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New voices from the ship of fools

A critical commentary on the renaissance of ‘permissiveness’ as a political issue

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Abstract. Conventional ‘left’ accounts of ‘Thatcherism’ have stressed the authoritarian nature of its political rhetoric. This paper suggests that convergences between the ‘new’ conservatism and more fundamentalist moral positions, meeting on the ground of obscenity and violence in the media, are a relatively recent development, associated with renewed strategic concentration on the question of law and order. Indeed, the libertarian right, in adhering to a utilitarian laissez-faire understanding of private pleasures, has presided over a positive proliferation of erotic and other gratifications. We argue that in the United Kingdom the authentic constituency of the ‘moral right’ is an increasingly socially marginal one, rendered progressively more so by the rapid development of technologies of communication and entertainment.

During the winter of 1985–86 a cold, but in some ways familiar, wind began to blow again in British political life. ‘Permissiveness’ and its alleged partners and products – media violence, pornography, cultural corruption, connected to rising crime, street violence and a more general undermining of the social order – was restored to the political agenda. Indeed, from its effects in both raising these issues again and generating a series of responses to them in various aspects of public debate, it is a storm rather than a wind – with its epicentre situated firmly in the core of the Conservative Party. The chilliest blast came perhaps from Party Chairman and well known right winger Norman Tebbit. Delivering the annual Disraeli lecture at St Stephen’s Club in London on November 13, 1985, Mr Tebbit argued that the ‘trigger’ of today’s outburst of crime and violence lay . . .

. . . in the era and attitudes of post-war funk which gave birth to the permissive society, which in turn, generates today’s violent society . . .

. . . thus was sown the wind, and we are now reaping the whirlwind (*Daily Mail*, 14 November 1985).

And his speech has been echoed by a number of other prominent Conservative Party members. Lord Hailsham, the Lord Chancellor, speaking on December

11, 1985, linked the 1985 riots in London and Birmingham to the 'wickedness pervading society'. He continued . . . 'It must mean something to us that at every level of public life the bottom seems to have dropped out of morality.' (*Daily Mail*, 12 December 1985).

Meanwhile, Mr Douglas Hurd, the Home Secretary, made explicit the presumed relationship between sexual violence and the media which is always implicit in this discourse. He threatened broadcasters with legislative action:

Mr Hurd yesterday called for tougher sentences to be imposed for violent crimes and warned television broadcasters that if they failed to curb violence and sex on the screen the Government could introduce legislation to force them to do so. (*The Times*, 9 December 1985).

The weight of presumption which allows this use of the simple conjunction *and* to connect the two (arguably somewhat distinct) clauses of the above sentence suggests that the language of cultural 'miasmas' emanating from the screen is well-entrenched. The only pre-emptive strategem open to broadcasters, under threat of legislation, was to set up their own internal inquiries despite their insistence that violence had (previously) been consistently a lesser ground for viewers' complaints than boredom or bad language (see *The Times*, 22 January 1986, 23 January 1986).

Given this background, it is our intention in this paper to provide an account of the particular course and content of this debate and the way in which right-wing critiques of 'permissiveness' in the United Kingdom have taken the form of periodic rallying points. We shall argue though, that at the present time this platform reveals a *paradoxical* rather than complementary entanglement, in their respective concerns for 'law and order' between neo-liberals (or New) and moral (or Traditionalist) conservative constituencies. Its immediate target has become the blameworthy character of the popular media (although, of course, this has been by no means the exclusive preserve of the Right throughout the twentieth century). However, the above representatives of an avowedly modernising, populist capitalist party are, in our view, clearly seeking to cage a demon of their own devising. What the prognoses and possibilities *really* are for the kind of moral policing that they infer should be on the political agenda are by no means clear. Indeed, it will be our argument that this particular platform (at least in the context of the United Kingdom) is significantly at odds with the emphasis placed on liberalism and market forces that is to be found in New Right ideology. Precisely because technological developments and their effects cannot now be regulated without massive intrusions of privacy and personal liberty, the traditionalist conservatives have become increasingly marginal to the prevailing political discourses and series of expectations that these have engendered (about 'personal freedom', 'choice', 'indi-

vidual liberty' and so on). Equally, the fact that pornography is now an international industry which to a large extent puts it beyond the effective control and regulation of individual capitalist states¹ must seriously constrain the effects of any political intervention in this area. Simply 'turning the clock back' is neither politically feasible as a strategy, nor, we shall argue, is the New Right in the United Kingdom likely to make any serious attempt to do so.

Despite the attention that has been given by some critical observers to what they see as being both the popular appeal and immediate consequences of traditionalist/fundamentalist Conservatism in the United Kingdom (see for example Hall et al 1978), we will argue that this particular strain of moral criticism from the Right, although vocal at present, comes from and is concentrated amongst those sections of the population who feel out of touch with or out of place in a society undergoing major technological and economic transformation. Rather than being major policy makers, they represent one of the least powerful political constituencies.

There are two further points we must address at this stage. Firstly, the location of our analysis is the United Kingdom; we recognise that elsewhere the issue of permissiveness and the Right is likely to and has taken a different course. Indeed, it does seem that the 'moral majority' has been able to make a real political impact in the U.S.A. (see for example, Gordon and Hunter 1978; Ray 1983; more generally, Ratner and McMullan 1983²). Social conditions specific to the United Kingdom have taken this debate along a very different direction.

