Toward a Sociology of Evil

Getting beyond Modernist Common Sense
about the Alternative to "the Good"

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Evil . . . has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a "hypermorality." . . . A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil, which is the basis of intense communication.
GEORGES BATAILLE, "LITERATURE AND EVIL"

The social sciences have not given evil its due. Social evil has not been sufficiently respected; it has been deprived of the intellectual attention it deserves. Evil is a powerful and sui generis social force. It must be studied in a direct and systematic way.[1]

MODERNIST COMMON SENSE

This is not to suggest that the deficiencies of our societies—our "social problems," in the jargon of sociology—have not been of great concern to social scientists. Nothing could be further from the truth.[2] From its beginning, sociology in particular has been motivated by a reforming zeal for uplift and purification. Its practitioners, great and small, have conscientiously directed their studies to what they have taken to be the sources of social evil: oppression, domination, inequality, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and corruption.

What these studies have not demonstrated is theoretical reflexivity about what might be called the existence of evil as such,[3] for social scientists have conducted their studies in the framework of common sense. Within this framework, what is evil and what is good "go without saying." The orientation to good and evil is informed by an implicit assumption of objective transparency, of "obviousness." Rather than problematizing the categorical distinctions themselves, the existence of the good and the evil is assumed to be natural, and social scientific effort is devoted not to explaining how the categories came to be established, but rather to explaining how particular

manifestations of these categories come into being. Thus, earlier social scientists asked: How is the "criminal mind" or the "sociopath" formed? What makes underdeveloped societies primitive? Later studies asked: How is crime created by poverty, homophobia by prejudice or lack of education, political extremism by endemic racism? How does globalization distort local economic development? In each of these cases, the dependent variable is taken as an obvious representation of some form of social evil. The point has been to find the independent variable that explains it, not to question how it is that such a highly evaluative, highly negative dependent variable ever came into being.

The implication of the common sense approach to evil is that when and if these social causes and effects are altered, social problems will be banished from the world and good will reign.[4] But what if evil can never be eliminated from the social world, no matter how well motivated or effective the social reform? What if the point of sociology and, indeed, the other ameliorating social sciences is not to do away with evil but actually to establish the fundamental reality of its existence?[5]

This is not to suggest moral relativism or political resignation, but rather the necessity to make a fundamental break with the framework of modernist common sense.

THE CULTURAL TURN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

To break from the path of common sense, we must follow the cultural turn more faithfully and persistently than naturalistically minded social scientists are usually inclined. Perhaps good and evil should be seen, in the first instance, as products of cultural understanding, not as the results of social arrangements in and of themselves? Perhaps evil is an effect, an inevitable and necessary result, of the act of social interpretation, of the categorical system human beings employ to make sense of the societies in which they live?

It seems likely, in fact, that the objects of sociological investigations of evil are relative and historically various. There is less a naturalistic, objectively given conflict between good and evil—between "positive" and "healthy" social forms, such as law, equality, or religion, and "negative" or "sick" forms, such as criminality, domination, or alienation—than a culturally constructed division that has taken the widest possible variety of organizational, material forms. From this perspective, reformist social analysis is more, and less, than either a scientific effort to sketch cause or a hermeneutical effort to understand meaning. It is, in addition, a morally inspired symbolic effort to establish the ontological reality of evil and to organize appropriate indignation in response to it.

These observations underscore the need for a cultural rather than simply

an organizational, institutional, or interactional social science. Functional patterning is one thing, the symbolic construction of the meaning of this patterning, and of actors' orientations to it, quite another. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, after Wittgenstein, Saussure, and Geertz, it seems possible finally to entertain this proposition in a serious way. Yet, it has been and still remains an idea that has been difficult for social scientists to accept. It has seemed, for many, to undermine the point of a social science, and its very suggestion has aroused controversy. Lévi-Strauss was forced to make a radical break with the entire history of social anthropology when he insisted that kinship was a linguistic structure, not just a set of institutionally determined social roles: "Exist[ing] only in human consciousness[,] it is an arbitrary system of representations, not the spontaneous development of a real situation."[6] In much the same way and at about the same time, Parsons seemed to be denying all things sociological when he proclaimed the fundamental analytical distinction between cultural and social systems.[7] Yet, in making these controversial claims, Lévi-Strauss and Parsons were drawing on arguments that were already fifty years old, on semiotics and hermeneutics, respectively.[8] And it would take another fifty years before their disciplinary arguments would be taken seriously enough for culture to begin to be given its rightful place.

In the course of the last two decades, there has emerged a new recognition of the independent structuring power of culture. Yet it turns out that this new disciplinary self-consciousness has not been any more successful in addressing evil than its reductionist predecessor. In thinking about culture—values and norms, codes and narratives, rituals and symbols—"negativity" has been set off to one side and treated as a residual category. While it has not been treated naturalistically, it has been presented merely as a deviation from cultural constructions of the good. Thus, in social scientific formulations of culture, a society's "values" are studied primarily as orientations to the good, as efforts to embody ideals.[9] Social notions of evil, badness, and negativity are explored only as patterned departures from normatively regulated conduct. If only this were the case! It seems to me that this cultural displacement of evil involves more moralizing wish-fulfillment than empirical realism. Not only does it detract from our general understanding of evil, but it makes the relation of evil to modernity much more difficult to comprehend. Thinking of evil as a residual category camouflages the destruction and cruelty that has accompanied enlightened efforts to institutionalize the good and the right. The definition of social evil and the systematic effort to combat it have everywhere accompanied the modern pursuit of reason and moral right. That is the central and most legitimate meaning of Michel Foucault's lifework, despite its simplifications, one-sidedness, and undermining relativism. It is the salvageable, saving remnant of the postmodern critique of modernity.

