

# **Criminological Theory**

## *Past to Present*

**Essential Readings**

*Third Edition*

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# Introduction

## *Understanding Criminological Theory: A Guide for Readers*

Criminology is a field rich in theoretical imagination. To an extent, this diversity of theorizing reflects the discipline's immaturity—its inability as of yet to develop a single paradigm that is so empirically superior to its competitors that it earns the allegiance of most scholars. In biology, for example, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution provides the organizing framework that virtually all serious scientists embrace. Economists as a field share the assumption that human behavior is self-interested and based on rational choice—the pursuit of benefits over costs. Both biologists and economists disagree among themselves a great deal and develop different ideas about how the world operates, but they tend to do so within the parameters of an overriding paradigm.

Criminology, however, is structured in a different way. There are many theories or “schools of thought.” Again, the fact that criminologists do not agree on “why crime occurs” can be seen as a limitation of the field. But the richness in thinking within criminology also is a manifestation of the complexity of its subject matter. Like much social behavior, crime is multifaceted and potentially shaped by a range of factors that operate inside and outside individuals, that exist on the macro level and the micro level,

and that have effects across various points in the life cycle. Illuminating what causes crime is thus a daunting task that benefits from efforts to view its origins from many angles and through different colored lenses.

The purpose of this volume is to capture the diversity of thinking on crime causation that now prevails within criminology. As we surveyed the large and growing body of theoretical criminology, it became apparent that a surplus of worthy contributions was available; this reader could easily have doubled in size. The practicalities of editing a single volume of manageable length and appropriate for classroom use, however, required that we make tough choices as to what to include and what, regrettably, to omit. In doing so, we attempted to select the most *essential readings*—that is, works that have had or are now having the largest impact on criminological theory and research. These writings either were instrumental in creating a theoretical tradition or subsequently extended an existing perspective in noteworthy ways.

However, using and learning from a book of readings—a “reader”—can be challenging. There is a certain comfort in a traditional textbook in which the authors summarize the knowledge in a clear and convenient way. In contrast, edited readers

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require that you return to the original writings. These writings were authored at different times, for different audiences, and, of course, in different voices. There is much value in revisiting the originals—of not relying exclusively on someone else’s retelling of the theory. But it is also not always easy to keep all the ideas straight and to understand fully what is being said.

In this collection, however, we take steps to guide readers along their excursion through criminological theory. This introductory essay is our first effort to tell readers how to use this book and what the Third Edition of *Criminological Theory: Past to Present* “is all about.” We invite you, therefore, to take a few moments to consider the rest of this “guide.” We trust that the investment will make our collections of essays more accessible, understandable, and rewarding.

### How to Use This Book

The Third Edition of *Criminological Theory* is like two books in one. Most important, the book presents 50 selections from scholars who have sought to explain the origins of criminal behavior. These are arranged from Chapter 1 to Chapter 50. Taken together, these writings provide remarkable insights into why people break the law.

The “second book” is comprised of the introductory material that we, as editors, have written and inserted throughout the book. *Criminological Theory* is divided into 14 parts. These are labeled Part I to Part XIV. Each “part” represents a distinct theoretical approach to the explanation of crime. To guide readers on their adventure across time (from past to present) and across theories, each of the volume’s parts is preceded by a general introduction that places its readings in their scholarly context. For a given part, the introduction conveys the central thrust of a perspective; that is, it addresses what makes the theory unique or different from other explanations of crime. It also attempts to show how specific readings “fit into” the theoretical paradigm covered in that part of the book. In

many ways, these introductions—when taken together—are much like a separate textbook on theories of crime. Again, each introduction is tied to a distinct part and to the selections therein. But they could virtually be read by themselves as a fairly comprehensive summary of criminological theory.

Beyond the overviews leading into the book’s 14 parts, we have also written separate introductions for each of the 50 selections (which are arranged as “chapters” in this volume). These article introductions should make the excerpts more understandable by pointing out the key issues that readers should attend to as they study each selection.

We also divide the book one further way, grouping chapters into Sections 1 to 5. Chapters are placed together into a section based on some commonality, such as a similar time of origin, longstanding rivalry or integration, and shared theoretical or political assumptions. Later in this Introduction, we will return to these five sections and show how they help to organize the book and help you to understand the development of criminological theory.

Given the way we have organized the book, we suspect that the most effective way to understand each theoretical selection is to proceed in four steps:

First, read the introduction to the part in which the selection appears. Again, this material will provide an overview of (1) the principles of the general school of criminological thought examined in the part and (2) the specific selections in that school included in the volume.

Second, before reading a given individual selection, be sure to read the introduction written specifically for that chapter. After doing so, you should have a reasonably solid understanding of both the general theoretical framework and the specific content of the selection you are about to read.

Third, now turn your attention to the original work authored by the criminological theorist(s) in question. Ideally, you will have the foundation to comprehend not only the content of the theory—what the

theory is saying—but also how it “fits” in with the school of thought in that part of the book.

Fourth, if you become confused in any way, you might then revisit either the part or the chapter introduction where we have reviewed the materials. As will be explained, we also provide a table here that summarizes the main schools of thought. This chart might also be employed to refresh your thinking.

