THE CONTRIBUTION OF CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY TO OUR UNDERSTANDING
OF CRIME IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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1.0 Introduction

Contemporary criminology exists in a rapidly dynamic world. The pace and profundity of changes in the contemporary world is ricocheted in the swiftly changing character of criminology subject matter, policies on crime, crime rates, policing practices, prevention and punishment. Contemporary criminology is also informed by social life and social control, circulation of goods and persons, cities’ spatial ecology, organisation of families, power yielded by state authorities and the nature of work and labour markets (Garland & Sparks 2000).

Political, social and economic changes pose significant challenges to the criminology discipline. Reformation of social and fiscal relations, the volatility of social processes, pace of technological transformations coupled with cultural heterogeneity in modern society creates intellectual challenges to criminology which cannot be overlooked. These concerns are a significant component of contemporary social thought and public policy and should therefore be approached in order to keep with the canons of criminology that is clarity, perspicacity and relevance (Garland & Sparks 2000). In line with this argument, this essay aims to establish the contribution of critical criminology to our understanding of crime in contemporary society.

1.1 Critical Criminology

Critical criminology ignores the normal notions of crime. Critical criminology perceives crime as resulting from social conflict and economic rivalry. Critical criminology further aims to determine the societal economic structures which control all people. Critical criminology discards the view that laws are developed to uphold tranquil and a fair society, and that criminal offenders are malevolent individuals out to tread on others’ rights. Critical criminology considers multiple variables including working conditions, foreign policy and imperialism among others (DeKeseredy 2010). The discipline is informed by Marxist criminology which predominantly
argued that crime emanates from the capitalist system. According to Marxist criminology, crime elimination involves elimination of problematic situations in the society which trigger the criminalization process. Critical criminology thus incorporates class struggles and inequalities in distribution of power and wealth as a source of social conflict and crime (Tayrol, Walton & Young 2013). Social thinkers maintain that post-industrial and capitalist economic systems and societies create the haves and have not’s leading to economic competitiveness and conflicts which destabilise social groups and institutions (DeKeseredy 2010). Critical criminologists view crime as a political concept intended to protect power and position held by the upper class at the expense of the poor. Criminals are viewed as creations of the society and its economic systems creating the need to eliminate the social conditions which endorse crime (Taylor et al. 2013).

1.2 Critical Criminology and Crime in Modern Society

Though conditions have improved over the years since conceptualisation of critical criminology, the concept still remains relevant to the modern day society. Critical criminology informs modern understanding of crime in various concepts including left realism, peace-making theory and post-modernism. Left realists argued that crime results from relative deprivation created by social conditions whereby the poor seek to acquire the benefits of capitalist systems through unorthodox means (Hopkins Burke 2005). Through the peace-making theory, critical criminology emphasises the need for restorative justice and discarding of punitive methods in the justice systems (Barnes 2007). This is especially important in an age where justice systems should serve to rehabilitate offenders and prepare them for integration into the society rather than punish them. Modern justice systems have to some extent adopted this viewpoint since offenders are provided with important technical skills for assisting them to contribute to the society. The concept of postmodernism informs understanding of crime in modern society by emphasising the
need for deconstruction of conventional assumptions and perceptions about crime and the need to establish the contextual factors leading to crime in modern society (Einstadter & Henry 2006).

1.2.1 Left Realism

The concept of left realism was conceptualised and propagated by Jock Young and John Lea in 1986 in a publication titled “What is To Be Done about Law and Order”. The premise of left realism was the arguments that the common and dominant criminology perspectives of the time were based on Marxist theories and were viewed as irrelevant in accordance to the political ethos set by Margaret Thatcher (Jones 2001). Left realism viewed crime as a product of social conditions and relative deprivation. According to the concept, criminals are therefore conscious of their actions as they are properly socialised and have the rational choice of choosing to or not to offend. Nevertheless, criminals view crime as a means of resolving some or all of their particular challenges. Left realists argue that the problems which criminals try to resolve results from the capitalist ideology which created egalitarian notions and placed individuals in particular positions in the social hierarchy. DeKeseredy (2010) in emphasis of this point of view argued that, left realism views crime as a product of relative deprivation created by a capitalist system. The author emphasised that economic segregation and poverty among individuals in a society of plenty leads to discontent and crime. Hopkins Burke (2005) emphasised that deprived individuals become desirous of the benefits accrued by others. This results into view of criminal enterprise as a means of rectifying the inequality and accessing the benefits provided by the capitalist system. DeKeseredy (2010) calls for pragmatic and community based crime prevention and control measures coupled with political solutions to social inequalities.
1.2.2 Peacemaking Theory

