

**GOD ALONE CAN SAVE THEM:
Reflections on Sex, Drugs, Crimes, and Rock and Roll**

by
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In what way do the people in charge of social policy today resemble the people who are the subjects and objects of social policy today? I believe that the answer to this question more clearly and forcefully than any other single concept captures the dilemma confronting the advanced civilizations in Britain and the United States. Accordingly, I shall attempt to illustrate the consequences that flow from the answer which we are compelled to offer, namely, that they (the policy mongers and their subjects) are the reciprocals of a two piece puzzle, pieces which fit together, although the only viable solution to the puzzle is in fact their seating poorly together—like virtue and vice.

There is a statistical story to tell about these searing difficulties, but I find that the statistics commonly employed characteristically conclude far short of the reality. Concerning the business of drugs, for example, the official story rivets our gaze on urban centers and supposed underclass conditions. In reality the drug trade, in the United States to be sure, has attained such an amplitude the last two decades as to be explainable ultimately only in terms of the tastes and habits of suburbanites distinctly not underclass who regularly resort to urban cores not only for drugs but the concomitant and perverse sexual rituals as naturally allied with this underground economy as is the rabid crime which is well documented.

Along with my colleague Richard Fehnel, I chronicled this emerging phenomenon twenty-two years ago, in a study of drug use in the Washington, D. C. metropolitan area for the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. We discovered, and reported, that the economics of illegal drug use were driven by the appetites of lawyers, businessmen, shopkeepers, teachers, and bureaucrats (including those responsible to eliminate or control the traffic). More significantly, given what has transpired since, we foresaw an inevitable invasion of grade schools and junior high schools in the suburbs with predictable consequences. The soil in which this extensive depravity was sown was a morality in the suburbs indistinguishable from its urban peer, save in its dress. I will return to this moral identity which defies racial and class barriers in a starker context later.

Robert Bellah (et. al.) sees the nature of this pervasive decline as a failure of institutions, broadly construed. His new book, *The Good Society* accordingly contrasts these contemporary “social choices” with

older traditions, biblical and civic republican, that had a better grasp on the truth that the individual is realized only in and through community[.]

which had been held forth in the earlier work, *Habits of the Heart*. The analytic of “social choices” obscures, however, the precise nature of the dilemma we face. Thus, when he addresses drugs, he wonders why “we, ... only 5 per cent of the world’s population, ... consume more than 50 per cent of the world’s drugs?”

It is easy to see this [he continues] as a personal problem, to say that Americans have become selfish, self-indulgent, spoiled by affluence and readily available consumer goods; or as a cultural problem, to say that we have lost the work ethic and have come to believe that the good life is a life of hedonism and comfort. But we want to argue that it is also, and perhaps, primarily, an institutional problem.

The fact is, however, that this is a category error. For even if every man jack of us indulged an appetite for mood altering drugs, it would still not be the case that “we” do so in an institutional sense, for our choices would have been made not with reference to a common aim but with reference to our own particular aims. We all breathe oxygen, and air pollution is an institutional problem, but we do not all breathe institutionally. Unanimity of conduct does not create a system of conduct.

This is the same mistake people who speak of an American educational system make, reasoning from the fact that formal education pervades our social system. In the United States we are sometimes federalistic in the pursuit of our virtues, and we are always radically federalized in the pursuit of our vices. Besides, some of us do not “do drugs” and accept no share of responsibility for our fellows who do. Nevertheless, many of us do use drugs, and it appears that they do so in some substantial part because of what we as a society do not do rather than what we do—namely, we do not maintain the kind of moral strictures which would render such conduct unthinkable.

Bellah approaches but does not embrace this view when he correctly observes that,

More and more we think of problems that government cannot or will not solve—infant mortality in poor communities, the AIDS epidemic, rising drug use—as public problems for which government is responsible. And this expansion of public responsibility leads us to experience an interdependence that we both recognize and resent.

I hasten to reassure my economist colleagues that, by casting off this acquired responsibility, I do not deny the accuracy of their concept of externalities—the untoward, public consequences of private actions—which is every bit a matter of public concern. I only insist that resolving to eliminate or reduce unpleasant side-effects of imprudent conduct should not impose an ethic of communalizing vices.

We have long possessed analytical resources sufficient to deal with this question. Tocqueville’s “Memoir on Pauperism” of 1835 not only predicted, à la Charles Murray, that public charity for the able-bodied would operate necessarily to increase pauperism (thus denying to the welfare state its sole intellectual justification in advance of its emergence), but he reasoned as well that, beyond needs with which man is born, in advanced societies “habit and education” would engender additional needs many of which would be unfriendly to civilization. The question of how to respond to these

additional needs, therefore, is far more significantly a question of safeguarding the foundations of civilization than it is a question of compassion. Tocqueville further observed that, of the two incentives to work in humans, the need to live and the desire to improve one's condition, only the former has a certain operation. The latter, he said, is "only effective with a small minority."

