class and crime. A strong relationship between low socio-economic status and involvement in conventional criminal behaviours such as theft, vandalism, robbery, assault and homicide has been found by studies in Australia, Great Britain, India, Nigeria, Uganda, the United States, France, Canada, Argentina, Japan, Spain, Israel, Yugoslavia, Puerto Rico, New Zealand, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Ceylon, Mexico, South Africa, Sardinia, Sweden, and Germany. Admittedly, most of the studies from most of these countries are based on official records of crime and delinquency which are subject to important sources of class bias. Nevertheless, a thorough review of the evidence from less class biased sources, such as self-report studies, victimisation surveys, and

direct observation, on balance also leads to the conclusion that for traditional criminal law offences (excluding corporate crime) lower class people are more heavily involved in crime and delinquency than others groups in the community⁸.

Where are these societies which, lacking differential class symbols of success, show no class differences in criminal involvement? It is reasonable to reject Merton's qualifications and assert that *all* twentieth century nations for which we have data tend to evidence patterns of crime where the poor commit traditional criminal offences at a higher rate than the rich. This seems to be true irrespective of the extent to which differential class symbols of success are present in the society.

ELABORATIONS ON MERTON'S POSITION

Perceived relative deprivation will not of itself be likely to stimulate the commission of crimes if the deprived are persuaded that the existence of a wide gulf between rich and poor is, for political, religious or other reasons, justified. If the rich can persuade the poor that the reasons for the existence of a wide gulf are legitimate, then dissatisfaction with the condition of society will not be manifest⁹.

This kind of elaboration on Merton's position by Woods puts the emphasis on resignation to one's economic failure, belief that one's failure is justified; that is, the emphasis is on accepting failure by middle class standards, rather than on withdrawing commitment to middle class standards and identifying with distinctively lower class symbols of success. The implication is the same. Woods formulation leads to the prediction that in some types of societies — those where the poor accept their lot as deserved — the class differential in crime rates will disappear. But as we have seen, the massive accumulation of evidence on this question provides little joy for such a prediction.

The most influential elaboration of the Merton thesis has been by Cloward and Ohlin¹⁰. Cloward and Ohlin are best known for observing that for commitment to a cultural success goal to result in delinquency, two fundamental conditions are necessary. First, like Merton, they say that legitimate means for achieving the goal must be blocked; but second, illegitimate means for achieving the goal must be available. Even the satisfaction of these two conditions might not be sufficient. Cloward and Ohlin argue that delinquency is more probable under certain conditions. The most important of these "is the attribution of the cause of failure to the social order rather than to oneself, for the way in which a person explains his failure largely determines what he will do about it"¹¹. Belief that one is the victim of an

⁵ Merton, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁶ P. A. Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories*. New York, 1928, pp. 560-61.

⁷ J. Braithwaite, *Inequality, Crime, and Public Policy*. London and Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979.

⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

⁹ G. Woods, Unemployment and crime: A general perspective. University of Sydney Institute of Criminology Seminar. Sydney, July, 1978.

¹⁰ R. Cloward and L. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

unjust system will result in alienation from that system, and withdrawal of attributions of legitimacy from official norms. Belief that failure is the result of one's personal deficiency results in pressures to improve oneself, and leaves the legitimacy of established norms intact.

Cloward and Ohlin cite two main factors that determine attributions of blame of internal or external causes. First is the perception of discrepancies between official criteria of achievement (hard work, ability, perseverance, etc.) and pragmatic criteria ("connections", familial ties, luck, etc.). Second is the perception of systematized prejudices in conferring success, prejudices against people of a given race, class, place of residence, or other visible group. Failures become angry when they perceive themselves to be equally endowed on those criteria which are institutionally and normatively stated to be relevant, but are unjustly deprived because of visible barriers.

