I am going to discuss teenagers and, as in these lectures I am examining national patterns and problems, that means, almost inevitably, that I am going to talk about violence and sex; but I should like to make it clear from the start that I regard the present increase of crimes of violence and the present state of confusion in the rules governing sexual behaviour as problems not only of adolescence but of our society as a whole. I believe that juvenile delinquency and sexual promiscuity can be regarded as pointers to areas of uncertainty, of confused values, in contemporary adult life.

Adolescence is, after all, the period of apprenticeship to one’s adult role. There can be no doubt that this apprenticeship is not working smoothly just now. If we begin by considering crime and violence, we are confronted by some astonishing facts. There are nearly three times as many men in our prisons today as there were in 1940, and nearly half of all the indictable offences are committed by youths under the age of twenty-one. This increase in crime was the more remarkable because it reversed a longstanding trend. Early in this century crime (and especially theft) was associated with poverty, and it was believed that when extremes of poverty were relieved, crime would diminish. Up to a point, this did in fact occur. Two surveys of London Life and Labour, published at the turn of the century and in 1930, showed that during that period the incidence of severe penury had been greatly reduced—and that the crime rate had also diminished.

Today, few schoolchildren are compelled to work; the majority receive pocket-money on a scale which would (and often does) startle their grandparents. As soon as they leave school, boys and girls can earn wages which enable them to spend so freely that whole industries exist to cater for their tastes. Whatever makes our adolescents rebellious and unruly, it is not penury. Adolescents differ from us who have grown older in the strength of their feelings, and in their longing for certainties; they want to believe in something, and they lapse into cynicism only when there seems to be nothing to believe in. They are capable of acting generously and disinterestedly: for example, I regard the teenagers’ readiness to march in support of nuclear disarmament as an indication of their social responsibility.

The so-called adolescent crisis has been a favourite subject for study by psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists. It was, indeed, the theme of Margaret Mead’s first field work, in 1926, when she lived for nine months in village communities in Samoa. She set herself the questions: ‘Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture? ‘She discovered that in Samoa adolescent stress and turmoil was as exceptional as it is usual in Western society, and she attributed this ease of transition to certain characteristics of Samoan society—its prevailing casualness, the absence of deep interpersonal relationships
either within the family or between friends; and, as in most simple, homogeneous cultures, the absence of choice in matters of belief and conduct. There was, she believed, 'much less neurosis among Samoans than among Americans, and she ascribed this to differences in their early experiences—particularly to the diffusion of personal relationships among many kinsfolk instead of their intensification in small self-contained family units, and to the tolerant acceptance of sexual experience as one of the pleasurable facts of life. Another element in Samoans' upbringing which may have protected them against neurosis was their familiarity, as children, with biological realities. Not only sex but birth and death were frequent events in Samoan households, and they were not concealed. Children learned about death and corruption, about birth and labour pains, as a matter of course, learned to accept them as the penalties of being alive, just as sexual dalliance was among the rewards. In contrast, Western children are increasingly sheltered from contact with any of these events, which tend as a result to become mysterious and emotionally disturbing.

In Samoa, there was a stable society offering a strictly limited choice of adult roles. There have been times, long ago, when our society showed a similar continuity: but the opposite has been the case during the present century, in which the social environment of each generation is radically different from that of its predecessor. I have repeatedly referred to the changes in our people’s health and nutrition; but changes have been no less marked in popular education and in types of employment. Nowadays we take universal basic education so much for granted that we forget how recent an acquisition it is; yet only in this century have more than half of the parents in our population had an efficient elementary education. In some respects we are not so far, after all, from countries like India, whose literature was until recently accessible only to a privileged minority of its people.

Throughout the century, great changes have taken place in industrial techniques, and perhaps the greatest change is coming about now, with the spread of automation. These changes have had important repercussions, upon family life, upon children’s upbringing, and perhaps especially upon their attitudes to authority. Traditionally, one of the functions of the family has been to reconcile children to the restraints on their behaviour which society expects them to obey. In a patriarchal society, such as ours has been—though this is changing—it is supposed to be the father who imposes these restraints.

