

The Evolution of Criminological Theories: Tracing the Path from Classical to Contemporary Perspectives

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Abstract

Criminology has undergone significant evolution since its emergence as a formal discipline, reflecting shifts in societal structures, philosophical paradigms, and scientific advancements. Initially rooted in the Enlightenment-era classical school, criminology emphasized rationality, individual accountability, deterrence, and proportionality in punishment. The positivist school later challenged these principles by introducing empirical methodologies and deterministic explanations that considered biological, psychological, and environmental influences on criminal behavior.

In the 20th century, sociological theories reframed crime within the context of social structures and interactions. The Chicago School underscored the impact of urban disorganization and community dynamics, while Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory identified criminality as a learned behavior shaped by socialization. These perspectives highlighted the interplay between individual agency and environmental factors, moving beyond earlier deterministic frameworks.

The mid-20th century saw the rise of critical criminology, which interrogated power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and the sociopolitical dimensions of crime. This period introduced feminist criminology, critical race theory, and labeling theory, expanding the discipline's focus to include marginalization and identity formation.

Contemporary criminology embraces interdisciplinary approaches, integrating insights from psychology, neuroscience, and technology. Theories such as routine activity theory and cultural criminology reflect ongoing efforts to address the complexity of crime in a rapidly changing world, while innovations in big data and predictive analytics continue to transform criminological research and practice.

This article traces the historical development of criminological theories, emphasizing their theoretical milestones and the interplay between historical contexts, philosophical paradigms, and academic inquiry. By exploring these developments, it illuminates the diverse lenses through which crime and deviance have been understood and addressed over time.

Keywords: Criminological theories; classical school; positivist criminology; sociological criminology; critical criminology; routine activity theory; cultural criminology; crime and deviance; interdisciplinary approaches; historical context; power dynamics; marginalization; predictive analytics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Criminology, the scientific study of crime and its causes, consequences, and control, has evolved significantly over centuries, mirroring broader societal transformations,

philosophical shifts, and methodological advancements. What began as a rationalist endeavor during the Enlightenment era has expanded into a multidisciplinary field, incorporating insights from sociology, psychology, biology, and technology. Each theoretical paradigm builds upon the foundations of its predecessors while challenging prior assumptions, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of crime and deviance.

The origins of criminological thought can be traced to the classical school of the 18th century, which emphasized rationality, free will, and proportional justice. Influenced by Enlightenment ideals, early thinkers like Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham advocated for a legal system that deterred crime through predictable and proportionate punishment. As the limitations of this framework became evident, the 19th-century positivist school introduced empirical methodologies, exploring biological, psychological, and environmental determinants of criminal behavior.

In the 20th century, sociological theories rose to prominence, focusing on the influence of social structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships on criminal behavior. Critical criminology further expanded the field by examining systemic inequalities, power dynamics, and the sociopolitical dimensions of crime. Contemporary criminology integrates these historical perspectives with advancements in neuroscience, data analytics, and cultural analysis, providing innovative approaches to understanding and addressing crime in an increasingly complex world.

This article traces the evolution of criminological theories from classical to contemporary paradigms, highlighting key milestones and the interplay between theoretical development and historical context. By exploring this progression, it seeks to illuminate how criminology has adapted to changing societal needs and scientific advancements, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of crime and justice.

2. CLASSICAL CRIMINOLOGY

The Classical School of criminology, emerging during the Enlightenment of the 18th century, represents one of the foundational pillars of modern criminological thought. It arose as a response to the arbitrary and often brutal justice systems of the time, characterized by inconsistent punishments, torture, and heavy reliance on supernatural explanations for deviance (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). Philosophers and reformers sought to create a system of justice that was rational, fair, and rooted in Enlightenment ideals of reason and humanity (Cullen et al., 2018).

2.1 Key Figures and Theories

2.1.1 Cesare Beccaria

Prominent figures of the Classical School, such as Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham, revolutionized the understanding of crime and punishment. Beccaria, in his seminal work *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), argued against the use of torture and capital punishment, advocating instead for punishments proportionate to the crimes committed. He emphasized clarity, consistency, and predictability in the legal system, asserting that the certainty of punishment, rather than its severity, was the most effective deterrent to crime (Beccaria, 1764/1986). Beccaria's principles laid the groundwork for modern legal concepts such as due process and the presumption of innocence (Pratt et al., 2016).

