

# Perspectives: Outcasts After All?

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*ABSTRACT* Deviance is a classic subject of study for sociologists, anthropologists and social education workers, but not yet for Danish historians, who have been concerned predominantly with political history or other aspects of social history. This article arises from a conference, the purpose of which was to make Danish historians aware of deviance as an analytical concept that connects what would initially seem to be very diverse topics, such as disability, race, ethnicity and class. The conference highlighted a wide range of interesting examples of “deviant” groups that once arose, existed for a period and suddenly disappeared again. The conference showed that deviance is time-specific, cultural and social-specific, and last but not least, that “deviants” are extremely valuable for “normal” individuals to define a common identity and to confirm their own “normality”.

Deviance is a classic subject of study for sociologists, anthropologists and social education workers, but not yet for Danish historians, who have predominantly been concerned with political history or other aspects of social history. Due to the author’s interests in the history of disability, the history of race and ethnicity and a wish to draw attention to these subjects, a conference was held at Aalborg University, Denmark, on 2–3 April 2004 for historians from Danish universities working with topics related to marginalization processes. This article sets out some reflections on the history of deviance, based on discussions that occurred at that conference.

For the last 35 years one has hardly been able to focus on deviance without considering the work of the pioneer in the study of the history of deviance, Michel Foucault. His purpose in taking a historical perspective was to show that marginalization is neither static nor progressive but is rather a process that changes through time and moves in many directions. Since time is what binds historians together, the purpose of the conference was to make Danish historians aware of deviance as an analytical concept that connects what would initially seem to be very diverse topics, such as disability, race, ethnicity and class.

The following remarks are taken from the author’s own contribution, which was an attempt to give an overview of the conference, to relate it to the ideas of Michel Foucault and to define deviance. Ever since Jean Baudrillard’s criticism of Michel Foucault’s “seductive theories” (Baudrillard 1987) there has been discussion on how to go beyond these theories. The author’s

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viewpoint was just the opposite, since it seemed so obvious that we could benefit from these widespread theories in order to fulfil the overall goal of the conference: to unite a thus-far divided handful of historians.

### **Value-Laden Concepts and Power**

The chairperson opened the conference by pointing out how difficult it can be to mention a group of “deviants” in a neutral way because ideas such as that of an ideal state or a lower limit for tolerance are constructed according to a neutral or positive term, “normal”, while its counter-term, “deviance”, is always value-laden. The value-laden aspect is implicit in the concepts and is always present when we use them, because “deviants” are seen as inferior, superior, dangerous, demonic or exotic, but never as equals. The so-called “normal” may find the “deviant” repulsive or attractive, often at the same time, but never indifferent. This view finds expression in highly popular television broadcasts about, for example, mass-murderers.

An example of this was given, namely the depiction of external and internal stereotypical enemies in old anthropological and ethnographical books about the population of Africa, which in fact represented the majority compared with the colonial powers at the end of the 19th century. Nonetheless, they were presented as physically and mentally subordinate and as a deviant counter-image to their white masters, masters who were placed at the apex of evolution and therefore held a natural “God-given” right to rule (Duedahl 2003:337–341). The minority Jewish population in Europe, on the other hand, was considered superior in the intellectual and economic field, and therefore a threatening counter-image for the rulers.

From this point of view it seemed that no matter how deviance has been reproduced from antiquity to the present day and no matter what the various contexts and groupings they have occupied, marginalization can always be reduced to a single circumstance: the power relationship. Those in power make the rules and the rulers consider themselves “normal”, while others are considered “deviant” in one way or another, as the relationship between normality and deviance is interpreted in the works of Michel Foucault.

### **Power and Regimes of Truth**

In his early works in particular, that is his works on madness and civilization, and the history of the prison, Michel Foucault operated with this fairly traditional view of power as a top-down agency of prohibition. He considered power relations in the 19th century much more widespread and diffuse than under the former absolutist rule, although no less powerful. The largest concentration of power was personified in popular assemblies, which in order to assemble their power had created a range of institutions, such as police, prisons, military and the educational system, whose purpose was to control and shape their subjects. Through their control of their subjects, the central power could decide what kind of world-view should prevail: a “regime of truth” according to Foucault (Foucault 1977, 2001).

Intellectuals who were prepared to adopt the “regime of truth” were offered titles as teachers, professors, experts, doctors and psychiatrists and held the authority to make other people objects of their knowledge, to divide them into “normal” and “deviant” according to the “regime of truth”, to discipline them and to ensure that they behaved in the required direction.

