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Thatcherism, Crime and the Legacy of the Social and Economic ‘Storms’ of the 1980s

Abstract

Using insights from the classical sociology of deviance and social structure (notably Durkheim and Merton) we explore the enduring impact of the social and economic changes which started in the UK in the early 1980s. In the two subsequent decades the UK went through a period of radical economic restructuring, leading to lasting social change. We seek to gauge the effect of these combined social and economic processes, which we label social and economic ‘storms’, at the national level. In so doing we assess and ultimately defend the heuristic utility of this conceptualisation, considering the extent to which such social and economic storms (individually and collectively) weakened bonds between individuals, within and between families and across communities. We use proxy measures of economic and social changes in combination with recorded crime statistics to explore the degree to which such processes might be associated with victimisation rates. We find that crime was related to these macro-level ‘storms’, although ultimately they were driven by economic variables. Our analyses show how political decision-making can shape long-term trends in crime rates.

Introduction

Few would disagree that Margaret Thatcher’s period as Prime Minister (from May 1979 to November 1990) was one of considerable social and economic turbulence for the UK; more contentious is the enduring character of the social and economic change to which this period gave rise (Farrall and Hay, 2014). The ‘Thatcher governments’ as they are commonly referred to, sought, in their own terms, to ‘roll back’ the frontiers of the post-war welfare state, reducing its range, reach and influence within and control over large sections of British social and economic life. Above all, 1980s’ New Right thinking, of which ‘Thatcherism’ was one expression, emphasised free markets, restrained government spending and endorsed deep tax cuts, transforming modes of local and national governance. Certainly de-industrialisation, which can be traced back to the 1960s, accelerated during this period, vast parts of the British economy were comprehensively restructured (manufacturing declined by about a half, putting many out of work, decimating whole communities and leading to a rise in economic inequality, Dorling 2014a, Walker, 2014) while new sectors of the economy (especially banking, insurance and the service sector) became core to domestic economic output (Crafts, 1991; Glennerster, 1994). In addition, council houses were sold off, local governments’ control of schooling and other public services was challenged, and trade union powers were significantly contracted (Walker and Walker, 1997). Rules relating to who could claim (and what could be claimed) from the social

security system were also modified (Walker, 1993). However, as this process of state retrenchment advanced, it generated its own contradictions and conflicts that later required containment and redirection.

During the same time period, officially recorded crime rates, and self-reported rates of victimisation increased substantially (Jennings et al, 2012; Morgan, 2014), mirroring rises in crime rates in other democracies (Rossenfeld and Messner 2009). Studies have shown that, as levels of unemployment and inequality increased, so too did rates of property crime (Pyle and Deadman 1994; Hale 1998; Jennings et al, 2012; Farrall and Jennings, 2012; Morgan, 2014). While Thatcher and some of her key ministers spoke out about ‘law and order’,¹ the government did not pass the draconian acts one might have expected given her electoral rhetoric and that of successive British governments since 1979, despite rising crime rates (Farrall et al, 2016a).

While social science research has gone some way to broadening our understanding of the long-term impacts of Thatcherite public policy, other crucial questions remain unanswered. What happened to those parts of England, Wales and Scotland in which de-industrialisation had been most acute? Were rises in crime higher in certain areas of Britain than others? Was fear of crime linked to the incidence of crime? We know relatively little beyond the national picture in terms of the economy-crime link. But what is the picture when one explores violent crime or other forms of social harm (such as non-accidental deaths and alcoholism)? Notably, scholars from related branches of social policy have also begun to conduct allied longitudinal investigations in housing policy (Dorling, 2014b; Farrall et al, 2016b), opiate drug-use (Morgan, 2014), education policy (Berridge et al., 2001) and social attitudes (Duffy et al., 2013; Natcen, 2014), highlighting the need to build an integrated model of analysis. Moreover, research has demonstrated that how individuals relate to their environment and community can impact their feelings about crime (Farrall et al, 2009) as well as the rate of reporting crimes (Goudriaan et al, 2010) and perception of neighbourhood disorder (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004). Put simply, the analyses undertaken so far provide us with few answers to these key questions.

