

After Bulger

We live in unfriendly times. As neighbourhoods have made way for wretched anonymous towerblocks, so neighbourliness has become outdated. It is not that people have chosen to become careless and uncooperative; as social animals we are never happier than when we are able to behave in mutuality, empathy and compassion towards our fellow human beings. But the way that life has come to be organised conspires against our will to be human. "There is no such thing as society", said Thatcher, and her words were met with howls of protest by those who did not want her words to be true, and by blushes of embarrassment by those who knew just how true her words were becoming. For the truth is that community is now little more than a quaint ideal, a sociologist's buzzword. The depressing reality is that more than ever we live in a society which does not resemble anything very social.

This sense of crushing alienation, which was once a mere term of jargon employed by those who had read Marx (who wrote about how workers are alienated not only from the product of their labour, but from their very selves as creative beings who are transformed into robotic profit-producers) is now inescapable. The city streets are settings for fear and loneliness. Housing is designed according to the cheap measurements of profits for rapacious landlords whose concern for comfort, dignity or social fellowship in the place where we live simply does not exist. The transport system is unsafe and its weary users shuffle ritualistically to and from wage slavery in various conditions of unease, stress and anger. Services are running down—the basic needs of workers are too expensive to bother with, so let us dwell amongst the refuse of late twentieth century squalor. This is our environment. For most of us saving our environment is not about trees and forests and fish ponds; they are out of reach and survival within the urban wasteland is about dodging the dog mess and hoping that it will be someone else's house that they break into.

An alienated world of non-community turns others into strangers and strangers into enemies. People turn in on themselves and draw lines like stone fortress walls around their lives, their emotions. And within the darkness of these enclosed lives horrible, unthinkable abuses occur. People like to speak about "the freedom of the individual", as if being atomised, isolated and excluded from social cooperation were somehow a form of liberation. It is not; it feels horrible inside those fragile, impoverishing, life-limited walls of the alienated human's existence. And this is where awful nightmare's come to life. Yesterday's unthinkable becomes today's headline and, perhaps, tomorrow's routine.

Why did two ten-year old boys kill a two-year old boy? No simplistic answers are on offer here. If you want to blame someone or something there is no shortage of scapegoat hunters on the market. The boys had access to sick videos. One of these, in the home of one of their fathers, appears to depict a crime much like the one they committed. Who made this video? That "artist" of our age was not in the courtroom as the boys sobbed. Perhaps he is working right now on a new work of cinematic art which reproduces the killing in question. And if there is a market for it . . . an audience with cash to pay for thrills from screen violence . . . plenty of profit in that, so what can be wrong? And who are the government to condemn such an entrepreneur? How can a government which sells arms to dictatorships and torture

equipment to the highest bidder state any but the most hypocritical objections to films which celebrate gratuitous slaughter? Were there no two-year old babies in Baghdad when British and American bomber planes went on their killing spree in defence of the profits and power of the unelected dictator of Kuwait? Let those who kill children, and celebrate it within their daily lie sheets, claim no moral highground now that the murders are beyond the law.

The boys played video games for hours. These games now outstrip the music record industry in sales. When once (in "the bad old Sixties", of course) kids sang that all you need is love and dopey parables about two little boys with their two little toys, now for hours on end they stare at video violence turned into a game. Press this button and Kill, Kill, Kill . . . and then put in another pound and your licence to kill begins all over again. Killing without consequence. Just as the victim of a shooting in a bad American film limps away and returns in the next scene ready to run the New York marathon, so the message of these "games" are that violence never really hurts. How about a game where you insert your pound and the machine boots you in the balls?

As life has become more of a miserable struggle to survive in the face of debt and the dole and a dreary environment, so entertainment has come to be about releasing anger. The racist louts who killed a teenage lad at a bus stop because they imagined that his skin pigmentation made him a threat were probably briefly entertained by their bullying victory. The kids in Manchester who captured and tortured a young girl might have had a brief high, and the list could go on. The truth is that the list is a very, very long one.

This capitalist system under which we all live—even if we many deny that they do, and most do not even know that they do—has committed against us the greatest of crimes. It has denied us our freedom to be innocent. Contrary to the medieval remains which lurk within Christian minds of professional pessimists like the Bishop of Liverpool, babies are not born evil. The whole notion of evil belongs in the museum of antiquated follies. Would Hitler have been a Nazi dictator if he was your brother?

We are born neither good nor bad. To imagine otherwise is as sensible as to imagine that we are born with a preference for Pepsi rather than Coke, a genetic inclination to rape rather than pass the parcel. We are born to be within the world as it is. And the world as it is right now is not a happy place in which to be born.

