CRISIS...

influential explanation for the explosion of crime in this country post 1955. It is agreed that the post-War world was marked by such widened state provision and softened state penalties, that people were permitted to ignore the consequences of their actions. Charles Murray has argued that the decay of moral standards, the perverse incentives of welfare policy, and the coddling of criminals are all linked. For Norman Dennis and George Erdos, not unlike Murray, the disintegration of the nuclear family and its mores is seen as a principal source of the crime problem.

However, such views suggest that criminals are them rather than us. For example, Murray originally defined the underclass in terms of high levels of illegitimacy, criminality, and an absence of the work ethic. More recently he has emphasised illegitimacy and distinguished between 'the new Victorians' and the 'new rabble'. Such a challenge serves to distance and separate criminals from non-criminals. The 'economics of crime' perspective needs to take account of the moral dimension and its implications. If there has been a particular decline in civility then this has serious ramifications for the 'criminals are potentially all of us' position endorsed by economists. Of course, a widespread decline in civility would be less serious for this approach, with criminals more likely to be all of us, although its significance would need to be explicitly addressed since such civility could not be assumed to have been stable or equally distributed over time.

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The Underclass: Regressive Re-alignment

A few days after six-year-old Rikki Neave's naked, dead body was discovered in a copse only 500 yards from his home at the end of November 1994, his Peterborough estate became the focus of panicky speculations about a crisis of parenting. "Local parents cannot be absolved," commented a reporter for radio's respected World at One current affairs programme. Of what? Killing? Neglect? This child's life and death, much like the death of two-year-old Jamie Bulger in Liverpool, was mobilised to support a familiar motif in British politics - the underclass.

It was not the school's lack of vigilance that attracted the attention of commentators - he had not turned up for school that day - nor the efficacy of community policing, nor the threat to children's safety in their own homes and communities. It was the atmosphere of an estate that could be anywhere in Britain, an atmosphere that subliminally supports the notion of the underclass as a self-evident description of a class that exists outside the cultures of class, beyond history, and beyond reach. All the elements were there of dangerousness and death. His neighbourhood was analysed by a local planning chief as "indefensible space", it was pictured on television as an unlit landscape stalked by lads, and despite the efforts of a well-known local woman to affirm the efforts of parents and to insist that they couldn't lock up their children 24 hours a day, Peterborough's furious mayor announced that she was "absolutely disgusted" and she was sure that youngsters knew what had happened to the child. In her absolute disgust she confirmed a sense of an underclass that was not only unpresented by politicians but did not deserve to be.

The underclass

The notion of the underclass became hegemonic during the 90s, a decade when, if we did not know it before, it became apparent that much of the municipal landscape of Britain was living in a permanent state of economic emergency, abandoned by both public and private economic power and by the political system.

Drawing on a long tradition of class contempt for poor people, the notion acquired new advocates in Britain. They were not concerned with the survival strategies of pauperised places. Nor were they

interested in the cultural contours of neighbourhoods marooned by their lack of resources yet connected by micro-technology to global popular cultures. They conflated these developments with the revolution in sexual manners and relations between men and women as if the latter caused the former, and as if the turbulence of family life, once so secret, belonged only to the poor.

Gender anxieties

What is rendered invisible by underclass propaganda and its advocates in political discourse is that the evidence of domestic disarray is an old, old story - with a different ending. The advocates of the notion of an underclass disconnect poor people from the values, passions and difficulties of the rest of society.

Undoubtedly, the notion of the underclass is sustained by an anxiety about gender and, therefore, represents an intervention in the turbulent relations between men and women which have been at the centre of feminist thought and action for the last 25 years. It is also an intervention at the interface between public and private, the boundary where community life is lived and human subjectivities are shaped. It, therefore, occupies the same terrain as radical women's politics which have drawn attention to those relations at the core of civil society. But it is estranged from the experience of women and repudiates their radical critique of the macho, militaristic cultures which exhaust and frighten the neighbourhoods in which they nest.

