STIGMA AND STEREOTYPE — THE INTERACTIONIST APPROACH

The structuralist-functionalist views society as a labyrinthine superstructure composed of layers of systems and subsystems. Parsons tried to reduce the social system within multiples of 4 squares. Others tried to discover some paradigms of social relationships that are structured into Arabeques, Gothic spires or Byzantine domes. If some structural interrelationship is not apparent it does not mean that it isn’t there, all we have to do is try again; look further until we discover the missing structural link. The conflict theorists regard the social structure and human relations within it as a perpetual obstacle course where the pendulum swings between contradictory and conflicting pressures towards the dialectical progress of the synthesis. For the conflict theorists, tradition and conservation of structures, both for romantic and pragmatic reasons, lead to staleness and decadence. Rejecting Durkheim, they assign a negative mark to adjustment and stability. For them, the synthesis resulting from a clash of conflicting forces is the essence of progress. The decree of the historical necessity of conflict would consequently view deviance which «rocks the boat» from a diametrically opposite vantage point to the one held by the structuralist-functionalist.

The symbolic-interactionists however, and their modern offspring, the ethnomethodologists, do not see any grand system or design in the social system and human interaction. As per them, there is no way of tying one pattern of human interaction to the wider matrix of personality structure or the behaviour of groups. Human, face-to-face interaction is like a minuet dance, one move may be predicted from the other, but one ball cannot be coordinated with other dances taking place in another space and time.

However, the main premise of the symbolic interactionists is that the delinquent or deviant stereotype is strongly related to the group’s reaction against the perpetration of delinquent acts. The behaviour of an individual is indeed a predisposing factor for his being considered a delinquent or deviate. However, the crucial decision rests with the group and its organs of social control, which may or may not label him as deviant. This means that the given behaviour outside its social context is insufficient to constitute social deviance. Moreover, many times, people who were not at all deviant in their behaviour were labelled as such by the agencies of social control.
The ostracisers in ancient Greece, the medieval inquisitors and the modern professional slanderers have caused people to be treated as deviants because they have been declared by voices of authority to be so. This, incidentally, is an apt illustration for W. I. Thomas's basic theorem of the social sciences, namely: if man defines a situation as real, it becomes real in its consequences. The branding mechanisms of society are the crucial instruments which create, according to the interactionists, social deviance.

The Changing Nature of Social Labels

The nature of the labels are also highly relevant in this context. The whole concept of deviance would undergo a metamorphosis according to the attitude of the group towards the deviant. We may envisage a kaleidoscope of different meanings of deviance depending on whether the group regards the norm infringer as a sinner possessed by the devil, a freak of nature, a sick person or just a normal human being »who learned to be bad«. The attitude of the group towards criminals, for instance, shifted throughout the ages. Originally, the criminal who offended against his fellow man was considered a sinner whose crime raised the wrath of the gods or other supernatural powers and was therefore cursed by pollution. This pollution was deemed to be contagious; the stigmatized offender was very often segregated and ostracised. Sanction was originally an expiatory act that was supposed to cleanse and purge the pollution and stigma incurred by the victim. The crime offends the gods and causes pollution. The formal punishment cleanses the offender of his pollution and also appeases the gods. The phenomena of stigma and pollution as a consequence of violation of norms were almost universal, and there are numerous examples in mythology, drama and history.

These examples, and many others which abound in both ancient civilizations and contemporary primitive cultures, illustrate the historical precedence of stigmatized pollution as the group's reaction to norm violation. In certain periods in the Middle Ages, the tag of heresy was a sanction applied to diverse and heterogeneous modes of belief and behaviour. The common denominator of heretics seemed to be their deviation, not from the prevalent religious dogma, but from the norms of society relating to everyday life. The heretic was a person who deviated from accepted norms in the use of language, dress, manners, sexual mores, or one who was conspicuous or different in his external appearance and behaviour.

Stigmatization as a heretic was an extremely fierce sanction: it could be incurred for diverse and undefined reasons and sometimes for no apparent reason whatsoever. The results of being branded as heretic were, however, far from vague. Heretics could consider themselves fortunate if they were merely ordered to wear a yellow cross on their garments because they frequently suffered far worse indignities at the hands of the Inquisition.

