



# TOWARDS THE REMORALISATION OF SOCIETY

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## **Sociological Notes No. 12**

ISSN 0267-7113      ISBN 1 85637 049 6

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,  
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This article was first published in Martin Loney, ed., *The State or the Market: Politics and Welfare in Contemporary Britain*, Sage, London, 1987.

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# TOWARDS THE REMORALISATION OF SOCIETY

STEPHEN DAVIES

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Today British society is in a state of moral crisis. Over the last forty years or so it has become progressively demoralised. This crisis of demoralisation has many symptoms, the most dramatic being the remorseless increase in levels of criminal and delinquent behaviour; others include the apparent breakdown of stable family life and the general decline of civility. To use the terminology of 'crisis' is to imply that a process of change or social transformation, taking place over a long period, has reached a critical stage where some kind of resolution of the stresses and tensions involved has become inevitable. What that resolution may be is quite another matter.

Any observer of contemporary Britain is faced with a truly colossal array of information obtained from a bewildering variety of sources. There are the statistics derived from both official and private publications, the more apparently subjective evidence of surveys and polls, the unquantified and subjective data provided by journalistic accounts and the direct knowledge gained by the personal experience of oneself and one's acquaintances. One task of social scientists is to assess and interpret all of this information. What does it tell us about the state, condition and nature of the entity called British society in the 1980s? This obviously involves making judgements as to the relative value and validity of the different types of information available. It must also involve an element of interpretation and judgement. The naive positivist or empiricist approach which claims to be neutral as between different value judgements and concerned simply with establishing 'the facts' is useless here. The precise meaning or interpretation given to a particular datum such as the number of divorces depends upon the theoretical model employed by the observer. A social analysis which will be of any use and will contribute to our understanding of where we are must have four main features:

1. It must present a model or theory which explains, integrates and interprets large numbers of brute facts.
2. It will of necessity be prescriptive as well as descriptive - a social analysis will lead to conclusions as to the proper or effective course for public policy.
3. It will be normative insofar as it will raise moral and philosophical issues and must adopt clear positions on these. Thus meaningful and useful social analysis must contain, for example, notions of the nature of the good life, the good society, the nature and causes of human action and the differentiation of public and private.
4. Finally, any effective analysis must be historically aware. All human institutions and activities have a history and can only be properly understood in a historical context.

To summarise, the work of social scientists is not only descriptive but diagnostic in the strict sense of simultaneously explaining and prescribing. Social policy can only take place within the context of an agreed model or explanation of the state and condition of contemporary society. Thus interpretations of data feed directly into active social policy.

## THE THESIS

The main thesis being put here is that many features of contemporary British life, and much of the information available to us,

are explicable only in terms of a threatened or actual process of demoralisation. This has reached a stage in parts of Britain where the very existence and idea of a moral community is at risk. The notion of demoralisation does not refer to such obvious matters as the rate of crime, the disregard of sexual and other taboos or levels of single parenthood. It means rather that the very idea of morality and of a moral code or rule which governs relations between individuals is in doubt. Matters such as rising delinquency are symptomatic of this erosion of the belief that there are or should be moral rules of any kind. In particular there has been a falling away from the belief that people as individuals have rights or claims which should be respected in all relations, public or private.

The main premises on which this thesis is based are these:

1. Human beings have free will and the capacity to make choices and decisions. Indeed, life consists of the process of choice.
2. The essence of this is the use of reason and will. By virtue of their capacity for free will humans are therefore responsible beings and can be held accountable for their actions. (Clearly this does not apply in cases where the capacity or reason is undeveloped or absent, as in children or imbeciles.)
3. This accountability is what makes humans moral creatures and enables us to make judgements of right a wrong. If people lack free will in some important respect then questions of praise or censure, right and wrong, are irrelevant when applied to human action.
4. Individuals have certain rights which in one sense constitute a claim against one's fellows. The most important of these are those to life, property and security of person (Rothbard, 1981). Social intercourse between people and groups should be based upon the observance of these rights and claims - indeed if this does not happen then in a very real sense a civil society cannot be said to exist.
5. A violation of rights is a moral wrong. A truly virtuous society is one in which rights are generally observed and respected and people are free to act rather than being subject to coercion, being held responsible for their actions. This leads to the creation of a moral community where, although there may be a plurality of views on particular matters such as sexual mores, there is a consensus that people be held responsible for their actions and that social interactions should respect the rights of others thus making theft, acts of violence and so on generally reprehensible (Buchanan, 1985).
6. Conversely, a social order in which responsibility is denied and rights limited will erode virtuous behaviour until it is faced with a stark choice between moral chaos and the attempt to enforce virtue by force. This is self-defeating because if people are 'forced to be good' their status as responsible beings is further denied and the moral value of a coerced act is inherently dubious.
7. Obviously free will is exercised not in a vacuum but in a particular social and material context. This can give a proclivity to one type of choice and hence action rather than another. Crime and anti-social behaviour are the consequence of the

breakdown of a moral community which leads to changes in people's subjective perception of themselves and their position *vis-à-vis* other individuals.

