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ON THE IMPORTANCE OF NONDEVIANCE IN SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES OF DEVIANCE

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This paper seeks to present a very simple and seemingly naive argument. Nonetheless, it strikes me as very important. I would like to argue that in both research and practice dealing with criminality and its place in social life, a disproportionate amount of interest has been focused on crime, deviance, and nonconformity. As I see it, we would be much better off concentrating on the absence of crime: on nondeviance and conformity.

If criminologists, and sociologists studying social deviance, aspire to be useful to society through their research – and I think in one sense of the word “useful” or another they all share this aim – then the question ought to be raised whether in fact criminologists carry out their studies in the right settings and are selected according to the right criteria.

Criminologists are generally placed – and conduct their research – in those settings where society exhibits the most negative side and least beneficial features of its efforts to prevent and control such phenomena as violence, theft, and vandalism. Accordingly, there are more criminologists in the United States than in Europe and more in the European metropoles than in the countryside. Moreover, men are studied more often than women, and the young more frequently than the elderly.

Even when criminologists *are* assigned to the proper settings and *are* selected in the proper way, they often fail to make good use of their position. The criminology of women becomes the study of the abuse of women and the exploitation of the female sex, and not a forthright and critical stand against a society that fails to make use of strong female cultural traits, such as sensitivity, creativity, understanding, and tolerance. Yet these are traits of untapped potential in society that are desperately needed, especially in terms of crime prevention.

The criminology of the elderly – to the extent that a discipline of this kind can be said to exist at all – becomes a description of weak, powerless, and anxious citizens, rather than the cultural challenge it could present to a society that places priority on a materialistic and quick-paced life. Elderly women in the countryside thus represent the real (the best and the true) experts on crime prevention. In industrialized and urbanized societies, they are the group offering

the most concrete and enlightening practical example that it *is in fact possible* to exist without engaging in such activities as violence, theft, pollution, and vandalism. They have more to offer in this respect than any other group in our societies.

Young men in U.S. cities represent the opposite end of the spectrum. They have absolutely nothing to offer when it comes to crime prevention – only a vision of horror.

But where do criminologists go when they choose their area of research and their research sites? Which research papers and research monographs do they actually choose to read? It has been my overwhelming experience that many more criminologists and sociologists choose to go to the young men in American cities, rather than to the elderly women living in small villages. This is true either in a literal sense (they really go there) or in the indirect sense of their selection of journals, papers, books, and the like, when they take up this problem. In more precise terms: when we, as criminologists and sociologists, seek to be professional, when we attempt to learn something about how to behave in a way that does not trigger such activities as violence, theft, and robbery, then we turn, directly or indirectly, to the violent, thievish, and fraudulent behaviour frequently found in America's big cities.

On the other hand, when we simply want to be human beings, private persons, when we personally seek to be treated caringly, lovingly, and pleasantly by people who genuinely worry about us, listen to us, and spend time with us, then we turn to our grandmothers, living in the so-called periphery of our societies.

As I see it, this reveals a widespread alienation among criminologists, a deep disruption whose roots may be found in the positivist ideal of social science, with its insistence on a total separation between the objective and the subjective, between the professional and the private.

When we raise our children, we do not do so by asking them to spend as much time as possible with those we consider least worthy of emulation, in order that they may learn from their opposites. Yet, when we try to educate society, this is precisely the strategy we employ.

As stated at the outset, the point to be made here is both simple and naive: the criminology and sociology of deviance has to study areas and population groups where crime does not exist. Practically speaking, it is here that there is the most to study and the most to learn. A criminology and sociology of deviance that implicitly or explicitly aspires to prevent crime is best served by focusing on respect rather than disrespect for the law.

Many criminologists may very well agree with this and, in fact, it has been my experience that most *do*. Nevertheless, we need only cast a glance at the tables of contents in a few of the best-known criminological journals or abstracts, to see what in fact criminologists spend their professional lives doing. I will not bother to provide empirical documentation of this statement. For any random look at journals, research papers, or monographs will make it exceedingly clear that the overwhelming majority of these writings concentrate on crime and nonconformity and that astonishingly few focus on noncrime and nonconformity.

