

Radical Criminology: Theoretical Origins.

One of the first things to note and / or understand is that "Marxism", as a theoretical perspective, involves a number of different variants (or "ways of seeing" the social world). In this respect, although we often tend to talk about Marxism as if there were only one kind (just as we tend to talk about other sociological perspectives - such as Functionalism - as if it only involved one basic set of ideas), it is evident that Marxism, as a school of thought, has been interpreted in a number of different ways by various writers.

However, just as it's important to realise that any sociological perspective will involve writers who may interpret the social world in small, but important ways, it's also important not to go too far in the other direction and see the work of any writer as being "complete unto itself" (that is, to treat the work of individual sociologists almost as "perspectives" in their own right).

Writers who call themselves Marxists do have a number of things in common and, whilst it's important not to over-estimate this "Communality of ideas", it's also important to recognise that what they share is a broad set of basic assumptions about both the nature of the social world and how to study that world.

Having noted the above, a brief discussion of the basic theoretical tradition that has informed much Radical Criminology will be useful for a number of reasons:

1. Firstly, because it will help you to recognise a couple of basic variations in Marxist thought.
2. Secondly, the next Study Pack in this series concentrates on the work of Marxist Conflict theorists who have criticised Radical Criminology from another Marxist perspective ("New Left Realism"). It will, therefore, be instructive to look-at and understand the theoretical traditions that each draws upon in order to understand both the differences in interpretation involved and, most importantly, the basis of the "New Left Realist" rejection of Radical Criminology on theoretical - as opposed to ideological - grounds.
3. Finally, by understanding some of the theoretical assumptions of Radical Criminology it should make it easier for you to carry-out an evaluation of this particular brand of Marxist Conflict theory.

What I want to do in the following couple of pages is:

- a. Outline some of the basic ideas involved in the theoretical tradition upon which Radical Criminology is based.
- b. Evaluate these ideas in relation to criticisms put-forward by Marxists working within a rather different theoretical tradition (if this all sounds a bit complicated, things should become a bit clearer as we start to look at the above ideas in more detail).

As I've previously said, an overall evaluation of Radical Criminology will be included at the end of these Notes

Initially, the most important idea to note is that Radical Criminology was / is based upon the theoretical tradition of a variant of Marxism which we can term "Instrumental Marxism".

If you are particularly interested in looking at this tradition in more depth, Ralph Milliband's book "The State In Capitalist Society" is a good example here.

The basic idea to understand in this respect is that "Instrumental Marxists" argue that the operation of all social institutions (for example, work, family, education, legal systems and so forth) and specific agencies of social control (the police, mass media and the like) can be linked - either directly or indirectly - to the needs, purposes and basic interests of a Capitalist "ruling class".

In this respect, all institutions in our society are seen to "function" in a more-or-less seamless way to promote the interests of a ruling class.

Whilst it's important to note that Instrumental Marxists do not use the concept of "function" in the same way as Functionalist sociologists, the idea that social institutions somehow function in the interests of a ruling class (rather than "society as a whole") has been criticised - as we shall see in a moment - by other Marxists.

In some ways, therefore, the way in which social institutions are organised and operate can be seen as a kind of "giant conspiracy" that exists to ensure that the members of a ruling class always "come out on top" whenever conflict occurs in society. Whilst the Instrumental Marxist position is a bit more sophisticated than this, the idea of a "hidden, unstated, conspiracy" is quite useful as a way of sensitising you to the basic theoretical impetus of the perspective (just as long as you don't go overboard with it and start arguing that everything that happens in our society is the result of some "secret conspiracy / agreement" between members of the ruling class to keep their powerful, privileged, positions...).

The basis of the idea that institutions in society somehow exist to "serve the interests of a ruling class" can be seen in two main things:

1. Firstly, the idea of a "dominant ideology" (to which all other "ways of seeing and interpreting" the social world are subservient) which allows a ruling class to insinuate its ideas and interests into the consciousness of people through such things as the socialisation process, peoples "experiences" in society (education, work and so forth) and the like.

This "dominant ideology" represents a kind of "theoretical justification" not just of the Capitalist system (that it is superior to all other forms of economic organisation), but also of such things as inequality, poverty, unemployment, personal wealth and so forth.

2. Secondly, the interlocking relationships between the members of various elite groups in society. For example, an economic elite may have direct links with a political elite through the common membership of schools ("the old school tie"), clubs and so forth. In this respect, two ideas are stressed:

- a. That, on a personal level, members of a ruling class share a similar social background. In this respect, they will have been socialised to understand their privileged, powerful, position (and so understand their common basic interest in the maintenance of their privileged position).

- b. That, on an institutional level, politicians, for example, frequently act as directors of companies. High ranking civil servants may also join the boards of major

corporations (after they "retire" perhaps) as "advisers", just as senior military figures may act as "advisers" to government...

