

TO: Students in 406

FROM: R. B. Taylor

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RE: Comments on LaFree

LL (Losing Legitimacy) represents a particular type of theory. It is focused on changes, and it is macro-level, seeking to explain societal-level changes.

When we switch to a theory that focuses on changes, rather than cross-sectional relationships, some things “drop out,” because they are no longer relevant. For example, note that “race” is not in the model, even though it attends to differences by race. Did the racial composition of the U.S. change during this time? Yes. But did it change a lot in the few years when there was the huge crime increase (1974-1974)? Probably not. This is just one example.

Another is the discussion we had in class today about underlying racist attitudes and policies on the part of those who run criminal justice agencies, or who make laws. Is this part of ongoing structure: according to many, definitely yes. But is it something that changed dramatically during the same years that violent crime rates were changing rapidly? Probably not.

There are numerous important points his work brings to light. Perhaps most importantly, at a very general level, he helps us understand how crime is linked in to the very core of our society, and is woven into our culture with many different threads. When we talk about crime rates as random variables, we are talking about an outcome that is

determined or shaped by a large number of factors. LL concentrates on just three sets of factors: economics, family, politics.

Could other institutions have been added? Certainly. But it would be hard to make a case that if you only had three institutions, something else was more central than these three

If we accept that changes in national crime rates are driven largely by these other societal changes, then that raises very hard questions about how much we can do to alter these crime rates. LL suggests in some fundamental ways that crime rate shifts are byproducts of changes taking place in many different areas of society. Is it possible to legislate the kinds of social changes that are taking place and then driving up or down crime rates? Probably not.

But what does come in to play are other institutions which he calls reactions to rising crime rates: the cj response in the form of rising imprisonment rates and longer sentences, the rise of welfarism, and increasing involvement of young persons in educational institutions. None of these last three institutions can alter the fundamental shifts presented by the first three institutions, but they can perhaps create an influence that moderates the impact of the societal changes on crime. Notice as was pointed out in class today that these are reactions to crime because they lag temporally- these shifts come after the crime shifts.

So in essence he is saying large scale, national scale, even international scale changes cannot be slowed down or averted, but there can be other responses to those shifts which dampen the impacts of those shifts on crime.

You end up with factors pushing crime up, the fundamental social changes, and other facts, the government responses if you will, coming online later and pushing crime down.

Several criticisms have been made about this book in two different reviews by leaders in the field.¹

- it leaves out other important racial / ethnic categories
- it does not tell us about what is happening in communities
- his model denies endogeneity – for example, crime itself could further undermine political legitimacy, in a direct way.
- the concept of legitimacy is loose or “slippery”

I leave it to you to decide whether each or any of these criticisms are legitimate.

One additional point raised today was the question about whether the model posed here in the book was fully tested. It was not. For example, we sometimes do not have indicators of the mediating variables. The way a mediating model works is:

$$X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$$

where the mediating processes “carry” the impact of the predictor (X) on the outcome (Y). Can you see that this is what his model is?

If this model is to be tested than both impacts

¹ Rosenfeld, R. (2000). “Review of: Losing legitimacy: Street crime and the decline of social institutions in America.” *Contemporary Sociology* 29(1): 253-254; Short, James F., Jr. (1999). “Review of: Losing legitimacy: Street crime and the decline of social institutions in America.” *American Journal of Sociology* 105(2): 540-542.

X → M

and

M → Y

must be tested. LaFree has numerous other publications, which are serious, which you should look closely at in the future to decide whether he is really testing a model.

One question that came up is: What has he done since then? He did a book review that is really a major piece of work, commenting on several analyses trying to explain the crime drop seen in the mid-1990s. He talks about the fourth period as the “crime bust.” I strongly recommend this review article to learn both about the crime drop, and about LaFree’s later thinking.² He suggests there may be no crime drop.

In Messner and Rosenfeld, we are going to get even more macro, talking about international differences. We are going to turn back to cross sectional differences, rather than changes. So bear that in mind.

When you look at Messner and Rosenfeld you will see they separate out institutions into structure (demographics, for example) and culture (norm-based, value driven). If you reflect back on LL, you will see it did not do that.

These points aside, LaFree’s model does include key theoretical components from other theoretical perspectives, and it does take on of the most important and perniciously difficult questions that our field has to answer: why the huge crime run up in the 1960s

² LaFree, G. (2000). Explaining the crime bust of the 1990s. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 91(1): 269-306.

and 1970s? IMHO, I know of no one else who has come close to providing as complete an answer.

LaFree's work does not connect that closely with other books we are going to be reading, because he has focused on changes rather than enduring differences.

The question about what drives changes, however, is extremely important in many areas of criminology, such as neighborhood crime rates³ and delinquency.⁴ In fact, Bursik argues that Shaw and McKay's social disorganization theory is really about changes, and not about enduring differences.⁵ As a student of theory, you want to be well versed in theories about changes.

³ Taylor, R. B., & Covington, J. (1988). Neighborhood changes in ecology and violence. *Criminology*, 26, 553-589.

⁴ Bursik, R. J. (1986). Ecological stability and the dynamics of delinquency. In A. J. Reiss & M. Tonry (Eds.), *Communities and crime* (pp. 35-66). Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Bursik, R. J., & Webb, J. (1982). Community change and patterns of delinquency. *American Journal of Sociology*, 88, 24-42.

⁵ Bursik, R. J., Jr., & Grasmick, H. (1993). *Neighborhoods and crime*. Lexington: Lexington.