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BAD KIDS AND BAD HOMES:

CRIMINOLOGICAL IDEOLOGY AND THE IDOLATRY  
OF THE MODERN FAMILY

This article asks why there exists a common belief that juvenile offenders come from bad homes. The article suggests that this belief is grounded in two central features of the modern family: its sacredness and its privacy.

According to official statistics, juvenile crime occurs almost wholly outside the home. Muggings take place in streets and parks, vandalism occurs to the walls of public buildings and subways, Mars Bars are stolen in the anonymity of the modern supermarket, and the young thief breaks into other people's houses, not his own. This would lead the detached observer (say a visiting anthropologist from Mars) to suspect that there is something about public places in modern society (say their anonymity) that facilitates the commission of crime. It is somewhat puzzling therefore that by far the commonest explanation for juvenile crime to be found today is that it stems from deficiencies within the family. Magistrates, social workers, criminologists, politicians and many people in the street all assent to the conventional wisdom that bad kids come from bad homes. In order to understand children's behaviour in public places, it is assumed by many that the meaning to the child of public places is of little importance compared to that of the private place of the home.

This assumption is rather curious, and so this article will explore some of the reasons why people should hold this belief that juvenile crime, although committed in the street and supermarket, has little to do with street and supermarket and everything to do with the home. I am not directly querying the *accuracy* of this assumption, but puzzling over *why* people should hold it: to explain why a belief is commonly held says nothing (in the first instance at any rate) about whether that belief is true.

To understand the attraction and plausibility of this belief, we must look first at the nature of the modern family and its

relation to the distinction in modern society between public and private. Society is divided in people's experience between their private world, which includes most importantly the family, where they feel at home and over which they have some control; and the public world of work, bureaucracy, politics, and the street, where they feel much less at home and over which they have little control. As A.H. Halsey put it in one of his Reith lectures: "The old 'us and them' of the working class mother is now a more generalised division as between the inner life of families of all classes and the external public forces."<sup>1</sup> People are all too glad to have as little as possible to do with the anonymous public world of politics, bureaucracy and officialdom, while by contrast they see their family as the place where meaning, love and commitment is (or ought to be) both found and given.<sup>2</sup> (Some of course find their families stifling and intolerable, and they deliberately return to the public sphere of work or street; but it is important to note that they do not do so gladly or willingly.) To use the term of Emile Durkheim and some anthropologists, the private family is sacred; the public world is profane. This distinction encompasses the whole of modern life; it provides two co-ordinates which enable the individual to map and give meaning to all the situations he finds himself in. This current belief in the modern family as (a) private and (b) sacred provides the key to understanding why people blithely assume that bad kids come from bad homes. Let us look first at the sacredness and then at the privacy of the modern family:-

#### *The Sacred Family*

If something is believed to be sacred, and at the same time there are things perceived to be wrong with society, then the usual deduction people make is that the sacred is under attack. Thus religious folk who believe God and religion to be sacred respond to social disorder by claiming that it's all due to a decline in religious faith; likewise, ecologists who believe nature to be sacred explain contemporary pollution and exhaustion of natural resources in terms of mankind's treatment of Nature as a profane thing to be exploited rather than as something sacred to be respected. The same reasoning occurs with the sacred family. All kinds of social changes such as the supposed increased level of industrial unrest, the increase in crime, and even Britain's declining economic performance are put down to a supposed decline in family life. If society is going bad, it must be because the sacred is in disrespect. This argument is most forcefully put by pressure groups such as the National Festival of Light and also by various right-wing and anti-feminist groups, but it is also happily reiterated by the whole spectrum of politicians and by those who stress the common-sense notion that bad kids come from bad homes. If society-wide disorder derives from a general breakdown in family life, then personal disorder (such as delinquency) derives from deficiencies in the individual's own family.

It is this belief in the sacred family that has sustained the plausibility of Freudian and neo-Freudian ideas and that has led to them being institutionalised within the ideology and practice of the professions of social work and psychiatry. These professions are now geared to reducing personal and social difficulties to problems within the individual's family. This is not to say that individual social workers may not identify a slum neighbourhood, poverty or unemployment as the origin of a client's difficulties, but *as a social worker* (or as a psychiatrist) there is rather little he or she can do about such problems. The structure of his profession enables the social worker to intervene in a client's family, but does not facilitate intervention in other areas. This has been substantially reinforced in the last ten years by the restructuring of social work in Britain following the Seebohm and Kilbrandon reforms which mandate the social worker to work with families rather than with individual clients.