And secondly, it is of vital importance not to conflate traditionalist conservative opposition to permissiveness with the feminist critique of and political opposition to pornography. If there has been some apparent convergence in the past (cf. Taylor, B, 1981), it is clear that for feminists the issue of pornography has become the catalyst for a direct attack on the patriarchal relations of power between men and women which underscore and inform predominant sexual discourses (see, for example, Root 1983; Kappeler 1986) while at the same time seeking to preserve

one of the most important women's gains in recent years; the recognition of their sexuality outside of the activity of reproduction (Taylor, I. 1981, p. 201).

At the same time, there are also *some* indications that, in the United Kingdom, the issues of pornography/violence and women's sexuality is becoming more recognised at a popular level on these terms set down by the Women's Movement (see Winship 1985) – in addition to the various local forms of resistance taken by women's groups and collectives. Thus, while we see such forms of opposition as an emerging force, our concern is with the way in which

traditionalist conservative opposition has become increasingly marginalised.

At the same time, in coming to understand how and why this should be the case, we need to break out of the parameters of critical debate in which the issue of permissiveness and the moral Right is usually located. We shall now address what we see as being some of the shortcomings in the two prevailing modes of explanation to be found here.

The moral panic and the repressive hypothesis

The political statements we noted in the introduction brought back into the media limelight prominent representatives of the traditionalist Right in British society, the leading figure being Mrs Mary Whitehouse of the National Viewers and Listeners Association (who hitherto had largely faded from the political scene)³. While at the same time the whole issue of sex, violence, permissiveness and the like – and the supposed contribution of television in popularising these themes – has been raised again as a subject for more general media scrutiny and discussion⁴.

In some respects, there is nothing new in this resurgence of talk about ‘permissiveness’ and its associated products and effects, nor from the political domains that this talk is coming from. Indeed, as a general issue, it has regularly been a part of the rhetoric of the Right of the Conservative Party since at least the mid-1950s (see Gamble 1974) and historically such periodic concerns and ‘panics’ over permissiveness and related matters can be traced back to the early days of Victorian society and beyond (see Williams 1961; Swinewood 1976; Pearson 1983). They have come to be regarded as a metaphor for wider societal developments and social change (see, here, Wallis 1976).

In another sense, this kind of debate, these quite deliberate and specific attacks on what are seen as the products of 1960s ‘liberalism’, is exactly what we might expect, given the anticipations and expectations of the critical Left of Thatcherism. We had been forewarned, of course, right throughout the 1970s of what might be on the political agenda of the Right in the aftermath of the 1960s liberalisation and reform measures

Indeed, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) claimed that ‘the kissing had stopped’ by the end of the 1960s.

From here on

the backlash had indeed begun. The silent majority were rallied by the more active of the moral entrepreneurs in campaigns to ‘clean up’ Britain (beginning, symbolically, with the BBC). Closer to the ground, the police were now goaded and prodded into action, especially over drugs, the alternative press, obscenity (Hall et al 1978, p. 253).

And so this shift to 'the Right' – and all that this is understood to entail – appeared to gather force. By the mid 1970s we find the formation of 'an active authoritarian social gospel' whose ideologues included the Thatcherite section of the Conservative Party, newspapers, journals *and* a more populist element:

the Clean-up Television, Anti-Abortion, Festival of Light campaigns, National Association of Ratepayers Action Groups, the National Association for Freedom, National Federation of the Self-Employed, the National Union of Small Shopkeepers, Voice of the Independent Centre, lobbies, who give to the new authoritarianism of the right considerable popular depth of penetration in the aroused middle-classes and petty-bourgeois sectors (Hall et al 1978, p. 315).

By the time Thatcher came to power, the entire political climate, it seemed had been shifted quite fundamentally (in every sense of the word) to the Right.

By this means – first, forming public opinion, then disingenuously, consulting it – the tendency to 'reach for the law,' above, is complemented by a popular demand to be governed more strictly, from below. Thereby the drift to Law and Order, above, secures a degree of popular support and legitimacy amongst the powerless, who see no other alternative. And this leads to a sharp *closure* in the whole movement. Against this background we must speak, not only of the tendency towards authoritarian state, but rather of the production of an *authoritarian populism*. (Hall 1979, p. 1).

This has entailed, apparently, a return to 'stone-age morality' and 'moral orthodoxy': a viewpoint still shared by some in the United Kingdom writing from this perspective (see Edgar 1983; Jacques 1983).

Thus, in addition to the feminist perspectives we have referred to above, we are given two further explanations of these developments. The first subsumes them under the general rubric of 'moral panic'. But at the same time, this a-historical approach fails to address the specificity of the present panic. In our view this not only relates to the consequences and implications of important and widespread technological change *but at the same time* the 'populist base' of this panic has been undercut by the *attraction* of these effects and the political ideology of the New Right. In effect, then, it is not simply a reiteration of previous demands for 'morality', 'law and order' and so on from a static and homogenous social location. Instead, we will argue that this current renaissance of interest in permissiveness should be seen as the cri-de-coeur of an *unpopular* and redundant moral category: a collection of individuals and interest groups who appear to have no place in the probable projection of an

electronically mediated expansion of private and public pleasures and indulgencies. If, hitherto, their domain has usually been populated by the petty bourgeois, we believe that it is not now a location that can be explained solely by reference to traditional notions of class. This may still be one of its unifying threads but there are likely to be others: such as age (too old to enjoy these new pleasures); health (too unfit, disabled or incapacitated to participate in these indulgences); and religion (too constrained by conscience or the confession). But, notwithstanding such a wide range of sources and, indeed, the historical strength of puritan tradition within the British working class (see Moore 1985) our contention is that the sum of these fragments is likely to represent a 'moral minority' rather than exist as a counterpart to the North American 'majority'.

