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# MORAL CRUSADES IN AN AGE OF MISTRUST

The Jimmy Savile Scandal

**Frank Furedi**





## **Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust**

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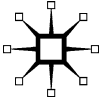
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▶ **Moral Crusades in an  
Age of Mistrust: The  
Jimmy Savile Scandal**

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## Preface

We live in an age of scandals. As I write, the radio informs me that Lance Armstrong, former hero of the Tour de France and the central figure in the scandal enveloping the world of bicycle racing, is about to confess his misdeeds on *Oprah*. The scandal surrounding Dominique Strauss-Kahn continues: this former head of the International Monetary Fund faces prosecution in the French courts for pimping. A sex scandal recently led to the resignation of the Director of the CIA, General David Petraeus, and a US Senate committee found HSBC Bank guilty of laundering the money of drug barons. By the time this book is published, new scandals will be dominating the headlines.

Major scandals are rarely about just a single individual. Since they implicitly represent a violation of prevailing moral norms, they provide sociologists with an opportunity to gain insights into the way that a community understands itself, through analysing how it responds to unexpected challenges to the moral order. From this perspective the Jimmy Savile scandal is not so much about what a sexual predator did in the past as about how a society gives meaning to its way of life today.

The eruption of a series of scandals following a television documentary exposing Jimmy Savile as a sex offender, broadcast in October 2012, indicates that far more was at stake than the revelation of criminal acts. Several generations of British people have grown up with Savile grinning at them from their television screens. Outrage at the exploitation and violation of children gave this scandal a distinct emotional intensity. The perception that several

major institutions – the British Broadcasting Corporation, the National Health Service, the police – failed to protect children from Savile also lent this crisis an institutional dimension. Unlike many of the other major scandals that have dominated the headlines in recent years, such as the fiddling of expenses by Members of Parliament and the wrongdoing by the banks, Savile's misdeeds were experienced by many as personal.

It's hard to imagine the impact that the revelation that Sir Jimmy Savile OBE was a serial child abuser had on middle-aged British people – unless you're one of them. Almost without exception, everyone over the age of 40 grew up with Jimmy Savile. 'Sir Jimmy' was not just a dominant television celebrity but a one-man institution; courted by royalty, charities and politicians, he was constantly featured as the people's entertainer and a man with a heart of gold. That is why the revelation that 'Sir Jimmy' was also a rampant paedophile has caused such moral upheaval throughout society.

A moral crisis rarely leads to a dispassionate and temperate debate – especially when children are involved, and especially when sex crimes and child abuse feature so prominently in the story. In such circumstances emotion is allowed far more latitude to influence matters than is the norm, and often incites responses that lack restraint and careful thought. In the midst of a moral crisis, decent people want to take a stand against evil, but moral crusades also inflame passions that can lead to acts of intolerance. In the post-Savile climate of moral outrage, respectable journalists confused rumour with fact and ended up accusing at least one innocent person of the crime of paedophilia.

It is certain that numerous young people have suffered from the pain and humiliation inflicted on them in the past by Savile and other sexual predators. But neither those who were victims in the past nor youngsters today will benefit from the culture of fear that has enveloped the subject of child protection. Children's lives are already dominated by a regime of hyper-vigilance, and we owe it to them not to let adult obsessions create a world in which childhood becomes even more intensely policed and scrutinised. *Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust* argues that that outrage at Savile's behaviour and the wider reaction it precipitated serve as a form of psycho-cultural displacement of concerns about the moral order. The following chapters explain why so much of society's mistrust of its institutions is channelled through anxieties about children.

The idea for writing this book took shape after a long conversation with a group of 16-year-old boys who wanted to know whether it was



really true that it was the promiscuous 1960s that were responsible for Savile's behaviour. Their demand for answers led me to the conclusion that it was important to offer a sociologically informed explanation in the moment, as the whole drama was unfolding. This attempt at responsive cultural sociology benefited from discussions with Dr Ellie Lee and colleagues at the University of Kent's Centre for Parenting Culture Studies. Professor Keith Hayward shared with me his insights into the culture of infantilisation. Special thanks go to Jennie Bristow for her constructive insight into this tawdry tale.

# 1

## Introduction: Scandals, Panics and Crusades

**Abstract:** *The Savile affair detonated an explosion of scandals which affected both individuals and key public institutions. Scandals usually play an important role in clarifying the moral issues preoccupying society. However, in the absence of moral consensus scandals breed uncertainty instead of restoring moral order. This is what occurred in the wake of the Savile scandal. The febrile atmosphere surrounding the exposure of Savile as a paedophile should be conceptualised as a moral crusade rather than as a moral panic.*

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Jimmy Savile was one of the most influential celebrity entertainers working in British television in the 1970s and 1980s. He was a much-revered personality, whose tireless work on behalf of numerous charities was widely praised by leading members of the British establishment. Knighted by the Queen and by the Pope, 'Sir Jimmy' was hailed as a British hero when he went to his grave in October 2011. A year later, on 3 October 2012, a television documentary devoted to exploding this image of benevolence accused him of abusing underage girls in the 1970s. These allegations immediately prompted the police to launch an inquiry, which was swiftly upgraded to a formal criminal investigation. By this time most of the media displayed no doubt that the former British hero was in fact an evil monster. That is why a few days after the documentary, despite the absence of a trial or a thorough investigation, Commander Peter Spindler, head of Scotland Yard's Specialist Crime Investigations, could publicly brand Savile a 'sexual predator with a predilection for young girls.'

The rapid transformation of Savile from a celebrity-saint into the personification of evil was facilitated by an outburst of media interest in the scandal. This interest was not motivated simply by the significant news value of the hundreds of new abuse allegations against Savile in the weeks that followed the documentary. The denunciation of Savile's criminal behaviour was, from the beginning, coupled with condemnation of the behaviour of the BBC. Even before the showing of the documentary by its main competitor, ITV, the BBC had been accused of burying its own investigative programme about Savile's criminal behaviour in order to protect the reputation of its former star. Over the first two weeks of October 2012 criticism of the BBC's decision to drop its programme acquired a ferocious intensity, which forced the organisation on the defensive.

On 23 October George Entwistle, the Director-General of the BBC, appeared before a committee of Members of Parliament and acknowledged that there was a 'problem of culture within the BBC' that had allowed Savile's behaviour to remain undetected. The BBC became clearly disoriented by the pressure it faced. On 2 November the BBC's flagship news programme *Newsnight* transmitted an interview with Steve Messham, a former resident of a North Wales children's home, who alleged that he had been repeatedly abused by a leading Conservative politician in the 1970s. What began as a story surrounding the criminal behaviour of one person mutated into a potentially explosive scandal about Britain's governing party. Social media sites immediately identified

the unnamed target of Messham's accusation as Lord McAlpine, a former treasurer of the Conservative Party – but a few days later Messham retracted his statement, and *Newsnight* and the BBC stood compromised by this allegation. On 10 November Entwistle recognised the damage caused by the very public targeting of an innocent man by *Newsnight* and resigned. The BBC faced the greatest crisis in its history.

The speed with which revelations about one man's abusive behaviour engulfed and overwhelmed one of the most influential media organisations in the world indicates that this was no longer just a story about Jimmy Savile. Other institutions were brought into the frame. Allegations that Savile had abused people on hospital premises forced the National Health Service to launch a series of internal inquiries. Criticism of police indifference towards allegations made against Savile in the past led to investigations into this institution's behaviour. Most unnerving was the sense of unease expressed by the British government. On 5 November Prime Minister David Cameron ordered an urgent investigation into the allegations made on *Newsnight* about how abuse claims had been dealt with in Wales in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

The intervention of the Prime Minister politicised the issue and suggested that what was at stake was a matter of great interest to the state. This reaction encouraged a variety of political interests and campaigners to channel the concerns of the public into a moral crusade.

Rumour-mongering acquired a powerful momentum as different moral entrepreneurs harnessed the anxiety fuelled by press speculation to promote their own agenda. In the end Tom Watson, the Labour MP for West Bromwich East, trumped them all when he spelled out his theory of a Tory paedophile ring lurking in the shadowy wings of Westminster. He hinted at a conspiracy by a secret cabal of senior Tories based at Downing Street, and for a brief time succeeded in gaining the public's attention.<sup>3</sup>

Watson's claim was supported by a group of campaigning journalists and social media commentators. Iain Overton ran the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, which helped to compile the *Newsnight* report on the Steve Messham allegations. Overton played a key role in a Twitter campaign designed to expose Lord McAlpine as the arch-paedophile, reportedly boasting a few hours before the programme was broadcast that *Newsnight* was going to expose a leading Tory figure as an abuser of boys in a North Wales children's home, and later tweeting words to that effect.<sup>4</sup> Within hours the Twitter campaign went viral.

An inspection of these tweets reveals the light-hearted and cavalier manner in which they dealt with their prey. Overton tweeted, 'we've got a *Newsnight* out tonight about a very senior political figure who is a paedophile'. His boast was widely circulated, and soon others were piling in to demonstrate that they, too, had inside knowledge about the identity of the political figure in question. The campaign acquired such momentum that on 8 November David Cameron was forced to respond to a television interviewer's demands for action by warning that there was now a danger of a witch-hunt.

Even those who were responsible for circulating rumours on Twitter acknowledge that speculation online acquired a frenzied character. When some of them were eventually forced to apologise for their false allegation of paedophilia, they justified their behaviour on the ground that they got caught up in the intense mood of rumour mongering. One journalist tweeted his apology for contributing to what he called a 'febrile' atmosphere; another campaigner wrote that she was 'VERY sorry for inadvertently fanning flames'.

In this feverish atmosphere the police investigation into Savile appeared to acquire a momentum of its own. During the weeks that followed, numerous celebrities and entertainers were arrested over allegations that they, too, had been abusers. The fact that large numbers of allegations were forthcoming is not surprising, since, in effect, the police called on the entire nation to recollect any incident of abuse that might have happened to them in the past. In December 2012 it was reported that the police were investigating allegations against 25 celebrities for a variety of sex offences committed in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> With the police claiming that they were dealing with almost 500 lines of inquiry, some commentators said that it seemed as if the entire decade of the 1970s was being morally condemned.

## **An epidemic of scandals**

Throughout history scandals have precipitated political upheavals and even caused revolutions. Scandals can set off a powerful and unpredictable chain of events because they outrage moral sensibilities and encourage people to demonstrate that they are on the side of the right against the wrong. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a scandal represents an 'offence to moral feeling or sense of decency'. From a

sociological perspective a scandal can be interpreted as a moment when society becomes aware of the point at which behaviour turns into an act of moral transgression. ‘Societal norms become more evident when they are violated, making outbursts of moral upset sociologically interesting,’ claims a sociological study of scandals, noting that ‘scandals provoke moral positioning and help in clarifying – and dramatizing – lines of difference or conflict.’<sup>6</sup>

Scandals often precipitate moral outrage because they are interpreted as expressing a violation of values that are held sacred. Usually a scandal reveals ‘a moral order that is temporarily disrupted.’<sup>7</sup> Historically, communities have responded to such a disruption by consciously distancing themselves from the source of their concern through affirmation of the values that they hold dear. In the wake of the Savile scandal, the constant condemnation of paedophilia and the institutions that protect the predators can be understood as an attempt at this form of moral positioning.

The ease with which the reaction to the revelations about Savile was absorbed into a pre-existing cycle of institutional scandals indicates that what is at issue is not simply a temporary disruption of the moral order prevailing in British society. Although it has several unique features, in many respects the Savile affair represents the continuation of an ongoing series of scandals. At the moment when Savile was branded with infamy, British public life was still reeling from a more than year-long scandal concerning newspapers illegally hacking the phones of hundreds of people. From early 2011 the so-called hacking scandal had dominated British public life, and it overlapped with the Savile affair. Indeed the Leveson Inquiry into phone-hacking and the behaviour of the press, which was set up in July 2011 by the Prime Minister, published its report in the middle of the unfolding of the Savile crisis.

The phone-hacking scandal itself was preceded by a series of scandals that stretched back to the mid-1990s. New Labour’s portrayal of the Conservatives as a party of sleaze was crucial to its election victory in 1997. However, the New Labour government soon discovered that it was not immune to the politics of scandal. The 1997 election triumph was followed by a succession of minor scandals involving Labour MPs that led to the resignation of a number of ministers. Since 2000 scandals about corrupt political practices – ‘cash for honours’ – and the misuse of parliamentary expenses have undermined the credibility of professional politicians. Other scandals have implicated the banking and financial services industry, the police and the Church.

The recurrence of scandals indicates that their disruption of the moral order is far from temporary and that in current times the potential for scandals to restore the moral order and clarify society's values is rarely realised. Why? Because the capacity to clarify values presupposes that there is an underlying consensus regarding fundamental norms of behaviour. Yet constant debates on topics such as the nature of the family, abortion and the right to assisted suicide indicate that there is little consensus even on some of the most elementary questions about the meaning of life. Heated exchanges about these issues indicate that society lacks a master-narrative that can endow communities' experience with shared meaning. In response to this absence of shared meaning, the unresolved suspicions that are fuelled by scandals continue to attach themselves to new issues and concerns. As a result scandals today are often not followed by the restoration of moral order. The lack of a shared grammar of morality leads to a sense of disorientation, which is manifested through periodic outbursts of outrage and anxiety.

## The moral crusade

Since the 1970s social scientists have frequently characterised the periodic outbursts of outrage and anxiety as a *moral panic*. This is a concept that appears to capture the anger precipitated by the many public scandals during the past four decades. As a result, the term 'moral panic' has become a colloquial idiom used by the wider public. However, despite its widespread usage it is not a concept that can capture the feverish atmosphere of events such as the Savile scandal.