Modern society highlighted productivity and the increasing importance of economic values and other premises for capitalism. As a result, a set of new “deviants” emerged, people who could not live up to the modern norms of self-control, rational behaviour and productivity. Their words were considered meaningless; they were not qualified to vote or to make valid contracts. Modern society initiated a hunt for mentally ill and disabled people in order to lock them up in a range of reformatories founded for this purpose in the 19th century. Here they were “cured” of their uncontrolled madness and lack of productivity in order to be useful as civilized and productive citizens.

However, categorizations are not objective truths, but rather expressions of relative valuations that may be legitimized by being officially recognized as objective and scientific, at least as long as the “regime of truth” has a monopoly of knowledge. That also implies that attitudes toward unproductive social elements can change. In fact that happened as a result of the general positive economic circumstances of Danish society in the 1960s. As Professor Birgit Kirkebæk has shown, large groups of unproductive “deviants” went from being considered dangerous, negative elements to being considered less dangerous “deviants” who were even offered social benefits because their lack of productivity was no longer seen as a threat to law and order (Kirkebæk 2001, 2003).

### **Self-Image and Counter-Image**

During the conference Foucault’s change of view on power relations was discussed, that is his recognition that there exist many other power relations than the one between a central power and its subjects. There are power relations between men and women, adults and children, citizens and farmers, natives and foreigners, social workers and clients, warders and inmates, teachers and students. And here there are variations in what would be considered “deviant”, depending on the observer. In Foucault’s later works he rejects the idea of power as a central prohibitive institution that represses the individual from above. Power is seen rather as a host of complex, strategic situations existing between individuals.

In his investigation of the history of sexuality, Foucault sees each individual as a force that suppresses other individuals. People constantly watch over one another, control each other and inflict sanctions on one another when anyone breaks the norms. Power was, in fact, present at all times and in all places and prompted individuals to repress themselves before others punished them (Foucault 1990). Self-control is apparent in all cultures, but according to the sociologist Norbert Elias and his classic work on the civilizing process, self-control in the western hemisphere made people stop spitting, farting, burping or picking their nose in public, as described in books of etiquette. Sleeping,

eating and sexual intercourse were, to modern society, primitive activities and therefore affected by taboos, modesty, moderation and a well-developed sense of embarrassment and shame (Elias 2000).

Although Michel Foucault down-played the importance of state institutions and regulating governmental laws, his focus on the individual contains some really interesting points on power. Among them is his focus on the self-image of the counter-image. For example, when medical science and jurisprudence in the 19th century were preoccupied with the limits of the sexually acceptable and created a range of apparent sexual perversions that might be identified, fought and “cured”, they were also strongly influencing the creation of an independent culture, an alternative identity and therefore a concentration of power among the ostracized, such as gays and lesbians. When people considered to be “deviants” act by protesting loudly, by writing travel reports from Denmark or by writing memoirs from the prison cell, they possess the power that is incorporated in the spoken or written word when it is heard or read by others. When “deviants” possess the power of the word, the prevalent world-view is often turned upside-down, and it is the normal that comes to seem to be the deviant (Duedahl 2002b).

An example was given of how the magician’s view of normality and deviance in 16th century Italy was quite different from the official one – a view that could be reconstructed through Inquisition journals. A similar, and even classic, example was the Italian miller Menocchio, known from Carlo Ginzburg’s famous book *The Cheese and the Worms*. Menocchio’s more or less home-made cosmology gave him some logical and, in his village, normal insights into the arrangement of the world. Unfortunately, it collided with the prevalent theological “regime of truth”, the biblical explanation and, afraid of the rise in Protestantism, the clergy had to marginalize and later execute him as an example to warn others away from flirting with alternative world-views (Ginzburg 1993).

Michel Foucault gradually focused more and more on these individual stories as part of his argument on individual power relations, because they had the ability to alter the perspective and lead to alternative “regimes of truth”. He published a book with personal notes from a man who committed three murders and some notes from a man who described his sexual excesses in Victorian England. In Odense City Archive in Denmark there exists a diary that is of a similarly challenging nature. It was written in the 1890s by a shoemaker in Odense, who thought that his neighbourhood had launched a conspiracy against him. People involved in the conspiracy he called “the rabble” and it contained a number of citizens who constantly kept him under surveillance and communicated by coughing and clearing their throats. The shoemaker complained to the police but they refused to help him. He then wrote a letter to the Danish king, which made the police react. The police confiscated his diary and a judge who read it threatened to send him to a mental hospital, which only made the shoemaker draw the conclusion that the police and the jurisprudence were part of the conspiracy to persecute him. His only remaining chance to punish his neighbourhood was to spit at all “deviants” who coughed or cleared their throats, which was quite a number in

the golden days of tuberculosis. In just 1 week he attacked 82 people (Duedahl 2004).