Culture cannot be understood only as value and norm, which can be defined as conceptual glosses on social efforts to symbolize, narrate, code, and ritualize the good. Culturalizing evil is, in sociological terms, every bit as important as such efforts to define and institutionalize the good. In semiotic terms, evil is the necessary cognitive contrast for "good."[10] In moral terms, exploring heinous evil is the only way to understand and experience the pure and the upright.[11] In terms of narrative dynamics, only by creating antiheroes can we implot the dramatic tension between protagonist and antagonist that is transformed by *Bildung* or resolved by catharsis.[12] In ritual terms, it is only the crystallization of evil, with all its stigmatizing and polluting potential, that makes rites of purification culturally necessary and sociologically possible.[13] Religiously, the sacred is incomprehensible without the profane, the promise of salvation meaningless without the threat of damnation.[14] What I am suggesting here, in other words, is that for every value there is an equal and opposite antivalue, for every norm, an antinorm. For every effort to institutionalize comforting and inspiring images of the socially good and right, there is an interlinked and equally determined effort to construct social evil in a horrendous, frightening, and equally realistic way. Drawing Durkheim back to Nietzsche, and writing under the impact of the trauma of early twentieth-century modernity, Bataille articulated this point in a typically pungent and literary way.

> Evil seems to be understandable, but only to the extent to which Good is the key to it. If the luminous intensity of Good did not give the night of Evil its blackness, Evil would lose its appeal. This is a diffcult point to understand. Something flinches in him who faces up to it. And yet we know that the strongest effects on the sense are caused by contrasts. . . . Without misfortune, bound to it as shade is to light, indifferences would correspond to happiness. Novels describe suffering, hardly ever satisfaction. The virtue of happiness is ultimately its rarity. Were it easily accessible it would be despised and associated with boredom. . . . Would truth be what it is if it did not assert itself generously against falsehood?[15]

Actors, institutions, and societies systematically crystallize and elaborate evil. They do so, ironically, in pursuit of the good. To these paradoxical and immensely depressing facts attention must be paid.

THE INTELLECTUAL ROOTS OF THE DISPLACEMENT OF EVIL

To appreciate the pervasiveness of this truncated conception of culture, it is important to recognize that, while deeply affecting contemporary social science, it is rooted in earlier forms of secular and religious thought.[16] From the Greeks onward, moral philosophy has been oriented to justifying and sustaining the good and to elaborating the requirements of the just society.

Plato associated his ideal forms with goodness. To be able to see these forms, he believed, was to be able to act in accordance with morality. In dramatizing Socrates' teachings in the *Republic,* Plato made use of the figure of Thrasymachus to articulate the evil forces that threatened ethical life. Rather than suggesting that Thrasymachus embodied bad values, Plato presented Thrasymachus as denying the existence of values as such: "In all states alike, 'right' has the same meaning, namely what is for the interest of the party established in power, and that is the strongest." Thrasymachus is an egoist who calculates every action with an eye, not to values, but to the interests of his own person. Plato makes a homology between self/collectivity, interest/value, and evil/good. In doing so, he establishes the following analogical relationship:

Self:collectivity::interest:value::evil:good
Self is to collectivity, as interest is to value, as evil is to good.

The commitment to values is the same as the commitment to collective beliefs; beliefs and values are the path to the good. Evil should be understood not as the product of bad or negatively oriented values, but as the failure to connect to collective values. Evil comes from being self-interested.

In elaborating what came to be called the republican tradition in political theory, Aristotle followed this syllogism, equating a society organized around values with an ethical order: "the best way of life, for individuals severally, as well as for states collectively, is the life of goodness duly equipped with such a store of requisites as makes it possible to share in the activities of goodness."[17] Republics contained virtuous citizens, who were defined as actors capable of orienting to values outside of themselves. As individuals become oriented to the self rather than the collectivity, republics are endangered; desensitized to values, citizens become hedonistic and materialistic. According to this stark and binary contrast between morality and egoism, value commitments *in themselves* contribute to the good; evil occurs, not because there are commitments to bad values, but because of a failure to orient to values per se. While it is well known that Hegel continued the Aristotelian contrast between what he called the system of needs and the world of ethical regulation, it is less widely appreciated that pragmatism endorsed the same dichotomy in its own way. For Dewey, to value is to value the good. Interpersonal communication is bound to produce altruistic normative orientation. Crass materialism and selfishness occur when social structures prevent communication.[18]

This philosophical equation of values with goodness and the lack of values with evil informs contemporary communitarianism, which might be described as a marriage between republican and pragmatic thought. Identifying contemporary social problems with egoism and valuelessness, communitarians ignore the possibility that communal values are defined by

making pejorative contrasts with other values, with others' values, and, in fact, often with the values of "the other."[19] Empirically, I want to suggest that the issue is not values versus interests or having values as compared with not having them. There are always "good" values and "bad." In sociological terms, good values can be crystallized only in relation to values that are feared or considered repugnant. This is not to recommend that values should be relativized in a moral sense, to suggest that they can or should be "transvalued" or inverted in Nietzschean terms. It is, rather, to insist that social thinkers recognize how the social construction of evil has been, and remains, empirically and symbolically necessary for the social construction of good.[20]