Every child has to submit to a great deal of frustration of immediate desires and impulses in the process of growing-up. This frustration can be more readily tolerated if it is imposed by parents on whose support and affection the child knows he can rely; and socially acceptable patterns of behaviour can best be learned by the child’s taking such parents as the models for his own adult role. At one time it was assumed that filial and parental feelings were natural and would develop spontaneously. In fact, however, in their complexity they are a typical example of human behaviour which has to be learned. A child’s feelings towards his or her parents often include violent alternations between affection, anger, and rivalry. The ability to establish a lasting truce in these feelings depends on how well they get on together, while the child grows towards maturity.

But you may well ask how I define that elusive concept, maturity. I suggest that the mature person shows these attributes: a realistic grasp of his environment, a sense of conviction about his own identity, an ability to cope with his practical tasks, and an
ability to establish deep mutual relationships with other people. None of these, obviously, are inborn attributes; they all have to be learned, and they are learned in stages. As the child grows he masters successive stages of physical accomplishment, of intellectual understanding, and of mastery of anxiety; after each step forward there is a pause for consolidation. At adolescence, however—and by this I do not mean simply the year of attaining physical puberty but the often long-drawn-out transition between childhood and adult life—comes the real challenge: is one ready to relinquish one’s parents’ support, to be independent? At this time all the anxieties which were aroused at the earlier stages tend to be reanimated, and most prominent now is what Erikson has called the ‘crisis of identity’, the pressing question: ‘Who am I?’ In their attempt to answer this question, adolescents frequently try out various roles, identify themselves with gangs or indulge in hero-worship.

In earlier times the resolution of this problem was easier because they were confronted with only a few traditional occupations from which to choose, but now the range of choice is bewildering. Still, however, the young person’s relationship with the parent of the same sex is of crucial importance. If all goes well, a boy identifies himself with his father and accepts him as an ally; but if the father fails him (and this is more likely to happen at a time when the father’s own self-confidence is precarious) this truce is not declared, the boy’s conflict of feelings remains unresolved. He finds himself a prey to sudden accesses of uncontrollable anger and destructiveness which seem wanton and senseless to the outside observer—as indeed they are to the boy who so often lamely and yet truthfully pleads that he ‘doesn’t know what made him do it’. Children who have not had this guidance are less likely to fit into society; successive studies have shown that delinquency is commonest in families where the father has been missing because of death or desertion or absence on war service during his son’s early years. But fathers can also abdicate their role. This happened to some extent during the great depression of the nineteen-thirties (which was followed by a minor wave of delinquency when the small boys of that period reached late adolescence), and it appears to be happening again now. In reply to a recent questionnaire about the bringing up of children, a surprising number of working-class fathers expressed the view that children should be taught discipline ‘by the state’.

If we turn to consider young people’s sexual behaviour today, we encounter many vehement opinions, but little reliable information. There has been no Kinsey survey in Britain. It is frequently asserted that teenagers today are precociously active in sex relationships. On purely biological grounds, this need not surprise us because one of the consequences of improved health and nutrition has been a steady lowering of the age of puberty: a hundred years ago the mean age at which girls began to menstruate was seventeen years, now it is thirteen and a half. In keeping with this physiological change, the mean age of marriage has declined during the present century; but there is still a delay of several years between the time when young people are physically ready for sexual experience, and their becoming either emotionally mature or economically independent. Precisely at this time modern advertising, films, and popular reading expose them to constant sexual stimulation.

The increasing number of cases of venereal disease in young people, and the fact that in 1961 no less than 31 per cent of girls who married while in their teens were pregnant at the time of their wedding, are two indications of precocious sexual behaviour in our society. And yet, what do we mean by ‘precocious’? Biologically
and emotionally, children are capable of enjoying sexual relationships from the age of puberty. In many societies, they are positively encouraged to do so; every Trobriand Island boy and girl, every young Samoan, every young member of Indian jungle tribes like the Maria, has had many sexual experiences before their betrothal and wedding. The interesting thing is that this pre-marital licence has been found to be quite compatible with stable married life. I believe that we may be mistaken in our alarm—at times mounting almost to panic—over young people’s sexual experimentation. Contraception is still regarded as something wicked, threatening to chastity, opening the way to unbridled licence. But is chastity the supreme moral virtue? In our religious traditions the essence of morality has sometimes appeared to consist of sexual restraint; but this was not emphasized in Christ’s own teaching. For Him, the cardinal virtue was charity, that is, consideration of and concern for other people. It was His intemperate disciple Paul, an authoritarian character, who introduced the concept of celibacy as an essential part of Christian teaching, and centuries later it was the reformed libertine St Augustine who placed such exaggerated emphasis upon the sinfulness of sex. It has always been those whose own sexual impulses have been precariously repressed who have raised the loudest cries of alarm over other people’s immorality.

As I have said, many societies get on quite well without premarital chastity. It seems to me that our young people are rapidly turning our own society into one in which sexual experience, with precautions against conception, is becoming accepted as a sensible preliminary to marriage; a preliminary which makes it more likely that marriage, when it comes, will be a mutually considerate and mutually satisfying partnership.

I have been talking so far as though our society were a single cultural unit, with consistent attitudes to such things as violence and sex; but this is far from being the case. At the end of last century, the gulf between the lives of different classes was so wide that when sociologists like Charles Booth or Beatrice Webb lived among working-class people their first-hand descriptions were as full of novel discoveries as an anthropologist’s first reports about a primitive culture. Our literature and our history-books have been so permeated with the concerns of the educated classes that it is easy to forget that they have always been a privileged minority group. When Dickens, or, in our century, Jack London, described the life of the London poor, they seemed to their readers to be writing about a different people, leading a different life. It was the same elsewhere in Europe: in Vienna, for example, the young Sigmund Freud was struck by the contrast between his own relatively sheltered middle-class upbringing and the hardships of the common people. He noted the contrast between typical middle-class restraint and working-class abandon, and speculated whether these traits might be influenced by the assurance of material comfort on the one hand and the constant threat of penury on the other. He ends a letter to his future wife with the words: ‘I will not follow these thoughts further, but one might show how the common people judges, believes, hopes and works quite otherwise than we do. There is a psychology of the common man which is somewhat different from ours…’ Unfortunately he never did follow these particular thoughts further; if other interests had not claimed him, he might have become a pioneer of social psychiatry. Had he seriously pursued this line of thought he would presumably have tried to unravel the early emotional experiences of patients from poor homes as well as those of his
bourgeois clientele, and by so doing he might have added another dimension to his
time of personality formation.

Perhaps it is easier to recognize contrasts like this in alien cultures. That, at least, was
my experience during my anthropological field work in India. I became aware of the
very striking differences in attitudes to sex and violence in two of the communities
which I studied, the high-caste Hindus who lived in settled villages, and the Bhils, a
warlike tribe who inhabited the nearby jungles. High-caste Hindus enjoin a very strict	


taboo on any public display of sexual interest or even of affection; they teach their
children to cultivate control over their emotions; it is not seemly to laugh out loud, to
give open expression to feelings of any kind — but especially unseemly to give way to
anger.

In contrast, the Bhils delight in ardent love affairs which they celebrate in song, and
they are familiar with aggression; older Bhil children sometimes even strike their
parents — which would be almost unthinkable in Hindu society. Their aggressive
feelings are not overwhelming, nor alarming, but are harnessed to their preferred
activities of hunting, abducting cattle or girls from other Bhil villages, and pursuing
the feuds which follow a successful raid. The Bhils have succeeded in turning their
aggressive energies to constructive use — constructive at least in terms of their
boisterous way of life.

