What does the American Dream mean today? For Niko Bellic, fresh off the boat from Europe, it is the hope he can escape his past. For his cousin, Roman, it is the vision that together they can find fortune in Liberty City, gateway to the land of opportunity. As they slip into debt and are dragged into a criminal underworld by a series of shysters, thieves, and sociopaths, they discover that the reality is very different from the dream in a city that worships money and status and is heaven for those who have them and a living nightmare for those who don’t.¹

Introduction: A Spectre Is Haunting Criminology . . .

The connection between crime and economics is complex and multifaceted. Perhaps because of this density, thorough coverage of the topic of crime and economics has proven to be so elusive to mainstream or administrative criminology, particularly in the United States, despite some ostensibly elaborate and occasionally very high-profile attempts to address it. In some respects, the topic is anathema to criminology. While such an assertion may read as sacrilegious to orthodox criminologists, it is not anywhere near as wildly unsubstantiated as some of orthodoxy’s high priests might retort. As any
devoted reader of the indecipherable articles that fill such journals as *Criminology* and *Justice Quarterly* (to say nothing of moribund textbooks and stale government reports) can undoubtedly attest, a plethora of criminological studies purport to address the matter of crime and economics. However, many (dare I suggest most) of these studies, if they address economics at all, do so in a disjointed, limited, and myopic way. In various degrees, these studies attempt to account for the impact of economics on crime rates, ethnoracial or subcultural variations in offending, policing practices, criminogenic age cohorts, victimisation risks, incarceration, recidivism, and a host of other issues. They do so in a sophisticated and nuanced fashion, symbolically representing crime’s factors with $\lambda$ and $\chi$, employing elaborate multiple-regression models and the latest statistical alchemy (see Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008; Muzzatti, 2006, 2009). They ultimately tell us very little about crime and economics. Whilst I do not mean to cast any aspersions upon the researchers involved or question the countless hours of work and effort they devote to these projects, most fall victim to a fatal ontological flaw: They fail to address capitalism.

It seems that *capitalism* is a bad word in criminology. It is not something to be discussed in polite company (such as at the American Society of Criminology’s annual meetings) lest you be labelled a leftist ideologue or, worse, a reductionist; and it is certainly not something to be committed to print (except occasionally, in esoteric, European-based criminology journals). Academic criminology’s gatekeepers have long been aware of the potential consequences associated with allowing an unbridled thrashing of the “C-word” and work diligently to prevent it from sullying the good name of the discipline.2 Aside from a few serpentine flashes, any emancipatory potential to be found in criminology is met with the Marcusian repressive tolerance of programme committees, blind-reviewers, institutional ethics boards, tenure and promotion committees, and outside funding sources, such as the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). It is far easier and more respectable to facilitate work on “nuts, sluts, and pretverts” and “the exotic, the erotic, and the neurotic” under the aegis of “value-free” voodoo criminology and the numbers game than to risk the ire of editors, publishers, and granting agencies, to say nothing of the grief that one will undoubtedly suffer at the hands orthodox criminology’s high priests and most of the lesser clergy who totter along in ideological lockstep (see Liazos, 1972; Muzzatti, 2003; Young, 1999 and 2007.)