In its original form, as presented by the social scientists Jock Young and Stanley Cohen in the early 1970s, the term 'moral panic' was used to explain how apprehensions about deviant behaviour were mobilised by the media, policy-makers and moral entrepreneurs.<sup>8</sup> It dealt with British society's attempt to gain moral clarity through distancing itself from deviant youth sub-cultures and delinquency. When Cohen published his classic *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in 1972, he could assume that his study of society's reaction to the youth sub-cultures of Mods and Rockers was guided by a taken-for-granted moral code. However, since the 1980s the relative weakness of moral consensus has meant that so-called panics are often detached from the language of morality.

One strength of the original conceptualisation of moral panic was that it drew attention to the important moral dimension of society's reaction to and perception of a problem. However, in the absence of moral consensus such reactions are often expressed in a way that self-consciously avoids using moral language. For example, at least in public, anti-abortionists often prefer to use a medical vocabulary warning of psychological damage and trauma than to use the language of evil and sin: the assertion that 'abortion is bad' is displaced by the argument that 'abortion is bad *for you*'. This shift in the way that threats to society are represented has important implications for the relevance of moral panic theory. The criminologist David Garland points to 'a shift *away* from moral panics' in societies such as the UK and the US, 'where it is difficult to find any public issue on which there is broad public agreement and an absence of dissenting voices'.<sup>9</sup> At a time when competing lifestyles and attitudes towards personal behaviour are the subject of acrimonious debate, it is rare for different sections of society to unite against traditional folk devils.

There are, of course, issues that provoke a solid moral consensus, and in those circumstances it may be appropriate to use the concept of moral panic. Garland believes that in America the 'panic over child abuse' is an example of a 'genuine moral panic'.<sup>10</sup> The same observation holds for Britain and most Western societies. As explained in Chapter 4, panics about paedophilia have a unique capacity to mobilise powerful emotions and harness the moral sentiments of the entire public. Indeed, precisely because of its unique capacity to resonate with the community's moral imagination, the issue of child abuse has acquired tremendous significance in public life since the 1970s. Campaigns surrounding this issue have acquired the character of what Howard Becker, in his path-breaking study *Outsiders*, conceptualised as a moral crusade.<sup>11</sup>

Back in 1992, the social historian Philip Jenkins wrote, 'if, in fact, a society can be understood in terms of its fears and folk-devils, then Great Britain in the last decade offers a rich mine for social scientists'. He added that 'there have since the late 1970s been repeated scandals and public panics focusing on different types of sexual predators, who targeted women and especially children'.<sup>12</sup> The trend outlined by Jenkins persists to this day. Year after year claims are made that the problem of abuse is getting worse than previously imagined. Panics over Satanic Ritual Abuse in the late 1980s may have been discredited, but new forms of crime against children are regularly brought to the attention of society.<sup>13</sup>



Not all explosions of outrage are based on alarmist fantasies, as was the case with Satanic Ritual Abuse. Crimes against children by sexual predators constitute a tragic dimension of reality. However, the tendency to represent such crimes as the symbol of evil invariably heightens tension and encourages alarmist behaviour.

'I think what is absolutely horrific, frankly, is the extent to which this child abuse has been taking place over the years and across our communities over the years,' stated Theresa May, the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, when she outlined the details of the government's inquiry into sex abuse in North Wales care homes and into Jimmy Savile's activities.<sup>14</sup> Her insistence on the all-pervasive character of child abuse resonates with widespread anxiety about the scourge of paedophilia. In one sense the tendency to massively inflate the peril of paedophilia can be associated with the reaction of panic. But given the constant and settled character of this narrative about an all-pervasive threat, is it useful to attribute it to a panic?

The sociologist Joel Best reminds us that a 'classic moral panic doesn't last long – a few weeks, maybe a year or so'. He adds that 'once a claim leads to some sort of institutional apparatus assuming ownership – an inquisition to ferret out witches, a presidential declaration of war on drugs or terror – the dynamics of making claims and maintaining concern are sufficiently different that the term moral panic no longer seems useful'.<sup>15</sup> Certainly the highly institutionalised character of child protection and the growth of a veritable industry around it indicates that the type of statement made by Theresa May is integral to the expected normal discourse and should not be interpreted as an expression of a moral panic.

A far more useful concept with which to capture much of the reaction to the Savile scandal is that of a *moral crusade*. According to Becker, a moral crusade is oriented towards altering people's behaviour through the promotion of an ideology of evil. Despite gaining support and recognition, a moral crusade is rarely able to accept that a problem has been solved. That is why a moral crusader tends to 'discover something new to view with alarm, a new evil about which something ought to be done'.<sup>16</sup> The frequent discovery of new crimes against children – peer-to-peer abuse, online grooming and pornography, child sexual exploitation by gangs – shows how sightings of new evils are an integral feature of a moral crusade.

A moral crusade can, but need not, coincide with a panic. The Savile scandal has certainly set off a powerful and potentially destructive chain

of events. Numerous institutions are now embroiled in expensive and time-consuming investigations into their past. The police have thrown the net wide open, and have encouraged people to reinterpret their past and make allegations about crimes they experienced decades ago. This focus on what are called ‘historic’ crimes is likely to distract us from confronting the problems of our times. The quest for historical victims has already led to an ever-growing number of people becoming targets of suspicion. And when the many inquiries report their conclusions, there will be even more calls for laws designed to protect children from adult predators. Arguably one reason the Savile scandal did not turn into a public panic is because it is difficult to provoke intense anxieties about the dead and about the past. Attempts to find new targets – individuals and institutions – may succeed in harnessing the outrage directed at Savile.

What is interesting about the scandal to date is that insofar as there has been an overreaction to the Savile affair, it has been confined to the political and cultural establishment. When the police commander Peter Spindler described him as a ‘predatory serial sex offender who “groomed a nation”’, the media were able to endow Savile with the kind of malevolent powers found only in Hollywood fantasy horror films.<sup>17</sup> Many of the journalists and campaigners involved in the zealous Twitter campaign against the unnamed senior Tory politician sought to minimise their responsibility for their false allegation by blaming the febrile atmosphere. In a climate in which evil threatened the natural order, it was argued, something had to be done. ‘I felt a powerful compulsion to do what I have done throughout my career: to help the voiceless be heard,’ wrote one journalist in his letter of apology.<sup>18</sup> Yet the ‘compulsion’ to do something was mainly confined to a very narrow stratum of people.

Despite the relentless press coverage of the sordid details of Jimmy Savile’s life, the British public was not caught up in a state of anxiety and panic. The highly charged week-long Twitter campaign was very much a top-down moral crusade. Fed by journalistic rumours and a lively conspiratorial imagination, this was the *cause célèbre* of an agitated section of Britain’s cultural elite.

The central argument of this book is that the Savile affair is a scandal of a community in which people find it difficult to trust one another and their institutions. Savile gives a face to a powerful mood of betrayal, and that is why so much current debate is focused on the integrity and character of public figures. Major statements made by public figures are

scrutinised not for what they say but for what they are attempting to hide. The media and campaigning organisations are often attracted to the idea that behind every headline there lies a hidden agenda, and the focus is not on the story but on the story behind the story; however, in this case the media itself became part of the ‘conspiracy’. So the revelations about Savile swiftly turned into a search for the hidden forces that collaborated with him, and institutions such as the BBC and the NHS were immediately aware that they needed to show they had nothing to hide by launching public inquiries.

Savile’s abuse of children should be interpreted as the catalyst that unleashed the pre-existing mistrust and resentment of unsettled and uncertain moral communities. Unfortunately, such reactions are unlikely to facilitate the process of moral clarification that traditionally follows a scandal. But then we are not living in times when the patterns of the past apply – and this is why, instead of investing so much energy in dredging up the misdeeds of previous decades, society would do better to learn how to give meaning to its own experience.

## Notes

- 1 ‘The Jimmy Savile Files: Police Call Late Star “Sexual Predator” and Are Investigating FIVE Other Celebrities’, Tom Pettifor, *The Daily Mirror*, 10 October 2012.
- 2 See Chapter 6 for a discussion of this case.
- 3 Watson’s role in this affair is discussed in Chapter 6.
- 4 See David Leigh’s interesting account of this affair in ‘The *Newsnight* Fiasco That Toppled the BBC Director General’, *The Observer*, 10 November 2012.
- 5 ‘Police Investigate 25 Celebrities for Sex Offences’, David Leppard, *The Sunday Times*, 9 December 2012.
- 6 Jacobsson and Löfmarck (2008) p. 204.
- 7 Jacobsson and Löfmarck (2008) p. 205.
- 8 Cohen (1972); Young (1971).
- 9 Garland (2008) p. 17.
- 10 Garland (2008) p. 17.
- 11 Becker (1963) pp. 148–55.
- 12 Jenkins (1992) p. 9.
- 13 Campaigners against Satanic Ritual Abuse claimed that Satanist cults were systematically abusing children. See the government-sponsored report by La Fontaine (1994) for a refutation of these claims.

- 14 ‘Theresa May Calls Extent of Paedophile Activity across Britain “Absolutely Horrific”’, Nigel Morris, *Independent*, 6 November 2012.
- 15 Best (2011) pp. 39 and 45.
- 16 Becker (1963) p. 153.
- 17 Spindler is quoted in ‘Jimmy Savile Scandal: Report Reveals Decades of Abuse’, *BBC News UK*, 11 January 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20981611> (accessed 28 January 2008).
- 18 ‘Lord McAlpine – An Abject Apology’, George Monbiot, 10 November 2012, <http://www.monbiot.com/2012/11/10/lord-mcalpine-an-abject-apology> (accessed 6 December 2012).

# 2

## Jimmy Savile: Man, Monster, Celebrity

► **Abstract:** *The sudden transformation of Savile from a saint to a malevolent beast was accompanied by an explosion of allegations and rumours about his past. An analysis of Savile's public performance of impression management indicates that he sought to cultivate the image of a classless entertainer who served as the voice of common people. His adoption by the British establishment as their 'man of the people' strengthened his influence. His success was in part supported by the way his Peter Pan image resonated with an infantilised popular culture.*

Furedi, Frank. *Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. DOI: 10.1057/9781137338020.

When, on 20 September 2012, the media reported that two memorials to the famous DJ and entertainer had been unveiled in Scarborough, they still referred to him as ‘Sir Jimmy Savile’. Accounts of the memorial service in newspapers such as *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Mirror* and *The Sun* adopted a light-hearted though respectful tone. The affectionate reports pointed out that Savile would have had a good chuckle about the spelling mistake in the inscription on his huge headstone. *The Sun*’s headline, ‘It Was Good While It Lasted’, communicated a sense of cheerful admiration for a man thought to be a bit odd.<sup>1</sup> The sentiment communicated by an obituary carried by *The Guardian* a year previously – he was ‘an impossible act to follow’ – continued to define the prevailing media consensus about him.<sup>2</sup>

The reports of the service allude to the massive size of Savile’s grave-stone. They quote his nephew Roger Foster, who stated, ‘it is rather large but then he was a rather large character in his life’. Friends and family members at the memorial service referred to Savile’s good deeds and his special affection for the Yorkshire seaside town of Scarborough. Father Michael Sellers of St Joseph’s Church blessed the grave, prayed that God would reward Jimmy for ‘all the good he did in his life’ and read a passage of scripture from St Paul.<sup>3</sup>

Savile’s reputation as a larger-than-life philanthropist and a national treasure would not last out the month. On 28 September 2012, the television company ITV1 launched a publicity campaign for its soon-to-be-broadcast documentary programme *Exposure: The Other Side of Jimmy Savile*. The announcement immediately gained the attention of the media and, by the time the documentary was broadcast on 3 October 2012, rumours and allegations regarding Savile’s predatory and abusive conduct had acquired a powerful momentum. The allegations by a group of women, including one aged under 14 at the time of the alleged abuse, that they had been sexually molested or raped by Savile in the 1960s and 1970s immediately prompted a police inquiry, which was almost instantly upgraded to a formal investigation.

Within days of the showing of the ITV documentary, Jimmy Savile’s Scarborough grave was vandalised and a plaque that had been installed only the previous month was daubed with the words ‘rapist’ and ‘paedophile’. Scarborough was clearly feeling ill at ease with its hitherto celebrated association with Savile. The signs were removed from a footpath recently named in honour of Savile, and Scarborough’s Sir Jimmy Savile Memorial Steering Group, which had been set up to honour the famous celebrity,

announced that it would scrap plans to construct a life-size statue of the man. Two days later – at the request of Savile’s family – the recently erected headstone was discreetly removed in the middle of the night.<sup>4</sup>

As the public image of this ‘larger-than-life’ character metamorphosed into that of a malevolent beast, even members of his family joined the campaign to exorcise this demon from society’s cultural memory. In early November Savile’s nephew Guy Marsden called for the exhumation of his uncle’s body from the cemetery in Scarborough. Marsden noted that he entirely ‘supported families of other people buried at Woodlands Cemetery who [had] called for his uncle’s body to be moved away’, adding that ‘if it was one of mine who was buried there, I wouldn’t like it if someone like Jimmy was in the same place’. Conservative councillor Colin Haddington echoed Marsden when he argued, at a Scarborough Borough Council meeting, for Savile’s body to be exhumed.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the reaction provoked by the allegations made in the ITV documentary was nothing short of extraordinary. Julie Bindel wrote in *The Guardian* that she had been asked ‘by a group of enthusiastic feminists if I would like to take part in a bit of direct action and help desecrate Jimmy Savile’s grave’.<sup>6</sup> This impulse to direct anger and hatred not just at a dead celebrity but also at his remains was continuously fed by a steady accretion of new and often highly sensationalist allegations. One of Savile’s former BBC colleagues, Paul Gambaccini, accused him of being a necrophiliac. Gambaccini also described Savile’s usual sexual partners as ‘under-aged subnormals’.<sup>7</sup> One consequence of Gambaccini’s allegations was to provoke speculation about what went on during Savile’s alleged nocturnal visits to the morgue at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. *The Sun*’s statement ‘TWISTED Jimmy Savile may have sexually abused CORPSES as well as kids’ exemplifies the way in which reports of hypothetical nefarious behaviour were circulated by the national press.<sup>8</sup>

Speculative claims-making about Savile’s nocturnal perversions was by no means confined to the populist tabloids. Dr Mark Griffiths of the Psychology Division at Nottingham Trent University wrote in *The Independent* that ‘recent reports about the sexual preferences of Jimmy Savile have not only thrown up allegations of paedophilia but have also hinted that he engaged in other sexual paraphilias such as necrophilia’.<sup>9</sup> ‘Allegations’ and ‘hints’ gradually hardened into probable truths and certainties in the public imagination.

Rumours of nocturnal perversions competed with insinuations of Savile’s involvement with the criminal underworld; it was also reported

that allegations about Savile's possible associations with the Irish Republican Army were to be investigated.<sup>10</sup> Some attempts were made to dramatise Savile's misdeeds by speculating about hypothetical links to well-known criminals and previous high-profile horrific crimes. One newspaper headline asked, 'Savile and the Ripper: Was BBC's Paedo Also a Killer?'<sup>11</sup> John Stainthorpe, a former West Yorkshire Police detective, informed the media that Savile had been a suspect in the notorious Yorkshire Ripper murder case more than 30 years earlier. The apparent purpose of Stainthorpe's statement was not to accuse him of the murders but merely to couple him with this notorious crime. Stainthorpe suggested that even though Savile was not guilty of the Ripper murders, the person who gave the police the anonymous tip-off about Savile had been intuitively 'aiming in the right direction'. Why? Because, according to Stainthorpe, 'child perverts soon become child killers'.<sup>12</sup>

What is remarkable about this observation is the seemingly casual manner in which an inaccurate tip-off is retrospectively reinterpreted as a prescient warning about the menace represented by a sexual predator. The confidence with which a conceptual leap is made from the child pervert to the child killer speaks to a climate in which speculation and guesswork are uncritically represented as valuable intelligence. The proliferation of throwaway remarks about child perverts and child killers is symptomatic of a mood of confusion in which innuendo and the rhetoric of guilt by association acquire the status of common sense, if not fact.

When the mainstream media has become addicted to presenting rumours and allegations as important information that is worthy of serious investigation, is it any surprise that sensationalist conspiracy theories about Savile's connection to powerful rings of establishment paedophiles are circulating on the Internet? According to one such conspiracy theory website:

Jimmy Savile's connections were certainly not confined to the royal family. They fanned out into the realms of politics and the rich and famous across the spectrum of human society. In short, he was not only a paedophile himself, but a supplier of children for some of the most famous paedophiles and Satanists on the planet.<sup>13</sup>

Such conspiracy thinking is not confined to the generally discredited extreme of what Richard Hofstadter has characterised as the 'paranoid style' of politics.<sup>14</sup> The whole of Savile's life was reconstructed as a one-man conspiracy to abuse children. Mark Williams-Thomas, a



detective-turned-journalist whose research played a central role in providing the storyline for the ITV documentary, asserted that Savile 'engineered his programmes within the BBC and Radio Luxembourg in order to gain access to young children'. 'I can very clearly tell you now that he created his television series as a vehicle for his offending,' he stated.<sup>15</sup>

The assertion that from 1958, when he started to work as a DJ on Radio Luxembourg, Savile had 'engineered' his programmes to feed his addiction to abusing children implies that this monster's public persona was always a cleverly constructed mask designed to deceive the public. That such assertions were simply conjectures was rarely considered in an atmosphere in which worst-case thinking assumed a powerful influence over the unfolding of this drama. With so much uninhibited speculation about Savile's dark and malevolent motives, is there anything about the man that we can be certain about?

The dominant reaction to the disturbing revelations about a previously hidden truth was to question just about everything that was known about Savile. Suddenly the man and his public image were dramatically recast as an artefact of deception and evil lies. This spectacular transformation in perceptions was poignantly expressed by Savile's biographer and close friend, Alison Bellamy. Bellamy, who was quoted as stating that 'Savile has gone from childhood hero to monster', echoed a widely held sense of betrayal. She, like others, turned to the project of re-examining the past for clues. 'To find out he was not what I thought he was is utterly devastating,' she stated. As an afterthought she added that he 'spoke in riddles' and was manipulative.<sup>16</sup>

It is unlikely that reinterpretations of Savile's riddles will conclusively establish the true meaning of his words. Memory is far from being a reliable instrument for capturing the truth.<sup>17</sup> All too often reading history backwards encourages anachronism, an act of reinterpretation that says more about our preoccupations now than about what actually happened in the past. But while we can never be sure what made Savile tick, a study of his outward behaviour, the image he sought to present to the world and his role in public life can at least help us understand why he achieved the status of a celebrity-saint. Following the sociologist Erving Goffman, we interpret Savile's presentation of his self as performance. Through such a performance, individuals work on the impression of themselves that they communicate to others, and those who watch this performance react and attribute meaning to it.<sup>18</sup>

A performance constitutes 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way the other participants'.<sup>19</sup> A sociological analysis of a performance should not be understood as a statement about the inner motives that drive the actor: as Goffman reminds us, a 'performer can be fully taken in by his own act'. At the opposite end of the spectrum, some performers are entirely cynical and are simply motivated to create a particular impression of themselves among their audience.<sup>20</sup>

A sociological analysis of Savile's performance makes no claim to reveal insights into his inner life. Its objective is to analyse his persona – that is, the role that he assumed in his public life. 'It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is mask,' wrote the American sociologist Robert Park. But, he hinted, although our mask is the product of role playing, it is also an integral part of who we really are.<sup>21</sup>

## Jimmy's mask

The front cover of his authorised biography features a picture of a larger-than-life Jimmy Savile, loudly attired and heavily decorated with flashy jewellery. His stock-in-trade ultra-bleached hair, the permanent grin and an impossibly long cigar stuck to his lips complete the easily recognised mask of a man once regarded as the officially endorsed clown to Britain's children. He is clearly performing for the camera and acting out the role that he had made his own over the decades.

Savile's biography, *How's About That Then?*, systematically promoted the image of a self-made hero who succeeded against all the odds in becoming one of the most famous figures in post-1960 Britain. The blurb promoting the book indicates that this is a biography not of just the entertainer Jimmy Savile but of 'Sir Jimmy Savile OBE, KCSG'. The reference to his numerous honours serves to underline the recognition that Jimmy enjoyed from the British establishment. It also highlights the biographer's claim to tell 'the extraordinary rags-to-riches story of a working class hero'. Savile's 'humble origins' are a theme recurrently emphasised by his biographer, Alison Bellamy, who in the publicity material also explicitly draws attention to her own working-class background. The blurb states that Bellamy is a 'West Yorkshire mum of two little girls, Florence and Winnie, who is married to plumber Neil'. Other

details revealed are her membership of the National Union of Journalists and the fact that ‘as a Yorkshire coalminer’s daughter, she much appreciated [Savile’s] stories about life down the pit.’<sup>22</sup>

The biographer represents Savile as more than just a famous celebrity who, upon his death, enjoyed ‘an extraordinary display of public affection’. In her account of Savile’s funeral, Bellamy writes of a ‘three-day extravaganza’ which was a ‘farewell fit for a king’. Nevertheless, so far as his hometown, Leeds, was concerned, Savile was their ‘working-class hero’: ‘Even at the height of his fame, when he counted pop legends, politicians and royalty among his friends, he had still been one of them at heart, re-using his teabags and washing his shirts in the hand basins of hotels.’<sup>23</sup> It is this identity of ‘being one of us’, which was so carefully cultivated by Savile in his appearance and affectations and in the language he used, that allowed him to project through the media an image of an avuncular intimate.

Savile’s image as an eccentric cheeky chappie crystallised at precisely the time when there was a demand for it in the British media. The growth of popular culture in the 1960s in part represented a reaction to the traditional culture of the establishment. This was the point at which provincial accents became fashionable and pop groups such as The Beatles made a feature of their Liverpool dialect. From the start of his public career, Savile astutely assimilated the new zeitgeist. He promoted himself as the former miner from Leeds, and his ‘guys and gals’ rhetoric attempted to evoke the familiarity and intimacy of someone who was closely connected to the British public. The role that he sought to perform was that of a man comfortable with the new classless Britain. He never attempted to be really cool or edgy; rather, his catchphrases and folksy way of talking resonated with an audience who wanted to gain entry into the swinging 1960s with one foot still in the past.

Despite misgivings, even the crusty BBC establishment were prepared to utilise Savile’s apparent populist appeal among the youth in the 1960s. According to one account, some senior members of the BBC hierarchy were initially less than enthused by Savile’s vulgar behaviour. Tom Sloan, who became Head of Light Entertainment in 1961, opposed using Savile on a new music programme – and received the reply ‘sorry baby, but that man is box office’.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that the BBC was initially hesitant about employing Savile to present the youth music programme *Top of the Pops* is confirmed by Paul Jackson, a former head of entertainment at both the BBC and ITV. Jackson

recalled that back in the early 1960s his father, T. Leslie Jackson, who was involved in the discussions that led to the launch of *Top of the Pops*, had told him that Savile would 'never work for the BBC'. Paul Jackson believes that the initial reservation towards bringing Savile into the BBC was due to his background in the seedy demi-monde of the Leeds and Manchester club scenes: 'Savile was thought to be dodgy, there was a feeling he was heavy, you didn't cross him, he was a heavy dude.'<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, precisely because he was perceived as a successful DJ with mass popular appeal, he soon became the obvious choice for fronting *Top of the Pops*.

Why was Savile thought of as 'box office'? No doubt he was a formidable entertainer. And at a time when the main media organisations were increasingly focused on gaining a mass audience, particularly among the youth, Savile's common touch came to be perceived as an indispensable asset. The BBC's management was by no means the only section of the British establishment who believed that this larger-than-life personality reflected the worldview of ordinary people. From the standpoint of the cultural elite, Savile was well suited to provide the kind of popular entertainment that catered to the tastes of the common folk.

Savile also liked to cultivate the image of a man with a whiff of scandal about him. As a former dance hall manager he was familiar with bodyguards and bouncers. In 1963 he took up wrestling and, although he was not particularly successful in the ring, he succeeded in establishing a reputation as something of a hard man. Savile did little to discourage rumours about his connections with the underworld, hinting at them in a newspaper interview in 1983,<sup>26</sup> and in a 2000 BBC2 documentary about his life he talked freely about how he dealt with troublemakers in his club. He told interviewer Louis Theroux: 'I never threw anybody out. Tied them up and put them down in the bloody boiler house until I was ready for them. Two o'clock in the fucking morning... We'd tie them up and we'd come back and I was the judge, jury and executioner.'<sup>27</sup> Today numerous observers claim that Savile's boasts about his links with the criminal world were intended to intimidate his numerous victims. However, it is likely that his performance as a hard man was integral to his self-image. The swinging London scene of the time was a place where celebrity underworld figures such as the Kray twins mingled with starlets and establishment figures.

Savile was single-minded in his pursuit of a reputation as an eccentric, instantaneously recognisable figure. However, it is likely that his performance was not simply a means to achieving this end: writing of

his 'gimmicks', his biographer acknowledged that 'his tracksuits, string vests, blind barnet, bling and cigars – they were all terribly important to him', because 'they were what he was known and recognised for'. She added that 'he had spent his lifetime carefully crafting his extreme persona'.<sup>28</sup>

His allusions to a murky past notwithstanding, from the standpoint of the BBC and the media establishment, Savile was a safe middle-of-the-road entertainer. His lewd nod-and-wink television persona was very much within the mainstream of the prevailing media culture. It is worth noting that from the 1960s, light entertainment provided a steady diet of sexual innuendo, snide double-entendres and salacious allusions. However, Savile was not simply a television personality with a proclivity for smut. He also performed the role of a big-hearted and generous celebrity who used his celebrity power to do good.

Savile presented himself as a clown with a heart of gold. During the 1970s he stood out as one of the first major celebrities to become associated in the public mind with raising money for good causes. His highly visible work with charities and hospitals – Stoke Mandeville, Leeds General Infirmary, Broadmoor Hospital – and his well-publicised fundraising initiatives brought him high esteem and standing in the public imagination. Almost all the published obituaries highlighted his generous philanthropy – as *The Guardian* put it, 'it is as a raiser of cash for charity that he will be remembered'.<sup>29</sup> That is why, even after the revelations about his abusive behaviour, so many people still refer to this side of his persona and say that at least he did a lot of good for charities.

Savile's popular appeal as an entertainer and as someone associated with good works ensured that he was enthusiastically adopted by important sections of the British establishment. In March 1972 he was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE). During the 1970s he was the recipient of numerous public honours. He was awarded an honorary medal and green beret by the Royal Marines for completing a Commando speed march. He became an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Radiologists. Over the years he also received numerous honorary degrees from universities. In 1990 he was knighted for 'charitable services' by the Queen and awarded a papal knighthood by Pope John Paul II.

