

# LAIDE-ÉPOQUE – THE UGLY EPOCH

## AN ANALYSIS OF THE 1960–90 CRIME WAVE

*After summarising evidence of the surge in violent crime that afflicted the industrialised West from the 1960s to the 1990s, this essay reviews the principal explanations advanced by scholars and concludes the discussion with some new analytical elements. Essentially, the main theories of the West's "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, a genuine effort has not been made to nest both approaches into a comprehensive explanation. This essay construes the crime wave of 1960–90 as a singular release of violent energy related to an epochal/generational break. Within this framework, the intensity of such an energy release is viewed as dependent on the condition of a community's economic and political bodies.*

GUIDO G PREPARATA

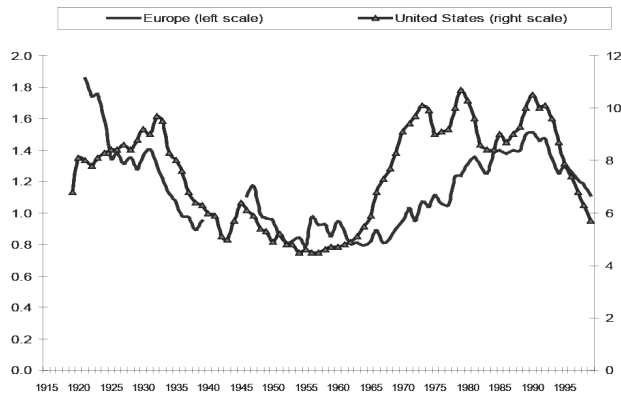
*"Quand elle n'est pas satisfaite, la violence continue à s'emmagasiner jusqu'au moment où elle déborde et se répand aux alentours avec les effets les plus désastreux" ("When not satisfied, violence continues to build until it overflows and spreads with the most disastrous effects")—René Girard (*La Violence et le Sacré*, Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1972, p21).*

## THE EVIDENCE

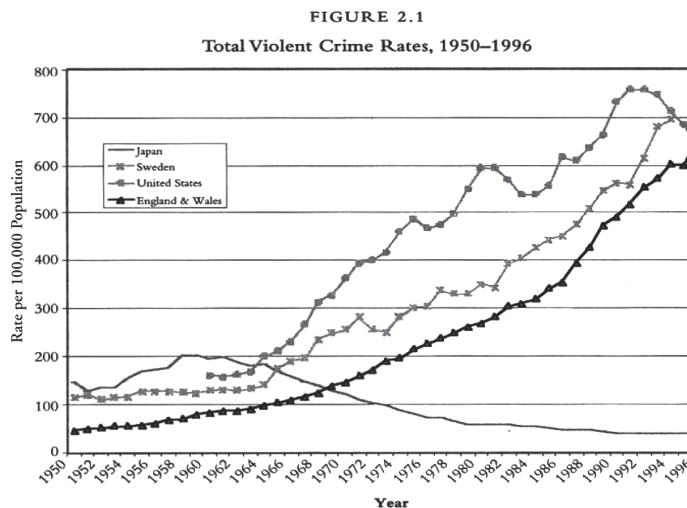
**I**t is unanimously accepted that from the early nineteen sixties to the early nineties Western countries were shaken by a crime epidemic. This fact is all the more puzzling, as that particular time period has not been recorded as one of severe economic or political turmoil. If anything the opposite appears to be true, that is, the social upheaval occurred “in the midst of plenty”—at least up to the early seventies, before the unemployment rate rose, showing creases in the distributive physiognomy of the industrialised West. While the pattern of social dysfunction (crime, family break-ups, drops in fertility rates, etc) in the late sixties varied from country to country, the nature of the “disruption” and its sudden increase was so similarly diffused across national boundaries and at roughly the same time that the dysfunction has come to be viewed as a sort of generalised illness affecting the developed world as a whole (Francis Fukuyama, *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*, London: Pacific Books, 1999, p61). The overall statistical picture painted by the available crime data however is not univocal. For instance, data collected in Manuel Eisner’s “Modernity Strikes Back: A Historical Perspective on the Latest Increase in Interpersonal Violence 1960–90” (*International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, no2, 2008, pp288-316) contrasts with the charts presented in Fukuyama (*ibid*, p32, p33 and p282) (Figures 1 and 2). Nonetheless, there is consensus on the following facts:

1. The trend displayed by violent crime in the West throughout the twentieth century followed a U-curve, with the trough roughly covering a twenty-five-year span from 1935 to 1960 (Figure 1).
2. The “modern” breakdown appears to have begun in 1963–65 (approximately half a decade later for Latin countries) and became endemic by 1973 referred to as the “middle period” by Gary LaFree (*Losing Legitimacy: Street Crime and the Decline of Social Institutions in America*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998, pp8–9).

