

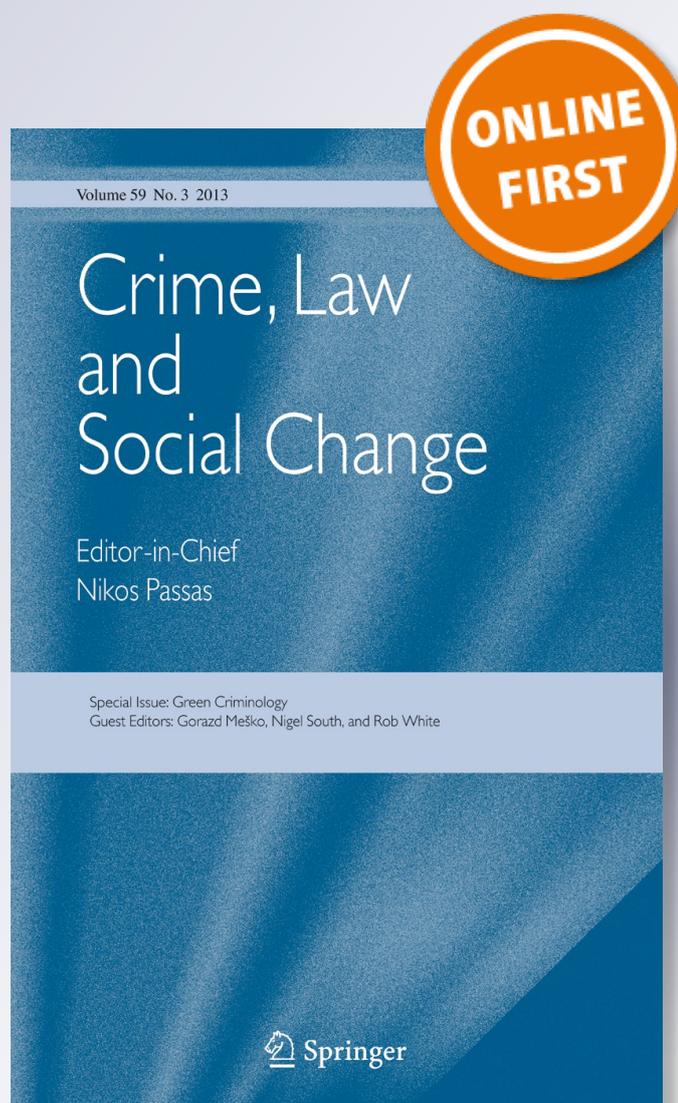
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Industrious rebels and captains of deterrence: defiance interpreted through a Veblenian reformulation of strain theory

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Abstract Strain and Defiance are criminological theories that lay ambivalent emphasis on the notion of “rebellion,” which is to say that they both regard mutinous behavior as being motivated by positive or negative ends alike. Individuals rebel, say, by stealing in order to achieve higher status (economic strain); or they may violently antagonize authority as a way to “salvage dignity” in an environment in which they have no social stake whatsoever (defiance). Conversely, they may responsibly protest to oppose blind consumerism (strain); or they may civilly disobey racist laws (political defiance). It is here argued that both theories may be construed *as special cases of a general problem*, which Thorstein Veblen had already diagnosed in 1899. Veblen depicted social dynamics as a battle between the *detering* forces of conservatism, which are animated by an overpowering predatory-pecuniary instinct, and those of progressivism, which rely, on the other hand, on an (ever more enfeebled) instinct of cooperation and workmanship. In this Veblenian model, civil defiance represents a challenge of the *peaceable* middle-class to the rule of the elite, whereas economically-strained defiance is the expression of the attempt of (middle to low) classes possessed by a pecuniary drive to emulate the status of the elite itself.

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Introduction

L'existence d'une criminalité avait une utilité *généralement directe et quelque fois indirecte*; indirecte parce que le crime ne pouvait cesser d'être que si la conscience collective s'imposait aux consciences individuelles avec une autorité tellement forte que toute transformation morale serait rendue impossible, directe en ce que parfois, *mais parfois seulement*, le crime a été un précurseur de la morale à venir.

E. Durkheim [1]

After presenting a summary of the theories of strain and defiance, this essay will treat the question of whether there exists a connection between the two by proceeding in two stages. The first stage offers a preliminary, simple answer to the problem by linking strain and defiance theory in two different ways—namely, considering defiance either as a complementary elaboration of strain theory, or as a particular variation of a generalized template of strain theory.

In the second stage, a critical examination of Merton's "Social Strain and Anomie" sets the tone for a recasting of the entire problem in light of Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. The main claim is that the father of strain theory, Robert K. Merton (1910–2003), by mistaking a part (the strain) for the whole (social process), mis-specified the nature of strife and inter-class conflict in a modern industrial society. In the Veblenian vision, strain is *not* the spring of progressive lawlessness, but rather the inherent drive of the acquisitive mindset, which is predominant—predominant over its antithetical spiritual bent, that of industry and workmanship.

