Moral Alarms

A Cycle of Outrage. America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s. JAMES GILBERT. Oxford University Press, New York, 1986. viii, 258 pp. + plates. $19.95.

Unless we understand how society defines, studies, measures, and publicizes its ills, we don't know much about our "social problems" and certainly not enough to solve them. This insight informs historian James Gilbert's savvy and authoritative description of America's reaction to juvenile delinquency over the decade of the 1950's. He implies that America would have had to invent something like an epidemic of juvenile delinquency regardless of what kids were actually up to during those postwar years. By studying the social construction of this delinquency crisis, Gilbert helps us understand the society that created it.

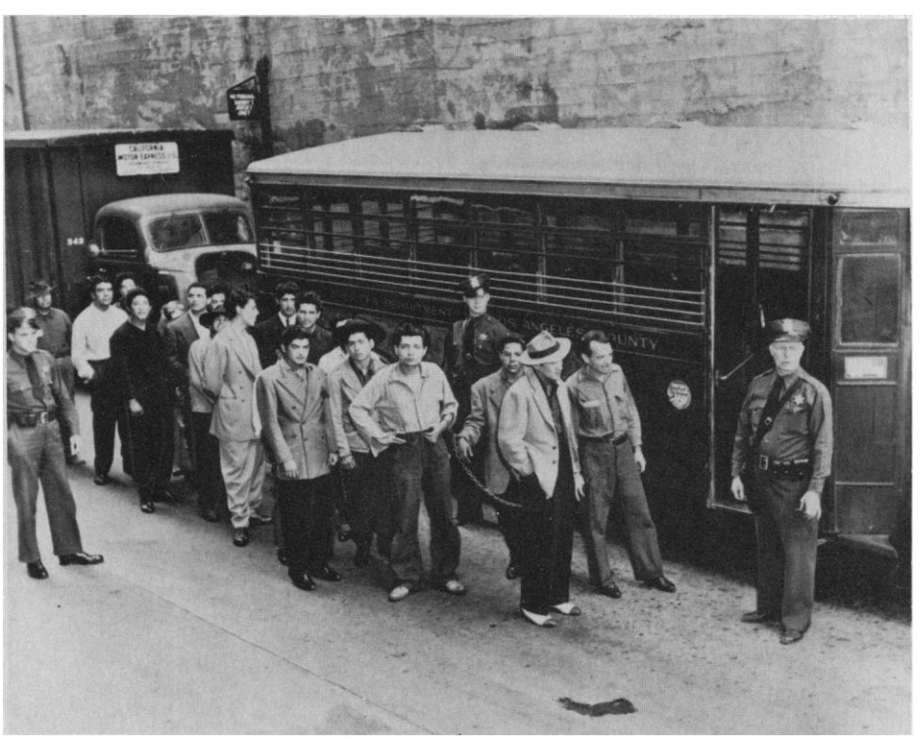
Gilbert fruitfully speculates that "youth," at least since the time *that* social category was invented, embody the social changes of their time. This does not just mean that young people innovate in order to adjust to a changing world. More profoundly, the young display in their behavior the changes that have already affected their parents' lives. Thus the comic books, rock and roll, and car mania that "gripped" teens in the 1950's were reflections (perhaps exaggerated and stylized) of changes more generally under way. Gilbert points out that despite our stereotypes of the '50's as a reactionary time, great liberalization was occurring in civil rights and in an intensified consumerism celebrating all sorts of new life possibilities, not the least of which was that presented by the family car with its chromed design extravaganzas, oversize engines, and joys of the open road. Just as Kenneth Keniston's and Richard Flacks's surveys told us that 1960's activists were conforming to their parents' expectations rather than rebelling against them, '50's boys with hot rods, T-shirts, and Levi jeans (the radical-wear of the day) were rather consistent with their families' enthusiasm for a more informal and "fun" life-style.

