

MISESIAN PRAXEOLOGY: AN ILLUSTRATION FROM THE FIELD OF SOCIOLOGY OF DELINQUENCY

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ABSTRACT: The two main principles of the praxeological system elaborated by Mises are his concept of action and his epistemological apriorism. This paper illustrates these principles in the field of the sociology of delinquency. It first shows that the Misesian concept of action is very helpful in order to (1) understand why a praxeological turn occurred in the 1950s with the critique of the culturalist approach to criminality, and (2) analyze some of the main theoretical developments that took place afterwards, such as the social control theory, the low self-control theory, and the routine activity theory. The paper then shows that, behind their positivist façade,

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these sociological theories illustrate rather than contradict the aprioristic character of the theoretical sciences of human action.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult for me to express with words how honored I am to have the opportunity to give this 2012 “Ludwig von Mises Memorial Lecture.” Mises is the economist I most admire, as is probably also the case for many people in this room. And he fully deserves our admiration, as an outstanding scientist, a great epistemologist, and a leading fighter for liberty. In this lecture, I want to pay tribute to the depth and relevance of his conception of theoretical social science as a *praxeology*. Misesian praxeology rests upon two main pillars, first the concept of *action*, and second the *aprioristic character* of the theories of human action. When he developed these insights, Mises had mainly economic science in mind, and that is perfectly understandable. Now, I would like to illustrate his principles of action and of apriorism with the help of another branch of social science, namely the sociology of delinquency. This survey will offer an unusual but also—hopefully—an instructive perspective on the foundations of social science as elaborated by Mises.

MISES AND THE CONCEPT OF ACTION

The title of Mises’s greatest treatise, *Human Action*, clearly indicates the foremost importance that he attached to the concept of action. Indeed, his whole theoretical and epistemological edifice is built upon this key concept and he devotes many pages to its presentation. His starting point is the definition of action as “conscious or purposeful behavior” (1949, p. 11) and he then deduces the main components implied by this concept.

- *Ends and means* are the two most basic elements of the theory of action: a human action consciously uses means in order to reach a chosen end.
- *Causality*: the relationship between ends and means implies the category of causality, so that, at the very least, the means are causes and the ends are effects.

- *Rationality*: an action can fail, of course, due to the lack of knowledge of the actor; however, an action is necessarily rational in the sense that it is always adapted to the end pursued, on account of the personal knowledge of the actor; the choice between ends, on the other hand, is a value judgment that specifically belongs to the acting person and that is therefore neither rational nor irrational.
- *Ordinal scale of values*: the ends envisioned by an actor can be crudely materialistic or highly refined, but whatever their concrete content, their value or importance for the acting person is purely subjective and they are ranked along a scale that is ordinal; no measure or calculation of subjective values is possible.
- *Imputation*: the means of an action also have a value or importance for the actor, but since they only play an instrumental role in bringing about a chosen end, their value is derivative in the sense that it is imputed or ascribed to them from the value of the end.
- *Psychic profit or loss*: since the means are scarce, when the actor devotes them to reach an end, he must also sacrifice a less preferred end; his action, if successful, will bring him a subjective or psychic profit that is the non-measurable but positive difference between the value of the end reached and the value of the end foregone; if the action is unsuccessful, then the actor suffers a psychic loss.
- *Time*: action necessarily takes place in time; its aim is always set in the future since the present cannot be changed.
- *Uncertainty*: action also implies change and uncertainty; if the future was certain, then no action could possibly change it and there would be no role for acting.

THE CULTURALIST PARADIGM IN SOCIOLOGY OF DELINQUENCY

In the 1920s and 1930s Mises was very busy laying down the foundations for a theory and epistemology of action. His collection of papers on the *Epistemological Problems of Economics* was published in German in 1933 and the first German edition of *Human Action*

in 1940. During these very same decades, sociologists and criminologists were developing theories in which the core concept was not action but rather *culture*. Modern criminology or sociology of delinquency appeared in the 1920s with a classic treatise by Edwin Sutherland, who is considered as the most influential criminologist of the 20th century (Laub, 2006). Born in 1883, he was two years younger than Mises, so they both belonged to the same generation. Sutherland developed a famous culturalist theory, according to which criminal behavior is explained by the anti-social or pro-delinquency value system held by the criminal.

