

# SOME COMMIT CRIMES BECAUSE THEY ARE RESPONDING TO A SOCIAL SITUATION

ROBERT K. MERTON (1910–2003)

## IN CONTEXT

### FOCUS

**Anomie or strain theory**

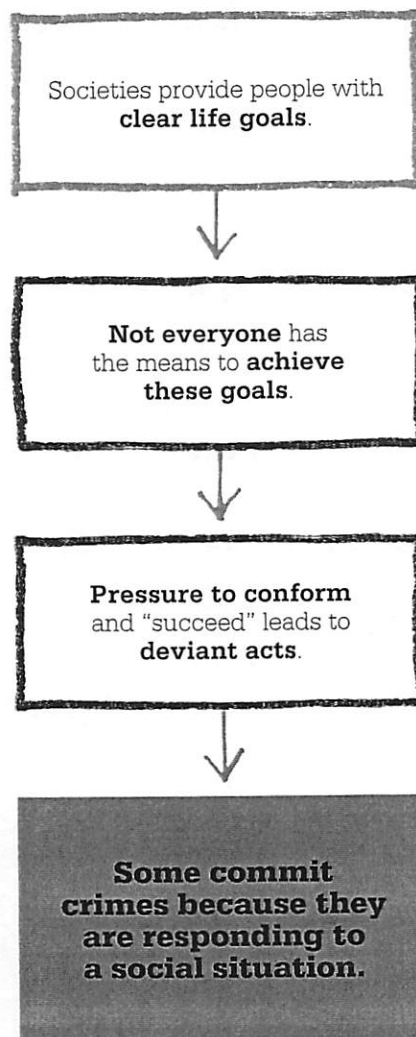
### KEY DATES

**1897** In *Suicide*, Émile Durkheim uses the concept of anomie to account for differing suicide rates among Protestants and Catholics.

**1955** US criminologist Albert Cohen, a former student of Talcott Parsons, says the disadvantages faced by lower-class men cause status frustration, or strain, leading to delinquency, which is seen as a way to command respect.

**1983** British criminologist Steven Box says some accounts of delinquency, such as those of Albert Cohen, fail to explain the crimes of the powerful in society.

**1992** US sociologist Robert Agnew insists that anomie, or strain theory, can be used to explain crime and deviancy but should not be tied to class.



**D**eviance is universal, normal, and functional, according to French theorist Émile Durkheim. He argues that when people no longer feel integrated into society and are unsure of its norms and rules—for example, during times of rapid social change—they are more likely to turn to deviant acts or suicide. This condition is known as *anomie*, a Greek word meaning “without law.” In his article “Social Structure and Anomie,” published in 1938, US sociologist Robert K. Merton adapts Durkheim’s analysis of deviance, applying it to contemporary US society and arguing that such behavior occurs as a direct result of strain.

### The American Dream

Merton suggests that the ideals and aspirations connected with individual “success” in the US—the “American Dream” of, for example, material prosperity, and home and car ownership—are socially produced. Not everyone can achieve these goals through legitimate means because certain constraints, such as social class, act as barriers to achieving them. According to Merton, deviance

See al:  
Max W

J. Putnam 124-25 ■  
-85 ■ Talcott Parsons 300-01



**The American Dream** of leading a charmed life, owning a home and a car, and accumulating wealth is a fantasy for many, especially those caught in the clutches of poverty and unemployment.

(which is also socially constructed) is likely to occur when there is an obvious tension or discrepancy between social expectations and the ability or desire to attain them. This "strain theory," for Merton, explains the direct correlation between unemployment and crime: for example, a lack of money means that the legal routes to buying a car, a house, or other items are not accessible, but the pressure to conform to what is expected can lead people to theft.

### Rebel or conformist?

Merton extends his theory by dividing people into five categories according to their relationship to culturally accepted goals and the means of achieving them. "Conformists," he suggests, have invested in the American Dream and, through the accepted routes of education and gainful employment, are able to attain it. "Ritualists" do

not aspire to society's cultural goals, but nevertheless respect the recognized means of achieving them. They may, for example, go to work every day and perform their duties conscientiously, but they do not attempt to climb the corporate ladder to "success."

"Innovators" (often seen as criminals) are those who believe in the goals of society but choose less legitimate and traditional means to achieve them. "Retreatists" are society's dropouts—they reject not only conventional goals but also the traditional means of attaining them. Finally, "Rebels" are similar to Retreatists, but they create alternative goals and means of achieving them and seek to advance a counterculture. It is this group (which often includes terrorists and revolutionaries) that, according to Merton, can effect social change.

Merton's strain theory has been criticized for focusing on individual deviancy at the expense of group or gang behavior. It is also argued that the theory relies too heavily on official crime statistics, which often obscure middle-class crime. ■

## Robert K. Merton

Robert K. Merton was born as Meyer R. Schkolnick in 1910 in Philadelphia. His parents were working-class Russian-Jewish immigrants; the first few years of his life were spent living above their dairy shop (which later burned down). He adopted the stage name Robert Merlin at the age of 14 as part of his magician act, but changed it to Robert K. Merton when he won a scholarship to Temple University.

Merton is credited with coining the phrases "self-fulfilling prophecy" and "role models," and is said to have pioneered the focus-group research method. He was elected president of the American Sociological Association in 1957.

### Key works

1938 "Social Structure and Anomie"

1949 *Social Theory and Social Structure*

1985 *On the Shoulder of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*

“Antisocial behavior is... 'called forth' by... differential access to the approved opportunities for legitimate... pursuit of... cultural goals.”

Robert K. Merton