

SOC 3290 Deviance
Overheads Lecture 15: Conflict Theory 2:

Today we will cover 4 basic topics:

- (1) Karl Marx on deviance & social control;
- (2) Various applications of Marxist theory;
- (3) Marxist theory & social policy; &
- (4) Critiques of Marxist conflict theory.

Marxist Critical Thought: An Introduction:

* Karl Marx (1818-1883):

- Experienced inequality/alienation in 1800's Germany
- Tried to critically understand/alter oppressive, hierarchically imposed social structures

* Intellectual Influences:

(1) Georg Hegel (idealist):

- Life=progressive, dialectical unfolding of Absolute Spirit
- Driving force in history=synthetic resolution of contradictions

(2) Ludwig Feuerbach (materialist):

- Hegel's ideas an illusion
- Life=struggle for material existence
- Thought proceeds from material being, not being from thought

* Marx's Synthesis ("dialectical materialism"):

- History proceeds in dialectical movement
- Contradictions/resolutions are material
- Turns Hegel "on his head"
- Central historical forces=social production of economic relations
- Permeates all aspects of social life

* Consequences of Marxist synthesis:

- Practical political struggle against capitalist inequalities
- Theoretical understanding

* Marx's two critical theses:

- (1) Capitalist theft of "unpaid labor" ("surplus value")
- (2) The "fetishization of commodities"

* Deviance and social control:

- Focus on historical organization of material existence
- Originally egalitarian (acephalous societies)
- Technological development encourages inequality
(e.g. emergence of exploitative "supervisors")
- Some eventually benefit more from social control
- Aided by rise of centralized state authority
- Inequality affects entire network of social relations
(e.g. controllers vs. the controlled)
- Ideologies justify/mitigate impact of inequalities
- Acts which threaten dominant groups most strongly condemned
- Reflected in laws in slave, feudal, and capitalist societies

* Marx:

- Did little formal writing in area of deviance/social control
- Viewed these issues as inseparable from political economy
- Suggests dealing with inequality first, then deviance.

Applications of Marxist Imagery:

* Later European theorists inspired by Marx:

(1) Willem Bonger: Crime a result of:

- lower class social conditions; and
- cultural logic of capital (egoism and greed)

(2) Rusche & Kirchheimer:

- changes in labor markets reflected in severity of punishment and control
- principle of “less eligibility”

(3) E.B. Pashukanis:

- terms of imprisonment in capitalist societies related to capitalist commodification of time.

* American theorists inspired by Marx:

(1) Richard Quinney:

- individualistic myths prevent us confronting structural barriers encouraging crime

(2) Steven Spitzer:

- Potentially deviant “problem populations” arise through
 - (i) contradictions in mode of production (surplus labor); and
 - (ii) indirect contradictions produced by social control (expectations)
- Identifies factors increasing likelihood of control of such populations

(3) Raymond Michalowski:

- Focuses on dynamic relations between;
 - (i) mode of production;
 - (ii) hierarchical workings of state control
 - (iii) hegemonic cognitive, emotional and bodily ritual processes
- (e.g. Race=set of social and material relations over time)

* Ultimately the Marxist approach:

- Locates deviance/social control in recurrent historical struggles to control material existence
- Solutions predicated on transforming society

Marxist Theory & Social Policy:

* Meaningful social change impossible without overthrow of capitalist economy & state / replacing with socialism:

- power to unfairly criminalize will be eliminated
- social inequality will be eliminated, thus less crime

Evaluation of Marxist Conflict Theory:

- * Instrumentalist position of state (“conspiracy theory”) is untenable. Replaced with structural position (including “class factions” & relative autonomy” of the state). Explains conflict within ruling class & occasional laws contrary to interests of capital.
- * Some laws serve everyone’s interests, not just capital (e.g. murder)
- * “Romanticizing” criminals as “political prisoners,” etc.
- * Lack of realism in social policy
- * Untestable, *ex post facto* explanation (“ideology”)
- * Yet, Marxist conflict theory has its positive points:
 - its focus on uses/misuses of legal power
 - stimulating research into political/business crime
 - focusing attention on ideology
 - stimulating additional critical theorizing