In short, we have attempted to provide an integrated learning experience. Traditional textbooks are useful, but again, they deprive readers of the opportunities to hear theorists in their own voices. Books of edited readings supply the original works, but many include only cursory introductions, which leave readers to their own devices to “figure out” what the theories mean and how all the information “fits together.” Our goal, by contrast, is to furnish both the originals and the kind of detailed but clear commentary that will make reading these primary materials an enriching rather than a mystifying experience. For this reason, we urge readers to take advantage of the introductory essays and to use them to make the primary materials in the individual chapters more accessible and meaningful.

Finally, at the close of each reading, we list several “Discussion Questions.” These queries are designed to test your knowledge of the theories, to encourage you to critically evaluate the theories, and to guide class discussions on the theories.

### **Central Theme: Past to Present**

*Criminological Theory* is not just an endless roster of one reading after another. Already, we have explained that the book is divided into 14 major parts, with each area representing a major theoretical perspective or “school of criminology.” In making the selections of which readings to place into each of these 14 parts, we focused—as we have said—on theoretical writings that were essential or “must reads” for anyone wishing to be literate in criminology.

However, our book is organized around another theme that also is represented in its subtitle: *Past to Present*. Within each part,

we thus start with one or more “classic” works that were responsible for, in essence, finding or establishing the school of thought. Then, we include one or more selections from more contemporary criminologists. In this way, readers see how the theoretical perspective covered in the part has evolved from “past to present.” This approach makes sense to us because, as we have seen in our joint careers, criminological theory is dynamic, not static.

Studying the past—the classic works—is important for two reasons. First, collectively, they help us to learn about the history of the discipline and to learn in detail how scholars first set forth distinct, competing ways of viewing crime causation. Second, the writings of today’s scholars typically are not created anew; they come from someplace. Understanding why a theorist makes certain claims today is difficult without some insight into where his or her ideas first originated. In short, the past provides the context for understanding the present.

But classic works, although due their respect, should not be enshrined as having conveyed sacred truths that are beyond criticism and revision. Knowledge grows, and as this process unfolds new ideas develop that extend earlier statements of a theory. As Robert K. Merton observed, however farsighted the “giants” in the field have been, those who stand “on the shoulders of giants” can see even farther. Contemporary theories thus represent our latest insights into the causes of crime. They also have the largest influence in directing the empirical research of today’s scholars. As a result, *Criminological Theory* includes a good deal of material on contemporary explanations of crime.

In short, in arranging this book, our goal was to select works that not only were essential readings but also revealed the development of criminological theory from past to present. In approaching each part, the reader should be aware that selections are arranged with the classic works first and the more contemporary works second. Although the writings within each part can be read in different orders, they are placed in a sequence that we believe best shows the de-

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velopment of ideas within the school of thought represented in the part.

We emphasize this structure of the book—repeated within each individual part—so that readers will not simply read one selection after another without thinking about how each of these chapters are *interconnected*. These theoretical interconnections, moreover, are discussed in the introductions to each part. In this way, readers will be alerted as to how early writings laid a school's theoretical foundation and then how, specifically, later works built upon these classic statements.

The excitement, then, is not simply in knowing what each school of criminology—or each contribution within each school—has said. Admittedly, learning the content of the theoretical works is part of the job, so to speak. But for those of us who make criminological theory not only our livelihood but also our passion, the challenge and fascination come from figuring out *how ideas about crime develop*. As this puzzle is completed one step at a time—that is, as readers master one school of thought after another—it is as though a giant mosaic is being revealed before one's eyes. It is a wonderful experience that the arrangement of our book hopefully makes possible.

### Keeping Theories Straight

As authors, our challenge is how to take the many important writings on crime and to whittle them down to the 50 most noteworthy contributions. But to readers, such a lengthy roster of writings might well produce an opposite reaction: “How am I supposed to keep all these readings straight?”

We have given part of the answer already. Thus, we have alerted you that the readings in this book are not simply a continuous list of 50 separate chapters that should be seen as distinct entities. Rather, criminological theory is *organized into schools of thought*, and our book reflects this theoretical landscape. Accordingly, the first “cognitive framework” to employ is to ask yourself what school or general theory a reading “falls into.” Once this fact is known, you are likely to have a good sense or clue as to what

the reading is about. Furthermore, the book is arranged by a second “cognitive framework”: the readings *within each school* are organized from “past to present”—from original or foundational statements of the theory to more contemporary statements. As a result, readings can be “placed” as being earlier or later in a theory's development.

This ability to *locate* each reading (1) into a general criminological school and then (2) into a particular's school's development is one strategy for “keeping theories straight.” As any given work is reviewed, it might be helpful to envision where in the “scheme of things” this reading “fits.” For example, when reading about Travis Hirschi's “social bond theory,” one would make a “mental note” that this work is in the part on “control theory.” This categorization means that Hirschi is going to link crime to some sort of absence or breakdown of control. Now, given the date of publication of Hirschi's work (1969), you would also know that it is a fairly early control theory. This fact makes it likely that later theories would, at least in part, build upon the social bond perspective. With this information “in mind,” Hirschi's theory is not an isolated reading but exists within an intellectual context. Making these linkages increases the chance that the details of his theory will be more easily recalled.

