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BAD SOCIETY

*What's wrong with the United Kingdom
- and how to fix it.*

Volume I

Bad Education

“The proper aim of government and the law
is the greatest happiness of the greatest number.”

Cesare Beccaria (1738-1794)

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Introduction

The Nazi leader, Josef Goebbels, said you can rule the world with propaganda. And it's true. It's amazing how easily we can be persuaded if constantly bombarded by the same messages - even when these messages contradict the evidence of our own senses.

I witnessed an example of this one Saturday morning in New York City. The night before, my friend Lisa and I had arranged to go to a weekend cottage upstate. I rose early, packed a few things, and phoned to let her know I was coming to pick her up. Our plan was to get a taxi to Grand Central Station, from where we'd take a train. To my surprise, Lisa said: "Are you nuts? We can't leave now. There's a hurricane! They've cancelled all the trains!"

I looked out my window. It was a perfectly normal day. "Where's the hurricane?"

"Turn on the News!"

I turned on the TV and, sure enough, presenters were hysterically reporting a massively destructive hurricane. But I could see no sign of it. I urged Lisa to ignore the TV, but she held firm. There was no point in even *thinking* of leaving the city. There were *no* taxis. The trains were cancelled. *It wasn't safe to go out!*

I left, hailed a cab, and, before long, arrived at Lisa's building. She was astonished to find me at her door. How had I gotten a cab? It took a lot of persistence, but I finally persuaded her to change her mind and come out.

When she emerged, she was dressed, head-to-toe, in gear suitable for an arctic blizzard, her face cocooned in woollen scarves. All I could see were her eyes, darting around in fear.

The taxi took us to Grand Central where we purchased our tickets, got on the train and enjoyed an uneventful journey to our destination. It was a bit windy, but there was no sign of a storm, let alone a hurricane. Despite this, when we reached our stop, Lisa, her face red and accusing, said: "I don't know *why* I let you do this! We could have been killed!"

The power of the media is awesome.

In 1999, I returned to England after ten years in Los Angeles, where I'd been earning my living writing film scripts. Writing American movies, which are usually about 'doing the right thing', was weird because 'doing the right thing' was not something the people around me generally thought much about. As a film-author, I was a propagandist. This didn't make me feel cool. Writers don't like to produce "spin", they feel much better when they're identifying and expressing truth.

The word "spin" comes from Madison Avenue, the US advertising industry, and means 'to distort the truth in order to sell a product'. It's at the heart of American culture. In fact, it's become so embedded in American life that it's now acceptable to put on an act to your colleagues, your friends, your loved-ones, even yourself. This high spin-tolerance is partly a consequence of America's 'salesman culture'¹, and partly a product of American history - a history of constantly erased societies.

Honesty comes from morality. What is morality? Morality is a set of rules which people agree to follow so they can live in a decent, coherent and supportive society. But historically, in the United States, whenever a society began to form, it was erased by a new wave of immigration or a sudden lurch in economic forces. As a result, the common experience of most Americans is: *morality doesn't deliver*. There's only one thing you can positively rely on and that's self-interest. America's belief in self-interest finds its rationale in the philosophy of monetarism - and monetarism can certainly produce wealth. But monetarism does not provide what Americans crave most: a decent, cohesive and supportive society.

Like a starving man dreams of food, Americans dream of 'America' - a democratic, egalitarian nation where most folks are 'good guys' and anyone can be President. This American Dream is worshipped, like a deity, in schools, colleges, the media and the movies. But no-one really believes in it. It's a fantasy which keeps up morale, and soothes the aching, unmet need for society.

¹ This theme is explored in Arthur Kopit's film *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (adapted by Alan Rudolph and Robert Altman).
See also: *Irresistible Empire* by Victoria de Grazia. (Belknap Press).

Ninety-five per cent of Americans never leave the US, so they assume their egocentric way of life (with its compensatory 'dream'), is the only way to live. The minority who venture abroad and encounter authentic societies with functioning moralities, are deeply sceptical. Are these people for real? What's the scam?

When I returned to London after ten years in L.A., I was taken aback by how Americanised the city had become. Kids were listening to gangsta rap and wearing hip-hop fashions derived from US penitentiaries; British companies had adopted US-style call centres and automated voice-systems; universities and lawyers were advertising on TV; newspapers and magazines were full of US-style celebrity worship; there was a Starbucks on every corner, and the air was full of spin. This was very disturbing.

But even more disturbing was how much Britain's quality of life had declined. This first hit me with the railways, which had been privatised while I was away. People had traditionally moaned about the trains, and they were moaning still, but now with limp and exhausted voices. The deterioration of the railways, combined with steep fare increases² and relentless spin that the railways were improving, seemed to have extinguished all hope.

The next thing which hit me was the spooky absence of police. Where were the London bobbies? Then my brain was pulverised by a siren. What was it? A nuclear attack? No, a police-car. The police, it turned out, were no longer on the streets but in fast cars with Five-O sirens, accelerating through red lights and shattering speed limits. Some were even wearing dark-glasses, body-armour and toting guns.