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**Figure 1: Homicide Rates in Europe and the US 1915–95**

Source: Eisner (2008, *ibid*)

**Figure 2: Violent Crime Rates in Japan, Sweden, the US and England and Wales 1950–96**

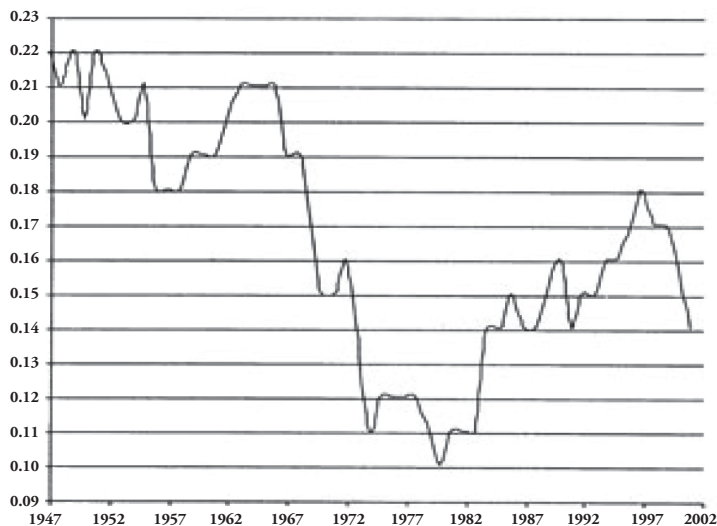
Source: Fukuyama (1999, *ibid*)

3. The crime “fever” showed signs of abatement in the early nineties.
4. The United Kingdom and the United States of American (US) exhibited levels of violent crime decidedly higher than the Western average.
5. The record featured the presence of two outliers—Japan, whose crime rate markedly decreased in the same time-frame and Sweden, whose relatively more equitable social edifice was not expected to suffer, as it eventually did, crime levels significantly above the European average (Figure 2).

## THE THEORIES

Explanations offered for this enigmatic development have generally fallen into three groups—theories strictly relying on economic processes, theories focusing exclusively on cultural dynamics and varying mixes of the two. As far as economics is concerned, economists have little doubt that the seed of the social breakdown of the seventies was planted in the early sixties, at a time when American and European manufacturing systems set out to curtail the investment process, thereby reducing the formation of fixed capital. This was in response to the clear exhaustion of profitable industrial opportunities in the developed world (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: US Corporate Profit Rate 1947–2002**



The passage from boom to stagnation occurred between 1965 and 1973 (Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy*, London, New York: Verso, 2002, p18 and Yann Fitt, Alexandre Faïre and Jean-Pierre Vigier, *The World Economic Crisis*, London: Zed Press 1976/1980, p152). In the process and despite subsequent tentative investment spurts, the US eventually scrapped its automotive industry and transitioned towards its present service economy status (Seymour Melman, *Profits without Production*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983). While the burgeoning service sector created more jobs than deindustrialisation

destroyed, the destabilising effect of millions of jobless manufacturing workers without a safety net was severe. A sizeable portion of the unemployed went on to swell the poverty ranks of America's underclass, whose numbers crept up in the late sixties (Figure 4) after a spell of "prosperous growth".