More specifically, his theory rests upon two main principles. First, a *learning principle* that quite simply states that delinquency is learned. This learning is a socialization process that takes place in small and intimate groups where members mainly learn two things: (i) criminal techniques and (ii) pro-delinquency values. This idea of a learning process is important because it breaks with the genetic theories of criminality developed in the 19th century by the positivists, for instance by Cesare Lombroso and his famous “born criminal.” The second principle of this culturalist criminology is *differential association*: each individual belongs to some groups that favor conventional or law-abiding behavior (such as family, for instance), and may also belong to groups that favor anti-social or delinquent behavior (such as groups of young delinquent peers). So the individual is confronted with contradictory or conflicting influences. If antisocial values predominate around the individual, then he will become delinquent, and if conventional or pro-social values predominate, then he will comply with the law.

On a more general level, this explanation belongs to the culturalist paradigm that was developed by the first Chicago School of sociology, and which uses the idea of *culture conflict* in order to account for the pathologies—including crime, of course—of the great American cities in the first decades of the 20th century.

A NOTE ON THE WORD “CULTURE” IN *HUMAN ACTION*

There is just one occurrence of the word “culture” in the whole treatise, in a sentence in which Mises writes about the “culture of

many Asiatic peoples."¹ Since it was quite surprising to find so few occurrences of this word, I checked the German edition of the treatise, *Nationalökonomie*, and discovered that Mises repeatedly uses the German word *Kultur* but translates it in English with the word "civilization." And indeed the word "civilization" appears 115 times in *Human Action*, mostly in the expression "Western civilization." It is clear from the contexts where these words appear that Mises uses them in the classical ethnographic sense of a "complex whole" (Tylor, 1871) that includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, religion, law, custom, and habits. Quite obviously, the description of a culture or of a civilization in this sense belongs to the realm of history, not of praxeology.

THE CRITIQUE AGAINST CULTURALIST CRIMINOLOGY: THERE IS NO CULTURE CONFLICT

In the 1950s, the two criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957) provided one of the first convincing criticisms of culturalist criminology. They showed that criminals or delinquents in fact do *not* have a set of values different from that of the general population. They came to this conclusion through an investigation of the arguments used by the criminals themselves, when they try to justify their own illegal actions in court. And they observed that these offenders do not challenge the conventional value system. Rather, they use what these authors famously called "neutralization techniques" that help them to excuse their own behavior. For instance, they use the technique of the *denial of responsibility*: they justify their illegal behavior by saying that they were pushed by an overwhelming force, because they were drunk, or needing drugs, or angered, and so on. They also use the technique of the *denial of injury* that attempts to mitigate the significance of theft: since no one got physically hurt, it cannot be that bad, and so on.

What is very interesting here is that in all these kinds of arguments used by the offenders themselves, the conventional system of moral and legal norms is *implicitly taken for granted*. It is not criticized

¹ "It is precisely when one recognizes the fact that in the past the *culture* of many Asiatic peoples was far ahead of that of their Western contemporaries, that the question is raised as to what causes stopped progress in the East" (1949, p. 839, emphasis added).

nor attacked, but rather acknowledged and circumvented. So even if the delinquents have specific “subcultures,” those are not directly opposed to the conventional and usual morals prevalent in society. Criminals, in their own words, are not committed to a pro-delinquency system of values.

The culturalist explanation by Sutherland is totally contradicted by these observations. And also, the theoretical question of the cause of delinquency drastically changes. Sutherland tried to answer the question: how do some people acquire an anti-social value system that turns them into criminals? But now the question becomes more subtle: why do some people break the moral and legal rules to which they otherwise believe (even if not very strongly)?

THE PRAXEOLOGICAL TURN

At this point, the sociology of delinquency is ready to take a praxeological turn that is to some extent similar to the subjectivist revolution that took place in economics at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, once the culturalist approach is discarded, the Misesian conception of action becomes highly relevant. There are two reasons why this is so.

