

The Sociological Perspective on Evil

My purpose in the writings that follow is to discuss whether evil can be subjected to sociological analysis and, more precisely, whether it can be studied with the existing methods of social science as an extension of the study of deviance and social control. Put as a query, I ask whether our understanding of deviance can be deepened or broadened by the inclusion of evil as part of its subject matter. In short, does the study of evil help complete the sociological account of what happens when there is deviance.

For some sociologists, perhaps most, such questions will appear to be regressive, or a circling back to an earlier era of thinking when a number of writers more or less took the existence of evil for granted. I refer here to turn-of-the-century books of social reformers in which they wrote of the "social evils," such as prostitution, gambling, and drunkenness, sometimes explicitly attributing the latter to the "demon rum."

In contrast to these writings, those of persons identified with the social science movement of the post-Civil War period reflected growing commitment to the philosophy of the early physical and biological sciences that rejected explanations of human behavior based on other than natural phenomena. The ascendancy of rationalism as the underlying premise of Western thought became so complete that references to supernatural explanations of events by social scientists were likely to put them at risk professionally.

There are particular reasons why present-day sociologists have avoided the topic of evil, apart from their allegiance to the rigors of the scientific method and its associated philosophy of

positivism. One is the prevalence of cultural relativism as a predominant perspective. An extension of this is the reluctance of sociologists openly to apply terms like "bad," "immoral," or "evil" except in descriptive or analytical contexts. Sociologists often have been at their best playing the role of the demystifier or the unmasker, who exposes the dilapidation and gaps between moral principles and human action. In so doing at times they have dealt heavily in irony and paradox, especially in discussions of deviance. Finally, sociologists have excluded possible concern with evil by conceiving social control and deviance in terms of rules, rule compliance, and conformity, which while relevant to the study of bureaucratized society, scarcely allow comprehension of morality and evil in a broader universalistic sense.

Despite the formidable hindrances to the enterprise, a small number of sociologists have boldly confronted the subject of evil both as a substantive issue as well as analytical. Among the very first, if not the first, sociologists to write on evil as a distinctive topic was E. A. Ross, whose work *Sin and Society* appeared in 1907. For Ross (p. 98), evil was essentially the equivalent of sin, something he defined as "conduct which harms another." Sin, he said, is not self-limiting, as is the case with vice; hence, "Satan's main onset today is on the side of sin rather than vice."

However outdated the post-Victorian Ross's words sound today, nevertheless, his empirical referents for sin were surprisingly modern, being directed at the lack of accountability and control of corporations—a condition that, he said, "transmits the greed of investors but not their conscience" (p. 102). Seeking to fashion a corporate morality, he spoke of monopoly as a "fiduciary sin," along with such practices as rebates, dummy directors, flaunting of factory laws, insurance thievery, inoperative mine inspection laws, and laws for tenement reform.

Ross was essentially a social critic/reformer perturbed by the depredations of the so-called robber barons of the time and their large-scale business and industrial combinations. In a sense his tactics were like those of General Custer's, who "rode to the sound of the guns." His theoretical premises came from French social psychology, which opposed the individual to society as "anti-social" and needing socialization into its fabric. Like some

of the other sociologists of his time, he was little deterred from designating evil and evildoers as he saw them and urging their social control.

More than half a century passed before any sociologist appeared in print to argue for the creation of a sociology of evil. The first such publications in what might be called the modern era were written by Kurt Wolff for Italian and French journals (1964, 1967); his English statement came in 1969, "For a Sociology of Evil," published in a psychological rather than a sociological journal. Among other concerns Wolff stressed the need to study alienation and the misdirection Weber's (1958) idea of a value-free society had given to sociology.

In 1978 came the first lengthy discourse on evil *per se* by Stanford Lyman: *The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil*. While the background rationale in this, and to a lesser extent in Wolff's papers, did not exclude concern with the corporate misdoings condemned as evil by Ross, it nevertheless changed to reflect existentialist misgivings about the mission of sociology itself and to feature the alienated nature of the human condition engendered by a corporate-based world. Thus Lyman charged sociology with lacking an awareness and a language for confronting the ubiquitous erosion of meaning resulting from the rationalizing, "scientizing," and bureaucratizing of human activity.