**Figure 4: The Poverty Rate in the US 1959–2009**



In Europe, dependent as the continent was on Bretton Woods and the centrality of American investment strategies (Michael Hudson, *Superimperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of US World Dominance*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, pp16–18, p22, p307, p340 and p357), the deindustrialisation switch was even more dramatic (Ronald D Kutscher and Constance E Sorrentino, "Employment and Unemployment Patterns in the US and Europe, 1973–87", *Journal of Labour Research*, no10, 1989, pp5–22). Manufacturing employment decreased more rapidly and in certain countries (Britain, Italy and Sweden) (John C Carrington and Gary T Edwards, *Financial Industrial Investment*, London: Macmillan, 1979, p33, p35 and p139 and Barry P Bosworth and Alice M Rivlin (Eds), *The Swedish Economy*, Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1987, pp26–27 and p33), the steep reduction in fixed capital formation also led to the shedding of manpower into the underclass (Folker Fröbel, Jürgen Heinrichs and Otto Kreye, *The New International Division of Labour: Structural Unemployment in Industrialised Countries and Industrialisation in Developing Countries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977/1980, pp2–3). This was conspicuous in the case of Britain and Italy, which attempted to offset losses of "structural unemployment" by boosting investment in the public sector. It was

less so in the case of Sweden (Figure 5), which while it also absorbed joblessness through welfare programmes, managed to “disguise” its official unemployment rate through early retirements (Finn Diderichsen, “Health and Social Inequalities in Sweden”, *Social Science and Medicine*, no31, 1990, pp359–67), training programmes and communal initiatives (Melvyn Krauss, “The European Model is not for Us”, *Journal of Labour Research*, no10, 1989, pp61–5).

**Figure 5: Sweden’s Employment Structure 1950–2005**



As France and Germany did not undermine their manufacturing base as much as their American and European partners, their respective economic and social indicators performed relatively better. Japan was the most resilient of all and despite the oil shock and an investment hiccup in the early seventies, weathered the storm by preserving its efficiently financed industrial base (Carrington and Edwards, *ibid*, p114). In sum, the dismantling of the manufacturing industry in the West and its replacement by outsourced multinational production on the one hand and bloated welfare “mopping-up” on the other—a process which culminated in a singularity that Nobel Laureate Maurice Allais (*La Mondialisation: La Destruction des Emplois et de la Croissance*, Paris: Clément Juglar, 1999, p126, pp144–5, p164, p216, p218 and p273) referred to as *la cassure de 1974* (the fracture of 1974)—became for economists the sole source of social degeneracy (crime, lower fertility rates, etc) that characterised the season of economic disarray.

Without doubt, the economic argument has merit. Chronologically, through the declining profit index, it traces the criminal upswing satisfactorily

and its portrayal of the slump's osmotic feeding of an underclass ever more prone to violence is indeed suggestive. Furthermore, most authors acknowledge the importance of economic inequality, rather than unemployment, as a good correlate of crime. Nevertheless, economics as the prime mover of criminal dissipation fails to convince for a variety of reasons. It does not explain why the wave lost momentum in the nineties, why in the US violence relented when the economy went into recession and there is no historical evidence of a criminal boom at the time of the Great Depression. In addition, as far as Europe is concerned, economics does not account for the reality that some countries (Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland) virtually devoid of a deprived underclass, nonetheless witnessed increased levels of social disorder (Eisner, *ibid*, p308). Finally, the economic case by itself, fails to capture the state of spiritual agitation whose facets—counterculture, crime plague, lifestyle revolution, rioting, terrorism, etc—loom large in that time of expectant commotion and “mass-radicals” (José Ortega y Gasset, *The Rebellion of the Masses*, New York: WW Norton, 1930/1993, p96).

The notion of an “exclusive society” moves beyond a purely economic focus. Crime is accounted for by fusing the realities of market failure with the processes of social transformation. According to this model, the crime flare-up was the result of the transition from a modern conforming world to a “late-modern” post-industrial environment. While the former was a mechanised apparatus denoted by a Fordist mode of production, public safety and welfare entitlements of a confident middle-class, the latter is a virtual realm compartmentalised into an out-of-sight gated elite, a pauperised middle-class held hostage to the vagaries of the “secondary market” (for low-paying “temps”), a novel and increasingly multi-ethnic toiling substratum and an intractable, unemployable and crime-ridden underclass. While the main driver according to this explication remains economic, the description of the structural after-effects avails itself of an overarching metaphor of society depicted as an organism having morphed from an aggregative to an exclusionary machine. In other words, our system instead of seeking to assimilate all human material and casting out the “deviants”—as it had done in the modern past—presently absorbs all forms of “diversity”, while electing to spit out at any given point one group instead of another according to a “gradient” of privilege/misery depending on the economic drift of society (Jock Young, *The Exclusive Society: Social Exclusion, Crime and Difference in Late-Modernity*, London: Sage, 1999, p1, pp7–9, pp14–31 and pp56–65).

