

Theorizing Media and Crime

1

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Media “Effects” 13	Pluralism, Competition, and Ideological Struggle 26
Mass Society Theory 15	Realism and Reception Analysis 29
Behaviorism and Positivism 15	Late Modernity and Postmodernism 30
The Legacy of Effects Research 18	Cultural Criminology 33
Strain Theory and Anomie 20	Summary 36
Marxism, Critical Criminology, and the “Dominant Ideology” Approach 21	Study Questions 38
The Legacy of Marxism: Critical Criminology and Corporate Crime 25	Further Reading 38

OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 provides:

- An overview of the theoretical contours that have shaped the academic fields of criminology and media studies during the modern period.
- A discussion of the “media effects” debate; its origins, its epistemological value, and its influence on contemporary debates about media, crime, and violence.
- An analysis of the theories—both individual (behaviorism, positivism) and social (anomie, dominant ideology)—that have dominated debates about the relationship between media and crime within the academy.
- An analysis of the theories (pluralism, left realism) that have emerged from within the academy but have explicitly addressed the implications of theory for practitioners and policymakers.
- An exploration of new, emerging theories, which can broadly be called “post-modern,” including cultural criminology.

KEY TERMS

- anomie 20
- behaviorism 13
- crime 12
- criminalization 22
- critical criminology 22
- cultural criminology 33
- deviance 12
- effects research 13
- folk devils 19
- hegemony 21
- hypodermic syringe model 17

- ideological 22
- late modernity 30
- left realism 29
- Marxism 21
- mass media 12
- mass society 13
- mediated 28
- paradigm 21
- pluralism 27
- political economy 22
- positivism 15
- postmodernism 30
- psychoanalysis 15
- reception analysis 29
- stereotyping 28

Why are we so fascinated by **crime** and **deviance**? If the media can so successfully engage the public’s fascination, can they equally tap into—and increase—people’s fears about crime? Is the media’s interest in—some would say, obsession with—crime *harmful*? What exactly *is* the relationship between the **mass media** and crime? Students and researchers of both criminology and media studies have sought to understand the connections between media and crime for well over a century. It’s interesting to note that, although criminologists and media theorists rarely work together, striking parallels can be found between their efforts to understand and “unpack” the relationships between crime, deviance, and criminal justice on the one hand and media and popular culture on the other. Indeed, it is not just at the interface between crime and media that we find similarities between the two disciplines. Parallels between criminology and media studies are evident even when we consider some of the most fundamental questions that have concerned academics in each field, such as “What *makes* a criminal?” and “Why do the mass media *matter*?”

The reason for this is that as criminology and media studies have developed as areas of interest, they have been shaped by a number of different theoretical and empirical perspectives that have, in turn, been heavily influenced by developments in related fields, notably sociology and psychology, but also other disciplines across the arts, sciences, and social sciences. Equally, academic research is almost always shaped by external forces and events from the social, political, economic, and cultural worlds. Consequently, we can look back through history and note how major episodes and developments—for example, Freud’s “discovery” of the unconscious, or the exile of Jewish intellectuals to America at the time of Nazi ascendancy in Germany—have influenced the intellectual contours of both criminology and media studies in ways that, at times, have synthesized the concerns of each. In addition, the interdisciplinary nature of both subject areas and their shared origins in the social sciences has meant that, since the 1960s when they were introduced as degree studies at universities, a number of key figures working at the nexus between criminology and media/cultural studies have succeeded in bringing their work to readerships in both subject areas—Stanley Cohen, Richard Ericson, Stuart Hall, Jock Young, Jack Katz, Mark Fishman, and Gray Cavender, to name a few.

The purpose of this first chapter is to introduce some of this cross-disciplinary scholarship and to develop a theoretical context for what follows in the remainder of the book. The chapter is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of all the theoretical perspectives that have shaped media research and criminology in the modern era—an endeavor that could fill at least an entire book on its own. Instead, it will draw from each tradition a few of the major theoretical “pegs” upon which we can hang our consideration of the relationship between media and crime. These approaches are

presented in an analogous fashion with an emphasis on the points of similarity and convergence between the two fields of study (but remember that, in the main, scholars in media studies have worked entirely independently of those in criminology and vice versa). In addition, the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter are presented in the broadly chronological order in which they were developed, although it is important to stress that theories do not simply appear and then, at some later date, disappear, to be replaced by something altogether more sophisticated and enlightening. While we can take an overview of the development of an academic discipline and detect some degree of linearity insofar as we can see fundamental shifts in critical thinking, this linearity does not mean that there were always decisive breaks in opinion as each theoretical phase came and went. In fact, there is a great deal of overlap in the approaches that follow, with many points of correspondence as well as conflict. Nor does it necessarily indicate a coherence of opinion within each theoretical position or even any real sense of progress in our understanding and knowledge of certain issues. As John Tierney puts it

There is always a danger of oversimplification when trying to paint in some historical background, of ending up with such broad brushstrokes that the past becomes a caricature of itself, smoothed out and shed of all those irksome details that confound an apparent coherence and elegant simplicity. (1996, p. 49)

Notwithstanding that what follows is of necessity selective, condensed, and painted with a very broad brush, this chapter seeks to locate the last 50 years of university-taught media studies and criminology—across two continents—within over 100 years of intellectual discourse about the theoretical and empirical connections between media and crime. Our discussion begins with one of the most enduring questions in the field, that of media “effects.”

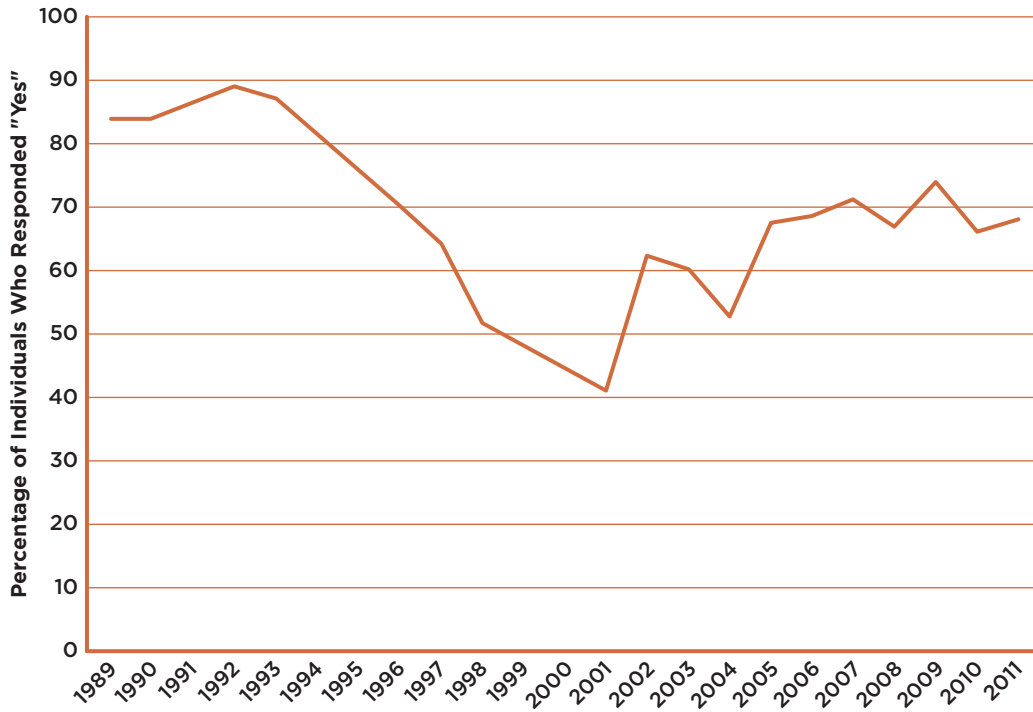
MEDIA “EFFECTS”

One of the most persistent debates in academic and lay circles concerning the mass media is the extent to which media can be said to cause antisocial, deviant, or criminal behavior: In other words, to what extent do the media “make us do things?” The academic study of this phenomenon—**effects research**, as it has come to be known—developed from two main sources: **mass society** theory and **behaviorism**. Although deriving from different disciplines—sociology and psychology, respectively—these two approaches find compatibility in their essentially pessimistic view of society and their belief that human nature is unstable and susceptible to external influences. This section explores how mass society theory and psychological behaviorism gave rise to the notion that media images are responsible for eroding moral standards, subverting consensual codes of behavior and corrupting young minds.

Since the advent of the modern media industry, it is often taken as an unassailable fact that society has become more violent. The arrival and growth of film, television, computer technologies, and social media have served to intensify public anxieties, but there are few crime waves that are genuinely new phenomena despite the media’s efforts

FIGURE 1.1

Is there more crime in the U.S. now than there was a year ago? (1989–2011)



Source: Based on data from Gallup, Inc. and University at Albany Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics.

to present them as such. For many observers, it is a matter of “common sense” that society has become increasingly characterized by crime—especially violent crime—since the advent of the mass media, even though crime surveys show declining rates of offending in many jurisdictions. For instance, the Uniform Crime Reports published annually by the Federal Bureau of Investigation have shown a fairly consistent reduction in rates of violent crime since a peak in 1993 (747.1 per 100,000 in 1993 compared to 386.9 in 2012). Yet, as an annual nationally representative opinion survey shows (Figure 1.1), a large segment of the U.S. public consistently reports that crime is getting worse, not better.

