

Conceptual Remixing in Criminology: Tracing Durkheim and Marx's Influence on Etiological Theories of Crime

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Abstract:

Sociologists have previously argued that our current knowledge and inquiries stem from our standing on the shoulders of giants. Exactly how this occurs, however, may be less clear. This paper identifies how the works of two of the most valued classical social theorists – Durkheim and Marx – have influenced theories of crime causation. In doing so, I reveal that classical social theory continues to be relevant in the advancement of criminological thought. Identifying this lineage is crucial in developing more informed research and policy on crime and social control, which is especially important given the widespread interest in crime and delinquency among students (and citizens more generally).

Keywords: Criminology | Social Theory | Crime Causation | Émile Durkheim | Karl Marx | Travis Hirschi

Article:

Scholars have aptly argued that our knowledge is cumulative yet progressive. Such an argument emphasizes the importance of situating current understandings and inquiries in a historical context. This paper details classical influences on etiological theories of crime in hopes of revealing the lineage of criminological thought. Because Durkheim and Marx are commonly cited as two of the most influential classical social theorists, I focus specifically on their unique influence on theories of crime causation.

I begin by detailing Durkheim's legacy in five leading theories of crime causation. Specifically, I argue that Durkheim's notions of integration and solidarity as motivators toward conformity are evident in models of social disorganization and Hirschi's social control theory. I also discuss how various strain theories rely on Durkheim's idea of social regulation, although theories

following a Mertonian tradition also emphasize the importance of integration. In each theory discussion, I point out Durkheim's influence but also note divergences.

Although Marx himself did not provide a complete theoretical explanation of crime, his influence on etiological crime theories is notable.¹ The Marxist and socialist criminological theories reviewed in this paper highlight Marx's own concern about the injurious results of a capitalist political economy. Specifically, I detail how critical criminologists use Marxist principles to posit that the competitiveness and class structures inherent in capitalism produce criminal outcomes. I conclude by briefly arguing that integrating core elements of Durkheim and Marx's may be fruitful in developing a general theory of crime.

Durkheim and social disorganization: the integrative role of intermediary organization

Durkheim (1984[1893], p. 257–260) notes that modernization, including the development of cities and industry centralization, encouraged increased population density and heterogeneity. Such changes, he posits, could leave societies at risk for instability, segmentation, and interruptions in the collective conscious. Despite these transitions, Durkheim (1984[1893], p. 131) recognizes that populations can remain unified through intermediary organizations. Yet without such organizations, which inform collective meaning and integrate people into cooperative groups, crime would rise to pathological levels (Durkheim (1982 [1895])).

Social disorganization theories are influenced by Durkheim's argument that excessive crime results from weak community controls. Shaw and McKay (1942), for example, hypothesize that densely populated areas with high levels of economic and residential instability and heterogeneous populations attenuate institutional integration and an inability to resolve common problems, such as crime. Although early disorganization models refer to a community's inability to realize common values and maintain social order as criminogenic (Kornhauser 1978), more recent work better specifies how pro-social integration, mutual trust, and solidarity hinder crime (e.g., Sampson and Groves 1989). This work continues to illustrate the relevance of Durkheimian notions.

Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) develop a systemic model of social disorganization, which explains how community social control, especially through dense friendship, kinship, and other associations, influence behavioral outcomes. Other theorists and researchers expand their model by hypothesizing that macro-social forces, such as economic volatility, obstruct social control by disrupting the ability of community members to foster strong pro-social social networks (e.g. Bursik and Grasmick 1993; Sampson 1988). Sampson et al. (1997) argue that structural instability may result in communal distrust that interrupts communication and hinders the realization of common values (also see Morenoff et al. 2001). Their argument is reminiscent of Durkheim's (1984[1893]) suggestion that structural instability weakens social regulation, producing pathological levels of crime.

