

Anti-Nirvana: Crime, culture and instrumentalism in the age of insecurity

Steve Hall and Simon Winlow

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Abstract

The disintegration of traditional forms of community and social order is one of criminology's core issues for the 21st century. As these forms are replaced by individualism, fragmentation and differentiation in a fluid, unstable culture governed by advanced capitalism's economic command to consume and discard with increasing rapidity, everyday values and practices are undergoing radical reconfiguration. Here we offer field data from two distinct social groups that are caught up in this process of change: socially incorporated young people in low paid service work, and socially excluded criminal young men from the north east of England. If this set of data is analysed in critical rather than celebratory ways, it suggests that current economic and cultural forces, rather than liberating individuals from repressive structures and traditions, are promoting sufficient atomisation, instrumentalism and insecurity in specific locales to threaten social cohesion and further increase the flow of young people into criminality.

Introduction

The breakdown of traditional forms of working class community and identity poses a number of important questions about the future of social cohesion in the twenty-first century. As the traditional class order recedes and fragments, what remains of the once largely unified and politically powerful working class has been absorbed into the lower echelons of the middle class, funnelled into the new economies of the service and leisure sectors or discarded altogether (see Horne and Hall, 1995; Young, 1999). The erosion of modernity's traditional forms of industrial labour and the distinct value systems, identities and sense of belonging that developed around them provides a particularly useful foundation upon which to build a critical understanding of the processes of social fragmentation and enforced adaptation to advanced capitalism's distinctly competitive individualization process.

Our recent research into the mutating values and practices of working class youth suggests that traditional forms of friendship and community are being radically transformed as prevailing cultural values and economic demands encourage young people to live their lives as competitive personal endeavours on advanced capitalism's difficult and irregular terrain. (Winlow and Hall, forthcoming). As mutual interests and the previously parallel trajectories of working class biographies diverge, people once bonded together by the deep friendships and communal values that – despite the usual interpersonal frictions and altercations – grew around hardship and exploitation now forge their identities in the relations of consumer culture and the seductive images of global media. As Bauman notes (2003: 74), 'the invasion and colonization

of *communitas*, the site of the moral economy, by consumer market forces constitutes the most awesome of dangers threatening the present form of human togetherness'. It seems that the explosion of self-interest and instrumentality triggered in the shift to consumerism could now be threatening all the traditional forms of social order established during and before the industrial-modern era. Although we agree with those progressive thinkers who regard the current exfoliation of undeniably disagreeable modernist forms and relations as a positive development, our concern is that in this phase of broad transformation some fundamental aspects of sociability *essential* to the maintenance of civilized interpersonal conduct might be eroding as anxiety, fear and self-interest become the new emotional responses to life in advanced capitalism (Hall and Winlow, 2003). At its most basic, our argument is a standard cautionary tale about what might happen if we throw out the baby with the bathwater.

The British communities that once typified the world's oldest working class (Byrne, 1989) lie in tatters as the culturo-economic forces that once bound individuals together now drive them apart. The old working class is splintering as it is swept away by the powerful currents of economic 'rationalisation', competitive individualism and consumerism, and formerly cohesive communities and neighbourhoods are being replaced by the faceless post-industrial city, the consumerist ghettos of new suburban housing developments, or the subterranean tangle of pathologies and tensions that characterize low income residential areas. Some individuals wrestle desperately with a new apparatus of social advancement that is based on minor accreditation, enterprise and personal image-management, clinging to the hope of creating a better world for themselves while constantly being mindful that the rug could be pulled from under them at any moment (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992). Simultaneously, the magnetic field created by the opposite pole drags those who fail to make the grade towards relative poverty, cultural insignificance and socio-economic exclusion.

There is no doubt that a connection exists between this major transition and rises in crime and violence in Britain and America (Hall, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Winlow, 2001). However, explaining this connection clearly and doing something about it are of course different matters. Following the emphasis made by so many theorists (see for instance Castells, 1996; Lea, 2002) on the gravity of today's socio-economic transition and its subsequent criminological implications, we want to stress the need for the constant reflexive reconsideration of what have become inadequate theoretical frameworks in criminology. More specifically, in this article we see a pressing need to challenge progressive criminology's rather over-enthusiastic importation of the fashionable notions that meanings are fluid and diverse and individuals are potentially 'free' to construct their identities in a 'post-structural' or 'postmodern' world. We intend to do this by focusing on the structural contexts and shared values, motivations and meanings that appear to exert strong influences on the ways in which two groups of young people – one largely law-abiding and the other persistently criminal – perceive and enact their identities in Britain's rapidly changing economy.

Two Expressions of Instrumentalism in Consumer Culture

A co-ordinated body of research on violent crime and youth identities recently conducted by ourselves has revealed the emergence of a strong streak of instrumentalism in youth cultures, which, although commonly shared as a value,

seems to be enacted under different rules that order distinct social and economic environments. Perhaps unsurprisingly in an Anglo-American world dominated by neo-liberal politics and culture for the past two decades, the commitment that young people once held to more traditional and communal ways of life has been supplanted to a large extent by instrumentalism and personal ambition, which, although they are constantly touted as the paths to freedom and prosperity, operate in a highly restrictive framework set by the logical demands of the consumer marketplace and have established themselves as norms in a climate of increased economic and cultural insecurity. The stringent need to find some sort of status-position in today's consumer culture has combined uneasily and paradoxically with the prevailing ideology of personal freedom and opportunity, subsequently fragmenting traditional friendships and communal interdependencies. Our data suggests that young people are beginning to relate to each other and all aspects of their personal, social and occupational lives in an increasingly instrumental, utilitarian manner (Winlow and Hall, forthcoming).

