Betrayal and Betrayers

The Sociology of Treachery

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Acknowledgements

Preface

The present book attempts to analyze different forms of betrayal. Concrete forms of betrayal or treachery are the trusted diplomat who turns out to be passing on information to the enemy – the spy; the workers who do not join the strike – the scabs; the informer in criminal groups – the snitch; the trusted colleague who suddenly decides to reveal dark secrets from his work – the revealer; those who work with the enemy during conflicts – the collaborators. These are well established social types; but apart from them, we encounter and are quite occupied with betrayal in everyday life. We are careful what we tell the known gossip, children will not play with the tattletale in school; in short, we weigh our words and select the pieces of information that are appropriate to communicate so that we will not ourselves be labeled gossips.

Still, if we possess a secret we must discipline ourselves to keep it. This is the lure of secrets and the "fascination of betrayal." The need for self-discipline is not necessarily because others ask for or demand information but for the sheer attraction of revealing – we are unable not to hint around that we possess valued knowledge. At the same time, social types such as the hero, who did not talk even under torture, or "a person with integrity" from everyday life, are obviously appealing. Thus we may be determined to keep the secret while simultaneously attracted to revealing it. Giving away the secret is sometimes called "betrayal."

This social element – betrayal – is something that catches our imagination. We have all betrayed or been betrayed and we have many words to describe it, an indication of its centrality. Our interest is also mirrored in the masses of fiction, newspaper reporting on spies, informers, etc. The title of Simmel's essay "The Fascination of Betrayal" is to the point.

However this fascination is not shared by other classical social scientists. Nor have I, during the course of my work, come across any modern sociological theorist pondering especially on this problem. This is

curious since treachery concerns such basic issues as a group's definition of its vital values, its boundaries, its relation to other collectives and furthermore the individual's relation to the collective. The Norwegian philosopher, Jon Hellesnes, has explored the subject but similarily notes, in his book *Jakta etter svikaren* (*Hunting the Betrayer*), the lack of interest among his colleagues: "Some philosophers have mentioned phenomena like betrayal and searching for betrayers in passing, that is in connection with some other topic. But a philosophy book with such a subject as its main topic is unknown to me. Thus, I am treading virgin territory. This has its disadvantages, and clearly its advantages: you lack a guide, but travel lighter." (1978, 9; my translation)

These missing guidelines have meant that I have written about areas that appealed to and interested me. This book is thus an attempt to explore and illuminate a very basic and general social phenomenon that has been neglected. It is my hope that others will find this field of research as exciting and complex as I do.

Introduction

My initial interest in the sociology of treachery arose while doing a study of violence and threats among inmates in Swedish prisons. (Åkerström, 1985b) Of all the possible sources for conflict or violence among prison inmates (such as failing to pay debts or having committed contemptible crimes such as sex-offenses), those that concerned betrayal seemed to me the most sociologically interesting.

While doing research on the criminal informer, I became more and more interested in the area as a general sociological topic. I caught myself taking notes on conversations I had with friends if gossiping about a third person – was this betrayal or not? I worked with other sociological studies and the issue of betrayal kept popping up – one's relationship to the interviewees as an example.

During this period I had kept on looking for a thematized work on treachery or betrayal. I used the University Library's computer search for key words (betrayer, traitor, snitch, etc.) but ended up with no sociological volume treating the subject *per se* and very little as more specific sociological work, for example, on traitors to the country or alike.

I searched (admittedly unsystematically) the indexes of our classics, our minor classics, and other possible sociological literature. No luck there either.

Perhaps though I had missed some vital work? To make sure, I finally consulted the late Professor Vilhelm Aubert and Professor Johan Asplund, both well-read in the sociological literature and both interested in this type of sociology. They confirmed that to their knowledge no thematized sociological work existed on the topic, and they also encouraged me to continue since they considered the theme as exciting as I did.[1]

The resulting work, this book, is a combination of both the analyses which concern criminal informers only as well as analyses dealing with a wider context and thus more general sociology. For this I have used

reports on diverse contexts since my goal has been what Simmel called formal sociology: to find generalities in spite of very different concrete content. The different chapters are meant to stand by themselves, although there are, inevitably a few cross-references.

Sources and Methods

The method and material for this study derives from several sources. The study of criminal informers derived from in-depth interviews with Swedish prisoners. The specifics about methods and sample are described in the Appendix. Apart from this primary material I have conducted some interviews with policemen in conjunction with research on police work conducted by Britta Andersson, a graduate student.

The material is mainly collected from other sources. These include the use of some of my own previous studies. Old field notes and interviews with staff at some women and victim's shelters became especially interesting due to their emphasis on not revealing their "clients" identities.

Other research sources are publications on sociological field work. In these the authors often discuss strategies for shielding their informants' identities, the balancing act of sometimes not revealing sensitive matters while truthfully reporting, and so on. Moreover, social science studies that generally discuss secrecy in various contexts have been used. The criminological and police science literature has obviously been reviewed as it refers to informers. Furthermore, I draw on biographies and autobiographies. These concern whistleblowers, spies, those related to spies, and members of the Resistance during World War II. Historians' and journalists' account of betrayers and their fates after the McCarthy era have also been used.

