

REITH LECTURES 1967: A Runaway World

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Lecture 3: Ourselves and Others

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Z Cars and *The Avengers*, film posters, stories of sudden death, fables of Hiroshima: we are surrounded by themes of violence from the day we are born. It is not just nature and technology that seem out of control, it is ourselves.

If you measure violence by quantity, then this is indeed an age of terror. Our weapons are more powerful than ever before; there are more people to kill and more get killed! But attitudes to violence change very little. War reports from Vietnam gloat over the horrors in much the same tone of voice as Icelandic sagas of the 12th century; official communiqués count the dead as if the generals were engaged in a grouse shoot—this sort of thing has been typical of human beings ever since the beginning of history. Hitler tried to exterminate the Jews in gas chambers; 16th-century Englishmen tried to exterminate witches and heretics by burning them at the stake. In modern civilised states the insane may be subjected to brain surgery and electric shocks on the comfortable theory that it might do good, and that in any case the suffering victim could hardly be any worse off than he is already; by the same principle Vesalius and Leonardo da Vinci advanced the understanding of human anatomy by dissecting the bodies of condemned criminals while they were still alive. When Stokely Carmichael urges his fellow Negroes to kill their white oppressors, he is only repeating Machiavelli's blunt advice: 'If you have an enemy, kill him.'

But why do we have enemies? Why should we seek to kill our fellow men? One thing you can be sure about: it isn't a matter of instinct. No species could ever have survived at all if it had an unmodified built-in drive to kill off all members of its own kind, because mating would then be impossible. The general pattern in the animal kingdom is that aggression is directed outwards, not inwards. Only in rare situations do animals behave like cannibals or murderers; predators kill members of other species, not their own. Fighting between animals of the same kind is usually a game, a sort of ritual exercise which allows one individual to dominate the other without either getting seriously hurt. There are human equivalents of this —duelling, boxing, playing football—but, in addition, we kill one another. How does this come about? My own guess is that our propensity to murder is a back-handed consequence of our dependence on verbal communication: we use words in such a way that we come to think that men who behave in different ways are members of different species.

In the non-human world whole species function as a unity. Wolves do not kill each other because all wolves behave the same language. If one wolf attacks another wolf, the victim automatically responds with a gesture which compels the aggressor to stop. The gesture has the effect of an utterance. It is as if I attacked you and you cried out, 'Hi, you can't do that, I am one of your friends,' or even more submissively: 'I am one of your servants.' Among animals these responses are trigger actions. At a certain

point the weaker party is bound to submit, and as soon as submission occurs the aggressor is bound to desist: so the victim of attack is seldom in serious danger.

The complication in our own case is that if a human victim is to be safe, the attacker and the attacked must not only *behave* the same language, they must *speak* the same language, and be familiar with the same code of cultural symbols. And even then each individual can make his own decision about what constitutes 'the same language', I am talking to you in English, and you are listening, and you can understand what I say. This act of listening and understanding is an act of submission on your part. You are admitting that we are animals of the same kind and that I have the right to hold the stage. But this is a free choice. If you want to get rid of my momentary domination you don't even have to switch off the radio. All you need do is to say to yourself: 'I can't stand that' fellow's fancy accent; he doesn't speak like me; he's not one of my kind.'

Let's look at this argument in a more general form. Because of the way our language is organised and because of the way we are educated, each of us is constantly- finding himself in a position of contest. I identify myself with a collective *we* which is then contrasted with some *other*. What we are, or what the other is, will depend upon context. If *we* are Englishmen, then the *others* are Frenchmen, or Americans, or Germans, If *we* are the upholders of capitalist free enterprise, the *others* are communists. If *we* are ordinary simpleminded citizens, the *other* is a mysterious they, the government bureaucracy. In every case *we* attribute qualities to the *other* according to its relation to ourselves. If the other seems to be very remote it will be considered benign, and it then becomes endowed with the attributes of Heaven. China as imagined by 18th-century European aristocrats and South Sea noble savages as imagined by Rousseau were both remote benign *others* of this kind. Incidentally, modern technology has now so shrunk the world that this kind of remoteness has almost ceased to exist.

At the opposite extreme, the other may be very close at hand in direct relation with myself, as my master, or as my equal, or as my subordinate. In ordinary daily life we have to recognise dozens of these closely paired, dependent relationships: parent! child, employer/employee, doctor/patient, master/pupil, tradesman/customer, and so on. In all such cases the rules of the game are well-defined. Both parties know exactly how the other may be expected to behave and as long as these expectations are fulfilled, everything is disciplined, orderly and proper. But lying in between the remote Heavenly *other* and the close predictable *other* there is a third category which arouses quite a different kind of emotion. This is the *other* which is close at hand but unreliable. If anything in my immediate vicinity is out of my control, that thing becomes a source of fear. This is true of persons as well as objects. If Mr X is someone with whom I cannot communicate, then he is out of my control, and I begin to treat him as a wild animal rather than a fellow human being. He becomes a brute. His presence then generates anxiety, but his Jack of humanity releases me from all moral restraint: the triggered responses which might deter me from violence against my own kind no longer apply.

There are hundreds of examples which illustrate this principle. In the 18th century when reason first became exalted, madness became horrifying, and the crazy were herded into dungeons and caged like wild beasts. When British colonists first reached

Tasmania they exterminated the local inhabitants as if they were vermin, claiming in justification that these original Tasmanians were not really human beings at all. Hitler said much the same thing of the Jews. In contemporary South Africa apartheid rests on the theory that the black are members of an inferior species, and therefore incapable of understanding civilised law and order. Most of us profess to be shocked by such attitudes but our own behaviour is hardly any different. Criminals, lunatics and the senile are shut away from society because they have been declared abnormal, but once this abnormality has been established our violence becomes unrestrained. It is true that we don't go so far as to resort to extermination, but gaols and police station cells can be terrible places and, in many other kinds of closed institution, punishment and 'treatment' can barely be distinguished. Reprisals against the weak always give deep satisfaction to the strong; momentarily, at least, they alleviate fear. Nearly everyone is horribly muddled about this. We persuade ourselves that punishment is a deterrent whereas mostly it is just vindictive.

We claim, of course, that our mental hospitals and our approved schools are intended to cure the sick and delinquent, but 'cure' in this context simply means compelling the unorthodox to conform to conventional notions of normality. Cure is the imposition of discipline by force; it is the maintenance of the values of the existing order against threats which arise from its own internal contradictions.

Notice at this point, how, in each generation, the special failures of society are shown up by the way that the orthodox manage to allocate blame. Before the last war many prosperous people talked as if slumps were caused by the unemployed. Today our failure to create a world fit for young people to live in is marked by rabid hostility towards the young people themselves: they are held to blame for the situation which has produced them.

Just now with moralists and politicians, high court judges and Fleet Street journalists all teaming up together, the adolescent is having a pretty rough time. The youth of Britain, we are told, is hell-bent for self-destruction. What with pot and purple hearts, long hair and LSD, mini-skirts and love-ins, student strikes and political demonstrations, along with a general confusion of rich sexy police court sensations of all kinds, the image of swinging Britain is one of total depravity. The young are talked about as if they were an anarchist fifth column. The old react with consternation. Should they exact summary vengeance or offer appeasement in the form of votes at 18? This is all very odd.

Tension between the generations is normal for any society; every son is a potential usurper of his father's throne; every parent feels under threat; but the present anxiety of British parents seems altogether out of proportion. Young people are being treated as an alien category: 'wild beasts with whom we cannot communicate'. They are not just rebels but outright revolutionaries intent on the destruction of everything which the senior generation holds to be sacred.

Let us be clear about this. What is odd is not the behaviour of the young but the reaction of the old. By any objective criterion contemporary English society is quite exceptionally orderly. We are law-abiding to a degree which astounds most visitors from other countries. And we have been growing more conformist, not less. The classic evils of urban civilisation— disease, drunkenness, prostitution—have all

declined very sharply over the past half century, and nothing now causes greater public concern than plain evidence that the police are sometimes actively disliked. Admittedly the statistics show a numerical increase in the incidence of crime. But this is a measure of police efficiency, not of the moral state of the nation. Crimes are created by Parliament; it needs a policeman to make a criminal. You don't become a criminal by breaking the law, but by getting found out. You might remember that next time you get stopped on the road to take a breathalyser test!

So what we have to consider is not 'why are the young so disorderly?' but - why do the old imagine that the young are so disorderly?' And I hope you can see that this problem ties up with the topics which I have talked about earlier on. It is because we feel ourselves separated from nature that natural phenomena such as the population explosion seem so alarming; it is because we try to insist that we are something other than very sophisticated machines that ordinary rudimentary machines become a source of fear. It is because the old allow themselves to feel separated from the young that the young create anxiety. What is it then about the present situation which should make the gap between old and young seem unusually wide?

Again, you must be on your guard against cliché explanations. Some people will tell you that youthful disorder is just a symptom of the breakdown of family life. I can see no justification for this view. Nearly all the large-scale social changes which have been taking place over the past century have been of a kind that should have brought the children closer to their parents rather than the other way about. The shortening of hours of work, improvements in housing standards, paid holidays, the prohibition of child labour, the extension of formal day-school education, the disappearance of domestic servants, should all, on the face of it, have helped to intensify family cohesiveness. But in practice it seems to work out the other way: the adults are now inclined to treat the teenagers as alienated ruffians—and not wholly without cause. Teenage gang warfare and the wrecking of public amenities is a reality. What has gone wrong?

Well, up to a point the old seem to be simply responding to visual signals. The young quite systematically and quite consciously go out of their way to look unconventional, and the old react by believing that the young really are unconventional. Quite a lot of the alarm is generated by sheep in wolves' clothing! But even if you should agree that the young are not really as rebellious as they look, you may still demand an explanation. What are the young people getting at? Why do they try to be so outrageous?

Well, mostly, of course, they don't know, they are just imitating one another. But the leaders, who do know, have a perfectly good political case. They argue that they are the involuntary heirs to a generation of incompetents. Their seniors, who still keep all the power in their own hands, have made a total mess of things. It is these incompetent adults who manage the educational system and lay down rules about what young people are supposed to learn. The whole set-up is rigged to fit the belief that, when the young grow up and come to power, they too will carry on running the show just as before. But this assumption makes co-operation impossible. If the old expect the young to participate in planning the future, then they might at least take the trouble to find out what sort of future the young would actually like to have. Quite certainly the young do not want to inherit a social system in which power is the

exclusive preserve of those with influential parents or of those who have shown themselves to be docile and obedient by conforming to parental expectations.

But the politically conscious are only a tiny minority, and the anarchist temper which prevails, with varying intensity, right through Britain's pop generation must reflect something far more fundamental. My own view is that it represents a really basic, and potentially healthy, attack on English class values. Symbols acquire meaning because of their relation to other symbols. The 'aggressive disorder' of the young can only be understood in terms of its opposite, 'orderly submission'. 19th-century boarding education for the sons of the English upper middle class created a new social category of great significance: 'the English public schoolboy', the prototype of unimaginative disciplined conformity. 20th-century day school education has likewise created a new social category, 'the teenager', and the one is simply the inverse of the other.

In private, the two types do not really behave all that differently, though young people of today begin to adopt adult attitudes towards sex a good deal earlier than did their predecessors. But there is a sharp contrast in formal public behaviour. Where the typical public schoolboy used to be tidy, polite and respectful of established morality, the teenager sets out to be a kind of slovenly dandy, a blatant immoralist contemptuous of all convention. The point is that, in a very deep sense, the public schoolboy took for granted the values of an ossified, class-stratified society and was quite happy to continue the tradition by quietly moving into his appointed station.. in an equally radical sense his anti-type, the teenager, is in revolt against the whole principle of a predetermined social order.

Social class is a very confusing concept. In a very general sense you can sort out the population of Britain into major social classes by using such crude distinctions as family background, economic status and occupation. But these are labels, not signals. Class as it affects our day-to-day behaviour is something much more intimate and on a much smaller scale. You do not recognise that someone is of your own class by looking at his weekly wage packet—you know. This is because any class-conscious behaviour which you exhibit is always in response to a stimulus from outside. Human animals, when face to face, behave like any other sort of animal: they react to signals emitted by the other party.

But as I said earlier, our human case is special because of our dependence on spoken language and material culture. Any wolf can communicate with any other wolf by behaving in the right way; but a human being can only communicate comfortably with a very restricted number of other human beings—those who speak in the right way and use the right cultural symbols. In contemporary Britain the signals which trigger off the negative reactions which inhibit free communication are such things as accent, style of dress, the furnishing of a room, styles of food and drink—in short, everything that might be covered by the ambiguous term 'manners'. Whatever is unfamiliar in any of these fields immediately marks off the person concerned as an alien stranger, someone with whom a relationship of friendly equality is impossible. If the gap in understanding is very wide, we say that the alien is a foreigner; if the gap is narrower, we compromise—yes, maybe he is British, but 'he's not our class.' The old who operate this system seek to perpetuate it; the young inheritors seek to destroy it.

This links back to what I said a few minutes ago about people attributing youthful disorder to ‘a breakdown of family life’. It is in the bosom of the family that we are first carefully taught to recognise and react to signals which indicate class difference, so any attack on social class will be felt as an attack on family values. Also, many of the more futile and unpleasant forms of youthful protest—vandalism in churches and public parks, for example— are intentional acts of sacrilege designed to shock the respectable family man, ‘Oh dear, what are we coming to? Why can’t parents instil a sense of public decency into their children?’ And the criticism is fair comment, for family values have become increasingly focused on private status rather than public good.