In other words, despite the well-publicized “crime drop,” a fairly sizable portion of the American public still believe rates of violent crime to be on the rise, a mythology often blamed on an insufficiently regulated media. Yet, as Pearson (1983) illustrates, the history of respectable fears goes back several hundred years, and public outrage at perceived crime waves has become more intensely focused with the introduction of each new media innovation. From theatrical productions in the 18th century, to the

birth of commercial cinema and the emergence of cheap, crime tabloids known as “penny dreadfuls” at the end of the 19th century, to jazz and “pulp fiction” in the early 20th century, popular fears about the influence of text and visual images on vulnerable minds have been well rehearsed. As significant advancements were made throughout the 20th century in photography, cinema, the popular press, television, and, latterly, mobile communication technologies and the Internet, it became common for writers and thinkers to mourn the passing of a literate culture, which was believed to require a degree of critical thinking, and bemoan its replacement, a visual popular culture that was believed to plug directly into the mind of the masses without need for rational thought or interpretation.

Mass Society Theory

Emerging in the latter years of the 19th century and early 20th century, “mass society” became firmly established as a sociological theory after the Second World War. The term usually carries negative connotations, referring to the masses or the “common people,” who are characterized by their lack of individuality, their alienation from the moral and ethical values to be gained from work and religion, their political apathy, and their taste for “low” culture. In most versions of the theory, individuals are seen as uneducated, ignorant, potentially unruly, and prone to violence. The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a period of tremendous turbulence and uncertainty, and mass society theorists held that social upheavals associated with industrialization, urbanization, and the Great War in Europe had made people feel increasingly vulnerable. Within this atomized society, two important strands of thought can be detected. First, it was believed that as communities fragmented and traditional social ties were dismantled, society became a mass of isolated individuals cut adrift from kinship and organic ties and lacking moral cohesion. An increase in crime and antisocial behavior seemed inevitable, and as mass society took hold—in all its complex, overbureaucratized incomprehensibility—citizens turned away from the authorities, who were seen as remote, indifferent, and incompetent. Instead, they sought solutions to crime at a personal, community-orientated, “micro” level, which included vigilantism, personal security devices, and, in some countries, guns. The second significant development that emerged from conceptualizations of mass society was that the media were seen as both an aid to people’s well-being under difficult circumstances and a powerful force for controlling people’s thoughts and diverting them from political action.

Behaviorism and Positivism

In addition to mass society theory, models of media effects have been strongly influenced by behaviorism, an empiricist approach pioneered by American psychologist J. B. Watson in the first decade of the 20th century. Deriving from a philosophy known as **positivism**, which emerged from the natural sciences and regards the world as fixed and quantifiable, behaviorism represented a major challenge to the more dominant perspective of **psychoanalysis**. Shifting the research focus away from the realm of the mind with its emphasis on introspection and individual interpretation, behavioral psychologists argued that an individual’s identity was shaped by their responses to the external environment, which

formed stable and recognizable patterns of behavior that could be publicly observed. In addition to emulating the scientific examination of relations between organisms in the natural world, Watson was inspired by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov, who was famously conducting experiments with dogs, producing “conditioned responses” (salivating) to external stimuli (a bell ringing). The impact of these developments led to a belief that the complex structures and systems that make up human behavior could be observed and measured and predictions of future behavior made. In addition to stimulus–response experiments in psychology and the natural sciences, developments were occurring elsewhere that took a similar view of human behavior; for example, the modern education system was being established with learning being seen as something to be tested and examined.

Meanwhile, in criminology, the search for objective knowledge through the positive application of science was also having a significant impact. The endeavor to observe and measure the relationship between “cause and effect” led to a belief that criminality is not a matter of free will but caused by a biological, psychological, or social disposition over which the offender has little or no control. Through gaining knowledge about how behavior is determined by such conditions—be they genetic deficiencies or disadvantages associated with their social environments—it was believed that problems such as crime and deviance could be examined and treated. The most famous name in positivist criminology is Cesare Lombroso, an Italian physician who studied the bodies of executed criminals and concluded that lawbreakers were physically different from nonoffenders. He claimed that criminals were atavistic throwbacks to an earlier stage of biological development and could be identified by physical abnormalities such as prominent jaws, strong canine teeth, sloping foreheads, unusual ear size, and so on. Although in more recent years, positivist forms of criminology have become theoretically more sophisticated, Lombroso’s rather crude approach to biological criminology is still evident today, particularly in popular media discourses about women and children who commit serious and violent crime (see Chapters 4 and 5).

While criminologists in the early decades of the 20th century were concerning themselves with isolating the variables most likely to be found in criminals as distinct from noncriminals, media researchers were also developing new theories based on positivist assumptions and behaviorist methods. The notion that all human action is modeled on the conditioned reflex, so that one’s action is precipitated by responses to stimuli in one’s environment rather than being a matter of individual agency, made the new media of mass communication an obvious candidate for concern. Amid rising levels of affluence, advertisers were to become regarded as “hidden persuaders” who could influence people to purchase consumer goods almost against their better judgment. Additionally, experiments were conducted under laboratory conditions to try to establish a direct causal link between media images and resultant changes in behavior, notably an inclination among research participants to demonstrate markedly agitated or aggressive tendencies.

One of the most famous series of experiments was conducted by Albert Bandura and colleagues at Stanford University, California, in the 1950s and 1960s, in which children were shown a film or cartoon depicting some kind of violent act and were then given “Bobo” dolls to play with (these were large inflatable dolls with weighted bases to ensure

that they wobbled but did not stay down when struck). Their behavior toward the dolls was used as a measure of the program's effect, and when the children were observed behaving aggressively (compared to a control group who did not watch the violent content), it was taken as evidence that a direct relationship existed between "screen violence" and juvenile aggression. Although these studies were undoubtedly influential and indeed have attained a certain notoriety, they are hugely problematic and have been rejected by most contemporary media scholars on the grounds of their many flaws and inconsistencies. Bandura and his colleagues have been widely discredited for, among other things, failing to replicate a "real-life" media environment; reducing complex patterns of human behavior to a single factor among a wide network of mediating influences and therefore treating children as unsophisticated "lab rats"; being able to measure only immediate responses to media content and having nothing to say about the long-term, cumulative effects of exposure to violent material; using dolls that were designed to frustrate; praising or rewarding children when they behaved as "expected"; and overlooking the fact that children who had not been shown any film stimulus were nevertheless found to behave aggressively toward the Bobo doll if left with it—especially if they felt it was expected of them by the experimenter.

Effects research is sometimes called the **hypodermic syringe model** because the relationship between media and audiences is conceptualized as a mechanistic and unsophisticated process by which the media "inject" values, ideas, and information directly into the passive receiver, producing direct and unmediated "effects" that, in turn, have a negative influence on thoughts and actions. Anxieties about media effects have traditionally taken one of three forms. The first is a moral or religious anxiety that exposure to the popular media encourages lewd behavior and corrupts established norms of decency and moral certitude. A second anxiety, from the intellectual right, is that the mass media undermine the civilizing influence of high culture (great literature, art, and so on) and debase tastes. A third concern, which has traditionally been associated with the intellectual left, was that the mass media represent the ruling elite and manipulate mass consciousness in their interests. This view was given a particular impetus by the emergence of fascist and totalitarian governments across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, which used propaganda to great effect in winning the hearts and minds of the people. The belief that the new media of mass communications were among the most powerful weapons of these political regimes was given academic attention by members of the Frankfurt School—a group of predominantly Jewish scholars who themselves fled Hitler's Germany for America.

A famous example that appears to support mass society theory's belief in an omnipresent and potentially harmful media and behaviorism's assumptions about the observable reactions of a susceptible audience concerns the radio transmission of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*, which aired on the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) on Halloween Night in October 1938. The broadcast was a fictitious drama concerning the invasion of aliens from Mars, but many believed they were listening to a *real* report of a Martian attack. While the broadcast was on air, panic broke out. People all over the U.S. prayed, cried, fled their homes, and telephoned loved ones to say emotional farewells (Cantril, 1940, as cited in O'Sullivan & Jewkes, 1997). One in six listeners were said to

have been very frightened by the broadcast, a fear that was exacerbated by the stature of the narrator, Orson Welles, and by the cast of “experts” giving orders for evacuation and attack. As one listener said: “I believed the broadcast as soon as I heard the professor from Princeton and the officials in Washington” (p. 9). This case provides a powerfully resonant metaphor for the belief that the modern media are capable of exerting harmful influences, of triggering mass outbreaks of negative social consequence, and of causing damaging psychological effects. However, to characterize the episode as “proof” of the hypodermic syringe effect of the media would be very misleading. The relationship between stimulus and response was not simple or direct because the panic experienced by some listeners was not without context. It was the time of the Depression, and American citizens were experiencing a prolonged period of economic unrest and widespread unemployment and were looking to their leaders for reassurance and direction. War was breaking out in Europe, and many believed that an attack by a foreign power was imminent. It is of little surprise, then, that the realistic quality of the broadcast—played out as an extended news report in which the radio announcer appeared to be actually witnessing terrible events unfolding before him—powerfully tapped into the feelings of insecurity, change, and loss being experienced by many American people to produce panic.