In the Enlightenment tradition, most forcefully articulated by Kant, concern about the parochial (we would today say communitarian) dangers of an Aristotelian "ethics" led to a more abstract and universalistic model of a "moral" as compared to a good society.[21] Nonetheless, one finds in this Kantian tradition the same problem of equating value commitments in themselves with positivity in the normative sense.[22] To be moral is to move from selfishness to the categorical imperative, from self-reference to a collective orientation resting on the ability to put yourself in the place of another. What has changed in Kantianism is, not the binary of value-versus-no-value, but the contents of the collective alternative; it has shifted from the ethical to the moral, from the particular and local to the universal and transcendent. The range of value-culture has been expanded and generalized because more substantive and more metaphysical versions came to be seen as particularist, antimodern, and antidemocratic.

If communitarianism is the contemporary representation of the republican and pragmatic traditions, Habermas's "theory of communicative action" represents—for social theory at least—the most influential contemporary articulation of this Kantian approach. Underlying much of Habermas's empirical theory one can find a philosophical anthropology that reproduces the simplistic splitting of good and evil. Instrumental, materialistic, and exploitative "labor," for example, is contrasted with altruistic, cooperative, ideal-oriented "communication." These anthropological dichotomies in the early writings are linked in Habermas's later work with the sociological contrast between system and lifeworld, the former producing instrumental efficiency, domination, and materialism, the latter producing ideals and, therefore, making possible equality, community, and morality. According to Habermas's developmental theory, the capacity for communication and moral self-regulation is enhanced with modernity, which produces such distinctive values as autonomy, solidarity, rationality, and criticism. The possibility of connecting to such values, indeed of maintaining value commitments per se, is impeded by the systems-rationality of modern economic and political life, the materialism of which "colonizes" and undermines the cul-

ture-creating, solidarizing possibilities of the lifeworld.[23] In arguing that it is recognition, not communication, that creates value commitments and mutual respect, Axel Honneth similarly ignores the possibility that pleasurable and cooperative interaction can be promoted by immoral and particularistic values that are destructive of ethical communities.[24]

This deracinated approach to culture-as-the-good can also be linked, in my view, to the Western religious tradition of Judaism and Christianity. In order to achieve salvation, the believer must overcome the temptations of the earthly, the material, and the practical in order to establish transcendental relations with an otherworldly source of goodness. According to this dualistic consciousness, evil is presented as an alternative to the transcendental commitments that establish value. As Augustine put it, "evil is the absence of the good."[25] The "original sin" that has marked humanity since the Fall was stimulated by the earthly appetites, by lust rather than idealism and value commitment. This sin can be redeemed only via a religious consciousness that connects human beings to higher values, either those of an ethical, law-governed community (Judaism) or the moral universalism of a church (Christianity). In this religious universe, in other words, evil is connected to nonculture, to passions and figures associated with the earth in contrast with the heavens. According to recent historical discussions, in fact, devil symbolism first emerged as a kind of iconographic residual category.[26] Radical Jewish sects created it as a deus ex machina to explain the downward spiral of Jewish society, allowing these negative developments to be attributed to forces outside the "authentic" Jewish cultural tradition. This nascent iconography of evil was energetically elaborated by early Christian sects who were similarly attracted to the possibility of attributing evil to forces outside their own cultural system. The Christian devil was a means of separating the "good religion" of Jesus from the evil (primarily Jewish) forces from which it had emerged.

THE DISPLACEMENT OF EVIL IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE

Given these philosophical and religious roots,[27] it is hardly surprising that, as I have indicated above, contemporary social science has conceived culture as composed of values that establish highly esteemed general commitments and norms as establishing specific moral obligations to pursue the good. This is as true for social scientists, such as Bellah and Lasch, who engage in cultural criticism, as it is in more mainstream work.[28] While issuing withering attacks on contemporary values as degenerate, narcissistic, and violent, such culture critics conceive these values as misguided formulations of the good—stupid, offensive, and pitiable but at the same time fundamentally revealing of how "the desirable" is formulated in the most debased modern societies.

On the basis of the identification of values with the good, mainstream social scientists and culture critics alike assume that a shared commitment to values is positive and beneficial to society. Functionalism is the most striking example of this tendency, and Talcott Parsons its classic representative. According to Parsons, value internalization leads not only to social equilibrium but to mutual respect, solidarity, and cooperation. If common values are not internalized, then the social system is not regulated by value, and social conflict, coercion, and even violence are the probable results.[29] In this sociological version of republicanism, Parsons follows the early- and middle-period Durkheim, who believed that shared values are essential to solidarity and social health. The lack of attachment to values marks the condition Durkheim defined as egoism, and it is by this standard that he defined social pathology. Durkheim emphasized education because he regarded it as the central means for attaching individuals to values. Since the simple attachment to culture is valued so highly, it is clear that neither Durkheim nor Parsons seriously considered the theoretical or empirical possibility that evil might be valued as energetically as the good.[30]

