

Applying Anomie & Strain Theory to Achieving the American Dream: Moving from Illegitimate to Legitimate Organized Crime in the United States

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Abstract

Merton and Durkheim's theories offer substantial insights into organized crime and criminal organizations. This paper employs Anomie and Strain Theory to examine the relationship between cultural success values, monetary goals, and the means employed by organized crime groups to achieve these objectives, utilizing Merton's Five Alternative Modes of Adjustment. The analysis specifically considers how *The American Dream* creates economic achievement pressures both domestically and internationally as countries embrace capitalism. Through systematic examination of theoretical frameworks and contemporary case studies, this research demonstrates how organized crime entities transition from illegitimate to legitimate enterprises, while exploring how strain particularly affects male participation in criminal organizations. The study concludes with an analysis of Russian organized crime as a contemporary example, tracing developments from the Soviet Union's dissolution to present-day operations.

Keywords: Merton, Durkheim, Anomie, Strain Theory, The American Dream, Organized Crime

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1. Introduction

Within the socio-criminological framework, a fundamental premise posits that society produces criminal conduct. Merton's contribution to structural functionalism, particularly through anomie and strain theory, provides essential insights for understanding criminal justice and criminal behavior theories, especially within organized crime contexts. The disconnection between deviant behaviors—such as prostitution, drug trafficking, and money laundering—and the cultural emphasis on success reveals dysfunctional consequences when legitimate pathways to success remain inaccessible.

Merton's 1938 strain theory represents one of the earliest comprehensive explanations for deviant behavior origins, establishing its significance in early sociology of deviance literature (Clinard, 1964). This theoretical foundation becomes particularly relevant when examining how organized crime groups navigate the tension between culturally prescribed goals and institutionally available means.

1.1 Economic Strain and Contemporary Challenges

Contemporary economic volatility has intensified the strain between aspirational goals and available means. According to Bushway, Cook, and Phillips (2013), robbery and property crimes typically increase during recessions while declining during recovery periods. Conversely, assault and homicide rates tend to decrease during economic downturns (Lauritsen & Heimer, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2009).

The National Bureau of Economic Research defines recession as "a significant decline in economic activity spread across the economy, lasting more than a few months, normally visible in production, employment, real income, and other indicators" (Labonte & Makinen, 2008). However, traditional crime statistics fail to capture white-collar crimes and organized crime activities such as money laundering and drug trafficking—areas where criminal organizations have historically profited during economic crises.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative theoretical analysis approach, synthesizing existing literature on anomie and strain theory with contemporary case studies of organized crime. The methodology incorporates:

Data Selection Criteria:

- Primary theoretical works by Durkheim (1897/1951) and Merton (1938, 1957)
- Contemporary applications by Messner and Rosenfeld (1994/2013)
- Empirical studies on economic conditions and crime rates (2010-2024)
- Case study materials focusing on Russian organized crime (1975-2024)

Analytical Framework: The analysis applies Merton's Five Alternative Modes of Adjustment to organized crime behavior patterns, examining how criminal organizations navigate between cultural goals and institutional means. Economic data from recession periods (1957-2020) provides context for understanding strain theory

applications.

Case Study Selection: Russian organized crime groups were selected as the primary case study due to their clear progression from illegitimate to legitimate business operations, extensive documentation spanning 50+ years, and their embodiment of strain theory principles following the Soviet Union's collapse.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Becker's Economic Theory of Criminal Behavior (1968)

Becker's pioneering application of economic principles to social problems, while initially controversial, has become mainstream analytical approach. As Lawrence Summers (2014) observed, Becker transformed economics from a narrow focus on "inflation, investment, trade, and business cycles" to encompass "racial discrimination, schooling, fertility, marriage and divorce, addiction, charity, political influence—the stuff of human life."

This economic uncertainty drives individuals toward various survival strategies: seeking any available employment, returning to education, or pursuing criminal behavior. Becker's cost-benefit analysis framework, building on Bentham's (1907/1789) rational choice foundation, suggests that criminal behavior results from calculating potential profits against punishment risks. When perceived benefits exceed anticipated costs, criminal behavior becomes the rational choice.

This framework proves particularly relevant for understanding recidivism patterns. Former inmates face reduced legitimate employment opportunities, potentially making continued criminal activity economically rational. However, the actual experience of incarceration may also increase perceived costs, potentially deterring future criminal behavior.

3.2 Durkheim's Foundation: Strain and Anomie

Durkheim's seminal observation that "no living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means" (1897/1951, p. 3) establishes the fundamental tension underlying strain theory. He identifies "constantly renewed torture" when individuals cannot meet their needs or goals, arguing that healthy societies must limit people's goals since individuals rarely self-regulate their pursuits.

When societies fail to provide goal regulation, normlessness or anomie emerges. Durkheim's analysis of unlimited aspirations leading to norm breakdown connects directly to Cloward's concept of "differentials in access to success goals by illegitimate means" (1959, p. 165)—a framework particularly applicable to organized and white-collar crime.

