

The Social History of Crime and Punishment in America: An Encyclopedia

Theories of Crime

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Theories of crime are defined in relation to modernity, spanning their development from the Enlightenment to the present, with the advent of postmodernism. Modernity involved the search for natural and human-based explanations and reasons for behavior and actions. Theories of crime became scientific in principle if not in practice. [p. 1798 ↓] Approaching behavior and seeking explanations in the human world using logic and/or experience and the reduced reliance on a shared set of morals as the primary factor distinguished modern approaches from premodern ones. Postmodern views stress language as a source of power allowing for the dominance of particular theoretical (and methodological) perspectives at the expense of particular ideas and schools of thought. Even postmodernist thinking would similarly criticize the exclusive use of spiritualistic or metaphysical explanations of crime and deviance behind the dynamics of language and culture. Implicitly or indirectly, most explanations for crime and social control use the instrumental model of rationality as the basic condition of modern societies.

This type of rationality permeates all spheres of modern societies and entails determining the best means to achieve particular ends. While factors may be differently presented in these explanatory models, the means of achieving goals in the form of constraints and facilitators toward crime and social control and the ends motivating individuals and ordering the distribution of conditions are always included. Environmental conditions are the other main aspect of criminological theories that are the source of the origins of both means and ends. In particular, criminological explanations include the notion that means and ends are pertinent to any explanation and criminal and social control behaviors operate through instrumental rationality.

Another relevant fact about many criminological perspectives concerns their focus on urban crime and social control. Modern societies moved toward urban dominance in all respects. Intellectually, socially, economically, and politically, ideas and conditions in urban areas were the motor forces of the historical development and evolution of modern societies. From the lens of urban elites of all types as well as governments, explaining crime included understanding the causes and effects of order derived from criminality. While disorder strongly signifies the political nature of deviance in 19th-century Europe and America, the political nature of criminological theories is closely connected to the notion that all theories of crime and deviance are associated with particular theories of social order and social control. Stephen Pfohl and Dario

Melossi converge in emphasizing how theoretical images of deviance and social control correspond historically, spatially, and through disciplines. This includes the notions of theories being partial and non-neutral. Historically, the politics of crime control in any given era synchronized with the predominant social controls utilized in the same time period. Spatial patterns and the distribution of crime and its control are also striking. The geographical nature of a large number of criminological theories supports this particular characterization. The disciplinary bases for many criminological theories is vital to their differences in terms of identification and analysis of the main causes of crimes, their effects on individuals and societies, and what are considered to be the proper social control responses. Classical, biological, psychological, and social-psychological theories all share roots in the disciplines of psychology, biology, sociology, or a combination of two or more of these disciplines.

More recent criminological theories are essentially sociological but borrow from geography, cultural studies, philosophy, and political science. Maintaining order through understanding and controlling crime reflects conflicts within society and the need to shape consensus. The bases of order and crime differed historically with criminological theories. Views of order gained through consensus were evolutionary theories, including premodern theories, biological and psychological theories in the 19th century, and social-psychological theories from the 20th century to the present. Conflict views of order saw order maintained through force, selective enforcement of laws, and oppression. Critical and radical theories fall into these categories, with Marxist, feminist, and labeling variants as examples.

Premodern Theories

Order and morals also have earlier historical precedents. Premodern theories were entirely based on religious explanations of why people committed crime and sin, and the appropriate responses to such behaviors largely involved religious punishments. There was a distinct lack of empirical validation of these theories, and punishments were determined solely by elite leaders to counteract supernatural forces driving crime. Ancient and feudal societies were more homogeneous, punishment more public with strong shaming [p. 1799 ↓] components, and enforcement and social controls worked mostly through monarchical and community surveillance and monitoring. Most

spiritualistic theories converged in equating crime with sin and worked well with smaller-scale, feudal, and homogeneous societies. While criminological theories became more secular, the influence of religion (to a lesser extent) and morals (to a greater extent) still retained their power to the present. Morality expressed itself in many theories but in different ways, whether through effects on individuals, communities, institutions, or the entire society. In this regard, the transition to modern theories, while considerable and transformative, has not been complete and pure. The closeness of demonological and early positivistic theories in 19th-century Europe is a case in point. Biological and sociological positivists in Europe shared with earlier premodern theories the moral failures of criminals and contrasted criminals with noncriminal members of society. Morality and science were then and remain intertwined with major positivistic theories. Criminological theories may have evolved methodologically, but the ideological trajectories to the present demonstrate strong historical roots.