The Legacy of Effects Research

Scholars in the UK have strongly resisted attempts to assert a direct, causal link between media images and deviant behavior. The same cannot be said for those here in the United States, as researchers and various activist groups continue to search for links between things like video games or music and antisocial behaviors. Still, for many, the idea of isolating television, film, or any other medium as a variable and ignoring all the other factors that might influence a person’s behavior is considered too crude and reductive an idea to be of any epistemological value. Much effects research cannot adequately address the subtleties of media meanings, the polysemy of media texts (that is, their being open to multiple interpretations), the unique characteristics and identity of the audience member, or the social and cultural context within which the encounter between media text and audience member occurs. It mistakenly assumes that we all have the same ideas about what constitutes “aggression,” “violence,” and “deviance” and that those who are susceptible to harmful portrayals can be affected by a “one-off” media incident, regardless of the wider context of a lifetime of meaning-making. Media effects research also tends to ignore the possibility that influence flows in both directions—which is to say that the characteristics, interests, and concerns of the audience may actually hold some sway over what the media produce.

But despite obvious flaws, behaviorist assumptions about the power of the media to influence criminal and antisocial behavior persist, especially—and somewhat ironically—in discussions within the popular media, which are frequently intended to bring pressure on governments and other authorities to tighten up controls on other elements of the media. Of particular salience in the public imagination is the notion that media content may lead to copycat acts of violence. This view is prominently aired when spree killings occur, especially those on school and college campuses perpetrated by disaffected students, and when new films and computer

games are released that are clearly aimed at consumers younger than the official age classification awarded them. Assumptions about harmful media effects draw on Lombrosian ideas about the kinds of individuals most likely to be affected. In addition, they dovetail neatly with mass society theorists' fears that institutions such as the family and religion are losing their power to shape young minds and that socialization happens instead via external forces, notably the media. Whether assessing the effects of advertising, measuring the usefulness of political campaigns in predicting voting behavior, deciding film and video game classifications, or introducing software to aid parents in controlling their children's exposure to certain forms of Internet content, much policy in these areas is underpinned by mediacentric, message-specific, micro-orientated, positivist, authoritarian, short-term assumptions of human behavior.

The ongoing political debate about censorship and control of the media tends to periodically reach an apotheosis when serious, high-profile crimes occur, especially those perpetrated by children or young people. There can arguably be no better example of this than the tragic death of a two-year-old child at the hands of two older boys in Liverpool, UK, in February 1993, which continues to have repercussions in political, legal, cultural, and media spheres more than 20 years later (and which will be discussed further in Chapter 4). There was a great deal of speculation in the popular press at the time of the offense that the young murderers (who were age 10) had watched and imitated *Child's Play 3*, a mildly violent American film about a psychopathic doll. Despite there being no evidence that the boys ever saw the film and consistent denials from the police that there was a connection, the insidious features of *Child's Play 3* were soon ingrained in the public consciousness:

Our gut tells us they must have seen the evil doll Chucky. They must have loved the film. And they must have seen it over and over again, because some of the things they did are almost exact copies of the screenplay . . . We all know that violence begets violence. (*Daily Mirror*, December 1, 1993, quoted in Petley, 1997, p. 188)

Despite the highly questionable evidence for the potentially harmful effects of media content, the proposition that media portrayals of crime and violence desensitize the viewer to “real” pain and suffering, and may excite or arouse some people to commit similar acts, persists in the popular imagination, where it is rarely applied universally but tends to be tinged with a distinct class-edged bias. Echoes of both mass society theory and criminological positivism can be detected in the lingering notion of a threatening “underclass” who pose the greatest threat to society. This view, appealing to commonsense notions of “intelligent people” versus the dark shapeless mass that forms the residue of society, also has a gendered bias. The contemporary culture of blame is frequently directed at the “monstrous offspring” of “bad mothers,” a construction that combines two contemporary **folk devils** and taps into cultural fears of the “other,” which will be explored further in Chapters 4 and 5. Consequently, when particularly horrific crimes come to light, the knee-jerk reaction of a society unwilling to concede that depravity and cruelty reside within its midst is frequently to attribute blame to the familiar scapegoat of the mass media.

Another element of the sentiment expressed in the British newspaper quoted above, which also has its roots in mass society theory, concerns a broader preoccupation with the globalization of cultural forms and products and, in particular, the American origin of much popular global culture. Television, film, video, and the Internet have been targets for criticism *outside* the U.S. by those who view anything American in origin as intrinsically cheap and trashy—or worse. In the UK, fears dating back more than a century have become crystallized in the view that the popular media are slowly corrupting the “British” way of life by importing values that are altogether more vulgar from the other side of the Atlantic. The concerns of Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer about the debasement of “high” culture by “low” popular cultural forms found synthesis in the UK with elitist concerns about an American-inspired youth culture in postwar Britain. In a fairly consistent fashion, moral panics have appeared in the UK only months after their appearance in the United States, and a wide range of phenomena—rock-and-roll music, mugging, dangerous dogs, carjacking, satanic child abuse, gun crime, gang warfare, and crystal meth addiction—have been characterized by media as essentially “un-British”—an unwelcome and alien crime wave of American origin (see Chapter 3).

STRAIN THEORY AND ANOMIE

By the 1960s, academic scholars were turning their backs on positivist, behaviorist research, believing that it attributed too much power to the media and underestimated the importance of the social contexts of media consumption, the social structures that mediate the relationship between the state and the individual, and the sophistication and diversity of the audience. Similarly, positivist approaches to explaining crime in terms of its individual, biological roots were giving way to more sociologically informed approaches, which originated in the work of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s. The overriding concern of Chicago School sociology was to understand the role of social environment and social interaction on deviant and criminal behavior. In other words, it was recognized that where people grow up and who they associate with is closely linked to their likelihood of involvement in crime and antisocial behavior.

Limitations of space preclude a full discussion of sociological approaches to crime here, but one important early theory that has a bearing on the present discussion of the relationship between media and crime is Robert Merton’s (1938) strain theory, or **anomie**. Like mass society theory, strain theory takes as its starting point a decline of community and social order and its replacement by alienation and disorder. Whole sections of society are cut adrift, unable to conform to the norms that traditionally bind communities together. Yet, within this state of normlessness, society as a whole remains more or less intact. Social cohesion may be partly accounted for by the pursuit of common objectives, and anomie draws attention to the goals that people are encouraged to aspire to, such as a comfortable level of wealth or status, and their means of attaining those goals; for example, hard work. Through socialization, most come to accept both the goals *and* the legitimate means of achieving them, a process summed up in the notion of the “American Dream.” But anomie describes a situation where a society places strong emphasis on a particular goal but far less emphasis on the appropriate means of achieving

it. It is this imbalance that can lead some individuals, whom Merton terms “innovators,” to pursue nonconformist or illegal paths to achieve the culturally sanctioned goals of success and wealth and is one of the key factors involved in the internalization of cultural goals is the media that, it might be argued, instill in people needs and desires that may not be gratifiable by means other than criminal. The anomic drive might thus be less concerned with feelings of desperation and have more to do with conspicuous consumption and the desire for peer approval. Some researchers even suggest that strain theory may help to explain serial killing, arguing that the growth of the American economy since the 1960s has resulted in a commensurate rise in the numbers of serial killings. Inevitably, some sections of the population will be excluded from the general rise in living standards, which, in a culture that glorifies violence, may lead some disaffected individuals to a (usually misdirected) desire for revenge (Coleman & Norris, 2000).

Anomie has fallen in and out of favor with remarkable fluidity over the years, but from its nadir in the 1970s, when Rock and McIntosh referred to the “exhaustion of the anomie tradition” (Downes & Rock, 1988, p. 110), it has recently enjoyed something of a revival thanks to two diverse phenomena. The first is the emergence of interest within cultural criminology in transgressive forms of excitement, ranging from extreme sports to violent crime, as a means of combating the routinized alienation that besets contemporary life. The second is the growth of the Internet and social media, which seem to offer a solution to the problems of dislocation by fostering a sense of community across time and space. In the world of virtual reality, anomie is both “a condition and a pleasure” (Osborne, 2002, p. 29).

MARXISM, CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY, AND THE “DOMINANT IDEOLOGY” APPROACH

It is clear from the discussion so far that the mid-20th century saw a change in focus from the individual to society. This **paradigm** shift led to the predominance of Marxist-inspired models of media power and, in particular, to the writings of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). Their theories of social structure led to the development of an approach known as the “dominant ideology” model, which was taken up enthusiastically by both criminologists and media researchers in the 1960s and dominated academic discussions of media power for over 20 years.