Jimmy Savile rose to fame precisely at a time when the establishment was beginning to reach out to celebrities to overcome its out-of-touch and old-fashioned image. In the 1970s the heir to the throne, Prince

Charles, established a very public relationship with Savile. According to a royal spokesman, 'The prince first met Savile through their shared interest in supporting disability charities and it was primarily because of this connection that they maintained a relationship in the years that followed.'<sup>30</sup> What is remarkable about this relationship is that it seems to have led to the eventual acceptance of Savile as an honorary member of Charles's household. Reports indicate that Charles sought out Savile to assist Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, in the aftermath of the break-up of her marriage to Prince Andrew.<sup>31</sup>

Reports also indicate that Charles used Savile as a royal party organiser and asked him to invite guests to Kensington Palace on his behalf.<sup>32</sup> Savile was courted by the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and is reported to have visited her at her official country residence, Chequers, on many occasions.<sup>33</sup> Savile often flaunted his close relationships with royalty and went out of his way to be photographed with Prince Charles. In an interview he claimed that the reason royalty was drawn to him was that he had a 'freshness of approach which they obviously find to their liking': 'I think I get invited because I have a natural, good fun way of going on and we have a laugh.'<sup>34</sup> It is likely that Charles attached importance to his relationship with a man he thought embodied the best of the common people. The Prince of Wales sent a box of cigars and a pair of gold cufflinks on Savile's eightieth birthday, with a letter stating, 'Nobody will ever know what you have done for this country Jimmy. This is to go some way in thanking you for that.'<sup>35</sup>

The image of Savile playing the pantomime common man to Charles the pantomime toff captures an important trend in the culture of the 1970s and 1980s. This was an era when traditional British institutions experienced an erosion of their authority. One of the ways that sections of the establishment sought to enhance their credibility was through cultivating a relationship with celebrities. Prime Minister Harold Wilson, arguably the first self-consciously anti-traditionalist leader of Britain, had himself photographed with The Beatles in March 1964; a year later he demonstrated his populist touch when he had The Beatles awarded the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE).

Since the days of Wilson, politicians have frequently sought to associate themselves with individuals who possess celebrity status. By all accounts Savile proved to be unusually adept at making himself useful as a celebrity to the establishment. Arguably he succeeded in fashioning himself into a one-man institution.

## Behind the mask

Over the decades Savile developed a reputation for eccentric behaviour. Since the television exposure of his abusive activities, attention has been drawn to numerous cryptic remarks that he made about his behaviour in media interviews. His biographer pointed out that he ‘spoke in riddles’. ‘Thinking back, he littered his words with phrases that I now see in a new light,’ stated Alison Bellamy after hearing the revelations about her former hero.<sup>36</sup> Others have focused on reinterpreting what Savile really meant in his more outrageous statements, such as that he actually disliked children.<sup>37</sup>

Attempts to decipher Savile’s puzzling words often assume that behind the mask was the real Jimmy Savile. During his famous 1992 interview with the radio psychiatrist Anthony Clare, Savile refused to reveal his ‘real’ feelings.<sup>38</sup> ‘I haven’t got any emotions,’ he replied. Although some therapists would interpret this remark as that of a person in denial, it is possible that what we are dealing with is someone who had a fairly restricted inner life. Savile appeared to live by and through his performance. ‘Jimmy lived for media coverage,’ attests his biographer, who also stated that ‘he loved publicity and meticulously kept all his newspaper cuttings.’<sup>39</sup> He seldom appeared emotionally engaged and lacked the capacity or interest to commit in intimate relationships; his remark that sex was ‘rather like going to the bathroom’ could be interpreted as indicative of his estrangement from passionate encounters.<sup>40</sup> His friend and biographer noted that ‘although he generated more than £40m for charity and gave his time and attention to hundreds of people and causes he would rarely become emotionally involved’.<sup>41</sup>

It is unlikely that we will ever know what made Savile do what he did. Commander Spindler’s assertion that Savile must have spent ‘every minute of every day’ thinking about his next sex attack is just that, an assertion.<sup>42</sup> Statements purporting to explain Savile’s behaviour are invariably speculative and made for effect. Although we live in an age when public figures are carefully scrutinised to discover their ‘secret lives’, it is important to issue a health warning about any attempt to reconstruct the private life of a deceased subject.

But what can be legitimately analysed is Savile’s public behaviour and his relationship to the culture within which he operated. When we watch him perform on television and in wider public life, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Jimmy Savile played the role of a man who never grew up. It is likely that he also succeeded in circumstances in which he

never *had* to grow up. He was 38 years old when he presented the first edition of the youth-culture-oriented *Top of the Pops* in 1964. He was 49 when in 1975 he launched the famous BBC television programme *Jim'll Fix It*. And for almost two decades he continued to entertain Britain's children on prime time television.

Savile's biographer astutely characterises her subject as 'always a Peter Pan figure'. He was consistently reluctant to confirm his date of birth. Was he joking when he told a newspaper in 1974, at the biological age of 48, that he was 17? At the time he declared, 'I suffer from retarded advancement because I have found quite by accident the secret of youth – dandelion and burdock, it contains a potion which means you live until 500.'<sup>43</sup> His light-hearted statement about his arrested development may have been meant as a joke. But in all his mannerisms and affectations he certainly provided a convincing performance of someone who sought to turn his immaturity into a virtue.

Savile was very much a product of his time. His emergence as an entertainer coincided with the infantilisation of British popular culture.<sup>44</sup> It is only in this context that a man constantly grinning for effect and obsessively seeking attention for his eccentric behaviour could be construed as a serious public figure and a national treasure.<sup>45</sup>

'Rumours have swirled for years hinting at possible child abuse and insinuating that he was somehow a threat,' wrote his biographer in 2012, before the current scandal broke.<sup>46</sup> And yet Savile was actively encouraged to perform the role of a friend to the nation's children. In the 1980s the BBC television series *Play It Safe*, aimed at preventing children's accidents, was introduced by Jimmy Savile. In the years that followed, despite rumours about his unhealthy interest in underage teenagers, he was frequently used to front a variety of children-related causes, including appearing as a celebrity promoter on the covers of public information pamphlets titled 'Stranger Danger' and 'Other People's Children.'<sup>47</sup>

Although Savile was the subject of police inquiries in 2007 regarding the indecent assault of a teenage girl more than 30 years earlier, no charges were brought against him while he was alive. Nevertheless, because of the intensification of the rumours surrounding his behaviour, the Savile brand gradually became severely damaged. That is why, in the aftermath of ITV documentary, all the rumours and stories about Savile's alleged depravity were suddenly transformed into solid evidence and hard facts. Esther Rantzen, the television personality and founder of Childline, summed up the feeling of her peers in an emotional interview



when she stated, ‘I feel that we in television, in his world, in some way colluded with him as a child abuser – because I now believe that’s what he was.’ Rantzen remarked that ‘we all blocked our ears’ and recalled that ‘there was gossip, there were rumours.’<sup>48</sup>

In the public mind, the misdeeds of the past continue to haunt society today. The sudden transformation of the public image of Jimmy Savile, coinciding with a compulsive attempt to put right the problems of the past, can be interpreted as a statement about the preoccupations of the contemporary world. The interesting question for analysis is, why now?

## Notes

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- 5 ‘Jimmy Savile’s Nephew Guy Marsden in Exhumation Call’, *BBC News*, 7 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-20243847> (accessed 28 January 2013).
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- 17 For an important study of memory and remembering, see McNally (2003), especially ch. 2.
- 18 Goffman (1990).
- 19 Goffman (1990) p. 26.
- 20 Goffman (1990) pp. 28–9.
- 21 Park (1950) p. 249.
- 22 <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Hows-About-That-Then-ebook/dp/B008GWTHMG> (accessed 28 January 2013).
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- 24 'Light Entertainment', Andrew O'Hagan, *London Review of Books*, 8 November 2012, for an account of this exchange.
- 25 'BBC Producers "Had Doubts about Jimmy Savile in the 1960s"', Maggie Brown, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2012.
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- 27 'BBC Producers "Had Doubts about Jimmy Savile in the 1960s"', Maggie Brown, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2012.
- 28 Bellamy (2012) p. 271.
- 29 'Sir Jimmy Savile Obituary: Flamboyant Disc Jockey with a Flair for Good Works', *The Guardian*, 29 October 2011.
- 30 'Jimmy Savile Caused Concern with Behaviour on Visits to Prince Charles', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2012.
- 31 'Jimmy Savile Caused Concern with Behaviour on Visits to Prince Charles', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2012.
- 32 'Jimmy Savile Invited Guests to Royal Party on Prince Charles's Behalf', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2012.
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- 34 'Jimmy Savile Caused Concern with Behaviour on Visits to Prince Charles', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2012.
- 35 'Jimmy Savile Caused Concern with Behaviour on Visits to Prince Charles', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2012.
- 36 'Jimmy Savile Biographer Devastated by "Monster of a Hero"', *The Express*, 30 October 2012.
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- 38 Bellamy (2012) pp. 243–4.
- 39 Bellamy (2012) pp. 245 and 255.
- 40 ‘Sir Jimmy Savile: Obituary’, Adam Sweeting, *The Guardian*, 29 October 2011.
- 41 Bellamy (2012) p. 271.
- 42 ‘Savile Spent Every Waking Minute Thinking about Abuse’, Martin Robinson, *The Daily Mail*, 11 January 2013.
- 43 Bellamy (2012) p. 246.
- 44 See Hayward (2012) for a discussion of this point.
- 45 For an interesting discussion of the infantilisation of popular culture, see Calcutt (1998).
- 46 Bellamy (2012) p. 246.
- 47 At the time of writing this chapter, a book called *Benjamin Rabbit and the Stranger Danger* featured on the website of Amazon and could be bought through third-party sites. The book, published in 1985 and subtitled *What a Child Needs to Know about Strangers*, contains an introduction by Savile. Another book (no longer available), titled *Other People’s Children: A Handbook for Child Minders*, has a picture of Savile grinning on its front cover.
- 48 ‘Jimmy Savile Accused of Being a Sexual Predator by Five Women Who Claim He Abused Them When They Were Underage Schoolgirls’, *The Daily Mail*, 29 September 2012.

# 3

## Remembering the Past: Good Old Days – Bad Old Days

**Abstract:** *Despite the scandal surrounding Jimmy Savile's exposure as a sexual predator there is little that is truly surprising about the revelations. The unending stream of revelations reflects society's morbid fascination with the past and its tendency to reinterpret the 1960s and 1970s in light of current values. The focus on the misdeeds of the past is used to give meaning to the problems confronting society today. It allows the revelations about Savile to serve as a moral condemnation of the permissive 1960s. This condemnation of past crimes is integral to the project of restoring moral order.*

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After more than two months of intensive work the police report into Jimmy Savile's activities could provide only a few previously unknown details about his life.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to widespread claims about secret conspiracies and cover-ups, what is striking is that Savile seems to have done so little to hide his proclivities. Certainly a discerning reader of his obituaries would have picked up on the many references to the man's 'odd' behaviour and the rumours of his sexual involvement with children. His authorised biography reads like a thinly veiled exercise in Freudian repression, with its numerous allusions to Savile's sexual predilections: 'There were certainly rumours that he had a fondness for young girls and we would joke that, if they were over 17, then he didn't want to know,' recounts Savile's biographer.<sup>2</sup>

Savile's personal assistant Janet Cope asserted, 'I knew how he operated so I was wary of him,' because 'I felt there was an undercurrent, there was a bad side, which not many people saw.'<sup>3</sup> However, it appears that many people did see Savile's 'bad side.' If all the claims made since the beginning of October 2012 are to be believed, it seems that virtually everyone with whom he worked knew of his dark side and suspected that he was a sexual predator with a perverted taste for young teenagers.

We now know that numerous people involved in the charity sector kept Savile at arm's length from their activities. John Sutherland, who was on the Yorkshire committee of the Royal Variety Club of Great Britain from 1981 to 1996, has publicly acknowledged his anxiety about allowing Savile access to his organisation. He recently stated that 'we didn't let him near the charity', and added, 'Everyone knew, everybody I spoke to knew he was dodgy.'<sup>4</sup>

So what did everyone know? That 'he had a reputation for entertaining young girls' and that 'he looked dodgy, he sounded dodgy, he was dodgy', according to Sutherland. It is striking how often the phrase 'everyone knew' recurs in recollections about Savile's past predatory behaviour. 'I hardly ever met him. ... but there were always whispers and words,' recalls former BBC producer Paul Jackson.<sup>5</sup>

Another charity that claims to have eventually 'banned' Savile from its activities is Children in Need. Sir Roger Jones, who chaired this charity from 1999 to 2002, stated that he would have resigned if Savile had been allowed to take part in the BBC's annual *Children in Need* telethon. He recalled a look of 'abject horror' on the faces of some of his staff when the name of Savile – who had appeared on the telethon in 1984, 1987 and 1989 – was mentioned. 'I think we all recognised he was a pretty creepy

character,' observed Jones. 'I had no evidence, but I found his behaviour very strange. I felt it was inappropriate. I couldn't prove he was a paedophile, but I didn't have to. I just knew he wasn't the sort of guy I would want to go fishing with.'<sup>6</sup> Sir Roger, a former BBC governor, also noted that rumours about Savile were discussed by his fellow Board members.

