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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Female Criminality

SISTERS IN CRIME: THE RISE OF THE NEW FEMALE CRIMINAL. By Freda Adler. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1975. Pp. 287. \$9.95.

*Reviewed by Henry P. Coppelillo**

We often are startled when someone presents us with a new awareness of the significance of issues or phenomena at which we have been looking for years but have never really seen. Freda Adler will startle a number of people who read her book *Sisters in Crime*. She will also anger them. The only thing her book will not do is leave people unmoved. *Sisters in Crime* provides punch, provocation, revelation, promise, and explanation, as the author uses the central theme of the change in the rate and nature of crimes committed by women to explore women's roles and fortunes in our society.

Professor Adler writes in a lucid and dramatic style. At times poetically, on other occasions powerfully, she makes her points clearly and cleanly, and while readers may disagree with some of the points, they are unlikely to misunderstand the author's message. In nine chapters, the author presents an overview of the changing patterns of women's crimes as well as some of the information and misinformation regarding women's biology, social roles, legal standing, historical-social evolution, psychology, and participation in the penal system. She covers these topics succinctly and well, and masterfully places in dramatic relief the cogent and important issues surrounding each topic. It is revealing to see how much of each issue has been obfuscated by our sexual bias. For the most part, the topic of female crime is the central platform in the book. From this central platform, Professor Adler ventures into the fields mentioned above only to return to the issue of crime in her effort to make causal connections, correlations, or inferences about the forces that have impinged on women in their journey through history.

In addition to the style and breadth of the book is yet another strength: *Sisters in Crime* is one of the most scholarly, well-documented books of its kind. With about 425 citations, the book can and should serve as an invaluable reference for any who would defend, treat, study, or want to understand women or feminist posi-

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tions. In this, as in other ways, *Sisters in Crime* is a serious book. While not without humor, it has little to do with the semi-humorous, or perhaps semi-ridiculous, trappings of feminism such as bra-burning or whistling at men on the street. Rather, it demonstrates how prejudice and unrealistic stereotyping corrode human potential and reduce the dignity of the bigot as well as his victim. To accomplish this, Professor Adler has synthesized an enormous number of facts, perceptions, and opinions. The reader of *Sisters in Crime*, therefore, not only benefits from Freda Adler's erudition, perspicacity, and literary style, but also from her remarkable ability to collect, condense, and integrate a prodigious amount of information. In certain sections of the book the reader can observe the process by which, under the author's guidance, facts become knowledge, and knowledge is polished into wisdom.

While I am enthusiastic about Professor Adler's work, I must acknowledge that I developed some disagreements with her as we carried on the running mental dialogue her writing stimulates. As a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, I feel her view of the field suffers from a degree of tunnel vision. While Professor Adler correctly links the increase of violent crime among women to the change in their social role (the increased involvement of women in all activities), she seems to have given short shrift to other variables that interdigitate with social determinants to alter patterns of female criminality. I should like to address myself to a few psychological variables that, in my clinical experience, can also be considered to have causal relationships to the phenomenon of crime by women. Roughly, sociological influences can be thought to be those determinants of behavior that originate in the environment in which the individual lives, while psychological factors can be considered the internal responses of the *individual* to events in the environment, as well as to his own internally generated wishes, needs, perceptions and fears.

Professor Adler only briefly notes that in the past couple of decades our culture has provided more understanding and latitude and less certain punishment for deviant behavior. The legal and civil rights of individuals are more formally recognized in our society now than ever before, and this recognition has extended to rights of the criminal as well as to those of other members of our population. As a result, negative responses from the environment have become a less frequently predictable outcome of deviant or unusual behavior. Who can doubt that this disturbs the balance between impulse and inhibition? One need only think of the well-controlled person

who functions in a relatively inhibited way in his own home town, but becomes a "swinging" part-time reprobate when he goes off to a convention in a distant city. Environmental expectations are an important factor in determining whether an impulse will precipitate action and what form the action, if initiated, will take.

In our culture women appear to have been burdened with more coercive expectations than men, and more of these expectations have been in the form of restraints. Consequently, as society becomes less harsh in its legal and social punitive responses to behavior that is deemed deviant, the imbalance between the wish to act and the restraints on action is experienced more keenly by women than by men. In this sense, then, the increase in violent crime among women must be seen as an intrapsychic disturbance as well as a response to the clarion call for social freedom.

Another variable, somewhat related to the balance between impulse and inhibition, is the extended family. Formerly individuals lived with or near their relatives, and this extended family provided emotional strength to its members. Beginning with the Second World War, however, geographic mobility became a way of life for Americans. As young people began to migrate far from their family homes, the extended family, which had been for many young women not only the vehicle by which society communicated role expectations to them, but also a source of support in times of strife, was no longer available. It is not surprising, then, that many young women who were alone, unaided, and often unprepared to meet the stresses of daily living made adaptations that were less than optimal. Following age-old patterns, some made bad marriages or fell into the hands of pimps. Others sought role definition in the ritualized relationships of gangs and their crimes, while still others found themselves unable to contain their rage or longings, and indulged in crimes that previously had not been considered women's crimes. In these latter instances, the individual woman, because of loss of external psychological support systems, found herself in *psychological* stress and made a primitive and violent maladaptive response. This is a far cry from a progressive and more adaptive response to stress that eventually will bring relief and benefits to her, her children, and her fellow women.

