

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Barbarity without vigor

by [Anthony Daniels](#)

*A review of The Strange Death of Moral Britain, by Christie Davies.*

A civilization, or at least a way of life, collapsed around the time I was born. Unfortunately these two events, which were not causally related, occurred in the same country: Britain.

Naturally, civilizations do not collapse overnight. They decay, erode, or decompose into unrecognizability. In historical terms, however, the process can be very swift. I grew up at the very end of the era Christie Davies, a sociologist who has something arresting to say on every subject he treats, calls “Moral Britain,” whose strange death he describes and tries to explain.[\[1\]](#)

I am uncertain whether to be grateful for having witnessed the last of Moral Britain, or to curse my fate, for the personal legacy has been ambiguous. On the one hand, it has given me an attachment to things that I believe are enriching; on the other, it has cast a pall of melancholia over my life, such that I now feel a stranger, or even an enemy, in my own land. Had I grown up just a few years later, I should not have known Britons could be other than shallow, vulgar, and egotistical. Ignorance of this might not have been bliss, exactly, but it would at least have been complacency and lack of comparison, without which true contentment is impossible.

Here, then, are some of the things that I remember at random from my childhood, that now seem as alien as anything in the farthest flung regions of the globe. The past definitely was another country, and they really did do things differently there.

Evening newspapers would be piled on an unattended stand, and anyone who wanted a copy put his money on the top of the pile and took it. It would have been a deeply shocking, almost inconceivable thing, for anyone to purloin the money, though nothing would have been easier to do.

From the earliest age, I traveled across London, still pocked with bombsites, and every evening, from the age of eight, I would take my dog out for a walk, even after dark. I was no more in danger than when I went upstairs to bed.

I went to football matches with a friend, unaccompanied by an adult, from the age of nine. The crowds were much larger in those days, because most spectators stood on terraces rather than sat. They were packed like sardines on bleak concrete steps open to the elements. But ordinary working class people would help unaccompanied children to the front of the crowd, so that they might see better, and I even heard them say that no one should swear because there were women and children present. We in Britain had heard rumors of crowd disturbances at football matches in foreign lands, of police trenches round pitches and tear gas used to control riots when the wrong team scored a goal, accounts of which we pretended to be incredulous, the very unthinkability of such conduct

confirming us in our national superiority.

Gentility was not quite dead, and its badge was still eagerly worn. To transgress had connotations of moral turpitude rather than of daring aesthetic innovation. A certain formality of manner persisted; people still worried about the correct way to address a bishop; and I learned how to end letters by claiming to be someone's obedient servant. Even quite bad men raised their hats to their acquaintances, and the bowler hat was not yet an object of ridicule. As for childish mischief, ringing doorbells and running away seemed the acme of delinquent daring.

Of course, there were drawbacks. The November fogs were so thick that you couldn't see the hand in front of your face, and a man would have to walk slowly in front of a bus to guide it inch by inch through the gloom. I loved those fogs as a child, but they killed thousands of people in a horrible way, and it took my father so long to get to work that on arrival he had to come straight back. As for the food, it was truly execrable. Vegetables were treated as if they were manioc and had deadly poisons in them that could be removed only by prolonged boiling; anything with a strong flavor was regarded as morally suspect, almost an instrument of foreign subversion. Physical discomfort was not then regarded as the terrible or worst possible misfortune it was later to become, and was even considered character-building.

At a time in my life when six weeks seemed an eternity, the social world around me appeared solid, dependable, and indestructible, partly because many of the coins in circulation were still Victorian, and very occasionally one might even find a pre-Victorian penny, from the reign of William IV. (Professor Davies has interesting things to say about the demoralizing effect of inflation, for example, by rendering thrift economically disadvantageous.) In reality, though, the seemingly secure and safe social world that surrounded me was already crumbling fast from within.

Disagreement between my parents on the matter of manners reflected the social ferment beyond our household. My mother favored the classical view, my father (who was her elder by twelve years), the romantic. My mother thought that manners were a matter of discipline and could be inculcated; the heart would follow habit. My father believed that good conduct was the consequence of sincerity and a spontaneous good heart, in the absence of which nought availed. Since man was born good, conduct would be good if artificial impediments were removed. And good manners, after all, were perfectly compatible with deep wickedness, a coexistence that was dangerous insofar as the former could easily hide the latter from view.

There is no doubt that my mother was on the losing side of the argument, both sociologically and historically, though she was morally in the right. Her concept of manners was derided by my father as mere etiquette, and there was an element of truth in this. For example, my mother so successfully drummed into me the notion that a man must always be on the outer side of the sidewalk when he accompanies a woman that to this day I am tortured by something akin to guilt if I accompany a woman on the inner side, and am prepared to go through agonies to get to the other side (needless to say, no woman these days has any understanding of why I switch sides, for example, when we cross the road). Clearly, it is a matter of moral indifference on which side of the woman I accompany her, so the discomfort I feel is not really guilt: it is more like what my dog feels when he has an accident in the hallway and rolls over on to his back in expiation.

Still, the great advantage of my mother's view—or disadvantage, from my father's perspective—is that it recognized social obligation as being of great, indeed decisive, importance in the determination of how one should behave. The romantic view, that made a fetish of spontaneity and feeling, was an egotist's charter. Its complete victory ensured that we were entered a golden age of self-importance, of individualism without individuality.

Another memory sticks in my mind. In 1962, a very clever boy at school called M---- (these were

the last days when friends called each other by their surname), who was expected to have a brilliant career in any field that he chose, came to me and enthused over a band called the Rolling Stones. I hadn't heard of it, for in those days pop music had not yet achieved its status as a cultural miasma from which it is impossible to escape. I was puzzled by his enthusiasm, which appeared feverish and disproportionate to—well, to anything. It was clear that he was in the grip of a powerful obsession, akin I suppose to a religious conversion.

M----'s academic performance declined precipitously, in a matter of weeks, so much so that a schoolmaster came to me and asked me whether I knew what was wrong with M----. Was there trouble at home that prevented him from concentrating as he should? Even then I suspected the answer, but I said nothing.

Just over four decades later, I live in a society in which everyone is physically wary of almost anyone under the age of thirty, for fear of an explosion of insensate rage or egotistical violence. We have become afraid of our own children, at least if more than three of them are congregated without adult supervision. The crudity of public expression knows no bounds; everyone demands respect but refuses to behave respectfully, and the majority of us who live without special privileges exist under an informal dictatorship of criminals. The police—who are no longer the kind of people from whom one would ask the time, but rather an alien occupying force wearing peculiar stab- and bullet-proof vestments that are festooned with repressive paraphernalia, simultaneously menacing and ineffectual—recently put a pamphlet through my door informing me that burglars were “operating” in my area and advising me how to turn my house into a kind of bank-vault. As for social pathology, we in Britain now lead the world: no country at a comparable level of economic development can begin to approach us in everything from public drunkenness to VD, from teenage pregnancy to drug abuse, from illegitimacy to burglary, from divorce to street robbery. It's Gin Lane with the National Health Service thrown in.

How has this extraordinary, and extraordinarily swift, social change come about? In a sense, of course, there can be no definitive or final, incontestable answer: history being a seamless robe, any development has roots that can be traced back to Original Sin at least. If the explanation is to be sought in the realm of ideas, why did ideas change? If it is to be sought in economic factors, why did those economic changes take place?

First Professor Davies reminds us that moral Britain was a brief and untypical interlude in the country's turbulent social history, lasting perhaps just over a century. George Orwell may have been able to write with justice in the 1930s that most foreigners were struck by the gentleness of English life, but for most of our history foreign visitors have been struck—horrified, perhaps, would be the word—by precisely the opposite qualities, the uncouthness and barbarity of our manners, whose only redeeming feature was a certain vigor. Indeed, our modern depravity is often treated by liberal commentators, anxious to avoid the blame for the changes that have occurred in Britain, as if it were nothing but a throwback to an earlier age, like a genetic condition that has skipped a generation. Our problem is, however, that we have become brutal and effete at the same time: our barbarity has no vigor to it.

The well-ordered society into which I was born was not to any large extent the product of repressive legislation, as Professor Christie points out. It is true that the sale of alcohol was controlled, but public drunkenness had declined spontaneously before any such control was instituted. Where once men took pride in never going to bed sober, and might indeed take pride in a reputation for uncontrolled bibbing, they came within a few generations to regard drunkenness as a sign of loss of self-control, which itself was supposedly the distinguishing feature of the civilized man when compared with the barbarian. The mistaken anthropological notion that primitive man was a child with poor impulse control actually exerted a positive social effect on everyone who wanted to distinguish himself from the primitive.

Nor did the dramatic fall in crime that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, and lasted until the middle of the twentieth, result from state repression—or, at any rate, from state repression alone. The phrase “poor but honest” actually meant something. Humble men who led lives of great difficulty were proud of the fact that they nevertheless conformed to canons of ethical conduct that they regarded as universally binding. A man might lose his job because of an economic downturn, but he did not lose his character. The years of the Great Depression were actually low in crime overall, despite a relative increase in property crime born of desperation. Self-respect, not self-esteem, was what people valued and aimed for: and the two aims have very different social consequences. The first imposes obligations; the second demands rights. The first is social; the second egotistic. And a society that is composed of egotistical atoms is bound to display predatory characteristics in aggregate.

The Sunday School movement was both a symptom and a cause of the drive towards respectability. I was surprised to learn from the book that three-quarters of British children were once enrolled in Sunday Schools of one denomination or another, despite the fact that Britain had long since ceased to be (if it ever really had been) a deeply religious country. Even parents whose belief was tenuous at most sent their children to Sunday School, because they believed it was morally good for them, by giving them a biblical sense of right and wrong. Underlying this was an instinctive understanding that large-scale societies needed boundaries if very disparate people, with opposing interests and political viewpoints, were to live together in tolerable peace. That some of the boundaries may have been ethically indefensible gave to reformers their *locus standi*; unfortunately, the reformist cast of mind is often an insatiable moloch that cannot leave anything alone, and wishes to destroy not this or that boundary, but *all* boundaries. For the conservative, the slippery slope is a danger to be avoided; for the reformist, it is a positive—indeed, irresistible—attraction. What lies at the bottom of the slope is much less important than the glorious sensation of sliding down it.

