

"Losers" and their mothers: Personal and political implications of poverty

Book review

James, O (1995) **Juvenile violence in a winner-loser culture: Socio-economic and familial origins of the rise of violence against the person**. London: Free Association Books. ISBN 1-85343-309-0. 164 pages.

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In 1987 there was a sharp rise (40%) in juvenile violence against the person in the Britain. This was at the same time as the numbers of juveniles involved in other crime dropped, and the number of young men (as a percentage of the population) also began to decrease sharply. What can explain this trend towards violence (as opposed to other forms of crime) in young people? This question is used as the focal point for a wide-ranging examination of the social and familial origins of interpersonal violence. The style is reminiscent of crime thriller: we accompany the author as he tries to find out.

While this book focuses on the poor, the unhappiness of the employed and even moneyed classes is developed in James's more recent critique of consumer culture, **Britain on the couch** (1998). Having heard him speak on the latter, I asked if I could meet with him to discuss this review for **PINS**, and (somewhat to my surprise), he agreed. I met with James in late 1998, and spent a very interesting afternoon discussing his views on advanced capitalism, consumerism, depression and violence.

James is quietly proud of the glowing praise **Juvenile violence** received on publication. But there was a sense of anti-climax also. "The press, academics, the Home Office Research Department - they all said that there is no disputing the argument about poverty and violent behaviour in young men. It all makes common sense... Everyone agreed." Not that "common sense" is going to make much impact on the economic structure of either British or South African societies, but that is another struggle.

In **Juvenile violence** he concludes that interpersonal aggression between young men is rooted in two clusters of interacting social, economic and personal factors: 1) low income families and the consequent depression of mothers in particular; and 2) a "winner/loser" culture in which possessions have replaced other markers of social status and identity, portrayed as available to everyone, which it very obviously is not.

Why 1987? Boys who reached age 10 in 1987 were more violent than those whose tenth birthday was in 1980. These were 'Thatcher's children', growing up under the change in culture and social policy introduced by the Tories. In the 1980s, James argues, Britain became more unequal than at any other time since 1945. Unemployment increased, wages were lower and the quality of work available for the lowest social classes fell. He argues that what makes the difference between this period of economic disparity and relative deprivation different from previous ones is the emergence for the first time in the Britain (as opposed to the USA) of a "winner-loser" culture. In this new culture people of low income were judged as inadequate morally, intellectually and emotionally. This may have changed the way males in the poorest sections of British society interpreted the new inequalities; and when feeling angry and frustrated, may have made them more likely to respond with physical violence. It was only in the mid-1980s that the consumer culture idealising the lifestyles of the wealthy (what he memorably calls "sex 'n shopping" novels and TV shows) emerged in its present form. It was only when being poor (and male) meant being seen as a "loser" that low income began to be translated into a sense of unreasonable and provocative inequality with no light at the end of the tunnel.

Admitting that the connection between a "winner/ loser" culture and juvenile violence is at best speculative, James does however make a powerful argument for the link between low family income and interpersonal aggression, with maternal depression being the bridge. Alternative theories (the effects of single parenting; low IQ; the idea of "sub-class"; short term effects of the business cycle; drug use and younger alcohol use in teenagers; value shifts in attitudes to authority; long-term effects of urbanisation and the break down of community cohesiveness) are dismissed except insofar as they contribute to low family income. In brief, he claims the following causal trail:

- Violence is associated with being male, young and from a low-income family.
- The variance between violent and non-violent males from low-income families is explained by the presence of parental abuse, disharmony and irritability.
- Depressed mothers are more likely to be irritable; poor mothers are significantly more likely to be depressed than other mothers.
- Irritable mothers are more likely to use inconsistent, arbitrary, neglectful or abusive parenting styles which lead to aggressive boy children, and depressed girls.
- Boys who are aggressive in childhood are more likely to be violent as adults.

It is "common sense" that violent men are most likely to have come from a low-income home. The "how" of it (maternal depression) is much more interesting. Depressed, stressed mothers, quarrelling parents and miserable children - human, ordinary, and very, very common. The book moves the debate from the domain of the purely economic to the interpersonal, cultural and psychological, the domains in which poverty and violence has the most impact, after all.

I found the chapter on inequality particularly interesting. If being poor makes people violent, why have the British become more, rather than less, violent in the last forty years, when they have become several times richer not poorer? Why are Third World nations not violent to the same degree, and so on? This chapter covers research on the relationship between wealth, poverty, inequality, community cohesiveness, relative denial of opportunity to classes of people, and violence across nations and across times. Recent British history is then examined to try and explain the 1987 rise in

interpersonal violence. James concludes that it is the combination of inequality in incomes with the *false promise of equality of opportunity* (the American "anyone can run for president" is cited as a prime example) with "American style" lack of welfare support for the disadvantaged, together with poor (or no) job quality are major causes of violence in developing and developed nations alike.