There are, however, more than just pragmatic reasons and considerations related to crime prevention that should stimulate the criminological interest in conformity. There are also epistemological reasons for doing so. A basic tenet in theories of knowledge states that to know and understand a specific phenomenon, you have to know and understand its opposite. We first know what white is when we know what black is. We first know what a city is when we know what the countryside is like. We first know what violence is when we know what nonviolence is. And so on. In fact, one might even feel tempted to formulate this as a central research strategy: Always go out and study the opposite of what you have been asked to study and/or what you initially considered your subject of research. But I have to admit that you might run into certain problems with research councils and sponsors if you adhere to this principle all too strictly...

I have to add that when it comes to the concepts of crime versus noncrime, or conformity versus nonconformity, it is always noncrime and conformity that are the much more mysterious and that thus present the greater intellectual challenge: as complex phenomena, they are difficult to explain and to formulate adequate theories about. We tend to assume that noncriminal and conform conduct is the natural way to act, but these very widespread ways to behave are far from natural. Considering what we start out as when we are born, crime and nonconformity appear to represent the more natural modes of behavior. The main intellectual challenge facing the social scientist is the explanation of conformity, rather than nonconformity.

Criminology itself is sustained by its interest in deviance, but it makes both too much and too little use of this phenomenon. Whenever the criminology and sociology of deviance make the search for deviance the be-all and end-all of their discipline, it is only, as it were, living half its life.

One result of the lopsided concern with crime-intensive areas is an overly criminalized image of the world – a distorted view that criminologists work with and convey to others. In this criminological perspective, young persons

are transformed into juvenile delinquents, big cities into centers of crime, and streets into settings of random violence, even though crime is rarely the predominant (or even an especially important) feature of the persons, groups, organizations, or societies studied.

Another result is that criminology is afflicted not so much with “bad” theories, as with theories that in a sense are too “good”. These theories are, namely, able to explain more crime than reality is able to provide. For example, most theories on juvenile criminality would lead us to expect much higher juvenile crime rates than are actually found. Criminology needs to decriminalize its view of the world in order to describe and locate criminality more appropriately within its social context. A desirable and even necessary step in this process involves efforts to address the following questions: Why is there no crime, or why is there not more crime than there actually is, or why has the crime rate not increased to a greater extent?

Conversely, and viewed from another angle, deviance is a necessity for criminology. In all scientific work, deviance – in the sense of deviation from the norm – is of invaluable importance for the production of knowledge. Even if the task of science is to uncover interrelationships and structures that remain constant over time, those seeking knowledge can only make advances by continually keeping an eye open for deviations from established theories and ideas. If the hypothesis is put forth that alcohol and violence are closely related, discovering a community or society which substantiates this claim does not represent a major cognitive advance. Societies, however, that confute this claim, where for example, negligible violence but widespread alcohol use is found (or vice versa), provide a much more fruitful object of research. In fact, in my judgment, the “analysis of deviations” is *the* most important scientific means of testing and understanding established hypotheses and interrelationships and of promoting the emergence of new frameworks of understanding.

In sum, it is important and productive for both cognitive advance and crime prevention to direct criminological and sociological research towards certain areas and groups where an unexpectedly low level of crime exists.

The reader might ask if this is anything more than a gimmick. Will this strategy not result in exactly the same conclusions and remedies for crime as the traditional one? To put it in another way: is noncrime not simply the opposite of crime, the other end of the same scale, so to speak? Is conformity not simply the opposite of nonconformity? To take up our previous example, if we find that alcohol consumption leads to violence, will not abstaining from alcohol lead to nonviolent ways of socializing human beings to interaction? Have we not learned all the lessons there are to learn about alcohol, crime, and

their interrelationship by studying crimes committed by alcohol abusers and/or alcohol use by criminals?