In its desire to construe crime in late-modernity as a socioeconomic product,

the thesis of the *Great Disruption* (*ibid*) is similar to the scenario of the *Exclusive Society* (*ibid*). Its starting point is also the post-industrial paradigm shift from manufacturing to information technology. The “conversion” in this narrative is magnified by a series of decisive social factors—the freeing of brawn for more brain activity that begot more widespread leisure, accompanied by women’s emancipation—especially via the pill—and consequent participation in the labour force. Family bonds were thus loosened at a time when baby-boomers came of (offending) age. Their advent felt like an onrush of “barbarians”, while a widespread and swollen sense of individualistic achievement corroded the fabric of “social capital”. The end of the patriarchal household in the middle of the reconfiguration of the economy and mores shocked the collectivity in such a way that conventional forms of anomic distress—falling fertility rates, generational conflict, political trouble and widespread crime—could not but manifest (Fukuyama, *ibid*, p4, p28, p31, p45 and p77). In essence, both these theories remain economic accounts in which the cultural element is treated as either a pictorial add-on

(the exclusionary “chewing” of a part of mankind) or an amplifying negative effect (egotism and communal disintegration following the depletion of manufacturing and agricultural employment). For critics, these interpretations retain all the flaws of the solely economic perspective without leveraging the hermeneutic power of sociological explications.

It is as yet unclear what triggered such an explosive change by the mid-sixties—before the effects of decreasing profitability could be felt—or why an exclusionary or hyper-individualistic shift followed the decline of the welfare state, bringing with it the massive rise in crime. To address this difficulty, certain cultural analyses subsume the economic factor within broader categories of “institutions” and regard the crime wave of late-modernity as the combined effect of “declining political trust, increasing economic stress and family disintegration” (LaFree, *ibid*, p10). In this, “the heroic age” in the US—that of Eisenhower and the end of Camelot in November 1963—marks a generational break, which bears witness to a dissolution of “solid values” and a generalised estrangement

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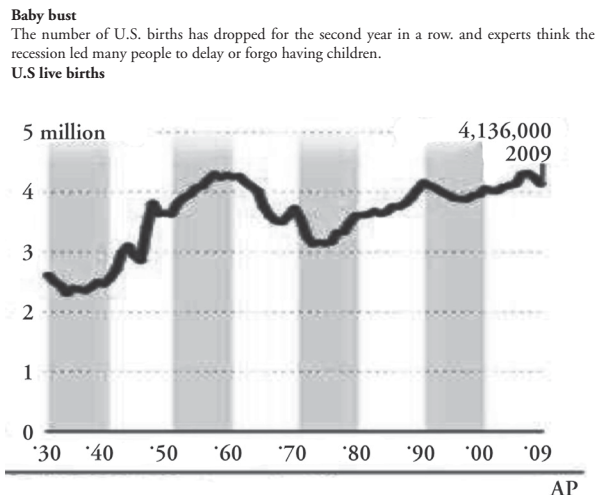
of “public opinion” vis-à-vis the new Democratic leadership and its vanguard of hippie agitators. With the bond of trust between ruled and rulers unravelling, the sinews of society gave way and anomie ensued. This is the typical stance of the American Right, which in its radical version blames the incidence and permanence of crime on the irresponsibly liberal allowances of the welfare system to America’s predominantly Black underclass (Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950–80*, New York: Basic Books, 1984). In its moderate form, this view claims to have solved the timing conundrum of why crime rates took-off when they did and why Black Americans, whose crimes made up the bulk of the upturn, “rebelled” when they did, considering indeed that their defiance level had been lower in the era of segregation, that is, at the time when they would have been expected to react more violently against higher discriminatory barriers (LaFree, *ibid*, pp6–7, p10, p52, p57 and p66). The limits to this approach are its American-centrism and the interaction it assumes among the several causal variables. Its advocates do not explain how a structure of such complexity as the economy could owe its immediate malfunction to the sudden onset of political mistrust or how the latter could just as swiftly translate into extraordinary criminal defiance. If so, France, Italy and Spain would be perennially mired in a state of civil warfare. There are countless examples across countries of prosperity bouts accompanied by the public’s downright aversion to the political class and of the converse—economic stagnation with popular support. The strength of this approach lies in its emphasis on circumscribing the socioeconomic analysis of the phenomenon to the singular point of a cultural/generational change, whose centrality it affirms.

