

Nothing Burns in Hell

On Delinquents and Respectable Citizens



In the bottom, sorrow dwells, in the heights anguish

1.

A society as disastrous as the one in which we unfortunately live can hardly avoid talking about its shortcomings. But social problems are only taken up by the institutions and media of this deceptive society in falsified form. All that we see are misrepresented failings and spurious remedies. The prevailing babble about youthful 'anti-social behaviour' is no exception. We are typically given to understand that delinquents are rejecting the norms of society, and respectable citizens are being impoverished by a loss of the tranquil enjoyment of ordinary life. This way of viewing matters is perfectly misconceived. The problem is not that young delinquents have gone too far in their defiance of the dominant society, but that they have not gone far enough. The problem is not that the lives of the respectable citizens of this society have become disturbed, but that they have remained frozen. Delinquency does not so much cause the poverty of everyday life as continue it in different guises.

2.

I shall not offer exhaustive definitions of what I call the "delinquent" and the "respectable citizen". Who cares for such tedious exercises in procrustean classification other than the spent souls of academia? Suffice it to say that my delinquents include, amongst others, (a) bored kids who try to draw a line between themselves and the shitty world around them with music, dress, and the frugal use

of cool talk; (b) the loose, local groups of friends and acquaintances who come together from time to time to sneer at passers-by and indulge in unlawful kicks and perhaps a little criminal enterprise; (c) other minor street criminals who ply their trade in order to pay for their partying; and (d) the more consistently criminal associations sometimes referred to as "gangs". But not everything I say applies to each kind of delinquent equally. As for my respectable citizens, well, I'm sure we all know one when we see one. At bottom, what is important, at least to me, is that *you* consider whether *you* recognise some part of *your own* everyday life in what I have to say. If you do, I am afraid that it is up to you to determine what practical consequences follow from this. One step toward refusing the dominant society consists in breaking the habit of expecting one's thought and practice to be handed down to you.

3.

It is often lamented that delinquent youths lack respect for figures of authority. But it should come as no surprise that teachers, the police, parents, etc, do not attract respect, for the very simple reason that these contemptible roles do not deserve it. Why on earth should we treat with deferential regard those who would reduce us to the shrunken lives this society permits? The very notion of deference is merely a demand that we quietly and blindly submit to the external authorities who have placed themselves above us. It is loathsome. The delinquents are to be congratulated for taking steps towards a practical recognition of this. Unfortunately, while they reject some of what the society offers up for respect, they defer to other elements of the alienated life we are asked to lead. What is worse, they have come to admire and desire the very alienations they have failed to contest. For as long as this persists, they will remain stultified.

4.

To dependent youth, the unemployed, the working poor in shit jobs, and the residents of ghettos, it is all too obvious that boredom, subordination and contempt are no small part of their lot. There are several different ways of responding to this insight. One is to grin and bear it in the hope that conformity will eventually be rewarded by higher status and better-paid work. This is perhaps the most common response. Another is to contest the society that produces so much dead time. A third is to pursue alternative sources of prestige and money within this very society. For all too many, delinquency is in essence a search for such illusory alternatives.

5.

Consumer capitalism expropriates the whole of humanity's capacity to create its own world, the whole of its labour power, and subordinates it to the production, circulation and praise of commodities. In return, it offers to the individual a selection of goods, and of images of the good life, to consume within the narrow confines of his or her private life. This is not just a matter of offering a pallid world of subdued, suburban pleasures to the well-behaved middle classes. Far from it. There are only

so many washing machines that can be sold. There is only so much grief and disappointment that can be assuaged with replacement furniture, a holiday in a European hill village, or an unending succession of polite men and women on screen and disc. Modern capitalism must offer something different, something more, if it is to survive.

6.

