

MARGINAL CONVENTIONS

**POPULAR
CULTURE,
MASS MEDIA
AND
SOCIAL
DEVIANCE**

**edited by
Clinton R.
Sanders**

Marginal Conventions:
Popular Culture, Mass Media
and Social Deviance

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In Memorium
Priscilla Kiehnle Warner
1952-1989

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I

Introduction

‘A Lot of People Like It’: The Relationship Between Deviance and Popular Culture

Clinton R. Sanders

Introduction: Deviance, Popular Culture, and Power

The complex network of shared meanings we refer to as culture and the rules which derive from these meanings are the essence of social life (Geertz, 1973). Cultural artifacts and activities are based on shared understandings and rule-violation is a natural consequence of the existence of rules. The sources and consequences of both cultural products and rule-breaking are issues of significant concern in social scientific and everyday discussion. The essays included in this collection all focus on unconventional behavior and the groups, products, controversies, and themes which revolve around it.

Guided primarily by their vested interest in seeing society as an orderly structure bound together by shared norms, conventional sociologists typically have presented individual normative violations as, at worst, threats to a stable social order (eg., Merton, 1957: 131-194) or, at best, one mechanism by which the social system either undergoes necessary adaptive change or reinforces (through ritualized reaction to violations) the dominant social order (Durkheim, 1938). The major alternative perspective on deviance presents a very different picture. Rather than seeing deviance as an objective phenomenon—behavior is either deviant or not depending upon whether it conforms with or is in violation of social norms—the “labelling” or “social reaction” perspective presents deviance as largely a definitional issue. In this view, no behavior is intrinsically deviant. Instead, the “deviance” of an act depends on whether or not it is known to others and, consequently, whether or not it comes to be the focus of negative social reaction (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1972; Schur, 1971). Like other forms of interaction, the deviance of an activity, therefore, depends upon the relative power of the actors and the situation in which the action takes place. Interpersonal violence, for example, is not inherently deviant. It is widely regarded as such when it is engaged in by those who do not possess the authority and fill the accepted roles (eg., law-enforcement officer, soldier, parent) for which violence is a legitimate component and it takes place in situations in which violence is conventionally deemed to be inappropriate. In short, deviance, from this

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perspective, depends on *who engages* in the behavior, the *purpose* of the action, who becomes *aware* of the conduct, and the *situation* in which the behavior is carried out.¹

Power has further relevance to this definitional/subjectivist perspective on deviance. Power insulates one from the reactive consequences of behavior which has the potential of being socially discrediting. The powerful actor can engage in rule-violating activities apart from situations in which he or she runs the risk of being observed and subsequently subjected to negative social reaction. Should knowledge of the discreditable behavior somehow slip out of the protective boundaries of privileged information control, however, those in positions of power typically possess the economic, political, legal, and interpersonal resources by which they can deflect or avoid negative repercussions.

Those in positions of control (elites, members of the "establishment," the "ruling-class," authorities, and so on) have, therefore, a distinct interest in shaping societal definitions of deviance. To the extent that social order exists, it rests upon the maintenance of a general consensus regarding good and bad behavior. The powerful have the most to gain from order and the most to lose from significant alterations in social patterns and understandings. For this reason elites consistently employ the considerable resources at their disposal to shape shared understandings of normality, dangerousness, acceptable behavior, legitimacy, immorality, and the myriad other definitional components of deviance and conventionality. Products commonly regarded as popular cultural—especially mass media fare—are of key importance in these efforts intended to maintain the status quo. Popular culture themes are consistently chosen and constructed by production "gatekeepers" so as to reinforce conventional norms and perspectives on reality. In other words, popular culture is, as many of the contributors to this volume emphasize, an eminently *political* phenomenon.

