The Resurrection of the "Dangerous Classes"
J.M. Taylor

Recently, *The Nation* columnist, Alexander Cockburn (1994A), resurrected the socially archaic phrase the "dangerous classes" as a comprehensive term dusted off and used to describe the focus of the hardening "fascist" attitudes of some towards immigrants, toward the desperately struggling welfare dependent poor, and toward, in many cases, the resultant criminal. Ironically, at nearly the same time, conservative columnist George Will (1994), writing for *Newsweek*, noted that "Fascism flourishes as a doctrine of vengence ..." and is a philosophy favoring "... the visceral over the cerebral." Concommittantly, Dr. Jeffery S. Adler (1994), associate professor of history and criminology at the University of Florida, explored not only the American origins of the term "dangerous classes", but also the birth of the concept of deviance in the United States and the policies enacted to combat the then newly "publicly" identified social threat. These definitions and prescriptions today sound all-too-familiar in the debate over immigration policy, welfare reform and criminal justice legislation.

The development of the concept of the dangerous classes extends back nearly two hundred years, originating after the social disarray of the Napoleonic Wars in Britain and continental Europe (Gaucher, 1987). The first use of the phrase "dangerous classes" was by Miss Mary Carpenter, a well-known English writer on criminal matters in 1851. She noted those branded (literally) by imprisonment or "... if the mark has not yet been visibly set upon them, are notoriously living by plunder -- who unblushingly acknowledge that they can gain more for the support of themselves and their parents by stealing than by work ... form the dangerous classes" (Carpenter, 1851). Then in 1859, the *Oxford English Dictionary* encoded the term in the official lexicon of that society (Tobias, 1967).

Adler (1994:34) explains that between 1850 and 1880 Americans 'discovered' the "dangerous classes". Newspapers, paradoxically, borrowed the phrase from the French and molded it to fit American conditions. The New York City Draft Riots of 1863 (in response to the life-threatening conditions and economic hardships imposed by the Union's newly enacted conscription law that also allowed the wealthy to "buy" stand-ins) gave impetus to the concept of this class that the era's experts explained was composed mainly of immigrants and tramps. The apparently (from the perspective of the monied class) irrational, unfocused, and wide spread violent destruction of property and random assaults on by-standers and authority figures (over 100 people died during the five-day riot) "... haunted intellectuals and reformers for years to come" (Adler, 1994:35). The great national railroad strike of 1877 (caused by draconian management, repeated wage cuts, dangerous working conditions, and little job security) rekindled the memories of the Draft Riots and reinforced in the country's conscience the existence of the dangerous classes. By 1882, the term "dangerous class" was in wide use in the United States.

The mainstream exponents of this new theory claimed that large numbers of immigrants formed this class, but they disagreed about why this was so. The rationales ranged from immigrants being wretches

kicked out of their own societies, to the traumatic experience of immigration, to the separation from their old community mores compounded by the influence of the evils of the big city. A social worker of the time wrote of immigrants that "... they go to pieces and become drunken, vagrant, criminal, diseased and suppliant" (Hunter, 1904). From the bourgeois viewpoint, those who avoided work were believed to have rejected the bonds of society and scorned the established social order. Edward Devine (1994) of Columbia University observed that "... the mere act of obtaining gainful employment indicated that a person sought to participate in orderly society." Such gainful participation, however, was hard to find and hold onto for many due to the perpetual economic dislocations (i.e. recessions and depressions) resulting from the evolving and self-obsoleting unrestrained capitalistic industrialization of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Moreover, for the foreign born and colored, discrimination such as "No Irish Need Apply" and "Whites Only" employment policies, and blatant labor exploitation, such as the Chinese building the Union Pacific Railroad, was rampant and socially acceptable.

