

Asocial not Antisocial
The Respect Agenda and the Therapeutic ‘Me’

The demand for law and order, which at first sight appears to attempt a restoration of moral standards, actually acknowledges and acquiesces in their collapse. Law and order comes to be seen as the only effective deterrent in a society that no longer knows the difference between right and wrong (Lasch 1977: 187).

Introduction

The promotion of respect in society, like the concern about antisocial behaviour engages with issues that on the one hand are relatively small or insignificant – dropping litter or not saying thank you for example. And yet at the same time these issues are often felt to be significant both in themselves and also through their association with major social problems like the ‘breakdown of communities’. The ‘ASBO agenda’ has been criticised for its authoritarian dynamic – especially by those on the left. However, even for critics there appears to be an uncertainty about the nature of behaviour today and a certain sense that there are some real problems to be addressed. Some for example believe that we are living in a ‘culture of greed’ – a belief that raises questions not only about capitalism and consumerism, but also about the very nature of relationships between people – indeed about the nature of people themselves.

This chapter argues that there are some new problems to address today, but that the problem we face is ultimately not one of an antisocial society but of an asocial society. Seen in this way, the myopic focus on antisocial behaviour can be seen not only as a diversion but as something that actually reinforces the asocial nature of society itself.

The problem

Until the 1990s the term ‘antisocial behaviour’ had no public or political existence. In the last 15 years the awareness and construction of this social problem has grown and grown, and it is now understood to be one of if not *the* problem facing society. So seriously does the government take this problem that immediately following the 2005 general election victory, Prime Minister Tony Blair launched the ‘Respect Agenda’ – an agenda that extends the politics of behaviour further still into the realms of politeness and manners. To reinforce the seriousness of this issue, the *Respect Action Plan*, published in January 2006 by the Respect Task Force, came with a footnote from each member of the cabinet – from the Health Secretary to the Secretary of State for Works and Pensions, and of course from the then Minister of Respect, Hazel Blears, explaining what contribution their departments would make to the battle against antisocial behaviour, and for respect.

Conservative leader David Cameron has also recently painted a gloomy picture of a society that has become resigned to the fact that ‘behaviour is bad and getting worse’ (*Guardian* 23 April 2007). But Cameron is no Mary Whitehouse and this concern is not a re-run of past moral campaigns by conservatives. The very fact that the Labour Party is at the forefront of the push for respect suggests something other than the Christian moralising of yesteryear is behind this development. Indeed the old divide

between conservatives and liberals around issues of liberty versus growing police powers no longer holds and past cries of ‘moral panic’ while remaining in relation to questions to do with the family are less frequently heard in relation to issues of crime and safety. A recent MORI poll for example found that around two thirds of *Guardian* readers supported the use of ASBOs. Questions of freedom and an opposition towards state regulation of society appears to have declined over recent years.

Despite today’s high levels of cynicism that exists towards politics and politicians this has not resulted in a rejection of state interference in people’s lives or the rise of libertarianism amongst the electorate. Indeed an existing decline of libertarianism observed in the early 1990s has accelerated over recent years with for example the 2007 Social Attitudes Survey finding that only 15 per cent of Labour voters opposed identity cards compared with 45 per cent in 1990. As Britain becomes the CCTV capital of the world – with little opposition from the public Professor Conor Gearty has noted that, ‘It is as though society is in the process of forgetting why past generations thought those freedoms to be so very important’ (*Guardian* 24 January 2007).

In part this decline of libertarianism and the greater acceptance of new laws like ASBOs within the UK has come with a growing concern about the behaviour of others. The concern about civility and the development of laws to deal with it has also become significant in other countries and in particular the United States where a number of the specific issues like curfews and the targeting of ‘aggressive beggars’ first developed. One of the best known American politicians outside of the President himself is the ex-Mayor of New York Rudolph Giuliani. His fame largely stemmed from his notorious promotion of zero tolerance policing and his campaign launched in 1998 to improve the manners of pedestrians, motorists, taxi drivers and even the city’s civil service. As Mark Caldwell explains in his *Short History of Rudeness*, ‘in recent years civility and the perceived trashing thereof have become an American obsession, from cultural critics to politicians’ (1999: 2). Here he also notes how in 1996 a *U.S. News & World Report* survey found that 89 percent of respondents felt that America was ‘basically uncivil’ (Caldwell 1999: 5).

On both sides of the Atlantic issues that may have captured the imagination of some conservatives in the past now appear to be both more mainstream and are taken more seriously by the authorities. In the US the transformation of 1970s New York from a ‘hip’ and edgy urban space into today’s ‘Safe City’ is striking, and suggests that the expectations of the public – and perhaps the nature of New Yorkers itself has changed: The hard boiled Americans of old apparently did not need campaigns to protect them from impolite taxi drivers – but now it seems they do.