Since the Second World War advanced capitalism, and the quest for contentment through consumption that it fosters, has generated a long series of consumable youth rebellions. This has included the teds, mods, rockers, hippies, skinheads, punks, rave culture, and the worlds of hip-hop and rap. Each of these has put forward its own particular array of clothes, music, drugs and cool behaviours as an authentic and ecstatic alternative to the misery of unskilled and semi-skilled work and the ways of life that honest and conforming people pursue. Indeed, where mainstream employment and commerce have more or less completely abandoned an area (as in ghettos of North America), cool culture and cool criminality may appear to be the only realistically available means to avoid poverty and obtain a sense of dignity. But none of these rebellions has marked the slightest departure from the global domination of the commodity and its logic. They have served only to assimilate young people into yet more external models of thought and action, and yet more waves of commodity production and consumption. The delinquents of today remain stuck in this pseudo-rebellious process. Consider, my friends, their sportswear, trainers, caps, and jewellery, the ways in which they walk, talk, fight, fuck and get high, and their view of what makes up the good life. Do these not reveal the extent to which they are seeking to gain status and pleasure by acting out a small local variation on a few global gangster templates the dominant society has shown to them ("It probably had a little to do with the gangster films we saw. Like a gang had a lot of drugs or money. They did drugs, had the coolest cars and chicks, that kind of thing...mostly we got it from films and those kind of things" — Swedish heroin user)? Consider, too, their unbroken, nervous concern for the visible approval of their friends. Does this not show how the individual is subordinated to a domineering collective? For all their defiance, the delinquents essentially live much as others do. Assimilating oneself into an external image of the good life, and submitting to a collectivity, is a perfectly ordinary form of alienated existence in the existing society. The delinquents are mistaken to associate this state of affairs with autonomy, excitement, shrewdness and freedom. They may purchase some fragile self-esteem, kicks and acceptance, they may even secure some precarious means of survival, but they pay for them with the usual currency of self-alienation.

7.

The admiration that delinquents have for what the dominant society says is desirable is not necessarily confined to its pseudo-rebellious products. Delinquents may straightforwardly yearn for some very ordinary consumer goods ("I want nice clothes, to get my hair done, I want nice bags and all the other shit...The right shampoo, the right shoes, the right fucking name on your T-shirt: it's life, it's all there

is" — prostitute in the north east of England). They may dream of such widely-admired trappings of success and affluence as widescreen televisions, sports cars and the kinds of gaudy wives and homes preferred by professional footballers ("one of them proper top-notch houses, swimming pool and that...a nice car, top-class bird" - criminal in the north east of England). In the end, they may wish for nothing more than to have the things they read about in tabloid newspapers and see on television ("them massive plasma screen TVs all over the place...a proper mansion and that, big gates and CCTV cameras" — criminal in the north east of England). Aside from their criminal methods and their taste for a few illegal commodities (notably drugs), their submission to the degraded tastes of their era may be total.

8.

The conservatism of many delinquents can equally be seen in their attitudes towards gender roles. The ideology of gender roles, the utterly idiotic notion that each gender has its own distinctive set of attitudes, emotions and behaviours to which individual men and women must adhere on pain of ridicule or violence, has been one of the more destructive prisons of human possibility developed by the dominant society. Its practical repudiation across everyday life has been, and remains, an essential means and end of any real project of human liberation. Yet it is almost entirely absent from the lives of the delinquents. They continue to value toughness, aggression, unintelligence and a lack of emotion outside of sport in men, and submissive domesticity or submissive sexual availability amongst women. Why? These roles were only the alienated means by which working class men and women once adjusted themselves to the needs of harsh manual labour and imperialist warfare. The women maintained the men, and the men maintained the production and profit of the bosses. This division of labour was part of the surrender of a defeated working class. The roles it created may have allowed those who adopted them a small sense of dignity, but it was never anything other than a dignified prostration. There is nothing to admire or emulate in these straightjackets of human behaviour. Those who continue to live within their narrow limits betray a very unfortunate taste for bondage. Of course, it is true that one has to be tough to survive in some of the social environments in which delinquency flourishes. But that need for toughness is in part precisely a product of the predatory violence to which delinquent machismo itself leads. Moreover, the options available to delinquents are not restricted to machismo or a wimpishness that encourages victimization. Becoming a macho idiot is not the only way of not being a "pussy". Merely transposing a few elements from one gender role to another (for example, by adding a dash of violence to the old femininity, or vice versa) does not help: if you mix together two types of shit, you still end up with shit. It is a matter of discovering new types of 'toughness' that reject the old solutions to the problems of surviving in harsh circumstances and supersede both masculinity and femininity. You might start by developing a consistent cruelty to the man and women within you: by treating the gender roles you have picked up along the way as the fatal alien implants they really are.