Because sociological folklore has so often pitted the functionalist "equilibrium" theory against the more critical "conflict" theory, it is well to ask whether, in fact, Parsonian functionalism is the only guilty party here. Have the theoretical alternatives to functionalism provided a truly different approach to the problem of evil? Let us consider, as a case in point, how Marx conceptualized the depravity of capitalism. Rather than pointing to the social effects of bad values, Marx argued that capitalism destroyed their very possibility. As he put it so eloquently in *The Communist Manifesto:* "All that is holy is profaned, all that is solid melts into air." The structural pressures of capitalism create alienation and egoism; they necessitate an instrumental and strategic action orientation that suppresses values and destroys ideals. Because materialism destroys normativity, there is no possibility for shared understanding, solidarity, or community. Only after socialism removes the devasting forces of capitalist competition and greed does value commitment become possible and solidarity flourish.

The notion that it is not evil values but the absence of values that creates a bad society continues to inform the neo-Marxism of the early Frankfurt school. For Horkheimer and Adorno, late capitalism eliminates authentic values.[31] Culture exists only as an industry; it is a completely contingent set of expressive symbols, subject to continuous manipulation according to materialistic exigencies. While Habermas's later theory of discourse ethics avoids this kind of mechanism and reduction, it continues to be organized around the pragmatic notion that communicatively generated value commitment leads to mutual understanding, toleration, and solidarity.

The apotheosis of this "critical" approach to evil-as-the-absence-of-value — evil as the displacement of culture by power—is Zygmunt Bauman's expla-

nation of the Holocaust in his highly praised book, *Modernity and the Holocaust.*[32] Bauman writes that Nazi genocide has largely been ignored by social theory, suggesting that it has troubling implications for any positive evaluation of modernity. Bauman is right about this, but for the wrong reasons. He attributes the social evil of the Holocaust not to motivated cultural action but to the efficiency of the Nazis' bureaucratic killing machine. There is no indication in his explanation that this genocide was also caused by valuations of evil, by general representations of the polluted other that were culturally fundamental to Germany and its folkish, romantic traditions, and more specifically by representations of the Jewish other that were endemic not just to German but to Christian society. Yet only if this possibility is seriously entertained can the Holocaust be seen as an intended action, as something that was desired rather than merely imposed, as an event that did indeed grow out of systematic tendencies in the culture of modernity. It seems important, both morally and empirically, to emphasize, along with Goldhagen, that the Nazis and their German supporters wanted to kill Jews.[33] They worked hard to establish Judaism as a symbol of evil and in turn they annihilated Jews to purge themselves of this evil. The act of murdering millions of Jewish and non-Jewish people during the Holocaust must be seen as something valued, as something desired. It was an evil event motivated not by the absence of values—an absence created by the destructive colonization of lifeworld by economic and bureaucratic systems—but by the presence of heinous values. These polluted cultural representations were as integral as the positive idealizations upon which it pretended exclusively to rest.

GIVING EVIL ITS DUE: TOWARD A NEW (POSTMODERN) CULTURAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL MODEL

We need to elaborate a model of social good and evil that is more complex, more sober, and more realistic than the naturalistic or idealistic models. Symbolically, evil is not a residual category, even if those who are categorized by it are marginalized socially. From the merely distasteful and sickening to the truly heinous, evil is deeply implicated in the symbolic formulation and institutional maintenance of the good.[34] Because of this, the institutional and cultural vitality of evil must be continually sustained. The line dividing the sacred from profane must be drawn and redrawn time and time again; this demarcation must retain its vitality, or all is lost.[35] Evil is not only symbolized cognitively, but experienced in a vivid and emotional way. Through such phenomena as scandals, moral panics, public punishments, and wars, societies provide occasions to reexperience and recrystallize the enemies of the good.[36] Wrenching experiences of horror, revulsion, and fear create opportunities for purification that keep what Plato called "the

memory of justice" alive. Only through such direct experiences—provided via interaction or symbolic communication—do members of society come to know evil and to fear it. The emotional-cum-moral catharsis that Aristotle described as the basis for tragic experience and knowledge is also at the core of such experiences of knowing and fearing evil.[37] Such knowledge and fear triggers denunciation of evil in others and confession about evil intentions in oneself, and rituals of punishment and purification in collectivities. In turn, these renew the sacred, the moral, and the good.

Evil is produced, in other words, not simply to maintain domination and power, as Foucault and Marx would argue, but in order to maintain the possibility of making positive valuations. Evil must be coded, narrated, and embodied in every social sphere—in the intimate sphere of the family, in the world of science, in religion, in the economy, in government, in primary communities. In each sphere, and in every national society considered as a totality, there are deeply elaborated narratives about how evil develops and where it is likely to appear, about epochal struggles that have taken place between evil and the good, and about how good can triumph over evil once again.