Panics past and present

For some of those who question the ‘panic’ about antisocial behaviour and the promotion of ‘respect’ the ‘problem’ of behaviour is nothing new and today’s panic is part of a cyclical pattern of anxieties that fluctuate over time. In the early 1980s Pearson’s *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983) illustrated the way that panics about crime came and went with conservatives often harking back to a golden age twenty years hence – a time, as Pearson noted, that in reality had very similar concerns and panics about crime. Caldwell likewise argues that the concerns about

manners has a 'cyclical character' and is something that has emerged both at the end of the nineteenth and then again at the end of the twentieth century as 'part of a general syndrome of millennial jitters' (Caldwell 1999: 3).

The 'theory' of millennium jitters may have some validity but is much too general and lacks historical specificity. Today however Pearson's more detailed thesis that located elite anxieties within the realm of national and most especially class conflicts equally appears to be out of date. The anxiety about crime and the preoccupation with it amongst the elite remains high despite the working class being less of a 'threat' than they have been in any other time in their history.

With the decline of the working class as a political force in society there has also developed a curious transformation in the meaning of left and right and to some extent the calls for regulation, control and 'respect', once the preserve of conservative campaigners, has become framed within a new form of radical conservatism.

In the 1970s and 1980s the questions of crime, behaviour, and indeed civility were politicised and there was a radical opposition to the restrictions and behaviour codes promoted by conservative moralists. However, at the same time a number of the political battles of the eighties around issues of equality themselves developed into new codes of behaviour – and a new form of etiquette emerged in society. The question of 'behaviour' is no longer simply a right wing concern and indeed many of the codes of conduct developed within workplaces and indeed more widely in society over the last decade or so have incorporated issues to do with gender and race awareness.

The legalisation or at least the formalisation of behaviour around these new behaviour codes raise questions about the moral dynamic behind the 'politics of behaviour'. And despite the positive intentions behind these developments there are some who have raised doubts about the benefits of them. Caldwell for example examining the criminalisation of 'sexual harassment' asks whether this development portends a 'dangerous shift in our understanding of civility [and] a tendency to inflate conflicts once resolved informally into wounding gladiatorial combat' (Caldwell 1999: 5). Conservatives like Gertrude Himmelfarb similarly argue that,

The movement against "hate speech" is not intended, as is sometimes claimed, merely to revive the old rules of civility. It has invented new rules, defining as violations of civil rights, and therefore punishable, remarks that were formerly regarded as boorish or vulgar (Himmelfarb 1997: 265).

Himmelfarb bemoans the decline of the old moral framework while denouncing what she describes as the New Victorians with their modern form of "moral correctness". The question of civility, respect and the use of language are no longer simply conservative concerns – and as the arguments and somewhat extravagant reactions to events and 'words' in the Big Brother house have recently illustrated, it is often radical concerns regarding issues like race that have to some extent become incorporated into the British (indeed Western) understanding of what is and is not *acceptable behaviour*.

Today the concern about behaviour and the demand for the regulation of it is more than a mere re-run of past conservative moral panics. The political framework of left and right has been transformed and has arguably helped to influence this development. While the behaviour of the public may have changed to some degree questions must also be raised about the changing nature of the public itself – and of the individual's capacity and preparedness to deal with the tensions of everyday life. Compared to the 'hard boiled' attitudes that appear to have existed in the 1970s, today, from Major Guiliani's campaigns to the reaction to Jade Goody and the 'N' word on Big Brother, the public appear to be – or at least those in authority appear to believe that they are – more easily offended.

Perhaps it is that we are more 'soft boiled' today that explains the problem of 'offensive behaviour', rather than any change in behaviour itself?

The problem of the elite

Before we explore the meaning of 'me' today, it is of some benefit to go back to the quote by Christopher Lasch at the start of the chapter to examine first and foremost the changing nature of the elite itself in the latter part of the twentieth century: A time when Lasch argues, 'law and order [came] to be seen as the only effective deterrent in a society that no longer [knew] the difference between right and wrong'.

The quote is taken from *Haven in a Heartless World*, written in 1977, and Lasch's argument was fundamentally that in the United States the move towards a tough law and order approach by the political elite in the 1970s, did not, as it was understood, indicate a shift to the right with a subsequent restoration of 'moral standards' in society. Rather it indicated the reverse. The move by the elite to enforce standards of behaviour through law – rather than through moral or political arguments, campaigns and movements – indicated that in fact, the elite had given up. They had lost the capacity and even the will to lead – now the best they could do was regulate and control a society that felt increasingly out of their control.

