
TEARING THE SOCIAL FABRIC?

Offender or Victim? This is a question of perspective. For the woman who is raped, or whose house is ransacked, or whose car is stolen, the issue is clear: she is the victim. In individual terms, the pain is acute; in social terms, the pain of some perpetrators is more of a social injury which has seen an individual solution.

This paper is about two ways in which we can see society and ourselves. The first is a prevalent view neatly summed in Hewson's package which sees society as a group of individuals, whose preference is self interest and who choose to care for themselves. This leads to privatisation and market forces providing the basis for contract, and the role of the Government is to be minimised.

The other option sees society as sets of relationships with an emphasis on linkages. It works by affirming our communalities and interdependence. It does not focus on our differences and seeing ourselves as naturally in conflict with Others. It sees us belonging at large and not just as members of our immediate family and tribe.

It is based on a view of society that believes we function best as social beings responsible for each other. This allows us to see altruism¹ as a mutual care and social cohesion, not a psychiatric disturbance. It supports the idea of us being essentially and insolubly social, and therefore the need for the establishment and maintenance of links is not an option, but a necessity. It rejects the dominant views, expressed in the Hewson line and current policies and media, that self interest is the engine of progress and therefore that it is reasonable to create inequalities and reward the powerful.

We can see the social system as either a collection of individuals seeking co-operation because self interest suggests this is an advantage, or we can see ourselves as indivisibly linked to others in a web of society, and it is these links that define us.

In Koori, Nunga and Murri communities, care is expressed as obligation and custodianship. There is a recognition that the linkages that create us also require attention. Children are not possessions but responsibilities, and adults are custodians for all related children. In this, there are some indications of an alternative way forward.

This difference would appear to be crucial in assessing the possible options for social control. In the view of the first group, the causes of crime are irrelevant, but the need for punishment and control are clear. Crime is seen as a threat to social order and therefore social control expenditure increases in tandem with crime, especially crime against persons and property at the lower levels.

The second view would tend to look at the social system that breeds crime. A rise in crime rates² would suggest a breakdown in the social system and the creation of alternate

1 One major proponent of economic rationalism confessed in conversation that he did not know how to factor altruism into his equations so he left it out. This may account for some of the mistakes they make.

2 I do not see crime as entirely socially caused. There are those whose pathologies would make them criminal in even the best of worlds but they are a small and constant proportion at the end of the normal curve.

cultures which affirm the 'criminal' behaviour. Alternatively it suggests the loners, who see themselves as unconnected, so that all are Others.

I use the term Other as object, as the alien, the different, and therefore not to be considered as similar to self. The rape victim is not another being but an object to the rapist. The victim of burglary is not seen by the thief as a person, but objectified. The other may be seen as enemy, as of another tribe and therefore a suitable object of criminal behaviour. In the maintenance of the social fabric, we need to ensure that there is a visible commitment to certain minimum standards of equity and justice in the distribution of resources. This needs to involve communal responsibility to others, a mutuality which exceeds individual compassion or charity.

I have problems even with the concept of social justice, as it is still posited on an individualised view of society. It assumes that we, as individuals, need to claim and defend. In my word processor's thesaurus, the language of justice is legal, the language of care is nurturant, female (and martyred).

We recently came up with a definition of citizenship in which rights and responsibilities were linked. We made the right to dignity, economic and social opportunities contingent on the obligation to ensure that others also received their entitlements.

In discussions of social cohesion we need to challenge some of the current assumptions which drive social policy to create insiders and those who feel outsider enough to penalise others for their problems. The prescriptions of the 80s were a form of economic fundamentalism, to quote Donald Horne, in which decision makers gave gospel status to beliefs about market forces. Despite Paul Keating's 'One Nation' statement, there seem to be, in Disraeli's terms, 'Two Nations' now in Australia. There is an ever widening gap between haves and have-nots, which follows those in Britain and the USA. We seem to be moving towards a future where a few may do well, locked away from the angry rejects who no longer have any stake in mass society.

So now we have problems with entrenched unemployment, increased social control bills and current severe recession. Yet future prescriptions on both supposed sides, is a further reduction of Government intervention, leaving markets to sort out the price of everything with minimal assistance for the 'deserving' poor only.

In the USA, there are signs that racism, anti welfarism and sexism are on the rise again. Dispossessed populations and those anxious about their futures are looking for scapegoats and they are finding them amongst those lower down the pecking order. In the UK, the Anti-Fascist League is being re-established to counter racism, and the new freedom in Germany is bringing out the Neo-Nazis.

There are other signs of social divisions: in no-go areas in big cities in the USA and Britain, those whom society excludes, create their own tribes and rules for survival. These show versions of torn social fabric. The dystopias of *Mad Max*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Memoirs of a Survivor*, and earlier versions such as Vonnegut's *Player Piano*, give us due warning of the ability of 'developed' society to collapse backwards.

The causes of many of these are not the victims who band for their own survival, but the tribes of the righteous: those in power who wall themselves into their greed and domination and take no responsibility for others. These use the philosophical premises of the new right to create greed as a good and punish those who move outside their laws to emulate them. The powerful create their own protection by limiting their tax payments and increasing the demand for law and order. They use the media to create scapegoats so they can blame Others for their damage.

Australia used to be a very relaxed country, easy to live in and with a tradition of anti-authoritarianism which seemed to be a protection against the bureaucratic and political excesses of other countries. We were bemused and amused when we had to find identity cards and residency permits when we lived overseas.

We had a fairly mean social security system with low payments, but it offered the possibility of being expanded universally. We were moving towards a universal aged pension, education was free and there was a recognition that many Australians had not shared the wealth and comforts.