Our initial research revealed increasing instrumentalism – or at least instrumental practices that appear to be more pronounced because the traditional communal codes that governed and repressed them have largely evaporated – amongst the young people of the former working class who were surviving in or attempting to move through the insecure non-tenured sector of the economy (see Hutton, 1995; Taylor, 1999). We have found copious evidence that, despite superficial differences in form and expression, this basic value now influences virtually every aspect of young people's lives as social and economic actors (Winlow and Hall, forthcoming). So far we've focused on the manner in which friendships and personal relationships are now negotiated through the new market-generated social mechanisms that encourage young people to place instrumental self-interest at the core of their working lives in Britain's service sector and their social lives in its burgeoning club and pub scene. Whilst there's insufficient space to exhibit all the interview data from this group, a selection of quotes that ably display the type of sentiments expressed by the vast majority of our sample have been presented below.

It's now clear that the 'nocturnal economy', with its peculiar mix of hedonism and conspicuous consumption, is becoming a crucial cultural site for young people seeking companionship and forging their identities (Winlow et al, 2003; Chatterton and Hollands, 2002). For most of our respondents, the establishment and maintenance of close personal relationships were synonymous with 'going out', and many voiced the belief that without 'going out' there would be no 'friendship' at all.

Paul:

'I used to see my mates all the time when I was younger. I stopped going to the match, and we used to play five-a-side, but that stopped. Now, if I see them, it's always in a bar or something. We were saying, last week, if we'd still get on if we were all sober when we went out, you know, just joking and that...now we only ever see each other when we go out [on the town]'

Neil:

'It's hard to keep in touch and keep friendships going if you're working and you've got a life of your own. My friends and me used to be really close when we were younger because you spent more time together. Now, everyone's got jobs, ... [and] stuff going on. I keep in touch with maybe a couple, like talk to

them on a weekly basis, and I know I can call them if I fancy going out or something. The others, really, haven't got anything to do with me anymore. It's like they're strangers, even though we might go out for a pint and have a laugh together. It sounds harsh, because I still like them and I still enjoy seeing them and they're still my best mates... I think as I get older, I'm more and more happy just to spend time in my own company ...'

Lianne:

'[Apart from Paula, my best friend] the others, to be honest, I just see when we go out. They're nice and that, don't get me wrong, but, I don't know, I don't like to get drawn into all that kind of stuff, where, you know, you see each other all the time... We usually get on all right, but I know, if anything happened, or if I stopped going out, I just probably wouldn't see any of them... There's a time and place for friends, and I suppose we all like to meet up now and then, and we text each other and stuff, but really apart from Paula, I'm not that close to any of them.'

Of course friendships have been changing across the individual's life-course for some generations, but what becomes important here is the culturo-economic context in which these fragile relations are enacted and maintained, where the long-term mutuality, reciprocity and loyalty that were core properties of traditional friendships are being rapidly eroded by the prevailing neo-liberal ethos of self-interest. Although some of our respondents talked about the depth of their affections for friends, in most cases they were mindful of the inherent instability of these attachments from the moment they were established. The 'close relationship' seems to have become a *rare bonus* rather than an everyday normative end in itself, a luxury that is always contingent on the utility that it provides for the achievement of personal occupational and lifestyle ambitions. Many current youth friendships do not seem to be generating the deep personal knowledge of each other's lives that was such a palpable feature of traditional working class communities (Willis, 1990). As traditional community and the ethos of mutuality declines, labour markets become increasingly diverse and friendships become centred around lifestyle ambitions, individuals are now often unaware of their friends' work, family, politics or inner emotions because they have no regular contact in these dimensions of life. An unwritten agreement appears to exist that the anticipated hedonism and abandon of a night out should not be spoiled by talk of them.

Joe:

'I think we make a conscious effort not to talk about certain stuff. If one of the lads comes out and starts talking about work, complaining about this or that, he's just going to get the piss taken out of him and everybody knows that. We get enough of that ourselves, during the day. We don't want to hear about depressing stuff cos it's going to spoil the night. You go out to have fun... We'll talk about girls, sex, drinking, football... We'll take the piss out of each other all the time: Out of what someone said, out of clothes, anything, because that's the point of the night, to have a laugh, and that's why we all get on well because they're all up for a laugh.'

While they could often recount in detail aspects of their friends' 'going out' selves, the everyday aspects of their lives appeared secondary.

'Most of them I know everything about. I know who's going to get pissed first, I know who's going to be on the score all the time, I know which ones are going to sneak off to meet their girlfriends, I know who's going to get chucked out of nightclubs... The sense of humour you have to know because you need to know how far you can push certain people, like Eric, he'll stand for a bit of piss-taking but not too much or he'll go mad, whereas someone like Andy just takes the piss all the time... Eric, guaranteed, is going to have the worse clothes ever, Ian likes trainers, and he keeps getting dodgy hair cuts... and Tony, he's probably the best looking and most likely to score.'