Durkheim and Hirschi: social integration's emphasis and effect on criminal offending

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory is perhaps the most frequently cited theories of crime causation. Social control theory shares the same assumptions about human behavior and social order as Durkheim's work. Both Hirschi and Durkheim assume that humans are naturally inclined to pursue self-interest, and because anti-social acts are thought to satisfy self-interests, individuals are expected to be inherently motivated toward crime. Hirschi's (1969) theory is particularly influenced by Durkheim's work on suicide and his arguments that criminal behaviors are deterred through attachment to others. In fact, Hirschi (1969:3) describes Durkheim's work as being "one of the purest examples of control theory" (also see Kornhauser 1978)

Hirschi (1969) posits that the key factor explaining criminal involvement is the presence of weak or severed social control. In short, he hypothesizes that inadequate socialization weakens an individual's bonds to others freeing the person to commit criminal or delinquent behavior. According to Hirschi (1969), social bonds include four mutually reinforcing elements: attachment to others, commitment to conventional achievements, involvement with conventional activities, and belief in a common value system. He refers to these elements collectively as social control. The likelihood of crime is expected to increase when any one of the bonds are weak; however, since the bonds are highly interrelated, it is likely that individuals who are strongly attached to others will also be committed to and involved in activities and believe in conventional codes of conduct.

The four elements of the bonds

Hirschi's conceptualization of social bonds is influenced by Durkheim, but each bond differs in the degree to which they draw on Durkheim's work. Hirschi's attachment and belief bonds are more influenced by Durkheim than Hirschi's commitment and belief bonds. Moreover, both theorists imply that attachments and beliefs are greatly interconnected. Durkheim (1984[1895], p. xliii) argues, for instance, that attachments to others influence individuals' acceptance of moral codes of conduct, and Hirschi (1969, p. 26) implies attachments encourage belief in society's value system.

According to Durkheim (1984[1895], p. 69), thoughts and behaviors are established by individuals' integrative attachments, obligations, and duties to others. Durkheim uses the concept of integration as a way to describe the meaningful connection to others. Individuals refrain from anti-social acts, such as suicide, when they were sufficiently integrated (Durkheim 1951[1897]). Durkheim's notion of integration is similar to Hirschi's attachment bonds. Hirschi (1969) described attachments as affection and respect for others, including caring about their wishes and expectations. However, Hirschi (1969, p. 83) also notes that attachments restrain individuals from criminal participation because individuals "take it into account when and if he contemplates a criminal act." This statement suggests that attachments deter criminal participation out of fear that criminal involvement will harm the valued relationship. As such, Hirschi describes conformity as more utilitarian than Durkheim (1961[1903]).

Durkheim's legacy is also apparent in Hirschi's belief element in both description and in emphasis. Hirschi (1969) describes belief as one's acceptance of society's value system. Consistent with Durkheim, this definition emphasizes Hirschi's assumption of a monolithic value system. Further, both theorists centralize the significance of believing in normative rules of conduct. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim (1995[1912]) discusses the stabilizing effect of a belief system at length, and some scholars argue that belief in moral codes is the most significant determinant of social order to Durkheim (Parsons 1937). Similarly, Hirschi (1969, p. 30) notes that even in the face of weak attachments, strong beliefs can deter criminal involvement.

Hirschi's commitment and involvement bonds are less influenced by Durkheim. Hirschi (1969) defines commitment as an investment in conventional achievements. Commitment is hypothesized to restrain crime and delinquency due to apprehension about the deviant act harming one's aspirations, goals, or reputation. Therefore, the commitment bond is a "rational component in conformity" (Hirschi 1969, p. 20). As mentioned previously, Durkheim (1984[1893]) focuses on emotive motivations toward conformity, so Hirschi's utilitarian approach to explaining conformity contradicts Durkheim's philosophy.

Hirschi's involvement bond stresses the importance of time by noting that individuals were less likely to attend to their criminal nature if they were busy participating in conventional activities. Although Durkheim (1984[1893], p., 159) hypothesizes that solidarity relied on frequent contact between individuals, he did not posit it as an independent source of social organization.

Social control and typologies of suicide

Durkheim's (1951[1897]) *Suicide* demonstrates how social conditions influence individual-level behavior and details the stabilizing and criminogenic effects of social integration and regulation by positing various typologies of suicide. Durkheim argues that weak or severed integration or regulation could result in antisocial acts – specifically egoistic or anomic suicide, respectively. In addition, excessive levels of integration or regulation result in deviance (altruistic and fatalistic suicides). While Durkheim's egoistic taxonomy is consistent with the Hirschi's (1969) theory, anomic, altruistic, and fatalistic suicides are not.

