

Bullying and Sustainability

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Sustainability – as typically defined – is about organising our economy so that it supports employment and output in ways that do not irreversibly damage the life-giving capacity of nature and natural systems. But it is also about organising our societies so that we can limit the extent and duration of bullying.

Bullying is where power is exercised arbitrarily to damage others physically, emotionally or financially, unrelated to any specific culpability of its victims. Its practitioners have a wide armoury, including verbal, visual and written taunting, sarcasm, beating, patronisation, isolation and ostracisation, demonisation, spreading of rumours, half-truths and images, arbitrary arrest, and mobilising technologies to support their malign designs, including most recently the internet.

In its extreme, bullying becomes murderous.

There is an extensive literature on bullying, its causes and remedies. The following characteristics generally apply:

- Unchallenged and unchecked, bullying grows in scale and obnoxiousness, and becomes increasingly difficult to control.
- A lack of independent scrutiny and accountability of those with responsibility for the most vulnerable.
- In the right setting – official or quasi-official authorisation, cultural and popular validation – most of us have the potential to be bullies, and will be so given the opportunity. The darkness is within us all, as epitomised in William Golding's 'Lord of the Flies'.
- Where a society gives moral or official sanction and protection to the bullies, it becomes pathological, and in the end is likely to undermine the society.
- Bullying can occur at all ages and stages of life, from babyhood to antiquity, in families, business, clubs, nursing homes, schools, the army and prisons.
- We all can be, and typically are, from time to time bullied. For most, it's a transient experience from which we escape, but for some it is a lifetime of tension and despair which can result in self-destruction.
- Difference – in race, sex, size, style, appearance, language, income, religion – attracts bullies, and this is especially the case where difference is characteristic of minorities and the vulnerable.
- Bullies are often (but not always) male. One thinks here of Mo Ibrahim, who believes that women are the real hope for Africa on the basis that 'they are more honest with money and they don't go around murdering people'.
- Wars and conflict provide the pretext. In 'Memories of the Future', Charles Simic, makes the case:

*There are one or two murderers in any crowd.
They do not suspect their destinies yet.
Wars are started to make it easy for them
To kill a woman pushing a baby carriage.*

- When loyalty to an ideology – fascism, communism, capitalism, nationalism – or to a religion becomes a universal obligation and the test of goodness and patriotism, bullying becomes endemic.

Examples that support these propositions abound. The toxic combination of Hitler Youth, the Gestapo and the SS, which murdered Jews and destroyed their property in Germany and Austria on November 9th and 10th in 1938 – Kristallnacht – typified the quintessence of officially sanctioned bullies throughout the ages, and presaged the holocaust.

Mao's Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) closed schools, and the mass mobilisation of youth in the Red Guard units denounced and persecuted Chinese teachers and intellectuals; engaged in widespread book burnings; facilitated mass relocations, and were responsible for up to a million deaths.

The Ku Klux Klan in the US included lynching of African Americans in their malign repertoire.

The Great Famine of 1845 in Ireland was deeper and more disastrous in its consequences because of ideological bullying: the adherence by the authorities to the view that to interfere in the workings of the market would make matters worse.

Ireland also provides more recent examples of systematic bullying. The Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (the 'Ryan Commission') reported in May 2009 on the extent and effects of abuse of children from 1936 onwards in the network of 60 residential reformatories (for young criminals) and Industrial Schools (for destitute and orphaned children) – now closed – operated by Catholic Church orders, funded and supervised by the Irish Department of Education.

The report concludes that 'a climate of fear, created by pervasive, excessive and arbitrary punishment, permeated most of the institutions and all those run for boys. Children lived with the daily terror of not knowing where the next beating was coming from. Sexual abuse was endemic in boys' institutions. There was constant criticism and verbal abuse and children were told they were worthless. The system of inspection by the Department was fundamentally flawed and incapable of being effective'.

In November 2009, a second report was released. The Dublin Archdiocese Commission of Investigation (the 'Murphy Commission') reported on the handling of clerical sexual abuse in the Archdiocese of Dublin over the period 1975 to 2004, using a sample of 46 priests to provide the evidence.

The Report concludes that 'the main preoccupations of the Dublin Archdiocese in dealing with cases of child sexual abuse, at least until the mid 1990s, were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities. The Archdiocese did not implement its own canon law rules and did its best to avoid any application of the law of the State'.

These reports did not address in any substantive way how this was allowed to happen, but it is likely that it was a product in part of the inter-related, enabling characteristics noted above. The victims were mainly from deprived backgrounds with no voice; there was no independent scrutiny, and this was in part because – for historic reasons – the Church had credibility with most of the public as a defender of their interests and as a safe haven for the deprived.

Ireland was poor, and poverty is associated with a lack of formal education, which engenders lack of confidence and an unwillingness to challenge received wisdom. Unchallenged, sadism grew and became pervasive. In the case of the Church, what is clear now is that – with a few notable exceptions – there was very poor quality of leadership; loyalty to the institution consistently trumped loyalty to the tenets of the Sermon on the Mount, and the heads that rose above the parapet and questioned the status quo were cut off.

Fr. Kevin Hegarty was moved out of his job as editor of the Catholic Church magazine, *Intercom*, and moved back as a curate to Kilmore Erris in the west of Ireland after commissioning articles on subjects like clerical sex abuse, women priests and compulsory celibacy. When he was appointed to the job of editor in 1991, he was regarded as one of the rising intellectual forces in the Irish Catholic Church. He was informed by the bishops that articles in the magazine were 'bad for morale'.

Albeit very belatedly, and too late to help most of the victims, we have finally and rigorously documented what happened. We now need to devote time in a measured way to exploring why, and in particular why most of us chose not to know. And then put in place systems and cultural reflexes that set limits on bullying – not just in institutions, but in all walks of life.

We cannot prevent it, because the impulse to bully is part of the human condition. But we can choke it off. A society that abhors bullying and successfully limits its growth is a society that is truly sustainable.