

Political Science Theories of Crime and Delinquency

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This literature review provides a brief overview of four theories of crime and delinquency and highlights the connection between each theory and political science. The theories reviewed include deterrence theory, conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory. Although rooted in sociology, these theories are considered in this review because they met the following criteria: (1) The theory was considered significant by scholars in several disciplines, including political science, (2) the assumptions in the theory included analysis of political and/or governmental institutions, and (3) some of the major tenets of the theory focused on political and governmental processes.

KEYWORDS *Crime and delinquency, political science, theory*

INTRODUCTION

U.S. citizens are bombarded with images of crime and violence. Images of crime flash at viewers from TV screens, newspapers and, now, computer screens and even cellular phones. The public has become accustomed to the nightly news with the cautious warnings and fears that these images evoke. These fears, whether founded or not, affect attitudes among neighbors and citizens. These attitudes shape interactions and voting habits.

The public has also witnessed how messages of crime, delinquency, and violence fuse with political messages. Slogans such as “tough on crime” and “three strikes, you’re out!” have become part of popular discourse. Politicians often use this rhetoric to attract attention and to gain votes. Their political views on crime often become part of their policy agendas, which they use to reach voters who are fearful about crime and delinquency. Many politicians

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have used their policy agendas to enact more punitive legislation at the state and national levels, as reflected in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s that saw an unprecedented rise in the amount of criminal justice legislation (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002).

There are many ideologies played out in voting patterns and public analysis of legislative policies, but many are not aware of the related theories that can be used to explain crime and delinquency. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary (2009) defines political science as "a social science concerned chiefly with the description and analysis of political and especially governmental institutions and processes." Therefore, although most theories of crime and delinquency originated in the sociological and criminological fields, theories that explain engagement and non-engagement in crime and delinquency through analysis of political and governmental institutions and processes can be considered political science theories. This review aims to identify these major theories. They are deterrence theory, conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory.

Deterrence theory lies within the broader classical theory of criminology, and conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory lie within the overarching socio-political philosophy of critical theory. So, a brief overview of the classical school of criminology and its derivative, rational choice theory, are presented to provide the background for describing deterrence theory. Next, a brief overview of critical theory provides the foundation for describing conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory. This review concludes with a conceptual map of how these political science theories help to explain the causes of crime and punishment and a discussion of the interrelationships between the theories and the implications for future research.

METHODS

This literature review utilized the online journal databases available through the University of California, Berkeley libraries, primarily the following political science databases: *The Political Science Worldwide Databases* and *J-Store*. In addition, *Sociological Abstracts* and *PsychInfo* were searched. Using the search items of *political science and crim* and theor**, and *political science and theor* and delinq*, the *Political Science Worldwide Databases* provided primarily international sources that proved to be less relevant for this search. *J-Store* proved far more useful because of the ability to limit searches solely to political science journals. *Sociological Abstracts* proved to be helpful.

Based on a review of the search results, the following four themes emerged: deterrence theory, conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory. Though other theories emerged, the criteria for inclusion in this review included (1) the theory is considered significant by crime and delinquency

scholars in several disciplines, including political science, (2) the assumptions in the theory included analysis of political and/or governmental institutions, and (3) some of the major tenets of the theory focused on political and governmental processes in defining criminal acts or crime desistence strategies. Once the theories were selected, additional searching in the *J-Store* and *Sociological Abstracts* databases helped to identify additional articles related to each theory (e.g., theories were searched with *deterrence*, *conflict*, *Marx** and *crim* and theor**). Additional criteria used in selecting articles included that the article documented current theoretical trends, presented historical development of the approach, or was frequently cited by others. Some of these articles were found using the “article locator” function in *J-Store*, searching by either author or title.

This literature review has several limitations: (1) It provides highlights and is not comprehensive, and (2) it does not reflect other major theories in political science. However, this review does provide a beginning roadmap of the major theories and the relevance of these theories for understanding current public attitudes and social policies related to crime and delinquency.

Political Science Theories of Crime and Delinquency

Several theories help to explain how political and governmental processes influence conceptualizations of crime and delinquency. The theories relate to individual choice, conflict, societal labels, and power dynamics. Understanding these concepts is crucial to the process of separating scholarly analysis from political rhetoric on crime.

This review begins with the ideas of the classical school of criminology as a way of analyzing one of its derivatives, namely, deterrence theory. Then, the review focuses on three critical theories: labeling theory, conflict theory, and radical theory. Together, these four theories comprise the major political science theories of crime and delinquency because each is considered significant by scholars in several disciplines (including political science) as a way to explain the relationship between political and/or governmental institutions and crime and delinquency. The review concludes with a synthesis of these major theories.

