

THE DEVIANT IMAGINATION

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Psychiatry, Social Work and Social Change

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For Jonathan and Kate

'This is abstract thinking: to see nothing in the murderer
except the abstract fact that he is a murderer, and to annul
all other human essence in him with this simple quality.'

George W. F. Hegel

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PREFACE

An article in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* in 1969 complained that some young patients were not listening to their doctor's orders and instead were reading the books of the psychiatrist Ronald Laing. It is an odd state of affairs when one doctor complains that another doctor's books are not good for his patients, particularly when those same books were probably confirming for his patients that he was no good for them.

This example is symptomatic of the turbulence and feuding which has been taking place in the social sciences, social welfare, psychiatry, social work and criminology since the 1960s. Theory and research into deviants, misfits, social inadequates, the disturbed, 'problem families', crooks, perverts, outcasts and oddballs took a sudden turn in that period. The question of what it is to be 'deviant', and what imagination it is which powers those who are called 'deviant', was raised in a critical form. Sometimes theory and research sided with the underdog deviant against his professional helpers and professional guardians. The question was posed whether these professionals were helping at all. And sometimes professionals were frightened by this turn of events, felt that it was not playing the game properly, and that it was mischievous, subversive, or even ignorant. Only rarely blessed with any kind of literate expression, these professional feuds were usually not written down and were passed on by gossip. But they were none the less real, and this book is an attempt to reach behind the written word and to make some of the problems which are posed for the field of deviance theory and social welfare articulate. In recent years the whole area has been spattered with question marks. This book addresses itself to those questions.

This is a book about *social practice* – specifically, about how social scientists, social workers, and so on, look at deviants and misfits. It is a social practice which consists not only of attempts

to control, cure or correct deviants, but also of attempts to articulate the deviant's motives and to understand what the misfit's deviance says about the society in which he lives. This book is therefore about how theories are developed (by men), how they are read and received (by men), and how they might be implemented in action (by men). Theories do not fall out of the sky, and it is an assumption of this book that the men who make them are not at all unlike other men and that they share with other men blind-spots, weaknesses and ecstasies. If that is so, and if I am therefore also not unlike other men, it is wise to make a few preliminary confessions.

First, I have worked as a social worker, and I do not believe that it is possible to have done that and rest easy with theory and research which remains at the level of speculation without touching the day-to-day unhappiness of people called 'deviants' and 'clients'. Given that, however, the conclusion of the book is awkward, for it does not provide immediate solutions to social problems. Instead it arrives at the conclusion that there are no immediate solutions to social problems, at least without a comprehensive re-ordering of priorities in this society which is called a civilised society. It also concludes that social welfare is biased and unhinged in its appraisal of the deviant question, and this book is an attempt to open and continue certain areas of debate which might correct that bias. In order to do that it is necessary to forget for a moment the unhappiness of the deviant and explore the unhappiness of the professional.

The beginning of a book is perhaps an odd place to state its conclusion. But perhaps not: it has the advantage of announcing to the reader what he is letting himself in for. A common conclusion of studies in the social sciences is for the author to write that 'more research is needed'. But that kind of conclusion has become something of a bad joke and it is not my conclusion. That kind of conclusion should be recognised for what it is: a way of dodging the problem of arriving at a conclusion, burying one's head in the uncertainty which only scholars understand. Also, as a way of ending – or abandoning – a study, an appeal for more research begs another question: research for what? There is no shortage of research on deviance. The problem often is simply to know what to do with it. Commonly all the busy practitioner can do is forget it and 'get on with the job', and commonly all the

researcher or academic can do is recognise that the conclusion of someone else's studies is not his own conclusion.

The reasons for this are simple enough. All conclusions embody theories and ideologies, and no amount of conclusive evidence can sway a reader from a theory or ideology which he finds persuasive. And for someone engaged in the practice of deviance-control, theories and ideologies which tickle his occupational defences or injure his professional self-esteem are not amusing. His job is not to juggle one theory off against another, and a theory which subverts his professional view of the world can give him little more than a headache.

Men choose from theories what they find useful, and they ditch what they cannot use or what discomforts them. They also sometimes see things in social-science literature which are not there. That is to say, they 'read in' things. The arguments of this book presuppose something of the nature of this relationship between what men read and how men read. They presuppose a theory of the relationship between social-scientific endeavour and literary endeavour, and a notion of social science *as* literature. My attitude is that men, as participants in the social world, do not read social-science books as they might read the theorems, proofs and calculus of mathematics. The marks which social-scientific literature leaves in its readers are partly made by implicit and unacknowledged literary and poetic devices. I do not assume that this is either a good thing or a bad thing; I simply assume that it is the case. Social science makes its mark when attitudes within its own texts makes links with, and resonate with, attitudes within its audience; but these attitudes are, nevertheless, rarely explicitly rendered. They are part of the attempt by men and women, through reading and writing, to come to terms with the experience of their lives.

The Deviant Imagination assumes and sets out to establish that learning about deviance and social control is not simply a question of memorising the formulae, aetiologies and prognoses of certain kinds of deviant act. Rather it involves an imaginative enterprise as to how men construct and conceive notions of social order, reasonableness, familiarity and events which go bump in the order of things. It is part of what Paulo Freire calls 'a difficult apprenticeship in naming the world'. The study of how and why men do things other than what they are supposed to do, and how other men think of this disorderly conduct, is also a study of how things

might be other than they are. It touches a delicate nerve of the relationship between freedom and social order. In a strict sense each man must dream up his version of the world for himself and each man must find a place for his own deviant imagination.

This book would not have been started, and certainly not finished, without other people's encouragement, nagging, advice and love. For different things at different times I wish to thank Peter Barham, Irwin Epstein, Colin Fletcher, Anita Guiton, Derek Guiton, Laurie Hemingway, Geoff Mungham, Anne Murcott, the National Deviancy Conference, Norma Powell, Shaie Selzer, Ian Taylor, Jan Thomas and Paul Walton. There are, of course, many other people who have given help and friendship and they will know who they are. But there is nothing bad in this book which is the fault of any of these people, and if I didn't listen to them there is only one person to blame.

Cardiff, Wales
June 1974

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