The analysis, following Veblen, modifies the dynamics of strain theory by shifting the dialectical focus to this tension between conservatism and progressivism, and incorporating Merton's taxonomy into Veblen's general scheme of class conflict.

Finally, Defiance is itself reinterpreted in this framework as a contest pitting a heterogeneous front of recalcitrant forces—delinquents and middle-class reformers—against the *deterring* and unyielding posture of the most privileged strata of the community.

The strain theory of anomie

Strain theory construes crime as the aberrant outcome arising out of the mismatch between the cultural models of prestige and material success conventionally believed to be within reach of the population at large, on one side, and a highly uneven distribution of resources and opportunities, on the other.

The items upon which Merton focused are essentially the American Dream ideal, the cultural emphasis on goals overwhelming institutional norms, and the centrality of money and pecuniary success in the value system of the American society [2].

At heart, Merton's 1938 essay, "Social Structure and Anomie," is a story of (progressive) hopes betrayed [3]. Merton, the son of Eastern European immigrants, had "come to see the core American cultural goal as universal and, in particular, as

shared by those who grew up in poverty as he did.” [4] Yet he understood that there lies an insidious kink in America’s universalist call to grow prosperous. The essay, in this sense, is a denunciation of deeply-rooted wealth disparity, which, coupled with vulgar credulousness in deceitful slogans of instant enrichment, threatens eventually to disrupt the fabric of society by means of violent and/or anxiety-induced felonies designed to “get ahead.” It is the catch-22 of the “American Dream,” in fact: if affords no final stopping point [5].

At times, Merton says, such a disproportionate stress upon self-seeking behavior may lead to the gradual loosening of civil bonds. And lawlessness (anomie) eventually ensues. How does the community in its various segments adjust to the (venal) “strain”? Merton envisions five main adaptive types: conformists, innovators, ritualists, retreatists, and rebels. The conformists are, say, Howard Becker’s “squares,” [6] who keep the “cultural malintegration” (between uneven means and universal goals) going: they are law-abiding and believe in the “dream,” in spite of all. Ritualists, instead, are lower-middle-class Americans of a meeker disposition, committed to a sense of propriety that renders their lot somewhat impervious to the temptations of emulative ostentation. And retreatists were former squares, whose eventual feeling of revulsion for the most degrading side-effects of the “dream” short-circuited their allegiance so completely as to have a-socialized them altogether: psychotics, pariahs, hobos, drunks and addicts are in their midst. Dropouts and rejects, in short.

But it is in the other two groups—amongst the “innovators” and “rebels”—that anomic impatience breeds. Cultural emphasis upon pecuniary success, writes Merton, in certain cases, pushes a number of over-eager and frustrated individuals to seek “innovative” avenues to bypass the Law in order to pursue the prescriptions of conspicuous consumption. This drive, Merton asserts, is particularly rife in the lower-class; its expression, simply stated, is crime. But it operates in the upper strata as well, and its, by now frequent, and fraudulent, by-products have come to be subsumed under the heading of “white-collar crime” —also known as the practice of “cuttin’ corners.” [7] So Merton collapses into the (economic) category of “innovation” both violent crime and the less truculent, but allegedly far costlier (to taxpayers) financial delicts perpetrated by the middle- and upper- business classes.

Finally, the rebels. Their presence in the model is a homage to all standard-bearers of social reform, and also the visible token of the author’s optimism in the face of evidently disappointed socio-political expectations. Much in the way of idealist emotion is therefore staked on the figure of these “renegades,” who, often at considerable personal cost, assume unpopular positions in order to carry out what they feel is just—opposing, that is, their “counter-mores” to the obsolete customs of the day. They are not outcast, *resentful* individuals —that is, envious of a world of privilege they have proven incapable of entering—, but esteemed *insiders*, “exponents of a rising class,” who periodically succeed in that most daunting of tasks: changing the system from within.

Defiance

Prior to the introduction of the notion of Defiance, the conceptual approach to the varying effects of criminal sanction on the rates of deviance was divided between the

belief in the efficaciousness of swift and severe punishment and/or threat thereof (“deterrence”), and the skeptical position (“labeling”), according to which an incremental infliction of punitive sanctions would, in many instances, embolden potential and repeat offenders to commit more crime than otherwise.

Defiance took shape as a series of experiments in several American metropolises was conducted to test the available theories on the effectiveness of punishment in the case of domestic assault [8]. Although the results disclosed by the first of these studies seemed to corroborate “arrest” rather than “advice” as the more efficacious crime-stopper, subsequent replications of the experiment in other cities did not, acknowledging instead that weakly-bonded offenders—those with little, or nothing to lose (friends, family and work)—find in violence the only means to shield themselves from the stigmatizing blow of deterrence. Sanctions would merely incite them to strike again. With this realization came the implication that a myopic policy of police deterrence might run aground of *defiance* [9].

