Suburbia's "Crime Experts": The Neo-Conservatism of Control Theory and the Ethos of Crime

Guido Giacomo Preparata
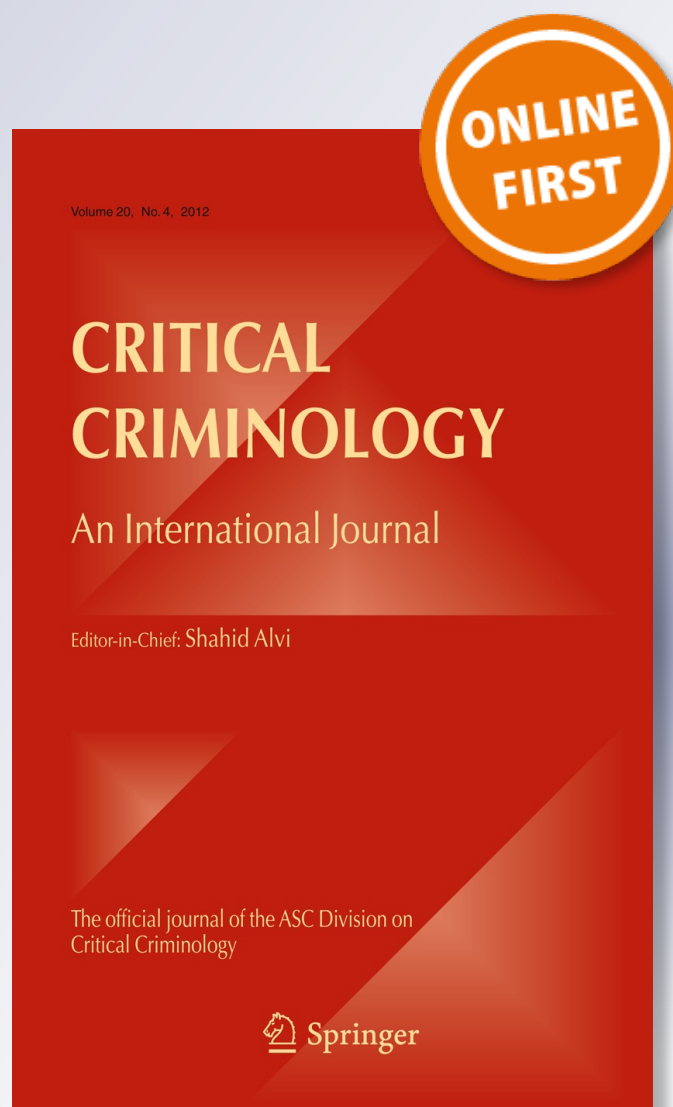
Volume 20, No. 4, 2012

CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY

An International Journal

Editor-in-Chief: Shahid Alvi

The official journal of the ASC Division on Critical Criminology

🐎 Springer

🐎 Springer

Springer

Suburbia's "Crime Experts": The Neo-Conservatism of Control Theory and the Ethos of Crime

Guido Giacomo Preparata

Abstract This essay tackles the relationship between morality and crime by way of the debate surrounding Travis Hirschi's double contribution to so-called "control theory," first as "social bonding theory," and subsequently as a "general theory" of crime. The assessment conducted herein construes the first version of "control" as an expression of patriotism, and its late formulation, on account of its emphasis on varying individual levels of self-mastery, as an implicit reaffirmation of the inevitability of class division. Over the years, the fixation with "self-control" has become a rubric for the suburban anxieties of an upper-middle class surrounded by expanding (ghetto) poverty and plagued by familial dysfunction and the alienation of its own offspring. In the final analysis, these reflections form the basis for a general reformulation, inspired by the sociology of Thorstein Veblen, of the relationship between class and crime and condign punishment by leveraging the notion of *ethos* (a common mindset peculiar to each class), and proving thereby that crime is systematically determined by this very mindset, which is the spiritual complement to class formation, rather than by the conventionally classless categories of rational self-interest or idiosyncratic proneness to violence.

G. G. Preparata (✉)
Department of Social Sciences, Pontifical Gregorian University,
Piazza della Pilotta 3, 00187 Rome, Italy
e-mail: g.preparata@unigre.it

🍵 Springer

I've got values but I don't know how or why
Pete Townshend & The Who, *The Seeker*

Those who define Man as a "rational […] animal" and
so on, achieve nothing.
Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* (1967a, b: 145)

Ce serait un grand malheur pour l'homme d'être privé
de la possibilité de désobéir.
Julien Freund, *L'essence du politique* (2004: 234)

Introduction

The nature of the relationship between crime and morality—a problem of forbidding conceptual magnitude—is here treated from the narrower angle of the recent criminological debate surrounding so-called "control theory." This theory is reputed the most representative criminological construct of the past twenty-five years. Its chief exponent is an American academic, Travis Hirschi, who, over the span of two decades (1969–1990), issued two differing elaborations of the fundamental idea that Man is an unruly creature needful of appropriate monitoring support(s). Ever since its second installment, criminologists have juggled Hirschi's contribution's as some kind of a hyper-contentious discursive dyad, attacking and praising, in turn, the significance of communal *"bonds"* in socializing the individual (first theory), and the subsequent disregard of virtually all factors for the exclusive predilection of the individual's *"self-control"* (second theory).

Among methodical realists, the later theory is seen as deficient in its expression of crime causation, and such a deficiency, in turn, as an opportunity to redefine crime itself as well as the crucial variables responsible for its commission. According to this critique, it is not (self-) control, but *morality* that should assume the preeminent, conative role in the mechanics of transgression.