Officials working at St James's Palace have come forward to confirm that there was 'concern and suspicion' about Savile's visits to its offices. Dickie Arbiter, who was the Queen's spokesman for more than a decade, recalled that Savile 'would walk into the office and do the rounds of the young ladies taking their hands and rubbing his lips all the way up their arms if they were wearing short sleeves.'<sup>7</sup> In recent interviews staff who worked at Broadmoor Hospital 24 years ago stated that they were surprised that Savile was given a set of keys to walk about as he pleased, since they considered him to be a psychopath. Richard Harrison, a former psychiatric nurse at Broadmoor, stated that he, along with many of his colleagues, believed that Savile was a 'man with a severe personality disorder' with a 'liking for children.' 'I'd say he was a psychopath,' said Bob Allen, a former staff nurse, adding that a 'lot of the staff said he should be behind bars.'<sup>8</sup>

What is striking about all these recollections is that Savile's eccentric and predatory behaviour was common knowledge, particularly among people in the media and the world of pop music. According to Rick Parfitt of Status Quo, 'Everybody was at it on *Top of the Pops*.' He indicated that he wasn't surprised by the 'revelations' about Savile, 'because a lot of us, like everybody else, we all kind of knew' that 'there's something not right there.'<sup>9</sup> Paul Gambaccini, one of Savile's BBC colleagues, also 'knew', and in a television interview in October 2012 he claimed that he had been waiting 30 years for the allegations to come out.<sup>10</sup> Similar stories have been told by people who worked in hospitals supported by Savile's charities.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it can be argued that many of the allegations made about Savile are not so much revelations as recollections. Anyone watching Savile on *Top of the Pops* or *Jim'll Fix It* could have had little doubt that here was a presenter revelling in his role as a dirty old man. He made little attempt to hide the movements of his famous constantly wandering hands. Nor did he try to moderate the way he leered at teenage girls and young women. Savile always had an uncanny talent to direct his audience in a nod-and-wink, sexually titillating direction. As one astute commentator wrote, these programmes 'now seem little more than televised grooming.'<sup>12</sup>

The question posed by many commentators – ‘How could his crimes go unnoticed?’ – overlooks the fact that there was a time when it was almost impossible to avoid seeing the grinning face of this very strange man.<sup>13</sup> In the current climate of ostentatious expressions of shock and horror at Savile’s crimes, it is useful to recall that much of what outrages contemporary sensibilities was carried out in front of millions of television viewers. Take a video of a *Top of the Pops* programme transmitted in 1976 that is available on YouTube. There is Jimmy Savile, surrounded by a group of young girls, introducing the next musical act. As he talks to the camera, it is evident that he is groping the bottom of a girl sitting next to him. You can see her suddenly jump off her seat in order to move away from him. His stock-in-trade grin turns into a smirk as he tells the world, ‘I tell you something, a fella could get used to this, as it happens, he really could get used to it.’ Sylvia Edwards, the victim of Savile’s very public assault, recalled, ‘I felt his hand go up my skirt. I leapt off my chair in shock. I was so surprised I cried out and didn’t know how to deal with it.’<sup>14</sup> Nor did British society, apparently.

## Memory work

One of the most interesting questions raised by the scandal surrounding Savile is ‘Why now?’ Why did Paul Gambaccini wait 30 years for the allegations to be made public? Why did millions of British television viewers put up with the kind of behaviour that would today be labelled ‘inappropriate’, ‘abusive’ or ‘predatory’?

One explanation that has been offered by numerous commentators is that the standards of behaviour, particularly between adults and children, were very different in the 1960s and 1970s from those of the twenty-first century. For example, Mark Easton, the BBC’s Home Affairs Editor, recalled that when he was a young cub reporter in the late 1970s, his story about a councillor’s sexual assaults on young girls was ignored by the news editor of his local paper. Easton noted that 40 or 50 years ago there was little public discussion of paedophilia. Today, when paedophilia is a constant subject of media attention, it is easy to overlook the fact that in the 1960s and 1970s paedophiles were often treated simply as ‘strange’ people whom you kept your children away from.

The dramatic shift in attitudes towards paedophilia has been paralleled in sexual politics in the workplace. Easton wrote that ‘many career

women over the age of 50 will have a story of being touched up or groped by some senior colleague at work', and that until fairly recently 'there existed a pervasive attitude that unwanted sexual advances were an irritant rather than a disciplinary matter or a crime.'<sup>15</sup> The change in cultural attitudes is probably most striking in relation to society's perennial anxiety about the motives of adults towards children. As one report stated, 'One of the extraordinary things about the Jimmy Savile case is the level of regular, easy access he appears to have had to vulnerable children in institutions such as care homes, schools, hospitals and the BBC.'<sup>16</sup> Today, when any adult working with a child needs to be cleared by the Vetting and Barring Scheme, it is 'inconceivable' that Savile 'would be allowed such unfettered access.'<sup>17</sup>

There is considerable force in Easton's claim that the 'Jimmy Savile story takes the sexual politics of the present day and applies them to another age.'<sup>18</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, in the discussion of the invention and construction of the concept of abuse, attitudes towards intergenerational contact and relations have undergone a spectacular transformation during the past 40 years. Anyone who grew up in the 1960s will recall that opinions on matters pertaining to sexual and physical contact and perceptions of childhood were very different from those of contemporary times. For example, back in 1969 Eric Clapton's group Blind Faith featured a bare-chested pre-adolescent girl on the front cover of their eponymously titled album. When this album was re-released as a CD in the 1980s, a white band covered the girl's chest. The redesign of this iconic album cover indicated that what was thought by a mass audience to be cool in the 1960s risked being interpreted as child pornography in the 1980s.

Some of the current discussion of Savile's 40-year record as a sexual predator relies on a simplistic juxtaposition of the bad old days of the 1960s with our more enlightened era today. 'Was this abuser at the heart of the nation's popular culture a product of the permissive 1960s and '70s, or do the conditions that let him get away with the abuse still exist, even as awareness of child sex abuse is more widespread?' asks one commentator on the scandal.<sup>19</sup> Numerous others have responded to this question by condemning the permissive attitudes and values of the 1960s and 1970s. Such sentiments are often driven by a current morbid fascination with the misdeeds of the past. The Irish writer John Waters has warned against a 'dangerous condescension to the past' and what he characterises as an 'unlimited appetite for past obscenities.'<sup>20</sup>



This 'unlimited appetite for past obscenities' can be interpreted as an attempt to seek meaning in the problems of the present by finding their root cause in the past. Mobilising memory in order to find the roots of our current problems somewhere in the past has become a highly respectable, culturally sanctioned activity. This strategy relies on reading history backwards, and encouraging people to make sense of current existential problems by seeing them as part of the damage inflicted by past wrongs and injustices. In the modern world the search for the truth frequently focuses on the past because of the profound difficulty of gaining clarity and meaning in the present.

In England the current fascination with inquiries, into everything from Savile's activities at the BBC in the 1970s to the Hillsborough football tragedy and the role of the police in the miners' strike of the 1980s, has turned into a powerful force that feeds on itself. Within a few weeks of the outbreak of the Savile scandal, numerous inquiries were announced into other historical cases of abuse. The most prominent of these inquiries dealt with allegations that former Liberal MP Sir Cyril Smith had sexually abused boys as far back as the 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

When Prime Minister David Cameron and other leading figures instructed the BBC Trust to 'uncover the truth' about Savile, they spoke from a cultural script that imagines that the real answers to present predicaments are hidden in the past. But, as noted above, there is very little that Savile tried to hide, and the inquiries into his life are likely to reveal what has been known for some time. From the standpoint of cultural psychology, the twenty-first-century inquiry can be understood as a form of 'retroactive attribution of meaning'.<sup>22</sup> Freud developed the concept of *Nachtraeglichkeit* to explain the tendency to rework the past through memory. As Alan Young, an ethnographer of the psychiatric sciences, explains, *Nachtraeglichkeit* refers to the process whereby 'the facts are known but rediscovered after they are put in a different context'.<sup>23</sup>

So-called revelations about the past are today reworked and put into the context of Britain's early twenty-first-century crisis of institutional authority. That is why, almost instantly, the focus of concern shifted from Savile as an individual to the BBC as an institution. Within a few days the ritualistic expressions of outrage directed towards an individual mutated into a denunciation of institutional cover-up. Retrospectively the BBC and related organisations have been invested with responsibilities that they never possessed in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s. Although they had no direct role in child protection, they are now denounced for not working

at that time to rules and regulations that began to be introduced only in the 1990s. Through the mobilisation of the memory of past misdeeds to discredit a cultural institution that historically had no formal responsibility towards children, something indeed is 'revealed'.

## **A moral condemnation of the past and the 1960s**

The attempt to 'uncover the truth' by mobilising people's memories invariably invites society to reinterpret past experiences through the prism of present-day preoccupations and values. On an individual level people are encouraged to make sense of their current existential problems as the inevitable outcome of the damage inflicted by past wrongs and injustices. This act of reinterpretation is guided by a cultural script that explicitly invites people to redefine experiences according to the interpretation advanced by moral crusaders to account for the troubles of the world. So whereas the 1960s tended at the time to be criticised by traditionalists and conservatives for encouraging drug-taking and sexual promiscuity, today the decade is more likely to be condemned for creating a climate in which the abuse and sexual exploitation of children and women could flourish.

Revelations about Savile help to construct a memory of the 1960s that locates the cause of our current predicament in the past. That is the truth sought by the numerous inquiries launched in the aftermath of Savile's exposure as a serial predator.

The belief that the truth is out there – that it is in the past, waiting to be uncovered by an official inquiry – is just that, a belief. The reality is that the answers to today's problems will not be found via an archaeological excavation of yesterday's culture. On the contrary, the project of excavating the past is motivated by an instinct to evade the present, and to seek validation from history for modern dilemmas. As the psychiatrist Derek Summerfield writes, 'Any act of remembering is interpretative, driven by the concerns or ideas of the present.'<sup>24</sup> Memory has a fluid and multi-dimensional dynamic that constantly interacts with personal and cultural stimuli. Consequently, how we remember and what we remember is as much the cultural accomplishment of a collective memory as a personal one.

In recent decades Western societies have mobilised memory towards the project of reworking past social traumas in order to elaborate a

grammar of morality for making sense of human experience. As the American sociologist Jeffrey Alexander outlines, “Experiencing trauma” can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences.<sup>25</sup> Through the mobilisation of memories of painful injury, ideas are constructed about whom to blame for troubles facing people today.

In an important exploration of society’s cultural fixation with trauma and memory, the psychiatrist Patrick Bracken links it to the ‘dread brought on by a struggle with meaning’.<sup>26</sup> He believes that as the ‘meaningfulness of our lives is called into question’, people respond to distress in an intensely individualised and traumatised fashion. This response of the vulnerable self ‘stems from a wider cultural difficulty regarding a belief in an ordered and coherent world’.<sup>27</sup> From this perspective the problem of meaning is experienced through a perception of disorientation and confusion. Often the attempt to find meaning in confusion leads to a preoccupation with one’s past. Why? Because through the act of interpretation a sense of order can be imposed on the past in a manner that eludes attempts to gain meaning from an uncertain present.

In previous times the quest for meaning was answered through the prism of a common culture, a shared view of the world, religion or political ideologies. Today society appears to possess a diminished capacity to answer the question of who we are, and the quest for meaning has led to an unprecedented concern with the question of individual identity. This preoccupation with identity has had a significant impact on popular culture and social and political life.

The focus on the past can be interpreted as a symptom of the difficulty that society has in developing the cultural resources necessary to motivate and inspire people. As a result, modern society’s optimistic embrace of the future has been displaced by a turn backwards. As Bernhard Giesen writes, ‘Today, the horror of the past and the remembrance of the victims replace the attraction of utopias that once produced the victims.’ Memory of the common experience of suffering often trumps the vision of a better future as the foundation for solidarity. People’s identity gains meaning through the act of remembering; indeed, ‘it is only remembrance, and not the utopia, that is able to provide the unquestionable basis of a universalistic collective identity’.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the success of period dramas and historical biographies, twenty-first-century popular culture possesses only a limited appetite

for nostalgia. The act of remembrance is frequently drawn towards the experience of victimisation and suffering. In this context the identity of the victim has gained moral status on the basis of its association with the ethic of suffering. And it is through revelations about past suffering that this identity gains definition. Victim identity is fluid and subjective, and is based on a constant interpretation and reinterpretation of past experience.

The fluid character of the revelations surrounding Savile and the various spin-off scandals is shown by the way that public anxiety floats from present-day concerns to the misdeeds of the past and back again. This is a free-floating, culturally sanctioned anxiety that can glide across space and time and attach itself to a variety of otherwise separate concerns. However, whatever the current focus of this public anxiety, its cumulative effect is to distance society from the bad old days of the past.

According to its current representation, the past is like a buried store of secret scandals and hidden acts of human malevolence. History serves the role of therapy that is called upon to help people to recall past injuries. The transformation of history into a form of therapy is inspired by an unimaginative sensibility that flattens out differences between historical periods. It is bad history because it judges every unpleasant episode and act of cruelty by the standards of contemporary society. From this perspective there is no existential distance between the present and the past. Once an act of cruelty has occurred the trauma will exist until the end of time. History as therapy distracts people from living in the present. Little can be done to repair the damage inflicted on people generations ago.

In contrast to previous times, when people were encouraged to celebrate the legacy and achievements of the past, the cultural script of twenty-first-century Britain conveys an attitude of cynicism towards the practices and values of yesteryear. In popular culture the 'good old days' are often portrayed as possessing few redeeming features. Instead of achievements, we tend to dwell on the theme of human cruelty, oppression and trauma. The frequency with which the term 'the bad old days' is used to distance society morally from its past demonstrates a powerful sensibility of estrangement from its historical legacy. So when Prime Minister David Cameron denounced racism in football and declared that 'we will not let recent events drag us back to the bad old days of the past', he expressed the estrangement of the British establishment from the nation's cultural legacy.<sup>29</sup>

The cultural narrative of the bad old days has a particularly strong influence on the conceptualisation of abuse. It is frequently argued that society has finally become aware of and now recognises a variety of problems – child abuse, domestic violence, workplace bullying – that were obscured or covered up in the past. One feminist commentator has warned against playing ‘into the hands of those who wish to go back to the bad old days, when the default position was to disbelieve the victims and protect the perpetrators.’<sup>30</sup>

Those devoted to the twenty-first-century project of plundering the past are preoccupied with excavating its atrocities and horrors. Their preoccupation is with reinterpreting history as a story of human abuse, atrocity, genocide, ethnic cleansing and holocausts. A morose fascination with human evil – the paedophile, the serial killer, the terrorist – threatens to overwhelm our capacity to imagine an individual’s potential for altruism, heroism or simply doing good.<sup>31</sup>

The past is frequently represented as a site of victimisation for the individual. From this perspective the victimisation that individuals have suffered in their childhood constitutes a powerful influence that continues to dominate their lives as adults. The significance that society attaches to the experiences of early childhood leads to a fatalistic acceptance that adults are merely acting out on these influences, and the notion that adults are merely performing to a script written during their childhood has encouraged people to search continually for clues about their lives in the past. From this standpoint the key to understanding the adult self is gaining an understanding of what happened in the past, during childhood. At the level of the individual the ritual of revelation is re-enacted through some form of therapy. Contemporary society accords unusual insights to the recovery of memory, and as I note elsewhere the recovered memory movement never fails to discover acts injurious to the psyche which are said to account for the adult’s predicament.<sup>32</sup>

For some time now memory work has been drawn towards the troublesome era of the 1960s. It was in this historical moment that people, particularly the younger generations, found it difficult to identify with traditional morality. The permissive 1960s were a time when traditional values were openly ridiculed and when the absence of moral cohesion led to a series of clashes which are today often referred to as ‘the culture wars’. Consequently, the 1960s were and continue to be frequently blamed for the breakdown of moral order and a variety of social problems.