In this paper we assess the extent to which dramatic economic and social change – and the shocks which it produced in terms of socio-economic processes – was associated with crime at the collective level. Our intellectual framework is derived from thinking developed by Emile Durkheim and Robert Merton, and subsequently revised by Robert Agnew, Steven Messner and Rick Rosenfeld. Our argument is that the new right economic policies of the period had tangible effects on the livelihood and relative prosperity of individuals and families in the UK (creating an ‘economic storm’) which in turn produced a resulting ‘social storm’, that is an elevated degree of social disruption. Whilst ‘storms’ are often considered to be short-term, we nevertheless term these effects ‘storms’ because despite their sometimes long-term causes, they were felt immediately (during the 1980s) and had consequences which played-out over time. The effects of these storms were like the radiating ripples which follow a stone being dropped into a pond. Our project has found that some of the effects take a very long time to emerge, being produced through processes of political socialisation, for instance (Grasso et al, 2017). As such we treat the concept of social and economic ‘storms’ as a heuristic device; a useful way of approaching and

¹ For example, in the final election broadcast on the eve of the 1979 general election, Thatcher spoke about citizens needing to feel “safe in the streets” (Riddell, 1985: 193). She also repeatedly stated that she was in favour of capital punishment (Thatcher, 1993: 307). In 1981 Norman Tebbit also derided rioters, saying “I grew up in the '30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it.”

modelling the effects of politically-initiated social and economic change which can be isolated in time, but which have consequences which emerge over many years. We explore the heuristic value of the idea of such storms by examining the degree to which these were associated with increases in the rate of property crime.² This builds on previous work on the economy-crime link, but seeks to better understand the set of social and economic changes that were associated with rising crime rates. These insights may also shed light on why the interrelationship between economy-crime has become less strong since the financial crisis which started in 2007/08.

Similar research which has connected Thatcherite policies to adverse social and economic outcomes has started to be undertaken in other branches of the social and medical sciences. While distinct from our focus on crime rates, studies of changes in health and well-being have pursued similar questions with regards to the effect of government policies on mortality (Scott-Samuel et al, 2014; Shipton et al, 2013). For example, Scott-Samuel et al (2014: 53) find that “Thatcher’s policies were associated with substantial increases in socioeconomic and health inequalities”, before going on to demonstrate that Thatcherite social and economic policies were associated with the “unnecessary and unjust death of many British citizens together with a substantial and continuing burden of suffering and loss of well-being” (2014: 66). Shipton et al (2013) use officially-recorded data on the cause of death for three UK cities to show that the cohort of people born in the 1940s and 1950s (and who were in their 30s and 40s during the 1980s) had the highest levels of mortality in Glasgow (one of the regions hardest hit by economic policies during the 1980s), which changed from cardiovascular and heart disease to deaths associated with alcohol, drugs, suicide and violence. These cohorts (in their 30s and 40s) may have been amongst those who felt the changes most acutely; younger generations may not have grasped the radical nature of the social and economic changes that took place, while older generations may have escaped their sharp edges via reliance on retirement incomes and the attrition of financial burdens that an older-age brings. In a related study, Jackson and Stafford (2009) found a strong statistical link between worry about crime and mental ill-health and physical functioning, suggesting worry about crime is not only implicated in one’s social and political anxieties (Farrall et al, 2009), but also fills a discernible role in cycles of decreased health. That crime and public fear of crime were at their height during Conservative rule³ stresses the need to acknowledge the manifold consequences of neo-liberalism on crime and quality of life.

Durkheimian Anomie Theory

It was the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, writing almost a century before the period which we are interested in, who coined the term ‘anomie’ to refer to the weakening of the social norms of society and the sense of ‘dislocation’ which this engendered in individual members of society (1893; 1897). It was, of course, another sociologist (Merton, 1938) who interpreted this thinking in such a way as to be operationalisable by empirically-minded criminologists. And whilst

² We focus on property crime since these crime are less susceptible than violent crimes to changes in public willingness to report crimes such as domestic violence or rape, or to changes in the counting rules which added over a quarter of a million violence offences after 1998/99 (see Maguire 2012: 216 on the former and Maguire 2007: 259 on the latter), though trends in the rate of property crime and violent crime are nevertheless highly correlated.

³ While measuring long-term crime trends is beset with technical pitfalls most commentators agree that crime increased dramatically during the 1980s, peaking between 1992 and 1995 and declined thereafter (Newburn, 2007). Likewise, fear of crime as measured by the British Crime Survey reached its height in the mid-1990s (Farrall et al, 2009).