This perspective has profound implications for the way we look at both cultural and institutional processes in contemporary societies. I will discuss the former in terms of "binary representations," drawing in some detail from my ongoing research on the discourse of civil society. I will discuss the latter in terms of "punishments." While space limitations preclude a detailed discussion of such institutional processes, their central elements will be laid out.[38]

Binary Representations: The Discourse of Civil Society

In the last two decades, the rush of real historical events has brought the concept "civil society" back into social theory and empirical social science.[39] Civil society refers to the social and cultural bases for political democracy, to the capacity for autonomy and self-regulation that allows independence from coercive political authority. Beyond this broad understanding, of course, civil society is a highly contested concept. It is used both to justify capitalist market relations and to legitimate social movements that oppose and regulate them; some think it refers to everything outside the state, others that it demarcates only the differentiated and univeralistic sphere of the "public" life. Despite their variation, these approaches agree that civil society indicates a democratic manner of demarcating the good, the moral, the right. When the values of civil society are discussed, and they often are, they are conceived as referring to qualities and relationships that allow self-regulation and equality. At the basis of this universalistic community, it is argued, there exists an idealization of the "free and autonomous" individual that sus-

tains strongly normative commitments to rationality, honesty, responsibility, openness, cooperation, inclusion, and transparency. Action according to these values, it is argued, allows individuals and groups to become members of civil society, to be included in its privileges and collective obligations. Whether in the hands of Habermas or Putnam, Cohen or Keane, Fraser or Arato, civil society is conceptualized in this highly idealistic way.

In my own studies of civil society, by contrast, I have suggested that insofar as it can be understood as a sign system its signifiers identify not only the qualities that allow individuals to become members of civil society but the qualities that legitimate their exclusion. The cultural core of civil society is composed not only of codes but of countercodes, antitheses that create meaningful representations for "universalism" and "particularism." On the one side, there is an expansive code that identifies the actors and structures of civil society in terms that promote wider inclusion and increasing respect for individual rights; on the other, there is a restrictive code that identifies actors and structures in terms that focus on ascriptively grounded group identities and promote the exclusion that follows therefrom. The discourse of civil society is constituted by a continuous struggle between these binary codes and between the actors who invoke them, each of whom seeks hegemony over the political field by gaining definitional control over unfolding events.

The binary character of "civil culture" is demonstrated not simply by the fact that code and countercode are present in every society that aspires to be a civil one, but also by the striking circumstance that each code can be defined only in terms of the alternate perspective the other provides. The discourse of civil society can be seen, in a certain sense, as revolving around secular salvation. To know how to be part of civil society is to know how one can be "socially saved." Members of a society can understand the requirements of social salvation, however, only if they know the criteria for social damnation, for exclusion on the basis of lack of deserts. In fact, just as monotheistic religion divides the world into the saved and the damned, civil discourse divides the world into those who deserve inclusion and those who do not. Members of national communities firmly believe that "the world," and this notably includes their own nation, is filled with people who either do not deserve freedom and communal support or are not capable of sustaining them. Members of national communities do not want to "save" such persons. They do not wish to include them, protect them, or offer them rights, because they conceive them as being unworthy, as in some sense "uncivilized."

When citizens make judgments about who should be included in civil society and who should not, about who is a friend and who is an enemy, they draw upon a highly generalized culture structure, a symbolic code that has been in place since the emergence of democratic communities. The basic

elements of this structure are sets of homologies, which create likenesses between various terms of social description and prescription, and antipathies, which establish antagonisms between these terms and other sets of symbols. Those who consider themselves worthy members of a national community—as most people do, of course—define themselves in terms of the positive side of this symbolic set; they define those who are not deemed worthy in terms that are established by the negative side. In this sense it is fair to say that members of the community "believe in" both the positive and negative sides, that they employ both as viable normative evaluations of political communities. The members of every democratic society consider both the positive and the negative symbolic sets realistic descriptions of individual and social life.

The discourse of civil society rests upon relatively unreflexive assumptions about human nature, which allow the motives of political actors to be clearly conceptualized along with the kind of society they are capable of sustaining. Code and countercode posit human nature in diametrically opposed ways. Because democracy allows self-motivated action, the people who compose it must be described as being capable of activism and autonomy rather than as being passive and dependent. They must be seen as rational and reasonable rather than irrational and hysterical; calm rather than excited; controlled rather than passionate; sane and realistic, not mad or given to fantasy. Democratic discourse, then, posits the following qualities as axiomatic: activism, autonomy, rationality, reasonableness, calm, control, realism, and sanity. The nature of the countercode, the discourse that justifies the restriction of civil society, is already clearly implied. If actors are passive and dependent, irrational and hysterical, excitable, passionate, unrealistic, or mad, they cannot be allowed the freedom that democracy allows. On the contrary, it is believed these persons deserve to be repressed, not only for the sake of civil society but for their own sakes as well.

The Discursive Structure of Social Motives

Democratic Code	Counterdemocratic Code
activism	passivity
autonomy	dependence
rationality	irrationality
reasonableness	hysteria
calm	excitability
self-control	passion
realism	unreality
sanity	madness

Upon the basis of such contradictory codes about human motives, dis-

tinctive representations of social relationships can be built. Democratically motivated persons will be capable of forming open social relationships rather than secretive ones; they will be trusting rather than suspicious, straightforward rather than calculating, truthful rather than deceitful; their decisions will be based on open deliberation rather than conspiracy and their attitude toward authority will be critical rather than deferential; in their behavior toward other community members they will be bound by conscience and honor rather than by greed and self-interest, and they will treat their fellows as friends rather than enemies.