Marxism proposes that the media—like all other capitalist institutions—are owned by the ruling bourgeois elite and operate in the interests of that class, denying access to oppositional or alternative views. Although the media were far from being the mass phenomena in Marx’s lifetime that they are today, their position as a key capitalist industry, and their power to widely disseminate messages that affirm the validity and legitimacy of a stratified society, made his theories seem very relevant at a later time when the mass media were going through a combined process of expansion, deregulation, and concentration of ownership and control. Gramsci developed Marx’s theories to incorporate the concept of **hegemony**, which has played a central role in theorizing about the media’s portrayal of crime, deviance, and law and order. In brief, hegemony refers to the process by which the ruling classes win approval for their actions by consent rather than by coercion. This

is largely achieved through social and cultural institutions such as the law, the family, the education system, and of course, the media. All such institutions reproduce everyday representations and meanings in such a way as to render the class interests of those in power apparently natural and inevitable. The media thus play a crucial role in the winning of consent for a social system, its values, and its dominant interests, or in the rejection of them. This is an important refinement of Marx's original formulation, for Gramsci dispensed with the idea that people passively take on, in toto, the ideas of the ruling elite (a position usually termed "false consciousness"), and instead established a model of power in which different cultural elements are subtly articulated together to appeal to the widest possible spectrum of opinion.

The writings of Marx and Gramsci inform the theoretical organization of much of the most important and influential work that emerged within the social sciences in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, although Marx himself had little to say about crime, the rediscovery of his theories of social structure gave impetus to a new "radical" criminology that sought to expose the significance of the impact of structural inequalities upon crime and, crucially, upon **criminalization**. Also drawing heavily on labeling theory, which posits that crime and deviance are not the product of either a "sick individual" or a "sick society" but that "deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (Becker, 1963, p. 8), were a new generation of radical criminologists such as British scholars Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young, who in their hugely influential *The New Criminology* (1973) took this proposition and gave it a Marxist edge, arguing that the power to label people as deviants or criminals and prosecute and punish them accordingly was a function of the state. In other words, acts are defined as criminal because it is in the interests of the ruling class to define them as such, and while the powerful will violate laws with impunity, working-class crimes will be punished.

Inspired by the "new criminology," a number of further "radical" studies emerged that drew attention to the criminogenic function of the state and the role of the media in orchestrating public panics about crime and deflecting concerns away from the social problems that emanate from capitalism. This work became known as **critical criminology**, and of particular importance are Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts and their book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (1978/2013). Again emerging from the UK, *Policing the Crisis* remains one of the most important texts on the **ideological** role of the media in defining and reporting crime and deviance. In media research, the work of the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) is also of note. The GUMG produced a series of "Bad News" studies based on empirical and semiotic analysis, looking at bias in television news coverage of industrial conflicts, political disputes, and acts of war. The central finding in these studies is that television news represses the diversity of opinions in any given situation, reproduces a dominant ideology (based on, for example, middle-class, anti-dissent, and pro-family views), and silences contradictory voices.

Another important perspective that influenced studies of media power throughout the 1980s and beyond was the **political economy** approach, which claims that the undisputed fact of increasing concentration of media ownership in recent years makes Marx's analysis all the more relevant to contemporary debates about the power of the media.

Political economy focuses on relations between media and other economic and political institutions and argues that, since the mass media are largely privately owned, the drive for profit will shape their output and political position. Concentration of ownership, it is suggested, leads to a decline in the material available (although there are more channels in which to communicate), a preoccupation with ratings at the expense of quality and choice, and a preference for previously successful formulae over innovation and risk-taking. The net result of these processes is that the material offered is reduced to the commercially viable, popular, easily understood, and largely unchallenging.

Some writers go as far as to suggest that the “dumbing down” of culture is part of a wider manipulative strategy on the part of the military-industrial complex to prevent people from engaging in serious political thought or activity. For example, Noam Chomsky’s “propaganda model” demonstrates how certain stories are underrepresented in the media because of powerful military-industrial interests. In a content analysis of the *New York Times*, he shows how atrocities committed by Indonesia in East Timor received a fraction of the coverage devoted to the Khmer Rouge killings in Cambodia. Chomsky claims that the reason for this imbalanced coverage is that the weaponry used to slaughter the people of East Timor was supplied by America, Britain, and Holland (Herman & Chomsky, 1992).

There are countless other examples that could be drawn on to make the point that, when it comes to global power structures, the media are highly selective in what they report. On the other hand, it is sometimes the case that journalists go where politicians fear to tread. The diplomatic protocols surrounding East–West relations, and the shifts in global power that have taken place over the last two decades, have resulted in a situation where leaders in the West have become cautious about criticizing other nations’ human rights records. The news that then-president Barack Obama canceled a visit by the Dalai Lama to “keep China happy” (Spillius, 2009) was treated with scorn by many news outlets, who recalled that 18 months earlier, Obama had lobbied his predecessor, George W. Bush, to boycott the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony in protest of the bloody repression of a popular uprising in Tibet. Time will tell the extent to which Donald Trump is allowed to continue tweeting in a personal capacity his vociferous criticism of China, but his outburst at the end of 2016 criticizing China’s military and economic policies, while he was still president elect, suggests that the rift between America and China might be widening—though Marxists might say that Trump has his own ideological agenda and that his use of social media illustrates that he puts protecting his business interests and celebrity status above the potential diplomatic and trade interests of the nation.

Although not without their critics, the Marxist-inspired works discussed in this section were among the first to systematically and rigorously interrogate the role of the media in shaping our understanding, not only of crime and deviance but also of the processes of criminalization. The common theme in all these studies is that information flows from the top down, with the media representing the views of political leaders, military leaders, police chiefs, judges, prominent intellectuals, advertisers and big business, newspaper owners, and vocal opinion leaders. At the same time, they reduce the viewer, reader, or listener to the role of passive receiver, overshadowing his or her opinions, concerns, and beliefs. Thus, a hierarchy of credibility is established in which

the opinions and definitions of powerful members of society are privileged while the “ordinary” viewer or reader is prevented by lack of comparative material from engaging in critical or comparative thinking (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987).

This structured relationship between the media and its “powerful” sources has important consequences for the representation of crime, criminals, and criminal justice, particularly with respect to those whose lifestyle or behavior deviates from the norms established by a white, male, heterosexual, educationally privileged elite. For example, in *Policing the Crisis* (1978/2013), Hall and his colleagues demonstrate how the press significantly overreacted to the perceived threat of violent crime in English cities in the early 1970s and created a moral panic about “mugging,” but only *after* there had been an intensification of police mobilization against black offenders. The net result of these forces—public fear and hostility fueled by sensationalized media reporting and heavy-handed treatment of black people by the police—combined to produce a situation where more black people were arrested and sentenced, which in turn set the spiral for continuing media attention. But as Hall and his colleagues explain, this episode can be set against a backdrop of economic and structural crisis in 1970s Britain, whereby the disintegration of traditional, regulated forms of life led to a displaced reaction onto black and Asian immigrants and their descendants. The central thesis of the book is that by the 1970s, the consent that might previously have been won by the ruling classes was being severely undermined and the state was struggling to retain power. The birth of the “law and order” society, evidenced in the development of a preemptive escalation of social control directed at a minority population, served to divert public attention from the looming economic and structural crisis, crystallize public fears in the figure of the black mugger, create a coherent popular discourse that sanctioned harsher criminal punishments, and ultimately justify the drift toward ideological repression. All these developments were disclosed, supported, and made acceptable by a media that had become one of the most important instruments in maintaining hegemonic power. Of course, the conditions identified by Hall and colleagues parallel developments in the U.S., where deindustrialization, job loss, and rising inequality were conflated with, if not positioned oddly, as the effects of the mid 1980s “crack epidemic” (Reinarman & Levine, 1997).

Critics of the Marxist approach suggest that it overstates the *intent* of powerful institutions to deceive the public; that it is not the case that media industries maintain a policy of *deliberately* ignoring or marginalizing significant portions of their audience. Rather, the apparent deception may be attributed to an underlying frame of mind that characterizes news organizations (Halloran, 1970). In other words, journalists are like those who work within any organization or institution in that they are gradually socialized into the ways and ethos of that environment and come to recognize the appropriate ways of responding to the subtle pressures that are always there but rarely become overtly apparent. In a news room, these “ways of responding” range from the individual reporter’s intuitive “hunch” through perceptions about what constitutes a “good story” and “giving the public what it wants” to more structured ideological biases that predispose the media to focus on certain events and turn them into “news.” But those who support the idea of hegemony maintain that alternative definitions of any given situation may not get aired simply because there is no longer the spread of sources that there

once was. The ownership and control of the mass media is concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals, and editors rely on a relatively limited pool of expert and readily available sources. Presently, the vast majority of television, newspapers, radio, and film in the U.S. is controlled by a handful of companies. These official sources and accredited “experts,” together with the journalists themselves, thus become the “primary definers” of much news and information—a kind of deviance-defining elite (Ericson et al., 1987). Consequently, according to proponents of the “dominant ideology” approach, there is an increasing risk that culturally dominant groups impose patterns of belief and behavior that conflict with those of ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities. Feminists have argued that gender inequalities in society are also reproduced ideologically by a patriarchal media industry, an issue that will be examined further in Chapter 5.