8. The most important means whereby a moral community is promoted and upheld is through a range of institutions which both enable and encourage people to act in one way rather than another. The state is the least important of these. Families and households, voluntary associations, churches, educational institutions, patterns of work and everyday living are far more significant.
9. Finally, levels of delinquent and immoral behaviour are historically variable: there is not a simple constant level.

## THE EVIDENCE

What then is the evidence for this thesis of demoralisation? To put it another way what are the phenomena which are explained by this thesis and why does it explain them better than other, alternative models? The phenomena called in aid and the evidence adduced are varied but all point in one direction. First, and most dramatic, is the seemingly constant risen in the level of crime. The statistics of crime reported to the police in England and Wales show a rise from 1,200 per 100,000 of population to almost 6,000 between 1960 and 1980 (Kinsey, 1986). For some offences such as burglary and theft the increases are even more dramatic. Since 1979 recorded crime per 100,000 has risen by no less than 40 percent. Such figures are open to criticism on the grounds that they only tell us about those crimes which have reached the attention of the law enforcement authorities: the 'dark figure' of unreported crime is not shown. This means that quite large increases in apparent levels of crime may only reflect a higher level of reporting or greater efficiency on the part of the police. Thus much of the massive apparent increase in rape and sexual abuse in the last two years can be put down to a growth in the willingness of victims to come forward. However, it is not proper to assume or argue that this model of increased reporting can explain the increases in other crimes where the special factors involved in sexual offences do not apply. In fact, the crime surveys introduced by the Thatcher government and those carried out under the auspices of local authorities in Islington and Merseyside all indicate that the increase in several areas is even more rapid than the official statistics suggest (Kinsey, 1984/5; Young and James, 1986; Hough and Mayhew, 1983). So, for example, the British Crime Survey showed that between 1981 and 1983 burglary rose by 20 percent *per capita* as opposed to the official rise of 15 percent (Hough and Mayhew, 1983). Recorded crime is only the visible tip of a very large iceberg. The percentage of crimes recorded in criminal statistics varies from 98 percent in the case of car theft, through 48 percent and 30 percent for burglary and theft from a motor vehicle to 8 percent for vandalism, 11 percent for sexual assault of all types and only 8 percent for robbery/theft from the person (Kinsey, 1986). Moreover, much of this increase in crime is concentrated in certain areas: the rise in Hackney and central Manchester is far greater than that in Surbiton. For the inhabitants of these areas the growth of crime is even worse than the aggregate figures suggest. Thus the Islington survey revealed that in the previous year 31 percent of households had had a crime committed against them (Young and Jones, 1986: p. 201).

The rise in crime is only one part of a more general increase in delinquent, often vicious and beastly, behaviour. Sexual and racial harassment, verbal abuse and foul language, rowdy and boorish behaviour and grossly immodest acts combine to make the lives of many people a misery. Women, the old and racial minority groups are particular sufferers. Clearly this cannot be quantified in the same way as crime because of the element of subjective evaluation; one person's gross indecency or rowdiness is another one's high spirits. Even so, all the surveys and work done of late on life in contemporary Britain point to a high and rising level of delinquent, vicious behaviour (Seabrook, 1978, 1984; Harrison, 1985: especially pp. 228-237). The degree of pain and suffering that can be caused is indicated by one account

published in the *Guardian* where a man from Liverpool describes how many are driven almost to suicide by the treatment they receive from some of their neighbours (*Guardian*, 23 August 1986).