Lyman (1978, viii) does not match Ross's crisp definition of sin. Rather he stated that "Evil is let loose whenever the capacity to criticize is subverted." He then calls evil a "structure of alienating sins." The reader must then find definitions or delineations for each of the seven deadly sins in succeeding chapters of the book, some of which are clear, some necessarily ambiguous.

Overall a reader of *The Seven Deadly Sins*, although likely to be enchanted by the author's lyrical style and erudition, is left uncertain as to his intent. One cannot tell whether the writer is claiming the existence of an objective standard of good by which evil can be judged or merely describing social dramas of good and evil with the implied need to look behind the dramas to decipher true evil. This may follow from a reluctance by Lyman to abandon his "sociology of the absurd" perspective (1989), or it may simply be the inability to rise above one of

the salient features Lyman attributes to the "mood" of modern dramas of evil, namely its ambiguity.

A heady conclusion from reading *The Seven Deadly Sins* is that the closer one gets to the subject of evil, the finer its analysis, the more ambiguous it becomes. As I will try to show, this inheres in the process of its ascription and the sociocultural context out of which any formulation or imputation of evil comes.

Other attributes of emergent evil in modern society that have been recognized by sociologists are those of scale and impersonality. They acquire their meaning from the large numbers of Jews and ethnic minorities put to death by German Nazis in World War II and cases of wholesale massacres of civilians during the Viet Nam War. Everett Hughes (1971, 1962) contended with the question, somewhat obliquely put, why otherwise "good" people in Germany tolerated the operation of the death camps. In answer to his own question he concluded that the problem revolved around "dirty work" and implied that in various forms and degrees it exists in all societies. It exists because ordinary people avoid thinking and talking about such things lest group solidarity be threatened. Moreover the greater the social distance between ordinary people and those the object of dirty work, the more likely an implicit mandate will be given to those who carry it out, in this case persons who are isolated from groups other than their own. Hughes also stated that dirty work people tend to be social failures.

Whether Nazi organizations and administration of the holocaust were staffed primarily by social failures or evil people is a debatable point, considering the wide variety of workers. Non-Germans and victims themselves, including Jews, worked in collecting, transporting, and killing victims of the holocaust. Beyond this is the nagging question of whether persons playing roles and obeying directives in large-scale organizations can be shown to work by evil intent or to commit manifestly evil acts. This is the painful theme encountered in Hannah Arendt's (1965, p. 287) study of the Eichman trial in Israel, which she subtitled *A Report on the Banality of Evil*:

when I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on a strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which

stared one in the face at the Eichman trial. Eichman was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind to determine with Richard III, "to prove a villain."

Lewis Coser (1969), who was equally concerned with Nazi genocidal projects, proposed a somewhat different solution to Hughes's query about the tolerance of evil by presumably good people. This was "structured visibility," which hides or protects people from sensual overload. He posited the existence of limits to the "span of sympathy" ordinary people have for remote victims of evil. Finally, Coser offered the idea that apocalyptic evil of such massive scope implies that victims "must have done something" to deserve such treatment. However, he does not tell us whether such reactions are themselves evil, merely how they make evil possible.

Sanctions for Evil

What Hughes, Coser, and some other sociologists were saying is that, given certain circumstances and beliefs, almost any human being is capable of ignoring, minimizing, or tolerating the evil practices of others. In a somewhat different way, Arendt specified how evil can result from the dispassionate, workaday motivations and ambitions of bureaucrats. A line of thought less passive than that of the sensory-removed audience and the mindless bureaucrat runs through another publication of a group of social scientists that includes sociologists, namely *Sanctions for Evil* (1971). This develops a common theme that doers of evil actually are sanctioned by other members of society who negatively evaluate and dehumanize other groups of people.

Among the sociologists contributing to the volume, Smelser (1971) somewhat legalistically defined evil as the use of coercion, force, and violence that exceeds institutional or legal "limits," or their use by persons without authority to do so. The result is destructiveness. A condition necessary for such an eventuality is a belief that some enemy is evil, intelligent, and omnipotent. At the same time the perpetrator of evil holds to a belief in his own omnipotence and moral superiority. Illustrations are Christian

militancy, Nazism, and vigilantism. Precipitation of evil follows from its legitimation, authorization, and rationalization.

Granting its conceptual symmetry, the most that can be concluded from all of this is that evil (read destructiveness) is the outcome of the process of collective behavior and group conflict. It remains unclear as to what is gained by introducing the term evil into such analysis, especially since the author gives no standard for determining what the limits of force are. Similarly no standard is given for judging the meaning of "unauthorized" actions involving destruction, such as the Boston Tea Party by revolutionary Americans.

