

We have been here before

Centuries of nostalgia for a peaceful, law-abiding Britain

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BY BAGEHOT

THERE have been some sweeping historical claims made in the wake of last week's unrest, with commentators of left and right decrying an unprecedented collapse in moral standards, parenting and discipline among the young. There have been cultural claims too, with calls to blame African-American rap music from broadcast.

Here is the *Daily Mail's* Melanie Phillips, [giving it both barrels with her assertion](#) that:

The violent anarchy that has taken hold of British cities is the all-too-predictable outcome of a three-decade liberal experiment which tore up virtually every basic social value. The married two-parent family, educational meritocracy, punishment of criminals, national identity, enforcement of the drugs laws and many more fundamental conventions were all smashed by a liberal intelligentsia hell-bent on a revolutionary transformation of society. Those of us who warned over the years that they were playing with fire were sneered at and smeared as Right-wing nutters who wanted to turn the clock back to some mythical golden age.

From the left, [here is the *Daily Mirror's* Paul Routledge](#), attacking foreign music and British materialism:

The mayhem erupted overnight, but it has been building for years. And putting more police on the streets – while vital to end the threat to life and property – will not solve the crisis. I blame the pernicious culture of hatred around rap music, which glorifies violence and loathing of authority (especially the police but including parents), exalts trashy materialism and raves about drugs. The important things in life are the latest smart phone, fashionable trainers and jeans and idiot computer games. No wonder stores selling them were priority looting targets.

On the BBC, [there was the bizarre and clunking intervention by David Starkey](#), the historian of Tudor England, who complained on *Newsnight* that working class young whites had "become black", or as he put it:

The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic gangster culture has become the fashion... Black and white, boy and girl operate in this language together. This language, which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois that has intruded in England. This is why so many of us have this sense of literally a foreign country.

Allison Pearson blames frightened, cowed and unhelpful parents [in the *Daily Telegraph*, writing:](#)

How did we end up with some of the most indisciplined and frighteningly moronic youngsters in Europe? How come our kids are the best at being bad? There's no use blaming the police; it's the parents, stupid...A friend who works in an inner-London comprehensive with boys twice her size is not allowed to send them to the headmaster. Faced with full-frontal rudeness or casual violence, Clare must first follow school policy and ask, "Darren, are you ready to receive the

discipline message?" ...During my childhood in the Sixties, teachers and parents were still on the same side; today, you would be a fool to take that coalition of adults for granted. Darren's parents are likely to attend any conference on their son's behaviour with a snarling attitude, and maybe a pitbull to match

These are bold claims, amounting to a thesis that Britain has been wrecked and transformed from a familiar, law-abiding spot to an alien hell hole in just three or four decades. But here is an odd thing, surely: go back precisely three decades and you get to the summer of 1981, scene of some of the nastiest riots in modern British history, when racially charged violence saw tracts of Brixton in south London and Toxteth in Liverpool burn for days.

Seeking guidance, Bagehot decided to go off-line and read some books. From the shelves of the London Library, a gem: "Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears" a calm and witty history of moral panics that have gripped England over the ages, published in 1982, and written by a Bradford University academic, Geoffrey Pearson (later at Goldsmiths). The book is out of print, so I trust I will be forgiven (not least by Professor Pearson) for quoting from it at length: it is a brilliant survey.

Just what happens if we take a time machine back three decades, to the time before the revolutionary transformation identified by Melanie Phillips?

Well, "Hooligan" records, you find front-page editorials like this one from the *Daily Express* of July 7th 1981, stating:

Over the past twenty years or so, there has been a revulsion from authority and discipline... There has been a permissive revolution... and now we all reap the whirlwind

You find editorials and columnists seeming to blame the decline on black immigration. Here is the *Sunday Telegraph* of November 29th 1981:

Brixton is the iceberg tip of a crisis of ethnic criminality which is not Britain's fault—except in the sense that her rulers quite unnecessarily imported it

Thanks to Professor Pearson's painstaking researches, the time machine can be ridden smoothly much further. At each stop, there are voices warning that the golden age of the past has been wrecked, and suddenly Britain is a dreadful place.

Here is Sir Keith Joseph, the Conservative politician, in 1974, declaring:

For the first time in a century and a half, since the great Tory reformer Robert Peel set up the Metropolitan police, areas of our cities are becoming unsafe for peaceful citizens by night, and some even by day

"Hooligan" compares the 1958 and 1978 Conservative Party annual conferences. In 1978, buffeted by calls from the floor for a return to the birch and "Saturday night floggings" for football hooligans, it notes, the future home secretary William Whitelaw pledged a new regime of short-sharp-shock Detention Centres modelled on army discipline.