Drawing from the realist critique, this essay will sketch an outline of crime typologies in American society divided by class and matching moral outlook, which essentially interprets "control theory" as *the criminological appendix to America's Neoconservative discourse*. In other words, the first part of the essay argues that the trajectory from "socializing bonds" to "self-control" is the criminological caption of America's New Right to the historical developments and acknowledged societal failures that have punctuated the crime wave of 1960–1990. In this sense, the examination of Hirschi's theories in their political/historical context and through the concept of morality yields the following, composite evidence: namely (1) that criminology is a micro-managing tool designed to "control the situation" on the domestic front by means of punishment and/or edification; (2) and that in the early 1990s, when Blacks in America, along with patriotic ardor, came to be regarded by the Neocons as a lost cause, the criminological scope was focused ever more constrictively on the *suburban* wasteland. Thenceforth the gaze was to be set on America's hallowed cookie-cutter sprawl, where "kids" reputedly lacking self-control were to be systematically denied *opportunities* to cause mischief. This conservative preoccupation with "keeping things together" within the (all-White) elite, has insistently ushered into an obsessive desire to "control," and contain, the vandalistic and larcenous (shoplifting) vagaries of the wealthy's (mercurial) adolescent brood on the one hand (see, e.g. Muraskin 1976: 564), and to shelter the same from "bad influences" (i.e. the "white trash" and the "ghetto punks"), on the other.

The second part of the article seeks to thrust anew Thorstein Veblen's powerful socio-logical framework into the arena. This is done not without a sense of urgency for criminology's utter neglect of Veblen's genius has greatly retarded in our view the understanding of basic realities of class structure and of its criminal pathologies. What *The Theory of the Leisure Class* would contribute to the discipline is a broad classification of offenses according to the notion of *ethos*: this is to say that with the very aggregation of a particular socio-economic class—itself a constituent part of a punctiliously hierarchized regime—comes a specific psycho-sociological make-up (the ethos), namely a way of perceiving, acting and being—a collective mindset—which suffuses and envelops that "group" as a whole. (More or less) stunted spiritual development is the key discriminant in this story. In this perspective, the two key Veblenian variables for drawing up a succinct taxonomy of crime are *barbarousness* and *tenacity* (or commitment to purpose). In sum, while both the lowest and uppermost classes tend to be under the sway of barbarous (i.e. acquisitive and prevaricative) behavior, the different level of tenacity existing between the two correspondingly occasions two different sets of criminal morphologies: the epic and Faustian crimes of financial dep-redation or war, for which the over-privileged customarily go scot-free; and the petty, con-crete and violent crimes of theft and homicide, for which, instead, the under-privileged are habitually immured. In between, the privileged middle class battles confusedly with the criminal trespasses of both neighboring strata, in addition to its idiosyncratic white-collar addiction to fraud and tax-evasion. Therefore, crime in its various strains is to be seen as the expression of the specific ethos prevailing in the offender's milieu.

Conclusively, this kind of model allows one to frame the discussion with a general tableau of America's criminal malady, in which the "ambiguous" (Wikström 2010: 230) dimension of Hirschi's models—i.e. the unresolved oscillation between the reliance on instilled law-abidance and external recourse to deterrence—reveals the basic organization/administration of crime and punishment subdivided by class and ethos, as it perforce exists in all uncompromisingly and rigidly compartmentalized societies.

Neoconservative Criminology

> …Sympathy, like love, is not enough.
> J. Q Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (1993: 251, 54)

In brief, Hirschi's theory of "social control" (H1 hereafter) states that unless man is not variously bound to society by way of affective attachment, professional commitment, gregarious involvement and public opinion ("belief"), he is, criminally speaking, at risk. That such a strictly micro, and rather unsophisticated proposition could attract considerable attention immediately after its publication in 1969 is a clear indicator of its *political* valence. In other words, by (1) ignoring entirely personal motivation, (2) dispensing with any form of social explication of crime (poverty above all), and (3) betting all theoretical stakes on so-called "traditional" values, the academic advancement of H1 sent a clear, defiant signal to the sociological mainstream, which, at that time was dominated by Marxian/radical approaches. It was precisely in those days that America's "new" con-servatives (the Kristols, Kirkpatricks, H. Jacksons…)—who were bent on fusing liberal-ism, Big Government, and patriotism—began to stir in disgusted response to the middle-class's embrace of the Summer of Love (e.g. Kristol 1995).

Of course, H1 was not even original: Hirschi himself duly acknowledged his debt to Durkheim's 1903 opus, *Moral Education* (Hirschi 1969: 30), which is customarily cited as

the foundation of "social control" (Taylor 2001: 375). What is the story, then, with Durkheim's treatise? At bottom, it is a perfectly unpersuasive attempt to squeeze morality out of rational reasoning. Foreshadowing the approach of the late "Social Intuitionists" (e.g. Heidt 2001), Durkheim assembled a chain of causation, which begins with the putative sensing of a moral ("do-good") drive within ourselves. The latter then generates an awareness of our needing the regularity of customs, whose authority does discipline our lives—lives that, in the final analysis, ought to be lived for the all-encompassing benefit of the nation: this was a moderate's ode to *la patrie*, in sum. The most revealing aspect of the book was the author's *pessimism* in relation to the solidity of social bonds in times of crisis. In this connection, two were the collectivity's fundamental sources of moral stress-resistance: discipline and attachment. If, in "critical," rebellious times, internalized control ("attachment") could not make up for the epochal lack of public deference to authority, society was condemned to debility, which, as Durkheim feared, would usher in waves of suicides along with other forms of collective dissolution. To avoid such disasters, it was therefore imperative to inculcate a moral, *patriotic* sense into the individual during *childhood*. And if the individual still stood defiant—shielded by "impassioned resistance," as Durkheim put it—there could be no remedy, alas, other than blind punitiveness (Durkheim 2002: 113).

Why an analysis of this kind could be fruitfully retold by American (neo-) conservatives in the late 1960s is not hard to fathom: it corroborated the sentiment that Man is intrinsically bestial ("the question is 'why don't we [all commit crime]?'") (Hirschi 1969: 34); it studiously eluded the problem of social injustice; and it sought to infuse the lapsing middle-class with a reinvigorating boost of "involvement and belief" (in the righteousness of the Vietnam War, most presumably). And so while traditional conservatives were unilaterally bent on punishing and incarcerating (Gordon 1980: 98), the "new" conservatives shifted the attention from deterrence to "attachment." It is therefore Durkheim's patriotic appeal in times of upheaval that is critical in this regard.

