22. Crime in a Market Society

Elliott Currie

In 1975, James Q. Wilson leveled a stinging attack on traditional sociological "thinking about crime" (Wilson, 1975; see also Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). Wilson argued that the search for "root causes" of crime was a fool's errand: these causes either did not exist or, if they did, were beyond the control of the government. Social welfare policies would not, said Wilson, reduce crime. Instead, the solution was to use the one governmental resource that could blunt the crime rate if administered wisely: prisons. Because a relatively small group of offenders commit a disproportionately high amount of the serious crime, the key to decreasing lawlessness was to lock up the "wicked" among us. In essence, Wilson was proposing the policy of selective incapacitation.

Elliott Currie (1985, 1998) has been perhaps the most articulate progressive criminologist in responding to Wilson's reasoning—an important task given that Wilson's way of thinking would prove persuasive to conservative policymakers (see also Bennett et al., 1996). In Currie's view, the crime and policy analysis advanced by Wilson and similar conservative commentators is flawed in three important respects.

First, they have a misplaced faith in the idea that prisons are the solution to crime. Currie does not deny that some dangerous offenders must be incarcerated or that locking up over 2 million Americans has some effect on the crime rate. But he points out that the sixfold increase in prison populations in the last quarter of the twentieth century did not yield a sixfold decrease in crime; in fact, crime rates rose and then fluctuated in a way that was not closely connected with rates of incarceration. In particular, Currie (1985, 1998) claims that there is little evidence that nations that imprison the highest proportions of their citizens are the safest.

Second, Currie believes that Wilson's crime analysis is flawed because his social analysis is flawed. In particular, Currie contends that conservative commentators such as Wilson fail to confront the distorting effect that America's largely unfettered capitalist system—what he calls the "market economy"—has on those people who are losing in the Social Darwinist fight to survive economically. The nation's powerful economic engine produces enormous wealth but also considerable poverty. This wide inequality creates powerful criminogenic forces, such as childhoods spent amidst the ravages of poverty, whole segments of the labor force left without the ability to secure steady employment and a meaningful livelihood, the concentration of disadvantage and associated problems in deteriorating inner cities, and so on.

The effects of these harsh and unforgiving conditions might be blunted if the government were proactive in cushioning the suffering of its people. But the market economy has another dark side: its production of cultural values and political interests that oppose government intervention to help *those in need. Thus, the market economy's emphasis on individual responsibility for failure, and its pressure on the state to reduce taxes and welfare budgets, means that social programs aimed at supporting at-risk citizens are constantly attacked as being "undeserving" and counterproductive. The result is disquieting. The combination of persisting high levels of inequality and of cutbacks in government support for the casualties of the market economy is a "toxic brew" that generates America's high rate of violent crime (see also Currie, 2009, 2013). The consequences of these conditions are felt most deeply in minority communities. As Currie (2020: 19) has recently noted, in the first two decades of this century, homicides have claimed the lives of more than 162,000 black Americans. The failure to respond forcefully to this epidemic of violence Currie terms a "peculiar indifference."*

Third, Currie rejects Wilson's conclusion that, in essence, the government can do nothing about crime other than incarcerate more offenders. In his writings, Currie (1985, 1998, 2020) documents a variety of employment, early intervention, and criminal justice programs that have been shown to be effective and that, when taken together, could create a more "compassionate capitalism" within the United States. The nation's failure to embark vigorously on these programs reflects not the dearth of knowledge or of resources but the dominance of market society ideology and a lack of political will. The consequence of this policy approach to crime is that prisons continue to be filled to the brim, but serious violence in America remains an enduring problem (see Cullen, 2010).

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In this paper I want to argue that it is precisely the extreme subordination of social life to the imperatives of what we rather inaccurately call the "market" that helps to explain not only the recent upsurge in violence in places like Russia and China, but also why the U.S. has long led the advanced industrial world in levels of serious violent crime—and why that unfortunate dominance continues in the face of unprecedented rates of incarceration which now surpass those of any other country in the world, advanced or otherwise, with the possible exception of Russia (Mauer, 1995).

The Idea of Market Society

I will argue that the varying levels of serious U.S. criminal violence across the "post-industrial" societies are closely tied to the greater or lesser growth of what I call "market society." By market society I don't just mean the existence of a market economy—but the spread of a civilization in which the pursuit of personal economic gain becomes increasingly the dominant organizing principle of social life; a social formation in which market principles, instead of being confined to some parts of the *economy*, and appropriately buffered and restrained by other social institutions and norms, come to suffuse the whole social fabric—and to undercut and overwhelm other principles that have historically sustained individuals, families and communities.

