The taking of life as the ultimate act of deviance: incoherent enforcements of norms and exercises of arbitrary power redefining the perimeters of outsiderness, and the identities of victims, offenders, and moral entrepreneurs

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Riassunto

Osservando il mondo moderno, appare esserci un mettere in discussione a più livelli il principio fondamentale che togliere la vita sia l'atto antisociale più estremo. Ottanta anni dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale, la politica nazionale e globale e le organizzazioni internazionali si trovano di nuovo di fronte a circostanze di straordinaria grandezza, come la migrazione o la guerra, e sembrano fallire collettivamente nell'affrontare le questioni con coerenza, cambiando così marcatamente forma alle società. Analizzando casi di cronaca e legali, questo saggio considera gli approcci istituzionali inconsistenti in relazione all'imperativo sociale di non uccidere, al fine di discuterne le conseguenze in termini di aspettativa di vita delle società, di identificazione dei devianti, delle vittime e dei perpetratori, e, in definitiva, della relazione tra potere, e pertanto gli imprenditori morali, e principio.

Parole chiave: Devianza, Imprenditori morali, Vittime e autori di reato

Abstract

When observing the modern world, there appears to be a multi-level challenge to the fundamental principle that the taking of life is the ultimate antisocial act. Eighty years after WWII, national and global politics and international organisations are again confronted with circumstances of extraordinary magnitude, like migration or war, and they seem to be collectively failing in addressing the issues with coherence, thus changing the shape of societies in dramatic ways. By analysing news and legal cases, this work considers the inconsistent institutional approaches towards the social imperative not to kill, in order to discuss their consequences in terms of life-expectancies of societies, of identification of deviants, victims and offenders, and ultimately, of the relationship between power, thus moral entrepreneurs, and principle.

Keywords: Deviance, Moral entrepreneurs, Victims and offenders

Résumé

En observant le monde moderne, il semble y avoir un défi à plusieurs niveaux au principe fondamental selon lequel l'atteinte à la vie est l'acte antisocial ultime. Quatre-vingts ans après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les politiques nationales et mondiales ainsi que les organisations internationales sont de nouveau confrontées à des circonstances d'une ampleur extraordinaire, comme la migration ou la guerre, et elles semblent collectivement échouer à aborder les problèmes avec cohérence, changeant ainsi la forme des sociétés de manière dramatique. En analysant l'actualité et des affaires juridiques, ce travail considère les approches

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institutionnelles incohérentes envers l'impératif social de ne pas tuer, afin de discuter de leurs conséquences en termes d'espérance de vie des sociétés, d'identification des déviants, des victimes et des contrevenants, et finalement, de la relation entre le pouvoir, donc les entrepreneurs moraux, et le principe.

Mots-clés : Déviance, Entrepreneurs de morale, Victimes et auteurs d'infraction

1. Introduction

When talking about deviance, 1960s and '70s' sociologists and criminologists were mainly preoccupied with drug-use, homosexuality, and alternative lifestyles (Simon & Gagnon, 1967; Heidensohn, 1968; McIntosh, 1968; Taylor & Walton, 1970; Young, 1971), but their inquiries incidentally made new complexities come to the surface (Bidwell, 1966; Giddens, 1971; Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973). The general public started reasoning, once again, about the concept of power, and crimes of the powerful (Liazos, 1972; Krisberg, 1975) with the onset of critical criminology (Sykes, 1974; Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1974), embracing the fact that societies are human products at large and therefore tainted with human flaws, prejudices, and misconceptions at all levels. Yinger (1960) and Roszak (1969) introduced the idea of a counterculture which challenged the established conservatism, and the discourse on deviance became enriched with new words like moral panics (Cohen, 2002 [1972]), moral entrepreneurs, rule enforcers, labels, and interactionism (Becker, 1963; Sarbin & Mancuso, 1970), which tried to explain why people act the way they do when they do not conform.

The task to re-think outsiders is a quest to re-draw a *Zeitgeist*, a revolution comparable to what the discovery of the Americas did to geographical notions. It cannot be achieved singularly, but every contribution, and endeavour will make new places appear on the map. This paper will thus consider the prohibition to take lives as the social principle which almost every judiciary system recognises as the foundational element of social peace, by observing three main stances drawn from global news and cases of law: a) when the life taken is that of a purported "outsider", socially-, religiously-, or politically-defined; b) when the State orders the taking of a life, via capital punishment, or by order of an authority and without due process, also considering the legal powers vested in law enforcement; and c) during a war, where the positions of normality and deviance, when relating to taking lives, are completely reversed. These stances will form the base for discussion on deviance and on issues to it related.