The resulting domestic social controls imposed on the dangerous class focused on the tramp and the vagrant, or, in other words, on surplus and/or undisciplined labor. Policies championed by the papers of the time are exemplified by the *New York Times* (1877) editorializing that the "... tramp is at war in a lazy kind of way with society and rejoices at being able to prey upon it." To combat the purportedly dangerous social deviants, legislatures approved anti-tramping statutes. Between 1876 and 1893, 21 states enacted tramping laws. City and county officials also passed vagrancy laws and tightened disorderly conduct and pauper statutes. As Adler (1994:40) notes, "... the hysteria surrounding the dangerous class profoundly affected the criminal justice system." Public officials anxious to visibly address this problem resorted to older practices. Some of these efforts included auctioning arrested tramps off for six-month terms to the highest bidder, posting rewards for the apprehension of beggars, and giving officials bounties for tramp arrests. Some states mandated solitary confinement and other even re-imposed whipping. Altogether, Gaucher (1982) reports that in the northern United States from 1800 onward, the criminalized population were largely composed of immigrants and blacks, the mainstays of surplus labour.

These reactionary practices included the expansion of police powers to "... preserve the social order over the need to protect individual liberty" (Adler, 1994:41), even to the point of arresting "dangerous characters" before the commission of any crime. Thus, police forces employed a "trawling" strategy in attempts to snare as many tramps at one time as possible. The *Tampa Morning Tribune* editorialized that it was "... better that two innocent ones be arrested than one guilty creature should escape" (City Brieflets, 1895). These law enforcement tactics were backed up by reformers who argued that the dangerous classes needed to be controlled through immigration restrictions, more aggressive child saving efforts (orphanages), vice suppression (blue laws and censorship), and temperance legislation (prohibition and drug laws). Officials also increasingly made poor relief more punitive.

Worrying that such would sustain or even promote expansion of the dangerous class, reformers strove to separate the "worthy poor" from the "unworthy". Thus, workhouses replaced soup kitchens and strict ordinances controlled "indiscriminate giving". Experts even cautioned city officials to halt the practice of allowing the homeless to shelter in municipal buildings' basements during inclement weather.

All of this action and effort by the criminal justice system to control the "dangerous classes" was, as Gaucher (1987:169) comments, to "... mask the needs of capital -- needs such as surplus labour, a stable social order and a disciplined workforce -- particularly in times of high unemployment." By shifting the focus of the problem from economic manipulation and exploitation to law enforcement, social capital is spent on symptoms instead of invested in treating the causes. Thomas Mathiesen (1974), in *The Politics of Abolition*, proposes that imprisonment fulfils four critical social functions integral to bourgeois legitimation activities: the expurgatory function (removing the incarcerated from social participation); the power-draining function (reducing if not eliminating the socio-economic influence of the incarcerated), the diverting function (the shifting of attention from the society to the individual), and the symbolic function (that action has been taken and progress made in combating social disorder). Thus the dangerous classes were controlled by legislatures essentially outlawing unemployed poverty, truncheon wielding cops pummelling the out of work, and the chain gang performing labor that society did not then have to pay for -- at least not directly.

If we fast forward one hundred years, the tune may have changed but the lyrics are resoundingly similar. For example, many of the proposals for welfare reform, sound suspiciously familiar. The GOP plan would cap the alleged spending growth in six major means tested programs ranging from Aid to Families with Dependent Children to Supplemental Security Income, while ending support after two years. As Republican Representative John Myers (IN) explains, "... our current welfare system penalizes the working poor and rewards the indolent." Proposals for reform range from fingerprinting welfare recipients before allowing them to receive assistance (*New York Times*, 1994) to denying aid to non-naturalized immigrants (Hudson, 1995) and any new unwed mothers under the age of 21 (*Tribune Media Services*, 1994), to norplant insertions conditional for social benefits (Cockburn, 1994B). And, who could forget, the Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich's call to mandate orphanages for the children of the unemployed poor. All measures designed to combat, as Representative E. Clay Shaw (R-FL) ludicrously claims, "... abuses by teenagers who have babies simply to receive more benefits" (Dunham, 1994).