It’s not surprising that many of you should feel anxious but perhaps it is the family itself that needs to be changed rather than the parents. Psychologists, doctors, schoolmasters and clergymen put over so much sappy propaganda about the virtue of a united family life that most of you probably have the idea that ‘the family’, in our English sense, is a universal institution, the very foundation of organised society. This isn’t so. Human beings, at one time or another, have managed to invent all sorts of different styles of domestic living and we shall have to invent still more in the future.

In contemporary Britain our ideas have been greatly affected by literacy and the use of the phrase ‘The Holy Family’ in religious contexts. Most people carry a stereotype in their minds which leads them to think that a ‘typical’ family consists of parents and young children, with mother at the centre, as housekeeper, and father, perhaps in a rather inferior status, as breadwinner. Reality is much more varied. For one thing, domestic groups usually pass through a cycle of development lasting at least 30 years. The family starts out as a pair of adults; it increases in size, as children are born; then dwindles away again as children grow up and the parents die. The internal network of relations is changing all the time and it will differ as between one family and another according to the number, age and sex distribution of the children and the occupation of the parents. There is no standard pattern. But besides that, individual families are linked up with the outside world in many different ways. The external relations of a family can be based on any sort of shared interest— politics, sport, leisure time activities of all kinds—but as a rule much the strongest bonds are those of kinship, neighbourhood and common occupation. It is therefore of the utmost significance that today, in most parts of the country, the householders in any one street will not all be doing the same job and will not all be related as kin.

This discrepancy reflects a very great change in our society which has come about mainly as a result of economic developments over the past 50 years. Up until the First World War a major part of the working population, both in the towns and in the countryside, was residentially immobile. The variety of possible occupations open to working-class people was small, and although there was a steady drift from the villages to the towns, most people had nothing much to gain by moving around from one town to another. In Lancashire, for example, practically everyone worked in the cotton mills, and there was no point in moving from Rochdale to Oldham or from Oldham to Bury. But today the go-ahead young man moves to the place where he thinks he can earn most, quickest, or he may even get shunted around from place to place by his employers. This change has had radical consequences for the basic structure of society. In the old days, bonds of neighbourhood, kinship and occupation tended to coincide; most people spent their whole lives close to the place where they

were born, so they were always surrounded by kinsfolk. Moreover, the girl whom a man married was often a near neighbour, and the two families were quite likely to be related already even before the marriage. It is still possible to find places where this state of affairs persists—South Wales mining communities, for example—but the general pattern is fast disappearing.

The effect of this change is as much psychological as social. In the past, kinsfolk and neighbours gave the individual continuous moral support throughout his life. Today the domestic household is isolated. The family looks inward upon itself; there is an intensification of emotional stress between husband and wife, and parents and children. The strain is greater than most of us can bear. Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents.

We need a change of values here, but It is not at all obvious just what the change should be. History and ethnography provide very few examples of societies constructed around a loose assemblage of isolated groups of parents and children. The domestic units are usually much larger and usually based on kinship. But kin groups can only function effectively if most of the members are clustered together in one place, and this requirement conflicts with one of the prime dogmas of capitalist free enterprise: the freedom to move around and sell your labour in the best market.

Our present society is emotionally very uncomfortable. The parents and children huddled together in their loneliness take too much out of each other. The parents fight; the children rebel. Children need to grow up in larger, more relaxed domestic groups centred on the community rather than on mother's kitchen—something like an Israeli kibbutz perhaps or a Chinese commune. Fitting such units into our style of industrial economy could never be easy. But the economy may change, and there are many other possibilities. The Japanese have a free enterprise system comparable to our own but they manage their domestic affairs entirely differently. For one thing they expect industrial firms to exert a degree of paternalistic control over their employees which Europeans find quite extraordinary. We need not follow their example but we too might be different in some other way.

But change at this intimate level will certainly not come easily. It is significant that most of us are so deeply committed to being alone in a crowded world that we turn the whole problem back to front: we worry about privacy rather, than loneliness. I can well understand that feeling. When anthropologists like myself try to adjust to living a less fragmented life in the context of primitive society, the first thing we always complain about is 'lack of privacy'. Western visitors to Eastern Europe often react in the same way. But it is we who need to change, not the others. Privacy is the source of fear and violence. The violence in the world comes about because we human beings are for ever creating artificial boundaries between men who are like us and men who are not like us. We classify men as if they were separate species and then we fear the other. I am isolated, lonely and afraid because my neighbour is my enemy. But the young have seen through our absurdities, and for the present at least, they are showing a refreshing determination not to be corrupted by our self-destructive scheme of values. They deserve encouragement, not reproach.