How Social Order Is Possible Essay, Research Paper

1. “How is social order possible?”

The way in which social order is achieved has been the subject of many theories

presented by respectable sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, Thomas Hobbes, George Herbert Mead, and Karl Marx. Among the most prominent of these theories are Hobbes’ “Social Control” theory and Meads’ “Symbolic Interactionism” theory. Through these two theories, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how social order can be achieved.

The social control theory of Thomas Hobbes has five basic premises to it. The first premise is that humans are egotistical beings that will do anything to fulfill their wants and desires. The second premise is based on the idea that because humans are egotistical, crime and deviance are a natural occurrence and do not need to be explained. Instead, those who are not criminalistic or deviant are the ones who need to be explained. The third premise is that humans conform to societal values and norms through rational choice. They do this by weighing the consequences of bad actions with the perceived benefits of good actions, then decide whether to proceed in the direction of good or bad. The fourth premise is that social control is a response to deviance and crime; coercive forms of social control can regulate or reduce crime and deviance. This is possible through the final premise, which is that the fear of consequences imposed by the state influences members of society to adhere to societal norms. The adherence comes from human beings being afraid of suffering a painful and horrible death, whether physical or societal. The social control theory holds strong validation in explaining why most people follow the values and norms of society. In a way though, the theory contradicts itself.

The first premise of humans being egotistical is an excellent observation in human nature. Most human beings continually strive to achieve goals that they perceive as valuable. This theory is best illustrated by American culture where competitiveness and the drive for escalation in social status is apparent in just about everyone. American colleges and universities are often the breeding ground of competitiveness for jobs after graduation. By looking at the large number of students enrolled in secondary education, it can be seen that many Americans choose to receive schooling in hopes of making more money and gaining an elevated social status.

The second premise of Hobbes’ theory is where he seems he contradicts himself. The contradiction comes from him saying that deviance and crime are human nature, and then in his fifth premise saying that members’ adhere to societal norms because they fear a horrible and painful physical or social death. If the fifth premise were true, then no one would commit crimes or become deviant, which contradicts the second premise of deviance and crime should be expected.

The fifth premise also seems invalid because it does not account for the vast number of criminals that are in jail or that have been executed. Obviously, the fear of social or physical death did not stop the large number of inmates that are flowing though the American criminal justice system. It does explain though, why those who are not in jail chose to follow societal norms. Most would agree that the consequences of committing a crime far outweigh the benefits, but again, it does not explain for those who do not share this belief.

The social control theory does give a glimpse of how victimization occurs. In their quest for egotistical needs, human beings ultimately have to either be better than others to get what they want, or unlawfully take it from someone. This creates the victimization aspect of the criminal justice process from the deviance and criminal nature of humans. Whenever a criminal commits a crime, no matter how petty the crime is, a victim suffers in one way or another. It can be concluded then, that the social control theory rationalizes the victimization of people in order for human beings to satisfy their wants and needs through deviance and crime.

Another theory that is pertinent to the stabilization of social control is George Herbert Meads’ theory of symbolic interactionism. The symbolic interactionism theory holds six basic premises, which Mead feels, help to guide society. The first premise is that social interaction is achieved through a system of shared meanings of common language, body movement, and symbols. The next premise is that through this socialization, humans learn the meanings of their symbolic environment, and emerge as a social entity from the reactions of others. The third premise theorizes that self-images, norms, and values change much as life goes on. This happens because social life a flexible interaction for the individual and society. The next premise is that sensitizing concepts such as interactions, symbols, meanings, process, emergence, and self-concept are used to study crime and deviance. The fifth premise is based on the idea that societal crime and deviance are a product of social control. The final premise is that from a micro perspective, the study of meanings prevails over the study of motives, and the study of labels is more important than the deviant act itself.

I believe that the symbolic interactionism theory holds a valid argument as to the cause of social control. Most criminals begin their life of deviance at an early age. They grow up learning that crime and deviance are acceptable. They learn this through interactions with others. A prime example of this is the life of John Gotti. John Gotti was reputed to be the head of the largest criminal organization in the 1970’s and 1980’s. John Gotti did not just decide to become a criminal out of the nowhere. He grew up in an area surrounded by crime and deviance. His interpretation of his surrounding environment was that crime and deviance was an acceptable and respected way to live (Capeci and Mustain).

Another example of deviance and crime through interactionism is Michael Dowd. Michael Dowd was a New York City police officer who was fired for being corrupt. In his testimony to a commission investigating the NYPD, Dowd told of how his corruption stemmed from seeing other corrupt officers around him.

The symbolic interaction theory not only explains why people are deviant, but also why people are not deviant. While growing up people learn what is right and what is wrong through their environment. Most people learn that deviance and crime is unacceptable in society and instead, they follow the social norms and values that others around them hold. An example of this is a child who shoplifts at a young age. If the child is punished for the act, they will most likely conclude that stealing is an unacceptable behavior and refrain from doing it again.

The symbolic interactionism theory if very efficient at describing why criminals do what they do, but its’ use in the study of victimization is very limited. The only possible aspect that can come out of the theory in regards to victimization is that people who become victims may choose to do so based on their interpretations of the symbols that surround them. Perhaps through their interpretation they make it easier for criminals to specifically target them for victimizing.

Social order is a highly complex subject. The cause of social order will most likely continue to be studied by sociologists for many years to come. In the mean time, Hobbes’ social control theory and Meads’ symbolic interactionism theory have many valid points in explaining how social order can be possible in such a vast society such as the United State of America.