9.

With some delinquents, the old masculinity has been fused with a callousness towards others characteristic of the most predatory capitalists and managers. These delinquents have the same taste for power and degradation as the managers, the same absence of humanity, and the same willingness to subordinate others to their own narrow self-interests ("Oh, yeah! Its like, 'That bugger didn't want to give the keys up for nothing!', 'Had to beat him to death', and all that. We get a buzz off it. I love it. Love the cars and the buzz" — criminal from the south west of Britain). Their craven inability to step beyond the tastes and ideas of their masters, their submissive aping of the worst oppressions visited upon ordinary people, condemns them. Even where violence is indifferently practiced by gangs of criminal entrepreneurs for such utilitarian purposes as enforcing payments from customers, it nonetheless leaves them with all the charm and subversiveness of a firm of unscrupulous bailiffs. They may have stepped outside the law, but they have not gone beyond the alienated social relations of the dominant society.

10.

One social space in which delinquency often flourishes is the school. For those who do not wish to be in school, who are failing to succeed within it, delinquency provides an apparent means of defence against the depredations of schooling, as well as an alternative source of status and satisfaction. Through disobedience of teachers and school rules, vandalism and truancy, delinquents curtail their own education and disrupt individual classes and events. However, their impact on individual schools and the system of mis-education tends to be small and transient. Even where they manage to exercise a widespread terror over their fellow students, and prompt the authorities to introduce ever-greater security measures, it all leads nowhere. They quickly become prematurely satisfied with an inadequate revolt, settling for bad reputations, mistreatment of the more studious, the same old antics, and escape. They do not deepen their refusal when they find that the school has survived what they have so far thrown at it. They do not subvert the majority into joining them (indeed cannot because their bullying of the more compliant students only repels them). They do not forge cooperative links with delinquents in other schools. They do not seek out a shared project of negation with those who suffer different forms of subordination outside of school. Like minor aristocrats in a small country, they blindly pursue in doomed isolation the same clichéd roles, impoverished privileges and debased abuses as their forerunners did. Sooner or later, they leave their schools much as they found them and join the ranks of the working, the unemployed or the incarcerated.

11.

One of the paler variants of delinquency can be found amongst middle-class youth. During the long adolescence through which they must pass on the way to higher educational qualifications, they possess few of the conventional badges of status. Some abjectly submit to the authorities placed over them, content with the

prospects before them. Others, however, puff themselves up with the cartoon nihilism of gangster rap (or some other facet of popular culture) and act out a jaded pantomime of bad manners and intoxicated hedonism for the approval of their peers. It does not last long. These accountants-in-waiting quickly grow old, as they graduate and take up other roles more appropriate to their new professional status. Less risible are those who grow disgusted with their education and falter on the path to affluent respectability that has been mapped out for them. However, many dissipate their incipient rebellion by directing it into deviant sub-cultural consumption. To the extent that they content themselves with different clothes, music, argot, drugs and gestures, their dissatisfaction is contained and recuperated. It does not matter how outrageous the content of the sub-culture may be. If it sustains itself by producing and consuming commodities, if it confines itself to the space, time and choices left over by the state and employers, it leaves the dominant society untouched. Regardless of the intentions of its originators, it functions as one more component of advanced capitalism's spectacle of pseudo-opposition.