The number of similar texts that confront the prevalent “regime of truth” is enormous because any power, especially central power, has always been extremely occupied with its “deviants”. One can therefore find “deviant” thought patterns in, for example, police files, social files, hospital files and educational files (e.g. Foucault 1980).

### Levels of Danger

The discussion of self-image and counter-image was connected with the discussion of how levels of danger define our ideas of deviance. From the very positively defined to the very negatively defined “deviant” there exists a range of deviance. Neither homosexuals nor paedophiles were considered “deviants” in antiquity. In the 1950s homosexuals were considered as evil *par excellence* – today that status belongs to paedophiles, while homosexuals are considered a lesser threat to order and can be tolerated, in some places even getting married and becoming each other’s legal heir.

The history of the group we can call “foreigners in Europe” has been different. Around 100 years ago foreigners were seen as mildly positive “deviants”. They were exotic creatures who could be studied with the charm of distance. That can be read in old and widely distributed novels about people from the “mysterious Orient”, the “Wild West” and “darkest Africa”. As long as non-conformity is not a threat against any power, it can be refreshing, even innovative.

The American writer Nella Larsen, the daughter of a Caribbean man and a Danish woman, in her autobiographical novel *Quicksand* has described her stay in 1910–12 with her mother’s family in Copenhagen, where she studied at Copenhagen University. In her novel she draws a picture of a coloured girl who was unwanted in the USA, but who came to provincial Copenhagen and was treated as a precious, exotic gift. In the beginning she lapped up all the attention and admiration, but after a while she sensed that she served only as an object to be shown at social gatherings. She began to feel like a savage, noticing that people stared at her but addressed themselves to her aunt instead of directly to her. She began to miss her fellow “deviants” in the USA (Larsen 1969).

Nella Larsen did not represent a threat to anyone. However, the picture can change dramatically if the “deviants” become too numerous and the situation uncontrollable. As objects of exhibition in Tivoli in Copenhagen, Chinese people were not dangerous and therefore could be regarded as exotic, but when a boat full of them was stranded in 1902 on the coast of western Jutland the situation was seen as out of control and the population no longer felt that they were only “exotic” – at least not until they were handed over to the police. And when Louis Armstrong and Josephine Baker in the 1930s were invited to play in the country’s concert halls and depraved the prevalent morality with their “jungle howl” and banana skirts, the press as well as the police simply hounded them (Duedahl 2002a).

Today the group that carries the less than hospitable designation in Denmark “*de fremmede*” (“the strangers”) still plays both a slightly positive and slightly negative role. On the one hand, they still play the role of noble savages – as positive, uncomplicated counter-images to the stiff facade and controlled feelings that are supposed to be characteristic of Danish-ness. Like the madmen in the Middle Ages they are given an exceptional authority to tell hidden truths. One of the participants in the conference gave an example of Africans who went to Europe and USA in the 19th century and had their memoirs written down because they were considered as people who, in all their naivety, were able to see what other people, in their wisdom, were unable to grasp. Their positive function was, in other words, to represent some kind of ethnic kitsch, which highlighted European traditions and put them into perspective, and thereby contributed to a kind of self-criticism. This kind of deviant romanticism is still practised in, for example, television commercials and films.

On the other hand, strangers also defined by their deficiencies, or else they would not be a stranger. They play the role as a poor copy of ourselves – almost like a child, who doesn’t speak properly, who is not familiar with the customs but is nevertheless demanding. If the foreigner is dissatisfied with their conditions in Denmark, it is because they do not show gratitude, which is bad manners; if they are satisfied it is probably because they abuse the social system, which is also bad manners. If they don’t work, they are lazy; if they work, they are taking a job from a Dane. If they don’t marry a Dane, they are not integrated; if they marry a Dane, they “steal” Danish men or women. If they choose to live among Danes, the neighbours find them intrusive and they cause the house prices to drop; if they choose the opposite, they ghettoize themselves and become a social problem. If they commit crime, they express their barbarian culture; if they adopt the norms, they are probably waiting for the final take-over. This is, of course, a huge exaggeration, but it makes the point clear. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas points out in her influential work *Purity and Danger*, to declare a controversial subject dangerous is to take it out of dispute (Douglas 2004).

### **“Normal” People or Positively Defined “Deviants”?**

A topic discussed widely at the conference was the notion of deviance as a socially relative concept.

In order to vary this viewpoint one of the participants gave a thought-provoking example of an elite: religious athletes in the Middle Ages, who didn’t consider themselves “normal” in the sense of mainstream but rather as a positively defined group of “deviants”. We could ask whether that undermines Michel Foucault’s first theory that power elites always define themselves as “normal” or whether the athletes’ self-definition was just a successful marketing strategy, whose purpose was to make themselves more interesting: we can only guess.

