Theories and explanations of Crime and Deviancy: Neo-Marxism

As we have seen, one of the greatest criticisms of the Marxist approach to crime and deviance is that it is, to a certain extent, over-deterministic. That is, Marxists all see individual behaviour as the inevitable product of large-scale structural forces in society such as economic systems. They leave little room in their analysis for the individual, and what the individual does, says, thinks, perceives and interprets through their interaction with others. The individual is seen essentially as a robot acting out his or her destiny as dictated by large-scale social forces, not as a thinking, conscious being making his or her own choices. Such theories are often placed under the all-encompassing heading of ‘Positivism’.

Positivism
Conventional Marxist analyses are positivist, as they view every action and thought as the product of relations of production within the capitalist economic system.

Positivist analyses, such as Marxism, have consistently been criticised for ignoring the role of individual action and choice as part of the explanation of deviant or criminal behaviour. More recently, some Marxist writers have attempted to deflect this criticism by developing Marxist analysis to the extent that it makes room for the individual within its theoretical framework. This ‘new’ perspective has often been called ‘neo-Marxism’.

Neo-Marxism
Neo-Marxist writers agree to an extent with conventional Marxist writers in the sense that they see capitalist society as fundamentally based on unequal, capitalist relations of production that give rise to class conflict. However, they reject the direct link that conventional Marxists make between these competitive relations of production and the causes of crime / deviance. That is, they don’t agree that crime and deviance are simply the result of competition for money and private property in capitalist society. They believe that individual action and choice have an important part to play as well.

Taylor, Walton and Young: The ‘New Criminology’
The New Criminology is an approach developed by three neo-Marxist writers. In 1973, Taylor, Walton and Young published their study entitled ‘The New Criminology’. They agreed that much crime is caused by the material inequalities that are inevitable in capitalist
societies. They were critical, however, of the conventional deterministic Marxist argument that all crime was caused by such economic factors in capitalist society. Criminal and deviant behaviour is, they claimed, a choice, not simply a destiny predetermined by economic forces that are beyond our control. How does this improve upon traditional Marxist explanations of crime?

**The New Criminology: A summary**

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<th>• Taylor, Walton and Young (1973) – <em>The New Criminology</em> fused interactionism and Marxism.</th>
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<td>• They believe that a Marxist approach must be taken that looks at the broader capitalist society that helps generate crime and the police’s response to it.</td>
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<td>• They use the interactionist approach to look at how the behaviour of victim, offender, media and the C.J.S. interact to influence how the situation develops.</td>
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<td>• Taylor et al criticise Marx himself of producing an economically deterministic theory.</td>
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<td>• They reject the idea that crime is a result of labelling, of the formation of subcultures or of poverty.</td>
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<td>• <strong>Instead, they argue that crimes are conscious acts committed with the intention of altering the inequality created by capitalism.</strong> What do you think of this idea?</td>
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| • This approach made no attempt to be unbiased; they wanted to look critically at how the media, C.J.S., and police serve the needs of the ruling class. |
| • They attempt to look at how the criminal mistakenly expresses their anger through crime, rather than politics. |
| • They advocate socialism, not Marxism. |
| • Hall (1978) used this criminological framework. |

Criminals such as ideological terrorists (such as the IRA in Ireland, or the PLO in Palestine) show us that criminal behaviour is often a highly conscious and deliberate act; a choice, not an unconscious response to structural forces such as exclusion or poverty.

In allowing a place for individual action and choice in their analysis, Taylor, Walton and Young made an important break with conventional
(deterministic) Marxism, and attempted to blend the structural approach of Marxism with the more individually-focused approach of *Interactionism*.