If actors are conceived of as counterdemocratic, on the other hand, the social relationships they form will be represented by the second side of these fateful dichotomies. Rather than open and trusting relationships, they will be said to form secret societies that are premised on their suspicion of other human beings. To the authority within these secret societies they will be deferential, but to those outside their tiny group they will behave in a greedy and self-interested way. They will be conspiratorial, deceitful toward others, and calculating in their behavior, conceiving of those outside their group as enemies. If the positive side of this second discourse set describes the symbolic qualities necessary to sustain civil society, the negative side describes a solidary structure in which mutual respect and expansive social integration has broken down.

The Discursive Structure of Social Relationships

Democratic Code	Counterdemocratic Code
open	secret
trusting	suspicious
critical	deferential
honorable	self-interested
conscience	greed
truthful	deceitful
straightforward	calculating
deliberative	conspiratorial
friend	enemy

Given the discursive structure of motives and civic relationships, it should not be surprising that this set of of homologies and antipathies extends to the social understanding of political and legal institutions themselves. If members of a national community are depicted as irrational in motive and distrusting in social relationships, they will naturally be represented as creating institutions that are arbitrary rather than regulated by rules; that emphasize brute power rather than law and hierarchy rather than equality; that are exclusive rather than inclusive and promote personal loyalty over impersonal

and contractual obligation; that are regulated by personalities rather than by office obligations and that are organized by faction rather than by groups that are responsive to the needs of the community as a whole.

The Discursive Structure of Institutions

Democratic Code	Counterdemocratic Code
rule regulated	arbitrary
law	power
equality	hierarchy
inclusive	exclusive
impersonal	personal
contractual	ascriptive loyalty
social groups	factions
office	personality

When they are presented in their simple binary forms, these cultural codes appear merely schematic. In fact, however, they reveal the skeletal structures upon which social communities build the familiar stories that guide their everyday taken-for-granted political life. The positive side of these structured sets provides the elements for the comforting and inspiring story of a democratic, free, and spontaneously integrated social order, a civil society in an ideal sense. The structure and narrative of political virtue form the "discourse of liberty." The discourse is embodied in the great and the little stories that democratic nations tell about themselves, for example, the American story about George Washington and the cherry tree highlights honesty and virtue; English accounts of the "Battle of Britain" reveal the courage, self-sufficiency, and spontaneous cooperative of the British in contrast to the villainous forces of Hitlerian Germany; no matter how apocryphal, French legends about the honorable, trusting, and independent patriots who resisted the Nazi occupation underlay the construction of the Fourth Republic after World War II.

The elements on the negative side of these symbolic sets are also tightly intertwined. They provide the categories for the plethora of stories that permeate democratic understanding of the negative and repugnant sides of community life. Taken together, these form the "discourse of repression." If people are not represented as having the capacity for reason, if they cannot rationally process information and cannot tell truth from falseness, then they will be loyal to leaders for purely personal reasons and in turn be easily manipulated by those leaders. Similarly, because such persons are ruled by calculation rather than by conscience, they are without the honor that is critical in democratic affairs. Constructing people in terms of such anticivil qualities makes it necessary that they be denied access to rights and the pro-

tection of law. Indeed, because they have the capacity for neither voluntary nor responsible behavior, these marginal members of the community—those who are unfortunate enough to be constructed under the counterdemocratic code—must ultimately be repressed. They cannot be regulated by law, nor will they accept the discipline of office. Their loyalties can be only familial and particularistic. The institutional and legal boundaries of civil society, it is widely believed, can provide no bulwark against their lust for personal power.

The positive side of this discursive formation is viewed by the members of democratic communities as a source not only of purity but of purification. The discourse of liberty is taken to sum up "the best" in a civil community, and its tenets are considered sacred. The objects that the discourse creates seem to possess an awesome power that places them at the "center" of society, a location—sometimes geographical, often stratificational, always symbolic—that compels their defense at almost any cost. The negative side of this symbolic formation is viewed as profane. Representing the "worst" in the national community, it embodies evil. The objects it identifies threaten the core community from somewhere outside of it. From this marginal position, they present a powerful source of pollution. To be close to these polluted objects is dangerous. Not only can one's reputation be sullied and one's status endangered, but one's security as well. To have one's self or movement be identified in terms of these objects causes anguish, disgust, and alarm. This code is taken to be a threat to the center of civil society itself.

For contemporary Americans, the categories of the pure and polluted discourses seem natural and fully historical. Democratic law and procedures are seen as having been won by the founding fathers and guaranteed by documents like the Bill of Rights and Constitution. The qualities of the repressive code are embodied, with equal versimilitude, in the dark visions of tyranny and lawlessness, whether embodied by eighteenth-century British monarchs or twentieth-century Soviet communists. Pulp fiction and highbrow drama seek to counterpose these dangers with compelling images of the good. When works of the imagination seem to represent the discursive formation in a paradigmatic way, they become contemporary classics. For the generation that matured during World War II, for example, George Orwell's *1984* made the discourse of repression emblematic of the struggles of their time.

Of course, some events are so gross or so sublime that they generate almost immediate consensus about how the symbolic sets should be applied. For most members of a national community, great national wars clearly demarcate the good and the bad. The nation's soldiers are the embodiments of the discourse of liberty; the foreign nations and soldiers who oppose them represent some potent combination of the counterdemocra-

tic code. In the course of American history, this negative code has been extended to a vast and variegated group, to the British, native peoples, pirates, the South and the North, Africans, old European nations, fascists, Communists, Germans, and Japanese. Identification in terms of the discourse of repression is essential if vengeful combat is to be pursued. Once this polluting discourse is applied, it becomes impossible for good people to reason with those on the other side. If one's opponents are beyond reason, deceived by leaders who operate in secret, the only option is to read them out of the human race. When great wars are successful, they provide powerful narratives that dominate the nation's postwar life. Hitler and Nazism formed the backbone of a huge array of Western myths and stories, providing master metaphors for everything from profound discussions about the Final Solution to many of the good guy/bad guy plots of television dramas and situation comedies.