Twenty years later, it was patent that the rally to the colors had failed. The war had been humiliatingly lost; the painful metamorphosis of the economy from a manufacturing system to a finance-driven service network had caused such severe dislocations (Becchi and Rey 1993: 32) as to swell massively the estranged ranks of the "poor" and "very poor," in whose midst the vast majority of crimes were consummated; and the government—presently semi-stripped of its "semi-welfare" apparatus—had responded to the truculent desperation and *unemployability* of these (mostly Black) masses by caging an enormous, unprecedented portion thereof (Wacquant 2009: 56–100, 144–149). Yet most dismaying of all for the periscopic eye of the neo-conservative legion was the realization that *the dysfunction of America's middle-class family* had become chronic, if not altogether and hopelessly irremediable: as recounted in Fukuyama's *The Great Disruption*, it seemed as though America would never quite recover from the feverish increase of divorces, juvenile crime, underage sex, illegitimacy, intoxication, unpatriotic distemper, domestic violence and fertility setbacks she had come to suffer in the wave of 1960–1990 (Fukuyama 1999).

It was at this particular juncture that Hirschi, in collaboration with M. Gottfredson, released his most notorious and debated work, *A General Theory of Crime* (1990, hereafter H2). H2 defined crime as "acts of force and fraud undertaken in the pursuit of self-interest" (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 15), and reduced the dynamics of crime to the propitious combination of an individual's low *self-control* (psychological trait) and a tempting *opportunity* (macro-setting). Gone was Durkheim's plea for "attachment," yet not his pedagogical exhortation.

> Crime is simple and easy. [People] will tend to smoke, drink, use drugs, gamble, have children out of wedlock, and engage in illicit sex: […] the evidence of offending versatility is overwhelming. […] Drug and delinquency are both manifestations of an underlying tendency to pursue short-term, immediate pleasure (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 90–93).

H2 suggested that low self-control tends to ossify in childhood, and once it does, no form of attachment can reverse the potential to offend of the incontinent subject—hence self-control theory's insistent reference to child psychology (e.g. Wilson 1993; Zahn-Walker and Robinson 1995). Prevention could thus be effected only by intervening in the early development of the individual through "effective child-rearing" via the traditional channels of family and school (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990: 99–117). Such was the new synthesis: it flattened the depth of field by conspicuously restricting the analysis to a range of crimes that are, all in all, the chief and exclusive worry of the White middle-class (i.e. mainly white-collar fraud, disruptive teenage behavior, and the osmotic muggings from the nearby ghettoes); it adhered to the "economic" view according to which Man is essentially a self-seeking, "feral" (Goode 2008: 12), yet *calculating* creature; and it reiterated, though far more detachedly this time around, its conservative commitment to the values of family and schooling.

In H2, the bigger picture, so to speak, was no longer of import. What seemed to matter most was what to do about White America's endemic familial breakdown—i.e. about all those problematic minors who were said to "assert selfhood" by "testing the limits of acceptable behavior" (Wilson 1993: 9). The key relaying notion in H2 was that of "opportunity," which would eventually dovetail with a whole criminological sub-field devoted to so-called "routine activities," on the one hand, and "techniques of reintegration" on the other. The "routine" approach construes crime as the joint result of individual "criminal readiness," a suitable target (prey or loot), and the logistical absence of deterrents ("guardianship") (Felson 2009; Felson and Clarke 2008; Brantingham and Brantingham 1993). It follows from the theoretical premise of H2—i.e. everyone is to a varying (self-controlling) extent an incorrigible, "hypocritical" deviant—(Felson 2002: 14–15) that, prevention-wise, first best would be to pre-empt crime by monitoring the environment as pervasively as possible, nipping *opportunity* in the bud.

> Individuals in the most deviant structural position — eighteen-year old males with D grade-point-averages whose parents have graduate or professional degrees— typically go riding in a car for fun 110 times per year, visit informally with friends 200 times, go to 40 parties, and spend 170 evenings out for fun […] Routine activities are a key intersection between the macro-level social structure and the micro-level of individual lives (Osgood et al. 1996: 652).

This translates, e.g. into the fastidious enforcement of speed limits, the regulation/prohibition of narcotics, the bureaucratic explosion of auditing and compliance, and the studding of the suburban landscape with CCTVs: "Morals, *in essence,*" writes the father of "routine activities theory," "are a license *to monitor others*" (Felson 2002: 15). Meanwhile, on the intimate front, the elders should be expected to rein in youth's rowdiness by means of *shaming* "backstop" techniques so as to drill teenagers to internalize the proper behavioral patterns (i.e. "punishing within a continuum of love"). On the other hand, needless to say, offenders "beyond shaming," again, can only expect to be punished (without any love, that is) (Braithwaite 1989: 56, 72).

Under H2, one could even devote a chapter, say, to "the pilfering of office supplies" (Brantingham and Brantingham 1993: 277–287): this was the new *criminology of*

suburbia—a discourse born of a middle-class vision shuttered by a triangular perimeter whose apices are the two-garage home, the office and the shopping-mall.[1]

On a higher discursive level, H1 and H2 (with its tributary approaches) formed but a segment of the Neo-conservative platform that was being hatched in the nineties (Young 1999: 32). In the field of ethics its epitomic synthesis was James Q. Wilson's *The Moral Sense*.