Durkheim argues that egoistic suicide results when an individual has low integration or attachment to others because low levels of attachment results in intensive individualism. Similarly, Hirschi's explains that weak or absent attachments free individuals from moral restraint and result in antisocial behaviors. In this way, Hirschi's hypotheses closely fit with Durkheim's egoistic typology.

Durkheim's anomic suicide, however, is described as resulting from a lack of moral regulation. Although egoistic and anomic suicide both emphasize high levels of individuality, Durkheim (1951[1897]) distinguishes these typologies by pointing out differences between integrative and moral bonds (Besnard 2005). While Durkheim (1951[1897], p. 170–171) describes egoistic

suicide as stemming from a lack of integrative bonds (characterized by weak attachments to others), anomic suicide results from an absence of normative regulation causing an individual's aspirations being "broadened beyond what he can endure" (Durkheim (1951[1897], p. 15). This form of suicide is less in line with Hirschi's notion of social attachment and more in line with Merton's view of maladaptive responses to anomie. In fact, Hirschi (1969, p. 124) proposes that Durkheim himself actually implied that anomic suicide was theoretically and empirically problematic.

Durkheim also suggests that one could be induced into delinquency because of excessive regulation and integration. He characterizes suicides resulting from exceedingly high level of integration as altruistic, and suicides resulting from extreme regulation as fatalistic. Because social control theory holds that the relationship between social control and delinquency is negative and linear, Hirschi (1969) would reject these typologies of deviance.

Durkheim and Merton: conceptualizations of anomie

Merton's (1938, 1968) theory of crime causation is influenced by Durkheim's (1984[1893], 1951[1897]) notion of anomie; however, the theorists differ in their conceptualization of the term. Durkheim introduces the concept of anomie to explain a transitory condition of weak, absent, or inconsistent normative regulation following rapid social change. Since Durkheim (1951[1897], p. 247) assumes that aspirations were innate and driven by self-interest and egoism, he posits that modern societies require social regulation to limit human drives and motivate pro-social behavior. Durkheim (1984[1893], p. 405) writes "...the only power which can serve to moderate individual egotism is the power of the group..." According to Durkheim, an absence of social regulation results in anomie, which was characterized by chaos, confusion, and pathological levels of crime (Tittle and Paternoster 2000). Merton pulled from Durkheim's notion of anomie and his general argument about the crime-producing consequences of anomie, but he alters the concept.

Although both theorists share the assumption that society is largely organized around a unified culture, Merton (1938, p. 672, 674; 1968, p. 175) argues that aspirations are culturally determined – not innate as suggested by Durkheim. Given Merton's (1938, p. 672, 679) belief, he focuses on socio-cultural sources of crime and uses the term "anomie" to describe a relatively stable disjuncture between culturally-defined goals (especially economic success) and regulated means of achieving the goals. Merton posits that an anomic condition occurs when (i) commonly held goals are overemphasized in relation to means of acquisition or (ii) goals are disseminated as being equally attainable to everyone although access to institutionalized means are unequally distributed. Thus, while Durkheim posits anomie resulting from a lack of society, Merton views anomie as existing because of society.

Still, Merton agrees with Durkheim's view that anomie is criminogenic. Both argue that anomic states cause a breakdown in normative ideals, which produces deviant responses. Both also

propose typologies to explain deviant responses to societal breakdown (see Durkheim 1951[1987]; Merton 1938). Merton (1938) specifically hypothesizes four deviant responses to anomic strain but ‘innovation’ is most closely associated with crime and reveals “inadequate socialization,” which results in an acceptance of goals but rejects normative means. Durkheim’s legacy continues in subsequent theories following the Mertonian tradition.

Cohen (1955) proposes a theory of status frustration in order to explain the formation of lower-class juvenile gangs in cities. Cohen agrees with Merton’s assertion that discrepancies between socially desired goals and differential opportunity to attain those goals produce criminal adaptations; however, he elaborates on two points. First, Cohen argues inner-city delinquent subcultures emerge as a collective resolution to this disjuncture. Second, Cohen recognizes goals beyond monetary gain, specifically focusing on young males’ desire for status.