The theory was developed by Harold Pepinsky and Richard Quinney in a publication titled *Peacemaking* in 1991. The theory draws from peacemaking conventions including religious, humanistic, critical and feminist traditions. Using the American justice system as an example, the authors argued that the system contributed to the continuance of crime, violence and oppression and lack of accountancy on how the general social system leads to crime (Barnes 2007). The theory contends that crime is correlated with suffering. Therefore, to end crime, we must also end all forms of suffering including poverty, racism, harassment, sexism and domestic abuse. The theory further contends that states through repressive social control policies such as the death penalty, criminalisation of petty offenses and lengthy prison sentences contribute to crime. Peacemaking criminology calls for promotion of social equity and shift from criminal justice to restorative justice (Barnes 2007). Peacemaking seeks conflict mediation, assisting of crime victims and reintegration of criminals into the society. This can only be achieved through social justice. DeKeseredy (2010) accentuated the argument that punitive control measures are counterproductive and calls for adoption of humanistic conflict resolution and mediation strategies towards crime prevention and control. The author also calls for states to revaluate punishments and criminal control measures which encourage rather than discourage crime.

1.2.3 Postmodernism

Postmodernism focuses on constitution of knowledge, the importance of language and signs and the capability of metaphors and concepts to capture the reality and establish the context and conditions for crime occurrence. Postmodernism is primarily informed by three elements, that is; crime is imposition of one’s will on others, individuals construct harms to others as a means of expressing power and control in the process dehumanising others and need to provide law
definers with liberating life narratives. Einstadter and Henry (2006) emphasised that postmodernism tries to question claims of truth, knowledge, progress and power in totality.

Postmodernists believe that knowledge is informed by claims to truth and no truth is superior to the other. Postmodernism calls for the deconstruction and construction of historical perspectives through the analysis of texts towards unearthing the implicit assumptions and values. In critical criminology this is achieved through studies on conventional knowledge areas for instance traditional criminology and disputing the exclusionary and flawed power structures used in crime control. Further postmodernists call for politically framed systems where humans are the central focus and socially constructed roles which are constantly remade and constructed (Einstadter & Henry 2006).

1.3 Conclusion

High modernity has led to relative deprivation resulting in high crime rates. Rise in living standards in the modern society has not been followed by a diminution in the gap between the rich and the poor. In contrast, this gap has widened. The global competitive capitalist economy rewards successful individuals astronomically. Marketization accentuates individual success thereby amplifying feeling of deprivation among the less successful leading to crime. This is emphasised by the left realism concept which views relative deprivation and social conditions as the main source of crime. From this understanding of critical criminology, policy makers in the modern society should be able to adopt policies which minimise competition and conflict. Policy makers should further come up with policies for reducing poverty levels and minimising the gap between the rich and the poor. Critical criminology through peacemaking theory informs adoption of restorative justice through nonviolent humanistic and non-punitive methods, reducing harsh punishments and seeking means of integrating criminals back to the society. This
has greatly influenced adoption of rehabilitative strategies within justice systems such as providing offenders with technical skills and basic education. These strategies together with programs and practices aimed at addressing the needs of offenders, ensuring offenders remain accountable and involvement of both offenders and criminals facilitate the healing process towards restoration of social harmony. Postmodernism informs understanding of criminal activities by championing adoption of novel perspectives towards crime and institutionalisation of dynamic political and social structures and systems to minimise crime. This is achieved through deconstruction of conventional viewpoints towards crime and criminal systems.
References


Garland, D & Sparks, R 2000, “Criminology, social theory and the challenge of our times”, British Journal of Criminology, 40, 189-204.