Finally, there is very little in Professor Adler's book regarding the shift toward a hedonistic materialism that has characterized our culture since the end of World War Two. Not only is ours above all the age of comfort and luxury through consumption of natural resources, medications, and technology, but it is the age of the *now*

generation. Whatever we want, we want right now. This trend brings a shift in values away from abstract gratifications toward more concrete and immediate rewards. Concepts such as virtue, honor, sin, and integrity are less potent determinants of attitudes and behavior than are the more concrete attributes of material wealth, power, possessions, and direct gratification. Some women, who until recently have been maneuvered and elbowed out of the race for open acquisition of tangible benefits, feel they must make up for lost time. Whether they set about getting what they consider their long overdue material rewards through hard work, marriage, or crime is of course dependent on their personality structures, moral codes, and sometimes pure chance. Surely the materialistic trend has facilitated certain activities about which women fifty years ago only dreamed, and among these activities is violence in the service of fulfilling wishes.

These alternative and supplementary explanations for the increase in female criminality are raised, not for the purpose of disputing Professor Adler's explanation, but because, as a psychiatrist, I have seen them causally operative in clinical situations. Therefore I must consider them equally valid causative factors. Also, I raise these points because one can come away from *Sisters in Crime* with the impression that increased criminality in women is the sign and by-product of psychological adaptation to a more just and more highly integrated social system. I have seen it clinically, at least as often, as the symptom of a disintegrating personality in a social system that has lost its old (and perhaps unjust) support systems for the individual and has replaced them with nothing of value.

Having raised some alternative explanations for increased criminality among women, I must be critical of an attitude on the part of the author that is evidenced in several ways. I believe that Professor Adler's pride in the accomplishment of women sometimes shades over into subtle glee and arrogance. There are places in the book where it would appear that her glee and satisfaction with women's commission of violent crimes is as marked as her rightful satisfaction with women's legitimate and laudable accomplishments.

An example of her arrogance is found in Professor Adler's discussion of one of the *few* penal institutions for women in the country that have unambivalently humane programs for rehabilitation—the Purdy Treatment Center for Women outside Tacoma, Washington. Although Professor Adler acknowledges that Purdy is a tiny light in a whole universe of unenlightened darkness, and that time for evalu-

ating its effectiveness has been too short, she concludes the passage with these sentences:

If such prisoner communities reforge the social links for women, they will undoubtedly do the same for men. It is satisfying to reflect that the social revolution of changed sex roles is freeing both the slave and the master from the bondage of dehumanization, that what women have taken from men in power they are restoring to him [*sic*] in liberty, and that the gain of freedom for each is a gain of freedom for both, because neither men nor women are islands complete unto themselves alone.¹

While there is much with which one can agree in this statement, there are numerous implications with which I disagree. Let me mention only one.

We have only just begun to address some of the pressing world problems that in this era confront both men and women. Raising our children free from hate, finding room to live, respecting individual rights without falling into anarchy, feeding ourselves without starving our neighbors, rendering human services without tyranny, humanely managing social and psychological deviancy, are all challenges that, unless met, threaten the very essence of human existence on this planet that is at once our haven and our prison. Have we come so far that we can afford to talk about what group gives and what group takes? Is it not better to think that if the condition of a segment of our people has improved, it has been the accomplishment of all humanity? We still have a very long way to go before we can take the time for self-congratulatory smugness, and humanity probably will not make the journey successfully if we continue to fragment our commitment with adversary chauvinism. Before the feminists bask in the warmth of their own magnanimous generosity toward men, they would do well to think first of a solid core of humanity, both male and female, that will withstand assaults on the survival of all. Then we shall have time for peripheral skirmishes of the sexes without eroding our sense of unity.

There is another point in the book where I feel a disturbing attitude is displayed. In discussing abortion and explaining the attitudes that led to change in the legal status of abortion, Professor Adler writes: "To be worthwhile as a woman no longer required frequent evidences of fertility. On the contrary, the respectably rotund maternal figure began to look a bit dowdy beside the svelte form of the career woman, and the once universally revered image of prolific motherhood was indicted in some ecologic quarters for population pollution."² Again, there is much in what she says, but

1. F. ADLER, *SISTERS IN CRIME: THE RISE OF THE NEW FEMALE CRIMINAL* 201 (1975).

2. *Id.* at 236.

the way she says it requires some response. "[T]he svelte form of the career woman" looks to some rather brittle, angular, arid, and not a little contrived, while the rotund figure of a pregnant woman evokes images of serenity and emotional security that are possibly unique in the human condition. Those who see the situation in this manner have as much right to their images as Professor Adler and her sisters have to theirs. My point is only that the new images of the world that proponents of a movement would have us accept are shoved at us with the same attitudinal tyranny as were the images the movement would replace. If the feminists are saying that women have a right to be what their talents, traits, and *preferences* would have them be, I look to join their ranks. If they are saying that their image of womanhood is the one that is right, and other images are to be derided, I would say that their goal is to replace the attitudinal tyranny of the past with a tyranny of the future. To that goal I would say that tyranny in the name of justice still comes off as tyranny.

Despite these concerns, I think the book is a splendid one. Professor Adler not only addresses the issue of society's past injustices toward women, but she also speaks eloquently to the point that humanity can no longer afford to let segments of its population be oppressed and denigrated. She is convincing and enormously sensitive, and her views, while at times disturbing and possibly irritating to some of us, direct the light of inquiry into shadows of ignorance that desperately need the illumination of reason. I cannot be certain that my criticisms are evenly well-founded, or that I am not responding to the itch of wounded male pride. A reading of *Sisters in Crime* should make it possible for you to decide for yourself.