Troy Duster (1971), by assuming that the absence of guilt is necessary for evil action, outlines a hypothetical state that, in the manner of Garfinkel's (1956) "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," proposes "Conditions of a Guilt Free Massacre." He sets down six such conditions, ranging from public faith in the organizational arm of violence, downgrading of individual grounds for action, fragmentation of distributive responsibility in organizations, secrecy, a vulnerable population, and developing a motivation for massacre.

Duster somewhat perversely raises but does not answer the questions about the corporate responsibility for destructive actions. He leaves the issue unclear as to whether groups can experience guilt or be held guilty. In sum he merely shows how a number of people can be shown to have massacred others without a pronouncement of guilt or a sense of guilt in the acting persons. While Duster's piece is a plausible enough formulation, whether it fits the actual history of massacres, he does not question nor even discuss. Off hand a significant exception comes to mind in the massacres of White settlers by Native Americans, who were highly individualistic in war-making and without much if any corporate organization in Duster's sense of the term.

A somewhat more Olympian sociological analysis of evil by Robert Bellah (1971) looks to the communal foundations of American society in a search for the sanctions for evil. These he finds in intrapsychic repression connected with the exclusion or rejection of some groups by others, originally on simple religious grounds, later in history on the high moral grounds of

religious piety, and finally on the basis of economic success or failure. Bellah readily admits that all societies have a "dialectic of inclusion and exclusion" but argues that this can be overcome by creating a new open society and a "new man." Bellah is forgiving towards the principals in the killing of villagers in the Viet Nam War, allowing that "we too might have acted as they did." However, not so for those who "failed to create punitive sanctions" and take action against the evildoers.

A conclusion from the writings of sociologists so far cited is that they tend to take the nature of evil for granted or see it broadly as harm or destructiveness. As such, evil emerges as a product of universalistic intrapsychic processes associated with group identities and the projection of primitive aspects of the person onto scapegoat groups. The concomitant destructiveness is "sanctioned," abetted, or even forgiven by humanization, fragmented responsibility, sensual overload, low visibility, or by lack of sanctions against evil acts.

While these sociologists concerned with evil do not quite endow man the social animal with original sin, they make it clear that given certain sociopsychological circumstances he is prone to evil—a kind of "there but for the grace of God go I" perception or one of "it could happen to anyone." In a paradoxical way they are caught up in the positivism of conventional methods of analysis, and, by finding causes for given behavior, inescapably mitigate the evil they identify and decry. They humanize that which has to be dehumanized to be evil. In so doing, however sophisticated their approaches, they do little to dispel the cloud of ambiguity that has hung over the subject for centuries.

The Roots of Evil

I prolong my critical search of the sociological literature on evil to include the work of Ervin Laub (1989), *The Roots of Evil*, who, although writing from a psychological vantage point, incorporates a variety of societal, cultural, and group concepts in his comparative study of mass killings. This has the special merit of concentrating on data with a known provenance from which relevant concepts are derived. As the title of the book suggests, Laub writes with an eye to the moral history or evolution of

human violence in its collective aspects. Laub says that individuals have potentialities for good and for evil, likewise groups. The direction they take is influenced by various factors: economic hardship, nationalism, ideology, motivations of perpetrators and bystanders, cultural self-concepts, and others.

Laub concedes that evil is not a scientific concept and that it has no agreed-on meaning, but that the idea of evil is part of the human heritage. A *non sequitur* nevertheless follows: "the essence of evil is the destruction of human beings." Added to this is the idea that the evil of group violence has a potential for growth much like a geometrical progression. In common with sociologists previously cited, Laub has some logical difficulties with the relationship of individual and group motivation but overrides these by saying that groups are like individuals so far as the optional development of good and evil is conceded.

Starkly considered, Laub's work does little more than append the term evil to its title and make some passing contextual references to it. It is, properly seen, a study of mass killings, defensible and praiseworthy as scholarship, but not as an understanding of evil. While an admitted feature of evil is incomprehensibility, Laub obviously believed that it can be made comprehensible. Thus he, along with sociologists, knowingly or unknowingly removed part of its core meaning.

Evil as Transcendence

Two sociologists have moved perceptibly away from broad causal explanations of evil to focus on its special socio-psychological concomitants as they relate to deviance and crime. In so doing they reflect ideas traceable to philosophy and literature, particularly French literature, that revolve around problems of validating human existence and repairing attenuated identity.

Shoham (1979) in his work *Salvation Through the Gutters*, draws heavily on psychodynamic psychology and myths along with ideas from Nietzsche to account for the evil dimensions of human acts. Such deviance is transcendental or heroic in nature and follows from "ontological prodding of the self" in persons whose lives are devoid of meaning and reality. Negative

acts, such as murder or arson, because of their basic ontological significance, give structure, meaning, or social substance to eroded identity. "Playing evil roles" in this way becomes an act of self-definition.

The theme of Shoham's work, figuratively put in the title of his book, was among other things influenced by the literature now grown to legendary proportions surrounding the life of Jean Genet. Genet and his varied literary chroniclers more or less colluded to fashion a grand moral paradox or ethical inversion in which "betrayal, theft, and homosexuality" are converted into saintliness, allegedly due to the intensity and purity of motivation to pursue such actions. Genet thus sought to glorify depravity as a means to achieve a sense of sovereignty, to transcend his low status and spoiled identity as defined by ordinary moral standards.

Genet's depiction (Dort, 1979) of his emergent superdeviant motivations stands as a delight to remaining partisans of labeling theory:

In order to weather my desolation, when I withdrew more deeply into myself. I worked out inadvertently a rigorous discipline I have used ever since. So to every charge brought against me, unjust though it were, from the bottom of my heart I would answer "guilty!" No sooner had I pronounced the word or phrase signifying it, when I myself felt the need to become what I had been accused of being.

Shoham incorporates such material on Genet into a kind of existentialist explanation of deviance resulting from separation of the ego from others and the resultant striving for congruence between them. This takes the author on a wide-ranging discussion of the works of Jung and neo-Freudians, as well as of religion, philosophy, and criminology. There is little systematic use of empirical data in the discussions.

Crime as Doing Evil

The most striking and in many ways captivating challenge to conventional studies of crime appeared with Katz's (1988) volume

on *Seductions of Crime* subtitled *The Moral and Sensual Attractions of Evil*. If the author does not fly in the face of positivist criminology, he certainly grievously faults it for its sins of omission. In essence he claims that prevailing studies of crime are insufficient or poorly grounded. They lack empirical substance, primarily because they ignore "Evil . . . as lived in everyday realities of society"(p. 10).

However, evil *per se* is less featured in Katz's discussions than the subjective states or "foreground factors" which accompany, precede, or induce various crimes by reason of their seductive qualities. These vary depending on the nature of the crime subjected to analysis, consisting of "sneaky thrills," "magic of violence," "transcendence on the field," "sovereignty," "spirit of street elites," "transcendent fascinations," "moral dominance" or "moral advantage," "moral meanness," "dizzying moral emotions," and "cosmological control."

Katz stretches his term for evil considerably when he speaks of inspiring dread as "moral advantage" (p. 88 ff) gained by threat and violence. In his descriptions these sound much more like simple intimidation, menace, open defiance, or provocation. However, such characteristics are scarcely applicable to the "thrills" experienced by teenage shoplifters, since there is little or no interaction between them and their proprietary victims. Intimidation practiced by "street elites" on the other hand obviously requires victims or an audience. Likewise, "doing stickup" robbery by its nature requires victims as well as specific kinds of situations. But here there may be a technical or instrumental need for dominance in the sense of using skilled threats to obtain money or other valuables. Katz, however, argues in some detail against the stumbling block idea that robbers evolve their techniques rationally to any significant degree.

Katz properly calls attention to the importance of feelings, emotions, and nuances of meaning important to the commission of some but not all forms of crime, especially as they bear on the subjective needs of offenders which are satisfied by their violent actions. Many of these concomitants are implicit rather than explicit and have to be inferred from analysis of cases. Katz alleges (p. 11) to have used the method of analytic induction for

this purpose but unfortunately gives only his results rather than demonstrating stepwise his use of data in a critical fashion.

It is possible to apply alternative explanations to Katz's material on stickups by Blacks. One of these directs attention to the situational particulars of such crimes. A goodly proportion of the victims of robberies and robbery-homicides are known to the offender and occur in residences; likewise the two in many cases live in close proximity to one another. Such facts are consistent with Donald Black's (1983) theory of crime as social control in which offenders seek to redress specific wrongs done them by particular others.

