
Granny vs the Hooligans

Keith Windschuttle.

1. Working Class Youth, Capitalism and the Police.

In the years between puberty and marriage, working class males in our society are subject to some very powerful institutional control. They are interned in schools compulsorily until they turn 15 or 16. At school they are treated like children, told how to dress, denied financial independence and discouraged from sexual relations. Their middle class counterparts are treated in a similar way but have the advantage of being able to see some purpose in their education. It is the key to future success, careers, money and influence. For the working class, high school offers nothing but waiting; a frustrating, pointless waiting until they can leave, find work and get some useful vocational education on the job and at tech.

Many working class boys cave in under the discipline of the school system and become dutiful types who obey the commands of their teachers, no matter how irrelevant or unfair they seem. But, just the same, there are many who have more spirit than this and who rebel at the irrationality of their situation. They defy their teachers in class and they wag school. They are labelled a "discipline problem", as if there was something wrong with them rather than the system to which they are subjected.

When these latter young men leave school and find jobs, it doesn't take them long to see how the world works. They learn very quickly that they inhabit an unequal society where most rewards go to the already privileged. In the few years before they marry and become fathers, and thus limit greatly their potential actions, these young men maintain the rebellious habits they developed at school. Only they don't often direct their antagonism at those in authority in the world of work. Their energy and anger become deflected — they fight with each other, they search for quick thrills in fast bikes, cars and flash clothes, they obliterate their consciousness with alcohol or drugs and, most pathetically, they work off their sense of injustice by lording it over working class girls.

A city where teenage girls use stiletto heels to stab the faces of strolling couples ... where young thugs smash and maim with karate blows ... A city where a quiet walk in the park can leave you scarred for life, where elderly couples have been thrown in front of cars just for kicks. Chicago? New York, Melbourne? NO. SYDNEY 1967. This was the stark picture of senseless teenage violence I found this week when I investigated the wave of hooliganism, vandalism and terror that has made some parts of Sydney places where only the brave walk at night.

(Sun Herald, January 22 1967)

An editorial in the same edition attempts to direct the fear straight to the heart of its middle class audience.

This is not gang warfare. These smashed bodies and ruined lives belong not to thugs. The victims are decent, innocent people. They could be anyone of us, or our sons and daughters. Their safety is in police hands.

As an initial response, the Police Commissioner told reporters he would direct police to "watch out" for bashings and he said he would assign more police to "trouble spots". The State Cabinet also said it was considering increasing penalties for offences related to hooliganism. (Sun-Herald January 22 1967).

The Police Commissioner, however, was obviously disturbed by the nature of the press campaign. The next week he briefed a *Herald* police roundsman on what he saw as the reality of the teenage "wave of violence". The story by Darcy Butcher appeared in the *Herald* on January 28, 1967. It quoted police and child welfare statistics which showed no increased trend in the State's youth to become more violent. "The rate of violent behaviour in young people to the age of 18 has remained remarkably steady with a very small downward tendency over the past eight years." the story quoted a police spokesman as saying: "Larrikinism is definitely not a phenomenon of the times in which we live." This was the last story on this subject on which Darcy Butcher's name appears.

The next day, January 19, the *Sun-Herald*, at the bottom of a long story headed "Plastic Bomb on Teenager in City Arrest" quoted the Police Commissioner as saying in a radio program that last week's *Sun-Herald* article and the statement "Only the brave walk at night" were "complete and utter exaggeration". "You find one or two isolated occasions" of unprovoked attacks, the Commissioner said. "After 38 years of being a policeman ... I have come to accept quite a lot of these newspaper statements has having little or no bearing on fact".

The *Herald*, in an editorial three days later, made a brief concession to these statements then quickly went on to ignore them. One would have assumed that the Commissioner's statement was clear enough but the *Herald* editorial began:

Contradictory and cloudy statements by police authorities do nothing to allay the considerable public diquiet over larrikinism and thuggery in Sydney ... Must peaceful citizens stay indoors at night? It is time for a cleanup and if a little more "discretion" in the arrest and charging of juveniles is needed then the police should be allowed to use it.