I am fortunate that editors Mary Maguire and Dan Okada were not only open to but enthusiastic about including in this collection an ontological and epistemological challenge to the crime and economics canon. For that I am grateful. Of course, readers should note that any shortcomings or foibles are mine alone. Readers should also be aware that, in addition to the term *capitalism*, they will encounter throughout this chapter a number of other profanities well outside criminology’s polite lexicon (ex. *political economy*, *late modernity*, etc.) as I attempt to historically and genealogically reconstruct a criminology of capitalism.
While it is true that many contemporary American criminologists fail to address the role of capitalism in matters of crime (whether causation, creation, reification, or commodification), some late 19th- and early 20th-century European scholars paid it considerable attention. In the following section, I briefly address the work of two often-overlooked criminological theorists, Germany’s Karl Marx and Holland’s Willem Bonger, as a means of contextualising extant issues of crime and capitalism in 21st-century America.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Considering his vast corpus of work, it is perhaps not surprising that many criminologists overlook Karl Marx’s writing on crime. With the exception of his article “Debates on the Law on the Thefts of Wood” in 1842 and a few pieces for the New York Daily Tribune in the 1850s, Marx rarely addressed the topic of crime specifically. However, he wrote extensively about capitalism as an economic and political system and the way this system essentially produced two classes of people: capitalists and proletarians. Because capitalists owned the means of production, they also were able to exert almost total control over social institutions (including but not limited to what we today understand as the criminal justice system) and were able to entrench their beliefs and values as the beliefs and values of society. In contrast, the proletarians owned and controlled nothing and hence were obliged to exchange their ability to work for a wage at the discretion of the capitalists. For Marx, the social production of concrete material relations—relations by which people secured their material existence—permeated all aspects of life. Because of this, the capitalist ruling class was able to translate its economic power into political and ideological power. Through his endeavour to illustrate that the material basis for systemic inequality produced conflict (which can manifest itself as crime), Marx provided the requisite conceptual tools for answering questions about crime.

At the risk of oversimplifying, Marx theorised that the criminal and criminal law are inextricably bound to the larger economic order. In The German Ideology (1846), Marx and his coauthor, Friedrich Engels, describe crime as the struggle of the isolated individual against the prevailing conditions. In other words, it was the economy, specifically industrial capitalism, that determined crime’s incarnations. The creation and enforcement of law were at the discretion of the capitalist class. Though this posit was ignored by most American criminologists, these correlates of crime and inequality are certainly no less true today than when Marx and Engels first described them.
Willem Adriaan Bonger (1876–1940)

Between the time of Marx’s death and the first decade of the 20th century, a criminology of the capitalist economic system was emerging in several European nations, notably France, Germany, and Italy. The late 1880s, in particular, saw a proliferation of these works by Italian criminologists, such as Bruno Battaglia, Napoleone Colajanni, and Filippo Turati. However, to the considerable detriment of Anglo-American criminology, few of these stellar contributions were ever translated into English. A notable and instructive exception was the translation of Dutch criminologist Willem Bonger’s book, *Criminalité et Conditions Économiques* (1905).

As a young man, Bonger studied law at the University of Amsterdam. It was here that he became well acquainted with the work of Marx and was inspired to study the political economy of crime by G. A. van Hamel, a renowned penologist who was his criminal-law professor. While Bonger made several major contributions to criminology in the areas of racism and criminal justice, suicide, penal philosophy, militarism, and war, it was the English translation of *Criminality and Economic Conditions* (1916) that proved to be his most enduring and the one most relevant to this chapter.

According to Bonger, capitalism is criminogenic. Put simply, capitalism’s brutality creates conditions under which crime is not only produced but flourishes. For Bonger, crime and capitalism are connected in three fundamental ways. Bonger employed the historical materialism of Marx and Engels in illustrating the first of these connections: the development of criminal law in unison with the aggrandisement of property rights. Hence, for Bonger the history of theft is the history of private property. Much of criminal law was created to protect the property of the haves from the have-nots. Connected to this was Bonger’s second major posit: that crime is engendered by the miserable conditions forced upon the working class in the emergence of industrial capitalism. Finally, and most prescient for the consideration of crime under late modernity, Bonger theorises that the economic logic of capitalism promotes endless greed and fosters crime.

Both Marx and Bonger addressed the myriad ways capitalism produces crime, including the miserable conditions under which the majority of the population languished, the biased creation and application of law, and the destructive values of avarice and individualism that permeated industrial society. However, with the notable exception of what came to be known as the conflict criminology of William Chambliss, Elliot Currie, Julia and Herman Schwendinger, Steven Spitzer, Tony Platt, and Richard Quinney in the 1970s and 1980s, few American criminologists took up these themes with vigour.