These sorts of assessments of friends, grounded in their detailed knowledge of the new cultural codes that have emerged in nocturnal leisure culture, contrast starkly with the often 'deeply descriptive' and insightful knowledge of the other that characterized traditional close friendships. Whatever familiarity with the personal histories and inner emotional lives of his friends Joe might have doesn't trip off the tongue as easily as his stories of their nights out together:

'Eric works in a factory somewhere in Northville... I'm not sure what he does really, something to do with car parts... He still lives with his Mam... I'm not really sure what happened to his Dad. He grew up in Yorkshire somewhere so I'm not sure where he went to school... I think he likes his job, the money's not bad, but he doesn't talk about it much... Tony is a car salesman, he did OK at school I think, but we didn't go to the same school so I'm not 100%. He's got a girlfriend and he's just got a flat in town. He used to live with his Mam and Dad. His girlfriend is called Karen, and that's about it really. He's always got a sunbed tan and he drives a Golf.'

Friendships appear to be used increasingly as a vital lubricant to the successful immersion of the self in the competitive and often narcissistic symbolic interplay of nocturnal leisure. As both traditional cultural norms and current fashion dictate that one cannot 'go out' alone, friendships must be maintained in order to allow and enhance the adventure in the nocturnal economy. Our data does not suggest that friendships always remain meaningless, but rather that these young people are tending to negotiate friendships initially and maintain them over time *primarily* on the basis of what they can get out of them, rather than regarding them as ends in themselves and an everyday normative aspect of their lives:

'I think mostly I was driven by the music, that was what was important to me. We'd go all over the place [clubbing], and I can remember I'd always offer to drive, or book trains or whatever, because I really wanted to go and you're trying to get all your friends to go... We sort of stayed together because we all wanted to go clubbing together; there was no-one else I could've gone clubbing with. If they didn't go I couldn't go... Slowly but surely we started to drift apart...'

'We all enjoy a good night out, and we all have a laugh when we go out together. There's maybe ten of us who go out regularly, but really, there's only really Paul who I'd call a good mate, because the others, I mean they're still mates, still good lads. But, apart from going out I don't really see them. I don't

even think most of them know what I do. See, it's not really talked about. You go out to have a laugh, and that's it.'

If conspicuous consumption and hedonism are the ends, work is the means that brings the ends within reach. These young people tended to drain their working lives of any residual symbolic meaning. Their approach to work often appeared purely pragmatic and instrumental: they worked in order to get the money to consume. Once again, this attitude might well have characterised many work cultures during modernity, but the crucial difference here is the current way fellow-workers relate to each other while they're doing it. Whilst at work, they tended to display only shallow aspects of self, rarely forming bonds with work mates and rarely acknowledging even the possibility of mutuality (Winlow and Hall, forthcoming). Labour mobility and the separation of work from community are important factors in the construction of a working environment populated by 'strangers', and in some cases this process was exacerbated by the nature of the work these young people did. For example, approximately half of our sample of young working people were employed in call centres, and consequently were distanced from workmates by workstation partitions, headsets and the constant flow of calls that demanded their attention. Donald's description of his work and his personal approach to it expresses a number of the key sentiments that pervaded our sample of young workers in this sector:

'It's got to the stage where I just go into autopilot, just blank out and take calls without really thinking about it...I have to stay there at the minute cos I need the money... It's [work] just the way it goes and you've got to get on with it. I hate it, but what can you do? Everyone needs money, it's the only thing that matters, you need it buy stuff, to do things, to go out, so you've got to put yourself through it [work]... There's nothing I like about it [work], nothing at all. The money, the people, it's just not a nice place to be and not what I want to be doing. Without the money though, you've got no social life, nothing.'

Joanne:

'Sometimes I think it's all right and sometimes I hate it. I don't want to stay there forever, but I need to have a job like that 'til I finish at Uni... Some of the people there are all right, but I haven't really got to know many people that well. You go off on breaks and you see different people so it's difficult to get to know many people. At the end of the night, everyone just gets out of there as soon as possible... I work nights and weekends mainly, but there's thousands of others who you never get to see cos they work different shifts. Most of the people in my team smoke, so they're outside having a fag, so it's can be a bit boring. Plus, when it's busy, the calls are coming in all the time, it's just one after another, so you can't really talk to each other... Even at the end of a call, you've got to mess about with the accounts, then whoever you were talking to has got another call, so it's a bit weird really... They have staff nights out but I wouldn't go... I don't really want to, we just haven't got that much in common really. I'd rather go out with my own friends.'

In much the same way as Donald, Debra appears to sifting and sorting aspects of work in order to fit in with the ethos of individualism and the pleasure principle. Work holds little or no pleasure, and her approach to it attempts to cut the traditional links – either resistant and negative or conformist and positive – between work and identity.

Those who surround her on the office floor don't constitute a social group to which she feels any attachment, and the traditional forms of mutuality and resistance associated with low paid labour appear to have lost their resonance:

I'm polite to everyone, I smile at people, but underneath I'm just thinking about other things. What's on TV that I'm missing, anything apart from work. Some people are obviously more chatty than me and you can tell some of them are friends, but I think a lot of the people there just use work to get money, and couldn't care less about it. Now, people just talk to me if they need to or to pass the time on a break or whatever.'