initially Merton's essay on the topic was little used, interest in his thinking grew dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s (Messner and Rosenfeld, 2000: 10). Merton adapted Durkheim's initial observations, drawing on Marxist theories on the causes of crime, and his own observations of US society, economy and recorded crime rates. Merton developed anomie as a socially-based set of discontents which routinely generated crime as a by-product of everyday activities which promised everyone great rewards but systematically denied the chances of success to a great many members of society (Rock, 2007: 45). Like Messner and Rosenfeld before us, we too "accept Merton's underlying premise that that motivations for crime do not result simply from the flaws, failures or free choice of individuals" (2000: 10). Any account of the causes of crime must attend to the cultural determinants and structural associates of the environments (social, economic and cultural) in which individuals find themselves and accordingly to which they need to adapt their behaviours and responses. In short, structural-level processes block legal opportunities for advancement, so (some) individuals turn to illegal activities to achieve success/status, or express their frustration at being blocked through criminal behaviour. Robert Agnew (1985) revised this thinking slightly, arguing that feelings of anomie could also be provoked by perceptions that one was 'trapped' in aversive situations. Either way, the basic argument is that structural-level variables prevent individuals from achieving what they desire, and so they turn to illegal activities to achieve these or to express their frustrations. In this perspective, national and regional level crime rates are not simply the 'aggregating up' of individual choices and actions, but rather are the outcomes of the social forces which shape and mediate individual actions and their context. To this end, governments can 'produce' variations in crime rates via their influencing of processes which impact on levels of economic hardship and social welfare. Accordingly, abrupt and deep changes in such processes (especially if they are associated with increases in hardship) can help to structure offending at the individual level. Messner and Rosenfeld characterise Mertonian thinking by suggesting that "social norms tend to lose their regulatory force" (2000: 11) – a point with which we would concur. However, we additionally argue that not only do such social norms lose their power, they are malleable themselves and it is changes in the shape, nature and power of institutions such as the family which mean that their regulatory powers are weakened.⁴ Merton argued that the pressure towards anomie was socially structured, becoming greater amongst the lower social strata (since their chances for advancement are weaker) (Wilkinson, 2005). We argue, with regards to the UK's experience during the 1980s, that the lower social strata were most affected by the social and economic changes unleashed by Thatcherite policies. However, and as Rock (2007: 47) reminds us, Durkheim saw such 'social stress' as being (relatively) short-lived; the birthing pains of a new social and economic order. Regardless of precisely how 'short-lived' such social stress is (is ten years a long or a short period of time, for example?), we have been at pains to chart and document the long-term implications of such periods of rapid change (see Farrall et al 2016a; 2016b; Jennings et al 2016; Hay and Farrall, 2011). From this perspective, theories of anomie offer a potential avenue to stretch our understanding of how dramatic social change and shifts in the patterns and pace of crime (such as that experienced during and after the Thatcherite era) impact upon society.

Research Questions

⁴ Similarly, Garland (2001) identified that there was a dramatic increase in consumer products from the 1980s, coupled with a reduction in situational and informal social controls (such as the family and community bonds) that gave rise to increased acquisitive offending.

Herein we explore the extent to which the dramatic social and economic changes which the UK experienced during the 1980s were part of the causal processes which led to the rise in crime witnessed in the later part of the 1980s and early-1990s. Crime had been rising steadily from the 1960s throughout the 1970s and into the first half of the 1980s. In 1979 there were 2.5m recorded crimes, which increased to 4.5m by 1990 and peaked in the early to mid-1990s at just under 6m (Britton et al 2012: 164). British Crime Survey data shows a similar trend; there were around 11m offences reported in 1981 rising to around 20m in 1995. As we shall show below, at the same time as these increases in the crime rate, the UK experienced increases in a number of key social and economic conditions which have been linked to crime (such as unemployment, economic inequality, drug use, and child poverty). To what extent, if at all, were the changes in the crime rate related to changes in these social and economic conditions?

Data and Methods

Sociologists and criminologists have long been wary of the inferences that can be drawn from officially-recorded crime rates (indeed Merton's reliance on these was one of the criticisms levelled against his work, Box, 1971). In order to avoid this pitfall, but so as to be able to explore the relationship between macro-economic and social-structural level change, measures of the economic and social 'storms' observed between 1971 and 2011 are estimated using dynamic factor analysis from official statistical indices, whilst our measures of crime rates are derived from official recorded data and from the British Crime Survey (1982 to 2009)⁵ (Jennings et al, 2015). The analysis in this paper uses time series regression methods to examine the relationship between variables of interest over an extended time period. Because of the highly aggregated nature of our data (i.e. national rates of crime), direct impacts of specific socio-economic policies are difficult to detect, and so we model the relationship between general trends in the social and economic organisation of British society and economy and changes in aggregate crime rates. Our theoretical model is presented in Figure 1 below. The first of these processes – of the impact of economic policies on macroeconomic outcomes – is not formally modelled here, but has been addressed in existing work (see Farrall and Jennings, 2012; Jennings et al, 2012 for summaries). There are limits to aggregate-level analyses too, such as the possibility that our measures serve as substitutes for some underlying but omitted variable, which requires caution in causal inference – and elevates the importance of theory and methodological diagnoses.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Creation of Indices of Economic and Social Storms