Psychological theories of crime can include the perspective that differences in behavior may make some people more likely to commit a criminal act. Personality characteristics and biological factors often contribute to these differences.



The decisive transitions to modern criminological theories resulted from major societal changes such as urbanization, industrialization, rapid population growth, and the growth of science and technology toward the end of the 18th century. This time period forward also saw the development of the modern system of government. Heterogeneity in morals, work, and thinking were prominent characteristics of modern societies, and this

heterogeneous development was the major context within which modern theoretical perspectives developed and evolved. Modern criminological theories distinguished themselves as using and applying reason to develop a fair, consistent, and reasonable system of crime and punishment. The Age of Reason is a common thread and shared set of contextual forces for most all modern theories of crime. Even those perspectives that deemphasize the rationality of behavior operate and utilize a rational, logical methodology, analytical principles, and data collection in positing the irrationality of criminal behavior or the construction of criminality.

Most notably, the normative and idealistic aspects of these theories were not eliminated due to the use of rational thinking and the scientific method. Theories were prescriptive and reflected varied ideological orientations. Individual defects (and moralizing these failures) have been one prominent ideological strain throughout history (the “nature” part of the nature versus nurture controversy). The other major ideological orientation emphasizes nurture factors, making up the environments influencing crime. Based on the prevailing urban conditions responsible for crime, these theoretical perspectives recommended alternatively utilitarian goals of punishment and rehabilitation, which continue to characterize criminological theories (and associated social control components) to the present. The oscillations of exclusionary and inclusionary social controls are direct evidence of the cyclical nature of criminological theories. During times of societal crises, reestablishing order through the state, community, or other social controls signified the [p. 1800 ↓] dominance of nature approaches. This included harsher deterrence, more retributive, and incapacitation-focused penal systems. In contrast, inclusionary penal systems in more prosperous times emphasize rehabilitation more than deterrence, the need to reform and change to improve criminals and enhance reintegration, and appreciative perspective of deviants and the forces responsible for their criminality. A combination of deterrence, rehabilitation, retribution, and incapacitation underpinned these perspectives in the past and continue to do so today.

Classical and Positivistic Theories

Early modern criminological theories included classical theories emphasizing free will, rationality, and deterrence that developed toward the end of the 18th century and

sociological positivistic ones followed in the early 19th century. Crime prevention was a shared focus of these early theories, whether through an analysis of robbers in mid-18th century England conducted by Henry Felding, or the distribution of property and violent crimes conducted by Lambert A. Quetelet and André M. Guerry in continental Europe in the 19th century. Another element of classical theories was the emphasis on social contract between members of society and governmental institutions. The main roles of the state were to provide security and protection of citizen freedoms in exchange for acceptance of punishment if citizens broke this contract. The rights to punish and use force are integral elements of modern legal and criminal justice systems today. The neoclassical model and more recent rational-choice theories are dominant in social science disciplines consistent with the positivist emphasis on application of scientific methods to validate any study.

Marxist and positivist theories developed almost a century later and dominated from the end of the 19th century and continuing to have influence today. The origins of the criminal class and forces responsible for this class were the distinct questions studied by these perspectives and then moved to related questions about the institutional and organizational aspects of crime and social control. These perspectives developed out of the disciplines of political economy in earlier periods and added the growing subfield of law and society in the 20th century. Developing even later, radical and postmodernist perspectives were influential (not as significantly as the classical and positivist approaches) from the 20th century onward. Not part of mainstream criminology, these perspectives blossomed in the 1960s, a period of significant economic, political, and cultural changes in Europe and North America. Building on detailed studies of modern societies and their social control systems, these theories concentrated on how a significant amount of crime and deviance was directly caused by the actions of social control institutions and actors and powerful groups in society pressuring formal social control agencies to selectively enforce laws.