In modern society the sanction of stigma differs in kind and consequences from the medieval stigma of heresy and the primitive taboo, but its inherent nature is unchanged. An individual who differs in his personality or behaviour, or is considered different in a way that infringes the group's normative system, is liable to be stigmatized as being deviant; the social and economic consequences of this stigma are dependent on the severity of the infringement of the norm and are determined by the inner strength of the norm, which
may be measured by the indignation of a representative sample of the public when this norm is infringed. This inner strength of the norm may be also determined by the severity of stigma which is labelled on the infringer of the norm. On the informal level, the group’s attitude to the violation of a norm is apparent only from the stigma branded on the violators. The stigma, therefore, is the best instrument for measuring the inner strength of a social norm.

Consequently, according to the interactionist approach, the tagging, the labelling, the commendable attitudes or the derogatory stigma are crucial factors in identifying an act as bad or good, conforming or deviant, delinquent or non-delinquent. A convenient model for the relative force of stigma in generating social deviance might be as follows:

**Value Deviation + Deviant Behaviour + Social Stigma - Social Deviance**

where value deviations is the individual’s detachment from the value system of the group and which may predispose him for subsequent deviant behaviour. Also, this model suggests that stigma, deviant behaviour and value deviation are interrelated with one another and are linked to social deviance in a descending order of significance. We may define social stigma as a derogatory attribute imputed to the social image of an individual or group and viewed as a tool of social control. As such, stigma may be a tool of stereotyping delinquents and deviants as well as generating further delinquency and deviance. Social stigma can therefore be studied on two levels. First, its effect on the initial recruiting into crime and deviation, and second, its effect on further crime and deviation after a person has already clashed with the machinery of law enforcement and other mechanisms of social control. This second phase of stigma is related to its formal effects. The stigma of conviction as a criminal, or being identified and tagged as a deviant limits a person’s socio-economic opportunities and forcibly changes his status and role. He may reject at first some of the „legitimate” group’s norms and seek the company of other ex-convicts and deviants who have had similar adjustment problems. Finally, a total rejection of the norms and values of the legitimate group may ensue, leading to the adoption of the normative system of the deviant group.

**The Explanation of Social Stigma**

The most notable contributions to the theoretical analysis of the effects of stigma on deviance is the, now classic, description by Tannenbaum of the tagging and isolation by society of the delinquent group. Howard Becker examined the effect of stigma on the self-concept of individuals who joined deviant groups, e.g., marihuana users and dance musicians. Cloward and Ohlin in their *Delinquency and Opportunity* have used social stigma in their explanation of the formation of deviant juvenile groups. They stated: »The initial contrast between the individual and the authorities over the legitimacy of certain social norms and the appropriateness of certain acts of deviance sets in motion a process of definition that marks the offender as different from law-abiding folk. His acts and his person are defined as ‘evil’ and he
is caught up in a vicious cycle of norm-violation. The process of alienation is accelerated, and the chasm between the deviant and those who try to control and reform him grows wider and deeper. In such circumstances the delinquent subculture and the prevailing bases of an individual's rejection becomes increasingly dependent on the support of others in his position. The gang of peers forms a new social world in which the legitimacy of delinquent conduct is strongly reinforced«.

A Model of Social Stigma

Our model of social stigma synchronizes two levels of causal analysis. The first is an assortment of predisposing factors, the second a chain of dynamic processes which leads to the actual stigmatization. The predisposition factors are some forms of value deviation and deviant behaviour which in a given culture raise the probability that an individual will be stigmatized. We stress the cultural element because these predisposing factors vary from one society to the other. We have already dealt extensively with value deviation and deviant behaviour. We should add, however, that these predisposing factors only raise the probability that an individual be stigmatized, yet one may be branded with the Mark of Cain of deviance although he is a conformist both in his values and behaviour.

Our method of analyzing the dynamic processes of stigma would be to trace first its psychological origins, then the socio-psychological factors which stem from the relationship of the individual to his group and, finally, to examine the meaning and nature of stigma as a social act of power.