Peter:

I just want to get out of there as soon as possible. It's just a way to earn some money until I find something better... The people there, they're mostly young, 19, 20, the manager's only 27. I think most of them, you know, they don't like it, but most of them, they'll probably end up staying there cos there's not much else they can do... Me, I'll end up doing something else cos I'm not like them really.'

Whilst a number of themes can be developed from this data (see Winlow and Hall, forthcoming), our concern here is the riptide of instrumentalism surging through the lives of many young people trapped in this exploitative employment sector and subjected to the overwhelming cultural power of the global consumer market and its attendant neo-liberal politics. Not only do they appear to be emptying employment of meaning and disassociating themselves from colleagues and traditional community, but also they prefer instead to relate their own identities to the sign value of the general consumer and nocturnal leisure industries. In this powerful current many appear to be establishing and maintaining personal relationships not as ends in themselves or sanctuaries for human affections and the urge to resist, but as means of successfully negotiating the insecure and difficult new terrain of neo-liberal consumer culture.

Now we want to shift the focus to another group of young people who inhabit conspicuously less stable and supportive home environments, and whose attempts to survive and prosper on this same terrain are characterised by persistent involvement in criminality. Here, it will become apparent, our inability to use recording equipment with this group of respondents required a different research method based on the unstructured interview.

Radiator Ronnie has been involved in acts of petty crime since his first 'dipping' (pick-pocketing) attempt at the age of twelve. By the age of fourteen he was a regular shoplifter and drug user. Now in his early twenties, he has graduated into small-time drug distribution and various types of theft, specializing in the removal of appliances and equipment from building sites and vacated council houses, especially central heating systems, from which his nickname derives. His attitude to acquaintances displays the same instrumentality as the previous respondents, but it tends to be expressed in a more hostile manner when he describes most of them as 'mugs' or 'muppets' who had better not 'fuck him around' in the 'business' arrangements they make with each other as temporary accomplices, receivers of stolen goods or customers in the drug-distribution network. They are chosen primarily for their

functional use to Ronnie's personal efforts to gratify his immediate desires and continue to 'please himself' in his choice of lifestyle; their relationships are little more than a shifting matrix of brief fiscal transactions and exploitative deals. He displays no sense of mutual interests or common fate: everyone in the world is simply 'out for themselves'. His attitude to current occupational opportunities is again similar, only more extreme, and the death of his beloved grandfather caused by industrial disease provides a powerful justification for his total rejection of 'shitty work', with its low pay and overbearing authority, as a valid means of survival or prosperity. Only 'mugs' work.

Trippy is a twenty-four year old heroin addict who has recently moved back in with his parents after being fitted with an electronic tag, a disposal that requires a place of residence with a permanent telephone connection. He feigned depression and psychosis to qualify for disability allowance rather than social security, because the former does not carry 'job-seeking' requirements. His attitude to work is again hostile: 'I won't be working me arse off for four quid an hour like some of them daft cunts'. His friendship network, based mainly around drug-taking, has fragmented over the past ten years of his life as many of his former acquaintances have drifted away. He remembers that relations with his acquaintances were consistently hostile, and bouts of drug-taking and drinking would often end up in arguments, fights and permanent rifts. He was taught by his father to use violence as a first resort in dispute resolution, to mistrust all others and to put his own interests first. Relations with his family are strained, and he has never felt any reliable support from his jobless and occasionally violent father or his permanently ill mother. He seems to have adapted in a fatalistic way to the uncertainty and insecurity that prevails in today's world:

"I mean, fuck knows what I'll be doing in ten years time, I could be fucking dead, in the jail, I could win the lottery, fuck knows. I'll still be taking drugs, I know that much."

John's interview was permeated by constant reference to the inadequacies of what he perceives as his lazy, incompetent and negligent father. He also displayed what could be construed as a misogynistic contempt for women who practice what he sees as the sort of loose sexual morality that he suspected was a characteristic of his mother. He left his girlfriend – who, at 27, was 11 years older than him – quite early in the relationship, because he 'didn't like the responsibilities' that accompanied living with a 'useless slag' and looking after children who had been fathered by a number of other young men. To him, the influx of 'scrounging foreigners' to impoverished locales in Britain was the principal threat to his personal prospects, although he demonstrated no interest in politics apart from a vague affinity to the BNP. When asked, he appeared to be unaware of the history, the structure or the policies of this particular party. All politicians, and all other individuals for that matter, are 'cunts out for themselves', and throughout the interview he emphasised his own instrumental individualism and attributed it to everyone else as a matter of course. Everyone is 'on the make'; how individuals go about satisfying their desires is a personal matter, and, as if to emphasise his commitment to the tactics he preferred, the word 'thug' was tattooed in elaborate script across his stomach.