For most events, however, discursive identity is contested. Political fights are, in part, about how to distribute actors across the structure of discourse, for there is no determined relationship between any event or group and either side of the cultural scheme. Actors struggle to taint one another with the repressive brush and to wrap themselves in the rhetoric of liberty. In periods of tension and crisis, political struggle becomes a matter of how far and to whom the discourses of liberty and repression apply. The cause of victory and defeat, imprisonment and freedom, and sometimes even of life and death, is often discursive domination, which depends upon how popular narratives about good and evil are extended. Is it protesting students who are like Nazis, or the conservatives who are pursuing them? Are the members of the Communist Party or the members of the House Un-American Activities Committee to be understood as fascistic? When Watergate began, only the actual burglars were called conspirators and polluted by the discourse of repression. George McGovern and his fellow Democrats were unsuccessful in their efforts to apply this discourse to the White House, the executive staff, and the Republican Party, elements of civil society that succeeded in maintaining their identity in liberal terms. At a later point in the crisis, such a reassuring relationship to the culture structure no longer held. The general discursive structure, in other words, is used to legitimate friends and delegitimate opponents in the course of real historical time.

Punishment: Social Process and Institutions

If it is vital to understand the cultural dimension of society as organized around evil as much as around good, this by no means suggests that the problem of social evil can be understood simply in discursive terms. On the contrary, organizations, power, and face-to-face confrontations are critical in

determining how and to whom binary representations of good and evil are applied. While these social processes and institutional forces do not invent the categories of evil and good—that they are not responsive purely to interest, power, and need has been one of my central points—they do have a strong influence upon how they are understood. Most importantly, however, they determine what the "real" social effects of evil will be in time and space.

The social processes and institutional forces that specify and apply representations about the reality of evil can be termed "punishment." In the *Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim first suggested that crime is "normal" and necessary because it is only punishment that allows society to separate normative behavior from that which is considered deviant. In our terms, we can suggest that punishment is the social medium through which the practices of actors, groups, and institutions are meaningfully and effectively related to the category of evil. It is through punishment that evil is naturalized. Punishment "essentializes" evil, making it appear to emerge from actual behaviors and identities, rather than being culturally and socially imposed upon them.[40]

Punishment takes both routine and more spontaneous forms. The bureaucratic iterations of evil are called "crimes." In organizational terms, the situational references of criminal acts are precisely defined by civil and criminal law, whose relevance to particular situations is firmly decided by courts and police. Polluting contact with civil law brings monetary sanctions; stigmatization by contact with criminal law brings incarceration, radical social isolation, and sometimes even death.

The nonroutine iterations of evil are less widely understood and appreciated. They refer to processes of "stigmatization" rather than to crimes.[41] What Cohen first identified as *moral panics* represent fluid, rapidly formed crystallizations of evil in relation to unexpected events, actors, and institutions. Historical witch trials and more contemporary anticommunist witch hunts, for example, are stimulated by the sudden experience of weakness in group boundaries. Panics over "crime waves," by contrast, develop in response to the chaotic and disorganizing entrance of new, formerly disreputable social actors into civil society.[42] Whatever their specific cause, and despite their evident irrationality, moral panics do have a clear effect, both in a cultural and a social sense. By focusing on new sources of evil, they draw an exaggerated line between social pollution and the good. This cultural clarification prepares the path for a purging organizational response, for trials of transgressors, for expulsion, and incarceration.

Scandals represent a less ephemeral but still nonroutine form of social punishment. Scandals are public degradations of individuals and groups for behavior that is considered polluting to their status or office. In order to maintain the separation between good and evil, the behavior of an individual or group is "clarified" by symbolizing it as a movement from purity to

danger. The religious background of Western civil society makes such declension typically appear as a "fall from grace," as a personal sin, a lapse created by individual corruption and the loss of individual responsibility. In the discourse of civil society, the greatest "sin" is the inability to attain and maintain one's autonomy and independence.[43] In terms of the present discussion, scandal is created because civil society demands more or less continuous "revivifications" of social evil. These rituals of degradation range from the apparently trivial—the gossip sheets which, nonetheless, demand systematic sociological consideration—to the kinds of deeply serious, civil-religious events that create national convulsions. The Dreyfus affair that threatened to undermine the Third Republic in France and the Watergate affair that toppled the Nixon regime in the United States represented efforts to crystallize and punish social evil on this systematic level. Once again, scandals, like moral panics, have not only cultural but fundamental institutional effects, repercussions that range from the removal of specific persons from status or office to deep and systematic changes in organizational structure and regime.

There is nothing fixed or determined about scandals and moral panics. Lines of cultural demarcation are necessary but not sufficient to their creation. Whether or not this or that individual or group becomes punished is the outcome of struggles for cultural power, struggles that depend on shifting coalitions and the mobilization of resources of a material and not only ideal kind. This applies not only to the creation of panics and scandals but to their denouements. They are terminated by purification rituals reestablishing the sharp line between evil and good, a transition made possible by the act of punishmment.