Regardless of this resonance with the emerging ethos of the day, the postwar displays of youth culture were confounded with delinquency. They were taken as signals of moral and behavioral decay. White House conferences were held, congressional investigations launched, and new federal agencies created. The National Science Foundation was persuaded to begin funding social science research for the first time in hopes that a cure would be found. Gilbert documents the "cycle" in which news reporters, ambitious politicians, law enforcement officials (J. Edgar Hoover in the lead), and child psychologists recounted shocking incidents of youth crime, immoral sexual activity, and antisocial behavior in the schools. The "moral entrepreneurs" (Howard Becker's apt phrase) were at work, trying to police the culture. Gilbert contrasts their alarmist assertions with the official crime statistics, which, even at the time, could not support the assertions. He is able to show, sometimes in quite precise quantitative terms, that there was little connection between the level of outrage (as represented for example by the number of stories about delinquency in major news media) and any real evidence of increased crime on the part of young people.

If delinquency increased at all over the period, it was likely in the realm of "status crime." Status crimes are acts defined as criminal because of the kind of person who commits them, not because the acts are proscribed generally. Murder is not a status crime, but underage drinking or driving is. Given the widespread social approval of both drinking and driving in the 1950's but the legal separation of kids from both, certain kinds of youthful lawbreaking had to have gone up almost by definition. It's a wonder the youth crime wave was not sufficiently robust to shout louder through the statistics.

Although there was some informed and sensitive analysis of these events at the time (primarily from academic sociologists and staff at the federal Children's Bureau), the outrage was persistent and plausibly quite damaging. The preoccupation with delinquency kept other, more meaningful, issues off the public agenda and shaped the careers of bureaucrats and intellectuals who molded their public statements to be relevant to the celebrated moral crisis. In the most prominent instance, Fredric Wertham, a liberal psychologist whose work had been instrumental in the Supreme Court's ban on school segregation, became so popular as a comic book critic that his other priorities (and overall social viewpoint) were submerged.

Adults were particularly distressed by any perceived threat to the idealized sexual-social mode of prewar middle-class family life. Youth culture's assimilation of working-class motifs (in "hip" language, dress, and sexual displays) provoked anxiety. The ris-



"Zoot Suiters Arrested in Los Angeles in 1943. Days of anti-zoot-suit riots by off-duty servicemen were one of several events that led to Senate investigations of juvenile delinquency during World War II." It was the zoot suiters, not the servicemen, who were investigated. [From *A Cycle of Outrage*; NAACP Collection, Library of Congress]

"Fredric Wertham, leading critic of comic books. Wertham points to one of the many forms of violent and anti-social images that he believed inspired juvenile crime." [From *A Cycle of Outrage*; collection of Mrs. Fredric Wertham]

ing rate of teen marriage (an authentic trend) was portrayed as a serious social problem, requiring education or punishment, depending upon the commentator's ideology regarding such matters. In still another effort to "discipline the family," parents were held criminally responsible for the transgressions of their children, with some fathers going to jail as a result. Mothers in the work force (whose employment had initially been prompted by wartime labor needs) were portrayed as another cause of delinquency; kids would return to normal if their mothers stayed home.

The moral entrepreneurs were obsessed with mass media. Comic books led not only to juvenile delinquency but also to physiologically fixed learning disabilities. Wertham (a neurologist as well as psychologist) claimed that comics caused "linear dyslexia"—a malfunction induced by repeated vertical eye movement from characters' faces to the bubbles drawn above their heads. Movies also caught their share of the blame. In response to censorship boards, the moviemakers established internal procedures in which even initial conceptions of film projects had first to be cleared with the studio thought police. The results were the hundreds of insipid films in which crime never paid and (recall the Doris Day–Rock Hudson prototype) adultery, homosexuality, and reproductive organs did not even exist. Films that were eventually to help Hollywood break out of the puritanical mold, such as *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, brought new storms of protest.