The Legacy of Marxism: Critical Criminology and Corporate Crime

As we have seen, the dominant ideology approach has successfully highlighted the extent to which those in power manipulate the media agenda to harness support for policies that criminalize those with the least power in society. But Marxist-inspired criminologies have also been useful in raising awareness of the crimes of the powerful themselves; in other words, the offenses committed by corporations, businesspeople, politicians, governments, and states. Critical criminologists whose intellectual roots lie in Marxism have noted that the media rarely cover “white-collar” or “corporate” crime unless it has a “big-bang” element and contains several features considered conventionally newsworthy (see Chapter 2). Their reluctance to portray corporate wrongs contrasts with the manufacturing of “street” crime waves and reflects a pervasive bias in the labeling of criminals. Although this inclination extends beyond the media and arguably constitutes a collective ignorance toward corporate crime on the part of all social institutions, there is little doubt that the media are among the most guilty in perpetuating very narrow definitions of crime. In fact, the media might be said to be doubly culpable: first for portraying affluence as the ultimate anomic goal and glamorizing images of offending and, second, for pandering to public tastes for drama and immediacy over complexity. To paraphrase Steven Box, the public more easily understands what it means for an old lady to have five dollars snatched from her purse than it grasps the financial significance of corporate crime (1983, p. 31).

Criminologists have sought to redress this imbalance and to expose the crimes of governments and corporations. For example, Steve Tombs and Dave Whyte (2007) have estimated that 2 million people are killed at work each year. With the exception of high-profile cases, such as the gas leak at Bhopal, India, in 1984 or the collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza clothing factory building near Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013, both of which killed thousands of people, crimes that have occurred as a result of corporate negligence fail to attract a great deal of interest. Even the reported deaths of more than 1,000 migrant workers on Qatar building sites, as the Gulf state prepares to host the FIFA World Cup in 2022, has received a fraction of the media coverage devoted to other issues, including the heat in which the qualifying soccer teams will be expected to play in. Like allegations of corruption and bribery, claims that migrant slave labor is being used to build the infrastructure for this global sporting event may become prominent in the news only if

the decision to hold the event in Qatar is reversed—and it would still be unlikely to make much of a splash in the U.S., where soccer is still a relatively minor sport.

But as Chapter 2 will demonstrate, crime is by and large portrayed by the media as a matter of individual pathology and moral failings, which militates against the investigation and reporting of wrongdoings in a large organization. On the whole, corporate crimes are not the stuff of catchy headlines and tend to be reported, if at all, in such a way as to reinforce impressions of their exceptional nature and distinction from “ordinary” crime. The underdeveloped vocabulary of corporate crime compounds the difficulty of regarding it as an offense. Words such as “accident” and “disaster” appear in contexts where “crime” and “negligence” might be more accurate. Where they succeed in making the news agenda, corporate crimes are frequently treated not as offenses but as “scandals” or “abuses of power,” terminology that implies “sexy upper-world intrigue” (Punch, 1996). Alternatively, they may be presented as “acts of God,” thus reinforcing the notion that modern life is beset by risks and that actions that result in casualties and/or fatalities are random or preordained, depending on your religious convictions. The choice of this kind of language not only serves the purposes of a commercial media steeped in circulation and ratings wars but also suits corporations themselves, who are able to secure powerful political allies and carefully control and manage information about damning incidents (Herman & Chomsky, 1992). So, while a few journalists uphold the investigative tradition and are prepared to act as whistleblowers when they uncover corporate offenses, the vast majority of media institutions—according to radical crime and media theorists—either ignore the crimes of the powerful or misrepresent them. As a consequence, news reporting remains coupled with state definitions of crime and criminal law.

A related area that does not attract much media attention, although it is a burgeoning field of critical criminology, is “green” crime. A new generation of scholars are examining notions of environmental harm and justice following the publication of a special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* on “green criminology” in 1998. Since then, debates about the meaning of “green” as related to criminology have resulted in a wealth of scholarship that has taken the discipline into new and imaginative areas of concern, including climate change, air and water pollution, genetically modified food, and animal abuse (South & Brisman, 2013; Walters, 2010; White, 2013). Some green criminologists have made dramatic, even apocalyptic, claims about the impacts of environmental harm; for example, predicting that climate change will become one of the major forces driving *all* crime over the course of this century (Agnew, 2012, p. 21). However, like corporate crime more generally, ecological and environmental offenses can be difficult to communicate succinctly, attempts to attribute blame can appear tenuous, and audiences may simply fail to connect with stories about issues that do not necessarily seem to affect them obviously, directly, and immediately.

PLURALISM, COMPETITION, AND IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

The theoretical models outlined so far share a belief in the omnipresence of the media and hold assumptions about a passive and stratified audience, with those at the bottom

of the socioeconomic strata being the most vulnerable to media influences, whether they be “effects” caused by media content or discrimination at the hands of a powerful elite that uses the mass media as its mouthpiece. By contrast, the “competitive” or “pluralist” paradigm that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s tends to be a more positive reading of the mass media as an embodiment of intellectual freedom and diversity offered to a knowledgeable and skeptical audience. Given this favorable characterization of the media industry, it is unsurprising that, while the “dominant ideology” perspective has been influential within the academy, **pluralism** has been championed by practitioners and policymakers.

Pluralists argue that the processes of deregulation, privatization, and technological advancement that have gone on over the last three decades have succeeded in removing the media from state regulation and censorship, encouraged open competition between media institutions, and given media users more individual power. Advocates of these processes have heralded a new age of freedom in which the greatly increased number of television and radio channels, magazine titles, and, particularly, Internet-based networking services have offered a previously unimaginable extension of public choice in a media market of plurality and openness. The result has been that, in addition to the primary definers already mentioned—politicians, police chiefs, and so on—there also exist “counterdefiners,” people with views and ideas that conflict with those of official commentators and that are given voice by through various media channels. Consequently, it is suggested that while we can still identify a dominant economic class in an abstract, materialistic sense, it rarely acts as a coherent political force and is consistently challenged by individuals and organizations campaigning for policy changes in areas such as criminal justice. Furthermore, traditional ideological inequalities formed along lines of class, gender, and race no longer inhabit the static positions suggested by those who favor the dominant ideology approach outlined previously. Thanks to higher education, social mobility, the Internet, and the rise of “celebrity culture,” the contemporary “ruling class” is more culturally diverse than at any time previously, and the modern media has been at the forefront of the erosion of traditional elitist values (McNair, 1998).

The expansion and proliferation of media channels and the Internet have certainly made more accessible the views and ideas of a greater diversity of people. In the past, the pluralist perspective might have been said to be limited by its sheer idealism because it does not take account of the many vested interests in media ownership and control, or of the fact that, for all the proliferation of new channels, media industries are still predominantly owned and controlled by a small handful of white, wealthy, middle-class men (or corporations started by such men). However, even though the media still may be regarded as a potential site of ideological struggle, proponents of the competitive, pluralist paradigm believe that *all* minority interests can be served by the plurality of channels of communication available. In particular, social media are said to have democratized contemporary cultural life, with Twitter and blogs providing powerful channels of influence and offering a form of public participation to those who traditionally may not have had access to it.

However, social media have also joined competition and deregulation in being said to pose a serious threat to informed media commentary and analysis. Following accusations

that in a commercial marketplace, competition for audience share leads to “soundbite” journalism, in which there is little room for background, explanation, or context, those who have not embraced social media despair at the idea of communicating anything meaningfully in 140 characters! Further, it is argued, while there may be greater public engagement with shocking or visually dramatic events, there is little evidence of extensive public participation in the issues of policy, politics, and reform that underlie such stories, or of a media willing to communicate such a context to the public (Barak, 1994; Manning, 2001). Public participation in **mediated** discourse may *appear* to be more inclusive; after all, more people can air their views on the serious issues of the day—not just on Twitter but also via talk radio, television audience shows, newspapers’ reader comments, and other online forums. In fact, texting and social media have broadened traditional channels of communication to the extent that television news broadcasts now encourage viewers to send in their thoughts and opinions to be transmitted almost instantaneously on air. But the 20- or 30-second viewer contribution has arguably been introduced at the expense of complex analysis or detailed critique, and *media* pluralism—that is, many channels—does not necessarily result in *message* pluralism—diversity of content (Barak, 1994).

Critics argue that the mainstream media continue to provide homogenized versions of reality that avoid controversy and preserve the status quo. Consequently, ignorance among audiences is perpetuated, and the labeling, **stereotyping**, and criminalization of certain groups (often along lines of class, race, and gender) persists. We might view the resilience of the *National Enquirer* as evidence of homogenized and stereotyping news output. Described by one critic as an “impeccable source for space-alien abductions,” the supermarket tabloid is nevertheless nearing its ninth decade of providing American consumers with salacious headlines and dubious information about all facets of social life, including crime (Grochowski, 2002). Political economists would argue that the increasingly commercialized character of media groups like the *National Enquirer* and *E!* results in tried and tested formulae—a focus on entertainment, gossip, and celebrity (much of it misogynistically directed at women’s bodies) with a good measure of terrifying stories, frequently involving violent and atypical crimes, thrown in.