The idea of a social or economic 'storm' is premised on the sense that key social and economic processes are becoming increasingly unstable and that these 'storms' result in a widespread sense of anomie and dislocation. Inherent in this thinking is the notion that these changes will take place across a number of key indicators at around the same time, and that those trends capture processes that are self-reinforcing in their effects. This might indicate an underlying state of

⁵ In 2012 the British Crime Survey was renamed the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

disruption to social norms and behaviours, or a series of economic shocks that impact on national productivity and employment. In this regard, a social storm can be equated with Durkheim's anomie, in describing the confluence of certain conditions which in conjunction may be linked to higher rates of deviance or social harm. Our measure of the 'social storm' is based on four variables measured annually between 1981 and 2011. Whilst it would be preferable to generate a measure that captures longer-term trends in social conditions over the full post-war period, prior to the policy shift marked by the election of the first Thatcher government in 1979, not all the data is available (specifically, suicide rates which are an important macro-level indicator of societal distress, Gilligan 2013, are not available from the Office for National Statistics as a continuous series prior to 1981). For the purposes of analysis, this starting point means that our conclusions are limited to understanding the relationship between social and economic change and rates of offending over the time period in question, rather than directly testing the impact of individual (or collective) policy interventions on social and economic distress.

Our measure of the social storm is constructed using a range of indicators of social distress, harm, dislocation and the weakening of norms and social ties. The selection of appropriate indicators is normatively problematic insofar as certain forms of social disruption and change (e.g. divorce) correspond both to forms of social breakdown and emancipation (i.e. women's social and legal rights). As a result our principal criterion of selection is that indicators are linked either to distinct social harms or upheavals in the aggregate – even if they also reflect progress in rights of the individual. Further, the method that is used here simply estimates the degree to which defined variables move together over time, and thus the question of what constitutes our measure of social storm is mainly an empirical one that can be resolved through modelling. Nevertheless, it is important to set out some expectations concerning why these indicators of social change and disruption might be both a consequence of economic shocks and restructuring and impact on deviance.

Studies of deviance and criminal behaviour have long emphasised a range of antecedents, including individual characteristics, cognitions and experiences, as well as the powerful roles of youth and political culture, poverty and the environment (Maguire et al, 2012). More recent analysis has indicated that it is highly likely that a combination of factors influence patterns of crime (Wikström and Butterworth, 2012) via interaction effects, multilevel or hierarchical structures and complex recursive relationships (Nagin and Tremblay, 1999; Smith and McVie, 2003; Nagin, 2005; Smith and Ecob, 2007; McAra and McVie, 2010a; 2010b; 2012). For example, researchers have developed a general theory of moral action - Situational Action Theory, which examines how personal and environmental characteristics interact to influence acts of crime (Wikström, 2004; Wikström et al, 2012). While our analysis does not operate at the level of the individual, we aim to incorporate a set of indices of the social storm that also represent an integrated analytical framework. Our initial set of indices comprise of the following:

- Suicide rate: the age-standardised rate of suicides per 100,000 of population; where suicide is defined as “deaths given an underlying cause of intentional self-harm or injury/poisoning of undetermined intent” (Office for National Statistics 2013). While suicide itself is a measure of societal distress and malaise, and tracks rises in the rate of unemployment (Nordt et al, 2015), it can also have secondary effects on wellbeing and financial circumstances of surviving family members who may be forced into reliance on illicit earnings in the absence of any loss of income following the death of

a family member. Studies of the survivors of suicides has indicated that many family members often report feelings of guilt, shame, stigmatisation, loss of social support and self-destructive behaviour, some of which may result in criminal behaviours (Calhoun et al, 1982).