By market society, in other words, I don't mean "market" in quite the same way that is meant when economists talk about the "free" market—the idea of an economy in which everyone gets to compete on level terrain without government interference. That is part of the *ideology* of market society, but is decreasingly its reality. We don't have that kind of market economy in the U.S., which, again, is the traditional exemplar of market society among the advanced nations: we have an economy in which increasingly those better situated are able to *insulate* themselves remarkably well from the pressure of market forces. . . . What we *do* have in the U.S., however, and to a growing degree in Britain and many other advanced industrial countries, is a society in which most areas of social life—most of the major institutions through which we grow up, earn a living, care for our bodies and minds, and put a roof over our heads—are increasingly shaped by private decisions made in the service of the accumulation of private gain. And that is what I mean by market society.

Market societies, in short, are Darwinian societies, whether or not they can be said to be "free" in any meaningful sense. They are societies which, by definition, offer few cushions against the impact of disabilities or misfortunes in the ... markets and minimal public provision of ... At best they provide basic "safety ... for the worst victims of economic insecurity ... even those are likely to be fragile and ... being ... as market society advances. ... "sink or swim" societies, at least for ... unable to control enough private resources ... that increasingly the dominant organizing principle of social life; a social formation in which market principles, instead of being confined to some parts of the *economy*, and appropriately buffered and restrained by other social institutions and norms, come to suffuse the whole social fabric—and to undercut and overwhelm other principles that have historically sustained individuals, families and communities.

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Market societies, in short, are Darwinian societies, whether or not they can be said to be "free" in any meaningful sense. They are societies which, by definition, offer few cushions against the impact of disabilities or misfortunes in the labor market and minimal public provision of social services. At best they provide basic "safety nets" for the worst victims of economic insecurity, but even those are likely to be fragile and increasingly besieged as market society advances. They are "sink or swim" societies, at least for those unable to corral enough private resources to stay afloat.

I suggest that market society, as thus defined, is a particularly fertile breeding ground for serious violent crime. . . . Our uniquely devastating experience of serious violent crime, in short, reflects the equally unique extent to which the principles of market society have driven America's social and economic development and shaped its national culture. And that not only helps us understand the state of crime—and punishment—in the U.S. itself, but offers a cautionary tale for other countries tempted to follow a similar developmental path.

. . . No one much disputes the reality of a relative absence of institutions countering the unfettered expression of the market principle in American history. In modern industrial societies those countervailing institutions have been essentially of one of two kinds; borrowing from the American economist Richard Belous (1992: 1–3), we can call them "compassionate" and "keiretsu" forms of capitalism. "Compassionate" capitalism stresses social solidarity, equity and community values; it is historically a bottom-up development rooted in traditionally strong unions, as in Scandinavia (this is similar to Will Hutton's description of the operative principles of "social market" Europe). "Keiretsu" capitalism, on the other hand, is paternalistic rather than communitarian—top-down rather than bottom-up; and has its roots in that kind of corporate paternalism rather than in a strong labor movement: Japan being the classic example. But both systems may end up in somewhat similar places when it comes to protecting ordinary people against the forces of unfettered markets. Thus taxation is relatively low in the Japanese version of "keiretsu" capitalism (or "peopleism," in Hutton's phrase); but so is inequality, and "human relations and the necessity of nurturing them are centre stage" (Hutton, 1995: 269).

Employment policy is a prime example of this rough convergence. Both Sweden, historically one of the most prominent exemplars of the compassionate model, and Japan, with a very different political history, have traditionally sought to keep workers employed even under the most adverse macroeconomic conditions. And both stand in stark contrast to the U.S. and some other exemplars of what Belous calls "contingent" capitalism, in which employers hire and fire at will and reject even the most modest government intervention in the labor market.

What makes the U.S. so distinct is that alone among post-industrial societies it has *neither* history—not the top-down but in many ways quite supportive corporatist tradition of a country like Japan, or the bottom-up, social-democratic buffers against the ravages of the market that strong labor movements and their allies successfully fought for in many European industrial countries—measures which are today, of course, under siege in many of them.

What does this have to do with violence? A great deal. This history means that the criminogenic effects of the market have traditionally been unleashed in the U.S. far more than in other advanced industrial societies. That is not to say that the U.S. is the only place they are found. Indeed part of my concern is precisely that they are becoming a familiar, even normalized part of the social landscape in many places around the world. But outside the Third World no country yet has experienced these effects in as concentrated and sustained a way as the U.S. And therein lies the core of our violence problem.

Market Society and Violent Crime

. . . There are at least seven of those profoundly criminogenic and closely intertwined mechanisms operating in "market society." They are not temporary aberrations, but—I would argue—intrinsic to the logic of market society itself. . . .