While these young men tended to exhibit dispositions and forms of criminality traditionally associated with the 'lower-class' (see Miller, 1958), in reality they exist

largely outside the restrictive codes of traditional lower class culture (Horne and Hall, 1995; Jefferson, 2002) and, for the most part at least, outside of all but the most formal and punitive techniques of social control. The development of criminal cultures in micro-communities that have been excised from advanced capitalism's commodity circuits (Horne and Hall, 1995) and excluded from society (Young, 1999) has 'liberated' many young men and – and, increasingly, young women (Chesney-Lind and Pasko, 2004) – from their local variants of modernity's repressive techniques of maintaining civility and sociability. However, although these allegedly 'transgressive' practices do tend to appeal to some romantic sociological commentators (for critiques see Sumner, 1994; Hall and Winlow, 2003; Jenks, 2003), our evidence suggests that in reality they are usually accompanied by a palpable sense of menace and absorbed in the values of conspicuous consumption and its attendant mass-media imagery. The cultural capital that many of these young men carry is now associated with naked self-interest, which is glorified in criminal cultures that have been allowed to flourish in locales where the legitimate economy is in permanent recession and modernist methods of social control – formal or informal – no longer operate effectively. Techniques of enacting consumerist values and demands slide further away from social acceptability with each passing year, manifesting themselves quite often in brutal methods of pursuing personal interests that are now appreciated by those who inhabit the vague boundaries of 'street culture' (Shover and Honaker, 1991; Jacobs et al, 2003). The inability to plan for the future that is now a feature of everyday life (Bauman, 2003) takes on added significance in criminal cultures, and cultural capital pivots on the performative ability to negotiate the burgeoning criminal marketplace with a combination of wits and violence across an atomised cultural terrain that not too long ago was saturated with communality and mutuality.

Apart from a few fleeting allusions from those engaged in higher education, neither group displayed a significant degree of the long-term rational calculation and consequential awareness that Wouters (1999) insists is essential to the maintenance of stability and civility in a world where the traditional 'conscience' or 'super-ego' – a product of now largely obsolete inhibiting and repressing cultural rules – is no longer the principal reproductive mechanism of the civilizing process. Many appeared to be immersed in the codes and practices of individualism and entrepreneurship and tightly focused on their personal ambitions, but few were adept at planning ahead for themselves beyond the short-term or considering the long-term social consequences of the new culture that they were busy enacting in their everyday lives. A sense of collective politics was *entirely* absent. Aside from the problems associated with attempting to predict the life-course in essentially unpredictable times (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), the need to slake the thirst of market-generated desire has profoundly transformed approaches to social and cultural engagement.

Many individuals in both groups seemed determined to achieve a common form of status in consumer capitalism's cultural hierarchy, but the means of achieving this end were notably different, which gave the impression that in the classical Mertonian sense lifestyle status-groups were emerging around different means of achieving common cultural goals set by consumer capitalism (Merton, 1938). However, the current scenario has moved beyond the quaint 'house on the hill' ambitions of New-Deal American dreamers. Most expressed a preference for a 'real fuck-off job' as the answer to their common ambitions of wealth, total personal freedom and a high

status-ranking in the hierarchy forming around those ideals, but resigned themselves to the probability that this will never be attained. The majority of the criminal group were as highly attuned to consumer symbolism as the more law-abiding sample of young people, but their attitudes to work were tellingly different. The employed group approached their work in a surly, resigned and purely instrumental fashion: a necessary hardship to fund their immersion in hedonistic leisure and consumption. The criminal group were also instrumental in their attitude, but willing to tolerate the inconvenience of work *only* if rewards were high enough to fund *instant* access to the commodity market's high ground. As Paul, a small-scale drug dealer and occasional thief told us:

“Work is a nightmare... To be honest, I can't see why people bother, all the headaches and worrying about bills... I've been offered jobs a couple of times but you think, if I'm going to be getting paid nowt anyway what's the point?... I think something like, maybe 50 grand, and then it's worth it. You get yourself a Mercedes, all the best clobber, then you can put up with it.”

The criminal group displayed characteristics already well-researched by criminologists: a radically dismissive attitude to work and education, the experience of childhood in chaotic, uncomfortable and unsupportive families, the cultural normality of violence and criminality in their locales and the relative absence of work and opportunities in local economies that languish in permanent recession. However, our research suggests very strongly that added to this is an upturn in the degree of uninhibited instrumentalism that many young people are willing to use to achieve their paradoxical ambitions to both fit in and stand out in consumer culture (Winlow and Hall, forthcoming). The inhibiting norms that permeated working-class cultures in Britain's classical capitalist phase are now being rapidly displaced by the sort of rugged hyper-individualism that is more readily associated with North American culture, and instrumentalism is being enacted in a more radical, non-consequential and ruthless manner by individuals who feel trapped – and in many cases *are* trapped (Westergaard, 1995; Wilson, 1996) – in situations of extreme economic disadvantage, cultural impoverishment and psychosocial insecurity that set them apart from other social groups.

Insecurity's Magnifier

One of progressive criminology's biggest mistakes over the past forty years was to marginalize discussions of the conditions that underly crime and assume that criminality is simply a socially constructed category constituted by the powerful elite's ability to criminalize the cultural preferences of the 'marginalized other'. This contributed heavily towards criminology's 'aetiological crisis' (Sumner, 1994; Young, 1999) and lost a lot of ground to the right, who moved in gleefully with their own populist aetiological preferences such as wickedness, laziness, lack of deterrence and so on (Hall, 1997). There is, of course, no *essential* link between instability, insecurity and instrumentalism on the one hand and crime and violence on the other. So, if the current of competitive individualism and instrumentality sweeping through advanced capitalist life does indeed – as Bauman (2003) speculates and our own data and analysis tends to support – constitute 'an awesome threat' to the social and moral order, how can criminologists begin to make sense of this in a more specific,

historicized way that might help to explain the rises in the rates of crime and violence that the West has experienced during its recent economic transition?