Bauman has similarly described an unstable, directionless society – a *Liquid Modernity*. This is a society within which the lost sense of control reflects the elite itself, who as Bauman argues have abdicated the responsibility of being the pilot of society. This is an elite that, 'rule without burdening itself with the chores of administration, management, welfare concerns, or, for that matter, with the mission of 'bringing light', 'reforming the ways', morally uplifting, 'civilizing' and cultural crusades' (Bauman 2000: 13). Where past rules were set down by the 'captains' of society and 'displayed in bold letters in every passageway' - rules that could be followed or challenged – today, in comparison, 'the passengers of the 'Light Capitalism' aircraft...discover to their horror that the pilot's cabin is empty' (2000: 59).

For Lasch, American society was losing its engagement with the past and perhaps more importantly with any sense of the future. This more directionless and anxious society was, he believed moving into an age of 'diminished expectations' where safety, limits and regulation were replacing the drive to 'go West', to 'boldly go' or even to find a past golden age to inspire the current generation. The lost sense of history and progress meant that American society was both less grounded and lacked

a narrative about where it was going. Consequently a new form of conservatism emerged, a kind of survivalism that could aspire to little more than the conservation of society as it was (Lasch 1979).

For Lasch and later on for Bauman as well, the elite were understood to have lost their way and consequently gave up on directing society in any meaningful way: Managing what C. Wright Mills described as private *troubles* rather than engaging with social *issues* has therefore increasingly become the business of government (Mills *).

It appear to be no accident that in the UK a similar process to the one that developed in 1970s America can be observed from the late 1980s as the political contestation of the old left and old right came to an end and the micro-politics of the 1990s developed into a managerial form of governing through an ever greater range of laws and controls.

In Britain over the last two decades, the move towards using laws, regulations and codes of behaviour to resolve society's problems has developed at a relentless pace. Often narrowly understood within public debate, as the actions of authorities to genuine issues of concern about rising crime, or of violence and abuse, relatively little is said about the extent to which this way of running society has come to dominate ahead of all others. In the UK an acceleration of new laws took off under the Conservative leadership of John Major in the early 1990s and has subsequently been accelerated further under the Labour governments since 1997.ⁱ It has recently been observed that almost unbelievably there have been over three thousand new laws introduced since Labour came to power – one for every day they have been in office.

Laws, regulations, and the attempt to control the behaviour of the public have in the last decade or so become a replacement for politics and purpose, and through the eyes of the new elite *social* problems have been recast as problems of personal behaviour.

The respect agenda is one example of this development – an agenda that was launched in full directly following the 2005 election – an election that appeared as a mere political irritation that once out of the way could allow the government to carry on with the introduction of another 45 new laws as announced in the Queens Speech.ⁱⁱ

Respect what?

The idea of 'respect' promoted by the government can be confusing and appear to be a mere replay of past moralising. When speaking to a more traditional audience like the Women's Institute for example, Tony Blair in June 2000 explained that respect and the 'essential decency of the British character', was about 'honour, self discipline, duty and obligation' (*Guardian* 18 May 2005). Sentiments that could have been expressed by Baden Powell, Winston Churchill or Mary Whitehouse here situate Blair firmly with the blue rinse '*Daily Mail* reader'. However as with the call by Blair following the killing of James Bulger in 1993 to challenge the 'moral vacuum' in society, this new call for respect may appear familiar but has emerged at a curious political and historical point in time – and one where traditional moral and political ideas have largely lost their meaning.

Even the terms used here by Blair that would once have been self evident in their meaning are today more confused. 'Duty' to whom or what for example and who or what should we 'honour'. The often empty plinth at Trafalgar Square where a statue to a modern day hero should be suggests the British elite themselves cannot easily answer this question. And 'self discipline'? Self discipline to what end – or is this now an end in itself, and how does this idea sit with the more recent idea of self esteem?

When we look for a wider meaning to the respect agenda despite the big words occasionally muttered we are often left feeling more than a little empty. More often the issue of respect is shown up to be more about not disrespecting others than about who and what we should respect. A Labour council leader struggling to give some weight to the issue of respect explained that, 'The Respect agenda is not just about tackling unacceptable or anti-social behaviour', before elaborating that it was about creating, 'a modern culture of respect by working on the underlying causes of bad behaviour, whether in school, community or elsewhere' (*Guardian* 23 January 2007). Respect is not just about antisocial behaviour it appears – it is about the causes of antisocial behaviour as well!

Despite attempts to give it a wider social or moral meaning, time and again we find that the meaning of 'respect' is simply to be respectful, and that the basis of a good society is to not be bad. Rather than elaborating upon key issues of duty, honour or obligation politicians appear to fall back upon the basis of the good society being one where people are not antisocial. The tautology of respect appears to start and finish with the issue of bad behaviour. But explaining what we should not be is not the same as elaborating upon what we should be and why.

In 2003 at the Labour Party conference Tony Blair elaborating on the meaning of a 'just society' explained that, 'We cannot live in a just society if we do not put an end to the anti-social behaviour, the disrespect, the conduct which we would not tolerate from your own children and should have to tolerate from any one else's' (*Guardian* 18 May 2005). The very meaning of a just society is itself for Tony Blair about *preventing* antisocial behaviour but surely we need more than a call to 'be nice' to fill the 'moral vacuum' in society or indeed to create a 'just' society.