(Sydney Morning Herald, February 2)

This situation, however, is an extremely volatile one that always threatens to explode. The inward direction of this energy may suddenly change if an outside source of oppression can be identified. In Northern Ireland and South Africa in recent times it has been teenage boys who have shown the most bravery and determination in fighting British troops and Afrikaaner police.

In Australia there is a long way to go before that sort of consciousness is reached by working class youth. However, the potential threat they represent has long been recognised by our middle classes. Ever since large cities grew in the nineteenth century under the impact of capitalism and industrialism, working class youth have banded together in urban peer groups or gangs that have literally terrified the bourgeoisie. In Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were called "larrikins". After the



Second World War they were known as "hoodlums", "bodgies", "hooligans" and "juvenile delinquents". The names changed but the concept didn't.

Social scientists have identified many forms of social control that capitalism has devised for its own protection – the concept of a "national interest", the education system, the family, the promise of social mobility, suburban isolation, the ability to co-opt radical movements into a conservative consensus. However, the most underestimated method of social control is the police force.

Police control under capitalism operates in two ways. Firstly, the threat of the police terrorises working class parents. Apart from an unmarried daughter becoming pregnant, the worst thing that can happen to a working class family is for a son to be sent to jail. This is the real symbol of failure as a parent, of failure to achieve the modest respectability for which most working class families strive. The shame of prison is held up by parents to sons as the major reason why they should keep out of trouble.

Secondly, the police directly intimidate working class youth by arrest and the threat of arrest. Police constantly patrol places where they know working class youth congregate, such as pubs and dances. The arrests they regularly make at the places are usually for offences such as drunk and disorderly, swearing, "offensive" behaviour or for retaliation to police provocation, usually defined as "resisting arrest" or "assaulting a police officer".

In other words, the police arrest people for simply acting out their cultural norms or for rejecting police interference in their leisure. Police harassment of working class youth generates a very large body of what liberal criminologists have called "victimless" crimes.

Theoretically, the police force is an autonomous organisation pursuing lawbreakers without being influenced by other social groups. The notion that the police force takes its orders direct from the Australian ruling class is commonly dismissed as a left-wing fantasy which substitutes an intellectually pathetic conspiracy theory for proper analysis of the complex webs of power. The case history that follows is an account of how a powerful section of the Australian ruling class – the people who control the Fairfax group of newspapers – have had a very strong influence on police administration and patterns of arrest of working class youth. Such a case history should not be regarded as an exception but as a familiar and recurring phenomenon. Stanley Cohen, in his study of mods and rockers in the late 1960s in England (*Folk Devils and Moral Panics* London 1972) has documented similar forces at work. So have several radical American scholars of juvenile delinquency and some historians of the impact of capitalism on the youth culture of Europe. (see references at end).

Thus while it should be recognised that capitalism maintains control over its subjects in many sophisticated ways, what deserve more recognition are the often very transparent relationships between the ruling class and the police. This applies particularly in the control of youth. The lessons about power that working class people learn in their youth remain with them, ensuring that most remain dutiful and docile citizens all their lives.

2 The Fabrication of the Hooligan Menace: 1967.

In the first three months of 1967 a press campaign was waged largely by

the Fairfax newspaper organisation against "teenage hooliganism" in Sydney. Some other sections of the news media did jump on this bandwagon, but Fairfax started it and pursued it more vigorously than anyone else. It was a home-grown campaign that had not been sparked by any overseas reports such as those on riots between mods and rockers or by skinheads which have occasionally been followed up locally and which have led reporters to suddenly discover that the same juvenile "menace" lies under our own noses.

Late in 1966 a perhaps lower than usual number of hooligan and hoodlum stories were making the press. One MLA had complained in November about "large numbers of hooligans" on Coogee Beach but apart from this, things were pretty quiet. (Sydney Morning Herald November 30, 1966). The *Herald* had only one teenage hoodlum story in any of its editions for December 1966.

But, suddenly, by mid-January 1967 the press was portraying Sydney streets as being alive with hooligans who would attack anyone at the slightest excuse.

"Decent" citizens were afraid to go out at night. "Attacks by gangs armed with knives, bike chains and sticks have alarmed Sydney's police," reported the *Sun-Herald* January 15 1967, and an editorial in the same edition was headed "The Reign of Terror" and said:

What sort of a city are we living in? How long are police going to permit this sickening reign of terror? Week after week the bike chains and the belts are out. Somewhere an innocent victim falls, bruised, slashed, kicked. The silence of the city passes over them. Doesn't anyone care? Mr. Allan might ponder. He has the chance of passing into history as the Commissioner of Police under whose rule Sydney citizens were afraid to walk down the main streets after dark.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* took up the fray later in the week:

Hooliganism and vandalism have reached epidemic proportions in this city ... The Government, to its credit, is doing its best to remedy this. But what is more disturbing than this is the seeming social decline and the deterioration in moral outlook which makes more police necessary. Gangs of young hoodlums and would-be "tough guys" oddly arrayed and hunting in packs, terrify shopkeepers, attack innocent strangers in the streets (just for "kicks" apparently) and do untold stupid damage in trains, buses and anywhere else they think they can get away with it.

(Sydney Morning Herald, January 19, 1967)

The editorial concluded by demanding tougher penalties — "gaol or a really stiff fine". This particular editorial, with its concern for "social decline and the deterioration in moral outlook" and one or two phrases that few journalists would use — "oddly arrayed" — has the appearance of being written by one of the *Herald's* proprietors.

By the next weekend, all the big guns of the press were out. A double-page spread on pages 4 and 5 of the *Sun-Herald* under the two-page headline "Only the Brave Walk At Night" carried several stories, the main one of which began:

State government politicians made it quite clear that they were taking note of the press campaign and that they intended to ignore the advice of their Police Commissioner. On February 3 Premier Askin asked his Attorney-General to reduce from 18 to 16 the age at which juveniles might be given

open Court hearings. His rationale was: "The fear of the publicity might not only deter juveniles from hooliganism but also induce parents to exercise more control over their children." (*Sydney Morning Herald* February 3 1947). Two days later, under a headline "Pledge To Stamp Out Hooligans", Premier Askin was promising that "You can take it from me that we will keep after these people. We will take all measures no matter how drastic to deal with them." (*Sun-Herald* February 5 1967).

Askin told reporters that he believed that there were three reasons for "this upsurge of youthful assertiveness and violence". There were people in the community who were encouraging violence through demonstrations (i.e. against the Vietnam war). "And today I don't think there is as much parental control in the homes ... There's also the emphasis on violence through various public media ... As far as I can see the fundamental remedy is more police."

The actual cause of this campaign remains obscure. None of the journalists concerned that I have been able to contact remember its origins except one who really believed there had been an increase in hooliganism. My unsubstantiated guess is that one of Fairfax's board or senior management had a nasty individual experience which he generalised as common to the whole of society and which led him to seek reprisals amongst the class responsible.

In this 1967 campaign, the press achieved very quick results. On February 7, just 23 days after the first reports appeared, the Premier announced he had ordered the Police Commissioner to detach special public patrols "to concentrate on juvenile hooliganism in the Sydney metropolitan area". The 21 Special Squad and the Vice Squad were to devote a number of patrol cars and detectives to the juvenile problem. On the same day, the NSW Cabinet authorised legislation to permit public hearings in Children's Courts of charges against 16 and 17 year olds. (*Sydney Morning Herald* February 8, 1967)

By February 23, the *Herald* could announce on its front page that the Police Department had appointed Assistant Commissioner N.H. Mijch to head a special new section to fight hooliganism. Areas where there was a "small" hooligan problem were to lose some staff who would be transferred to "trouble spots" and more radio cars were to be manned for this issue. Mijch promised a "sudden halt" to hooliganism. It had taken just 5½ weeks for the press to effect this sort of reorganisation in the police's priorities and administration.

The next *Sun-Herald* (February 26) devoted yet another double-page spread to the issue. On page 4 and 5 the two page banner headline read "We toured Sydney's Square Mile of Fear" (i.e. the Kings Cross/Darlinghurst area).