THE CLASSICAL SCHOOL: RATIONAL CHOICE AND DETERRENCE THEORY

In criminological scholarship, the classical school refers to the theories related to a general consensus and desire for social cohesion in which rational people want to engage in formal and informal social contracts based on free will (Bohm, 2001). Dating back to the eighteenth-century writings of Beccaria, crime is explained, like all human behavior, in terms of gratification and avoidance of pain (Shoemaker, 2005). Classical theory assumes humans are rational actors that weigh the costs and benefits when attempting to reach their goals (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Shoemaker; Bohm).

Rational choice theory is derived from the classical school. Rational choice theorists make the assumptions that opportunities, risks, and benefits are weighed before a crime is committed and that this decision-making process may vary at different stages and with different types of crime (Cornish & Clarke, 1987). If the gains outweigh the costs, criminal behavior can occur (Becker, 1968; Geerkin & Gove, 1975).

Deterrence theory is also a derivative of the classical school. Deterrence theorists focus on controlling crime through punishment (Bohm, 2001). Beccaria (1764, as cited in Bohm, 2001) wrote that the purpose of punishment is to stop people from committing crime again (special/specific deterrence) and to stop others who know about the punishment from committing crime (general deterrence). Bentham (1823, as cited in Kahan, 1999) specified that policies regarding punishment should create incentives for non-criminal behavior.

During the 1960s, psychological studies about controlling behavior with direct and vicarious punishment led to interest in empirically verifying the effects of deterrence (Bandura, 1969; Nagin, 1998). Deterrence concepts are now part of an interdisciplinary social science theory and have been used to support legislation at both local and national levels.

Geerkin and Gove (1975) provided an overview of the following major hypotheses embedded in deterrence theory. First, the deterrence system will be more effective if the punishment is quickly administered. Second, the greater the severity of the punishment, the more that criminals are convinced they will actually receive the punishment. Each of these hypotheses have had significant impact on political rhetoric and policy making. For example, legislation influenced by deterrence theory has sought to cut down on the time that criminals wait to go to trial, enforced more severe punishments (particularly for violent and drug-related offenses), and tried to establish systems (such as increased policing) that can lead to increased arrests. Deterrence theory has been used by politicians to justify their positions on such issues as capital punishment, gun control, and hate crime laws. Indeed, the outcomes of elections can be traced to a politician's stance on these issues (Kahan, 1999). Some theorists point to political debates and slogans, such as "three strikes and your out!" as a means to decrease the overall deterrent effect of the criminal justice system (Nagin, 1998). They argue that this political rhetoric dilutes the perceived threat of incarceration because people understand that the system is economically overwhelmed and hands out sentences unfairly (Nagin).

Other critics argue that there are significant methodological problems in empirically determining the effects of deterrence and in determining whether sanctions had minimal effects or even increased criminal behavior (Paternoster, Saltzman, Waldo, & Chiricos, 1983; Bridges & Stone, 1986). Despite these critiques, deterrence theory remains a prominent basis for political discourse and criminal justice policy.

THE CRITICAL THEORIES: CONFLICT, LABELING, AND RADICAL THEORY

Critical theory is the broad term used to describe theory that emerged from the neo-Marxist thinkers of the Frankfurt School and modern theories that embody their philosophy. The Frankfurt School was largely influenced by the writings of Marx, Weber, Kant, and Hegel, and they included Horkheimer, Adorno, Fromm, Habermas, and Marcuse. Critical theories rely on the following assumptions: (1) that those in power create the social and political structures that dominate society, (2) society is based on conflict between groups, and (3) science is inherently value-laden (Bohm, 2001). Although sociological in their origins, the following theories of crime and delinquency share these assumptions and meet the criteria of a political science theory. They are (1) conflict theory, which includes implications for racial differences in attitudes toward criminals, criminal behavior, and criminal justice application, (2) labeling theory, which includes implications for criminal justice policy, and (3) radical or neo-Marxist theory, which includes implications and critique of capitalist class structures.

Conflict theory. In contrast to classical theorists that assume society is based on a consensus of moral values, conflict theorists assert that society is built on conflict and competition between disparate groups (Bohm, 2001). Conflict theorists view criminality as a large social problem that “is a by-product of political and social conflict” (Vold, 1951, p. 160). Conflict among groups (as defined by their political-economic position relative to each other) involves the process of improving the position of one group in relationship to another (Boulding, 1962). This process is separate from individuals and behaviors (Boulding). Criminological conflict theorists focus on the process of violating legal norms and enforcing authority derived from legal norms and not on the individual criminal (Turk, 1966).

