

'Social evils' and 'social problems' in Britain, 1904–2008

Social evils, such as hunger and destitution, were fatalistically viewed by the Victorians as unavoidable. Joseph Rowntree's more positive philosophy promoted social research and intervention to transform 'social evils' into less malign 'social problems' that could be cured. However, some of the evils that were thereby eradicated have subsequently reappeared. This study examines social problems and changing perceptions of them since 1904.

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The study examines the following periods:

- Edwardian Britain (1901–10): the foundation of the Rowntree charitable trusts in 1904 coincided with international economic recession. Enquiries into the impact of widespread poverty prompted reforming legislation such as the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act.
- First World War and mass unemployment (1914–30s): there were great geographical disparities in poverty and prosperity, but 'primary' poverty was reduced. Liberal capitalism was seen as the source of all social evils.
- Planning and post-war reconstruction (late 1930s–early 1960s): a new generation of social scientists played a major role in founding the British welfare state. Social studies of the period give conflicting views of contentment and unease among British people.
- Sea changes of the later twentieth century (1960s–90s): income-support policies were increasingly targeted to relieve social 'need', and the sexual revolution and rise of immigration brought major social changes. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher ushered in an era of rapid modernisation and free-market capitalism.
- The diseases of prosperity in the twenty-first century: the Joseph Rowntree Foundation public consultation of 2007 revealed unanimously pessimistic concern about social issues, despite real incomes rising by 70 per cent.

Comparative historical perspectives and conclusions:

Britain has been through social crisis at least twice during the last century but suffered less than elsewhere, largely due to the strength of its local communities. Recently, however, community strength has been lost as the social security system has evolved to target individual rather than collective needs. Contemporary studies conclude that social evils can arise as a negative result of increased prosperity. They support the original Rowntree philosophy in suggesting that social evils have a moral as well as a material dimension.

Introduction : defining social evils

What is meant by a 'social evil' and how does it differ from the more familiar and less dramatic concept of a 'social problem'? A working definition might be that a '*social problem*' suggests an undesirable state of affairs that people believe to be curable and for which they are hoping to find, or believe they have found, a practical cure. A '*social evil*', by contrast, suggests something more complex, menacing and indefinable and may imply a degree of scepticism, realism or despair about whether any remedy can be found, other than ones that either make matters worse or require a radical transformation of human nature. In everyday speech both terms are often used rhetorically and interchangeably, with little hint of any more precise meaning. At a deeper and more technical level, however, the language of 'social problems' may be seen as linked to the Anglo-French 'positivist' tradition, endorsed over the past century by many prominent British social investigators and social reformers. The language of 'social evils' is more difficult to pin down precisely, but is more often used by people from a variety of traditions – radical and conservative, secular and theological – who see both individual and social action as in some sense shaped and constrained by moral, natural or transcendental laws.¹

Social responsibilities

Questions also arise about the very meaning of the term 'social'. For much of the nineteenth century, 'social' responsibilities in Britain were very largely thought of as civic, voluntary or 'associational' ties, to be discharged either by the local poor rate, by individual and 'organised' charity or by one of the innumerable self-governing friendly societies that insured members against sickness, old age and death (bodies that in the last quarter of the nineteenth century probably embraced, however minimally, as many as two-thirds of the British lower classes). It was only in the early twentieth century that, for a variety of reasons (relating not just to scale but to enhanced consciousness of 'nationhood'), both social evils and the responsibility for dealing with them came increasingly to be identified as 'national'. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, that perspective has shifted yet again, as social relations, social obligations and indeed the mysterious entity of 'society' itself are increasingly re-conceived as cross-national and even 'global' in scope.

A further complication arises from the fact that some perceived 'social evils' of the present time were seen in the past as quintessentially private concerns (even when viewed with moral opprobrium). Thus addiction to opium (casually smoked by Sherlock Holmes), supplying cocaine (purchased over the counter by Edwardian ladies of fashion) and the physical chastisement of children (a routine adjunct of parenthood down to the present day) were scarcely viewed as 'social' offences at all, let alone as potentially criminal ones, before the early to mid decades of the twentieth century.

Victorian attitudes and Joseph Rowntree's philosophy

Since 'evil' is intangible and social language is fluid and fast-changing, the above definitions are necessarily somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, they capture certain distinctions that would have been only too familiar to many analysts of British society throughout the Victorian age. Most nineteenth-century

economists, for example, believed that 'artificial' strategies to counteract unemployment, however morally well intentioned, would inevitably exacerbate the 'social evil' they were trying to prevent. Many Victorian reformers felt the same about hunger and destitution – it was a moral duty to assist the victims of these conditions, but unthinkable to expect such evils ever to go away. Such tragic paradoxes were similarly portrayed in much nineteenth-century imaginative literature. Charles Dickens, in particular, dramatically highlighted a long series of appalling social evils, ranging from death by starvation, child cruelty and paedophilia, through to sexual exploitation, compulsive gambling and environmental filth. But though literary writers helped to highlight such evils, they very rarely pointed towards realistic solutions, other than (as in Dickens' own case) calling for greater personal generosity and the softening or conversion of individual human hearts.

Such attitudes provide both a backcloth and a clue to the philosophy of Joseph Rowntree and the founding of his three great charitable trusts in 1904. As a largely self-made Quaker chocolate manufacturer, Rowntree himself reflected many of these Victorian beliefs. He fully endorsed public scepticism about treating 'social diseases' by applying 'worse remedies' (a charge levied in the 1890s against the 'Darkest England' policies of General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army), but he also shared the commitment of Booth and other popular philanthropists to a moral, spiritual and personal element in promoting social reform. There was, however, a distinctive third element in Joseph Rowntree's approach. This was his belief in the possibility of transforming certain menacing but ill-defined 'social evils' into clearly defined and measurable 'social problems', by subjecting them to systematic social research. Such an outlook and motivation were implicit in the thinking behind the third of his major charitable foundations, the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust (one of the very few bodies in Britain during the 1900s that gave financial sponsorship to any kind of formal 'scientific'

inquiry into matters outside the spheres of chemistry, physics and biology).²

Social research and the interventionist approach

One of the long-term results of this new, research-based approach to social questions was a gradual shift of public attitudes away from the earlier fatalism towards a much more far-reaching and interventionist conception of what had formerly been seen as ineradicable social ills. Over the course of the twentieth century many dire social conditions that earlier generations had fatalistically accepted as unavoidable facts of life were either eliminated completely or gradually transferred to the domain of remedial social policies. Malnutrition, mass unemployment and the treatment of many fatal diseases may all be seen as conditions that underwent this redefining process.

Nevertheless, the lurking notion of a set of amorphous but intractable 'social evils', lying beyond the reach of constructive intervention, never entirely went away. Instead, it ebbed and flowed at different moments and periods over the course of the twentieth century, with the identity of what constituted the most serious of such evils varying at different times. And, more recently, something akin to the ill-defined but widely pervasive sense of unease and social disintegration that had pervaded late Victorian and early Edwardian times has conspicuously resurfaced during the present decade. Such concerns were dramatically mirrored in responses to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's public consultation exercise, launched through the internet in the summer of 2007, and similar views have found widespread expression in many parts of the mass media.

Resurgence of social malaise

Both the causes and content of such surges of collective anxiety remain, however, to some extent conjectural, and deserve closer interrogation than they usually receive. The present paper will aim briefly to trace the history of such concerns over the course of the twentieth century and to pose some questions about the social realities behind such

oscillations of confidence and unease. How far did the periodic resurgence of such anxieties accurately reflect objective material and structural conditions? Or should they rather be seen as indices of more indefinable factors, such as changing moral, religious, behavioural and gender norms, over a century when Britain (like many other countries) was grappling with continuous and often painful adaptation to 'advanced modernity'? To what extent have such moments of malaise been not just socio-economic in character but also political and moral – indicating a breakdown of confidence in governing institutions, in the 'moral character' of individual citizens and in social 'trust'? (O'Neill, 2002) Why have some social difficulties that were believed to have been 'solved', or 'consigned to history', re-emerged in more recent decades and been conceived once again as 'social evils' (on a par perhaps with anxieties about certain formerly 'curable' diseases that now appear resistant to antibiotics)? More conjecturally, how far has the widespread Victorian belief – that certain kinds of 'social remedies' simply generate 'worse evils' – reacquired some degree of credibility in the complex and fast-changing circumstances of the early twenty-first century? Some attention should also be given to how far these cycles of moral anxiety were peculiarly British concerns, or whether (as is arguably the case today) they mirrored similar and parallel concerns in other cultures and countries.

Shifts in perception of social evils

To fully address all these questions would require much more detailed treatment than is possible here, particularly as public understanding of what constituted 'social evils' at any one moment was often far from consensual. The aim here is to draw a sketch-plan of some of the major shifts in perception of 'social evils' in Britain (including their partial, or in some cases wholesale, redefinition as manageable 'social problems') over the past hundred years. One of the reference points used is the extensive research of Joseph Rowntree's youngest son, Seebohm Rowntree, who eventually succeeded his father as

chairman of the chocolate firm, but also pursued a parallel career as Britain's most prominent empirical social scientist throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Seebohm Rowntree's own research agenda almost certainly helped to define his father's goals in founding the Rowntree Trust, but his work as a social scientist also affords a particularly useful point of entry into the question under review. Like his father before him, Seebohm harboured a lifelong interest in the moral, cultural and spiritual aspects of social and economic relations, together with an equally strong commitment to developing a 'value-free' social science (the latter to be pursued even where its findings clashed with his own moral preconceptions).³ Moreover, though his primary interest lay in analysing different kinds of poverty, the range of Rowntree's inquiries was much more multilayered than this theme might suggest. It encompassed much of what he saw as the attitudinal and 'communitarian' strengths and weaknesses, as well as the more material attributes, of the periods he was investigating. And, because his surveys successively encompassed the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, the interwar years, the Second World War and the rise of the welfare state, it is possible to treat them, although not factually infallible, as a significant thread in the evidence for changing social attitudes and values in Britain from the 1890s through to the 1960s. Moreover, Rowntree's findings, both quantitative and interpretative, are still the subject of ongoing critical debate among social scientists today. His researches therefore offer an important benchmark from which to contrast earlier perceptions of 'social evils' with those of the present day.

Edwardian Britain: poverty and 'degeneration'

The foundation of the Rowntree trusts in 1904 coincided with an unusual moment of acute malaise and uncertainty in British social history, as was clearly hinted at by the 'foundation document' in which Joseph set out his social philosophy. This malaise was closely linked to a

prolonged national fiscal crisis, to the after-effects of the expensive and unpopular Boer War (1899–1902) and to international economic recession (all bringing in their wake widespread unemployment and the first shrinkage in average real incomes in Britain for more than half a century). Dealing with these issues was to have far-reaching and long-term implications for the wider structure of politics and government in Britain. But a more immediate result was to concentrate attention on a range of social conditions, long known about in a rather desultory way, that now sprang to public attention, not just as matters of philanthropic concern but as active dangers to the overall 'health' of the wider body politic. The central theme of this wave of concern was not just mass poverty, but – much more speculatively and sensationally – the possible link between such poverty and the spectre of social breakdown, economic failure and national decline.

Surveys reflect poverty

The prevalence of mass poverty in Britain had been identified during the 1890s, first by social researcher Charles Booth's monumental survey of 'life and labour' in London, and then, more precisely and scientifically, by Seebohm Rowntree's 1899 survey of York. These two studies had together concluded that between a quarter and a third of the inhabitants of Britain were living in 'poverty', a condition that both authors diagnosed as harmful not just to individuals but to the efficiency and well-being of the whole of society. Both had suggested that at least part of this poverty was caused by alcohol, with around 20 per cent of average working-class household incomes being spent on drink.⁴ Rowntree's study, which was the first to be based on a precise estimate of income necessary for basic physical efficiency, also suggested that – even if all poor people were to practise the most rigorous abstinence and frugality (as many of them did) – then 10 per cent of the population in the world's richest nation still had incomes below the level necessary for physical health. (The diet affordable by an unskilled labourer in York, for

example, was lower by over 1,000 calories a day than the medically approved diet of an inmate in a workhouse or prison.) Both studies also concluded that the direst poverty was heavily concentrated among families with young children and among old people living alone.

Poverty as a danger to physical health and national security

These findings had caused something of a stir when they first appeared, particularly in temperance circles. But it was not until 1904, with the publication of a War Office inquiry into national 'Physical Deterioration', that poverty and its attendant social ills were suddenly catapulted into the public arena as a pressing danger to both military security and the nation's physical health. This happened because the Physical Deterioration inquiry reported that up to 60 per cent of recruits to the British army during the recent war had proved physically unfit for military service. It portrayed this unfitness as linked to a vast interlocking network of secondary conditions – such as malnutrition, overcrowding, low wages, chronic under-employment, contaminated milk supplies, tuberculosis, parental inadequacy, 'working mothers', mental deficiency and venereal disease – all of which fell largely outside the scope of any existing system of public health inspection or social support. And perhaps most shocking of all was the disclosure that one-sixth of infants born in Britain at the start of the twentieth century were dying before the age of one year. It was these bleak findings, coming not from the post-Victorian 'bleeding hearts brigade' but from the very heartland of the military establishment, that precipitated a decade of intense public enquiry into the terrifying and all-encompassing spectre of 'social evils'. The underlying theme of this concern was not mere 'poverty' (in itself nothing new), but the much more menacing spectre of poverty as a key determinant of physical, social and cultural 'degeneration'.

Between 1904 and 1914 there were to be no less than eight royal commissions of enquiry in Britain, which together with hundreds of lesser

enquiries, official, academic and philanthropic, investigated these issues. Such bodies addressed what were seen in many quarters as the most shocking and threatening aspects of contemporary social change, such as the supposed proliferation of the mentally and physically 'unfit', problems of 'eugenic' and environmental decline, escalating rates of infant mortality and child cruelty, a chaotic and irregular labour market and a concurrent rise in vagrancy, alcoholism and sexually-transmitted diseases. Most important among them was the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1905–9, which launched the most comprehensive review of social, health and environmental conditions ever undertaken in Britain – a review that embraced not just clients of the Poor Law, but the great mass of the nation's working population (two groups whom much late-Victorian thought had erroneously imagined to be largely distinct). Many of these enquiries played a seminal role, not just in voicing both popular and 'expert' understanding of contemporary social evils, but in proposing remedies. The report on Physical Deterioration, for example, precipitated major changes in public policy on the health, physique, diet and physical and moral welfare of children. The proceedings of the Poor Law Commission likewise generated the climate of public opinion that was to lead to the 'break-up' of the Poor Law system and its eventual replacement by the much more comprehensive services of the welfare state. Seminal legislation of the later Edwardian period, such as the 1908 Old Age Pensions Act and the 1911 National Insurance Act, gave promise of addressing with dignity the problems of 'honourable' poverty and unpredictable 'interruptions of earnings'. The decade also brought rapid expansion in the employment of health visitors, midwives and social workers, together with major developments in the 'voluntary' sector, such as the Scout and Guide movements, the Territorial Army and the setting up of 'Social Service Councils' in cities throughout Britain.

Confidence in reform

Moreover, closely relevant to the theme of this paper, was the fact that – despite much sensationalist news reporting – the overall impact of Edwardian public enquiries ultimately turned out to be cautiously optimistic, reassuring and anti-alarmist in tone. With certain notable exceptions (mainly in relation to mental deficiency), very little credence was given by serious investigators to panic-stricken fears about hereditary degeneration, breakdown of social and family structures, a hidden army of ‘unemployables’ and other symptoms of national decay. Indeed – far from suggesting that ‘nothing can be done’ – the attitude of many Edwardian experts in these areas suggested, if anything, a degree of over-confidence about the long-term prospects for progressive social, economic, industrial and environmental reform.⁵ The upturn in real wages from 1905, the introduction of school milk and meals in 1906–7, the payment of the first old-age pensions in 1910 and, above all, the steep decline in infant mortality that set in over the Edwardian decade, all helped to deflect and defuse some of the oppressive sense of social malfunction and breakdown that had lurked in many quarters of public life during the aftermath of the Boer War.

First World War and mass unemployment

Both the pessimistic and optimistic strands in social thought down to 1914 were overtaken by the far more pressing and apocalyptic anxieties that arose from the ‘Great War’ of 1914–18, which brought in its wake such diverse trends as escalating food prices, rationing, mass military recruitment and conscription, unprecedented absorption of women into the labour market and the enforced break-up of many great aristocratic estates. Not all pre-war concerns were eliminated overnight, and indeed some were temporarily intensified, as troop movements and mass disturbance of the civilian population made certain ‘social evils’ much more visible to the respectable classes than ever before. Thus, though overall alcohol

consumption almost halved during the war, public fears of the ‘racial poison’ of alcohol grew, if anything, even more vociferous (Smith, 1918). And, similarly, popular anxieties about the moral and biological menace of ‘working mothers’ were intensified as young women were increasingly drafted into factories making munitions. Nevertheless, such evils paled into insignificance in face of the experiences of the six million young men who faced battlefields, U-boats, maiming, shell-shock and violent death (all putting anxieties about domestic ‘social evils’ into a more muted and secondary perspective).

External economic restraints and industrial issues

The eventual aftermath of the First World War saw a great resurgence of anxiety about social conditions in Britain, but this was to take a very different form from that of the Edwardian decade. A striking feature of social debate in the 1920s, and indeed throughout the interwar years, was to be its much greater subordination to external economic constraints than had been the case before 1914. Great Britain was no longer the world’s predominant financial power, its basic heavy industries were threatened by world over-production, and concrete problems of restructuring the economy took precedence in the minds of many over the challenge of more amorphous ‘social evils’. Many policy experts who had been prominent in pioneering reform movements before 1914 now either became much more cautious in outlook, or were increasingly attracted to the more ambitious social experiments that appeared to be taking place in post-1917 Russia. Moreover, the enormous increase in trade-union membership that took place during and after the war meant that the focus of debate on social issues shifted away from the degenerationist concerns of the Edwardian era towards much more industrial and class-conflict-ridden issues, such as wages, strikes, lockouts, workplace conditions and – above all – mass unemployment.⁶

Shift in geographical distribution of hardship and reduction in 'primary' poverty

The full significance of these changes cannot be fully detailed here, but one important aspect was that not just the content but the geographical distribution of the most pressing social questions changed markedly from the pre-war years. An unexpected trend, only partially understood or even identified at the time, was that the 1920s and 1930s proved to be a period of rising real wages and unprecedented material prosperity for working people in some regions and occupations, while bringing prolonged misery, poverty and redundancy, even to highly-skilled workers, in others. Another change, as Seebom Rowntree noted in 1936, was that opportunities for working-class domestic consumerism and leisure had greatly increased since 1899 (again underlining the enormous disparity between different geographical regions). A further change was that, even in severely depressed areas, many of the social services and income-support schemes initiated in the 1900s took off during the interwar period, with the result that – despite prolonged battles over job losses, wage cuts and benefit rates – the worst indices of sheer physical privation were never quite so dire as they had been in 1904. Thus, three of the major poverty enquiries of the period – Llewellyn Smith's London survey of 1929–32, Seebom Rowntree's second York survey of 1936 and the Pilgrim Trust enquiry of 1938 – all found poverty still heavily concentrated among lone older people and families with young children. But they also found that, despite the shrinkage of many major industries, the proportion living in 'primary' poverty was half what it had been a generation before.⁷ And the surveys also suggest that a tacit sense of what would later be called 'relative deprivation' – i.e. of 'poverty' not as absolute want, nor even as induced by 'drink', but as exclusion from the normal culture of wider society – had begun to penetrate the meaning of the term by the mid-1930s.

Suspensions of government failure to implement rational solutions

How far did such changes affect the dichotomy between 'social evils' and 'social problems' identified above? On one level the notion of a dire 'social evil' – as something tragically beyond the scope of remedial human action – exactly fitted the case of mass unemployment in this period. Certainly there were many public-spirited people in interwar Britain who could see no way of creating jobs for the unemployed without diverting investment away from other parts of the economy, thus merely intensifying overall recession. And the fact that, when such policies *were* adopted in other countries they were often accompanied by authoritarian dictatorships, seemed simply to confirm the fatalistic viewpoint that 'nothing can be done'. The 'hunger marches' of the early 1930s seemed to many people – both those living in depressed northern towns and those in more affluent regions through which the marchers passed – to epitomise the notion of a 'social evil' in the face of which governments, experts and ordinary people felt hopeless and helpless. In more radical discourse of the period, however, the focus was quite different, with critics from both left and right claiming that, not just on unemployment but on many other issues, governments and vested interests were failing to implement rational solutions to social problems, the nature and causes of which were perfectly well known.

This suspicion in itself pointed to another aspect of the 'social evils' question that appeared subtly different in the interwar years from the Edwardian decade, which was the emergence of a much wider spectrum of contested political and philosophical convictions about the very nature of social and economic life. This was particularly so in the early and mid-1930s – after the onset of the Great Depression, but before full realisation had dawned about the character of Nazism (and, much later, of Stalinism). During this period, and in some cases long afterwards, significant numbers of normally 'constitutionalist' politicians and social activists dabbled with the possibility of curing mass unemployment by

extra-parliamentary direct action or use of 'emergency' powers (Cripps, 1933). In this perspective liberal capitalism itself came to be seen as the source and summation of all 'social evils', far outweighing such merely secondary symptoms as mass unemployment or poverty.

Planning and post-war reconstruction

Despite the attraction of many theorists to more extreme solutions, the later 1930s brought a major resurgence of empirical research into social questions, including the possibility of what many saw as a 'halfway house' lying somewhere between liberal constitutionalism and more authoritarian politics, in the form of social and economic 'planning'. The planning movement included some who continued to favour revolutionary goals, but it also attracted a new generation of young social scientists who were usually on the 'left' in politics, but whose practical ideas owed much less to Marxism than to the 'positivist' tradition of the French social reformers Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte.⁸ These planners had many different 'policy' interests – the economy, the environment, housing, education, income redistribution, national health – but a key theme binding them together was a unanimous confidence in the future of applied social science. For this generation there were no imponderable 'social evils' (other than those artificially fostered by *laissez-faire* liberalism or fascism); instead there was a wide range of practical 'social problems' urgently waiting to be clearly defined, investigated and solved.

The Second World War, social scientists and the founding of the welfare state

Such attitudes came to a head with the outbreak of the Second World War, and particularly after 1940, when Britain's desperate military plight appeared to overturn all conventional ideas about limits to collective action. And, simultaneously, the impact of bombing and mass evacuation opened the eyes

of many politicians, planners and ordinary citizens to the modern variant of the geographical 'two nations' that had been invisibly developing over the interwar years.⁹ Despite much talk of national solidarity, the initial reaction of 'respectable' Britain to the condition of slum-dwelling evacuees was no less moralistic than in former times – the difference being that patriotic citizens now had to swallow their horror and do something about it. Such developments brought to the fore an unprecedented degree of influence for the expert social scientist. Seebohm Rowntree's recommendations on child poverty, based on his 1936 survey, were incorporated into government plans for wartime family allowances as early as the autumn of 1939 (though the survey itself was not published until 1941).¹⁰

The next six years were to see a continuous stream of public enquiries into both immediate wartime problems and planning for post-war 'reconstruction', in which 'social scientists' of all kinds – economists, statisticians, demographers, housing and town planners, nutrition experts and social psychologists – were to play a seminal role. The most celebrated of these was the Beveridge Report of 1942, which recommended the final abolition of the Poor Law, and its replacement by universal subsistence-level national insurance, universal family allowances, a comprehensive national health service and the permanent elimination of all but frictional unemployment by a system of centralised economic planning. The Beveridge Plan is often seen as the founding document not just of the British 'welfare state', but of similar developments throughout Europe and much of the British Commonwealth. From the vantage point of this paper, however, it was also significant for a quite different reason. This was that, having been at the cutting edge of reformist movements during the Edwardian era, Beveridge – like many other liberal intellectuals over the interwar years – had for a time been overwhelmed by the prevailing pessimism of 'nothing can be done' (in other words, that mass unemployment was a social evil that simply could not be cured by normal

democratic means). In the early 1940s, by contrast, he moved towards an opposite extreme, at times hinting that even a largely 'communitistic' style of social planning need not be irreconcilable with maintaining personal liberties in a democratic state. Moreover, Beveridge was in no sense untypical in this respect. On the contrary, many writings on post-war reconstruction conveyed a very similar message. This could be seen most explicitly in the wartime town-planning movement – where traditional values of privacy, freedom, consumer choice and family life were all portrayed as perfectly compatible with a centrally-planned and prefabricated urban environment, collectively owned by the community and directed by the social planner.

Strength of family and community life recorded in 1940s and 1950s

For better or worse, chronic deficit in national finances after the Second World War prevented many of these ambitious wartime visions of holistic planning from being fully acted upon, with priority being given instead to more long-standing concerns about health, full employment and abolition of poverty. The immediate post-war period was one of prolonged economic hardship for a majority of people in Britain, with food queues, rationing quotas, housing and 'black-marketeering' being even more severe than in wartime.

Nevertheless, sociological studies of the later 1940s reported on the continuing, indeed renewed, strength of family and community life, as women returned from factories into the home, as parents and children took their first holidays together for nearly a decade, and as working men enjoyed greater job security, higher real wages and more enhanced social status than at any previous period of English history. Infant mortality (still seen, as in the 1900s, as the crucial litmus test of social well-being) had fallen dramatically since 1939. And public opinion surveys likewise suggested that most people in post-war Britain were extremely happy with the new social services. Maintaining full employment became an absolute priority of

post-war economic policy, while the National Health Service, founded in 1948, instantly commanded well-nigh universal support throughout the British population (despite, or possibly because of, the fact that its early years were spent struggling with a vast backlog of several generations of untreated ill-health). Seebohm Rowntree's final York survey, published in 1951, suggested that primary poverty had all but vanished in post-war Britain, its only serious incidence occurring among a few elderly people living alone in decrepit dwellings that were too big for them (their 'aloneness' – arising from the fact that their families had been rehoused on new estates – often being more of a problem than quantitative shortfall of income).¹¹ At a more subjective level, many people continued to be apprehensive about all kinds of incalculable 'evils', but these were much more closely linked to the aftermath of war, the implications of the atomic bomb and the rise of the Soviet Union than to the more explicitly 'social' evils of earlier in the century.