Another strategy that you might use to keep theories straight is to think about the *names of the theories*. Criminologists do not select names for their theories randomly. Instead, they take a great deal of time to pick out terms that capture the essence of their theory. Not all titles of theories or of the works listed in this book contain explanatory terms, but many do. For example, Hirschi's work is called “Social Bond Theory.” Immediately, as a reader, you should have a good idea what his central thesis is: if people have social bonds, they will not go into crime; if social bonds are weak, they will go into crime. Or, take Sutherland and Cressey's “A Theory of Differential Association.” Any idea of what these theorists propose is the key cause of crime? If you an-

swered “differential association” with criminal definitions, then you already know their central premise. What about “strain theory”? Right! People under strain are more likely to become criminal. Of course, theories are much more complicated than this, and it is important (and fun!) to learn their nuances. But knowing the names of theories is an effective device to sensitize yourself to recalling the theory’s main message; it is then but a small step to fill in the details on the theory in question.

Another way of keeping theories straight is to understand that each theory “says something new and/or different about crime.” For a theory to make its mark on criminology—and to be included in a book like this on “essential readings”—it must make a point that other writings have not made previously. Again, theories tend to build upon one another and thus typically are not completely novel. Still, each theory tries to carve out its own special niche—to make the case that previous works either were mistaken, omitted a key cause of crime, and/or can be interpreted in a new way. Thus, when trying to remember a reading, it might be helpful to ask: What is this author saying that makes his or her work different?

For example, James Messerschmidt argues that men commit crime as a way of showing that they are “masculine”—as a way of “doing gender.” Two features, then, are unique about his work. First, like other feminist writers, he says that theories that

do not take gender into account have omitted a key factor of social life and thus are bound to be incomplete, if not wrong. Second, he says that feminist writers who focused on *female* crime did not pay attention to what it means to be *male*. Yet, if males commit a disproportionate share of crime, it is logical to assume that something about *being a man* might be involved in causing crime. In this context, understanding Messerschmidt’s work—“keeping it straight”—is easier if the reader thinks about what makes his work different: his focus on what it means to be male or on “masculinities.” Of course, this task is made easier by reading the introductions we have written to his article and to the part of the book in which his selection appears.

Finally, to aid in readers having a sense of where theories fit, we have developed Table 1, which is a brief *reader’s guide* to criminological theory. This table lists the general theories of crime, which part of the book each theory appears in, each theory’s main authors, and each theory’s central thesis. We must caution that this chart does not take the place of actually reading the introductions and selections. It is *not* the *Classic Comics of Criminology!* In fact, the table will make the least sense to those who have done the least amount of reading. However, for those who have studied the book in detail, this table can serve as a handy guide to remind you of how the various theories, theorists, and themes fit together.

*Table 1*  
*A Brief Readers’ Guide to Criminological Theory*

Theory of Crime	Part of Book	Main Theorists in This Book	Central Thesis of the Theory
Classical	I	Beccaria	Crime occurs when the benefits outweigh the costs—when people pursue self-interest in the absence of effective punishments. Crime is a free-willed choice.
Positivist	I	Lombroso	Crime is caused or determined. Lombroso placed more emphasis on biological deficiencies, whereas later scholars would emphasize psychological and sociological factors (among others).

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Theory of Crime	Part of Book	Main Theorists in This Book	Central Thesis of the Theory
Individual Trait	II	Glueck and Glueck Ellis and Walsh Rowe Caspi, Moffitt et al.	Criminals differ from noncriminals on a number of biological and psychological traits. These traits cause crime either directly or indirectly (i.e., in interaction with the social environment).
Social Disorganization/ Chicago School	III	Shaw and McKay Sampson and Wilson Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls	Disorganized communities cause crime because informal social controls break down and criminal cultures emerge. They lack the “collective efficacy” to fight crime and disorder.
Differential Association/ Social Learning	IV	Sutherland and Cressey Akers Wolfgang and Ferracuti Anderson	Crime is learned through associations with criminal definitions. Interacting with antisocial peers is a major cause of crime. Criminal behavior will be repeated and become chronic if reinforced. When criminal subcultures exist, many individuals can learn to commit crime in one location, and crime rates—including violence—may become very high.
Anomie/ Institutional-Anomie	V	Merton Messner and Rosenfeld	The gap between the American Dream’s goal of economic success and the opportunity to obtain this goal creates structural strain. Norms weaken and “anomie” ensues, thus creating high crime rates. When other social institutions (such as the family) are weak to begin with or are also weakened by the American Dream, the economic institution is dominant. When such an institutional imbalance exists—as in the United States—crime rates are very high.
Strain/ General Strain	V	Cohen Cloward and Ohlin Agnew	When individuals cannot obtain success goals (e.g., money, status in school), they experience strain or pressure. Under certain conditions, they are likely to respond to this strain through crime. The strains leading to crime, however, may not only be linked to goal blockage (or deprivation of valued stimuli) but also to the presentation of noxious stimuli and the taking away of valued stimuli.
Control	VI	Hirschi Gottfredson Sampson and Laub Hagan	They ask the question, “Why <i>don’t</i> people commit crime?” They assume that criminal motivation is widespread. The key factor in crime causation is thus the presence of absence of control. These controls or containment might be rooted in relationships (e.g., social bonds) or internal (e.g., self-control). Types of social bonds may vary across the life course; they are “age-graded.” Acquiring bonds may enable offenders to desist from persistent offending. Exposure to control also might differ by social location and historically, such as the changing level and type of control given to males and females.
Labeling/Shaming	VII	Lemert Braithwaite Sherman	People become stabilized in criminal roles when they are labeled as criminals, are stigmatized, develop criminal identities, are sent to prison, and are excluded from conventional roles. Reintegrative responses are less likely to create defiance and a commitment to crime.

