Deviant Interpretations
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who represent, or claim to represent, prisoners, mental patients, welfare claimants and the like (Taylor, 1973b). Organisations which champion the dispossessed and the incarcerated are somewhat volatile. Their fate is often determined by the work of a few men, and those men tend to be changeable. Lacking a firm bureaucratic base, substantial finance and a powerful membership, these groups are also threatened by the politics of disrepute. There are taxing problems of legitimacy and political consequentiality (cf. Mathieson, 1974). Confronting established and powerful agencies, they are strategically and tactically weak. In the main, the principal parties of the Left are unresponsive to their vision. As a result, the politics of the marginal are marginal politics, drifting into inaction or expressive displays.

Radical criminology may leave a legacy which will be useful. It has restored a concern with the traditional problems of orthodox society, completing the courtship which was initiated by the symbolic interactionists. Those who address police work may then begin to lean on a Weberian analysis of bureaucracy or a Simmelian description of the dyad and the triad. The politics of deviance may be renewed by Marxist ideas or ideas flowing from Mosca and Michelis. The gulf between criminology as an antiquarian repository and sociology as an innovative stimulus would accordingly be bridged. But the bridge would not be a Jacob's Ladder. It would unite disciplines which have little commerce with essences, deep truths and total analysis.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Stan Cohen for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
2. Edwin Sutherland and his colleagues at the University of Indiana were exceptions. But there have not been many such exceptions.
3. Of course, high sociologists tend to be beset by uncertainty as well, but it is an uncertainty typically born of despair. There is a peculiar paradox which attends the rise and fall of grand sociological systems; cf. Hawthorne (1976).
4. The very marginality of interactionists opened up significant intellectual and methodological opportunities. But it has also been exploited by critics to emphasise the discréditable qualities of their work. A false syllogism has been propounded by such men as Alvin Gouldner: it argues that the socially marginal must be somehow intellectually marginal, as a kind of hippy exuisance. Such criticism is not only ad hominem, it also belittles the analytic consequence of work by alluding to the 'inconsequentiality' of its object. As many sociologists have demonstrated, there is no necessary affinity between social importance and intellectual importance. Neither is there always an affinity between the grandeur of a problem and the gravity of its explanation.

Misunderstanding
Labelling Perspectives

Ken Plummer

The past decade has seen striking changes in the prominence given to sociological theories of deviance. Most notable is the changing status that has been accorded to labelling theory. Whilst far from new;¹ in the early sixties it was seen as a 'radical, underground' theory, attracting the 'young Turks' of sociology who used it as a basis for developing critiques of the dominant paradigms in deviancy analysis. By the late sixties (in America at any rate),² the theory had been co-opted into the mainstream of sociological work — enshrined in formal statements, texts, readers and Ph.D. theses, taught widely on undergraduate sociology and criminology programmes, and absorbed into much 'positivistic' social research (cf. Cole, 1975; Spector, 1976). This acceptance of the theory has been followed most recently by the growth of criticism of it from a number of contrasting perspectives, most notably ideologues who are critical of its biases, limitations and liberal assumptions (e.g. Manners, 1975), and 'positivistic' researchers who find it empirically falsified (e.g. Gove, 1975). In just ten years, labelling theory has moved from being the radical critic of established orthodoxies to being the harbinger of new orthodoxies to be criticised. Yet as one recent defender so forcefully put it:

The sheer volume of the critics could easily lead one to presume that labelling theory is dead and already buried. But when the criticisms are considered one at a time labelling theory emerges as a still lively and viable theory. Indeed, to the extent that the criticisms call for clarification and specification of the theory it may be fairly claimed that labelling theory is strengthened by going through the process of challenge and response. The volume of criticisms may be seen as a tribute to the power of the theory. (Conover, 1976, p. 229)

In this article, I wish to consider some of these criticisms that have engulfed labelling theory in recent years and to show that they have far
from succeeded in dealing the death blow to it. I will begin by considering precisely what labelling theory is, and will argue that it is most usefully conceived as a perspective whose core problems are the nature, emergence, application and consequences of labels. I will suggest that there can be many differing theoretical approaches within this perspective, and will go on to argue that the failure to be precise about the kind of theory one is using has led to many confusions. Symbolic interactionism is only one such theory, and hence criticisms of such a theory should not be seen as synonymous with criticisms of labelling theory. My own preference, however, is for an interactionist theory of labelling; my subsequent comments will therefore be erecting a dual defence.

The main body of the discussion will then centre on three clusters of criticism: the charge of confusion especially over definitional and value problems; the charge of bias and limitations; and the charge that the theory has been shown to be empirically falsified. My goal throughout is to clarify the foundations of the labelling perspective so that it may continue to grow as a most fruitful approach to the study of deviance.

WHAT IS 'LABELLING' — A PERSPECTIVE, A THEORY OR A PROPOSITION?

Because the labelling perspective is seen alternately and simultaneously as a perspective, a theory and a proposition, it becomes an easy target for attack and a ready refuge for defence: it is all things to all men. In looking at this muddle, I will identify those sociologists most commonly viewed as labelling theorists, locate their views on the nature of the theory, consider why confusions arise and propose some standardisation of terms.

First, who are the labelling theorists? In a review of twenty standard books and articles at hand, I found four groups of theorists referred to as labelling theorists:

(a) Becker and Lemert — mentioned by nearly everyone;
(b) Tannenbaum, Kitsuse and Erickson — mentioned by well over half;
(c) Goffman, Schur, Garfinkel and Scheff — given between six and eight references each;
(d) a diverse sprinkling of names referred to only once or twice — Matza, Waller, Platt, Lofland, Lorber, Simmons, Sudnow, Pilavin and Briar, Cicourel and Quinney.

Now if one takes this list as representative, it is clear that 'labelling' can only be a perspective; there is no unanimous proposition that these writers

are testing (cf. Erickson (1966) on issues of boundary maintenance; Becker (1963) on moral enterprise and deviant careers; Schur (1965) on victimless crimes; Platt (1969) on the historical origins of delinquency categories; Wilkins (1964) on deviancy amplification; Matza (1969) on techniques of neutralisation and signification; Pilavin and Briar (1964) on the screening process), and there is considerable theoretical diversity — functionalism (Erickson), dramaturgy (Goffman), phenomenology and the sociology of law (Quinney), systems theory (Wilkins and Scheff), naturalism (Matza), interactionism (Becker) and ethnomethodology (Kituse and Garfinkel). The same conclusion is reached by looking at both the main exponents of labelling theory, Lemert and Becker. Neither restricts his analysis to a major proposition, and while one is a symbolic interactionist, the other is only reservedly so (Lemert, 1967, p. vi; 1974). On this score, then, 'labelling' is a perspective, which raises a series of problems and suggests a few themes.

Further, none of the theorists above actually began by identifying himself as a labelling theorist: rather ironically, they had that label thrust upon them by others and only later came to incorporate it into their own sociological identities (cf. Kitsuse, 1972; Goode, 1975). Thus neither Becker nor Lemert seems at all happy with being identified as a labelling theorist; neither used this tag in his earlier work. Indeed, by the early 1970s Becker was publicly stating his preference for being known as an interactionist rather than a labelling theorist (Becker, 1974, p. 44), while Lemert was disassociating himself from the 'conceptual extrusions' and 'crudities' of labelling theory (Lemert, 1972, p. 6). Goode's review of the field also concludes that Becker and Lemert (as well as Erickson and Kitsuse) 'cannot be called labelling theorists' (Goode, 1975, p. 571). It is important to stress both this lack of self-recognition by labelling theorists and their diverse theoretical concerns: for the labelling perspective has only emerged from the retrospective selection of a few select themes largely from diverse theoretical projects. They are united by some common substantive problems but not common theories. There are often much wider discrepancies than overlaps. Erickson's brand of functionalism can hardly be equated with Cicourel's ethnomethodology, while Lemert's focus on putative deviation (which implies a non-putative or objective deviance) jars markedly with Kitsuse's relativistic 'imputed deviance' (which denies an objective reality of deviance) (cf. Rains, 1976).

What are these common substantive problems? Becker suggests the following: 'We [should] direct our attention in research and theory building to the questions: who applied the label of deviant to whom? What
consequences does the application of a label have for the person so labelled? Under what circumstances is the label of a deviant successfully applied? (Becker, 1964, p. 3).

While these questions have certainly received much attention from labelling theorists in recent years, they are unnecessarily narrow (and in practice Becker dealt with a wider range of problems). Since the theme of the tradition is labels we should seek to discover all that we can about this phenomenon and not just a limited portion. Basically, therefore, labelling theory should centre on asking:

1. What are the characteristics of labels, their variations and forms?
2. What are the sources of labels, both societally and personally?
3. How, and under what conditions, do labels get applied?
4. What are the consequences of labelling?

All would seem clear: the labelling perspective constitutes neither theory nor proposition, but is a useful series of problems designed to reorientate the former mainstream study to the consideration of the nature, emergence, application, and consequences of deviancy labels. Yet it remains unclear because of (i) the confusions of labelling proponents themselves, and (ii) the narrow orientation fo their critics.

