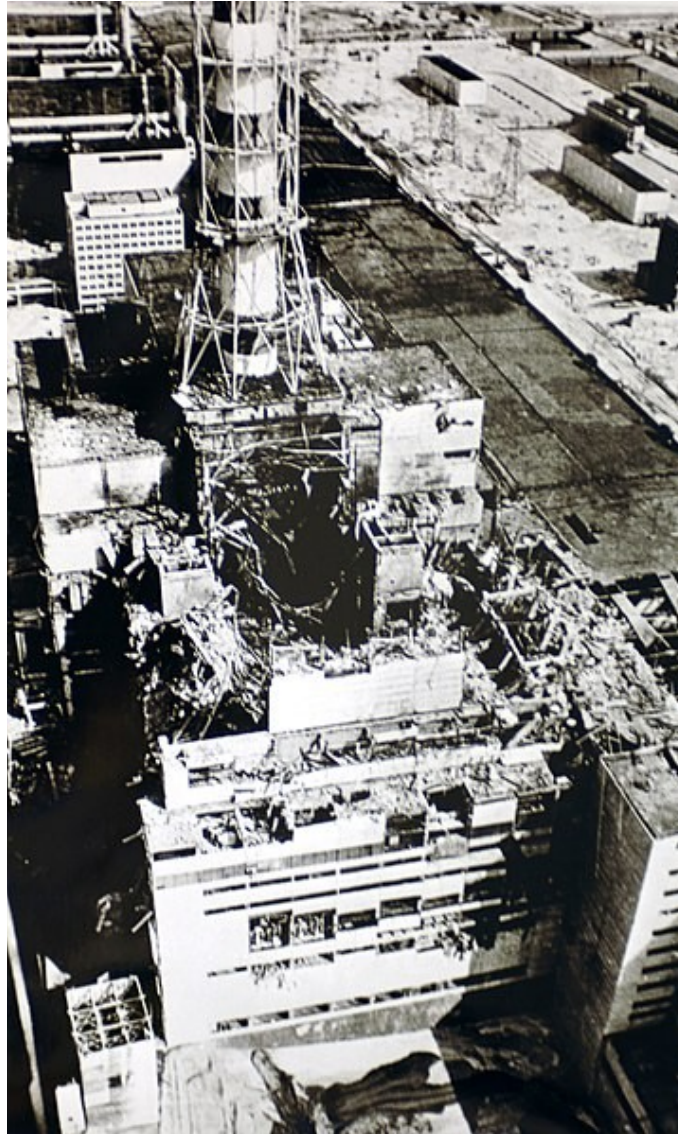


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## Progress and the Normalization of Deviance



**Chernobyl – When Deviance is Normalized**

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The concept of [normalization of deviance](#) comes to us from safety engineering and refers to the process by which which deviance from correct or proper behavior or rule becomes culturally normalized. The term was first used by Dianne Vaughn in a [paper published in 2014](#) inspired, in part, by the [Space Shuttle Columbia disaster](#). The process of the normalization of deviance has since been [applied to nuclear engineering](#), especially in light of the events of the [Chernobyl Disaster](#) in 1986.

So what can we learn from this? One is that it is easy to progress from a situation where a certain behaviour is seen as deviant to one where it is somehow considered normal. The word progress is

important since the change in the view of a behaviour from deviant to normal is usually presented as “progress”.

The best example of this process is in social attitudes to homosexuality. In the 1950’s, no one would have questioned applying the label “deviant” to homosexuality. In the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s the work of civil rights activists gradually changed the public mood to one of tolerance for the practice. In the 2000’s and 2010’s, increasing numbers of people came to view homosexuality as either normal or something within the normal range of human behaviour. Now, in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, failure to wildly praise homosexuals and their lifestyle is presented as the great evil of homophobia. Soon we will be told to accept paedophilia as “normal”.

All these changes in attitude have been presented as “progress” and they certainly fall into the category of normalization of deviance.

There are other examples of the normalization of deviance besides homosexuality:

- We used to confine the mentally ill to hospitals. Gradually our view of how to treat them has been changed and we now release them into the community to live as homeless people. This has been called progress.
- We used to celebrate free speech. Gradually this has been changed and now any speech that might hurt someone’s feelings is labelled “hate speech”. Also we now tolerate coercion against people with “unacceptable views” where we used to tolerate the views. This has been called progress.
- While not perfect, we used to run our school systems to impart useful knowledge and especially to train people to be citizens. Gradually this changed, for many reasons. We now run our school system to train people as consumers and give them credentials, which may or may not be related to actual ability. This has been called progress.
- People in my country, Canada, used to be proud of our collective accomplishments and were encouraged to express patriotism. Gradually this has been changed and we are now told that our country is evil because of past injustices and that we should be ashamed to be Canadian. This has been called progress.
- Our leadership class used to be an elite that were rewarded for uniting our society behind common goals. Gradually our leaders became a sociopathic ruling class who use their skills to divide, rather than unite, society. This has been called progress.
- We used to accept that individuals were responsible for only their own behaviour. Gradually this changed and now we blame current generations for the faults of their ancestors based upon their skin colour. At the same time, we excuse the crimes by others, also based upon their skin colour and their status as the descendants of historic victims. This has been called progress.

None of the things outlined above happened suddenly. Rather, we allowed the wrong kinds of change. Sometimes we had what we thought were good motives and sometimes we went along with the change because we just didn’t care. We are responsible for allowing the inversion of values so that, gradually,

what we formerly saw as deviant we are now required to see as normal. We also allowed the coercive element in that change.

In the end, we have normalized deviance to the point where we can expect things to get worse. We have sown the wind and will reap the whirlwind.