

An exchange over the Nathaniel Abraham case

18 July 1998

Dear Editor,

It is a tragedy when anyone commits a violent crime, especially a child. However, after reading your article, I felt that I was reading a political agenda, not a story about a little boy.

There was a loose association to the fact that child care was expensive and most people in that area could not really afford it. You did not cover in any substantive way the child care situation for Nathaniel. You also did not take into consideration that not only was his environment partially responsible for his act, but what about the television programs he watched.

You focused very heavily on the economic depression of this area. If Nathaniel, who is being treated as an adult in this case, is acquitted due to his economic misfortune, then shouldn't the same be argued for true adult criminals?

I don't know your politics and don't care to; but, it seemed your article was more concerned with the economic depression of the area due to corporations and government than it was with Nathaniel. Your argument was not convincing.

Thank you,

EH

In regards to your 2 July 1998 story ...

So, now having a difficult childhood excuses murder? I dare say that Ronnie Green, the decedent, had a much more difficult childhood than Nathaniel Abraham; he was murdered in his teens, after all.

Millions suffer, endure, and survive dreadful childhoods without stooping to murder. A difficult childhood may, possibly, excuse stealing food to eat. It never excuses the theft of a life.

Facile representations of Nathaniel as 'a nice boy' are fatuous at best. Ask anyone who knew Theodore Bundy. He was 'a nice boy,' too. Of course the 'establishment news reporters' 'have been making

[Nathaniel] out as a criminal' ... HE'S A MURDERER! The last time I looked, murder was a crime.

I'd love to be able to find out, without harming anyone, if Shannon Jones and Larry Roberts would feel the same way about Nathaniel if Ronnie had been their child. Unfortunately, it's easy to give a glib, self-affirming answer to such questions when not actually facing or having faced the situation oneself. Walk a mile in the shoes of the dead child's family before excusing Nathaniel.

DF

Larry Roberts replies:

Thank you for your responses to our article. While there are differences in the formulations of the two letters, both express the concern that by discussing the social circumstances of Nathaniel Abraham's life we thereby excuse the shooting death of Ronnie Green.

The problem with this approach is that Nathaniel's case is not an isolated incident. Any serious investigation reveals both the specific and the broader social causes of events. At issue are the circumstances of this individual youth's life, as well as the shift in politics and philosophy that have resulted in what we consider to be a cruel and inhuman social policy.

Is there any question that the massive cuts in social programs have had an affect on society? The cuts in mental health are truly scandalous. Michigan politicians, Democratic and Republican, have closed down 76 percent of the mental hospitals, replacing them with facilities operated by the Community Health Department, a system that is widely recognized as inadequate. This helps explain why Gloria Abraham, Nathaniel's mother, was unable to get help when she desperately sought it.

Mental health care experts have stated that the number of cases like Nathaniel's is increasing as a direct result of the cuts by state governments in health

care, including the care for children. The individual we cited, Sam Davis, explained to me that our society is now paying a price for the failure to reach children with emotional difficulties when they are young. Once they reach the adolescent age, it is obvious that their problems can have far more severe consequences. The response of state governments is to throw these children into jail rather than provide the treatment they desperately need.

The same point was made in an article published in the *New York Times* on March 5. The article stated, 'On any day, almost 200,000 people behind bars--more than 1 in 10 of the total--are known to suffer from schizophrenia, manic depression or major depression, the three most severe mental illnesses. The rate is four times that in the general population. And there is evidence, particularly with juveniles, that the numbers in jail are growing.' The article called the Los Angeles County jail the largest mental institution in America, as it houses 1,500 to 1,700 inmates who are severely mentally ill.

Is there a relationship between these events and the circumstances in which Nathaniel Abraham finds himself? He is the first child in the US to be tried as an adult for murder at the age of 12. He has been charged under Michigan state laws with the 'conscious intent to commit murder,' despite the fact that he has the mental capacities of a six year old. Evidence suggests that he was shooting at trees when Ronnie Green was shot. How can he be treated as an adult who carried out some premeditated crime?

Recent court decisions in various states, as well as the Youth Predator Act that is presently being considered in Congress, are attempts to reverse nearly 100 years of judicial and legislative action stipulating that children should not be treated as adults in criminal court. In 1899 the Illinois Supreme Court established the first juvenile court, a legal recognition that children could not be treated in the same manner as adults. It was not until 1938 that the US government enacted legislation establishing a national juvenile court system. Its official doctrine was that courts had to act in the best interests of the children with the aim of rehabilitating juvenile offenders. The courts at this time took the optimistic view that children could be transformed into better citizens with mentoring, education, and improved opportunities.

EH notes that we 'focused very heavily on the economic depression of this area.' We did so quite consciously. The growth of poverty encompassing a substantial section of the working class is significant and is the source of many of the ills of our society. Does poverty entirely explain, much less excuse, violence or murder? No, and that is not what the article implies. However, it is noteworthy that America has more of its citizens in prison than any other country in the world--1.7 million people, the overwhelming majority of whom are poor and have been brutalized in one form or another.

Genuine humanity implies empathy and the defense of the weakest sections of society, creating the basis for everyone to reach his or her full potential. A brutal society produces brutal people. It also produces opposition. We stand for the building of a socialist political movement of the working class in opposition to this brutal society.

Sincerely,

Larry Roberts

See Also:

Investigative Report

The case of Nathaniel Abraham: background to the prosecution of a child for murder

[2 July 1998]

Alienation, adolescence and violence - The social crisis in America



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