Certain behaviors are defined as criminal for the benefit of the dominant group that views such a system as just and non-discriminatory to further control vulnerable groups (Bohm, 2001). Crime is a direct result of conflict that results from stratification or power differentials between groups; it emerges from a sense of relative powerlessness (Vold & Bernard, 1986, as cited in Bohm, 2001). The criminal justice system and its policies are in place to meet the needs of the dominant group. Critiques of conflict theory are based on its inability to explain individual differences in criminal behavior and types of crime (Bohm).

However, the basic tenets of the theory have been extended and used to explain overarching racial differences in attitudes and public opinions about crime and the police, and rates of involvement in criminal justice (Turk, 1966; Barkan & Cohn, 2005; Howell, Perry, & Vile, 2004; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Gilliam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002). In particular, hypotheses about the impact of race and racism on crime and delinquency have had a considerable influence on political science. For example, there have been numerous

studies of the impact of racism on public attitudes, on voting tendencies, and on social policies related to crime (Peffley & Hurwitz; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997). Others have looked closely at social stratification outcomes related to race and criminal justice whereby different racial groups hold unequal amounts of power in society and are therefore in conflict with one another (Kerley, Benson, Lee, & Cullen, 2004). Racial minorities are increasingly and negatively affected by the criminal justice system, which serves the interests of the dominant majority.

In particular, scholars concerned with the role of race in conflict have often looked at how social stereotyping has affected the attitudes of whites toward African-Americans, especially when African-Americans comprise 12% to 13% of the general population but make up more than 50% of all arrests for murder and robbery and represent nearly half of all inmates in federal prisons (Peffley, Hurwitz, & Sniderman, 1997; Hacker, 1995; Meir, 1994). The goal of research is to seek a better understanding of why this discrepancy exists: Are African-Americans unfairly targeted by the police? Are they actually involved in more criminal activity than other racial and ethnic groups, and if so, why? How has racial stereotyping in the media contributed to this unequal representation? How does racism affect fair trials and the treatment of African-Americans in the judicial system? How do racial prejudices in the general public contribute to the acceptance of this inequality and allow for more punitive policies toward African-American criminals? (Barkan & Cohn, 2005; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Peffley et al., 1997).

Researchers examine the issue from various viewpoints including influences of the media on public opinion and public policies related to crime and delinquency. As the relationship between racism and crime is complex, it is helpful to look more closely at these areas.

Hurwitz and Peffley (1997, 2002) have examined general public attitudes and stereotypes regarding race and crime and how this translated into white support for the punitive treatment of criminals, especially African-Americans defendants, and tough policy on criminal sentencing, prison furloughs, and rehabilitation. Similarly, Barkan and Cohn (2005) found that whites were more likely than African-Americans to support increases in spending to fight crime and punish criminals, and that these same whites were more likely to assume that the types of criminals affected by this legislation will be black. White Americans, as the dominant group, saw themselves as threatened or in conflict with African-Americans, and this led them to desire greater control and power by means of the criminal justice system (Barkan & Cohn).

The discussion of the media's influence on politics and culture dates back to the beginning of the discussions of the critical theory in the Frankfurt School (Buchstein & Dean, 1997). Mass media were viewed by Adorno and Habermas as a means of espousing the views of the dominant group and exerting power over social groups (Buchstein & Dean). The tradition of critical analysis of the media and its influence on criminal policy continues

today. More recently, Gilliam et al. (2002) assessed the extent of the media's influence on racial attitudes related to crime and delinquency. For those with little real-life exposure to African-Americans, the negative media images of African-Americans portrayed as criminals highly influenced their support for more punitive criminal policies. Others criticized the rhetoric used by the dominant white group to characterize harsh penal policies as "race-neutral" in the media and political campaigns (Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002, p. 59). Despite its critiques, conflict theorists have assisted in explaining racial differences in public opinion and policy support. Because it has continued relevance to race and public policy, conflict theory remains an important theory that helps to understand crime and delinquency.