Theory of Crime	Part of Book	Main Theorists in This Book	Central Thesis of the Theory
Critical	VIII	Bonger Quinney Currie Colvin	Inequality in power and material well-being create conditions that lead to street crime and corporate crime. Capitalism and its market economy are especially criminogenic because they create vast inequality that impoverishes many and provides opportunities for exploitation for the powerful.
Peacemaking	VIII	Quinney	Crime is caused by suffering, which is linked to injustice rooted in inequality and daily personal acts of harm. Making “war on crime” will not work. Making peace is the solution to crime.
Feminist	IX	Adler Chesney-Lind Heimer and De Coster Messerschmidt Steffensmeier and Allan	Crime cannot be understood without considering gender. Crime is shaped by the different social experiences of and power exercised by men and women. Patriarchy is a broad structure that shapes gender-related experiences and power. Men may use crime to exert control over women and to demonstrate their masculinity—that is, to show that they are “men” in a way consistent with societal ideals of masculinity.
Deterrence/Rational Choice	X	Stafford and Warr Cornish and Clarke	Building on classical theory, crime is seen as a choice that is influenced by its costs and benefits—that is, by its “rationality.” Crime will be more likely to be deterred if its costs are raised (e.g., more effort required, more punishment applied), especially if the costs are certain and immediate.
Environmental/Routine Activity	XI	Cohen and Felson Clarke	Crime occurs when there is an intersection in time and space of a motivated offender, an attractive target, and a lack of capable guardianship. People’s daily routine activities affect the likelihood they will be an attractive target and will encounter an offender in a situation where no effective guardianship is present. Changes in routine activities in society (e.g., women working) can affect crime rates. The best way to lower crime is through situational crime prevention in which the focus is not on changing offenders but on reducing the opportunity to commit a crime in a given place.
Conservative	XII	Wilson and Kelling Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters	Crime is not due to “root causes” such as poverty and inequality but to a breakdown of morality in society and to the leniency of the criminal justice system. The key solutions to high crime include vigorous policing against minor infractions in disorganized neighborhoods (“fixing broken windows”), mandatory prison sentences that deter, incapacitating predatory offenders, and moral reform in society, including faith-based initiatives.
Developmental/ Life Course	XIII	Patterson, DeBaryshe, and Ramsey Moffitt Laub and Sampson	Crime causation is a developmental process that starts before birth and continues throughout the life course. Individual factors interact with social factors to determine the onset, length, and end of criminal careers. The key theoretical issues involve continuity and change in crime. Some theories predict continuity across the life course; others predict continuity for some offenders and change for other offenders; and some predict continuity and change for the same offenders.

Theory of Crime	Part of Book	Main Theorists in This Book	Central Thesis of the Theory
Integrated	XIV	Elliott, Ageton, and Canter Thornberry Title Cullen Agnew	These theories use components from other theories—usually strain, control, and social learning—to create a new theory that explains crime. They often are life-course theories, arguing that causes of crime occur in a sequence across time.

## How Criminological Theory Developed

As with other scholarly fields, criminology as a discipline has its unique history. The most important ideas about crime have not occurred all at once but rather have developed at particular points in time. We have already alluded to this time dimension when we noted that the readings in each part of the book are arranged from “past to present.” But beyond the development of ideas *within each theoretical perspective* (e.g., control theory), there is also the issue of when different schools of thought first came on the scene and/or became major influences within criminology (e.g., social disorganization theory before labeling theory). This development of criminological schools is not easy to diagram because perspectives have waxed and waned in popularity, and many have overlapped for many years despite beginning at different times. That is, the world of ideas does not always arrange itself in a nice, neat package. Still, it is important to know that the 14 parts in the Third Edition of *Criminological Theory* are generally arranged in a sequential order, with earlier schools of thought presented first and more recently developed perspectives placed later in the book. We thus pause briefly to review how criminological theory has developed and how this development is reflected in the structure of our book.

In a way, then, our goal is to try to *tell you a story* about the evolution of scholars’ thinking about crime. As noted earlier, we have tried to capture this development of criminological theory by grouping the 14 parts into five sections. To borrow John Laub’s term, each section is devoted to a major “turning point” in theoretical crimi-

nology—a juncture when a different way of seeing crime emerged and reoriented the direction of the field. Again, many existing theories did not vanish. But during these turning points, existing paradigms were fundamentally challenged and criminology was fundamentally transformed.