- Death due to drug misuse: the total number of deaths due to drug-poisoning involving illegal opiates (i.e. heroin, morphine, methadone); which measures the level of drug abuse and misuse in society, specifically relating to ‘hard’ or ‘Class A’ drugs. Drug addiction has been linked to regional variation in rates of property crime (Morgan 2014) and other acquisitive crimes (Parker and Newcombe, 1987) while rates of drug use themselves indicate rates of lawbreaking and permissiveness.
- Divorce rate: the rate of divorce per 1,000 of married population; which measures changing social norms in relation to marriage as well as relationship breakdowns that in some cases impact on children. This might in some cases be directly linked to economic conditions via pressure on relationships via unemployment, relocation for the purposes of employment or increased stresses brought on by financial hardship. Similarly, divorce may weaken parental bonds (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001), known to be a protective factor against involvement in crime (Hirschi, 1969, Sampson and Laub, 1993). Children of divorced parents are more likely to drop out of school (Rodgers and Rose, 2001), itself associated with offending (Farrington, 1990; 1992).
- Teen pregnancy rate: the number of conceptions per 1,000 women aged 15 to 17. The rate of teen pregnancies provides a potential measure of a breakdown in traditional family structures, and discipline, which downstream impacts on deviance. These pregnancies are the result of early sexual encounters, which have been associated with school truancy, teenage drinking, drug use and juvenile delinquency (Farrington, 1990). The teen pregnancy rate would thus be expected to be associated with wider breakdown in social control and juvenile deviance, and absence of parental control.
- Child poverty rate: the fraction of children (<16) living in families on 40 per cent of contemporary median income, after housing costs (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2014). The child poverty rate provides a measure of economic deprivation and inequality affecting juveniles. It is of potential consequence for the study herein due to the impact of financial pressures on family life; the prevalence of economic disadvantage for the demographic most at risk of offending (i.e., young males, see Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000: 318) and the wider connection between income inequality, deprivation and crime (Taylor et al, 1973; Jarjoura et al, 2002; Bourgois et al, 2004; Gray, 2005; Muncie, 2006; Munro, 2007).

Each of these indicators provide a distinct signal of social stress and disruption, and changing social norms and breakdowns of control, community or family cohesion, that may result from economic change and restructuring and which may in turn impact on deviance. Dynamic factor analysis (Drukker and Gates, 2011) is used to summarise the underlying tendency in the identified social indices (as in Whiteley et al., 2013). This method calculates a single factor, with

scores for each latent factor reported in Table 1.⁶ We standardise each of the constituent variables (subtracting the mean of the series from each value and dividing by the standard deviation) in order to be able to directly compare the relative degree to which each variable loads onto the principal factor. Here we see that the unobserved factor is a significant predictor of each of the observed variables, with the exception of the suicide and teen pregnancy rate; where the positive and significant coefficients of similar magnitude for rates of child poverty, divorce and opiate-related deaths due to drug poisoning reveal common variation over time.⁷ Additionally, the lag of the unobserved factor (F_{t-1}) exhibits a high degree of persistence (0.986, $p < 0.001$).⁸

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Visual inspection of the estimated dynamic factor, shown in Figure 2, provides further insight into the shared trajectory of these social indicators. This reveals that the social storm dynamic factor rose throughout the 1980s, peaking in around 1994, and declined before rising briefly around 2002/3, and falling thereafter. This is largely consistent with an underlying dynamic of social change, as put forward in accounts of considerable social dislocation and turbulence during the early 1980s: rising child poverty, and growing rates of divorce and drug mortality (Farrall and Hay, 2014).

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

As we noted earlier, the idea of an economic storm can be equated with the confluence of various economic shocks and/or trends that impact on national (and regional) wealth, productivity and employment, potentially exacerbated by self-reinforcing dynamics. Some economic mechanisms may, on the other hand, be countervailing, providing stabilisers against downturns or instability (e.g. government transfer payments for unemployment benefits). Most crucially this second round of modelling intends to capture the level of economic stress and disruption relative to other time periods, taking key indicators as a benchmark. Our economic storm index is estimated using six variables measured annually from 1971 until 2011.

- Unemployment rate: the percentage of the male U.K. population, aged 16 and over, that is unemployed, seasonally adjusted (Office for National Statistics 2013); where this measures the proportion of men out of work, indicating under-employment of

⁶ The social storm index has a mean of 0.136 and a standard deviation of 1.471. See Table A1 in the Appendix.

⁷ That the suicide and teen pregnancy rates did not load onto the estimated factor raises a common question for statistical analysis; should one present a theoretically specified model and retain variables which are not significant, or does one present a 'reduced form' model dropping insignificant variables? As it was, the dynamic factor model includes variance parameters for each of the variables, and these were significant for both. This means that the measures did contribute to the model, even if the independent variables themselves are not statistically significant. Hence we opted to retain these variables since there were good theoretical and statistical reasons for doing so.