The tendency to play it safe by offering the shocking, the sensational, and the “real” is also evident in TV schedules where mainstream programming is dominated by seemingly endless and increasingly stale imitations of once-innovative ideas. Even 24-hour rolling news services are restricted by the news values to which they have to conform (see Chapter 2) and by the pressures of having to succeed in a commercial environment. As Jay Blumler (1991) suggests, while American broadcast news media may have a tradition of professional political journalism, it can nonetheless be the case that “heightened competition tempts national network news . . . to avoid complexity and hit only those highlights that will gain and keep viewers’ attention” (p. 207). These “highlights” will rarely involve in-depth political commentary or sustained analysis. Instead, viewers are fed a diet of “infotainment” that may have a strong “human interest” angle, a particularly dramatic or violent element, or a visually arresting component. This trend—often described by its critics as the “dumbing down” of news and current affairs media—privileges audience ratings over analysis and debate and results in “a flawed process of public accountability, with

few forums in which issues can be regularly explored from multiple perspectives” (p. 207). Crime is a subject that is especially limited and constrained by a media agenda on an endless quest for populist, profitable programming. One of the few strands of “documentary” filmmaking that has survived the wave of deregulation celebrated by pluralists is the “true crime” genre, where a serious criminal case is reexamined via a predictable formula, starting with a dramatized reconstruction of the crime itself and then a smug-with-hindsight examination of the sometimes bungled, frequently tortuous police investigation before the dramatic denouement when the culprit is captured and convicted. Such programs—which are commonly concerned with highly unusual yet prominent cases involving rapists and serial killers—pander to the thrill-seeking, voyeuristic element of the audience while at the same time quenching their thirst for retribution.

While pluralism has traditionally been viewed as an expression of how things *could* be rather than how things *are*, there is no disputing that Internet-based forums are democratizing communication and allowing more freedom of expression. However, skeptics would argue that the apparent openness that social media afford to their users must be squared with a recognition that dominant groups still enjoy structural advantages and that there are ongoing contested processes both inside social institutions and within the media themselves.

REALISM AND RECEPTION ANALYSIS

Throughout the 1980s, established theories were being challenged by new approaches that turned on their heads some previously held assumptions and altered the focus of scholars in both criminology and media studies. In criminology, a new perspective called **left realism** emerged as both a product of and reaction to what it saw as the idealistic stance of the left, represented in works like *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978/2013). Accusing writers on the left of adopting reductionist arguments about crime and romanticizing working-class offenders, left realists claimed that the political arena had been left open to conservative campaigns on law and order that chose to overlook the fact that most crime is not interclass (that is, perpetrated by working-class people on middle-class victims) but *intra*class (perpetrated on members of one’s own class and community). In the UK, influential writers John Lea and Jock Young (1984) urged criminologists to “get real” about crime, to focus on the seriousness of its effects—especially for women and ethnic minorities—and to make the experiences of victims of crime a focus of their analyses. After all, if there was no rational core to the proposition that crime is a serious problem, the media would have no power of leverage over the public consciousness, and the numerous attempts to theorize the relationship between media and crime discussed in this chapter would simply never have materialized.

Meanwhile, in media and cultural studies, a form of audience research called **reception analysis**, pioneered by David Morley, dominated the agenda throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Researchers reconceptualized media influence, seeing it no longer as a force beyond an individual’s control but as a resource that is consciously *used* by people. In the modern communications environment where there is a proliferation of media and the

omniscience of any single medium or channel has diminished, most audience members will select images and meanings that relate to their sense of self-identity or to their wider experiences of work, family, and social relationships. Furthermore, in an age of democratic, interactive, technology-driven communications, it is argued that media and popular culture are made from “within” and “below,” not imposed from without and above as has been traditionally conceptualized (Fiske, 1989). By the mid-1990s, researchers had dismissed concerns about what the media *do* to people and turned the question around, asking instead, “What do people do *with* the media?”

An example of criminological research using this approach is *Captive Audience* (Jewkes, 2002). Here the aim was to examine the media’s role in the exercise of power relations and the construction of masculine identities in prisons. At the time, most prisoners in England had access to television, although for some it was in communal TV areas and for others it was within their own rooms (“in-cell TV” was just being rolled out across the prison estate). The study found that communal TV viewing in prison replicates many of Morley’s findings concerning TV within the family. “We discuss what we want to watch and the biggest wins. That’s me. I’m the biggest” is a typical comment from a male respondent in Morley’s 1986 study that had resonance in the prison context. In this prison study, solitary viewing (and reading and listening) revealed a range of motivations and identity constructions, some of which were familiar to all media consumers (passing time, becoming informed, chilling out) and some of which had a particular salience (enhancing one’s credentials as a violent man, “tuning out” the aggressive prison culture) or poignancy (escapism, evoking memories of loved ones) in the context of the prison.

LATE MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNISM

There is a clear trajectory that links the theories discussed so far, even if development has come from antagonism as well as agreement between different schools of thought. **Postmodernism** is a paradigm shift that impacted a range of academic disciplines including criminology, becoming a ubiquitous and unavoidable term throughout the 1990s. Postmodernism is frequently presented as an emphatic and decisive break with all that went before, with large-scale theories like Marxism being rejected for their all-embracing claims to knowledge and “truth.” Most commentators now prefer to describe the current epoch in terms of **late modernity**, to indicate that, while there have been radical changes in patterns of global cultural, political, and economic life, they have not entirely *replaced* the structural characteristics associated with “modern” society: class structure, capitalism, industrialism, militarism, the nation state, and so on.

However, traces of earlier theories can be found in postmodern accounts. Like reception analysts, postmodernist writers view audiences as active and creative meaning-makers. In common with realists, they share a concern for fear of crime and victimization and make problematic concepts such as “crime” and “deviance,” just as labeling theorists did in an earlier period. Furthermore, like advocates of the pluralist approach, postmodernists suggest that the media market has been deregulated, leading to an explosion of programs, titles, and formats to choose from. All tastes and interests are now catered to,

and it is the consumer who ultimately has the power to choose what he or she watches, listens to, reads, and engages with, but equally what he or she ignores, rejects, or subverts. In this glossy, interactive media marketplace, anything goes—so long as it doesn't strain an attention span of three minutes and is packaged as "entertainment." Postmodernism, then, is concerned with the excesses of information and entertainment now available, and it emphasizes the style and packaging of media output in addition to the actual substance of its content. This is the "society of the spectacle" (Debord, 1967/1997), a "hyperreality" in which media domination suffuses to such an extent that the distinction between image and reality no longer exists (Baudrillard, 1981, 1983). Mass media and the collapse of meaning have produced a culture centered on immediate consumption and sensationalized impact but with little depth of analysis or contextualization (Osborne, 2002). It is the fragmentary, ephemeral, and ambiguous that are observed, and pleasure, spectacle, pastiche, parody, and irony are the staples of postmodern media output. The media's responsibility is to entertain, and audience gratification is the only impact worth striving for.

This abandonment of a distinction between information and entertainment raises two problems, however. The first is the threat to meaningful debate that postmodernism seems to imply. A media marketplace based on a pluralist model of ideological struggle may suffice as a forum for debate, but it relies on the public's ability to discriminate between what is true and what is not, between fact and interpretation. In an early critique of postmodernism, Dick Hebdige warns:

The idea of a verifiable information order, however precarious and shifting, however subject to negotiation and contestation by competing ideologies, does not survive the transition to this version of new times . . . today aliens from Mars kidnap joggers, yesterday Auschwitz didn't happen, tomorrow who cares what happens? Here the so-called "depthlessness" of the postmodern era extends beyond . . . the tendency of the media to feed more and more greedily off each other, to affect the function and status of information itself. (1989, p. 51)

The second difficulty with postmodernism lies in how we define "entertainment." As Hall et al. (1978/2013) suggest, violence—including violent crime—is often regarded as intrinsically entertaining to an audience who, it is argued, have become more emotionally detached and desensitized to the vast array of visual images bombarding them from every corner of the world. Many see this as an escalating problem and highlight that it has become necessary to accelerate the drama of each successive action to maintain the same level of coverage (Mander, 1980).