Transitioning from Theory to Contemporary Application: Durkheim's insights about prosperity and depression both producing deviant behavior prove prophetic in understanding modern organized crime. Whether individuals face economic decline requiring reduced expectations or sudden prosperity creating unrealistic aspirations, both conditions can generate criminal behavior when goals exceed available legitimate means.

3.3 Merton's Anomie and Strain Theory

Merton's central contribution identifies culturally recognized goals, purposes, and interests as driving forces in social behavior (1938, p. 672). While culture encourages pursuit of these goals, institutions "define, regulate, and control the acceptable modes" for goal achievement (1938, p. 673). This creates fundamental tension when institutional limitations prevent legitimate goal attainment.

Merton's crucial insight recognizes that when behavior focuses exclusively on achieving goals rather than following "socially approved" methods (1938, p. 674), individuals will pursue the most efficient path to success regardless of legitimacy. This dynamic generates anomie—the state arising when goals cannot be achieved through legitimate means.

3.4 The American Dream as Cultural Framework

Messner and Rosenfeld's (1994/2013) institutional anomie theory identifies four core American Dream values that intensify economic achievement pressure:

1. Universalism: Everyone should achieve success
2. Fetishism of money: Material/financial success represents the primary goal
3. Individualism: Success must be achieved independently
4. Achievement orientation: Success should be pursued regardless of cost

These values do not directly create crime but establish conditions where economic success takes precedence over non-economic institutions' regulatory capacity, potentially justifying criminal means for legitimate ends.

4. Merton's Five Alternative Modes of Adjustment: Application to Organized Crime

Merton's adaptation schema provides a framework for understanding how individuals and organizations respond to the tension between cultural goals and institutional means:

4.1 Conformity (Adaptation I)

Conformity represents the most common response, accepting both cultural goals and institutional means (+/+). This adaptation maintains societal stability, with most individuals following legitimate pathways. However, for individuals lacking access to legitimate success pathways, conformity may prove insufficient for achieving American Dream aspirations.

4.2 Innovation: The Organized Crime Response

Innovation (+/-) accepts cultural goals while rejecting legitimate institutional means—the adaptation most characteristic of organized crime. **Case Study Connection:** This theoretical framework directly applies to organized crime operations, where groups embrace American Dream success symbols while employing illegal methods for goal attainment.

Criminal organizations exemplify innovation through their business-like approaches to illegal activities. They maintain conventional success metrics (wealth accumulation, status symbols, territorial control) while operating outside legal constraints. This adaptation proves particularly attractive when legitimate pathways remain blocked by socioeconomic barriers, discrimination, or limited opportunities.

4.3 Additional Adaptations in Criminal Context

Ritualism (-/+) appears in some criminal organizations through rigid adherence to criminal codes while abandoning broader success goals. Retreatism (-/-) manifests in complete withdrawal from both legitimate and criminal success pursuits. Rebellion (\pm/\pm) involves attempting to replace both existing goals and means with alternative systems—occasionally seen in revolutionary criminal organizations.

5. From Illegitimate to Legitimate: The Organizational Evolution

5.1 Theoretical Foundation for Criminal Enterprise Evolution

Organized crime groups demonstrate sophisticated understanding of strain theory dynamics. They recognize that conformity (legitimate work) provides limited success potential, while innovation (combining legitimate and illegitimate means) offers accelerated achievement of cultural goals. This "maximization" strategy (Robinson & Rogers, 2018) represents rational adaptation to structural inequalities.

Agnew's (2001) research indicates that certain strains more effectively generate criminal pathways, particularly when strain appears unjust and traditional emotional coping mechanisms prove inadequate. For men specifically, threats to masculine status, autonomy, and financial security significantly increase criminal involvement likelihood.

5.2 Market Dynamics and Criminal Entrepreneurship

Kleemans (2012) identifies criminal organizations as entrepreneurs responding to supply-demand imbalances in restricted markets. When legal prohibitions create artificial scarcity without eliminating demand, criminal organizations fill market gaps. Historical examples include Prohibition-era alcohol trafficking and contemporary drug markets, cigarette smuggling, and human trafficking operations.

Contemporary Application: This entrepreneurial framework explains organized crime's resilience and adaptation capacity. As legal markets shift and new restrictions emerge, criminal organizations pivot to exploit new opportunities while gradually legitimizing their operations.

6. Case Study: Russian Organized Crime and The American Dream

6.1 Historical Context and Methodological Approach

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 created unprecedented conditions for examining strain theory in practice. The rapid transition from socialist to capitalist economic structures generated massive strain between newly introduced American Dream values and limited legitimate means for achievement. This case study traces Russian organized crime development from 1975 to 2024, examining their progression through Salerno and Tompkins' (1969) criminal organization evolution: "strategic and tactical crimes" to "illegal businesses" to "legitimate businesses" to "big business."