Rather than a "new science of the soul," as blurbed by an incontinent *Washington Post*, this was an a-theological compendium bizarrely patched together with the usual mainstream goo of rationalist sermons, "experimental updates," social Darwinism, avuncular uncandidness (e.g. in America "bad families are so rare"…), and gratuitous, explosive idiocies such as the image of Mother Nature inventing Man and not knowing what to do with his senseless aggressiveness; or the claim that, because an "experiment" conducted in a kibbutz showed that boys and girls revert to their respective gender-marked behaviors after having been raised identically, matriarchy is, and has always been, an impossibility…(Wilson 1993: 157, 183–185). Overall, this queer summa was permeated by the tone of postmodern resignation. Predictably, as was also the case with Durkheim's treatise on morality, whenever one tries to conjure the existence of a moral sense by means of the human reason alone, which in so doing applies the patterns derived from natural investigation, he ends up with a pessimistic representation of (collective) life: he inevitably depicts the moral order as degenerating in entropic fashion (Steiner 1986: 48–49).

In essence, Wilson conjectured that morality exists in us as a flicker of conscience ("a small candle flame") (Wilson 1993: 251)—itself the by-product of *selective (i.e. Darwinian) intellectual* development—,[2] vying against the overpowering pull of base instincts. In this evolutionary mold, the self-mastering task of socialization has fallen to the art of *self-control*, which "becomes a dimension of morality" (Wilson 1993: 97). The standard erudite reference cited in support of this thesis is Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*, which ascribes Man's yet-to-be-achieved emancipation from brutishness to the disciplining formation of the centralizing State, and the inter-individual competitive strain to succeed within the new boundaries of modernity's moralizing bureaucracy (Elias 1976). "State monopoly" at the top *and* "competition" at the bottom: here we find, again, two (non-

---

[1] Nothing exemplifies the self-righteous and wholly middle-class-bound screening of suburban criminology more poignantly than the following self-reported self-identifying "experiment" of a rational choice process putatively leading the subject from middle-class respectability to "deviance": "If I could imagine my own circumstances of life changing so that I would be attracted to participation in a deviant subculture, I might imagine first confronting an opportunity to participate with others in illicit drug use. But since I once had a frightening experience with marijuana interacting with alcohol, even soft drug use would not appeal to me in the least. An opportunity to smash things does not appeal either, so a vandalism opportunity would be a bore; an opportunity to rape a woman would overwhelm me with disgust rather than pleasure. *On the other hand*, the prospect of being $1,000 richer and my bank $1,000 poorer sounds like a result that would please me, so maybe if my life circumstances rendered me amenable to crime, *fraud would appeal to my taste*. The point is that criminological theory […] systematically forgets that people have different tastes." (Braithwaite 1989, p. 66, emphasis added). A taste for rape?…Overall, one notices how this author is chiefly concerned with preserving suburban decorum: with a wink to the "democratic" halo of the sixties, he confesses that were he to be a "deviant," he would *first* consider smoking pot—"with others" (of course, since toking solo, as one may infer, is for "losers"). A bad high, however, prevents indulgence. What other mischief, then, may one perpetrate? …Vandalism: improper, to put it mildly ("a bore"). Next: rape, which is (fortunately) deemed "disgusting." "On the other hand," a venial larceny at banking's expense appears to be not without appeal, should circumstances be hard enough to lead one to it. Thus the circle is closed: unsurprisingly, a suburban in good standing will opt for white-collar crime. As shall be argued in the final section, these types of conducts are almost exclusively driven by class and ethos.

[2] The argumentation is overall hardly convincing considering the contradictory use of the Darwinian imagery of the struggle for survival, which Wilson (1993) resorts to account for the selective breeding of violent traits (p. 186) *as well as* empathetic ones (p. 23).

necessarily contradictory) staples of Neo-conservative thought, whose composition is also revelatory of a certain kind of (Straussian) *elitism*—the kind that easily possesses one to pontificate on the merits of "self-mastery" (to this we shall return in the next section).

At a higher rhetorical level still, it may be seen how this type of (criminological and strictly-domestic-oriented) speculation complemented the historical pessimism that pervaded the hegemonic analyses of Neo-conservatism, such as Fukuyama's *The End of History* or A. Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which lamented the corruption of America's fighting (imperial) spirit in the degenerate era of MTV and (leftish) postmodernism (Fukuyama 1992: 230; Bloom 1987). The rhetorical artifices routinely invoked by this clan form a standard set, to be invariably recited according to the following sequence : Hobbes's *homo homini lupus* + self-interest; the Darwinian godless Void pragmatically masked by King and Country, Elias's *Civilizing Process*; *culture* is everything; and crime and poverty are basically unrelated. Indeed, "social control" theorists, categorically—and most disingenuously—deny that the crime wave of 1960–1990 (and the accompanying social disarray) is due to economic/material factors (e.g. Wilson 1993: 176–177; Felson 2002: 7,168) with a view to asserting, instead, that it should be blamed not chiefly on our innate "weakness" (Felson 2002: 42) but rather on the plague of *cultural* relativism: social bonds, already "fragile" per se have been further shaken in their vision by the work of moral debauching perpetrated by the *"avant-garde"* of the New Left (Wilson 1993: 9–10, 176). And such despondency and pessimism over the "collapse in the legitimacy" of American "middle-class values" is, in fine, also revelatory of the movement's (and America's at large) constitutive jingoism and racism. Feeling as though it were vested with the moral custody of the domestic front, Neo-conservative criminology finds itself perennially preoccupied with international rankings of victimization, in which America tends to fare poorly (Felson 2002: 13). Rushing to defend their country's good name, Neo-conservative criminologists rejoin that what merely distinguishes the United States from the rest of the developed world— itself diagnosed with an irreversible anomic syndrome, which is *not* to be interpreted as a defining (and absolutely disquieting) trait of "American exceptionalism"—is its higher degree of homicidal violence. Yet, mind you, deep down:

> We Americans are not more violent than the Europeans, we just do a better job finishing people off (Felson 2002: 14).

