CHAPTER 4

Why People Deviate in Different Ways

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An Introductory Note on Justice and Deviant Behavior

The efforts of ordinary people to cope with the injustices that mark their lives often lead them to break the rules that otherwise regulate their behavior. But the rules they break on such occasions vary widely. Sometimes men and women try to cope with injustice by defying the rules on which economic and political power rests, and which are inextricably connected to the injustices they experience. On such occasions, rule violations have a transparent logic—as in the defiant struggles by blacks and women in contemporary American history. At other times, however, people turn to forms of rule-violating behavior—whether suicide, madness, addiction, theft—that leave intact the social legitimations and structures supporting injustice. This difference is obviously of great importance. Indeed, whether men and women break one rule or another has often determined the outcome of the perennial conflicts between poor and rich, between the powerless and the powerful, and has even changed history.

More generally, we think the most important victories for political freedom and economic decency have been won through periodic struggles by ordinary people against their rulers: by the risings of slaves against masters, serfs against nobles, peasants against princes, workers against industrialists. Here is the locus of justice. It wells up out of
the travails of ordinary people, and it acquires force as people resist the various forms of exploitation and oppression imposed upon them by their rulers.

None of this means that the oppressed are noble and their oppressors not. The impulse to justice does not stem from the class distribution of moral virtue, but simply from location in the class structure itself. Upend the hierarchy, make the underclass the overclass, and the result would likely be the same, the same oppression and exploitation. Nor does it mean that all struggles mounted from the bottom express values of justice, since they are sometime reactionary. Still, the striving for justice has its roots in the aspirations of the subordinated, whoever they may be, to curb the power of their rulers. Our preoccupation with the question of why people break the rules that they do is therefore part of our larger concern with struggles by subjugated people to influence the institutions that shape their lives.

The Theoretical Problem

The striking diversity of rule-violating behaviors presses the question upon us of why people deviate in the ways that they do. Revolutionary violence, madness, exotic movements of religious protest, suicide, addiction, theft, and murder are clearly behaviors that exhibit complex differences. Some are collective, others individualistic. Some are directed against the society, and some against the self. And each involves the violation of a different cluster of social norms. Surely the differences among these behaviors demand theoretical attention. Yet the question that has fascinated analysts is not how people deviate but why they deviate at all.

There are no theories that cope adequately with the question of why people violate different rules. Classical European "structural malintegration" theories, with their twin emphases on stress and weakened control as the preconditions of rule violation, are longstanding examples of theories that generate utter confusion about the question of why people deviate one way rather than another. Stress and weakened control have been linked by one analyst or another to virtually every form of rule-violating behavior. The same point can be made about the "nonstress" schools of thought that developed in American sociology, including the "cultural transmission," "differential association," "societal reaction," and "resource mobilization" schools, as well as English "critical theory." While the adherents of these schools have leveled a variety of criticisms against structural-functional theories, none of these criticisms point to the failure to ex-