To give an example from my own research,<sup>3</sup> I studied all the court reports by local authority social workers on 50 boys who were eventually sent away. One would expect such reports to attempt an explanation of the type "This child is in trouble with the police because he comes from a bad home" in those cases where *both* the offence was manifestly serious and beyond the normal run of childish pranks *and* where there was evidence of things awry in the child's family. And this was indeed the explanation offered in the reports of such cases. But even in those cases where the offence was trivial or where there was no evidence of a deprived family, the bulk of the report was still geared to exploring the bad home/bad kid link to the neglect of other possible explanations, and in no case was the bad kid/bad home model challenged.

Four specific samples of the reasoning used, taken from the reports studied of instances where the home was apparently good may be given. In each case, the general validity of the bad kid/bad home model remained unscathed as a background assumption.

(1) If there is nothing apparently amiss in the family, it is assumed that the child cannot really be delinquent, that the offence is an isolated occurrence and will not recur. So the child should be dealt with lightly; a word and support to the well-meaning parents will suffice.

(2) If the offence is manifestly serious (I think of a boy who stole and wrote off a Glasgow Corporation bus), and yet the boy comes from a good home, it is argued in one report that as bad kids come from bad homes, a bad kid who comes from a good home must be doubly bad. If the devil is not in his family, it must be in himself. In the case of the bus-thief, this resulted in an especially harsh sentence.

(3) If it is difficult to write off the offence as a childish prank, yet there does not seem anything wrong with the family, the social worker may ask the court for more time to make further investigations into what *must* (assuming the bad kid/bad home thesis) be a deficient family.

(4) The report writer may not have any *prima facie* evidence of family deficiency but, once it is assumed that there *must* be things awry in the family, then disorder can easily be read into otherwise innocuous features of the family, as in the following example about pocket money in which there is no other evidence of family deficiency:

He receives from mother a fairly large amount of pocket-money as well as other material things. Mother's explanation of this is that this is to remove temptation for him to steal but I feel that this may be in reality an attempt to compensate for family deficiencies.

Thus the mother is not only overcompensating for (as yet unknown) deficiencies, she is also unaware of her own motives; clearly an unsatisfactory parent.

There is a self-fulfilling vicious circle with regard to the treatment of young offenders by social workers. Whatever the social worker may believe about the deleterious influence on the youngster of his school, his neighbourhood or his peers, the only explanation of delinquency that is going to keep the social worker in a job is that of bad homes. The social worker thus has a vested interest in believing bad homes to be the cause of delinquency. To focus on other explanations would either put the social worker out of a job, or would involve imaginative and possibly costly re-interpretation of the job (as is currently happening with social workers who believe in the neighbourhood explanation of delinquency and are consequently reinterpreting themselves as community workers, a neo-profession with as yet little status or resources).

Whether a profession continues with a particular explanatory model for its clients' problems depends on the profession's ability to take practical action based on the model. This becomes clear if we consider that the idea that bad homes produce bad people is not so readily applied to adult offenders as to young offenders. Once the offender has ceased to be a minor and to be the formal responsibility of his parents, there is no way that the law can mandate the social work profession to work with an offender's parents simply on the ground that their now-grown-up offspring is in trouble with the law. And even if family intervention were possible, now that the offender has left home there is very little good that could come of restyling the offender's parental family into the perfect model of the loving family. By contrast, social workers *are* empowered to work with an adult offender's own children

(especially if the adult has been put away and the children are in need of care). Thus the importance social workers place on the explanation that bad homes produce bad offspring wanes along with their professional power to do something about bad parental homes. Explanations are not disinterested results of scientific research; they are adopted to sustain an organisation which, in the case of social work, is premised on the idea of the family as sacred.