(1) *Delinquency is not an end in itself.* In the culturalist approach, delinquency is an end in itself: breaking the law is valued as such. Now, praxeology has nothing to say about ends and value judgments. In the words of Mises: “Its object is means, not ends” (1949, p. 21). It does not seek to explain, for instance, why some people choose asceticism while others choose hedonism, why some people enjoy refined pleasures while other people (or the very same people at different moments of time) enjoy crude pleasures, and so on and so forth. So if the essential difference between criminals and non-criminals is their respective value systems, then praxeology would not have much to say about criminality. The question “Why do some people choose delinquency?” would be similar to the question “Why do some people enjoy classical music?” But as Sykes and Matza (and others) have shown, the moral values of criminals and non-criminals are more or less the same, so they cannot by themselves alone explain why an individual commits a criminal act while another one in similar circumstances does not. The difference between criminality and non-criminality essentially becomes a

choice of means, not of ends. And to that extent, delinquent acts are perfectly legitimate objects of a praxeological analysis. Quebec criminologist Maurice Cusson (1983a) has consistently followed this line of analysis. He has shown that delinquent action indeed follows the same kinds of ends as law-abiding action, such as the search for wealth, prestige, and power. The difference is that the means are obtained through theft, fraud or illegal physical violence.

(2) *The paradox of culturalism.* There is the second reason why the sociology of delinquency was ready in the 1950s to take a praxeological turn. The culturalist approach rests upon a naïve conception of the relationship between culture and behavior: behavior is supposed to follow the rules prescribed by the culture or subculture in which the individual has been socialized. If this metaphor can be used, culture is conceived as a computer program and the individual supposedly follows the cultural moral code just like a computer follows the steps of a program. Now, as we have seen, offenders believe in the conventional moral code (not very strongly, of course), but their behavior more or less often violates this code nonetheless. In the culturalist framework, this situation is paradoxical and very difficult to account for. In the Misesian framework, on the other hand, the explanation is straightforward: even if a person is reluctant for moral reasons to break the law, she will choose an illegal act if it brings a higher psychic profit than the alternative legal acts. Let us suppose that an individual would prefer, everything else equal, to choose legitimate means rather than illegal means in order to reach his ends. In the context of a specific decision, he can nonetheless choose illegal means, for the simple reason that they allow him to reach an end that is sufficiently high on his value scale. It is thus very easy to account for the commonsense observation that people sometimes break their own moral code.

To sum up here, the culturalist approach is plagued by a paradox: individuals socialized in a culture should not break the prescribed rules (since those are *their* rules), but observation shows that they do break them quite often nonetheless. This paradox completely disappears when we use the basic praxeological concepts of ends, means, and psychic profit. The praxeological solution to the culturalist paradox is reminiscent of the marginalist solution to the paradox of value in economics, even though there is no strict parallelism between the two paradoxes and their solution.

THE THEORY OF SOCIAL CONTROL

The next significant theory developed in the field of sociology of delinquency is the theory of social control (Reiss, 1951; Hirschi, 1969; Cusson, 1983b), and it clearly belongs to the praxeological framework. Very briefly, this theory explains why some individuals commit more or less serious delinquent acts by the fact that their “bond” to “society” is weak or broken. The expression “bond to society” is not very Misesian, to say the least. It seems to imply a holistic conception of “society” that Mises forcefully criticizes. But society, here, is not at all conceived as a supra-entity that exists above and beyond the individuals, and I am going to show that, in fact, social control theory can easily be expressed in the praxeological language.

A Praxeological Interpretation

Let us follow the presentation offered by one of the most prominent exponents of social control theory, the American sociologist Travis Hirschi. In his well-known book *Causes of Delinquency* (1969), he explains that the “bonds to society” mainly consist in the *attachment* to others and the *commitment* to conventional lines of action. Both of these elements have a straightforward praxeological interpretation.

The attachment to others (to family, friends, peers, co-workers, and so on) is to care about them, to be sensitive to their needs. In terms of action, attachment is reflected in lending a sympathetic ear and providing help or advice. These acts can be carried out as ends in themselves, when it pleases us to help others for the sake of helping (say, when we are happy to make them happy). But quite often they are also means—means for the individual who wants to get in return some marks of respect, affection, love, or friendly help. In order to get these valuable services, the individual chooses to create and maintain relationships with other people, through friendship, wedding, parenthood, and other kinds of associations. Attachment, as a means towards ends, clearly falls under a praxeological analysis.