It is true that Katz employs the concept of social control but primarily as a dramatic act by an offender to assert control over the chaos in his personal life, who like Shakespeare's protagonist "takes arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing seeks to end them." What Katz fails to explore is that the stickup offender in his reaction to chaos may be opting for the specific negative identity of jail or prison inmate by the seeming irrational manner in which he performs the crime. He may be responding to high stress levels that ultimately go with his "hardman" image or identity.

In such a case, maintaining the hardman identity grows unbearable not only because of stress but because the rewards of stickup over time lose their validating effects for the self. Katz inadvertently recognized this when he noted the instance of a harassed robber who expressed relief on his arrest and by citing Laurie Taylor's (1984, p. 180) observation from English research that some such "villains" at critical points harbor a death wish so that they deliberately increase their visibility and thereby the likelihood of detection. These interpretations clearly are not consistent with the idea that the stickup man is imposing "disciplined control" by force of his personality over his chaotic life situation. Rather he is openly engineering a change of identity as an escape from his present life situation.

All of this reflects an underlying problem with Katz's type of analysis in that he sees transcendence as a state or a condition that explains criminal acts. His analysis is synchronic rather than diachronic and overlooks the possibility now entertained by some writers (Olson & Rouner, 1981; Griffin, 1991) that

transcendence must be seen as a process, or possibly as part of a process. Thus the same actions may have different meanings at different stages of a process or of a criminal career. Unless this is known, a kind of time or "phase" bias may affect case history data.

In my older study (Lemert, 1972) of systematic check forgers I found that they moved through a cycle of rising stress coupled with declining satisfaction with their "fast" life style composed of indulgence in fine clothes, first-class air travel, staying at fine hotels, gambling, and intercourse with women available on short acquaintance. Mounting stress came from the ubiquitous threat of arrest, while declining life satisfaction resulted from compounding social isolation imposed by the forger's high mobility, use of false identities, and closely guarded interpersonal interaction precluding the intimate validation of self. Finally, identity itself eroded to a point of crisis, at which time arrest usually occurred. This allowed reidentification in socially realistic, albeit negative, terms.

At the time I did this research and writing I realized that the robber's ultimate problem was analogous to that of the committed check forger in that both become isolated, although for different reasons. Further study may very well reveal that the robber's reputation as a hardman or as "somewhat crazy" (Katz's term) gets fed by his intimidation of personal associates as well as by his crime victims; this, complicated by his violent treatment of women, magnifies his social isolation and alienation in his own world. Thus while it emerges in a different context, critical social isolation of the stickup criminal may have the effect of precipitating an identity crisis much as it does for the systematic check forger.

The brief comparisons I have drawn here between stickup criminals and systematic check forgers necessarily raise questions about the sufficiency of the concept of transcendence as an explanation of evil. There are certainly "sensual dynamics" associated with bad checks passing in the form of thrills, excitement, and gamelike exhilaration that qualify as transcendence. However, ordinarily there is no visible "moral advantage" over victims as with stickups because the bogus nature of the bad checks is discovered only later. Nor does the crime produce

violence; check forgers seldom if ever possess weapons and, in interviews, protest that they "could never hurt anyone." With passing time the check forger's active criminal life does not become chaotic so much as empty and meaningless.

Although transcendence is a recognizable aspect of the check forger's criminal experience, he does not typically have an antecedent illicit life style attributed by Katz to street elites, "bad ass niggers," and stickup criminals. According to my early findings, habitual check criminals often came from middle-class backgrounds and in some cases were highly educated. A final dissenting note is that while such criminals may have been attracted "sensually" to bogus check passing, they did not find it morally seductive; to the contrary they were typically perplexed and deeply perturbed by the moral contradictions between their crimes and their conventional upbringing.

From what I have said and what research likely would show, transcendence can be the concomitant of a number of different crimes that vary greatly in the extent to which they can be characterized as evil. Moreover the need for transcendence may be a secondary effect of a crime as well as a cause, a confusion best eliminated by following some form of process or extended, trouble case analysis.

Common knowledge grants that transcendence is not exclusively a feature of evil crimes; it occurs in the lives of conventionally moral persons. Mystical experiences happen to people making up the normal population in many cultures and, as William James (1977) wrote, are institutionalized as religious expression. Artists and musicians attest to "moments of truth" in their creative moods; linebackers on professional football teams are known to "go a little crazy" prior to game time, yet revert to peaceful family life afterwards. Indeed even professors may transcend their sedate milieus, as in the case of Erving Goffman, whom Bennett Berger (1971, p. 136) referred to as pursuing his observations and writings with "demonic detachment."

