7.5A: The Conflict Perspective on Deviance

Conflict theories emphasize the social, political, or material inequality of a social group, that critique the broad socio-political system.

Learning Objectives

• Explain how conflict theory understands deviance and crime in society

Key Points

• In conflict theory, deviant behaviors are actions that do not go along with the social institutions.
• Marx himself did not write about deviant behavior, but he wrote about alienation amongst the proletariat, as well as between the proletariat and the finished product, which causes conflict and, thus, deviant behavior.
• Marx used the term "lumpenproletariat" to describe that layer of the working class which is unlikely to ever achieve class consciousness.
• Michel Foucault believed that torture had been phased out from modern society due to the dispersion of power; there was no need any more for the wrath of the state on a deviant individual.
• According to Foucault, instead individuals are controlled by institutions. Contemporary society is characterized by the lack of free will on the part of individuals because institutions of knowledge, norms, and values, are in place to categorize and control humans.

Key Terms

• institution: An established organization, especially one dedicated to education, public service, culture, or the care
of the destitute, poor etc.

- **Deviant Behavior**: The violation of prevailing norms or cultural standards prescribing how humans ought to behave.

- **lumpenproletariat**: the lowest stratum of the proletariat

Deviance, in a sociological context, describes actions or behaviors that violate social norms, including formally-enacted rules, as well as informal violations of social norms. In sociology, conflict theories are perspectives that emphasize the social, political, or material inequality of a social group, that critique the broad socio-political system, or that otherwise detract from structural functionalism and ideological conservatism. Conflict theories draw attention to power differentials, such as class conflict, and generally contrast historically dominant ideologies. It is therefore a macro level analysis of society. Karl Marx is the father of the social conflict theory, which is a component of the four paradigms of sociology.

In conflict theory, deviant behaviors are actions that do not comply with social institutions. The institution’s ability to change norms, wealth, or status comes into conflict with the individual. The legal rights of poor folks might be ignored, while the middle class side with the elites rather than the poor. Conflict theory is based upon the view that the fundamental causes of crime are the social and economic forces operating within society.

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**Karl Marx**

Marx himself did not write about deviant behavior specifically, but he wrote about alienation amongst the proletariat, as well as between the proletariat and the finished product, which causes conflict, and thus deviant behavior. Alienation is the systemic result of living in a socially stratified society, because being a mechanistic part of a social class alienates a person from his or her humanity. In a capitalist society, the worker’s alienation from his and her humanity occurs because the worker can only express labor, a fundamental social aspect of personal individuality, through a privately owned system of industrial production in which each worker is an instrument, a thing, not a person. However, Marx used the term lumpenproletariat to describe that layer of the working class, unlikely to ever achieve class consciousness, lost to socially useful production, and, therefore, of no use in revolutionary struggle or an actual impediment to the realization of a classless society.
Portrait of Karl Marx: The nineteenth-century German intellectual Karl Marx identified and described the alienation that afflict the worker under capitalism.

Michel Foucault

Michel Foucault believed that torture had been phased out from modern society due to the dispersion of power; so there was no need any more for the wrath of the state on a deviant individual. Rather, the modern state receives praise for its fairness and dispersion of power that, instead of controlling each individual, controls the mass. He also theorized that institutions control people through the use of discipline. The modern prison is a template for these institutions, because it controls its inmates by the perfect use of discipline. Foucault theorizes that, in a sense, the contemporary society is characterized by the lack of free will on the part of individuals. Institutions of knowledge, norms, and values, are in place to categorize and control humans.
Drawing of Michel Foucault: The French philosopher Michel Foucault theorized that institutions control people through the use of discipline.