Other efforts to combat the newly rediscovered dangerous class include cracking down on indiscriminate giving to the homeless. In San Francisco, Food Not Bombs volunteers have been arrested 720 times for giving homeless people sandwiches. Keith McHenry, a founder of the group, has been arrested 92 times, and now instead of misdemeanor permit violations (you have to have a myriad of permits to give food to the homeless in the city by the bay), he is being charged with felony assault (Cockburn, 1994C). If convicted three times, McHenry faces

life imprisonment without possibility of parole under the golden state's recently adopted "three strikes, you're out" legislation -- another measure to combat and control the dangerous class. Cockburn (1994C:18) observes "... that the way many cities and states are confronting social misery is to criminalize poverty."

The criminal justice system plays a major part today as it did a century ago in thwarting the dangerous class. The Omnibus Crime Bill of 1994 requires the Attorney General to study ways in which anti-loitering laws can be used to fight crime and to prepare a model act for states to implement (ACLU, 1994). More disturbing, though, is the "anti-gang" provision, which penalizes any group of two or more people who, either individually or as a group, commit two defined crimes within ten years. This provision defines as "gangs" any group "... that exhibit at least five of the following characteristics: formal membership with required initiation or rules for members; a recognized leader; common clothing, language, tattoos, turf where the group is known; and a group name" (Bryan, 1993).

The fact that aggressive and ambitious prosecutors have historically expanded legislations' parameters far beyond the lawmakers' initial intent (just look at the scope of RICO prosecutions) does not mean that they would use the anti-gang provision's vague and general criteria to violate the constitutional guarantee of due process. Under these guidelines, however, the Kansas City Chiefs football franchise, or **any** sports, fraternal or social organization for that matter, could find its entire organization under arrest if two members were arrested, for let's say, felony drunk driving (we won't suggest cocaine possession). Don't laugh; formal membership with rules for members (team players and NFL game Rule Book); recognized leader (coach Shottenheimer and quarterback Steve Bond); common clothing, languages and tattoos (red and white jersey with arrowhead symbol, "hut-hut-hut", and would a red and yellow bandaid horizontally placed across the bridge of one's nose count as a tattoo?); turf where the group is known (Arrowhead Stadium); and a group name (the Kansas City Chiefs). Then again, such mainstream, power-connected organizations like the Chiefs, Shriners and Jaycees, really would have nothing to fear, but would groups like the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party; the United Farm Workers Union or even the National Organization of Women feel as secure?

Already in Los Angeles County more than 105,000 young black men are considered "gang members" and listed in the GREAT (Gang Reporting, Evaluation and Tracking System) computer file (*L.A. Times*, 1992). Nearly half of those listed, however, have no previous arrest record, but instead were so tagged because they were identified in block, even neighborhood sweeps conducted by the police and sheriff departments' gang task forces. Shades of the 19th century and Depression Era "tramp trawling"! These individuals were literally in the wrong place at the wrong time -- though its hard to imagine why being in one's neighborhood is the wrong place -- and now face possible federal prosecution if any other "gang member" they are matched with in a computer record search is accused of two or more crimes. Moreover, the labelling ceaselessly continues. In Compton,

California, there are more names in police gang files than young males in the city (Cockburn, 1994C). And once a gang member, always a gang member as far as the police are concerned (GAO/T-GGD-92-52 at 16).

The Senate crime bill's anti-gang provision allocates $100 million for additional U.S. attorneys, new mandatory minimum sentences, and the lengthening of already long sentences; allows serious juvenile drug offenses to be considered the same as serious adult felonies; and allows juveniles to be tried as adults (ACLU, 1994). With the vast majority of "identified" gang membership composed of minorities and/or immigrants (93 percent of Denver Police gang listings are, for example, of Black or Hispanic origins), the ACLU comments that these statistics indicate that race, class, neighborhood and clothes, not conduct, often characterize a person as a gang member. In hundred-year-old terminology, vis-a-vis members of the dangerous class, it is better for social order "that two innocent ones be arrested than one guilty creature should escape."