Professor Davies points to a very important shift in the way that social problems were conceived between the first and second half of the nineteenth century. During the moralization of Britain, people (no matter how poor or degraded) were believed to be autonomous agents, who decided for themselves how to behave. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the intellectual elite began to lose faith in this model, precisely at a time when its acceptance by the population as a whole had resulted in a vast diminution of public disorder.

Perhaps the intellectual elite—growing in size as a result of the spread of education—realized that, if things continued thus, it would soon be deprived of any special or providential role in society. At any rate, it began to replace the notion of the moral autonomy of people with that of impersonal causation, or what Professor Davies calls “causalism.” If people behaved badly, it was not because they decided to do so, but because they were impelled by circumstances beyond their control, such as poverty, overcrowding, or poor drainage.

It was precisely here that the role of the intellectuals proved to be so disastrous: those who, by virtue of their intellectual vocation, should have had the firmest grasp of what was going on in their own society actually had the weakest grasp. Instead of recognizing the trend to improvement for what it was, they adopted a purely static view of society with regard to the past and present, combined with a purely dynamic one for the future, with themselves as the motivating force behind all beneficial change. They rejected out of hand Macaulay’s famous dictum that “the history of our country ... is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement,” preferring instead to concentrate on what General Booth (of the Salvation Army) called “Darkest England.” Unlike Booth, however, they saw the solution to social problems as lying in state intervention decreed by themselves rather than in further or continued moralization. Their view prevailed, and just as the population had once accepted the standpoint of the great moralists and religious revivalists, so now it came to accept that of the sociologists and psychologists, namely that they, the population, were

the victim of circumstances beyond their control. And they were gradually provided with material incentives, or deprived of disincentives, for accepting this view.

Professor Davies deals at length with the question of capital punishment, and the long struggle for its abolition, not because it was important in the statistical sense (even a comparatively uncommon cancer, such as that of the throat, was very much more important statistically) but because it went to the heart of the moral change that occurred in Britain. Capital punishment was a deeply symbolic question, the answer to which depended upon one's whole philosophy of life. Execution after due process was once seen as right in itself, irrespective of its actual practical effects, as the just desert of the murderer and as an expression of society's highest values; but reformers managed to change the terms of the debate, the only acceptable answer to the question being a purely utilitarian one, namely whether or not capital punishment deterred other would-be murderers. This in itself represented a general abandonment of the deontological approach to human problems for the purely instrumental one. If in practice capital punishment did not deter, it could have no justification, and since it was so difficult to prove its deterrent effect, the presumption was against it.

Oddly enough, utilitarians were not sufficiently or rigorously utilitarian: they did not even consider the possibility that the existence of the death penalty might have an effect on things other than the murder rate, and that its abandonment might symbolize such a loss of confidence in the rights of the law that the legitimacy of law itself might be called into question, with dire consequences for society as a whole. Utilitarian arguments are generally used by reformers to bolster foregone conclusions and moral propositions, not to investigate the world in all its complexity.

The death of Moral Britain has brought gains as well as losses. In some ways Britain is a more tolerant country than it was: though whether we are more tolerant of conduct different from our own, or merely so egotistically wrapped up in our own little worlds that we are indifferent to everyone else around us, is an open question. After all, the demand that we should welcome diversity requires that everyone should think the same and refrain from saying the unsayable. In the process, character has been replaced by personality, and eccentricity by whimsicality. Depth has been replaced by width.

The author studiously avoids the apocalyptic visions that are so exciting to those susceptible to them, such as I. We in Britain have, for example, learned to live with crime as a fact of life, and we know that we shall never return to the security of the old days. And the changes that have occurred in our society have been without violence, at least of the political kind. Violence has been privatized.

Yet the contrast between material advance and moral regression is itself a distressing one to contemplate. Moreover, it seems to me that our prosperity, on which such semblance of civility as survives now wholly depends (all other grounds for social solidarity having been destroyed), is in fact extremely fragile. This prosperity is largely based upon credit, itself underwritten by property inflation. Britain is a bit like a giant pyramid scheme, and should the confidence of the creditors suddenly evaporate (which would hardly be unprecedented in the history of the world), there could be a terrible smash. Forty percent of the population is in receipt of government subvention, and regards its income as I regarded my pocket money when I was a child. If the government should ever find itself in a position of being unable to pay the subventions, except by further debasement of the currency, all hell could be let loose. In the event of a serious economic downturn, we should see unadorned the full, glorious consequences of the demoralization of Britain, consequences so great that our current disorder would seem like a golden age of civility and gentleness by comparison.

But Professor Davies is probably right: we shall just muddle through. Soon, after all, there will be no one left to remember that there is anything to regret.

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## Notes

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1. *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* by Christie Davies; Transaction, 264 pages, \$39.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

**Anthony Daniels's** most recent book is *In Praise of Prejudice* (Encounter Books).

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