*The Private Family*<sup>4</sup>

So far, we have looked at the process by which the belief in the family as sacred sustains the commonly accepted assumption that bad kids come from bad homes. The other major characteristic of the modern family is that it is essentially private: it is experienced and valued as a haven from the anonymous public world. This too sustains the assumption that bad kids come from bad homes.

The privacy that the modern family jealously guards makes it rather difficult for outsiders to glean information about the inner life of a modern family. It takes a long time and a lot of probing for a social worker or psychotherapist to discover all there is to know about a family, and so, when no other explanation for a child being in trouble fits the facts, the professional can always fall back on the bad kid/bad home model for, even if there is nothing apparently wrong with the child's family, it may be supposed that on digging deeper something will be found. Also, family relationships are very complex; so if a delinquent child's siblings all behave normally this does not rule out the possibility of the child's particular history and biography within the family being different. Thus, the professional investigator cannot dismiss the bad kid/bad home argument just because all the others in the family do not show adverse effects. The modern private family contains an element of mystery, which is what one would expect of the sacred. Lengthy psychoanalysis into the mysterious unconscious of the young child is made plausible by the mystery associated with the sacredness of modern family life.

This is very different from other possible causes of delinquency. The main competing explanations are those which focus on the school (as the inculcator of middle class values incompatible with the life situation of the working class child and which he cannot live up to), on the neighbourhood, on the adolescent peer group, and on the harmful effects (such as labelling) produced by previous processing by other agencies. All these groups are more or less public and more is known about them than about the private family. It can easily be ascertained by the investigating professional what is the influence on a child of his particular school or neighbourhood, for schools and neighbourhoods have pre-existing reputations. Less may be known about peer groups, but social workers, youth workers and teachers have some knowledge of these. Agencies, such as the police and social work agencies, also have reputations, especially with other agencies. Thus, it may be easy to dismiss any one of these

explanations in the case of a particular child. But one can never finally prove that his own family is not the cause of his difficulties, and so diagnosis of and therapy with the private family can go on indefinitely.

This is facilitated by the belief that the deleterious effects of poor schools, neighbourhoods, peer groups and agencies are relatively even spread. Thus, if it is true that a child is being badly affected by his school, the investigator may expect there to be other such children in the school; likewise with neighbourhoods, peer groups and agencies. So if there are very few or no other delinquents in the school, neighbourhood, etc. the investigator may rule it out as an explanation of the child's delinquency. But the family cannot be ruled out on the grounds that no other children in the family have been in trouble, for the private family is a mysterious thing.

The privacy of the modern family gives its members considerable control and influence within their family, unobserved by bureaucracy and officialdom, but the public/private divide means that private individuals in modern society are remarkably powerless outside the family. Thus most families have little power compared to the other institutions and agencies at whose door the child's difficulties could, theoretically, be laid. For social workers or psychotherapists to publicly blame a child's school, local police or his previous social workers or probation officers would be inexpedient, for the goodwill of these agencies is necessary for the continuation of the professional social worker's work. These other agencies can fight back. True, adolescent peer groups and some local neighbourhoods cannot fight back, and this may make it easier for them to be blamed for the child's being in trouble. But whole towns may not be blamed in public as they wield political and in some cases financial power over welfare agencies. Schools, other agencies and towns may be blamed in private conversations among social workers and magistrates, but it is dangerous to name these in public or in writing as adversely affecting a particular child.

In contrast, parents cannot hit back. Their continuing goodwill is not required by an agency after the child has completed treatment, they are not organised, and they do not wield financial power over public welfare agencies. This is perhaps less true of middle class and rural parents. Middle class parents can mobilise other professionals such as solicitors and doctors to rally to their defence, while rural parents can occasionally rally support from the village to counteract imputed blame for their child's misdemeanours. The bad kid/bad home argument is typically pinned on urban working class families, those who are the least able to organise and repudiate the pinning on them of the blame for their child's difficulties.

In sum, what distinguishes the modern private family from other potential scapegoats for a child's difficulties is that, for the social workers, magistrates and public professionals whose job it is to deal with children in trouble, the family is the only group that is unambiguously on the other (the private) side of the public/private divide and is therefore the least powerful vis-a-vis public agencies. Families are blamed by public agencies because they are on the other side of this fundamental divide within society. They may be blamed with impunity; if they accept responsibility for their child's troubles, then they are guilty, and if they reject or deny responsibility then they 'lack insight' and are doubly guilty.