2. Operative definitions

As we set out to explore new territories, refence landmarks need to be established. The following are the operative definitions on which this work is based and their explanation.

Deviants and outsiders have always been used as synonyms, but at a closer scrutiny, they are not. A mere linguistic approach tells us that deviant implies a movement, from an internal point of origin to an astray position, while outsider carries a dual meaning, either someone coming from the outside, implying an incoming trajectory, or a destination reached, which conveys a perception of finality – the acme of the deviant's career. From such point of view, the outsider is either the opposite of a deviant, or a 'professional' version of the same, concepts which would deserve standalone scientific discussion. However, in this paper the terms will be used as synonyms because the central theme, the taking of life, is substantially, at one level or another, viewed as a crime in all cultures and judiciary systems[35], placing the perpetrator, ideally, outside the perimeters of the global social order and, at the same time, deviating from it.

The term society will thus also be used in its local sense, a State or community, but in its broader meaning, too. If it is true that a society is generally a place where diverse people are gathered, ruled by laws established by an authority which has jurisdiction to do so and recognition by the citizens, laws sanctioning murder in

[35] "Crimes like murder […] lead us to view the violator as a true outsider" (Becker, 1963, p. 1).

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the modern world stem out of conventions, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948)[36], drafted, accepted and adopted by most world countries. At the same time, principle is, according to the *Oxford Learners Dictionaries*, both "a law, a rule or a theory that something is based on", and "a belief that is accepted as a reason for acting or thinking in a particular way" (Oxford University Press, 2025), and, therefore, a foundational element, in this case, of a social universe.
Also, the taking of life is a concept that needs clarification: in this work, it is intended as voluntary actions or omissions – for any kind of retribution or gain - resulting in the death of one or more individuals who can enjoy autonomous life according to the most recent medical standards.
Last, but not least, 'antisocial behaviour' needs explanation. Although sociologists tend to think of deviance in terms of (dys)functionality or pathology (Becker, 1963), this paper intends antisociality as a form of 'sociological unsustainability', viewed as a course of actions or omissions that, in the long run, may cause social collapse and a detachment between the ruling and the ruled class.

3. Methodology of analysis and selection criteria

The *fil rouge* connecting the cases is the way in which the principle not to kill has been challenged at different institutional levels. A short commentary will follow the cases presented, extracting the elements that will inform the subsequent discussion, which will therefore analyse how the attempts to incoherently enforce the principle and exercise arbitrary power influence the perimeters of outsiderness by the so-called moral entrepreneurs, with more complex reflections on how our perception of deviance may change when anchored in power or principle, thus addressing Becker's idea that when dealing with deviance there are "two possible foci of inquiry [that must get] into balance" (1963, p. 156); how this, in turn, changes our ability to correctly identify victims and offenders, while giving new moral entrepreneurs a chance to emerge; and concluding with a set of questions whose answers, which we have to find singularly as individuals, and collectively as a society, will prove fundamental in future assessments of deviance, of where we should draw the perimeters of social acceptance, and of how far we have travelled on the path of social evolution.
As the principle is globally shared, the work will draw from a prevalence of events from the Western world, for language accessibility reasons, but also from incursions into less "domestic" scenarios, to stress the commonality of social behaviour, independently from specific traditional or cultural elements. Events were selected on several grounds. For victims already identified as deviants, cases were searched via Google/Bing search engines, using keywords in Italian and English, such as "migrant/homosexual/activist/Communist killed", "trial", "legal proceedings", with two cases coming from Italy as it is both a main European country of destination of migratory flows and the country with the strongest Communist party in past Western Europe (Bull, 1991). For the second two stances, the selection was more complex and required a two-tiered search first using English-only keywords, to avoid further representation of Italy, such as "capital punishment countries", or "martial law" and "governmental abuse of power", or "conscientious objection" and "war", and subsequent digging into the algorithm-ranked links with Boolean operator AND and "country name" to extrapolate a list of concrete examples.
All the cases deemed relevant by search engines at the time of search were further selected according to, from top to bottom: plenitude of information and reliability of sources (sources having national credit, whether newsrooms or sites, reconstructing the event in consistent ways and against verifiable codes and norms) and sparking, or originating from, social debate; identification of institutional interventions (whether from law enforcement, civil rights organisations, courts, national or international authorities, addressing the event as consistent); and the production of legal effects of some sorts (official observations, hearings, interrogations, laws, *fatwas*, trials, or rulings).
The time criterion for inclusion was based on: cases falling into the time-span of existence of consolidated notions of deviance (Becker, 1963; Taylor & Walton, 1970; Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973) and victimology (Hentig, 1948; Wertham, 1949; Mendelsohn, 1956; Fattah, 2000); and cases which are still discussed at the

[36] Article 3: "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person" (United Nations, 1948).

