"When the terrors of life outweigh the terrors of death..."

Another murder-suicide in Australia

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"When the terrors of life outweigh the terrors of death, the economist's costs/benefits equation indicates increased suicide risk. Sociologically, groups faced with greater terror include those under economic strain: the poor and unemployed."[1]

Sometime in the week beginning July 19, unemployed labourer Mark Heath drove his four young children, Sarah 8, Holly 6, Jak 4 and Kaleb 2, to an isolated bush track around 250 kilometres south of Perth, Western Australia, and connected a hose to the car's exhaust. On Saturday July 24, all five bodies were found in the car, dead from acute carbon monoxide poisoning.

The tragedy was all the more shocking because it came just three weeks after a similar murder suicide. On July 3, 25-year-old mother-of-five Barbara-Anne Wyrzykowski took Mark 8, twins Sarah and Luke 5, Jessie 4 and Jayde 1, for a drive in the family's 7-seater van to a remote track in dense State forest bushland, 50km south-east of Perth. There, she gassed them all.

Nine months earlier, in October last year, Ronald Jonker, 32, gassed himself and his three children David 7, Aaron 5 and Ashlee 17 months on the northern outskirts of Perth.

That 12 children could have been murdered by a parent, in three separate incidents, in the space of less than a year, within the same region of one state, raises disturbing questions about the state of Australian society.

To answer them, one needs to pare away the more superficial explanations in general circulation.

Speculation has been raised that, to some degree at least, a copycat effect may be involved, particularly in the case of Heath. Sociological studies over the past two decades have found that publicity surrounding suicides can, indeed, trigger copycatting. But if and when this occurs, it says more about the tendencies that already exist in the general population, than it does about the media. In other words, the key issue involved in copycatting is to what extent a potential already exists for similar acts; to what extent others identify with what they perceive to be the motivations behind the suicide.

The question remains, what drives someone to copy such an act? As the above-mentioned review put it: "What kinds of social contexts would facilitate a suicidal audience mood ripe for copycat suicide?"

After the initial flurry of lurid on-the-spot reports and sensationalism, even the tabloids have shied away from their usual "evil individual" approach. Most have been uncharacteristically sympathetic to the parents/killers, perhaps mindful of the fact that many ordinary people do in fact identify with the problems that were obviously tormenting them.

The comments of Jim Leaman, who lived near Heath's former wife and children, were typical: "You have to feel sorry for him. I know a lot of people would hate a bloke like this, but he has got a story to tell as well."

The main focus of the media coverage has been to avoid any mention of, let alone probing into, what the social roots of these terrible incidents might be. Interviews with forensic psychologists, criminologists, counsellors have abounded—all aimed at providing some quick, and above all, individual explanation—to identify a flaw in the psychological make up or background of each of the parents involved—a specific motivation that propelled them into such a state of anger, resentment or despair that they simply snapped.

In the case of Ronald Jonker, bitterness and revenge, provoked by his broken marriage and a recently concluded Family Court action, in which he lost custody of his children reportedly led him to kill them all.

Barbara Wyrzykowski, journalists revealed, had a troubled childhood, gave birth to 5 children between the ages of 17 and 23 and had suffered the recent suicide of a close friend. Experiencing deep and untreated depression, a heated argument with her de facto husband on the morning of the killings supposedly tipped her over the edge.

Mark Heath's actions, it is argued, were triggered by fears for his children's safety. Separated from his wife and children, he last year attacked a male relative who had allegedly molested his two daughters. Immediately after, he tried to stab himself. Informed that he would not be admitted into the approaching trial, and facing court action himself, carrying the possibility of a jail sentence, he decided to end his children's lives.

These facts may well be true. But they don't begin to account for such extreme behaviour. Why go to the extent of killing the children?

One police spokesman declared, after announcing the discovery of the Heaths' bodies: "Life is never that black that you have to take your own children's lives."

But Jonker, Wyrzykowski and Heath all drew the conclusion that it was.

Indeed, despair, while not always as acute, is rife in Australian society. In Western Australia itself, 24-hour counselling hotlines "receive a staggering 380 calls a day—or one in every four minutes" according to last week's *Sunday Times*.

"And many vital counselling services are flat out and booked weeks ahead as people become increasingly desperate and cry out for help."

The Samaritans' suicide counselling service in Perth received 25,800 calls and emails during 1998 - around 70 per day. This is in line with a national trend, where suicides are increasing at an alarming rate, particularly among young people. Between 1996 and 1997, the number of suicides shot up by 14 per cent, with 2,723 people taking their lives. Overall, suicides have increased continuously since 1988, and the Australian youth suicide rate is now one of the highest in the world. Drug overdoses, not counted in suicide statistics, are also at a record high.

At the same time, mental illness generally and depression specifically are reaching epidemic proportions. A recent survey has concluded that one in five Australians suffer clinical depression at some point in their lives. So widespread is the problem that the premiers of the two most populous states, Victoria and NSW, have advocated the urgent setting up of a national institute to examine and treat depression.