Labelling proponents have added to the confusion by either rejecting the tag of labelling theorist or by seeking to co-opt it into one narrow kind of theoretical stance. Since their first allegiance was never to a reified, academic 'labelling theory', but to 'social control processes', 'interactionism', etc., they have not seen fit to defend it. Thus Lemert equates labelling theory with interactionism, and sees his own intellectual task as altogether more eclectic (Lemert, 1972, p. 6; Lemert, 1974); while Becker equates the general orientation with interactionism, and then opts to call it 'an interactionist theory of deviance' (Becker, 1974, p. 44). So for these writers labelling theory is not an orientation; rather, it is synonymous with interactionism. But if this is so, we cannot include Lemert, Erickson, Garfinkel, Scheff, Matza or Cicourel so clearly under that banner anymore. Schur, who also views it as an orientation embracing different theories (phenomenology, conflict, functionalism, and prediction theory), seems to assume an interactionist base. But if it is an orientating series of problems, it does not have to entail a commitment to one theory. The problems of labelling may be dealt with by Marxists, ethnomethodologists, functionalists or positivists, there is no endemic link to interactionism, and it is interactionist imperialism to suggest otherwise.

More muddling than labelling theorists themselves are critics of the theory. While most vaguely acknowledge labelling to be a conception, the attacks are actually levied either at its interactionist base (e.g., Taylor, Walton and Young, 1973; Gouldner, 1968; Warren and Johnson, 1972) or at a narrow proposition attributed to it (e.g., Mankoff, 1971; Davis, 1972). Of the four problems I have mentioned above, critics usually focus primarily upon only one possible answer to the third and fourth questions — the independent and dependent variable issue (cf. Gove, 1975). They suggest that labelling theory may be characterised by the following proposition 'that societal reaction in the form of labelling or official typing, and consequent stigmatisation, leads to an altered identity in the actor, necessitating a reconstitution of the self' (Davis, 1972, p. 460); Or: 'Rule breakers become entrenched in deviant roles because they are labelled deviant by others and are consequently excluded from assuming normal roles in the community' (Mankoff, 1971, p. 204); or, most crudely: 'People go about minding their own business, and then 'wham', bad society comes along and slaps them with a stigmatising label. Forced into the role of deviant, the individual has little choice but to be deviant' (Akers, 1973, p. 24).

Through these propositions, labelling theory is vulgarised into a narrow theory which can be readily refuted. It can be easily shown that many people become 'deviants' without being directly labelled by others (cf. Mankoff, 1971; Becker, 1963, ch. 3), or are labelled because of their behaviour and not merely because of the contingencies that surround them (cf. Williams and Weinberg, 1971). Yet any criticism based upon this limited view is grossly unfair, because it tends to suggest that labelling theory is concerned with labelling that is overt, public, direct and unrelated to the act: and this is simply not the case. It is true that a few studies have implied this kind of limited argument (e.g., Scheff, 1966), and that some illustrations have been unfortunate (e.g., Malinowski, 1926) in Becker, 1963, but in general labelling theorists do recognise a multiplicity of answers to the problems of the conditions and consequences of labelling. Thus, for example, even the classic writings are not guilty of all that has been attributed to them. Becker's own statement of 'marijuana use and social control' does not deal with matters of formal control, as labelling critics would have us believe. As Paul Rock astutely notes:

Becker's becoming a marijuana user dealt entirely with its significance to the self. It had no reference to official control, but concentrated instead on the way in which significance was built up introjectively. I have always found that critics have neglected this basic article, and persistently misread the significance of the self-identifying activity.
In addition to these classic statements, there is now much writing on the issue of self-labeling and deviance avowal (cf. Turner, 1972; Rock, 1973a; Rotenberg, 1974; Levitin, 1975); of neutralizing deviance labels (e.g., Ball, 1966; Reiss, 1962; Rains, 1971; Warren, 1974b); of changing deviance labels (e.g., Lofland, 1969; Trice and Roman, 1970); and of labeling as a means of preventing as opposed to accelerating deviance (e.g., Cameron, 1964; Thorsell and Klemke, 1972; Tittle, 1975). Recently Rogers and Buffalo have furthered this kind of work by delineating nine possible adaptations of deviance to deviant labels — thereby reinforcing the view that people don’t have to become deviant because of labeling, and furthering the sophistication of the labeling paradigm (Rogers and Buffalo, 1974).

**THE LABELLING PERSPECTIVE AND THE SEARCH FOR THEORETICAL PURITY**

Labelling, then, should not be equated with a theory or a proposition but should be seen as a perspective in deviant research. And because of this it can harbour several diverse theoretical positions. There is thus a great potential for the perspective to contain theoretical contradictions, and to be eligible for criticism from all theoretical sides. Incompatible theories may get welded together. They may also be pitted against each other. Thus, as an illustration of the first point, interactional sociologists may use a drift-voluntaristic model to explain primary deviance, whilst succumbing occasionally to a deterministic, over-socialised conception of the actor in looking at secondary deviance (Broadbent: 1974); as illustration of the second, phenomenological sociologists can find much in labelling which violates the canons of their theoretical work. Seeking to take seriously the examination of meanings of morality and immorality as acted out in every day life (Warren and Johnson, 1972, p. 70), they argue that labelists have been too behaviourist and not taken these meanings seriously enough. Yet for critical criminologists it is precisely these concerns which are viewed disapprovingly. Thus, Taylor, Walton and Young wish to move away from the relativistic idealism of labelling into analyses which pay proper attention to structured inequality in power and interest which underpin the processes whereby the laws are created and enforced (Taylor et al., 1973, p. 68). They wish to move away from a microscopic concern with those who are labelled and those who apply labels to build a fully social (and grand) theory of crime. They eschew microscopic ethnography in favour of global assertion (cf. Manders,

1975). Now, which is it to be? Is the labelling perspective voluntaristic or deterministic, behavioural or idealistic? Since it harbours within it diverse theories, it can, of course, be both. Putting the problem more generally, the labelling perspective generates some of the oldest dilemmas in sociological theory: how to weld analyses of the structural with those of the situational; how to reconcile phenomonological with essentialism, absolutism with relativism, idealism with materialism, formalism with Verstehen; and how to abstract and generalise without reification. Imbedded in the labelling perspective are the unresolved tensions of generations of social theorists. How they may be resolved, or at least how working resolutions may be obtained between them, remains a major issue for those working in the labelling perspective.

Illustrative of one kind of resolution is that provided by Rock, but it is a resolution which only a phenomenological or interactionism-inclined sociologist could favour. Taking the intellectual claims of phenomenology seriously, and seeing phenomenology as a major motif of the new deviancy perspectives, he charts some of the tensions that I have located above. That is, he notes a tension between the essentialism found in the formalism of interactional sociologists, the deep rules of ethnmethodologists and the structural theories of Marxists, and the phenomonologism found in theories of Verstehen and the contextual analysis of interactional sociologists. The reconciliation of notions of structure with those of meaning is proposed through a focus on the actor’s definition of structure:

I shall argue that a systematic description of commonsense ideas of social structure affords the sociologist of deviance access to areas which have previously been denied him. This description will offer him the materials upon which a phenomenologial analysis of social structure can be built. For instance, he will be able to explore the import of such phenomena as social class without committing himself to the belief that social class is an autonomous or ‘real’ entity. (Rock, 1973b, p. 19)

Such a solution hardly resolves the basic dilemma of whether there is a real world out there, and it keeps Rock tottering on the brink of solipsism. Nevertheless, from his point of view it is a consistent way in which to cope with problems of structure and could give rise to one version of labelling theory fully grounded on phenomenology. Alternative versions of labelling could also be constructed by those who seek a more essentialist and/or structural account, in which, presumably, some absolutist notion of deviancy will ultimately have to be imported. Since the labelling perspective contains a variety of theories, these need to be rendered explicit and consistent.
Symbolic interactionism and labelling theory: an aside

Although it is only one of several possible theories that could be applied to problems of labelling, symbolic interactionism has the closest affinity with labelling theory. Its central problem — the construction of meaning — is clearly closely allied to problems of labels. Indeed, many of the criticisms that are levied at labelling theory are in fact directed towards symbolic interactionism. Since Paul Rock has defended the symbolic interactionists' account of deviance at length elsewhere in this volume, it would serve no useful purpose to produce an extended discussion of the symbolic interactionists' enterprise here. I would, however, like to digress from my main arguments and make a few suggestions of my own.

The interactionist's distinctive view of the social world — a view which is quite unlike that of any other sociology or psychology — can be seen as a fusion of several intellectual (sometimes anti-intellectual) traditions, such as pragmatism, formalism, romanticism, mild libertarianism and humanism.8 Taken collectively, such traditions focus upon the ever-ending flow of emerging experience. The human being is both subject and object. The importance is stressed of the localised setting and context, the uncertainty of knowledge and the ambiguity and fragility of meaning — as well as the inexorable tension between the shapeless stream of human life and the shaping structures of the wider society. The intellectual traditions which have given rise to interactionism are important to understand as, without such comprehension, interactionism can easily be seen as a lightweight, passing, theoretical fad of the affluent sixties rather than as a well-established position flowing from strong philosophical arguments. Many of the criticisms made of interactionism in fact rest upon a misunderstanding of the interactionist problematic and a shallow comprehension of its philosophical background. They assume that because interactionism looks at certain theoretical problems while ignoring others, studies certain topics at the expense of others, and uses certain methodologies rather than others, it could only be doing this through ignorance and not reason. There are many criticisms of interactionism derived from postures which are radically different but from which it is assumed that the critics' position is unquestionably superior. Given adequate knowledge, we would all be structuralists or behaviourists, we would all study politics and the class structure and we would all use historical or quantitative methods. The intellectual enterprise is thus rendered closed and monolithic.

