Symfiliosi, Cyprus

From the SelectedWorks of Nicos Trimikliniotis

Spring April 5, 2010

Gauging Deviance: Capitalist modernity, deviance and human progress

Nicos Trimikliniotis

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/nicos_trimikliniotis/25/
Gauging Deviance: Capitalist modernity, deviance and human progress

Ari Sitas, Professor of Sociology, Cape Town University, heading the cluster Gauging the Cycles of Deviance

What follows is a paper which consists of extracts from a draft paper co-authored by Ari Sitas, Sumangala Damodaran, Wiebke Keim and Nicos Trimikliniotis. The draft is 81 pages long but I have included here only a 7 page long document. It will take at least two forms: a short part 6000 words for the book edited by Immanuel Wallerstein in Polarisations in the World-system and a full-fledged co-authored book.

The cluster Gauging the Cycles of Deviance is headed by Ari Sitas for the proposes of the project on Polarisations led by Immanuel Wallerstein: the idea us to re-examine various aspects/dimensions of polarisations over the last 500 years is a fascinating and ambitious project: ten aspects of the transformations/trends over this long period were chosen in order to examine how matters have been transformed during this time in the core, semi-periphery and periphery of the world-system.

The story of modernity starts from Don Quixote tilting at wind-mills. He was “deviant”. Mostly it has been told from the perspective of the bewildered mill-owners.

Cervantes in his classic novel made us aware of how adorable a deviant he was. Alas, “history” Walter Benjamin insisted, “is always written from the perspective of the victor.”(1991:46) The mill-owners, their admirers and scribes did win the day. We can understand perfectly the reasons why Don Quixote’s bones had to be broken often and how necessary it all was in the name of progress.

There were two choices for classes of the older societies- become a status group within the new world with its growing cash nexus and rhythms of accumulation or if recalcitrant and contrary become ready to get swept aside. The comfort with which knights turned into foraging conquistadors or military officers, the clergy into missionary adventurers, the Brahmins part of the educational and professional classes, the chiefs part of colonial administrations, the landed gentry into agrarian capitalists or landlords and so on was remarkable. All that was solid did not, at least in the edifice of power and authority, turn into air as Marx and Engels evocatively intoned in the Communist Manifesto but it was re-shaped and re-defined to play a major material and symbolic role in the last four hundred years.
As Michel Foucault ([1971] 1974: 46) reminded us too, Don Quixote was truly emblematic in another sense: his narrative was about the new form of representation in tension with the old forms of “resemblance” and “similitude”. His worldview was situated at the end of a Renaissance cosmology. We are informed that “his adventure forms a boundary: mark(ing) the end of the old interplay between resemblance and signs and contain(ing) the beginning of new relations. [...] he is] a diligent pilgrim breaking his journey before all the myths of similitude.” The world of Don Quixote had to give way to the world of Rene Descartes. (1)

Thereafter, in the 400 years that concern us here with the new scribes in power, the story becomes one of improvement and development. It is one of self-reflexivity and learning- of institutional differentiation and complexity, of more freedom and autonomy. Is it?

The story is with us still despite nuance and post-colonial elocution: international bodies such as Unesco or OECD provide us an upbeat version of progress- life expectancy is going up, per capita income is going up, educational levels are going up. Important currents in social science follow this narrative of human progress. According to Francis Fukuyama (1992) and Manuel Castells (1996) we can afford to be captives of progress - the first argues so due to the victory of liberalism and neo-liberalism- “a few ugly dictatorships left here and there”; the second argues so due to the information age, our interdependence demands a new ethic of co-existence despite enormous forms of social exclusion.

It is hardly strange to define individuals, groups or collectivities as “deviant”. Those who had the power or confidence to do so have been doing so throughout history. It is not strange too to have bouts of panic about deviance or deviants or about the conditions that produce such phenomena or people. It is also not strange that the shrillness of the bouts of panic has been increasing with every perceived failure of the institutions that were supposed to deal with the problem, institutions that were supposed to eliminate it, control it and shape it.

Modern institutions have tried to cluster people in self-proclaimed unique ways to achieve both long-term and contingent goals. This is at the core of any sociological study. The factory, the mine, the plantation, the corporation, the state or local bureaucracy, the army, the police, the prison, the concentration camp, the gulag, the school, the hospital, the madhouse and so on, the list is familiar. Be they closed, total or more open in their character, their social architecture is filled with familiar resemblances. We know since Max Weber that unlike all prior institutions, these modern ones have all prided themselves on their efficiency and effectiveness (their rationality, their “purposiveness”): “Bureaucracy has a ‘rational’ character: rules, means, ends, and matter-of-factness dominate its bearing. Everywhere its origin and its diffusion have therefore had ‘revolutionary’ results...This is the same influence which the advance of rationalism in general has had. The march of bureaucracy has destroyed structures of domination which had no rational character, in the special sense of the term” (Weber 1991: 244). It is a powerful ideology of success and of human improvement which defines, however violent and inhuman, our contemporary humanity.