The commitment to conventional lines of action is the second aspect of the bond to society. It explains why most of the people

most of the time do not carry out any criminal acts. This is very simply because if they were caught these conventional lines of action would be threatened by legal or informal sanctions: their educational career would be at risk, or their job, or their family life, or their spare time activities, etc. The praxeological translation is obvious: the values of the ends sought through conventional lines of action are higher than those sought through delinquent means, even if there is no certainty of being caught. In other words, carrying out a criminal act would in this case result in a psychic loss. It is also interesting to note that Hirschi uses a correct conception of subjective cost: the cost of a delinquent act is not the legal and informal sanctions that may ensue; it is the ends—strictly, the value of the ends—that could not be reached anymore if these sanctions were incurred (1969, p. 20). This is a nice illustration of the Austrian concept of subjective cost.

To sum up, the theory of social control explains that the weaker is the “bond to society” of an individual, the less he is attached and committed, and the more he tends to carry out delinquent acts. And this theory can be considered, in the interpretation I have given, as a praxeological theory. Most people follow the rules most of the time because there is a “social control” inciting to conformity and to the avoidance of deviant acts, but this “control” is not an external force emanating from a holistic “society”: it can and should be analyzed in terms of ends, means, instrumental rationality, and psychic profit.

Group Delinquency

If the theory of social control is right, in that the bonds of delinquents to society are weak, then the question of group delinquency immediately arises: how is it that delinquency is quite often a group phenomenon, especially juvenile delinquency? Are not delinquents tightly bonded to the group of peers with which they carry out their delinquent activity? This was the starting point of the culturalist theory, whose premise is that delinquency requires an interpersonal transmission of techniques and values that can only take place in a small and tightly knit group. Social control theory, on the other hand, claims that delinquents are weakly bonded, even to their delinquent peers—a fact that has indeed been corroborated by empirical study (Hirschi, 1969).

A simple and convincing praxeological explanation of group delinquency has been provided by Maurice Cusson (1983a). He shows that a delinquent act is easier and less risky to perform when in group. In a burglary for instance, accomplices are quite helpful: they can monitor the area and help in picking up and carrying more spoils. The burglary can thus be quicker and safer for the offenders. In a hold-up or a robbery, a group of criminals is more frightening than a single individual, and reduces the risk that the victims will refuse to comply, flee, or even attack the offenders. In the case of shoplifting, the accomplices can distract the seller while the stealing goes on smoothly. Furthermore, in the case of teenagers, the members of the group can turn delinquency into a sort of game, in which each one challenges the others to perform delinquent acts. So with a group, delinquency is safer, quicker, more lucrative, and possibly also more fun. In other words, constituting a group is a means to reach the valuable ends aimed at through delinquency.

The culturalist theory explains the constitution of delinquent groups through a quite mysterious and largely *ad hoc* socialization process. The explanation provided by Cusson, on the other hand, is crystal clear and rests upon solid praxeological ground.

The typical narrative of juvenile delinquency told by the social control theory goes as follows: When youngsters are weakly attached to their family and to the school system, they tend to play truant and to avoid staying at home. They meet near school or on the streets—"birds of a feather flock together," as the saying goes—and they choose to gather round in order to have more fun and be more efficient in their delinquent activities. These delinquent groups are not well-structured organizations aiming at long-term goals through careful planning. In fact, they are just the opposite: their composition and objectives can change from one moment to another, and they do not imply any real attachment.

THE THEORY OF LOW SELF-CONTROL

Let us now turn to another crucial feature of delinquent action, namely its *impulsiveness*. The concept of impulsiveness can be translated into economic language as *high time preference*, and again here, as we shall see, the Misesian conception of action is highly relevant.

Delinquency and Impulsiveness

The impulsiveness of teenage delinquents and of adult criminals has been noticed for a long time and by several authors.^{2,3} The most detailed analysis to date has been developed by Gottfredson and Hirschi in the book which is my personal favorite on the whole subject of delinquency, *A General Theory of Crime* (1990). Their starting point is a description of typical delinquent acts such as burglary, robbery, homicide, auto theft, and so on. Here is, for instance, their description of the typical burglary:

[A] young male (or group of males...) knocks on a door not far from where he lives. Finding no one home, he tests the door to see if it is open. If it is open (as it often is), he walks in and looks to see if the dwelling contains anything of interest that he can quickly consume or easily haul away... In most cases, the proceeds of the burglary are quickly consumed, used up, given away, or discarded. (1990, p. 27)

Of course, “not all burglaries fit this pattern,” they add, but the basic nature of burglary can only be deduced from this typical scenario—not from the rare and very unusual burglaries reported by the mass media or from those entirely fabricated for movie audiences. Based on this understanding of what burglaries and other acts of violence or fraud typically look like, Gottfredson and Hirschi conclude that almost all delinquent acts share a series of essential features (1990, p. 89): they provide a *quick* and *easy*

² For an illustration in the Austrian school, see Hoppe (2001, p. 31) who not only takes this fact into account, but embeds it in the much broader framework of political philosophy.