What struck us during our research was the appearance of variegated yet commonly instrumental attitudes amongst young people who are floating in and around the margins of a society in the throes of profound economic and social reconfiguration. The ubiquity and depth of instrumentalism casts doubt on the popular liberal precept of infinitely 'malleable' and 'diverse' subjects capable of constant rational-cognitive and consequentialist appraisal of phenomena and relative autonomy of action in all dimensions of life. Yet, at the same time, our data constantly revealed a very vague, adumbrated awareness of the cultural currents in which they were caught up, and an equally vague unease about the current state of their personal social relationships which, because it was not informed by any prevailing discourse to which they were exposed, casts doubt on the post-structuralist 'subject of discourse' notion. Dissatisfaction with currently fashionable criminological and sociological paradigms (see Sumner, 1994; Eagleton, 1996; Hall, 2000) drew us towards classical concepts, amongst many others the possibility that perhaps Thomas Hobbes and Sigmund Freud were correct in suggesting that all human beings, no matter how much libertarian yearning and bravado they display, carry deep within their psychosomatic being a universal need for at least some *security* in their lives (see MacInnes, 1998).

All biographies and inner psycho-emotional lives are inevitably replete with unavoidable anxieties and vulnerabilities (MacInnes, 1998; Jefferson, 2002), which, denied cultural or political expression, become repressed in the unconscious, creating psychic tensions that demand release in any available form. The trick of civilization is to use culture to shape and inculcate the sort of refined desires that can achieve satisfaction in sublimated, socially acceptable outlets for the release of the inevitable tensions that any form of social and economic existence will cause (Freud, 1979; Elias, 1994). However, the personal ambition that has been systematically fostered by consumer capitalism – to expand, diversify and intensify the less refined yet in purely financial terms less easily satisfied desires that it requires as its primary fuel – creates an additional, external stimulator of insecurity for all who are caught up in it (Hall, 1997). The neo-liberal counter-claim that many human beings seem to thrive and become innovative in conditions of insecurity tends to ignore the fact that this sort of insecurity is not the traditional form experienced by people confronting the difficulties of novel social or material environments, but born of consumerism, and its tensions can only be resolved by further absorption in consumer symbolism rather than the creation of genuinely innovative and transformational solutions. Further, many of the 'cultural innovations' suggested by research groups – such as the Chicago School in their studies of the chaotic 'zones of transition' that appeared during urban immigration in early 20th century North America – were not genuine innovations at all, but variations of traditional ways of conforming strictly and efficiently to the business ethic and the logic of the commodity market. These strategies tended to be instrumental and self-centred much more often than communal or political (Downes and Rock, 2003) and – as they were played out in notably disorganised and trying circumstances where the opportunities to release psychic tension in legally acceptable forms were limited – often violent and criminal. What communality there was tended to appear in the form of hostile and defensive 'ethnic closure' (Downes and Rock, 2003; Taylor, 1999). Put simply, in order to fuel its basic dynamic, capitalism's historical project has evolved the means of stimulating and

harnessing the immutable human tendency to insecurity, risking outbursts of acquisitive crime and violence as by-products that, although unsavoury and annoying, are preferred to political unrest and to be contained by what its functionaries still rather hopefully regard as incrementally advancing techniques of social control (Hall, 1997).

Genuine, authentic resistance to the core economic demand to engage in one way or another with commodity circulation is at the moment virtually non-existent (Debord, 1995; Baudrillard, 1986; Hall, 1997). Apart from peripheral sub-cultures of withdrawal and pseudo-radicalism populated chiefly by downwardly mobile members of the middle-classes (Lasch, 1996), a grounded, viable and resolute political opposition no longer exists. It is disappearing even as a utopian ideal as its language and images evaporate in the heat of mass-mediated neo-liberal culture (Habermas, 1989; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2000). This is a system that has long since colonized its politico-cultural outlands, and, if indeed the threat of expulsion from both the meaning-system and practical interdependencies of a given social order are amongst the most potent generators of insecurity in the human psyche (Fletcher, 1997; Downes and Rock, 2003), the threatening presence of the sheer drop into insignificance that now marks the boundary of advanced capitalism's commodity circuit becomes the inevitable outcome of the intensifying consumer pressure emanating from the core, magnifying the general insecurity that pervades the whole landscape. The death of community also marks the absence of collective means of coping with the constant threat of impoverishment, exploitation, cultural negation or expulsion, and the prospect of being shoved rudely towards this terrifying precipice is now born by the individual.

The potential threat of losing meaning and value in the form of identity '...can be one of the most painful experiences in an individual's life' (Fletcher, 1997:63). The sense of possible expulsion from a disintegrating socio-economic order – no matter how repressive and unjust that order might have been – and having no place reserved in its nascent replacement can engender complex combinations of despair, irrational hostility and quite frantic pseudo-conformist activity (Hall and Horne, 1995). However, the current 'lifestyle-industry' relies precisely on the constant destruction and re-making of identity, which lends weight to the notion that the fostering and harnessing of insecurity is indeed a crucial psycho-social element of capitalism's economic dynamic (Hall, 1997). In his discussion of psychogenesis and sociogenesis, Norbert Elias (1994) drew upon the Freudian principle of psychic insecurity being invoked in unstable social circumstances, where high levels of apprehension amongst a population about the loss of national identity and standing within the geopolitical community can have a profound effect on the cultural and behavioural codes that maintain tolerable levels of sociability and civility amongst the population. Although Elias acknowledged the link between the economy and psycho-social security, he tended to focus more on the fine details of social power struggles (Fletcher, 1997). However, if the economy were to be given more weight as a basal context in the Marxian sense, this analysis could be equally relevant to the break-up of working-class communities, whose members, since their bitter experience of the disruption, dispossession and disempowerment in the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism, had become dependent on the nation's economic fate for their identity and for their material and psycho-cultural security. Even if periods of rapid economic change provide some individuals with opportunities for the free and creative