2.1.2 Jeremy Bentham

Jeremy Bentham expanded on these ideas with his utilitarian philosophy, encapsulated in the "greatest happiness principle." He argued that laws and punishments should maximize societal welfare by balancing the pain inflicted by punishment with its deterrent effects (Bentham, 1789). Bentham's concept of a "hedonistic calculus" suggested that individuals weigh the pleasure of committing a crime against the pain of its consequences. This rational-choice model, which assumes people are free agents capable of reasoned decision-making, became a cornerstone of classical criminology (Cullen et al., 2018).

2.2 Core Principles

The Classical School rejected supernatural explanations for crime, favoring a rationalist approach that attributed criminal behavior to individual choice rather than divine or demonic forces (Bohm & Vogel, 2011). This paradigm shift was instrumental in developing a justice system based on predictable laws and proportional responses, moving away from the arbitrary rulings of monarchs or local authorities (Tittle, 1995).

Classical criminology also introduced the concept of deterrence, which remains a cornerstone of modern criminal justice systems. It distinguished between specific deterrence—preventing an individual offender from reoffending—and general deterrence, dissuading the broader public from engaging in crime by example (Pratt et al., 2016). These principles influenced the design of modern penitentiary systems, shifting the focus from retribution to prevention and reform (Cullen et al., 2018).

The principle of proportionality, central to the Classical School, asserts that punishments should fit the severity of the crime to ensure fairness and reinforce deterrence.

2.3 Legacy and Critiques

The Classical School's legacy extends far beyond its historical context. Its principles are enshrined in contemporary legal systems through codified laws, proportional sentencing, and due process rights (Cullen et al., 2018). For example, the idea that punishment should fit the crime underpins sentencing guidelines in many jurisdictions. The emphasis on rationality and individual accountability continues to shape policies prioritizing fairness and consistency in the administration of justice.

However, classical criminology has its limitations. Critics argue that its reliance on rationality oversimplifies human behavior, overlooking the social, psychological, and economic factors influencing crime. Modern research demonstrates that many offenders do not engage in a rational cost-benefit analysis before committing crimes. Factors such as poverty, mental illness, addiction, and peer pressure challenge the Classical School's emphasis on free will and rational choice (Paternoster and Bachman, 2001).

The focus on deterrence has also faced scrutiny. Studies suggest that the certainty and swiftness of punishment are more effective than severity in reducing crime, yet legal systems often emphasize harsher penalties over consistent enforcement (Pratt et al., 2016). This raises questions about the practical application of classical principles in contemporary contexts.

Another critique is the Classical School's limited consideration of systemic inequalities and structural factors contributing to crime. The framework assumes a level playing field where all individuals are equally capable of making rational choices, neglecting disparities in education, resources, and opportunities. These limitations

paved the way for the positivist and sociological schools, which address broader influences on criminal behavior (Cullen et al., 2018).

Despite these critiques, the Classical School remains foundational to criminology. It established a justice system prioritizing rationality, fairness, and predictability, principles that continue to inform legal and policy decisions. While newer theories have refined its ideas, the Classical School provides a clear framework for understanding the enduring relationship between crime, choice, and punishment.

The Classical School of criminology marks a critical transition in the evolution of criminal justice, moving from arbitrary and supernatural approaches to a rational, legalistic framework. Its emphasis on proportionality, deterrence, and individual accountability has shaped modern justice systems and continues to influence debates on crime and punishment.

3. POSITIVIST CRIMINOLOGY

3.1 Introduction and Philosophical Shift

The emergence of positivist criminology in the 19th century marked a significant departure from the philosophical underpinnings of the Classical School. While classical theorists emphasized rationality, free will, and proportional punishment, the Positivist School sought to ground the study of criminal behavior in empirical observation and scientific inquiry. This shift reflected broader intellectual currents of the time, as the natural sciences inspired scholars to apply systematic methods to the social world (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2018).

3.2 Key Figures and Contributions

3.2.1 Cesare Lombroso

Cesare Lombroso, often called the father of modern criminology, was a pioneering figure in the positivist movement. In *The Criminal Man* (1876), Lombroso proposed that criminality was biologically predetermined and identifiable through physical traits or anomalies. He argued that certain individuals were "born criminals" with atavistic features resembling primitive ancestors, such as asymmetrical facial structures, excessive body hair, or unusually long limbs. Although groundbreaking, Lombroso's reliance on anecdotal evidence and unrepresentative samples attracted significant criticism (Bohm & Vogel, 2011).