In the above respect, it is not difficult to find examples of the way in which influential members of economic and political institutions are inter-locked (even a cursory glance through a "business directory" will furnish you with examples).

As an exercise, try looking through something like "Kelly's Business Directory" in the library to see if you can identify examples of such things as:

Individuals who hold multiple directorships.

Prominent politicians who are directors of major companies.

An obvious recent example in the above respect is that of Nigel Lawson who resigned from his job as both a Member of Parliament and Chancellor of the Exchequer to take -up a position as "adviser" to Barclays Bank. In fact, if you look at the background interests of almost any Conservative MP, you are likely to find that they are personally involved as directors of many different major companies.

It should, of course, be noted that - in the interests of objectivity, value-freedom and the all-round undesirability of being sued for libel - there is nothing "improper" in this arrangement. Clearly, no MP would be recruited by a company simply to buy influence or, heaven-forbid that you should think any such thing, encourage the government to introduce legislation favourable to sectional business interests. In addition, the fact that many businesses / individuals contribute vast sums of money to the Conservative Party should in no way be construed as a sordid attempt to buy privileges or preferential treatment (and certainly not a Knighthood or Peerage).

In many ways, the theoretical position outlined up is similar to Functionalist forms of theoretical analysis, the main differences being that:

- a. Society is seen to "function" in terms of the general interests of a ruling class rather than "everyone".
- b. The potential for class conflict (and other forms of conflict of course) is always present - a ruling class has to continually act to reproduce its domination of other classes in society.

As I've noted above, this form of Marxism has been criticised "internally" by other Marxists and it would be useful to draw your attention to a number of these criticisms concerning the general theoretical background to Radical Criminology.

1. Firstly, it tends to be argued that, in many ways, "Instrumental Marxism" is similar theoretically, to Functionalist forms of analysis (hence the somewhat disparaging dismissal of Radical Criminology as "Left Functionalism"), the main differences being:
 - a. That society "functions" in terms of the general interests of a ruling class rather than "society as a whole".
 - b. The potential for conflict is always present (but is continually negated / neutralised by the power of a ruling class).

2. Contemporary Marxists (in particular Nicos Poulantzas) have argued that the relationship between a ruling class and other social classes is rather more complex than Instrumental Marxists would have us believe. In particular they tend to note that:

a. Conflicts occur within a ruling class (Poulantzas uses the idea of "class fractions" to represent the idea that different sections of a ruling class may have quite different sectional interests (for example, Industrial Capitalists and Finance (Banking) Capitalists).

b. The working-class is a potentially powerful class in society (especially when it is politically organised in some way). In this respect, conflict between Capital and Labour has resulted in real improvements in the overall condition of the working class. Concessions from a ruling class have been fought-for and won...

For example, in relation to Britain, the idea that such things as the Welfare State, improvements in living standards amongst the working class and so forth are somehow "in the interests of the ruling class" is criticised on the basis that the working class had to fight for these improvements - they resulted from class conflict.

Some of these ideas have been picked-up and elaborated by New Left Realist writers (a perspective we will cover in greater detail in the Study Pack on "The New Realism").

3. Marxists such as Poulantzas (who tend to be called "Structuralist Marxists" because of the primary emphasis they place upon structural factors / concepts) have argued that the ruling class is not particularly cohesive enough to know precisely where its real interests lie.

4. Like Functionalist forms of argument, Instrumental Marxism can be criticised for its teleological tendencies (in simple terms, the idea that we can somehow explain the past by reference to the present - a form of "predicting the past").

Thus, Radical Criminologists have been accused of allowing their theoretical perspective to intrude into their interpretation of past forms of behaviour (youth sub-cultures, for example, as being indicative of some form of symbolic resistance to bourgeois hegemony - whether or this is the case, it's highly unlikely that the members of such sub-cultures would see the reasons for their behaviour in such terms).

The problem here is that any interpretation you care to make about the past can be neatly fitted into your current theoretical position - and you only choose those interpretations that fit...

5. Following from the above is the charge that Instrumental Marxism (and by extension, Radical Criminology) is ahistorical. That is, historical developments are understood not in the context in which they arise but only through extensive re-interpretation "after the event". Thus, if you start from the assumption that a ruling class has clearly-defined interests, any historical development can be interpreted to "fit" this idea. Thus:

Laws restricting business freedom can be interpreted as an attempt to deflect criticism from a ruling class by portraying its nastier manifestations as the activities of a few deviant individuals.

In this respect, historical conflicts are simply re-interpreted to "fit" the assumptions one uses in order to "explain" them.

To conclude this Study Pack, it is evident that the distinction between varieties of Marxism is a complex one and the following reading from Bilton et al attempts to show how you can distinguish between them in relation to the way in which a Capitalist ruling class is able to translate its undoubted economic power into political and ideological power.

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