Banality and Viciousness in Late Modernity

Whilst the conditions of 21st-century America are very different from the early and high industrialism of Marx and Bonger’s Europe, capitalism rages
on, leaving a broad swath of destruction and human suffering, including but not limited to what is narrowly defined as crime. Contrary to the vociferous pronouncements of capitalist running dogs, market-order cheerleaders, and neoliberal apologists, globalisation and the concomitant postindustrialisation have not made the American landscape a better, safer, or more humane environment. Massive transnational corporations the size and scope of which the authors of the Sherman Antitrust Act could nary imagine continue to steal and murder with impunity, street crime is ever more racialised, minor transgressions increasingly come to be addressed through the criminal justice system’s formal and punitive mechanisms, and living-wage jobs are nearly impossible to find and even more difficult to keep.

Under such conditions, it is little wonder that people are adrift and cling desperately to anything that promises more stability than late modernism’s liquidity (see Bauman, 2000). Unfortunately, there is relatively little available on which people, particularly young people, can moor themselves. As Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum (2008) illustrate with great aplomb, because the global capitalist project is increasingly reliant upon finance capital rather than productive capital, material reality has readily been displaced by a fictitious realm of fleeting visceral pleasure and ephemeral amelioration. Hence, unlike pre-deindustrialised generations, in which social worth was determined through the relationship to the means of production and other stratified forms of social meaning, under late modernity our selves and our subjectivities are increasingly determined through our consumption practices (Ewen, 1977, 1988; Hayward & Yar 2006; Muzzatti, 2008, 2009). In his seminal work on crime and consumer culture, Hayward (2004) illustrates that the products and services we acquire and access through our consumer exercises are the primary indices of identity. While there is nothing inherently new about capitalism’s unapologetic promotion of consumerism as a gateway to social integration, the process has accelerated rapidly over the past decade, reaching gargantuan proportions. Today, the creation and expression of identities via the celebration of consumer goods have all but supplanted other, more traditional forms of identity expression. This, in combination with the aforementioned withdrawal of meaningful, living-wage employment opportunities, seriously undermines the life world, moral codes, and habitus of ordinary people (Bordieu, 1984; Hall et al., 2008).

____________ Youth and the Vicissitudes of Late Modernity

Commenting on his experiences living and working in 1830s Manchester, Engels (1845) wrote of the English working class’s children,

And children growing up in this savage way, amidst the demoralising influences, are expected to turn out good-goody and moral in the end! Verily the requirements are naive, which the self satisfied bourgeois makes upon the working man! (p.168)
Again, although he was writing about a place very different from 21st-century America, Engels’s insight should not be lost on those of us who strive to better understand the contemporary workings of consumer capitalism and its impact on the everyday/night lived experiences of young people. Although it is not my intention to demonise America’s youth (that is the purview of the corporately owned news media), it behooves us to realise that the 18- to 25-year-old demographic is responsible for a not insignificant portion of traditional street crime, particularly violent street crime. So, too, and perhaps equally as telling, young people disproportionately find themselves the subjects of the orthodox criminological lens. Historically, orthodox criminology’s treatment of youth delinquency and crime has been no better, and in some respects worse, than its “efforts” to address capitalism. However well intentioned, the canon—from “inverted values” and “generating milieus of gang delinquency” through “subcultures of violence” and “elements of bonding”—has provided little insight into youth involvement in criminality and has reified class bias both within academic criminological discourse and, more disturbingly, among criminal justice policymakers and practitioners.

The criminalisation of youth and class is itself part of the ideological work of capitalism. By suggesting that a particular working-class or underclass age cohort holds a monopoly on crime, orthodox criminology transmits a political economy of values that serves the interests of global capital while positioning the marginalised subject group for optimal regulation and control. It does so in part by atomising or individualising social problems and furtively sheathing late capitalism’s destructive values beneath a veneer of spectacle and the carnivalesque (see Presdee, 2000).