While Katz fathered a host of fresh ideas for the study of crime, he made no effort and did little to clarify the idea of evil; if anything, like others writing on the topic, he has added ambiguity to the term. A pertinent query is why he chose to use the word in the title of his book and intermittently in his

discussions, for in likelihood they could have been put just as well without invoking the notion of evil. Questions of this sort turn attention to the author's purpose in writing his book, his mission, if you will, and to the audience he addresses, as well as to the larger purpose he conveyed by his writing style. It shifts attention away from evil *per se* to its rhetoric.

The Rhetoric of Evil

Lyman's writings on sin and evil stirred little lasting interest among sociologists or among those in its most relevant area, deviance and criminology; but in one respect they were ahead of their time. I refer to his urgent call for a rhetoric of evil. As he put the matter (1978, viii):

we lack a rhetoric of criticism for social evils . . . a rhetoric that grasps the structures of consciousness, the phenomenology of history and the dramaturgy of contemporary scenes. . . . Such a new rhetoric . . . would take evil as a topic in its own right, seeking to uncover its historical backgrounds, describe its social forms and architectonics, and examine its supports and strengths.

It is only recently that sociologists and researchers in the field of communications have given a "new turn" to rhetoric or returned to its study with new perspectives. In the past, rhetoric suffered ill repute among scientists, who often treat it with derision or as an antithesis to logic, reason, and objective communication. Current rhetorical studies, while focusing on how best to persuade an interested, informed, and judicious audience, now analyze written and oral materials to decipher how they are qualified and given epiphenomenal meaning by their format and style (Simon, 1989; Hunter, 1990).

Gusfield (1988, 1987, 1981), for example, portrayed how a kind of special rhetoric develops as part of the culture of social problems, such as drunk driving, but was content merely to point to its deficiencies. Lyman (1978) seemingly is the only sociologist self-consciously to undertake the task of creating

a rhetoric of evil. Whether he succeeded is dubious, and if he did, it was a fractured rhetoric.

A careful reading of Lyman's discussion of the various sins of mankind shows that he employed two vocabularies, one historical and morally descriptive, another conceptualizing such things as overeating, addiction to drugs, and alcoholism with terms taken from texts on deviance and abnormal psychology. The "rhetoric" appears in captions that combine the two vocabularies, such as *Gluttony and Social Structure*, *The Social Construction of Gluttony*, and *Absolution from the Sin of Gluttony: Strategies of Excuse and Justification*. [See ch. 6] The text itself is threaded with sermonizing frequently in the manner of Old Testament prophets, fittingly conveyed by the last word in his book, "Amen."

Evil as Metatext

Lyman's lone voice on the subject does not mean that sociological compositions are so sanitized by the scientific method as to be barren of any reference to evil, nor indeed, that scientific writing more generally avoids the attractions of evil—to loosely use Katz's phrase. Quite a few years ago Merton (1949) and later Kuhn (1962) demonstrated that science has a moral structure that is affected by social influences, and that scientists tend to accept or reject ideas and findings based on their congruence with paradigms legitimized in their fields. A good deal of discussion in the scientific field thus takes the form of strategic debates over the moral validity of assumptions, definitions, models, and perspectives (Toulmin, 1958).

Insofar as the human sciences are in a preparadigmatic stage or in a state of unresolved conflicting perspectives, much of the writing follows a persuasive mode rather than one of logical proof. Authors in these instances play the role of rhetor or animator as well as that of scientist, and they complicate their tests by introducing elements of multivocality and polyphony. This can be done through the use of epigraphs, metaphors, and allusions, and the restatement of opposing views in captions—all of which serve in varying degrees as a metatext.

The metatext of evil on close scrutiny may be no more than implicit in the way in which discussions are framed. Whether referents of evil are implicit or explicit, they track discussion at a level of the unprovable, the contingent, the uncertain, and the judgmental. The rhetoric of evil more than any other draws upon the "resources of ambiguity" in language because it touches and activates deeply rooted emotions and dialectical forms of thought.