A first theory of defiance came on the heels of these experimental finds, which it systematized thus: there exists a state of defiance whenever an individual offender, who is unloosed from the ties of society, perceives the criminal sanction imposed upon him to be unfair, and refuses thereby to suffer the disciplining humiliation by antagonizing aggressively all manifestations of the law-enforcing apparatus. It follows that prescriptive measures to break recidivism come to hinge on the temperamental bias of the “criminal”: if he is prone to being shamed, deterrence “works”; if he is not, sanctions are likely to increase crime; and if he feels tightly bonded to the community, punitive strain may be altogether irrelevant.

The intriguing singularity in this picture, however, is that collective, and all-American, phenomenon of a sanctioning community “that perversely values both law-abiding and defiant behavior” —a peculiar state of cultural affairs, which the movie-going folk is wont to celebrate by showering with endless waves of affection borderline stock characters such the avenger, the noble outlaw, or the unpatriotic patriot [10].

America’s notorious pop iconography of the contumacious hero therefore suggests that there might be more to defiance than just the wounded frustration of mishandled perpetrators. In fact, more than a reaction to a castigatory jolt, Defiance could be envisioned as an intrinsic drive of social actors—that is, a “moral obligation” to challenge the status quo whenever the conditions appear ripe for the endeavor. In the late reformulation of the theory, Defiance may be so broadened as to encompass all those instances for which behaviors underpinned by countervailing sentiments of *justice* collide. Defiant law-breaking (e.g., taking the law in one’s hands) [11] or defiant law-enforcing (e.g., exceeding the limits of containment in the Rodney King case) [12] may be thus two outcomes of the same interpretative frame. In its discursive form, Defiance portrays social dynamics as a struggle opposing a culture of civil *and* delinquent disobedience to the compact front of all forces bent—out of an equally felt, yet opposed, sense of moral duty—on defending the established order. This is the moral contest of Deviance vs. Deterrence, and it is also very much a *dramatic* performance of momentous impact. It is a contest for “audience approval,” for “the hearts and minds” of cohorts of followers, who watch intently the joust and sway accordingly as the chronicle of reformist triumphs or traditionalist counter-thrusts is being written thereby [13].

Veblen, strain and defiance

What unites Strain and Defiance is first of all the political subtext: they are both expressions of a long (American) tradition of progressive aspirations, as may be evinced, for instance, from the implicit condemnation of consumerism and income inequality in Strain, or the detailing of the anti-racist battle in Defiance [14]. Unlike Strain, Defiance is not an economic theory, but the ethical orientation is affine.

As to theoretical construction, a purist of Strain could regard Defiance as a complementary elaboration of Merton's "innovative" and "rebellious" rubrics. On the one hand, Defiance invests low- and upper-class *economic* delinquency with a sense of righteousness, which broadens the understanding of the motivations behind the offense: e.g., individuals steal (or cheat on their tax returns) because it is *morally* expedient to do so in the face of unjustifiable income disparities. On the other, the defiant social reformer fits the profile of the rebel; they are the same actor.

Alternatively, within Robert Agnew's theoretical effort devoted to extending the scope of Strain beyond economic stimulants, Defiance may itself be considered a special typology of Strain [15]. Defiance as Strain would view anti-social behavior as the resultant of a cultural confrontation, which characteristically features a conservative incumbent intent on repelling the onslaughts ("deterrence"), as well as dashing the hopes, of a weaker, yet insubordinate fringe of delinquents and rebels. In this variation, Merton's disjoint between (corrupted) goals and (mal-distributed) means is replaced by a matched clash of world views.

The problem

As such, Defiance as Strain presents a conceptual image that is more consistent than Merton's. The latter, in fact, deplors both strident class stratification and moral degeneration, which he nonetheless identifies as the two springs of social dynamics, i.e., of strain. This makes Merton's essay also a critique of America's power system. But in proceeding thus he partly erases from the model what should indeed be the protagonists of the theory: *the business elite and the reforming insiders*.

Here the discussion rejoins the standard debate on the shortcomings of strain theory. In point of fact, the critics have repeatedly stressed how Strain neglects the "human" factor: in their view, the model fails to specify which generalizable psychological features—within an environment strained by the tension "to succeed"—are ultimately responsible for deviance. Simply put, one wonders, when pressured to succeed, what makes certain people click and others flip: in this connection, "criminologists are often unhappy about anomie theory's lack of specificity and point out that not all those exposed to the same problems respond in the same way [16]." We know it: not everyone succeeds. And the general sentiment of humiliating, unforgiving discomfiture that may emerge from repeated failure—"failure" understood in its aggregate, historical, or generational expression—may be so diffuse and harrowing as to generate all manners of brutally dysfunctional "sub-cultures" (those, e.g., of gang violence, familial breakdown, child abuse...). When such manifestations manage to "take defiant root into the fabric society"—that is, when they "crystallize" as (inverted) "role-models" for droves of other irremediable outcasts—the system is said to create "deviance without strain [17]." Which is to say that, exposed to an

abiding “tradition” of defiant and violent renunciation (e.g. the “ghetto culture”), some of us play themselves out from the outset, without ever even trying —straining— to run the (damned) race.