Reinterpretation of a modest 'golden age'

Despite the omnipresent dread of nuclear war, much of this modest post-war contentment appeared to survive throughout the 1950s. Indeed some contemporary commentators suggested that Britain was living through a modest 'golden age', marked by full employment, rising living standards, greatly enhanced social equality and close-knit family and community life. Such indicators were coupled with some of the lowest levels of crime, delinquency, drunkenness, public disorder and marital breakdown ever registered in British history. Even divorce, which had risen sharply in 1945, reverted to a level only slightly above that of earlier decades, while per-capita consumption of alcohol fell in the mid-1950s to its lowest point on record. Despite the collapse of the old Victorian friendly societies (now rendered redundant by welfare-state provision), voluntary and associational life appeared to flourish, with charities, churches, chapels, youth movements, sports clubs and 'special interest' groups all booming in numbers. Later commentators, however, were to reinterpret the

1950s in a much more pessimistic light. Critics on the right drew attention to the period's low growth rates, mounting inflation, bad industrial relations, chronic budgetary deficits and a fatal decline in Britain's international competitiveness. Critics on the left emphasised the persistence of class divisions and 'deference', an unhealthy clinging to outworn visions of empire, and the emergence of new and disturbing symptoms of social pathology, such as juvenile delinquency, Rachmanism (exploitation of tenants by unscrupulous landlords) and widespread prejudice against immigrants from the 'new commonwealth'.

'Better off' but 'less happy' in the 1950s and early 1960s

How far was either the optimism of earlier accounts or the pessimism of later ones reflected in the subjective perceptions of people actually living at the time? The 1950s and early 1960s was a classic age of sociological surveys into what real people thought about real issues, so it is not difficult to track down feelings of both contentment and unease, often expressed simultaneously by the same people. Such evidence suggested that Britain was seen as a much 'fairer' society than in previous times, but that, despite the unifying impact of the still recent war, the 1930s perception of Britain as 'two nations' had by no means wholly disappeared. It suggested also that, even in more affluent areas, there were feelings of strongly felt loss as well as gain attached to the material benefits of post-war reconstruction. Indeed, a recurrent theme of social enquiries of the period was that, though many people perceived themselves as 'better off' than in the past, they nevertheless felt 'less happy'. The reasons given for this were often vague or confused, but some at least were linked to the side effects of recent government policies of which respondents acknowledged themselves to be the (often grateful) beneficiaries. In particular, higher living standards, better housing and wider educational opportunities were often seen as being achieved at the expense of close contact with families and

communities and by loss of former cultural identities that had not been replaced, or only very partially so, by new ones. 'Of course, we used to go to church,' was a recurrent response of young women and men who may or may not have had an active religious identity in their previous communities, but had certainly not found it in their new ones.

Rise of 'private affluence' at the price of 'public squalor'

Despite the solidarity of family life there were certain premonitions of future disturbance in this sphere, as women who had initially returned to the labour market simply to furnish their homes with consumer goods, started to find – often to their own surprise – that paid employment was more rewarding and enjoyable than housework. Many men of the 1950s disliked any suggestion that they should undertake domestic tasks, but a large minority who actively wanted to share in parenting and home-building found these goals often in conflict with the demands of overtime, unsocial hours and the need to earn extra money. In a rather different sphere, the sense of 'aloneness', noted almost casually by Rowntree in 1951, a decade later had become a widespread phenomenon, among not just old people but young mothers and single people of both sexes who (even when desperately wanting to do so) found it difficult to discover contexts in which to meet neighbours or find friends. Another significant finding, largely expressed by the middle-aged but by no means confined to the middle classes, was a quite unexpected hankering for something called 'pre-war'. Indeed, an important but neglected aspect of the period was that – despite almost universal gratitude for the welfare state – other services of a non-welfare kind (such as buses, trains, town halls, community centres, municipal dance halls and general dealings with officialdom) were often felt to be greatly inferior to those of the pre-war years. This seemed to echo the claim made by the American economist J. K. Galbraith about 1950s America, that the hallmark of the epoch was not communal prosperity but the rise of 'private

affluence' at the price of 'public squalor'. Many such concerns were relatively trivial (or at least weakly felt) by comparison with the much deeper anxieties of the 1900s or 1930s, but they may perhaps be seen as presaging certain aspects of the much more intense sense of unease and social dislocation that was to resurface later in the century.

Sea changes of the later twentieth century

A central focus of this paper so far has been on ways in which certain 'social evils', long seen by the lay public as menacing but inescapable facts of life, came to be translated by social investigators into clearly defined 'social problems', which in turn became the basis of remedial social policies. This had been an important feature of the culture of public life in Britain (partly, though not wholly, transcending class and ideological divisions) throughout the earlier twentieth century. The 1960s brought a number of fundamental changes in this process, that subtly transformed ways in which 'social evils' were conceived and understood. One such change was that the increasing professionalisation of social work, planning and the social sciences meant that there was an increasing divergence between 'social evils' as perceived by policy 'experts' and those encountered by citizens in the street (a divergence particularly apparent in such complex and conflict-ridden areas of policy as urban redevelopment and the treatment of problem families, drug addiction and the mentally ill).

Social changes and opposing ideologies

Another important trend was that from the early 1960s onwards (in marked contrast to most other major European economies), income-support policies in Britain gradually shifted away from the post-war 'universalist' model of contributory insurance and reverted back to the means-tested system inherited from the Poor Law. This meant that social benefits were increasingly targeted not on wider contractual entitlement, but on selective relief of social

'need' (a shift that severely disadvantaged the skilled and 'regular' working classes by comparison with more marginal groups). This trend coincided with a much more dramatic and conspicuous development in the shape of an emerging revolution in sexual, interpersonal and gender norms, which was to transform social attitudes in Britain over many subsequent decades and (in sharp contrast with the era of the Victorian Poor Law) was to penetrate deeply into relations between child-bearing, parenthood and co-habitation on the one hand and the system of state welfare on the other. The arrival in Britain of large numbers of immigrants from a great diversity of cultural backgrounds, whose family structures ranged from the ultra-conservative to the ultra 'post-modern', likewise profoundly challenged long-established British social perceptions and norms. And, perhaps more fundamentally, the later 1960s and 1970s were to bring about a tidal erosion in the support of many British people (often in direct opposition to their stated ideological values) for the public-service/welfare-state/mixed-economy model of government and society that had prevailed in Britain since the end of the Second World War. As the pound lost its value, as industrial relations worsened, as oil prices tripled and as British staple industries collapsed in the face of foreign competition, powerful ideologies on both left and right increasingly challenged the modest consensual idealism of the post-war era. Such critics called on the one side for a much more egalitarian, collectivised 'workers' state', based on a 'fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth', and on the other side for the freeing up of capitalism from state control and the defusing of industrial strife, not by benevolent state paternalism but by monetary stringency and the 'discipline of the market'.