⁸ Tests of variance parameters against zero (σ^2_0) indicate that for each of the suicide rate, child poverty rate, teen pregnancy rate, and opiate-related deaths due to drug poisoning this is significantly greater than or equal to zero. This is not the case for the divorce rate.

individuals and more broadly the prevalence of financial hardship facing particular sections of society. Changes in the rate of unemployment among men are particularly relevant to this study given the impact of economic restructuring on the traditional male breadwinner model in certain communities under deindustrialisation and the considered link between unemployment, crime and imprisonment (Box, 1977; Carmichel and Ward, 2001; Raphael and Winter-Ebner, 2001).⁹

- Income inequality: the Gini coefficient measures the relative dispersion of income within society after housing costs (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2014). Essentially it captures the distribution of wealth in society and relative differences in income between groups, such that higher values indicate higher inequality (between 0 and 1). Notably, various longitudinal and meta-analytic studies have identified significant (albeit complex) positive associations between forms of crime and economic inequality (Hsieh and Pugh 1982; Kelly, 2000; Leigh et al, 2009). Associated closely with income inequality, we also measure:
 - i) Average weekly earnings: the annual growth rate of the historic average weekly earnings series and;
 - ii) Income-related benefits expenditure: expenditure in £ million, real terms, on income support and lone parent income support; where this indicates the level of reliance on income-support for low income families and;
 - iii) Poverty: the fraction of the working-age population living (after housing costs) on 40 percent of contemporary median income or less (Institute for Fiscal Studies 2014); where this measures the degree to which the incomes of poorer households keep up with middle income households.
- Housing repossession rate: the percentage of properties taken into repossession as a percentage of all loans. Such a dramatic shift in a households' tenure status may be associated with a "landscape of precariousness" (Nettleton and Burrows, 2001: 253) in relation to their employment, access to welfare, social and familial relationships (Nettleton, 2006) and homelessness or greater reliance on suboptimal accommodation (Fitzpatrick et al, 2012).

We again use dynamic factor analysis to estimate the underlying tendency (single factor) in the identified indices. The results are reported in Table 2.¹⁰ These reveal a high degree of persistence in the lag of the unobserved factor (0.993, $p < 0.001$), which is a significant predictor of each of the observed variables. Positive coefficients for the standardised rates of male unemployment, income inequality, housing repossessions, benefits expenditure and relative poverty reveal that worsening economic conditions tend to be observed in common across a range of indices. The negative coefficient for average earnings suggests that growth of incomes moves consistently in the opposite direction.

The availability of these various economic series for the earlier time period allows us to observe

⁹ If the dynamic factor analysis instead uses the overall unemployment rate, this estimation results in an inferior goodness-of-fit (i.e. a higher log likelihood value), and an insignificant prediction of the unemployment rate by the unobserved factor.

¹⁰ The economic storm index had a mean of 0.000 and a standard deviation of 1.013. See Table A1 in the Appendix.

the trend in the estimated dynamic factor prior to the change in the economic policy paradigm of British government in 1979 (see Hall, 1993). This is plotted in Figure 3. Following relative stability throughout the 1970s, the economic storm index exhibits a steady increase from 1981 onwards (as unemployment, inequality, benefits spending, housing repossessions and poverty all rise in tandem), temporarily falling during the late 1980s but only seeing a sustained decline after 1994/5. Estimation of the unobserved factor thus is consistent with many characterisations of the economic turbulence of this period (Dorling, 2014a; Walker, 2014).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Testing the Impact of Social and Economic Storms on Property Crime

Estimation of these unobserved factors enables us to describe the dominant underlying trajectories of social and economic change over an extended time period.¹¹ This does not resolve the question, however, of the nature of the relationship between these socio-economic processes, or their consequences for crime. Inspection of plots of standardised values of the social and economic storm indices against recorded property crime and self-reported victimisation suggests a substantial degree of common variation across these series. This is consistent with our theoretical expectations, as well as a substantial body of past research. Proper testing of this claim requires time series modelling, to account for the inherent dynamics of each of the series, however. Because of gaps in the self-reported victimisation data from the British Crime Survey (which was not run in various years between 1983 and 2001), we use recorded property crime rates for the formal test of our model.

We start by considering the relationship between the economic and social storm indices, using a time series regression model in first differences. This considers the annual change in the social storm measure ($\Delta\text{SocialStorm}_t$) as a function of change in the economic change measure during the same time period ($\Delta\text{EconomicStorm}_t$) and can be expressed in the form:

$$\Delta\text{SocialStorm}_t = \alpha_0 + \beta_1\Delta\text{EconomicStorm}_t + \mu_t$$

The model is fitted using the Prais-Winsten method (Prais and Winsten, 1954) to control for serial autocorrelation of the residuals (μ_t), estimated as the first-order autoregressive process: $\mu_t = \mu_{t-1} + \varepsilon_t$. The results of the time series regression model are reported in Table 3.¹² Here we see

¹¹ The correlation between the economic and social storms was 0.77 (p= .000).