Yet the question begs an answer ever more insistently: which psycho-social trait or mechanism, if any, could give an indication of a person’s likely course of conduct in the face of tough competitive exigencies? Is there even such a “trait,” which could enable sociologists to divine —for various classes of individuals differentiated on the basis of such a trait— the life-cycle of Man’s loyalty to “the system” and its code of Laws?

Merton’s “strain,” and the lawlessness that may ensue therefrom, does not quite identify these putative forces, these Durkheimian “waves,” which, by investing a “significant number” [18] of differentiated clusters of individuals, move them to transgress. So, in essence, despite being “characterized as a socio-psychological concept,” [19] Strain lacks a rudimentary psychological characterization of society; and this deficiency to shed light on the mysteries of the “micro-macro” — namely, of relating elegantly “structure” (culture, politics, propaganda) to individual behavior— is not greatly alleviated by throwing into the model the additional factors of “relational” insights, “relative deprivation” (i.e. the frustration of “having less,” vis-à-vis one’s peers), and/or “class”. In this last regard, as stated above, Merton clearly understood that the (anomic) proneness “to weaken the guiding power of social norms,” especially by obvious way of “crime,” are far more conspicuously pronounced among the lower-strata than in the upper bourgeoisie [20] ; yet he could not fully account for diverse differing behavioral trends within the (more or less) affluent strata, let alone their sociological rationale, from the premises of his model. Again, one wonders: deep down, what makes one a “ritualist” or a thieving corporate raider rather than a (mildly tax-evading) “conformist”?

To return to Strain’s sin of abstraction —namely its excessive, and politically correct emphasis on “structure,” and the concomitant erasure of the drama’s primadonnas—, it is important to note how Merton should have, instead, taken as his point of departure a finicky portraiture of these very protagonists: the aforementioned business elite and the reforming insiders.

The former seem to have been conflated with the “conformists”, which is not a satisfactory classification, while the latter are readmitted through the backdoor of “rebellion,” so to speak. It is as if Merton’s script showcased heroes without villains, or rather, rebels of flesh fighting disembodied evil in the middle of an ocean of morose apathy: “Strain” is thus a kind of quasi-metaphysical meditation, something in-between-genres —which, by definition, can never be quite captivating enough. From the theoretical standpoint, the explanation of crime as the effect of strain so defined is therefore not entirely convincing, for the overachieving excesses of the pecuniary race, which Merton mistakenly imputes to society as a whole, is, in truth, the exclusive and organic affair of *only one side* of the social equation—that of the “villains,” i.e. of the *conservative classes, high and low*.

Veblen

This observation is one of the high points of Veblen’s landmark study, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) [21]. Veblen characterized social tension as the

(antagonistic) encounter of two rival “spiritual bents,” that of predation and acquisition (the barbarous type) and that of workmanship (the industrious type). These two types are derived from his idiosyncratic digestion of anthropology and genealogy. Veblen contended that, like a plant, humanity seems to breed, in some unspecified Mendeleevian fashion, according to an occasionally bifurcating pattern in which the dominant traits of the domineering male cast are occasionally mutated, by atavistic (and not a little mysterious) reversion into those of the benign (feminine) “savage”: cooperative and gentle.

The “barbarous,” masculine type abides by the law of status, emulation, individualism, and warfare, whereas the “peaceable,” feminine type is inclined to view the rhythms of life not according to luck, but cause-and-effect: industry, group solidarity, [22] and peace are his/her purview. The predatory type, instead, thrives on upmanship, physical prowess, relentless antagonism, business/finance, sports, and gambling. Modern industrial society is indeed complex to decipher for, in the countenances and behaviors of its components, it presents various (and often grotesque) amalgamations of both tendencies, even though the dominating trend has been one of undisputed predominance of the acquisitive over the industrious type: ours, for Veblen, is more a world of prevaricating, yet technically-equipped, beasts than of compassionate human beings. And it is precisely this concern that lies at the basis of both Strain and Defiance.

In Veblenian parlance, the champion of business and competition is “the Captain of Industry” (alternatively and no less contemptuously, referred to as “captain of finance” or “captain of solvency”) while that of industriousness and peaceableness is the “Engineer [23].” To Veblen, the Robber Barons of his age (the Morgans, Carnegies, Rockefellers, etc.) were contemporary expressions —“survivals”— of barbarousness: according to this view, technical knowledge, and the affluence that came with it, spread to society not by entrepreneurial grace of the Barons, as Liberalism would have it, *but despite their parasitical intromission*. A modern dreamer, Veblen believed in the spontaneous generosity of the machine process [24]. If only society could be freed of its diseased predatory gene by un-learning the superstitious liturgies and honor codes of the calculating warlord; if only society could be thus reformed it would be able to pry the technological apparatus from the clutching clasp of the Captains of Robbery and deliver it, for the benefit of all, into the hands of all-seeing, angelic “engineers.” Once rid of the corporate oversight of the Barons of leisure, “soviets” of technicians would run the machines at capacity and dispense thereby an abundance of milk and honey to the rest of a collectivity ever less afflicted by the imperative to (perform dirty) work.