Gilbert gives us more than a good laugh at our silly past; he clues us in to why it happened and why it continues to happen. If youth are the messengers, it's always a temptation to kill them and their media. We kill not with the dispassion of the hangman but with the ambivalent intensity that comes from seeing in the other's behavior the desires we know in ourselves. Today's outraging against rock lyrics, video arcades, porn, single black parents, purple hair, and dirty talk repeats, with some fidelity, the patterns of a generation ago. The experts and intellectuals are there, the news media enthuse, politicians know their bandwagon, and the cops (along with many mothers and, this time, some of the feminists) want their retribution and blood. The kids, the kooks, the artists, and the panderers strive to fend them off. As Gilbert wisely concludes about the post-'50's years, "the struggles over American culture, with its divisions of class, age, ethnicity, region and race poured into new channels." Like the beat, the cycle goes on.

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Ecological Interactions

Les Fourmis et les Plantes. Un Exemple de Coévolution. PIERRE JOLIVET. Société Nouvelle des Editions Boubée, Paris, 1986. 254 pp., illus. F230.

The tendency for scientific literature to be partitioned by language as well as by research field is hard to overcome. The author of this work on the interactions between ants and plants is therefore to be congratulated for covering the English, French, and German literature equally. Written in French, his book is lucid and straightforward enough to be comprehensible to an English speaker with only rudimentary knowledge of French, such as myself, and is likely to be the standard reference work on ant-plant interactions for some time.

The main part of the book is a detailed compendium of ant-plant associations catalogued by geographic region and by plant family. This is sandwiched between an introductory section that concentrates on the classification of ant-plant interactions and a concluding section covering evolutionary aspects, miscellaneous research problems, and the agricultural significance of ant-plant interactions. Jolivet's own opinions and observations, incorporated throughout the book, contribute substantially to its value, as do the 33 color plates illustrating relevant features of representative plant species. Two themes that recur throughout the book are the suggestion that the mere presence of distasteful ants on a potential food plant, rather than active aggression, may be sufficient to deter mammals and herbivores, and that ant defense can be valuable to the plant even if limited or only partially successful.

Viewed by some early naturalists as little more than a curiosity, ant-plant interactions and higher-order interactions involving ants and plants are now appreciated as economically as well as academically significant. For the theoretical ecologist, they provide a manipulable tool for the analysis of ecosystem structure and coevolutionary pathways. For the agronomist and horticulturist, particularly in the tropics, they can be a significant help or a major problem.

Leaf-cutting ants in tropical tree crops such as citrus, coffee, and cocoa, seed-harvesting ants in temperate and semiarid pastures and in mine rehabilitation areas, and imported fire ants in the continental United States all cause millions of dollars' damage annually and support a substantial pesticide industry in consequence. Even more serious is the transmission of plant diseases by sap-sucking Homoptera tended and transported by ants. A fungal epidemic that devastated Sri Lankan coffee plantations, for example, was spread by a sap-sucking scale insect tended and transported by ants, and ant-tended Homoptera are also implicated in the transmission of viral diseases of cocoa, bananas, and other tropical crops. On the positive side, the manipulation of competitive ant mosaics and deliberate nest transplants of aggressive ant species can form a useful component in the control of crop herbivores.

After such a painstaking and useful review, the book's conclusions, though unarguable, are rather weak and generalized: basically, that ant-plant interactions seem to provide a good example (or examples) of coevolution and that ants should be incorporated usefully in integrated pest control rather than destroyed indiscriminately with pesticides.

In my own opinion, there are four critical directions for future research: (i) The biochemistry of ant-plant and ant-plant-arthropod interactions, particularly the chemistry of communication; there have been a number of recent studies in this area, but the scope—and the potential economic benefits—are enormous. (ii) Experimental manipulation of plant morphology; excision of nectaries and replacement with droplets containing nectar components (sugars, amino acids, and so on) in various combinations are among the many possibilities. (iii) Ex-