³ Yochelson and Samenow (1976, pp. 448–453) do not agree with this impulsivity thesis, because they have observed that criminals often premeditate their violent acts. They give the example of a man who has stabbed his wife to death. Since she was cheating on him and was asking more and more money from him, he had often thought of killing her. Until one day, after she had spent the night with her lover, she told him she did not want to be with him anymore and spitefully insulted him. He pulled the knife he was carrying and killed her. Does the fact that this man had for a long time been thinking of killing her refute the impulsivity thesis? It does not seem so. The act of killing was carried out in specific circumstances (cheating, breakup, vicious insults), when the gratification from hurting his wife was so high that the inconveniences that had restrained the husband until now were lifted. So this murder can legitimately be called impulsive, even though the husband had it in mind for a long time.

gratification of desires; they are *exciting and thrilling* but offer *few if any long-term benefits*; they require *little skill or planning*, and show *insensitivity* to others since they result in suffering of the victims. In short, the typical delinquent act displays all the characteristics of an impulsive act. And people who commit this kind of act on a regular basis can be labeled “impulsive”: they tend to grab very short term gratifications while jeopardizing their long term projects—assuming they have any. In the terminology of Gottfredson and Hirschi, they are characterized by a “low self-control.” Maurice Cusson (1983a) uses a suggestive expression: he calls this psychological feature “presentism.” In economics, we would say that they have a “very high time preference.”

Now in the first chapter of his treatise, Mises devotes a section to the analysis of the relationship between impulses and action (“On Instincts and Impulses,” 1949, pp. 15–16). He explains that, of course, people have impulses, impulses to grab things that are not theirs, to molest people that they dislike, and so on, but most of the time they choose to resist these impulses because yielding to them would be much too costly—and *this is the core of the theory of social control*. In his own words:

Man is a being capable of subduing his instincts, emotions, and impulses; he can rationalize his behavior. He renounces the satisfaction of a burning impulse in order to satisfy other desires. He is not a puppet of his appetites. A man does not ravish every female that stirs his senses; he does not devour every piece of food that entices him; he does not knock down every fellow he would like to kill. (1949, p. 16)

And Mises adds two very interesting considerations. (i) First, when an individual yields to his impulses, it is still an action, not an automatic behavior. Emotions and impulses affect the terms of the choices faced by the actors, but they do not prevent nor replace action. Anger, for instance, may favor the use of physical violence as a means. But whether in anger, in fear, or in a quiet mood, the person acts nonetheless: he consciously uses means in order to reach a chosen end. (ii) And his second consideration is that the reason for yielding to an impulse is to be found in a high time preference:

[When man decides in favor of yielding to an impulse] a great role is played by the circumstance that the two satisfactions concerned—that

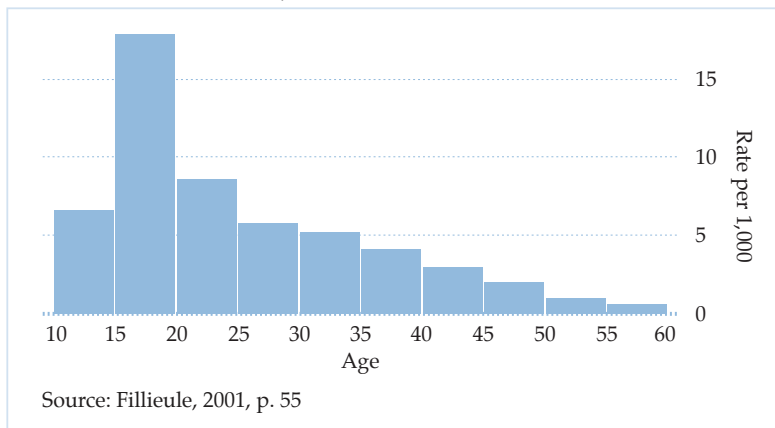
expected from yielding to the impulse and that expected from the avoidance of its undesirable consequences—are not contemporaneous (1949, p. 16).