6.2 Innovation Adaptation in Practice

Russian organized crime groups, particularly the Odessa Mafia operating in Brighton Beach since the mid-1970s, exemplify Merton's Innovation adaptation. They embrace American cultural values (+) while rejecting legitimate institutional means (-) due to limited access and institutional barriers.

Contemporary Operations (2024 Update): Recent investigations reveal Russian organized crime's continued evolution into sophisticated financial operations. Money laundering activities now exceed \$750 billion annually (updated from earlier \$500 billion estimates), making it potentially the world's second-largest industry after technology. These groups have successfully integrated into legitimate banking, real estate, and technology sectors

while maintaining criminal enterprises.

6.3 Legitimacy Acquisition Strategies

Following patterns established by earlier Irish and Italian organized crime groups, Russian organizations systematically infiltrate legitimate institutions. This includes corrupting law enforcement officials, judicial personnel, attorneys, and political figures—extending to electoral manipulation in some instances (CBSNews, 2000; updated investigations through 2023).

Critical Analysis: While this progression appears to support strain theory predictions, alternative interpretations merit consideration. Some scholars argue that Russian organized crime success stems from cultural factors specific to post-Soviet transitions rather than universal strain dynamics. Others suggest that American Dream mythology obscures more fundamental economic inequality issues that transcend cultural explanations.

7. Addressing Theoretical Limitations and Alternative Perspectives

7.1 Critiques of Anomie and Strain Theory

Several theoretical limitations require acknowledgment:

Cultural Determinism Concerns: Critics argue that strain theory overemphasizes cultural values while underestimating individual agency and alternative value systems. Some organized crime groups may operate according to entirely different success metrics that don't align with American Dream assumptions.

Class Bias Implications: The theory may inadvertently excuse upper-class criminal behavior while pathologizing lower-class responses to strain. White-collar crime often involves individuals with substantial legitimate opportunities, challenging strain theory's explanatory power.

Gender and Cultural Limitations: Strain theory's development during mid-20th century America may limit its applicability across diverse cultural contexts and gender experiences. Contemporary organized crime includes increasing female participation and operates across vastly different cultural frameworks.

7.2 Alternative Theoretical Frameworks

Social Learning Theory suggests criminal behavior results from learned associations rather than structural strain. Differential Association Theory emphasizes criminal skill acquisition through social networks. Critical Criminology perspectives argue that strain theory fails to address fundamental power inequalities that create conditions requiring criminal adaptation.

Institutional Anomie Theory Refinements: Recent scholarship by Messner and Rosenfeld (2013) addresses some limitations by examining how specific institutional configurations create varying crime rates across societies, providing more nuanced analysis than original strain formulations.

8. Contemporary Relevance and Policy Implications

8.1 Current Data and Trends

Recent data supports continued relevance of strain theory principles:

- **Economic Inequality:** U.S. wealth inequality has reached levels not seen since the 1920s, potentially intensifying strain between cultural goals and available means
- **Organized Crime Evolution:** Contemporary groups increasingly operate as legitimate businesses with criminal subsidiaries, rather than purely criminal organizations
- **Technology Integration:** Digital platforms create new opportunities for both legitimate and illegitimate success pathways

8.2 Policy Considerations

Understanding organized crime through strain theory lens suggests policy approaches should address structural inequalities alongside traditional enforcement strategies. Reducing strain requires expanding legitimate opportunity structures while maintaining effective deterrence mechanisms.

9. Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that Merton and Durkheim's theoretical frameworks provide substantial insights into organized crime behavior and organizational development. Anomie and Strain Theory effectively explain how cultural success values create pathways to criminal innovation rather than simple rebellion against social norms. The Russian organized crime case study illustrates strain theory principles in practice, showing how rapid cultural transitions can generate conditions favoring criminal adaptation. However, this analysis also reveals theoretical limitations requiring continued scholarly attention and refinement.

Understanding organized crime as rational adaptation to structural strain—rather than simple deviance—offers more sophisticated approaches to both academic analysis and policy development. As economic inequality continues expanding and global capitalism spreads American Dream values worldwide, strain theory's relevance

for understanding criminal organization development appears likely to increase rather than diminish.

Future research should examine how digital technologies alter the relationship between cultural goals and institutional means, potentially creating new forms of strain and criminal adaptation in the 21st century.

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Table 1. Merton's Five Alternative Modes of Adjustment or Adaptation

	Culture Goals	Institutionalized Means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	–
III. Ritualism	–	+
IV. Retreatism	–	–
V. Rebellion ¹²	±	±

	Culture Goals	Institutionalized Means
I. Conformity	+	+
II. Innovation	+	–
III. Ritualism	–	+
IV. Retreatism	–	–
V. Rebellion ¹²	±	±