¹² It is possible to further assess the temporal relationships between social and economic storms using tests of ‘Granger causation’ (Granger 1969). These determine whether past values of a variable x improve prediction of another variable y, relative to prediction from y from past values of itself alone. This is not a test of causation in the strictest sense, but evidence of the predictive content and the temporal ordering of one measure in relation to another (Granger 1988). We test for Granger causation between social and economic storms (in first differences) using a vector-autoregression framework, with the lag order (of two years) selected according to the Akaike information criterion (AIC). The results of the Granger causation Tests are reported in Table A2. The estimated χ^2 statistic considers whether economic storm Granger-causes social storm or whether social storm

that changes in the social storm measure are associated with changes in the economic storm measure, as the effect is positive and significant at the 95 per cent confidence level (0.511, $p < 0.05$), as hypothesised. The common underlying trajectory of economic conditions can therefore be linked to the common underlying tendency of key measures of social change, disruption and dislocation.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Returning to our principal concern, whether economic and social change were associated with increased rates of crime during the 1980s, we first estimate the impact of change in the economic storm measure on the rate of recorded property crime. This again takes the form of a time series regression model in first differences, estimated with the Prais-Winsten method (Prais and Winsten, 1954). The first lag of recorded property crime (Crime_{t-1}) is included as a variable on the right-hand side of the model to control for the tendency for crime rates to revert to their long-run equilibrium (as indicated by a negative coefficient of the lagged dependent variable). The results are reported in the left-hand column (Model 1) of Table 4. These are consistent with expectations, as the positive and significant effect of change in the economic storm measure is associated with a 1.6 point increase in the rate of recorded property crime per 1,000 head of population (1.634, $p < 0.05$). At the same time, the effect of the lag of the property crime rate has a negative and significant effect (-0.147, $p < 0.05$), where the value of the coefficient of equal to -0.15 means that after an initial one-point shock, some 85 per cent of that shock remains after the first year ($1 * 0.85$), some 0.72 per cent remains after the second year ($1 * 0.85 * 0.85$), and so on. When we restrict the model to the same period for which we also have data on the social storm (from 1982 to 2009) (Model 2), the general inferences that can be drawn remain the same, though the size of the effect of economic storm on the recorded crime rate is greater (2.027, $p < 0.05$) as is the rate of re-equilibration (-0.571, $p < 0.01$).

The final step of our analysis considers the effect of social and economic storm measures in the same model on the recorded rate of property crime. This is reported in the right-hand column of Table 4 (Model 3), and can be compared against the base model in Model 2. Together, the results indicate that while changes in the economic storm are a positive and significant predictor of changes in the property crime rate, changes in the social storm index are not. This could be because the social storm did not have a material effect on crime rates during this period. When property crime is modelled just as a function of social storm, the effect is not significant. This suggests that the social storm had neither a direct or mediating role in the processes observed here. Another explanation is that the social storm index and property crime are simultaneous outcomes of underlying changes in the economic system (modelled here in the form of the economic storm). Another possibility is that the effects of social disruption cancel out in the aggregate, and do not give rise to clear patterns. This would all suggest that property crime is reducible to economic variables, and that the association between social variables and property

Granger-causes economic storm, such that where the χ^2 test statistic is significant there is Granger-causation between the variables. This indicates that economic storm tends to lead social storms (where the χ^2 test statistic is equal to 7.214 and significant at the 95 per cent confidence level). In contrast, there is no support for Granger-causation in the opposite direction (where the χ^2 test statistic is equal to 0.761 and is not significant at the 95 per cent confidence level). We thus have confidence that the causal direction runs from economic shocks and dislocation to social disturbance than vice versa.

crime is spurious. In which case, the theoretical model would need to be revised (see Figure 4). From our findings, this seems most likely in the absence of observed direct effects of the social storm on the recorded crime rate.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Conclusion

We have examined the impact of what might be termed ‘Thatcherite’ social and economic policies and their consequences for crime rates in England and Wales over the period between 1971 and 2011. Our initial model proposed that changes in the management of the economy would result in economic turbulence which would create both social turbulence and an increase in crime. Certainly, the analysis herein indicates that economic disturbance was a reliable predictor of rises in property crime in the 1980s and 1990s. We also hypothesised that the social turbulence produced during this time would also contribute to the rising crime rate. This aspect of the model was not as we had hypothesised, and the social storm did not have the significant impact on crime that the economic storm had. However, our analysis broadly supports our initial thinking that the changes to the operation of the economy drove both social changes and change in the rates of crime in England and Wales. Specifically, rapid-onset neo-liberal economic policy in Britain in the late part of the 20th century contributed towards a surge in property crime.