Cloward and Ohlin therefore see greater equality of opportunity as a means of attenuating some of these barriers, thereby reducing system-blame and delinquency. Moreover, equality of opportunity will give the poor *hope* that they will lift themselves out of poverty, perhaps in the next generation at least. Thus the theory is taken as implying a policy of *equality of opportunity* rather than *equality of results*. Indeed Cloward and Ohlin's work was one of the major theoretical underpinnings of the equality of opportunity programs of the "War on Poverty" of the late '60s in the United States.¹²

The evidence that blaming the system for personal failure correlates with delinquency is not strong. Rosenberg and Silverstein¹³ report that their 130 very poor lower class and mostly quite delinquent youths reported feelings of "deep resignation" rather than "relative deprivation", and were prone to explain their predicament in terms of personal inadequacy rather than system-blame. Gold¹⁴ found no differences between the responses of repeated official delinquents and non-delinquents to the question, "Do you feel that every boy in this country has as good a chance as every other boy?" Quicker¹⁵ concludes from his review that the evidence is conflicting and inconclusive on the question of whether system-blame rather than self-blame leads to delinquency. Since that review, a study by Picou et al.¹⁶ has been published which found that lower

class Negro delinquents were more likely than lower class non-delinquents to believe that opportunities for the attainment of occupational goals were blocked *both* because of "my race", and because they were "not smart enough". Another review by Elliott and Voss¹⁷, mainly of studies using Rosenzweig's measure of punitiveness, also concluded that there is little evidence that blaming the system is associated with delinquency. Contrary to Cloward and Ohlin, it is reasonable to hypothesize that if one fails in a system, one will withdraw attributions of legitimacy to that system, irrespective of the reasons for failure.

OTHER REASONS FOR CLASS DIFFERENCES TO PERSIST

Even if in a given society there exist differential class symbols of success, and the poor view reasons for their poverty as legitimate and blame themselves rather than the system for their economic failure, there are many other factors which will result in their propensity for traditional criminal violations being greater than that of the rich. It will still be the case that to the extent that crime arises from a semi-rational weighing up of the rewards and costs of criminal activity, lower class people will have a higher reward-cost ratio for crime than middle class people. Twenty dollars stolen in a robbery is worth more to the unemployed black than it is to the wealthy white professional. For the slum dweller, a rational assessment of the costs of conviction leads to the conclusion that they are relatively low if life seems almost as dismal outside of prison as it is inside. In this regard Gordon has quoted a black hustler from Harlem:

It is not a matter of a guy saying, "I want to go to jail [or] I am afraid of jail". Jail is on the street just like it is on the inside. The same as, like when you are in jail, they tell you "Look, if you do something wrong you are going to be put in the hole." You are still in jail, in the hole or out of the hole. You are in jail in the street or behind bars. It is the same thing.¹⁸

Conversely, for the affluent person, the comparison between his present life style and prison is striking, and the rewards of crime seem small compared to what he can earn legitimately. So the reward-cost ratio of traditional crime is much higher for the lower class than for the middle class person. Consistent with this formulation, Ehrlich¹⁹ found that the deterrent effect on violent crime of an increased probability of a prison sentence was significantly less for blacks than for whites.

The reward-cost model is said to be particularly applicable to juvenile delinquency. Middle class adolescents, who are just beginning on the path to

¹² See W.R. Burkhardt, *The Application of Opportunity Theory to Delinquency Prevention: Evaluation of a Case Study and Critique of the Literature*. Ph.D dissertation, Wayne State University, 1973.

¹³ B. Rosenberg and H. Silverstein, *The Varieties of Delinquent Experience*. Waltham, Mass., Blaisdell, 1969, pp. 130-133.

¹⁴ M. Gold, *Status Forces in Delinquent Boys*. Ann Arbor, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, 1963, pp. 159-60.

¹⁵ J.C. Quicker, A consideration of the relationship of "punitiveness" to delinquency as developed in opportunity theory, *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 64, 1973, pp. 333-338.

¹⁶ J.S. Picou, A.J. Cosby, A.W. Lemke, and H.T. Azuma, Occupational choice and perception of attainment blockage: A study of lower class delinquent and non-delinquent black males, *Adolescence* 9, 1974, pp. 289-98.