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present time. Grounds for exclusion were thus scarcity of information, lack of public debate and legal effects, and the time-related element.

4. Case Presentation and Discussion

4.1 The victim as an already purported outsider/deviant

On September 8, 2024, a surveillance camera records a 65-year-old Italian woman repeatedly running over a 52-year-old North-African man, a so-called 'illegal migrant' who had previously stolen her purse, and leaving the place of the accident after retrieving her belongings. The man, rescued shortly after by passers-by, dies after arrival at the ER (Il Giornale D'Italia - Il Quotidiano Indipendente, 2024; Palma, 2024). On July 2, 2025, the woman is charged with aggravated first-degree murder (Mazzeo, 2025). The Preliminary Hearing Judge rejects the plea to drop the aggravating circumstances and re-classify the offence as negligent excess of self-defence or second-degree murder (Dinelli, 2025). Three days after the event, Matteo Salvini, Italian politician and Ministry, posts on his social media accounts: "The death of a person is always a tragedy, violence is not a solution, and justice will have its course. This tragedy, though, is the consequence of a crime: if the man who lost his life had not been a delinquent, it would not have ended so. What do you think of it?"[37] (Il Messaggero, 2024). The replies, in the thousands, consistently veer towards a justification for the action of the woman, as it is maintained by many that Italians are fed up with illegal migrants coming to commit crimes in the country, and the general feeling is that the Left tends to shield the migrants to the detriment of Italian citizens. Andrea Crippa, vice-secretary of Salvini's party, is less direct, maintaining that the "total absence of the certainty of the punishment and the essentially total absence of trust of the Italians in justice leads to such kind of facts"[38] (Agenzia Vista, 2024).

On February 15, 2025, South African Imam, Muhsin Hendricks, is killed in Gqeberha (South African Government, 2025) . Hendricks, "often […] described as the world's first openly gay Imam" (*Ibidem*), had already received threats related to his activism, after founding a Mosque "designed to be inclusive of queer Muslims and marginalized women" (Owolabi, 2025) and the victim himself had spoken about being "a target of a series of fatwas[39] […] issued by South Africa's Muslim Judicial Council"[40], which, however, condemns the murder (Imray, 2025; Igual, 2025a). Imam Hendricks engaged in what is viewed by a widespread part of the Muslim community as *haram* - not simply forbidden, but sinful (Aloul, 2025a; Aloul, 2025b). Although the response of the public on social media is measured, and mostly in mourning of such a pioneering figure, there are accounts of fierce critiques and justifications for his murder, coming from more shielded pulpits, like mosques (Igual, 2025b). MambaOnline.com[41] points out that, in spite of the many promises made by the authorities after the murder, no answer or update has come the public's way (Mamba Writer, 2025) and that "[the] Director at Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM) expressed deep concern at the absence of transparency and updates" (Gwala, 2025), suggesting that the authorities are not treating the case as a "high-profile hate crime" (*Ibidem*).

On May 9, 1978, Giuseppe Impastato's shredded body is found on the Palermo-Trapani train tracks, blown up by a TNT charge (Figliuolo, 2023). Although the son of a man having close ties with the local Cinisi mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti, he was known for his militancy in the left-wing area, *Democrazia Proletaria*,

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[37] "La morte di una persona è sempre una tragedia e la giustizia dovrà fare il proprio corso. Questo dramma, però, è la conseguenza di un crimine: se l'uomo che ha perso la vita non fosse stato un delinquente, non sarebbe finita così. Voi cosa ne pensate?" (Matteo Salvini - La morte di una persona è sempre una... | Facebook).

[38] "[…] la totale assenza della certezza della pena e la praticamente totale assenza di fiducia degli italiani nella giustizia porta a fatti di questo tipo" (Agenzia Vista, 2024).

[39] A *fatwa* is a religious ruling (Igual, 2025a).

[40] The MJC (SA) is a "Non-Profit Organization in a country where Muslims are a minority group" (Muslim Judicial Council (SA), 2023). One of the *fatwas* referred to can be found on the MJC (SA) site at the link: ISLAM AND HOMOSEXUALITY – MJC (SA) | Muslim Judicial Council of South Africa and the ruling "falls under a category of directives classified as "known to be part of the Islamic faith by necessity"" (Khan, et al., 2022), although the document concludes that "[o]ur religion teaches us to hate the sin, not the sinner" (*Ibidem*).