In this impassioned Victorian utopia, the Engineer *innovates*, [25] the Captain *conserves*. Indeed, he conserves by “retarding” innovation from the “rising classes” essentially in three ways: 1) through the inertia proper of the leisure class itself; 2) by prescribing the canons of wasteful and conspicuous consumption; and 3) indirectly through an unequal distribution of wealth and income. Thus, deprived of the resources needed to nurture self and cultivate knowledge, and having spent whatever meager surplus he had in articles of status, the low-class individual finds himself entirely absorbed by the struggle of daily sustenance. He is perforce rendered an expression of *conservatism*: ignorant, aggressive and imbued with the “cultural” imperatives set by the leisure class.

The strain of self-assertion against odds takes up the whole energy of the individual; he bends his efforts to compass his own ends alone, and becomes continually more narrowly self-seeking [26].

Crime and strife are means to the deprecated end of pecuniary affirmation, and, as such, they are the economic expression of *conservative* individuals issuing from middle- and low-classes, who are attempting to rise through the ranks. The leisure class, on the other hand, is an aristocracy that notoriously manages its estate in an invidious, exclusivist and proprietary fashion: among “barons,” the contest for positions of influence is, by definition, unsparing. In addition to this, one must also remember that the systematic need to recruit eager debutantes from the lower rungs of the hierarchy is a task that needs to be undertaken carefully; it is a delicate casting job dictated by the necessity to bind the middle-class, which is the custodian of technology, ever more closely to the absentees. This coopting mechanism is clearly observable, for instance, in the basic structure of the modern corporation. In the corporate schematics the shareholders —i.e., the absentees of the leisure class— exercise complete control over the technical/mechanical process by treating as conventional employees the engineers, whom the CEO further “barbarizes” by mandating that they acquire a “business education” via the insuppressible MBA.

The constituency of the leisure class is kept up by a continual selective process, whereby the individuals and lines of descent that are eminently fitted for an aggressive pecuniary competition are withdrawn from the lower classes. In order to reach the upper levels the aspirant must have [pecuniary attitudes] in such an eminent degree as to overcome very material difficulties that stand in the way of his ascent [27].

On the other side of the ethical divide, we find the progressive, industrious classes. For Veblen, what separates the “Captain of finance” from the Engineer is, as said, spiritual complexion. But what differentiates —among pecuniary-barbarous types— the low-class delinquent from the Captain, and to a less degree, from the lower business classes —those engrossed with the subordinated employments of business/finance & corporate law— is “*tenacity of purpose*,” i.e., consistency of aim, stubbornly pursued. And this appears to be that very psycho-sociological trait that has eluded Strain from its inception; tenaciousness is the “micro-receiver,” so to speak, of the forces unleashed by the structural shifts affecting society as a whole.

So, at the bottom end of the social spectrum, past the bourgeois —who is torn by the pull of a coercive fealty to the system and his inner yearning to rebel—, there festers the “delinquent” whose low-tenacity *modus vivendi* is a specular image, yet one drenched in the squalor of the ghetto-life, of that of the (highly tenacious) corporate lord.

The ideal pecuniary man is like the ideal delinquent in his unscrupulous conversion of goods and persons to his own ends [...], but he’s unlike him in possessing a keen sense of status, and in working more consistently and farsightedly to a remoter end. The kinship of the two types of temperament is further shown in a [...] relish of aimless accumulation. [...]. The temperament of the delinquent has more in common with the pecuniary and leisure classes than with the industrial man or with the class of shiftless dependents [28].

According to this repartition (two-dimensional schema defined by spiritual drift and tenacity), at the bottom of the industrious classes one finds the “shiftless ne’er-do-well,” i.e., the peace-loving “fool on the hill.” This “clever, good-for-nothing fellow” means well but does not possess the fiber to “fight” defiantly amongst the rebel Engineers, although, when the time comes, he may be expected to cheer for them.

Indeed, most of these elements are present in Merton’s discussion—he does acknowledge gambling, varsity athletics, and paupers “handicapped by little formal education”—but the perspective is too narrowly focused on the pernicious influence of business, as a lamentable degeneration of the Dream, to afford the analysis exhaustive theoretical breadth.