Millions and millions of children are born into conditions of such material constraint that it is amazing they grow up fit for anything. Some do not emerge fit for anything. The wounds suffered as a result of authoritarian parenting, of sexual and violent abuse (both misuses of power) and of squalid and ignorant upbringings are injuries which were once unthinkable—or at least, unthought about. Perhaps, if capitalism had been removed long ago, these effects would have been of a lesser magnitude and we could go in greater innocence towards creating our futures.

As this century comes to an end the hard, unpalatable fact (perhaps even for many socialists) is that the psychological pain caused by the artificial way of organising life under capitalism has led to a loss of innocence for most of us. Put plainly, we have all been much more hurt by this system than it is easy to admit. And that is why there

will be more horror stories to fill the gutter press. More and worse, until we get rid of this system.

The reformists, who were always wrong, now stand mute before what is to them an inexplicable breakdown in civilised culture. After all, had they not set up a welfare state, with its ever-ready social workers and free schools for the poor? But the kids can't stand the schools and see no point in going when all they must learn is to become unemployed—sorry, "Job Seekers". The churches talk about the collapse of the family, with their eyes carefully averted from the disaster zone of the family which heads their religion. But when Norman Tebbit said to fathers that they must get on their bike and look for work (and families don't fit on bikes, you know) and the smug bankers threw tens of thousands out of their repossessed homes into the insecurity of hostels, then what real chance did the children of those families have?

Now Tory ministers cry for moral education in the schools. But what reasonably sensible school student would for one minute accept moral instruction from that rabble of corrupt and callous rogues? And what moral depravity would characterise the child who received an A+ in the exam set by exploiters to test the sturdiness of the soon to be replaced exploited?

All that is left for capitalism is blame. Guilt is the final cudgel in their diminished ideological armoury. As the 1990s come more and more to resemble the 1930s, no lessons are learned by our masters' mouthpieces who set the tone of the media. The best that they could do was whip up hysteria. Releasing the names of the two "guilty" boys and delighting in the waste of their lives places the British tabloid press several rungs further down the moral ladder than these little boys have ever had a chance to descend. These were the headlines of the tabloid press on Thursday 25 November, the day after the two boys' conviction for murder:

Daily Mail: EVIL, BRUTAL AND CUNNING.

Daily Mirror: FREAKS OF NATURE—The faces of normal boys but they had hearts of unparalleled evil.

Daily Star: HOW DO YOU FEEL NOW YOU LITTLE BASTARDS?

All of the above appeared with pictures of the little boys—pictures that would ensure the victimisation of them and their families for many years to come. The articles within these rags stooped to any claim in their eagerness to cast blame on these children. The editors and the journalists and the sort of vile readers who throw rotten eggs at prison vans were comforted by this orgy of attributing guilt to the feeble and infantile targets of popular wrath. What they did not report were the four suicides this year within the juvenile detention centre in west London where life for the guilty ended in the defeat of all hope. And while they screeched and yelled about the "unparalleled evil" of two confused and antisocial boys they did not report how killers of exactly the same age are employed by such armies as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the government side in the civil war in Sierra Leone. ("Since the civil war began in 1991 children as young as eight years old have been used by government forces in Sierra Leone to execute suspected rebels, sometimes cutting their heads off with machetes", readers were informed by the *Independent* on 2 December last year). But why worry anyone's narrow minds with such distant, legalised atrocities to which our rulers have uttered not a word of meaningful condemnation? How much easier it is to concentrate little minds on the guilty faces of little children (the freaks, the bastards,

the murderers) and rest content that the origin is in the unequalled blackness of their hearts.

Sometimes, through the fog of confusion which is how life is viewed by many people, and despite the brutalised indifference which seems to be the price of keeping afloat within the relentless competition to afford any kind of a life, certain events make us especially sad. These events are very largely selected for us by unaccountable media chiefs whose employees orchestrate public grief on such occasions. That does not diminish the authenticity of our sadness. After all, we are human beings. We are social animals. And sometimes, after a Warrington bomb or an Ethiopian famine disaster, a collective nerve is touched. And then what?

Socialists do not indulge in piety. That can be left to those who prefer to respond on their knees with their eyes shut. We leave moral self-righteousness as their monopoly as well. No sugary sentiments of love for little children will be heard from us. It is only under a system where the material stimulus to love and care is lacking that "loving thy neighbour" is promoted as some great virtue. No proposals here for teaching children what is right and wrong; not under a system which would have willingly taken those sane children only five years further into their lives and taught them to kill strangers as paid members of the British army.

Occasional sadness is a sign that we have not been wholly brutalised. Just as the fact that the overwhelming majority of children do not adjust willingly to the competitive, vicious and violent norms of the capitalist ethos is proof that this system has not and will not desensitise us all. To punish the dehumanised for what an inhumane world has taught them to become is as wise as to lock a dog in a kennel and then beat it for barking. The fact is that the kennel door is unlocked. It does not have to be like this.

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