A CAUSAL MODEL OF SOCIAL STIGMA

Deviant Behaviour ———————— Predisposing Factors ———————— Value Deviation
The Dynamic Process of Stigmatization

Psychological

1. Outlet for Aggression
2. Projection of Guilt
3. Displacement of Resentment
4. The Stigmatized as »Scapegoat«

Socio-Psychological Pressures

5. The stigmatized: a symbolic source of danger
6. Relative powerlessness
7. Vulnerability to the source of stigma
8. »Somebody to look down upon«
9. »Explaining away« alters achievement

Social Level

10. Stigma as an Act of Power
Inner aggression and the projection of guilt for the stigmatizer's own deviant tendencies are the subconscious sources of social stigma. The urge to stigmatize is presumably linked to the individual's own aggression and the »free floating« aggression in groups. Inner negativity and group tension find at least partial release in the derogatory branding of others. Social stigma is an institutionalized safety valve and is thus similar in function to the fights of the Roman gladiators, bullfights, public hangings, wrestling and boxing matches. The mechanism of projection as a psychological source of stigma has been described by Flugel as follows: »(People) experience delight in gossip and scandal in which they gloat over the pecadillos and frailties of their neighbours and acquaintances. They are indulging their own guilty desires vicariously, preserving their own virtue intact (the implication is that they themselves would never partake in such scandalous proceedings as those under discussion) and expressing their disapproval through appropriate inflections of the voice and shaking of the head«.

The release of frustrations and resentment through the subconscious mechanism of transference and scapegoating is also the catalyst for the psychic formation of social stigma and allows it to crystallize against a specific individual or group.

The Socio-Psychological Processes

The choice of objects of social stigma is governed by conspicuous differences which arouse fear and anxiety in the stigmatizer. The choice of the objects is also determined by their relative powerlessness and hence vulnerability to stigma.

The stigmatized are, no doubt, very often chosen in a rational and formalized manner as in the case of illegal behaviour. In other cases, although the choice is irrational and subconscious, it is not random. A major factor determining the choice is the object's being different in a symbolically relevant way and therefore disturbing or menacing.

One of the most ancient sources for the hatred of foreigners and other ethnic groups lay in the fact that the members of out-groups were not only different but actually dangerous, not potential, but real enemies.

In ancient Greece, where policy-making was quite often realistic, stigmatization by ostracism was achieved by »chipping off the tallest ears of corn«, those which seemed to be more conspicuous than necessary and the question which was asked from the assembly in a manner quite relevant to our context was: »Is there any man among you who you think is dangerous to the State? If so, who?« In other words, we have here conspicuousness and danger: difference equals or implies danger — this seems to be the most obvious criterion for the attributes and therefore choice of the stigmatized.

Social stigma in an achievement-obsessed culture serves as an illusory achievement technique where real achievement has failed or is insufficient (as defined by the stigmatizer). Because achievement is relative, an individual can »achieve« by derogatorily branding (stigmatizing) others. When an achievement-obsessed individual or group craving for success as compensation for
insecurity and anxiety does not achieve these goals, they will try to «achieve» status by lowering the status of the stigmatized. This is the actual function of stigma, and is recognizable in the gossiping matron belittling the looks of a rival as well as in the perennial inclination of the socially insecure lower middle-class to the hatred of out-groups, anti-semitism and racial discrimination.

Stigma related to a person's successful innovation or imputed to his achievement, can «explain away» his performance so as to narrow the gap of «relative-achievement» between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. «If I cannot be as good as John Smith, I can at least neutralize his success by bringing it down to my level». The Nazi ideology, for instance, stressed that Germany did not actually lose the war, the war which should have been fought «properly», as among knights of the Nibelungen. «It was not they, the celestial Teutons, who had lost the war, it was the Jews and the Marxists who slyly and surreptitiously had administered the fatal stab in the back which made them reel and falter». It was not a fair fight. However, no logical or material link need be apparent between the stigma and the superiority of the stigmatized. Usually the connection is superfluous or non-existent. Cause and effect seem to be irrelevant for «explaining away» success by means of stigma.

Stigma as an Act of Power

The stigma of maladjustment is acquired in a way similar to that of a criminal. It is not necessarily linked with ethics, metaphysics or justice, but with an act of power directed against an individual or a group too conspicuously different, whose existence or behaviour is detrimental to the power-backed stigmatizing agencies. The essence of social stigma on the social level is embodied in Inez Cirano's statement to Garcin in Sartre's No Exit: «You are a coward, Garcin, because I want it to be so».

The Roman infamia is the most appropriate illustration of stigma as an act of power. The criteria for this declaration was so amorphous as to amount to a complete freedom for the censor to brand any person he chose with the stigma of infamia.

Sumners' description of the normative basis of social mores fits the conception of stigma as a social act. «Nothing but might has ever made right». If a thing has been done and is established by force, it is right in the only sense we know, and rights will follow from it which are not vitiated at all by the force in it. We find men and parties protesting, declaiming, complaining of what is done and which they say is not «right». They lose sight of the fact that disputes always end in force. Therefore, might has made all the right which ever has existed or exists now. The habit of using jural concepts, which is now so characteristic of our mores leads us into vague and impossible dreams of social affairs, in which metaphysical concepts are supposed to realize themselves, or are assumed to be real.

Pressure, coercion and stigma are applied by the group (or by individuals who possess enough power to do so) when some interest or value of the group (or of a powerful individual) has been infringed or injured. No other criterion has the same significance. Justice, ethics, piety and «positive» values are at
best only formal and idealized criteria for differentiating between the delinquent and the good, the misfits and the »adjusted«. The criterion which actually triggers the process of dividing the criminal and non-conformist from the law-abiding and conforming population is the power element of social stigmatization. No other criteria would serve to define the mythical crime of Prometheus and the anti-social behaviour of Socrates, Alcibiades, Savonarola and Jesus Christ; they acted against the interests of groups which had enough power to ostracise them and ultimately to exterminate them.

In the last analysis, a criminal, a deviant or an antisocial person is one who is branded and treated as such by a group or an individual with the power to do so. The Mark of Cain, therefore, consists mainly in an exercise of power by the branders to put tags on individuals or groups who »don’t fit in«. In the case of crime, there are certain legal barbers to the branding machinery of society, but not so with stigmatization of a person as deviant and maladjusted.

The criteria for stigmatizing a person as deviant are necessarily amorphous, and change with every shift in the power structure of government, bureaucracy, custom and other components of the social system. The effects of stigma are powerful once started, the segregating and stigmatizing pressure leads down and the way back upwards to regain social status is blocked by many barriers.

Kafka’s Mr. K. was not familiar with the nature of social stigma when he insisted on his innocence. His Mark of Cain of social stigma by itself was more than enough to establish his guilt.

This potency of social stigma has induced many social scientists, notably Becker and Goffman, to redefine deviance, not by the act or actor, but by the labels which these acts and actors have been tagged.

Another important premise of the interactionist approach relates to the crystallisation of the self-concept of the deviant following the internalisation by them of the deviant tags branded on them by the agencies of social control. The interactionists claim that the individual’s self-concept is crystallised by his interactions with his surroundings and especially with the relevant »others« around him. The need for food, shelter and acceptance and the impossibility of full and constant reciprocity by the providers make for a conflictual basis to this interaction. The self-concept is deemed to be delineated by the »ego-boundary« which has been conceived as the imaginary dividing line between our self-concept and the outside world: This ego boundary does not exist in the very early phases of development. The young child does not have any sense of differentiation among himself, other human beings and his inanimate entourage. He gains this through interaction with his relevant others in early socialization. It is being built layer after layer and with each consecutive expansion the boundary becomes clearer and the self-concept more distinct.