Yet the philosophical foundations of interactionism portray a world which is markedly at odds with the absolutism of structuralists, Marxists, positivistic criminologists and the like. Viewed collectively, pragmatism, formalism, romanticism, libertarianism and humanism have played an important formative role in the shaping of a distinctive interactive vision of the social world. Highlighting the endless flux of human experience, welded and shaped through the transforming power of synthetic a priori categorisation, and focusing upon the dereified phenomenal world where knowledge is always limited and uncertain, the interactionists have come to portray an image that is at odds with most other academic theories. It is not, thus, a vision that many academics or sociologists can be content with, since it brings in its wake a strong anti-intellectual commitment, totters frequently on the brink of self-defeating arguments and seems to reveal in a multitude of irresolvable paradoxes.

The anti-intellectualism is a product of the commitment that reality is inexhaustible, that the noumena can never be grasped and that the only firm flowing truth is that which emerges in the local situated experience: abstract, analytic reasoning and global theorising that attempts to grasp absolute transcendental truths, or vast classificatory edifices that are not firmly anchored in experienced life have no room in the interactionist scheme of things. Yet such a position — while cumulatively sponsored and often well argued — leads to a number of tottering paradoxes. It is difficult to conduct intellectual work on a foundation which denies its very possibility.

Thus interactionists might want to defend their position with abstract philosophical reasoning, but the very possibility of this is denied them by their pragmatist heritage. They may wish to produce systematic codified statements of their theory, but the very possibility of this is denied them by their phenomenalist heritage. They may wish to generalise, even produce universal statements, but the value of this is questioned by the romantic base of their position. They may wish to be messianic, absolute, imperial propagandists of an elite interactionist expertise, but their libertarianism forces them to a piecemeal eclecticism. They may wish to be objective external observers of the world, but their humanistic bent constantly hurls them towards the subject and the possibility of solipsism. The paradoxes of the interactionist heritage are great indeed. Interactionists have to live with contradiction and ambiguity, knowing that any argument they make could be self-defeating.

It is not surprising, given this, that interactionism has generally been seen as a marginal theory within sociology and that interactionists have
often been 'marginal men'. For much of its history it has been submerged in an oral tradition, lacking the formalisation and proselytisation that accompanies most other theories. Only recently have texts and readers been spawned, but these have emerged alongside the tradition of phenomenology which seems almost instantly to have superseded it. The Mullinses, in their admittedly curious study, 'Theory Groups in American Sociology', could actually say by 1973 that 'it is clear that the original ideas that developed within symbolic interactionism have run their course intellectually and socially. As a change maker and general orientation for sociology and as the loyal opposition to structural functionalism however it has come to an end' (Mullins and Mullins, 1973, p. 96).

Grounded in ambiguity and contradiction, floundering in irony and paradox, lacking a strong formal training ground, built by 'marginal men' and now given the death wish, it is amazing that interactionism has managed to survive at all. But it has, and I personally hope that it will continue to do so even in the face of criticisms from all sides and from within. Its view of the world may be quirky and its contradictions may be intellectually unsatisfying; it may find few sympathisers willing to stay with it for long — it is a phase one may pass through on the way to loftier enterprises. But — even in the face of all that — the interactionist does continue to provide an alternative vision of the world. It is a necessary and radical, though modest, counterbalance to most traditions of thought. Its final irony is that whilst it is consistently rejected as a valid approach to the world in academic writing, it is consistently acknowledged, most of the time, in our daily lives. The problematic meaning, ambiguity and flux which is the focal concern of interactionist thought is also the focal concern of many lives. It gels with empirical reality. Thus while interactionism may never be a dominant sociology, it has much to offer as a subservient tradition of thought within mainstream sociology (cf., Rock, forthcoming).

TWO GENERAL PROBLEMS IN LABELLING AND DEVIANCE THEORY

Before looking at some of the major limitations and biases which critics have levied at the labelling perspective, it would be useful to examine two objections which are not so much criticisms of labelling theory per se but problems to be found throughout the whole of the sociology of deviance. The two matters I refer to are, first, the problematic nature of defining deviance and, second, the problem of values. I will deal with each in turn.

The problem of definition

One major set of muddles occurs over the problem of defining deviance. The main source of these muddles is Becker's own classic statement (1963) where he starts his discussion of outsiders by first dispensing critically with definitions of deviance that evoke statistical, pathological or dysfunctional criteria before going on to suggest his own: 'Deviance is not a quality of the act a person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an offender' (Becker, 1963, p. 9). That he does not see deviance as solely the manufactured product of societal responses is demonstrated a few pages later, when he introduces his equally famous typology of deviance, using the additional yardstick of rule violation. Thus, combining rule violation with society responses, the following typology is produced (ex Becker, 1963, p. 20):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived as deviant</th>
<th>Rule-breaking behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obedient behaviour</td>
<td>False accused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not perceived as deviant</td>
<td>Conforming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, locked within Becker's definition and typology are muddles indeed, some of which Becker himself addressed in a recent paper (Becker, 1974). What are the muddles, and how may they be resolved?

First, and most simple, it is argued that Becker has not provided a definition of deviance at all. As Sagarin noted:

Becker's statement is not a definition and should not be confused with one. It merely delineates the self-other process by which the placing of a person, or a group of persons, in the category of deviant is made, but it fails to note the characteristics that deviants have in common, and those which are utilised by oneself and others to give persons that label. (Sagarin, 1967, p. 9).

Thus it is possible to say the same things as Becker about almost any other form of behaviour: conformity is behaviour that people so label, silliness is behaviour that people so label, and beauty is a state that people so label. Without specifying the criteria by which such labels can be recognised, the statement of Becker's remains a vacuous tautology.

This criticism is not so valid of other labelling theorists. For example, Lemert utilises a conception of deviance which straddles the statistical and
the norm violation (Lemert, 1951, p. 27). Further, some work has devoted attention to the problem of the contents of deviant labels, the criteria used being such as (a) essentialist themes and (b) stigmatising or devalued meanings (Scott, 1970).

A second line of criticism suggests that labelling theory is 'relativistic in the extreme' (Gibbs, 1966, p. 10). Since nothing is intrinsically deviant, anything could be called deviant and nothing has to be. By this argument, child molesters, strippers, dwarfs or 'flat earthers' may be called normal if one so chooses, and routine marriage, hard work and average intelligence may be called deviant. Nothing is deviant but naming makes it so.

Now there are several real advantages of such an approach. It highlights the ambiguity of a world no longer divided into a series of neat types, the black and the white, the good and the bad, the normal and the mad: the continuum between normality and deviancy is stressed. It opens up the field of inquiry so that it is possible to discuss a range of areas hitherto neglected — blindness (Scott, 1969), subnormality (Mercer, 1973), fatness (Maddox, Back and Liedermann, 1968), and interpersonal relationships (Denzin, 1970) — thereby enabling both the foundations for a formal theory of deviance as a social property and a method for understanding the routine and the regular through the eyes of the ruptured and the irregular. And it provides the potential for a constant challenge to hitherto taken-for-granted categories and an impetus for a radical definition of those categories supported by master institution of power.

Yet this enlarging of the field has not been without difficulties. Most notably, it flies in the face of empirical reality, where we commonsensically know that some acts are more deviant than others. Deviance as a social category, and as opposed to a sociological category, is simply not as variable as the labelling theorists often seem to imply. As Taylor, Walton and Young say:

Our objection to one assumption of the societal reaction position is this: we do not act in a world free of social meaning. With the exception of entirely new behaviour, it is clear to most people which actions are deviant and which are not deviant... We would assert that most deviant behaviour is a quality of the act, since the way we distinguish between behaviour and action is that behaviour is merely physical and action has meaning that is socially given. (Taylor et al., 1975a, p. 147)

What these writers assert is that behaviour is embedded in wider social contexts comprised of systems of meaning which are pre-given: they cannot be neatly wished away. These contexts of meanings provide the resources out of which members fashion their interpretations of given behaviour, and are far from being capable of instant transformation. Thus, for example, in this culture 'everybody knows' that murder is illegal, that homosexuality is at least different and that blindness is a handicap. Our routine contexts simply do not permit us to say that murder, homosexuality or blindness are 'normal', and to argue such a case is to commit sociological mystification.

A second problem arising from the labelling theoreticians' relativism argues that their relativism notwithstanding, their work is directed at fields which are in fact commonly recognised as deviant: despite all disclaimers, it remains true that sociologists of deviance study strippers, drug users and criminals and not more mundane activities (Liazos, 1972). Their relativism is dishonest, since their work is informed by absolute categories commonly sensed as deviant. And closely allied to the above, the point is made that their work often serves to reinforce the apartness and 'deviantness' of certain groups (cf. Lofland, 1969). By studying the mentally ill as deviant, the sociologist tacitly concurs with public definitions of deviance. Further, when such categorisation is also combined with the sociologist's insistence on ambiguity or relativism, he may not only reinforce existing categories of deviance but also create new ones. Any work the sociologist of deviance performs is likely either to reinforce labels of deviance or to create new ones.

A third (now standard) definition muddle arises from Becker's typology cited earlier, in which there arise logically contradictory cells. More specifically, given Becker's relativistic, definitional approach to deviance, it is hard to see how two categories on his typology can exist. For if deviance is a matter of identifying and labelling, then clearly there can be no 'secret deviance' or 'falsely accused'. It is not possible to have people called 'deviant' who are not so identified, and it is not possible to have people called 'non-deviant' who are not so identified. There can only, therefore, be deviants and non-deviants.