In keeping with the retrograde stratagems and theorems to deal with this once again newly identified social threat, some states, like Washington and three others, have imposed "civil commitment" (indefinite incarceration) programs for some offenders **after** they have completed their prison terms, because of what they "might do" in the future (Wright, 1995), while other states, like Alabama and Arizona, have reinstituted chain gangs (Leland and Smith, 1995). Even more outrageous, the Mississippi legislature is considering bringing back corporal punishment to its prisons (Nossiter, 1994). So today one might not be guilty of any crime, except that of being labelled among the dangerous classes, arrested anyway, be whipped while in the joint, and then held after the end of your bit because of what you might do in the future -- all for the good of social order, of course.

The myth of the dangerous class a century ago slowly faded into obscurity as reformers began to understand the influence of social structural forces. These second generation social experts began instead to focus on the economic and environmental roots of social problems. Slowly more refined, though, really no less accusatory, explanations such as race ("Coloreds"), intelligence (imbecility), economics (poverty) and social conditions (alcoholism) were seen as causes of social deviance. A "class", as such, was no longer openly labelled. Adler (1994:46) explains, and recent commentators remind us, "... the idea of a dangerous class has proved more resilient than the label." As Rothman (1994) has observed, the underclass, from which the dangerous class predominantly originates, has served as the scapegoat for deteriorating social conditions, instead of being defined as the victims of the deterioration itself.

As the economy expanded and the Progressive Era produced more equitable living standards and governmental protections, and as the expansion of the social safety net through the New Deal and War on Poverty programs softened the structural inequities inherent in capitalism, the dangerous class became nearly extinct in the social conscience. However, as the economic conditions of the post-industrial/information-service era become leaner, meaner and starker

(not "kinder and gentler") for more and more of the population, social deviance in the guise of family dysfunction, drug abuse, and crime seems to grow.

As structural and social forces made the label of dangerous classes politically incorrect after the turn of the century, changes in these same forces are now coming full circle. America's working poor, those earning less than $14,764 a year for a family of four, have risen in numbers a shocking fifty percent in the last decade and now compose 15 percent of the national population according to the latest Department of Commerce figures (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1994). All the while, the IRS now calculates low income as a single taxpayer earning less than $23,500 (Librach, 1994). Yet as the poor grow in number, the federal government allocates less than two-thirds of the budget in constant dollars (now approximately one percent or $14 billion) for welfare than it allocated in 1970 (Bernstein, 1994A). According to the Washington based Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, subsidized housing program allocations -- adjusted for inflation -- have been cut by 62%, employment and training by 59%, community-development block grants by 29%, energy assistance by 54%, and legal services by 29% (Foust, 1994). As adjusted wages have stayed flat or declined since the 1970s (Stanglin, 1995), the gap between rich and poor is now at Depression Era dimensions (Bernstein, 1994B).

Political commentator William Greider (1991), writing for *Rolling Stone*, comments on the bankrupt strategy emanating from Washington, labelling it as "scapegoating". This he explains, is a way to change the subject from what is really hurting people and panders to an impulse that is ingrained in American politics and canonized by Machiavelli. As Greider (1991) writes, "... whenever things are going badly, whenever people are losing their jobs and social decline is visible, it's easier to blame the troubles on minority segments who seem to be getting more than their share."

The modern version of the tramp and vagrant are the homeless, the panhandlers, and those who "will work for food". The present day dangerous class equivalents are those isolated and alienated souls left behind in our headlong quest for the elusive American dream and are concentrated in the inner cities -- primarily people of color, people of other languages and cultures, and the expanding number of people suffering from poverty. "Whether or not the dangerous class existed in industrial America", Adler concludes (1994:45), "the idea of such a class encouraged middle-class Americans to view the poor as a threat to society and persuaded policy makers to rely on the criminal justice system to address the effects of poverty".

