In traditional social thought and social practice deviance has placed itself outside politics, secured in a neat division between ‘welfare matters’ on one side, and ‘political science’ on the other. It is a state of affairs which David Matza found ‘hardly believable’: that one could conceive of the regulation of disorderly behaviour and crime independent of the workings of the state.¹

The 1960s announced a partial surrender of these firm boundaries. The misfit paradigm exploited a number of the thinning spots in this division of politics and welfare and argued the essentially moral and political character of deviance-control. Anti-psychiatry pointed to the need for an engagement with the political undergirdings of psychiatry and the ideology of humane, liberal social-welfare programmes. Social work itself underwent a crisis of some magnitude. The glitter to this abrupt shift in social thought was provided by the counter-culture and the re-discovery of the Frankfurt School: in the ‘personal politics’ of the New Left the control and counter-control of human experience and sensibility became the most significant political act. The benign face of social welfare emerged as a candidate for political dissection: it was seen, that is, as a political agent. Within the convergences of the misfit paradigm the personnel of the welfare apparatus become the ‘brain police’.

The political alternatives embodied within this perspective were never altogether clear: a characteristic of this convergence is that it throws together in a political soup snatches of Marx, a romantic mysticism, some shreds of democratic pluralism, and a politically untutored wish to better the condition of all people, everywhere. Notably absent from the politics of the confluence of the misfit
paradigm was any concern with piecemeal social engineering. It was, and is, a utopian movement of thought: the power to imagine an alternative way of life was its political engine; the deviant imagination, which 'takes the law into its own hands', was an inspiration which had stepped outside one-dimensionality.

A characteristic of subjectivist politics is to imagine that there is a richer human sensibility to be found on the edges of society. A very short list of precedents in this tradition would include beats and bohemians; Norman Mailer’s hip ‘White Negro’ together with the ‘natural rhythm’ of the ‘real’ negro;² visionaries and lunatics whose madness goes close to genius, and whose simplicity approaches innocence; Red Indians, Eastern mystics, and the ‘proles’ of Nineteen Eighty-Four: here, the message of subjectivist politics runs, are the truly creative, sensitive, human people; here are men whose minds are not fettered by the constraints of reasonableness. The tradition, which is quite powerful in western thought, says little more than that: commonly, in subjectivist politics, inspiration from the edges of social order is held as a charm against the drudgery of the day. In the theoretical vocabulary of the New Left, however, the deviant imagination is given a more vigorous political articulation, and misfit sociology imagines that it has political heroes for its research data.

But ‘deviance’ is an object with a dual character. On the other side of its ‘inspirational’ qualities is a darker face: contemporarily viewed as a conglomerate of oddballs, misfits and inadequates, at earlier times in history one would have talked of the ‘submerged tenth’ of the population, the ‘residuum’, or the ‘dangerous classes’.

These two faces of ‘deviance’ are not at all separate. They intermingle and leave traces of themselves in each other. When Timothy Leary, self-acclaimed high priest of the underground imagination of the counter-culture, reflected on early experiments on the quasi-therapeutic use of the drug LSD with ‘the most dangerous uncontrolled criminals’,³ he formulated his notion of the freedom of the deviant imagination in the following terms. (It should be held in mind that Leary is in dialogue with critics who suggested that while disciplined minds [Huxley is the prototype] might find the drug-effects illuminating, undisciplined minds would burn out in total chaos, ‘like a zoo with all the cages open’.) I have retained Leary’s emphasis: