Reflections on social evils and human nature

This paper (an extract from the book *Contemporary Social Evils*) examines how cultural theory can help us to understand the slide into social pessimism and the credit crunch.

June 2009

It would I suppose be surprising if a project on the new social evils were to conclude that there weren't any. But was it inevitable that there would be such agreement about what Zygmunt Bauman calls 'the withdrawal of society'? Most of the public and most of the intellectuals consulted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation spoke with one voice; the greatest evil is society's retreat in the face of rampant individualism.

It is in the explanations for this phenomenon, and the emphasis put on its different manifestations, that can be traced to familiar dividing lines. The starting point for writers from the Left, like Neal Lawson, is the decline of social solidarity, the widening of inequality, the labelling and punishing of the disadvantaged. For thinkers from the Right, like Anthony Browne, the dilution of behavioural norms and the loss of a shared sense of identity lie behind our sense of social malaise.

On the whole, the public leans towards behavioural rather than structural accounts of social fragmentation, with the poorest – perhaps reflecting their own day-to-day experiences – most inclined to highlight pathologies like criminality, drug use and family breakdown.

All this confirms that we are living in a time of profound social pessimism. Opinion polls show an ever-widening gulf between our view of ourselves and our view of society at large. A major recent BBC poll found that more than nine in ten of us are optimistic about our family's prospects (up from 40 years ago) while an ever-smaller minority (fewer than one in five) shares this optimism about other people.

The contemporary feeling of social unease is undeniable; the dark seam exposed by the JRF is the same one mined by David Cameron in his talk of a 'broken society'. Yet as A.C. Grayling reminds us, a latter-day Harold Macmillan would have every reason for proclaiming that we have never had it so good (this, of course, before the credit crunch, of which more later).

Nor is it simply that we live longer, earn more, travel more and relax more than our parents or grandparents. We are also today more tolerant, better educated and more compassionate, certainly, than our Victorian counterparts. And the last few years have seen serious and successful attempts to reverse the baleful legacy of both 1970s planning and the abandonment of the public sphere in the 1980s.

Take the hard case of Birmingham. Fifteen years ago the city centre lived up to the West Midlands' image of unloved and unlovable utilitarian grimness. Scuttling nervously through dank, gloomy subways – the planners' churlish concession to pedestrians in the age of the car – lifelong Brummies were found to be ignorant of the topology of the city's remaining historic buildings. The city was not only ugly and barren; it had also become illegible.

Go now and you can walk from New Street station (the last relic of 1970s subterraneanism and itself earmarked for replacement) to the refurbished canals at the back of the International Convention Centre without seeing a car. Instead, you stroll along pedestrianised streets past the restored glories of Victorian municipalism and multiplying examples of the new wave of public art. That locals have affectionately renamed the magnificent sculpture and fountain in Victoria Square 'the Floozie in the Jacuzzi' is testament to how they feel at home again in their city. And, yes, there are lots of new shops. But these too can be engaging, attractive places where people of all races and backgrounds rub shoulders.

A similar story of town centre renewal can be repeated in cities across the UK. Maybe this seems anecdotal, but is it any less so than most of the examples of social decay paraded before us by media commentators and opposition politicians? Whether we are relying on dry statistics or vivid stories, it is as easy to say that things are good and getting better as to assert the opposite.

One way to resolve this apparent paradox is simply to choose one view of reality over the other. So, from one side of the argument, social pessimism is seen as an aspect of modernity only to the extent that we now have higher expectations and the opportunity to wallow in our doubts. The gloomy findings of opinion polls on the state of the world can be questioned on the reasonable grounds that they invite us to speculate on issues we hardly ever consider and that the framing of the questions invites negativity.

The converse position says that what matters is what we feel. Not only do we suffer social pessimism, but also our aggregate levels of life satisfaction have not risen with higher levels of affluence. We are, it is said, twice as rich as our grandparents but no more content. What is the point of all these improvements in our material circumstances if we don't feel happier in ourselves or more hopeful about society?

A more fruitful line of thought may be to explore, at a number of levels, what it is about the way things have got better that makes us feel worse. In what follows I will explore three ways of answering this question: first, a theory of affluence and its discontents; second, a theory of human development and transition; and third, an account of the fundamental forms of social relations.

Affluence and its discontents

A convincing account of the detrimental impact of affluence on human contentment and social relations has been developed by Avner Offer (2006) in his seminal work *The challenge of affluence*. Offer does us the favour of summing up his argument and the wealth of evidence on which it is based, in the first few words of his book: '[A]ffluence breeds impatience and impatience undermines well-being' (2006, p 1). Offer means by this that affluence undermines the material and emotional case for those social norms, conventions and institutions that encouraged us to look to our own and society's long-term interests. He calls these aspects 'commitment devices' and includes among them marriage, the welfare state, but also regulations and social norms that encourage deferred gratification by, for example, incentivising saving and discouraging debt. The weakening of these commitment devices has been cause and effect in the rise of a culture of instant gratification, inauthentic communication (for example, advertising, public relations, spin doctoring) and unearned entitlements.

Offer maintains that it is impossible for society to thrive and for most of us to get what we want without commitment devices. Indeed, it proves to be impossible even for the market to work without both trust and regulation. The idea that we can always get what we want whether in our relationships, at work or in collective decision making is a myth, as is the notion that the short-term choices we make are always fully informed or wise even in narrowly self-interested terms. (This, by the way, is the myth that more than anything else blinded us to the crisis brewing in the financial services.) People don't work like this and society can't work like this. For example, it leads to the suboptimal solution to the classic 'Prisoners' Dilemma'[1] (both betray) and makes it impossible for us to develop the optimal learned solution (both cooperate). Affluence encourages us both to believe and to live by myth. Without a change of direction we are doomed to be disappointed and for society to be eviscerated.

Offer's book was a powerful critique of consumer capitalism and neoliberal politics even before the economic turmoil through which we are now living. Polly Toynbee and David Walker (2008) recognised their debt to Offer in their more trenchant and policy-oriented book *Unjust rewards*. But now, as we see the full folly of an under-regulated banking system, a political class in thrall to free-market fundamentalism and a populace that had come to take ever-greater debt-fuelled affluence for granted (regardless of its wider social consequences), Offer moves from siren to prophet.

Offer is an economic historian and to explain why we have succumbed to the challenge of affluence, he relies on an economist's explanation. Technological innovation fuelling economic growth and rising living standards (in the developed world) has simply changed the incentives we face. Instead of being held back by commitment devices we are now free to pursue blind short-termism. In tracing our problems to our hardwired limitations, Offer's theory reminds us of the joke about the previously obedient dog, who when given a £50 note to perform his usual trick of buying milk from a store is later found by his owner *in flagrante* with a poodle, blind drunk and penniless. "But you never did this before!" says the dismayed owner. "Ah yes," slurs the dog, "but you never gave me £50 before."

For many on the Left, the problems Offer describes are not an accident. The powerful combination of neoliberal ideology, financial globalisation and consumer capitalism was created and maintained by those who most clearly benefited from it. This is true. The politics and economics of the bubble relied on an ideology that portrayed something human-made and precarious (the cocktail of consumer debt and financial speculation) as a force of nature. It is more evidence of collective delusion that many of these who were champions of deregulation and debt-fuelled finance are now queuing up to say they had misgivings about the Emperor's new clothes all along: "We all

knew the bankers weren't wearing anything, but it was just too embarrassing to say it."

Society in transition

But Offer's analysis prompts a different question. Human beings are not simply driven by short-term desires (for Offer to be arguing this would put him in the camp of the neoliberals). We can make collective judgements and adapt. Why have we proven so susceptible to attitudes and behaviours that did little to increase our well-being in the short term and about which we clearly felt major misgivings? True, this party is now over but it was not because we chose to call time. One answer is that society is going through an acute period of transition. In this period we are particularly prone to confusion and social pessimism. As well as explaining our current malaise, transition theory offers the hope of human beings attaining a higher stage of development.

Offer suggests that we cannot cope with plenty. Historians argue that past civilisations have collapsed in part because the elite in those civilisations – the only ones who lived with plenty – succumbed to self-indulgence and a loss of vitality and authority. Today, three quarters of the UK's population has more disposable income than it needs, not only to survive, but also to enjoy good health and the opportunities for leisure and self-development. But rather than growing from this opportunity, some would say, we are exhibiting a kind of mass version of the decadence that history has taught us to associate with the fall of the Roman Empire. If this sounds far-fetched, try going out to an English city centre on a Friday evening, watch the chemically enhanced mood swings of the entertainment classes or witness politicians turning a blind eye to the big, hard, long-term issues while pandering to the demands for middle-class tax cuts.

There is a 'chickens coming home to roost' feel in much commentary about the economic downturn. Public concerns about excess, whether drugs, food or alcohol, about the decline of social relations, about the lack of political leadership mean that we cannot help feeling we had it coming to us.

But could it be that the period of hyper-consumerism was transitional? Human beings have, after all, spent most of their existence with only just enough; indeed, being hardwired to expect no more than that. Those who live among the top two thirds of the people of the rich countries have now found that plenty creates as many problems as it solves. So will we start to ask a different question: what do we truly need to live the good life? This is after all what we tend eventually to do in our own lives; to crave something we are denied, to over consume it when we have unlimited access and then to realise that (in my grandmother's favourite phrase) 'enough is as good as a feast'.

If we imagine a timeline labelled 'material need and consumption', might it be possible to trace a transition from subsistence, through excess, to a balanced and sustainable way of thinking and living? It would be a strange line as the first stage lasts 200,000 years and the second, in the rich world at least, a few decades. But there are other areas of human endeavour – most notably science and technology – that have seen a similarly rapid acceleration of development in modern times. Other important facets of the human condition (and sources of discontent) can be traced on to this crudely Hegelian account of human progress. Thus, current worries about identity, community cohesion and religious extremism can be seen to reflect a transitional stage of unease and disturbance between our long history of social segregation and homogeneity and our emergence into a higher stage of cultural plurality, global citizenship and freedom of expression. Similarly, in our political culture we can be said to be moving from a long history of deference (or, at least, obedience) to tradition – and to earth and then sky Gods – to hereditary and finally democratic authority. The goal for human development is creative self-government. But sadly, we are currently stuck,

surly and disengaged; unwilling to be governed, not yet willing or able to govern ourselves.

From the perspective of transition theory, our vulnerability to the challenge of affluence, and our susceptibility to social pessimism, reflect not just the power of new technology and the allure of its consumer goods, but also a more general frailty as we go through what some have caricaturised as the adolescence of enlightenment man. This is an attractive argument. It suggests that we might grow out of our current weaknesses and ascend to a higher level than a promiscuous canine. The adolescent metaphor also helps us explain the coincidence in modern character of folly and self-obsession with an impressive capacity for inventiveness and growth (just ask any parent of a teenager).

There are those who argue strongly for the possibility, indeed the necessity, of human beings attaining a qualitatively higher state of functioning and consciousness. Many of these thinkers – for example, Henryk Skolimowski (1994), author of *The participatory mind* and Ken Wilber (2000), author of *A theory of everything* – have been heavily influenced by Buddhist practice and teachings.

Maybe it is just that the attainment of Nirvana is beyond me, but I fear few of us can hope to transcend human nature. Notwithstanding the change of heart needed to transform us from 'shopaholics' to truth seekers, it is difficult to see how one might reconcile the disciplines of personal enlightenment with the concrete challenges of running a complex society. Who will make the trains run on time when we are all in a state of meditative bliss?

Social change, cultural theory and human nature

Progress is possible. Otherwise we would still have an average life expectancy of 29. But progress does not take place down a linear or inevitable path. Instead, social change results from the enduring contest between fundamentally different ways of seeing and acting upon the world. This is the perspective offered by cultural theory. It is based on the work of the classic French sociologist Emile Durkheim French and the research of the distinguished anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992), as taken forward by scholars like Christopher Hood (1988) and Michael Thompson and colleagues (1990). Cultural theory suggests four fundamental ways of viewing and managing social relations. These ways are:

- the *hierarchical*, in which change is driven from the top down through authority, expertise and rules;
- the *egalitarian*, in which change is driven bottom up through strong group membership, shared values and solidarity;
- the *individualistic*, in which change is the result of free individuals pursuing their own self-interest; and
- the *fatalistic*, in which change is seen as illusory or random.

(Thompson *et al.*, 1990, add a fifth category – *the hermit* – but things are complicated enough.)

Cultural theory is analytical and normative, arguing not only that these ways of seeing and acting are ubiquitous, but also that engaging with each of them is necessary to enable the emergence of what they call 'clumsy solutions'. The theory is evidenced by solutions that were doomed by their failure to engage with one or more of the ways of conducting social relations. For example, cultural theorists predicted the limited impact of the Kyoto accord due to its reliance on hierarchy and its failure to engage individualism or be realistic about fatalism.

Is it possible that cultural theory offers us a way of understanding not only our social pessimism but also the unfolding of the credit crunch? To do so requires us to add history and technology to the theory. The argument is that at certain

times the reinforcing combination of socioeconomic context and emerging techniques fosters a particular cultural orientation. Thus, the conditions between the end of the Depression and the end of the Second World War created the right context and encouraged the right techniques for a hierarchical orientation to become dominant in the succeeding decades. This expressed itself through the centralised corporation (both private and public sector), national planning and corporatism, and a confidence in the scope for socially benevolent expertise (in science, economics, social policy) to drive social progress. The norms and methods of post-war hierarchism generated real gains for society but, like all systems that systematically privilege one orientation to social relations, it contained the seeds of its own destruction. While hierarchy was arguably compatible with fatalism (those happy to follow orders and be the cogs in systems), egalitarian and individualist dynamics were marginalised. Their fight back came through the combination of the radical anti-establishmentarianism of the 1960s and 1970s, and the neoliberal individualism that triumphed in the late 1970s and 1980s. The build-up of both an egalitarian (Left) and individualist (Right) critique of the post-war settlement may help explain the apparent paradox that the revolutionary politics in culture, universities and trades unions broadly coincided with the triumph of neoliberal political economy.

Continuing to paint with the broadest of brushes, the last 20 years can be seen as a period of hegemonic individualism favoured both by historical circumstance – the perceived failure of corporatism and the big state, the collapse of communism – and by the emergence of powerful techniques of individualism – personalised consumerism, focus group politics, the internet. The culture of the City represents the most extreme version of individualism triumphant. All that mattered in the City was individual ambition. There was no egalitarian belief in a wider social or moral purpose for banking, nor was there any effective hierarchy as the rules didn't work. Those notionally in charge were on a merry-go-round they could not get off (even if they wanted to) and no one even really understood how the system worked. Finally – and crucially – there was no fatalism, which cultural theorists see as playing an important role in social order and change. Every banker believed they had an unlimited capacity to generate wealth and increase their earnings. To have a major area of activity so dominated by a single framing of human relations is rare. To then give those in that area the power to influence the well-being of billions of citizens is – as we have now come to understand – a disastrous error.

