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The Erosion of Solidarity

Today industrial labour – or what is left of it – is very much within the majority class of those who have an interest in preserving the status quo. The underclass on the contrary is a mere category, a victim. It is unlikely to organise and defend the many similar yet not really common interests of its members. They are, if the cruelty of the statement is pardonable, not needed. The rest could and would quite like to live without them.


Now look at them yoyos, that’s the way you do it,
You play the guitar on the MTV,
That ain’t working, that’s the way you do it,
Money for nothing and chicks for free.

(Mark Knopfler and Sting, Money for Nothing, 1985)

Crime, change and social cohesion

Until the mid-1990s, the idea that the market, unmolested by governments, would bring forth a fairer and more prosperous society had had a significant impact upon the social and economic policies of Western governments (Glennester & Midgley 1991, Bourdieu 1998). However, as we have noted, the free market proved to have a particularly acute downside; generating social and economic divisions, undermining social cohesion, destabilising families, deepening poverty and promoting criminality. The Blair administration of 1997 has the distinction of being the first European government elected, specifically, to repair the damage done to the economy, the social fabric and popular morality by neo-liberalism. Yet while many of the problems inherited by the Blair government can be laid at the door of what Denis Healey has called

J. Pitts, The New Politics of Youth Crime
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'sado-monetarism', the story of the erosion of social solidarity in Britain begins a long time before Mrs Thatcher embraced neo-liberalism.

From the mid-1950s, despite unprecedented economic growth and increasing material well-being, recorded crime in Britain rose steadily. In the 1980s, its trajectory steepened. In marked contrast, the final decades of the nineteenth century saw a steady decline in ‘ordinary’ crime, theft, burglary, assault, despite what we would now regard as intolerable levels of poverty. This fall in crime, as John Lea (1998) has observed, paralleled the rise of the Labour Party and the trade union movement, which transformed an inchoate urban proletariat into a powerful political and moral force. As a result, the first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a relatively secure, unionised, industrial workforce whose social well-being was underpinned by the progressive expansion of rights to healthcare, housing, education and material security. These developments produced reliable workers, stable families and ‘respectable’ working-class neighbourhoods. It is not that crime, once believed to be a ubiquitous feature of lower-class life, disappeared during this period, but rather, that in popular perception, and to a considerable extent in fact, working-class crime came to be concentrated on the ‘social margins’, among those who had not been incorporated into what eventually came to be called ‘the post-war settlement’.

In the 30 years after the Second World War, the central motif of British politics was ‘progress’, to be achieved through government intervention in the ‘market’, the redistribution of wealth via progressive taxation and welfare transfers, and the development of social and educational policies which expanded legitimate opportunity for the least well off. In the 1960s, rapidly increasing incomes, heightened material aspirations and the rise of ‘consumerism’ obscured, for a time, the reality that those at the very bottom of the social structure, single-parent families, the poor single elderly, etc. were not making any progress (Abel-Smith & Townsend 1964).

By the early 1980s as deindustrialisation began to drive unemployment to unprecedented levels, the post-war trend towards an overall narrowing of income inequalities was reversed. In the new ‘30–40–30 society’ of the 1980s (Hutton 1995), it was skilled industrial and clerical workers who were forced to the social and economic margins, not just the ‘poor’. Now, a Conservative government, wrestling with the burgeoning costs of unemployment, began hurriedly revising the terms of the ‘post-war settlement’. Maintaining that the amelioration of the deleterious effects of ‘globalisation’ upon business and industry would represent a market imperfection, the Conservatives cut industry adrift to