Labeling theory. Similar to conflict theorists, labeling theorists (labeling theory is also known as interactionist theory) focus on the meaning of crime in our society and how people and behaviors are defined and labeled as criminal by the government (Bohm, 2001). Influenced by the writings of Mead, labeling theorists have incorporated three concerns: (1) the social-historical development of deviant labels, (2) the application of labels to certain types of people in specific times and places, and (3) the symbolic and practical consequences of the labeling process" (Pfohl, 1994, p. 347). Historically, other influences on the formation of labeling theory (James and Cooley) focused on social interactions and their effects on self concept (Shoemaker, 2005).

Labeling theorists contend that initial delinquent or criminal acts occur for many, reasons (Shoemaker, 2005). The initial delinquent act is seen as less important than the subsequent negative, formal label placed on the act and actor by the government (Shoemaker). The delinquent label is determined by and serves the dominant social group by branding delinquents as outsiders (Becker, 1963). Therefore, those with the least power (particularly minority groups and those with low socioeconomic status) in society have the greatest likelihood of being labeled criminal. And actual criminal behavior is only one factor (among other status-related factors) associated with obtaining criminal status in society (Turk, 1966). This negative label changes the self-concept and becomes internalized, thereby negatively altering behavior and perpetuating criminal acts (Shoemaker). Labeling theory explains the secondary aspects of deviance or delinquency after the primary delinquent act has been externally and internally labeled. The consequences of the label required further study (Lemert, 1951). Merton (1948) discussed "the self-fulfilling prophecy" that he defined as "a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true" (p. 195). As a result, the official delinquent label can increase recidivism (Meade, 1974). Political scientists have found labeling theory to be useful in assessing the affects of policies aimed at preventing crime and in assessing the approach of judicial systems to first-time offenders and juvenile delinquents.

The labeling of criminals serves as a form of social control of those with the least amount of power in society. Labeling also exacerbates the relationship between social class, power, and criminal behavior (Sparks, 1980). Critics have claimed that labeling theory fails to adequately address how power is delineated and maintained within the political and legal systems (Davis, 1972) and that it assumes increased crime rates in low power groups (Tittle, 1983). However, labeling theorists have provided helpful and insightful ways to view crime and delinquency and have shaped the ideas located in related theories.

Radical theory. Radical theory has been referred to as Marxist theory and neo-Marxist theory owing to the heavy influence of Marxist political and economic philosophy on its formation. The application of Marxist philosophy to crime and delinquency gained widespread attention within the context of the social movements of the 1960s (Spitzer, 1975). Its influence, in part, arose out of a critique of the social control and deviance criminological theories of the time (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1974). By the mid-1970s, radical theorists were addressing crime as a form of deviance produced by capitalist society and its inherent political-economic conflicts. Marxist theory is based on the premise that capitalist society and its class structures and problems can be understood by analyzing the historic modes of production and the relationships of different groups to those modes of production (i.e., laborers/proletarians or factory owners/bourgeoisie). Class conflict emerges because individuals in each group compete for more resources by exploiting others within their group and other groups. Radical theorists posit that crime results because of (1) this intra- and interclass conflict and exploitation, (2) the promotion of ruling class power leading to the control of societal structures, including the criminal justice system, and (3) the fact that certain groups/behaviors are labeled delinquent if they challenge the power of the ruling class (Chambliss, 1975; Quinney, 1978; Spitzer).

According to the Marxist perspective, capitalism creates a desire for consumption and the inability for most to earn enough to afford desired items (Chambliss, 1975). The capitalist system creates an environment wherein crime is a rational response to the system (not a behavioral pathology), and the enforcement of criminal penalties by government is a process that serves the bourgeoisie (Chambliss; Taylor et al., 1974). As a result, criminal law is developed by and for the ruling class to control “problem populations” that become identified by questioning or hindering (1) capitalist modes of wealth distribution, (2) capitalist production schemes, (3) capitalist patterns of distribution and consumption, (4) capitalist labeling of productive and non-productive roles, or (5) capitalist ideology (Spitzer, p. 642). Therefore, capitalism creates material necessity to label deviants as criminals (Taylor et al., 1974).

An essential feature of radical theory is the concept of praxis and a belief that there is a remedy to alleviate societal ills that requires action. One way to

empower proletarians to take action is to provide them with the knowledge gained in the process of conducting radical research (Taylor et al., 1974). Radical theorists believe the theory is the foundation for socialist revolution because it assists in developing class consciousness that challenges the ruling class (Quinney, 1978). Political mobilization and action within the underclass are necessary to reduce crime rates (Colvin & Pauly, 1983). Criminal behavior should be redefined from definitions that protect the powerful to definitions that sanction the violations of human rights at all class levels (Bohm, 2001).