Three overarching philosophical frameworks with distinct historical evolutions are the main sources of most existing criminological and criminal justice theories today: classical, positivist, and legal (social control) behaviorist. Within these frameworks, there are numerous internal divisions. However, the divisions between and across theories are not absolute. Rather, these theoretical frameworks have considerable overlap and their historical development followed trajectories based on existing

conditions of modern society and, particularly, the shared intellectual heritage (including the importance of empirical validation, development and testing of concepts, and collective debates about the validity and utility of theories as well as associated methodologies). Theories are grounded in what is considered commonsense views of criminality and appropriate social control responses. By providing rationalizations to criminal justice policy and practice, theoretical perspectives were consistent and supported visions of crime and social control.

In relation to the extremist tendencies of these broader theoretical frameworks, David Matza noted the tendency to polarize classical and positivist approaches (even by theorists from each camp) and the ensuing overgeneralizations and problems that resulted from these practices. A prominent example is the common practice of stressing the discontinuities between classical and positivist approaches, which is not consistent with the historical record. The classical approach emphasizes human agency and exercise of free will, but also recognizes the positivist focus on external factors on behavior (albeit the particular constraints are different between the two approaches). Similarly, [p. 1801 ↓] the positivist emphasis on causality and deterministic explanations was easily accommodated with the emphasis on deterrence and free will operating in conjunction whereby external forces influence individual decision making.

Social Control and Environmental Theories

The growth of capitalism and the modern nation-state, along with the development of ideas accompanying the growth of science, were pertinent realities for both these theoretical schools of thought. The political imperative of controlling crime grew with the development of the legal and criminal justice systems in Europe and America. Classicism emphasized the political aspects of crime, and positivism and radicalism jointly centered on the threats to order from growing inequalities in industrial societies. Even radical perspectives are not necessarily incompatible with classical and positivist approaches, as the emphasis remains on understanding the social determinants of criminal behavior from the actions and exercise of power of dominant societal actors. The legal social control behaviorist perspectives, in the same vein, discuss the determinants of choices driving law enforcement and criminality

and the relevant environmental conditions that are influential in these choices. The common thread across seemingly divergent perspectives is use of a choice and conditions (environments providing constraints or facilitators for actors) model of criminality and social control with differing emphasis on the choice and conditions aspects behind criminal and social control behavior. Structural approaches focus on environmental conditions, which are the sources for means and ends in different forms in criminological theories. The selection of conditions, means, and ends varies across criminological theories and many perspectives simply assume away either of these components as being uniform or unimportant. For example, many individual positivistic and classical theories simply posit environmental conditions in a static fashion being a fixed set of parameters in their theories. Alternatively, structural theories assume that variations in individual characteristics are unimportant for explaining crime rates.

The classical perspective shares with individualistic-centered positivistic theories the emphasis on attributes of individuals and differences between criminals and noncriminals as being critical to explaining crime and criminality. These include 19th-century biological theories and 20th-century psychological, social-psychological, sociological, and rational-choice theories. These theories are closer to the historically dominant volitional criminological model of modern criminal justice (crime is a product of free choices requiring appropriate responses and environmental factors are ignored in this model). Explaining criminality and the incidence of crime in individuals are the main goals of these approaches. Surprisingly, some radical and postmodernist theories also pay attention to individual-level factors and choices, although extra-individual processes and structural contexts are also stressed. Process-level factors bridge these micro individualistic theories with more macro structural ones.

Structural theories mainly examine the organization of society and environmental conditions as being critical to explaining major crime and social control patterns. These perspectives are radical and positivistic (even combined), emerging in the late 19th century and intensifying in the 20th century. Whether Marxist or Durkheimian versions, these schools of thought coincided with the transformation of societies, the concentration of economic and political power, and the development of mass production and consumption. Based heavily in sociology and political science, these approaches highlight the aggregate distributions of crime and social control within and across societies as products of the arrangements of society in terms of

values, status, class, and other related dimensions. Unlike individualistic theories, rates of crime are the main dependent variable. Macro theories remain popular in academic criminology but have been less so with criminal justice practitioners due to their emphasis on the societal origins of crime and social control. From the view of practitioners and policy makers, changing these conditions is extremely difficult and beyond their control. The political economy of crime policy and practice, coupled with the cultural constraints, limit wholesale adoption of macro-structural policies. Crime control policy and practice is heavily skewed toward status quo approaches that warrant traditional individualistic/legal views of crime and traditional individualized social control responses. Criminological [p. 1802 ↓] history has been covertly a history of competing theories at different levels of analyses. Microtheories have won these historical battles for the most part with some notable exceptions. From the end of the 19th century to the 1960s, critical and radical theories dominated.