Rather than seeking to remove the adversities yielded by vice, the prudent judge ought rather to reflect on the super-human immensity of the task of trying to distinguish unmerited misfortune from just desert. In Tocqueville's time already the cries for relief to the underclass had risen to a Dickensian pitch.

They amount to a deafening cry—the degraded condition in which the lower classes have fallen! The number of illegitimate children and criminals grows rapidly and continuously, the indigent population is limitless, the spirit of foresight and of saving becomes more and more alien to the poor.

Now that our own concerns have finally turned to the supposed white underclass, and properly so, these observations bear greater relevance still. For the fact is, as Charles Murray has observed, it is no longer the conduct of an isolable minority, from which the society might conceivably insulate itself, but the conduct of numbers sufficiently large as to challenge the existence of the society.

When one thinks of the specific forms of conduct abroad in the underworlds of sex, drugs, crime, and rock and roll, one will readily discern how urgent is the question, does this conduct reflect the tone of the society altogether. With popular rap singers jailed for violent murders and rapes, a rock and roll star who speaks almost exclusively to youths accused of child molestation, the verified world of filth and polymorphous perversity that constitutes the institutional framework of the drug trade, and frenetically growing examples of unrepentant random violence, we have reason to be concerned.

Stanley Crouch found a dreamy-eyed inclination to make excuses for black criminals a barrier to sensible responses to extremes of violence in the inner city. It is notable that the approach he pleaded for is an uncompromising resolve to remove the criminals from society—permanently, to the extent possible—in the name of the decent citizens who deserve protection. I applaud his suggestion that specific educational objectives would become the only parole ticket from the discipline camps to which he would assign these prisoners. These proposals, however, speak more to the character of the society than to the fate of the prisoners. The idea that conjugal visits should be disallowed, for example would depend utterly on a revolution in ideas about sexuality and personality in the minds of the policy makers responsible for such a change. How likely is such a change? The fact is, it is not our sense of humanity but our sense of the exigency of sex that leads us to grant conjugal visits—a kind of Smithian sympathy.

Let's employ the central issue of all those we now discuss as a way to answer that question. I refer to the problem of sex, or, more precisely, bastardy (which is perhaps the only admissible public discussion of sexual proclivities).

I acknowledge the common acceptance of the term illegitimacy in preference to bastardy in our contemporary usage. I revert to the older term to prepare the conclusion of these remarks—stigma and abandonment.

Nowhere has the 20th Century revolution in mores been more accomplished than in matters of sex. The Revolution of the 1960s has been complete, total. While Bellah seeks to absolve the 60s of responsibility for moral decline in the West—even redefining them as moralistic—in order to do so he must abstract completely from the sexual revolution. [p. 168] As a concomitant to demands for responsibility in universities and government and for inclusiveness in society, the drug and sexual revolutions help to identify the 60s not with moralism but with the overthrow of hierarchies and patterns of deference. The opposition to deference, in turn, was founded on a not much veiled appetite for pleasures unmediated by social choices. It was the 1960s that inscribed in the practical consciousness of the people in the United States, “what am I to get out of it?” Not wild students alone but also Great Society bureaucrats cooperated in this work, replacing the question, “What’s good for the country,” with a rejection of the ethic of self-sacrifice. This rejection of an ethic of self-sacrifice was the buzz-saw that President Carter ran into with his famous “malaise” speech of winter, 1978. This ethic is the very one honored in the breach in President Reagan’s “Its Morning in America” campaign of 1984, which self-consciously refused to challenge the nation.

Nowhere does the ethic of “What’s in it for me” wreak greater havoc than in sexual conduct, as George Gilder has shown. The problem of bastardy we now discuss, then, is different from though similar to the age-old problem discussed by Tocqueville, discussed in 1964 by Moynihan, and now discussed again by Charles Murray. Let’s examine what has changed.

Heretofore the problem of bastardy was discussed as the always singular and usually dysfunctional conduct of persons acting beyond the range of accepted mores. No longer. Today’s bastard is the offspring of prevailing lusts in the society.

Consider the dramatic difference between those once heroic stories of lone mothers giving birth to the offspring of husbands who had fallen in battle and the mere dramatic representation of the “Murphy Brown” syndrome! Of these two single mothers, one is a hero, the other a slut. The problem lies not in the fact of being a single mother but how she comes to be that way. Now, the conduct that produces a slut will produce a slut whether she conceives a child or not, and whether she gives birth or no.

While there is some element of good fortune in escaping the natural fruit of improvidence, it remains a moral problem for society if improvidence prevails. In that sense we should broaden the definition of bastardy to include abortions as numerous as births to unwed mothers. In doing this we discover that, just as with drugs, we marry the suburb to the ghetto.

Reliable estimates inform us that there are more than 1.5 million abortions annually in the United States, roughly a third of whom among minority women. Census reports for 1989-90 show just under one million births out of wedlock, of these roughly 450 thousand to minority women. The result: approximately 1.5 million abortions and bastard births to non-minority, non-ghetto women, and two-thirds that number, or 1.0 million abortions and bastard births to minority, largely inner city women.

I emphasize the numbers instead of the percentages to make a point: the society at large has a problem. If we persuade ourselves this is a special problem of special

groups, we deceive ourselves. This will be doubly significant where the society at large sets the moral tone for the special groups.

The breakdown in families occurs more profoundly in the breasts of apparently traditional families than among the poor. There we find a cultivated indifference to the responsibility of prosperity, and hence a recourse to abortion as convenient. The family is not an artifact of the state, nor even of society. We derive the family, and the family derives its authority, from God-given natural laws. Families make society, not society the family. Thus, the family is not essentially a mediating institution, however it may mediate. It does make a difference just how a family is constituted and what obligations families assume toward their offspring. Of those obligations, none is more important than the duty to cultivate life towards mature responsibility.

We lose that important perspective when we allow social policy mongers to focus a magnifying lens on poverty and the inner city, as though the family were nowhere else in trouble. Chastity is every bit as difficult for the comfortable “Doogie Howsers” as for the poor today, perhaps more so since the temptations of the comfortable are so much greater. Further, where the comfortable cannot set a worthy example for the poor, it is little to be expected that the poor will attain to higher moral standards. For that very reason it is something of a moral wonder that poor women, without leadership from favored classes, continue to prefer life to death for their offspring. (Charles Murray, of course, would discover this moral wonder in the incentives of welfare! I, on the other hand, know well that we cannot measure virtue against the standard of self-interest; we measure self-interest against the standard of virtue, because only through virtue does one become the fullest self.)

Nevertheless, one of the consequences of the magnifying lens applied to the poor is precisely to turn their neighborhoods into social laboratories which actually worsen their situations. For those social laboratories serve to import the diminished moral standards—such as condoms in the schools—which prevail among the “better sort.”

If these remarks seem to be leading toward an impasse, that is exactly correct. We face a hard choice—namely, whether to attempt to re-introduce a discourse of improvement in these corrupt times or whether to abandon lost souls.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from the street people, where before we have been giving lessons. In their eyes, the “better sort” are just “freaks” who dissimulate their passions. A new book by Carl Taylor details these views in startling candor. His *Girls, Gangs, Women, and Drugs* is written with a heart to sympathize and defend (the girls, like all wrong-doers among the poor today, become society’s victims). What he accomplishes, however, is to blast and condemn. In the process a startling but not unnatural truth is revealed. In order to combine their careers of crime, indulgence, and perversity, the people in the street *need* to think that we are no better than they; while we, in order to check those careers *need* to know ourselves better than they.

In an early work which I have long hesitated to publish, I maintained the two-part thesis that the new republicanism established as a condition for its success that the good must somehow continue to rule without being assured any privileges (and hence without necessarily holding office), and that their rule must consist in moving the society as a

whole toward constant improvement by means of praising men as better than they are. That argument contemplated the viability of the discourse of improvement in a society every way human, and thus flawed, *but not entirely corrupt*.

We must now wonder—gauge perhaps—whether the corruption of the times does not overpower the discourse of improvement; whether it is not impossible to introduce a discourse of improvement in a corrupt society. If that should prove unlikely our choice is made for us—safety for the remnant would inhere in abandoning the lost ones. A civilization in which there is no ethic of self-sacrifice has no recourse but to sacrifice them that improvidently ruin themselves.

Do I think it will happen? No! But moral leprosy should be dealt with in the same manner as its physiological patronym—*isolation*. There is this difference: the physiological leper *is* a victim who deserves mankind's sympathy and gentle care; while the moral leper victimizes mankind and deserves no more from mankind than public safety can afford in the measure of humanity.