We come then to the second phenomenon which is the focus of this collection. Most simply, popular culture is regarded as made up of products which—as indicated in the quote by Irving Berlin² which provides part of the title of this piece—are consumed and (presumably) enjoyed by "a lot" of people. More specifically, popular culture is typically presented as consisting of materials and activities which are mass produced, acquired through some form of commercial exchange by members of a large and heterogeneous audience/consumer group, not intended solely for members of elite social segments, and characterized by formulaic/conventionalized form and content (Browne, 1983; Nye, 1970; Lewis, 1972: 2-4). Elitist critics of popular culture have tended to view these types of materials and activities with considerable distaste. Those who have employed a leftist political perspective (eg., Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Marcuse, 1966) have asserted that "mass culture" is created primarily for profit, borrows from and thereby trivializes "high culture," draws talented people away from the more worthy endeavor of creating elite products, and generates uncritical and passive consumers who are open to the wiles of totalitarian leaders. Conservative

right-wing critics have tended to take a rather similar position. They have stressed the view of popular culture as presenting themes which are trivial, brutal or otherwise unworthy and as being a major factor causing the decline of the society's moral principles (see Rosenberg, 1964; Kaplan, 1972; Greenberg, 1972; cf., Markson and Lewis in this volume). These negative presentations of popular culture were particularly fashionable in the 1950s but died out somewhat during the 60s when elitist ire was redirected at the youth culture and its presumed advocacy of hedonism, nihilism, mysticism, and related "countercultural" orientations.

With the apparent decline of the youthful counterculture in the 70s, criticism of popular culture enjoyed something of a resurgence. Spearheaded by the religious right on the one hand and neomarxist analysts on the other, popular culture was again seen as the source of moral decay and/or the primary tool of the "ruling class" intent upon establishing authoritarian hegemony through the simplistic blandishments of mass produced "**bread and circuses**" which contain the ideological underpinnings of the current system (see Gitlin, 1979; Kellner, 1981; Goldman and Wilson, 1983; Dorfman, 1983).

These negative views of the simplistic form, banal content, and untoward social effects of popular culture have, in turn, been the ongoing focus of various counter-critiques by analysts with more pluralist or less judgmental orientations. Herbert Gans (1974) is the best-known advocate of this "populist" view of popular culture (cf., Barzun, 1956; White, 1964). Rather than decrying the supposed dangerous effects and mediocre content of contemporary culture, Gans and the other pluralist commentators present an image of society as composed of interdependent "taste publics" centered around specific cultural items and events. Members of taste publics—from elites attending the performance of a symphony orchestra to working class viewers of professional wrestling—*enjoy* the cultural forms they consume, *employ evaluative criteria* to differentiate "good" from "bad," and *use their knowledge* of the conventional elements of the materials to focus interaction and establish co-membership. The taste cultural items, in turn, *incorporate and reflect the values and interests* of the publics that consume them. The conventional view that culture is hierarchically ordered with materials consumed and activities enjoyed by the elites being of more value than those consumed and enjoyed by the less affluent is, therefore, simply a form of ethnocentrism reflecting the tastes of academics, members of the production world surrounding "fine" art, and other elites. The pluralist perspective emphasizes a separate-but-equal orientation toward contemporary culture and rejects the notion propounded by both conservative and leftist critics that popular culture degrades its consumers and the society in which it is situated. Popular culture should, according to pluralists, be the focus of serious attention because it is of intrinsic interest rather than because analysis can necessarily lead to a better understanding of the mechanisms by which cultural producers purposefully debase or manipulate members of the consuming public.³

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The Process of Cultural Production

The pluralist perspective has provided a major grounding for the serious investigation of contemporary popular culture. To a significant degree it is at the core of the “production of culture” approach which examines the social process whereby cultural products are conceived, created, selected, evaluated, disseminated, chosen, and used. Like all social processes, those centered around cultural production are expedited by the fact that participants—from creators to consumers—share conventional knowledge which eases the collective action surrounding production and facilitates the evaluative communication between producers and consumers (Peterson, 1976; Becker, 1982; Sanders, 1982; Jensen, 1984).