Modern Trends

Recent theoretical trends are toward use of integrated and developmental crime theory perspectives. Integrating theories has been proposed as recognition that crime is a result of a combination of multiple factors rather than by unifactorial approaches become prevalent throughout criminological theories. Integration has been impeded by recognition that theories are better suited for explaining specific aspects of crime and do not operate at the same level of analysis. The origins of developmental theories lie with the attention given to career criminals and the need to understand the developmental processes translating crime at younger ages into serious criminality at later stages of criminal career. This trend is consistent with academic criminology being driven by policy and practical concerns. Other, more recent criminological perspectives such as routine activities and environmental criminological theories similarly cater to the needs to understand, explain, and control crime patterns impacting the formal criminal justice apparatus of modern societies. Developmental and integrated theories remain tied to the dominant social control and physical environmental crime theories today, as well as consistent with historical variants of these theories in classical and positivistic forms.

Most of the differences among theoretical perspectives, historically to the present, are overplayed and those promoting the inherent incompatibilities and discontinuities fail

to recognize each perspective developed concurrently and involved active exchange and interplay between different theoreticians responding to the same historical conditions of their time. A persistent theme in each criminological perspective involved detailed examination of changing forms of criminality and social control. In early modern classical and positivist theories, serious property and violent crimes were being discovered as following particular trends in society. Vagrancy was treated as a direct threat to capitalism and violence in dense, crowded, and anonymous settings threatened social stability and predictability vital for modern living. Later modern theories, especially those developed in the 20th century, moved to looking at the institutional and technological aspects of crime and social control with specific attention to how socioeconomic diversity posed distinct challenges to understanding and controlling crime. Most changes took a significant amount of time to develop as well as had uneven impacts, which was reflected in the significant overlap between different criminological theories. Most theoretical frameworks and perspectives evolved over long periods of time and were modifications of prior theories to changed historical conditions.

The long historical progression of criminological theories with associated continuities and discontinuities can be better understood through a deprivation and control framework. Most current theories trace their roots back to earlier theories emphasizing individual moral, psychological, and biological deprivations to macro social, economic, political, and cultural deprivations in later theories. Premodern and 19th-century-based theories favored the micro deprivations perspective with emphasis on restoration of formal governmental and community controls or, for the worst criminals, incapacitation or sterilization. Institutions emphasized in these theories include family, peers, community, and socialization ones in general but all of them are linked ultimately to individual deprivations. Modern-day versions of these theories include social control, social disorganization, routine activities, and rational-choice theories.

The other major deprivation and control perspective historically to the present is environment focused. Twentieth-century criminological theories began to focus more on macro social deprivations (or a combination of deprivations particularly micro psychological ones) and penal reform and rehabilitation as the main forms of control. This continued even with more radical and critical theories developed more recently that moved to cultural and political deprivations. The associated controls required for addressing macro deprivations include economic and political investments, emphases

on treatment and rehabilitation, and reduced reliance on formal social controls as well as traditional familial and community social controls. Classical, positivistic, and [p. 1803 ↓] legal behaviorist perspectives of both the micro and macro variety share the need to use particular control types and strategies. While many do not view positivism and critical theories as control-oriented perspectives, these types of theories along with classical ones have promoted the use of particular controls academically and normatively. The history of crime theories and social control can be fruitfully seen as between a history of integration and separation.

The current state of criminological theorizing exhibits theoretical and methodological pluralism. Historically to the present, pluralism has not meant equal influence of each theoretical perspective over time and across space but rather dominance and influence of particular theoretical perspectives during specific time periods and for specific areas. Criminology has become more utilitarian over time and serves the legal and criminal justice systems more directly. Crime has become a prominent political issue and can be used to justify particular ideological and political agendas. The emergence of permanent and extensive criminal justice systems in modern societies has resulted in the favoring and dominance by particular criminological theoretical perspectives. The perspectives favoring family and traditional institutions of social control have stronger currency today than they did 40 years ago.

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See Also

- [Corruption, Sociology of](#)
- [Criminology](#)
- [Morality](#)

Further Readings

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