It is usually organizations that fall outside mainstream consensus politics that best understand this theory of acceleration. Groups with a radical political agenda are well practiced in the art of manipulating the media and will frequently "create" a story through the use of controversial but stage-managed techniques, knowing that it will make "good copy." Greenpeace, the Animal Liberation Front, Fathers 4 Justice, and anti-globalization, anti-capitalism movements are examples of pressure groups that have been extremely successful in garnering media attention and ensuring attention-grabbing headlines. Even

the police have adopted the techniques of heightened drama and suspense to produce spectacular, even voyeuristic television, with stage-managed press conferences involving “victims” of serious crimes whom they suspect of foul play, and dramatic raids on the homes of suspected burglars and drug dealers in which police officers are accompanied by television cameras. But it is arguably terrorists who have taken the lesson of sensationalized impact to heart to the greatest and most devastating effect:

The spectacularly violent acts of terrorists can be viewed as performances for the benefit of a journalistic culture addicted to high drama . . . the terrorist act is the ultimate “pseudo-event”—a politically and militarily meaningless act unless it receives recognition and coverage in the news media. (McNair, 1998, p. 142)

However, the desire to “play up to the cameras” may be no less true of state aggressors as it is of terrorists and dissidents. For example, military campaigns may also be planned as media episodes, as was witnessed in the 2003 Allied War on Iraq when journalists were “embedded” with military personnel and were allowed unprecedented access to troops and operations. Similarly:

When President Reagan bombed Libya [in 1986], he didn’t do it at the most effective time of day, from a military point of view. The timing of the raid was principally determined by the timing of the American television news; it was planned in such a way as to maximize its television impact. It was timed to enable Reagan to announce on the main evening news that it had “just happened”—it was planned as a television event. (Morley, 1992, p. 63–64)

But the most compelling example to date of a postmodern media “performance” occurred September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center took place when millions of Americans would be tuned in to the breakfast news programs on television. The timing of the actions ensured that viewers across the world who missed the terrifying aftermath of the first attack on the north tower would tune in to see “live” pictures of the second hijacked aircraft being flown into the south tower 16 minutes later. The television pictures from that day—transmitted immediately around the globe—have arguably become the most visually arresting and memorable news images ever seen, evoking countless cinematic representations from *The Towering Inferno* to *Independence Day*. The “event that shook the world” had such an overwhelming impact because of the immediacy and dramatic potency of its image on screen; it was truly a postmodern spectacle. Terrorist attacks on “innocent” civilians chime with the postmodern idea that we are all potential victims. Postmodern analyses reject traditional criminological concerns with the causes and consequences of crime, pointing instead to the fragmentation of societies, the fear that paralyzes many communities, the random violence that seems to erupt at all levels of society, and the apparent inability of governments to do anything about these problems. This concern with a lurking, unpredictable danger is fortified by an omnipresent media. Postmodernist critic Richard Osborne suggests that the ubiquity of mediated crime reinforces our sense

of being victims: “Media discourses about crime now constitute all viewers as equally subject to the fragmented and random danger of criminality, and in so doing provide the preconditions for endless narratives of criminality that rehearse this ever-present danger” (Osborne, 1995, p. 27). Perversely, then, the media’s inclination to make all audience members equal in their potential “victimness” lies at the core of the postmodern fascination with crime. For Osborne, there is “something obsessive in the media’s, and the viewer’s, love of such narratives, an hysterical replaying of the possibility of being a victim and staving it off” (p. 29).

Another aspect of the hysteria that surrounds criminal cases, fusing the fear of becoming a victim with the postmodern imperative for entertaining the audience, is the media’s inability, or unwillingness, to separate the ordinary from the extraordinary. The audience is bombarded in both factual media and in fictional representations by crimes that are very rare, such as serial killings and abductions of children by strangers. The presentation of the atypical as typical serves to exacerbate public anxiety and deflect attention from much more commonplace offenses such as street crime, corporate crime, and abuse of children within the family. Reporting of the “ever-present danger” of the predatory pedophile or young thug who is prepared to kill with little provocation are the stock-in-trade of a media industry that understands that shock, outrage, and fear sell newspapers. In recent years, interest has turned to the collective outpouring of grief that has been witnessed in relation to certain violent and/or criminal acts, which has resulted in them occupying a particular symbolic place in the popular imagination. It has been suggested that the “coming together” of individuals to express collective anguish and to gaze upon the scene of crimes in a gesture of empathy and solidarity with those who have been victimized is a sign of the desire for community, a hearkening back to pre-mass-society collectivity or an assertion of “people power” (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001, p. 2). But equally, it might be regarded as a voyeuristic desire to be part of the hyperreal, to take part in a globally mediated event and say “I was there.”

CULTURAL CRIMINOLOGY

The populist, entertainment imperative of the postmodernist approach is central to the developing perspective known as **cultural criminology** most commonly associated with the work of its American originator, Jeff Ferrell, and with the criminology department at the University of Kent in the UK (e.g., Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2015; Hayward & Presdee, 2010). This approach seeks to understand both the public’s mediated fascination with violence and crime and also the enactment of violence and crime *as* pleasure or spectacle. Its debt to earlier work by Stuart Hall, Stanley Cohen, Phil Cohen, and Jock Young (who was himself part of the cultural criminology vanguard) is evident in its proposition that all crime is grounded in culture and that cultural practices are embedded in dominant processes of power. It therefore supports the early Marxist-influenced, critical criminological view that criminal acts are acts of resistance to authority. But unlike earlier accounts that conceptualized resistance as something that was internalized and expressed through personal and subcultural style, cultural criminologists also emphasize

the externalization of excitement and ecstasy derived from transgression and resistance. Here, cultural criminology is indebted to the work of sociologist Jack Katz, who argues in *Seductions of Crime* (1990) that crime is not simply driven by acquisition, materialism, or economic need but also the enactment of power, identity, presence, status, and the cultivation of “sneaky thrills.” Many criminal activities involve risk-taking and danger, but may in fact represent an attempt to break free of one’s demeaning and restraining circumstances, to exercise control and take responsibility for one’s own destiny. In a social world where individuals find themselves overcontrolled and yet without control, crime offers some the possibility of excitement *and* control. The consistently high levels of lethal violence among young people who live in marginalized neighborhoods in Chicago, for instance, might be understood as individual acts of violent self-expression—an attempt by those with little self-determination to articulate their will—which, somewhat ironically, makes the individuals involved feel alive.

For some cultural criminologists, crime is a participatory and transgressive performance, a “carnival,” and the streets its theatre. Some commentators have found this a refreshing antidote to Marxist-inspired studies such as *Policing the Crisis* insofar as cultural criminology avoids the condescension of criminal-as-victim (of disadvantageous circumstances; Jefferson, 2002). Mike Presdee provided some of the most compelling examples from Britain of the carnival of crime. Describing the large-scale ritualized joyriding (automobile theft) that he observed in marginalized neighborhoods in the 1990s, Presdee comments:

Their joyriding became a celebration of a particular form of car culture that was carnivalesque in nature, performance centred and criminal. The sport of joyriding went something like this: a team of local youths would spot a hot hatch (the car of choice) and steal it (or arrange with others to have it stolen). It would be delivered to another team who would do it up, delivering it finally to the drivers. In the evenings, the cars were raced round the estate, not aimlessly but in a way designed to show off skill. Furthermore, two competing groups (teams) attempted to outdo the other. These displays were watched by certain residents of the estate who, the story goes, were charged a pound for the pleasure, sitting in picnic chairs at the sides of the road. Often after these races the cars were burned on deserted land. (2000, p. 49)

Similarly, in an exploration of the ways in which fire setting is, for some, an act of rebelliousness, resistance, defiance, and destruction, Presdee explains the primeval attraction of arson via stories from the U.S. and UK:

On Monday 6 December 2004 in Indian Head, Washington, USA, unknown arsonists put a complete new up-market housing development to the “torch,” burning 26 houses in one spectacular conflagration! It was a five million pound bonfire that was deliberate, and organized, changing both the landscape and society in one swift and totally destructive act . . . [Meanwhile in a field in Gloucester on Bonfire night]:

they got wooden boards and placed those over the fire and as the flames rekindled the fire dance began again. They faced each other bouncing on the bridges of burning boards, jousting with each other with burning sticks as the howling wind made the flames more dangerous. Like mediaeval knights they fought in the fire and the watching crowd feasted on this spectacle of fire. (Presdee, 2011, pp. 120, 124)

Riots, protests, and other outbreaks of disorder can also be viewed in this way. It is not the case that all carnivalesque performances involve crime, but it can be said with some certainty that participation in them can lead to criminalization. It is therefore not just the cultural significance of crime but the criminalization of certain cultural practices that cultural criminologists are interested in.

While cultural criminology is not without its critics (P. Mason, 2006, archly refers to it as “ghettoized ’70s retro chic”), it is undeniable that it has had a significant impact on the ways in which connections between crime, media, and culture are made. Cultural criminology celebrates postmodern notions of difference, discontinuity, and diversity and breaks down restrictive and negative stereotypes. What were formerly regarded as unconventional interest groups or simply public nuisances have been embraced amid a renewed verve for ethnographic enquiry and a fascination for the power of the image. For example, in *Crimes of Style* (1996), Ferrell explores the meaning and practice of graffiti: the building up of the “tagging” experience, the mastery of the art, the aesthetic attention to detail, the thrill of getting away with it (or getting caught); and the network of friendships built up with fellow artists, all of which take shape and meaning within the immediate contingencies of boredom, disaffection, and alienation. The comment of a graffiti artist in the celebrated documentary *Style Wars* sums up the feeling of transcendence experienced:

I think it’s something you can never recapture again once you experience it . . . even the smell you get, like when you first smell trains, it’s a good smell too, like, a dedicated graffiti writer . . . you’re there in the midst of all the metal and, like, you’re here to produce something. (Chalfant & Silver, 1983)

Once viewed exclusively in terms of teenage delinquency and mindless vandalism, graffiti is one of the many “underground” subcultural practices that has been appropriated by corporations and repackaged for mass consumption (see Snyder, 2011). It has even been featured on the U.S. version of *The Apprentice* (NBC) in an episode that required the two competing teams to create a graffiti advertisement on a 20-foot wall in Harlem, New York, for the Sony PlayStation game *Gran Turismo 4*. The show’s star, Donald Trump, announced, without a trace of irony, that there is a “new form of urban advertising—it’s called graffiti,” before going on to exclaim, “I’m not thrilled with graffiti. I don’t like graffiti, but some of it is truly amazing.” The sums of money demanded for works by British street artist Banksy (some of which have been illegally removed from the buildings on which they were painted) provide further evidence of the transition of graffiti from underground to the mainstream.

