

# Tiny Criminals

by Titusz Tarnai

Urban junkies, angry ninja joggers, cruel fuckers, almost Banksies, black mr. robot hackers. Cities are crowded by hateful characters unleashing their tragic trajectories, shitting out pain and evil. Criminals? Violators? Outlaws? Sinners? Who are they? Is there such a thing as born bad? Mythologies and belief structures are full of bad deeds. Prometheus has stolen fire from the gods, Apollo has committed numerous accounts of rape, Zeus hardly less, and the Bible tells us that we are born in sin, and night after night we wind up in front of the tele to be enchanted by violence in a safe distance.

In recent scientific explanation models we are confronted with the notion that some individuals carry genes which predispose them to become criminals. Some of us are born bad, while others seem to strive on the constructive side of live. Should we thus indulge in weeding out the bad seeds? Invest in systems of early detection?

Or would it be more appropriate to investigate the elements of transgression as a potential that lies in each and everyone of us? This paper intends to retrace the curriculum of man, man who is born in anxiety, who is thrown in this world unfinished, and who is more or less left alone to carve out his path, to attend to his needs, and invent himself in the pursuit of personal happiness.

Analytic theory has two main points of departure. The first is the maturation from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, the second is the mastering of anxiety through object relations. In both, earliest experiences play a crucial role. The trauma of birth, infantile dependency are presumed universal human experiences which continue to influence our reality through more or less conscious phantasies. Dreaming of becoming powerful, invincible, of defeating real and imaginary adversaries are undercurrents fuelling our day to day actions. Wishing things away, getting hold on other things, being loved and desired make us move. Some with more restraint, more obedient, others more violently, with varying levels of regard for the others. There is an inherited randomness, in the course of which events are impeding on our psyche. Some have to run, some have to fight, each of us is pressed into environmental structures which are conducive to certain modes of behaviour. The one free of sin should throw the first stone.

At this point the counter distinction between wrongdoing and criminal offence has to take place. Both can come about with varying degree of violence accompanying the act. Malignant acts are in any case manifest symptoms of maladjustment, a certain lack of empathic perspective one could say. Children do many things wrong until they learn what is acceptable and what is not. Their challenge is to deal with their anxiety and aggression, developing successful and fruit bearing strategies. To adjust the view onto the nature of criminality, especially juvenile delinquency, it is important to enter the world of infantile psychic life. Psychological theory as much as the penal code agree on the fact that children are not born with the full capabilities of responsibility for their actions and one could ask if a person is anyways ever fully accountable for his actions. The answer of course, for the sake of the maintained cohesion of society, has to be a firm yes.

But only for that particular reason. So if at birth we are just at the beginning of our cognitive assembly line, then at which point does the criminal thought emerge in the young mind? Which must be the environmental circumstances? Or should we rather ask: how does need evolve to greed? Where is the point where disregard for the other becomes pathological? Or punishable?

Allow me for a case example, which I have studied first hand. When I was four, I have buried my sister, under a mountain of toys, which I threw into her crib one by one. Upon questioning, I confessed that I pitied her that she could not play because she was in that cage. When I was five, I, after proposing to play hairdresser, cut off a piece of her hair which everybody admired so dearly, held in onto my head and ran to our mother with pride: look ma how pretty I am, which of course backfired. I ended up with some sort of criminal sentence which I then successfully repressed. Later I stole money from her wallet to bring it to school, straight to the teacher, who was in charge of a kind of kids' bank, we would get stickers, the money would be paid back at the end of the school year. I wanted to have the most stickers. What can I say? They set up the competition, I just wanted to win. The biggest thing I ever stole was a watermelon, and the worst thing that happened to me was ending up at the juvenile court with my best friend. But we were lucky, and got away with community service. Yet, many years later I went back to visit the juvenile court with the adjacent correction facility where I almost ended up. The tiny cells were already abandoned, the names of the last inmates were still on the doors. Exotic names, very few Austrian sounding ones. Is it hereditary? Well my grandfather, a man of high moral integrity, who himself partook in subversive action, quasi a terrorist, in bringing the government down, which now of course is cool, but he not only violated law, but also ruined his career, and was probably happy to have gotten out alive, used to tell me stories of how my father and my uncle would collect guns from the streets, it was time of the revolution, and stash it at home, how they would place ammunition on the rails, and so when trains would pass, there would be a firework of random bullets. My father continued the story. The gang of boys would steal scrap metal from the police yard and sell it off and with the money they would buy a ping pong table. Probably there was more to it. We all were lucky enough to get away with it, and most importantly lucky enough not to resort to beastly acts.

