Society is Broken

Theodore Dalrymple

THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

CIS OCCASIONAL PAPER 146

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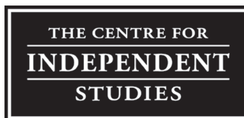

CIS Occasional Paper 146

Published June 2016
by The Centre for Independent Studies Limited
Level 1, 131 Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000
Email: cis@cis.org.au
Website: www.cis.org.au

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Dalrymple, Theodore, author.

Society is broken / Theodore Dalrymple.

9781922184672 (paperback)

CIS occasional papers ; 146.

Welfare state.
Social problems.
Social values.
Social policy.

Other Creators/Contributors:
Centre for Independent Studies (Australia)

Dewey Number: 361.65

Society is Broken

Theodore Dalrymple

The Centre for Independent Studies
2016 Max Hartwell Scholar-in-Residence

18 April 2016

The Centre for Independent Studies Lighthouse Lecture
in partnership with Sydney Opera House

A phrase such as 'a broken society' should not be made to bear more meaning than it has. Societies do not break; they continue to exist even after catastrophe — albeit in an often unpleasant way. The nearest to an account of a genuinely broken society I have read is *The Mountain People*, the story of the Ik, a Ugandan tribe displaced from its ancestral environment, written more than forty years ago by the anthropologist Colin Turnbull. According to him, the Ik became deeply psychopathic, each person pursuing his own ends with a callousness and indifference to the suffering even of their spouses and children of a quite astonishing degree. Not only has his account been challenged as inaccurate because he stayed with the Ik only a short time and did not speak their language, but on his own account even Ik society, unpleasant as he depicted it, did continue to function in its way. By coincidence, I met a man in Brisbane who had recently visited the Ik who told me that Turnbull had had it all wrong, and misunderstood what he saw.

When we talk of a broken society we seem to imply, at least if we take the term too literally, that there was ever a whole society that was not broken or fractured: that is to say, a society whose every member felt completely at harmony with it. This is utopianism projected on to the past. Such a society has never existed, of course; and it is the whole point of Dr Johnson's famous fable, *Rasselas*, that dissatisfaction is the permanent condition of mankind, that there is no perfect sublunary form of existence for humanity this side of paradise, if only because we are each of us prey to conflicting and contradictory desires that cannot all be satisfied at the same time or indeed in a single lifetime.

A short time ago I visited the Sydney Justice and Crime Museum, which, I must say, is a very good antidote to romanticising the past. The exhibition dealt with decades from the 1910s to the 1940s: and there was obviously in those years an impoverishment and physical squalor probably far greater than anything seen today.

When we criticise our own societies, then, we do not do so from the standpoint of wanting a return to a mythical past in which everyone behaved as we should wish them to behave today. On the other hand, we should not so congratulate ourselves that we have transcended a past whose great defects — moral and material — we now see clearly, that we can or ought to feel completely satisfied with our glorious

present. Each age has its own problems, and must judge them by its own criteria.

Though we must not idealise the past, this does not mean that we have nothing to learn from it at all or nothing to envy it in any respect whatever. Let me illustrate what I mean by reference to crime. Statistics in this field are of course contested and not altogether easy to interpret, but it does seem that the twentieth century saw an enormous increase in the levels of crime in many western countries, not least in my own, Great Britain.*

In 1900, there were about 100,000 indictable crimes known to the police, and in 1990 about 5 million. There are definitional problems, of course, and it is sometimes said that it is now easier to report crimes than it was because of the spread of telephones (I sometimes wonder whether people who use this argument have ever tried to report a crime to the British police by telephone). On the other hand, where crimes are few it is likely that a greater proportion are reported; and in fact it was easier to find a policeman on the street to report a crime to. One of the little remarked aspects of the story of Jack the Ripper is that when a body was discovered, locals ran for a policeman and usually found one within a couple of minutes, a few minutes at the most. The policeman would be patrolling on his own, equipped with a bullseye lamp, a whistle and a truncheon: and this was in Whitechapel, then regarded as the very worst and most dangerous slum in the whole of the country. I don't think a policeman would venture on his own into the worst and most dangerous slum in Great Britain today armed only with a bullseye lamp, a whistle and a truncheon.

The comparative safety of Whitechapel which we may infer was not because it was not poor, of course. The levels of squalor, deprivation, hardship, hunger, cold, illness and so forth were of a scale quite unknown today. (When my father was born not so very far from Whitechapel 30 years after Jack the Ripper, his life expectancy at birth would have been less than 48 years and the infant mortality rate, the proportion of infants born alive who died before the age of one year,

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* Statistical comparisons over time can be made to show almost anything. Even the highest crime levels during the Twentieth Century were low by comparison with those in, day, the eighteenth or sixteenth centuries. It seems to me, however, that comparisons with immediately preceding period are the most relevant

was 124 per thousand — that is to say an eighth of children born did not survive to their first birthday.)

Let me give you another example. In 1950 there were, in the whole of New Zealand, 200 violent crimes recorded by the police. In 1999, there were 70,000 such crimes. Even allowing for the doubling of the population, and possible differences in the method of recording and classifying violent crime, this is a startling increase. It cannot be because New Zealand was richer in 1950 than it was in 1999. Nor is it a racial problem: not only were the Maori present in New Zealand in 1950, but when you factor out violent crimes committed by the Maori, the increase remains.

In the United States, the homicide rate is five times what it was in 1900. This might not sound very startling; but a medical paper not long ago suggested that if the same resuscitation and surgical techniques were used today as were used in 1960, the homicide rate would be five times higher than it is, meaning that many victims of violence survive today who would have died in 1960. Now by 1960, resuscitation and surgical techniques were many, many times more effective than those in 1900 when, for example, blood transfusion was still unknown. In short, then, we can say that the homicidal attack rate is scores of times higher than it was in 1900, though even then the United States was regarded as a violent place by comparison with much of Europe. Again, it cannot seriously be argued that the United States suffered less severe poverty in 1900 than in 2015.

The point I am trying to make is that there is not and cannot be a simple mechanical relationship between poverty and crime. It is true, of course, that in any given society the poor commit more crime than the rich, at least crime of the kind of which we are afraid when we walk in the street or sit at home. But even here the relationship is not simply a mechanical one; and the same applies to relative poverty as to absolute poverty. In some cases, the causative relationship may even be the opposite of the one that is frequently touted: criminality may be so prevalent that it inhibits efforts to escape poverty. But whatever the explanation of crime, the causation has to operate through the mediating influence of the human mind; for in our jurisprudence at any rate, the proximate cause of crime must be the decision of the criminal to commit it. That decision might be itself affected by many

factors, but it is still the necessary cause of crime. Moreover, to deny this, even where there are powerful extenuating circumstances, is to deny the criminal his humanity.

Here I interpose for your consideration something so elementary that I should be ashamed to mention it were it not so often forgotten: while it is true that the majority of crime in any given society is committed by the poor or relatively poor, the overwhelming majority of victims of crime are also the poor or relatively poor. Burglars, for example, are not usually great travellers; they break into houses near to where they themselves live. And since the class of victim is very much smaller than the class of perpetrator, thanks to the phenomenon of recidivism, sympathy for the criminal without greater sympathy for the victim is, for many vulnerable and victimised people, to add insult to injury and not at all the generosity of spirit that some people mistake it for. Moreover, I would add that the marginal harm done to the poor victim is usually greater than that done to the rich. For the latter, it is upsetting and annoying to be victimised by a burglar, of course; but I would guess that there are few readers of this whose worldly wealth could be entirely carried off by a burglar. There are people in our society — certainly there are in Great Britain — of whom this would not be true. For them, a burglary is a devastating economic blow.

I hope you will forgive me if I now refer a little to my personal experience. There are dangers in anecdotal evidence, of course, but there are also less-publicised dangers in a lack of it. Mankind is not just a collection of abstract qualities; it is composed of beings of flesh and blood with particularities as well as regularities.

