

CHAPTER 11

Integrating Culture, Media, and Gender Studies: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Crime Production

OVERVIEW

This chapter analyzes crime from a cultural studies standpoint that tells the story of crime in terms of capitalist political economy and the contextualization of life histories/identity formation. An understanding of the culture of late capitalism requires an understanding of electronic mass media, which shape political consciousness and identity. These are increasingly about 'cybernetic rites of sign work' that blur first hand experience with electronically mediated collective social representations that create premodeled (ideologically laden) images. Late capitalism is also characterized by increasing global capital and a kaleidoscope of consumer choices and consumerism that are so tied to identity as to encourage its pursuit through illegitimate means by both the rich and poor.

Race, class and gender are powerful aspects of the context within which identities are shaped. An understanding of oppression and inequality are thus important projects, though experiences can vary dramatically within an ethnic category by gender (which can be seen with the research on gangs). To further contextualize criminals, Barak has criminals talk about crime not to create a criminal profile but as an ethnographic exercise to show that crime is about: establishing ego identity, gratifying emotional and material desires, saving face, controlling threats to psychic self-esteem and protecting themselves from vulnerabilities. The final section discusses 'criminological indicators' for offenders and unhealthy social ecologies.

* The Instructor's Manual for *Integrating Criminologies* is available as a downloadable Adobe .pdf file by chapter or in complete form through <http://paulsjusticepage.com/IntegratingCrim/index.htm>. The author's website is <http://greggbarak.com>. The website for Amazon.com has additional information about the book, and the [publisher's website accepts requests for academic desk copies](#).

OUTLINE

I Introduction

- A. Cultural studies interested in politics of difference and identity, dealing with plurality and diversity in world
- B. Not 'value neutral' but side with the oppressed, marginalized and invisible
- C. Examine crime in probabilistic terms related to individual biography/identity and social context (political economy, individualism, consumption, symbolic self-esteem, racism)
- D. Look at narrative themes, symbols, and images (textuality)
- E. Ideology: conceptual framework we use to make sense of social existence; allow positions of identification and knowledge from which to utter 'truths'

II Mass Communications and New World Cybernetics

- A. Mills: communications stands between consciousness (identity) and existence; changes in communication change our social experience and self
- B. 'Cybernetic rites of sign work' involve rituals of collective social representation that are symbols and ideology blurring the boundary between first hand and electronically mediated experiences
 - 1. Premodeled images of crime: black men on drugs, but no way to put into play collective memories of white male capitalist violence
- C. Cybernetics is the study of command, control and communications systems

III Change in Late Modernity: Crime and the Culture of Consumption

- A. Late 20th Century, crime and social control increasingly tied to internationalization and globalization of capital that has a homogenizing effect (such as the development of malls that look the same everywhere)
 - 1. Multinational corporations seek to maximize profits and make decisions without regard for the needs or policies of states/localities
 - 2. Downsizing of manufacturing industry or development of commercial area affect patterns of crime
- B. Cities are kaleidoscope of consumer choices that offer self identity to those with the means to consume; others search for same opportunity through deviant means
- C. Globalization of decontextualized consumer choices undermines traditional community normative values

- D. Braithwait: inequality in advanced capitalism will produce high rates of white collar and street crime
- E. Importance of consumer culture through strain/anomie theory because ends overemphasized relative to means for both rich and poor (Messner and Rosenfeld)
 - 1. Cooperative bonds weakened and people will turn to illegitimate means to keep status/consumption when necessary

IV Variability and the Intersection of Race, Gender and Class

- A. Problem of complex interactive effects of race, class and sex that neither quantitative nor qualitative theory can adequately articulate
- B. Four accounts for differences in criminality
 - 1. Hereditary traits (basically discounted)
 - 2. Socialization practices (Sutherland's differential association)
 - 3. Structural opportunities (Cloward and Ohlin)
 - 4. Societal reaction (biases in formal and informal systems of control)
- C. Integrative-constitutive perspective
 - 1. Appreciate that whites also have race and men have gender, so all are part of historically created system that finds structural form in interconnected social institutions
 - 2. Also appreciate that each category needs to be taken on its own terms with awareness of cultural hegemony
 - 3. Incorporate external processes and internal perceptions of oppression
- D. Gangs
 - 1. 'Gang' seems to be a code word for 'black', but they are multicultural and include both sexes
 - 2. Gang meets different needs and has different social reality for boys and girls even of the same ethnic group
 - 3. Gangs provide social outlet, relief from boredom and protection
- E. Class
 - 1. Inequality growing, social mobility declining for many, and downward mobility is a reality for many
 - 2. Trends suggest further illegalities and future without stability or consensus

