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Does youth have a future?

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Introduction

There are problems with 'behaviour' today, some old problems, some new, but there is also a preoccupation with behaviour, an exaggerated sense that young people are out of control.

This sense of disorder is not based on nothing, it is not a simple figment of our imagination, but it is often overstated (O'Neill 2004). The media are often blamed for this situation, for pasting 'Neds', 'Yobs' and so on, on their front pages and depicting young people in an overly negative light. But at a time when the behaviour of young people has been so politicised, when politicians talk of a 'job culture', and when antisocial behaviour initiatives have become political issues at a local and national level, it is hard to blame the media for what has been made into a major social issue and debate over recent years. The behaviour of young people is clearly also an issue that resonates with the wider public, for example, in a recent report by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) entitled *Freedom's Orphans* it was noted that, in the UK, adults are indeed, 'scared of the kids' (Margo and Dixon 2006).

The obvious and most widely accepted explanation for the public fear of young people, the political focus on 'antisocial youth' and indeed the media headlines, is quite simply that young people are in fact out of control and behaving worse than ever before. However, even if this were true and young people were behaving worse than in the past, this alone would not explain why antisocial behaviour has become the huge problem it is perceived to be. Outside of the behaviour of young people, there are other significant factors that have made youth behaviour the number one issue in Britain today. So why do we get so upset about antisocial behaviour, why are we so

scared of the kids? Why does the prime minister of Britain use the Queen's Speech to highlight the issues of graffiti and vandalism as the most important problems facing the nation?

A loss of belief

To understand the fear of youth today, we need to understand the general nature of the culture in which we live – a culture that has lost any positive sense of the future. Since the enlightenment, progressives, and people on the left have had a positive sense of the future, unlike conservatives, who have often looked to the past for comfort in an ever changing world. Today however, it is hard to find any positive sense of belief in the future, even – indeed especially – amongst 'progressives'. Where only a decade ago, the idea that 'The End is Nye' could only be found on the sandwich boards of a few old religious men walking up and down the High Street, today this sentiment has become widespread, if not the norm. Take for example a film review of the awful *Children of Men* in the 'liberal' Guardian last year. This film depicts a future where immigrants are in cages in the streets, and where women can no longer become pregnant due to pollution. Based twenty years in the future, reviewer Peter Bradshaw described this apocalyptic film as showing an, 'eerily plausible future vision' (Guardian 4 September 2006). The future today only appears to be 'bright' if you are an add-man for Orange, otherwise the sense that we are doomed appears to fit far more comfortably into our cynical society. The glass today is nowhere near half empty, it has been drained dry and our sense of humanity has become profoundly negative. Within this climate, the worse case scenario has become the most popular, with this being reflected for example in the continued belief that youth crime is increasing, despite statistical indicators that in fact the opposite is the truth (Scottish Executive 2005). In the USA Franklin Zimring has noted how since 1996 the only aspect of the growth in the youth population that has been examined in Congress and been influential in developing future policy, has been juvenile arrest and crime rates. In other words, the growth in the youth population is understood by American politicians as a negative thing, something to be considered in terms of the criminal potential of these young people. Rather than young people being seen as the future in any positive sense, it is purely the potential criminality of youth that captures the

imagination of the political representatives of the most powerful nation on earth (Zimring 2000: 179).

This loss of a sense of the future or any positive sense of 'belief' can be seen most clearly in the realm of politics. Here cynicism has become so widespread, that to meet an individual enthusiastic about politics today would be like meeting someone from another planet. People rarely vote in elections today and when they do they do so more to vote against someone than for someone. My mother is a good example of someone who, having voted Labour for forty years can no longer bring herself to vote for anyone. My friends vote either against the Conservatives who they hate or against 'that bloody Tony Blair'. Indeed, as a MORI opinion poll recently noted, political parties are one of the least trusted groups of people in Britain (MORI 2001).

The significance in the collapse of politics and the profound levels of cynicism in society cannot be underestimated. Why? *Because politics is about a belief in our capacity to influence and change society for the better. When we lose this we lose any positive sense of the future, we become more pessimistic and conservative.* Why is this important in understanding our attitude to young people? Because how we understand the future determines to some degree how we think about young people. Today, adults both fear young people more than previously, but they also fear for them and for their future (Barnardos 1995).

When society had a more positive sense of the future and a belief in progress, the 'energy of youth' was something that was seen as useful – as something that could be harnessed. This led to a profoundly different way of interpreting the actions of young people. Take for example the case of Lord Baden Powell, the founder of the Scouts, who in the 1920s saw something positive in the rise in shop raids by young people. As the *Times* reported,

To him it was rather a promising sign, because he saw in those banditry cases, robbery with violence, and smash and grab, little 'adventures'. There was still some spirit of adventure among those juveniles and if that spirit were seized and turned in the right direction they could make them useful men (Pearson 1983: 34).