The second explanation has assumed the status of the orthodox critical Left position and is founded on the basis that there is some affinity, some effective alliance between the moral Right and the various other components of the New Right entourage. This we doubt. And, in addition, it also seems to us to be another version of what Foucault (1979) has termed 'the repressive hypothesis': that is, it assumes that there is some essential link between sexual repression and the political Right; and more generally, that power is exercised in negative terms and is channelled through the modalities of law and the police. But to what extent have all the anticipations of this return to 'stone-age morality' been fulfilled?

Are prohibition, censorship and denial truly the forms through which power is exercised in a general way, if not in every society, most certainly in our own' (Foucault 1979, p. 10)?

Has it really been the case that all the everyday scenes, language, ideas and suggestions of eroticism – which this supposed commitment to repression has set out to curtail – have been closed down? And that the machinery of its economic and cultural infrastructure have been done away with? It is around these issues that we now wish to interrogate this conventional Left position: this means examining the legislative changes in this area since the first Thatcher government in 1979.

Private and public policing

To some extent, it can be argued that the 1960s and 1970s saw a move towards a model of private policing of the sexual and violent content of media. The two television networks set up their own codes of conduct (BBC 1972; IBA 1973): and were followed by the attempt of the British Adult Publications Asso-

ciation Limited to introduce a regulatory code for the 'soft porn' genre' (B.A.P.A.L. 1978). Similarly, the Williams Report (1978), on pornography and obscenity suggested a form of self-regulation for the outlet of such material. For example, sex shops and similar premises should

- (a) refuse admission to persons under the age of 18
- (b) place a prominent warning sign by all access routes into the building; and
- (c) make no display available to persons not passing the warning notice, other than the name of the business and an indication of its nature. (Williams 1978, p. 160).

Since then, there *has* been a number of legislative initiatives which, on the face of it, might sustain the tenets of the Repressive Hypothesis. This legislation⁵ has taken the form of

- (i) the Indecent Displays (Control) Act 1981: this established an offence of publicly displaying indecent material;
- (ii) the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982: local authorities were given the power to introduce a licensing system for 'sex establishments' and empowered to use the licenses to prevent the spread of such establishments moving from their traditional localities to supposedly new and untouched domains;
- (iii) the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act 1982: this required all local cinemas to be licensed and introduced a new certificate ('restricted 18') to cover all film and video exhibitions⁶;
- (iv) the Video Recording Act 1984: each of the 6,000 video titles for sale or rent in the United Kingdom will be vetted for classification as being 'suitable for viewing in the home' or not.

Its specific task is to regulate recordings that are concerned 'to any extent' with the depiction of 'human sexuality', 'mutilation, torture or other areas of gross violence' or 'human genital organs'.

There has also been an attempt in a private members Bill, introduced by Conservative M.P. Mr Winston Churchill, to tighten the control of public broadcasting (the Obscene Publications (Protection of Children) Amendment Bill 1986). Although this did not eventually get on to the statute book, it might be thought, *prima facie*, that this and the preceding legislation belong to some general moralistic crusade designed to redraw the boundaries between permissible and non-permissible modes of pleasure and entertainment. It is as if there has been a drive to replace self-policing with state policing, which Taylor (1985) goes on to argue marks an important regression from the Wolfenden⁷ principle of allowing 'freedom of choice' in the realm of private pleasures.

Certainly, then, firmer boundaries have been drawn: yet at the same time,

we have to recognise that these new territories to be policed constitute only one fragment of the vast entourage of everyday sight, sound and expectation of pleasure, titillation and excitement that is framed in and addressed through a range of channels of communication such as the media, fashion world and the general economic fabric and infrastructure of pleasure industries. What has been, or is likely to be the effect of the new laws on this more general terrain? It seems to us that they represent extensions of policing that are either:

i) *outside the boundaries of 'the normal'*

The 'video nasties' legislation is a good example of this. It has been estimated that only about 30 of the 6,000 video films available to the public (and about one in three homes in the United Kingdom now has access to video recorders) come into this category (see Robertson 1984), with the most notorious of these being *I Spit On Your Grave*, *Driller Killer* and *S.S. Experiment Camp*. But the point would seem to be that the 'apocalyptic character' (Taylor 1985, p. 44) of these latter three in particular may actually place them outside the mainstream of 'the normal'. It may only increase their notoriety rather than popularity and largely diminish any more general appeal that they might have. Indeed, we can draw an analogy with the popularity of certain kinds of pornography. Gagnon and Simon (1973), p. 263 contend that

There are fundamental limits to the flexibility of the world of vicarious experience or symbolic representation. When the reordering of social life or social values becomes excessive, representation comes to be plausible and identification becomes difficult or impossible (which is the reason why most of the Marquis de Sade fails as pornography) except for the manifestly pathological personality or we become unable to manage guilt and organise sexual tension.