Below, we review these five sections of the book and, in so doing, attempt to provide a brief historical account of the criminological enterprise.

### Section 1. In Search of the Criminal ‘Man’

*Criminological Theory* begins in Part I with two general perspectives—the Classical and Positivist Schools—that laid the foundation for the field of criminology. The Classical School was rooted in an attempt during the Enlightenment to reform criminal laws that were unfair and cruel. Based on the noble vision that all humans were endowed with free will and equal rights, it suggested that crime was a rational choice based on the pleasures of an illegal act outweighing its pains. The criminal law could deter crime if it was certain and just harsh enough that the choice of crime would not “pay.” The focus thus was not on the offender but on findings ways to finely calibrate the criminal law so that it would make crime an unattractive choice.

In contrast, the Positivist School rejected these views as wishful philosophy. Instead, Lombroso and those who followed in his footsteps argued that crime, like illness, was *caused*, not chosen, and that the role of criminology was to use science to detect the sources of criminality. Lombroso’s theory, which essentially used the principles of Charles Darwin to argue that criminals were not sufficiently “evolved” biologically,

would prove controversial and be rejected by later scholars. But Lombroso's paradigm—his basic approach of studying offenders to see what made them different from non-offenders—would become the main strategy of modern criminology. That is, we could not simply assume that all offenders were the same but would have to search for the origins of the criminal “man” (women would not be studied systematically until many years later).

The readings in Part II follow in the Lombrosian tradition of searching for the criminal “man”—of trying to discover what is peculiar about individuals that makes them criminal. These approaches are said to be searching for *individual differences* or *criminogenic traits*. Some scholars prefer to use the term *heterogeneity*; that is, people's traits—whether eye color, height, weight, or criminal propensity—are not homogeneous but heterogeneous. So, the key to criminology is in asking: What is it about criminals that makes them different? Scholars in the individual-trait paradigm typically answer that offenders have biological or psychological deficiencies. Some of the more sophisticated approaches argue that individual traits do not lead directly to crime but rather interact with the social environment to create a person-situation nexus that is criminogenic (e.g., a temperamental child is more likely to be spanked and rejected by parents, which in turn makes the child develop conduct problems).

Individual trait theories were popular in early American criminology (in the beginning part of the 1900s) and have reemerged in popularity in the last decade. This is especially true because of the revolution within genetics that has made tracing biological influences more feasible. For much of the twentieth century, however, scholars rejected such approaches for failing to incorporate *sociological* causes of crime. During this lengthy period, American criminology was largely sociological criminology. The debate among scholars was not over whether crime was a social product, but rather over which set of social factors was the main source of criminal behavior. These ideas tended to fall into three schools of

thought—differential association, control, and strain theories—that have earned the status of the “Big Three” in criminological theory. We turn to these next.

## Section 2. The Rise and Growth of American Criminology

Although earlier commentaries and studies existed, the origins of modern American criminology—today's criminology—can be traced most fully to the investigations of Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay. Using juvenile court records, Shaw and McKay mapped the distribution of delinquency in pre-1940 Chicago, finding that crime rates were highest in neighborhoods located closest to the center of the city. They rejected the idea that crime in inner-city communities was due to the individual traits of the people who had moved to these areas. (This is sometimes called a “compositional effect.”) Instead, they argued that crime was a product of the *characteristics of the community*. (This is sometimes called a “contextual effect.”) They thus made a powerful case that crime was a sociological phenomenon—a theme that would dominate American criminology for the rest of the twentieth century.

To be specific, Shaw and McKay set forth a social disorganization perspective that linked crime to the breakdown of informal social control in the neighborhoods. They also argued that as control waned, cultural values supportive of delinquency emerged that were transmitted from one generation to the next (e.g., through gangs). There is a long tradition that, even today, studies how characteristics of communities, rather than of residents, causes crime (see Part III).

Because of the location of their study and the fact that scholars were linked to the University of Chicago, this perspective became known as the “Chicago School” of criminology. Importantly, beyond their own social disorganization model, Shaw and McKay's approach eventually gave rise to two distinct theories that, ironically, have become vigorous rivals in contemporary criminology. These are “differential association/social learning theory” (Part IV) and “control theory” (Part VI).

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First, Edwin Sutherland borrowed Shaw and McKay's idea that crime would occur if criminal values were transmitted. Later joined by Donald Cressey, Sutherland formalized this insight into his theory of differential association. His key contention was that learning definitions favorable to crime would precipitate illegal conduct. Other theorists would follow who would document the content of criminal "subcultures" and show how these pro-criminal and pro-violent beliefs were conducive to wayward behavior. Later, Ronald Akers would formalize these views still further in his social learning theory that applied modern learning principles to explain the initiation and continuation of criminal behavior (see Part IV).

