

Boys in their Hoods

Splitting my time between writing on education and teaching in a South London comprehensive I often enjoy a rather more conjunctive perspective than most on the youth issues of the day, and the recent debacle over 'hoody'-wearing gangs is no exception. In my classroom – a veritable hoody Mecca – I have the (occasionally dubious) privilege of spending a lot of time talking to and getting to know some of these children who are causing politicians so much consternation, and am thus forced to reflect in a more balanced way when these politicians pronounce on them.

The messages coming from these young people resonate strangely with those of their detractors: they need to feel loved and they need to feel secure, but, rather than feel that they are letting their communities down, they feel that their communities are often letting *them* down. Perceiving the withdrawal of the more affluent from their institutions, and with many of the normal familial sources of security unavailable to them, they turn to each other for support. Thus, without the involvement of the wider community in forming a healthy world-view, they patch together the identities and lifestyles being sold them by sportswear companies and computer games.

If we are to address the root issues, rather than just ban the surface garments, we will need to seriously question our own responsibilities and actions and ask whether they have not inadvertently added to the problems we now express such shock at. This 'serious debate' – that procrastinatory phrase heard ringing throughout the election – needs to happen at all levels from the local to the national. It must also avoid the demonising of a section of our communities who are not only already experiencing too high levels of exclusion but, as all children do, are quick to live up to the stereotypes we give them.

The recent media attention was catalysed by the announcement that a shopping centre was banning 'hoodys' as they prevented identification on CCTV cameras. Bluewater, the sum of all Iain Sinclair's fears, the ex-gravel pit turned 'most exciting retail experience in Europe', from which the economically proactive now mine burgers and chinos, is a modern Delphi, where blood is shed, intoxicating smoke is inhaled, and all of us peer into the depths to see our nation's future. In the acres of glass, darkly visible through the haze of petrochemicals, we see the vectors of our country's development: new fashions, desirable gadgets and emerging patterns of behaviour.

Prescott's choice to wade in in support of the shopping centre that has banned 'hoodys' was a piece of political genius, but added little of value to this debate. In doing so he aligned himself with everything quintessential in the modern English aspiring classes, and thus re-affirmed himself as the man-in-touch; the everyday-bloke face of the government. His tale of staring down (albeit with Special Branch support) a group of hoodys means he can empathise with the rest of us who have had to face them; his invective about needing to rid society of this sort of antisocial behaviour gives us confidence that this new Labour government really means business.

Thankfully, Tony Blair has said more of substance. He has spoken well of making respect a central plank of his third term vision, and of the deep-seated causes being in a lack of parental responsibility. "I can't solve all these

problems,” he said, “but I can start a debate on this and I can legislate.” So what are the key issues to be raised in this debate, and what legislation, if any, might follow?

Firstly, Blair is right to focus on parents. If Bluewater is our oracle we must ask, how do these gangs of youths get there? Who is allowing these groups of children – often aged just 10 or 12 – to roam unsupervised, and provided the means for them to travel to a site just off the M25? The anecdotal evidence that the basics of parenting are somehow being lost seems to be supported by the proliferation of behaviour-busting related television programming.

The format of these shows is simple: a set of parents are despairing at their devilish child, who is running rings round them and behaving atrociously. After observation by some imported professional, the parents are forced to face up to the fact that it is actually their own behaviour – usually a complete inability to set any clear boundaries – which is largely responsible. They are helped to put these boundaries in place, and, low and behold, the little devil turns angelic within the week. Tune in next week for a virtually identical tale.

Blair needs to back his words up with action. Any Headteacher will tell you: schools cannot teach children how to behave. They can only back up what is going on at home, and parents need real support in how to do this from the earliest days of parenthood.

However, secondly, these same archetypal televised stories of transformed parenting need to be applied to the rest of us adult members of communities. Yes, parents have the primary responsibility for bringing up their children. But, in a properly functioning community, the adult population as a whole has a responsibility to back up and support that work done by parents, and currently, just as in the opening scenes of these programs, we are too quick to point the finger of blame at the devilish miscreants without appreciating how our own behaviour is contributing to it.