12.

Contrary to what disapproving conservative commentators like to suggest, delinquents often work for a living. This may involve participation in the legal world of shit work or involvement in less licit professions such as burglary, car theft, street crime, smuggling, fiddles kept from the prying eyes of social security officials, or the sale of stolen goods and illegal drugs. It is all work. It is all activity given over to the exchange of commodities, to the imperial imperatives of a separate economy that is not within our control. It is all alienated. However, delinquents' practical criticism of work is generally limited. They may well be starkly aware of the vileness of the monotonous, humiliating and poorly-paid work in the service industries to which they are periodically forced to return by circumstances ("You going to the office? How late you working till? No fucking way...I thought they'd abolished slavery" — East London gang member). But their response when doing that work rarely goes beyond transient gestures of defiance and slamming the door behind them when they leave. They have little conception of acting with others to sabotage the operations that have quite rightly nauseated them or of putting an end to the social institution of nauseating work. Their critique of criminal work is more limited still. In some cases, the fact that this particular way of succumbing to the logic and the world imposed by the capitalist economy may not involve a boss or a rigid formal hierarchy is mistaken for a sign of freedom and autonomy. This is rather like those respectable citizens who regard themselves as free because they do exactly what is required of them before anyone tells them too loudly to do so. But much more important than any illusion of relative freedom, the delinquents are timid and defeated. For all their swagger, they cannot envisage a successful attack on the existing society and are persuaded that they themselves, in concert with others, cannot successfully overturn that society. They have settled for adjustment to what exists. They have limited themselves to desiring the goods and the illusions of consumable pleasure that advanced capitalism offers in return for abandoning the creation and control of the world to it. They have failed to recognize that the very tastes and pleasures they seek to indulge are externally imposed impostures. In

place of pursuing in theory and practice a carefully-calibrated assault on a society that has excluded and enraged them, they have picked up a false image of revolt from the counters of that same society, from its spectacle of pseudo-opposition.

13.

The delinquents lack a critical relationship to their own practice and to the history of the delinquents of previous decades. Look at the delinquents of ten, twenty or thirty years ago. What they were doing then is very much the same as what today's delinquents are doing now. Where have they ended up? No small number are dead, prematurely killed by violence, accident or disease. Others are imprisoned, or crushed by illness or addiction. Some are still hustling in the old ways, always hoping for a break into the big time that never comes or never lasts, while a very few have achieved 'success' in conventional or criminal terms, allowing them to have a little more of the same rubbish that everyone else does. Most have settled into the narrow mediocrity of family life and run-of-the-mill work. It is not just the broken and becalmed who are failures. They have *all* failed to create an everyday life that it is really worth living. Yet the current generation of delinquents has learned nothing from this. They persist with the same failed strategies and tactics, the same well-beaten paths down blind alleys, the same signposted roads to surrender.

14.

Failure stalks the present as much as the future. When they are not working, the delinquents try to make something happen that will break the prevailing boredom through fights, harassment, fucking, escapades, partying, etc. The results are invariable paltry. The 'real life' that delinquents like to contrast so favourably with the gullible drudgery of the respectable citizens is a mess of puerile pranks, pointless fracas, mechanical sexual encounters, and thin, fragile, artificial paradises built out of pneumatic beats, desperate dancing, and the chemical impairment of the senses. It is no surprise that at the heart of delinquent life is a conspiracy of exaggeration through which petty events are talked-up and retold afterwards. Nonetheless, boredom returns. The delinquents largely find themselves back where they began, tediously stuck at the bottom of a society over which they exercise no control.

15.

