

Chapter 4: Theoretical criminology: a starting point

Theoretical criminology is a vast, sprawling subject that straddles more than two centuries of intellectual thought and a range of academic disciplines. The aim of this chapter is to offer those new to the subject a 'starting point', a very general (and hopefully gentle) introduction to some of the main criminological theories that have sought to explain and account for crime and criminality in the modern age. Although the approach in this chapter is to breakdown theories into short, independent sections, it is important to recognise that criminological theory is not something that is easily compartmentalized. It is essential, therefore, to think critically about both the origins and the contemporary roles of criminological theories, rather than just repeating some learning of their basic outline/structure. Hopefully this chapter will help you in this endeavour. One must also bear in mind that, whilst criminological theory is often viewed by many as an abstract, even esoteric enterprise (on this particular point see the following chapter by Claire Valier), in reality its impact over the last century in areas such as crime control (see chapters 21 and 22), juvenile justice (see chapter 19), and public and penal policy (see chapters 10, 26 and 27) has been profound and far-reaching. One need only think of the role played by criminological theory in such diverse policy initiatives as the 1970s 'welfarist' movement within youth justice, and the 'zero tolerance' policing phenomenon of the 1990s to recognise the influential, indeed potent, force of theory. In this sense, theoretical criminology should be seen as a vital, living subject, and not some historical or intellectual fancy. We hope that the ten theoretical vignettes that constitute this chapter serve as an interesting introduction to the vibrant world of criminological theory.