It is here within the network of social interaction surrounding popular cultural production that we may see one of the key connections between deviance and popular culture. Driven largely by the ongoing problem of “commercial uncertainty”—creators and administrators of mainstream popular culture are not sure of the features that guarantee commercial success—popular culture tends to be characterized overwhelmingly by formulaic form and content. Producers decrease uncertainty by reproducing materials like those which have made money in the past (Hirsch, 1972). However, because key actors in the process—especially creators and consumers—value, at least, some degree of novelty, stylistic innovation is necessary. Innovative materials hold the promise of establishing newly successful formulae and innovative work allows popular culture creators to retain a creative self-definition. Culture administrators commonly display a conservative resistance to innovation, seeing it as a “deviant” threat to the established formulaic order (see Gitlin, 1983: 273-324; Kaplan, 1987; Cruz in this volume). In many cases the innovative creator must take steps to redefine the formula-violating materials as non-deviant through an overt “promotion” process (Lewis, 1986). This promotion of deviant/innovative cultural materials within the interaction system surrounding cultural production is analogous to the “educational” efforts which organized groups of social deviants (homosexuals, ex-mental patients, alcoholics, and so forth) direct at “the public” in order to attack widespread negative definitions and ease the weight of social reaction.

Deviance as a Popular Cultural Theme

In addition to the violation of stylistic conventions as a conflictual mechanism by which innovation takes place in the form and content of cultural products, rule-breaking is one of the favorite themes in contemporary popular culture. Deviance is an especially “hot topic” in the mass media (see Lyon, Crew, Cruz and Farnen in this volume). The general image of rule-breaking presented in the media is simplistic and stereotypic—deviance is atypical, pleasurably rewarding, and eventually results in the nonconformist suffering extraordinarily painful consequences. Most commonly, media deviants are presented as being driven by sickness, innate

wickedness, weakness, or ignorance. Further, they are typically portrayed as not only acting abnormally, but also as *looking* like deviants. The rule-breaker's appearance reflects his or her moral status (Needleman and Weiner, 1976). Heroic characters who uphold the rules are attractive and ordinary citizens look ordinary while deviants are conventionally presented as ugly, misshapen, dirty, bizarrely costumed, atavistic, dark, and frightening (see Warner in this volume).

The physical and motivational atypicality of the media deviant and the obligatory conclusion in which the nonconformist pays for his or her deviant pleasure by suffering extraordinary pain point to what a number of analysts see as the major function of the presentation of deviance in the media and other popular culture products. Images of deviant behavior and the deviant actor provide object lessons which define and reinforce the consensual boundaries of social order. The normative order is legitimate, official agents of social control are necessary, rule-breaking is unusual, and violators are always punished for their misbehavior (see Wilkins, 1973; Young, 1973; Gerbner, 1978; Crew, Cruz, and Carveth in this volume). Recent discussions presenting a "constructionist" view of the media and its effects (eg., Gamson, 1988) stress similar ideas. Media messages are ideological constructs used by members of the audience to identify, interpret, and devise solutions for deviance and the other social "problems" which are the dominant focus of media attention.

Some Unanticipated Consequences of the Deviance Theme

It may be that popular cultural presentations of deviance work against the interest of those that have a major stake in maintaining conformity. Wilkins (1973), for example, observes that stereotypic displays of rule-breaking actually act to "amplify" deviance. To the extent that members of the media/popular culture audience see these materials as reflective of reality, the intense focus on deviance tends to increase public perceptions of the frequency and threat of rule-breaking. Consequently, heightened negative perceptions of nonconformity within the public generate more rigorous social reaction. In turn, rather than convincing deviants of the error of their violative ways, increased social reaction acts to further isolate deviants from "normals" thereby decreasing the likelihood that they will climb back onto the normative straight and narrow (see Crew and Farnen in this volume).

Most of the ways in which analysts see the negative social consequences of popular cultural presentations of deviance are considerably more straightforward than that provided by the amplification notion. Most common views of the relationship between portrayals of deviance and "real life" rule-breaking posit a more or less direct causal connection. Cultural consumers who are routinely bombarded with fictional accounts of "anti-social" (ie., "anti-status quo") behavior will take those presentations and model their own actions after them. Bolstered by the findings generated by a massive body of experimental studies, advocates of this rather simplistic