The 1960s are routinely associated with all manner of social problems, from crime to the crisis in education. In the 1990s David Owen, a former president of the UK Association of Chief Police Officers, blamed a reported growth in crime on a 'decline in standards, and it is a very serious one': 'It began, I think, with the "anything goes" ideas of the Sixties. You cannot pretend that it doesn't matter that there has been such a decline in private and public morality, in family discipline and the education system.'<sup>33</sup> The myth of the 'anything goes' idea was embraced by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who also argued that the 'Swinging Sixties' were partly to blame for crime and social breakdown. 'A society of different lifestyles spawned a group of young people who were brought up without parental discipline, without proper role models and without any sense of responsibility to others,' stated Mr Blair in July 2004. His attack on the 1960s was motivated by the aspiration to restore moral order; he argued that people 'want rules, order and proper behaviour'.<sup>34</sup>

It seems that with every new decade the memory of the 1960s as a unique moment of moral corruption embraces a wider section of opinion. That is why the revelations about Savile turned so swiftly into a condemnation of the 1960s. Numerous broadsheet newspapers and tabloids blamed the permissive decade for giving child abusers like Savile the freedom to commit their crimes unhindered. One commentator wrote that 'the belief that we can all make up the sexual rules as we go along has created a society which quite simply has stopped protecting children'.<sup>35</sup> This point was echoed in a radical Islamist publication when it cast Savile in the role of a 1960s villain, stating that 'since the 1960s society has seen values that encourage marriage, fidelity and self-restraint abolished – in favour of values that encourage "free love" (aka promiscuity)'.<sup>36</sup>

Blaming the 1960s for the moral malaise of contemporary society may well help people gain clarity about something that has been lost. But the focus on the past – whether individual or collective – is likely to distract us from confronting the questions of our time. The myth of the corrupting 1960s also distorts history and mystifies the issues of our time.

For most people in the 1960s and 1970s, life was far removed from the idyllic representation of peace and love promoted by some hippies. But this was not an era that provided cultural affirmation for sexual exploitation and abusive behaviour. No doubt the new freedoms available to young people were not always utilised for positive and enlightened ends. However, it was not the emergence of the new, relatively relaxed attitudes that accounts for Savile's behaviour and the freedom he enjoyed to pursue

his predatory appetite. A review of accounts of the period suggests that Savile was not simply a product of his time. He was also a powerful man who was rarely forced to restrain his behaviour. He enjoyed not only the power that comes with being a celebrity but also the influence associated with his sacralisation as a philanthropist and as a member of the establishment.

## Notes

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- 4 ‘BBC Producers “Had Doubts about Jimmy Savile in the 1960s”’, Maggie Brown, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2012.
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- 11 See, for example, ‘Savile Boasted of Sleeping with Nurses in His Hospital Room’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 November 2012.
- 12 ‘The Search for Paedophiles Is More Carnival Than Witch-Hunt’, Hannah Betts, *The Guardian*, 7 December 2012.
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- 15 'Jimmy Savile and Workplace Culture Today', Mark Easton, *BBC News*, 12 October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-19870676> (accessed 28 January 2013).
- 16 'Jimmy Savile: The Road to Hypervigilance', Vanessa Barford and Kathryn Westcott, *BBC News Magazine*, 29 October 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-20093812> (accessed 28 January 2013).
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- 24 Summerfield (2000) p. 10.
- 25 Alexander (2004) p. 22.
- 26 Bracken (2002) p. 2.
- 27 Bracken (2002) pp. 14 and 207.
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- 31 See the fascinating discussion of this trend in part 2 of Lasch (1985).
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# 4

## Childhood at Risk: How Children Became So Precious

► **Abstract:** *Constant anxiety about childhood is based on the perception that children are defined by their vulnerability. This sentiment is fuelled by the unique emotional investment that adults make in their offspring, and leads to the sacralisation of childhood. The sacred child has emerged as one of the main foci of moral concerns. Those who assert that they are speaking on behalf of the child can assume that they will gain recognition of their moral authority. The paedophile symbolises the antithesis of the sacred child and is therefore the principal target of moral crusades.*

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The powerful emotions stirred by the Savile scandal can be understood only within the context of the morbid fascination with tragic events afflicting children that has become a recurring feature of public life. Reports of the murder, kidnap or violation of children have a unique capacity to provoke an intense level of moral outrage. Despite the fact that these dreadful events are very rare, anxiety about children's safety and about the threat posed by sex offenders has attained a permanent and powerful influence over the nation's psyche. In Britain the names of child victims such as Sarah Payne, Holly Wells, Jessica Chapman and Milly Dowler haunt our imagination. Since her disappearance in May 2007, the young girl Madeleine McCann has served to symbolise the peril of childhood.

This chapter attempts to explain why childhood has become associated with an expanding variety of dangers. It explores the social and cultural influences that have led to a radical redefinition of childhood, and makes the argument that because children have become the main conduit for the expression of moral concerns, issues related to childhood are invariably a source of public anxiety.

## **The vulnerable child**

Virtually every dimension of children's experience comes with a health warning. Our anxieties about childhood have little to do with any specific threat, real or imaginary. Western culture does not worry simply about paedophiles, bullies or the traffic: eating disorders, obesity, stress, depression, addiction to the Internet and peer pressure are just some of the recent concerns surrounding childhood.

The belief that childhood constitutes an exceptionally dangerous phase in human development has become a central theme in public life. Since the 1980s society has adopted a radically new definition of childhood, best captured by the term 'children at risk', a relatively recent coinage that entered into widespread use in the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> One study of this concept notes that 'one of the most striking changes over time is the relative and absolute growth of the number of at-risk children'.<sup>2</sup> The term 'the vulnerable child' is used interchangeably with 'the at-risk child', and vulnerability is represented as a central feature of childhood.<sup>3</sup>

A study of the emergence of the concept of vulnerable children shows that in most of the published literature it is treated as 'a relatively

self-evident concomitant of childhood which requires little formal exposition.' It is a taken-for-granted idea that needs no elaboration, since 'children are considered vulnerable as individuals by definition, through both their physical and other perceived immaturities'. Moreover this state of vulnerability is presented as an intrinsic attribute of children. It is 'considered to be an *essential* property of individuals, as something which is intrinsic to children's identities and personhoods, and which is recognisable through their beliefs and actions, or indeed through just their appearance'.<sup>4</sup>

Since the 1980s the belief that youngsters are inherently vulnerable and 'at risk' has acquired the character of a cultural dogma.<sup>5</sup> The constant coupling of the terms 'vulnerable' and 'child' implies that the attributes of powerlessness and fragility are intrinsic to the identity of a child. During the 1980s the traditional representation of children as hardy and able to cope with adversity gave way to the conviction that children lack the inner resources to deal with unpleasant and traumatic experiences. Terms such as 'damaged' or 'scarred for life' are used to diagnose the likely impact of misfortune and adversity, and contemporary depictions of childhood communicate the disturbing message that emotional distress will continue to haunt adulthood. This alarmist account of childhood trauma is not confined to popular culture: professionals bombard parents with warnings about the manifold risks to the emotional development of their children.<sup>6</sup>

The belief that children are defined by their vulnerability has encouraged an unrelenting tendency to inflate the threats facing them, and what I have characterised as the 'diseasing of childhood' has acquired its own inner logic.<sup>7</sup> The metaphor 'Toxic Childhood' is used by writers and experts to convey the allegedly perilous influences – consumerism, pollution, pressure of school exams, sexualisation of children, online predators, peer pressure – that afflict the life of children.

Numerous observers have pointed to the paradox that precisely at a time when children live a safer and healthier life than ever before, they are also deemed to be more at risk than previously.<sup>8</sup> This apparent disjuncture between the social and material position of children in Western societies and the proliferation of risks they face is rooted in adults' perception of childhood. It is important to note that ideas about childhood are mediated through the adult imagination; the fears that adults express about the risks to children are influenced by their own experiences and preoccupations, and, at least in part, the heightened

insecurities attached to childhood are adult anxieties sublimated into concerns about children.

## The sacralisation of childhood

The trend towards associating childhood with vulnerability has been paralleled by a steady expansion of the emotional investment in children. In his study of the emergence of public awareness of the problem of child abuse in Canada, John Pratt has drawn attention to its connection with the intensification of the emotional and cultural valuation of children.<sup>9</sup> At a time when everyday life is becoming increasingly instrumental, the bond between parent and child provides a striking contrast to those relationships that are subject to calculation and negotiation. This bond stands out as a rare example of an interaction motivated by sentiment and even altruism: with so much emotional involvement at stake the veneration of childhood also excites concern and anxiety.

The unprecedented level of emotional investment in children is eloquently captured in Viviana Zelizer's concept of the 'sacralisation' of childhood. Zelizer's study outlines how a radical shift occurred in the economic and sentimental value of children from the 1870s to the 1930s. Whereas in the nineteenth century children were valued mainly for the economic contribution they made to the family, by the 1930s their productive role had declined. Thereafter children were increasingly perceived as having a value in their own right. Zelizer argues that the 'emergence of this economically "worthless" but emotionally "priceless" child has created the essential condition for contemporary childhood.'<sup>10</sup>

The priceless child of contemporary society has become an object of sentiment and veneration. However, in recent times the exaltation of the child has acquired far greater force than in the past. Since the 1970s human reproduction in developed societies has increasingly been carefully planned and monitored. The dramatic decline in birth rates means that newborn babies are almost always wanted and from the outset are the subject of enormous emotional investment. With the decline in family size, a significant amount of emotion is invested in each child. And with so much emotional attachment at stake, parents often construct their identity through their relationship with their offspring.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of emotional investment in children is underwritten by powerful social forces that call into question the stability and durability

of adult relationships. The uncertainties attached to adult identity and relationships are evident in the world of work and in community life. And this fluidity and transience does not characterise public life alone. Informal and intimate relationships are frequently experienced as unstable. High rates of divorce and breakdown in family relations intensify the sense of uncertainty surrounding adult identity. Such uncertainties have disrupted the sphere of intimate relationships, where the emotions that adults invest in each other are often tempered by expectations of impermanence. Adults are frequently encouraged to think of their self-interest and to place their own needs and personal growth ahead of their relationships. As the sociologist Ann Swidler writes, 'permanence becomes almost a sign of failure' in a culture in which personal growth acquires a privileged status.<sup>12</sup>

However, this mood of scepticism about long-term emotional commitment does not extend to children. Indeed, precisely because the aspiration for recognition lacks an obvious outlet, the validation of one's adult identity through one's child has acquired great significance. 'The trust that was previously anticipated from marriage, partnership, friendship, class solidarity and so on, is now invested more generally in the child,' writes one sociologist.<sup>13</sup>

The promise of a durable relationship between parent and child stands in sharp contrast to the perceived instability surrounding marriage and other forms of adult commitment. This endows the bond between parent and child with a distinct emotional quality. As the German sociologist Ulrich Beck remarks, 'Partners come and go, but the child stays.' Consequently, 'everything one vainly hoped to find in a relationship with one's partner is sought in or directed to a child', and the 'child becomes the final alternative to loneliness, a bastion against the vanishing chances of loving and being loved'.<sup>14</sup>

In these circumstances the veneration of childhood represents a response to a very real existential problem. That is one reason childhood has come to be invested with sentimental, even religious, meaning. Childhood serves as one of the main conduits for the channelling of moral sentiment.

The moral foundations of Western societies have lost much of their cohesion. Very few norms and values are beyond question. When old-fashioned moralists ask, 'Is nothing sacred anymore?' my sociologist self is inclined to answer, 'Very little.' Ideas about what constitutes an appropriate form of family life, or about what is acceptable as opposed

to unacceptable behaviour, are continually contested. Disagreement about fundamental questions of value is refracted through debates on issues such as family life, abortion, gay marriage and assisted suicide. Such disagreements have tended to weaken clarity about the line that separates the moral from the immoral, and that which is allowed from that which constitutes a transgression.

But in contrast to the culture wars fought over a wide range of controversial issues, there is a rare example of moral consensus, which is the affirmation of the moral status of the child. This consensus is best exemplified by the veneration of the innocence of childhood and a universal loathing for the child abuser.