Here my answer is: perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. Until we attempt to study these phenomena from this reverse perspective, though, we cannot and will not know. And we – and this means the students of the criminology and sociology of deviance – have not yet tried to practice this discipline “the other way around”.

Once again, the theory of knowledge can provide us with very good reasons for being more interested in the exceptions to the rule (or the correlation at hand) than in the rule (or correlation) itself. For one, this is often the only way of reaching a more precise understanding, of more exactly specifying the relationships between variables, especially in quantitative empirical research. On an even more basic level, this way of thinking grows out of a criticism of inductivism, a criticism of that school of scientific theory that postulates the possibility of theory verification. In my view, the skepticism that critical rationalism exhibits toward every form of dogmatism is more than justified – a skepticism vis-à-vis the belief in the existence of instruments or means of understanding that if only used correctly can guarantee the truth. Therefore, the essence of any method we can deem scientific has to consist in systematic criticism: systematic attempts to falsify earlier theories and findings and efforts to formulate new ones. And this entails keeping an ongoing lookout for perceiving and discovering phenomena contrary to established knowledge, no matter how deep the belief in the correctness of the given hypothesis, theory, or interpretation may be. Accordingly, the raising of questions, rather than answering them, becomes the real and most basic part of the scientific enterprise. What matters is the process, not the final result.

But again, this is just more or less theory. The proof of the pudding must be in the eating. The question is: how does it work in practice? Let us take up a few examples of what it means or can mean to work according to the principles which have been outlined here: to focus on the opposite of one's object of research and on the exceptions to one's theory.

A look at other disciplines and other areas of social analysis provides us with some good reasons for doubting that crime and noncrime, conformity and nonconformity will turn out to be simply two poles of a one-dimensional continuum. We will find good reasons for believing that the causes or correlates of crime are partly or completely distinct from the causes or correlates of noncrime.

For example, in the field of conflict and peace research, it has proven very important to consider war and peace as radically different phenomena. The

absence of war cannot be equated with peace, and the lack of peace need not necessarily imply war. I am not going to explore this example in greater detail here, but do wish to point to the vast literature assembled on this topic, which has much to offer to the field of the criminology and sociology of deviance.

Motivational psychology and the sociology of work furnish us with another example. The Sixties were marked by studies of satisfaction at the workplace. Individuals were asked simple questions about their general job satisfaction and more specific questions about their satisfaction with such things as the level of information they were provided with, their salaries, and their working hours. On the basis of these studies, sociologists predicted greater satisfaction at the workplace if people were better informed, and received such goods as higher pay and better fringe benefits.

At this point, an American social psychologist, Frederick Herzberg, came along and said more or less the following: What has been studied up until now is only *dis*-satisfaction and its causes. In attempting to remedy dissatisfaction, it is no doubt correct to argue for such things as higher wages, greater fringe benefits, and better-informed employees. Generally speaking, if you treat people better at work, they will be less dissatisfied (Herzberg 1968).

However, Herzberg then went on to say that he was in no way convinced that treating people in the best manner possible will necessarily lead to job satisfaction, in the sense of evincing a true sense of happiness, an intensive feeling of well-being. This prompted him to undertake a series of empirical studies of *satisfaction* at work. In his interviews, he asked people about satisfaction (and not about dissatisfaction), about intense feelings of job satisfaction: Have you ever been highly satisfied at this workplace such that you felt really happy and had strongly positive feelings of well-being? Those who responded affirmatively were then asked to describe the circumstances under which such satisfaction arose.

The factors he found associated with job satisfaction differed qualitatively from those associated with job dissatisfaction. Satisfaction-related factors were primarily connected to the tasks employees were called to perform rather than the treatment they received. High satisfaction was linked to the more intrinsic sides of the job, such as job contents, the challenges of the job for its holder, and the use it made of his or her personal qualifications.

