

who returned to prominence during this period, argued that rules were created by elites and designed to protect elite interests and that social control agents ignored elite deviance while repressing rebellion in the name of social order. In this view, labeling's interest in marijuana smokers, police officers, and other offenders and social control agents with little power ignored the greater crimes of elites. The labeling theorists stood accused of having bought into the existing social order; from the perspective of conflict theory, the labeling theorists were no more critical of elite domination than were their functionalist predecessors.

Feminism offered a second critique. It charged that the sociology of deviance had tended to overlook both society's harsh treatment of female deviants and its failure to protect women from victimization. Functionalism had neglected women, but so had labeling's advocates, whose sympathies for deviants had led them to ignore rape, battering, and other violence against women. Like the conflict theorists, feminist critics argued that labeling was oblivious to key inequities in society.

Third, social movements for gay rights and disability rights led to an *identity politics* critique of the sociology of deviance. In this view, sociologists who defined homosexuals or the disabled as deviants failed to recognize that they were better conceptualized as political minorities than as rule breakers. This critique was particularly severe in that it challenged the very legitimacy of the concept of deviance: If rules and moral categories should be seen as essentially arbitrary manifestations of a political order, how could sociologists confidently characterize an activity or condition as deviant? Like conflict theory and feminism, identity politics criticized the sociology of deviance for uncritically accepting conventional standards of morality.

A fourth critique came from *mainstream* sociologists who argued that the labeling approach was narrow in that it ignored traditionally central topics such as the causes of deviance. Mainstream analysts sought to translate the labeling approach into testable hypotheses about the operation of social control systems and then test them using the regression-based techniques that greater computing power was making practicable. These empirical studies offered only weak and inconsistent support for labeling's claims.

IS DEVIANCE "DEAD"?

By the mid-1970s, social theorists seemed unable to resolve a fundamental issue: the definition of deviance. Arguments that deviance could be defined in terms of either rule breaking or societal reaction had been challenged from several theoretical camps, but there was no generally agreed-upon alternative definition. While sociologists continued to offer courses on deviance and to study crime and other phenomena considered to be deviant, the concept of deviance was less often at the center of their analyses. Occasional efforts to articulate new theoretical approaches to the study

of deviance failed to capture the imagination of the discipline in the way the anomie or labeling had. Some analysts shifted to less disputed terrain, locating their work within the sociology of social problems or medical sociology (studies of medicalization focused on how medical authorities assumed control of some forms of deviance). Most researchers defined their work in terms of the substantive issues they studied, so that there was a marked revival in criminology and the study of crime, and parallel developments in the sociological literatures on mental illness, substance abuse, and so on. In other words, sociologists continued studying phenomena nominally thought to be deviant, but they were less likely to try to overtly locate their research within some broader theory of deviance. After the 1970s, appearances of the term deviance in sociology's flagship journals began to decline; sociologists were simply using the word less often.

Deviance, then, occupies an anomalous position as a theoretical concept. It is certainly part of the standard vocabulary of sociology, but there is no consensus regarding how it ought to be defined or which issues are central to its study, and there seem to be few efforts to either revive old perspectives or devise new theoretical agendas. In 1994, Colin Sumner published *The Sociology of Deviance: An Obituary* and touched off a small literature debating whether the idea of deviance was "dead." Obviously, crime, mental illness, and other behaviors classified as deviant have not vanished, and sociologists continue to study those phenomena. The issue is whether those sociologists will continue to find the concept of deviance useful. While the discipline seems reluctant to abandon the notion of deviance, sociologists also seem uncertain how to best put it to use.

— Joel Best

See also Conflict Theory; Crime; Durkheim, Émile; Feminism; Goffman, Erving; Labeling Theory; Merton, Robert

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DIALECTIC

The dialectical mode of logic has its strongest roots in the works of G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx. Hegel was a dialectical idealist principally concerned with a dialectic of ideas.