Another shock was the collapse of our once-proud National Health Service: opticians were now fee-paying, dentists were fee-paying, and doctors had become impersonal apparatchiks who examined a computer screen instead of you, and no longer did home-visits. I noticed with dismay that most of the small, friendly hospitals had gone. My favourite, Queen Charlotte's, where my sister had her babies, was now the headquarters of a mobile phone company. In the mega-hospitals - more like airports than

² In 1989 a return ticket between Manchester and London cost £37. Adjusting for inflation, the journey in 2005, would cost about £99. But the price was £202.

hospitals - the good-humoured, 'have a cup of tea' atmosphere of the National Health Service had entirely disappeared. Gone too were the erect, flamboyant doctors, the bustling, competent matrons, the wonderful British nurses. And again there was the omnipresent propaganda. Billions were being poured into the NHS - over eighty billion pounds of taxpayers' money a year³. Healthcare was improving. It was definitely improving!

So why was it so much worse?

Another trauma was the cost of housing. When I left London in 1989 I almost bought a one-bedroom flat for £47,000 but didn't because it was too expensive. Ten years later this same flat (which, allowing for inflation should have cost no more than £75,000) was priced at £205,000 - complete with spin that this was 'affordable'! More than anything, it was this ubiquitous spin - this bullshit - which troubled me. The United Kingdom, traditionally a nation of understatement, had 'gone American'.

One example of this was the case for war in Iraq. In 1998, weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who, together with his UN inspection teams, Israeli intelligence, *and* the CIA, spent seven long years combing Iraq for illegal weapons, reported that Iraq was "fundamentally disarmed"⁴ Iraq had *no* nuclear capability, *no* long-range missiles, *no* chemical weapons and was very unlikely to have any biological weapons. This was made public. Moreover, shortly before the Iraq invasion, Hans Blix, head of the UN weapons inspectorate, declared: "One cannot say there is compelling evidence (of weapons of mass destruction). Iraq is guilty only of small infractions."⁵ Yet our government insisted that Iraq had weapons so fearsome they could destroy our bases in Cyprus in forty-five minutes! Why did people believe this? Spin. Propaganda. As Joseph Levine once said: "You can fool all the people all the time if the advertising is right and the budget is big enough." The power of the media is awesome.

³ £87 billion in 2005 - which is 70% of what we pay in income tax. *This Year's NHS bill is £87bn* - by Jo Revill. The Observer. 11 December 2005.

⁴ "90-95% of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction capability has been verifiably eliminated" (Page 23. *War On Iraq* William Rivers Pitt. Profile Books.)

⁵ Report to United Nations, May 2003.

What prompted me to write this book was alarm at how rapidly Britain had degenerated during the ten years I'd been away. Public services had declined, the cost of living had soared, the streets were lawless, crack cocaine was rife, and there was an epidemic of mental illness. Everywhere I looked, people were stressed-out, unhappy and time-poor. Why was this happening? Why was Britain falling apart?

When I started planning to write about this, I was daunted to say the least. To identify what was wrong, I had to first understand British society; no easy task given our society is so complicated, with every part affecting every other part. But then I found the key. If you look at our state institutions and ask: 'what purpose do they serve?', the internal dynamics become revealed. Our problems are primarily caused by the way our institutions function. As I intend to show, they are all well past their sell-by date. Many of them have hardly changed since they were first set up - some as long ago as the 12th century.

UK business practice, for example, is practically unchanged since the Companies Act of 1862, which established limited liability companies with autocratic directors and serf-like shareholders. In 1862, business conventions were modelled, as you'd expect, on the class conventions of the time. And they're still that way today. This is why the managing directors of big firms are rewarded with large bonuses when sacked for poor management, and why the directors of shareholder-owned companies are not penalised for hiding information from their shareholders - such as they've blown the pension fund.

The business practices of other Western nations have, in most cases, evolved to respond to changing conditions. In the US, for instance, their Freedom of Information Act requires corporate managers to keep shareholders fully informed, and corporate decisions cannot be made without a quorum of fifty people. Presently, in the UK, a major corporate decision can be made with a quorum of *only two* people, and there's no obligation for these two to inform the shareholders!

While our cultural colonisation by America is profoundly destructive, it might be beneficial to adopt some of America's business practices. You may protest that the scandals of Enron and Worldcom show American business to be corrupt and dishonest - as indeed it can be. But, in reality,

these scandals demonstrate the effectiveness of the US legal system, which has a strength and independence we in Britain can only dream about.

In Germany, where business rules were reformed after World War II, companies have *two* boards: a board of directors and a board of shareholders. So everyone knows what's going on. When people have suggested this sensible practice be adopted in Britain, the 'powers-that-be' have accused them of being communists!

The Twentieth Century saw immense progress in science and technology, but this has not been matched by progress in our institutions. It's time to look at these institutions and ask what we want them to do for us. How best can they be re-shaped to serve us effectively?

The following - *Bad Education* - is the first in a series of books seeking to do this. The next volumes in the series are: *Bad Government*, *Bad Law*, *Bad Business*, and *Bad Health*.

Fasten your seat-belts. We're in for a bumpy ride.