Letters on the social crisis in the US

16 January 2004

Below we post a selection of recent letters on the social crisis in the US.

On "Nearly half of New York City's homeless are children"

Dear Mr. Whyte,

I want to commend you for your article on homelessness. I have lived in New York off and on since the late 1970's until last year, when I resigned myself to the fact that it is simply unaffordable for someone in my income bracket. Most of the time I lived in New York was spent in residential hotels—now an almost extinct species of housing.

Although never idyllic dwellings, residential, or "welfare" hotels *did* provide an alternative to shelters or sleeping on the street. Since no security deposit was required, a person could move in with as little as one week's rent (In 1979 this was about $50). At least it was a permanent address, a place to sleep and bathe with some degree of comfort and dignity.

It seems that by the 1990's, two things changed: The first was a significant reduction in the number of such hotels, either due to demolition or renovation into more luxurious, high-rent units; the other was an agreement made between the city government and the landlords of the hotels. The hotels were allowed to impose a 21-day limit on a tenant's stay, thereby preventing a tenant from achieving a permanent residency status.

This concurred with the advent of workfare—a "welfare reform" strategy that required nearly all welfare recipients to work, usually picking up trash or cleaning parks, and begin their work day at 6:30 a.m., even when these workers had no place to sleep and no place to keep an alarm clock. Many of the people I knew had their benefits terminated during those periods between stays. Ostensibly, a person could check back into the hotel after a three-to-five-day absence, but because of the long waiting list, the actual time out was often more than a month.

I just wanted to thank you for your article and your compassion, in general. If you would ever like to do an article on some of the other contributing factors to the current unconscionable homeless problem in the U. S., I would be honored to help. Continue the good work.

Sincerely,

SB

On "US job growth virtually zero in December"

Dear Editor,

David Walsh in his January 10 article forgot to mention the closing down of all production facilities in the US by Levi Strauss Jeans, which are being transferred to Asia. An historical move if ever there was one!

MB

10 January 2004

Hello,

This is for your information. The company I work for, Ispat Inland (formerly Inland Steel of East Chicago, Indiana), has announced that it will cut 130 salaried jobs this month. The company says that this move is necessary in order to match the labor concessions at International Steel Group (ISG). It really has a number of employees on edge, and is really not enough to make a dent in its current financial situation. We speculate that this move is related to the upcoming union labor talks, as the current contract will expire in August. They've done that in the past, using salaried concessions as a bargaining chip in talks with the union. Of course, it usually hasn't worked, as the union sees their interests as contrary to those of the salaried workforce. We are staffed pretty thin now, and these cuts will only make that situation worse. There are some specifics to this which we consider unfair. One of them is that they won't take any volunteers for this number reduction. Some of the employees do want to leave, and with a little incentive thrown in, would gladly go. However, the company says that it won't do that, as they risk losing valuable employees with this.

C

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10 January 2004

Hello,

My husband and I moved to Florida five years ago. Talk about a state behind the times. The “good old boy system” is alive and kicking. The treatment of prisoners on a general basis is horrible. Guards beating, torturing, and even killing prisoners go unpunished. Murder is just that, murder...whatever the guards do should also be punishable by time behind bars.

This state has given them a green light to treat prisoners as they darned well choose. Most prison guards couldn’t hold a job on the outside—granted not all, there are some who do their work well and hate to see prisoners mistreated.

The entire prison system throughout the US needs reform. I’ve heard so much about “suspected” terrorists in Cuba...what about the prisoners on US soil? One of these days, this country will answer for all the inhumane treatment of others. May God wake us up.

I used to be for the death penalty, when I was ignorant of the fact that there are so many in prisons not guilty of the crime. Now, I’m not for the death penalty. Nor am I for charging children as adults—-they are not adults.

Sincerely,

BB

8 January 2004

On “Arkansas: Mentally ill inmate put to death”

Thank you for this important story, which is of special interest to me as a psychologist.

One legal question merits further attention though. As best I can make out, although the crime was committed in 1979, evidence of mental illness did not emerge until the 80s. In other words, this is not a clear case of a crime committed by a mentally ill person. Why is this important? Because, in my opinion, the basic issue is one of competence at the time of the crime. Children, the retarded, and the mentally ill may, technically, appear to know right from wrong; but when examined closely it becomes clear that their understanding is primitive, simplistic or distorted; and their ability to control their impulses through the rational ego is defective as well. Therefore, there is no basis for finding that they can be held accountable.

All the very good arguments you make apply to those who are mentally ill at the time the crime is committed. I personally agree that they may well apply also in the case of a person in whom the disease declares itself after the crime; but in fairness, this is much harder to prove in a court of law.

As to using drugs only to make the person eligible for the death penalty, while I agree that this is barbaric, this is only part of the larger issue of the court’s egregious ignorance of human psychology. The whole notion of the value of punishment, frequently associated with some notion that the criminal should admit his crime and show remorse, is absurdly antiquated and should not be tolerated. It is ultimately based on theology, not psychology; and is as useless and dangerous as “creation science.”

Having been trained in psychoanalytic ego psychology, I have watched in amazement as this theory, which offers our best understanding of ourselves, has been savaged, distorted, and well nigh erased and sent down the memory hole. We are now only interested in cures which promise high income for corporations, such as prescriptions or gene therapy(!), or in faith-based programs which placate the Right.

I am not meaning to fall into a tirade; but I truly am beginning to wonder if this is one example of the neo-conservative (Straussian) approach to truth and knowledge. That is, only the elite need to know the truth. The rest of us need only as much as keeps us pacified and manipulated.

P.S. In your list of statistics, I would add substance abuse. Many crimes are committed under the influence of alcohol and other drugs. Yet, for even more arcane reasons, substance abuse is not considered a subset of mental illness.

Without the concept of free will, we cannot hold people responsible. Therefore, in a society which values “holding people accountable” above liberal education and rehabilitation, free will MUST exist. Don’t confuse them with facts when their minds are made up.

The only solution is regime change.

NR

8 January 2004

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