Marx combined Hegel's sense of dialectical thinking with the materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach to produce dialectical materialism. This shift from a concern with ideas to what many social scientists would consider a more grounded materialistic approach is what makes the dialectical thinking of Marx, not Hegel, most relevant to social theory.

Dialecticians take a relational view of the social world. Their focus is not on any one aspect of that world in isolation, but rather on the relationships among and between various elements, as well as on the totality of social relations and its relationship to those components. Furthermore, they emphasize reciprocal relations among and between the various elements. There is a heightened attention to the ways in which effects flow back and forth between the various entities involved in a relationship, rather than a focus on one-sided causal explanations. This sense of reciprocal relations also explains why a dialectical approach does not see clear-cut dividing lines between social phenomena. Objects in the social world are not seen as existing independently, but rather as blending into one another in innumerable and frequently imperceptible ways.

Another feature of the dialectic is a concern not only with the present relationships between social phenomena but also with how they relate to both past and future social phenomena. This means that objects in the social world exist in a dialectical relationship to one another across both space *and* time. For example, in addition to outlining what he saw to be the dialectical relationship between capitalists and the proletariat (in a dialectical fashion, exploitative actions taken by the capitalists serve to make it increasingly likely that the proletariat will eventually come to rebel and overthrow the capitalist economic system), Marx was also concerned with dialectically tracing the history of changes in society from primitive through feudal to capitalist society. While he shied away from utopian blueprints of the future communist society, Marx did see it emerging dialectically out of both the advances (for example, technological) and downfall of capitalist society. Thus, there is a dialectic between capitalism and communism, and the latter could not emerge without the former. (Of course, history seemed to prove Marx wrong as communist societies, or at least those that purported to be communist, emerged in societies such as Russia and China that had never been capitalist, while it did not emerge in the advanced capitalist societies such as Germany and the United States.) However, such considerations of the future do not imply any inevitabilities. Indeed, the very nature of dialectics, and continuing dialectical relationships, precludes the possibility of *any* inevitabilities.

Dialecticians are interested in the relationships between actors, between structures, and between actors and structures. Although Marx eventually focused a greater amount of attention on social structures, he still manifested a great concern with the relationships between actors and the ways

in which they were affected by and were able to affect the large-scale social structures on which he focused.

Another critical component of the dialectic is a concern with conflict and contradiction. Dialecticians do not see social phenomena as inevitably weaving nicely together or, as a structural functionalist might, as being different organs of the same social body. Instead, they view various aspects of society in constant conflict with one another. Each aspect of society, as well as the society as a whole, is riddled with contradictions. Thus, as mentioned above, Marx saw a contradiction in capitalism between capitalists and proletariat and that contradiction would be the system's eventual undoing; the capitalists were creating their own gravediggers. In other words, what is necessary for capitalism to succeed (exploiting the working class) is also what is necessary to undo capitalism (creating the conditions that would lead the working class to revolt).

Another aspect of dialectical logic, and Marxism more generally, that sets it apart from many other modes of analysis, especially a Weberian approach, is a belief that values should be an integral component of any research endeavor. Many scientists, including sociologists and social theorists, believe that their work should be "value-free." That is, they do not feel that larger social values, or their personal feelings or opinions, should affect their study of the social world. On the other hand, Marx did not believe that it was desirable, or even possible, to separate values or his own personal feelings from his work. He thought that the best research would come from social scientists who were the most passionate about their topics of study. Even Weber, who is most often associated with the idea of value-freedom, believed that social analyses should be "value-relevant." That is, they should relate to the pressing issues and widely shared beliefs of the day.

Overall, the dialectic is a useful way of thinking about the social world, and it offers a number of approaches that stand in distinction to, and offer advantages over, the more widely used and broadly accepted causal mode of thinking.

— Michael Ryan

See also Capitalism; Historical Materialism; Marx, Karl; Marxism

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