And in 1958? The agenda included a debate on a "disturbing increase in criminal offences", and speakers asserting that "our wives and mothers, if they are left alone in the house at night, are frightened to open their doors", and that "over the past 25 years we in this country,

through misguided sentiment, have cast aside the word "discipline", and now we are suffering from it". Delegates fumed over the "leniency" of modern courts and the way that young people were "no longer frightened of the police". Over calls from the floor for a return to flogging, the home secretary R A Butler pledged a programme of building short-sharp-shock Detention Centres, wherein "there should be a maximum of hard work and a minimum of amusement."

Still, no African-American rap music to corrupt the young, at least. Alas, "Hooligan" notes, the country was in the grip of a moral panic about rock and roll. In a 1956 front page editorial, headlined "Rock 'n Roll Babies" the *Daily Mail* declared:

It is deplorable. It is tribal. And it is from America. It follows rag-time, blues, dixie, jazz, hot cha-cha and the boogie-woogie, which surely originated in the jungle. We sometimes wonder whether this is the negro's revenge.

What of parents, surely free to smack and belt their way to discipline in those days?

Not according to the Recorder of Bradford, Frank Beverley, recorded in his law court in 1951 inveighing on the crimes that could be traced to poor parenting:

Parents at this time, unfortunately, do not take sufficient care in bringing up their children. They expect someone else to be responsible.

Back to 1932, and a guide to the work of boys' clubs lamented:

The passing of parental authority, defiance of pre-war conventions, the absence of restraint, the wildness of extremes, the confusion of unrelated liberties, the wholesale drift away from churches

Thanks, again, to Geoffrey Pearson's research, here is the *Times* of 1898, sorrowing that fathers no longer saw fit to save a "scapegrace" son from prison "by loyally and sounding whipping him," and quoting a horrified magistrate's view that:

it is melancholy to find that some parents are not ashamed to confess that children of seven or eight years old are entirely beyond their control

Still, at least no computer games, eh? Alas, here is M.G. Barnett, author of "Young Delinquents" (Methuen, 1913) warning readers that silent films present children with "a direct incentive to crime, demonstrating, for instance, how a theft could be perpetrated". Small wonder that the *Times* of the same year editorialised:

All who care for the moral well-being and education of the child will set their faces like flint against this new form of excitement

Back to 1900, and the Contemporary Review is fretting about how the "garbage" infecting music hall programmes "glorifies immorality", while in his 1905 work "Manchester Boys", Charles Russell draws a direct link between murders enacted on stage and later "instances of violence on the part of young men, in the back streets of the city."

August has often been a tricky month. There was a moral panic in August 1898, after Bank Holiday disorder that saw 200 involved in a fist-fight in the Old Kent Road, and 88 people hauled before the Marylebone court in a single day. Matters were not helped when, in October

1898, a street mob attacked police officers dealing with a domestic dispute. There were loud cries of "Boot them" as the constables were kicked and assaulted.

In 1883, London police were armed for the first time amid fears of a crimewave by armed burglars, a step seen as "un-English" by the press.

The great "garotting" panic of 1862 centred on lurid reports of a new form of mugging involving strangulation, and led to the restoration of flogging as a punishment, shortly after it had been abolished. The *Times* sadly concluded that England now resembled a foreign land:

Our streets are actually not as safe as they were in the days of our grandfathers. We have slipped back to a state of affairs that would be intolerable even in Naples

Back to 1840s and the Industrial Revolution. Professor Pearson meticulously notes the widespread moral panic about the collapse of ancient, rural moral codes in the face of rapid urbanisation, the rise of working mothers and the spread of child labour (feared because it put money in the pockets of impressionable youths). "Hooligan" records an 1842 House of Commons debate, which heard how the "morals of children are tenfold worse than formerly".

Still, at least no Jamaican patois, eh? Ah no, the same Commons debate saw an MP denouncing parts of the country suffering a "preposterous epidemic of a hybrid negro song".

In London, 1815 sees the foundation of the Society for Investigating the Causes of the Alarming Increase in Juvenile Delinquency in the Metropolis. 1751 sees Henry Fielding's "Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers" (Fielding fingered "too frequent and expensive diversions among the lower kind of people"). The seventeenth century saw moral panics about violent and rowdy apprentices, as well as about organised fighting among gangs (wearing coloured ribbons to identify their troops). Professor Pearson ends with the sixteenth century and puritan fears about, if not gangsta rap, popular songs that treated criminals as heroes.

Now, none of this is much comfort if you live in one of the areas of England that has just been looted or burned. None of this takes away from the fact that this country has some serious social problems involving young people and children: Britain tops European league tables for teenage pregnancy, and has dropped down international rankings for educational achievement.

But for all its wit, "Hooligan"—written at a time of really horrible racial tension in Britain—had a serious purpose: to urge readers in 1982 to avoid moral panic and a rush to historically-illiterate judgement. Its lessons hold just as true today.