[41] "South Africa's leading LGBTQ+ online community platform" (Mamba Writer, 2025).

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and for his fierce opposition against mafia (Redazione Associazione Culturale Peppino Impastato, n.d.). Right from the start of the investigations, the authorities maintained he had died during a botched terrorist attack, due to his political stance, or by suicide, and not, as will be sentenced in 2002, murdered by order of the same boss he sarcastically referred to as "*Tano Seduto*" [Sitting Tano] when broadcasting from his radio station, *Radio Aut* (Figliuolo, 2023). Impastato was fighting against the drug trafficking ring ran by the mafia in Cinisi (tg2 dossier - RAI, 1979) but his political views gave the perfect excuse for a long red-herring activity implemented by authorities and media (Simonetti, 2025). A periodical print retrieved in Oliva's blog (2020), published an article at the time, dubbing Impastato as a "Sicilian extremist", and a "loser" who took his own life (Mannoni, n.d.).

In all three cases there is an institutional attempt at diminishing the impact of the event by discrediting the victims, placing them firmly into the realm of deviance and producing a challenge to the principle of not taking lives respectively by way of simple rhetoric, of allegedly stalling an investigation and of stalling an investigation with a red-herring activity (Figliuolo, 2023). All the victims' starting positions are presented as belonging to a minority and, within that minority, labelled as norm-breakers, ideally turning them into first aggressors of a definite *milieu* (Durkheim, 1982 [1895]; Groh-Samberg, Schröder, & Speer, 2023). This double element is persistent and seems to be pivotal in order to apply the label of deviants.

4.2.1 A State's order to take of a life via capital punishment and the power vested in law enforcement

In 2012 India, the brutal gang-rape and death of a 23-year-old woman caused the introduction of the so-called Nirbhaya Act (The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act Bill, 2013 - An Act further to amend the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973, the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, 2013), which extended, among other measures, the application of the death penalty to the most serious cases of rape, and ordered police accountability, should they fail to report rape crimes. (Paigwal, 2024). In 2020, this Act formed the legal basis for the hanging of the adult perpetrators of the rape (Pandey, 2020), although the law was passed after the event[42]. The public, especially women's, responses to this act were extremely positive even when this caused side-effects[43], as it was maintained that "justice has been done" (*Ibidem*).

In occasion of a subsequent rape-and-homicide of a young veterinarian in Hyderabad, in 2019, the Police are suspected to have carried out "extrajudicial killings" of the alleged perpetrators (BBC, 2019) with people "celebrat[ing] the police action" (Pandey, 2019). The policemen involved in the so-called encounter killing were tried by a "Supreme Court-appointed Commission of Inquiry" (Rajagopal, 2022), which ruled that the encounter was staged and recommended that they be tried by the Telangana High Court for murder. Court which, however, suspended criminal action against the policemen, prompting the case senior advocate to take exception to the order of suspension (Apparasu, 2024) which at the time of writing has only resulted in a "First Information Report (FIR) […] registered against them" producing no trial (Karman, 2022), and the request that Public Interest Litigations on the case be "clubbed together" (Newsmeter Network, 2024). The extension of the death penalty for a new crime marks the will of the State to challenge the principle versus a State dealing with an existing law and merely failing to confront the notion of an already-established State-mandated homicide. The Hyderabad incident seems to indicate that law enforcement may also engage in extra-judicial actions when principles have already been challenged at higher levels.

4.2.2 An authority's command to take lives by order and without due process

Starting September 2025, the US Government implemented military strikes on alleged drug-smuggling Venezuelan boats in international waters, sinking the vessels and killing the sailors, with quite an already high body count at the time of writing (Murphy & Cheetham, 2025; Lowell & Stein, 2025). Both US

[42] Thus, making its effectiveness retroactive, marking the violation of a legal principle.

[43] Such as witness intimidation and murder in rape cases (Pandey, 2020).