The point is, then, that without some direct purchase on 'the real world', such material, whether it be pornographic or violent, is likely to remain marginalized and unpopular. However, the video market as a whole (and indeed local cinemas) still provides a vast range of material that concentrates on or combines erotic and violent thematology (see, for example, *Dressed to Kill* and *When a Stranger Calls*). Furthermore, some of the most popular videos in the United Kingdom at present⁸, such as *Policy Academy*, *Sudden Impact*, *The Good That Men Do* and *Once upon A Time In America* all have a significant sexual and/ or violent content. At the same time, the more 'moderate' versions of the 'nasties' are still available to the general public. Thus one national newspaper has carried a full page advertisement for a range of videos including *Frauleins in Uniform* ('Hitler's sexy volunteer corp leave little to the imagination') and *Elsa Fraulein* ('Hitler's love train for his Gestapo officers')⁹. In

effect, then, the particular extension of policing that is envisaged here is likely to be targeted at already marginalised sectors of the sexual landscape. Meanwhile, mainstream material continues to display a very significant content of sexual and/or violent material

ii) *or are exaggerated forms or more specialist aspects of a more generally available and predominant mass culture.*

The Local Government Act can regulate the licencing of sex shops and other such acute concentrations of pleasure – for this seems to be precisely what they are: concentrated or exaggerated versions of the set of taken-for-granted images, ideas and anticipations that have been disseminated throughout the commercial and cultural milieus of society: for the hard-porn sex shops, substitute the ‘adult magazines’ rack of the newsagents; for the peepshows substitute the ‘special attraction’ of some public houses – lunchtime strippers. Again, then, the availability of the more general, if more diluted, aspects of this culture, is likely to remain unaffected.

iii) *or have the effect of only increasing the allure of these more strongly policed areas.*

Some of the immediate consequences of the Indecent Displays Act were reported as follows:

Soho’s red-light area made a token retreat behind blacked-out windows simply labelled ‘We Sell Offensive and Indecent Material’

Sex shops can become exempt from the law simply by displaying a sign on the door saying that persons passing beyond it would find material which they could consider indecent. This very notice was last night enticing extra business in Soho (*The Guardian*, 27 October 1981)

And in newsagents and bookstores, the practical effect seems to have been to increase the distinction between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ markets. While exotically-clad models decorate the front covers of the latter, warnings are printed over the former (for example, ‘not to be sold to under-18s’; ‘keep out of the reach of children’; ‘indecent material is contained inside’). Such warnings have an additional function: they add to the inducement to purchase this material by emphasising its ‘special quality’.

In effect, then, the consequences of repression may be to popularize, or to make more alluring, that which it is intended to repress.

Technological change, culture and modernity

As these particular boundaries have been more tightly drawn, the acreages of what they allow and permit seem to have steadily increased. Indeed, one of the economic consequences of Thatcherism – *in coincidence with* major technological and media changes and transformations – has been the creation of a much greater space for the pursuit and enjoyment of individual hedonism. Technological acceleration, particularly in the areas of communication and information, and developments in the fields of cable, satellite, video and interactive media offer horizons that go far beyond the parameters of broadcast television. And the degree of control (and the consequent implications for *national* broadcasting cultures) which either national legislatures or broadcasting institutions are able to exercise is brought sharply into question. And one of the consequences already is the opportunity given for the valorisation and economic development of leisure as a commodity. This is both pleasurable in its own right and at the same time pedagogic in that it instructs viewers and listeners how to engage in such pleasures. This has led, on the one hand, to the cultivation and growth of *private* pleasures and entertainments: for example, the home video industry and the development of cable television, offering the viewer far greater choice than before. And, on the other, this combination of erotic, sexual and violent thematology has further colonised *public* space. It surveys an array of pleasures, titillation and excitement to its audience at large: it constitutes an exhortation to indulge while also providing the building bricks for the development of a new economic infrastructure. At the heart of the modern city, the labour-intensive factory is replaced by leisure – freeing technologies: the uniformity of the factory worker by the opportunities for style and consumerism of the technocrat:

the rise of the ‘cultural industries’ is a facet of economic change. Jobs for actors, actresses, producers and all the ancillary functionaries substitute in the medium run for older, decayed manufacturing industries. Here is an area of economic specialisation where Britain does well. (*The Times*, 24 February 1986)

And it is possible to see how the topographical features of everyday life have been redrawn to take account of the availability and visibility of these socially ratified pleasures and pursuits. The prominent themes of these contours include

i) *an emphasis on youth and the need to retain identifying characteristics of youth.*

Notwithstanding the regular negative and frightening images of British youth

(such as the football hooligan, the skinhead, see, for example, Mungham and Pearson 1976; Muncie 1984), there is another dimension to the issue of youth, another set of images that are available to us. These consist of positive and exhortatory valorisations of ‘youth’ as the high point of enjoyment, pleasure and fulfilment¹⁰. Youth is seen as being at the forefront of economic and technological change, which provides the means to achieve such desired end products: in this way, spectacular consumption replaces thrift as a social obligation in a technological, mass-production economy:

‘Hence greater affluence has led not only to the emergence of new social groups, but to the spread of lifestyles and behaviour which fundamentally deny the legitimacy of the lifestyle and culture of the entrepreneurial middle-class . . . Short-run hedonism has come to replace this worldly asceticism as the dominant value system of a mass-consumption society.’
(Wallis 1976, p. 285)

ii) *instructions in the practice of individual hedonism.*

This can range from discourses related to ‘the presentation of self in everyday life’ which offer instruction on and advise meticulous care in respect of ‘going out’, to the range of manuals centred around the issue of sexual performance and its improvement/diversity/regularity and so on (Featherstone 1982)¹¹. At the same time, the youth/pleasure nexus generates a pedagogy around the subject of how to retain and hang on to youthful attributes: how to continue to dress with style, to remain sexually active and adventurous, to remain fit and healthy and to cultivate and preserve the body and its associated pleasures (see Hepworth and Featherstone 1983).

iii) *the normalisation of the erotic*

The soft-porn magazines milieu would seem to be a particularly good example here. Recent circulation trends (see Benn’s Press Directory 1984) show a quite marked fall in overall sales from the high points they achieved in the late 1970’s. But if regular male readership (estimated at one in four of the United Kingdom population in the Williams Report 1978) has declined, the magazines still have a sufficient client base to serve as important educators and instructors of male opinions and attitudes on sexual matters. The decline is perhaps attributable to the effects of economic recession and the availability of other outlets for eroticism and titillation – such as the booming home video market (cf. Taylor 1985). However, what is particularly interesting here is the strategy whereby some of the United Kingdom based magazines¹² have managed to hang on to or indeed have actually increased their sales and readership. As one of us has argued elsewhere (Pratt 1986), the way this has been achieved is to provide covers and contents which not only have alluring and titillating qual-

ities in their own right but which also emphasise the way in which some erotic dimension to everyday life is normal, almost banal. Within their pages the erotic is neither confined to secret hideaways nor is it made *exotic* – set in exclusive domains and settings such as tropical shores and desert islands. Rather than this, the readers are informed, it can be located *everywhere*: around any corner, in any mundane location.

As such, female bodies are displayed and situated in the world of laundrettes, offices, libraries and so on. Similarly, the ‘biographies’ which accompany the photographic content are full of references to ‘ordinariness’: such as life in the office, going to clubs, keep-fit programmes¹³. In effect, then, it is not by filling their pages with *extraordinary* contents that have enabled them to sustain their popularity but the way in which they have provided a focus for the combination of the erotic and the normal.

iv) *a combination of adventure, stylisation, and irony in popular entertainments*
 Again, we would like to illustrate this point by reference to developments in the popular media. If we look at developments in the television ‘cop show’ genre (particularly, for example, the very popular American serials *Miami Vice* and *Cover Up*) we find that although they observe some of its traditional features (see Reiner 1985), particularly in respect of the ultimate restoration of order by the intervention of the policeman-hero, at the same time they bring to it style, glamour and excitement. In contrast to their predecessors¹⁴, these popular heroes are both vigorously masculine, dapper and youthful and simultaneously show integrity and strength that is underwritten, not compromised, by their casually expensive clothes and laconic humour. As such, it is a form and style of policing, we contend, that accounts for their popularity, with its heroes set entirely within, indeed, made the centre point of this context of modernity.

It is as if these programmes weave a fabric around real life: a fabric that is close to everyday reality and possibility (which makes it popular) but which at the same time is rather more than this – a kind of exaggerated and condensed representation of real life (which at the same time rescues it from pure banality and makes it all the more attractive).

To come across these regular and interconnected features of modern life, it is important to note that we are not reduced to hunting out such examples from the recesses of the social body, as would have been the case some two or three decades ago. To look for pleasure and excitement, there is no need to venture into this twilight world. This particular venue still exists, of course, and indeed is probably policed more stringently as a result of the legislation of the last few years. But now, there is no longer any need to move beyond the parameters of the normal to track down these allurements, nor is there any need to be furtive when seeking them out. Indeed, it seems at times that there is a positive

inducement to enjoy and celebrate these 'shining jewels' of consumer culture (cf. Foucault 1979).

The moral career of a moral entrepreneur

There is an irony, then, in the association between the New Right and the 'authentic' voices of conservatism. This is exacerbated by the latest re-enactment of an entrenched discourse of moral decay and the proliferation of new media which both excite reaction and yet whose underlying tendency is to subvert its programme. Nonetheless, their point of intersection in the field of 'law and order' retains considerable force both because it calls upon deeply felt and widespread anxieties and because the generalities of its proposition forbid disconfirmation.

Accordingly, the ideas set out in the Disraeli Lecture speech of the Conservative Party Deputy Leader are not new, but belong to a tradition which has regularly counter-posed the alleged decay of modern society to a fictionalised point – some period sufficiently long ago to be either beyond living memory or with the memory of only an older generation shocked into nostalgic yearnings for the past by the tumult of social change. In the present case, we have Mrs Thatcher's romantic dream of 'Victorian values'; in the chronology of Mrs Whitehouse and her supporting organisation, it seems to be the world that existed before television 'became available to all', that is, pre-1956: the point at which the hegemony of the BBC came to be challenged by the enfranchising of 'commercial' television. Such analyses begin by drawing attention to social anxieties and the need for a reaffirmed social discipline – but then go on to elide all aspects of such crisis under a single head, representing them as a consequence of some feature of social cognition and disregarding the particular features of the language, imagery and origin of the 'present crisis', as we see in the following editorial from a local paper:

It was Winston Churchill who drew the attention of the British people to the need to stand up to an aggressor . . . 'or plunge forever into a new Dark Age.' The good fight was fought and won, but the new Dark Age has nevertheless descended upon us with the grim inevitability of predestined fate.