Several psychologists and counsellors have pointed to the lack of professional services available as one of the causes of the latest spate of

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murder-suicides. After attempting suicide last year, for example, Heath was offered no treatment. Funds to provide counselling for parents affected by Family Court decisions have been slashed as have all mental health services, leaving people like Jonker entirely on their own.

"You are looking at a crisis situation," warned forensic psychologist Tim Watson-Munro. "Obviously something is failing in the system in terms of detection and, in a broader sense, in terms of prevention."

Allan Huggins, director of Men's Health, Teaching and Research at Curtin University in WA commented: "I think it [Heath's response] very much reflects the lack of services available for people in crisis, particularly men."

"Often people who take their own lives and those of their children feel utter despair, and that they have no one to turn to."

Again, this is no doubt true, but it simply begs the more fundamental question—why are so many people depressed in the first place? Why is the need for counselling so acute?

Last month the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW reported findings from its national survey of attitudes to social and economic change that almost one third of the working population feel they have lost control of their lives and are in constant fear of losing their jobs. Among those earning less than $400 per week, the figure was just over 40 per cent.

Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the United States have all experienced a rash of violent eruptions in recent years—multiple murders, murder-suicides, schoolyard killings, office shootings, youth suicides. New Zealand now boasts the highest crime rate in the world, and the third highest youth suicide rate, just trailing Russia and Lithuania. Throughout the 80s and early 90s it was held up as the model for economic restructuring. Likewise, the last decade and a half has seen the full embrace of free market policies in Australia, the UK and America. Unprecedented levels of social inequality have been the result. Wealth, of almost unimaginable proportions, has been amassed by a thin, privileged layer, at the direct expense of the majority of the population.

In Australia, the old manufacturing industries have virtually disappeared, and with them, hundreds of thousands of permanent, full-time jobs. The processes of privatisation and casualisation have seen the tearing up of working conditions, the lengthening of the working day, and a fall in the level of real wages.

Rural and regional areas are staring disaster in the face: the youth, without jobs or training, despairing of any future, succumbing to drug and alcohol abuse, and, increasingly, to suicide.

The division between rich and poor is widening annually. For those not in the wealthiest 20 per cent, economic insecurity permeates every aspect of daily life. A general rule obtains: the more affordable the housing, the higher the levels of unemployment in the surrounding areas, the more intractable the social problems, and the fewer the public facilities.

In working class areas, parents of young children face additional pressures. Responsibility for education, health, recreation, child-care increasingly devolves on them. Conditions are grim and services grossly inadequate and underfunded.

Welfare is under sustained attack. The "user-pays" principle is being applied ever more widely, with the sick, the disabled, the unemployed and the elderly increasingly being forced to rely on their own meagre resources to survive or take low-wage jobs.

Accompanying the dismantling of the welfare state has been the ideological offensive, waged first by Thatcher in Britain, then taken up with gusto by Labor governments in Australia, Clinton in the US, the National government in New Zealand, Blair in the UK and now the Howard Liberal government, among others, aimed at stigmatising welfare recipients, and promoting the concept of "individual (or "mutual") responsibility".

Government, according to this line of thinking, is not in the business of ameliorating poverty or providing social facilities. How one fares in today's society is one's own (or family's) concern.

Barbara Wyrzykowski, for example, worked the night shift at McDonald's from 10pm until 6am. Her partner, a builders labourer, left home for work as she arrived. School holidays meant her five young children were at home all day for two weeks. So, in the words of one report, she had lived through two "sleepless weeks", immediately prior to the killings, working at night, minding five boisterous children during the day.

Two wages are necessary to make ends meet, but not sufficient to pay for ongoing child-care. Resolving social problems has become, in other words, an individual responsibility, creating almost unbearable stress for working class families.

Not only have governments washed their hands of the plight of ordinary working people, so have the old workers' organisations—the Labor Party and the trade unions. Literally no avenue exists through which the interests and concerns of the working class can be articulated and advanced.

What is a parent supposed to conclude, then, if they are simply not in a position to provide their kids with the "good life" dangled incessantly in front of them? If "success", in terms of money, career, educational opportunity, is simply unattainable? If guaranteeing a future for their children is impossible? That it is their fault? That they have failed? That the situation is hopeless?

Children as Victims of Homicide, a criminological study by Dr Heather Strang, of Australia's 126 known child murders in the four and a half years between July 1989 and December 1993, found that many of the killings were motivated, not by anger, but by altruism. The parent-killers often felt that by murdering them, they were acting in the best interests of their children—carrying out their parental responsibilities—and this, the author noted, had been underscored by British and American studies of similar cases.

By all accounts Wryzykowski, Heath and Jonker were devoted parents, deeply committed to caring for their offspring. Their desperate, demented responses were, in the final analysis, produced by an insane set of social relations—a society in which social priorities have become totally perverted.

Note

1. *Suicide: A 15 Year Review of the Sociological Literature*, by Steven Stack, Wayne State University, 1998. Located at http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/crimjust/StackArticle.html

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