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President, Donald J. Trump, and Secretary of the Department of War (former Department of Defense), Pete Hegseth, took credit for the actions (Toropin, 2025), which were carried out, as experts say, in a way that "stretches the meaning of [lawful military targets] beyond its breaking point" (Murphy & Cheetham, 2025). Trump did not hide that his plan of a land hit, because "we're allowed to do that" (Toropin, 2025), although these strikes were ordered without congressional approval (*Ibidem*), a formal declaration of war, or even the enforcement of the War Powers Resolution, which would require a letter to Congress "explaining [the decision's] rationale and reviewing [the President's] orders to the Department of Defense"[44] (Askarinam & Cappelletti, 2025). At the beginning of November, the US Senate "rejected legislation that would have required approval from Congress before [the President] could take military action against Venezuela" (O'Brien & Gould, 2025). Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, according to Senator John Kennedy, seemed to have "researched the legal ramifications carefully and he believes we're on solid ground in attacking these narcoterrorists" (Toropin, 2025). Rubio himself added that "[i]f people want to stop seeing drug boats blow up, stop sending drugs to the United States" (Short, 2025; Toropin, 2025).
The label of 'narcoterrorists' justifies, in the eyes of executive power, the killing of individuals which have not been subjected to due process. These strikes are carried out by on-field forces without any apparent objection[45], also possibly reinforcing the hypothesis that violations of the principle at high institutional level and abuses of power by law enforcement agencies may be correlated. The public debate ensuing involves the challenge to the idea of a democracy that moves along a balanced separation of powers.

4.3 War

On 23rd February, 2023, Vitaly Alekseenko, a 46-year-old Ukrainian man, began his one-year detention as a "Christian conscientious objector", for refusing to join the national army and asking for civilian service in alternative (CNE News, 2023; Corley, 2023a; Corley, 2023b). Alekseenko, maintaining that "objection to military service is not [so much] a crime [as a] human right" (*Ibidem*), is not alone. Forum 18 reports other cases, some objecting to being sent to kill people and some objecting to serve on the ground of their Christian faith, and nearly seventy Jehovah's Witnesses being prosecuted with, apparently, inconsistent results (Corley, 2023a; Corley, 2023b). As Forum 18 points out, the provision for conscientious objection stems out of the CCPR/C/UKR/CO/8 document, which, under point 30., states that "the Committee […] stresses that alternatives to military service should be available to all conscientious objectors without discrimination as to the nature of their beliefs" (UN Human Rights Commitee, 2022).
The criminalisation of the citizens who have internalised the principle of not taking lives marks the complete reversal of the social order as known in times of peace. However, this also brings to the fore other issues, such as civil activism, or the belonging to *enclaved milieux* (Albrow, Eade, Washbourne, & Durrschmidt, 1994; Turner B. S., 2007) based on religion[46] in this case, or ethnicity, as crystallised by Muhammad Ali's objection to serve in Vietnam (Calamur, 2016).

4.4 Discussion

It would be tempting to tackle the subject of a principle in terms of good or evil, or right or wrong. However, sociology, even the sociology of deviance, should not trespass into the realm of philosophy and should treat matters with the (more) neutral approach of the technician. As technicians, it is not a moral judgment we are to perform, but an objective analysis of social phenomena, by finding the questions that unveil fundamental social needs and allow society to choose a course of action or growth. This is what this discussion aims at and, concurrently, its limitations. In this case, therefore, it does not rest on the notion that life is sacred but that the principle of not taking lives is the foundation of social cohesion, without

[44] Department of Defense which, as noted earlier, no longer exists.
[45] Although some members of the Judge Advocate General Corps have expressed their concerns and dissent, and have later on been fired – the correlation between the voicing of their concerns and their dismissal being just an allegation (Bertrand, 2025).
[46] A list of religious confessions officially allowed to opt for civilian service can be found in Corley (2023a).

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which individuals would be forever stuck at the survival point of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943), thus stumping any social evolution - the basis for the 'sociological sustainability' concept, not meant as a sociological approach to sustainability (Neckel, 2017), but rather as the life-expectancy of a social organization based on the behaviour of power and the reaction of its subjects.

All the cases presented above make the same point: a recognised authority – a political party, a religious institution, law enforcement (broadly including the military and secret services), or a State – tries to diminish or annul the force of the principle that murder is a socially damaging act. That it is socially damaging is proven by the fact that the norm prohibiting it is globally shared. By force of logic, the same also proves that it is a principle. This norm should govern the social universe, but the cases presented question the principle at escalating level, whether it is a form of power attempting to cast doubt over the conduct and character quality of a victim to make the event appear less serious, or that, in some ways, they had it coming; or legislative or executive powers issuing orders that finalise the violation of this principle, by law or authority, almost automatically placing power on the side of right, while law enforcement, as rule enforcers (Becker, 1963), comply with orders without questioning them, or possibly going well beyond their call of duty; or, again, in the event of a war, when, executive and military powers coinciding, martial law[47] takes the lead and individuals who do not comply with the order to wear a uniform and kill face jail or even worse fates.

At an immediate level, talking about deviance without considering the notion of *milieu* is impossible. It is not, as Becker pointed out (1963), the rule-breaking behaviour that places people away from others, but it is the very fact that these others exist in greater numbers or with greater powers, thus the *milieu*, the social and cultural finite environment these outsiders or deviants find themselves embedded in, that makes them different. Our societies are complex systems of systems[48], where there are balanced powers (and moral entrepreneurs) like the judiciary, the executive, and the legislative, but, also, partly self-regulated communities tied for example to religion (and lack thereof), language, origin, or economic status, which can be viewed as *enclaved milieux*. Individuals can concurrently belong to more groups, which label them peers or deviants, all at the same time. The *milieux* of immediate or indirect reference can be of different kinds, but the main point is that these are regulated by some authority recognised by a larger or more powerful population. The authorities have, in this way, accepted jurisdiction over a matter. If we take the case of Imam Hendricks, for example, the *milieu* of direct reference in legal terms is the South African Government, for which homosexuality is no longer a crime[49], but Hendricks' faith placed him in an *enclaved* religious *milieu* of indirect reference whose judicial authority ruled against homosexuality, using the term sin as a replacement for crime. That potentially allowed whoever misinterpreted the *fatwa* to act against the Imam (cf. footnote[6]), viewing him as an offender who needed to be righteously punished.

However, *milieu* is not enough. The cases show that this differentiation also depends on how easily the 'deviants' fit into an already-known category: the 'clandestine', the homosexual, the Communist, the rapist, the narcotrafficant, the traitor. Without these labels (Becker, 1963), the individual would simply be a misfit, a category-orphan subject who is perceived as not entirely outside the perimeters of society and not entirely inside and therefore not so easily condemnable. The fact that these people are identified as deviants under 'statutory' labels within an established *milieu*, though, coincidentally provides an excuse not to put society and its rulers under the microscope. It is Becker's reference to the "two possible foci of inquiry" (Becker, 1963, p. 156) which seems to be constantly eluded, the questions being if a *milieu* is a natural produce of people gathering together, or if it can be created or manipulated by power; why a *milieu* may produce a

[47] Whatever martial law may mean (Torres, 2013), Trump has seemingly invoked article 94 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (US Congress, 1951) against Democrats who invited he military not to obey illegal orders, accusing them of "SEDITIOUS BEHAVIOR, punishable by DEATH" (Waldenberg, Saenz, & Maher, 2025).

[48] As defined in Engineering, a system of systems is "an assembly of two or more interoperable systems that [...] delivers a specific function or benefit" (Elahi, 2022).

[49] Since 1998, when the Constitutional Court of South Africa in the aftermath of the new, post-*apartheid* Constitution, deemed the law on sodomy anti-constitutional (National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality and Another v Minister of Justice and Others, 1998).

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specific deviance and why it is only addressed as 'foreign' to it; and if this deviance can be defined an *enclaved milieu* or is true deviance. These are not minor questions.

Becker's reference to Malinowski's Trobrianders (Becker, 1963, p. 8 ff.) seems to confirm that even societies without imposing institutional overstructures keep social peace by identifying norms and transgressions. It may be thus inferred that *milieu* is a natural by-product of human societal organisation. But when there are institutional overstructures, like legal codes and procedures, politics, power, and governments, can the natural *milieu* be influenced or manipulated into something less natural? Are the perceived deviants also a natural produce of their *milieux* or are they created? The answers which can be inferred from the cases presented above are complex and multi-layered. We first have to operate a clear distinction. Rape-and-homicide and narcotraffic may qualify as deviance in absolute, objective terms, as these destroy lives, whereas clandestine, homosexual, and Communist qualify a deviant in relative terms, as these do not automatically equal lost lives. This is proven by the fact that migrants in certain historical times were not illegal (Spafford, N.A.), homosexuality in ancient times was not uncommon (Bullough, 2019 [1979]), and Communism in USSR would have been the norm.

So, it is argued that the answer is both yes and no. Deviance may be a natural product when the terms are absolute and man-made when the terms are relative. What marks the distinction between absolute and relative perspectives, then, may be found in the relationship between power and principle, where we have two different scenarios - as it is also argued here that the social world cannot be governed by both: should power have reason over principle, power would unmistakably be prevailing, and vice versa. So, when deviance is anchored in power, it is power alone that defines not only who is regarded as 'other', but also who are the victims and perpetrators and how far power itself is exempt from the rules that apply to those who are ruled. When deviance is anchored in principle, instead, principle governs both, the rulers and the ruled, and, if it is true that power makes laws, it is also true that the law is grounded in further principles that bind power to their respect.