1. First, *market society breeds violent crime by destroying livelihood*. It has sometimes been fashionable to argue that there are few if any connections between the labor market and crime. But the accumulating evidence strongly suggests otherwise. How individuals, families and communities fare in the labor market affects the potential for criminal violence in multiple and profound ways. On the level of individual aspirations and motivation, for example, the long-term absence of opportunities for stable and rewarding work, especially for the young, breeds alienation, undercuts the sense of having a "stake" in legitimate society, and exerts powerful pressures toward participation in illicit enterprises (Sullivan, 1985). Steady work provides one of the most important bonds that enable individuals to desist from early criminal careers (Sampson and Laub, 1993), and its absence helps explain why doing so is considerably harder for black youth in the U.S. than for their white counterparts (Elliott, 1994). Moreover, the absence of strong work opportunities undermines the effectiveness of programs to reintegrate offenders into the community, thus ensuring high rates of recidivism (Currie, 1985: Ch. 4). Long-term exclusion from stable work disrupts families and inhibits family formation in the first place (Wilson, 1987: Ch. 3), and diminishes the capacity of adults to perform credibly as role models and agents of socialization and the transmission of values to the young (Fagan et al., 1993). Less often discussed, but not less important, is the effect of *overwork* in poorly-paid jobs on the capacity of parents to provide a nurturing and competent environment for childrearing and on the capacity of communities for self-regulation and the maintenance of networks of mutual support and care. At the community level, the lack of opportunities for rewarding work breeds illicit enterprise, especially drug sales, which once established both increase the level of routine violence and weaken the community's capacity for supervision and support (Wilson, 1995). And mass exclusion from steady, well-paying work interacts with traditional gender norms to produce a broad stratum of men for whom violent means of asserting "manhood" flourish in the absence of conventional ones.

On all these counts, market society tends inherently to push the labor market in precisely the wrong directions. The fundamental problem is that in market society labor appears simply as a cost to be reduced rather than a social institution valuable in its own right—among other things, because of its capacity to promote social cohesion and personal integration. Accordingly, it is a central thrust of market society to seek to cheapen labor and/or eliminate it altogether. The result is a constant, systemic pressure toward the degradation of the labor market—through the proliferation of low-wage, high turnover jobs, endemic structural unemployment, or some combination of both. That is especially true in the context of the recurrent global overcapacity which market economies tend routinely to produce.

That combination, in fact, is what has most clearly characterized the U.S. labor market since the 1970s. The U.S. economy is often viewed as a highly successful "job machine," and its labor market policies have accordingly been widely held up as a model for the "rigid" economies of Europe to follow. But to the extent that the U.S. has indeed achieved higher job growth and lower measured unemployment than many (though not all) other advanced economies, it has been at the expense of wages and benefits—boosting the numbers of the "working poor" and creating a stratum of low-wage workers who are uniquely disadvantaged vis-à-vis their European counterparts. Thus, as of the late 1980s, as the economist Richard B. Freeman shows, men in the bottom decile of the U.S. earnings distribution earned only 38% of the median wage, while their counterparts in the bottom decile in Europe averaged 68% and in Japan 61% of the respective medians. The lowest-paid American workers "have lower real earnings than workers in all advanced countries for which there are comparable data"—earning less than half, for example, of what the lowest-paid German workers earn (Freeman, 1994: 12–13). That helps explain higher U.S. levels of family poverty (about which more below), and also in its own right exacerbates the criminogenic effects of overwork on families and communities. Market society can indeed, apparently, create "jobs"—lots of them. But it cannot reliably create *livelihoods*.

Moreover, the relatively low rates of official unemployment in the U.S. obscure relatively *high* levels, on average, of *non*-employment in recent years (Balls, 1994)—as measured by the proportion of working-age men who have dropped out of the labor force. . . .

Market society, moreover, tends to exacerbate the criminogenic impact of weakening labor markets through its reluctance to cushion the economic impact of joblessness or to use public resources to generate new jobs and serious training for them. The comparative figures are stunning: At the beginning of the 1990s the U.S. was spending less than half of what even the British spent, just a quarter of what the Dutch spent, and *less* than a quarter of what the Swedes spent on labor market programs of all kinds. And a good part of what it *did* spend went for unemployment insurance. When it comes to programs to provide training and jobs outside the private labor market, these differences are much starker. Sweden spent eight times what the U.S. did, proportionately, on these "active" labor market programs (Reutersward, 1990).

2. The second—closely related—mechanism through which market society breeds violence is its *inherent tendency toward extremes of inequality and material deprivation*. The progressive elimination of good work (and the systematic resistance to an active employment policy) is part of the reason for that tendency. Another is the resistance of market societies against government intervention to offset the inadequacy of labor market incomes.