Industrial relations and Thatcherism

These issues were to be fought out in a long series of industrial battles over the course of the 1970s, and there can be little doubt that to many Britons of all political persuasions at that time the key 'social evils' of the epoch were not

moral or welfare issues (nor even rising crime rates or immigration) but the mutually reinforcing pressures of 'inflation' and bad industrial relations. These battles culminated in the 1978–9 'winter of discontent', when power stations closed down, rubbish rotted in the streets, dead bodies remained unburied, life-saving operations were cancelled and rats were seen in public hospitals for the first time since the late Victorian era. The result was the election of 1979, which brought to power a government and prime minister committed not just to reduction of government and restoration of markets, but to a fundamental re-conceptualisation of what many people understood by the term 'social'. For Margaret Thatcher, a devout disciple of the liberal economist and philosopher F. A. Hayek, 'society' was not a disembodied force or entity in its own right, but simply the sum of autonomous human individuals (together with 'natural' units such as the family) and their multiple interactions. Post-war public ownership of the 'commanding heights of the economy' was now dismissed as a thinly veiled form of protectionism, while economic inequality, far from being a prime 'social evil' (as many post-war Britons had come to believe), was seen as the indispensable motor of efficiency and higher output. In such a vision social welfare services and protection against poverty were by no means deemed unnecessary, but – in stark contrast to the 'universalist' aspirations of the post-war era – they were seen as needing to be targeted on a diminishing minority, who for various personal reasons would be unable to share in the overall maximisation of wealth.

Such ideas were to fuel government social and economic programmes in Britain over the next three decades, with 'New Labour' after 1997 honouring Mrs Thatcher with the sincerest form of flattery. They were never imposed with the out-and-out thoroughness that many neo-liberal theorists had hoped for, but nevertheless they transformed many aspects of British economic and social relations to an extent that would have been unimaginable in the post-war years (when it had been assumed by many thinkers right

across the political spectrum that the era of free-market capitalism had gone forever). Nevertheless, despite generating deep and sometimes violent disturbances (such as the Brixton and Toxteth riots of 1981 and the Miners' Strike of 1984–5), they clearly struck a deep chord in British society, as witnessed by the fact that Margaret Thatcher won three general elections, and her successor won a fourth. Some Thatcherite policies were, initially at least, widely popular, particularly the sale of council houses to sitting tenants, the restraints on inflation and the curbs on wild-cat strikes. The full impact of Thatcherism on the values and structures of British society in the later twentieth century still awaits serious historical assessment (with many books written about the period being manifestly polemical and partisan). Nevertheless, since many voices within the recent surge of concern about 'social evils' directly invoked and blamed certain Thatcherite themes, it is worth trying to pinpoint more precisely some aspects of what that impact actually was.

Modernisation, globalisation and consumerism

One consequence of Thatcherism (and subsequently of Blairism) was that many trends which had been slowly evolving over the previous quarter of a century now raced forward with unprecedented speed. Thus the 'commodification' of public services, the shift from a 'social insurance' to a means-tested system of welfare and the castration of the powers of local government had all been gestating under the regimes of Macmillan, Wilson and Heath, but the sheer pace and scale of such developments under Thatcher had the effect of transforming them from changes of degree to changes in kind. At the same time many aspects of British local and national culture appeared to become far less cohesive and distinctive than in any earlier period of history. This was not just because of 'modernisation', but because the closure or foreign takeover of many major industries, the free movement of labour and capital across international boundaries, the disappearance of

ancient provincial centres under car parks and shopping malls and the globalisation of banking and finance were not simply economic variables but forces that radically transformed the ways in which people thought and lived and even, to some degree, who they actually were. Thus skilled and semi-skilled industrial workers who in 1951 had made up 70 per cent of the adult male employed population in Britain, by the end of the twentieth century were to be a mere 15 per cent, their successors having moved upwards into professions, sideways into marketing and retail or downwards into the ranks of the long-term sick and unemployed. Such a change, for better or worse, inevitably entailed major changes in social relations and in the character of popular culture, not least because such workers had played such an important role in the fraternal, voluntarist, sporting and communitarian culture of Britain earlier in the century. Their transformation into 'consumers', whose main leisure activity (after watching television) was shopping, could scarcely fail to have a far-reaching impact both on personal relations and on wider British life and national culture.

The diseases of prosperity in the twenty-first century

Social theorists and moralists throughout human history, from Aristotle and the prophets of the Old Testament, through to figures like John Ruskin, R. H. Tawney, and Mahatma Gandhi in more modern times, have warned against the dangers of affluence and acquisitiveness for their own sake rather than for meeting basic human needs or for public and communal purposes. Many modern economists have treated such warnings with some disdain, as trying to smuggle subjective ethical and spiritual concerns into 'value-free' social science (a criticism frequently levied by market economists against the 'economics of welfare' school that inspired some of the founders of the welfare state). Ironically, however, the triumph of market principles in public policy over the Thatcher years was to be accompanied by a marked resurgence of

interest in such normative questions among mainstream academic economists (including among their number not just the sentimental or journalistic second eleven, but some of the world's greatest practitioners of the discipline, such as Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen). The separating out of the concepts of 'wealth', 'welfare' and 'well-being' as inter-related, but nevertheless distinct, ways of describing human satisfactions has increasingly figured in recent economics literature, together with attempts to measure subjective as well as objective indicators of these conditions. Likewise, qualitative as well as quantitative notions of consumption have crept back into the discussion of such concepts (in conscious echo of John Ruskin's once-famous maxim, 'there is no wealth but life').

Unhappy affluence

Recent research by both economists and economic historians into such questions in the USA, Britain and elsewhere has produced some surprising and suggestive empirical results. One *unsurprising* point (indeed wholly predictable from a Hayekian/Thatcherite perspective) is that 'inequality' appears to have been universally more efficient than 'equality' in generating a level of economic growth that initially makes possible a system of redistributive 'social welfare' of any kind. Nevertheless, recent case studies have suggested that this ceases to be true whenever a certain level of prosperity is reached and wherever private 'affluence' has become a strategic device for keeping an economy going, rather than a means of satisfying real human needs. Furthermore, mounting evidence has suggested that affluence tends positively to undermine the pleasures of consumption and to generate numerous secondary disorders, such as boredom, obesity, addiction, antisocial behaviour and even marriage breakdown (all of which add greatly to the overhead costs of keeping a society going). It also tends to subvert normal rationality and prudence, and above all singularly fails in the utilitarian objective of making people happy. Thus, cross-national studies of 'subjective well-being' (a concept

derived from the pioneering early studies of Seebohm Rowntree) have found that such an entity varies widely across different countries and cultures, with only minimal reference to levels of income. No significant improvement in *subjective* well-being appears to have occurred, for example, in such prosperous economies as Japan, France and the USA since shortly after the end of the Second World War.

