

**Hendershott, Anne. *The Politics of Deviance*. San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002. 184 pp. \$26.95 hardcover.**

To those with even a passing familiarity with the social sciences it will come as no surprise that the relativism that has dominated those disciplines since the 1960s has been particularly corrosive to the concept of deviance. As the moral core of social order has been progressively deconstructed, sociology in particular has been actively engaged in (in Daniel Moynihan's apt phrase) "defining deviancy down." From suicide to homosexual practice, sanctions that formerly defined the boundaries of human society have been demeaned and diminished to the vanishing point in the service of pluralism, diversity and nonjudgmental tolerance. Yet, as any orthodox Catholic scholar knows, such tolerance does not itself tolerate the proposition that some things should not be tolerated.

Into this environment Anne Hendershott's *The Politics of Deviance* comes as a breath of fresh air. Through careful, extensively researched analysis, Hendershott traces the decline of deviance as an idea, and the corresponding rise of deviance in practice, in seven pivotal areas of recent social discourse. Comprehensive discussions on drug abuse and pedophilia chronicle the triumph of therapy over culpability, in which abusers are considered victimized and treated rather than sanctioned. Two chapters on mental illness discuss the transformation of misbehavior into questionable "diseases" or "syndromes" – for example, boys' restlessness into "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder" or homicide of abusive husbands into "battered women's syndrome." The theme of the removal of any normative limits to behavior is extended to sexual behavior in chapters that examine the growing normalization, even routinization, of homosexuality and adolescent sexual activity, and to end-of-life decisions in a chilling discussion of the proliferation of

assisted suicide. Oddly, there is no discussion of abortion, which directly connects these issues of sexuality and life.

At the same time that seriously destructive behavior is being trivialized, Hendershott argues, relatively trivial behavior is being treated as seriously destructive. Two chapters detail the explosion of moral hysterias such as the 1980s “epidemic” of child abuse in day care centers and feminist-inspired accusations of “Rape, Real and Imagined” (122). Of particular interest to Catholics is her discussion of the virtual invention of the problem of priest pedophilia, driven by dissident Catholic interest groups and latent media anti-Catholicism, an account which mirrors but updates that of Philip Jenkins in his 1996 book “Pedophiles and Priests”.

Unfortunately the nuance of these excellent analyses throughout the book does not carry through to Hendershott’s final-chapter conclusions. Here she concludes that the root problem is a de-moralization of social discourse. She laments “the reluctance of sociologists to acknowledge that there are moral judgments to be made” (156) regarding the limits of society, as was the case a century ago, and calls for a return to Victorian standards of public moral discourse. Yet, as her own findings demonstrate, not all deviance has disappeared, and a growing social consensus has defined some formerly accepted behaviors as deviant. Some of these, such as too-inclusive definitions of rape or ADHD, Hendershott disagrees with, but she acknowledges that “identifying racism and bigotry as deviance [has] led to positive social change” (157). The same could be said for gender discrimination. Likewise, her claim that deviance has disappeared from mainstream sociology is highly overstated. Google the words “sociology” and “deviance”, and hundreds of course syllabi from American colleges come up. The

American Sociological Association's section on "Crime, Law and Deviance" is among the largest, most active and fastest growing. Moreover, Hendershott fails to address a difficult fact that, it would seem, any general thesis that a decline in deviance has recently gutted the social order has to confront: Crime, the most directly destructive form of deviance, has been in steady decline for decades.

Hendershott finds hope in the reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. She concludes the book by musing that in the aftermath, "[p]erhaps we will begin to recognize that a society that . . . refuses to acknowledge or negatively sanction [destructive] deviant acts . . . is a society that has lost the capacity to confront evil that has a capacity to dehumanize us all" (163). Perhaps. But it is common, in even the most relativist treatments of deviance, to distinguish between those behaviors that are universally considered unacceptable, such as murder of innocents, and those whose acceptability is contested or varies from culture to culture. It is not obvious—nor, from Hendershott's own evidence, even likely—that a moral consensus opposing terrorism will necessarily lead to, say, the proscription of homosexual acts, or opposition to the decriminalization of drug abuse.

A more accurate statement of the burden of Hendershott's evidence is that what has declined is not a moral context for social science, but the consonance of that context with traditional Judeo-Christian moral values. Plenty of moral assessments are offered today, only they are much more likely to be Marxist, pagan or secular than they are to be Christian. There is, after all, something problematic with an argument that contesting moral categories leads to the general de-moralization of society, since contestation is predicated on the affirmation, not the denial, of shared moral ideals. The problem of

postmodern civic society is not that the ideal of a common moral order has been abandoned, but that we can't agree on whose moral order is to become common.

These questionable conclusions, however, do not detract from the strength of this book, which is Hendershott's detailed analysis of the social and personal costs of the disorders she examines. For most of the chapter topics she discusses, such a focused critical analysis is not easily available elsewhere. I found much that I intend to use in my own courses on deviance. (Indeed, recast only slightly, the topic chapters of this book would make an excellent introductory text on deviance for evangelical or Catholic colleges and universities.) In sum, Hendershott does an admirable job documenting the debilitating effect of the decline of Christian morality and common sense in setting the boundaries of social order in the United States, presenting in effect the case for a re-Christianization of American civic life.

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