In the U.S., where "market" principles reign supreme in the absence of strong countervailing forces, income inequality has traditionally been more extreme than in other advanced societies; in the early 1980s, the share of the poorest fifth of the population in GDP was half again as high in West Germany and nearly *twice* as high in Sweden (Barr, 1992: 776). And those gaps widened substantially in the 1980s and 1990s, as the U.S. income distribution took a sharp turn toward increased inequality. . . .

The key reason for the wider spread of inequality in the U.S. is that the bottom is so far down, as recent data from the Luxembourg Income Study illustrate in sharp relief. At close to 22%, the child poverty rate in the U.S. towers above that of European countries—even relatively poor ones like Ireland (at about 12 percent). Child poverty rates are below 4% in Sweden, Belgium, Finland and Denmark; the closest competitors to the U.S. among advanced industrial nations are Canada and Australia, at roughly 14% (Rainwater and Smeeding, 1995, Table 2)....

Even more striking, from the LIS data, is the stark *inequality* in the economic condition of American children. Thus, in no European country do children in the *upper* fifth of the scale of real income match the income of comparable children in the U.S.: but only in Ireland (and Israel) are children's real incomes in the *lowest* fifth below those of the poorest American children. Poor children in the U.S., in short, are not only more numerous but also poorer than their European (or Canadian or Australian) counterparts, while the most affluent children in America are considerably *richer* than their counterparts in other advanced countries....

What makes it troubling, among other things, is that both poverty and inequality are increasingly implicated in violent crime. Again, as with employment, the relationships are complex and some are indirect. Yet the evidence points strongly to a profound role for both absolute and relative deprivation. How much poverty, and how wide a spread of inequality, a society tolerates *matter* in terms of violence, and this for several related reasons.

The evidence for a strong link between income inequality and homicide in particular is long-standing, and it comes from a variety of different kinds of research carried out across a variety of different settings (cf. Blau and Blau, 1982; Currie, 1985: Ch. 5; Messner, 1989; Gartner, 1990). Notably, one recent study finds a strong and specific association between the growth of wage inequality in the U.S. since the 1970s and levels of homicide and aggravated assault (Fowles and Merva, 1996). These connections are typically drawn in terms of some conception of relative deprivation. But there is also growing evidence that poverty itself—or more precisely a syndrome of multiple deprivation (what Land et al. have usefully called "resource deprivation")—is implicated in homicide generally (Land et al., 1990; Smith and Brewer, 1992) and in family homicides in particular (Goetting, 1995).

The long-term deprivation characteristic of market society generates high levels of violent crime in part because of its impact on child development. To begin with, the link between severe economic deprivation and child abuse is one of the strongest and most recurrent in the literature on child development (Sampson, 1993). In the U.S. the risk of reported physical child abuse is seven times higher in families making below $15,000 a year than in those making more (Cappelleri et al., 1993). Poverty's strong contribution to child abuse increases the level of criminal violence both directly, by increasing violence against children, and indirectly, through the intergenerational impact of abuse on later violence (Widom, 1992). At the same time, "persistent" poverty of the kind routinely generated by market society inhibits intellectual and social development among children and predisposes them toward school failure and later economic marginality (Miller and Korenman, 1993). The more years children spend in poverty, the more their measured intellectual development falls behind, even after other factors, like family structure, are controlled (Duncan et al., 1993).

3. But the lack of public supports to ameliorate the market's impact on the well-being of families and communities involves more than just income benefits alone. The third main mechanism by which market society breeds violent crime is by *weakening other kinds of public supports* that we have good reason to believe act as strong buffers against crime.

As with the problems of inadequate livelihood and economic deprivation, the problem is that market society is *intrinsically* antagonistic to the provision of the kinds of social supports that, as Frank Cullen (1994) has detailed, may act as critical inhibitors of serious crime. Because it is a basic operating principle of market society to keep the public sector small, it forces individuals and families to rely on individual efforts to secure some of the basics of healthy human development that less Darwinian societies, even poorer ones, provide much more reliably and accessibly. Poor but relatively generous societies, accordingly, are likely to do a better job at keeping violent crime low than wealthy but mean-spirited ones.

The withdrawal of public provision has especially devastating consequences when it is combined (as it invariably is in advanced market societies) with the broad structural shifts in the labor market I have noted above. The strains between family and work offer a key example. The adoption of low-wage, high-turnover labor market strategy that is an essential feature of "contingent" capitalism tends to undercut parents' ability to nurture and supervise their children, leading, in turn, to the kinds of problems that many versions of control theory warn us about. As wage levels fall and steady full-time work is replaced by the packaging of several part time and/or temporary jobs, parents in market societies increasingly need to work excessively long hours to make ends meet—which means that their children are likely to be deprived of attention and support. Reliable and affordable child-care facilities and after-school programs could ease that strain considerably; but market societies provide them spottily and grudgingly at best.