Now all three of the criticisms outlined above pose problems (cf. Kitsuse, 1972; Becker, 1974; Gibbs, 1972; Pollner, 1974). Basically, the problems stem from a need to reconcile the irreconcilable: how to blend an absolutist conception of deviance with a relativist one. There are a number of ways in which such a tension might be partially resolved, depending upon one's theoretical posture. The solution that I feel most easy with is to define deviance as a conceptual field within sociology (not the social world) that is marked out by two criteria: that of rule violation and that of the imputation (by self or others) of stigma and devaluation. The issue of rule violation leads to the problems of which rules and whose rules —
which in turn leads to the analytic distinction between societal and situational deviance. By societal deviance I refer in a shorthand way to those categories that are either (a) commonly sensed by most of society’s members to be deviant, or (b) lodged in some abstract meanings, such as the law or reified norms, and not to be wished away by individual members. Such deviance implies a high degree of consensus over the identification of the deviance, even if there is subsequently much dissent about the appropriateness of such a label. Thus it would be hard for anyone to say that being blind, committing armed robbery or being a transvestite were publicly acknowledged as ‘normal events’, even though it is clear that many people may view their designation as deviant to be utterly inappropriate. By situational deviance I am referring not to abstract meaning systems (perceived or real), but rather to the actual manner in which members of society go about the task of creating rules and interpreting rule violations as ‘deviance’ (although, of course, they would hardly use such a word) in context. Clearly, much of this rule making and deviancy interpretation will be contingent upon the abstract societal system I have located above. But the point remains that in situations members are freer to (i) neutralise or reject the societal version of deviance and (ii) construct rules and definitions at odds with those commonly sensed to belong to ‘society’. While, in one sense, societal deviance steers towards absolute categories of deviance, situational deviance steers towards a more relativistic stance. Two examples may help clarify some of these distinctions.

First, take the situation of routine, informal interaction on a production line (or any other conventional situation, such as routine marital interaction, peer interaction, or interaction in a club setting, etc.) (cf. Roy, 1954; Bryant, 1974, pt. 1). Such routinisation becomes possible through the co-ordination of conduct and the development of a network of tacit rules. Now, neither in society’s minds nor in any dominant abstract system of values in society could such routine work be identified publicly as deviant. Routine work is not societal deviance. Yet it should also be clear that through the co-ordinated rule system, violation of such rules — or perception of violation — becomes a possibility. When such violation occurs — or is perceived as occurring — situational deviance emerges.

A second example can be drawn from the homosexual subculture (cf. Warren, 1974a). In this culture homosexuality must be viewed as societal deviance. All members of society must acknowledge (even if they strongly disagree) that homosexuality is commonly regarded as deviant; alternatively, it is hard to posit an objectified, abstract set of values in this society according to which homosexuality is not viewed as in some sense a marginal (sinful, sick, sad) state. Yet to acknowledge that homosexuality is societal deviance is not to acknowledge that it is situational deviance. Thus in situated contexts members of society or homosexuals themselves may create rules which normalise homosexuality. Homosexuality is no longer viewed as deviant. However, focusing, for example, on the rule systems of the homosexual subculture, the violation (or perceived violation) of this system becomes a possibility. Homosexuals themselves may create a category of deviance within their own ranks. For instance, homosexuals may come to view the ‘too camp and swish’ role, the ‘too straight’ role, or the ‘too promiscuous’ role of other homosexuals as deviant. Here we have compounded complexity: societal deviance becomes ‘normal’ situation becomes situational deviance.

**The problem of values**

A major issue with any sociology of deviance must be its explicit awareness of the problem of values and, concomitantly, its own value bias. At least superficially, the labelling perspective fares well here. Most of the writings of labelling theorists seem to lack the moral disapproval of sociologists of earlier decades, and many of their writings devote space to the value debate (e.g., Becker, 1963, 1964, 1967, 1974). However, while it may be unfair to accuse the labellists of lacking awareness of value problems, this by no means precludes criticism of their particular resolutions to the problems. Two issues may be raised here: the issue of bias and the issue of solipsism.

From all sides, Becker et al are accused of bias. To the Right, labelling theory is seen as deeply subversive of the status quo — challenging orthodox absolutist definitions of deviance and taking seriously the viewpoint of the deviant. It is biased in favour of the deviant. To the Left, labelling theory is seen as strongly supportive of the status quo — smuggling in taken-for-granted categories of deviance, focusing attention on lower-level functionaries while neglecting the oppressive power elites behind the dominant master institutions, and masking all these activities under a gentle radical guise. It is biased in favour of the oppressors, and provides a good example of the way in which the oppressive system of democratic capitalism is able to absorb potential academic threats. Now, these opposing criticisms may either simply be taken to represent the particular value positions of their proponents, or they may be taken as academic arguments about the nature of bias in scientific work.

In the former the critic has started out from a series of moral and
political assumptions which the labelling theorist is shown not to support. Debates about these assumptions can ultimately only be conducted in the area of politics or philosophy, and while they must inform sociology, they are not coterminous with it.

The second issue is more germane to sociological (as opposed to purely political or moral) work. The issue here centres largely on what constitutes bias. Becker (1971) distinguishes two forms: (a) work is biased when it presents statements of fact that are demonstrably incorrect; (b) work is biased when its results favour or appear to favour one side or another in a controversy. Becker suggests that ‘we cannot avoid being subjected to the charge of bias in the second sense’, but that the former ‘isn’t in principle an unattainable goal and is worth striving for’ (Becker, 1971, p. 13). Thus, taking Goffman’s account of becoming a mental patient as an illustration, this work may be accused of bias because it gets the picture of what it is like to be a mentally ill person wrong, or because it tacitly sympathises with the patient, criticises the custodians and ignores the wider power structure. If the former is true, then the work is misleading and possibly dangerous — and should be rejected. But the latter could be — until the unlikely day arrives when the sociologist is able to grasp the totality of ‘all sides’ in the situation at once (cf. Becker, 1967, p. 247). Those who make the charge of bias do so primarily in this second sense, which once again allows the sociologist to make clear on which side he perceives the bias to be generated.

Thus, assuming good ‘objective’ work is to be done, the problem becomes that of distinguishing how the work of labellists may be biased towards certain groups. In general, they do have an underdog bias: they do try to get the record straight on behalf of those groups who are conventionally perceived as troublesome, and hence challenge mainstream studies which view deviance through the eyes of the establishment and the correctionalist. Yet at the same time this ‘unconventional sentimentality’ is very often congruent with establishment definitions, because the very categories studied by the labellist remain those which are designated deviant by official groups. The labellist studies homosexuals not heterosexuals, criminals not law-abiders and prostitutes not heterosexual couples. In doing this the labellist tacitly confirms the establishment portrait of deviants. And in focusing — frequently — on the more exotic aspects of these deviant life styles, he also tends to emphasise the difference of these groups. The bias of the labelling theorist to date, then, has been double-barrelled: supporting the deviant but not challenging the status quo (cf. Liazi, 1972; Warren and Johnson, 1972; Mankoff, 1971; Thio, 1973). 11

Now this charge of bias — of seeming to ‘take sides’ — can often lead to a much more serious epistemological problem: that of solipsism. For in the work of some labelling theorists (notably those of an interactionist or ethnomet hodological variety), there is a strong tendency to take seriously the persons, meanings or labels of the world and to ignore the possibility of any external referent. In the words of two extreme proponents of this view: ‘Nothing in the social world has an inherent meaning. Meaning consists only of that which is imputed by people to persons and objects, as they go about their daily lives trying to make sense of the world’ (Lyman and Scott, 1970, p. 26).

Thus, tacitly in some instances and explicitly in others, the sociological task becomes that of describing first one world view, then another and so on, through the entire social world. But there can be no way of reconciling these differing world views: each one has to be considered in its own terms. We study the delinquent as he experiences the world in his natural habitat and we document as accurately as possible this experience — taking very seriously the boy’s own account and rejecting any concern for forces shaping his behaviour which are unperceived by the boy, or the possibility that the boy’s account may not be ‘right’.

In some ways this has been a most important development in sociology, for in the past sociologists have been trained not to take the individual’s own accounts seriously but instead to go in pursuit of the causal factors unperceived by him. After listening to what the respondent says, the sociologist then sets about trying to find the real explanation for that behaviour, whether it lies in unconscious motivations, behavioural conditioning, the maintenance of needs or the consequence of economic forces. How the person defines his or her motives has been ignored in a pursuit of ‘real’ motives. And such ‘real’ motives are generally located in some absolutist metaphysic around which the entire world seems to revolve.

Now the beliefs upon which this ‘orthodox’ sociology have largely been built have all come under much fire recently. It can no longer pass unchallenged that there is surely a world of causation apart from actors’ intentionality, that actors’ meanings and talk can ultimately be translated through the medium of some universal constant, or that an absolutist metaphysic can be adhered to which explains the world by a few grand principles.

Yet a problem with much of this well-founded criticism is that it becomes guilty of ‘rejection by reversal’ and of what Sorokin has analysed as the ‘faults and foibles’ effect (Sorokin, 1956). By ‘rejection by reversal’ I mean the tendency to construct an alternative theory by simply reversing the major features of an opponent’s theory. Thus absolutism turns into
relativism, objectivism turns into subjectivism and value-free sociology becomes a value-committed sociology. By ‘fads and foibles’, Sorokin indicated the tendency of sociologists — in their hectic pursuit of new ideas and discoveries — to ignore what was good in past theories and to posit too radical a break with the past.

