

# Combative Young Men

Keith Rankin, 21 November 2015

When scary things happen that we don't understand, in France or elsewhere, we seem determined to resist by trenchantly refusing to understand. When in doubt about what to do, we should first decide what not to do. And to decide this, we should always apply the [first law of holes](#) ("when in a hole, stop digging").

We don't need sympathy for "terrorists", but we do need empathy, and we need to know the difference. Empathy is the capacity to imagine any situation from another person's point of view.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is Muslim (though emphatically not Shia Muslim) and, as a supra-national movement, does draw inspiration from the early military conquests of the seventh century.

In the time when Europe was at the weakest it's ever been in the last 2,500 years, the Mediterranean area was a demographic and political opportunity for a new hegemon. By the 10th century of the common era, Islamic Spain probably had the highest living standards ever known or unknown in global history. Defeated militarily in Spain in 1492, after centuries as a standard-bearer of science and mathematics, Islam remains an important cultural force that has much good to offer the world.

What most characterises ISIL, however, is neither its Muslim-ness nor its propensity to gratuitous violence. It is its youth, and its rejection of the system of nation states. I believe, to address the ISIL problem, we have to look more generally at the world from the point of view of its marginalised young men, and from the understanding that Islam is a culture that never has and probably never will interpret the world as principally a patchwork of independent sovereign nations.

What is it that young people – young men in particular – need from life? I would break it down into three essential things: venturing opportunities (action; risk-taking; fellowship; affiliation), income-earning opportunities (providing), and homes (security) from which they can meaningfully engage with the wider world. As men get older, the sometimes destructive venturing imperative morphs into a contribution imperative, the basis of publicness that characterises the mature expression of all humanity.

In the meantime, our global capitalist world operates like a perpetual version of the game 'musical chairs'; a game which requires that there be losers – loser communities, not just loser individuals. In some of its phases capitalism creates many more losers than in other phases; these are the phases that increasingly emphasise the need to be 'competitive', and that word's softer synonym 'aspirational'. Capitalism's only answer to its systemic tendency to create ever larger numbers of losers is economic growth. (We can think of growth as an offsetting process of creating new chairs – spaces and places – at the same rate that naked capitalism removes them.) Inequality and austerity are the two realities that make modern capitalism into an increasingly lethal cocktail of more losers and fewer winners.

Social Darwinism is not a new imperative. The years 1914 to 1945 reflect the endgame of Victorian Social Darwinism. The ideology is back: the unsurvival of the unfittest. But the 'unfittest' are not dying. Capitalism needs its losers to live on as indebted consumers, living increasingly meaningless lives in increasingly ghettoised suburbs of western cities. In these human wastelands – populated by many young people with few opportunities to do valuable work, let alone to venture – the marginal product of labour is zero. Life is not good when you know that your economic value is, at best, zero. (The generation of young men who couldn't wait to fight in World War 1 likewise led lives, often in rural ghettos where the marginal product of labour was also zero.)

Young men loiter. Gangs form. Where there's shared cultural identity in marginalised communities, that culture defines the threat which others see.

ISIL is an international mix of uncompromising 'brothers'; those within the 'Middle East' who have lived through lethal violence perpetrated in their homelands, and of the most ghettoised young Muslim men from Europe and North Africa. (In the former group I would include the [Chechen fighters](#) who are likely more interested in fighting Russia than France.) These youths are radicalised – bomb by every bomb or air-

strike or other violent act from an occupying force – that affects them, their families, or families like their families. Further, there is a striking generation gap within Islam, fuelled by the youthful imperative to act and to belong to an action group.

So how can ISIL be effectively opposed? It's through depriving their destructive fire of oxygen, not [adding fuel to that fire](#). And through working to ensure that youth generally have constructive outlets for their venturesome spirits.

We know that dystopian Malthusian growth is not inevitable. The twentieth-century welfare states showed us how collective income security leads to sharply reduced birth rates. But these states experienced growing economies, and never evolved to deal with twenty-first century limits to growth.

We can adapt the income-sharing process to a global economy that grows in productivity but not necessarily in population or aggregate output. And, through economic opportunities made possible by income-sharing, we need to allow young men to participate in joint-ventures – as young New Zealand men (and women) do through travel and sport and business and hacking and music and graphic art – so they can experience danger and winning and losing while minimising the harm they do to themselves and especially to others.

The 'terrorism' we face today is symptomatic of the unaddressed ills of an economic order that systemically creates losers, and in increasing percentages. When these losers form alliances around particular cultures, we attack these cultures rather than the absence of economic and social spaces that make good and meaningful lives possible.

Economic security is a collective, not individual, enterprise. To choose a benign rather than a malign future, we have to think of money as a social means, not as an individual end. Our future needs to incorporate income-sharing and opportunity-sharing. That's not communism or anything like it. It's simply about giving capitalism a public face to complement its already well-developed private aspect.

Love your enemy; respect your adversary. (My favourite movie of all time was [Joyeux Noël](#).) Our apparent enemy is not a bad person or a bad culture. Our adversaries are just as confused – just as wilfully blind – as we are. And on the theme of fraternising with one's 'enemy', I suspect that New Zealanders are less Islamophobic (indeed less xenophobic) than most westerners; possibly because of Gallipoli. In 1915, young naïve New Zealand adventurers met similar young Turks and Arabs across the hilltops, gullies and trenches, and saw that they were basically the same; good combatants and good men.

Today's world is full of frustrated internationally footloose young men. Nations erect fences and walls to keep them out. Other nations imprison and expunge them. Still other nations complain that there will soon be too few young people to provide services for their old people, arguing that older people must cling onto their income-earning opportunities; their musical chairs.

Look. Today's young people are our future – our global future – for better or worse.

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