¹⁷ D.S. Elliott and H.L. Voss, *Delinquency and Dropout*. Lexington, Mass., Lexington Books, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ D.M. Gordon, Capitalism, class and crime in America, *Crime and Delinquency* 19, 1973, pp. 163-186.

¹⁹ I. Ehrlich, The deterrent effect of criminal law enforcement, *Journal of Legal Studies* 1, 1972, pp. 259-277.

building a professional or managerial career, have a particularly great deal to lose from damaging their reputation by getting into trouble with the law. Toby has expressed this argument clearly:

youngsters vary in the extent to which they feel a stake in American society. For those with social honor, disgrace is a powerful sanction. For a boy disapproved of already, there is less incentive to resist the temptation to do what he wants when he wants to do it. Usually, the higher the socioeconomic status of the family, the more the youngster feels he has to lose by delinquent behaviour.²⁵

Even if lower class youths are resigned to the legitimacy of inequality, and believe in the deservedness of their own failure, it still remains the case that they have a status problem of the kind that Albert Cohen has described in *Delinquent Boys*. Moreover, it still might be that many lower class school failures might solve their status problem collectively with other students who have been similarly rejected by the school. According to Cohen the outcasts band together and set up their own status system with values which are the exact inverse of the middle class values of the school — contempt for property and authority instead of respect for property and authority, immediate impulse gratification instead of impulse control, apathy instead of ambition, toughness instead of control of aggression. Paradoxically, this kind of criminogenic subculture formation is the epitome of "differential class symbols of success". In this subculture the delinquent's conduct is right precisely because it is wrong according to the middle class values of the school. Participation in the subculture permits the lower class school failure to resolve his status problem and enhance his self-image by rejecting his rejectors.

Slum dwellers who believe that they deserve to be poor still cannot escape the reality of living in an area with plentiful criminal role models, widespread illegitimate opportunities, poor informal social control, overcrowding, and inadequate recreational and educational resources. Indeed affluent middle class families who live in lower class areas suffer substantially higher delinquency rates among their children than is the case for middle class families living in middle class areas.²¹

In *Inequality, Crime, and Public Policy* this author has argued that inequality of power is important in contributing to both traditional criminal offences, and to those conceptually quite different types of crime which involve the abuse of the power inherent in white-collar occupational roles — what we normally call white-collar crime. So far as traditional offences such as assault, rape, theft, and vandalism are concerned, it is often the case that such behaviour reflects an attempt to make a mark on the world, to be noticed, to get identity feedback. Crime can be a manifestation of powerlessness: "one way to get

society to pay more attention is to muss it up a little"²² Matza is a pre-eminent theorist of this view in his *Delinquency and Drift*.

Being "pushed around" puts the delinquent in a mood of fatalism. He experiences himself as effect. In that condition he is rendered irresponsible.²³

At the other end of the power spectrum, *inequality, Crime, and Public Policy* advances a variety of theoretical speculations, laced with a little data, to support Lord Ancton's dictum that power corrupts. These arguments will not be repeated here. However it is worth repeating the conclusion of this work that "too little power and wealth creates problems of living which produce crime of one type; too much power corrupts, and this produces crime of another type". It is argued that greater equality of wealth and power is a way of reducing both types of crime, since, fundamentally, blue collar crime arises from the fact that the poor are exploited, white collar crime from the fact that the rich exploit. The point is that if powerlessness (or excessive power) contributes to crime, then to assert that the poor will not have a high crime rate in a situation where they accept their fate as deserved ignores the fact in this situation the poor still remain powerless.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MERTON FORMULATION

The differential class symbols of success formulation implies that even though we may be able to show that nations with great income inequality have higher murder rates, even though cities within the United States with a wider gap between the poor and the average income earner have higher rates for various types of crime²⁴, such an inequality-crime connection will not be universally found. Most importantly, there can be no guarantee that a given marginal decrease in inequality will lead to a drop in the crime rate since the consequences of greater deprivation will be contingent on how such deprivation is subjectively interpreted. While it would be foolish to reject so reasonable a qualification out of hand, it does need to be asserted that even where greater deprivation is interpreted by the deprived as totally justified, there are a great many other reasons which lead us to expect that a sharpening of inequality will be associated with a rise in crime. Moreover, while we have a great deal of evidence to demonstrate the connection between objective inequality and crime, there is none to show that this correlation disappears when such inequality is socially constructed as legitimate.