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behaviorist image of human behavior have mounted organized attempts to “clean up the airwaves” or ban other popular cultural materials which they see as causing the supposed increase in immoral or misanthropic activities. The efforts of groups opposed to media violence (see Lyon in this volume), “lewd” rock and roll lyrics (see Markson in this volume), and the graphic erotic depictions contained in “pornography” (Dworkin, 1981; Lederer, 1980) reflect this understanding of the social impact of the presentation of deviance in popular cultural materials.⁴

Taste Publics and Deviant Subcultures

The highly social nature of both deviance and popular cultural production/consumption points to yet another linkage between the two phenomena. As emphasized in the pluralist view of popular culture, social groups form around specific cultural products and devise a considerable body of evaluative information about the central conventions which characterize the focal materials or activities. These “taste publics” are, in essence, *subcultures* which are generated by the mutual leisure interests and shared problems of the members (see Arnold, 1970). Similarly, subcultural groups adhere around activities conventionally regarded as deviant and are the focus of negative social reaction. Deviant subcultures provide a variety of services for their members. Within them participants may acquire the materials and knowledge which are essential to successfully pursuing the disvalued activities. These groups also incorporate and share values and definitions of reality which members use to understand themselves, the behaviors for which they are condemned, and the larger society which is the source of negative definitions and overt social reaction. Deviant subcultures are protective social phenomena—they offer group support, provide information about protective techniques, and supply positive definitions useful as alternatives to the negative labels conferred by conventional agents of social control (see Sutherland and Cressey, 1978: 77-97). Not infrequently, these informal groups develop a more formally organized core which directs collective efforts intended to encourage a redefinition of the condemned behavior thereby easing the pressure of negative social reaction.

Taste groups surrounding popular cultural phenomena function similarly for their adherents. They provide direct or mediated social contexts in which evaluative conventions are communicated, pleasurable interactions with like-minded individuals can take place, and access to the cultural items around which the taste public revolves is available. Although the materials and activities constituting taste cultures are rarely subjected to the same degree of negative social reaction as are the unconventional activities which provide the organizational focus of deviant subcultures, taste publics—like organized groups of deviants—do act as sources of innovation. Popular culture administrators and creators commonly borrow from taste cultures in their search for new styles and products. This form of “bottom-up” innovation is especially apparent in the areas of fashion, popular music,

dance, "fine" art, and colloquial language (see Hirschman, 1981; Castleman, 1982; Levine, 1988; Sanders, 1989).

For the deviant social group as well as the taste public, this process of education, innovation, and borrowing can have both positive and negative consequences. A major pleasurable aspect of membership in subcultures is the exclusivity and unconventionality of involvement with the core phenomenon—be it illegal drug use or zydeco music (see Lewis, 1988; Stern and Friesen in this volume). Although cultural and behavioral difference commonly has negative aspects—especially for those involved in illegal activities—involvement with unconventional tastes and knowledge provides feelings of uniqueness and separation from the rigid blandness of the mainstream. When ad executives begin to wear long hair, Pat Boone records a song by Little Richard, established politicians sport tattoos, or insurance agents smoke marijuana, these activities, styles, and products lose their raw impact and their power to symbolize "hipness" is significantly reduced. Of course, for those individuals whose tastes and behaviors are especially discrediting and who are consistently subjected to inconvenient social reaction, the legitimation which comes from "educating" the public about the lack of threat posed by a particular lifestyle or consumption activity offers considerable advantage (see Sanders, 1989: 25-35 and Stenross in this volume).

Deviance within Cultural Production Worlds

A final connection between deviance and popular culture is seen in those situations where salient norms are violated by participants in the social worlds surrounding cultural creation. One obvious example of this type of rule-breaking is seen in those cases in which higher-ups in the hierarchy of the production world overtly victimize those with less status. The sexual exploitation of the "casting couch" in theatrical or film production (Morris, 1987) or the theft of a subordinate's ideas or products are two examples of common, but formally condemned, activities in the social networks surrounding cultural production.