When the delinquents manage physically to intimidate the occupants of an area, their dominance is equally illusory. They may control some of the movements of some of the occupants some of the time, but they are not masters even of their own tiny terrain. Above and beyond them, decisions about public services, infrastructure, redevelopment, education, healthcare, employment, production, etc, continue to be largely made outside of their control. And when the state and capital decide to reclaim their territory, they are simply swept away. For example, no matter how numerous and arrogant the gangs of Chicago may have been, when it was decided that the two-mile stretch of land occupied by the Robert Taylor Holmes and Stateway Gardens housing projects was to be given over to Legends South, a new

housing development largely occupied by the middle classes, they were ejected along with all the other residents. In the end, the delinquents are, at best, the temporary caretakers of abandoned ruins.

16.

The alienated character of delinquent life is starkly revealed by the code of respect many live by. This code may serve to deflect the contempt directed at those at the bottom of society; nonetheless, it is an external and arbitrary system that ties an individual to a reputation miserably dependent on the approval or deference of others. One of its most destructive facets is the expectation that any display of disrespect is remedied by violence. Another is the encouragement it gives to newcomers to establish status amongst their peers and competitors by engaging in eye-catching acts of especially ruthless violence. All this has led to a reified contempt for life, disdain for open criticism, staggeringly high rates of injury and death (in Harlem during the mid-1990s, for example, young men were as likely to die violently as soldiers were during the second world war), more and more defensive weapons, and a ubiquitous ambience of threat and fear in the areas where delinquents live. None of this is in the best interests of the delinquents themselves, the worst of which have been reduced to veritable zombies by their relentless treatment of others as objects and the need to suppress all real thought and feeling about their patently loathsome actions. What is supposed to be the delinquents' own code has clearly escaped them. Like an angry god, it consumes those who worship it. More generally, delinquents' activities create blighted lives for themselves as much as for anyone else, but they doggedly persist with this self-immolation. "I dunno, they've got a brand new Merc outside but they're cracked out in some poxy flat with their mum. They can't use the front room in case someone shoots the house up, and they're looking at untold 'bird' if they get nicked. What's that about?" (London gang member). Even when things seem to be going well for criminals who engage in business, all they spread around them are alienated relations with suppliers and customers. Their relations with others are mediated and defined by the goods for which they have become the bearers and the mouthpieces. All they find around them, all they have created around them, are people who wish to buy from them, sell to them, or supplant them — people for whom they are merely buyers, sellers or commercial competitors. They strove to break free of the constraints around them; they ended up as hooded greengrocers of oblivion.

17.

As well as failing to confront their own reliance on alienated images of delinquency, delinquents have done little to disrupt the wider use of images of delinquency by the rulers of society. For decades, the threat supposedly posed by delinquents has been an important element of the state's justification of its rule over society. In effect, the state has presented itself as a necessary defence for the respectable citizen against what are said to be their common enemies, the delinquents. For their part, the delinquents have rarely even attempted to disabuse respectable citizens of this illusion. Often confined in estates on the outskirts of cities and the poorer parts of

town, they have not explored ways of breaking down their isolation and communicating directly with ordinary people who are better off than they are. They have not sought out common ground with ordinary people whose lives are as blighted by affluence as theirs are by deprivation. (Artistic specialists may have offered up depictions and discussions of the life in the margins through rap and music, plays, poetry, etc, but such portrayals and protests, having been framed as cultural products, merely end up being taken within the narrow private lives of the affluent and passively consumed as aesthetic experiences or news.) Worse, some delinquents seem perfectly content to play the part that the state's spectacle of terror assigns to them, delightedly acting out their gangster role on the streets, the media and youtube videos, or simply dolling out rote discourtesy to passers-by. They are happy to feed the fist that strikes them.

18.