This showed that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not simply two sides of the same coin, two values along one dimension. A whole new way of thinking about motivation and satisfaction/dissatisfaction was introduced, seriously challenging the classical Maslowian approach: this new mode of thinking focused on distinct, dynamic situations: situations creating “elation” and

situations prompting “dejection”. A dialectical element was introduced that allowed individuals to be in contradictory moods at the same time, for example, to be both satisfied and dissatisfied, as in the classic situation of the starving artist.

In my view, the criminology and sociology of deviance could profit greatly from this way of thinking. It is also essential that crime be conceptualized in terms of such dynamic situations: the lives of individuals need to be described as quickly changing and constantly fluctuating situations. And we must allow ourselves to think of crime dialectically: to view people as criminal and noncriminal at the same time – as two sides of one coin, each with its own potential determinants.

A third example provides more direct evidence of the importance of studying conformity in criminology. In 1979 I was in charge of a self-report study in Denmark. The study involved 14–15 year old adolescents and other young people living in a suburb of Copenhagen (Balvig 1984; 1988). The primary objective of the study was to test some critical ideas developed about previous self-report studies carried out in Denmark and in a host of other countries. In our judgment, the way in which crime and delinquency were measured in these studies was flawed: it was too unreliable, had an insufficient level of validity, and it proved too irrelevant, especially if it were to be used as a basis of comparison with registered crime and convicted criminals. We thought that these self-report studies placed too much emphasis on trivial and nonserious delinquent acts and made too little effort to map out the more serious acts and to measure them in a way comparable to criminal activities recorded by the police.

The study corroborated the importance of our basic criticisms, but more important for the present context was our interest in conformity: we wished to devote much more attention than had ever been done before (at least in Scandinavia) to those adolescents and youth who reported no acts of delinquency in answering the questionnaires, i. e., to the nondelinquent, noncriminal adolescents. The question guiding our research was: Which child-raising practices, which spare-time activities, which kind of school systems, and so on have made it possible for a fifteen year old youth – in contrast to most others in the same age group – to avoid committing any form of crime or delinquent act?

In fact, we found (and were not surprised) that this conforming group accounted for very few of the adolescents. Only about 5% of all youth questioned had absolutely no delinquent acts to report about. We also discovered a few other unsurprising things, which more or less supported the trivial view that conformity is simply the opposite of nonconformity. For example, girls were

heavily overrepresented among noncriminals and boys were equally heavily overrepresented among “nonconformists” (i. e., those not conforming to the law). This was very much in line with traditional criminological theory and the findings of the earlier studies.

However, we also found that in other respects there were great similarities between the most conforming of adolescents and the most criminal, and that these two groups had more in common than they had with the vast majority of youth, who were neither “conformists” nor criminals. For example, in both groups, adolescents were overrepresented whose parents were members of the lowest socioeconomic groups in society, i. e., youth from the lower social classes. Adolescents from broken homes were also overrepresented in these two extreme groups. In these and other ways, there was a resemblance to certain findings from political sociology which support the argument that political ideology and political activity are not best described as a line connecting the politically far left and the far right. Instead, they are best conceived of as a circle where people supportive of or active on the far right or left have much in common, including frequently the same background, and generally exhibit many more similarities with each other than with those normally placed somewhere in the “middle” of the political spectrum.

This in turn leads us to the third remarkable aspect of our research findings. Many of our criminological theories lead us to believe that juvenile delinquency is associated with negative phenomena, such as a poor economy or family problems. This allows one to deduce that conformity in society can be reached by such measures as improving the economy or bettering the social welfare provided to families. This is certainly not wrong, but neither is it the *whole* truth. Thus, in the self-report study we found that the most conforming youth in many ways lived under very troubling conditions and had very troubling lives: relatively poor socioeconomic conditions in the family and divorced parents have already been mentioned. One can add social isolation, from both peers and adults; social inactivity and passivity; identity problems; and indifference to both school and their own futures.