Apropos, what keeps mankind alive? As we tend to focus on shortcomings and trajectories of individual cases, it might prove fruitful to amend the investigation with a macroscopic picture. According to Tom Waits, what keeps mankind alive,

The fact that millions are daily tortured  
Stifled, punished, silenced and oppressed  
Mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance  
In keeping its humanity repressed  
And for once you must try not to shriek the facts  
Mankind is kept alive by bestial acts.

In his *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) Freud says on p. 89: It (aggression) is at the bottom of all the relations of affection and love between human beings possibly with the single exception of that of a mother to her male child.

Which of course is far from reciprocal. The young son has an array of issues to deal with. Rank in his book *The Trauma of Birth* sets out the argument that the main task of childhood is the overcoming of the aforementioned trauma, mastering the anxieties that are awakened by the primal separation.

If we look at the psychical development of the child from this point of view, it may be said that the human being needs many years—namely, his whole childhood—in which to overcome this first intensive trauma in an approximately normal way. Every child has anxiety, and from the standpoint of the average healthy adult, one can, with a certain amount of justification, designate the childhood of individuals as their normal neurosis. Only this may continue into adult life in the case of certain individuals, the neurotics, who therefore remain infantile or are called infantile.

Lieberman in the foreword of the book sums up:

We are violently expelled from uterine bliss, threatened with asphyxia along the way. Our lives are dedicated to finding that bliss again, by adapting the world-as-mother to ourselves or vice versa. We repress the birth trauma and the prenatal memory of bliss, but play out the representations of both in every aspect of living and dying. We are anchored to life in large part by (literally) breathtaking anxiety that prevents regression to a state of fetal mindlessness, on the one hand, or suicide, on the other. Life is hard, and the periods before and afterwards are infinitely better (...) but we are trapped in our human status, half animal, half divine.

In that process, the infant gradually learns to separate himself from his surroundings. Using infantile phantasies, he begins to draw up preliminary borders, and to develop tentative hypotheses. He learns to be distinct from his mother as he finds himself in a state of dependency. Thus he is informed of the pain of abandonment, to which he is still not equipped to give words. He learns to endure, to hope, to hate and then to love. The mother comes to being as his first drug dealer. The pleasure of sucking, of being nurtured is contrasted by the times of exasperating withdrawal. His anxiety to be destroyed he learns to project outwards, thus he learns of the nature of revenge. Now he wishes to destroy. From the clinical observations of Klein we learn from the temporal coincidence of teething and the state of maximum sadism. As the little one learns the destructive capabilities of his little sharp teeth, he immediately begins to deploy them in his first sadistic attacks. Now he can return some of the pain he has so far was bound to endure.

It is the mother whose function at this stage is to assure the child of the power of love by providing the pleasurable contents of her own body and thus to discourage the

attacks upon her mother's breast as the first object of her destructive impulses and which contained phantasies of destroying the breast by biting it to pieces and dirtying, poisoning, and burning it by means of her excreta. (Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, p. 314-15)

The outcome of this frail bodily dialogue is the entering the oedipal conflict, in which the child widens his scope from the dyadic relationship to the mother to recognise the presence of his father, giving rise to a renewed flood of emotions, on the bottom of which the anxiety of separation is looming, and which now is fuelling the notorious infantile phantasy life. Theft is here only the smallest of a variety of mental hate crimes. And how does the mother react? She sings a song:

This may come, this may come as some surprise  
But I miss you  
I could see through all of your lies  
And still I miss you  
He takes her love, but it doesn't feel like mine  
He tastes her kiss, her kisses are not wine, they're not mine  
He takes, but surely she can't give what I'm feeling now  
She takes, but surely she doesn't know how  
Is it a crime  
Is it a crime  
That I still want you  
And I want you to want me too  
My love is wider, wider than Victoria Lake  
My love is taller, taller than the Empire State  
It dives and it jumps and it ripples like the deepest ocean  
I can't give you more than that, surely you want me back

She will continue to sing this song, long after he is married.

But we are not there yet.

Following the theories of infantile sexuality, which is based on the assumption that all pleasurable sensations experienced in the early life: oral pleasure of sucking, of biting, the pleasure of watching, of being touched, of releasing bodily substances, are dissociated streams which in later development are organised under the regime of genital gratification, children experience their surroundings in a delirious and disorganised stream of events which are amalgamated into a magical-mythical narrative. They begin to attach their affections to preliminary objects in their proximate surroundings. Barely able to speak, the world of rational causality, or even moral codes, are still far down the road. A famous case of an obsessional neurotic, presented by Freud as Wolf-Man involves the retracing of the early life of a man, who as revealed in analysis, was seduced by his sister when he was age three. In the course of the seduction he in a sudden moment was exposed to the sensations obtainable by having his penis being touched. This event, which of course, as in most of the cases, went unnoticed by the parents, has had the effect that he began to seek the repetition of the event. He approached his sister and was rebuffed, which led him to approach his next love object, his nanny called Nanya. He began exposing his penis in front of her, naively expecting her to touch him. Nanya did the worst thing possible. She threatened him with castration: Naughty boys who do such things, end up with a wound there.

