

Disturbing continuities: 'peaky blinders' to 'hoodies'

Youth gangs and street violence are not a new phenomenon, says
Geoffrey Pearson.

The youth crime debate in the UK is invariably accompanied by, and embedded within, some notion of generational decline in terms of family, community, authority, tradition and morality, so that young people with their senseless crimes and their tuneless music reflect some kind of modern emptiness. For example:

"That's the way we're going nowadays. Everything slick and streamlined, everything made out of something else. Celluloid, rubber, chromium steel everywhere...radios all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over...There's something that's gone out of us in these twenty years since the war".

Or again:

"The passing of parental authority, defiance of pre-war conventions, the absence of restraint, the wildness of extremes, the confusion of unrelated liberties, the wholesale drift away from churches, are but a few characteristics of after-war conditions".

We know this sorry postwar blues off by heart. However, the immediate and complicating difficulty is that these are both complaints from *before* the war. The first is from George Orwell's pre-war novel *Coming Up for Air*. The second is a Christian youth worker, James Butterworth, reflecting in 1932 on his experiences in the boys' club movement in the Elephant and Castle area of working class London.

'Since the War': which war was that?

This 'postwar' malaise was a general current of feeling in the 1920s and 1930s. One voice of discontent was F.R. Leavis's 'Scrutiny' group at Cambridge, repeatedly thundering against "this vast and terrifying disintegration" of social life. "Change has been so catastrophic", wrote Leavis in 1930, that it had "radically affected religion, broken up the family ... the generations find it hard to adjust themselves to each other, and parents are helpless to deal with their children". T.S. Eliot's writings were drenched in the same anxieties. "We have arrived", he thought, "at a stage of civilisation at which the family is irresponsible...the moral restraints so weak...the institution of the family is no longer respected".

Then as now, these sentiments were linked directly to problems of crime and criminal justice. In addition to common allegations that the family, community and authority were in disrepair, a key

cause of crime was seen as American gangster movies that offered incitements towards 'copy cat' crime and immorality. Indeed, the King George's Jubilee Trust report of 1939 on *The Needs of Youth* summed up a catalogue of complaint that is uncannily familiar:

"Relaxation of parental control, decay of religious influence, and the transplantation of masses of young persons to housing estates where there is little scope for recreation and plenty for mischief...a growing contempt by the young person for the procedure of juvenile courts...The problem is a serious challenge, the difficulty of which is intensified by the extension of freedom which, for better or worse, has been given to youth in the last generation".

Queen Victoria's hooligans

In so many ways these inter-war complaints seem like a carbon copy of our own, and those who voiced them were often to be found looking back to happier times 'before the war'. Indeed, even today the late Victorian and Edwardian years are often regarded as the gold standard of moral worth, remembered as a time of unrivalled domestic harmony. The cosy fug of the Music Hall. The unhurried pace of a horse-drawn civilisation. The rattle of clogs on cobbled streets. Here, perhaps, is the true home of 'Old England' and unfettered tradition. This was not, however, a picture of itself that late Victorian England would always have found recognisable.

"The tendencies of modern life", as Mr. C.G. Heathcote the Stipendiary Magistrate for Brighton explained in 1898, "incline more and more to ignore or disparage social distinctions, which formerly did much to encourage respect for others and habits of obedience and discipline". Submitting evidence to the Howard Association on the subject of juvenile offenders, Mr. Heathcote was in no doubt that "the manners of children are deteriorating" and that "the child of today is coarser, more vulgar, less refined than his parents were". Nor was he alone in taking such a gloomy view. In the following year "the break-up or weakening of family life" was on the editorial agenda of *The Times*, no less than "the break-up or impairment of the old ideas of discipline or order" in the cities.

It was in fact during the hot summer of 1898 that the word 'hooligan' made an abrupt entrance into the English language, in the wake of an excessively rowdy August Bank Holiday celebration in London when hundreds of people appeared before the courts

on charges of assault, drunkenness and assaults on police officers. After the dust had settled, London's original hooligans emerged as what we would nowadays call a 'youth culture', having adopted a uniform dress code of peaked caps, neck scarves, bell-bottom 'narrow-go-wide' trousers cut tight at the knee, heavy leather belts with designs worked in metal studs, and a hairstyle which was cropped close to the scalp with a 'donkey fringe' hanging over the forehead. In other cities, similar gangs with the same dress-style were known and feared by different names: the 'scuttlers' and 'Ikey lads' of Manchester and Salford; the 'peaky blinders' of Birmingham.

In London it was commonly reported that the hooligans engaged in pitched-battles or 'free fights' between rival gangs, armed with iron bars, knives, powerful catapults, and even pistols and revolvers. They also patrolled their local neighbourhoods in rowdy gatherings, shouting obscenities, playing mouth-organs and pushing people down. One of the more alarming aspects of late Victorian street life highlighted by the hooligan gangs was the tradition of resistance to street arrest, whereby a police officer attempting an arrest would be surrounded by dozens of people shouting 'Rescue! Rescue!' and 'Boot 'im!'. The English fair-play habit of fighting with the fists and not the feet would already seem to have entered into eclipse. So badly used were the police that, as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's annual reports indicated, each year around the turn of the century one in four of London's policemen were assaulted in the course of their duty, and one in ten of these would be on the sick list for a fortnight or more. The policeman's lot was not a happy one.

Nor were these mere scuffles. As an indication of different standards of civility and justice, we can note a case from 1898 when a man was killed amidst a bottle-fight amongst holiday-makers returning to London one Sunday evening from a railway excursion to the seaside. The only action taken was that three men were hauled before the magistrates the following day, charged with 'assault', fined twenty shillings each and required to pay the doctor's bill on the dead man. Life was evidently cheap in the streets of 'Old England'.

Moral panics and material realities

What are we to make of these stubborn continuities between past and present which disturb our accustomed ways of relating to youth crime and disorder? Clearly we are in the midst of a 'moral panic' concerning hoodies, knife attacks, gangsta rap, gun culture, ASBOs, chavs and bling and the rest of it. But that is not to say that nothing is going on: in some neighbourhoods, local residents do live in fear of gangs of youths; the use of knives and guns is an extremely worrying problem; drugs are a relatively new aspect of risk culture for young people to engage with, whereas the demon drink is an old friend and foe. A common vulgarisation of the concept of 'moral panic' is that what is represented

in the media is simply 'made up', whereas the true concept emphasises the way in which media images magnify and amplify certain aspects of a phenomenon, while obscuring and down-playing others. So that, what is wrong with government and media responses to youth crime and anti-social behaviour is its emphasis on the unprecedented nature of the problem, while losing its grip on the actual social and historical background. What can be done to unlock this profound historical amnesia? Answers on a postcard please. . . .

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