The construction of "news" by newswriters is an issue of rule-breaking within popular culture organizations which has been the focus of contemporary concern. Widespread ethical expectations held by the media public center around the basic "facticity" of news stories. When newswriters fabricate or initiate events and present them as being independent newsworthy occurrences, the public commonly views this as being a significant violation of the expectations constraining news reporting. There is, of course, some flexibility in expectations depending on the media organ in which the fraudulent news story is presented. Purposeful misrepresentation of events reported in the *New York Times* or on the CBS Evening News is an issue of considerable concern (Eason, 1988). Fanciful stories constructed out of the thin air and presented as fact in *The National Enquirer* or other "check-out counter" tabloids are defined as quasi-fiction by all but those readers with the most tenuous connection to consensual reality. These popular

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culture products are the focus of negative social reaction only when they claim to present facts about public figures who feel themselves to be slandered and initiate legal proceedings (see Ressler, 1988).⁵

Conclusion

The papers presented in this anthology cohere around three interconnected themes. In general, deviance is not seen as an “objective” attribute of behavior. Instead, whether an activity is regarded as deviance and the person who participates in it is regarded as a deviant depends on a complex process of social definition. The status of the actor, the situational context in which the activity occurs, the visibility of the behavior, and the degree of social consensus which surrounds the rules which are violated are key factors shaping definitions of deviance and subsequent social reaction.

The vested interest of those in positions of power in maintaining the established social order by controlling salient definitions of deviance is another theme underlying these essays. By shaping the form and content of popular cultural products—especially messages disseminated through the mass media—the powerful (the “State,” the “ruling-class,” the “establishment,” and so forth) construct the larger reality which provides the foundation of social action and reaction. Our experience with popular culture products provides us with information about the “reality” of AIDS, rock and roll, immoral behavior by film stars, televised violence, gun collectors, and political terrorism and the dangers inherent within them. The controllers of cultural production self-servingly direct reactions to deviance by shaping how it is consensually understood.

Finally, involvement with a marginal or disvalued activity or product entails certain social risks. Popular cultural taste groups and deviant subcultures revolve around the shared interests and knowledge of their members. Cultural publics and subcultures provide access to valued activities and objects, contact with like-minded others, protective insulation from negative judgments and actions of “outsiders,” and an evaluative typology members can use to maintain positive understandings of themselves and the social objects to which they and their fellows are committed.

Notes

¹The act of swallowing an amphetamine tablet, for example, is “conforming” if it is done by a soldier in a front-line position, under the supervision of a physician, in order to achieve the alertness demanded by the immediate battle situation. On the other hand, when engaged in by a teenager, the same act of drug ingestion is “deviant” (at least in the view of parents, police, guidance counselors, and other powerful actors intent upon controlling teenagers) especially when it takes place at a party and is intended to enhance the “fun” of the recreational experience (Young, 1973).

²Irving Berlin is reputed to have stated that, “Popular music is popular because a lot of people like it.”

³Viewing popular culture from a pluralist perspective does not necessarily require that the analyst reject the notion that cultural materials may have socially untoward effects or that they are, not uncommonly, purposefully constructed so as to reflect and reinforce the interest of elites. The sizeable literature on the construction of "news," for example, provides considerable evidence that this cultural product is consciously chosen and shaped by powerful "media gatekeepers" so as to present a particular, status quo maintaining, image of the ongoing "reality" of current events (see Gans, 1979; Altheide, 1976, 1985; Schlesinger, 1978; Cohen and Young, 1973; Stein, 1974; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). These effects are, however, limited by the selectivity exercised by cultural consumers in the forms and content of the materials they consume, their interpretive activities premised on pre-existing beliefs, and the central importance of immediate co-interactants in shaping the attitudes and opinions held by social actors (Klapper, 1960; Bauer, 1963).

⁴For cogent counter-arguments to this modeling view see Tong, 1987; Caught Looking, Inc., 1988; Pattison, 1988; Markson in this volume.

⁵Constructed events presented as factual sometimes do have significant social impact even when the media creators do not intend the public to interpret them as being anything but realistic fiction. The widespread panic generated by the broadcast of "The War of the Worlds" by Orson Welles and the Mercury Theater (Cantril, 1940) and the similar reaction to a Swedish radio broadcast reputedly carrying the story of a nuclear accident (Rosengren, et al, 1978) are examples of social reaction to "unintentional" media deviance.

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