Talk to the Hand

The number of books on behaviour and indeed on manners has flourished in the past decade as has the number of papers and pamphlets being written by think tanks and Labour politicians themselves. One of the most successful of these book is the more populist *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life* written by the best selling author Lynne Truss. Despite this books obsessive focus on 'rudeness', in a book that Truss herself accepts is a bit of a rant, there are however more insights in *Talk to the Hand* than in any document the government has produced in the last ten years.

The key to Truss' insight is that in her description of the 'hamster ball' society, a world made up of individuals living in their own private bubble, she gets very close to describing the real problem we face today. *This is not a problem of antisocial*

behaviour, but of an asocial society. A society that lacks the capacity to connect people with one another through a system of meaning.

Looking at the problem as one of an asocial society, is useful as it shifts the debate away from the often unhelpful preoccupation with antisocial behaviour. However it also helps to make clear some of the genuine and new problems with behaviour between people today.

For example, in our more fragmented world, where the purpose of society is unclear and our individual role within it even more so, there has emerged a form of introspection and a new trend for people to relate only to their rules, 'Hey, my bubble, my rules', as Truss puts it. This is a world where we walk around in our own private bubble, and the public becomes simply an obstacle in our way as we listen to our iPod and text our friends. Living in our bubble world, Truss argues, when standards – or manners - are enforced from outside ourselves, we are more inclined to stick two fingers up. 'Authority', Truss notes, 'is largely perceived as a kind of personal insult' (2005: 33).

This sense of distance and separation between the individual and society rings true, a world where personal concerns override public interests, where our business is nobody else's, where the separation between public and private has broken down. As Truss observes, 'It's as if we now believe, in some spooky virtual way, that wherever we are, it's home' (2005: 102).

Describing the way we have become disconnected from one another and become inwardly focused, she explains that, 'The once prevalent idea that, as individuals, we have a relationship with something bigger than ourselves, or bigger than our immediate circle, has become virtually obsolete' (2005: 35).

The 'therapeutic me'

Truss' explanation for this type of behaviour is that society has become more individualised, more selfish and more greedy. This is an explanation that sits comfortably with many commentators from a variety of political persuasions. Labour advisor Geoff Mulgan in the Demos pamphlet *Freedom's Children* for example has attacked the culture of greed and the young working class 'underwolves' that he believed were a product of Thatcher's Britain – a product that had the capacity to 'ruin pretty much everyone's quality of life' (Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995: 108). In America Caldwell notes that, support for Giuliani's zero tolerance approach to incivility has come from many who see the problem as one of a 'rude culture of self-indulgence' that has trampled good manners (Caldwell 1999: 2). The *Respect Action Plan* itself talks about the problem of behaviour as a problem that has emerged within the 'selfish minority'.

This idea of the selfish individual – a kind of 'neo-liberal man' – is widespread and is seen as a problem by communitarians and radicals alike. Thatcher's child – the spawn of Essex man and the 'underclass' has come back to haunt us in the form of the antisocial 'yob' and the 'neighbours from hell'.

However, this representation of a somewhat greedy hard boiled character does not ring true, and despite Truss' own sense of their being a 'climate of unrestrained solipsistic and aggressive self-interest', she also, more usefully hints at an alternative explanation for the changes in behaviour today – changes that the sociologist Frank Furedi has categorised as being part and parcel of a wider *Therapy Culture*. This is a society less of 'selfish', assertive and expansive individualism, than one where the mantra, 'talk to the hand', expresses an inward looking and rather fragile sense of the self - a defensive retreat into the world of self esteem. Rather than there being a libertarian impulse for unrestrained freedom the opposite is the case as support for regulations, surveillance and restraint have developed in part to overcome the problem of 'offence' that is more acutely felt today than previously. The modern man or woman is less a greedy aggressive individual than an anxious and vulnerable one (Furedi 2004).

The modern fragmented individual may well be inclined to see the world from their hamster ball – and so be inclined to see authority as a personal insult – but this self same individual is also inclined to have an exaggerated sense of the problem of the antisocial behaviour of others. In this respect the 'antisocial offender' and the 'easily offended' should be understood as two sides of the same asocial coin.

Despite Truss' often caricatured rant about all the rude people she comes across she also recognises that people in the UK still queue quietly. Similarly as Kate Fox (2005) has shown in *Watching the English*, British people are often well mannered and when we bump into one another the vast majority of us apologise even when it is not our fault.

