

Vertigo and vindictiveness: some notes on the political economy of punishment

Jock Young explores the economic and social insecurities of late modern life.

In *The Exclusive Society* (1999) I talked of how insecurities in economic position and identity engender feelings of resentment both in those looking up the class structure and those peering down. In this article I develop this further, noting how such insecurities can be experienced as a sense of vertigo and how, outside the charmed sphere of the contented minority, such uncertainties are tinged with anger and dislike. These processes have a wide resonance throughout society, underscoring many of the anxieties and obsessions of contemporary life.

Vertigo is the malaise of late modernity: a sense of insecurity, insubstantiality, and uncertainty, a whiff of chaos and a fear of falling. The signs of giddiness, of unsteadiness are everywhere, some serious, many banal; once acknowledged, a series of separate, seemingly disparate, facts begin to fall into place. The obsession with rules, an insistence on clear uncompromising lines of demarcation between correct and incorrect behaviour, an increased intolerance of deviance, a disproportionate response to rule-breaking, an easy resort to punitiveness where simple punishment begins to verge on the vindictive.

A wide swathe of the middle classes feel resentment towards those they perceive as an underclass detached from decent society yet living on their taxes and making none of the daily sacrifices that they have to make.

Some of these things are quite blatant, they are the major signposts of our times – the rise in the United States of a vast gulag of 2.2 million people in prison, and one in 34 of the population in prison, on probation, or parole at any one time, the draconian drug laws, the use of terrorist legislation to control everything from juvenile gangs to freedom of speech. Some are quite banal – the obsession with political correctness, zero-tolerance policies, New Labour attempting to control undesirable

behaviour, 'ASBO' entering the English language (even becoming a verb: 'to be ASBO'd'), and a British Home Secretary standing up at the 2005 Labour Party Conference and announcing his intention 'to eliminate anti-social behaviour' by 2010 (a statement of Canute-like munificence). Moral panics abound.

The sources of late modern vertigo are twofold: insecurities of economic position and identity. Although such a feeling of unsteadiness permeates the structure of society, it is particularly marked in the middle classes, in the American sense, of everyone from the middle level manager to the skilled worker. It is less so amongst upper middle class professionals, whose skills and professional organisations protect them from threat, or from the working poor and below who have precious little distance to fall. There is, as a Blair speech writer put it in an inspired moment: 'nowadays an upper class, an underclass and in between an increasingly nervous class'. This covers a wide swathe of workers; here fear of falling is fear of losing everything – it is material dereliction but it is also a loss of narrative, of a sense of career, it is the threat of a broken marriage, and a dislocation of community.

Such a dislocation of work and career threatens both material wellbeing and identity, but on top of this are the effects of the hyper-pluralism of the late modern world. The shock of the different; the encounter with diversity face to face in the cities, on tourist visits abroad and through the global implosion of media imagery and actual realities, produces a sense of disorientation. It points to the possibility that things could be different and that rational discourse need not lead to the same

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conclusions as in one's own culture; it 'de-reifies' and 'de-familiarises' – making the familiar no longer obvious and taken for granted.

But disorientation alone does not precipitate feelings of anger and resentment. Indeed, among the secure and contented middle class, pluralism brings out the sense of the international flaneur; for the sophisticated well-versed in European cultures and the frisson and energies of the United States, the awareness and enjoyment of diversity is an integral part of their lifestyle. For the secure middle classes, such encounters with diversity corroborate rather than threaten their ontology, their way of life, their sense of themselves. But this is not so for a wide swathe of the middle class whose jobs are threatened and who feel resentment towards those that they perceive as an underclass detached from decent society yet living on their taxes and making none of the daily sacrifices that they have to make.

Edward Luttwak, in an article written in 1995 entitled 'Turbo-charged capitalism and its consequences' presents us with three sets of figures. The US aeroplane company Boeing on August 10th 1995 had its shares quoted at \$65, representing 77 times the earnings of the shares in the previous four quarters, whilst in the same week the International Association of Machinist and Aerospace Workers (which is a major union at Boeing) publicised the findings of a survey which showed that 50% of their members, who overwhelmingly see themselves as middle class, felt their jobs to be insecure and only 20% felt themselves to have security of employment.

Lastly, he looks at the extraordinary size and nature of the American gulag, both in terms of prison numbers and those on probation, and parole. On our behalf, Luttwak ties together these three statistics. He starts with the process of globalisation: the deregulation of markets which opens up Boeing's aeroplane sales to the world, whilst at the same time outsourcing the production of airframe parts anywhere in the globe where labour is cheap. Couple this with the computerising of much repetitive labour and one has a downsizing of the work force which results in a remarkable acceleration of profits. Staff are laid off not only in bad times, as in the past, but also, most significantly, in times of prosperity, in order to achieve a more lean and efficient core of workers. Thus we arrive at the second set of figures. Boeing employees are correct to feel insecure in their jobs and their anxiety is compounded by the fact that decent jobs in the primary labour market are harder and harder to find whilst marginal and low paid service sector jobs expand and both formal and informal support for the unemployed is in decline. Thus a middle class sector of the population once part of Galbraith's vaunted 'constituency of contentment' has due cause for anxiety (Galbraith, 1992). For the shift is from a good job with fringe benefits to drastic drops in income, possible loss of highly mortgaged homes, and inability to sustain children in college. 'No society', he warns, 'can fail to pay a heavy price

for widespread middle-class insecurity' (ibid. p.7).

One symptom of this insecurity is the draconian reflex of punishment which forms the core of the American prison explosion. And on a broader scale is the urge to punish and prohibit which characterises contemporary US society. Luttwak refers not only to the 'war against drugs' but also to the vast range of new prohibitions: smoking, fatty foods, sexual harassment, pornography, use of derogatory language, etc. From the quasi-criminal to the politically incorrect, all manner of behaviour, attitude and gesture is subject to taboo and control. The always criminal become more criminalised, the quasi-criminal becomes criminal, and around these large penumbra informal prohibitions arise. Of course some of these activities are doubtful and unsavoury. Yet as Luttwak notes, 'Because each prohibition has its own plausible defence, only their sheer number and great diversity reveal their common origin. They are all expressions of the same deep resentment'.

In the *Vertigo of late modernity* (2007) I attempt, through concepts such as moral indignation, resentment, bulimia and essentialism to point to the social processes and psychodynamics which give rise to both widespread vindictiveness of those who are precariously included in the system and the transgressive anger of those who are excluded.

As widespread concern with disorder is present in many countries, most notably in Britain where the campaign against anti-social behaviour has been taken to new levels and where, unlike in the United States, the overall decline in the crime rate has been largely ignored by politicians and the mass media, let us remind ourselves that the stabilisation or actual decline in crime is a more and more common occurrence in the First World, yet the increase in intolerance of deviant behaviour and punitiveness towards crime has become widespread. I have argued that the causes of this are changes in the wider economy and social structure of late modernity. My contention is that defining deviancy up is an international phenomenon and that this growing intolerance of deviancy is the product of fundamental insecurities generated in late modern capitalism. ■

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References

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