

Industrious rebels and captains of deterrence: defiance interpreted through a Veblenian reformulation of strain theory

Guido G. Preparata

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Abstract Strain and Defiance are criminological theories that lay ambivalent emphasis on the notion of “rebellion,” which is to say that they both regard mutinous behavior as being motivated by positive or negative ends alike. Individuals rebel, say, by stealing in order to achieve higher status (economic strain); or they may violently antagonize authority as a way to “salvage dignity” in an environment in which they have no social stake whatsoever (defiance). Conversely, they may responsibly protest to oppose blind consumerism (strain); or they may civilly disobey racist laws (political defiance). It is here argued that both theories may be construed as *special cases of a general problem*, which Thorstein Veblen had already diagnosed in 1899. Veblen depicted social dynamics as a battle between the *detering* forces of conservatism, which are animated by an overpowering predatory-pecuniary instinct, and those of progressivism, which rely, on the other hand, on an (ever more enfeebled) instinct of cooperation and workmanship. In this Veblenian model, civil defiance represents a challenge of the *peaceable* middle-class to the rule of the elite, whereas economically-strained defiance is the expression of the attempt of (middle to low) classes possessed by a pecuniary drive to emulate the status of the elite itself.

G. G. Preparata (✉)
Pontifical Gregorian University, Piazza della Pilotta 3, 00187 Rome, Italy
e-mail: ggprep@yahoo.com

G. G. Preparata
e-mail: g.preparata@unigre.it