The »Containment« Theory of Deviance

A strong »ego boundary« making for a favourable image of self has been related to many theoretical and empirical expositions of deviance. One of the first theories of deviance, or to be more precise, conformity in relation
to the self-concept, was Reckless' »Containment Theory«. The gist of this theory is that »internal containment consists of 'self components' — those having to do with the strength of the self as an operating person. It is composed of:

1. A favourable image of self in relation to other persons, groups and institutions.
2. An awareness of being an inner-directed, goal-oriented person.
3. A high level of frustration, tolerance (i.e., one does not »lose one's cool« very easily).
4. Strongly internalized morals and ethics.«

This image of the strong, silent, reliable and moral hero of the American movies of the twenties and thirties could indeed effect a self-concept (if properly internalized) which insulates itself from deviance. Subsequent research in these inner barriers against delinquency revealed that »insulation against delinquency is an ongoing process reflecting internalization of non-delinquent values and conformity to the expectations of significant others«.

»Differential Identification«

Glazer's »Differential Identification« theory deals with the absorption by the individual of deviant roles. The essence of this theory is that »a person pursues criminal (or deviant) behaviour to the extent that he identifies himself with real or imaginary persons from whose perspective his criminal behaviour seems acceptable.« In other words, a person who incorporates within his self-concept deviant roles and images is more likely to behave in a deviant manner.

»Techniques of Neutralization«

Sykes and Matza present their »techniques of neutralization« by means of which a deviant may rationalize his motives for his behaviour so that he retains his self-concept by having done the »right« thing. A delinquent may voice the psychiatric jargon as in »Gee, Officer Krupke« of West Side Story, to prove that his personality as moulded by the wretchedness of slums made it impossible for him to behave otherwise and that consequently he is not morally responsible. He may also point out that because of the elaborate insurance systems nobody really suffers from a bank robbery. Or he may point out that homosexuals »have it coming to them« if they are mugged and robbed while looking for small boys in the park. Another common »technique of neutralization« is based on the belief that one's loyalty to the gang is more important than the laws of society. A gang member's self-concept as being »right« not only remains intact, but is actually strengthened by preferring the norms of his deviant gang to the »square« rules of society.

»Unsharable Problems«

There are some less-generalized ontological expositions of deviance which relate to specific and relatively well-defined modes of behaviour. Gressey's study of embezzlers was anchored in what he called »unsharable
problems« which are basically conflicts between the prospective embezzler’s self-concept as presented to some relevant others and some harsh facts of life. A bank messenger who presents himself to his new girlfriend as a bank manager could not possibly ask his boss to share with him some expensive night club bills. The same holds true for a husband who is reluctant to share with his wife the news that he has lost a month’s salary at the race tracks. Both might see in embezzlement the only way out of their plight.

The »Masculine Protest«

The »Masculine Protest« theory was formulated by Talcott Parsons and is based on his analysis of the structure of the middle-class American family. The mother is the main socialising figure in this family, whereas the father is most of the time outside the home taking care of his business and other affairs. This causes the boy’s identification with the »role-model« of his mother; consequently, when the boy seeks a masculine identity he may turn to the unrealistic extreme of being tough and nonsentimental. One way to be »tough« (and, to be sure, an obvious one) is to commit delinquent acts »becoming to a man«.

Cohen also subscribes to this hypothesis while dealing briefly with middle-class delinquency. He adds that »good behaviour is symbolized by (mother’s) femininity, whereas 'bad' acts stand for masculinity and a lad who grows up in a family dominated by feminine figures and images, asserts thus his manhood by being 'bad', i.e., deviant.«

The »Closure« Theory

Lemert expounded his »closure« theory to explain the naive cheque-forgery of persons who are economically not needy. The subjectively-felt social isolation of the person resolves itself in an act of impulsive cheque-forgery which leads to punishment of oneself or some »relevant others.« In some forms of deviance such as homosexuality, the self-concept is all important. The »coming out« phase is the realisation by the latent homosexual of his deviant tendencies and the crystalization of his new identity which clarifies uncertainties and disperses the diffusion in his self-concept. This is, reportedly, a rather pleasant, tension-releasing experience. Conversely, a heterosexual self-concept when enhanced by some strict rules of behaviour remains intact although a person engages regularly in male prostitution.

