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Piotr Chomczynski
Lodz University, Poland

Book Review:

The Deviant Mystique. Involvements, Realities and Regulation
by Robert Prus and Scott Grills. Preager Publishers, 2003, 313 pp.

Authors of "*The Deviant Mystique. Involvements, Realities and Regulation*" investigate the problem of social infamy. Robert Prus and Scott Grills disclose conditions that influence the process of constructing deviance as a public issue. They examine deviance as a socially constructed phenomenon. Prus and Grills distinguish major actors and roles that they play in deviance-making process. They write: "Our objective, thus, is to generate a sustained focus on the ways in which people define, experience, and act toward deviance within the many arenas of activity that constitute the human community" (from Preface).

Before we discuss details of the Authors' standpoint let us see how they define the term deviance.

[...] the term deviance refers to any activity, actor, idea, or humanly produced situation that an audience defines as threatening, disturbing, offensive, immoral, evil, disreputable, or negative in some way. At the very heart of this standpoint is the notion that nothing is inherently good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate. Rather, deviance is social in its very definition, or conversely, deviance is brought into existence only when something is so defined by an audience. (p. 3)

As we can see the problem of deviance is here embodied in definitions produced by social actors. Their definitions and interpretations of situation that initiate reactions constitute the status of someone who is going to be named deviant. Prus and Grills represent the standpoint totally different from the one of Robert K. Merton. His influential book *Social Theory and Social Structure* played important role in deviance perception among not only sociologists but also other people less connected with sociology. Merton connected deviance with breaking the major, socially rooted rules that are undisputed and common agreement prevails towards them. Somebody who "crosses the line" is almost automatically defined as a deviant, because being deviant is identified with not obeying the basic norms. Deviance is rather negative to society functioning because it stimulates its disintegration and lack of social integration. This standpoint was rather popular in these times and shaped social definitions of people whose behavior did not correspond with common agreement.

Prus and Grills use an interpretative approach that enables them to look at the problem of deviance from the level of interactions. Interactions lie under the process

of labeling and perceiving someone as deviant. Their standpoint is very similar to the point of view represented by Orrin Klapp in his article *The Fool as a Social Type* (1949), Harold Garfinkel who wrote about group labeling in *Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies* (1956) and of course Howard Becker, the Author of the famous book *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*. The Authors of *The Deviant Mystique* are naturally also very close to Erving Goffman's conclusions that he presented in *Stigma*. All the authors mentioned above assume that public image which people tie with someone must not necessarily be compatible with their real characteristic. The heart of deviance-making process is public picture that is constructed, managed, shaped by the audience that takes into account selected premises and links them with the chosen individual. Prus and Grills write: "we take the viewpoint that deviance or trouble does not exist as an objective or inherent state but rather reflects some audience's (person or group) definition of that situation" (pp. 38-39).

The Deviant Mystique consists of 5 parts and 14 chapters. Part I entitled *Conceptual Frame* includes 3 chapters. The first one *Encountering the Deviant Mystique: Fascination, Indignation, and the Dramatization of Evil* refers to the problem of deviance as a social phenomenon. In this chapter there is also presented symbolic interactionism as a theoretical perspective that the Authors use investigating the problem of deviance. Prus and Grills convincingly connect basic premises of symbolic interactionism with the topic of their research goals.

In the second chapter *Intersubjective Accomplishment: Human Knowing and Acting* the Authors focus on basic premises that undergird the interactionist approach. There are also discussed qualitative methods with all their potentiality to show complexity of investigated reality. The Authors also provide the central conceptual frame and define the object of their interests.

Chapter 3 *Theaters of Operation. Deviance as Community Enterprise* presents "theaters in which members of the community operate and the ways in which they engage aspects of the deviance-making process" (p.10). The Authors touch the problem of how in various ways deviance can be experienced by people more or less engaged in constructing deviance. Moreover there is also shown problem of managing trouble. The Authors present strategies of dealing with deviance like: Spotting Trouble, Raising Consciousness, Identifying Deviants, Regulating Deviance, and Providing Secondary Aids. Prus and Grills also discuss the problem of Participating in Public Forums which seems to be crucial for spreading and directing deviance as a social issue. They distinguish its different ways such as: Interpersonal Exchange, Educators and Scientists, Politicians and Community Arenas, Religious and Secular Moralists, and Media Materials.