Now phenomenological labelling theory (in its preoccupation with actors’ meanings) can be led to a defencelessly uncritical posture in which there are no external standards by which to appraise the individual’s situation. When the homosexual tells us he or she is sick and needs treatment, when the poor tell us they are ‘well off’ and content, when the delinquent boy informs us that his delinquency is a product of a broken home, we can do nothing more than record this situation. A total solipsism emerges. Its rejection of absolutism reinforces this intellectual impotence.

Any work that fully espouses the principles of subjectivism and relativism must inevitably render its own findings, along with all others, incapable of possessing claims to be listened to or taken more seriously than anything else. While some of the phenomenological sociologists would go this far, interactionists walk a tightrope between social behaviourism and phenomenological idealism, and their intellectual origins in formalism and pragmatism certainly permits the incomplete grasping of localised truths. There is no inevitable connection between interactionism and ‘mindless relativism’ as some critics suggest (cf. Lewis, 1976). And, of course, for other — more structural or positivist versions of labelling theory — the relativist problem is bypassed.

THE BIASES AND LIMITATIONS OF LABELLING THEORY

A number of biases and limitations have been detected in labelling theory to date. It ignores the sources of deviant action; has too deterministic a conception of the labelling process; has relevance to only a limited range of deviant activities (cf. Reiss, 1970, pp. 80-2; Schur, 1971); ignores power; neglects structure; avoids history; focuses upon individuals to the detriment of interactional (Ward, 1971, p. 287) and organisational factors (Davis, 1972); has a ‘methodological inhibition serving to limit the field to an ethnographic, descriptive, overly restrictive sociology’ (Davis, 1972, p. 466), as well as a tendency to look only ‘at the visible end of the selection process’, ignoring ‘those cases which do not develop into “career” deviants’ (Bordua, 1967, p. 154). Because of restricted space, I will deal only with the first five here, but they can all be shown to be largely unfair.

The neglect of becoming deviant

The first and most frequently cited limitation of labelling theory is that it fails to provide any account of the initial motivations towards deviance; it ignores the origins of deviant action and thereby frequently denudes the behaviour of meaning (Gibbs, 1966; Bordua, 1967; Mankoff, 1971; Taylor, Walton and Young, 1973a; Davis, 1972). These criticisms seem to be both fair and unfair. They are unfair in so far as they attack the perspective for not doing what it manifestly does not set out to do. A theory of labels does not have to be a theory of behaviour, although at those points where the theory suggests that the behaviour is shaped by the labels or the labels are shaped by the behaviour the two areas do interact.

However, a number of the criticisms are fairer, because while labelling theorists do not have to account for the initial deviance in principle, they very often do in practice. What critics are actually attacking is a tacit theory of primary deviance. Let me briefly give a few instances of how the problem of initial deviance has been dealt with in labelling theory (some are more successful than others). In a number of studies the analysis picks up from the stage when the ‘deviant’ has been identified and follows the interactions from there on (e.g. Emerson, 1969; Sudnow, 1965); these simply ignore the problem. In others the analyst may provide a summary of extant eclectic work on deviant origins before embarking upon his own study of the impact of labelling (e.g. Schur, 1963). And in some an open-ended proposition is made about the sources of deviance, which acknowledges the importance of initiating forces other than labelling but elects to ignore them (e.g. Lemert, 1951, p. 67; Plummer, 1975). All of these seem to me to be reasonable positions: no theory explains everything and the analyst is entitled to set his boundaries. Yet there are some theorists, most notably Becker, who do tacitly produce theories of initial motivation. While they do not develop these, the theories lie dormant in their accounts awaiting explication. The two accounts most frequently criticised seem to be ones in which:

1. the labels themselves are seen as the initiator of deviant behaviour; in other words, the deviance is created by societal reaction alone;
2. the impulse towards deviant activities is regarded as ubiquitous and widespread in society; in other words, all people would be deviant if there were not good reasons to be otherwise.

The first proposition is one frequently used by critics for the purpose of attack, but I do not think any labelling theorist would endorse it (cf. Schur,
and commitment in a very different manner from that allowed in the societal reaction approach (Walton, 1973, p. 179).

Walton has successfully demonstrated that in some instances deviant choice may be much more wilful than that which is conventionally discussed by labelling theorists. But, in effect, both Young and Walton’s critiques are rather one-sided. Labellists have generally played a major role in restoring choice and meaning to the deviant’s activity (cf. Matza, 1969). And this they have done primarily by constructing processual models of becoming deviant, rather than static-state/causal snapshots. In the interactionist account of labelling, people do not become deviant ‘all at once’ but rather — through a series of shifts and negotiations — gradually build up a deviant self. Minor but meaningful fantasies may gradually emerge in deviant action. Both Young and Walton seem to seek to close this processual model and return it to a picture of person who — at a certain moment in time — suddenly seeks a clear-headed, wilful, deviant activity (in Young’s case it is the hedonism of the marijuana smoker and in Walton’s it is the political commitment of the Weathermen). Yet a cumulative, sequential account of ‘becoming’ is largely incompatible with a model that postulates powerful initiating forces. At least in the interactionist variant of labelling, human life is constantly being pieced together through conjoint action and ambiguous interpretation: it is not hammered out by clear, unilateral motives.

It must be stressed, however, that to retain choice and process is not necessarily to see these processes as ‘random’ and ‘accidental’. Processes may stem from different systems and choice may depend on different sets of contingencies. So while it may be true that in some parts of his writing Becker seems to imply a randomness of initial motivations towards deviance, I do not think this should be seen as a necessary feature of labelling theory. Indeed, at this point the most common postulate for explaining primary deviance may be evoked. States simply that the early stages of deviant careers may be constructed from diverse sources. Thus for Scheff ‘residual rule breaking’ arises from ‘fundamentally diverse sources’ — organic, psychological, external stress, and volitional acts of innovation of defiance (Scheff, 1966, p. 40), while for Lemert, ‘differentiation’ is accounted for by biology, demography, technology, groups, psychic processes and ‘drift’ (Lemert, 1951, ch. 2; Lemert, 1967, ch. 2). It is true that these amount to little more than open-minded confessions of ignorance, but as I have noted before it is basically unfair to criticise a theory for what it does not set out to do.

In sum, I do not find the criticisms of labelling theory, on the ground of

1971, p. 5; Rock, 1973a, p. 66). Yet despite the fact that no labelling theorist seems to espouse the ‘label creates behaviour’ view, it is very often developed by critics. Mankoff, for instance, has shown how in a number of empirical instances (including Becker’s own marijuana smokers, and Lemert’s own ‘naive check forgers’), that ‘societal reactions seem to be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for career-achieved deviance’ (Mankoff, 1971, p. 211): there can be career deviance without societal reactions. Now, while in a few limited instances labelling theorists may argue that it is the societal reactions which sets a deviant off on his career, these are extremely untypical cases. Lemert, Becker and Schur have all denied that careers necessarily start with societal reactions, although it remains unclear where, according to their argument, careers do commence (cf. Stebbins, 1971).

It is, I think, a gross misreading of the interactionist version of labelling theory to impute the initiation of deviant careers to labelling. It is also a misreading to believe that labelling can only be evidenced by direct formal labelling. While, however, the critics’ first attack on labelling theory’s account of initial motivation can be faulted because no labellist would argue that position, the butt of the second criticism can certainly be evidenced in labellist writings.

This proposition is built right into the very heart of Becker’s account. As Becker says: ‘There is no reason to assume that only those who finally commit a deviant act actually show the impulse to do so. It is much more likely that most people experience deviant impulses frequently. At least in fantasy, people are much more deviant than they appear’ (Becker, 1963, p. 26); or later: ‘Instead of deviant motives leading to the deviant behaviour, it is the other way round; the deviant behaviour in time produces the deviant motivation. Vague impulses and desires — in this case — are transformed into definite patterns of action through the social interpretation of a physical experience which is in itself ambiguous’ (Becker, 1963, p. 42). Becker’s view has much in common with control theory. However, critics have pointed to the possibility that this theory can trivialise the actor’s initial reasons for getting into deviant activities. As Young says: ‘Thus human purpose and meaning are taken from the deviant; his project is not one of importance to him, rather, it is a product of experimentation and the “accident” of labelling’ (Young, 1974, p. 165). Walton (1973) has exemplified this argument by providing a case study of a highly politicised deviant group — the Weathermen — in which the initial motivation for the acts can be seen as powerful. As he says: ‘The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate that some deviants exhibit purposefulness, choice,
its neglect of initial motivation, very convincing, since there is no reason of internal consistency why it should address itself to the problem of initial motives. However: (a) in practice, labelling theorists have often implicitly addressed themselves to these problems in the past, and these theories do need critical examination and elaboration; (b) some researchers (though not necessarily labelling theorists) need to focus more directly upon the possible range of links between initial motives and labels (cf. Turner, 1972).

The 'man on his back' bias: a determinism of societal reactions

Closely linked to the above is the argument that labelling theorists have rescued the deviant from the deterministic constraints of biological, psychological and social forces only to enchain him again in a new determinism of societal reactions. Thus Bordua suggests that labelling theory 'assumes an essentially empty organism or at least one with little or no autonomous capacity to determine conduct' (Bordua, 1967, p. 154), and Gouldner comments that it has 'the paradoxical consequence of inviting us to view the deviant as a passive nonentity who is responsible neither for his suffering nor its alleviation — who is more sinned against than sinning' (Gouldner, 1968, p. 106).

