

# BOOK WEEK

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# WRITERS & ISSUES

## Crime and free will

By Amitai Etzioni

For decades sociologists have argued that crime is an illness not a sin, that criminals do not freely choose a life of larceny, prostitution or narcotics peddling. They have become criminals because society deprived them of the normal childhood and education in which moral principals are acquired, and denied them opportunities to satisfy their basic needs legitimately. In other words, society itself has been viewed as the primary source of anti-social behavior. In recent years, however, some social scientists have begun to attack this assumption, and to go beyond it to inquire just how free men are to set their own course, how responsible they are for their conduct, as measured against the extent their behavior is controlled by social, economic, and cultural conditions.

The question was reopened, typically, not by a crucial experiment—a discovery of a previously unknown tribe or some other new data—but by several speculative books. One is *Delinquency and Drift* (1964) by David Matza, a young sociologist from Berkeley. Matza calls attention to two facts that criminologists were aware of but had failed to take into proper account. The first is that juvenile delinquents frequently do "conform," that is, they act in keeping with the standards of their groups. The rebelliousness, aggressiveness, and impulsiveness commonly viewed as typical of delinquents are not characteristic of their relations with each other. In short, they can behave differently. Secondly, although delinquents violate some laws of society many of them also acknowledge the force of others. Matza asked a number of delinquents what they thought of a variety of petty crimes,

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such as mugging, auto theft, and stealing a bike, and found that only two per cent of them approved of committing them; 40 per cent were indifferent, and more than 50 per cent expressed either mild disapproval or indignation.

Matza extends his analysis of delinquent behavior to argue that while some men are freer than others, all of them have a significant measure of freedom: there are choices to be made, alternative norms of behavior to adopt—or to combine, as is often the case, by drifting from one to another. To support this position, he draws on evidence which has often embarrassed sociologists, that people who come from the same neighborhood, culture, even gang, eventually lead quite different lives; thus, their future, in some part, depends on what they themselves make out of their past and their opportunities.

A further step is taken by Peter Blau in *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964). Like George C. Homans's *Social*

*Behavior*, Blau's book uses models developed by economists to explain social behavior as a deliberate course chosen by a calculating, well-informed, self-oriented ego. Thus people give gifts, according to this analysis, in the hope of receiving something tangible in return or to enhance their prestige. If gifts do not bring a return, few will be given. The image of man that develops is that of an agent who is free to pursue or desist from a mode of behavior in keeping with the calculation of his interest. He is in charge.

For the conventional school of sociological interpretation, love is the classic example of irrational uncalculating commitment, but in the economic model, it emerges as a cool transaction. Peter Blau explains that "a man's intrinsic attraction to a woman (and hers to him) rests on the rewards he expects to experience in a love relationship with her . . . The ease with which he obtains the rewards of her love, however, tends to depreciate their value for him . . . How valuable a woman is as a love object to a man depends to a considerable extent on her apparent popularity with other men . . . A woman who

readily gives proof of her affection to a man, therefore, provides presumptive evidence of her lack of popularity and thus tends to depreciate the value of her affection for him." Gone is the force of passion, sexual and platonic, gone is the mother-image that the woman is supposed to evoke and satisfy. Masochism and sadism are beside the point. Girls hand out just enough affection to build up their popularity rating and to avoid undermining it; and boys on their way home, ponder the latest reading of their status before they decide to call again. Love is like any other "possession," and dealing with it is like another deal.

If Blau has made a long step forward toward restoring to sociology the image of a free man, Karl Deutsch has made a leap. In his most recent book, *The Nerves of Government* (1965), Deutsch attempts to renovate concepts such as consciousness and free will, which social scientists have considered to be "metaphysical" or meaningless, by applying principles that have been developed in the field of cybernetics to the study of social behavior. He views the political process, for example, as made up of

messages sent from a center, "feedbacks" of information to the center, snags due to "overloading" of communication lines and of switchboards. This terminology gives Deutsch's book a hardheaded, scientific tone. Freedom enters on a computer tape, consciousness is defined as "a collection of internal feedbacks of secondary messages," and man is viewed as a super computer who is able to alter his own directives "internally."

It may be argued, of course, that the "internal" forces themselves have been previously shaped by the external processes of environment. This would leave man about as free as a computer which has been taught to occasionally change its own programs (which many of them can do). But Deutsch goes a step further to reintroduce the concept of *autonomous* free will. In his harsh lingo, free will is redefined as "internally labelled decisions . . . proposed by the application of data from the system's present or future." Translated, this means that human character is not determined by outside pressures (the

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past data), for Deutsch stresses that these are "internally rearranged." Man is capable of creativity (molding a new pattern out of these rearrangements) and of initiative (embarking on a new course of action without an external challenge or stimuli).

Such freedom is not absolute since the mechanisms we use for these internal rearrangements are themselves influenced by our social environment, for instance, by language and education. But Deutsch, like Matza and Blau, implies that these external influences still permit a significant degree of individual freedom of choice, one which provides a new basis for a social scientist's view of man.

Two earlier observations by sociologists fit into this renewed emphasis on personal freedom. The first is that most social pressures to conform are localized and that men in modern society are able to choose their social environment, and hence the social forces to which they accommodate themselves. While only saints and the insane can live without belonging to one or more social groups, and to be secure in it requires following to some degree the precepts of the group, the question of *which* group to belong to is much more open to individual choice. The options remain limited: few Negroes as yet can move into white groups (and vice versa). But a person who leads a "deviant" life—let us say, a homosexual—can move to a neighborhood where his behavior would be quite acceptable and can limit his intimate social contacts to those that share his sexual preference. Similarly, those who find small towns and suburbia too oppressive can move to the city, or to less socially oppressive suburbs. To be sure, there is usual-

ly a cost, but the option to pay it and be freed from any particular conformity, or to refrain from paying and submit to group norms, is a choice many members of modern society make—and often the cost is not inordinate.

Secondly, sociologists in recent years have stressed that most men are under the pressure of several sets of forces which are only partially compatible. The demands of a wife's family and one's own, those of friends at work and friends in the neighborhood, are not identical. Insecurity in this respect is mainly a problem for the conformist who seeks to live up to the demands made by all comers. To the more self-directed man they provide a realm of choice between alternative pat-

terns, some closer than others to his tastes, preferences, and beliefs.

Most people's freedom is sharply limited because they are unwilling to pay the price it requires. Still it is important to observe that laws of society, unlike those of nature, *can* be disregarded, and that the decision to comply is ultimately individual, and in this sense, free. Under the spell of group norms and pressures, lulled into conformity by television and other mass media, the average citizen may be unaware of his freedom, and this is precisely what the new sociological writings seek to counter. What the philosophers first argued is again becoming a proposition in social science—the final word is with man, each man, criminals included.

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