Some of that murderous wrath, they say, is the price one has to pay for the creative brutality of American's vibrant democracy—the only political form, Wilson adds, capable of sheltering the human spirit from tyranny (Wilson 1993: 246–250); and the remainder, then, is to be debited to the problematic cohabitation with Blacks, who are responsible for the majority of violent offenses. "An imaginary nation without Blacks," wrote Gary LaFree (not without dreamful expectancy, we suspect), would bring down America's crime rates approximately to the level of Italy's (!) (Lafree 1998: 47)…

Morality, Ethos and Crime

The realist critique of control theory—here in the guise of Situational Action Theory (SAT)[3]—is prevalently aimed at H2, which it acknowledges as "possibly the most popular

---

[3] In order to formulate a proper understanding of crime causation, SAT, in a nutshell, proposes to integrate methodically the motivational and moral make-up of the individual agent with a specification of the particular environment in which he may find himself potentially drawn to offend.

theoretical perspective" in the field.[4] To begin, realists find the notion of "control" rather vague and H2's definition of crime (acts of fraud and force in pursuit of self-interest) exceedingly partial: crime, instead, is redefined as "an act of moral rule-breaking defined in law." Such a redefinition allows one to break down the issue of crime causation into four basic phases:

- the moral make-up of the individual (micro);
- his ability to exercise self-control;
- the moral "air" of the social setting (macro);
- the eventual incidence of deterrence (external controls).

On this basis, realists argue that self-control is not to be thought of as an individual trait but as a faculty that one may choose to exercise under particular circumstances. More specifically, three are the main conceivable scenarios in this framework: (1) the individual's beliefs run counter to those of society; (2) the individual is a type wont to offend out of "habit"; and (3) there exists "moral correspondence" between the subject and his socio-political habitat. In the first two cases, there is simply no occasion to exercise restraint: in the first, motivation is a strong enough drive to perpetrate the offense (as, say, would happen for an act of political violence); and in the second (habit), it is the setting that propitiates what is a "criminal reflex," as it were. All of which is to imply that H2's singularly mono-dimensional representation of crime may be confined to the special *situation* featuring a "square" faced with the option of breaking the law to satisfy his self-interested motivation.

SAT's methodical reappraisal of self-control in the chain of crime causation is cogent, though (self-)control theorists may well afford to ignore it, for, in truth, their socio-politically motivated objective confines them to accounting for little else beyond the suburban "subset" of criminal phenomenology (Goode 2008: 7)—i.e. accounting precisely for those chronicles of White middle-class teenagers *resolving* to indulge, say, a night of mailbox vandalism (moral correspondence with deliberation, accompanied by occasional low self-control). Which is not to say, of course, that H2 has accomplished that segmented task convincingly—the opposite is true (see below); the main weakness of SAT is that of having taken control theory at face value, i.e. as a "general theory," which it never was.

Now, before coming to a general summary of the question of morality and crime in America, a note on Aristotle's book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is in order. As known, Aristotle had drawn up a moral taxonomy comprising five characters. (1) Above all towers the Man of Perfect Self-Mastery (*o sophrón*). Thereafter come (2) the Man of Self-Control (*o enkratés*); (3) the Man of Imperfect Self-Control (*o akratés*); (4) the Profligate, i.e. the man who has lost all self-control (*o akólastos*); (5) and the Brute or Bestial Man (*to theríon*). This typology is purposeful here in that it conjures the notion of *ethos*. After the manner of Ortega y Gasset, we take "ethos" to signify "the system of moral reactions that operate within the spontaneous being of every individual, class, people, or epoch." (Ortega 1966a: 506–507). Above the ensemble of a community's ethoses, Morality beckons with a set of Utopian aspirations, which may inform the "orthopedic" letter of the Law (Ortega 1966b: 687), though not systematically, for the Law is often likely to reflect the *commanding, political* ethos of the elite (Freund 2004: 237).

The notion of "ethos" bears within itself a sort of micro–macro valence for although it attaches to a subject, it is yet impregnated with a code of traditions, of class-woven usages. What this means for the present discussion is that we might be able to bring a modicum of

---

[4] The gist of SAT's critique is drawn from Wikström (2010) and Wikström and Treiber (2007).

structure among what is otherwise treated as the undifferentiated moralities and preferences of the (potentially offending) population. It is not true, as rational choice/control theory asseverates (without SAT objecting), that there is a great variety of motives or desires to the commission of crime: the range of variation of such motivations is actually restricted by the extent of a society's class stratification.

As may be gathered from Thorstein Veblen's grand fresco of the business elite, American society has been suffering for the past two centuries from a severe case of schizophrenia (Veblen 1899), which since his day appears to have paved the way for the victory of the barbarous, invidious animus over the peaceful, gregarious instinct of workmanship. The entire scholarly lode of Strain Theory seems a manifest, though only half-conscious acknowledgment of this spiritual rout: it is now a fact that the aggressive ethos of patriotism and business and competition is very much in control in all matters of American social life,[5] and every other spiritual counterforce likewise very much on the defensive. What has therefore emerged in clear outline is the following.

The vast majority of crimes occupying the minds of criminologists and publicists are *economically-motivated* (Gordon 1980: 95–96). The upper- and upper-middle class (the elite) shares to some extent with the lower "business" classes an involvement in financial fraud and tax evasion, yet the former usually goes scot free whereas the middling strata, when caught, are customarily made to pay an infinitesimal toll of the annual stream of embezzled and undeclared funds (e.g. Messner and Rosenfeld 2007: 29–30). That this is so is dictated by the institutionalized preeminence of banking and finance as (predatory) tools of managerial and political organization: *noblesse oblige* (Quinney 1974: 59–60). At the specular end of the social scale, low class-delinquents are entrusted with the management of services that are critical to the upper echelons, but decorum-wise more or less inadmissible (prostitution, gambling, and narcotics): after all, have not the urban rackets functioned as "one of the queer ladders of social mobility in American life"? (Bell 2000: 129). Depending on the evolving geometries of backroom politics, the bosses (the mobsters of "organized crime") may either go on undisturbed or be pushed aside in some fashion, whereas "the hands" (of "ghetto-crime") exist as the expendables committing *out of habit* the very delicts that will send a great many of them to prison. They are the ones without (patriotic) attachment and "beyond shaming": for the most part Blacks, on whom America appears to have definitely given up—and with her, Neoconservative criminology as well (see chart below). As far as the suburban focus of H2 and routine activities is concerned, its object is clearly visible in the aggregate fate of White middle- and upper low-class adolescents: these have been the target of Hirschi & Co's hortative/admonitory work, and their ornery misconduct—past childhood's little window of opportunity—is presently handled by the preventive technologies of traffic control, beefed-up security, crime-watch architecture and video-camera surveillance.[6]

---

[5] The systematic fomentation of competitive aggressiveness amongst Americans serves the joint purpose of (1) keeping the martial spirit ever sharpened for the benefit of the country's ongoing project of world hegemony (external exigency), and, along with inequality, (2) repressing remuneration levels on the employment front (domestic exigency) (Gordon 1980: 103).

