

# Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Taylor, Ian, Paul Walton, and Jock  
Young: The New Criminology

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Chapter Title: "Taylor, Ian, Paul Walton, and Jock Young: The New Criminology"

Pub. Date: 2010

Access Date: September 12, 2014

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412959186

Online ISBN: 9781412959193

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n257>

Print pages: 937-941

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n257>

*The New Criminology* is the magical *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole through which most contemporary critical and radical criminologists fell on their way to whatever approach to studying crime and society they now pursue. It is also one of criminology's contemporary classics, as well as a dependable fountain of ideas for new theoretical paths and methodological challenges. Assessing its long-term impact on criminology—more than 36 years since its publication—can be accomplished by starting with how it was received at birth and ending with an overview of what it has spawned. This plan necessitates a summary of what its authors—Ian Taylor, Paul Walton, and Jock Young—claimed they wanted to do.

After 2.5 years of writing that expanded the American social reaction theorists' emphasis on the activities of rule-creators and rule-enforcers in [p. 937 ↓ ] the criminal process, they concluded that much of criminological theory had become insulated and isolated from sociological theory—so much so that the study of criminals' central relationships to structures of power, domination, and authority had all but disappeared. Instead, over time, criminology had been aligned with the classical utilitarian approach to the protection of individuals from excessive punishment and various varieties of biological, psychological, and social positivism. What was needed—Taylor, Walton, and Young argued—was a theoretical approach that examined crimes, deviance, and dissent as confrontations with social structures and the social arrangements within which the criminal process is played out.

Taylor et al. attempted to “open out the criminological debate” by providing both formal and substantive guidelines for the development of a “fully social theory of deviance [and] social control” (p. 269). With a focus on developed societies dominated by a capitalist mode of production and division of labor, their seven-point requirement for a critical criminological theory stressed constructing a perspective that analyzed a wide view of the political economy of deviant acts and state reactions to them. They also emphasized the need for a social psychology of crime, one that recognized that individuals may consciously choose “the deviant road ... as the one solution to the problems posed in a contradictory society” (p. 271). This social psychology would also study the contingencies and conditions that are crucial to the decisions to take action against deviants.

## Early Reactions

In a highly complimentary foreword by the noted American Marxist, Alvin Gouldner, *The New Criminology* was described as so powerful in its critique of traditional criminology that “it redirects the total structure of technical discourse concerning ‘crime’ and ‘deviance’” (p. ix). One year later, Elliott Currie praised it as an important document in the “effort to build a more humane criminology” and “probably the most comprehensive critical review of ‘the field’ that has been produced so far” (p. 133). In a few short years, the title of the book became the moniker for a new school of criminology. The new radical perspective was more intellectually sophisticated and well-grounded in criminological literature and continental philosophy than that found in its counterpart in the United States. And unlike the minority position of radical criminology in the United States, it grew to share equal partnership with conventional criminology.

This was accomplished in no small part by its clear articulation of its objections to the assumption that the social order was based on a public consensus and traditional criminology's overly deterministic treatment of crime. To overturn these assumptions, the new criminology stressed that conventional studies of crime were too narrowly entrenched in theories and paradigms that assumed that they had a monopoly on the “correct,” “scientific,” and “deterministic” understanding of human nature and social order.

Another major persuasive argument in the opened debate was to make crime the central focus of concern for social scientists rather than the peripheral topic it had become by traditional positivism with its notions about objectivity. For the new criminology, the latter concept had been created by “positivism ... in its pursuit of a mistaken scientificity” (Young, 1988, p. 161). By shifting the focus on crime from traditional positivism to a perspective that emphasized the political nature of crime, the new criminology made crime the central plank for social scientists wishing to illuminate both order and social disorder.

*The New Criminology* generated sound and thoughtful criticism. Whereas some of it diminished the book's early praise, it did not deliver a death knell to its critiques of

traditional positivism or its call for developing a political economy of crime. Three major problems were identified.

In addition to being just plain wrong in some of their discussion of conventional criminology, Taylor et al. gave misleading impressions that criticism of biological explanations of crime (as understood in the early 1970s) applied equally to psychological and sociological determinism. The writing style of *The New Criminology*, according to Currie, was too closely akin to the finely tuned interests in the field of criminology, and thus a barrier to creating a meaningful exchange with criminals and deviants. Lastly, an approach that integrated biological and psychological explanations of crime would have been more useful.

