

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Bonger, Willem: Capitalism and Crime

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In the early 20th century, scholars examining the causes of crime tended to see the roots of criminal behavior as products of people's free will or of other causes lying within the individual. Willem Bonger, a Dutch sociologist, took a different approach and argued that crime was caused by societal factors, specifically the economy and its effects on people. In creating his argument, he was influenced by theorists such as Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, and he explored the links between crime and economics in his text *Criminality and Economic Conditions* (original version: 1905; English version: 1916). In this book, Bonger argued that the capitalist economic structure can have a detrimental influence on society and can create criminal behavior and allow it to flourish. Many scholars view Bonger as a founding father of critical criminology.

Origins of Bonger's Approach

In building his argument that the causes of crime have a basis in society in *Criminality and Economic Conditions*, Bonger first critiqued the more common viewpoint at the time that crime was caused by factors resting within the individual, either because of their free will to choose their own actions, including criminal behaviors, or by their biological makeup. In developing this argument, Bonger explored a number of scholars who had examined the causes of crime from various standpoints, including philosophers, spiritualists, biologists, sociologists, and bio-sociologists, and he compared each school's discussion of the origins of crime. Bonger refuted each school's claims and noted that the link between crime and the economic conditions in a country was the most compelling argument. One basis for his reasoning was that many of those authors who have examined this link agree that economy and crime are related, even if other factors, such as morality or imitation of others' criminal behavior, are more important. Only a small proportion of the cited authors argued that there is no relationship between crime and economic conditions.

Many of the above authors looked at economic conditions solely in terms of the amount of poverty and wealth in a country. In contrast, Bonger believed that to understand how these conditions can influence crime, scholars need to look at *distribution of wealth* in a country rather than the total amount of wealth. In other words, a country that is wealthy overall may still have a high crime rate if there are people who are impoverished

alongside people who are very wealthy. Bonger then described that the economic conditions of a country build the social structure of that country. The economic condition that is a key cause of a society's crime is modern capitalism.

Although Marx and Engels did not have a primary focus on crime and law, they did mention some aspects of crime that Bonger further expanded upon. People will produce goods and services to meet their survival needs, such as food and shelter. In a capitalist society, some individuals will own and control the means of production; they are the people who own the factories and businesses that distribute goods and service and are referred to as the bourgeoisie. Other individuals have only their own labor to trade for other goods and services; these are the workers (the proletariat). Social classes developed as a result of this differential access to goods and services. In a capitalist society, therefore, some individuals will have money and that money can translate into power to distribute resources at will; other individuals will lack money. Those people who have the power want to keep it, mainly through exploiting the labor of those who do not have power, and those who do not have the power will struggle against those who do. One's status in society is not due to one's innate capacity but rather is the result of capitalism, which creates differences in money and power.

Capitalism is not the sole economic structure that can lead to the gap between rich and poor; under capitalism, however, the distance between rich and poor has increased to a larger extent and continues to increase. As support for his argument, Bonger examined problems such as poverty and illiteracy in various European countries for many years and compared these to the countries' [p. 99 ↓] crime rates. With a few exceptions, he found that as poverty or illiteracy increase, so does the amount of crime.

The Downside of Capitalism

A primary purpose of capitalism is for people to make a profit. Under capitalism, production is for the sake of exchange rather than for personal consumption. In other words, people do not use the goods they produce; they exchange those goods for money or other goods or services. In any exchange, people try to maximize their own profit while minimizing the profits of others. Capitalism has benefits, including the fact that all people have the potential to obtain wealth and that a competitive market makes

products better and cheaper. However, there is a societal drawback. The capitalist mode of production creates and fosters egoism in people. Egoism refers to placing one's own self-interests above the interests of others; it is the opposite of altruism, which refers to placing the interests of others above those of oneself. According to Bonger, humans are intrinsically altruistic, and he based this assumption from an examination of helping behaviors of other animals and by looking at more "primitive" human societies, mainly Native American tribes, which were described as kind, hospitable, and focused on helping each other.

Bonger highlighted that egoism itself does not make people criminal but can make people more capable of crime. Capitalism either creates or reinforces egoism by lessening any altruistic instincts and by weakening the "moral force in man which combats the inclination towards egoistic acts" including criminal ones (p. 532). The change toward capitalism drives people to be more ambitious and greedier and to develop "egoism at the expense of altruism" (p. 401). When people are looking out for themselves above all others, they lose compassion for others and "a great part of morality disappears" (p. 532).

Although egoism is the primary cause of crime under capitalism, crime also occurs as a result of the demoralization of people who live in poorer conditions. Bonger described various social institutions, such as marriage and family, and how capitalism can weaken these institutions. For example, women must marry in order to obtain social and financial security; those who are unable to attain financial security in that way may turn to prostitution. Bourgeois children are spoiled by luxury, whereas proletariat children are not taught proper morals that would keep them out of crime. He argued that the children of the proletariat need to work in factories to help earn money for their families, thereby lessening prosocial intellectual and moral education. Instead, their work brings them into contact with older people who may teach them poor moral values and egoism, which in turn leads to the greater likelihood of crime. Many poorer children will be raised in this poor environment in which they have little education other than beatings from their parents, which can habituate them to violence; therefore, a tendency to violence is taught at a young age. By the effects of capitalism destroying the traditional cultural values and informal social controls, and promoting hedonism and selfishness, people are no longer prevented from committing harmful acts. Crime becomes a rational response to capitalist exploitation.

The Breadth of Bonger's Theory

The problems of capitalism can be used to explain a variety of crimes, from minor crimes to more serious offenses. For example, vagrancy and begging are more common under capitalism because there will always be some people who are unable to sell their labor. Furthermore, Bonger noted that as an example of how poorly paid some laborers are, it can even be more profitable to beg than to work. Next, because in a capitalist society having possessions can be viewed as success, people who cannot afford these possessions may turn to crime, especially theft, to attain greater status in the views of others. As an example of violent crime, the economic situation influences the amount of rape by affecting whether people can marry; marriage, in turn, limits these crimes. Members of the proletariat are less likely to be able to afford to marry, and therefore must satisfy their sexual urges illegally. Women's inferior social position along with alcoholism, a more common affliction among the proletariat, and "sexual demoralization and lack of civilization" can lead members of the proletariat to rape (p. 620).

Through applying the above arguments regarding the influence of economy on social structure, Bonger can explain the causes of crime within a [p. 100 ↓] society as well as variation of criminality across different societies, as capitalist societies will have more crime compared to countries with more equal distribution of wealth. Because the problems of capitalism can influence both the wealthy and the poor, Bonger explored not only crimes by the working class but also those of the people in power. Wealthier people could, for example, steal a large amount of other people's money, partly because of their opportunity to have access to other's money (e.g., in working in a bank) and partly because egoism stimulates greed for all classes.

The Economic Solution to Crime

In order to eliminate most crime, Bonger advocated for a society based on community support and a lack of material poverty. Culture, intellect, and wealth should not be limited to the benefit of some people but rather should be enjoyed by all. If an economic

system like capitalism is the cause or rein-forcer of people's self interestedness, then an economic system that supports altruism would lessen people's egoism. According to Bonger, an economic system such as socialism, or one in which people have more equal footing economically, would support altruism and, in turn, reduce rates of crime.

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See also

- [Currie, Elliott: The Market Society and Crime](#)
- [Greenberg, David F.: Age, Capitalism, and Crime](#)
- [Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels: Capitalism and Crime](#)
- [Spitzer, Steven: Capitalism and Crime](#)
- [Taylor, Ian, Paul Walton, and Jock Young: The New Criminology](#)

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