Today on any T.V. news bulletin . . . (*Cambridgeshire Pride Magazine* August 1985).

It is important, in this respect, to pay attention to the centrality which is accorded, in the demonology of the moral Right, to the electronic media.

Certainly, it has not been lost on Mrs Whitehouse (nor a number of those Conservative Party politicians now speaking out) that the change in the temper of the times, as experienced by certain sectors of society, is precisely contemporaneous with the arrival of television as a truly 'mass' medium: and it is as if there is some known association – whether as symptom or effective agent – between television and moral decay.

In these respects, it is certainly not surprising that the Party which has been so attracted to 'law and order' postures in the past, should now be seeking some means of restoring its credentials by recourse to demanding the need for more social discipline. In this sense, it would seem to reflect a regrouping of the Right around a traditional vote – winning theme (cf. Taylor, I 1981) while at the same time acting as a diversion from the failures and disastrous consequences of Thatcherism – which, inter alia, has brought rising crime and civil disturbances despite the law and order programme (Taylor 1986). But at the same time, the present campaign is qualitatively very different from the previous law and order rhetoric (which undoubtedly *did* have mass appeal, see Clarke and Taylor (1980).

As such, it is not a campaign targetted around 'crime' i.e. summoning the resentment of the majority of the population against what are seen as the activities of a small but troublesome minority. On the contrary what gives it its specificity is that it is a campaign designed to remoralize *society as a whole*, with its starting point some of the most well received and popular aspects of contemporary culture. In effect, it is as if the whole thrust of modern society is moving in a very different direction (and has been given added impetus by the combination of technological development, the economics of Thatcherism and the ideology of the New Right) from the visions of social life that Conservative fundamentalists adhere to.

This becomes very apparent when we examine the position and perspective of Mary Whitehouse, the most prominent of these moral champions¹⁵.

It is not a causal theory (the advent of mass television leads to moral and social decay) that she offers but a form of *social criticism* (a point overlooked, we feel, by some of her critics, see Murdock 1984; Gunter 1985). Her critique of the post-war world (centred mainly around the expansion of the television medium) is perhaps best understood as a common-sensical inflection of 'mass society' theory (Giner 1976; Bennett 1977). For what is common to the pessimisms loosely grouped under the heading of mass society theory is the belief that the modern age has relinquished or compromised ultimate and basic values (religion, family, morality, discipline, hierarchy, etc.) with the likelihood of the dissolution of what had hitherto been a stable and orderly social body.

What is at stake is not just the trauma in the transition from the *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* of sociological theory, but a battle at the last ditch

against what is seen as the continuing plunge into the barbarism of modernity: for Mrs Whitehouse and her supporters, 'discipline' becomes the only guarantor of liberty, the essential protector of a sane and orderly society from the plunge into a Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It is as if

the thin veneer of civilisation that has kept the brute within all of us at bay has been deliberately cracked and we are back in the eighteenth century (Caulfield 1975, p. 125).

At the same time, the broadcasting companies (especially the BBC) are seen as being elitist, bureaucratic and almost by definition, 'out of touch' with 'ordinary people' for whom, on the other hand, Mrs Whitehouse claims to represent (see Caulfield 1975, p. 132). As such television is seen as an imposition, an invasion of the private domain and threat to family life:

there is some strange dark force at work which protects the media. When the chips are down and the choice is between what people . . . call 'freedom' on the one hand and the 'welfare' of children and society on the other, then the intelligentsia, the opinion-formers, those responsible for film and television, close ranks and defend their own highly specialised version of 'freedom'. Why, why, why? Is it money? Is it intellectual pride and an authoritarianism – that cannot brook contradiction? Or is it, as in some cases it most surely is – a commitment to cultural and political anarchy? Otherwise, how does it come about that minds are so closed and intellectual integrity so prostituted? (Whitehouse 1978, p. 15).

Yet, by the same token, a peculiar sense of desertion attaches to the fear that the master institutions of cultural continuity and certainty have, as it were, 'gone over' to the tide of modernity, of scepticism, of the heterogeneity of belief and experience. It is not that the discourse of Mrs Whitehouse, for example, represents the voice of a populist moral politics, but instead it is a discourse that has become marginal in its dissent – raging impotently against the television institutions, when this use of the medium is in the process of being surpassed by a range of new technological and media developments.

Given this, if those on the New Right are to continue to try and effect some combination with the traditionalists and fundamentalists of the Right, then it would not only form an important contradiction within Thatcherite politics and ideology, but at the same time would take the New Right down a route which some of its erstwhile supporters such as the Police Federation have specifically warned against:

Be careful not to confuse acceptance of violence with 'declining standards of

morality', particularly sexual morality . . . The Federation would be in danger of alienating support . . . if it tried to equate support for public order with an overly conventional view of sexual or other personal morality. It would be right to stress the value of the family and family togetherness and a respect for conventional discipline as a support for combating crime, but, for younger people, this does not entail what they might conceive of as a repressive attitude to freedom in personal behaviour (*Police* March 1976).