The cases outlined above seem to illustrate a reality where power prevails over a social founding principle and observation brings to the fore several important issues. First and foremost, when the definition of deviance is tied to power a paradox may originate. By taking Impastato's case, for example, we observe that the capitalistic *milieu* can produce a non-conforming reaction in political terms. Rather than addressing the distress causing this non-conformity, it is labelled as deviant by the very same power that causes the distress. But when the institutional measures taken assume the form of a challenge to the principle that taking lives is detrimental to society, turning the same power into a deviant in absolute terms, this becomes a systemic short-circuit. Diametrically opposed, but based on the same logic, is the Nirbhaya case: the emergency related to rape-and-homicide, so widespread as to require an ampler use of the death penalty within the Indian *milieu*, may be the product of a power overstructure like, for example, patriarchy (Sah, 2022). If so, when power simply opts for getting rid of those who 'take it too far'[50], power becomes an absolute deviant. The fact that power may self-absolve itself does not make it less deviant or less abusive in concrete terms.

This paradox is perceivable in society when we consider which power should then be the 'ruler' and absolver. The incoherent application of the principle not to kill risks creating "competition among the intra-systemic power centres", with the possible consequence of social instability (Davutoglu, 1997, p. 2). In all the cases proposed, clashes between the three State powers can be retraced, and, in the case of Imam Hendricks, we can also observe a clash between these and an indirect power of reference, which is religion. That these feuds carry social instability is also proven by Crippa's reference to the distrust of Italians in justice, which serves no social stability purpose in itself and risks having the opposite effect, amplifying this perception. But the paradox is also perceived by society when considering that a prerequisite for selection of the cases was strong social debate. So strong, in fact, as to require the involvement of institutional intervention and legal effects, which were other prerequisites. These clashes risk therefore triggering more antisociality in the public debate, where opinions and perceptions may assume the status of factual information and where

[50] Also creating further distress in those who do not support capital punishment (Yadav, 2025).

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citizens, as inhabitants of the different social *milieux*, are left confused, a rift opening between them and one or more powers that should govern their social existence.
On a higher level, this leads to a potentially absolute uncertainty in inhabiting society in mainly two ways. The first is in undermining reference points. Competing powers may ingenerate the perception that even the challenged powers' reactions are ways to regain lost territory, thus potentially robbing citizens of all their anchoring points. The second is in setting a scene where no one could feel 'safe'. A change of ruling power would endanger individuals not previously labelled as deviants, as for those conscientious objectors who were not viewed in negative terms before the war. But it may also be the case of rule enforcers under paragraphs 4.2.1 and 4.2.2, whose positions of potential extension of a higher abuse of power may be temporarily shielded by the executive or legislative power with regards to the allegation of extra-judicial killings, but who may also be held accountable for their conduct should power balances or needs change (BBC, 2019; Lubold, Kube, & Luce, 2025). In a power-prevailing scenario, only the fact that power never changes hands would surely prevent that from happening – risking leading society to a static condition.
In this scenario, then, another issue to be therefore considered concerns the emergence of civil and human rights organisations. In a world where lawmakers manipulate the principle according to need, victims of power abuse are turned into social *pariahs*. When this is perceived by society, these emerging moral entrepreneurs challenge the power-established notion of deviance. Although societies are usually transformed by these parties that give their contribution to evolution in positive terms, there are two elements that need to be carefully reflected on: the cost of their emergence, which takes a toll on social stability while the fight is still ongoing, and the cost of their defeat, should their "moral crusade" (Becker, 1963) prove unsuccessful, which may risk plummeting the purported deviants back into their original condition of designated culprits of social entropy, as illustrated by the last two cases under paragraph 4.1 or by the case under paragraph 4.3. Moreover, the definitions of victim and perpetrator, when deviance is anchored in power, risk becoming simple labels which are arbitrarily given only to produce desired power-related judicial outcomes, thus potentially creating even more uncertainty and distrust in the population.
Conversely, in the scenario where principle prevails over power, the two foci of inquiry are into balance and in harmony, and the hypothesis is therefore of social stability and evolution. It is argued that the natural consequence of having socially metabolised the imperative to not take lives would produce new measures to improve the conditions of life of all citizens. As clarified in the definitions, in fact, the coherent enforcement of the principle would require accountability for any loss of life due to action or omission. For this reason, when referring to a State, the willing failure to find solutions for those problems endangering the existence of people, like poverty, would be viewed as an absolute deviance with regards to the principle. The same could be said for capital punishment or for orders defying the rule of law: rather than resorting to shortcuts trying to preserve a tenuous, albeit expensive (in lost lives terms) social peace – the question being for how long – by expunging the alleged deviants, outsiders, or offenders from mankind, the prevalence of the principle would force power to synthesise more original, imaginative, and reformative methodologies. On a global level, instead and by way of example, unwillingness to enable negotiations for peace in situations of conflict, thus failing to preserve as many lives as possible, would similarly be considered an absolute violation of the principle[51]. Although a utopic world cannot be evoked – individuals disrespecting the imperative to not take lives have always existed and will continue to exist – the coherent application of the principle would gain momentum as a means of prevention of deviance, whether absolute or relative, and reinforce a democratic quality of society, mitigating the risk of competing powers, while acting as a natural limit and guidance to power. The coherent enforcement of this principle would also imply more social discourse on other themes, like abortion, end-of-life care or life-support termination, as with the Terry Schiavo dilemma, prompting a great richness in scientific and ethical reflections over other "provocative" cases (Perry, Churchill, & Kirshner, 2005). This, though, remains in the realm of pure