The illustrations given are often of a dramatic nature even though I believe that one of the features of betrayal is its normality and commonness. (This is also a major reason for its being an important and vital sociological issue.) The advantage with the dramatic is that it is illustrative. Everyday life examples were therefore sometimes exchanged for dramatic ones since the latter were clearer and more distinct. Furthermore in dramatic contexts such as spying, the ordinary is intermingled with the dramatic. Betrayal not only consists of treachery toward the country but experiences of betrayal are often entangled in relations with family and friends. They will suffer the consequences of the traitor's acts, sometimes in practical ways and sometimes by the experience of having been left out. In spite of my choice of illustrations, I hope the reader will be able to draw parallels from the dramatic contexts to more ordinary ones.

Some practical points: in the text I refer to a We that can be betrayed. The capital W in We is used instead of the more heavy, awkward "we."

The material is partly collected from interviews. Much work has been put into translation and finding the right phrases and slang words, but as always in the process of translating them some of the meaning and flavor disappears. This is especially bothersome with the different nuances for all the Swedish euphemisms, pejoratives, and slang words for "betrayer." This is a price willingly paid, however, by gaining the possibility of reaching a wider audience than the publishing in Swedish would permit.

Notes

1. Perhaps there is a growing interest in the field – at least in the restricted area of traitors in the form of spies. Some recent publications point to this. Corrigan (*Theory, Culture & Society*, 1989) has, for example, recently reviewed Cawelti and Rosenberg's *The Spy Story* (University of Chicago, 1987) and Denning's *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (Routledge and Kegan, 1987). King has published an article, "Treason and Traitors" (*Society*, July/August 1989), dealing with images of fictionary and real famous spies.

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Betrayal and Betrayers

Case 1:

Frank Bossard, war time RAF radar officer, civil servant, technical intelligence officer, and finally guiding weapons work in the British Aviation Ministry, supplied photocopies of secret Aviation Ministry files to the Soviet intelligence in return for money.[1]

Case 2:

Eva telling how she disliked the annual office picnic. Every section was supposed to bring its own blanket and food. One was not supposed to join any of the other sections. Even if one, as she did, usually had coffee and lunch with the others, on this occasion it was taboo. Not to stay on one's blanket was treachery, in her own words. (Private conversation)

The above two cases are very different illustrations of how betrayal can be perceived: one is a dramatic, unusual event; the other less dramatic and more common.

Obviously there are differences between the two. Sociologically however I believe it may be fruitful to analyze them as similar social forms – as breaches of trust.[2] Whether these appear as dramatic or not, it is important to acknowledge that treachery constitutes a central human concern. The importance of trust as a basic relationship has been described by Bateson in the following way:

This is what mammals are about. They are concerned with patterns of relationship, with where they stand in love, hate, respect, dependency, trust and similar abstractions vis-à-vis somebody else. This is where it hurts us to be put in the wrong. If we trust and find that that which we have trusted was untrustworthy; or if we distrust, and find that that

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which we distrusted was in fact trustworthy, we feel *bad*. The pain that
human beings and all other mammals can suffer from this type of error
is extreme. (Bateson 1977, 470)

Bateson refers to the strong feelings betrayal arouses.   Intense
sentiments such as indignation, contempt, revenge, and so on are not
reserved for those directly involved. Furthermore they can continue long
after the crime took place. Dante is a case in point: in his lusty description
of hell in *Divina Commedia* he places the archetypal traitors Brutus and
Judas Iskariot in the ninth and worst circle where they are lowered to
eternal ice and chewed into small pieces by Lucifer's three maws.
   What, then, is this phenomenon that engages us so intensively?
Betrayal is easily understood intuitively.   Making a more stringent
definition is not so easy. I will not suggest a comprehensive definition but
I will problematize the concept, and in that process point out some
characteristics of that which we experience as betrayal.
   Looking for material in the literature on treachery I found mostly
characters such as traitors to a country or police informers. Sociologically
the subject appears to be much more open for generalities. We also talk
about scabs, snitches, deserters, and defectors as social types who betray.[3]
My first point of departure therefore is to discuss betrayal as generally as
possible, in the Simmelean tradition of formal sociology. This implies a
search for different contexts and types of betrayal where discovered
similarities and differences are not attributed to the concrete content. My
second point of departure is that betraying is a common rather than
uncommon feature of social life. Most of us have experienced betrayal
such as a child discovering our friend preferred to play with someone else
and onward. We have betrayed or been betrayed – at least as fleeting
suspicions. My third point of departure is that the breach of trust involved
is an overstepping of a We-boundary – the We consisting of relations
ranging from a pair of friends to a nation.

Secrets as Creators of Social Bonds

   Why are secrets and confidences exchanged when the risk of betrayal
exists and possible betrayal can be so painful and/or dangerous? While
acknowledging the complexity of this issue one may concentrate on the
purely social motives. Simmel, who has written about secrets and secrecy,
has emphasized the bonds created by them. According to him secrecy is
one of the "great social phenomena" peculiar to man and one of his
greatest achievements, giving rise to a parallel world enlarging life.
Without secrets many aspects of social life would be impossible. (1964,