Durkheim already called our attention to the fact that crime and criminals can have positive effects on social life and society. One of these positive effects, and an advantage in comparison to many other problems, is the obtrusive character of many forms of crime. As victims and potential victims, crime and criminals threaten us, force themselves upon our awareness. This compels us to discuss crime and thus to make efforts to respond to it.

Other social problems are much less obtrusive, such as social isolation and social inactivity. These problems provoke much less discussion and much less

action, since they do not infringe upon other people's daily life in the same way or to the same degree. In summing up our self-report study, we could say that we have found both crime and noncrime, nonconformity and conformity, to be signs of illness in the society and in the lives of special persons or groups. Seen as a sign, conformity is just as troublesome for society as is nonconformity, or at least ought to be seen as such.

Moreover, the argument can also be made that conformity *per se*, as a characteristic of social life, can be troublesome in itself, outside of any possible symptomatic character. For central elements in the dynamic process of change in social life can be traced back to nonconformity. But that is quite another story, pointing to other vastly neglected areas of sociological macroanalysis of the functions of conformity in society. Here, we merely want to illustrate the fruitfulness of empirical studies of conformity, of noncrime.

Before leaving this example of the 1979 Danish self-report study, I would like to add that the study was repeated – in the same geographical area and with the same age groups – ten years later, in 1989 (Kyvsgaard 1991). As in several other countries, the crime trends for different age groups in Denmark in the eighties have been very different from those of the sixties and seventies. In those earlier two decades, the trends in crime statistics were increasing juvenile delinquency and decreasing or stagnating crime rates among adults. In the eighties, the picture was turned upside down: increasing conviction rates among adults and decreasing or stagnating crime rates among youth and adolescents. The younger the youth, the greater this decrease was.

The primary reason for repeating the self-report study was to verify the reality of this trend: has there really been a decrease in delinquent acts committed by adolescents or are extraneous forces at work, such as a change in the way that police work is now done or statistics are now interpreted? The study shows that the decrease in juvenile delinquency in the eighties is real. In particular, the number of highly conforming youth has grown – from about 5% in 1979 to more than 20% in 1989. What is even more interesting is that the correlates – or to use a stronger and more dubious term, the causes – have changed. Girls are still overrepresented, but not to the same extent as previously. Thus, it is primarily the boys who have started to conform to the law to a greater degree. Moreover, in 1989, youth from lower social classes and broken homes were no longer overrepresented at all among those conforming the most. Nor were members of this group more isolated socially or less active than other youth.

The real basis for these new trends are rather rapid and dramatic changes in the norms of youth culture, at least in Denmark: it has become acceptable in

youth culture *not* to commit crime, acceptable in the sense that you do not lose status, companions, or friends by doing so. It is much more acceptable among many more youth today to say no to shoplifting or joyriding, or whatever the illegal activity at issue is, than it was just a few years ago.

A greater level of attachment to adults is also found today, to both parents and schoolteachers, to mention only the most important authority figures for adolescents. For example, they like school *per se* more than ten years ago, and they argue or fight less with their parents (except about television; apparently there can be no paradise without a snake).

On a macrosociological level, these trends can be explained in part by the narrowing of the generation gap (which in turn is partly the result of the markedly "younger" life-style of today's elderly) and in part by the impact of changes in political and economic structures in the society at large on today's norms. Let it be reiterated that the point here is not to initiate discussion nor to say something specific about trends in crime, but merely to give a concrete empirical illustration from criminology of the fruitfulness of orienting our studies around conformity.

I suggested earlier that it might prove especially productive to focus not simply on conformity, but on those instances of observed or apparent conformity that would not be predicted by existing theories or just by common sense. Two final examples are used to illustrate this point.

The first example involves Christiana, a geographical area close to the center of Copenhagen. It formerly served military purposes, but was abandoned by the armed forces twenty years ago. Due to a planning gap, the area remained unutilized for a period of time, until it was occupied by young people. It still is, which is an interesting story in itself. Today, about 1'000 people live in Christiana. What is interesting in our present context is the fact that the place has been especially attractive for those who have been in conflict with the law, alcoholics and the homeless. From a commonsense point of view, one might expect a great deal of crime to originate from this area and, over time, that a kind of criminal culture could and would develop, increasing the criminality of those who moved into the area.