Cohen’s (1955) theory of status frustration argues that individuals want to achieve social status, but boys reared in lower- and working-classes are denied legitimate ways of obtaining status. He links experiences in the educational system with the emergence of criminal gangs by arguing that educational institutions are marked by middle-class values, which stress deference to authority, acting in ways that suggest personability, renouncing self-indulgence, establishing long-term occupational goals, being involved in organized recreation, and valuing private property (Cohen 1955). Because working and lower-class boys are structurally positioned at a disadvantage, Cohen argues that they are not well-equipped to adhere to these middle-class standards of behaviors. As such, they often do poorly in school and find it difficult to achieve the respect and status that they desire. This failure causes problems of adjustment. In reaction to these adjustment problems, they share their frustration with one another and develop their own subculture, which opposes middle-class expectations, with an alternative status hierarchy (Cohen 1955, p. 121-122).

Durkheim (1995[1912]) argues that strong emotional connections and group boundaries result from extensive contact, common feelings, and unified attention. This argument is consistent with Cohen’s (1955) argument that subcultures form because proximity allows persons to share frustrations and create collective solutions. In fact, he notes that deviant subcultures may reveal “defects in organization” not an “absence of organization” (Cohen (1955, p. 33). Hence, gang members are highly cohesive but resist regulation from middle-class standards. In addition, like Durkheim, Cohen emphasizes the non-utilitarian form of crime. For example, Cohen (1955, p. 25–30) hypothesizes that stealing is done as an expressive response to middle-class standards, not for any utilitarian gain.

Durkheim and Agnew: conditioning effects of social support

The link between Durkheim and Agnew is diluted but nonetheless present. Elaborating on Merton’s work, Agnew (1985, 1992, 2006) specifies three social-psychological sources of strain: denial of goals and aspirations, actual or perceived loss of valued stimuli, and actual or

anticipated negative stimuli. Agnew hypothesizes that these strains can lead to negative emotions, which motivate individuals to crime as an adaptation to strain. However, criminal participation is conditioned by other factors, including the availability and use of coping techniques, which rely on social support and group integration (Agnew 2006).

Like Durkheim, Agnew sees modern societies as being marked with diversity. Both explain conformity by emphasizing the importance of interdependence in establishing pro-social cohesion in such diverse societies (see Agnew 2006; Durkheim 1984[1893]; 1951[1897]). Further, although Agnew does not employ the term “anomie” in his discussions of general strain theory, his theory implies a form of acute anomia whereby individuals feel deprived or discouraged and turn to crime as a way to resolve those negative emotions. Despite these similarities, Agnew’s (2006) framework does depart from Durkheim in that he suggests that the conditioning effects of social support are related to a rational fear of damaging social bonds (defined using Hirschi’s elements). As previously mentioned, Durkheim would have argued that reciprocity was due to emotional assurances, not rationality.

Marx’s influence: inequality and criminal outcomes

Marxist-inspired criminology emphasizes the criminogenic consequences of domination and subjugation, and such perspectives are often split into two broad classifications: critical criminology and conflict criminology. Critical criminology can be described as focusing on the crime-producing forces of capitalism, with critical criminologists positing that a capitalist political economy promotes a devaluation of humankind, which encourages crime. Conflict criminologists are better characterized as being concerned with stratification more generally (Taylor et al. 1973). Criminogenic inequalities are theorized to extend beyond capitalism. Thus, conflict criminologists argue that it is conflict among various groups that employ varying degrees of power that produces crime (Bohm 1982). This perspective often notes that hierarchies related to race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and/or sexuality are important factors skewing criminal definitions and the unequal application of law that favor the privileged in these hierarchies.

Some scholars suggest that the distinctions between “critical” and “conflict” theory are erroneous (e.g. Wagner 1963), and while it is true that all critical and conflict criminologists hold oppression and power inequality as crucial factors in understanding crime causation, there are differences in how each perspective discusses the emergence of conflict. Therefore, distinguishing critical and conflict criminology from one another continues to be an important part of the criminological discourse.

The below review is concerned with identifying etiological theories of crime that openly cite Marx’s work as influential. As such, I narrow my focus to (critical) Marxist and socialist criminology. It is important to acknowledge, however, that Marxian notions have in some way influenced a vast amount of criminological thought (e.g. Becker 1963; Blalock 1967; Chambliss

1975; Clinard and Yeager 1980; Reiman 2004; Rusche and Kirchheimer 1939; Spitzer 1975; Sutherland 1949; Turk 1969), but such a review of each work is beyond the scope of this paper.