Unfortunately, the “special sense of the term” and what he means about “revolutionary results” traps our thinking within a narrow European understanding of modernity and state-formation.

The point of this work though is not to harp on poor Max Weber or Emile Durkheim, or Karl Marx and the Indian Railway system all of whom were victims of the scholarship available
during their times and of prejudices so outrageous as to be tiresome. The point is rather to do good sociology, at once historically informed and aware of the subtle interconnections in an emerging planetary configuration of power. To do that, we have to clear the landscape of some enduring idiocies. Furthermore it is to dare or conjecture six hypotheses that if correct might change the way we think, we communicate and disseminate our craft.

• Unlike what Max Weber had argued the institutions of modernity were not effective because they were more rational or that they were derivations of some cultural force like the protestant ethic but because they were powerful enough to shape behaviour and to convince power-blocs that they could shape behaviour.

• the reason why they were effective had more to do with the dynamics of smart and ruthless foraging to start with rather than the habits and customs of some white men or women; it was not about the industrial revolution or its pre-conditions either. The “great transformation” and the social structures it engendered has to be brought back in time if anything sensible is to be said about vast swathes of humanity: Africa, Latin America and major chunks of Asia. To understand this we have to stop teleological determinism and understand each period in its own terms.

• if we further strip Durkheim too of his Eurocentrism and the nonsense about mechanical solidarity of traditional societies and extend our understanding of deviance in three directions as will be done below- “behavioural”, “articulatory” and “existential” we can understand something decent about otherings and the importance of such alterities for historical change.

• a focus on non-teleological thinking, on deviance and on institutions brings Foucault centre-stage as he too shares in a progress taboo and he has written definitive takes on modernity’s gulags. But pace Foucault, the world has not only been about the shift from one form of domination to another; there has always an attempt to get there no doubt, but there has also been the ratcheting effect of deviant struggles towards more freedoms and autonomy.

• that however much we empathise with Wallerstein’s work and world systems and the world economy, we have to stand the theory of economic cycles on its head- that the Up-phases of the world economy are contingent on the ways deviance and alterity have been sorted out by those powerful enough to do so. In doing so, new paths for accumulation and growth become possible.

• Finally, we argue that there are anomalic phases and cycles of deviance that are fascinating to study in their own right. They tell us something about the societies we live in at present.

In the pages that follow we shall start from the last claim about Cycles of Deviance; we will then define what we mean by behavioural, articulatory and existential deviance; we will then take each one type of deviance and explore their significance up to midway in the 18th century. We will take the discussion of these patterns, leaving the next two hundred years for another time to the contemporary period to reflect on their intensity and implications for the broader study of “polarization/s”.  

[.....]

We argue that the melding of the three distinct categories of deviance as argued above, has
been reshaping the very notions of ‘deviance’ itself. There are different processes at work here. ‘Moral panics’ about ‘new types of crime’ characterise national identities and create the framework for politics across contexts as diverse as Europe and South Asia. In multi-ethnic societies such as in India, this melding of categories is apparent and can be clearly seen as the need to acknowledge difference and diversity in ‘national’ culture defined in sanitized and non-threatening ways. Often, this ‘sanitised’ version of national culture is an appropriation of cultural symbols and art forms used by resistance movements, popularized through advertisements, national campaigns that glorify this melting-pot nationhood. One of the major aspects of compliance for all groups of the ‘other’, is to demonstrate their non-deviant character through public decrying of the principal deviant country, Pakistan.

What is new, is that for the first time that words like ontological, existential or social insecurity are articulated as concepts in Western European and American thought in relation to “others”. Much of the ontological turn of the 1920s and 1930s articulated by philosophers like Heidegger where “being” was in a state of “throw-ness” in the world, a da-sein, had to do with the metaphysical collapse of Being and of the Nietzschean demolition of it. Although it might have been intimately linked to the rise of fascism as Bourdieu attempts to demonstrate such ontological insecurity did not arise from the presence of Algerians in Paris or Turks in Wiesbaden.

[...]