That Merton’s derivation of the five adaptive groups, though it came forty years after *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, may actually be gainfully, and effortlessly, fitted into Veblen’s original mold (see Fig. 1) speaks, yet again, to Veblen’s greatness. Merton’s “conformists,” in the guise of conservative bourgeois, are inserted between

A Veblenian Reformulation of the Strain Theory of Societal Anomie

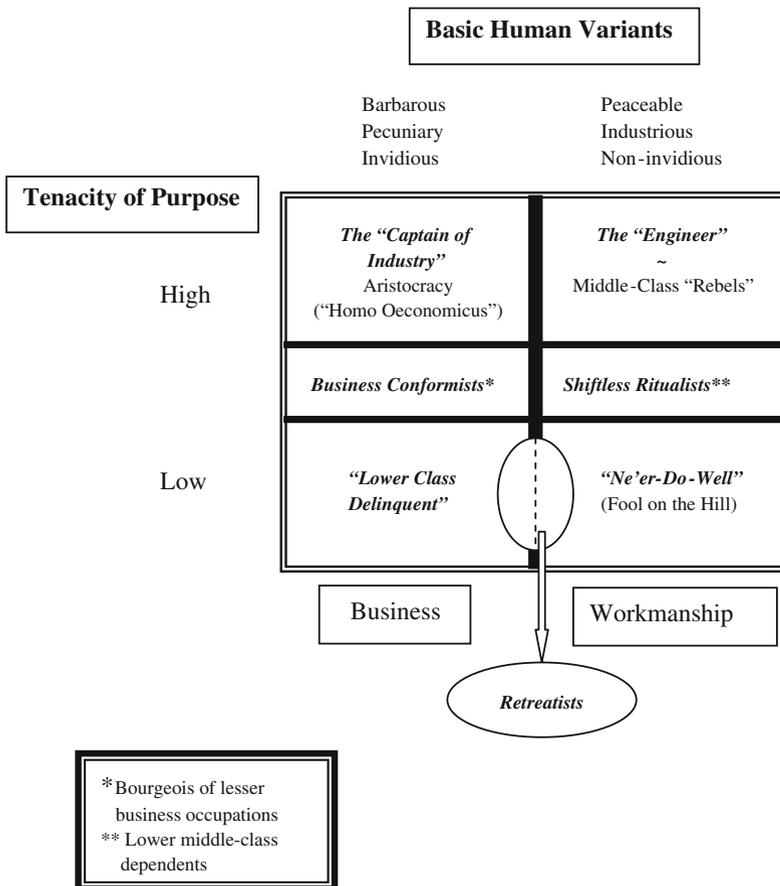


Fig. 1 A veblenian reformulation of the strain theory of societal anomie

the Captains and the low-classes. The “ritualists” are the specular image in the industrious realm of the conformist, business middle-class (“shiftless dependents”), while the “retreatists” comprise a mix of drifters and ne’er-do-wells.

This expanded Veblenian model of strain theory may in turn be used to depict the basic schemes of Defiance, which itself provides a synthesis of the fundamental facts discussed hitherto (see Figs. 2 and 3).

Defiance (Fig. 2) is here represented as an offensive arc cutting across the lower conservative camp and reaching into the industrious vanguard. At the lowest social grade, defiant energy is expended as economically-driven (larceny) or aimless violence, such as Los Angeles’s gang- and ethnic clashes, or the angry shoot-outs of America’s black ghettos and white suburban schools [29]. One level up from this landscape, the middle business stratum may be observed attempting to embezzle its way up to the top, while on the other side of the spiritual fence, supported by the expectant gaze of the shiftless ritualists (the “good folk” waiting for “the Prince” to win for all of them), the enlightened rebels conduct their altogether different kind of reformist battle. This last scenario is the stuff of intellectual romance. As said, the ideal-type of the battle fought in the tenacious section, across the divide of spiritual inclination provides the (edifying and super-optimist) moral tale with its classic structure. In such a tale, the “hero” —a healthy cell who had previously managed God-knows-how to secure tenure