Second, the emphasis of social disorganization theory on the weakening of controls led to the development of a variety of "control theories" (Part VI). Walter Reckless, a member of the Chicago School, developed an influential perspective that he called "containment theory." He was interested in how there could be "good boys" in the "delinquency areas" studied by Shaw and McKay. His answer was that these youngsters had "containments" that insulated them against the pushes and pulls of crime. The general principle of control theory is that crime is more likely when controls are weak but that the lure of crime will be resisted when controls or "containments" are strong.

Perhaps the most famous control theorist has been Travis Hirschi. Hirschi popularized the notion that the motivation or propensity to commit crime was virtually universal. Humans by nature pursued self-gratification in the easiest and most immediate way possible. The attraction of crime, said Hirschi, resided in the fact that such acts were gratifying, readily within reach, and not difficult to commit. The key question thus was not why people committed crime but why they did *not* gratify their desires and commit crime. The answer, of course, was that individuals do not commit crime because *controls* are present.

In his career, Hirschi has promoted two different explanations as to which controls

are most important in restraining criminal desires. Early on, in his 1969 book *Causes of Delinquency*, he proposed "social bond theory," which argued that control rested in the relationships or bonds that individuals had with conventional society. Later, in his 1990 book *A General Theory of Crime*, which he coauthored with Michael Gottfredson, he suggested that restraint was more of an internal process. He argued that the key causal factor was "self-control."

Hirschi was also consequential because, in *Causes of Delinquency*, he used data to argue that his control theory was superior to two other theories: "differential association theory" (or what he called "cultural deviance" theory), which we have just discussed, and "strain theory," a perspective developed by the famous Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton. Hirschi sought to carve up the field into *three dominant theoretical paradigms*. His project was then to show that the other two perspectives were flawed logically and empirically, and thus that his social bond theory should be the reigning theory of crime.

The third perspective, strain theory (Part V), actually has two different dimensions—one showing how strain produces the societal condition of "anomie" and another focusing on what happens when individuals personally experience strain. In brief, Merton set out to explain why the United States has a high crime rate. He observed that American society is marked by a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand, people are taught to embrace the "American Dream"—the idea that *everyone* should want the goal of economic success. On the other hand, due to an unequal class structure, only some Americans have the legitimate means or opportunity to achieve this goal. This contradiction, contended Merton, created structural strain or a pressure on the *norms* governing the means that should be used to pursue success (i.e., the prescription to "work hard" or "go to school"). Ideally, individuals should use legitimate means, but the constant strain caused by the mean-goal contradiction caused the regulatory norms to lose their vitality and seem less relevant. In turn, as the

norms weakened—as “anomie” (or normlessness) set in—people were freer to use “whatever means necessary,” including crime, to try to be successful. High rates of crime in America—and in certain deprived segments of the United States—were the result.

Other scholars—most notably Albert Cohen and coauthors Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin—applied this thinking to explain delinquent acts. They focused more on what happens when individuals are blocked from achieving success goals and experience feelings of strain or “status frustration.” The adaptation to this strain, they asserted, was delinquency and, when conditions were correct, the formation of delinquent subcultures. Later, Robert Agnew would broaden this theory into his “general strain theory.” He noted that blocked opportunity was only one type of strain; other strains could also be a source of criminal behavior. Agnew further specified the conditions under which strains are most likely to result in crime as opposed to some other behavioral outcome.

Now let us return to Travis Hirschi. He did not fully succeed in eliminating his two theoretical rivals, although he did stir up much debate. Regardless, Hirschi was able to clearly demarcate how American criminological theory was dominated by these three main perspectives—control, differential association, and strain theories. We refer to these as the “Big Three,” because they remain—even today—the three most significant and long-standing theories in criminology. Sociological theories that have emerged in the last three decades either have borrowed elements of these perspectives (see the integrated theories in Part XIV) or have been developed in opposition to these perspectives. It is to these oppositional or “critical” theories that our attention briefly turns.

### **Section 3. Rethinking Criminology**

What goes on in the larger society often influences what goes on inside criminology. Similar to other citizens, criminologists live in and are affected by the prevailing social context. Events of the day show how they

see the world. When the social context changes in significant ways, it is likely that old ways of thinking will be challenged and fresh ways of thinking will emerge. This is precisely what occurred in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. At this time, criminologists were moved by the events of their day to ask what role the state (or government) and power played in causing crime. A turning point in the development of criminology thus occurred.

As readers may recall, this was a period of remarkable social turmoil in the United States—a time marked by the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War and the related protest movement, the state’s killings of students at Kent State and inmates and guards at Attica, government scandals highlighted by Watergate, and so on. Taken together, these events prompted many in American society—including criminologists—to become deeply mistrustful of the government’s power and to question whether American society was arranged in an equitable way. Theories that resonated with these sentiments emerged and quickly won adherents. The “Big Three” theories were often singled out as examples of how criminology had ignored the role of the state and of unjust social arrangements in crime causation. There was a call for a “new criminology”—a different way of seeing the world.

Labeling theory was one of the earliest of these new perspectives (Part VII). Rather than focus on how societal conditions generate unlawful conduct, this model argued that continued involvement in crime is caused by “societal reaction” initiated by the state’s labeling of people as criminals. Crime was depicted as a transitory or experimental stage that would vanish if “left alone.” But when the state pulled individuals into the criminal justice system and placed them in prison, it set in motion social processes that ensnared people in crime. Thus, a central theme of theories in this tradition is that publicly stigmatizing offenders, imprisoning them, and excluding them from conventional social roles will have the unanticipated consequences of deepening their criminality.