#### ATTEMPTING A SYNTHESIS

According to José Ortega y Gasset (“El Tema de Nuestro Tiempo”, *Obras Completas*, vol3, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1923/1966, pp145–50 and “En Torno a Galileo”, *Obras Completas*, vol5, Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1933/1966, pp29–54), history is a chronicle written by a succession of generational cohorts. A generation comprises thirty years (Ortega, *Rebellion of the Masses*, *ibid*, p93) and may be “cumulative” or non-confrontational towards its predecessor or conversely “polemical”. The polemical group that came of rebellious age in 1965 was largely an “extremist” formation born during World War Two and rose to antagonise the “cumulative” elite born between World

War One and the interwar period. This is a typical example of the passage from an oligarchic to a democratic regime as described by Plato (*The Republic*, Book VIII, pp551–65)—an economic transition wrought by a gradual pauperisation and criminalisation “of the many” by way of indebtedness. As Plato stated, under “democracy”, intoxication and consumerism are rife and to the displeasure of the wealthy and the silent majority, public hustings are monopolised *sine die* by an aggressive faction of libertarians, who advocate obsessively the cult of freedom, the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women. Demographically the surplus human “mass”, likely to funnel a “democratic” upswell and the concomitant criminal eruption due to a lack of proper education and cultural regimentation, was provided by the post-war baby-boomers (Figure 6) who formed the polemical generation (Ortega, *Rebellion of the Masses*, *ibid*, p50 and Fukuyama, *ibid*, p31).

**Figure 6: Births in the US 1930–2009**



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

In the sociology of Fernando Pessoa (*Scritti di Sociologia e Politica*, Roma: Settimo Sigillo, 1994, pp112–13 and p191), this state of affairs is called “super-progressivism” and takes place when progressive ambition overly prevails and incumbents find themselves unable to fall in step. The leadership then rises to counter dissent so aggressively that the country sinks into a state of near chaos. Through civil strife, super-progressivism engenders a dissolving process of denationalisation, which only a patriotically binding counterforce (ideally war)

can reverse. On the basis of these observations, one may affirm that a tumultuous generational discontinuity brings society to release varying amounts of violent energy, which may be channelled (according to distributive patterns yet to be investigated) into three different directions—crime, war and suicide.

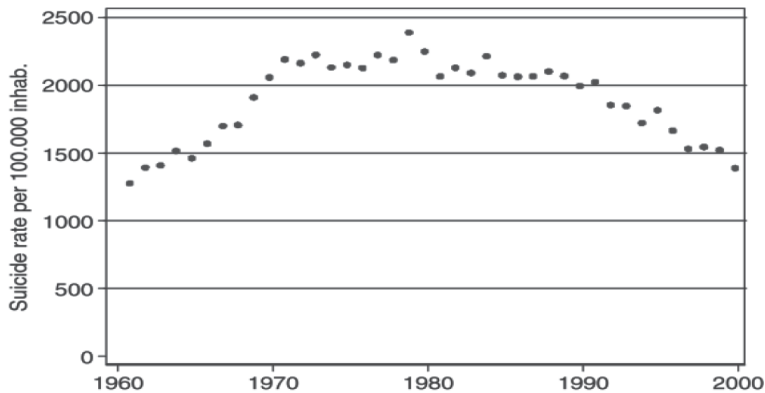
The elements introduced thus far—the economically driven generational shift causing a super-progressive/democratic “disequilibrium” and the demographic booster—provide the grounding for the application of Georges Bataille’s “theory of power” (“Collège de Sociologie”, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol2, Paris: Gallimard, 1937–39/1970, pp342–52). According to him, violence is a mass of energy that is somehow “conserved” in the system while “modernity” is envisioned as a bureaucratic usurpation of divine sacred energy. Hence the birth of the modern state, as a rule thrusts the violence outwards (war), rather than ritualistically consummating it inwards (mass sacrifice), as was done in pre-modern “sovereign” times. For the problem at hand, Bataille’s concept implies that the dramatic drop in violence experienced from the mid-thirties to the early sixties was evidently the symptom of a collectivity that through the run-up, consummation and aftermath of World War Two had been temporarily “drained” of its enormous potential for violence. A generation later, pent-up violence exploded anew in the “revolutionary” bravado of the baby-boomers and in the criminal defiance of this cohort’s most underprivileged strata. Thus, a country’s individual course under the pressure of violent energy unleashed through intergenerational conflict is a function of the health of its society’s economic and political establishments, which act as the two “diffusers” or shock absorbers of the violent discharge.