The Making of Jean Genêt

Probably the best illustration of the development of a deviant self-concept is the case of the thief-poet-philosopher, Jean Genet. Genet’s self-image is, no doubt, one of a thief, an »ex-con«, a member of the criminal sub-culture. His writings are very personal. Although fact and fiction intermingle, most of the episodes happened in one way or the other with Genet as participant, resulting in a mixture of personal experience, feelings and reminiscences.

Genet was born out of wedlock. His mother abandoned him in his cradle and he was cared for in his formative years by the state orphanage in Paris.
In due course he was entrusted to a foster home — a peasant family in Le Morvan. At first he was happy there. He lived the peaceful life of a village youngster. However, he soon realised that he was not like the other youngsters. He was a foundling, he had no mother, no father, and therefore no clear identity to internalise. The village was a closed community and he soon found out that in the peasant family he was »Jean, the little bastard«. The other children in the family found a simple solution to their problems by attributing any mishap or misdeed to »the little bastard« from the orphanage. He thus became the receptacle for all the residual, unwanted and despised attributes of the family and small peasant community; his self-image or inner anchor of identity consisted of definitions, images and characteristics tagged on him by the relevant others. Genêt did his utmost to comply with the negative images branded on him by the peasant family and the village community. He wilfully, almost joyfully, plunged into depths of negativity. He finally knew who he was for he had been given the image he never had before — and if the image was that of a pederast and a thief, it had to be honed to perfection.

The Self Image of an »Outsider«

Outsiders like Genêt who comply with the images of evil imputed to them by the surrounding »others«, feel that by assuming the role they serve the group: by being evil because they have been defined as evil the outsider feels that he has fulfilled a mandate — he has been submissive, has conformed to the tagged image, and society owes him, if not acclaim, at least acceptance; disillusionment is bitter if he is not accepted. Many convicts have personally reported a similar feeling to the author. They were accused of committing a crime and against all common prudence they were seized with an urge to confess, a wish to expiate themselves, to turn over a new leaf, to repay the debts in order to be reaccepted — and all this by one magic act of admission, of compliance, of redemption. Some confess even when the prosecution has scant evidence against them, and subsequently feel a sense of ease, as if they say: »You, judge, jury, attorneys, the world at large, you say I am evil; right, I am, but now we are quits. You have to accept me — you owe it to me«. The inevitable rejection quickens the cycle of stigma and counter-stigma; this is the essence of the »outsider's dilemma«.

A Criminal Identity

Treachery, theft and homosexuality are Genêt's sacred trinity. He raised these three perverse elements to the rank of a theology, contrasting the cherished bourgeois virtues of loyalty, the sanctity of private property and heterosexuality.

The adroitness and literal-mindedness of the criminal world is contrasted with the hypocrisy, smoothness and double standards of »your world.«

The act of crime for Genêt means vigour, freedom and fulfilment. Vigour, because one puts a lot of energy and concentration into an act of stealing, it has a »terminal oneness«, a combination of sacrifice and damnation which, for Genêt, is the epitome of moral vigour. Freedom, because the commission
of a crime or a betrayal gives one a sense of ease without any moral preoccupation, a feeling of expiatory detachment. Fulfilment, because the inner violence of the act of theft gives it a ritualistic and religious aura — it becomes an expiating sacrifice, an offering.

When Genêt commits a crime he acts according to the image cast on him. He complies first of all with the expectations of his immediate environment and this in itself is satisfying. Genêt, of unknown origin, with no parents and no past, of a precarious present and uncertain future, at last finds his coveted identity; one that is not only cast upon him, but one that is his alone: nobody is going to challenge him to it or take it away from him as they did with other things. The compliance with the image of a criminal not only gives him an identity, but also makes him eligible for entry into the group of other thieves and homosexuals, thus affording the opportunity for group-identity and a sense of belonging.

Empirical confirmation of this hypothesis was provided by Lewin who showed that the emotional tension of adolescent youths was greatly diminished when they finally became members of a criminal gang where they found their coveted identity. The crucial point, however, is that every new act of crime reinforces this identity with a resultant feeling of accomplishment, elation and energetic vigour.