There are four dyssynchronous types of deviance today, according to their chronological emergence:

1. Retrospective deviants of the former phase who still live today. The defeat of Communism in the bi-polar contestation between East and West has eased somewhat the extermination of communists and capitalist-roaders. The collapse of walls and the collapse of existing socialist societies, alongside changes towards democratization in Latin America and the post-apartheid conundrum in South Africa brought forth retrospective deviants—servants of the communist state apparatus, of the military dictatorships and of the Apartheid state. We can assume that this type of retrospective deviants has no further polarizing potential as its natural fate is likely to die out. This assumption applies, unless they manage to transform their ‘nostalgia’ for the old regime into some creative energy and vision for the future, which opens up potential action for new types and means of deviance. It may be the case that retrospective deviants transform themselves into forces for the future by building on the myth of the past (which may nevertheless have little connection to the reality of the past but it can act as an idealisation of the past or even an invention of the past). For instance the Islamists idealise the millet system and the Ottoman Empire in general; various nationalists idealise various other past empires of the past as examples ‘the glorious past’ as they need concrete examples etc. Retrospective deviants may be able to transform themselves via their sharing their experiences, platforms and thus joining forces with other deviants to create potential movements that must be reckoned with (for instance the anti-globalisation movement). At the same time we ought to distinguish between the ‘servants’, who materially, ideologically and symbolically benefitted from those regimes from the mass ideologies or ideologies of the masses, which are a material forces of potential deviant subject, combatants etc.

2. The deviance of opposing neo-liberalist reform. Economically and geo-politically, post-1989, the dominant institutions in the West and globally attempted to reverse the downturn by creating a neoliberal world but this had very serious and radical implications. But however
nationalist, populist or socialist nation-states claimed to be they fell in line and busied
themselves with smoothening globalization patterns. Also, India and China joined the global
accumulation game so new passions manifested themselves in the social fabric. For a while,
institutional change to conform to market dynamics was undertaken not because it was the
“better way” but for its ideologists, “the only way”. Through this systematic generation of a
manufactured consensus, those who opposed the policies or suggested alternatives were seen
to be behaving in ways that were inimical to progress, required to be silenced at the least and
harshly disciplined if necessary.

This has led to forms of deviance from the perspective of internationally dominant
institutions – those in favour of neo-liberal reform and structural adjustment – more precisely
a) articulatory deviance formulating alternatives in thinking; should also be mentioned here,
movements arguing for simple ways of life, slow food, right to laziness and attempts at
deceleration, that seek to counter the inherent tendencies and implicit assumptions of
capitalism with regard to human existence. b) behavioural deviance of those who explicitly
oppose the neo-liberal project practically; and c) deviant States (Cuba, Venezuela, Muslim-
dominated states, rogue states). It remains open to question whether the tendency here is
towards further polarization after the failure of neo-liberalism.

In countries of the developing south, the panics were shrillest when governments changed,
with pressure being exerted for them to continue being committed to reforms and
importantly, to publicly pronounce the commitment. In some countries of the South that saw
the consolidation of the strong Developmental State such as South Korea, Singapore and
Malaysia, opposition to economic policies was dealt with through extreme repression and
violence. In this period, therefore, a whole series of repressive apparatuses of the State that
aimed to protect economic policies and systems came into existence to contain opposition.

3. Those deviants that were newly created or reinforced in numbers and quality by neo-
liberalism and SAPs, i.e. by economic polarization that forces population groups into
deviance. The hollowing out of the nation-state and its failure to get assimilation on a
successful start also brought forth the surviving “existential deviants” of the 18th century, as
first nations who survived nation-state formation and minorities are making irreconcilable
claims. Even in countries were Washington consensus reforms were entered with enthusiasm,
young they generated great inequalities and social strife and newer forms of mobilization. Thus,
economic and political integration did not create stability or trust but rather, it has produced
new and insoluble alterities and forms of resistance in our current phase. These often mix
with the deviants as described under 2.), but the accent here is on the development of deviant
forms of behaviour and on profiling of others as existential deviants in struggles to survive
economic hardship of the current phase. Among the newly emerging forms of deviance, we
can distinguish “passive” and “active” deviants, where the former are left-overs or perceive
obstacles to of neoliberal reform, eventually even formerly respectable citizens who dropped
out of their conformity and are therefore defined as deviants by proponents of neoliberal
reform – unemployed, landless, farmers left without crops, journalists or managers suffering
from burnout syndroms as well as children diagnosed with “attention deficit disorders” as
pre-schools and schools prepare them for their functioning in the market. Cuts in state
funding have also increase dramatically the awaiting trial category as the arm of the law has
turned irregular and limpid.

Some of them turn into active deviants, trying to figure out their own chances and initiatives
in this new world. A plethora of new issues were brought about by rising insecurity,
subsistence needs, disappearing livelihoods, collapsed services, cutting of welfare measures and marginalized identities that have lead to new forms or revitalisation of ancient forms of behavioural deviance: impoverishment and social marginalization has lead new groups into criminal forms of survival, such as those described as modern hunter-gatherer-communities. They could not be contained by existing arrangements.