Here too, the figures differentiating the U.S. from the "compassionate capitalist" countries are stark and consistent. Just as we are the post-industrial nation with the most meager income support for low-income families, so too we have the least developed mechanisms to mitigate the stresses between work and childrearing. Virtually every other post-industrial nation provides nearly universal care for 3- to 5-year-olds, in one way or another, and all provide some form of paid parental leave (indeed a number of *developing* countries do better in this respect) (Kamerman and Kahn, 1995). Once again, the effects on violence are multiple and complex. The tendency of market society to force parents on to their own (often slim) resources puts children at great risk of abuse and neglect; it simultaneously increases the risks of domestic violence, as the paucity of outside supports for child care combine with weak job opportunities to trap women in abusive relationships.

This pattern, moreover, applies across the board to other public institutions that could play an important role in preventing violent crime. Widely accessible, high-quality preventive and prenatal health care, for example, might prevent some of the most basic physical and emotional traumas of childhood that we know are implicated in violent crime (Lewis et al., 1988). But the U.S. is also the only post-industrial nation without a national health system to deliver that care. (Those systems, of course, are increasingly under siege—in countries as diverse as Britain and Costa Rica as global market society advances.)

4. The withdrawal of *public* supports is compounded by the simultaneous tendency of market society to erode *informal* social supports and networks of care. This is especially a consequence of the rapid movement of capital and, accordingly, of opportunities for steady work in market society—which is characterized by the demand for "flexibility" in the workforce and by the absence of strong ties of capital to any geographic community. But what the system hails as "flexibility" from the point of view of the employer translates into rootlessness for individuals and families and atomization for communities. The result is to deplete the sources of informal support that might otherwise buffer the consequences of mass joblessness, poverty and the retreat of public social services.

If, for example, a family stressed by long working hours and unable to procure decent child care could lean on the grandparents down the street to care for the children; if they could look to uncles, cousins, and friends to help keep an eye on their teenagers when long working hours mean they can't do it themselves; then the criminogenic consequences of overemployment and poverty could arguably be mitigated. But market society systematically splits extended families and creates communities characterized by rapid geographical mobility and the consequent "thinning" of networks of close friendship and mutual care. The overall result is not unlike what social disorganization theorists have warned about since the 1920s, and recent research has repeatedly confirmed (see Sampson and Groves, 1989; Sampson, 1993; Cullen, 1994).

That "thinning" of community under the impact of market development is speeded by systematic private sector disinvestment—as the economic and social condition of the hardest-hit communities no longer suffices to justify investment in market terms—at least in the short term, which is, more and more, the operative time frame in market society. As market society progresses, in other words, we increasingly see communities with not only few *public* agencies—recreation programs, health clinics, libraries—but also few stores, restaurants or movie theatres.

The overall result is a deepening, self-fueling cycle of social impoverishment—what Jeffrey Fagan and his colleagues, in their recent multi-city study of crime, drugs and neighborhood change in the U.S., describe as a progressive "unraveling" of low-income communities. As these researchers point out, the resulting depletion of stable adult supervision and support means that youth gangs or drug dealers may become "the dominant informal control and socialization force" (Fagan et al., 1993: 4). More generally, it leaves youth more and more dependent for help, advice and role modeling on their peer groups and on an increasingly pervasive consumer culture (on which more below).

A second consequence is equally potent. As two decades of research make abundantly plain, it is precisely this sort of "social" impoverishment that is heavily implicated in severe child abuse and neglect—and which helps to explain why some low-income communities have much higher levels of child maltreatment than others (Zuravin, 1989; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1992; Sampson, 1993). It is important not to overstate this case. Even in the most "unraveled" parts of American (or Third World) cities, there remain strong families, at least some solid, longstanding communal institutions (in the U.S., notably churches); and often a handful of dedicated, if overextended, nonprofit social service agencies. But the overall drift of market society is increasingly to marginalize and, at the extreme, to overwhelm them.

5. Market society simultaneously breeds crime by *promoting a culture that exalts atomized and often brutal individual competition and consumption over the values of community, contribution and productive work*. The tendencies I have noted in the labor market, in levels of inequality, deprivation, social provision and support, are exacerbated by fundamental changes on the level of culture. Here the empirical reality is murkier and the changes harder to quantify. Yet I do not think we can adequately understand trends in crime in either the advanced or the developing world without paying these changes close attention. Market society is underpinned by a distinctive set of cultural values and norms—and as it develops, these come to push aside others which have traditionally helped communities to maintain social cohesion (and low levels of violence) in the face of economic deprivation and uncertainty.