This in turn can be seen as an extreme expression of a more general decline in civility. In this context 'civility' means not just orthodox politeness but general respect for the feelings, sensibilities and autonomy of others; thus to eat pork in front of a devout Moslem or Jew is a gross breach of civility. More seriously, activities such as the playing of very loud music which disturbs and aggravates one's neighbours, or the use of foul language in front of older people and young children, are commonplace examples of such incivility which cause much tension, even distress. Here objective assessment of change is even more difficult but it is revealing that once again a decline in consideration and civility is one of the main complaints of respondents in surveys and journalistic accounts. One fact which all accounts note is that the great offenders for both general incivility and more serious delinquency are the young, especially young males. This is the group which is also responsible for most recorded crime. A very disturbing trend is for such anti-social behaviour to start at an ever younger age; a recent report showed that according to a survey of schoolteachers the attitudes and actions of primary school entrants have declined sharply in the last ten years (Lawrence and Steed, 1986).

As well as anti-social acts there has also been a marked increase in patterns of behaviour which, while not directly anti-social, are profoundly self-destructive and irresponsible and which can contribute to more directly delinquent lifestyles. The most prominent example is the growing use of drugs, but more serious in both scale and effect is the truly massive increase in drunkenness and alcohol abuse, particularly among teenagers. This has grave implications not only because of the personal unhappiness and economic costs but also because of the clear link between drink and crime, especially violent crime.

There are several other pieces of evidence which cannot be presented in a straightforward quantified mode but are perhaps even more important. There is increasing evidence of a decline in stable social relationships, evinced by the rapid increases in levels of divorce, illegitimacy and the number of children and young people running away from home. For obvious reasons it is exceedingly difficult to discern what is happening to personal relationships within the nation's households but it would seem that family ties and relations are becoming weaker, particularly that between father and son. This partly reflects a more general erosion of the social contact between older and younger men. It would seem that for many the family is a restrictive and resented influence which prevents self-gratification and is therefore seen as a hindrance, something to be escaped from.

## CHANGING BELIEFS

This in turn reflects the most sinister feature of the contemporary scene, the domination of public and private discourse and debate by a set of interlinked and mutually reinforcing beliefs.

First is moral relativism, the great scourge of our time: the assumption that there is no right or wrong, that one act or code is as good as another with everything dependent upon the situation or the whim of the actor.

This leads directly to nihilism, perhaps the most fashionable idea of the moment amongst people of all types and conditions. Nihilism comes in two brands, one cheerful, the other despairing, but both share the common premises that nothing matters, nothing has any real value and that virtue is impossible.

Third is the unquestioned assumption that desires and wishes should never be thwarted and that anything which prevents the realisation of wants should be removed. This found classic expression during the public debate on *in vitro* fertilisation, where the desire of parents to have children was taken to be an unanswerable argument - how could anyone prevent the realisation of such a desperate want? (I should point out that I am in favour

of both *in vitro* fertilisation and surrogate motherhood but for other, better reasons.)

However, the most influential and pernicious of all these notions is the denial of personal responsibility. It is one of the great commonplaces of modern times that we are not truly free, that we live in a system of concealed domination and manipulation so that our acts are not our own (Minogue, 1985). The capacity of humans to make choices of their own free will is systematically denied in much modern thought. Actions are explained instead in terms of biology, economic status, environment, uncontrollable psychology and many other factors, seldom in terms of responsible choice. This notion is found on both 'Left' and 'Right', the former explaining crime by pointing to the deprived background of the criminal, the latter blaming drug use on malevolent pushers and ignoring the choice of the users who are seen as helpless puppets.

Fifthly, the notion of identity and character as the product of a series of willed choices is denied. Character and identity are thought to come from outside the individual, being socially determined, and the whole idea of identity becomes problematic.

Finally, one can call in aid several cultural phenomena, notably the cult of violence and aggression which finds expression in films such as *Rambo* and the profoundly anti-social values expressed by the 'youth culture' which represents a working-out in concrete and overt form of the five ideas spelt out above. The diagnosis put here is that all of this forms and is caused by a moral crisis.

#### 'NO PROBLEM' MODELS

What though of other, alternative theories and how can we judge between them and the one put forward here? Are social science models incommensurable paradigms with the decision as to the one you support a matter of political sympathy or personal taste? Actually a model can be judged on several criteria. These are: internal logic and consistency - does it contain major contradictions or anomalies?; its success in explaining the known data - are there any data which it cannot account for?; it may generate predictions which can then be tested by empirical research; and it may generate specific conclusions for public policy which can then be tested in practice.