The benefits from an impulsive act are immediate, but the negative consequences are often suffered at a later date. So the higher the time preference, the more the future inconveniences are disregarded, and the more likely the person will yield to his impulses. And *this is the core of the theory of low self-control*. So the analysis offered by Mises on the subject of impulses, even though it is quite short (less than one page), is brilliant. He anticipates some of the most important theoretical developments that have taken place in the following decades in the study of delinquency.

The Age Curve

A very important phenomenon can also be explained with the help of the concepts of impulsiveness and time preference, namely the relationship between age and delinquency, which is called the “age curve.” Figure 1 shows the typical relation between the age of offenders and indicators of delinquency (see Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990, p. 124, for other illustrations).

Figure 1. The Age Curve of Arrest for Property Crimes in the United States, 1999



All the curves for different years and from different countries show exactly the same pattern: the tendency to commit delinquent acts picks around age 18, then quickly diminishes. So a massive and “natural” phenomenon of rehabilitation occurs with age. How can this phenomenon be accounted for? Certainly not by the culturalist theory, which is in fact contradicted by this pattern (why would small primary groups of individuals socialized within delinquency tend to dissolve and disappear after the age 18?). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have provided an explanation that I find quite convincing. When people grow up, they tend to become more and more mature, which means that their time preference decreases. They become less and less impulsive with age. So when people age they tend to commit less and less delinquent acts—hence the shape of the age curve. It must be made clear that the maturation process that occurs with age is not a praxeological phenomenon. It is a psychological phenomenon, an “ultimate data” from a praxeological viewpoint.

THE ROUTINE ACTIVITY THEORY

Let us take, as a last example, another major development in sociology of delinquency: the “routine activity” theory that was expounded at the end of the 1970s by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson (1979). These authors start from a puzzling phenomenon. Between 1960 and 1975, the United States went through a really explosive increase in delinquency: robberies increased nearly fourfold, aggravated assaults increased nearly threefold, rapes, homicides and burglaries each also increased nearly threefold according to police data. There is of course much to be criticized in police data, but since they are collected roughly in the same way year after year, they offer a quite reliable image of the evolution—not of the level—of delinquency. This explosion of criminality is all the more enigmatic that this very period was quite favorable from a social and economic point of view: unemployment was low, poverty in the official sense was diminishing, and income inequalities were also decreasing. So it is impossible to explain the surge in delinquency from 1960 to 1975 by the usual scapegoats such as unemployment, poverty, and inequality.

The starting point of the explanation offered by Cohen and Felson is a consideration of the minimal conditions for a predatory

criminal act to occur. They assert that three minimal conditions are required, first a *motivated offender*, second a *suitable target*, and third *the lack of a capable guardian*. They immediately cast aside the first condition, the motivated offender. They take for granted that there are motivated offenders—always have been and always will be. They focus instead entirely on the two other conditions, which are both purely situational. And from there on, their theory is extremely simple. If it so happens that suitable targets multiply, and that capable guardians are more and more lacking, then we should expect an increase in the number of criminal acts. And they show that these are just the circumstances that occurred in the period of the 1960s and 1970s.

Let us take just one example, burglaries. Thanks to the increased quantity and quality of consumers' goods produced, houses were more and more often filled with suitable targets such as electronic devices (TVs, record players), vinyl records (back then), bottles of alcohol, jewelry, fancy clothes, and so on. Furthermore, in the case of electronic devices their weight and size significantly decreased during this period, so that they became easier to carry away—all the more easier that cars, stolen or not, could be used for transportation. Now as far as capable guardians are concerned, they were indeed more and more lacking: houses were more often empty during the day simply because the proportion of women working was increasing; also, families were leaving their houses empty to go on vacations—vacations that lasted for longer and longer periods. So the routine activity of American households around their house was greatly altered during the 1960s and 1970s (hence the name of the theory). And this alteration in the routine activity explains, for a big part, the upsurge in burglaries.

More generally, Cohen and Felson show that in the period considered, delinquent action has become (i) more rewarding, (ii) less difficult, and (iii) less risky. So the initial puzzle—an explosion of delinquency in a quite favorable economic situation—has been solved by adopting a strictly praxeological approach. The authors did not care at all about the motivational or cultural aspects of delinquency. Instead, they analyzed delinquent acts as means towards ends, and discovered that these acts could henceforth reach more valuable ends at lower costs. In the Misesian language, we can say that the psychic profit of delinquent acts tended to rise

relative to other kinds of acts, and that therefore delinquent acts were more often carried out.