As individualism stumbles, we are seeing the reassertion of other ways of thinking. Hierarchy will be rehabilitated as world leaders rediscover the idea of global leadership, coordination and regulation. Egalitarians who were already gathering strength at the margins through the growth of downsizing, alternative living and environmental movements will be emboldened to question the values and outcomes of the free market. Advocates of individualism will have to adapt their message and means to new times or accept being out of fashion. And if we enter into a prolonged period of economic stagnation we will all be more prone to (and possibly comforted by) fatalism.

Perhaps this is simply an evolutionary cycle, a dialectic of memes (cultural traits) in which dominant patterns emerge, dominate and decay. Most people will find a way of adapting to the prevailing cultural atmosphere, others will resist. Like politicians we can sail with the wind. Or like record collectors we can be out and proud when our tunes are in fashion, retreating to a small circle of true believers when our music is considered naff. But what about those of us who have found something of interest in very different political platforms (and much to deprecate in them all); those who like the fatalism of Joni Mitchell, the egalitarianism of the Clash and the individualism of Kanye West? We have been encouraged to see our eclecticism as weak and woolly minded. Yet, if individualism, egalitarianism, hierarchism and

fatalism and the inherent competition between them are inevitable, should we not be looking for solutions that harness (or at least recognise) them all? Should we not favour accounts of society, types of organisation and ways of managing that speak to these different perspectives?

With the rise and rise of neuroscience, one fruitful new area of research may be to explore ways in which the schemas of cultural theory might map onto brain activity. Reduced to its simplest, the four ways of seeing social relations can be expressed as 'I will do what I want', 'I will do what the group does', 'I will do what I'm told' and 'It doesn't matter what I do'. Do these responses involve particular cognitive processes? Recent research has distinguished between the brain processes involved in learning through experience (which are likely to be linked to individualistic and fatalistic responses) and those involved in learning through advice (which are more likely to be associated with egalitarian and hierarchical responses).

Having, at last, left behind the baleful myth of selfish, separate, rational humankind, can we demand of attempts to explain human action that they are at least credible at three levels: the social, the behavioural and the physiological? We are a long way from 'a theory of everything' but it would be good to start looking in the right places. More practically, are there examples of the kind of approach that cultural theory implicitly advocates? How about social enterprises, which combine clear goals and strong management with shared values among employees and the space for individuals to express themselves and grow? Or for those who despair of politics, how about the brave and holistic account of the problem of race given by Barack Obama in March 2008?

President Obama, as he became, called for solutions that require leadership, overcoming group victimhood and promoting personal responsibility. Aren't the best schools the ones with visionary and strong leaders, that want their pupils to thrive as individuals and which create a strong sense of community and pride in the institution? No solution is perfect, and cultural theory insists that each paradigm of social relations gains its strength from competing for power and adherents with the others (selfish memes to go with our selfish genes). But we can at least distinguish solutions doomed to failure from those that might at least provide the right framework for progress.

The human race has made great strides, especially in the last few hundred years. But progress has been interspersed with error and tragedy. By privileging one way of thinking over others – as we have recently done with individualism – we at best squander human potential and at worst risk disaster. We could achieve more and be happier about it if our ways of thinking and acting engaged with all the ways in which we are human.

Note

1 The Prisoner's Dilemma, first framed in the 1950s, suggests that two suspects are arrested without sufficient evidence for a conviction. The police separately offer each the same deal. If one testifies against the other and the other remains silent, the betrayer goes free and the accomplice receives a 10-year sentence. If both remain silent, they are sentenced to six months in prison for a minor charge. If each betrays the other, they receive a five-year sentence. Each prisoner must choose to betray the other or to remain silent.

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has started a UK-wide debate to find out what are the social evils of the 21st century. This paper is part of a programme of work by key commentators on the themes that emerged from a public consultation. A book (*Contemporary Social Evils*), published in June 2009, summarises the findings so far, including new research with disadvantaged groups, and looks forward to a post-recession future.

See http://www.jrf.org.uk/social-evils for more information.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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