Pursuit of 'consumption' creates new social evils

Such findings seem directly relevant to the history of the ebb and flow of anxieties about 'social evils', and in particular to the construction of such evils in Britain at the present time. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's public consultation exercise in the summer of 2007 occurred at the high peak of an unprecedented investment and housing boom, and at the end of a quarter-century of market-oriented economic management by both Conservative and Labour governments in Britain. Over the course of that period real incomes in Britain had risen by nearly 70 per cent, inflation had reached a historic low and standard rates of income tax had fallen by a third. And, though public services had stagnated in the Thatcher years, since 1997 government spending on health services, education and various forms of income support (including, in particular, the targeting of poverty among young children) had virtually doubled. How, then, did it come about that respondents to the 2007 JRF consultation voiced unanimously pessimistic concern about such issues as social, communal and family breakdown, an epidemic of drug and alcohol abuse, persistent and worsening poverty and inequality, widespread crime, violence and child cruelty, and unsettled and ill-defined apprehensions about race and immigration? (All this, of course, more than a year before the sudden precipitate collapse of the world's national economies into cataclysmic recession.) Orthodox economic theorists of a very short generation ago might well have suggested that the JRF respondents were simply 'smuggling in' non-economic ethical concerns and that all such problems would solve themselves, if only

meddlesome politicians would leave them to be dealt with by the discipline of the market. The new international economics of 'affluence' and 'well-being', however, points towards a rather different conclusion. It suggests that pursuit of 'consumption' as an end in itself, regardless of the 'value' of the objects consumed, or of prudent calculation of future needs, may in fact be a powerful generator of personal misery, failure of rational self-discipline, social pathology and economic disorder and decline. Such reflections throw a highly suggestive light, historical as well as theoretical, upon the genesis and character of social evils in the cultural and economic context of the early twenty-first century.

Some comparative historical perspectives

As indicated above, a historical perspective is a useful reminder that anxieties about 'social evils' are by no means unique to the present time. It suggests that a comparable sense of moral crisis gripped the public imagination in Britain at least twice during the last century – the first occurring in the aftermath of the Boer War (in circumstances very comparable to the present time), the second generated during the interwar years by mass unemployment. In both cases, these crises were eventually transcended. But this did not happen without a great deal of intellectual effort, serious research and social controversy and conflict (including, some would argue, the fundamental reshaping of economic and social relations in Britain that stemmed from the impact of two world wars).

Little has been said so far, however, about the comparative and international dimension of such crises, either in the past or at the present time. Such an enormous subject can only be touched upon briefly here. But a few examples may give some indication of how far anxiety about 'social evils' should be seen as part of the wider experience of 'modernity' (and more recently 'post-modernity'), or merely as evidence of circumstances and attitudes peculiar to Great Britain. Cross-national

evidence for the 1900s suggests that the perception of social crisis in Edwardian Britain, though intensely felt by many at the time, was in fact quite mild and minimal by comparison with similar apprehensions in many other industrialising countries. In France and Italy in particular, studies on social questions during the *fin-de-siècle* epoch were far more deeply obsessed with visions of a dangerous 'underclass', of hereditary biological 'degeneration' and of imminent social breakdown than was ever the case in turn-of-the-century Britain. And, despite the torrent of anxiety about the condition of 'darkest England' and 'outcast London', many measurable symptoms of social pathology, such as crime, illegitimacy, prostitution and suicide, were very much more muted in Britain than on the continent of Europe. (Indeed, the American sociologist Abraham Flexner described Edwardian London as being 'like a great open-air cathedral' by comparison with the squalor, misery, violence and immorality of Paris, Vienna and Berlin.) Commentators in the United States during the 1900s likewise remarked upon the boredom, rootlessness, alienation and estrangement experienced by residents of great American cities, to an extent unknown at that time anywhere in Britain (though predicted by some as the desolate future for all modern societies). A generation later, Britain, as the most heavily industrialised country, suffered far more prolonged mass unemployment than elsewhere in Europe, yet by comparison with much of the continent, British society remained a haven of social integration and order throughout the interwar years. Moreover, both in the 1900s and in the 1930s British social relations were glued together by very dense networks of voluntary organisations – religious, occupational, sporting, hobbies-based or simply sociable in character – that, despite depression and unemployment, were seen by many as the distinctive essence and social cement of British national culture (often compared, for example, with France of the Third Republic, where all such organisations were frowned upon, unless specifically regulated and licensed by the state). And in both decades Britain had by far the

smallest professional police forces per head of population of any major Western country. The vast majority of Britons, so one authority had claimed in 1912, had little need of 'policing' in the continental sense. Instead they largely 'policed themselves', either through their clubs, societies and other self-governing organisations, or through the inner discipline of the 'Anglo-Saxon conscience'.

Loss of British community strengths

Social indicators and other historical evidence over the most recent decades, however, tell a rather different story. They suggest not that Britain had become more like other nations but that some of the distinctively 'communitarian' features of earlier British historic culture – which had militated against many of the more dire social evils earlier experienced on the continent – may have declined or been irrevocably lost. Thus, although the British people were still extensive supporters of charities and voluntary movements, by the end of the twentieth century this had become a predominantly passive activity, mainly involving payment of monetary subscriptions to organisations run by professional fund-raisers and managers. Sport likewise, formerly the vital epicentre of a nationwide local associational life (including mass 'amateur' games playing), had been transformed into a largely commercial and 'spectator' pastime – a trend not helped by the mass sale of school playing fields or the ban on 'competitive games' by teachers' unions (two policies inflicted simultaneously on the nation's schoolchildren in the later 1980s). Similarly, although nearly 80 per cent of the population at the start of the twenty-first century claimed to have some kind of religious belief, the corporate and associational aspects of religious practice had steeply declined, transforming Britain – in outward observance at least – from being one of the most religious into one of the least religious cultures throughout Western Europe. And, possibly as a consequence of waning religious sanctions, the self-regulating 'Anglo-Saxon conscience' seemed also to be in steep decline, a trend signalled in many quarters by a widely pervasive loss of the sense of 'mutual

trust' on which Britain's lightly-regulated institutions had so long relied. This took the form on the one hand of a widespread loss of popular confidence in government agencies, public institutions and professional bodies, and on the other hand of a reciprocal lack of trust on the part of government itself, expressed through the escalation of ever more detailed regulatory codes for guiding the public and professional conduct of citizens (a practice long familiar in many continental countries, but hitherto almost unheard of in traditionally 'self-policing' Britain).

Influence of social security system on personal and family life

Moreover, by a strange paradox, the ever-increasing regulation of public and workplace behaviour coincided with ever-increasing libertarianism, diversity and instability in the sphere of personal relations. Such developments in personal life-styles were of course common across the Western world, but there were marked differences in the ways in which they impacted on society. In the 1900s, and again in the 1950s and early 1960s, British society had had the lowest divorce rate, lowest levels of recorded family violence and lowest 'illegitimate' birth rate throughout Western Europe, but by the early twenty-first century it had moved close to the top of the comparative league table on all three counts. Moreover, although births of children to unmarried couples were rising from the 1980s at a very similar rate in most of Western Europe, during the year 2000 only in Britain did a majority of children born outside formal wedlock live on a permanent basis in one-parent rather than two-parent families. This was a pattern shaped in part by the fact that most continental social security systems paid generous 'universal' family allowances to all settled couples, whereas Britain since the 1960s had gone down the (supposedly more 'economical') road of 'targeting' benefits on lone mothers according to individual financial need. Likewise Britain by the year 2000 had by far the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Europe, again reflecting the fact that (as in the USA, where lone motherhood was even more prevalent) the

structure of benefits and housing provision privileged single parenthood over the claims of married or permanently cohabiting couples. Such policies bore witness to an admirable concern among British policy-makers of all parties for tackling problems of child poverty. But they may also suggest a lack of official imagination about possible ways of doing this, together with an almost perverse degree of tunnel vision or myopia about possible interaction between social security arrangements and the long-term cultural evolution of personal lifestyles, private choices and structures of family life.