CULTURALISM, A SLIGHT RETURN

Culturalism, however, has not said its last word. Criminal data show that a surprising phenomenon occurred in the 1990s. During this decade *the delinquency rate in the United States has been divided by two* (see for instance the trends in murder and robbery in the United States in Goldberger and Rosenfeld, 2008). This is a very substantial drop. Now, this evolution is quite difficult to explain. The most obvious cause would be the huge increase in the number of people behind bars (this upward trend began in the early 1980s and only stabilized at the end of the 1990s). According to the statistical calculations of some authors (for instance Levitt, 2004), this policy has had a quite strong negative effect on criminality, but other authors find weak correlations (Ouimet, 2004), so there is no consensus between statisticians on this topic. Furthermore, in Canada a similar strong decline in delinquency has occurred, which cannot be explained by an increase in the incarceration rate, since no such increase has taken place. And among the other explanations, none is really convincing: the strong economy of the 1990s, the changing demographics with a lower proportion of teenagers and young adults, the increase in the number of the police, the improvements in police organization and practice (such as hot-spot policing), etc.

Even when all the aforementioned causes are taken together, they do not seem to deliver a satisfactory explanation of such a significant and unexpected phenomenon. So, some criminologists fall back on a culturalist explanation. Marc Ouimet (2004) for instance, a Canadian criminologist, thinks that the decrease in criminality could be an effect of the “new ethos of moderation” that characterizes the US and Canada since the 1980s, and that is observable in the reduction in overall drinking and smoking. The drop in delinquency could thus be explained by an important change in “collective values.” The famous criminologist James Q. Wilson (2011) also believes that the usual factors are not sufficient to explain the phenomenon, and he concludes a recent paper in the *Wall Street Journal* by saying that “crime in the United States

is falling... because of a big improvement in the culture." It is true that major surveys in moral values conducted worldwide tend to show that culture is slowly but surely improving (Boudon, 2002). This culturalist explanation, however, is hardly satisfactory. The connection between the two phenomena (criminal behavior on the one hand and moral surrounding on the other) is never clear in the culturalist approach—and this is the main reason why this approach is often inferior to the praxeological approach.

THE APRIORISTIC CHARACTER OF PRAXEOLOGY

Let us now turn to the second main element in the Misesian conception of social science, namely the aprioristic character of praxeology. This issue is controversial, and it is not an exaggeration to say that almost all social scientists today reject apriorism. They are positivists in the sense that they believe that, in social science, a theory can be corroborated or falsified by empirical data. They think, quite simply, that social science is an empirical science similar to the natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and so on. This positivist viewpoint is totally rejected by Mises. According to him, the theories of human action are logically deduced from the postulate of action (combined with specific initial conditions). The postulate of action states that human action consciously uses means in order to reach chosen ends. This postulate is *a priori* true. It would make no sense to test it against experience in order to check its validity. So the whole edifice of theoretical social science has an aprioristic character too, since it is logically deduced from this postulate of action (combined with initial conditions, such as the existence of money for instance).

I will now show that *the development of the sociology of delinquency, properly understood, exemplifies the Misesian apriorism.*

The Refutation of the Culturalist "Theory"?

One of the main episodes in the sociology of delinquency in the 20th century was the critique and demise of the culturalist theory. As we have seen, this theory has been convincingly criticized by showing, with the help of empirical investigations (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Hirschi, 1969), that criminals do not have a system

of values opposed to that of the conventional surrounding society. So it seems that we have here an example of an empirical refutation of a theory of social science, namely the culturalist theory of criminality. But according to Mises, in social science, theories can be neither confirmed nor refuted by empirical investigation. So, does this episode contradict the Misesian aprioristic conception? The answer is a resounding *no*.