[p. 938 ↓ ]

## Left Realism

One of the most lasting strengths of the new criminology perspective is that its supporters have for so long continued to respond to their critics and changing social context with new critical thinking. One of the first examples of this intellectual virtue came in Britain as its “New” Right with Margaret Thatcher succeeded in a 1979 Conservative/Tory Party victory. It was committed to making ideological and political breaks with the assumptions and rules governing the social democracy that developed in Britain during the 1940s. The Conservatives ushered in a new ideology, with an agenda committed to privatizing for-profit government industries and imposing restrictions on welfare, national health, and educational support.

As the New Right's policies were being formulated and implemented, radical criminology recognized that although the tide had turned, it was not a tsunami as much as dramatic ideological shift that provided a background against which *The New Criminology* was re-evaluated. British critical criminologist Stan Cohen wrote that it had not changed the institutional foundations of the country's criminology; they were intact and unchanged—a conclusion that was not seriously disputed.

One of the major weaknesses of the new criminology, according to Roger Mathew and Jock Young, was that it had improperly concentrated on the impact of the state on the criminal at the expense of neglecting the effect of crime upon the victim. For radical criminology, the basic and proper subject matter would have been the social relations among the offender, the state and the victim. As a partial remedy to this oversight and the claim that radical criminology was in a state of crisis, radical criminologists moved away from the new criminology and developed an approach to studying crime that they called *left realism*. It placed less emphasis on the state and focused more on the causes of crime and its victims. This was a significant shift in British radical criminology. It was not so much a move away *from* theoretical issues as *toward* research and statistical analyses of crime causation and its consequences.

Left realism was explicitly concerned with the origins, nature, and impact of crime in the working class. But this was not just an emphasis on victims. It was also concerned with “risk rate of vulnerability” of certain sections of the community. The complexity of this point is illuminated by thinking of the working class as victims of crime from all directions. Young notes that the more people are economically and socially marginalized, the more likely it is that *both* working-class and white-collar crime will occur against them. This perspective also placed great emphasis on studying crime as people experienced it whether it was sexism, racism, policy, police brutality, and any number of everyday crimes.

The uniqueness of this perspective was—and still is—its strong interest in the class and power dimensions of crime causation and what can be done about it. It, too, represents an effort at synthesizing several theories, including labeling, strain, subcultural, radical Marxism, and some feminist perspectives. Left realism has now been in criminology's market place of theories for more than a quarter century, and its appeal, contributors, and criticisms have come from a number of countries, including Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States. One issue is whether it has strayed too far from its roots in radical thought, especially Marxism. Another concern is its emphasis on realistic approaches to the causes of crime come far too close to advocating punitive control strategies popular with conservative ideology.

## Extended Influence

The early contributions by the new criminology and realist criminology were part of the emergence of the “new left” in North America and Britain during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Its scope of creative criticism focused not only on the issues discussed here with positivism of traditional criminology but also on what became known as the anti-psychiatry movement, prison support groups, campus sit-ins, and community action efforts. Both perspectives have also contributed to a long list of concepts that are now staples of criminological culture, whatever its political persuasion (Young, 1988, p. 164). These include a powerful critique of the mechanical determination associated with some biological explanations of crime, the social construction of statistics, emphasis on the endemic rather than a solely class-based conception of crime, and the largely invisible victimization of domestic violence against women, the abuse of children, and racism.

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During the late 1990s, two events occurred that provided an opportunity to reevaluate the impact of the new criminology and at the same time provide a vicarious evaluation of left realism. The first was at first glance a historic shift in Britain's politics that held the promise of a new and different political policy. The second was the publication of *The New Criminology Revisited*.

In May 1997, Tony Blair was elected as the youngest prime minister since 1812 to the most popular new government in British history, ending two decades of Conservative rule. As the New Labor Party it promised a transition to a “New Britain” that would support community inclusiveness, modernized health care, a reduction of runaway welfare, globalization, poverty reduction, a more cooperative relationship with the European Union, and the devolution of Scotland and Wales.