3.2.2 Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo

Building on Lombroso's ideas, Enrico Ferri and Raffaele Garofalo expanded positivist criminology by incorporating environmental and sociological factors. Ferri emphasized the interplay between biological predispositions, psychological traits, and social conditions, advocating for a multidisciplinary approach to crime. Garofalo, meanwhile, focused on "natural crimes," proposing that responses to crime should align with the offender's level of social danger, a precursor to modern risk assessment practices (Cullen et al., 2018).

3.3 Methodological Innovations

Positivist criminology introduced scientific rigor through observation, measurement, and data collection, laying the foundation for empirical research in the field. This

methodological innovation paved the way for statistical analysis and longitudinal studies, which remain central to contemporary criminology.

3.4 Critiques and Evolution

While positivist criminology introduced valuable innovations in methodology and theory, it faced significant challenges that prompted its evolution. These critiques centered on its deterministic framework and ethical implications, leading to more holistic approaches in the field.

3.4.1 Critiques of Determinism and Ethical Concerns

The deterministic framework of early positivism faced ethical and methodological challenges. By reducing criminal behavior to inherited traits or environmental circumstances, positivism risked denying individual agency and justified discriminatory practices, such as eugenics and harsh punitive measures against marginalized groups (Paternoster and Bachman, 2001). Lombroso's theories, in particular, were criticized for neglecting social inequalities, economic deprivation, and cultural norms that influence crime (Tittle, 1995).

3.4.2 Evolution of Positivist Criminology

In response to these critiques, positivism evolved by integrating psychological theories, such as Freud's psychoanalytic framework, and sociological insights into family dynamics, education, and peer relationships. This evolution emphasized the importance of environmental influences alongside individual traits, marking a shift toward more holistic understandings of crime (Pratt et al., 2016).

3.5 Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

One enduring legacy of positivist criminology is its focus on rehabilitation and prevention. While the Classical School prioritized deterrence and retribution, positivism highlighted intervention and reform, advocating for addressing root causes such as poor education or mental illness to reduce recidivism. These ideas influenced the development of rehabilitation programs, probation systems, and modern risk assessment tools that predict an individual's likelihood of reoffending (Cullen et al., 2018).

Despite its contributions, positivism remains a subject of debate. Critics argue that its reductionist tendencies oversimplify human behavior, failing to capture the complexity of the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. Ethical concerns persist regarding predictive technologies and surveillance systems, which may perpetuate biases and inequalities (Paternoster and Bachman, 2001).

Figures like Lombroso, Ferri, and Garofalo laid the groundwork for modern criminological research, emphasizing biological, psychological, and sociological lenses. By addressing its limitations and integrating more nuanced approaches, contemporary criminology has advanced toward a deeper understanding of crime and its causes.

4. SOCIOLOGICAL CRIMINOLOGY

4.1 Introduction and Paradigm Shift

The emergence of sociological criminology in the early 20th century marked a significant paradigm shift in the study of crime. Moving beyond the biological and psychological determinism of the positivist school, sociological criminology emphasized

the broader social, economic, and cultural factors that shape criminal behavior. This shift was driven by the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the time, which created social dislocations and heightened awareness of structural inequalities (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2018).

4.2 Key Theories and Contributions

4.2.1 The Chicago School and Social Ecology

The Chicago School of Sociology, founded at the University of Chicago, played a pivotal role in shaping sociological criminology. Scholars like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess examined urban environments to understand how spatial and ecological factors influenced behavior. Their concentric zone model illustrated how cities developed in rings, with the inner zones—often marked by poverty, overcrowding, and social disorganization—being most prone to crime and deviance (Shaw & McKay, 1942).

Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay expanded on this framework with their social disorganization theory, which argued that neighborhoods with weakened community structures experienced higher crime rates. In their landmark study *Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas* (1942), they found that high-crime areas exhibited poverty, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity. These factors eroded social cohesion and informal social controls, creating an environment conducive to crime. Their research demonstrated that environmental conditions, rather than individual traits, were key drivers of delinquency.

4.2.2 Differential Association Theory and Social Learning

Building on sociological insights, Edwin Sutherland's differential association theory shifted focus to the role of social interactions in criminal behavior. In *Principles of Criminology* (1947), Sutherland proposed that crime is learned through interactions with others, particularly within close social groups. Individuals adopt delinquent behavior when exposed to an excess of definitions favorable to lawbreaking over those unfavorable (Sutherland, 1947).