(The Arc of) Defiance

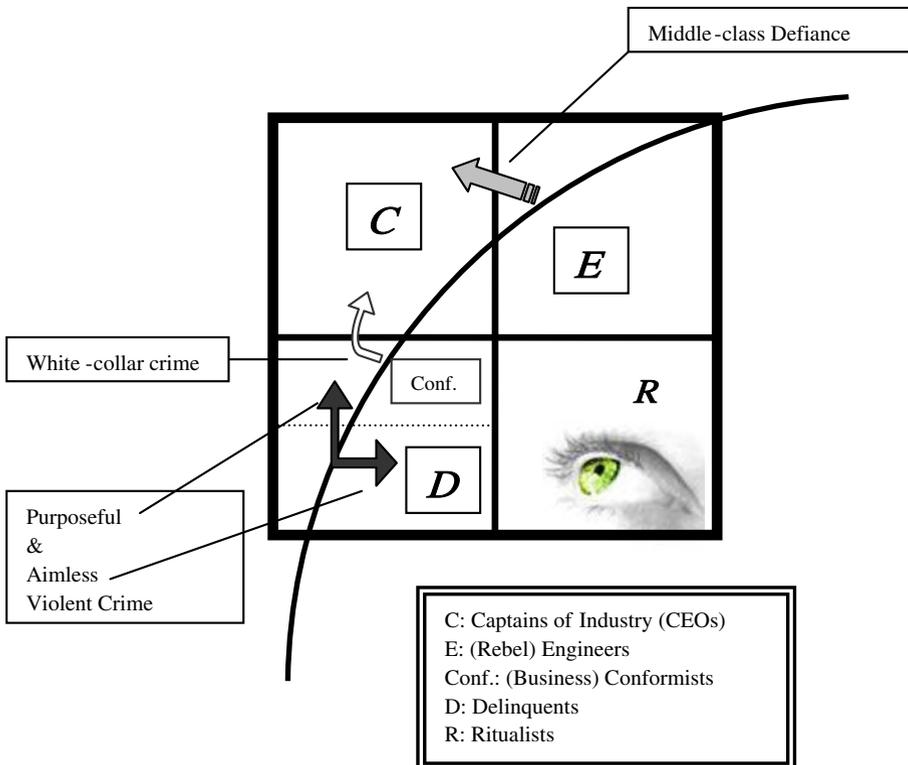


Fig. 2 The Arc of defiance

The Shield of Deterrence

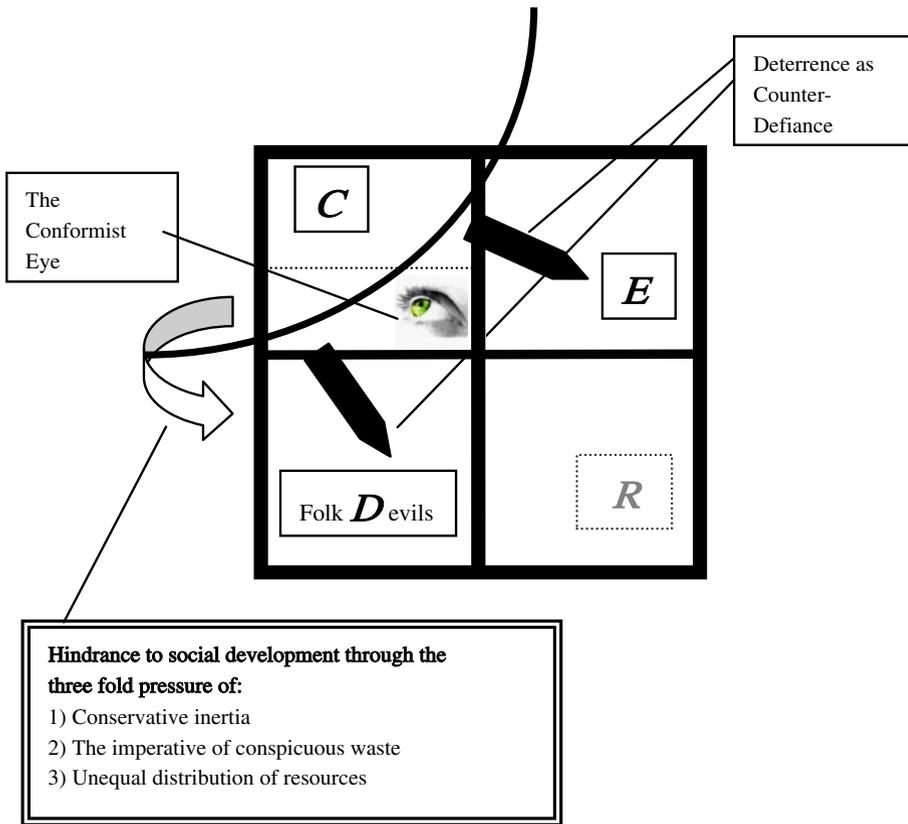


Fig 3 The shield of deterrence

in a putrid host and hold out *uncompromisingly* before reaching the fateful juncture—resolves to take on “the System”...and, in the finale, subvert it for the good.

Deterrence (Fig. 3), instead, features the upper classes repelling the Engineers on the one hand (via cooptation, intimidation, etc.), and, on the other, keeping the lowest class under control in two ways: through 1) economic debilitation –i.e., the imposition of retrograde cultural models, and restricted access; and 2) criminal sanctions [30]. The whole of Deterrence is played out and *staged*, according to various modules, for winning the approval of the conformist and “invidious” [31] eye of the middle-business stratum, which, thus habituated, is ever susceptible to believing in the “folk Devil [32].” This is the rather more pessimistic, and realistic portrayal of contemporary society. The heroes —be they natural philosophers, martyrs and saints, social workers, Tolstoyan aristocrats, or artists — are eventually (and without excessive difficulty) blackmailed into submission by the impossibility for the modern individual, barring the availability of significant personal wealth, of procuring, without acknowledging submissively the gift, sufficient resources for feeding body