He said that he gave up masturbating very soon after his Nanya's refusal and threat. His sexual life, therefore, which was beginning to come under the sway of the genital zone, gave way before an external obstacle, and was thrown back by its influence into an earlier phase of pregenital organization. As a result of the suppression of his masturbation, the boy's sexual life took on a sadistic-anal character. He became irritable and a tormentor, and gratified himself in this way at the expense of animals and humans. His principal object was his beloved Nanya, and he knew how to torment her till she burst into tears. In this way he revenged himself on her for the refusal he had met with, and at the same time gratified his sexual lust in the form which corresponded to his present regressive phase. He began to be cruel to small animals, to catch flies and pull off their wings, to crush beetles underfoot; in his imagination he liked beating large animals (horses) as well.

(...)

I do not know how often parents and educators, faced with inexplicable naughtiness on the part of a child, might not have occasion to bear this typical state of affairs in mind. A child who behaves in this unmanageable way is making a confession and trying to provoke punishment. He hopes for a beating as a simultaneous means of setting his sense of guilt at rest and of satisfying his masochistic sexual trend.

What could be observed from outside, was that the boy was developing a destructive behaviour. His outbursts of anger, his rage and violence were directed against his environment, and one would come to the conclusion, that the boy was going down the road, likely to end up as an antisocial individual. He violently was searching for a sort of satisfaction, the nature of which remained hidden to his family. Inside, his narrative regarding the order of the world was shifted, the meaning of things remained entangled and unmediated. He obsessively was bound to return to his original trauma, blocking the path of healthy adjustment. Haunted by past experiences, the ego function of secondary evaluation, which has the role to bind together the discrete experiences to a life story, was severely disturbed by anxiety and its derivatives: guilt, persecutive fears and anger. He so to speak got stuck on his issue, and was acting out his drama in a disturbing way. Regard for the other, symbol formation, could not develop, his ability to take in the norms of society was impeded. If an engine lacks cooling water, it is bound to run hot, and it would need an intervention from the outside to return to the reality principle.

Viktor Frankl states that

In between stimulus and response is choice.

Yet, if the capacity to form choices is damaged, as it is on a certain level in the case of the neurotic and definitively in a more severe form in the case of the psychotic, how could the individual, who as a single bodily entity is represented through his actions, be held accountable? When psychic reality runs against the demands of society, the formation of free will appears incapacitated, the individual acts upon his flooding and painful emotions. His main task will be to manage the pain, to attain those forms of pleasure which promise an immediate relief. As for the most of us the first narcotic was the mother's milk, and the first pain was the withdrawal of the same, the role of the mother continues to be to take in the toxic psychic products of the infant and through love cleans those and return the refined and repaired contents to the developing child. He will learn to endure, to accept, to wait, to restrain himself, with the confidence that in the end love

is stronger, and that he is safe. Of course it falls short to blame the mother for all misdemeanour in the same way as to assume that some inherit criminal genes, but what is important to understand that there are no short recipes or answers as to how or why a person has turned to destructive attitudes in his life, and that it takes a lot of resources to reconstruct the trajectory of a crooked life, much more than society is willing or able to afford.

But does not the healthiest person carry traces of respective criminality in his persona? As we all have passed the trauma of separation and abandonment which we indiscriminately have met with urges of retaliation, passing paranoid and sadistic phases in development, these experiences are still at play in the vaults of the unconscious, waiting for their chance. There is evidence scattered all over our cultural artefacts that the coming into being of society as such is rooted in a capital crime. Religious sacrifice, as such, is nothing else than ritualised murder, which is the reenactment of a primordial crime, with its aim to unite us in collective guilt. We have killed, we have killed our alpha father, and now we promise to live together as brothers. And we now have built a system of regulations and punishments, have adopted the ideal of respect for the other as a defence system and thus we are bound to punish the transgressors, who remind us of our historic guilt. Yet everyday we continue to dream about ridding ourselves the others: the boss, the father, the Vor-fahre, the one driving in front of us, a bit too slow maybe, he who is obstructing our path.

Schließlich besteht ja das Ding nur durch seine Grenzen und damit durch einen gewissermaßen feindseligen Akt gegen seine Umgebung; ohne den Papst hätte es keinen Luther gegeben und ohne die Heiden keinen Papst, darum ist nicht von der Hand zu weisen, daß die tiefste Anlehnung eines Menschen an seinen Mitmenschen in dessen Ablehnung besteht. (Musil, Der Mann Ohne Eigenschaften, p. 29)

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