At the core of the “new criminology” was a diverse group of writings united under the term “critical criminology” (Part VIII). Often informed by the writings of Karl Marx and other radical commentators, these works reflected the growing sentiment in the United States that the nation was racked by social injustices. A central organizing theme was that “capitalism caused crime.” A largely unfettered market economy was seen to create vast economic inequality, which in turn fostered conditions ripe for crimes by the rich and poor alike. Thus, the poor were driven to break the law by the suffering inherent in a harsh life of socioeconomic disadvantage, whereas the rich were able to use their corporate positions to exploit workers, “rip off” the public, and despoil the environment in the pursuit of even greater wealth. Inequality was also reproduced within the criminal (in)justice system. The poor who dared to violate the law would feel the heavy hand of the state and be imprisoned, while the rich would visit their immense harms on society without fear of ever being charged with a crime. Jeffery Reiman captured the prevailing sentiment of the day when he stated that “the rich get richer and the poor get prison.”

Meanwhile, the growing Women’s Movement sensitized criminologists, especially female scholars, to the way in which another form of social injustice—gender inequality—was implicated in crime. For many years, criminologists—who were almost exclusively men—felt free to limit their studies almost exclusively to male offenders. But feminist scholars—led by Freda Adler among others—brought attention both to females as criminals and then to females as victims of men (Part IX). As this paradigm evolved, scholars such as Meda Chesney-Lind illuminated the role of patriarchy—men’s dominance over women—as a structure of inequality that shaped the nature of female criminality. Much research and theorizing were conducted on how crime was a reflection of gender inequality of power and used by men to control women (e.g., domestic violence, sexual violence). Later, James Messerschmidt would attempt to show how crime was a means

through which men attempted to demonstrate their “masculinity.”

### **Section 4. Choice, Opportunity, and Punishment**

Over the last two decades, three models have emerged that, although different, share a common link: the depiction of offenders as making choices (Part X, XI, and XII). In the late 1970s, Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson argued, in essence, that criminologists had erred in focusing mainly on what motivates offenders to break the law and not on how the distribution of opportunities in society shape the amount and nature of crime. Of course, a “motivated offender” is needed for a crime to occur. But Cohen and Felson built on the commonsensical observation that without access to criminal opportunity, no amount of motivation would produce a criminal act.

Cohen and Felson made an important conceptual leap, however, in dividing the general concept of opportunity into two components: “target attractiveness” and “capable guardianship.” They then proposed that crime occurred when motivated offenders came into contact with attractive targets (e.g., property, person) in the absence of capable guardianship. They further noted that substantial changes in people’s daily routines in American society—such as women entering the workforce in record numbers—could result in more crime, even if the pool of motivated offenders remained unchanged. This might occur because changes in daily routines could increase offenders’ access to attractive targets and reduce guardianship (e.g., as women worked, they were more vulnerable to assaults, and houses—now left vacant during the day—were more vulnerable to burglary). Because of this focus, their perspective is referred to as “routine activity theory.”

Implicit in Cohen and Felson’s theory was the idea that offenders make choices as to which targets are attractive and as to when guardianship is present. This view was accentuated by theorists who sought to revitalize the Classical School’s focus on crime as a rational choice. Some of these

neo-classical criminologists were human capital economists who used economic thinking to explain a range of social behavior, including crime. Other scholars provided a more sophisticated analysis. They did not contend that crime was completely rational, but only that crime was a choice and that the likelihood of making this choice was influenced by the costs and benefits crime would bring forth.

Routine activity and rational choice theories were tied together—especially in the work of Ronald Clarke—because they encouraged a similar, practical approach to decreasing criminal behavior: situational crime prevention through opportunity reduction. In this model, the goal is to make crime more difficult to commit essentially by making potential targets less attractive and by increasing guardianship—or, if one prefers the language of rational choice theorists, by making crime less beneficial. For example, a house that once was easily burgled could be made less vulnerable—that is, less “rational” to victimize—by installing an alarm system, purchasing a dog, and cutting down bushes so that the prime entry points could be seen by neighbors close by.

A more controversial development is whether legal punishments—increasing the certainty and severity of legal punishments—have a meaningful effect in *detering* crime. Given the amazing growth of the U.S. state and federal prison system—from near 200,000 inmates in 1970 to over 1.4 million today—research into and theorizing about deterrence has gained increasing attention from criminologists in recent years. Again, the issue revolves around whether crime is mainly a matter of rational choice and whether the calculus used by offender to make this choice is influenced by legal punishments and the related consequences that flow from being arrested and sanctioned by the state.