La Piere (1938) pointed this out many years ago in his work on *Collective Behavior* in which he attributed a "universal habit of human thinking about group conflict." This he saw as a contest between heroes and villains. Nor did La Piere hold scholarly lecturers immune from this tendency to dramatize issues as persons in conflict in order to motivate their audiences. One way this is done is to dramatize deviance as a "social problem story . . . [that] is simply a tragedy in which the system is made out to be the villain" (p. 243).

More recently a somewhat similar point of view surfaced in assertions that rhetorically considered, classical sociology variously depicts human societies as being in a state of vague malaise that needs explanation. For example, Davis (1986) contends that the seductive appeal of such theories lies in their ambiguity that allows the authors to play on the fears of readers. Each classic writer (Marx, Durkheim, Freud and Weber) regarded his fundamental factor—(alienation, unresolved Oedipal conflict, the division of labor or anomie, and rationality) as a "major source of evil in the modern world to the degree that it undermines the individual and society."

A current author, Stivers (1982), goes even further, by insisting that sociology in general harbors a concealed rhetoric of evil. This he attributes to the high technological development of American society and its displacement of rhetoric by media propaganda. In the process the social sciences have supplanted religion as sources of moral discourse. One way positivist sociology does this is by symbolizing evil as a social problem. In subsequent analysis Stivers confines himself to a limited study of deviance, namely the violation of sacred rules whose transgression makes up the content of evil. Presumably this is revealed in modern myths and rituals that symbolize order and chaos

of social life. While there is a laudable ingenuity in all of this, it is doubtful that the data of folk beliefs and the tenuous interpretations of structuralism are entirely adequate to clarify evil in our highly secularized society.

Even if what Stivers says about the positivists is true, it does not follow that in all instances they are loath to employ a rhetoric of evil openly in arguments for superiority of hard science methodology. Whether this is done without complicity or is a product of an inner Mephistophelean bargain is a question best left to the reader.

An instructive case of explicit utilization of rhetorical evil comes down from the annals of social problems literature, namely, in Hirschi's 1973 article on "Procedural Rules and the Study of Deviant Behavior." In retrospect this piece has always struck me as the thinly disguised polemic of an indignant positivist with a rhetorical no-tricks-barred stance, girded to do battle with the proponents of the then-dominant labeling theory of deviance and crime. The author's strategy targeted a number of methodological rules which, he averred, had arisen outside of science to serve unscientific needs and were destined to interfere with the sociological enterprise. These had become oral traditions of the deviance field and the hidden agenda of graduate instruction.

Hirschi imputed his list of rules to a kind of contraculture methodology, headed by the injunction to avoid the "evil causes evil fallacy." Under this are to be found both upbeat and downbeat headings, such as "seek evil explanations of good phenomena," and near the bottom of them all, one highly provocative to the author, "appreciate deviance." This he likened to the "happy nigger" theory of race relations.

It is not difficult to find La Piere's (1938) good guys and bad guys in Hirschi's article. The bad guys are labeling theorists, who used nontheory and antitheory to undermine and threaten sociology with destruction. The good guys continued to defend "traditional" or "conventional" logic and methods, with heed to empirical evidence as the final arbiter of theoretical validity.

The puzzle here is why did Hirschi choose to paraphrase his argument with the rhetoric of evil. Ostensibly this was a reaction to the use of the same rhetoric by those he opposed, the bad

guys, in this instance Cohen (1970) and Matza (1969). Presumably Hirschi opted to meet them on their own ground and accepted evil metaphorically as a choice of weapons. Still more attractive to Hirschi, perhaps, was the opportunity to demonstrate virtuosity in determining whether the "liberal" deviance-loving proponents of science unruly labeling theory had any moral concerns at all. This was apparent in one passage of the article in which Hirschi, while denying the validity of the good-causes-evil hypothesis, nevertheless stated that if he had to choose between it and the evil-causes-evil hypothesis he would certainly choose evil. This certainly clouds, if not reverses, his earlier disclaimer that he did not want to defend evil.

While none would associate Hirschi, a leading figure in the field of criminology, with evil, nevertheless in this instance his arguments did reveal an impish quality. If evil *per se* held no attractions for Hirschi the same cannot be said for its rhetoric, which here obviously had a seductive appeal.

Is There a Prototype of Evil

From what has been written so far and more that could be written, it is fair to say that human beings, including sociologists, appear to have a need for a language, rhetoric, and even a belief in the existence of evil. This is a precarious point of departure for discussion in that it invites reification and tautology, saying that because people widely recognize evil there must be a need to do so. It also entangles thinking in shopworn structural or structure/function social theory, in essence that, given said needs, institutional forms arise to satisfy the needs and merge into a self-renewing system.