Nevertheless, at least for the period studied, this has not been the case (Balvig 1982). Surprisingly, young people with problematic backgrounds are found to be doing much better here than in Copenhagen itself (to say nothing of a comparison with the effects of putting them in institutions such as prisons or reformatories).

A process of destigmatization appears to be part of the explanation. The identity of the young people involved appears to change from that of a criminal to that of a political activist or simply to that of an ordinary citizen. For the first time in their lives, they find themselves in a situation where no one makes an issue of their background or their past identities. They only care about their identities in the here and now and how they are going to shape their common future together.

An additional explanatory factor appears to involve their experiences with a new kind of supportive relationship. The help they now receive in their daily lives is not from professionals, but from others in the same situation, whom they very possibly may be helping tomorrow. Thus, such mutually supportive relationships are based on equality and symmetry and prove to be much more effective and much less degrading and alienating than unequal and asymmetric ones.

A final explanatory factor involves the reactions they sometimes (though not always) experience when they *do* commit criminal acts, reactions much more meaningful than those normally experienced. In the society at large they are used to punishment, yet in Christiana the response is sometimes just the opposite. If someone steals something and is unemployed and poor, he is sometimes given money to provide for the next few days or following this, a job to allow him to legally satisfy his future needs.

Much more could and would need to be said about Christiana, but this does provide a taste of the socially interesting world that often opens up when the focus is on conformity, and especially conformity where it is not expected. Let us now turn to my last example, one concerning Switzerland.

Due to the work of the U.S. criminologist Marshall B. Clinard, an image of Switzerland arose, at least in criminological circles, that portrayed it as a country enjoying remarkably low crime rates. Clinard's study was made almost twenty years ago (Clinard 1978). As a consequence of my particular approach to criminology and what I think it has to be about, I became very interested in this study and in Switzerland *per se*. Here we seemed to have a country that exhibits a very high degree of conformity and, at the same time, is very exceptional according to international standards, especially in light of the degree of urbanization and the living standard it enjoys.

This led to my 1986 follow-up study to Clinard's, an analysis much more narrow in scope than his. My main interest was simply to see whether anything had changed in the picture of Switzerland since the seventies (Balvig 1988). The ideas that I have presented in this article give the broader rationale for my

research of and in Switzerland in the latter part of the eighties. For I do end up agreeing with Clinard that the crime rate in Switzerland is remarkably low. However, in my view, this tells us more about Clinard and his country, the United States, than it does about Switzerland. A U.S. criminologist can, namely, go to almost any country on the face of the earth and find a remarkably low rate of crime, if his or her frame of reference is the United States and its remarkably high crime rate.

If, however, other small European countries like Denmark, Norway, Finland, Belgium, or Scotland (to name but a few) are taken as the framework of reference for comparison, the crime rate in Switzerland will not be found to be remarkably low: neither at the time of Clinard's study, nor at the time of mine (1986), nor (according to recent surveys and statistics) in the last few years (Dijk et. al 1990). It should be added that I also do not find the crime rate in Switzerland to be exceptionally high in any way. The crime rates in the small European countries are just not, generally speaking, that remarkably different from one another.

To conclude this article, I would like to make one last claim. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the crime scene in Switzerland is not (or I might say *was not*, since I am primarily referring to the time when Clinard made his study) its low crime rate, but its *image* of having such a low crime rate. And I would further speculate that this image was perhaps quite fitting in the framework of general Swiss culture and the Swiss way of understanding itself and its society as a "white as snow" culture. This image, this understanding is what strikes me as so unique; just as it seems very fitting for American culture and the "American way" of understanding itself and its society, with its "black as coal" culture, to focus on crime.

(Written in English; edited by Neil Solomon, Heidelberg)

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