More recently, *The Times* newspaper, now one of the leading media trumpeters of New Right orthodoxy, recognised the contradiction of such a posture in an important editorial:

. . . what is disconcerting is to see Mrs Whitehouse joined in her campaign by Conservatives – including the Prime Minister herself, apparently unaware of the discrepancy between their espousal of market individualism and their enthusiasm for heavy-handed policemen agents of the State, interposing themselves between individual consumers and broadcast material.

What a signal to give the nation. To bring the State with its apparatus of censorship into stage, street, gallery, even the daily newspaper, because it knows better than parents when and in what way the young are to be protected. (*The Times* 24 February 1986).

In effect, Mrs Whitehouse and her associates are unwelcome guests for the true believers of the New Right. Essentially, the latter have a vision and plan of the future: Mrs Whitehouse, our exemplar, remains locked into the past. Equally, the belligerent posture of defence that she and various other moral entrepreneurs have seen as necessary only adds to their social marginality and isolation. Their attack takes the form of constantly describing, assessing, denouncing the content and supposed impact of television¹⁶: as such, it is a process of bearing witness to the present from the point of view of a reaching back into the past. However, if in Mrs Whitehouse's historiography of modern culture, the crucial date was 1956 ('mass television') then it is also clear that for most young people her attempt to rekindle up and hold on to fleeting glimpses of a past which did not contain such possibilities has no grounding in reality. Yet all the time that this conjuring takes place, so the sense of dislocation from the present increases – both in terms of being able to speak to a public that might share such views, and also in respect of continuing technological changes that make the present even more unacceptable.

Certainly, Mrs Whitehouse and people like her no longer feel at home in this modern society, nor are things likely to improve for them. But, in one sense their anger and distress have not been misdirected, for in speaking out against

television, they have located not only the acme of the first industrial revolution, but the horizon of the second.

The ship of fools

We have referred to the writing and campaigning of Mrs Mary Whitehouse and the National Viewers and Listeners Association since we see them as being the prime example of the marginalisation of the moral Right. Their work and that of similar British organisations (such as the Responsible Society and the Middle Class Society) represents not so much a serious threat to liberal values as a desperate attempt to retrieve and direct the movement of history as it drifts away from them and must be understood as such. And just as this political constituency has become increasingly marginalised so too, it seems to us, have the legislative changes introduced during Mrs Thatcher's tenancy of government, been directed at the margins of contemporary culture. Within the boundaries of what is permissible, all the indications are that there will be a continuation and expansion of a general incitement to engage in pleasures and indulgencies. This seems to us to be an embedded and inevitable feature of life in modern Western societies: we see the growth of an enormous leisure space with an expanding and far-ranging economic fabric woven around it: and allied to media and technological advances, it is made all the more alluring and attractive.

Against this, Mrs Whitehouse in our view, represents par excellence a collection of voices and anxieties from what has become a redundant moral category within the modern social body: consisting of all those, whether on the grounds of age, conflicting moral purviews, or whatever, find themselves increasingly left out or under threat from the combination of effects and pleasure-giving produce of the increasingly mediated and technologised society.

If such developments do indeed constitute the beginnings of a second industrial revolution, then it seems likely that, just as in the first industrial revolution, there are going to be a range of social casualties. One group can be seen most vividly in most northern cities in the United Kingdom: great regiments of unemployed men and women who, whether on account of their lack of the requisite skills and training, their age or capability, have been made *economically* redundant. But, by the nature of this second revolution, there also seems to be another collection of individuals – a redundant *moral* category.

From which part of the social body is this conglomeration of voices coming from? Far removed from its fulcrum, it would seem. More likely, some tightly barricaded corner that is energetically defended. And yet in spite of their

vigorous defences, the contingent of moral entrepreneurs still find that they are pushed back beyond the margins of society and are cut off from its moorings. Adrift, they have begun a navigation without end, for it is the past that they wish to be their destination. And perhaps what those of us left standing on the United Kingdom shoreline can see is the modern-day equivalent of the medieval Ship of Fools floating out to sea (cf. Foucault 1967). The difference lies in its crew: it is no longer populated by madmen, but instead by despairing, but self righteous moral entrepreneurs, identifying the terrain they are sailing away from as the cause of their hopelessness.

From the shore we can hear their crying, shouting and bewailing: indeed, it is possible to discern the rhythm of liturgical chanting at times, such as the following example, taken from an editorial in the English *Daily Express*, the traditional media representative of this political constituency and itself in serious decline:

We know that the permissive society is *not* the civilized society . . .
 That evil is growing and must be fought . . .
 Maybe there is something in a comparatively affluent society, long at peace,
 which produces its own mindless brutality . . .
 Abandonment of sound moral values is itself a cause of our present woes . . .
 (*Daily Express* 14 March 1986).

But despite their frantic attempts to attract our attention before all is lost, this collection of individuals and organizations are themselves set on the course of a sea crossing that can never come to an end. As the social contours and landmarks of the United Kingdom become eroded and less familiar, so do their voices become louder and shriller – and more incoherent¹⁷.