[6] The organizational complement of the elite's employ of CCTVs may be construed as neoliberalism's urge to "veil," "displace", efface*, and thereby criminalize* undesired targets—such as vagrants and other "socially unpresentable" personas. The object of the strategy is ultimately that of redesigning the "moral space" of (sub-)urbia also via a monitoring device—the ubiquitous/recording eye of the camera—that includes, by capturing the deviant's image, as much as it excludes, through the silent intimation to all undesirables to vacate the targeted zone (see Coleman 2003: 28–34).
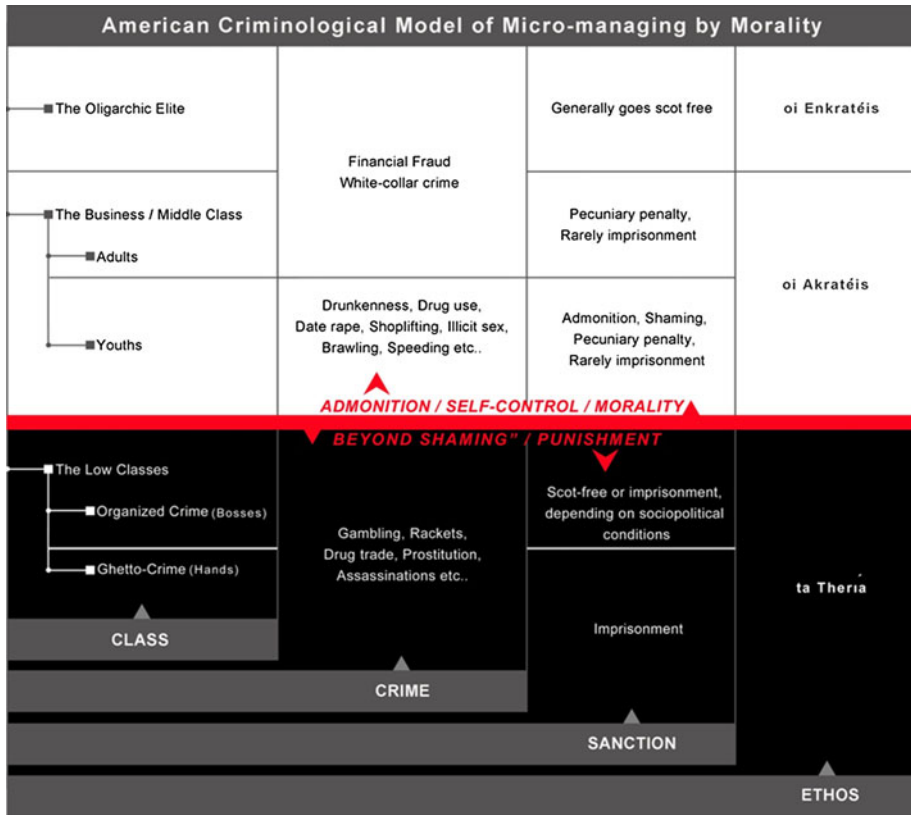
What brings these privileged yet disaffected youths to "break the law" has occupied the minds of a great many. Most interesting in this regard has been the call to train the eye on the "foreground," rather than the background of crime: as s/he seeks the causation of criminal patterns, the criminologist is invited to desist from combining incongruently socio-economic status (the setting) with individual temperamental differences (the individual), and attempt, instead, to unearth more promising clues by exploring the actual pleasure, the seduction to transgress. In this sense, vandalism, shoplifting, and other such "sneaky thrills" among middle-class youths could be contemplated as an exciting and publicly deviant "demonstration of competence" on the part of teenagers routinely subjected, at home and at school, to scheduled broadsides of "humiliation, righteousness, arrogance, ridicule, cynicism, defilement, and vengeance." To which is added the institutional and even more stressful obligation to *perform*—perform physically in sports, intellectually in standardized tests, or "cosmetically" in the "dating market" (Katz 1988: 4, 9).

Certainly, but there is something else to it. If it were mere seduction, such a contention would amount to little more than an aesthetic reissue of Hirschi's "Why don't we all commit crime?" In addition to the very high pitch of competitive aggressiveness, which distinguishes markedly Anglo-American from European culture, disaffection among middle-class teenagers appears to originate in a diffuse feeling of having being repeatedly betrayed by one or both parents for failing to love, shield and/or prepare them properly in an acrimoniously combative environment, and the ensuing vandalism—that is, when the

surging rage, unmitigated by intoxication, does not turn into self-mutilation, or worse—seems consequently a desire to strike at the parents, at symbols of middle-class correctitude, at the genitors' (more or less unforgivable) sins of hypocrisy and selfishness, basically. This seems to be all the more veracious if one is inclined to assume that emotions—and thus even violent, criminal (re)actions—are conjured in order to mask what we, *massmen* of the modern era, are most perturbed about, namely the "emptiness, the absence of personal identity" (Katz 1999: 310–344). The fear of being seized by this sense of "blank-slate-ness," so to speak, is, quite obviously, far more pronounced in teenagers, for whom the "emptiness" is nearly a physiological truth. This would account for the more or less truculent violence of their rebellious motions whenever the "mood-related insecurity" (Kelley 1996) becomes unhinged from proper parental guidance and is thereby surrendered to specific social and aptitudinal drifts. And this specific set of vagaries remains, in fact, a decisive referential instrument for tracing these, as well as all other kinds of, criminal dynamics.