Differential association theory was revolutionary in its application to both street crime and white-collar crime, challenging stereotypes that confined criminality to lower social classes. By emphasizing social learning, Sutherland broadened the scope of criminological inquiry beyond deterministic models (Cullen et al., 2018).

4.2.3 Anomie and Strain Theories

Expanding sociological perspectives, Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie provided a foundation for understanding how societal disruptions lead to normlessness and deviance. Robert Merton's strain theory built on this by positing that crime arises when there is a disconnect between culturally valued goals, such as material success, and the legitimate means available to achieve them. Merton's typology of responses to strain—including innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion—offered a nuanced framework for understanding individual adaptations to structural pressures (Merton, 1938).

4.2.4 Community Dynamics and Cultural Criminology

Walter Miller's "focal concerns" theory and Albert Cohen's work on delinquent subcultures further explored how community dynamics shape deviant behavior. These

theories highlighted how subcultures develop their own values and norms, some of which encourage deviance as a response to marginalization (Cohen, 1955).

More recently, cultural criminology has examined the symbolic and experiential dimensions of crime, emphasizing the role of media, consumerism, and subcultural identities in shaping deviant behavior. This approach highlights how individuals navigate and construct meaning within their cultural and social environments (Hayward & Young, 2004).

4.3 Implications and Critiques

Sociological criminology has profoundly influenced crime prevention and intervention strategies. Policies aimed at strengthening community bonds, improving education, and reducing poverty draw directly from social disorganization and strain theories. However, the field is not without critique.

Some scholars argue that the focus on structural factors can downplay individual agency and responsibility. Early Chicago School research has also been criticized for neglecting systemic racism and structural oppression, which exacerbate social disorganization and crime (Cullen et al., 2018). Additionally, sociological criminology sometimes oversimplifies the diversity of individual experiences within similar environments.

Sociological criminology has transformed the study of crime by situating it within its social context. From the Chicago School to cultural criminology, the field has provided frameworks that emphasize the interconnectedness of structural, cultural, and interpersonal factors. These insights continue to inform both theoretical advancements and practical interventions, making sociological criminology a cornerstone of contemporary criminological inquiry.

5. CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY

5.1 Introduction and Foundations

The emergence of critical criminology in the 1960s and 1970s marked a transformative period in the study of crime, justice, and societal power dynamics. Rooted in Marxist theory and influenced by civil rights, feminist, and anti-imperialist movements, critical criminology challenged traditional narratives by focusing on the structural and systemic forces that shape crime and justice. Critical criminologists argued that crime cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined within the context of inequality, exploitation, and social control (Chambliss and Seidman, 1971; Quinney, 1977).

5.2 Key Theories and Contributions

5.2.1 Marxist Criminology: Crime and Class Struggle

Central to critical criminology is the Marxist critique of capitalist society, which emphasizes the role of economic structures in shaping laws and justice systems. Scholars such as William Chambliss and Richard Quinney argued that laws often serve the interests of the ruling class while marginalizing the working class. Chambliss's study of vagrancy laws highlighted how such regulations historically maintained a compliant labor force rather than addressing genuine social harms (Chambliss and Seidman, 1971). Quinney expanded this critique, contending that crime is a social

construct shaped by elite interests in his influential work *Class, State, and Crime* (1977).

Marxist criminology reframed crime as a byproduct of systemic inequalities, emphasizing how the legal system serves as a tool of repression. For example, laws against unionizing or protesting have been used to suppress challenges to economic hierarchies, reinforcing structural violence.

5.2.2 Labeling Theory: The Social Construction of Deviance

While Marxist criminology emphasizes structural inequalities, labeling theory shifts focus to the societal reactions that define deviance and reinforce marginalization. Developed by Howard Becker, labeling theory explored the societal reactions that define certain behaviors as deviant. In *Outsiders* (1963), Becker argued that deviance is not inherent in an act but is socially constructed.

The application of deviant labels can stigmatize individuals, pushing them further toward criminal behavior due to marginalization and exclusion. Labeling theory also highlighted the discriminatory nature of societal responses to crime. Marginalized groups, particularly racial minorities and economically disadvantaged individuals, are more likely to be labeled as deviant, perpetuating cycles of inequality (Becker, 1963).