This was crime, indeed to some extent serious crime, not ‘antisocial behaviour’, that was being described as little more than adventures of energetic young people – imagine the headlines and political comments today about such ‘spirited’ youth!

Powell had his belief in Empire, in Great Britain, and ultimately in himself and his capacity to engage with and inspire young people to come on board. Alternatively there were socialists at this time who had an alternative positive vision of the future and of society, and who similarly saw youth within this context.

In the 1960s, the time of the moral panic about Mods and Rockers – when there was an exaggerated reaction to the fighting between young men at various seaside resorts – there was still a more balanced reaction from the then Conservative Home Secretary, who in parliament noted that the reports of fighting had been ‘greatly exaggerated’ (Cohen 2002: 113). Society at this time still had a positive sense of purpose, a belief in the future and in the ‘white heat of technology’, and despite significant changes in young people and ‘youth culture’, young people were still largely seen in a positive light.

Events in the past that were seen in a positive way, or in a more balanced way were seen like this not because of the nature of the events or the nature of young people – but because society and the leaders of society had a more positive sense of themselves and of the future. The same events occurring at different times can be interpreted in a profoundly different way.

The public similarly can see things differently depending on their understanding of society and the future of it. When we had a greater sense of where society was going and what the future would hold for young people, when we knew what to do with the ‘energy of youth’, then the ‘aggressive’ behaviour of young people and young working class men in particular was seen in a more relaxed or even positive way. Being tough and aggressive were characteristics that were more likely to be seen as useful for young people who would become the ship builders, miners, fathers and even soldiers of the future. Being able to ‘take care of yourself’ had a positive ring to it, as did the idea of ‘being a man’. Now, the idea of ‘being a man’ is associated more

with 'machismo' and violence, domestic abuse and 'yobs'. Today, when society has a more negative view of the future, when the future is unclear or appears to be 'doomed', then the 'aggressive' behaviour of young working class boys is more often interpreted in a problematic and highly negative way. Are the 10 year olds hanging around our streets really the antisocial yobs of tomorrow and the criminals of the future? Or is this simply our understanding of them, our sense of a negative future projected onto the children of today? Because what we think about the future in reality is about what we think of today – and what we really think of other people in the here and now.

Today even the language used to describe the actions of children and young people has changed. Terms like 'mischief' and 'boisterous' are now out of date, as we find it difficult to think of the bad behaviour of young people in a light hearted way. Actions that were interpreted in a less threatening or problematic way are now alternatively described as being 'aggressive' and 'antisocial'.

Rather than see the potential in people, today without a positive sense of the future or a belief that we can do much about it, we are more inclined to feel the need to conserve things, rather than develop them, regulate situations rather than free them up, and ultimately make everything *safe*. Safety has become today's moral absolute, a framework around which almost everything is organised. Communities are now 'safer communities', within them we have parents and teachers organising their lives and activities around 'child safety', teenagers must be educated about 'safe sex', and even when out enjoying ourselves we must be aware of how to drink, or even take drugs 'safely', while of course we are now all made 'safe' from one another with the smoking ban.

With such a negative view of the future, and such a cynical view of politics, society has become preoccupied with preventing harm rather than creating good And this in part has influenced the way we see young people – as potential problems rather than solvers of them, as dangers or threats in a society that is out of control.

Conclusion

The more cynical and pessimistic sense of the future has arguably transformed the way young people are understood – as without a positive sense of social meaning and developing possibilities, the lives of the future generation come to be seen as more directionless and out of control. In the past, when there was a greater understanding of where young people would fit into society and also what the role of adults was in this process (Furlong and Cartmel 1997: 110), a more relaxed attitude was taken to forms of behaviour that are today seen as being antisocial. Without a sense of social progress or a view of the future, the trend in politics and society more generally has been to lose the optimistic belief that young people will ‘grow out of crime’ (Squires and Stephen 2005:21), or that their energy will be harnessed in socially useful ways – within the workplace, by ‘serving their country’ or in looking after themselves and their family.

In 1977 George Benson wrote, ‘I believe the children are the future’. Perhaps this was always a bit sickly, or have I simply become a cynic like everyone else. Today it is hard to imagine anybody coming up with such a lyric, at least not without a sense of irony, indeed it appears we are more inclined to believe that a ‘plausible future’ doesn’t even have any children. With this level of cynicism coming from liberals and even radicals today it seems likely that whatever young people get up to in the future, their image will remain shrouded in concerns about safety, violence and antisocial behaviour. Hopefully however, young people themselves will be less cynical and pessimistic than their ‘grumpy old’ parents generation but for this to happen they will need to reclaim a sense of the future for themselves.

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