This argument has been most clearly documented by Schervish, who suggests that there is a philosophical bias in existing labelling studies which work from 'pessimistic and fatalistic assumptions that an imputed label is both passive and stands alone as an individual' (Schervish, 1973, p. 47). This has come about partly because it is methodologically easier to study relatively formal situations where the powerful label the weak, and partly because of the liberal assumptions of sociologists, as a consequence of which more aggressive political deviance tends to get ignored. Schervish is optimistic that although this bias has existed in the past, labelling theorists should now be able to move beyond their carefully drawn social psychological studies of individuals and begin to explore group, organizational, and societal levels of labelling conflict, (Schervish, 1973, p. 55).

Now while Schervish's optimism at least allows for a place for labelling theory in the future, I do not think that the 'man-on-his-back' criticism is particularly well founded.

First, even those studies which seem to provide the most crude model of labelling ('no deviance->slam label->deviance') are often firmly within a humanist tradition which sees the labelled person as sensibly playing a part under the weight of the deviant label. Goffman's mental patients are classic examples of people who have a label which is not internalised thrust upon them (Goffman, 1968). Secondly, there are a number of instances in the labelling literature of members working to fight off labels and neutralise their possible impact. Reiss's boy prostitutes, who develop normative systems which insulate them from homosexual self-conceptions, constitute one early instance of this tradition, and there have been many such accounts since that time (Reiss, 1962; McCaghy, 1968). Thirdly, studies are now developing of deviants who actively seek out the deviant label rather than having it cast upon them by others. The Braginsky's theory of mental illness centres on the idea that people seek out labels of madness in order to resolve problems of everyday life (Braginsky and Braginsky, 1969); and Rock has presented a discussion of expressive, politised and entrepreneurial deviants, all of whom, for varying reasons, find it important to present themselves publicly as deviant (Rock, 1973a). In other words, although there may be instances of 'passive labelling' both in the literature and in the empirical world, there are also many instances where the passive picture of the man on his back simply does not apply.

I find this criticism as especially curious one when it is levelled against the interactionists' account of labelling, for it is so clearly antithetical to some of the basic tenets of interactionist theory. To take a theory that is sensitive to self, consciousness and intentionality and render it as a new determinism of societal reaction could only be possible if the theory were totally misunderstood in the first place.

The irrelevance of labelling theory to certain problem areas

A third, and much less frequent, argument against labelling theory is raised by those who suggest that it is simply inapplicable to large areas of deviant behaviour. Thus the labelling model is not suitable for the analysis of impulsive crimes such as violence, physical deviance such as blindness or mild deviations which involve few overt labellers and low normative and physical visibility, such as premarital intercourse (cf. Reiss, 1970, pp. 80-2). These criticisms are generally based upon crude models of labelling, arguing either that the behaviour exists in the first place, before the application of a societal reaction (whereas presumably in areas where labelling theory is applicable, the behaviour has to be caused by labels), or that the non-existence of specific others to react to the deviance makes the model inappropriate (whereas presumably in areas where labelling theory
is applicable, there have to exist specific others, like control agents, who respond to the deviance). These criticisms are based upon misconceptions of labelling theory. No labelling theorist argues that societal reactions bring about the behaviour: only that labels alter the nature, shape and incidence of the experience. And few labelling theorists believe that all the labelling has to flow from specific others: it may also stem from abstract rules and self-reactions. Labelling theory is, in principle, applicable to any area of social life, deviant or non-deviant, and key studies have already emerged in those areas often attacked as being irrelevant (e.g. Scott, 1969; Mercer, 1973; Edgerton, 1967; Rains, 1971; Christensen and Carpenter, 1962).

The neglect of power

The most serious objection to the labelling perspective which ‘radical’ or ‘critical’ criminologists have raised appears to be that it is insufficiently political. Their arguments, made forcefully in the early 1970s, take two major forms.

First, it is argued that labelling perspectives ‘tend to incline sociologists toward focusing on deviance committed by the powerless rather than deviance committed by the powerful’ (Thio, 1973, p. 8). Most notably, they concentrate upon the ‘sociology of nuts, sluts and pervers’ at the expense of ‘covert institutional violence’ (Liazios, 1972, p. 11). And as a result of the general acceptance of this criticism amongst ‘radical’ criminologists (certainly in England, though to a much lesser extent in America), there has been a drastic revision of the field in the past few years towards the study of the ‘crimes of the powerful’ (cf. Pearce, 1976) and offences against ‘human rights’ (cf. Schwendinger and Schwendinger, 1973).

Secondly, it is argued that while many labelling theorists ‘mention the importance of power in labelling people deviant’, ‘this insight is not developed’ (Liazios, 1972, pp. 114-15). In particular, labelling theorists focus upon interpersonal relationships and so-called ‘caretaker institutions’, but fail to look at the broader economic structures in which deviance emerges. Again, as a result of the general acceptance of this criticism among radical criminologists (in England), there has been a reorientation of the field towards ‘the political economy of crime’.

The consequence of these criticisms can only be viewed positively. It is important that sociologists should study the crimes of the powerful and the political economy of deviance. But while the consequences of the criticisms are sound, the criticisms themselves are weak. Both of the criticisms mentioned above flow from an ignorantly insensitive and dogmatically assertive assumption of the rightness of an absolutist position. The criticisms come close to denying the rightness of any theoretical posture or problematic other than their own. They generally imply that sociologists who look at these ‘powerless’ areas do so out of blindness, stupidity, ignorance or plain conservatism rather than reason. I will consider these two objections in turn.

First, the issue of a focus on the powerless. At first sight this criticism would seem to have great force. Almost without exception sociologists have focused upon the deviance of the powerless. This granted, however, it still seems to me that ‘radical’ critics have failed to comprehend four things: the sociology of deviance is not criminology; the study of deviance is the study of the powerless; the symbolic interactionist problematic is not the Marxist problematic; and the politics of libertarianism directs one to work with the victims of state power. These four statements are interconnected, but I will unpack each one separately.

First, the sociology of deviance is not criminology. This is a distinction that was much discussed during the mid-sixties, with the advent of the ‘new deviance’ theories. The rejection of so-called positivist criminology ushered in the sociology of deviance; but this sociology not only changed the theoretical base for the study of criminals, it also brought in its wake a dramatic restructuring of empirical concerns. Sociologists turned their interests to the world of expressive deviance: to the twilight, marginal worlds of tramps, alcoholics, strippers, dwarfs, prostitutes, drug addicts, nudists; to taxi-cab drivers, the blind, the dying, the physically ill and handicapped, and even to a motley array of problems in everyday life. Whatever these studies had in common, it was very clear that it was not criminology. Of course, some of these same students continued to study crime, but only as one instance of deviance — an uneasy coexistence was established.

This uneasy coexistence has rarely been directly confronted, but it does serve as one root dividing point between the recent critical criminologists and the interactionist labelling theorists. The former gravitate towards criminological concerns; the latter gravitate away from them. Yet the former are unwilling to relinquish their affinities with deviance study. Thus even the title of their magnus opus The New Criminology — For a Social Theory of Deviance (my emphasis) captures the inherent confusion. For the book as a whole is about crime, criminals and the law; nowhere in the book is there to be found a concern for the blind, the stutterer, the subnormal, the physically handicapped, the physically ill, the
religious deviant, the nudist or the interpersonal problems of families. It is essentially a book on criminology, but it is unwilling to relinquish its claim to be the study of deviance.

Now this is not nit-picking. Of course, I do not want to defend the arbitrary construction of academic boundaries and the creation of sterile demarcation disputes. But is it vital to recognise that the concerns of the sociology of deviance (and I am not here particularly concerned with what the concerns of criminology are — I am no criminologist) send one necessarily on a mission to study powerless groups. It is not capricious whimsy but theoretical necessity that leads the sociology of deviance to study powerlessness. And the reason should be so obvious that one wonders how the attacks could ever have been so seriously accepted. For the study of deviance is the study of devalued groups, and devalued groups are groups which lack status and prestige. Now, of course, it may be useful — for a full account of deviance — to study ‘top dogs’ who maintain their prestige in order to understand the mechanisms by which prestige and stigma gets allocated. It is theoretically relevant to understand why it was so long before Nixon was placed in a devalued role. But a sociology of deviance which does not focus centrally on powerless groups is likely to be a very odd sociology of deviance.

Given that deviance is concerned with devalued groups, it is also possible to suggest that there is an affinity between symbolic interactionism and the study of deviance. That interactionists have readily studied deviance is apparent; that there are good theoretical grounds for doing so is perhaps less clear. Yet it is agreed that the interactionists' problematic is fundamentally the analysis of the ways in which members construct meanings — of self and of the social world — and of how such social constructions are pervaded with ambiguity, then it becomes clear that the topic of deviance provides an unusually complete set of illustrations for such analysis.

Thus the interactionists' persistent (though often tacit) concern with ambiguity may be greatly illuminated by an examination of those situations where incongruity and equivocations are central features. An ironic consequence is that such illumination may also serve to clarify the less ambiguous, more routine situations of the social world. In either case the study of deviant groups and deviant situations affords an unusually stimulating pathway to such understandings. Thus, for instance, to look at the world through the eyes of a hermaphrodite or a transvestite will tell us much about the ambiguity of gender roles and the way in which such precarious gender meaning becomes stabilised (Garfinkel 1967; Kando, 1973; Feinbloom, 1976).

Further, the interactionists' desire to remove themselves from abstract generalities or reified theorising and to immerse themselves in the understanding of small, local contexts inevitably leads them to notice the diversity and plurality of small social worlds. All the world is not deviant, nor are there only limited realms which are consensually defined as deviant. It is not that the interactionist must select exotic groups, but that any group once studied closely will reveal a diversity of meanings and life styles, along with anomalies and problems that require studying. Most of the groups studied by interactionists are not really that quaint or exotic: they are you and I going about our daily tasks of walking and talking, living in families, visiting doctors and going to work, meeting friends and falling in love, making telephone calls, sleeping, dying and the like. This concern does not lead to the study of exotic groups but to the study of the commonplace situations of ordinary people. But once studied closely, the diversity and deviance of daily experience becomes more apparent.