5.2.3 Feminist Criminology: Gender and Justice

Feminist criminology emerged as a critique of the androcentric focus of traditional criminology. Carol Smart's *Women, Crime, and Criminology* (1976) challenged the exclusion of women's experiences as both offenders and victims. Feminist scholars argued that the criminal justice system often reinforces patriarchal norms, marginalizing women's voices and perpetuating gendered power imbalances.

Feminist criminology also advanced intersectionality, exploring how race, class, and sexuality compound experiences of systemic oppression. This approach has informed more inclusive analyses of crime and justice.

5.3 Broader Contributions of Critical Criminology

Critical criminology has expanded its scope to address global and environmental issues. Scholars have critiqued how the criminalization of poverty disproportionately targets marginalized communities, such as through aggressive policing in low-income neighborhoods. Additionally, green criminology examines environmental harm and ecological degradation, highlighting the ways in which such crimes disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

5.4 Critiques and Evolution

While critical criminology has profoundly influenced the field, it faces critiques for its focus on structural factors at the expense of individual agency. Moreover, its critiques of capitalism and state power, while insightful, often lack practical solutions for addressing crime. Nevertheless, critical criminology continues to evolve, incorporating insights from cultural criminology, green criminology, and restorative justice to offer broader frameworks for understanding and addressing crime.

Critical criminology has reshaped the study of crime and justice by challenging traditional frameworks and exposing the systemic inequalities embedded within legal systems. By interrogating the power dynamics that define laws, enforcement practices, and societal reactions to crime, critical criminologists have provided a socially conscious perspective. From Marxist analyses of class struggle to

feminist critiques of gender bias, critical criminology continues to offer valuable insights into the complex interplay between crime, power, and social justice.

6. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES IN CRIMINOLOGY

6.1 Introduction

Contemporary criminology reflects the evolution of the field into a multifaceted and interdisciplinary domain that integrates diverse theoretical approaches. These perspectives respond to the complexities of modern societies, drawing on advances in science, technology, and cultural analysis. Expanding beyond traditional frameworks, contemporary criminology incorporates insights from sociology, psychology, biology, and critical theory to provide nuanced understandings of crime. The following discussion examines key contemporary approaches, highlighting their contributions and implications for the study and prevention of crime.

6.2 Key Theories and Contributions

6.2.1 Routine Activity Theory: The Role of Situational Factors

Routine activity theory, developed by Lawrence Cohen and Marcus Felson in 1979, emphasizes the situational dynamics that facilitate crime. Unlike earlier models that focused on offender motivations, this theory examines the conditions under which crimes occur. According to routine activity theory, three elements must converge for a crime to take place: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of capable guardians.

Cohen and Felson argued that societal changes, such as increased urbanization, greater mobility, and shifts in work patterns, create opportunities for crime by altering the availability of targets and guardians. For instance, the rise of dual-income households has been linked to increased property crimes due to unattended homes during work hours. Routine activity theory has influenced crime prevention strategies, including situational crime prevention, environmental design, and community policing, through measures like improved lighting, surveillance systems, and neighborhood watch programs.

6.2.2 Cultural Criminology: Crime as a Symbolic and Expressive Act

Emerging in the 1990s, cultural criminology examines the symbolic and expressive dimensions of crime, exploring how cultural contexts shape deviant behavior. Scholars such as Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward, and Jock Young argue that crime cannot be fully understood without considering its cultural meanings, including how it is mediated, represented, and experienced.

Drawing on anthropology, sociology, and media studies, cultural criminology investigates how subcultures, consumption, and social identity contribute to deviance. For instance, gang-related violence may assert identity and territorial dominance, while cybercrime reflects the subversive culture of hackers challenging authority. Cultural criminology also critiques media portrayals of crime, which often glamorize deviance or reinforce societal fears. This perspective provides valuable insights into the interplay between individual agency and cultural forces in a globalized and digitized world.

6.2.3 Biosocial Criminology: Revisiting Biological Influences

Biosocial criminology integrates genetics, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology to explore the biological underpinnings of criminal behavior within sociological contexts. Moving beyond deterministic assumptions, this approach emphasizes the interaction between biological predispositions and environmental factors. Researchers like Anthony Walsh and Kevin Beaver have examined how genetic factors, neurochemical imbalances, and brain structure influence behaviors like aggression and impulsivity.