Despite some genuine concerns about the changing nature of relationships between people Truss also, if only at certain times within her book, recognises that most of the people most of the time are pretty decent to one another. 'And yet', she notes, 'if you ask people, they mostly report with vehemence that the world has become a ruder place. They are at breaking point. They feel like blokes in films who just. Can't. Take. Any. More.' (2005: 39).

Unlike the myriad government ministers who relentlessly take the preoccupation with antisocial behaviour at face value, Truss has the presence of mind to recognise the contradictory situation where everyone feels that everyone else is rude. 'So what on earth is going on,' she asks?

What is going on is that the 'bubble world' we are living in has a pretty thin skin; it encircles a rather anxious and vulnerable *therapeutic me*. There has been a shift in recent years from the idea of public man - a strong-willed citizen who can make decisions and take actions by himself - to therapeutic man, where we are increasingly seen as fragile, potentially damaged, and in need of help from apparently benign authorities to manage not just our day-to-day lives but also our innermost emotions and feelings.

Behind today's therapeutic mindset there lurks the idea that humans are frail and weak; that we need constant protection from others and from the challenges thrown up by life itself. In *Therapy Culture* Furedi notes how terms like 'self-esteem', 'trauma', 'stress' and 'syndrome' have exponentially increased within newspapers since around

1993 as the understanding of social problems shifted onto the perceived 'emotional deficit' in society: An, 'invisible disease that undermines people's ability to control their lives', and one that was predicated upon an, 'intense sense of emotional vulnerability' (Furedi 2004: 5). As this understanding of people becomes normalised it influences how we understand ourselves, what we expect from ourselves and how we experience the behaviour of other people.

The therapeutic culture coupled with the more fragmented society we live in has resulted in the 'antisocial behaviour' of even young children, being experienced as more serious than it would have in previous times. Already feeling somewhat vulnerable, in our disconnected society, where one of the few positive connections we have with other people is through polite exchanges we experience as we drift past one another, politeness has become more significant, not less. We may not all practice it, but, almost to a man, we are concerned about it - and when politeness is not forthcoming, we react in a more extreme way to this perceived snub. We 'rage', or more often we are simply internally outraged.

In this respect 'antisocial behaviour' acts as a catalyst to our sense of alienation within our asocial society.

In a humorous description of how she feels holding the door open for people who refuse to say thank you, Truss notes her own sense of wounded dignity - 'you feel obliterated', she writes, 'Are you invisible, then? Have you disappeared?' She continues,

Instead of feeling safe, you are frightened. You succumb to accelerated moral reasoning. This person has no consideration for others, therefore has no imagination, therefore is a sociopath representative of a world packed with sociopaths. When someone is rude to you, the following logic kicks in: "I have no point of connection with this person...A person who wouldn't say thank you is also a person who would cut your throat...Oh my God, society is in meltdown and soon it won't be safe to come out". Finally you hate the person who did not say thank you (2005: 54).

Disconnected

In a world where people had a strong sense of connection with society, with institutions, organisations and beliefs, and consequently with one another, the irritations of everyday life would pale into significance.

Again this is something that Truss herself recognises when she looks at the issue of smoking. 'Personally', she explains, 'I hate smoking [but]...I do remember a time when it just didn't bother me', so what's changed? It's not just the health issue she notes, but rather that,

I used to accept something I truly don't accept anymore: that being with other people involved a bit of compromise. When you were not alone, you suspended a portion of yourself. You became a member of a crowd. You didn't judge people by your own standards. I believe we have simply become

a lot more sensitive to other people's behaviour in a climate of basic fearful alienation (2005: 188).

What Truss is describing is what Mills (1968), Rose (1996) and a number of sociologists have described as the diminution of the 'public', a development that in recent years has also come with a growing intolerance of other people. The world of 'my bubble, my rules' may have resulted in the emergence of a 'me generation', but this is a therapeutic me. A more introspective individual who on the one hand, is inclined to be less aware of any social mores beyond their own selves, but perhaps more significantly, is prone to overreact to those around them and demand protection of their own private world.

The strength of *Talk to the Hand* is not in the identification of *The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life*, which is after all, in our world of ASBO's and *Respect Action Plans*, hardly a novel outlook: But rather with the implicit recognition of the problem of an asocial society. Unfortunately, in the end, like another useful book that addresses the issue of behaviour - the Conservative Alexander Deane's (2005) *The Great Abdication* - the start and end point of *Talk to the Hand* is a preoccupation with rudeness, or antisocial behaviour.

With Truss, this is forgivable, as she acknowledges both that her book is a bit of a rant, and once again, is perceptive enough to recognise the limitations of what she is proposing. What Truss ultimately aspires to, she concludes, is 'to be a zero impact member of society'. 'But', she continues, 'does this qualify me as the opposite of an anti-social person? Quite honestly I don't think it does, because that would be *pro*-social, which would involve acting on societies behalf, and I don't do that' (2005: 181).