Traditionally, criminologists had been skeptical that crime could be lowered by the actions taken by the criminal justice system, including mass incarceration. They believed that the “root causes” of crime were located in social ills such as concentrated disadvantage, blocked opportunities, and

disorganized communities—all problems that were beyond the power of the criminal justice system to fix. Criminals raised in these conditions would develop strains, criminal values, and weak social bonds that would make them inclined to enter crime. Unless they were rehabilitated—their wayward orientations changed—they would hardly be thwarted from breaking the law by some distant threat of being arrested and sentenced to prison. Labeling theorists even warned that stigmatizing and sanctioning offenders would increase their criminality.

Most criminologists continue to hold these views—and with good reason—but conservative scholars have boldly challenged the discipline’s accepted wisdoms. For one thing, they do not believe that deprivation and other “root causes” lead to crime. If there is a root cause, it is not economic poverty but *moral poverty*—a breakdown of morality and in our ability to teach decent values to children. In their view, bad communities do not produce bad individuals; instead, bad individuals—those not socialized to govern their lives by virtuous morals—produce bad communities.

This perspective helps to explain why conservative criminologists believe that our best strategies for reducing crime must involve the criminal justice system. In their view, calling for more social welfare programs to address root causes is utopian at best (it will not work) and counterproductive at worst (it teaches offenders that they are “victims” of society rather than responsible for their own choices). Instead, offenders must be sent a different message. In the community, police must teach them that even minor indiscretions—hassling pedestrians, hopping turnstiles at train stations to avoid paying fares, disturbing the peace—will not be tolerated (this is the idea of “fixing broken windows” discussed by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling). In the courts, stern punishment should be meted out to teach offenders that crime does not pay. And for those who are not educable—for those who prove to be “super-predators” or incurably “wicked”—there is a foolproof way to keep the community safe: incapacitate them in prisons for years on end.

When taken together, why were these ideas about “choice, opportunity, and punishment” a turning point in criminology? As suggested, the key organizing idea is that offenders are not mindless but make choices that include breaking the law. These theorists thus reject the criminological project originally defined by Lombroso: the task to search for the criminal “man” and to find out what makes him (or her) different. By contrast, scholars in Section 4 downplay the importance of this kind of behavioral investigation. They believe that we can safely assume that offenders are rational and, in turn, that we can change the choices they make by restructuring the environment in which they live and behave. In particular, regardless of their individual traits and differences, offenders will be less likely to choose crime if we make doing so harder (e.g., put locks on windows), increase the risks of getting detected, and, if detected, raise the punishment that is forthcoming. Further, there is the ultimate method to take away the opportunity to victimize society: place the offender behind bars.

### Section 5. The Future of Criminology

What will be the main theoretical developments in criminology in the first decades of the twenty-first century? Prognosticating a discipline’s evolution is risky business, because shifts in thinking can occur suddenly and in unanticipated ways. Still, there are at least two areas that we are confident will occupy much theoretical attention in the time ahead.

First, there is a continuing, if not growing, interest in *theoretical integration* (Part XIV). Some scholars believe in theoretical competition, with individual theories squaring off against one another to see which one will win the explanatory contest (e.g., is control theory better than social learning theory?). The other view, however, is that criminal behavior is a complex phenomenon with complex causes and will only be understood if scholars draw from diverse theories to create models capable of addressing crime’s multifaceted causes. This controversy—integration versus competition—has not been settled. Even so, it seems

virtually certain that efforts to synthesize knowledge about crime remain an important approach to formulating new criminological theories.

Second, perhaps the most important theoretical invention over the past decade or so is “developmental criminology” or—as it is also called—“life-course criminology” (Part XIII). Although these insights have long been present in the writings of individual trait theorists (Part II), throughout much of the history of American criminology, scholars simply ignored the fact that humans have a childhood. Of course, these scholars knew that offenders were not “born” at, say, age 14, but they did not give this observation any theoretical weight. Because crime rates spiked upwards in adolescence and into early adulthood, most of the dominant theories focused on what might be happening during this particular segment of the life course to cause criminal involvement. But researchers eventually were confronted with a stubborn empirical finding: Most serious, chronic offenders first started to manifest problem behavior not in the teenage years but in childhood. There was, in short, continuity in problem behavior over time. If this was indeed the case, then the origins of crime must begin—if not substantially lie—early in life.

This realization pushed criminology back into the early years of life. Scholars have now started to trace what occurs from the prenatal period onward to set an individual on a trajectory either toward or away from a life in crime. They also have begun to theorize about what causes continuity in offending and what might cause offenders to change and abandon a criminal life course. These are exciting theoretical developments that are likely to exert an increasing influence on the field of criminology in the years ahead.

## The Criminological Adventure Begins

It is now time to begin your excursion through criminological theory—from past to present, and across its diverse theoretical

paradigms. Our purpose in offering this guide has been to facilitate your travels by providing a detailed roadmap to the Third Edition of *Criminological Theory*. First, we wanted to explain how the selections of readings were made, how the book was organized, and the importance of consulting the introductory materials we have included. Second, we attempted to provide insights on the best way to use this book, including how to keep theories straight.

Third, we believed it would be instructive to furnish an initial overview of the development of criminological theory and to reveal how this development was reflected in the sequencing of writings within the book. Now we are optimistic that you are prepared to learn from the readings and materials that lie ahead. We wish you all our best on your intellectual journey into the study of crime! ♦