As Ian Hacking notes, the innocence of children has become the symbol of purity.<sup>15</sup> This symbol of purity offers an important moral focus through which society's ideas about right and wrong gain meaning and definition. The French psychoanalyst Gérard Wajcman goes so far as to argue that the 'sole remaining prohibition, the one sacred value in our society to remain has to do with children.' While many of the moral transgressions of the past have lost significance, those directed at children are policed more intensively than at any time in human history. 'In an age when sexuality is exhibited on every street corner, the image of the innocent child has, strangely, returned with a vengeance,' observes Wajcman.<sup>16</sup>

According to some accounts the intense moralisation of childhood is fuelled by the imperative to meet society's need for clarity about the constitution of good and evil.<sup>17</sup> With such intense moral sentiments attached to this symbol of innocence and purity, it is not surprising that the vulnerable child serves as a catalyst for the mobilisation of so much fear and anxiety. There is a 'particularly close fit between innocence and vulnerability', which endows childhood with a singular moral intensity.<sup>18</sup> As one study of the working of moral panics points out, children, 'particularly "innocent children" have become important triggers of moral politics', where the concept of a trigger is used to account for the unleashing of 'sensitive feelings of indignation, unfairness and anguish.'<sup>19</sup>

Paradoxically, the intensification of emotional investment in children provides adults not simply with a sense of a permanent attachment and security, but also with a heightened sense of risk. With so much at stake it is difficult to reconcile the comfortable feeling of certainty promised by this unique relationship with the uncertainty of everyday life. Thus what is 'at risk' is not only the child, but a very special relationship.

## Territory for claims-makers

The sacralisation of childhood and its pre-eminent moral status has encouraged a tendency to harness the emotional power associated with the vulnerable child to assist the promotion of a wide variety of causes. Often the simple expedient of bringing children into the frame serves to amplify the power of a fear appeal. Take, for example, the headline 'Children in Peril from Flesh-Eating MRSA That Thrives in Classes and Nurseries', which appeared in *The Daily Mail* in 2007. The article reported that a 'Superbug researcher' had determined that 'children were in most danger'. Although the researcher had seen just 'three or four cases', she reportedly concluded that this was only the 'tip of the iceberg'. A couple of months later the same newspaper followed up its scoop with the headline 'GPs On Alert for Killer MRSA Strain in Nurseries, Schools and the Gym'. It claimed that 'the risk is so serious that the Health Protection Agency and the British Society for Antimicrobial Chemotherapy have come together to draw up the advice [given to GPs], designed to stop the bug running riot across the UK as it has in the U.S.'<sup>20</sup> In this case an 'untreatable' threat to humanity is dramatised by framing it through its impact on children. These examples speak to a familiar pattern: drawing attention to an alleged danger facing children has become a regular feature of the twenty-first-century media landscape.

Social constructionist sociology interprets the framing of threats through their effects on children as a form of symbolic politics. One example of this trend is the rebranding of the problem of poverty as that of 'child poverty'. This change in emphasis is motivated by the belief that the poverty faced by children will evoke far greater sympathy than a more general appeal to alleviate the plight of their family. In the same way, campaigners against the reduction of state housing benefits have argued that this policy 'leaves [the] young at risk of abuse'<sup>21</sup> Almost every social problem – homelessness, drug addiction, obesity, prostitution – becomes amplified through its association with children or young people. The framing of a problem as one that threatens the vulnerable child is likely to gain attention for the message of moral entrepreneurs. 'Because the child-victim menaced by the adult deviant is a particularly dramatic, emotionally powerful image, claimsmakers sometimes adopt the language and imagery of child-victims when describing children threatened by poverty or other impersonal conditions,' writes Joel Best.<sup>22</sup>

Although there is sometimes an element of opportunism in the way that general problems are rebranded as threats directed specifically at children, the sentiments are usually sincerely held. Childhood is not simply the symbol of innocence; it also provides the moral resources necessary for giving meaning to experience. That is why children often serve as the conduit for anxieties about changing moral behaviour. For example, at a time when pornography appears to have gone mainstream, concerns about its impact are most likely to be expressed through the condemnation of child pornography or of the sexualisation of children. As one American campaigner has argued, the making of 'pornographic images of children was the most heinous crime imaginable, one that led to their "mutilation"'.<sup>23</sup>

Some social scientists believe that a sublimated form of guilt accounts for the intense hostility towards the child molester. David Garland wrote that 'the intensity of current fear and loathing of child abusers seems to be connected to unconscious guilt about negligent parenting and widespread ambivalence about the sexualization of modern culture'.<sup>24</sup>

In public life the advocacy of claims through the language of morality now tends to be frowned upon. But this technique is still permissible in relation to the threats facing children. Such sentiments are often expressed in relation to the moral outrage aroused by the exploitation of children by child pornographers and, particularly, paedophiles. The recasting of moral anxieties about existential issues through the narrative of a threatened childhood has been conceptualised by Phillip Jenkins as the 'politics of substitution'. The influence of the politics of substitution is apparent in the focus of moral crusades since the 1970s. According to Jenkins, groups who were opposed to homosexuality, or the sale of pornography or Satanism, could make little progress in a climate 'which emphasized the freedom of consenting adults to determine their private moral conduct'. However, by linking their concern to child protection these campaigns could make greater headway: 'In the 1980s, therefore, we find morality campaigns directed not against homosexuality, but pedophilia; not so much against pornography in general, but child pornography; not against Satanism, but against ritual child abuse'.<sup>25</sup> This focus on children served to amplify people's apprehension, and 'meant that deviant behaviour automatically crossed a higher threshold of victimization than would have been possible if adults alone had been involved'.<sup>26</sup> This point is echoed in an important study of the moral panic associated with the sudden rise of Satanic Ritual Abuse in the United States, which



indicates that the feverish climate of the time was in part an expression of sublimated concerns about pornography and homosexuality.<sup>27</sup>

The unique moral status of the sacred child is so powerful that it is literally beyond discussion. As Anneke Meyer observes, “‘the child’ becomes a shorthand for sacralisation and moral status; its meaning no longer has to be made explicit’. She concludes that this narrative is ‘so powerful that in fact *any* opinion can be justified by simply referring to children, and without having to explain *why* and *how* children justify it’.<sup>28</sup> The very mention of the word ‘children’ closes down discussion; the discourse on the perils of childhood provides an uncontested validation for claims-making and ‘*anything* can be justified via children as children make the case good and right’.<sup>29</sup>

Childhood also provides the moral resources for claims-making. Claims-making involves making statements about which problems deserve or ought to deserve the attention of society. A claim constitutes a warrant for recognition or some form of entitlement; thus, claims demanding that a newly discovered risk to children be recognised draw on prevailing assumptions about the vulnerable child. As Joel Best, in his important analysis of claims-making, reports, ‘How advocates describe a new social problem very much depends on how they (and their audiences – the public, the press, and policy-makers) are used to talking about other, already familiar problems.’<sup>30</sup> Claims-makers who draw on a widely familiar moral discourse on childhood often gain status and respectability for their stance. As Meyer notes, ‘justifying attitudes and practices in the name of the child can serve to represent yourself as a moral person’.<sup>31</sup>

The morally charged discourse on the perils of childhood acquires its most intense expression in contemporary society’s obsession with the threat of paedophilia. Claims invoking the threat of child sexual exploitation and adult predators typically communicate an alarmist message. It is because the adult child abuser is perceived as the embodiment of evil that claims-makers feel uninhibited about adopting a language that comes across as a modern version of demonology. Their narrative of outrage and horror aims to incite a moral crusade against the malevolent forces threatening children.

In these circumstances media commentators and public figures are drawn towards communicating a dramatised version of events. ‘Confronted with evidence of children being violated, even reputable newspapers, broadcasters and journalists often lose all sense of judgment

and proportion,' observed one dispassionate observer of the unfolding of the Savile scandal.<sup>32</sup>

In some cases the loss of judgement and proportion is expressed through the dramatic language of demons and witch-hunts. Back in July 2000 *The News of the World's* 'name and shame' campaign against paedophiles showed how members of the public could be incited to behave hysterically. Preying on the public's anxiety regarding the threat posed by predatory paedophiles, the campaign succeeded in provoking fearful parents into organising vigilante groups. In the end the outbursts of violence discredited the campaign. But what this incident demonstrated was that evoking the threat posed by the paedophile could rapidly create the frenzied atmosphere of a witch-hunt.<sup>33</sup>

The climate of fear surrounding the 'name and shame' campaign is often represented as the outcome of a particularly exploitative form of British tabloid journalism. However, it is important to note that the witch-hunt atmosphere was not simply the accomplishment of the mendacious so-called gutter press. For years before this campaign, stories of child exploitation and abduction by malevolent paedophiles had gripped the public imagination. These media stories were complemented by campaigns organised by advocacy groups who promoted fear appeals about the threat of 'stranger danger'. The cumulative effect of these claims-making activities about the risks facing children has been the normalisation of paedophilia.

## The pathologisation of adult–children relationships

In one sense the paedophile possesses the stand-alone status of the embodiment of malevolence. However, the distinction between the paedophile and 'normal' adults is an ambiguous one. That is why the cultural narrative regarding paedophilia invites us to regard all strangers – particularly men – as potential child molesters. The concept of 'stranger danger' and the campaigns that promote it have as their explicit objective the educating of children to mistrust people whom they do not know. Stranger danger helps to turn the unthinkable into an omnipresent threat that preys on our imagination. Promoting the attitude among children that suspicion and mistrust is the responsible and sensible orientation towards strangers pathologises intergenerational encounters. This representation of adult behaviour has come to influence public life

to a significant extent, leading to a fundamental erosion of trust in the motives of adults towards children.<sup>34</sup>

The normalisation of paedophilia is continually transmitted through rules and warnings about the risks inherent in adult–child encounters. Physical contact between adults and children is now perceived as a prelude to the act of molestation. One consequence of this perception has been the proliferation of ‘no-touch’ rules in institutions such as nurseries and schools and in activities organised by voluntary groups. Teachers, nursery workers and play workers are now frequently warned about the danger of putting suncream on youngsters.

For example, after a heatwave in the UK in the summer of 2006 numerous teachers were confronted with requests to put sunscreen on their pupils. The advice of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) was that touching children was far too much of a risk and therefore it was preferable to keep pupils indoors during the boiling weather. Chris Keates, the General Secretary of NASUWT, insisted that teachers should inform heads that putting suncream on children was not part of their job description. ‘Clearly, children have to be protected but we are extremely concerned about teachers taking responsibility for applying sunscreen to children in the present climate of false allegations,’ she stated.

What was significant about the NASUWT’s response was its assumption that since the pursuit of false allegations was a fact of life, all that could be done was to give way to it. The immediate consequence of the pragmatic acceptance of this reality was that children were kept indoors on sunny mornings. As Keates observed, ‘I am not saying that teachers should not care, but it is safer for teachers to question whether children need to spend time in the sun.’<sup>35</sup>

It is, of course, simply not possible to ban all forms of physical contact between adults and children. Heather Piper and Ian Stronach’s research into ‘the problematic of touching between children and professional’ found that their respondents ‘accepted that touch was essential to very young children and other young people’; however:

Many respondents admitted feeling fearful of being regarded as physically or sexually abusive; behaved as though they did not trust themselves; had to prove to others (and vice versa) that they were innocent of any malevolent intent; did not trust others (adults and children) to judge their actions as innocent and appropriate; and did not trust children (and sometimes adults) to refrain from false or malicious allegations.<sup>36</sup>

The respondents expressed the sense of disorientation regarding adult–child relationships that prevails throughout wider society. Arguably adults who do not work with children need not be preoccupied with formal ‘no-touch’ rules. But they still have to remember to keep their distance – physical and emotional – from other people’s children. And when adults are obliged to behave as if they are not worthy of trust, they are likely to view the behaviour of their peers towards children through the prism of suspicion.

Embedded in the current conceptualisation of adult–child relations is an implicit moral contrast between the sacred and its adult negation. The veneration of the child means that the threats that children face are not simply physical: they are readily moralised through a narrative of evil. Since the late 1970s a powerful and convincing master-narrative has been constructed which, at times, has the power to unleash public panics that can engulf innocent people.<sup>37</sup> Garland refers to the phenomenon of the ‘recurring contemporary panic centred upon paedophile sex offenders.’<sup>38</sup> Such outbursts of public concern are founded upon a narrative that has a unique capacity to resonate with prevailing conceptions of good and evil.

The sudden metamorphosis of Savile into a depraved beast shows the mobilising potential of the narrative of evil. It is to the exploration of this narrative that we now turn.

## Notes

- 1 An analysis of the newspaper database LexisNexis suggests that 1978 was the year when the phrase became frequently used in the English-language media.
- 2 Dekker (2009) p. 9.
- 3 Christensen (2000).
- 4 Frankenberg, Robinson and Delahooke (2000) pp. 588–9.
- 5 This point is developed further in my chapter ‘The Myth of the Vulnerable Child’ in Furedi (2008).
- 6 Furedi (2008).
- 7 Furedi (2008) p. 12.
- 8 See, for example, Dekker (2009) p. 18.
- 9 Pratt (2009) p. 106.
- 10 Zelizer (1994) p. 3.
- 11 For a discussion of this process, see Furedi (2008) pp. 102–20.
- 12 Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan and Swidler (2007) p. 117.

- 13 Jenks (1996) p. 107.
- 14 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) p. 37.
- 15 Hacking (2003) p. 40.
- 16 Wajcman (2008) p. 68.
- 17 Webster (2005) pp. 567–73.
- 18 On the relationship between innocence and vulnerability, see Meyer (2007) pp. 89–90.
- 19 Hunt (2011) p. 61.
- 20 ‘Children in Peril from Flesh-Eating MRSA That Thrives in Classes and Nurseries’, Fiona Macrae, *The Daily Mail*, 29 November 2007, and ‘GPs On Alert for Killer MRSA Strain in Nurseries, Schools and the Gym’, Fiona Macrae, *The Daily Mail*, 24 January 2008.
- 21 ‘Axing Housing Benefit “Leaves Young at Risk of Abuse”’, Jill Sherman, *The Times*, 22 November 2012.
- 22 Best (1994) p. 11.
- 23 Cited in Nathan and Snedeker (1995) p. 39.
- 24 Garland (2008) p. 15.
- 25 Jenkins (1992) p. 10.
- 26 Jenkins (1992) p. 11.
- 27 Nathan and Snedeker (1995) p. 40.
- 28 Meyer (2007) p. 99.
- 29 Meyer (2007) p. 100.
- 30 Best (1999) p. 164.
- 31 Meyer (2007) p. 102.
- 32 See the comments by Peter Wilby in ‘Media Hysteria Creates a New Set of Victims’, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2011.
- 33 For a discussion of this campaign, see Critcher (2002).
- 34 For a discussion of this development, see Furedi and Bristow (2010).
- 35 ‘Union Puts Block on Suncream’, Jon Slater, *Times Educational Supplement*, 7 July 2006.
- 36 Piper and Stronach (2008) p. x.
- 37 deYoung (2011) p. 124.
- 38 Garland (2008) p. 15.