Conclusion

The above narrative and analysis is necessarily highly selective, particularly in relation to recent decades, where – despite the vast proliferation of both national and international social and economic data – the long-term historical significance of changing attitudes, institutions and patterns of human behaviour remains far from clear. Nevertheless, certain tentative conclusions and suggestions may be drawn from this historical survey. One is the fairly obvious one, that concern about the menace of widely-perceived but only half-understood ‘social evils’ is by no means unique to the present time, but has erupted for a variety of reasons at a number of earlier moments in both British and European history. A second, less reassuring, suggestion is that whereas in past epochs, many aspects of the highly-integrated historic culture of Britain meant that British institutions and policy-makers were better able to cope with such crises than their continental neighbours, at the present time they may be much less so. A third point links together the specific concerns of respondents to the recent JRF consultation exercise with current developments in economic theory and ‘welfare’ thought, about the nature and understanding of human happiness and ‘human flourishing’. These studies have concluded that many aspects of contemporary ‘social evils’ appear to have come about not just because some groups in society have been excluded from recent general prosperity (though there has certainly been much of that), but because the very nature of that prosperity has been in certain respects deformed, corrosive of interpersonal and communal ties, even pathological in its influence on individual and collective human behaviour.

A further point is to suggest a closer reassessment of the social philosophies of both Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree. Both these men were deeply committed to the view that ‘social ills’ might be moral and spiritual in character as well as measurable and material, but that nevertheless the techniques involved in

assessing these two dimensions should not be confused (a distinction that was implicit in Joseph Rowntree’s ‘foundation document’ of 1904). Seebohm Rowntree’s poverty studies likewise went to great lengths to separate out the purely ‘quantitative’ aspects of social need from those associated with mis-spending and disorderly lifestyles, and his lesser-known work on Belgium similarly distinguished the material prerequisites of prosperous communities from the moral, cultural and spiritual ones. A result has been that, over the course of a hundred years, Seebohm Rowntree has frequently fallen foul of criticism from both approaches. Thus, humanitarians have accused him of an inhumanly ‘Spartan’ definition of ‘primary poverty’ while positivists have accused him of just the opposite – of smuggling in all kinds of subjective and culture-bound value judgements about desirable and undesirable personal behaviour and patterns of human life. The current debate, however, supports the claim that these two approaches are complementary, since the very language of ‘social evils’ necessarily includes an implicitly moral and immaterial dimension. This conclusion is further reinforced by, and dovetails with, the critique of the intellectual bankruptcy of purely quantitative accounts of human flourishing, suggested by recent empirical, historical and theoretical writings on the themes of wealth, welfare and well-being.

Notes

1 A third term, 'social ills', which seems to hover between 'problems' and 'evils', was often used in Rowntree publications and other social reform literature of the early 20th century.

2 The Ratan Tata Trust at the London School of Economics, founded in 1912 by an Indian iron and steel millionaire to carry out research into problems of poverty in Britain, was another rare example. It is of some interest that Sir Ratan Tata saw poverty in Britain as much more in need of investigation at this time than in India.

3 On Joseph Rowntree's own earlier involvement in applied social research, see Worstenholme (1986). On Seebohm Rowntree's thought and work, see Briggs (1961).

4 This calculation included the very large numbers of working people who rarely or never touched alcohol, indicating that in some households the percentage of income spent on drink was very much higher than 20 per cent.

5 The meaning of the term 'environmentalist' at that time was not 'green' policies, but anti-Darwinian social policies that would improve the material environment of the poor, rather than accepting the notion of hereditary degeneration.

6 This is not to suggest that industrial problems had not been prominent in the Edwardian era, but simply that they loomed much larger in the 1920s and 1930s.

7 Rowntree's estimate of a 50 per cent reduction in primary poverty has been criticised in the light of the evidence collected by the New Survey of London Life and Labour in 1931 (Hatton and Bailey, 1998). A rather different problem arises from the fact that Rowntree in his second survey retrospectively adjusted his estimate of primary poverty for 1899 from 10 per cent to 15.46 per cent of the population. This was presumably done because Rowntree in 1936 had adopted a slightly more cultural and less austere physiological definition of basic human needs. This redefinition to some extent

blurs the contrast between the findings of the two surveys, but it reinforces the contrast between the degree of stark poverty that had existed in 1899 and the amount of improvement that had taken place by 1936.

8 A further important stimulus to planning was the publication in 1936 of J. M. Keynes' *Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, a work that seemed to overturn a central premise of British economic thought – namely that 'artificial' investment to counteract unemployment was always counterproductive. The theoretical roots of Keynes' ideas were in fact very remote from those of the positivists, but the crucial historical point was that he appeared to have undermined the view, which had paralysed thinking about problems of unemployment for more than a century, that 'nothing can be done'.

9 The 'two nations' was a phrase originally coined in the 1840s by Benjamin Disraeli to contrast the burgeoning industrial north of England with the depressed agricultural south, i.e. a very different pattern from that which had emerged in the 1930s. The pattern discerned by Disraeli had not entirely vanished, however. A survey of 1940 found the worst malnutrition in England among the children of farm labourers in rural Oxfordshire, where the local county council had resolutely refused to implement the school meals and milk legislation of 1906–7.

10 Minutes of Economic Advisory Council, 1939. Rowntree's proposal, which he had been developing since 1899, was for universal subsistence level family allowances that would raise all families with children out of poverty without raising wages – a remedy strongly opposed by trades unions. The adoption of this policy, which was pressed on a rather reluctant government by J. M. Keynes, was motivated by the imperative need to avoid wartime inflation. Rowntree's survey was not published until 1941, with the result that his influence on the introduction of family allowances has often been overlooked.

11 The over-optimism of Rowntree's 1951 report has been blamed for the 'disappearance' of concern with poverty in Britain until the early 1960s (Hatton and Bailey, 1999). But this seems implausible, partly because so prominent an authority as Richard Titmuss was vociferously drawing attention to old-age poverty in the mid-1950s, and partly because the poverty crisis of the 1960s focused mainly on lone mothers, who scarcely appeared in earlier poverty surveys.

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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.

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