Ironically, it is in impoverished neighbourhoods that we witness many young men's commitment to the ancient powers of both proletarian and prosperous masculinity that were traditionally expressed as difference and domination

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It is the role of crime in the crisis of community that has powered this process of alienation. The coupling of crime and community as key terms in political discourse has not illuminated the palpable links between crime and masculinity, but rather holds the morals of mothers culpable for the bad behaviour of boys.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Reinventing civility

The adherents of the underclass, both on the right and the left of the political spectrum, share a preoccupation with gender, and yet they are rugged in their refusal to connect the problem of crime with the cultural histories of masculinity. Crime and community have become the site of a regressive realignment rooted in anxiety about gender. On the Right, the realignment has been promoted by amongst others, Charles Murray whose chilling designation of the underclass as "subpopulations" evokes an imperialist representation of poor people as sub-human colonies who should be met by the robust refusal of the welfare state to support the main agents of their purported degeneration, single mothers. The work of Norman Dennis also exemplifies the masculinist mutiny against mothers that infuses the theory of the underclass.

Both invoke a golden age of family life as an exemplar of communities and homes properly policed by decent dads. Both rely on the discredited regime of respectability as regulator of public tranquillity. Until the mid-Eighties, when the dramatic changes in domestic life, and particularly marriage, were consolidated in Britain, communities had "plentiful good examples of good fathers around them," argues Charles Murray.

For Dennis, too, it is fathers' absence from the family and the community that is the cause of community crime. But Dennis's own affection for the regime of respectability reveals what motivates his fury - independent, and therefore, unruly motherhood. Respectability polarised the roles of men and women and their freedom of movement across the landscape of community. Respectability disciplined mothers in economic dependency upon fathers and constituted fathers not as parents but as providers whose protected access to waged work produced their power over women and their privileged access to the social world.

Dennis has forgotten his own account of that polarisation between the sexes. In one of his best-known texts, *Coal is Our Life*, an account of an archetypical industrial community in the golden era of family life, the Fifties, he described fathers' flight from the family: "A man's centres of activity are outside his home; it is outside his home that there are located the criteria of success and social acceptance. He works and plays and makes his contact with other men and women outside his home."

By his own account, fatherhood was never about parenting. Research into domestic life reveals that whatever the economic status of men, their care of their children and their performance of domestic work is almost unbudged by contemporary expectations of domestic equality.
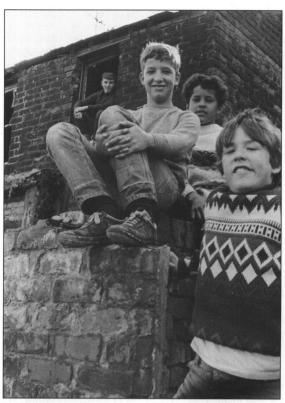
Crime and masculinities

The criminologist Richard Kinsey and others have shown that the research base relied upon in Dennis' more recent publication *Families Without Fatherhood* did not sustain the connection between crime and the marital status of mothers, but highlights a stronger connection between gender and crime. In Tyneside for example, 88 per cent of young offenders appearing before the courts are boys.

Ironically, it is in impoverished neighbourhoods that we witness many young men's commitment to the ancient powers of both proletarian and prosperous masculinity that were traditionally expressed as difference and domination. Cast by poverty into the same time and space that men share with women, primarily home and community, they still show a determined difference from women, a reluctance to share cultures, commitments and responsibilities.

What sustains that commitment is not the absence of fathers or the morals of mothers but a regressive political culture which still seeks to rehabilitate patriarchal values and which recoils from an empathetic engagement with mothers. Citizens living in hard-pressed communities as well as professionals trying to service them are familiar with the consequences of men and women's differential response to their difficulties. If crime is strongly associated with young men, community action shows a similarly strong association with mother. This is not to suggest an essentialist belief that women are simply nicer than men, but that the

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work of mothering locates women at the interface between private and public; it is mothers who put the tea on the table, get the men and the boys up, negotiate with schools and solicitors, and visit the shops and the doctors.

But the political discourse that is guided by the propaganda about fatherless families offers only reproach to the stalwart, if unrespectable, agents of community activism who are often struggling to survive the worst efforts of the lads and the withdrawal of statutory agencies which have abandoned them to their communities' most dangerous elements.

This political discourse is not only misogynist, it is disconnected by both sexism and snobbery from the difficulties of young men and what these young men admire about mainstream masculine assemblies. By reproaching mothers it offers no endorsement for men who, personally or professionally, try to co-operate with women. By bestialising young offenders it escapes the challenge to its own commitment to the very difference that is valorised by these young men.

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