Ironically, the 'bubble world' that Truss identifies as the ultimate problem people face in their dealings with one another, ends up being the place that Truss herself retreats into. Only Truss would like 'her bubble, her world' to be a little bit more polite than it is at present.

Asocial politics

However, if the more profound problem we face is one of an asocial society, we need to address how we 'burst the bubble' and create a 'pro-social' society. Unfortunately, the trend at present is not to challenge many aspects of the asocial nature of society and of individual's behaviour, but to endorse it and attempt to relate to it.

The world of 'my bubble my rules' when it takes the form of teenagers wearing hoodies and drinking on street corners results in new laws and forms of policing to prevent this type of behaviour. But when it means that individuals sue their local councils for tripping over a paving stone, or taking their local hospital to court for an accident during surgery, we find that society endorses this type of asocial or indeed anti 'social' behaviour. Rather than people feeling that they are part of society, that accidents sometimes happen, and that it would be wrong for them to drain the resources of their local authorities, today the 'my bubble, my rules' outlook is institutionalised through law and we are encouraged to 'blame and claim'.

Until relatively recently the idea that you would sue your council or health service for accidents that occurred, thus starving local authorities of desperately needed funds would have been unthinkable. But today, the use of law to compensate individuals for every misfortune, relates to and encourages a cultural climate that separates the interests of people from society while undermining a sense of personal responsibility.

In Scotland, where new antisocial behaviour laws and initiatives are constantly being churned out by the Scottish Executive and concern is raised about the expense of having to deal with litter and graffiti, little is said about the more troubling example of the £5 million worth of compensation that has been paid out to Scottish policemen and women over the last five years. Even for the people who are meant to be defending the 'law and order of society', the sense of individual grievance and 'where there's a blame there's a claim' outlook appears to be overriding any wider sense of duty and responsibility. When the police start claiming for bites they receive from their own police dogs 'society' really is in trouble.

Worse still, in terms of the loss of any sense of loyalty amongst individuals to society, is the example of the soldiers who have made claims against the Ministry of Defence for not providing them with a safe working environment!

Unfortunately, rather than challenging these asocial developments, the state and the law has institutionalised mechanisms to allow the growth of a compensation culture. Unable to project and promote a national or social sense of purpose and responsibility, today's elite have incorporated the outlook of 'my bubble, my world' into the framework of society.

The problem of the asocial society is that the relationship between the individual and society has broken down. However, politicians who lack the capacity to unite people around a common set of beliefs and values, have attempted to engage with individuals within 'their world'. In the process, our individual bubbles are being fortified against society – a process that has developed across social institutions and within the culture of society.

This engagement with the individual self can be seen in the way key jobs for society, that once embodied a commitment to a wider purpose, are advertised today. The ads for the Royal Navy on the Glasgow underground never fail to amuse and depress me, with their promotion of a life full of sun and fun where you make new friends. Placed next to a club 18-30 poster these two adverts could hardly be told apart.

Similarly the ads for teachers that promote teaching as 'enjoyable and stimulating', where the kids are the most exciting people you'll ever meet, engage not with the important and socially responsible job of transferring knowledge to the next generation, but with the 'fun' that *you* as a teacher can have in a classroom. When kids start misbehaving and undermining their teachers sense of 'well-being' it is perhaps unsurprising that they too feel 'obliterated' and 'frightened'.

Within education itself, the trend is towards engaging with and reinforcing the more introspective outlook (or 'in' look) of children, with the growing significance of self-esteem as the 'measure of man', and with the institutionalisation of 'bullying awareness' schemes. Rather than educating youngsters to climb out of their

caricatured adolescent self-absorption we appear to be encouraging the preoccupation with 'how I feel'.

Also within the criminal justice system the engagement with the vulnerable individual has grown rapidly over recent years and now rather than law being enforced by the state – on all our behalves, against the criminal – we have victim centred justice. A form of 'justice' that literally endorses the idea of 'my bubble, my rules' – or in this case, 'my feelings, my law'.

The development of a victim-centred justice system should be understood less as the rise of the moral right than as the collapse of both moral individualism and any sense of the social. It is part of an asocial process that relates directly to the vulnerable individual and more particularly to our feelings and fears.

ASBOs are a perfect expression of this development. As Atkins et al note in *Taking Liberties*, 'The British "common law tradition" means that you can do whatever you want as long as it is not illegal' (2007: 143). Labour may have introduced thousands of new laws but at least 'you still have to be found guilty of one to go to prison'. However, with Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, 'If you are doing something that isn't against the law, but someone else doesn't like it, they can go to a magistrates' court and get one of these orders that bans you acting in that way. If you break the ASBO you go to jail!' (2007: 145).

This is literally a case of my feelings my law – and unpleasant (offensive) behaviour has become criminalised.

In a society that no longer knows the difference between right and wrong, the authorities are increasingly engaging with and relying upon individual subjective experiences to create and enforce new offences. This is a therapeutic form of justice that is based not on a social system of justice but on the management of individual anxieties.