[51] Without referring to present day scenarios, it suffices to think about the Rwandan Genocide and how international actors failed to prevent the massacre (Scheffer, 2004).

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hypothesis, as the modern world, as discussed, seems to function on the alternative premise.
There is here a final note to be made, mainly at ontological level: a principle changed by power is no longer a principle, but a mere guideline. As such, the previous reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs would be the direct consequence. Society may risk a collapse, taking individuals into the realm of war. The conflict at the base of the case under paragraph 4.3 is the perfect example of this train of logic. The situation of the Donbass region was well-known to most human rights observers (Amnesty International, 2015) and the omission to act to re-balance a situation – for different reasons – escalated into a full-blown war which is still ongoing. The same chain of events can be observed in other situations, such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine, which have become international emergencies and have proven how inane international laws are when the principle regarding the taking of lives becomes a guideline.

5. Conclusions

As anticipated, this work does not discuss the morality of social endeavours, but the issues and potential consequences of an incoherent application of the principle to not take lives. The discussion above serves the purpose of raising questions, rather than finding answers, for the answers should be synthesised by society as a whole and by the will of each and every individual populating it. The main question would therefore be whether we want societies where this principle is prevailing – and what are the steps to take, should we opt for it. The answer is not ready-made, and it would take a global effort in order to map this route. What discussed above suggests that the journey towards social evolution has fallen short of the mark. It seems obvious that we are far from this goal and the fact that international and national laws on homicide lack figurative jurisdiction within powerful *milieux* is demonstrated by the offered evidence that victims can be or are identified as deviants or outsiders, or that power, for any reason, can refuse to identify the source and nature of a so-called deviance, while, at the same time, turning a blind eye to its own deviance. If this were not the situation, there would be no cases for discussion. At the same time, the fact that there is a discussion means that at least a part of mankind views that point of social evolution as desirable.
The second question, directly deriving from the first, is whether societies where power is prevailing are sociologically sustainable and if the incoherent application of this specific principle can lead to the collapse of a social cosmos. This hypothesis can rest on the direct observation, by mere reasons of visibility, availability of information, and proximity, of the present US society - which may function as a real-time litmus paper test, proving or confuting the hypothetical outcome. By tracking the latest events, the disintegration of the social order seems to be unfolding at a certain speed. However, even that would not offer any answer to whether the opposite could be more sociologically sustainable – sociologists can only offer hypotheses and analyses in good faith, which need to be proven correct by reality. Reality, though, would need to be enacted in order to have the complete set of answers.
The last question, which virtually links both previous ones, concerns the nature of power itself. The history of sociology has confronted this question and has abundantly theorised about it[52] but the main point is whether we want to be mere enablers of power, acting as simple tools, or if we accept the responsibility, and the necessary subsequent efforts, to function as limiters to power, resorting once again to the concepts of organic and instrumental solidarity (Durkheim, 1969 [1893]; Thijssen, 2012) with the scope of sociological sustainability. It essentially concerns the role that we, not as human beings, but as inhabitants a local and global system of systems, would commit to.
All these answers could potentially re-define and re-shape society, and possibly the language to describe it, at large. This would also potentially mark a decisive step in social evolution, thus projecting us, metaphorically, beyond the Pillars of Hercules and into the open ocean, ready to explore unchartered waters and discover new territories and new versions of our social selves, together with, hopefully, the gain of an improved social stability coming not from power above, but from the internalisation of fundamental principles, and thus from a diffused and balanced power.

[52] Turner (2005) offers a concise summary of theories

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