Months later, when I came to analyse my field notes, I realized that this antithesis
between Hindus and Bhils mirrored, in exaggerated form, the difference between
middle-class and working-class attitudes to sex and to aggression in our own society.
Life in working-class streets is ‘tougher’ than that in middle-class suburbs; in the
former, disputes are more open and more often lead to blows. This is true, too, for
expressions of sorrow and gaiety as well as for anger. In contrast, emotional reserve is
cultivated by the middle class and by those who aspire to middle-class status; their
feelings tend to be ‘bottled up’ and their anger smoulders underground, or is turned
against themselves. A good deal of nagging ill-health can be caused by feelings
(especially hostile feelings) which persist but are disavowed and denied expression.

Different Attitudes towards Sex
If a Kinsey survey were to be carried out in Britain, we could expect findings different
from his in America reflecting our community’s different attitudes towards sex; but I
think it is most likely that one of his findings would be confirmed — that is that young
people from middle-class and from working-class backgrounds (defined by Kinsey as
those who had college education and those who had not) deal with their sexual urges
differently. Middle-class youths try to practise prolonged sexual restraint; they
masturbate and feel guilty about it; young people of the working class tend to have
sexual experience more often and from an earlier age. Teenage sex and teenage
violence are predominantly problems of the urban working-class; and they serve as a
reminder of the continuing contrast between the privileged and the under-privileged in
our society.
I believe that the chief reason for the persistence of social class divisions in Britain is
the continuing inequality of educational opportunity in our country. It is true that we
have taken a great step forward, in the years just after the Second World War; but we
still lag behind America in this respect, and far behind the U.S.S.R. An enormous
amount of ability still remains undeveloped. In Britain today 75 per cent of children finish their full-time education at the age of fifteen.

Teenagers find it difficult to resist the immediate rewards of relatively well-paid unskilled work; but having once entered such jobs they come to realize, after a year or two, that they will never be able to earn substantially more. There is more social mobility in Britain today than ever before, but it is still limited, and still stressful for those who do break through. At the same time the popular press, radio, television, and films perpetually flatter their audiences by assuming that they are familiar with a level of material comfort and sophistication which seldom corresponds to their actual experience. The real advances in standards of living have been outstripped by this constant stimulation of material aspirations.

**Protest Behaviour**

Much of the delinquency shown by working-class youths can be viewed as protest behaviour, a protest not so much against their present hardships as expressing their feeling that there are many more good things in life which they would like to have, but which, are still beyond their reach. It is a gesture of defiance against a society which appears to ignore their predicament, a gesture which is more likely to be made when relationships with the parents are faulty. In fact, all too often he lacks support where he needs it most. Edward Blishen, a singularly compassionate schoolteacher, has described a sub-culture of our society that of the urban secondary modern school, where one child in three seemed never to have received the assurance of parental affection.

This poverty of human relationships can be found elsewhere, but it seems most frequent in city slums; it is perhaps the legacy of a century of sub-standard living. In the more distant past, even if parental affection was lacking, working-class children grew up in a community which had strong views of right and wrong; this morality perhaps owed more to the solidarity of a group who had shared rough times than to the formal Christian ethics in which better-class children were instructed. Today, however, both the popular and the church-going types of morality have tended to slip into disuse. Popular morality is now a waste land, littered with the debris of broken convictions. Concepts such as honour, or even honesty, have an old-fashioned sound; but nothing has taken their place. The confusion is perhaps greatest over sexual morality; here the former theological canons of behaviour are seldom taken seriously. In their place a new concept is emerging, of sexual relationships as a source of pleasure, but also as a mutual encountering of personalities in which each explores the other and at the same time discovers new depths in himself or herself. This concept of sex as a rewarding relationship is after all not so remote from the experience of our maligned teenagers as it is from that of many of their parents. It bears no resemblance at all to the unromantic compromise between sensuality and drudgery which has been the lot of so many British husbands and wives in the past sixty years. Its full realization could only be possible in a society where women enjoyed social and economic equality with men. We have not yet known such a society, but during this century we have moved a long way towards it. In my next talk I shall discuss this great social change, and some of its psychological consequences.