Marx and Bonger: capitalism as criminogenic

Marx posits that full human potential can only be realized when people participate in productive work (Marx (1964[1844]; 1967[1867])). A capitalist economic structure, however, interrupts human potential by alienating people through capitalism's emphasis on competition and personal accumulation (Marx 1964 [1844]). Concentrating on Marx's argument that capitalism demoralizes workers, Bonger's (1969[1916]) theory proposes that capitalist organization produces crime through a decreased moral order; that is, capitalism's emphasis on competition and egoism creates criminal thoughts, which manifest in criminal behaviors. Because he roots crime in capitalist organization, Bonger (1969[1916], p. 200) suggests that all persons, regardless of social class, living under capitalism were more likely to engage in crime. He posits that capitalism's pursuit of profit encourages competition, which breeds deprivation and eventual insensitivity to others. This lack of compassion or demoralization results in greater propensities toward crime.

Despite Bonger's postulation that all persons living in a capitalist economic structure are more likely to participate in antisocial behavior, he recognizes that persons who are economically disadvantaged are more likely to be punished for criminal acts since advantaged persons have greater socio-political opportunities to justify or hide their antisocial behaviors. This latter argument reflects Marx's (1967[1867]) hypothesis that class struggle is a political struggle and his view that capitalists use the laws and the state to protect their own interests (Marx 1970[1859]).

Marx and Quinney: crime as domination and accommodation

In *Class, State, and Crime*, Quinney advocates for a Marxist criminology that challenges "traditional" criminology. Quinney (1977, p. 13) writes "[t]he social, political, and economic events of recent years... have forced the social theorist to new formulations about the nature of crisis in social order." In his theoretical construction, Quinney's Marxian influence is evident. He argues that crime manifests from unequal material conditions and proposes two general forms of crimes. Crimes of domination and repression are said to be used by the capitalist class (and the serving state) as a way to reproduce capital accumulation. Crimes of accommodation and resistance are theorized to be committed by all oppressed persons, but especially the workers in capitalist systems.

To explain corporate, political and organizational crime, Quinney draws on Marx's 1964 [1884]) argument that capitalist systems require continual accumulation. Quinney (1977, p. 44-52) suggests that elites' desire to retain power encourages crimes that perpetuate existing inequalities. Illustrating this point, he provides examples of how the ruling class use crimes of control (e.g., civil liberty violations), crimes of government (e.g., political assassination and warfare), and

crimes of economic domination (e.g., price-fixing, pollution) to maintain control over the means of production.

Quinney (1977) also discusses crime as a way to resist and accommodate the exploitation that is pervasive under capitalism. He postulates that in response to domination and exploitation, oppressed persons may display behaviors that are defined as criminal. In short, Quinney (1977) postulates this form of crime as a maladaptive response to the social and economic oppression that exists under capitalism. For this reason, he argues that these types of crimes are most often committed by oppressed or working-class persons. This latter argument reflects Marx's (1967 [1867]) notion of primitive rebellion, which views crime as a form of revolt brought about by oppressive economic conditions.

Marx and Colvin and Pauly: capitalism and family life

Like Quinney, Colvin and Pauly (1983) also develop a theory to "critique criminology." Drawing on Marx's (1967[1844]) declaration that material production influences social relations, Colvin and Pauly (1983) link demoralizing working conditions to coercive home environments. Their theory begins with the Marxist assumption that material production is the most significant human relation since all other associations depend on this condition. Following, they hypothesize that one's relationship to the means of production affects parental practices and familial interactions, which shapes the likelihood of criminal offending. Specifically, Colvin and Pauly theorize that a person's class position is inversely related to their exposure to intimidating work practices, and following Kohn (1976, 1977), they posit that workplace encounters inform parenting practices. As such, employees who are subjected to coercive work practices are expected to employ similar practices at home, weakening the parent-child bond and encouraging criminal involvement. Although not subject to many empirical examinations, Colvin and Pauly's approach clearly delineates the interconnectedness of material and social reproduction.