In the US, the Vietnam War provided an egress, though it failed to bind patriotically the country whose overheated political climate and rattled economy allowed crime to spread. In this context, the outburst of crime among Black Americans was by no means counterintuitive. In the shake-up of society, which despite democratic rhetoric remained no less racist than before, the crime rate of the Black population rose exceptionally on account of their disproportionate representation in the underclass (for an account of the Civil Rights battle – Samuel P Huntington, *Who are We: The Challenges to American Identity*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004, pp147–8 and pp150–1). Britain’s hardship lay in the economic and political directives that disenfranchised the deindustrialised proletariat—that “incorrigible and unemployable lumpen mob”—described in the *Exclusive Society* (*ibid*) and presently toyed with in TV shows such as *Road Wars*.

Germany and France (minus Algeria) experienced similar patterns and showed

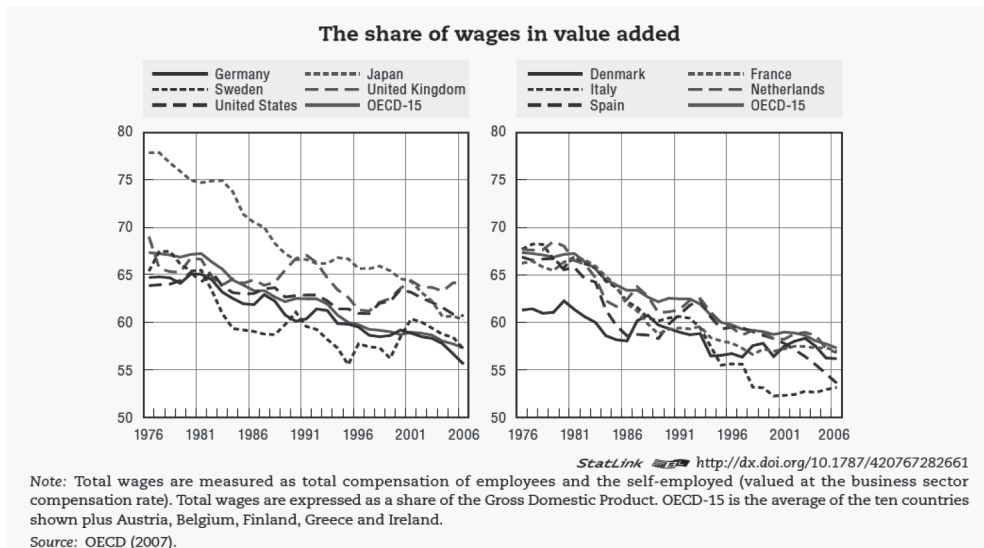
comparable resilience by dint of their overall compact economic and political foundations. Italy conversely fared much worse as a result of its incoherent economic structure and deeply riven political body (Ada Becchi and Guido M Rey, *L'Economia Criminale*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1994). Sweden's singular record may be tied to the interplay of the following five factors:

**Figure 7: Sweden's Suicide Rate 1960–2000**



Source: Own calculations based on the data described in the paper.