Another affinity between interactionism and deviance stems from their direct concern with processes of identity construction. The building and negotiation of the self is, of course, a major focus of interactionist analysis and, again, it is clear that much can be learned from studying these situations where identities are changed, disrupted or put under severe stress. It is at those moments that the processes involved in the constitution of self may be most readily observed and studied. The study of deviance provides a host of such situations, while the study of covert institutional violence seems less well provided with such cases.

Understanding of why the powerless have frequently been the topic of labelling theory lies, finally, in recognition of the liberal-to-libertarian sympathies of many of its practitioners. They have been concerned with the excessive encroachment of technology, bureaucracy and the state upon the personal life — often in its grossest forms (the increasing criminalisation and medicalisation of deviance; the bureaucratisation of the control agencies and the concomitant dehumanisation of the lives of their 'victims'; and the direct application of technology in the service of control), but also in its more subtle forms — daily alienation, meaningless, despair and fragmentation (with the concomitant 'theory and practice of resistance to everyday life' (Cohen and Taylor, 1976)). Now, although critical criminologists deride such sympathies, they must at least agree that there is a political rationale behind the study of many powerless groups and that sometimes such concerns have had important practical, political pay-offs (decriminalisation, deinstitutionalisation, demedicalisation, depoliticisation and the creation of movements concerned with such activities).
In summary, then, the labelling perspective gravitates toward the powerless because (a) the sociology of deviance generally directs them to devolved groups; (b) symbolic interactionism directs them to areas where ambiguity, marginality and precarious identities are readily available for study; and (c) libertarianism directs them to work with groups who are seriously 'up against the state'. Theoretically, sociologically and practically there are good reasons for a concern with the powerless.

Aside from the criticism that the labelling perspective studies only powerless groups, there is the more general problem that it neglects political analysis. This attack takes a weak and a strong form. In its weak form it implies that labelling analysts ignore the study of power; in its stronger form, it asserts that their analysis is false.

The first — weak — criticism is simply wrong. One could well argue that the labelling perspective brought political analysis (back?) into deviancy study. It recognises that 'naming was a political act' (Goode, 1969, and that 'what rules are to be enforced, what behaviour regarded as deviant, and which people labelled as outsiders must be regarded as political [questions]' (Becker, 1965, p. 7).

From this it went on to produce a series of empirical studies concerning the origins of deviancy definitions in political action, e.g. drug legislation (Becker, 1963; Dickson, 1968; Galliber and Walker, 1977); temperance legislation (Gusfield, 1963); delinquency definitions (Platt, 1969; Lemert, 1970); homosexuality (e.g. Spector, 1977); prostitution (Roby, 1969); pornography (Zurcher and Kirkpatrick, 1976); political bias in the apprehension and adjudication of deviants (cf. Box, 1971); and the distribution of power in the bargaining process (cf., Scheff, 1968; Emerson, 1969; Carlen, 1976). Masses and masses of work could be cited here which shows the concern with political factors in the labelling perspective.

The first attack — since it is false — leads to a consideration of the second: whilst power is present in the labelling perspective, the analysis is weak. This criticism is too vast to consider in detail here: it basically involves a reconsideration of classic debates in political science theory between pluralist, elitist and ruling-class models of power. For it is argued that labelling perspectives ultimately approach a pluralistic conception of power (albeit a 'radical pluralism' — cf. Pearce, 1976) and that such analyses are discredited. Assuming that pluralism has been discredited (a gross assumption), the problem is then clear: does the labelling perspective really imply a pluralist conception of power? The answer should be equally clear: within the perspective, any theory can be applied (see the introductory remarks to this paper), so there is clearly no endemic link with pluralism.

Whilst this solution may be satisfactory to a few, it actually bypasses the basis of most of the criticism. This is the charge that interactionism is equatable with labelling theory, and it is this theory which is pluralistic. Some brief comments are necessary here, therefore, on the symbolic interactionism version of power.

The essence of the interactionists' notion of power highlights the negotiated, ambiguous and symbolic issues in politics. It is a view which should capture the flow of the empirically observable political situations that people find themselves involved in daily. For the political acts that we all experience are shrouded in such issues — whether we confront them in university senates, in radical committees, in political organisations, on the shop floor, in church trustees' meetings or when working with (or against) the media.

In all these situations, the empirically observable situations are those of negotiation, disagreement and discussion, the selection of the right 'issue' and the right 'image', the behind-the-scenes canvassing. Interactionism can be used to study and understand politics at this level (Edelman, 1964, 1971; Gusfield, 1963; Hall, 1972). The objection that is voiced against such a view, of course, is that while it does show what goes on in situations, its astructural location of such situations neglects the real issues. The same model of power can be applied to a business corporation, a Boy Scout group, the IRA and the Women's Institute. Ultimately, as it builds up into a cumulative portrait of the society, the interactionist theory has a close affinity with the pluralist model of power — with masses of apparently equally weighted pressure groups vying and wrestling for control. In practice I think that this is precisely the conception of power that underpins much interactionist work — it is probably no mere happenstance that Arnold Rose (a leading interactionist) is also the author of a major book on pluralist politics (The Power Structure, 1967). But in my view — and given the largely discredited nature of the pluralist theory — interactionism does not have to follow such a conception. In the same way as Scheff is ultimately able to weight the negotiation power of psychiatrist and client, so, too, wider groups in society will not have equal power. Society may be seen as a vast negotiated order constantly reproducing itself through a myriad of strategies and interpretive procedures. Masses of historically produced, intended and unintended decisions with intended and unintended outcomes give rise to a highly ambiguous and constantly shifting social order. To that one need only add
the hypothesis that the negotiations, decisions and outcomes are biased in favour of specific economic groups. The negotiated order is a stratified one. Paul Rock captures this conception neatly:

In complex societies there is a substantial fragmentation of rule-making and rule-enforcing effort. There are innumerable legislating, defining and policing agencies which collectively make up the formal structure of a society’s system of social control. Legislators, judges, magistrates, policemen, bailiffs, psychiatrists, prison officers and traffic wardens form a loosely co-ordinated system with shifting internal boundaries; a differentiation of power and function; and intricate linkages forged out of internal conflict, exchange and co-operation. The overall structure is hierarchical; chains of command fashion the flow of power and decision making. Each of the hierarchy’s subsystems is shaped by its fellows. Each has the possibility of acquiring limited autonomy from the rest; each tends to have a drive towards maximising its control over resources and problem areas; and each is concerned about defending its boundaries against outsiders. The higher strata have a greater capacity to exert influence over the whole but they are functionally dependent on and constrained by the lower strata. (Rock, 1973a: 123)

The Neglect of Structure

Although it is manifestly clear that in some accounts of labelling, structural matters are well represented (as, for example, in Erickson’s Wayward Puritans, 1966), critics who (wrongly) equate labelling processes with symbolic interactionism make the initially plausible complaint that the theory harbours an astrucutral bias. I say plausible because even sympathisers with the interactionist approach (such as Reynolds, Petras and Meltzer, 1975) would find this criticism a valid one. Yet it is most surely ill-founded — like most of the other critiques.

To accuse symbolic interactionism of neglecting structural concerns is to misread the interactionist enterprise. Every social science theory brings with it its own distinctive problematic and set of concerns, and to accuse theories of failing to deal with what they do not intend to deal with is unfair. A Marxist concern with the mode of production cannot be faulted for failing to deal with an account of heart disease, any more than a Freudian account of the unconscious can be faulted for failing to explain reinforcement contingencies. As Hewitt notes: ‘It is not the task of social psychology, whether symbolic interactionist or some other perspective, to account in great detail for the systematic and complex interrelationships among institutions, organisations, social classes, large-scale social change, and other “structural” phenomena’ (Hewitt, 1976, p. 148). However, that said, Hewitt rightly notes:

At the same time, such matters cannot go unremarked and unstudied: the basic social processes [discussed by interactionism] take place within a larger context of social order and social change, and if it is not the job of the social psychologist to explain these macroscopic phenomena in their entirety, they must nevertheless be taken into account. (Hewitt, 1976, p. 148)

The central concern of symbolic interactionism is not with structural matters; it does, however, need to acknowledge such concerns if it is to be a remotely adequate social psychology. And if one inspects the work of many interactionists — including that of both Mead and Blumer — one finds this is so. Thus, for instance, Mead comments: ‘We are individuals born into a certain nationality, located at a certain spot geographically, with such-and-such family relations, and such-and-such political relations. All these represent a certain situation which constitutes the “I”. . .’ (Mead, p. 182). And later in Mind, Self and Society (1934), Mead devotes many pages to an (admittedly grossly inadequate) discussion of the economic and religious orders (cf. part 3). Any adequate interactionist account will firmly acknowledge that the action of persons does not take place in a social limbo, although it is through the actions of persons that any wider social order becomes historically constituted. Further, it is also true that the interactionist generally has a conception of persons wrestling with this wider order. Lichtman’s argument that symbolic interactionism ‘ultimately abandons the sense of human beings in struggle with an alien reality which they both master and to which they are subordinate’ (Lichtman, 1970, p. 77) is (like much of his account) simply wrong. Most of the interactionist accounts of deviance portray the labelled deviant as someone who employs multiple patterns of resistance (Goffman’s mental patients, Cohen and Taylor’s prisoners, Matza’s delinquents, Humphrey’s liberated homosexuals, Scott’s blind, etc., etc.), and the wider interactionist portrayals of everyday life in society are overwhelmingly full of themes of the self in struggle with a wider ‘abstract’, ‘homeless’, ‘paramount Reality’ (Zijderveld, 1972; Berger et al, 1974; Cohen and Taylor, 1976).