In this case study, the empirical investigations show that criminals do not have a system of values that extols criminality as such. But the question “Do they have an anti-social value system or do they not?” is purely empirical. It is devoid of any theoretical content whatsoever. It is a historical question whose answer is to be found in an examination of historical evidence. And this is just what sociologists such as Matza and Hirschi have done: they have analyzed some relevant historical material collected with the qualitative methods of sociological observation. And they have concluded from these historical sources that, so far as they could tell, criminals do not have a value system opposed to the conventional one. Their statement is an empirical generalization from the small number of cases that they have studied to criminals “in general.” They resort to an inductive inference in order to reach an empirical generalization, but this kind of generalization is not a universal law at all. It clearly belongs to the branch of history, not of praxeology. In our society, we have good reasons to think that most delinquents share the common system of moral values (they are not deeply committed to it, obviously, but they share it nonetheless). This is a historical statement that could be proved wrong in another society or at another period. So the “refutation of the culturalist theory” is not at all the refutation of a praxeological law. It is the rejection of a historical premise of the culturalist approach, and Misesian apriorism is in no way contradicted—in fact, it is not even challenged—by this example.

The “Corroboration” of the Routine Activity “Hypothesis”?

The routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) offers another example that shows the relevance of epistemological apriorism in the social sciences. This theory, as we have seen, explains the great surge in delinquency during the 1960s and 1970s by a deep change

in the routine activities of American households, and specially the dispersion of these activities away from home. Stated in a positivist vocabulary, this theory is a hypothesis according to which delinquency (1st variable) is positively related to the dispersion of activities outside of home (2nd variable). In order to test this hypothesis, the authors calculate an empirical indicator of dispersion (mainly based on the female rate of participation in the labor force), and they find that there is indeed a positive and statistically significant correlation between the level of delinquency and the intensity of dispersion (even when economic and demographic changes are controlled). So the scientific enterprise of these criminologists can quite easily be expressed in a positivist framework: they formulate a hypothesis and then test it against empirical evidence.

But this interpretation is, strictly speaking, incorrect. In fact, the authors expound a praxeological theory, and their empirical study neither corroborates nor refutes this theory. Here is the *praxeological core* of the explanation provided by Cohen and Felson: When an action—for instance a delinquent action—becomes more rewarding, less risky, and less difficult, then it will tend to be more widespread (everything else equal). Can this statement be empirically tested? No; it is a pure logic of action related to psychic profit, and it should be noticed that the authors never even attempt to test this core statement. But then what is the meaning of their empirical study? Is it completely useless and irrelevant? No, it is in fact very useful, but should be correctly interpreted. It is *not an empirical test* of the theory. Rather, the empirical study is intended to check that the conditions necessary for the application of the theory are indeed present in the historical reality. Delinquent acts will be more numerous if they become more rewarding, less risky, and less difficult, everything else equal. This is the praxeological reasoning, true with aprioristic certainty. Now, in the period under study, do these acts indeed become more rewarding, less risky, and less difficult? This is the question that the empirical or historical investigation has to answer. At first sight, it may seem as if the authors are testing their theory against the facts, thus demonstrating that Misesian apriorism is erroneous. But this is not what they are doing. Their core theory is *a priori* true, and they test its applicability to a specific historical period. Misesian apriorism is not contradicted, but in fact exemplified by this case study.

This example of the routine activity theory and the previous one of the culturalist approach both show that if words are not used carefully, they can mislead us into adopting the positivist viewpoint. When we say that “The culturalist *theory* has been refuted by an empirical investigation,” we use the word “theory” in a questionable sense. We should say, more rigorously, that “An *empirical premise* of the culturalist paradigm has been invalidated.” When we say that “The routine activity theory has been *tested* against the empirical evidence,” we should say that “The *conditions of applicability* of the routine activity theory have been checked for a specific historical period.” The scientific vocabulary is full of positivist traps that can only be avoided if we stick to the very strict demarcation specified by Mises between history on the one hand and praxeology on the other.

CONCLUSION

This lecture was delivered as a tribute to Ludwig von Mises and more specifically to his thinking on the foundation of social science. As the example of the sociology of delinquency shows, his thinking is fruitful and relevant well beyond the realm of economics, and there is no doubt that illustrations from other branches of sociology could have been devised as well.⁴ His conception of action and his aprioristic epistemology are both essential in order to understand the development of the sociology of delinquency. His praxeological framework, in turn, is nicely exemplified by some of the most important theoretical developments in this field since the 1950s, such as social control theory, low self-control theory and routine activity theory.

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⁴ See Salerno (2008) for an application of praxeology to the study of war making.

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