Transgression and the Affirmation of Evil and Good

This essay has been an effort to establish the theoretical framework for a new field of investigation, one which might be called "the sociology of evil."[44] Considerations of time and space have limited this initial effort to the most elementary concerns. Not only have I been able to consider central issues only in a schematic way, but I have not been able even to take up areas of real theoretical and empirical import.

One critical area concerns the manner in which the "autonomy" of evil, culturally and institutionally, allows the experience and practice of evil to become, not simply frightening and repulsive, but also desirable. For the sociological creation of evil results not only in the avoidance of evil but also in the pursuit of it. Rather than a negative that directs people toward the good, in other words, social evil can be and often is sought as an end in itself. As Bataille observed, "evil is always the object of an ambiguous con-

demnation"; it is "not only the dream of the wicked" but "to some extent the dream of [the] Good."[45]

Attraction to the idea and experience of evil motivates the widespread practice that Bataille called transgression, and that Foucault, following Bataille, termed the "limit experience."[46]

> *Sacred* simultaneously has two contradictory meanings. . . . The taboo gives a negative definition of the sacred object and inspires us with awe. . . . Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination. Taboo and transgression reflect these two contradictory urges. The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it. . . . The sacred aspect of the taboo is what draws men towards it and transfigures the original interdiction.[47]

In particular situations, evil becomes positively evaluated, creating a kind of inverted liminality. Transgression takes place when actions, associations, and rhetoric—practices that would typically be defined and sanctioned as serious threats to the good—become objects of desire and sometimes even social legitimation. Bataille believed that transgression occurred mainly in the cultural imagination, that is, in literature, although he also wrote extensively about "eroticism" and was personally motivated by a desire to comprehend the dark social developments of the early and midcentury period—Nazism, war, and Stalinism.[48] Transgression, however, also takes a decidedly social-structural form. In criminal activity and popular culture, evil provides the basis of complex social institutions that provide highly sought after social roles, careers, and personal identities. Without evoking the term, Jack Katz certainly was investigating transgression in his profound phenomenological reconstruction of the "badass syndrome," as was Richard Strivers in his earlier essay on the apocalyptic dimension of 1960s rock and roll concerts. The latter embodied the long-standing "noir" strain of popular culture that has transmogrified into the "bad rapper" phenomenon of today.[49]

It seems that every social thinker and artist who sets out to explore the attractions of this dark side, whether in the moral imagination or in social action and structure, risks being tarred by self-proclaimed representatives of social morality with a polluting brush. This tendency is fuelled by the apparent fact that those who are personally attracted to transgressive practices are those who are most drawn to exploring them in art and social thought. The analysis set forth in this essay suggests, however, that those who are seriously interested in maintaining moral standards should refrain from this kind of knee-jerk response. It confuses causes with effects. Societies construct evil so that there can be punishment, for it is the construction of, and the response to, evil that defines and revivifies the good. One should not, then, confuse

the aesthetic imagining of evil, the vicarious experiencing of evil, much less the intellectual exploration of evil with the actual practice of evil itself.

Modern and postmodern societies have always been beset by a socially righteous fundamentalism, both religious and secular. These moralists wish to purge the cultural imagination of references to eros and violence; they condemn frank discussions of transgressive desires and actions in schools and other public places; they seek to punish and sometimes even to incarcerate those who practice "victimless" crimes on the grounds that they violate the collective moral conscience. The irony is that, without the imagination and the social identification of evil, there would be no possibility for the attachment to the good that these moralists so vehemently uphold. Rather than undermining conventional morality, trangression underlines and vitalizes it. Bataille, whom James Miller pejoratively called the *philosophe maudit* of French intellectual life,[50] never ceased to insist upon this point. "Transgression has nothing to do with the primal liberty of animal life. It opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed, but it maintains these limits just the same. Transgression is complementary to the profane [i.e., the mundane] world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it."[51]

Amnesty International, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, has been one of the world's most effective nongovernmental democratic organizations, exposing and mobilizing opposition against torture and other heinous practices of authoritarian and even democratic governments. It is all the more relevant to note, therefore, that at the heart of the internal and external discourse of this prototypically "do-gooder" organization one finds an obsessive concern with defining, exploring, and graphically presenting evil, the success of which efforts allows members and outsiders vicariously to experience evil's physical and emotional effects.[52] In the Amnesty logo, good and evil are tensely intertwined. At the core is a candle, representing fervent attention, patience, and sacrality of Amnesty's commitment to life. Surrounding the candle is barbed wire, indicating concentration camps and torture. This binary structure is iterated throughout the persuasive documents that Amnesty distributes to the public and also in the talk of Amnesty activists themselves. They revolve around narratives that portray, often in graphic and gothic detail, the terrible things that are done to innocent people, and, in a tone of almost uncomprehending awe, the heroism of the prisoner to endure unspeakable suffering and remain in life and at the point of death a caring, dignified human being. Amnesty's attention to evil, to constructing the oppressor and graphically detailing its actions, in this way contributes to maintaining the the ideals of moral justice and sacralizing the human spirit, not only in thought but in practice.

It is in order to explain and illuminate such a paradox that a sociology of evil must be born.