There are several alternative models but these can be classified under four main heads. Firstly, there are several which either deny that any problem exists or else seek to minimise the extent. One argument is that there are not enough statistically sound data to prove the existence of a true problem of crime and delinquency. The available statistics are held to show only that the legal system is working in a particular way, concentrating upon certain types of case rather than others. By this argument the present state of affairs is neither grave nor historically unusual. This kind of model is flawed in three ways: it overlooks the varying experience of different geographical areas and social groups - there may not be an objective crisis in Surrey while there is in Merseyside; it ignores the overwhelming evidence of the crime surveys that crime and delinquent behaviour are actually more common and rising more rapidly than the statistics indicate; while historically aware, the historical evidence is misinterpreted (see below).

More sophisticated is the popular argument that the present concern with crime and order is a 'moral panic', designed to legitimate an increase in the power of the state and particularly the police (Hall et al., 1978). In this model crime and delinquency serve the interests of a dominant class by legitimating repression at a time of capitalist crisis, by promoting mutual suspicion and weakening solidarity among the subordinate classes and by isolating the most economically exploited members of society as a labelled 'underclass' of incorrigible delinquents while ignoring the crimes and wrongs of the powerful (Box, 1984). Some of these points are shrewd and well taken. The growth in the numbers and powers of the police will on the evidence have little effect on levels of anti-social behaviour and probably does derive primarily from fears for public order: the notion of a 'criminal class' does

not stand up to analysis, whether of today or any other historical period (Beier, 1985; Hall et al., 1978). However, because a rising level of delinquency may have the effect of strengthening support for a strong state, it does not then follow that the rise is imaginary or invented. The panic promoting coverage of certain types of crime by the popular press does not mean that there is no problem, only that it is being presented in a misleading way. This type of model also falls foul of the evidence which undermines the first type and has recently been sharply criticised from the 'Left' and 'Left Realist' school of criminology (Young, 1981; Matthews and Young, 1986: pp. 21-25; Lea and Young, 1984: pp. 11-49; Rafter, 1986).

The third main 'no problem' model is one which portrays delinquent behaviour as simply activity which challenges the dominant ideology, hence anti-hegemonic, with the perpetrators labelled by the use of the criminal law. This model has several crucial faults. Even its advocates hesitate to describe some crimes such as rape as simply anti-hegemonic. More generally, as Rafter points out, such theories ignore the demonstrable fact that while there may be divergent views within society as to the rights and wrongs of, for example, drug-taking, there is a very wide agreement found in every recorded society that acts directly harmful to the person such as theft or assault are wrong and punishable (Rafter, 1986: p. 11). The ideological challenge model also has trouble explaining why most delinquents are not part of deviant subculture but often highly conventional members of the 'dominant culture'. What all of the 'no problem' theories overlook is that the main sufferers of the rising tide of delinquency are the poor, disadvantaged and weak. To assert that their problems are imaginary or 'got up' by the ruling class is both factually inaccurate and offensive.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL EXPLANATIONS

Secondly, there are theories which admit the existence of a social problem of delinquency but explain it by reference to environmental factors rather than the choices of the actors. The most popular accounts for the growth of anti-social behaviour by reference to the economic conditions of modern economies, especially the historically high levels of unemployment. Many of the arguments on both sides of this particular debate are weak. It is easy to show that there is a close correlation between the rise of crime and the increase of unemployment. However, that by itself is not enough to demonstrate a causal connection; if the two are both increasing at the same time there will be a correlation whether they are connected or not (Bottomley and Pease, 1986: pp. 137-140). The common counter-argument that because high unemployment did not lead to high crime levels in the 1930s it cannot be responsible for the high levels of today is also logically faulty. The experience of unemployment may be crucially different today as compared to fifty years ago so that its effect may be different. More to the point, the present rising curve of delinquency was well under way before the world economy slipped into recession in 1973. The flaws in this model are more basic. If criminal and anti-social acts are a consequence of the level of unemployment then one would expect people directly affected by it to be more likely to engage in such acts; this is not the case. This model also has problems with the motiveless and vicious nature of many delinquent acts: if they are a response to an economic situation then why are they so futile by any standard of rational conduct? In particular why should sexual offences increase as a result of a change in levels of economic activity? These questions can only be answered within the terms of the model by adopting a determinist notion of human action which makes economic factors account for almost all choices and renders acts such as rape unblameworthy: how can one criticise somebody for acts which derive from the way they are affected by economic forces over which they have no control?

A slightly different argument explains high rates of crime as the inevitable consequence of modernity. This is easily refuted. It is historically inaccurate: modernity has co-existed with falling rates of recorded crime (Gatrell, 1980). In the contemporary world there are societies such as Switzerland and Japan which are un-

doubtedly modern but have stable or falling rates of crime (Clifford, 1978).