and soul and, all the while, growing so strong as to be able to think, freely, for himself (viz. the eternal problem of “the job”). This joint labor of intimidation/cooptation wielded by the Captains of Deterrence against (what little is left of) the enlightened middle-strata is nowadays mostly a theatrical production confected for the natural allies of the elite —i.e., the hyper-timorous upper echelons of the bourgeoisie, whose financial treasure, and fate, are deeply nested into the banking loops of the absentees. These (middling to high) pecuniary types tend to be carnally-repressed puritans who, as a result of such self-mortification, have come to nurture so profound a resentment toward more successful peers as to lust for an indiscriminate urge to see punishment inflicted systematically and indiscriminately across the several layers of society. In this regard, the predisposition of privileged conformists to believe fanatically each and every artfully crafted “panic” (e.g. “terrorism,” or “financial collapse), while hysterically branding dissenters in their fold as “conspiracy freaks,” is possibly the chief psychical safety device employed by modern social organisms.

Conclusions

The notions and questions canvassed in the current debates within the literature of Strain, as well as in newer contributions such as *Defiance*, have afforded in this essay the opportunity to tap the analytical wealth of Veblen’s work, and to remind how crucial a totally neglected “classic” such as *The Theory of the Leisure Class* may be for contemporary sociological production of the institutionalist kind. In sum, the Veblenian matrix allows one to reframe Merton’s critique as a contrast of two mindsets —the source of the *main* tension— and to shift “strain” to the internal mechanics of the invidious classes alone. To this, *Defiance* adds the interplay of mass psychology, whose empathy or indignation may become the arbiter in deciding the outcome of the contest— contest which, in the last analysis, always boils down to a match between progressivism and conservatism.

Finally, this “note” is here stitched together to take a look at the curvature of one of those not-so-rare twists in the history of western thought. These twists render the absorption of our modern intellectual production somewhat less nauseous by remanding the reader, as they always and reproachfully do, to the, “truer,” more *radical* source. It is curious, indeed, to note how one of sociology’s most cited essays (Merton’s) features an interpretational framework of contemporary society and its criminal maladies that is, objectively speaking, far less sophisticated than the older, and virtually unknown, theoretical apparatus developed by Veblen in his masterwork. Unlike Veblen, whose mind and heart remained encapsulated for his entire life in a teenage dream of Viking sagas, Merton was too patriotically invested in his newly-acquired American status not to believe that the ethos of America as a whole was not one of “*egalitarian values*” [33] —egalitarian and universal values whose attainment was, for him, (for the most part, unfairly) predicated on differing, yet *unspecified*, subjective valuations of individuals variously distributed across America’s several social, yet allegedly mobile, classes. Merton had made himself too much of a Patriot, and a US “liberal,” to acknowledge that the system’s “lie,” the betrayal, was not so much the feeding of impossible visions of wealth to America’s semi-indigent estates, as the American Dream itself. The Dream is but an ethos of hypocrisy; it is a modern

sort of opinion-wave, which leverages what are, de facto, *pseudo*-egalitarian values. In this sense, the Dream is *not* the discursive by-product of a highly and ferociously compartmentalized, “gated,” community (such as the USA factually is), but the very spiritual foundation of such a community. Behind America’s rhetorical call to equality there lies a mercenary rallying cry for the greater glory of military, commercial, and cultural imperium. Therefore, if the creed of revolutionary saints cannot itself be possibly derived from the common pool of *modern pecuniary* belief, then heroic rebellion can only be imputed to an innate instinct of the human species: it is something truly universal, and germane to “brotherly love,” which Veblen, again, gleaned under the rubric of “instinct of workmanship [34].”

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17. *Ibid*, 88.
18. *Ibid*, 72.
19. Passas, “Continuities in the Anomie Tradition,” 96.
20. *Ibid*, 102, 104.
21. Veblen, T. (1899). *The Theory of the Leisure Class. An Economic Study of Institutions*. New York: MacMillan.
22. Such as that exhibited, e.g., by the Montagnais-Naskapi of the Labrador Peninsula, cited in Sellin, T. (1938). *Culture Conflict and Crime*. New York: Social Science Research Council, 58-59: “[In their midst], strife is scarcely present, violence strenuously avoided; competition even contemptuously disdained. These, they think, lead to ridicule.”
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25. Merton's word of choice for describing offending behavior— "innovation"— is, in this connection, not a felicitous one; "cheating and strife," e.g., would have been a more appropriate heading.
26. Veblen, *Leisure of Class*, 243, 238.
27. *Ibid.*, 235.
28. *Ibid.*, 237-238.
29. Messner & Rosenfeld, *Crime and the American Dream*, 90; Sherman, "Compliance and Consilience," 382-84; and Sherman, "Defiance, Deterrence, and Irrelevance," 466.
30. In this streamlined refitting of Defiance, it might be more expedient to consider particular cases of police brutality (such as the Rodney King affair) as forms of perverse, extreme deterrence rather than "defiant law-enforcing."
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