This is a painful realisation that is part of the transition from naïve to experienced pedagogy: part of the poor behaviour in my classroom is my fault. And we have to face the harsh truth that, just as the children on our screens act out the roles that parents are creating for them, so do our young people act out the roles that we as a wider community give them in a thousand subtle ways.

Christopher Booker has argued superbly in *The Seven Basic Plots* (see *Prospect* review, December 04) that our healthy human development relies heavily on the stories that we inhabit. Stories are the base materials for our boundaries, our first guides to what is acceptable. What all legislators, artists, educators, editors and even software developers must reflect on is the stories that they are both telling about our young, and the stories they are offering them for consumption. What are the major narratives forming the identities of children today? *Grand Theft Auto*? 50 Cent? Nike? McDonalds? Negative tabloid attention? When over-worked parents deny their children bedtime stories, they are not simply removing story from their existence. They are creating a vacuum which will be gladly filled by those seeking to profit by offering stories for sale. As good liberals we work hard, push back the boundaries of acceptable violence and demand that our children act in an adult way from an early age. We kit them out with expensive gadgets, hard-wire them to consume, then send them out with only a latch-key to remember us by and are surprised when they gather for a communal cock-fight of petty violence.

We should not rush to condemn the off the shelf identities that these 'hoodys' have purchased. Nor should we be shocked when they form into gangs to create a corporate narrative for one another. It is clear from the recent debate on 'Britishness' (see *Prospect* April 05) that we are lacking confidence in the central national narrative; that its plot is developing twists that not all of us are comfortable with. So perhaps our local narratives are taking on an even greater importance, and gang culture is simply a symptom of this. Hence, rather than criticise, we must think carefully about how we might offer young people better stories from an early age, and ensure that we are available to tell them.

So, thirdly, Part of that act of communal story-telling will be, as commentators have rightly pointed out, enabling people of different ages and backgrounds to meet one another and share their stories. There is currently a mutual suspicion between 'hoodys' and other members of our communities, and, as Booker points out, it is only once we are prepared to meet 'the other' that we will find something of ourselves in them and learn mutual respect.

Respect, as Blair has highlighted, is central to this problem. Gone are the days when respect was automatically granted because of age or background. It needs to be earned, and meeting 'the other' is the only way that this can happen. We must reflect on ourselves again, and see that the opportunities for such meetings are becoming less and less frequent as we withdraw our children from state schools and secure ourselves inside gated 'communities'. Jane Jacobs would even argue in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* that the proliferation of car travel – which reduces the numbers of walking-pace pavement encounters – has significantly contributed to the rise in anti-social behaviour in our urban areas.

The middle classes' withdrawal from society is leaving it flailing. This is a classic example of the tension between the personal and the communal: our fears create in us desires to withdraw our own into secure houses and exclusive schools; while this very act of withdrawal leaves behind an environment that is then perceived as more frightening. And while we in principle support the theory that if we all stopped withdrawing things would be immeasurably better, because of the lack of systems to support and encourage such a communal 're-entry' we each refuse to act alone. Blair may be right to be considering legislation, but any law-making to enforce interaction with 'the other' would surely prove far too controversial.

Fourthly then, we must overcome our fears and find ways of interacting positively with others, particularly teenagers from backgrounds different to ours. I am certain that we would be surprised by what we found: that while we have been paralysed by fear of them, many children's lives are also full of fear. Life for them is often extremely threatening. Most have been mugged for a phone or personal stereo, almost all will experience huge pressures from their peers, without appreciating that all their peers feel the same. Pressures to dress a certain way, to do the right (ie wrong) thing in order to fit in, to not express any opinions that might differ from the group. And many are made miserable by these pressures, forced into lifestyles that they know are damaging and know will prevent them from reaching their goals. But they know that life is about belonging, and perceiving rejection from absent parents, are fiercely loyal to each other.

While we may agree with John Prescott and Bluewater that we must ban the hoods, the real solution must come outside of legislation. We must support parents in the establishment of clear boundaries for young people, and become more confident in asserting these ourselves, not walking by on the other side. We must also help these children to become confident within themselves; to remove their own caps and take down their own hoods, and thus widen their narrow outlook as they experience a sense of belonging from us.