Skeptics, however, were soon questioning whether Blair and New Labor were any less conservative than their predecessors. This perspective was given considerable credence post-9/11 because of Blair's support for President George W. Bush, the Iraq war, and legislative initiatives that he supported that were strongly criticized as violations of human rights, invasions of privacy, illegal, and unjust (Lea, 2005). To some

critics, while initially influenced by left realism, New Labor's approach was soon equally as authoritarian, punitive, and conservative as that of the Tories. New policies included more private prisons, curfews on young people, enhanced use of electronic monitoring, harassing beggars, zero tolerance, and automatic sentences for persistent petty offenders. In addition, privatizing for profit various public services—including health, education, and criminal justice agencies—increasingly became Blair's touchstone. Incarceration increased to the point that England had the highest per capita rate in Western Europe. It is against these changes that the impact of *The New Criminology* of 1973, and its critical heir apparent, left realism, were reevaluated.

In retrospect, the editors and contributors largely reaffirmed most, if not all, of the major points advanced in 1973. They are as follows: (1) Crime and the processes of criminalization are embedded in the core structures of society, whether they are in class relations, its patriarchal form, or its inherent authoritarianism. (2) The sole and precise aim of the new criminology is improving the human condition. The new criminology has a utopian commitment. (3) The new criminology was and still is not committed to corrections as supported establishment criminology à la administrative criminology. Human behavior does not need “correcting.” (4) The new criminology is wedded to social change. Its adherents wish to do more than make professional contributions to human knowledge. (5) The new criminology aims to deconstruct criminological theories in an attempt to construct a social theory of crime and deviance.

## Current Impact

Today, there are scant publications that have new criminology or left realism in the title. Nonetheless, some of the ideas from these perspectives remain potent influences for examining working-class crime problems as well as important forerunners to much that now captures the imagination of scholars examining late modernity and crime. Most prominent here is the major work of Young between 1999 and 2007.

In *The Exclusive Society*, the first of two completed works in a promised trilogy on late modernity and crime, Young traced the ways in which he calls the “relentless forces of production” propelled society into late modernity. It was the movement from “the golden age” of stability of the post–World War II to the crisis years of the late 1960s



onward. In essence, it was a movement that replaced relative stability in work, family and community, material certainty, and uncontested values with risk, uncertainty, individual choice, and pluralism layered with deep-seated economic and ontological precariousness not uncharacteristic of the worldwide problems associated with the banking and housing crisis of 2008–2009 and beyond. According to Young, it was a structural transition from modernity to late modernity that witnessed the socio-economic, political, spatial, and cultural marginalization of the underclass.

*The Vertigo of Late Modernity*, the second volume in the trilogy, expanded the arguments contained in *The Exclusive Society*. Among its plethora of ideas about late modernity, turbo-capitalism and insecurities are pivotal. The former, Young argues, shifted manufacturing abroad, downsized, deskilled, and automated to such extent that it [p. 940 ↓ ] undermined the social embeddedness of jobs, community, and at times the family. One result was the creation of a high level of instability and what he calls a pervasive sense of unfairness and disembeddedness. These experiences are both generated and reinforced by what Young terms the shock of plural values that come from mass migration and from what those viewing global media have experienced on the street and on the screen. These further destabilized any firm sense of identity and security.

According to Young, this resulted in a sense of resentment from those looking up as well as down the social structure. For those looking down, there is a sense of vertigo, a sense of fear of falling as swathes of jobs, from bank clerks to car workers, are eliminated and downgraded. The middle class at the same time is pressured by lengthened working hours, dual careers, and commutes from the suburbs. By comparison, the lower class is limited by low pay, unstable jobs, and sporadic unemployment. However, they are not an underclass that is separate and apart from the middle class. Although they share the cultural values of the wider society and are structurally bound to it by low wages, they nonetheless are excluded from structured security or economic advancement.

The impact of *The New Criminology* on Young's most recent work on late modernity and crime is self-admittedly clear. Just as C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* inspired Walton, Taylor, and Young to develop a theory of deviance and crime that linked private problems (crime) with public issues (crime policies), so did it serve as an

injunction to connect crime to the “bustling hyperpluralism of the 21st century” (Young, 2008, p. 524). Other contemporary explorations into crime in late modernity have also been inspired and benefited from the critical insights and admonitions contained in the 1973 classic. These include cultural criminology and to a lesser extent convict criminology, and the new “consumer criminology” by Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, and Craig Ancrum. The impact of *The New Criminology* is deep and wide.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412959193.n257>

See also

- [Bonger, Willem: Capitalism and Crime](#)
- [Chambliss, William J.: Power, Conflict, and Crime](#)
- [Cultural Criminology](#)
- [Currie, Elliott: The Market Society and Crime](#)
- [Left Realism Criminology](#)
- [Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels: Capitalism and Crime](#)

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