V Criminals on Crime: Controlling their Vulnerability

- A. Examine views and world of criminals, who (like non-criminals) defend their existence, fight for integrity and establish ego identity
 - 1. Themes have to do with saving face and controlling (real or imagined) threats to psychic states of well-being
- B. Working class property offenders

1. Rational choice theory problematic because offenders gave little thought to arrest
 2. Thought about money and consumer purchases
- C. White Collar Offenders
1. Offenders denied criminal intent and did not assimilate criminal identities; self concepts validated through conventional occupational roles
 2. Resist 'criminal' label and condemn the condemners
- D. Sexual-Homicide Offenders
1. Adaptive behavior both compulsive-determined and rationally calculated
 2. Violence from challenge to grandiose self-assessment
- E. Battering
1. Emotional self-alienation
 2. Externalization of blame for inner anguish
 3. Roles, attachments and history of violence in the home
- F. Gangbanging
1. Importance of 'standing ground'
 2. "don't have nothin' to live for no more"

VI An Inventory of Criminological Indicators

- A. Not profiles of offenders, but manifestations of problems associated with the constitutive nature of crime production
1. Physicality (biochemical conditions)
 2. Temperament (personality types)
 3. Cognition (analytical abilities)
 4. Ego/identity (psychic development)
 5. Familiarity (early socialization)
 6. Gender (sexism)
 7. Race/Ethnicity (discrimination)
 8. Class (inequality)
 9. Resources/services (distribution)
 10. Social Ecology (environmentalism)
- B. Policies of non-repressive crime prevention take into account offenders as well as unhealthy social ecologies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1] Introduction to cultural studies and its methodology
- 2] Overview of late capitalism with emphasis on mass media/cybernetics and the importance of consumerism

3] Review of inequality with attention to race, class, gender

4] Discuss criminal ethnography and the emotional and material desires potentially satisfied by crime

IDEAS FOR LECTURES & DISCUSSION

Because the cultural studies perspective is a rich field, many topics of discussion present themselves. The first would be a general study of late capitalism and its social structure. *Crime and the American Dream* is a good theme from which to bring up many issues and build on discussions of earlier chapters. Especially important is the notion of consumer culture and materialism in an increasingly stratified and unequal social system. Other aspects of late capitalism include the role mechanization plays in eliminating jobs, with the attendant conflict between encouraging consumption and eliminating people from the paid labor pool. The Marxist analysis suggests that the criminal justice system controls the surplus population – those denied employment – which is consistent with recent trends in incarceration.

Meanwhile, even those who have vast accumulations of wealth commit illegal actions to acquire even more because there is no point at which one 'has enough'. A review of corporate crime, especially some of the Savings and Loan crooks would go a long way to showing how even people who have hundreds of millions of dollars – more than the lifetime earnings of the entire class – still wanted more. Such money goes for 'needs' like docks made of exotic hardwoods for 120 foot yachts with marble fireplaces.

Cybernetics is the study of what the military calls C3I – Command, Control, Communications and Information. The study of media is the more familiar aspect of this topic. Media coverage of crime and the expanding use of criminal justice for entertainment is an important topic for the field to understand. Indeed, such increased coverage may explain why fear of crime increases as crime rates have fallen (because the distinction between first hand experience and media consumption is blurred). The other important point is how media contributes to creating the social reality of crime. Segal's article on the time she spent working for a 'COPS' like program is an excellent look at what ends up getting edited out of such programs and shows clearly the ideology of 'reality' based TV shows (1993)*.

The less familiar part of cybernetics is how all people are increasingly 'wired into' the social system, which the Unabomber pointed out expects humans to adapt to it rather than changing to meet human needs. The advent of cellular phones, pagers, global positioning satellites, etc means that people

can always be found (and are usually tied more tightly into their jobs). There is also increased electronic surveillance of people's lives and discussion of implanting computer chips into humans, something we have already done with animals. People not only become figurative cogs in the machine, but more literal cogs as human parts are replaced with mechanization. The theme of technology intruding into people's lives and their very humanity is one of the staples of cyberpunk science fiction, where technology becomes part of the body and creates part-human part-machine 'cyborgs'. (This concept will be familiar to many through 'the borg' on the Star Trek TV series who have a 'hive' type mentality because they are all wired together.)

The material at the end of the chapter on identity and protection of self through crime can be related back to theories that explain why some people rather than others seem to have a precarious ego and sense of themselves. This includes psychoanalytic theories, development, learning, and family dynamics.

REFERENCES

Gregg Barak, Jeanne Flavin & Paul Leighton. *Class, Race, Gender & Crime: Social Realities of Justice in America*. Roxbury, 2001. More info available, <http://paulsjusticepage.com/reality-of-justice.htm>.

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