This chapter reviews and assesses some of the diverse perspectives that have dominated recent discussion of local government and politics. Various theories have already been drawn upon, sometimes explicitly and on other occasions implicitly, throughout this book. This chapter provides an opportunity to consider in more depth a number of those theoretical positions. Some readers may regard this as an unnecessary chore yet we would argue that to consider theories in a more systematic manner aids understanding and debate. An examination of different theoretical perspectives forces us to ask new questions; to consider the views of a diverse range of thinkers; and provides access to competing explanations of the world of local politics. By examining the language and arguments of different schools of thought we may be able to, at least conduct debates in a more sophisticated manner.

There are a substantial number of theoretical traditions and perspectives that could justify inclusion in a review of theories of local politics and government. Contributions to the debate about our political system have come from a diverse range of schools and approaches (Dunleavy and O’Leary, 1987; Held, 1987). A comprehensive review is not possible. We have to be more selective and concentrate on those perspectives with the most developed understanding of local politics and government.

We focus on four approaches which we label: localist, public choice, dual state and social relations. Each of these approaches will be examined in turn below. The main criteria for choosing to examine these four categories in detail is because much contemporary academic, practitioner and political argument about local government has been expressed in the language of these different approaches. They represent a cross-section of opinion, draw on a
range of theoretical perspectives and can be related to different points on the political spectrum.

The localist position draws largely on the pluralist tradition and can be regarded as the new ‘official’ ideology of local government. The public choice literature constitutes part of the New Right approach and can be used to provide a justification for the Conservatives’ attack on local government. The dual state thesis was the most widely promoted of the academic perspectives on local politics during the 1980s. It explicitly drew on a range of theoretical approaches, in particular combining elements of a corporatist and pluralist analysis. The social relations school has neo-marxist roots and echoes some of the thinking that informed the Urban Left in its approach to local government during the Thatcher years. These four approaches give a flavour of the different directions the debate took in the 1980s.

The four schools of thought are each briefly outlined and then some of their key propositions are criticised. The emphasis throughout is less on the methodology of each and more on its substantive arguments about the nature of local politics. The chapter concludes with an overall assessment of the debate which provides some tentative signposts for the direction it might take in the future.

In the discussion below we use, more or less interchangeably, the terms ‘local government’ and ‘the local state’. The localist and public choice theorists are more prone to use the former; while dual state and social relations schools are more likely to use the latter. The term ‘local state’ was coined by Cockburn in a book of that name in 1977. She intended the term to cover all state institutions operating at the local level. Local authorities, local offices of the DHSS, health authorities and other quasi-governmental agencies were to be embraced by the term. But her own empirical work focused on elected local government (in particular the London Borough of Lambeth) and that is where the focus has remained in subsequent discussions. This makes it relatively unproblematic to interchange the terms local state and local government since in practice they have come to mean the same thing.

The popularity of the term ‘local state’ rests to a substantial degree on its association with an opening out of the theoretical debate about the role of local government and the nature of local