Do the two strands of the argument hang together? The link between low income, parental depression, inadequate or abusive parenting and aggression is fairly well established. The speculative notion of a "winner-loser" culture, in a society where there is social and economic inequality is interesting, if not proven. Presumably, in previous periods of economic inequality, poor people's frustration and anger was directed inwards (depressive or self-destructive acts) or more contained in a culture of community cohesiveness, and at times, political struggle. The relative increase in wealth in Britain, with the introduction of an individualistic, consumerist, "winner-loser" culture in the 1980s at the same time as increased inequality, may have simultaneously raised the desire for, and frustrated working class aspirations towards "something better". Replacing working class politics with a "you can have it all" individualism.

James said in my interview with him that in **Britain on the couch** (1998) he took this argument further. It seems that it is only when things get better that "trouble starts". "Under complete oppression - such as in the USSR and South Africa - it is very hard to imagine anything different, and people didn't feel entitled. Now that the TV is offering all the goodies you can have - and in practice, if you're poor, you can't - it starts to be very frustrating". He comments that this consumer culture locates the cause of relative poverty in the individual, even when there are no practical means to advance yourself. "It is no longer external circumstances to blame, if I can't have it, it's my fault".

In **Britain on the couch** he looks at how a winner-loser culture removes the restraints imposed by community, "especially the channelling of frustration into political action". This is replaced by the idea that competition is a virtue, and those who don't or can't compete are losers. He also looks at the effects of social comparison, at how people who are depressed make upward social comparisons ("How come I'm not as successful/ beautiful/ loved as he/she is?"), rather than downward social comparisons ("How come I'm better off than them?"), which increase the sense of isolation and humiliation. When downward comparisons are made by depressed people, it is often with a realistic sense of the practical limitations faced by people "worse off than ourselves" - a sense of perspective not applied to the self, which is harshly judged for not being better off, or those seen as more successful who are not credited with having had unfair advantages to begin with. And envy?: "We can go two ways with envy," he says, "Communities can decide to contain it by co-operation, or get into competitiveness which only increases it. The latter can encourage the conditions for violence."

Perhaps because of the isolation of South Africa during the final years of apartheid, and the very focusing effect of the struggle for democracy, we are in some ways only at the beginning of the process described here by James. The end of apartheid has, in an odd way, opened the door for this winner/loser culture despite the government-promoted and much-spoken-of call for *ubuntu*. The shift from community solidarity to a very economically based status hierarchy, with an overt "winner/loser" ethos seemed to me to be very rapidly spreading amongst young South Africans. Commentators have

linked this to the culture supporting crime and corruption. As is usual in South African politics, because of the severity of economic deprivation and inequality, explanations of violent or criminal behaviour can often be fairly mechanistic. What would be interesting would be a more careful reading, in the light of James's argument, of how family and personal experience is linked to the social, economic and cultural realities and trends already implicated in the "crime wave". Of course, much of this is already "common sense", hence the Department of Mental Health's pilot projects offering psychological support for depressed mothers in Cape Town. Maybe it's just a case of stating what everybody already knows.

I enjoyed reading **Juvenile violence in a winner-loser culture**. I liked the questioning style in which James poses a question, summarises research findings, then poses another question to see if there is an alternative explanation, or one that takes it further. Contradictory findings are outlined, research methodology and sample size taken note of, and his own opinion stated as such. It engaged my curiosity, keeping me thinking "Is this a logical conclusion? Does it fit my experience? Could there be another explanation?" It is precisely because it is trying to answer a question with real implications for our society, that makes it, I think, a good social psychology (teaching) text. It is an improvement on the predominantly North American encyclopaedic surveys of unrelated pieces of research which I seem to remember from my undergraduate days.

I do have a quibble though. I would have liked James to pay more attention than he does to attachment theory. Recently there seems to have been a significant increase in research in this field. Much is focused on the factors which disrupt secure attachment in children (and the frequently severe consequences for mental health), which would have extended his exploration of the psychological consequences of stress on parenting styles. At the moment, attachment theory is cropping up in almost every area of applied psychology in the Britain, and providing a very useful bridge of communication between the frequently opposing camps of psychoanalysis and biological psychology, trauma, cognitive-behavioural approaches to personality disorder, and forensic psychology. It is (sometimes deceptively) easy to explain and "common sense" model of what goes right or wrong between parents and their children, which is a central feature of James's model of poverty, maternal depression and interpersonal violence amongst young men defined as "losers". I think with both, it is the "how" of the link between the political/economic/social and the personal which is interesting; the link between the external and internal worlds of the people around us, and ourselves.