The emergence of cultural criminology can be characterized as a challenge to “crime science” and to the lingering influence of positivism, which, it is suggested, has led to a vacuum in so-called “expert” knowledge surrounding the pursuit of pleasure. The overriding concern with reason and scientific rationality means that traditional criminology has been unable to account for “feelings” such as rage, excitement, pleasure, and desire. The activities described by Katz, Ferrell, Presdee, Hayward, and others certainly convey the sense of excitement and desire that are at the heart of many criminalized behaviors, but they also hint at the possibility that such pleasures can be transmuted into something darker and more distorted. They recognize that postmodern media—*Big Brother*, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, and *The Voice* being prime(time) examples—merge “fun” and “hate,” “cruelty” and “playfulness,” “celebrity” and “nobody,” “inclusive” and “exploitative,” “accessible” and “extremist.” In this respect they share many qualities with the Internet, which celebrates a world of entertainment, spectacle, performance, and fetish. When it comes to privatized pleasure and public displays of narcissism, cyberspace is arguably the cardinal site of the carnival of crime (see Chapter 9).

SUMMARY

While of necessity a distillation of the historical development of two fields of inquiry (in addition to noting the importance of the broader terrain of sociology), this chapter has traced the origins and development of the major theories that have shaped the contours of both criminology and media studies and attempted to provide a broad overview of points of convergence and conflict between the two across two continents (America and Europe). In so doing, it has established that there is no body of relatively consistent, agreed-upon, and formalized assertions that can readily be termed “media theory” or “criminological theory.” Although such phrases are widely used, neither field has been unified by the development of a standard set of concepts, an inter-related body of hypotheses, or an overall explanatory framework. However, it has proposed that a sense of progressive development is nevertheless evident in ideas concerning media and crime. Despite their obvious etiological and methodological differences, the theoretical approaches discussed in this chapter have clear points of convergence that have enabled us to locate them in the wider context of social, cultural, political, and economic developments that were concomitantly taking place. In summary, the

theoretical “pegs” upon which our analysis has been hung are as follows:

- **Media effects:** Early theories connecting media and crime were characterized by an overwhelmingly negative view of both the role of the media and the susceptibility of the audience. Like Martians with their ray guns, the new media of mass communications were perceived through early-20th-century eyes as alien invaders injecting their messages directly into the minds of a captive audience. Although some academic researchers have strongly resisted attempts to assert the existence of a causal link between media and crime, rendering the debate all but redundant in media scholarship, notions of a potentially harmful media capable of eliciting negative or antisocial consequences remain at the heart of popular or mainstream discourses, including those that have been incorporated into policy.
- **Strain theory and anomie:** Merton’s development of anomie helps us to understand the strain caused by a disjuncture between the cultural

goals of wealth and status and legitimate means of achieving those goals. For those with few means of attaining success through normal, legal channels, the media might be said to place incalculable pressure, creating a huge ungratified well of desire with little opportunity of fulfilment. It is in such circumstances that some individuals pursue the culturally desirable objectives of success and material wealth via illegitimate paths. Recent commentators on anomie have suggested that disaffected individuals overcome feelings of isolation and normlessness by forming communities based on shared tastes and opinions and that social media and the Internet have, for some, countered the sense of dislocation that gaps in wealth and status inevitably produce.

- **Dominant ideology:** With the rediscovery of Marx's writings on social structure, scholars in the 1960s and 1970s focused their attentions on the extent to which consent is "manufactured" by the powerful along ideological lines. According to the dominant ideology approach, the power to criminalize and decriminalize certain groups and behaviors lies with the ruling elite, who—in a process known as "hegemony"—win popular approval for their actions via social institutions, including the media. In short, powerful groups achieve public consensus on definitions of crime and deviance and gain mass support for increasingly draconian measures of control and containment, not by force or coercion but by using the media to subtly construct a web of meaning from a number of ideological threads, which are then articulated into a coherent popular discourse.
 - **Pluralism:** This perspective emerged as a challenge to hegemonic models of media power. Pluralism emphasizes the diversity and plurality of media channels available, thus countering the notion that any ideology can be dominant for any length of time if it does not reflect what people experience to be true. Although there is undoubtedly a firm alliance between most
- politicians and sections of the journalistic media, pluralists argue that the media's tendency to ignore, ridicule, or demonize those whose politics and lifestyle lie beyond the consensual norm is changing, precisely because public sentiments have changed. There is growing antipathy for the apparatus of political communication, and people's responses to crime will always be much more complex and diverse than any headline or soundbite might suggest. In addition, it might be argued that the quantity and rapidity of contemporary news-making undermines the notion of elite power and ensures that governments are accountable and responsive to their electorate.
- **Postmodernism:** As far as we can state that there are "defining characteristics" of postmodernism, they include the end of any belief in an overarching scientific rationality, the abandonment of empiricist theories of truth, and an emphasis on the fragmentation of experience and the diversification of viewpoints. The postmodernist rejection of claims to truth proposed by the "grand theories" of the past challenges us to accept that we live in a world of contradictions and inconsistencies that are not amenable to objective modes of thought. Within criminology, postmodernism implies an abandonment of the concept of crime and the construction of a new language and mode of thought to define processes of criminalization and censure. It is often suggested that, for postmodernists, there are no valid questions worth asking, and Henry and Milovanovic (1996) insist that crime will stop being a problem only when the justice system, media, and criminologists stop focusing attention on it.
 - **Cultural criminology:** Media and culture are central to this form of criminological analysis; style is substance, and meaning resides in representation. Consequently, crime and crime control can only be understood as an ongoing spiral of intertextual, image-driven media loops (Ferrell, 2001). Cultural criminology embraces

postmodern ideas and underpins them with some more “radical” yet established concerns, borrowing especially from the classic Chicago School tradition of ethnography as well as the work of British scholars in the 1970s on subcultures and mediated forms of social control. And,

in a decisive break with traditional, “positivist” criminologies that have been unconcerned with “feeling” and “pleasure,” cultural criminology also draws attention to the fact that crime can have a carnivalesque quality; it is exhilarating, performative, and dangerous.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Choose one of the theories discussed in this chapter and discuss the contribution it has made to our understanding of the relationship between media and crime.
2. As the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast demonstrates, concerns about media effects frequently reflect or crystallize deeper anxieties in periods of social upheaval. What examples of contemporary concerns about the effects of the media can you think of, and in what ways might they be attributed to wider anxieties about social change?
3. Conduct an analysis of a week’s news. What evidence can you find for the proposition that news is ideology and that the mass media are effectively assimilated into the goals of government policy on crime, law, and order?
4. In a challenge to Marxist-inspired critiques, some cultural theorists (e.g., Fiske, 1989) argue that all popular culture is the “people’s culture” and emerges from “below” rather than being imposed from “above.” It is thus seen to be independent of, and resistant to, the dominant hegemonic norms. What implications does this have for those who hold deviant or oppositional viewpoints? Can “popular” culture really be described as nonhierarchical when it celebrates power and violence for men and sexual availability and victimization among women and children?
5. At the heart of postmodern analyses lies the thorny question of why crime is threatening and frightening yet at the same time popular and “entertaining.” How would you attempt to answer this question?

FURTHER READING

- A good place to start is the collection of readings with annotations brought together by Chris Greer: *Crime and Media: A Reader* (Routledge, 2009).
- Your university library may hold the three-volume set *Crime and Media*, by Y. Jewkes (SAGE, 2009), which is part of the SAGE Library of Criminology and is also a collection of readings with original commentaries.
- *Crime, Culture and the Media*, by E. Carrabine (Polity, 2008), is a challenging but rewarding resource.
- In addition, there are now numerous good introductions to criminological theory. The best of them, especially from a media/crime perspective, is *Criminology: A Sociological Introduction* (third edition), by E. Carrabine et al. (Routledge, 2014), which covers all the theories discussed here and also devotes a specific chapter to the relationship between crime and media.
- Covering many of the theories discussed in this chapter and anticipating the discussion of news in Chapter 2 is the classic *Power Without*

Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain, by J. Curran and J. Seaton (Routledge, 2010), now in its seventh edition.

- For a fun take on media criminology, which manages to combine theoretical sophistication with its application to cinema, *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture*, by N. Rafter and M. Brown (New York University Press, 2011), is highly recommended.
- Several works that come under the rubric “cultural criminology” are immensely readable, and some have consequently found a readership beyond university scholars. Examples include Jeff Ferrell’s exploits as a dumpster diver in *Empire of Scrounge* (New York University Press, 2005) and Alison Young’s homage to street art and graffiti, *Street Art World* (Reaktion, 2016).
- Finally, *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* (<http://cmc.sagepub.com>) is devoted to cross-disciplinary work that promotes understanding of the relationship between crime, criminal justice, media, and culture.

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