Notes

1. We would like to acknowledge the comments made by an external reviewer in respect of this particular point.
2. Although in contrast to their argument, we take the view that the popular appeal and development of the New Right are not phenomena that can be generalized on an international basis.
3. For more biographical details of this person and her background see, for example, Tracey and Morrison (1973); Caulfield (1975)
4. See, for example, *Daily Mail*, 14 November 1985; *The Sunday Times*, 8 December 1985; *The Times*, 31 January 1986; *The Guardian*, 9 December 1985; *Feedback*, BBC Radio 4, 15 February 1986; *This Week, Next Week*, BBC 1, 23 February 1986.
5. For more detailed review, see Taylor (1985).
6. The specific materials to be controlled are defined as ‘moving pictures, by whatever means produced, which –

- a) are concerned primarily with the portrayal of, or primarily deal with or relate to, or are intended to stimulate or encourage –
 - i] sexual activity; or
 - ii] acts of force or restraint which are associated with sexual activity; or
- b) are concerned primarily with the portrayal of, or primarily deal with or relate to, genital organs or urinary or excretory functions'

(Schedule 3, section 3, p.68).

7. This distinction between the public and the private domains in relation to sexual practices was set out in Wolfenden (1957).
8. Source: *Video World*, March 1986.
9. See *The Star*, 8 February 1986.
10. Empirically, 'youth' seems to range from 18–35. These are the age limits specified in the following advertisement, which addresses one of the most significant developments in British and other consumer cultures: the exotic 'holiday abroad'. Thus:

You and Me and *Buddies* . . . bid you welcome to the eighties-style way to holiday – fun and laughter in the exotic and homely places. Beaches and booze. Bokes and birds. Music and wine. Hot spots day and night. It's about day times crowded with activity and sunshine. New experiences – surf sailing, skiing, paragliding, horse-riding, go-carting, or simple lazy daze tanning. About night times of discos, night clubs, bars and taverns

Some people come in groups, some in pairs, some come solo. Any way they come, they come to relax, liven up, mix and mingle. And some come to meet someone special. And when the mixing and mingling is done, to get away somewhere quiet and discover each other . . . (*Cosmopolitan* February 1981)

11. There are numerous examples from the popular press that we could draw on here. Amongst the most typical was the series on 'the British Way of Love' which ran for a week in *The Sun*, the most popular British daily paper, from 28 April 1980, and which pursues an editorial line strongly in support of the New Right.
12. These magazines are respectively *Fiesta*, *Mayfair* and *Knave*.
13. As an example, *Mayfair* 18(5), 1984 contained a set of photographs accompanied by the following 'biography':

When pert-breasted 19 year old Susie told us that she worked as a secretary, we weren't very surprised. Her 34-23-35 figure would enhance any office. But when she added that she would like to be photographed where she actually works, we found the idea so unusual that we had to take her up on it. Consequently at 5 a.m. one chilly day, Susie and the photographer could be seen by early risers letting themselves into the ultra-modern block in the Milton Keynes where she is more often typing . . . Once in the third floor office Susie really came into her own, posing behind her desk in the clothes she wears every day to work. 'I loved every minute', she told us after the session. 'I only wish I could have done it during the day. But I don't think Head Office would have approved . . .

14. Such as the socially marginal and eccentric heroes of the 1970s – 'Cannon', 'Rockford', 'Kojak' and 'Columbo' (all from American television series). Moreover, the introductory sequence to, say *Miami Vice* places their heroes in the modern context. The viewer is drawn into a perspective of the local waterfront from the vantage point of a vertiginously speeding helicopter. This image is cross-cut with others of speed and energy and urbane pleasure, horse – racing, dog-racing, pelota, wind-surfing and a brief but lascivious alighting on women

sunbathing or strolling in bikinis. A frenetic sound-track underpins the impression of the pace and available pleasures of a leisured, moneyed, sexualised life. The use of popular songs as incidental music, provides for the instantaneous recognition and emphasis of moments of pleasure or poignancy. The programme seems to have learned the force of the concentration of the flow of images from the production of the promotional rock video . . .

15. One of the most popular and prominent hard porno magazines in Britain in the 1970s was *Whitehouse*, a deliberately chosen name. This shows, inter alia, the way in which the campaigning of Mary Whitehouse actually had the effect of popularizing such material.
16. One only has to read to output of N.V.A.L.A. publications to see the meticulous checking that takes place. One episode of *Streets of San Francisco* (another American production) provoked the following comments:

Liquor store robbery. Shooting by police and robbers. 'Bad' character badly injured. He dies. Police officer hit by van driven at him by robber. Liquor store owner also injured, then dies. Man crashes van. Fires three times at police officers. He is killed by shot fired by uniformed policeman. Girl fires revolver twice at police officer. Misses him, then runs away. Girl fires six shots at some police officer but misses him. He disarms her. Modern setting. Explicit violence. (from *Seven Days Violence: a one-week survey of violence in television programmes*, N.V.A.L.A. publications, 1985).

17. Witness the astonishment and embarrassment with which Mrs Whitehouse was greeted by other panellists on the BBCs 'This Week, Next Week' (25 February 1986) when in the course of a discussion on Mr Churchill's Bill (v.s.) which focussed largely on the 'graphic' violence of two films shown late at night on Independent Television Channel 4, she began to talk about the morality of the 'East Enders' soap opera, currently the most popular programme on British television.

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