transformation of identity and role, our research revealed extremely limited opportunities for prosperity and genuine freedom and a high degree of dependency and conformity that has simply been transferred from the roles, identities, norms, values and symbolism of industrial modernity across to the nascent equivalents of advanced consumer capitalism.

In the process of analysing our data we failed to see how convincing explanations of this ubiquitous instrumentalism could be constructed without exploring direct links between culture, identity and economy. Advanced capitalism has brought with it the second crisis of modernity (Wagner in Lea, 2002:106). The problems of equality and inclusion into a relatively coherent and stable social world – albeit one that was characterized by structured patterns of inequality and punctuated by episodic crises – that produced the Keynesian welfare state have been replaced by the disruption of coherence and stability as social and individual identity is compelled to forge itself in a world of permanent crisis and fragmentation. The fact that capital is no longer dependent on labour or social stability and now, in its advanced consumer form, benefits from the weakening of both has left the West in a condition of general socio-economic instability that is blemished by a large number of permanent localised recessions (Taylor, 1999; Lea, 2002). Widening income polarisation and a growing shadow-economy on and beyond the margins seem to engender very little concern amongst a global entrepreneurial class that no longer regards social integration as an ethical concern (Lasch, 1996) or a prudent investment (Hall and Winlow, 2003).

The breakdown of traditional family structure, prohibitive housing costs and the unattractiveness of economically struggling and culturally vilified males (Wilson, 1996; Faludi, 1999; Winlow, 2001) has further hampered the reconstitution of communities in economically marginalized areas. As our research demonstrated consistently, young men now show significantly less respect for older males who can no longer pass on useful skills, styles and values. In the unstable mainstream economy, the middle classes and tenured working class feel constantly squeezed by the threat of downsizing and redundancy, which of course indicates that insecurity, although differing in form and intensity, is a general condition of existence. These mainstream groups have responded by participating actively in what Gray (1998) describes as a process of de-bourgeoisification, fragmenting away from their once relatively stable interest group into much more competitive, hostile and fearful sub-groups based upon occupation, region, gender, age, ethnicity, style and so on, all of which are permeated by intense interpersonal competition.

These fragmented national populations now display very little sense of common fate and mutual interests in their everyday lives except the substitute pseudo-solidarity of fear and nationalism (Lasch, 1979, 1996; Taylor, 1999). Not only does capital no longer require mass labour, but also neo-liberal culture openly and loudly rejoices in this fundamental historical shift in relationships, lauding it in that rather comically utopian Ayn Rand style as the great liberation of the individual entrepreneur from the constraints of needing workers to make things. In the dizzying circuits of cyber-business, the entrepreneur's 'idea' can simply appear in front of consumers as if by magic. The traditional difficulty that lower-class groups experienced in defending their rights and struggling for politico-economic power has now been to a large extent displaced by the extreme difficulty of finding and fulfilling roles and responsibilities that are defined by the market-performance principle; the trick is now to frantically

find a function with some responsibilities before one can defend it or persuade neo-liberalism's political priesthood that one has any rights at all (Hall, 1997). The insecurity born of relative deprivation and political exclusion is now compounded by the far more overwhelming insecurity engendered by the relative inability to *participate in* and *matter to* advanced capitalism's performance-driven consumer/service economy: the prospect of total insignificance and redundancy now looms over and bears down on the individual. The poor no longer matter (Lasch, 1996; Davis, 1998; Lea, 2002) to the logic of the economy or the global overclass, and the insecure and competitive middle income groups, immersed in maintaining their own ability to participate and prosper, also care little: the poor – as our data shows, also joined by those in low-grade work near the precipice of relative poverty and insignificance – in a vague but very potent way, sense it (Horne and Hall, 1995). Gated communities and increased surveillance signify the paranoia induced by the palpable inability of formal or informal institutions to manage and regulate the current phase of economy and society (Davis, 1998), and the 'working class' is no longer something in which to seek collective strength but something from which to escape. The residue of non-escapees is the new 'dangerous class', to be dealt with no longer by welfare, discipline and normalisation but calculated actuarially as a social risk to be minimised (Wilson, 1996; Morrison, 1995). Fragmentation, insecurity, hostility and crime have now become part of the way the new economic system works rather than signifiers of its breakdown (Lea, 2002).

If Elias' (1994) claim that codes of civilized conduct tend to start crumbling in those dimensions where fears and insecurities are at their most intense, then a direct connection between advanced consumer capitalism and rising levels of incivility, hostility, crime and violence can without any doubt be postulated. Put simply, the primary generative source of fear and insecurity is not mass-mediated ideology and discourse but the experience of everyday life in the very real grounded and relational realities created by advanced capitalism's political economy. According to Fletcher (1997:84), disintegrating groups, or at least those with a sense of their own impending disintegration, tend to display the following indicators:

'...a rise in the levels of fear, insecurity, danger and incalculability; the re-emergence of violence in the public sphere; growing inequality or heightening of tensions in the balance of power between constituent groups; a decrease in the distance between the standards of adults and children; a freer expression of aggressiveness and an increase in cruelty; an increase in impulsiveness; an increase in involved forms of thinking with their concomitantly high fantasy content and a decrease in detached forms of thought with an accompanying decrease in the 'reality-congruence' of concepts'.