'Self' respect

Many arguments today, which appear to be coming from opposite sides of the fence, actually endorse the perspective of the asocial man. The reaction to the hoodie issue for example was not to raise a *public* debate about the use of CCTV cameras, but to cry 'my hoodie, my rules', as if *Guardian* readers lifestyle choice of wearing hoodies was under attack. Similarly, the reaction to CCTV and ID cards is often to simply question who is inspecting the inspectors – can we trust the people behind the cameras. The distrustful asocial outlook can be seen in those who favour CCTV cameras and want to be protected from the public, and [those who oppose the cameras] [and want to be] in many of those who want to be protected from the protectors.

Likewise, while future recruits to the armed forces are engaged with through their personal desire for fun, those opposing the war in Iraq have done so on a personalised basis – a rejection of a war that is 'Not in my name'.

Ironically, even within the governments Respect Agenda, the asocial outlook is actually encouraged rather than challenged and a kind of nimbyism of the self is actually reinforced.

In reaction to the concern about the problem of behaviour and a sense of a loss of community, the government has developed the *Respect Action Plan*. This action plan sounds like an old fashioned attempt to instil good moral values in society. It also appears to be all about creating a more social society, with catchy subtitles like, 'Everyone is part of everyone else', and 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Unfortunately, hidden within the very meaning of *Respect* promoted here, is the same asocial and equally amoral outlook that is coming to dominate politics and social policy.

Until recently the idea of respect related to experience and achievement. Adults, for example deserved respect from children due the socially accepted notion that they, as mature, active subjects – the people who made society – were worthy of respect from children. While particular individuals were given respect for great things they had done, with our heroes for example, being people we looked up to – because they had achieved.

Here respect was a socially ascribed category, something that was earned – it was a judgement of certain actions and individuals based on what they had done. There may have been battles over who should be seen as deserving of respect, from conservative and radicals, but within both it embodied the celebration of actions and attributes of certain individuals and institutions.

Today in comparison the idea of respect is devoid of content or of *character*. Everyone we are told should be respected – adults and children alike. Respect young people, the children's commissioner tells us, and they will respect you (Guardian [19 January 2006*]). The sociologist Richard Sennett's book *Respect* begs the question, how do the professional classes *give* respect to the poor. Here respect has become something handed down from above onto individuals, rather than a set of values that we aspire towards that can take us beyond our *selves*.

'Give respect get respect', is the opening chapter of the *Respect Action Plan*, with quotes from young people, like, 'Being able to be the way I am without being bullied or skitted. And vice versa', or 'Not offending or damaging someone else's feelings or property', to help explain what respect is all about. But this is a highly individualised, fragile and negative version of respect. Rather than respect embodying values of achievement and character – something we could look up to beyond ourselves – something that makes us change ourselves, mature and gain self respect, it has become something we demand for *who we are*.

Through a preoccupation with antisocial behaviour framed within the fragile asocial individual, the demand for respect has become little more than about being nice to one another. Give respect get respect, fundamentally meaning, 'be nice and others will be nice to you'. Rather than respect being a form of social judgement, we are told to be non-judgemental, to respect people for who they are. Indeed respect for the individual's self esteem is to be protected from any hurtful social judgement. But this

is little different from the sentiment of ‘talk to the hand’, or the outlook of the child who challenges your right to question his behaviour by arguing, ‘I know my rights’.

In essence the idea of respect today [is], ‘Respect my bubble, my rules and I will respect yours’. Rather than the individual being drawn out of himself through values that relate to society, society is validating the inward looking and insecure outlook of the therapeutic me.

Based on the defence by the state of the vulnerable individual, ‘respect’ becomes little more than the protection of one individual from the ‘abuse’ of another. It is not saying respect me because I have done something to deserve it. Nor is it saying respect adults because they know best – they have made this society and should be respected for it. It is saying respect everybody because if you don’t you are undermining them and their self esteem – it is a statement related to bad behaviour and the defence of the vulnerable – rather than a defence of the strong, of characters who have achieved a status that should be recognised. By saying everyone should be respect – young and old alike – it actually undermines the idea of respecting adults and infantilises the notion of respect itself.

In the past certain professions, like being a doctor, a politician, a soldier or a teacher were treated with ‘respect’ for the roles they carried out in society. Today, teachers are encouraged to be teachers not because of their important role in society, but because it will make them feel good about themselves. Soldiers are no longer encouraged to defend their country, but to have fun overseas.