My view will be repulsed as unnecessarily harsh and unrealistic. But there is a model for this analysis which begins by noting the credulous culpability of the overseers. These were the credulous foreign policy makers in the United States and Britain who fit so well with the purposes of Soviet policy that, far from riposting harmful threats, they often fostered them. At the extreme of this process, one will recall, a President was vilified for terming the enemy of his country's liberty an "evil empire." What made Ronald Reagan's vilifiers the cozy reciprocals of Soviet policy was not essentially a predisposition to favor the foe; it was rather the reality of subscribing to views of the world complementary to the rules of conduct which guided the foe.

Thus, in the 1920s Lenin succeeded in inducing the West to finance Russian imperialism by means of a calculated exploitation of this tendency—using apparent instability, disorder, policy confusion, and the supposed "death of communism" as his cover. Similarly, prior to the "fall of communism," Soviet policy consciously aimed to repeat the exploit, in still more dramatic fashion. If, on this occasion, the West was saved, it was largely fortuitous rather than a result of new found prudential suspiciousness.

I leave to history the judgment of whether our social policy mongers, who are too nearly like their subjects in passions and affections, shall be rescued from this fatal embrace by chance. I certainly see no prospect of a Great Awakening that will reclaim lost souls (as I shall not tire of repeating, it is impossible to introduce a discourse of improvement in an entirely corrupt society). Accordingly, I have focused my remarks on the fate they deserve given their character, rather than the more pleasant discussion of the ends of a better people. In this I follow Gertrude Himmelfarb, who reminded us that,

The late Victorians ... were painfully aware that it was sometimes necessary to feel bad in order to do good—to curb their own compassion and restrain their benevolent impulses in the best interests of those they were trying to serve.

So we come to the end. Which shall it be? Will we say, with Bellah, that society fails when any one of its members fails? Or, shall we say, as I insist, that society fails only when it becomes incapable to show contempt of failure? Lest you think that choice

is easy, I want to close with a true life story, from Taylor's book, a story that simultaneously puts liberal compassion to shame and challenges conservative indifference.

Mary, 28, on crack & cocaine for seven years:

My life was messed up from the word go. My parents divorced early and both of them are substance abusers. Things just went to hell for us. My father was very successful in business and left my mother for the better life, the fast lane. My mother was crushed and fell out and just started drinking and stayed drunk. I took to boys and got pregnant at fifteen. I was upset about my parents and all the other things that normal teens endure were happening too. I started smoking weed, drinking hard liquor, and next it was cocaine and then that damn pipe took over.

Hanging out with concert people and going to the television dance shows was my life. My younger sister started to get out of control. But she had no one to help, 'cause my mother and father were caught up in their own drug and alcohol problems. We went to school, I graduated and I don't know how. Got on welfare and just hung out in the street. I wasn't much of a mother. I had all kinds of men around, young ones and old ones ... I was going nowhere real fast. My mother was acting like my child. My father had got with the real fast people and lost his business. That's when I found out how bad that pipe was. He had this young girl, younger than my sister. My mother was living with me and she stayed drunk. So here we are, a drunk and a crackhead. It was hell for my baby, he was in elementary school and his mother and grandmother are supposed to raise him; we couldn't raise ourselves, it was messed up!

Then one day, I don't know what it was, something just sent me to this church. This little lady opened the door, and just smiled at me and said, baby, it's gonna be alright, 'cause God loves you. It was like some dream, I still, 'til this day don't know how I got there, it just happened. I would go back to church and sometimes I would be high from the pipe, but that little lady just won't give up on me, and it just got to be the place I went no matter what. Next thing I knew I wasn't thinking about that pipe. She just won't give up on me. Then I dropped all the people that kept me back, all the people that gave me dope. I wasn't one of those crazy Jesus girls, I just found myself with that little lady, Mrs. Jones, helping me. Next thing I was in school and I wanted to do better, and I was doing much better.

The church helped me, and then one morning I just woke up and said I am not going to depend on welfare no more. I remember I was in bed and just decided it was time to get off, and do for myself! I started to cry and thank God for making me alive and feeling like I was better than waiting for some welfare check. I finished trade school with skills and got a job, a good job. That pipe is still on my daddy's back, and my momma is still drinking. I realize they got to do it themselves. My son has a chance now, and I am still working to better myself. All I can say is that crack made me a slave, bless that little church lady for saving me. I got off, but I got lots of girl friends on that pipe. My daddy used to own his

own business and now he's sleeping in his car. That pipe has taken lots of good people to the dogs... Once you get on that pipe, it's hell, and the only thing that can save you is God. [pp. 71-72, ch. 4, "Drugs & Females," Carl S. Taylor, *Girls, Gangs, Women, and Drugs* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1993)]