For example, low serotonin levels are linked to aggression, while prefrontal cortex abnormalities affect decision-making and self-control. Biosocial criminology also explores environmental factors, such as childhood trauma and prenatal exposure to toxins, which shape criminal tendencies. By bridging biological and sociological perspectives, this approach offers comprehensive insights with implications for early intervention and rehabilitation.

6.2.4 Critical Race Criminology: Addressing Systemic Inequality

Building on critical criminology, critical race criminology examines the intersections of race, crime, and systemic inequality. Scholars like Michelle Alexander have highlighted the disproportionate impact of criminal justice policies on marginalized communities, particularly through practices like racial profiling, mass incarceration, and discriminatory sentencing (Alexander, 2012).

This perspective critiques how historical injustices, such as slavery and segregation, continue to influence patterns of crime and punishment. Racialized narratives of crime, perpetuated by media and political discourse, shape public perceptions and policy decisions. By centering the experiences of marginalized groups, critical race criminology advocates for transformative approaches to justice that address the root causes of inequality.

6.3 Integration and Innovation: Toward a Holistic Understanding

The integration of these diverse perspectives reflects the increasing need for holistic approaches in addressing the complexity of modern crime. Contemporary criminology's diversity highlights the growing challenges of globalization, technological advances, and new forms of deviance such as cybercrime and human trafficking. Innovative approaches now integrate data analytics, artificial intelligence, and geographic information systems to develop predictive models and targeted strategies.

Moreover, contemporary criminology emphasizes community-based and restorative approaches to justice. Programs that focus on repairing harm and fostering dialogue, as well as trauma-informed practices in policing, reflect a shift away from punitive models toward solutions that prioritize prevention, rehabilitation, and healing. Contemporary criminology represents a vibrant and dynamic field that integrates diverse perspectives to address the multifaceted nature of crime. From the situational focus of routine activity theory to the cultural insights of cultural criminology, the biological frameworks of biosocial criminology, and the systemic critiques of critical race criminology, these approaches offer valuable tools for understanding and responding to crime in a rapidly changing world. By embracing interdisciplinarity and innovation, contemporary criminology continues to evolve, providing insights that are both theoretically robust and practically relevant for creating safer and more equitable societies.

7. CONCLUSION

The progression of criminological theories highlights the discipline's adaptability and its responsiveness to evolving societal structures, intellectual paradigms, and scientific advancements. Criminology has continuously adapted to the complexities of crime and justice by integrating diverse perspectives and methodologies, underscoring the multifaceted nature of crime as shaped by individual, social, cultural, and structural factors.

The Classical School of the Enlightenment era laid the foundation for modern criminology by emphasizing rationality, free will, and deterrence through proportionate punishment. These principles introduced concepts like due process and proportional justice, which remain integral to contemporary legal systems. However, the limitations of classical criminology in addressing growing societal complexities paved the way for the Positivist School, which shifted focus to biological, psychological, and environmental determinants of crime. While groundbreaking, positivism faced criticism for its deterministic approach and neglect of broader social contexts.

The early 20th century marked a transformative period with the rise of sociological criminology, exemplified by the Chicago School and Edwin Sutherland's work. By situating crime within broader social and environmental contexts, these scholars underscored the critical role of community dynamics, cultural transmission, and structural inequalities. These insights not only enriched theoretical frameworks but also shaped policies aimed at addressing the root causes of crime.

In the mid-20th century, critical criminology challenged traditional paradigms by interrogating power dynamics and systemic inequalities within justice systems. By focusing on class struggle, labeling, and gendered biases, critical criminologists expanded the field's scope to include marginalized perspectives and socio-political dimensions of crime. Feminist criminology and intersectional approaches further enriched the field by examining the intersecting influences of race, gender, and class.

Contemporary criminology represents the culmination of these historical developments, characterized by interdisciplinarity and innovation. Theories like routine activity theory and cultural criminology explore situational and symbolic dimensions of crime, while biosocial criminology bridges biological and environmental factors. Critical race criminology continues to interrogate systemic inequalities and advocate for transformative justice. These perspectives reflect the field's ability to address modern challenges, such as cybercrime, transnational crime, and the ethical implications of predictive analytics and surveillance technologies.

As criminology progresses, emerging issues demand both theoretical advancements and practical solutions grounded in evidence-based research and a commitment to social equity. By fostering dialogue between diverse theoretical traditions and applying critical insights, criminology is well-positioned to address the complexities of crime and justice. This commitment to innovation and inclusivity ensures the discipline remains a vital tool for understanding and shaping justice in an increasingly complex world.

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