Marx and feminist criminology: capitalism and patriarchy

It could be argued that most feminist criminology is at least obliquely influenced by Marx's critical perspective, but criminologists using a Marxist feminist and socialist feminist perspective clearly combine elements of Marxism and feminism. Both perspectives acknowledge women's oppression as a result of their subordinate class position; thus like the Marxian-inspired theories reviewed above, crime is understood to originate from socio-economic relations (Radosh 1990). However, there are differences between the two perspectives. While Marxist feminist criminologists view capitalism and class oppression, which is sustained by sexism, as a root cause of crime, socialist feminist criminologists view class and gender oppression as mutually and equally criminogenic (Burgess-Proctor 2006).

Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1983) develop a Marxist feminist criminological approach to studying rape. They argue that the act of and responses to rape are a result of the capitalist mode of production. Specifically, they theorize that rape occurs because of the emergence of gender

inequality, which underscores and reinforces capitalism's emphasis on property, exploitation, and dominance. Schwendinger and Schwendinger (1983), for example, discuss how the development of paid labor created a false dichotomy between public and private life. Women were largely consigned to the private, household realm, and capitalist structuring necessitated household labor be unpaid, making women's labor largely devalued if not invisible. Such devaluation encourages male dominance, which can set the stage for a sexual fetishism of violence (Schwendinger and Schwendinger 1983: 199). Although their work concentrates on sexualized violence, their writings suggest that the capitalist political economy can lead to other forms of violence as well.

Messerschmidt (1986) provides one of the first criminological theories using a socialist feminist framework. While Messerschmidt is clearly influenced by Marxist notions of capitalism and class struggles, he also criticizes Marx for not recognizing the significance of gender hierarchies. In developing his theory, Messerschmidt (1986) relies on Quinney's (1977) elaboration that capitalism is crime-producing, but adds that crime causation cannot be effectively understood without also accounting for the unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt 1986:8). Thus, Messerschmidt (1986, 1993) reiterates Marx's position that capitalism is exploitive but postulates that crime is the result of patriarchal capitalism.

Conclusion

Durkheim and Marx's work is consistently relevant to the development of criminological thought. Durkheim's concepts about the integrative and regulative effects of solidarity on crime are important components of control and strain models, and Marx's emphasis on inequality within the capitalist system assists criminologists in theorizing about the causes of crime in varying economic environments and social groups. Although it may be easy to polarize Durkheimian and Marxist paradigms (i.e., functionalism v. conflict), such polarization is practically unnecessary.

Both Durkheim and Marx highlight the effects of solidity, inequality, and morality; thus, contemporary criminologists may benefit from reconsidering how these processes interrelate and generate antisocial behaviors. While some scholars argue that conflicting assumptions may make theoretical integration precarious (Hirschi 1979; Uggen 1993), others demonstrate that such integration is necessary to account for the complex causes of crime (e.g., Braithwaite 1989; Elliott et al. 1985; Greenberg 1977).

Recent theorizing appears promising. Tittle's (1995, 2004) control balance theory posits social controls as acting as a restraint and motivator toward deviance in order to acknowledge control as having both pro- and anti-social consequences. Additionally, differential coercion/social support theory hypothesizes that coercion, which is positively related to crime, and social support, which is negatively related to crime, collectively explain crime (Colvin et al. 2000).

Both of these theories recognize the complexity of criminal etiology, which is a necessary in contemporary theoretical constructions.

Short Biography

Cindy Brooks Dollar is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the Department of Sociology. Her research and interests focus on inequality, crime, and social control. Her work has previously published in the Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Deviant Behavior, Sociological Quarterly, Sociological Forum, and several interdisciplinary journals.

Note

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¹ Although Marx was a political economist, he is frequently cited as one of the influential contributors to sociological and criminological scholarship. Although Fredrick Engels commonly wrote with Marx, the Marx-inspired criminologists reviewed in this manuscript explicitly cite Marx as being significant in their theory construction. For example, Quinney (1975, p. 192) states “I am suggesting a critical philosophy for understanding the legal order. That philosophy is based on a critical development of a Marxist thought... Only a Marxist critique allows us to break out of the ideology and conditions of the age.” Other criminologists have also argued that Marx’s work provides a valuable basis for criminological theory (e.g., Chambliss 1975; Taylor et al. 1973, 1975).

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