Consuming Crime and Culture

Scything through capitalism’s veneer, it is evident that lives of late-modern subjects have been so thoroughly colonised by consumerism that the goals–means discrepancy (i.e., “strain”) Merton described over 70 years ago seems almost benign in comparison. Indeed, living in a world where work, if it exists at all, is increasingly deskilled, wages are pitifully low, and growing segments of the former middle classes slip into a vortex of unsecured debt, it is little wonder that consumption itself is now the strategy employed to demarcate, compartmentalise, and control the general public (see, relatedly, Bauman, 2000, 2007; Wilson, 1987). This transformation has served only to intensify capitalism’s inequality. According to Bauman, late-modern consumer society is now polarised between indemnified, privileged, and dutiful consumers on the one hand, and on the other, the increasingly swollen ranks of the marginalised and criminalised classes, who, as a result of either inability or unwillingness, have failed to acquiesce to the hegemonic dictates of consumerism. The first of these groups, the “Seduced,” exhibit the requisite desire and fixation required by unmediated consumer societies. More important, though,
they are in a position to satisfy their desire through continual cycles of unre-
flexive hyperconsumption. Standing in stark contrast to the “Seduced” are
the “Repressed,” a group that embodies what one might describe as the col-
lateral damage of consumerism. This throng of uncommoditised or failed
consumers represent an ever-growing, marginalised mass who, through neg-
ligence or wilfulness, fail to adequately acquit themselves of their consumer
“duties.” The Repressed’s insufficient and/or disreputable consumption pat-
terns do not satisfactorily integrate them into the acceptable echelons of con-
sumer society (Muzzatti, 2004, 2009). Though highly stylised, the opening
soliloquy by “Mark Renton,” the heroin-addicted antihero from the film
Trainspotting, sardonically captures the nihilism that is both the predictable
and not unreasonable consequence of such a vicious bifurcation:

Choose Life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose
a fucking big television, choose washing machines, cars, compact disc
players and electrical tin openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol,
and dental insurance. Choose fixed interest mortgage repayments.
Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisurewear and
matching luggage. Choose a three-piece suite on hire purchase in a
range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you
are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching
mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food
into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pissing your
last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the
selfish, fucked up brats you spawned to replace yourself. Choose your
future. Choose life.10

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Late Modernity, Crime, and Pseudo-Pacification

What is of importance in terms of this chapter (and something overlooked
by Bauman) is the way in which late modernity’s ideological work not only
serves to incessantly remind us of this bifurcation but also acts to control
and manipulate us by illustrating the consequences of lax or ineffectual
consumption work (Muzzatti, 2008, 2009). As Hall and his colleagues
poignantly illustrate, late capitalism systematically organises conditions of
social insecurity while simultaneously lauding aggressive competition and
individual hubris (Hall et al, 2008). Unlike the “norms” of the Mertonian
framework, late modernity’s norms are created in the fantasy world of
venture capitalism, hyperwealth, and unlimited personal and natural
resources. Such arrangements are potentially criminogenic, as they detach
people from reality, breed frustration, and undermine any true sense of
community and solidarity by fostering irresponsible and wholly instru-
mental attitudes toward other people (ibid). A rank, dog-eat-dog individualism and fortress mentality are vital components of late modernity’s
depoliticisation process, which lulls the populace into a state of false insecurity. Alternately described as anelpis (Hall & Winlow, 2004, p. 277, quoting Taylor) and vertigo (Young, 2007, p. 12), this malaise of late modernity is characterised by total cynicism, no opinions (except as they relate to the incontrovertibly mundane), no hope, a sense of entitlement, unrealistic expectations, giddiness, unsteadiness, uncertainty, and insecurity. Perhaps most significantly, it is evidenced by misplaced fear; not a legitimate fear of government, corporations, or other authority, but a misplaced and unrealistic fear of other people.