We talk a great deal, especially in the U.S., about the links between crime and the culture of poor people. We talk hardly at all about the role of the *common* culture. There is much discussion—I think *too* much—of the culture of the underclass, but little about the culture of the *overclass* (for a fine critique of the "underclass" discussion, see Gans, 1995). That is a serious default, because we will simply not understand the character of violent crime in the contemporary world—perhaps especially youth violence—unless we view it within the context of the growth and spread of a dominant culture of exploitation, predation and indifference to human life in our time.

We can break down these developments into at least three distinct parts; first, the increasing potency and primacy of consumer values; second, and relatedly, the erosion of what I would call "craft" values; and finally the increasing institutionalization, or normalization, of a "mainstream" culture of exploitation and irresponsibility.

There is nothing new about the idea of the U.S. being an extreme example of a consumer society. What *is* new, I think, is the extent to which the other trends I have described have made young people, especially, more and more vulnerable to the appeals of a frantically consumerist culture. As we have decimated both formal and informal adult institutions of supervision, livelihood and support—and not just in poor communities—the culture's insistent proddings toward acquisition and consumption, through the advertising industry, television and the movies, are increasingly unmediated. We have some evidence for this shift that goes well beyond the anecdotal. In their recent multi-city study of drugs and crime in impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, for example, Jeffrey Fagan and his colleagues found a growing "materialism" in American inner cities—indeed, in some cities, what they describe as "hypermaterialism" (1993: 8). Nor is that phenomenon confined to drug-dealing youth gangs. Surveys have described a significant shift toward "consumption aspirations" among American adolescents generally during the 1980s; the proportion agreeing that "having lots of money" was one of their main goals in life rose from less than half in 1976 to nearly two-thirds a decade later (Crimmons et al., 1991).

A second underappreciated casualty of the spread of market culture is what I would call "craft" values—by which I mean the value of a job well done, the pleasure in productive work and creativity, the self-esteem that comes from acquiring competence and contributing your growing skills to an appreciative community. I can't measure this loss in neat numbers. But I am struck by it frequently in encounters with young people in general and delinquent youth in particular.

As market society advances, the value of work and its ability to bind individuals into a productive community life is progressively demeaned in favor of the valorization of consumption for its own sake—and of getting what you want, or getting ahead of others, by whatever means will suffice. When that cultural shift is combined with the decimation of opportunities for good work, it produces a dual assault on one of the most crucial mechanisms of social support, social control and communal engagement.

I'm suggesting, in other words, that the eclipse of stable and rewarding work in market society has, in addition to the economic and social consequences I have proposed above, a more subtle cultural one. Work stabilizes society in part through its cultural meaning—its ability to provide channels of status and esteem, and definitions of virtue and worth, that involve hierarchies of competence, diligence, and contribution. It allows for the valuing of productive means over consumerist ends, of contribution over position. One of the quieter, but I think extremely corrosive, effects of market society is to chip away at those cultural standards linking esteem to the capacity for production and contribution.

These considerations may also help explain why some poor communities manage to resist, at least for a while, the atomization and institutional disintegration that engulf others—and the accompanying levels of violence. In the U.S., that pattern is often found to be true of recent immigrant communities, as against those with a longer history of economic marginalization and longer exposure to a "hypermaterialist" dominant culture. Immigrant communities may retain strong elements of premarket values stressing family obligation and the dignity of work—values which, as a broad body of empirical research makes clear, tend to be worn down the longer immigrants reside in the U.S. and are buffeted by the onslaught of market values.

Another cultural development, equally difficult to quantify, but I think equally important in understanding the links between market society and violence, is what might be described as the spread of a culture of "normal brutality." This too, is by no means a new idea; it is prefigured in the work of a number of early criminological theorists. Around the turn of the century, for example, Enrico Ferri wrote that what he called the "law of free competition" was a "disguised form of cannibalism"—because it established, he said, the rule that "your death is my life" (1962: 84). That insight has transparent relevance for the problem of white-collar crime, but its implications are much broader. Market society promotes violent crime in part by creating something akin to a perpetual state of internal warfare in which the advancement of some is contingent on the fall of others, and in which a corresponding ethos of unconcern—of non-responsibility for others' well-being—often legitimized under the rubric of beneficent competition, pervades the common culture and the interactions of daily life.

A culture in which routinely throwing employees out of work in the name of "restructuring" is increasingly defined as thoroughly laudable business practice; where losing one's footing in the intensifying scramble for livelihood and income means more and more the possibility of falling into real social limbo; where even the most basic help for those who do "lose" is granted, if at all, grudgingly and with overt disrespect; where even the risks of disability or death from illness or accident are contingent on market income and basic health care may be withheld from those without it; where, in short, those on top continually make it clear that they have only minimal concern for the well-being of those on the bottom—is a society in which the risks of violent crime are magnified, because those on the bottom are likely to internalize and reciprocate the prevailing ethos of disregard.