The difficulty with such theory is that real-life people have to develop such institutions, meaning that they must first recognize their "need," make choices to do something about it, get themselves organized, and discover the means to do so. But alas, people do not always do this—sometimes they mistake their need, or they make the wrong choices, or they find the effort too great, or they simply lack the means to pursue their purposes. Sometimes people do without cultural techniques that might make their lives more convenient, fulfilling, and free of

anxiety. Sometimes they get carried away by their ideas and beliefs and devise patterns of action that create more problems than they solve. This may be especially true of evil insofar as it is a product of the efforts to exterminate it.

It is with these caveats in mind that I return to the captioned query above as to the existence of a prototype of evil. This concept comes from older field research initiated by Evans-Pritchard (1968) on witchcraft among the Azande people in Southern Sudan. This study along with Kluckhohn's (1944, p. 107) work on Navaho witchcraft has figured prominently among anthropological discussions of magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Evans-Pritchard termed Azande witchcraft a prototype of evil because it was: "A planned assault by one man on another . . . a witch acts with malice aforethought . . . hatred, jealousy, envy, backbiting and slander go ahead and witchcraft follows after. A man must hate his enemy then bewitch him."

Evans-Pritchard's discussion of Azande witchery makes it clear that he spoke of belief only and that, as the Azande described it, no actual witchcraft existed among them. Nevertheless he regarded their beliefs and associated rituals as a prototype of evil because they pervaded the whole fabric of Azande society; they were the focus of ethical beliefs and the central fact of social control. People attributed all misfortunes as well as personal wrongs where the perpetrators were unknown, such as adultery, to witchcraft. Witchcraft, when "discovered," demanded vengeance.

Both Evans-Pritchard and Kluckhohn sought functionalist explanations of witchcraft: as a natural philosophy to account for misfortune, as an outlet for aggression, to affirm group solidarity by socially defining the "bad" or "malevolent," and for social control through scapegoating. It was also a means of gaining wealth and securing women, disposing of enemies, and gaining "center stage" for low-ranking persons. The two studies of witchcraft, along with a number of other mid-century studies of African witchcraft, revolved theoretically around structural concerns, or to use Kluckhohn's term (1944, p. 60), "structural dynamics." This, among other things, had to do with lineage stresses, their growth and decline, the power and affluence of chiefdoms, and maintenance of respect for elders affecting and affected by witchcraft.

The two notable early studies and some of the later studies, while highly informative and allowing comparisons, failed to generate cumulative replications, despite the attention they gave to social structures. The differences and inconsistencies brought to light in field studies of witchcraft in a number of African societies make the claim for the existence of a prototype difficult to sustain. Although Evans-Pritchard distinguished witchcraft from sorcery and magic among the Azande, the distinctions did not hold for other African societies. Nor did the apparent absence of the political use of sorcery hold true for other African peoples, as for example, among the Basuto in the first part of the nineteenth century when ritual murder and sorcery were practiced for purposes of political advancement (Jones, 1951).

Gluckman (1965) noted in a commentary that the Azande recently had been relocated by the Sudan government at the time of Evans-Pritchard's study, which may have accounted for their unusual pattern of lacking accusations of witchcraft within the lineal kinship group of the Azande.

Evans-Pritchard offered only passing references to the reactions of the Azande to colonial laws that forbade vengeance killings and compensation damages for witchcraft. This in retrospect was an unfortunate omission, in the light of reactions attributed to East African natives among whom such laws generated social tensions, leading them to believe that the State had aligned itself on the side of evil.¹

Another difficulty that denies easy acceptance of the Azandes' witchcraft as a generic model for evil is the apparently minimal influence of religious beliefs in relation to witchcraft. On this point Harwood (1970) challenged the model, based on his comparisons with the Safwa and other societies in South Africa. He noted that for the Safwa, insofar as vital forces were believed to reside in ancestral spirits having a protective function, their interference into the affairs of the people could be either for good or bad.

1. Among those who give some attention to the consequences of colonial laws forbidding retaliation against those accused of witchcraft and against the practice of sorcery: Middleton and Winters (1963, p. 21); Fortune, Reo (1932, Appendix III. Administration and Society).