Capitalism produces numerous contradictions. In late modernity, we live in isolation from our neighbours and cut ourselves off from all but a small number of intimates, yet we pay high monthly fees to have cable companies and satellite providers pump mediated images of the outside world into our homes. We distrust strangers and move briskly to maintain our physical distance from those we do not recognise on the street, but we loudly discuss our most intimate personal details on mobile phones in shopping malls and post the prosaic intricacies of our lives on social networking sites for anyone to see. We are suspicious of those who migrate to our shores, because they may “take our jobs,” or not work, and “live off our tax dollars.” We fear terrorism but fail to scrutinise the foreign policy of our own government lest we be labeled un-American. Perhaps capitalism’s greatest obfuscation is found in the fact that we continually feed our cravings for inexpensive consumer goods but fail to consider the real costs—economic, social, and environmental, at home and abroad—of doing so.11

Selling Crime, Marketing Transgression, and Commodifying Violence

Even in their most surreal nightmares, it is unlikely that either Marx or Bonger could have envisaged the leviathan proportions and seemingly infinite tentacles of 21st-century capitalism. However, given their respective historical contexts, both offered some discerning commentary on the saleability of crime. In the first volume of Theories of Surplus Value (1863), Marx’s insights into the marketability of crime are perhaps even more poignant under today’s conditions of late modernity than when it was first written. According to him (as quoted in Greenberg, 1981)

[t]he criminal produces not only crime but also criminal law, and even the inevitable text-book in which the professor presents his lectures as a commodity for sale in the market . . . but also art, literature, novels and the tragic drama, as OEdipus and Richard III . . . (pp. 52–53)

In a similar vein and in stark contrast to most contemporary criminology textbooks, Bonger begins Criminality and Economic Conditions (1916) not
with the conventional hyperbolic pieties about the current state of crime and justice but instead with several pages devoted to Thomas More’s fictional account of the traveller Raphael Hythloday. Although these examples focus on suffering under petty mercantilism and other precapitalist economic formations, they do address the narcissistic individualism that capitalism has exacerbated under late modernity.

While several early British conflict criminologists examined the way the news media used crime to sell (see Cohen, 1972; Cohen & Young, 1973; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), only in the last decade or so have criminologists seriously investigated the connection between crime and the entertainment media. A new wave of cultural criminologists has applied the contributions of such Frankfurt School theorists as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1946) to an understanding of the role played by the culture industries in transmitting corporate consumerism’s destructive values. Ferrell and Sanders were among the first of this new wave to examine on how mass or common culture is recast as crime. They theorise that the criminalisation of everyday life is a cultural enterprise of the powerful and must be investigated as such (Ferrell & Sanders, 1995, p. 7). Similarly, Presdee’s (2000) analysis of carnival desire and the sensuality of wickedness demonstrates how our everyday/night responses to late modernity come to be defined as criminal. Analogising mediated crime to the board game Monopoly, Presdee examines the way in which crime, like monopoly capitalism, is dehistoricised, whitewashed, and transmogrified into mass-marketed pleasure. Citing a range of examples, from Internet bondage sites and arson to stolen-car racing and weapon bazaars, Presdee explores the contradictions and irrationality of a commodity-oriented society from which criminalised culture emanates.

More recently, cultural criminologists have been attentive to the processes and products associated with what they have variously described as the “marketing of transgression” (Hayward 2004) and the “commodification of violence” (Ferrell, Hayward, & Young, 2008). This visual representation of crime and transgression, they argue, is not only central to the production of news but now a vital component of the entertainment media—gripping the collective imagination of television viewers, moviegoers, Internet browsers, video gamers, and other audiences. To a certain extent, of course, there is nothing intrinsically new about the use of this type of imagery in the service of consumerism; certainly crime and violence have been used to sell movie tickets, TV programs, video games, and music for decades. However, what is new, as Ferrell, Hayward, and Young illustrate, is the force and range of these “illicit” messages (2008, p. 140) and the effect this has had on the tectonic landscape of the late-modern entertainment media. In particular, there appears to be a far greater willingness among mainstream corporations to utilise allusions to crime and transgression to give their products edgy appeal whilst still serving the conservative interests of consumer capitalism and its control functions. Considering late capitalism’s oligopolistic media ownership
patterns, it is perhaps not surprising that the same racialised and class-biased images of the new “dangerous classes” (i.e., chavs and hoodies in Canada and the United Kingdom; ghetto-fabulous bangers in the United States) that are meant to frighten the public on the news are also now employed to entertain us and sell us a host of products and services.