²² K. Blanch, *Women in crime: Equal rights, equal wrongs, Cleo* (Australian Edition), August 1975, p. 25.

²³ D. Matza, *Delinquency and Drift*, New York, Wiley, p. 89.

²⁴ The international and intercity evidence on inequality and crime is reviewed in chapter 11 of Braithwaite, *op. cit.*

²⁰ J. Toby, Social disorganization and stake in conformity: Complementary factors in the predatory behaviour of hoodlums, *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science* 48, 1957, pp. 12-17.

²¹ Braithwaite, *op. cit.*, Parts I and II.

It is furthermore the case that in no situation will all of the poor feel that the worsening of their situation is completely justified and legitimate. Certainly in advanced Western capitalist societies the conservative hegemony is never so pervasive that some of the poor are not influenced by the egalitarian rhetoric of left-liberal politicians, trade unions, and even left-wing intellectuals.

There can be little doubt that how inequality is subjectively justified could be important in attenuating the impact on crime of changes in objective economic conditions. But to suggest that such subjectivity can completely negate the effect of objective forces seems difficult to sustain, both empirically and theoretically.

The political implication of the subjectivist position could be that instead of attempting to reduce crime by attacking inequality, we should work at persuading the poor to be content with their lot. But whether we believe in struggling for a more equal society or in telling the poor to be happy with what they have will be decided on many more important grounds than crime prevention. Irrespective of which way we jump on this question, irrespective of whether we are discussing a society in which the poor have a high or a low level of commitment to the legitimacy of inequality, we should be prepared to acknowledge, on the basis of the considerable accumulation of evidence, that it is reasonable to expect a move to greater equality to be associated with reduced crime. We might hypothesize that a society with great inequality and low legitimacy for inequality is likely to have more crime than a society with great inequality and high legitimacy for inequality or a society with little inequality and low legitimacy for inequality. Moreover, the latter two may be both likely to have more crime than a society with little inequality and high legitimacy for inequality. More systematic empirical work is needed to test these hypotheses.

Nevertheless, given that a search of the literature does not uncover any cases of societies with

high legitimacy for inequality and no association between class and crime, the following interim conclusion seems justified. For any prevalent level of legitimation for inequality in a given society, greater equality of wealth and power is likely to result in less crime than would otherwise have prevailed.

RÉSUMÉ

La théorie de Merton sur le crime et les symboles de succès différentiels selon les classes sociales:

La théorie de la structure sociale et de l'anomie formulée par Robert K. Merton a manifestement donné naissance à de nombreuses applications fructueuses, notamment dans les domaines de la délinquance juvénile et des crimes commis par les corporations. Dans le présent article, l'auteur se propose, à partir d'une démarche comparative, de dégager les implications de la théorie de Merton pour la question de savoir si une société plus égalitaire serait effectivement une société à faible incidence de criminalité.

L'auteur montre qu'il ne fait aucun doute que l'on doit, pour répondre à cette dernière question, tenir compte de la façon dont l'inégalité relative des membres d'une société est justifiée subjectivement par ceux-ci. Néanmoins, puisqu'une revue de littérature ne révèle l'existence d'aucune société avec à la fois un haut degré de légitimation des inégalités sociales et une absence de lien entre la criminalité et le facteur classe sociale, l'auteur se croit autorisé à conclure temporairement que l'incidence des comportements criminels dans une société pourrait effectivement être réduite en réduisant les inégalités d'opportunités, de biens et de pouvoir qui existent entre ses membres.