The extraordinarily prescient Willem Bonger put it this way, early in the century: "He who is abandoned by all can no longer have any feeling for those who have left him to his fate" (1969: 53). We do not have much of a language for this phenomenon in contemporary criminological theory. But I don't think anyone who has spent much time with delinquent youth, repeat offenders or drug dealers in the inner cities of the advanced societies can have failed to be aware of their sense of society as a "dog-eat-dog" world. Market society's fundamental cultural attitude of nonresponsibility, in short, breeds a pervasive tendency toward "unbonding" from society of those most impacted by economic and social insecurity and impoverishment—a sense that they are not merely deprived but maltreated. What we might call a "culture of callousness," in which concern for the well-being of other people becomes steadily attenuated, is not a "subculture" confined to "lower-class" youth, but a fundamental tendency of the *dominant* culture itself which poor youth assimilate and, no doubt, magnify, but cannot be said to initiate.

6. A sixth mechanism by which market society aggravates violent crime is by deregulating the *technology of violence*. I don't think this point needs much elaboration. The level of gun involvement in violent crime—especially homicide—in the U.S. is immense, and we won't understand the American pattern of violence apart from it. That is particularly true of the sharp rise in youth homicide that scarred the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s; from 1990 through 1994, 71% of black and 54% of white juvenile homicide victims were killed by firearms (Snyder et al., 1996: 3). There is much room for debate over how *much* of the difference in rates of homicide in the U.S. versus other advanced industrial countries can be laid to the prevalence of firearms—how many gun homicides, for example, might be carried out by other means if handguns were less easily available. If we simply subtract handgun homicides from the total, for example, the U.S. rate still towers above those of most European countries and Japan. But there is no serious dispute that the virtual absence of national-level regulations

on the sale and possession of firearms both distinguishes the U.S. from virtually every advanced nation and contributes substantially to the lethality of American violence (Cook et al., 1995). Nor is there dispute that the modest recent national-level legislation establishing waiting periods for gun purchases and restricting military-style assault weapons have left vast areas of the firearms market for all practical purposes untouched, notably the so-called "secondary" firearms market of informal gun shows and private sales (Cook et al., 1995: 87–90).

What is less often acknowledged is how closely this absence of public regulation of firearms meshes seamlessly with the general "market" orientation of American civilization. The unique proliferation of firearms, especially handguns, in the U.S. is often attributed to its "frontier" culture, but though there is surely some truth in that explanation, by itself it is unconvincing. Canada is also a "frontier" society, but it regulates guns far more stringently than does the U.S. and suffers only a fraction of the level of handgun violence. I think the more salient distinction involves the varying historic dominance of market culture and institutions across these two countries, which is evident across many realms of culture and social policy. It cannot be entirely coincidental that Canada has both more stringent controls over the sale of guns and (so far) a much more generous "welfare state" than the U.S., or that Canada pioneered the kind of universal medical care system which the U.S. has fiercely and effectively resisted in the name of the "free market."

7. Finally, market society breeds violent crime by *weakening or eroding alternative political values and institutions* through which those it hurts most could make sense of their situation in progressive terms and take effective collective action against it.

We don't talk about this issue much in our recent thinking about violent crime. But it has a significant, if abbreviated, history in criminology. Recall that Robert Merton's fifth "adaptation" to the condition of social "strain" was "rebellion," which

> leads men [*sic*] outside the environing social structure to envisage and seek to bring into being a new, that is to say, a greatly modified social structure.

Crime was only one of several possible responses to a disjunction between socially structured means and culturally prescribed ends; political action to change either or both was another. But in order to "pass into organized political action," frustration with the existing social structure had to be translated into allegiance to "new groups possessed of a new myth"—thus transforming mere alienation into positive rebellion. That in turn required breaking the "monopoly of the imagination" imposed by what Merton called the "conservative myth"—the assertion that the deprivation and inequality were inevitable in the nature of things or the result of individual failure rather than social structural constraints (1963: 155–7).

Merton himself did not elaborate much on this point, and it has been mostly forgotten since. But the central insight is crucially important. The way in which adverse social and economic conditions affect people's propensity to crime will obviously be mediated by the cultural ideologies and communal institutions available to them to respond to that adversity. Where strong labor movements or political parties address the concerns of low-income people, or strong ethnic or communal organizations are at hand to promote the collective well-being, the frustrations of social and economic deprivation are more likely to be channeled into constructive social action. But in "market" society those institutions are weak to nonexistent; in fact, it is precisely their weakness that allows market society to flourish to begin with. And as it progresses market society tends to erode them even further—witness the rapid decline of union membership in the U.S. (and many other advanced countries) in recent years, the casualty of market-driven deindustrialization and of concerted attacks by employers in legislatures and on the shop floor.