Sociologists Emile Durkheim and Kai T. Erikson (1966) postulate that society **needs** crime (as defined by the powers that be) to tighten bonds of cultural solidarity and thus have developed institutions whose purpose (even if unannounced) are to maintain a steady supply of deviants. Jeffrey Reiman (1984), in *The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*, advances what he calls the Pyrrhic Defeat Theory, in which he believes the failure of the criminal justice system, and in

essence the socio-political structure itself, to reduce crime, serves the interests of the rich and powerful in the United States by fulfilling a controlling function to mop up the messy and potentially destabilizing by-product of capitalism, surplus labor and poverty. Reiman (1984:39) notes "The fact is that the label 'crime' is not used in America to name all or the worst actions that cause misery and suffering to Americans. It is primarily reserved for the dangerous actions of the poor."

Today it is the policymakers who have persuaded the bourgeoise that the resurrected dangerous class exists and threatens their diminishing standards of living. From highly publicized, though rarely documented, cases of welfare fraud and dependency, (one-third of all adults leave the assistance rolls within two years) (Bernstein, 1994A), to the myth of exploding crime rates (overall per capita property and violent crime rates are lower today than in 1973), (*Corrections Compendium*, 1993), the single preferred solution is to continue reducing social programs while generously providing for the poor in federal spending for new prison construction. This conservative (dare one say neo-Fascist) ideology mirrors that of the British ruling class of a century and a half ago, as illustrated in *A Just Measure of Pain*:

> The persistent support for the penitentiary is inexplicable so long as we assume that its appeal rested on its functional capacity to control crime. Instead, its support rested on a larger social need. It had appeal because the reformers succeeded in presenting it as a response, not merely to crime, but to the social crisis of a period, and as part of a larger strategy of political, social and legal reform designed to re-establish order on a new foundation. As a result, while criticized for its functional shortcomings, the penitentiary continued to command support because it was seen as an element of a larger vision of order that by the 1840's commanded the reflexive assent of the propertied and powerful (Ignatieff, 1978:210).

The dangerous class, though, has never left us. In fact, they have always been with us, existing under varying chameleon like labels. They are not, however, the tramp and the homeless or the immigrant and the unwed mother, but rather they are the policy wonks and law makers who, in the parlance of the street, "make book" on the inequities perpetuated by unrepentant capitalism, overt and covert racism, and cultural xenophobia. Cockburn "called money" when he labelled such perpetrators fascists, for their "rap" today differs little from the rhetoric of the past. Or as Adler (1994:46) summarizes, "... popular and even scholarly descriptions of the modern urban underclass often bear striking similarities to late nineteenth century descriptions of the 'dangerous class'". As Gaucher (1982) pointed out fifteen years ago, "... rather than accepting the ruling class and its petit-bourgeois ideologues' depiction of the working class as degenerate, one must come to terms with the fact that it is 'lower class' life and social relations that are under attack in a most general way."

The right, led by the Gingrich, continues to redefine America in more and more exclusive and down right mean terms. *Wall Street Journal* editor David Frumm (1994), in his new book *Dead Right*, observes that the republican philosophy is moving toward a new kind of isolationist "nationalism". He foresees an aggressive GOP bashing immigrants, decrying affirmative action, and more vengeful in military

and criminal justice spending. To be forthright then in their intentions, they, as well, should openly resurrect the term of the dangerous class. At least then we will all be using the same terminology, if viewing it from different perspectives. This would be better and more honest than using the current round of code words for classicism and racism, such as criminal and gang member, welfare cheat and unwed mother, and illegal alien and foreigner.

All we need now is for Rush Limbaugh to slap his desk and in the same breath lament the predations of feminazis and the dangerous class, as he plops his oversized and underworked rump into his overstuffed and overworked chair -- all to the sycophantic applause of a largely white ("I've got mine"), conservative ("and I'm going to keep it"), applause-metered studio audience.

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