There is no doubt that the actions of delinquents disrupt the everyday lives of respectable citizens. Over the past thirty or so years, the majority of the population has chosen to pursue the rewards of conformity instead of the fruits of revolt. What they have been left with are ugly and stupid lives, ugly and stupid places, and a planet pushed to the very edge of destruction by capitalism's efforts to keep feeding them new promises of consumable happiness. But the thought that one is wasting one's life is not a cheerful one, and respectable citizens everywhere have gone to considerable lengths to avoid it. They have erected elaborate architectures of lies and self-deceptions in an attempt to persuade themselves and others that their work is not petty nonsense directed by contemptible bosses to idiotic ends, that their families are not desolate bunkers of mutual contempt and shared incarceration, that their leisure and friendships are not collections of inconsequential games and insubstantial interests, that their holidays are not banal tramps through despoliation, that the ways in which they think they avoid the common vulgarity are not entirely spurious, that their pleasures are not dreadfully small. They cling to these illusions with ferocious desperation; but the whole house of lying ghosts and grim parodies is a fragile one, and it is threatened by the depredations of delinquency. To the extent that delinquency prevents respectable citizens from misperceiving themselves as happy and free people who are blessed with rich experiences and continue to grow as individuals, it provokes their fury. It threatens to take away the very little they have, and replace it with nothing. It threatens to bring them face to face with a poverty of everyday life that has been there in one form or another all along.

19.

The rage of respectable citizens is compounded by their impotence. They have no control over their social environment, no ability to do anything other than stand or cower as isolated individuals in the face of the delinquents who harass them. They have given up the power to manage everything outside their front doors to others and accepted random collections of juxtaposed individuals in lieu of communities. Having refused to contest the separation and impotence that the dominance of the

state and the commodity economy imposes on everyone, they can only clamour for more police patrols and harsher punitive regimes.

20.

At bottom, delinquency is a product of the absence of revolt, the abeyance of revolution. It is a pathological result of the unwillingness of men and women to act against the conditions of their own alienation. If respectable citizens wish not to be the victims of delinquents, they must precisely become less respectable. If they wish to open a dialogue with delinquents that is capable of superseding their mutual hostility, they must end that sheepish plodding through a lifetime of work and consumption which understandably makes them so contemptible in the eyes of delinquents. They must develop, by and for themselves, an autonomous, self-managed project of practical negation that is directed at the reigning alienation and reproaches the delinquents with doing too little against the dominant society rather than too much. They must invite the delinquents to join them in a richer and more subversive game. If that does not happen, if a process of revolutionary contestation is not created in which both the respectable and the delinquent can participate as equals, the same old nonsense will proliferate, and the same old failed pacifications will be regurgitated by the state. We shall all end up dying before we have even begun living.

21.

Of course, it is necessary to act against recalcitrant delinquents who insist on bringing misery and terror to others. This cannot involve cooperation with the police, local authorities and courts, or demands for more from them. These separate powers are part of the apparatus that dispossess ordinary people of control over their lives and they must always be treated as the enemies that they are. Ordinary people have to find their own solutions. We know that individual confrontations with groups of delinquents can be dangerous, so seek out and act with others who are prepared to stand with you. Propose shared, self-directed confrontation by word and deed to those who share your frustrations. Bring thoughtful strategy and tactics to the matter. Carefully study the activities and operations of the delinquents. Gain as complete a picture as possible of what they do, how they do it, and where they do it. Be clear about what you wish to achieve. Identify the weak points, the times and places where confrontation with individuals (including customers of delinquents engaged in criminal commerce), or destruction of things (for example, stolen goods, drug stashes), will have large effects but carry acceptably small risks. Be imaginative in your tools and methods. Do not feel obliged to confine yourself to what is lawful. Make sensible use of publicity. Paste up criticisms of individuals and groups on the physical walls of the area and on the internet. Through texts, pictures, sound recordings, and videos, make public that which they wish to conceal from the wider world. Be as anonymous and as cautious as you need to be. But in the end, such an approach can only be a complement to a revolutionary strategy that contests the social conditions that breed delinquency as one form of alienation amongst many

others. In South Africa, an Islamic group, the People Against Gangsterism and Drugs, went so far as to execute some 30 gang leaders in 1996 alone. The gangs still exist.

22.

There is no-one to save you. It is up to you. And me. Courage. So that the night triumphs no more.

Wayne Spencer
14 July 2010

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