Why is this important for understanding violent crime? Because it leaves the people most "at risk" because of deprivation and social impoverishment with little means of constructively challenging the forces that are undermining their communities, families and futures—and thereby makes it far more likely that their response will take the form of an individual lashing-out, or a gratification of individual impulse at the expense of other people in the same boat. Over time, the withering of those countervailing institutions begins to deprive them of even the language, the conceptual framework, to define their problems in collective terms and to envision a collective response.

The Future

. . . I have argued that market society is peculiarly conducive to violent crime, for reasons that are analytically separable but, in the real world, closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing—operating simultaneously on the levels of material well-being, social support, and cultural meaning. Thus it is not just that market society increasingly forces a harsh choice of joblessness or low-wage labor, but that in doing so it exacerbates economic inequality and plunges large segments of its population into extreme deprivation—while simultaneously both withdrawing public provision of support and chipping away relentlessly at the informal support networks that might cushion these disadvantages. All the while it is also replacing earlier communal values and norms with an increasingly strident ethos of competitive consumerism which rubs raw the frustrations that accompany the declining economic fortunes of large strata of the population, and weakening the counter-ideologies and institutions that could mobilize constructive challenges to a harsh and depriving social order. To top it off, at the extreme such a civilization laxly regulates and opportunistically promotes the marketing of the mass instruments of lethal violence. It is a potent and toxic brew. And it is, again, a mixture intrinsic to the logic of market society—a function not of its failure but of "the quality of its success," as R. H. Tawney put it in the 1920s; "its light itself a kind of darkness" (1920: 33). . . .

This is not the place to go into the details of what would be required to deflect this trajectory. But a few points seem clear. I have argued that market society generates several analytically separable mechanisms through which it exacerbates the problem of serious violent crime. But these are not really separable in the real world, and some of them are more central than others. In particular, it is the systematic assault on steady livelihood that is arguably the most destructive feature of the advance of market society, and the one with the most diverse and potent ramifications for families and communities; it is, therefore, also the most promising lever for change. Full employment at socially meaningful work at good wages, and with reasonable hours, at a stroke attacks many of the criminogenic features of market society—integrating individuals into a larger social purpose, stabilizing local communities, and guaranteeing sufficient income. It makes illicit markets less appealing and reduces the kinds of family stresses that put smaller children at risk of abuse and weaken the supervision of older ones.

Building that kind of strategy, in the face of the technological changes now transforming work across the globe, means moving in two directions at once (see Currie, 1995): substantially expanding employment in the public and nonprofit sectors of the economy, and developing policies for worksharing and reduction of work time. Both are worthy in themselves, but both also have enormous potential for reducing violence. If we spread work and reduce work time, we not only widen access to livelihood among people who are now cut off from the integrative and supportive effects of stable work, but we also lessen the destructive impact of *overwork*. If we invest in public-sector job creation, we provide new livelihoods for many people the private market will not employ—and we can also staff the public agencies of social support and capacity-building which market society erodes if left to its own devices: health and mental health care, public schooling, child care and skill training. An active employment policy geared to creating new jobs in the public and nonprofit sectors, in short, meshes powerfully with a commitment to the universal provision of high-quality public services; and that combination can be the core of an effective attack on the conditions that breed violent crime.

Such is the state of public discourse on these matters in most of the developed world today that calls for revitalizing an active employment strategy along these lines are sometimes dismissed as Utopian. But there is considerable evidence that it is both eminently feasible (Glyn and Rowthorn, 1994) and capable of attracting strong public support. Even in the U.S., a substantial majority, according to opinion polls, agrees that government should guarantee work for those the private economy will not or cannot hire. Criminologists need to add their voices to what should become a broad and public debate over the nature of work and of social support in the advanced societies of the 21st century. They can do so best by affirming that violence is one of the clearest costs of our increasingly heedless global assault, in the name of the market, on the preconditions of a sustaining social life.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the "market economy"? How does it produce inequality and the conditions that are conducive to high rates of violent crime in the United States?
2. Compared to other advanced industrial nations (e.g., Japan, western European countries), is the U.S. government more or less supportive of its citizens who are in need? Why does Currie think this is the case? What does he believe are the consequences of these government policies?
3. How is Currie's "market society" theory similar to Messner and Rosenfeld's "institutional-anomie" theory? How do the theories differ?
4. What policies would Currie's perspective on crime suggest are likely to reduce crime? What policies would Currie believe would not reduce crime?