Nowadays it seems that normality itself is not much coveted either – rather what is coveted is deviance in a slightly positive way. A Danish psychological encyclopaedia pinpoints the statement “normality makes un-personal” as an

expression of this tendency among post-modern individuals to detach from normality in an attempt to create an identity that is more exclusive, exciting and non-conformist (Schnack 2002).

What is the explanation for this deviant romanticism? In modernity the ideal for a large group of people was comprised of a single common society, the agreed recognition of the common good and the protestant work-ethic. However, with increasing wealth and the fight against hunger becoming a fight against obesity, new values arose. Unlike the economic and functional values of the modern world, these new values are symbolic.

In a consumer society it is no longer work that is the motivating power, but rather consumption and self-display, because it is no longer money but fantasy that set bounds for purchasing things, or rather the symbolic value the things represent. Today tattoos and piercing are much in demand, as are buying organic vegetables and giving our children unusual names in order to escape from normality. However, these codes are soon understood by a large number of people and become familiar, widespread and ordinary. That is why so-called “lifestyle” experts are able to tell us about our job or interests just by looking at the contents of our refrigerators.

There is a fine line between the eccentric, the spectacular and the ordinary, however, and self-display must never become so eccentric that it sets us apart, because the purpose is still the same as it probably was for those religious athletes, namely to be seen as desirable positive “deviants”. No matter whether it is as a trendy hippie, a vegetarian or a David Beckham clone.

### **Outcasts After All?**

If “deviants” are social problems that the well adjusted should get rid of, why doesn’t central power eliminate them once and for all? Controversial as it might seem, this was, in fact, a theme of the conference. From a vulgar Darwinian point of view extermination would literally be a natural solution. There have even been attempts in that direction. The Third Reich was supposed to be the perfect “Thousand Year Reich” when it consisted only of Aryans, and similar solutions were proposed in some of the communist regimes and in the western hemisphere in the wake of the eugenic movement.

But it is one of Michel Foucault’s important points of view – widespread among sociologists – that the production of “deviants” has at least one positive function for the central power: in having someone to compare ourselves with and feel superior to, we also strengthen our own feeling of belonging to the “normal” group, which ought to support the central power instead of turning against it. Criminals unite the law-abiding and emphasize what is right and wrong, because it would not make any sense to be law-abiding if there were no law-breakers. Minority groups are simply useful to establish solidarity among the well-adjusted. The mentally or physically ill are the basis for solidarity among the healthy, as foreigners unite natives, and the unemployed support the productive. “Deviants” are, in other words, the exception that proves the rule and that makes it possible for “normal” individuals to define a common identity, to characterize what makes their

community homogenous and to confirm their own “normality”. In this respect “deviants” are extremely valuable. “Deviants” are not outcasts after all!

### **Deviance as an Analytical Concept in History**

At the conference many examples were given of deviant groups that once arose, existed for a period and suddenly disappeared again, such as lepers and witches, but also small groups not known to many historians, such as poison spreaders during the Black Death and so-called “suicide murderers” in the 18th century, while new groups have appeared, such as people with food allergies, children with DAMP (deficits in attention, motor control and perceptual abilities) and people with anorexia; “deviants” nobody had even heard of a generation ago. Jewish people, for example, were singled out in the inter-war period, because they represented the modern. Jewish people were considered emancipated and cosmopolitan – stereotypical characteristics that were at odds with the general European self-image at the time. Today, that European self-image has turned upside down, and now it is the Muslim counter-image that is marginalized, using the argument that the stereotypical Muslim is not modern enough.

The examples confirmed the fundamental point of Michel Foucault, that deviance is time-specific, and the fundamental point of sociologists and anthropologists, that deviance is cultural and social specific. Deviance is obviously based on concrete actions, particular manners, a distinctive look and concepts of sin, illness, biology and culture, but the historical perspective of the conference showed that the limits for who should be expelled from society are closely linked to context. Different value systems make some individuals part of normality in one society or one epoch and “deviants” in another.

In conclusion, the historicity of deviance and the usefulness of deviance as an analytical concept appear to be the only overall outcomes of the conference, and these are satisfying ones since they provide the basis for a more formal network of Danish historians studying topics related to the concept of deviance. The author’s aim (together with a couple of the participants) is to organize such a network. As a first step some of the papers from the conference will be published in order to increase awareness among historians of deviance as an analytical and historical concept that provides them with a wealth of opportunities to find documents and statements about those “deviants” who characterize the ruling world-views and power relations of a certain period better than anyone else.

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