Criminological research has demonstrated consistently that these indicators have increased their presence quite notably in most areas of permanent recession in the West (Wilson, 1996; Taylor, 1999). Our own research highlighted an important difference in the *degree* of insecurity that pervades the two groups of respondents. Both groups displayed similar attitudes associated with a general move towards atomisation and instrumentalism, a move that could possibly be explained as the product of neo-liberalism's powerful culture of instrumental individualism – a sort of revived and purified classical utilitarianism – operating as the principle guide for young people who are confronting the stringent demands of consumerism. However,

the criminal group tended to lack the minimal conformity to the work ethic, modest personal ambitions, techniques of personal presentation, family support and minor accreditation that protected the casual service workers from the extreme insecurity that pervaded the former's everyday existence. This is a sort of radiation-shelter scenario. The current atmosphere, which is thick with the fall-out from the process of stimulating and harnessing the human propensity for insecurity as the primary fuel for the capitalist project in a process that resembles nuclear fusion, is indeed the generality, and it is invariably extreme in its nature. In this macro-climate we all live with the nagging possibility of falling off the edge into oblivion. Protection and survival depends upon the strength of the radiation shelters that individuals and small family, friendship or entrepreneurial groups – but *primarily individuals* – can maintain around themselves.

What is rather lacking in criminology at the moment, as Jefferson (2002) and others astutely recognized, is a convincing explanation of the precise psycho-cultural processes that connect this socio-economically generated insecurity through categories such as class, gender, race, sub-culture and identity to the rises in crime and violence experienced in specific areas of the West since the 1980s. Freud argued that aggression, violence, narcissism and masochism are not simply temporary psycho-pathologies, but in fact durable cultural phenomena, products of complex psychodynamic and socio-cultural processes centred around the Nirvana principle, the primary urge to resolve the tension generated by the stimulation of insecurity (Freud, 1979; 1984; see also Elias, 1994; Fletcher, 1997). As we've argued elsewhere, the capitalist project recently reached a stage where the two main cultural manifestations of its historical pseudo-pacification process – the partial repression of individual desire and the maintenance of stable communal identity – became obstacles to its developmental logic (Hall, 2000; Hall and Winlow, 2003). In the world of mechanised over-production and compulsory consumption, instincts in general have become targets of stimulation and manipulation rather than repression. The old Marxist notion that the development of the instruments of production creates new needs that are socially acquired needs to be revised in the more complex prismatic light of consumerism, which now operates in the realm of manufactured discontents too far beyond the realm of necessity for the term 'need' to be appropriate. Thus consumerism has moved beyond the satisfaction of natural psychic tensions to the satisfaction of expanded tensions that it has itself stimulated as personal ambitions and commodified desires. It is quite possible that the competition and insecurity at the heart of advanced capitalism, disseminated by the language, images and practical demands of consumerism, is at its root nothing more than the return of an archaic technique of directly stimulating the potent unconscious drive to resolve insecurity (Hall, 2000).

We could tentatively name this process Anti-Nirvana. Modernity did at least provide the hope and the means of satisfying basic social and material needs, even though satisfaction was unevenly distributed across the various axes of its social structure. Consumerism's fantasies encourage the revolutionary idea that the limits to pleasure and freedom that the reality principal must impose on us at some time – if we are to understand, confront and deal with the real limitations that need to be worked upon in intelligent and communal ways – do not exist. These solutions are displaced by the individual's desire to satisfy a constantly expanding procession of personal fantasies by acquiring and displaying the symbolism from which they have been constructed.

The need for pleasure, friendship and security ceases strengthening the bonds between individuals and starts strengthening the bonds between the individual and the commodity market, which is becoming the only means of resolving the tension that it has itself stimulated in each individual (Hall, 1997; Hall and Winlow, forthcoming). Our research evidence suggests strongly that one of the main factors in the recent rise of crime and violence is the individual's need for a technique of satisfying these ambitions and desires and thus releasing over-stimulated psychic tension in those locales where the opportunity, support and skills necessary to do this in traditional legal ways are not easily available, where cynicism abounds, where the confidence to create cultural alternatives has never existed, where the tradition of criminality is strong, and where the sense of mutual solidarity and politics has been shattered. The constant individualized attempts to resolve the tension simply fuel the process that produces it, creating a downward-spiralling vortex of further insecurity that is compounded yet again as some of the hostile, criminal and violent attempts at resolution further erode the already badly shredded communal fabric that was once at least a partial refuge from personal insecurity. Of course, the absence of the material comforts and economic opportunities that can temporarily compensate for the loss of community is significantly more advanced in the most impoverished and economically redundant former working-class areas, creating a condition of double-insecurity from which escape can only be a personal matter. There is, we could speculate, no way to prevent these vortices from occurring other than a substantial reduction in the general climate of consumer-driven insecurity and the return of some sense of mutuality and collective politics.

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