**Does The New Criminology overcome the main problems of Marxism?**

**Paul Gilroy: Conscious deviance among ethnic minority groups**

Paul Gilroy, another neo-Marxist writer in the 1980’s studied deviant and criminal behaviour among ethnic minority groups. He suggested that crimes committed by ethnic minorities are frequently conscious and deliberate acts, not just unconscious reactions caused by structural or economic forces. Ethnic minority crime (e.g. riots in Brixton and Los Angeles) is often a *conscious* and organised response to the oppression and racism that minorities experience. Gilroy used the example of the Rastafarians, who believe (he claims) that white society is corrupt and oppressive, and wish to replace it with their own image of society. This represents a *conscious choice* to resort to deviant norms / goals / means etc. It isn’t just a blind reaction to the guiding but invisible hand of economic forces.

Neo-Marxist analyses of crime and deviance represent an important attempt by some Marxist writers to escape the criticism of economic determinism that is often made of them.

**Recent Marxist Theories of Subculture, Crime and Deviance**

In addition to the work of the New Criminologists and Paul Gilroy, it is worth acknowledging the work of other recent writers who have been influenced by Marxist traditions, and have done much to bring conventional Marxist analyses ‘up to date’.

**Neo-Marxist Analyses of Subcultures**

Such analyses are founded on the traditional Marxist belief that crime and deviance are the products of a capitalist society riddled with conflict. They also focus on the role of institutions of ideological control such as the school and the media. Such institutions, it is claimed, act as agents of social control by establishing ideological domination (‘hegemony’) over society through
promoting the values of the capitalist ruling class. Most people accept these values as they can see no advantage in going against the grain and following different, deviant values. For young, working class people, however, there is nothing to lose; they face harder problems than most other people do in terms, for example, of job prospects. In response to such a bleak future, young working class people start to form their own subcultures based around a resistance to capitalist values.

Perhaps the most important neo-Marxist theorist of subcultures is Phil Cohen. He argues that working class youth subcultures actively and consciously reject capitalist values in response to what they see as their unfairly deprived position. They actively show disdain for the dominant values of society, through their style of clothes and other forms of behaviour. Their resistance, for Cohen, is an act of class struggle, but it is not simply a blind, reflex reaction to the inequalities of capitalist society. It is a conscious move; Cohen highlighted the subcultures of ‘Mods’ and skinheads in 1960’s London to show how such things as clothing and hairstyle can represent conscious rejections of capitalist values and culture. The importance of Cohen’s work (and the work of other Neo-Marxists) is that it attempts to remove the excessive structural determinism of conventional Marxist analyses. Neo-Marxism allows room for individual action and choice within its analysis; it doesn’t simply see working class crime as the automatic end product of the economic forces and inequalities of capitalist society (although it does use this as a starting point).

**Jock Young and ‘Left Realism’**

The work of Jock Young (1980’s), often referred to as ‘Left Realism’ is also inspired by conventional Marxist analysis, but again tries to break away from its economic determinism, and again tries to identify the role of individual action in the causes of working class crime and deviance. Young, like Phil Cohen, directs attention away from white collar and corporate crime and focuses on the causes of working class crime. And like Cohen, he claims that working class youth subcultures form as a conscious response to what working class youths see as their unfairly deprived position in society (no real opportunities to succeed). Their response is to turn to crime and deviance as they have no other channel through which to express their discontent; working class adults do at least have trade unions and strikes through which to voice their resistance.

Thus Left Realism owes much to conventional Marxist analysis as it sees working class crime to a large extent as the result of working class deprivation. However, it brings Marxism ‘up to date’ by emphasising the role of conscious individual action as part of the cause and nature of working class crime.

**Criticisms of neo-Marxism**
• Traditional Marxists (Hirst, 1975) argued that New Criminology strayed too far from Marxism.
• Some, including Rock (1988) believes it gives too much of a romantic view of criminals.
• No mention of patriarchy.
• No one has been able to adopt the methodology.

**Evaluation of neo-Marxism**
• Critical criminology has forced sociologists to look at the wider social, economic and political factors.
• It offered a new, different approach to how crime is shaped by individual action within an unfair criminal justice system.
• It gave rise to Radical Criminology and some feminist sociology by challenging the status quo of the time.
• However, it provides few useful answers.