This is in essence the question. Suburbia's criminological romance is a tale of conservatism and racial neurosis; of parental inadequacy; of pervading barbarousness—an acquisitive barbarousness which, alas, has come to nest in and cohabit rather fluidly with technology, itself the brainchild of a mindset in principle hostile to barbarousness (Veblen's core insight of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*); but, more than anything, it is a tale of denial. Ever since the potent inflow of impecunious, non-Protestant immigrants and the "dangerous" propinquity of non-affluent Whites in the "transition zones" of America's metropolises, the upper-class has been hard pressed to insulate itself from these threats as best as it could. In this sense, Sutherland's classic Differential Association Theory (1939–1947) appears as a hefty rhetorical artifact superimposed on a very straightforward drawing of the line dividing proper frequentations from unsavory ones—unsavory clusters such as, say, the honored society of thieves or gangsters, which, with political correct disingenuousness *avant la lettre,* were posited as "social groups" in their own right (them), yet of a "different" kind from the "normal" ones (us). Furthermore, Social Learning Theory, which, building on Sutherland's treatises, predicates the persistence of or desistance from crime on past and present rewards and punishments, is, again, the aseptic expression of minds preoccupied with rehabilitating or preempting, through proper incentives, those members of the middle-classes (their own) that, for one deviant reason or another, have come to, or could, cross "the wrong side of the tracks." Coming full circle, a critic did indeed remark how central statements of H2 seem, in fact, "lifted straight out of Social Learning Theory" (Akers 1991: 209). Denial above all, because what passes as the "common sense" of control theory is, as has been widely recognized, the implicit avowal of a genuine, if class-conscious, concern exclusively for the fate of one's "own children" (Empey 1982: 268); yet what abides is the utter lack of candor of this underlying sentiment of parental apprehensiveness. Rather than facing their own personal limitations, rather than questioning the status quo or the exclusivist, pecuniary and ultra-competitive ethos they so adamantly enforce in the hearth, the custodians of suburban propriety prefer to seek the bad seeds "outside," in "other groups," in greed, or in the immutable laws of human nature, whatever those may be.

To return to our Veblenian chart, what pushes one to offend is not so much a preliminary question of psychological predisposition as one of ethos: evidently, being instilled since a young age a *code* of violence is bound to precipitate that criminal automatism that renders the issue of self-control conceptually irrelevant on the one hand, and behavioral "reform" (according to the conventional canons of morality) virtually impossible on the other. These conditions apply to the Veblenian sketch of the "low-class delinquent."

Alternatively, the "middle-class occasional vandal," signals through his (intermittent) deviancy an implicit rejection of the mores and ethos imposed at home, either because they are unendurably rigid, or because he feels that the enforcers themselves—the parents—do not live up to those very standards, and have thus with their hypocrisy thrown family organization into fundamental disarray (the betrayal, as mentioned above). In either case, the resort to violence is, in Veblenian parlance, a testimony of *low tenacity*: that is, a temperamental incapacity to commit to a purpose, to endure adversity for the sake of higher (spiritual) rewards and/or inner peace. Indeed, tenacity, variously gradated, is a far richer and more sophisticated notion than narrowly-defined self-control, for it links self-mastery to the dictates of one's conscience as the latter develops in response to the highest injunctions of the prevailing moral code (something which occurs with manifest schizo-phrenia in all self-righteous predators: military officers, CEOs, Mafia dons, etc.). Yet the possibility of desisting from venting wrath senselessly and being successively re-embraced by society somehow presupposes that, in the course of his upbringing, the individual, despite unfortunate deliberations and more or less imperious difficulties occasioned by an initial failing of tenaciousness, has been afforded the opportunity to glimpse more or less studiously these loftier ideals. Which is what may be generally counted on by growing up in a climate, spiritually and materially speaking, not wholly indigent. In social zones, instead, where, to paraphrase Lombroso, the spiritual temperature is low (Lombroso 2005: 428), no such reference points, no such ideals, no such glimpses of higher ethoses or privileges have ever been visible or available long enough to serve eventually as a grip with which one may climb back to conformity. In such zones, the chances to redress "hardened criminals" are perforce slim. If an individual exhibiting very low tenacity finds himself in a low-class setting fully impregnated by the barbarous ethos—i.e. one denoted by unremitting violence, virtual illiteracy, physical prowess, a sublimated sense of rank, profligacy, belief in luck, and predaceous appetites—the probability of his becoming a "delinquent" is not far from certainty. Thus, sensationally, Veblen distinguished low-class delinquents from no less barbarous captains of finance by a fundamental difference, *not in kind, but in degree*—of tenaciousness (a psycho-sociological trait), in fact: for both types, by sharing the barbarous mind-cast, exhibit the common worship of prevarication and prepotency. These observations brought Veblen to affirm, versus a non-comprehending Marxist Left, the fundamental *conservatism* of the low-classes by underscoring the mechanisms of spiritual affinity accounting for the proletariat's most intense emulative attraction to the caste of the rich and powerful.

It is without surprise, then, that one notices, yet again, how nothing really new is ever being written. In the end, what H2 might have implied with its inordinate emphasis on self-control was the politically incorrect wish to reaffirm the inevitability of social hierarchy: namely, that there are unreformable brutes at the bottom (*ta thería*); self-possessed "respectable folk" (*oi enkrateís*) somewhere up there, at the top; and undemonstrative types struggling with restraint in the *middle* (*oi akrateís*):

> Cleverness is not incompatible with Unrestraint (*akráteia*) […]. Nor indeed does the unrestrained man even know the right in the sense of one who consciously exercises his knowledge, but only as a man asleep or drunk can be said to know something (Aristotle 1968: 417).