Another argument which has gained currency recently lays stress upon the physical environment and especially the type and pattern of housing (Coleman, 1985). The empirical evidence here is very impressive, with Coleman's study showing a clear correlation between types of anti-social behaviour and particular forms of housing such as deck access. However this again does not explain the totality of delinquent behaviour, nor does it explain why people have responded to particular features of the new urban environment acting in one way rather than another. Why should the dark, dank tunnels of many estates be used mainly by potential or actual thieves? In other words this theory again lacks an adequate model of human motivation and action.

One model which is not lacking in that regard is the one best described as 'populist conservative'. The main feature of this theory is a pessimistic picture of human nature. Humans, especially men, are naturally sinful and prone to wicked acts. They need to be restrained by force or the fear of punishment. Social institutions exist to tame the natural anti-social instincts of men. Delinquency is thus a historically inevitable fact; increases in its incidence are due primarily to the demise of socialising influences and a diminishing likelihood of effective punishment (Van Den Haag, 1975). This model has strong elements, for example the stress on socialisation, but the emphasis on punishment overlooks the clear evidence that there is no clear correlation between patterns of punishment and levels of delinquency. Britain today has higher levels of crime than other comparable countries yet the pattern of punishment is more severe and the likelihood of detection similar.

All of these models share certain features. They are all, except for the conservative, concerned with aggregates and skirt around the question of why individual people act in the way they do. Apart from the conservative they all have trouble with the marked gender variation in delinquency and with crimes such as rape or sexual harassment. None is sufficiently historically aware. They all have problems with features of many delinquent acts such as their frequently impulsive and petty, even pointless nature. Not enough stress is put on the relations between individuals which form the 'sharp end' of crime and delinquency - the methodology is generally collectivist rather than individualist. All except the conservative tend to ignore the wider range of phenomena which go along with more serious delinquency.

## EFFECTS AND CAUSES

The model of demoralisation argues that crime, delinquency and the other phenomena listed above are all part of one dynamic process. As the idea of respect for other people's rights has declined and the very notion of a moral code has been eroded so the consciousness and ways of thinking of individuals are altered. Their actions and decisions are based upon premises which lead often to anti-social acts; this can lead to a vicious circle of demoralisation where each breach of the general principle of responsibility and regard for others leads to further breaches. This model explains a wide range of phenomena, not simply overt crime. What, though, has brought about this situation? It is always hard in social science to distinguish between effects and causes; to take one part of a phenomenon and present it as the cause of the rest is often misleading or worse. Sometimes there is an initial event or happening which then sets a self-sustaining process in train. The demoralisation of Britain can be ascribed to some things which are peculiar to this country, others which are found in most industrialised nations, whether capitalist or socialist (in recent years accounts of delinquency have become a major concern of the Soviet press); it is the countries with low and stable or declining levels of delinquency such as Switzerland and Japan which are exceptional.

A central place must be given to the hegemony of the body of ideas set out earlier. This is both part and cause of the crisis. These ideas took a long time to achieve their current pre-

eminence in thought and debate for although they first appeared in the 1880s it was not until the 1930s that they came to dominate intellectual debate and only in the early 1960s did they achieve the status of 'common sense'. Changes in the patterns of thought and belief of a given society can affect the actions and behaviour of individuals quite dramatically, as the impact of religion on a recipient cultural demonstrates. The more dominant one set of beliefs becomes the more true it appears to be as ever-increasing numbers of people act on the basis of these notions of irresponsibility and self-gratification but from small beginnings they have come to dominate every area of intellectual life - the idea that history or literary studies, for example, should contain an essential element of moral judgement is hardly considered. The source of these ideas is problematic; some would see them as a response to the breakdown of the Newtonian cosmology with its associated 'mechanical' world view (Johnson, 1983), while others present them as a response to the cataclysmic political events of the years since 1914. Yet others identify the beliefs but argue that they part and parcel of an advanced economy or of some complex psycho-historical process (Bell, 1976; Lasch, 1979). This debate is relevant insofar as it has implications for any attempt to undermine the hegemonic status of this body of belief; if they are a response to the demands of a particular type of economy, as Bell argues, then logically the economy must change if the ideas are to be affected. If the ideas are thought to have an autonomous status then intellectual argument and debate may be sufficient of themselves.

## SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC POLICY

Beside the influence of ideas and beliefs is the effect of economic and social policy. The policies followed in both of these areas over the last forty years or longer have worked to insidiously undermine crucial notions of responsibility and respect for others. The main aim of public policy in both areas has frequently been to protect individuals and groups from the consequences of their actions. This undermines any idea of responsibility. The practice of economic intervention and a great deal of social policy have undercut the idea that people as individuals have rights which should be respected since the operative theory has been that the needs of others supersede those rights. Paradoxically, the insistence upon rights in the sense of entitlements when applied to social policy has again eroded the concept of responsibility. These, however, are intellectual effects. More important in matters of policy is the impact which social and economic policy has had on the pattern of everyday life. Since the early 1920s the effect of public policy has been to undermine any sort of self-determining activity such as mutual aid or collective self-help. In the previous century most people were involved in an array of voluntary organisations which met the needs of most for education, leisure, assistance or simple conviviality. The common response to any social problem, personal or collective, was mutuality and co-operation. This tradition apparently died after the First World War and today is much diminished, though there is some evidence of a revival. Since that time the whole emphasis of public policy has been upon large-scale, collective solutions to social problems using the apparatus of the state. This amounts to a radical change in the experience of the majority of people from a situation where the response to any problem was to act on one's own responsibility to one where the assumption is that any difficulty is a public problem and should be dealt with by a paternalist state. This amounts for many to a removal of practical responsibility for and control over one's own life. Against this one can point to the record number of charities and voluntary organisations. However, many of the largest are professionalised with little or no direct relationship between the members/donors and the recipients, while a charity is in any case a different type of animal from a mutual aid association. Again many voluntary bodies partake more of the nature of pressure groups and see their main role as being advocates for an interest in the public policy arena. Even so there has been a revival of true mutual aid in recent years and this is a welcome development, but it has a very long way to go.

Social and economic policy has had other effects which have diminished the role and importance of personal responsibility. In particular it has in practice led to a great transfer of power to professionals. The most obvious case are social workers but perhaps the most harmful example of this process has been the change in the relationship between public and police. Since the turn of the century the entire thrust of public order policy has been to enhance the role and importance of the police while reducing that of the public. The protection of the rights of others is now thought of as a matter which concerns primarily the police, not the public at large. Since all the evidence shows that it is the public which is mainly responsible for upholding order and that public co-operation is essential if any policy strategy is to be effective this has had disastrous consequences Kinsey, 1986).

Perhaps the most visible effect of public policy which has contributed to the demoralisation is the state and nature of public housing stock. The physical structure and layout of many post-war estates have exacerbated the problems of delinquency and anti-social behaviour by making personal contacts in some ways more tenuous and by providing the opportunity for anti-social acts on a massive scale. Significantly, the crucial error appears to have been the creation of many large public spaces which no one was or felt responsible for and which have become derelict, a no man's land of violence, graffiti and vandalism (Coleman, 1985).

The blurring of cause and effect can be seen in the case of a large part of the cultural production of our times. This both reflects a moral vacuum and reinforces it, feeding back into both popular and elite attitudes and beliefs. There are certain autonomous influences which have played a major part in aggravating this, particularly television and the psychological impact of the nuclear arms race. In the instance of television, the problem is not the content or bias of the programme but rather the nature of the medium itself, which appears to promote passivity and lack of engagement as well as other undesirable qualities such as difficulty in concentrating. However these are broadly exacerbatory influences rather than original causes.

### THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER

Finally, there is the decline, already alluded to, of socialising and moralising institutions. Human beings are free to act and to choose, hence responsible, but the way they act reflects the way their character and identity have formed as well as their presumptions. During the formation of character the institutional and social context within which it takes place has great influence. A person brought up in an environment which emphasises clear rules and respect for others is probably going to act and develop differently to one raised in an environment of anomie<sup>1</sup> and irresponsibility. The most important factors seem to be the following: growing up in a stable household, at least in the earlier years of life; contact with adult members of society, especially during adolescence, which encourages integration into adult society; the existence within the home and life-sphere of a clear system of values; the opportunity to have responsibility and to take part in activities which promote civility and co-operation as well as personal responsibility (Murray, 1984). One should stress that the precise composition of the household or of the system of values is secondary; what matters is that these exist. Thus a single-parent household can be stable, more so than one with serious family divisions. The crucial matter is the reason for its being a single-parent household and the way it functions. However, it is of course much more difficult to meet some of the above criteria when a single parent but it can be done. There is a high correlation in the United States between single parenthood and delinquency (Murray, 1984) but these are both the product of a demoralised culture rather than one being the cause. The question of contact with adults is particularly important. As indicated earlier, young men are far more likely to be delinquent than women of a similar age. Setting aside the argument that girls are nice while boys are male barbarians/animals, the crucial difference appears to be that young men have far less contact with mature older men than girls have with older women. This makes the

dominant influence the peer group which, given other factors, is a profoundly anti-social one (Morgan, 1978). The decline of moralising agencies creates a vicious circle - as one generation succeeds another so the moralising agencies are weakened to an ever greater degree.

### THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before examining the prescriptive element, what of the historical context? Some would have it that the current state of affairs is merely a reversion to a historical norm. In this way of thinking it is the low rates of crime and delinquency recorded between 1920 and 1960 which are aberrant (Pearson, 1983; Middleton, 1986). However, this overlooks several facts. Most notably it ignores the historical pattern of crime, delinquency and anti-social behaviour recorded in Britain over the last 150 years. This shows a prolonged decline from the middle of the last century up to about 1900, followed by a long period of stability, then a sharp rise. In other words, since the Industrial Revolution levels of crime and delinquency have been static or declining as often as rising. The definitive work in this area is that of Gattrell, which shows quite clearly the scale and extent of the fall (Gattrell, 1980; Gattrell and Hadden, 1972). Trials for indictable crime fell from 288 per 100,000 to 164 between the 1860s and the late 1890s while for violence crime the decline was even steeper (Gattrell, 1980: pp. 280-292). The fall in crime was even steeper than these suggest for the increasing efficiency of the police led to a higher rate of detection which for some time counterbalanced the real decline.

What can explain this dramatic change? The obvious answer is that it reflected the impact of the New Police following the County and Borough Police Act of 1853 and the deterrent effect of the new penal regime adopted after the Prison Act of 1877. However, as Gattrell points out, the evidence does not support this for the pattern of conviction and sentencing did not change markedly (Gattrell, 1980: pp. 290-301) so that there is no evidence for any deterrent effect. Again there is no demonstrable correlation between police activity and levels of crime: in Manchester the fall in recorded crime began after the peak of police activity and during the period when the local police were plagued by corruption so flagrant that the Home Office was obliged to suspend the authority and impose a new Chief Constable (Davies, 1985; Jones, 1982). A similar pattern is found elsewhere. The decline in crime began at roughly the same time all over England and Wales regardless of the nature and level of policing in any particular locality and continued until just before 1900. Moreover there is abundant evidence of a more general decline in anti-social behaviour. The acute problems of drunkenness and social breakdown commented on by observers of the 1830s and 1840s had declined till by the late 1890s they were confined to a relatively small section of society. All the observers of the later period commented on the increased sobriety and respectability of the mass of the people in late Victorian England. What had happened between 1840 and 1900 was a great process of moral reform; the contrast at every level between the state of affairs in 1900 and 1840 is so sharp as not to require comment. Gradually Victorian society had developed mechanisms which minimised anti-social behaviour and controlled it when it did occur.

This change came about not as a result of direct political action but through the combined effect of voluntary action and the development of a liberal commercial society which by its workings encouraged the upholding by most people of a code of personal responsibility and respect for others. The process of reform had begun long before the decline in anti-social behaviour showed itself - there would seem to have been a one-generation delay in its effects being felt. What does the historical evidence and the diagnosis presented earlier indicate about the proper response to the problems of today?

### WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

The prescription which derives from the diagnosis is sweeping and has some surprising elements. In general, if anti-social acts are the outcome of the decline in the notion of morality and par-

ticularly the belief that others' rights should be respected, then the crucial need is to reconstruct these ideas. What is needed is a cultural/moral reform like that achieved between 1840 and 1900. This implies some measures/strategies which will not yield results for a long time and others which will have a more immediate palliative effect. In the short term changes in state policy are important but the longer term requires social or private action. Indeed in the longer term the role of state action in the process of remoralisation should be peripheral rather than central.

