

While this must be demoralising if you have romped home with four As at A-level, what if you've worked your arse off and still failed? What if you are one of the 45,000 16-year-olds who leave school each year functionally illiterate and/or innumerate? Maybe this helps explain why we have a growing population of Neets – people aged 16-24 and “not in education, employment or training”. If you've failed in a system that is characterised as easy, why would you stay on?

The exam system is only one part of the problem. (And if it is getting easier, could we please just sort that out, rather than forcing children through it each year, and then laughing at them in the event that they excel?) Attitudes which would rightly be unacceptable when it comes to any other group go unquestioned when expressed towards teenagers. Shopkeepers stick up notes saying that no more than two teenagers are allowed in at a time; if they wish to enforce this, they can buy a Mosquito alarm, an “ultrasonic teenage deterrent”, whose high-pitched squeal can be heard only by those under 20. Never mind that this throbbing whistle affects all children,

miscreants or not – including babies and, in one reported case in Ireland, an autistic five-year-old. When the Children's Commissioner for England, Albert Aynsley-Green, called for the alarms to be banned, there was uproar at this attack on our right to protect ourselves from “hoodies”.

Teenagers are characterised as drunken louts, and when the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, notes that “fewer young people are drinking, but those who are drinking are drinking more”, this suggestion that a minority – not the majority – of kids has a serious problem goes unreported. Yes, some teenagers are unruly, even violent – there are unruly, violent individuals in every social group – but rather than single out those actually causing trouble, we lump them all together.

As we look for ways to protect ourselves from children and teenagers, we seem to do very little to protect them. Children are the only group that can be smacked with impunity (so long as it is their parents who smack them, and there is no noticeable bruising), which is ironic considering that, physically and mentally, children are clearly among the most vulnerable social categories.

According to Home Office statistics, more than one-third of all rapes recorded by the police (36 per cent) are committed against children under 16, and the situation doesn't look up in those final teenage years. Young women aged 16-19 are four times as likely to be raped as women in general.

Bullying remains rife, with children often subject to the sort of treatment from a vicious minority of schoolmates that would result in huge redress if it happened in the workplace. And in February, it was reported that the child murder rate has increased by a third.

The problem is that, rather than looking at this situation and noting that our children need more protection, the general response seems to be that we need protecting from *them*. This leaves the good, law-abiding majority of teenagers completely cut off and cast adrift, because whatever they do – whether they excel in the classroom, work hard or not, drink or not, have unprotected sex or not, make clear, moral decisions or not – they are characterised as lazy, stupid and downright dangerous. I repeat: Who would be a teenager now? ●

## Beliefs

# The real lesson of Easter Island

## Ziauddin Sardar



Ancient cultures have much to teach us. Unfortunately, we still haven't learned how to look at them with unbiased eyes. Our examination of enigmatic ancient monuments, such as the stone figures on the tiny Easter Island, reveals only the predilections and perversity of our own world-view, rather than the reality of the people who produced them.

I call this the Grafton Elliot Smith effect. The great Australian anatomist believed that any sign of sophistication in the ancient world was the product of the Children of the Sun – that is, the Egyptians. Why? Because sophistication, capability, invention, your basic thought and imagination, were rare attributes. The world belonged to the savage primitive and only a few ever rose above that level. In modern times, by overwhelming general agreement, the few boiled down to white Europeans.

While academia has moved on from Smith, the popular imagination has not. It is much more gratifying and soothing to look at ancient cultures from a supremacist self-image.

The Rapanui, the people who colonised Easter Island (Rapa Nui), are the prototype for this phenomenon. They are seen through the constructed lens of what it is to be primitive. Not

only do primitives lack capability and rationality, they also have perverse beliefs and are mired in superstition. What else could one expect these people to do than to destroy their own environment, engage in warfare and cannibalism, and kill themselves off in slavish worship of false gods – whose empty eyes are all that remain?

The story of Rapa Nui is a morality tale of ecological devastation. As promoted by Jared Diamond in his bestseller *Collapse*, this theory has the inhabitants felling their forests to erect enormous, enigmatic stone statues. Without wood to build boats, they were marooned and unable to fish. Finally, cannibalism sealed their fate, thus providing an ecological lesson for us all.

Not a word of this thesis is true. Research by Terry Hunt of the University of Hawaii and Carl Lipo of California State University shows that the people of Rapa Nui did not kill themselves or destroy their environment. What killed their society was rats. The rodents had no predators on the island and its huge palm trees were rat candy. Hunt and Lipo's analysis, published in *Rapa Nui Journal* (21 (2): 85-97, 2007), notes the absence of evidence for either organised warfare or cannibalism. Moreover, the trees were not used to build these large statues. Far from being an example of

ecological collapse, Rapa Nui provides us with the opposite lesson.

So why do we insist on looking at “primitive cultures” in aggressively negative terms? I think we are attracted to the idea of native people doing themselves in for two main reasons. We find it difficult to face our own colonial history – it is not easy to acknowledge that the arrival of western Europeans wiped out numerous indigenous cultures throughout the Americas and Oceania, and sealed their fates subsequently by missionary activities and the slave trade. It is an ugly history we would rather turn away from.

Yet ancient cultures also provide societies responsible for devastating climate change with a contemporary means of guilt replacement – as Diamond's book demonstrates. If the impetus to self-destruct can be located far away and long ago, then it is not something shameful in us, the inheritors of gas-guzzling consumer abundance, based as it is on environmental despoiling and squandering. The more we cannot know about the rationality and sophistication that once was Rapa Nui, the less we have to hold ourselves to account for our present deeds of global excess.

Just what would we do without such primitive fairy tales? ●

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