H1 seemed a tale just of *akrateís*, of mediocrities, with no place given to the "better sort of men"—better sort of men, the *enkrateís*, whom H2 eventually ushered in, forgetting, of course, that these leaders might very well be the most miserable and dysfunctional of the suburban lot. And that is because, as the skeptics of antiquity understood, the temperate

man who daily strives to repress by reason low impulses within himself "retains the evil" at the end of the day, and is thus left seething in a state of perennial "perturbation" (Sextus Empiricus 1967b: 509).

Be it said, for the sake of thoroughness and in conclusion, that the "profligates" do not figure here for they—as the iconographic, non-violent "drop-outs"—, belong to that specially non-acquisitive and all but defeated half of the American Spirit, as do the *sofróntes*, wise and compassionate types, of whom—and of this we are certain—suburbia's crime experts will never be a part.

References

Akers, R. L. (1991). Self-control as general theory of crime. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 7*(2), 201–211.

Aristotle. (1968). *The Nicomachean ethics* (H. Rackham, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Library, Book VII, x.

Becchi, A., & Rey, G. M. (1993). *L'economia criminale*. Roma: Laterza.

Bell, D. (2000 [1960]). *The end of ideology. On the exhaustion of political ideas in the fifties*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bloom, A. (1987). *The closing of the American mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brantingham, P. L., & Brantingham, P. J. (1993). Environment, routine, and situation: Toward a pattern theory of crime. In M. Felson & R. V. Clarke (Eds.), *Routine activity and rational choice*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions.

Coleman, R. (2003). Images from a neoliberal city: The state surveillance and social control. *Critical Criminology, 12*, 21–42.

Durkheim, E. (2002 [1903]). *Moral education. A study in the theory and application of the sociology of education*. New York: The Free Press.

Elias, N. (1976 [1939]). *The civilizing process. State formation and civilization*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Empey, L. T. (1982). *American delinquency—its meaning and construction*. Chicago: Dorsey Press.

Felson, M. (2002). *Crime and everyday life*. London: Sage Publications.

Felson, M. (2009). Violence, crime and violent crime. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence, 3*(1), 23–29.

Felson, M., & Clarke, R. V. (2008). Opportunity makes the thief, *Police research series*, paper 98, Policing and Reducing Crime Unit, Development and Statistics Directorate, London Home Office.

Freund, J. (2004 [1986]). *L'essence du politique*. Paris: Dalloz.

Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York: The Free Press.

Fukuyama, F. (1999). *The great disruption. Human nature and the reconstitution of social order*. London: Pacific Books.

Goode, E. (2008). Out of control? An introduction to the theory of crime. In E. Good (Ed.), *Out of control. Assessing the general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gordon, D. M. (1980 [1971]). Capitalism, class and crime in America. In R. Anderson, & J. J. Siegfried (Eds.), *The economics of crime*. New York: Wiley.

Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Heidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgments. *Psychological Review, 108*(4), 814–834.

Hirschi, T. (1969). *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: The University of California Press.

Katz, J. (1988). *Seductions of crime. Moral and sensual attractions in doing evil*. New York: Basic Books.

Katz, J. (1999). *How emotions work*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Kelley, T. M. (1996). A critique of social bonding and control theory of delinquency using the principles of psychology of the mind. *Adolescence, 38*(122), 321–338.

Kristol, I. (1995). *Neoconservatism. The autobiography of an idea*. New York: The Free Press.

LaFree, G. (1998). *Losing legitimacy. Street crime and the decline of social institutions in America*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Lombroso, C. (2005). *Delitto, genio, follia. Scritti scelti*. Bollati Boringhieri: Torino.

Messner, S. F., & Rosenfeld, R. (2007). *Crime and the American dream*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wodsworth.

Muraskin, W. A. (1976). The social control theory in American history: A critique. *Journal of Social History, 9*, 559–569.

Ortega y Gasset, J. (1966a [1925]). Conversación en el 'Golf' o la Idea del Dharma. In *Al Margen de las Días, Obras Completas Vol. II*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente.

Ortega y Gasset, J. (1966b [1953]). Individuo y Organización, *Obras Completas Vol. IX*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente.

Osgood, D. W., Wilson, J. K., O'Malley, P. M., & Johnson, L. D. (1996). Routine activities and individual deviant behavior. *American Sociological Review, 61*, 635–655.

Quinney, R. (1974). *Critique of the legal order. Crime Control and Capitalist Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Sextus Empiricus (1967a). Against the logicians. In *Works Vol. II* (R. G. Bury, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Library, Book I [269–273].

Sextus Empiricus (1967b). Outlines of pyrrhonism. *Works Vol. I* (R. G. Bury, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Loeb Library, Book III, 276.

Steiner, R. (1986 [1921]). *Fruits of anthroposophy*. London: Rudolf Steiner Press.

Taylor, C. (2001). The relationship between social control and self-control: Tracing Hirschi's criminological career. *Theoretical Criminology, 5*(3), 369–388.

Veblen, T. (1899). *The theory of the leisure class. An economic study of institutions*. New York: Macmillan.

Wacquant, L. (2009 [1999]). *Prisons of poverty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wikström, P. O. (2010). Explaining crime as moral actions. In S. Hitlin & S. Vaisey (Eds.), *Handbook of the sociology of morality*. New York: Springer.

Wikström, P. O., & Treiber, K. (2007). The role of self-control in crime causation: Beyond Gottfredson & Hirschi's *General theory of crime. European Journal of Criminology, 4*(2), 237–264.

Wilson, J. Q. (1993). *The moral sense*. New York: The Free Press.

Young, J. (1999). *The exclusive society. Exclusion, crime and difference in late modernity*. London: Sage.

Zahn-Walker, C., & Robinson, J. (1995). Empathy and guilt: Early origins of feelings of responsibility. In J. P. Tangney & K. W. Fischer (Eds.), *Self-conscious emotions: The psychology of guilt, shame, embarrassment, and pride* (pp. 143–173). New York: The Guilford Press.