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Book Notes

David Wagner, *The New Temperance: The American Obsession with Sin and Vice*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997. \$60 hardcover, \$16.00 papercover.

As sociologists know, all human societies face the challenge of ensuring that individuals conform to the prevailing culture. In many societies, and particularly in pre-industrial societies, cultural expectations are clear, the mechanisms of socialization are effective and institutionalized means of sanctioning non-conformity are readily implemented. In industrial and post-industrial societies, where individualism is far more accentuated, the challenge of integrating individuals into the social order is more complex. In these societies, popular opinion, the search for identity and the manufacture of taste transcend traditional mechanisms for ensuring conformity. Indeed, the very nature of the social order is ambiguous. With competing interests interacting in complex ways, it is not only difficult to decide what the dominant culture expects, but what the dominant culture comprises.

These difficulties issues are examined in this racy, sometimes hilarious and sometimes frightening book. The author engages in a the reader in an riveting polemic about the paradoxes of contemporary American culture, and its resurgent obsession with sin and vice. Unlike the 1960s, when many believed that individualism had at last triumphed over crass obedience to outmoded beliefs and customs, events of the 1990's are suggestive of a return to the nation's historical preoccupation with conformity. The good, the bad and the ugly are more starkly identified, and the means of exerting social control are more insidious than ever before. Despite greater apparent individual freedom, the pressures towards conformity intensify.

Although the book may be criticized for not elaborating its thesis with more systematic references to sociological theory, its message is an important one. It is eminently readable and well argued. Its prophetic tone calls for a greater understanding of the events of the time and for appropriate responses that foster

greater tolerance and, at the same time, ensure the survival of a vibrant, pluralistic culture.

Lonnie Athens, *Violent Criminal Acts and Actors Revisited*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997. \$24.95 hardcover, \$14.95 papercover.

Although violent crime comprises only a small proportion of all criminal acts, it receives the most attention and has the most devastating consequences for its victims; it also has the most chilling effect on those who learn about it. For many, mindless violence is perplexing. Why do some people engage in the most brutal violence often for minimal gain? In an attempt to answer this question, criminologists have offered a plethora of explanations. These range from accounts that emphasize the role of individual psychopathology to those that stress the role of negative social and environmental conditions in the socialization of violent people.

This fascinating book introduces yet another element into criminological explanations of violent crime, namely the role of the subjective experiences of violent criminals. Insisting that criminologists should not only study violent acts but the feelings, meanings and explanations of violent actors themselves, Lonnie Athens reports on a twenty five year study of convicted violent criminals and the reasons they themselves give for their violent behavior. The book is replete with horrific but highly illustrative case studies which offer a very different interpretations of understanding criminal violence. Athens shows that an understanding of subjective meanings is critically important in the field. Since violent criminals range from the psychopathological to the ordinary, an interpretation of their careers more effectively informs understanding than explanations that utilize conventional explanatory theory.

This book will generate a great deal of discussion. In addition to his carefully documented interviews with offenders which richly illustrate the text, the author's own experience of undertaking the research makes for interesting reading. Particularly frightening is his account of how prison guards on one occasion deliberately left him alone with a dangerous offender who then attacked him. It seems that some of those who are entrusted with