Genêt sees himself as a scapegoat, as a receptacle of abuse, refuse and vileness. The black religiosity of Genêt induced him to apply ritual to every further step in his evil transformation. Every additional negation is a triumph. Being a criminal as a vicarious obligation to others, as a sacrifice to others, is a sacrifice worthy of fulfilment. The salvation is apparently not confined to Genêt himself, but is a sort of cleansing vehicle for the pollution of others. He is the scapegoat, the damned. He receives, as in stoning, all the evils from the community cast of from them and transferred symbolically to him. By receiving these stigmatizing stones, he is ritually expiated — he cleanses them of their sins by taking them upon himself. This is the basis of his claim to ritualistic fulfilment — the beatitude of a thief. He knows however, that his vicarious expiation of the evil of the others by being their damned scapegoat will not be paid with social acceptance.

Finally, the interactionist tradition envisages the situational analysis of the actual deviant, delinquent, or violent behaviour as distinct from the probabilistic profile analysis of the delinquent or deviant types of personalities. We may take, for example, the case of a murder cited by Wolfgang: »A drunken husband, beating his wife in their kitchen, gave her a butcher's knife and dared her to use it on him. She claimed that if he struck her once more, she would use the knife. He slapped her face and she stabbed him to death«. This excerpt describes the last phase of a violent exchange of words and actions between husband and wife which culminated in death. Most of the attempts to explain murder would aim at finding some specific factors which single out the slayer from other human beings. The biologists would try to find some physiological irregularities, abnormal blood chemistry, or the recently-popular XYY chromosome theory claiming that the murderer is a real »he-man«. Psychoanalysts would look for unresolved complexes in the development of the personality. Sociologists would pursue their peren-
nial quest for eorrelations between murder, »bad« homes, »bad« schools and »bad« neighbourhoods. These types of explanation are »genetic« or »historical«. However, the situational explanation of murder would consider it as a direct sequel to an escalation of tension, culminating in the violent act. This has already been pointed out by Sutherland.

Scientific explanations of criminal behaviour may be stated either in terms of the processes which are operating at the moment of the occurrence of the crime or in terms of the processes operating in the earlier history of the criminal. In the first case, the explanation may be called »mechanistic«, »situational« or »dynamic«, in the second »historical« or »genetic«. Criminological explanations of the mechanistic type have thus been notably unsuccessful, perhaps largely because they have been formulated in connection with the attempt to isolate personal and social pathologies among criminals. Work from this point of view has, at best, resulted in the conclusion that the immediate determinants of criminal behaviour lie in the person-situation complex.

The situational approach attempts to explain the deviant act by the criminal-victim relationship.

In some types of violence, for instance, personality and demographic factors would be relevant as predisposing factors. Apart from the physiological factors predisposing to «low boiling points», some measurable personality traits may also contribute to violence-proneness. On the other hand, we may envision a Maine farmer whose inner-directedness is so firm that any infringement upon his internalized standards would confront him with a private purgatory. Yet he would very rarely interpret communications transmitted by others to be provocations, as they are by definition extraneous to his internal controls.

Predisposition to violence, as gleaned from various studies, may eventually be expressed as probability profiles. These would point out the low or high chances of an individual displaying a given set of characteristics related to committing a violent act. However, the actual sequence of events precipitating the violence would in some cases take the form of a causal chain of interaction between criminal and victim. This communication pattern could be ignited on the spot by the exposure of a compromising situation, e.g., the ever-loving wife and her lover in the husband’s nuptial double-bed. Words hurled with gross and obvious intent to offend would have the effect of switching and individual’s action to a different cognitive level, i.e., »he would see red«. Other expressions may have this »triggering off« effect on an individual because he defines them subjectively as humiliating due to personality peculiarities of his own. The word »bugger« thrown at a latent homosexual or an expression questioning the virility of a man who has anxieties about his potency, may have this effect. The conventional form of an offensive gesture, such as the twisting of a moustache and the emission of a snore in the presence of a devout Moslem, may have an even stronger escalatory effect. Such an exchange of words and gestures would not trigger off immediate arousal to another cognitive level but, depending on the reaction, may gradually lead to the »point of no return« of violence.