This pinning of blame onto deficient private families is ideological. In modern society, adults feel (and are) wholly responsible for what goes on in their own families, only very slightly responsible for what goes on in the public world, and not at all responsible for what goes on in other private families. By pinning the blame for delinquency on other families (that is, not on the accuser's own family), both private individuals and public bodies wash their hands of any responsibility for juvenile delinquency. Local politicians, planners and teachers (for whom the taxpayer and voter are ultimately responsible) are exempted from responsibility by the bad kids/bad homes explanation. And certainly capitalism, urbanisation and industrialisation are let off the hook.

*How do the Parents Feel?<sup>5</sup>*

All this raises the question, "If virtually everyone blames the delinquent's parents, then who do the parents themselves blame?" A curious similarity emerges here, for the child's parents also pin blame on the other side of the private/public divide (remember the public sphere is profane) and on a particular part of the other side that cannot make a counter attack: the street peer group. Parents of children who have got into trouble almost without exception blame 'the other kids he goes around with'.<sup>6</sup>

Why is this? The high value that society places on the family makes parents responsible for the fate of their children, yet the private/public divide renders parents singularly powerless to control their children and determine their future; they cannot control what appears on the telly, what they are taught at school, and so on. In particular, whereas once the street was a 'safe' place within the protecting membrane of the local community (and still is in a few traditional working class areas), now the boundary is around the family, not the local community, and so the street has ceased to be part of home and has become part of the threatening impersonal world out there. This means that the other kids on the street have, for the parents, ceased to be part of 'us' and have become part of 'them'. And unlike other aspects of that impersonal world out there, aspects such as the school and the social security, the adolescent peer group is not usually in a position to get back



at accusing parents, and so may be blamed with impunity. (On those rare occasions when families are explicitly threatened by accused street gangs, the parents may well regret having made their allegations public.) Secondary blame is placed on the telly for its violence and sex: "how can my kid help not be influenced by it all?". The telly is also a part of the public sphere that is not going to take personal recriminations upon an accusing parent. In private, however, parents (like social workers) do blame those groups that could take recriminations - they blame the police, the school and even (when it comes to the delinquency of someone else's child) other parents.

### *Conclusion*

(1) The modern family is characterised by two features: it is private, and it is sacred. The all-encompassing distinction between private and public spheres bears the characteristics of the division between sacred and profane.

(2) Elsewhere I have outlined the effects of this privatisation of modern life on the inner city, on landscape imagery, on the church, and on juvenile behaviour in public places.<sup>7</sup> This present paper has discussed the way in which the sacred private family serves to maintain the dominant criminological notion that juvenile offending can best be understood in terms of deficiencies in the offender's family.

(3) An implication of the above analysis is that everyday and professional explanations of juvenile crime do not necessarily derive from those explanations deemed most adequate by (social) scientific research. Rather they are closely tied to the sacred in modern society; the notion that bad homes produce bad kids has, ultimately, more to do with religion than with science.<sup>8</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 A.H. Halsey: *Social Change in Britain*, OUP, 1978.
- 2 This privatisation of modern life has been discussed by many sociologists and historians such as P. Berger et al: *The Homeless Mind*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1974; E. Shorter: *The Making of the Modern Family*, Fontana, London, 1977; R. Sennett: *The Fall of Public Man*, CUP, 1977.
- 3 J.A. Walter, *Sent Away: a study of young offenders in care*, Saxon House, Farnborough, 1978, pp. 85-96.
- 4 Some of this section is drawn from *Sent Away*, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-170.
- 5 This section is drawn from Tony Walter: 'Who's For Families?', *Community Care*, 1 Nov. 1978.

- 6 *Sent Away*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-111; H. Parker, *View From The Boys*, David and Charles, Newton Abbot, 1974, p. 41.
- 7 See *A Long Way From Home*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1980; and a forthcoming book on landscapes.
- 8 For further explorations along these lines, see *A Long Way From Home*, *op. cit.*; J. Ellul, *The New Demons*, Oxford, 1976; T. Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, MacMillan, New York, 1967.