In the last decade we seem to have forgotten much of this. We now have a country that demands a range of identification to open a bank account, has a social security system whose complexity denies those most in need their entitlements, has immigration police to arrest and detain people whose only crime is that they want to live here. We are moving inexorably towards a system where the ideas of justice and responsibility seem to have tangled with a passion for control.

It behoves us who want a future where the quality of life is not gained at the expense of others' oppression, to act. Do we know what *just futures* would look like? Can we design the world we want to live in, the one we want for our daughters and sons?

Making a future for linked groups of beings suggests that we need to care for others, as their pain and exclusion affects all. In a more individualistic model we can look at our own survival, making care for others a citizen responsibility, not an act of necessity borne as individual sacrifice. It is about mutual relationships, not individuality. Therefore, I have real problems with the formulation of the problems that we often see. The compassion industry may well create some resources for programs but they do so by exploiting the victims. By creating objects of pity, we dehumanise and create a trap of our design. Those needing assistance have to be worthy of our charity and compassion and therefore have no claims if they fail to deserve our attention.

The obvious area where this occurs is in the privatisation of services where voluntary agencies have to fundraise and where the contributors chose where to put their money. This we know about but still allow to happen. In doing so we allow a re-run of 19th century moralism which makes people acceptable as supplicants, clean, moral and crime free. And the others are seen as unworthy.

The other area is more subtle but often more damaging. This is when we officially declare a group to be disadvantaged so they become eligible for official compassion. I can quote an example from my own experiences in the bureaucracy where good intentions on the part of compassionate policy makers created problems.

This draws from my experience some years ago at what was then the NSW Department of Youth and Community Services (YACS). We were riding high on an explosion of child abuse statistics of dubious validity which purported to indicate that we were in the middle of an epidemic of battered and beaten children. Well meaning Ministers used this as lever to extract resources and more staff were put on to detect and presumably protect the children from abuse.

I was in charge of the area for a short while, and used some of my research skills to look at the data to determine what was happening. I discovered that maybe 10 to 15 per cent of notified and confirmed cases were abuse in terms of pathologically inadequate parents who required some form of statutory intervention. The rest reflected a range of resource problems which added up to the fact that child rearing is a difficult and often inadequately supported task.

We got more investigators and more evidence that poor and single parents were more likely to come to departmental attention. Many children were removed from parents who required material assistance and support, because this was defined as a deviance common in dysfunctional families.

With all the millions spent on staff, there were no programs started which said bringing up kids was difficult and some people lacked people and other resources to help. The poverty issue was highlighted by some well meaning bureaucrats and welfare people, with the intention of increasing resources, and they increased surveillance instead.

I recently debated the issue of domestic violence statistics with a similar concern. In the above situation, the children of the poor were visible and therefore vulnerable to systems abuse. The children of the better off also needed services and support, as did many of their parents, but were not visible so it was seen as a poverty problem, not a social problem.

Similarly, the analysis of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics' recent figures on the incidence of Apprehended Violence Orders again sought to make this a class/poverty issue not a gender one. Again there are social causes, which have been amply identified, of the gender power imbalances which create domestic violence in most cases. The middle class wife of a barrister who is terrorised verbally will not take out an order, any more than she would ring YACS when desperately alone with difficult small children.

Despite good intentions, using the argument that poverty causes the problems as a way of focussing attention on the issue of poverty does not work. It allows the powerful to claim that not only are the poor lazy but also incompetent and vicious and therefore deserving of their fate. The households with violence, whether against children or women, will be seen as totally alien and Other, and often policed more severely, without any attempt to remedy the causes.

Poverty exacerbates and makes visible some of the results of social exclusion but may also mask the causes. In the two examples above, I would suggest that sanctioned male violence is at least partly causal in the manifestations the poor make visible. The privatisation of responsibility also means that there is little help for 'normal' people as we are supposed to cope alone. Only crises warrant assistance.

So we need to look at the whole area of criminology with some sense of the context. At present we have some remnants of the concepts of the common good and social responsibility. Yet in the broad political sphere we are not offered much in the way of options in this area.

The evidence from the USA and UK suggests to me that there are points of no return: we can impoverish our public sector so far that it cannot act as part of the weft and warp of social weaving. Then we end up with tribal barbarism, with enemies and bloodshed.

We need to use our advocacy so we can maintain and expand concepts of public good and common wealth before the tribes of the dispossessed grow to unmanageable proportions. This is enlightened self interest, as who wants to survive imprisoned in a fortification.

This becomes a gender issue, as it will tend to be easier for women to make the choices for alternative futures because we are closer to the problems. However, as we do not currently set the political or social agenda, this is hard. It is also obviously the reason that such options are not on the agenda.

Carole Pateman³ claims the concept of the social contract, which is one view of the State, legitimated the split of the public from the private. Women were left to the private sphere insofar as most of their former activities, and much of what they do now, was seen as outside the realm of state regulation, and therefore they are not citizens in the sense of being free and equal recipients of the protection of the state.

We have moved in industrial societies to systems which are built on concepts of law and contract, of regulating behaviour at least in the public sphere. We replaced the linkages of kin, family and community with the more distant relationships of workmates, friends and neighbours. We replaced local face to face contact with phones and access by car and plane.

We used laws to replace customs, and paid services to replace the unpaid exploitation of women. The old systems were rigid and often oppressive but they created a sense of belonging at local levels, and punished those who did not fit, in ways now unacceptable. The creation of a wider society, however, still requires an underpinning of communality and belonging, a recognition of humanity and similarity.

When these break down, no laws and punishment can contain society. Lebanon and Yugoslavia show the effects of fragmentation on a large scale, the creation of outgroups creates this on a small scale. A divided community sees the other as enemy and object, and both crime and punishment exacerbate the differences.

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3 "The Sexual Contract", *Polity*, 1988.

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