There were so many police on the beat, patrol waggons and carloads of detectives that it looked like a city under siege ... There was no sign in the streets of the 12 known hoodlum gangs which have terrorised the public for months. But the air of tension and the alertness on the faces of the shopkeepers and pedestrians were still there.*

*(*This was the first and last mention of these "12 known" gangs.)*

The *Sun-Herald* editorial in the same edition congratulated the police on their action and Assistant Commissioner Mijch received favourable comm-

ents there as well as in two of the paper's regular columns – Candid Comment by Onlooker and Back Page Looks Behind the News.

Obviously encouraged by this attention, Premier Askin next day called on the judiciary to chip in and help the police. The front page main lead story of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on February 27 read:

The Premier Mr Askin yesterday called for the Courts to make examples of youths arrested for hooliganism. Legislation provided stern penalties and these should be imposed by magistrates where there were no redeeming circumstances. Mr Askin was commenting on the continued wave of crime and violence in Sydney over the weekend.

It is quite clear, however, that this so-called "continued wave of crime and violence" was the result of nothing more than the extra activity of the police and the zeal which the press campaign had instilled in them. On Friday night March 5 police arrested 57 youths between 18 and 23. In the previous nine days there were nearly 200 arrests of youths (*Sun-Herald* March 5, 1967).

Yet in the entire period from November 1 1966 to January 31 1967 there had been only 159 attacks on people (including robbery) reported to police in Sydney and of these reports (not arrests) juveniles were involved in only 24. (*Sun-Herald* February 8, quoting figures supplied by Police Commissioner.)

This is a clear example of a **manufactured** crime wave. The press had fanned up hysteria and persuaded the government to direct more police to an imaginary problem. The police did just what was expected of them – they arrested every young person who gave them the slightest pretext. These arrests were then able to be cited as "proof" that the press had been right all along and that there had been a problem.

The campaign dragged on for a while after this with a few more full page exposes and the like – anatomies of the psychology of the hooligan, investigations of his home life and so on. In a rather pathetic attempt to make some positive contribution after this, reporters were given assignments to cover speeches and talks that they previously would not have taken seriously, such as a luncheon on March 11 at which a Boy Scout official announced that the "current wave of violence" would be solved if more youths joined the Scouts. *Sun-Herald* March 12). The Liberal club at Sydney University seriously discussed a proposal to put a curfew on youths, but the Minister for Justice Mr Maddison rose to his title and said that this would be "restrictive and impractical". Letter writers to the *Herald* thought the curfew a good idea (January 2 1967) and quite a number advocated corporal punishment, or as one letter described it "applied child psychology – preferably with a razor strop to the seat of the tight blue jeans". (February 2).

On August 8 a story appeared in the early edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald* which quoted Police Commissioner Allan making critical comments about the press's "irresponsibility" in its anti-hooligan campaign. The story is missing from the *Herald's* late edition that day and is replaced by an apparently more pressing item announcing that James Mason would play the lead role in the film "Age of Consent."

The 1967 campaign is a classic example of the media defining a social problem, manufacturing the evidence to prove its case, whipping up public

"I'VE LIVED HERE
IN THIS CITY
FOR OVER 40
YEARS!... AND
NEVER ONCE
HAVE I BEEN
BRUTALIZED
BY THE
POLICE!!"

R. COBB
DRAWN BY R. COBB



hysteria, pressuring the government and the police to take the only course they know – more police and judicial action. This sort of process is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It was obviously a source of much satisfaction to the press proprietors and journalists involved. They had a taste of the direct exercise of power and they probably felt they had made a contribution towards stemming the tides of barbarism and anarchy.

The victims were those hundreds of working class youths who were arrested for giving the police a bit of cheek, for not moving along quickly enough when ordered to, for making a bit of noise in the street, for getting in a fight. One can only speculate on how many collective days they spent in jail as a result, or what they paid in fines as the price of this campaign.

But one does not have to guess how they have been affected since. They gained forceful confirmation of the knowledge that there are enormous coercive institutions always ready to stamp on them should they deviate from the constricted lifestyle determined for them by their bourgeois rulers.

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