Early critics of radical theory have cited the lack of agreement and clarification on core concepts and lack of evidence to support the theory (Sparks, 1980). Critics have called Marxist thinking more ideological than theoretical (Akers, 1979) and a prediction and justification of lower class crime (Tittle, 1983). Critics have also stated that radical theory does not meet criteria for a general theory of crime but that some tenets of the Marxist philosophy could build upon existing theories (Ferrajoli & Zolo, 1985). In addition, there are many challenges to the viability of radical theory given the existence of crime and delinquency in socialist countries, middle-class delinquency, other non-class and economic explanations of criminal behavior (psychological), and the difficulty of testing class-related motives associated with criminal behavior (Shoemaker, 2005). Though radical theorists have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between political and economic injustices and crime, theorists are left to grapple with the challenges that these critiques present.

CONCLUSION

This review presented a brief overview of four major political science theories of crime and delinquency (deterrence theory, conflict theory, labeling theory, and radical theory). They were included because of the concepts related to political and/or governmental institutions and processes and how they focus on different parts of the criminalization process.

Figure 1 highlights the interrelationships between these theories. It illustrates the criminalization process, which begins with societal fear of crime, then moves to causes of crime and the criminal act and ends with punishment of crime. Each of the theories described in this review provides ideas about how to understand one aspect, or multiple aspects, of the process. The theories that provide insight into a particular aspect of crime and delinquency are listed below that step in the process. The overarching arrow linking fear of crime with punishment of crime highlights the strong connection between these two aspects of the criminalization process. The combination of these theories, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides a picture of the complicated and long-debated criminalization process. Each theory focuses on crime and delinquency from a different lens.

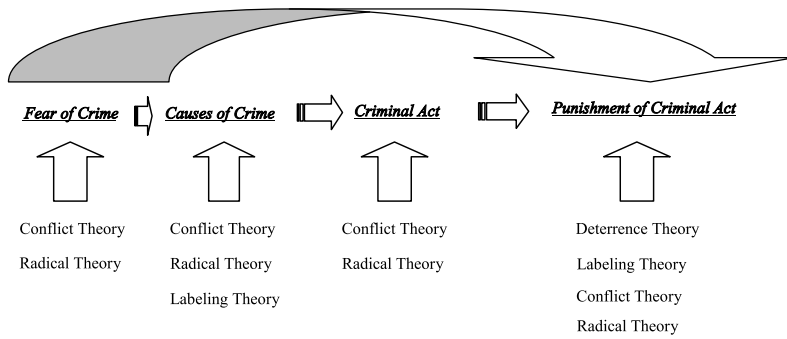


FIGURE 1 Political science theories of crime and delinquency.

Deterrence theorists focus on the punishment of the criminal act and suggest that when punishment is administered quickly, fairly, and publicly, it can deter the actor from future crimes and deter the public from committing criminal acts. The tenets of this theory were used as the basis for the U.S. criminal justice system and were based on the idea that people are rational actors who weigh the pros and cons of criminal behavior prior to committing a criminal act. In addition, the assumptions embedded in the theory are used by politicians in political debates about crime control.

Conflict theorists present a more comprehensive explanation of crime and delinquency that seeks to explain the fear of crime, causes of crime, and punishment of criminal acts. From this viewpoint, criminal behavior is a result of political and social conflict that results from competition between disparate social groups. The criminal justice system serves the needs of the dominant groups. The theory has been extended to help explain the overrepresentation of minority groups in prisons and racial differences in public attitudes about crime and delinquency.

Labeling theorists place relatively little importance on the causes of the initial criminal act, but rather focus is on the labeling process and the treatment of individuals once they are involved in the criminal justice system. The negative label that is given to individuals in this system can be internalized and negatively affect future behavior. A negative, formal, criminal label can lead individuals to adopt that label and act criminally.

Radical theory, like conflict theory, provides a more comprehensive explanation of criminal behavior at all levels of the criminalization process. Radical theorists posit that crime can be explained, like other social problems, by looking at historical modes of production and class structures. From this perspective, crime results from inter- and intra-class struggles whereby the criminal justice system serves to promote the ruling class.

These theories help to explain the relationship between politics, policies, and crime and the relationship of criminal behavior to the social environment. Political science theorists and others involved in the crime and

delinquency debate are continuously challenged to test their theories and assumptions in relationship to current and emerging policies. In a similar way, social workers can test the utility of these theories in their practice. It is expected that theories of crime, including those included in this review, will continue to evolve as our political system changes and as new attitudes emerge.

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