Chapter 4 *Defining Deviance: Perspective and Practises* and 5 *Labeling Deviants: Disrespectable Persons* belongs to the second part entitled *Designating Deviance*. The first mentioned chapter encompasses the preliminary matter of how people define something as deviant. The Authors investigate how influential social actors articulate, identify, promote and experience definitions of deviance within the human community. Under study are here strategies and conditions that help to define deviance. Chapter 5 presents following stages of designating deviance. It is focused on labeling deviance: "the ways in which particular people are implicated in the deviance-making process and the ways in which these targets manage the imputations, identities and reactions they encounter from others" (p.10).

The third part *Experiencing Deviance* consists of 4 chapters. The first one *Becoming Involved: Subcultural Mosaics and Careers of Participation* refers to

careers of people involved in some situations that others consider as disreputable or even shameful. The Authors suggest that people labeled as deviants live in subcultural groups that gather people that are similar because of their traits, activity, interests, hobbies or other social category “[...] while people [...] often do things on their own, great deal of deviance achieves its essence only through people’s involvements in one or other subcultural contexts.” (p. 98). The seventh chapter *Engaging Subcultures: Interactive Life-Worlds* focuses on how people engage in subcultural arenas such as acquiring perspectives, achieving identities, developing relationships, doing activities, experiencing emotionality, and participating in collective events. The next chapter presents the ways people make associations. Prus and Grills write about such aspects of the process of building groups like: the grouping process, establishing associations, objectifying associations, and encountering outsiders. The ninth chapter *Solitary Deviance: Alone with Others* touches the contrary problem of “people’s capacities for developing more isolated or idiosyncratic ventures, [...] the ways in which people experience deviance and disrespectability on their own” (p. 11).

Chapters 10 – 13 are located in the fourth part entitled *Regulated Deviance*. Chapter 10 *Encountering Trouble: Handling Deviance Informally* raises the problem of informal institutions that regulate, manage or direct deviance. “In actual practice, thus, a great deal of deviance encountered both outside and inside control agencies is handled informally” (p. 183). The eleventh chapter *Organizational Agendas: Maintaining Control Agencies* focuses on “control agencies or those persons and groups in the community who have undertaken the task of regulating deviance on a more official, systematic, and sustained basis” (p. 12). The Authors discuss the problem of institutional control of deviance that is professionally organized (police, prisons, regulatory agencies). The next chapter *Assuming Office: Control Agencies at Work* is devoted to professional activity of people responsible for regulation of deviance.

The emphasis, here, is on the ways that these officeholders attend to organizational objectives, adjust to existing organizational practices, maintain order within the agency, engage (and treat) the targets with whom they work, and strive for personal viability within somewhat precarious organizational context. (p.12)

The last chapter of this part *Experiencing Disinvolvement: The Problematics of Disengagement* touches the problem of how people define their situation. The Authors write about: involvement processes and context, disinvolvement processes, experiencing treatment, ambivalence and reinvolvement. In the last part *In Perspective* and also the last chapter *Studying Deviance: Ethnographic Examinations of Community* the Authors present deviance as an aspect of everyday life. They convince that an examination of deviance lets us better understand community life with all its complexity.

The Authors of *The Deviant Mystique* investigate deviance surprisingly carefully. Each aspect of deviance-making process is discussed in detail. They examine activity of social actors, motives that direct their strategies and also contexts within which they operate. Moreover symbolic interactionism used here as an adopted standpoint enables them look at very sophisticated problem of deviance from little distance, “frog’s perspective” as George Simmel called it. Thanks to that we can see from an interactional level how social actors create deviance. We can

follow the strategies and contexts of interactions and their role in a total outcome. In my opinion this book is useful in proper understanding of human communities complexity and processes that occur there and constitute its activity. *The Deviant Mystique* seems to be right book both for people who have contact with problem presented here but also those who are interested in these issues just theoretically.

References

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