

# Laide-Époque

## Discussion and Hypotheses for a Comprehensive Understanding of the 1960- 1990 Crime Wave

Quand elle n'est pas satisfaite, la violence continue à s'emmagasiner jusqu'au moment où elle déborde et se répand aux alentours avec les effets les plus désastreux.

René Girard<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

The episode addressed in this essay is the surge of violent crime that festered in the industrialized West from the sixties to the nineties.

After summarizing the phenomenology, this paper reviews the principal explanations advanced by scholarship, and concludes the discussion with a few new analytical elements hereby introduced to assemble an interpretative *synthesis* of this phenomenon.

Essentially, the main theories of the West's recent "crime wave" feature a combination of economic and cultural causes. While some assign greater, if not exclusive weight to the former and others to the latter, there does not appear to have

been a genuine effort to nest both approaches into a comprehensive explanation of the episode.

This is what this essay proposes to achieve by construing the crime wave of 1960-1990 as a singular release of violent energy occasioned by an epochal/generational chasm; within this framework, the intensity of such an energy release is viewed as depending on the joint condition of a community's economic and political bodies.

### THE EVIDENCE

It appears to be a matter of unanimity that from the early sixties to the early nineties the western countries were shaken by a crime epidemic. This event was all the more puzzling as that particular period is by no means recorded as one of severe economic and political turmoil. If anything, in fact, the opposite appears to be true, namely, that the social upheaval was allegedly occurring “in the midst of plenty”—at least up to the early seventies, before the unemployment rate would move up, showing creases in the distributive physiognomy of the industrialized West.

While the patterns of social dysfunction in the late sixties (family break-ups and fertility drops, in addition to crime) varied from country to country, the nature of the “disruption” and its sudden increase were nonetheless so similarly diffused across national boundaries at roughly the same time that the dysfunction has come to be viewed as a sort of generalized illness affecting the developed world as a whole.<sup>2</sup>