**Figure 8: Labours Value Added Share for Select Countries**



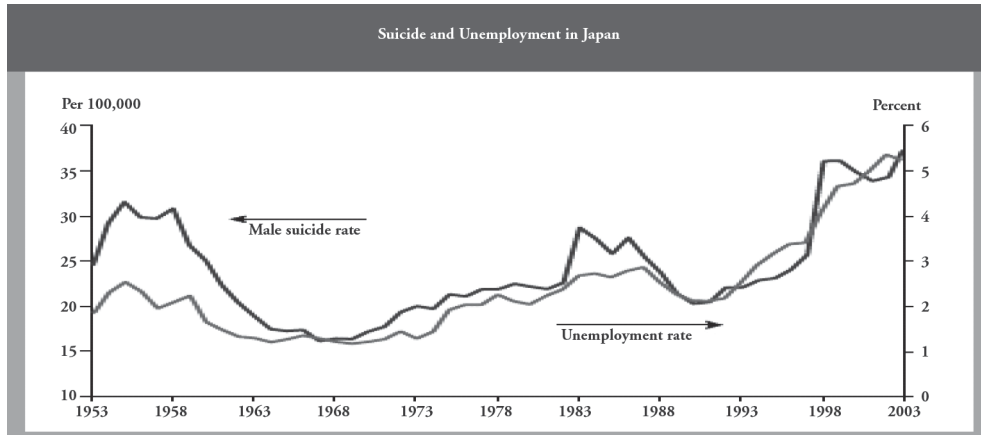
1. A “disguised” erasure of manufacturing workers, which was possibly responsible for the high grade of domestic violence (Diderichsen, *ibid* and for the health vicissitudes of displaced industrial workers and Sweden’s crime patterns – Per-Olaf Wikström, “Violent Crime” in Lars Dormén (Ed), *Crime Trends in Sweden*, Stockholm: National Council for Crime Prevention (NCCP), 1990, p42).
2. The unfavourable working conditions laid out for juveniles, who accounted for the other portion of the crime escalation (brawls in public spaces) (Hans von Hofer, “Criminal Violence and Youth in Sweden: A Long-term Perspective”, *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, no1, 2000, pp56–72 and Steven Stack, “Social Structure and Swedish Crime Rates: A Time Series Analysis 1950–79”, *Criminology*, no20, 1982, pp499–513).
3. The abrupt reversal of the suicide rate in 1970, which after shooting upwards in the 1960s may have contributed to fuelling crime as an alternative outlet (Figure 7). The unavailability of consistent estimates of Sweden’s true unemployment rate makes it difficult to affirm this with any confidence (for data on Sweden’s suicide patterns – Thor Norström, “Alcohol and Suicide: A Comparative Analysis of France and Sweden”, *Addiction*, no90, 1995, pp1463–9).
4. An indecisive drug policy, which by briefly legalising the intravenous consumption of methamphetamines in the mid-sixties stiffened a recidivist core of offending addicts (Lincoln J Fry, “Drug Abuse and Crime in a Swedish Birth Cohort”, *British Journal of Criminology*, no25, 1985, pp46–57)
5. A change in procedure for compiling statistics, which coincided with the marked crime increase of the 1960s (Per-Olaf Wikström, *Everyday Violence in Contemporary Sweden: Situational and Ecological Aspects*, Stockholm: NCCP, 1985, p154).

Finally, the inclusion of Japan in the cultural narrative of the West is at best moot. Although Japan’s economic and political bodies were more solid than most, its labourers like their Western colleagues suffered a significant compression of their value added share from the 1970s onwards (Figure 8) (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Annual Report*, 2007, online at <http://www.oecd.org>).

Japan’s only vent for violence was unemployment, which resulted with near-perfect correlation and in significant contrast to all other Western countries in a steady increase in the male suicide rate (Figure 9) (Yutaka Motohashi, “Effects of

Socioeconomic Factors on Secular Trends of Suicide in Japan 1958–86”, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, no23, 1991, pp221–7).

**Figure 9: Male Suicide Rate versus Unemployment in Japan 1953–2000**



Source: Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare.

## CONCLUSION

Three discursive pieces make up the puzzle of the crime wave of late-modernity and its solution lies in their particular concatenation. The pieces respectively are a chronicle of deindustrialisation attended by strife within the underclass, spurts of exceptional violence driven by irregular dynamics and an epochal/generational clash. Faced with the task of accounting for such complexity, scholarship has swayed between varying combinations of cultural and/or economic explanations. This essay has attempted to solve the conundrum by breaking its dynamics into two stages—by assuming that societies “conserve” violent energy and that certain conditions for the extraordinary release of stored violence need to be met. These conditions are represented by a trigger—a generational break marking the most extreme or “super-progressive” form of transition to a “democratic” regime—and by the “diffusion effect” caused by the relative weakness of society’s economic and political establishments. ❧