In this respect, crime ought to be seen alongside other dramatic social developments such as rises in the rates of suicide, divorce, drug overdoses, teen pregnancy and child poverty. Whilst processes such as divorce may represent greater levels of female emancipation and for the individuals concerned may be positive outcomes, they are also associated with other processes (both for the individuals directly concerned, or for their children) with less positive outcomes. This is not to repeat, of course, the New Right’s claim during the 1980s that ‘permissiveness’ was the direct cause of crime (claims made by the likes of Victoria Gillick and Mary Whitehouse, see David, 1986: 158-162), but rather to point to the fact that changes in the economic arrangement in England and Wales was the driver of both the increases in the crime rate witnessed in the 1980s and increases in the social changes which so concerned New Right thinkers of the time.

The economic restructuring of the 1980s was both profound (that is to say felt dramatically by many sections of the economy, some of which shrunk considerably and some of which grew enormously) and enduring in two respects. The processes of change themselves took time to be completed, and when completed then endured, becoming the ‘new normal’. Even so, the speed with which the restructuring took place would have felt, for many people within the communities affected, quite rapid. Jobs (and futures) which appeared certain for many would have started to appear less concrete and then to disappear within a decade or less. Unlike the profound changes which followed the end of the Second World War, during which the welfare state was slowly developed over a period of 30 or so years, the changes of the 1980s took hold in a relatively short period of time. What lessons does our modelling have for understanding when such storms arise

and the future more generally? The storms we have described were the result of political decision making which sought to both undo much of what had gone before and to create a rather vaguely described future (of homeowners, shareowners and free markets). Predicting the future is never a wise thing to do and crime patterns are exceptionally difficult to estimate; however, in the light of the vote for the UK to leave the EU, it is possible to see how the dramatic economic consequences of this decision may result in increases in both social harms and increases in property crime - albeit in new forms, such as online and bank card fraud.¹³

Significantly, the research herein emphasises the value of economic or structural perspectives in explaining certain types of crime, even if they had been otherwise eclipsed by recent intellectual or cultural ‘turns’ (Hall 2011). We have presented empirical evidence of the importance of economic factors in property crime and in so doing, have demonstrated the theoretical validity of economic theories of crime, as described by Durkheim and Merton. Indeed, theories of crime which incorporate the role of the economy continue to have direct relevance for understanding recent crime patterns.¹⁴ Durkheim believed that healthy societies required effective regulation of people’s aspirations. He warned that rapid social change dislocated local controls, producing ‘anomie’, agitation, discontent, and other social ills that could contribute to deviance (and suicide). Meanwhile, sociologists who took their lead from Durkheim, such as Mannheim and Merton, did not suggest any simple link between poverty and crime, but envisaged an anomic culture produced by materialism and consumerism that was both demoralising and criminogenic. Our analysis points to a similarly nuanced relationship between the economy, neoliberalism and property crime (Taylor, 1994; Reiner, 2007). As the data suggests, the combined effect of rapid unemployment, inequality and loss of tenure had a disruptive effect on acquisitive crime. Beyond the economy, Reiner (2007) has stressed that neoliberalism in Britain during the Thatcher and Major administrations initiated exclusionary (anomic) social and criminal justice policies and encouraged punitive social attitudes, noting that neoliberal political culture favoured “egotistic individualism” over “reciprocal individualism”, the latter of which had been prevalent in the post-war consensus (2007:18). Certainly Thatcherite policies were attempting to impart a cultural as well as economic change; one that would embrace personal responsibility, enterprise and penalise what was perceived as a ‘dependency culture’ (Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992). In sum, the neo-liberal capitalism of the Thatcher and Major years serves as an example of the influence which political decision-making about the management of the economy can play in increasing property crime rates.

¹³ The nature of property crime is changing, and is currently difficult to analyse. Offences which are committed via the internet and card and bank account fraud are not currently reliably captured by recorded crime statistics or survey-based studies of victimisation or worry about crime. To address the increasing prevalence of these crimes the Crime Survey for England and Wales added new questions relating to fraud and computer misuse in half of the survey sample from October 2015. These new and experimental statistics found that “adults aged 16 and over experienced an estimated 5.8 million fraud and computer misuse incidents in the 12 months prior to interview; 3.8 million of these were fraud incidents and 2 million were computer misuse incidents” (Office for National Statistics, 2016:7).

¹⁴ While this research has addressed property crime in England and Wales, Currie (1997) sought to explain how the proliferation of free market values in America has contributed to violent crime.

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