However, even given that the interactionists acknowledge the existence of a wider social order and demonstrate the persistent struggles of individuals with that wider order, it would be correct to say that they lack a conception of this totality as a structure. But they do not neglect the concept of structure out of ignorance (they speak to many of the same
The empirical validity of labelling theory

One final group of objections suggest that labelling theory is simply wrong: under the harsh light of research scrutiny, the ideas of labelling theory are given little support. One noteworthy theory to receive critical attack is Scheff’s labelling theory of mental illness (1975). This is in part because Scheff spells out his theory in proposition form and hence makes it readily available for falsification. But it is also because Scheff’s theory — when dismantled from the riders and cautions that Scheff himself builds into the account — comes nearer than most to being a crude, deterministic model of labelling; that is, it seems to suggest that without formal labelling there would be no mental illness, and that formal labelling is an irreversible stigma. Gove’s empirical critique suggests that both of these arguments do not hold (Gove, 1975). This same author has edited the proceedings of a conference specifically designed to test the validity of labelling theory over a wide range of areas — subnormality, alcoholism, disability, heroin addiction, sexual deviance, crime and delinquency — and has concluded: ‘The evidence reviewed consistently indicates that it is
It is clear that the research directives of the narrow propositions are simple and manageable: look at the ways in which formal control agents define deviants through contingencies. The research directives of the wider version do not lend themselves to such simple testing; the interaction between deviant and definer has to be considered, and the possibility of (symbolic) self-labelling analysed in detail. Labelling may occur without any specific intervening definer (cf. Rotenberg, 1974, 1975; Farrell and Nelson, 1975).

For the second area — labelling as an independent variable; the consequences of labelling — the narrow version suggests propositions like:

(3) labelling initiates or amplifies deviance — it has negative consequences;
(4) labels are deterministically internalised by labelles;
(5) such labels are irrevocable.

In contrast, the wider perspective extends these propositions to acknowledge that:

(3a) labels may prevent (deter) or change deviance — they may also have ‘positive’ consequences;
(4a) labels may be voluntarily avowed and disavowed, and respond to in a variety of ways;
(5a) labels may be reversible and changeable: destigmatisation is possible.

Again, it is clear that the research directives for the latter are altogether more complex. Rather than assuming that there is only one negative response to labelling, the entire programme of possible responses has to be charted. Some important studies have made moves in these directions (e.g., Reiss, 1962; Scott, 1969; Turner, 1972; Warren, 1974b). In summary, although it is true that to date labelling theory has not usually fared well at the hands of empirical researchers, this is largely due to the narrow interpretation given to the theory by the researchers. When viewed as an orientating perspective, the approach becomes important as suggestive of a wide range of areas demanding empirical attack.

**IN CONCLUSION: A PERSONAL COMMITMENT**

I was first introduced to labelling theory during a criminology course in the mid-sixties. Naively I thought it was a ‘new’ theory and I found it appealing. It switched attention away from the aetiology of deviant conduct and started to examine the definitional process and the ways in which this altered the shape of ‘deviant’ experiences. At that time there were few criticisms being made of the theory and — like an innocent — I was seduced.

Slowly its appeal spread through English sociology and it served, perhaps, as the central rallying flag at the establishment of the National Deviancy Conference in England in 1968. It began to emerge from the underground of theory to become a topic for books and theses, as well as enjoying widespread incorporation in newly developing sociology of deviance courses. And as it became more widely known, so — rightly — more and more problems with it were noticed. From one small anticipation of the weaknesses of the theory (Gibbs, 1966), there developed a major industry of criticism. Perhaps the watershed of this criticism was the publication of The New Criminology in 1973, for it served to divide the new British tradition of deviancy study into two groups: those who still found much to be gained from working within the approach of labelling (now the new orthodoxy), and those who had turned away from such matters towards a concern with a political economy of crime. From that time onwards, the content, nature and even frequency of the meetings of the National Deviance Conference changed. In America, too, the perspective increasingly came under fire — though usually on empirical grounds rather than ideological ones (Gove, 1975).

I have no doubt now that while some of the criticisms have been largely beside the point, many of them have served useful functions — forcing a clarification of key theoretical, methodological and ideological concerns, and properly redirecting much work to new and politically important arenas. But the critics drastically overstate their case if they believe they can announce the ‘death’ of labelling theory or claim paramountity of perspective, theory or method! I have tried in this paper to defend the view that labelling is essentially a perspective: the questions it raises are ones a sociology of deviance has to consider. I have gone on to argue that symbolic interactionism is only one theory that need be used within the labelling perspective, but that it has an affinity with the study of marginality and deviance and is a useful corrective to grander, more general theories. It has a useful role to play. Most of the paper has then considered more specific issues; most notably the suggestion that the labelling perspective is over-limited in its sphere of application and empirically wrong when tested. I hope to have shown the weaknesses of such arguments.
Massive criticism and counter-criticism can be extremely effective in sharpening perspectives and theories. It can also become sterile when the amount of ‘theorising about theorising’ outstrips empirical inquiry. Labelling perspectives, symbolic interactionism and political economies of crime do not have to rival each other. They each raise their important problems and they each deserve serious attention.

NOTES

1. The importance of Mead, Cooley and Tannenbaum is often acknowledged (for a recent instance, see Finestone, 1976, p. 188-91), but its history can be traced back much further (see Pearson, 1975).

2. Although the pattern is broadly similar, England followed a few years behind America. The Society for the Study of Social Problems was formed in the early fifties, but the English counterpart — the National Deviancy Conference — was not formed till the late sixties. The former may have become much more traditional over time, though, than the latter. Likewise the major American publications date from Becker’s books (1963 and 1964), but in England the first statements are Cohen’s (1967) paper and Young’s (1970) book. England came later to the theory and reacted it more speedily.

3. Outside of America and England, more specific versions of labelling theory have been developed (e.g. Muller, 1974; Shoham, 1970). For ease of management, I am excluding these theories from the above discussion.

4. The main theoretical omission from this list is Marxism. Labelling theorists have been influenced by Marxists (e.g. Young, 1970, 1975; Quinney, 1970, 1974; Platt, 1969, 1973), but Marxism has not been as influential in the labelling problems.

5. Schur seems to be the most ardent contemporary defender of labelling theory (Schur, 1971), yet he is only occasionally mentioned as a labellist. While sympathetic to interactionism, all his work is theoretically eclectic.

6. In a private communication, I am very grateful to him — along with Stan Cohen, Malcolm Davies and Jack Young — for helpful comments on various drafts of this paper.

7. Warren and Johnson, in an extremely lucid phenomenological critique, have amplified this basic point. They suggest that labelling theory fails on three grounds: first, in its desire to be an original ‘new school’, it has thrown out much ground; secondly, while it appears highly critical from past deviancy theory of that which is of value; thirdly, while it appears much more critical of cultural assumptions, it has been too easy to dismiss the label of ‘deviant’, and to ignore the role of deviance constructed by actors themselves. Thus the homosexual’s own sense of deviance is constructed by actors themselves. ‘Witch-hunts’, ‘criminals’ are often labelled indirectly because of the way they have constructed their own meanings.

8. Space does not permit an expansion on such links. For some basic sources, see Rock, forthcoming.

9. Sagarin also provides a more thorough general discussion of the meaning of deviance in his (1975) book (part one), and with Birnbaum (Birenbaum and Sagarin, 1976, ch. 2).

10. I cannot expand these distinctions here. But at the least it should be noted that these two societal definitions work from drastically differing phenomenological positions. The former (a) stays on the level of the actor’s definitions of the world (cf. Rock, 1973a), whereas the latter (b) moves — with some difficulty — between situational meanings and abstract meanings, in a manner derived from Berger and Luckmann (1967), and more problematically — Douglas (1971). What both these definitions have in common, though, is a concern with some form of seemingly objective, external standards of deviance.

11. While the interactionist labelling theorist is often on the side of an underdog, there is no reason why he or she has to be. Rock — in a private communication — helpfully comments:

I cannot imagine why it is necessary to take either stance during the process. If an account of public control exists, it should deal with other meanings as a mutually orchestrated process. The decision to give an interpretation priority, or to either partner, simply distorts understanding in a discussion of an encounter between a policeman and a delinquent, for instance. The individuals’ definitions of this encounter and their joint definitions must both be incorporated.

12. This criticism occurs on both an individual motivation level and on a structural level. Labelling theory does not explain why people commit deviant acts (Sagarin, 1975), or why there exist different ‘objective’ rates of deviance (cf. Gibbs, 1972). The latter criticism has the merit of being a sociological objection but the former is curiously misplaced. Why should a sociologist seek to explain individual motives? It is hard to imagine an industrial sociologist seeking the motives of a striker or a political sociologist those of a working-class voter. Yet sociologists of deviance are still supposed to seek such explanations. Paradoxically, the major attempt at a sociology of motivation has actually come from those who are broadly sympathetic to the labelling/interactional approach (cf. Taylor and Taylor, 1972).

13. For an even brief ‘list’ of such accounts, see the introductory chapter in Gove (1975).