**CONCLUSION: NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS**

This chapter’s epigram from the enormously popular video/PC game *Grand Theft Auto IV* poignantly illustrates the harsh and unforgiving landscape of late modernity. Whilst the narrative framing of the Bellic cousins is fictional, the brutality of capitalism that undergirds the storybound Liberty City is all too real in 21st-century America. Inexplicably, orthodox criminology continually fails to address this crimogenesis.

Irrespective of whether we conceptualise such a paucity of attention as obstinacy or as benign neglect, the end result differs little; the material conditions that influence our lives—and, indeed, the single most influential factor not only in the production, distribution, and consumption of crime but a driving force that has transformed human existence more in the last 200 years than anything in the previous millennia—remain unstudied by our discipline.

*If* there is a silver lining to this cloud, it is that late-modern capitalism’s multiple appendages, coupled with orthodox criminology’s inability/unwillingness to address it, leaves many openings available to those inclined to challenge the hegemony of these twin sacred cows. Certainly, from environmental racism and the prison industrial complex through the disappearance of work and crimes of globalisation, the fissures are legion.

The intention of this chapter, as astute readers likely surmised several pages back, was to provide neither a comprehensive assessment nor, for that matter, a general overview of the literature on crime and economics. In fact, some readers may be uncomfortable with this chapter’s leap from Marx and Bonger to a 21st-century criminology of capitalism. I am among them. However, my intention here was to produce not a definitive piece but rather a heuristic tool through which readers can intellectually and politically confront the intersecting convenient fictions of late capitalism and orthodox criminology. As such, perhaps much of this chapter was superfluous; perhaps all that was required was the epigram.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Other than the specific disciplinary constraints intimated by the author, why has American criminology failed to adequately address capitalism?
2. The author cites *Grand Theft Auto IV* as a crime–capitalism narrative. Draw on your own experiences with popular culture texts to provide another example.

3. Make a list of several street crimes and white-collar, corporate, or state crimes, and illustrate their connections to capitalism.

4. The author enumerates several examples of how capitalism fosters contradictory forms of human behaviour. Provide examples of other such contradictions.

**Notes**

2. See, for example, William Chambliss (1989).
3. The article was the third of three that Marx was commissioned to write on the Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly for *The Rheinische Zeitung*. The paper published only the first and the third.
4. “Capital Punishment” (February 18, 1853) and “Population Crime and Pauperism” (September 16, 1859).
5. See Bonger (1916, pp. 673–700).
6. Sadly, instead of translations of these, English-language criminology was introduced to the racist, misogynistic, and bigoted work of Lombroso and other biodeterminist European criminologists. The seeding of this “pathological” theory to the American criminological canon was certainly fuelled by, and served as an accelerant for, the eugenics movement and facilitated the growth of a home-grown pathological school (ex. Henry Goddard, Ernest Hooton, Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck).
7. In the intervening years, the paradigm alternately came to be known as radical or Marxist criminology. Today, it is generally referred to as critical criminology and encompasses a variety of traditions, including left realist, peacemaking, social justice, anarchist, convict, state, feminist and cultural criminologies.
8. A parallel but perhaps slightly more effervescent trajectory also emerged in the United Kingdom at this time, including the work of Stanley Cohen, Stuart Hall, Carol Smart, Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young.
11. Many of the same structural conditions that facilitate the crimes by the capitalist state abroad also contribute to the social harms it inflicts on people in America (see Tifft & Sullivan, 1980).
12. Published as a novel in 1516, St. Thomas More’s *Utopia* described a land of economic equality.
13. Among my most egregious offences herein is relegating the rich, vibrant work of many of America’s founding conflict criminologists to passing references and footnotes. It was a conscious decision made in keeping with space limitations. I hope that readers can take more from the chapter than a redundant and woefully incomplete history lesson.