1. The reform and physical reconstruction of a large part of the housing stock is clearly an urgent matter. This will be expensive but the immediate results, as experiments in London have shown, can be dramatic. The cost can be reduced by resort to self-build/rebuild schemes which have the additional advantage of making people once again responsible for their environment.
2. The entire pattern and strategy of policing needs to be rethought to involve the public and re-emphasise the general responsibility to uphold the law and respect others. This could mean going beyond neighbourhood watch schemes and reviving old institutions such as Associations for the Prosecution of Felons, as well as private prosecutions and more local control of the police.
3. In penal policy there is a need firstly for clear and certain penalties for wrongdoing, implying far less independence for magistrates and secondly for penalties which emphasise the personal responsibility of delinquents for their acts and towards their victims. This implies a major move towards a restitutive system of penalties as opposed to a retributive one (Barnett and Hagel, 1977: pp. 331-383).
4. The criminal law should be reformed so as to emphasise the nature of crime and delinquency as breaches of individuals' rights to life, property and security of person. This implies firstly that most of the offences now covered by the criminal law should be reclassified as civil wrongs (torts) since they do not involve such a breach but are rather acts of nuisance or else breaches of regulations of one kind or another. The criminal law should be reserved for acts which are offences against the rights set out above, so marking them out clearly as peculiarly reprehensible. Secondly, this implies that victimless crimes should be abolished since no person's rights have been infringed. This may seem strange in the context of an argument for remoralisation - surely acts such as drug-taking and prostitution are among the main targets for any process of remoralisation? Indeed so, but the crucial question again is that of responsibility. Where people engage in voluntary acts which harm themselves they must bear the responsibility for those actions and their effects. Any reform must be voluntary since, as said earlier, a coerced act cannot be moral except in the cases of children and mental incompetents. The state can act as an agency of remoralisation *via* the criminal law only where individuals' rights have been violated. Elsewhere, as in the cases of drunkenness and drug use, the process must be voluntary and carried out by other means than through the state. This would have the additional benefit of making people such as drug users more demonstrably responsible for their own acts and condition which on the evidence of alcoholism is the only hope for them anyway.
5. There need to be radical changes in social policy away from a paternalistic or protective model to one which emphasises choice and personal responsibility. The state should not provide services or goods directly; it should be an enabler, not a provider. This would mean major changes in social security and a general move to cash payments rather than free services with individuals left responsible for the disposal of the cash (Davies, 1986). Some may argue that welfare payments should be made in the form of vouchers rather than cash on the grounds that otherwise one could not ensure that money would be spent on the things for which it was intended. Such a policy, however, would undercut the fundamental idea of enhancing responsibility and control over one's own actions. Inevitably some people will act irresponsibly but the solution is not to take responsibility away from them - this will only increase their irresponsibility - but to ensure that they face the consequences of their actions. The underlying assumption behind the idea of using vouchers is that there exists a class of irremediably irresponsible people who must be guarded and regulated by a paternalistic elite. If this is so, then any idea of moralisation would be impossible.
6. There should be changes in the practice and theory of social work with a move back towards the ideas put forward in the last century by the Charity Organisation Society, moving away from the social worker as 'protector', responsible for looking after a client who is incapable of judging what is in their own best interest. The social worker should rather be an 'enabler' or 'assistant' who helps self-motivated action on the part of the client but no more. Such ideas are already widespread in social work but need to become more dominant in practice. (For the COS and its ideas see Mowat, 1961.)
7. The government should seek, perhaps through financial incentives, to encourage the formation of stable households and to better integrate young men into society. The critical factor here is obviously youth unemployment which implies steps to remove the various regulations which inhibit the entry of young men into the labour market, most notably minimum wage rules (this has been done to a great extent by the removal of young people from the coverage of Wages Councils) and qualification regulations.
8. In the longer term there must be firstly a revival of private action and mutual aid to give more people a greater degree of control over and responsibility for their own lives. This could be encouraged by the state but must ultimately depend upon private action.
9. There needs to be a non-state-led campaign of moral reform, carried out by private and voluntary organisations and dependent upon personal action. The model to adopt is that presented by self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or the Temperance movement of the last century which stress the personal responsibility and morally accountable nature of the individual.
10. Lastly - what will probably take longest - there must be change in the climate of opinion and belief. This requires action from everybody but particularly from schools, churches, writers and journalists and academics. This will be the slowest to have effect but the impact will be the most profound and long-lasting.

Faced with the crisis of the early nineteenth century our ancestors were able to moralise their society with a consequent reduction in all sorts of anti-social activity. In our own time that achievement has been progressively undermined with disastrous consequences for all of us but especially the weak and disadvantaged. The social crisis affecting much of Britain today is at root a moral crisis. Social policy must be directed mainly to solving that crisis and remoralisation should be its prime aim in every area.

#### Note

1. Anomie is a concept first formulated by the nineteenth century French sociologist Emile Durkheim and means literally lack of rules or norms. It is used to mean a condition where there are no clear rules of conduct or interaction leading to a perceived lack of purpose and meaning in peoples' lives.

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