At a time when respect for societies institutions – even the health service - are in decline, and politicians are the least trusted group of people in society (MORI>>>). the government is attempting to engage with the bubble world of the individual. Respecting others becomes contentless. A protection of all against all. Any sense of the ‘social’ informed by moral or political norms has been diminished, and today’s political elite promote a respect agenda in which there is no sense of society beyond the feeling of the ‘therapeutic me’. Through this process people are encouraged to have respect for the ‘self’ rather than achieving self respect. And manners become little more than an acquiescence to the vulnerable individual – of ‘respect’ for the therapeutic self.

Encouraging impotence

Traditionally respect was given to adults because of their capacity to *act*. Being a Man was about looking after yourself, your family, your nation [or being a trade union or activist] etc. This idea of respect had both a sense of the individual and of society. Today respect is about not acting, not harassing, upsetting, abusing, alarming or offending the vulnerable individual. Here there is no sense of individual capacity or of social responsibility – except in ensuring our actions do not harm others.

This preoccupation with harm to others has been latched onto by a government that lacks any social or political capacity of its own and can only develop social policy around the framework of social control. Protecting the diminished subject – the fragile individual – is the basis for myriad antisocial behaviour initiatives. Disastrously, this

approach takes the asocial self as the starting point and consequently reinforces the problem of the asocial society.

Rarely if ever are people encouraged to take responsibility for the behaviour of others. Rather a framework is being established that encourages us all to resolve the irritations of everyday life, of noisy neighbours, rude commuters, rowdy kids and 'aggressive' customers by contacting the growing array of authorities to deal with these problems for us. This both discourages any possibility of social norms being established by the public itself and it also adds to the sense of individual impotence.

Until recently antisocial behaviour was understood as a problem to be resolved by people themselves. When children swore and dropped litter or neighbours were noisy, people were expected to take a socially responsible approach and act themselves. Today we are less inclined to act and indeed are discouraged from doing so due to the various antisocial behaviour laws and programmes being introduced. Now there are a whole range of community wardens, police initiatives, helplines and even a soon to be introduced alternative 999 (semi) emergency number we can contact to deal with problems we have with other people's behaviour.

Unfortunately, when we fail to take responsibility for these problems that in our hearts we know we should be doing something about, when we retreat into our bubble, we diminish our sense of ourselves. Various forms of antisocial behaviour, in this respect are reacted to in an exaggerated way not simply because of the problem behaviour itself, but also because we sense our own impotence. Our frustration is felt and our insecurity reinforced by our inability to act. By not acting we sense and reinforce our own diminished subjectivity.

Despite New Labour's proclivity to replace a sense of purpose with an ever growing list of statutes, laws cannot resolve societies problems. Truss herself notes that when a policeman kindly asks you to get out of your car, regardless of how politely this is done, this is not a form of good manners, but of force. Manners, she notes, cannot be enforced. Today, through the process of relating to others only through third party mediators individuals are not only not creating a new society of 'respect' but are actually being de-socialised. One consequence of this is that we increasingly feel comfortable engaging with others only within a regulated environment – like the exchange between a customer and shop keeper – rather than through a free exchange with members of the *public*.

Ultimately, despite some real issues of behaviour in our hamster ball world, the preoccupation with antisocial behaviour has emerged because of the loss of connection we feel with society and with those around us. This is something that is being reinforced by an asocial elite who lack a social sense and are equally disengaged from 'public' life. By engaging with the asocial individual through their fears not only is the 'my bubble my rules' outlook not overcome, but the fragmented nature of society is reinforced.

Rather than examining how we can stop people being antisocial, the real question is how can we create a 'pro-social' society – how can we burst the bubble we are all increasingly living in. With this starting point there is the capacity to move beyond the myopic focus on antisocial behaviour, to raise the expectations of individuals to act

themselves, and also to identify how today's elite are actually reinforcing rather than transforming the asocial nature of society.

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Deane, A. (2005) *The Great Abdication: Why Britain's Decline is the Fault of the Middle Class*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

Furedi, F. (2004) *Therapy Culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age*. London: Routledge.

Mills, C. W. (1968) *Power Politics and People*. New York: Ballantine.

Rose, N. (1996) 'The Death of the Social? Re-figuring the Territory of Government'. *Economy and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp327-356.

Wilkinson, H. and Mulgan, G. (1995) *Freedom's Children: Work, Relationships and Politics for 18-34 year olds in Britain Today*. London: Demos.

ⁱ Across the Western world there is a similar trend towards the increasing regulation of society coming with, for example, a dramatic increase in the number of police officers – where Australia holds the record, with an increase of 97% since 1970 (Braithwaite 2000: 53) - and as Bauman observes, there has been a fast growing number of people in prison or awaiting prison sentences, in almost every country (Bauman 2000a: 33).

ⁱⁱ As Lord Phillips said about the ever increasing range of laws being developed to resolve societies problems, 'We are being drowned, and there's no two ways about that. Inundated. I sometimes talk about parliamentary affluent – all the ghastly stuff that goes through Westminster and then out on the poor unsuspecting public' (Atkins et al 2007)