For example, the SAP-related programmes in Zimbabwe brought about the mobilization of three movements – war veterans, trade unions and students. The ZANU-PF elite chose to align itself with the former and made pariahs of the other two. And turned to a range of commercial farmers, mostly white, to fast-track land reform by wiping them off the map. At the same time, organized violence such as networked terrorist associations, mafia-like structures in drug and weapons trade and human trafficking as well as violent criminal behaviour by former soldiers and army people (often interrelated or combined) have increased. Former soldiers of the Soviet army that could not be integrated into the civil societies and economies of post-1989 Eastern Europe and Russia have regrouped into criminal, militarily organised gangs throughout Europe or join civil war armies elsewhere. Most certainly women in prison have been on the increase everywhere.

4. Those defined as deviants by the “counter-public”. Economic polarization has also made the highest strata vulnerable to discourses defining them as deviant. This is exacerbated by the emergence of alternative media and platforms for counter-ehegemonic discourses, as stated above. In Europe, for instance, migrants (rather: the university-educated children of a few of them), are taking over their own discourse arguing for the autonomy of migration. Another example is mainstream media inviting “ordinary people” to express themselves, encouraging debates and critiques of top managers’ salaries who run their firms into bankruptcy and get away with a huge severance package while hundreds are fired in times of economic crisis. This form of deviance is often associated with indecently enriching oneself at the cost of ordinary people. The lower strata are thus defining their own criteria of deviance and making themselves heard. If the capitalist classes are unable to do so, is it because they cannot claim legitimacy as moral definers anymore? Finally, we have already mentioned another important counter-definition above: the image of “the West” as the unmoral, value-less society.

Conclusions

Anyway: thousands gather to witness the stoning of an adulterer, tens of millions watch the last moments of Saddam Hussein with a rope around his head thanks to a cell-phone’s video functions. Knives are used to commandeering the Boeings into the World Trade Center. Stones, twine and knives, the oldest means of violence interface with the latest mega-technologies to bring performances of violence and deviance in our intimate spaces. Like before, deviants are confined, transported, sorted out, killed or disciplined. But, the world is in no way, “normalized”. It is most certainly a shrunk world with a more isomorphic system of international law, including a Court for Crimes Against Humanity, an established precedent of Humanitarian Intervention, a multilateral system and a bureaucracy dedicated to planetary inter-state affairs and development.

The moral panic is perhaps shriller in present times due to the contradictory duality outlined so far, i.e. on the one hand ‘a march forward’ in terms of ‘progress’ in terms of recognition of rights as a result of historic struggles which ‘condense’ their passage via the punctuation of
these in legal/political/social norms and principles, and the expansion of disciplinary surveillance and the ‘law and order’ institutions to control society.

But, we cannot pronounce confidently on whether such a system could be more effective than ever before. There were in the short-term obvious winners: the super-rich whose comparative incomes have risen exponentially and the new international mandarins of knowledge-work, expertise and norm-setting whose income depends on their qualifications—the experts, the technologists, the fixers. Despite the talk of a global commons, private property has expanded territorially and has moved deeper down to molecular and genetic micro-levels. The proliferation of forms of property has produced a counter-proliferation of forms of piracy. It is by no means clear that these winners can usher a new grand normalization within the parameters of capitalist modernity.

Furthermore, from a long historical perspective, Michel Foucault is correct. The evidence garnered by our four research teams covering many areas of our planet and across the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries as a pilot, so far, points in two directions: 1) there are cycles of its proliferation that share with Michel Foucault (1984: 85) a concern that instead of more freedom or progress we see different forms of control and domination. In his words, we witness “the endlessly repeated play of dominations” or how “humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination. There are periods defined as polarizing, as a threat to the socio-economic system, as signs of imminent collapse and then, there is decisive action, change and re-steering. Yes there are cycles that involve the perceived proliferation of deviancy, let us call them “anomalic phases” which point to institutional failures which not only generate concern but bring with them improvisation, innovation and institutional reconfiguration.

Nevertheless, we also observe a cascading “progress” when the deviants struggle hard enough to win space and respite or societal recognition. Not all deviants did so effectively, but the many who did have counter-steered the system to more equality and more freedom. So for the current period the correct question is what are the polarizations embedded in current forms of deviance and can this anomalic phase be fixed?

No matter how more sophisticated the technologies of surveillance and control might be since the digital and the genetic revolutions, and how much the 226 nation-states that constitute the map of the present invest in them the bubbles of panics continue. We can stretch the anomalic phase but cannot as of yet, grasp the ascending avant-gardes of fixers, and moral entrepreneurs.

What technology has done is to make deviance theatrical and immediate where we can use it with ease to mobilize discomfort or difference. But, the world is in no way, “normalized”.