For many years I used walk the few hundred yards between the hospital in which I worked in the morning and the prison in which I worked in the afternoon. Among other things this little walk taught me was the connection between car crime and clement weather. On nice sunny days, the pavement would be strewn prettily with the shards of window glass of the parked cars that had been broken into. This was never the case in the cold or the rain. What this told me was that car crime was not the consequence of raw need, for in our climate raw necessity is more likely to occur in periods of cold and inclement weather than in periods of sunshine.

I should perhaps here interpose that the streets through which I walked were very near, and socially very similar, to a street about which a television documentary programme was made called *Benefit Street* — the benefit of Benefit Street being, of course, the welfare benefits for the unemployed and the sick, or allegedly sick, upon which a very high percentage of the population in the area was dependent for its subsistence. One of the stars of the show, an intelligent and in some respects resourceful woman, a serially single mother, has since become a millionaire living in Spain, thanks to her appearance on the programme; but what the programme showed very clearly was that the so-called dependent class was far from passive but reacted to the perverse incentives that it was given by what I suppose I must call the system, with what again I must call *entrepreneurial parasitism*.

On my walk from hospital to prison I used to examine the plentiful rubbish *en route*. The vast majority of it was the detritus of the meals and other refreshments people had taken while walking along. Interesting, at least for me, was the fact that the householders did not even clear up the rubbish that had been thrown, strewn into their front gardens, as if they had not noticed it as they went in and out of their front doors. What I learnt is that an Englishman's street is now his dining room.

This is actually not so slight or unimportant a matter as you might at first suppose. I was familiar with the insides of quite a number of the houses that I passed on my way to the prison, known locally as the Big House. I might say *en passant* that one of the households had as its members a notorious alcoholic father and three vastly fat daughters, each of enormous proportion, whose main claim to fame (literally) was that they had each had a child by the same man. Some man! Anyway, an American television programme that specialised in social pathology for the delectation of the daytime TV-watching masses got wind of this story and flew them over, giving them a fee I believe of US $50,000. Social pathology becomes entertainment.

The most important item in the households that I visited was usually the wall-fixed flat-screen television almost as large as a cinema, but there was no piece of furniture at which the members of the household could sit to eat a meal. There was no sign of any use of cooking equipment beyond the microwave oven, and meals involved

a transfer of something from the fridge to the microwave. They were eaten in a solitary fashion, as and when the mood or desire took; which was, in the main, frequently. The members of the household were a kind of domestic foragers or hunter-gatherers, subsisting on pre-packaged and prepared food.

Surveys have shown that about 20% of British children do not eat a meal with another member of their household — in circumstances where the illegitimacy rate is virtually 100% and serial step-fatherhood the norm, family is perhaps too strong a word for the forms of association in it — more frequently than once a week, and many of them less frequently still than that. Indeed, in the prison I would meet prisoners who had never in their lives eaten a meal at a table with another person.

This is not insignificant. Just imagine what the pattern of taking meals I have described actually means. The child who is subjected to it learns that, in the matter of when and how and what to eat, his appetite and opportunity are the only things he has to consult. Meals for him are not social occasions but nasty, solitary, British and short (and, I might add, frequent). He does not learn that, for the sake of the convenience or wishes of others, he sometimes has to refrain from eating or even to eat when he is not fully hungry. He does not learn to wait till others are served, or to share what food is on the table. He does not learn how to converse. These are very elementary social acquirements that he does not acquire. And I suspect that if they are not acquired early in life, they are seldom acquired at all, or only with great difficult.

When you look closely at the rubbish strewn in the street, you realise that there are practically no fresh ingredients in the diet of what is so hastily consumed and whose packaging is so carelessly discarded. Even the drinks, in cans or plastic bottles, contain large numbers of chemicals and no natural ingredients; they, both the drinks and their containers, are of very bright and even garish colours, such as those to which a child would naturally gravitate. It did not come to me altogether as a surprise when I read a paper in the British Journal of Psychiatry reporting the results of a double-blind trial of vitamin supplements to the diet of newly-admitted young offenders to a young offenders' prison, and which showed that such vitamin supplements

reduced the incidence of bad behaviour quite significantly. The youths were not so much undernourished as malnourished.

The first reaction of most people when they hear this is that the problem is one of income and the expense of food. And indeed, there is talk of so-called food deserts in England, where it is difficult to find fresh food, particularly fruit and vegetables. But it is not a question of money: not very far from where I used to live, in areas where many poor immigrant families lived, fruit and vegetables were so cheap that you could hardly carry away what you could buy for a small sum of money: ten kilos of onions or carrots, for example, for less than $3AUD. The problem was a complete absence of will to cook or even of a knowledge of how to do so. This was a cultural problem I have not encountered elsewhere, and seems to me to indicate a poverty, or perversion, of spirit.

The problem is a serious one because it is intergenerational. There is also reason to think that those who subsist on an obesity-inducing diet early in life have great difficulty in avoiding obesity later in life, never extending their dietary repertory beyond what they have known in childhood. It is not absolutely impossible for them to avoid adult obesity, but I do not think we should put more obstacles in the path of children than necessary.

I come now to the so-called cycle of deprivation and poverty. According to this theory our societies have their very own internal Third World. It was fashionable among development economists for a very long time to question why some countries were poor rather than why some countries were rich. For them, it was as if wealth were the default position of mankind: Man is born rich, as it were, but everywhere he's poor. Even the term deprivation suggests this: that one is deprived of something that it is natural and normal to have.

The development economists — for example, Raoul Prebisch, the head of the Economic Commission for Latin America — argued that there were countries so poor that their populations could never spare any income for useful investment purposes and therefore that the government had to enforce investment by levying taxes and investing on the country's behalf, or by obtaining external aid for the same purposes. Others said that the poor countries were poor because the rich countries were rich. They did not mean this in the merely

definitional sense because the terms rich and poor were relational: a country with a per capita income of $120,000 is poor by comparison with one with an income of, say, $240,000. They meant that rich countries were rich because they derived their wealth by making poor countries poor by various mechanisms.

All of this is clearly false on the most elementary considerations: if it were true, Man could hardly have emerged from the caves and countries would remain eternally ranked in the same way as far as wealth was concerned.

With regard to the internal poverty of relatively rich countries, similar arguments are still heard. There is a cycle of poverty or deprivation from which it is impossible for people to escape. Now I do not want in the least to deny the difficulties that many people do in fact experience in escaping their circumstances: but it is the source and nature of these circumstances that it is important to examine.

Some time back, the Guardian newspaper in Britain — there is an Australian version as well, of course — published an interesting breakdown of household wealth in Britain not by social class or by occupation, but by religious affiliation. The results were startling, and in effect should have destroyed the general outlook of the newspaper in which it was published.

The article showed that the two richest groups by religious affiliation were first the Jews and second the Sikhs. Of course, I am taking household wealth as a proxy for success in all its aspects, without claiming that financial success is the only or even the most important kind of success. I am far from supposing that a man whose assets are worth ten million dollars is necessarily ten times more successful than a man whose assets are worth one million — unless, that is, both men attach great and equal existential importance to the accumulation of assets. Nevertheless, as a measure of success, more or less, I think that it is suitable, especially if economic explanations are used in the matter of human behaviour: for example that social pathology of various kinds is straightforwardly a consequence of poverty, in the way that the direction of a billiard ball is determined by the mechanical forces acting by the billiard cue and the other balls striking it. In other words, that human conduct is a vector of forces *and nothing else.*

Now the history of the Jews and the Sikhs in Britain is similar in certain respects, though separated by a gap of some decades. Speaking foreign languages and with alien customs, both were impoverished on arrival; both experienced a welcome which, in the British tradition, was not always warm. There was prejudice against both groups, though no legal obstacle to their advancement, and the prejudice was not so great that they were not, on the whole, left to get on with things as best they could. The government neither helped them nor hindered them in any special way. And, within what in historical terms is a blinking of an eye, both groups, as we have seen, succeeded.

Why did they do so? It was despite prejudice, though I have wondered sometimes whether mild prejudice added an additional spur to their success. Two factors seem to me to have been of vital importance: the first is the maintenance of the family structure but, more importantly, the right attitude to education and personal effort – a kind of entrepreneurialism of the soul, as it were. This entrepreneurialism was not confined to the purely economic but also the educational and intellectual sphere. Their success was not the result of having leaders who lobbied on their behalf. Although it is true that Jews moved into the political sphere they did so as the consequence and not the cause of their success: and in my view this is entirely the healthy way round.

Now when I publicly debated in Britain the matter of poverty with a journalist who is famed for her very public sympathy for all the suffering of the world, and in particular believes that governmental redistribution through taxation is the solution (and the only solution) to the problem of poverty in our society and its statistically associated social pathology, I mentioned the success of the Jews and Sikhs, starting from a position of even greater poverty. They were, after all, living in the same conditions.

I was sure, I said, that she would not have wanted to say that the economic success of the Jews and Sikhs was at expense of anyone else in the country, that in effect we live in a zero-sum economy in which my success is your failure, and a crumb in my mouth is one less crumb for you. And to be fair to her, she did not want to say that,

though more I suspect from fear of appearing prejudiced than from any economic argument.

But that, of course, was precisely my point. The difference was in the mentality and in the culture, not in the raw economic situation or circumstances of the people concerned. And, if *this* were true, those who instilled, or tried to instil, the mentalities of the poor with the idea that there is an exterior answer to the predicament that will by itself resolve or improve their predicament without any great or particular effort on their part, were actually compounding the disadvantages of the poor.

Whatever may have been the case in the past, at other times and in other places, the lines of William Blake are now applicable:

I wander through each charter's street
Near where the charter's Thames doth flow:
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

No doubt I construe this in a slightly different way from how Blake intended: but it seems to me that the phrase, *the mind-forged manacles* ought to be ever present in our minds. Is what we propose, indeed is what we say, likely to strengthen or strike off those manacles?

The manacles are forged by those who wear them, but also by those who propound theories that, in the modern world, suggest that the manacles are not mind-forged but, so to speak, structural in our society. The manacles may also be forged by regulation and legislation. Again, it is no use referring to the past to prove that the manacles were once *not* mind-forged at all, but forged in some other way: for to do this is to indulge in a kind of mirror image historicism, in which the myth of the golden age is replaced by the myth of an age in which men were not more self-directed than billiard balls.

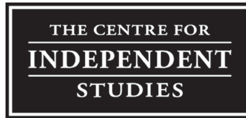
Men make their own history, wrote Karl Marx in 1852, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honoured disguise and borrowed language.

This passage is well worth reflecting on, both for its truths and its untruths: and since I am in Australia, let me quote a line from a recent Australian book, *Talking to My Country* by the eminent journalist Stan Grant. 'I am the sum of many things,' he wrote, 'but I am all history.'

This is false; and worse than being merely false, it is precisely the kind of sentiment that will forge many a manacle in the mind, should anyone choose to believe it. No one experiences himself as the sum of many things, as if he were only a pile of bricks to which he himself had added or contributed nothing; if he claims to have done so, he is special-pleading or trying to mislead someone else in a search for an illicit advantage. As for being all history, no one is *all* history however important history may be to him. There is always history, but there is always also *reaction* to history.

Marx adduces against the possibility of human freedom that each man is born, as he puts it, in "circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." This is true, because it is a truism; one cannot imagine an existence that is completely free of circumstances, or one in which there is no time. But it does not follow from this that there Man can never be free, any more than it follows from the fact that every language has rules of grammar that nothing new can be said.

If there is one thing that I should like to emphasise,
and for people not to forget, it is not any words of mine,
but William Blake's phrase — *the mind-forg'd manacles*.



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He frequently argues that the liberal and progressive views prevalent within Western intellectual circles minimise the responsibility of individuals for their own actions and undermine traditional mores, contributing to the formation within prosperous countries of an underclass afflicted by endemic violence, criminality, sexually transmitted diseases, welfare dependency, and drug abuse. Much of Dalrymple's writing is based on his experience of working with criminals and the mentally ill.

With experience as a prison doctor and psychiatrist, Theodore Dalrymple decries the impact of the welfare state and a culture of dependence in society.

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CIS Occasional Paper 146
ISBN 978 1 922184 67 2
ISSN 0155 7386

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