# 5

## The Inflation of Abuse and the Rise of the Victim

**Abstract:** *Abuse is a moralised concept that represents the functional equivalent of sin. The association of abuse with victimisation emerged as an idea in the 1970s and became a defining dimension of human experience in the 1980s. Since that time abuse has become normalised to the point that it serves as the cultural exemplar of evil. The narrative of abuse has facilitated the formulation of an ideology of evil through which a variety of problems are given meaning.*

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The depth of reaction to revelations about Savile's behaviour, and the rapid proliferation of accusations of child abuse against other individuals and institutions, were framed through a narrative about the meaning and consequences of such behaviour. This chapter explores how this narrative emerged and the meaning it gives to abuse.

## **An intensely moralised concept**

Abuse is an intensely moralised concept. In Western societies it is one of the few acts that can evoke the traditional idea of sin. It communicates notions about transgression that were once captured by taboos, particularly that of incest. Like sin, abuse implies the violation of something that a community holds sacred; however, unlike sin, which entails the transgression of divine law, the content of abuse is assumed and rarely spelled out. The diffuse connotations of this word are illustrated in the way that the *Law Times* attempted to explain it in 1860, stating that the 'word abuse is manifestly used as different from the word rape: it may include rape no doubt, or it may not'.<sup>1</sup>

The abuse of children in particular represents the violation of one of the few remaining symbols of what is held sacred. That is why, as Ian Hacking states, 'abusing a child has come to seem the most heinous of crimes'. The very mention of the term ensures that 'our most primitive and deep seated moral sensibilities are in full play', and these reactions are so powerful that 'our whole value system has been affected by the trajectory of child abuse in the past thirty years'.<sup>2</sup> The act of child abuse violates the sacred and the sexually innocent. It is likely that the 'dynamics between innocence, sexuality and violent crime turn paedophilia into a veritable atrocity', observes Anneke Meyer.<sup>3</sup>

The narrative of abuse interprets this crime as more than violation: it also signifies the corruption of innocence, and implicitly evokes the notion of moral pollution. Through abuse our very being is invaded, to the point that those who are polluted will never be the same again. The metaphor of pollution connotes intangible corrosive influences that affect the spirit, identity and emotional integrity of the person. These influences are the moral equivalent of the damage caused by the physical pollution of the environment.

It is important to recall that the traditional meaning of the word 'abuse' was interpreted through the grammar of morality. It related to the act of

misuse, improper use and perversion, but it also carried the connotation of pollution and defilement. Throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, self-abuse, or masturbation, was defined as 'self-pollution'. At times concerns about the damaging consequences of self-abuse took on hysterical proportions. The peak of the anti-masturbation panic was probably the second half of the nineteenth century. According to one study there was a sharp rise in the practice of repressive and surgical interventions to prevent masturbation from 1850 onwards, and 'sadism becomes the foremost characteristic of the campaign'.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the supposedly appalling consequences of this dreaded practice doctors, teachers and parents believed that they had a mandate to frighten and even terrorise children for their own good. In the nineteenth century anxious parents were advised to bandage their children's genitals or tie their hands to the bedpost at night. Among the more radical counter-masturbation measures proposed were having children sleep on wet sheets, confining children to straitjackets so that their hands could not stray near their genitals and the removal of the clitoris. Ingenious devices were invented to help parents police their children during the night. Parents could purchase a 'genital cage that used springs to hold a boy's penis and scrotum in place and a device that sounded an alarm if a boy had an erection'.<sup>5</sup> As far as some parents were concerned, such extreme measures were more than justified given the dangerous consequences of the practice of self-pollution. It is difficult today to comprehend the power that the repulsive image of the self-polluter held over people's consciousness during Victorian times. Numerous studies have noted that the sense of dread transmitted through the stigma attached to masturbation fostered a climate of panic about the perils of self-pollution.

Arguably the highly moralised language of sin, with its warning about the everlasting damnation of the self-abuser, has been re-appropriated by the current master-narrative of abuse. However, today the emphasis is on the pollution not of the self but of others.

What gives the narrative of abuse a peculiarly disturbing quality is its capacity to associate abuse with long-term destructive harm. The transformation of a problem into a threat is the precondition for effective claims-making. It is the capacity of a narrative to demonstrate that a particular form of transgression is consequential that allows it to win the attention of the wider public. Claims about abuse are often communicated in an alarmist language of infection and contagion; according to



this narrative the act of moral pollution releases spiritual toxins that are so powerful that those affected will never be the same again – they are in effect ‘damaged for life’.

As one important study of claims-making has noted, the ‘theme of lasting consequences is central to claims about intergenerational victimization – for example, claims about a cycle of child abuse in which abused children become abusive parents.’<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of pollution helps to convey the threat of long-term damage to the defiled individual. This intertwining of existential and moral fears is communicated by one child protection advocate who has criticised his fellow Americans for not taking steps to deal with the ‘polluted ecologies that drive many parents to child abuse.’<sup>7</sup>

## The construction of the narrative of abuse

‘The term master frame,’ explains the psychologist Michael Bamberg, ‘typically refers to pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation.’<sup>8</sup> A master-frame provides an interpretive perspective on problems that resonates with the temper of the times. The narrative of abuse draws on the master-frame of victimisation, and it is to the construction of this problem that we now turn.

With all the discussion surrounding victims of abuse it is easy to overlook the fact that this way of conceptualising human experience is a very recent one. Traditionally the word ‘victim’ was used in association with someone who was sacrificed to a deity or some supernatural force. It was also applied to someone who was subjected to torture or put to death. Until the late nineteenth century the word ‘victim’ was linked to extraordinary experiences, such as the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in exchange for the salvation of humanity. The word was also deployed to describe someone who was subjugated to the power of a destructive agency. It was only during the twentieth century that the word ‘victim’ began to be associated with more earthly experiences, and in the second half of the twentieth century it came to be interpreted to mean ‘a person who suffers from a destructive or injurious action or agency.’<sup>9</sup>

In the 1960s the word ‘victim’ became associated with the subjective experience of an identity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that the new meaning was closely linked to the work of criminologists writing about the impact of crime on the individual. The dictionary defines

the new concept of victimology as the 'study of victims of crime, especially the psychological effects of their experience'.<sup>10</sup> The shift from an essentially religious representation of the victim to a criminological one involved a fundamental revision of the word's meaning, and reflected a reorientation in focus from the action perpetrated to its psychological impact on the injured party. Soon victimhood would acquire the character of a permanent identity.

Today we not only use the word 'victim' differently than in the past; we also deploy it far more often and far more widely. An example illustrates this shift in emphasis. An examination of the *Times Index* in the 1940s reveals that the concept of a victim did not occur as either a category or a sub-category. In 1945 the headlines of two stories dealing with concentration camp survivors used the word 'victim': one, a story about the trial of a German camp guard, had the sub-heading 'Victims Allowed to Die', and the other referred to 'Victims of Fascism'.<sup>11</sup> The word 'victim' was used with the connotation of a one-off experience and clearly did not refer to a state of mind. Reports described the former prisoners as showing 'no sign of bitterness, exultation, hatred or vengeance', but 'simple dignity', even as being 'stolidly apathetic', although some women's faces 'twisted convulsively'.<sup>12</sup> The relative lack of attention paid to the emotional condition of the Jewish survivors indicates that the conceptualisation of victimisation, with its emphasis on lifelong psychological trauma, had not yet arrived.

The *Times Index* first included a separate category for victims in 1972. The British pattern was closely paralleled in America. An inspection of the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature (RGPL)* between the years 1963 and 1970 yields only one article with the word 'victim' in the title. It was the public discussion around the subject of victims of crime that created media interest in the issue. Four articles with the word 'victim' in the title are listed in the *RGPL* in 1971. During the period March 1972 to February 1973 the *RGPL* lists two articles on the subject of compensating victims, two on victims of crime, one on youth victims of crime and one on a victim of rape. From this time onwards there is a gradual broadening out of the concept to embrace crime against the elderly and 'black-on-black' crime. The main themes during the second half of the 1970s are crimes against the elderly, victims of rape and the compensation of the victims of crime.

The representation of victimhood as a distinct identity becomes evident with the increasing emphasis on the psychological and traumatic

dimensions of the experience in the early 1980s. Media interest in the psychology of the victim reflected the emergence of new medical categories that claimed to explain the trauma of victimisation. In 1980 the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM III)* provided a description of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that became a central component in the training of victim counsellors. In *DSM III* the cause of PTSD was defined as a 'psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience'.<sup>13</sup> Victim advocates took on board this definition and took it upon themselves to propose an expanding variety of incidents which were outside the range of usual experience. According to a review of the history of service provision to victims PTSD helped professionals to extend the definition of a victim: 'service providers began to realize that not only were direct victims of crime affected by criminal attack, but so were many of their friends and family members – indeed whole communities could experience crisis'.<sup>14</sup> Trauma became a free-floating disease that could transform an entire town into a community of victims.

The new focus on psychological damage is most evident in relation to victims who were depicted as abused. Victims of Child Abuse emerged as a major category in the *RGPL* in 1986, and soon the new categories Abused Women, Youth Abuse and Wife Abuse were added. The application of the word 'abuse' to an ever-expanding range of experiences represents an important milestone in the conceptualisation of the victim. Today the theme of abuse has become one of the distinguishing features of the Western narrative of transgression. The frequency with which the word is used, and the growing number of experiences that are defined as abusive, are symptomatic of the significance of this highly charged metaphor of contemporary culture.

But it is important to note that the word 'abuse' gained popular currency only in the 1980s. In Britain, for example, the term 'child abuse' entered the public domain in 1972, with the publication of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) report *Suspected Child Abuse*. Before this time 'battered babies' and 'battered children' were the terms most often used to describe violence against children. By the mid-1980s 'abuse' had become an everyday word, and in the following decade it was coupled with a variety of negative experiences and relationships. Elder abuse, spouse abuse, peer-to-peer abuse and same-sex abuse were newly invented conditions that suggested

that an expanding variety of human relationships were subject to this problem.

The conceptual linkage of abuse with victimisation did not merely imply a shift in terminology. The pathology of abuse offered a model of victimisation in which the trauma became a defining experience for the individual concerned. Abuse was increasingly represented as an identity-forming experience because of the psychological damage it inflicts on the victim.

By the mid-1980s the original representation of the victim as someone who has suffered from crime had been reconstructed through the medium of psychology to represent someone with a distinct damaged identity who needed therapeutic intervention. This shift in focus towards therapy reflected the gradual redefinition of the problem of the victim. In the 1990s the victim of crime, particularly of economically motivated crime, diminished in significance relative to the new problem of abuse. In the *RGPL* the high-profile victim of the 1970s – the elderly victim – gave way to the newly prominent abused children and women. Soon the elderly victim would reappear, but this time in the guise of elder abuse.

It is evident that the modern victim of the late 1960s has been fundamentally redefined. It is possible to distinguish three phases in the evolution of the modern victim. The first phase – roughly 1968–1975 – saw the construction of the modern victim as a ‘victim of crime’, often the victim of street crime. This presentation of the victim was closely linked to anxieties about law and order. The dominant theme of this phase was the concern that while criminals were pampered by an all-too-liberal system of justice, the victims of crime were ignored and offered little support.

During the second phase – *circa* 1975–1985 – the meaning of ‘victim’ was expanded to embrace the ‘newly discovered’ problem of abuse. Victims were increasingly represented as abused individuals who suffered not so much at the hands of economically motivated criminals as at the hands of people they knew. Rape, child abuse, elder abuse and spouse abuse were represented as the consequences of the destructive dynamic of interpersonal relationships. Victimisation was now presented as traumatising and therefore identity-conferring.

In the third phase – roughly 1985 to today – the meaning of the word ‘victimisation’ has expanded, and victimisation is increasingly presented as the quotidian experience for most people – but especially for children.

## Normalisation of abuse

The theme of abuse recurs in popular culture, media reportage and public discussion. The frequency with which the word is used, and the ever-expanding range of experiences that are characterised as abusive, indicate that it has become an important cultural resource for drawing attention to problems. Warnings about the 'growing risk' of elder abuse, spouse abuse, peer abuse or animal abuse all adopt the rhetorical strategy of universalising a problem. The narrative of big numbers suggests that 'we are all at risk' of abuse. A few months before the revelation of Savile's crimes, England's Deputy Children's Commissioner, Sue Berelowitz, declared that 'there isn't a town, village or hamlet in which children are not being sexually exploited'.<sup>15</sup>

Associating new problems with already-recognised ones helps claim-makers to gain attention for their cause. For example, warnings about the emotional abuse that parents allegedly inflict on their children can draw on the pre-existing consensus about the harm of sexual abuse to gain public attention.

The word 'abuse' is now used so widely that moral entrepreneurs often find it difficult to resist the temptation of alluding to it in their polemic. For example, in recent years opponents of male circumcision have castigated this practice as child abuse. Health activists sometimes accuse parents who allow their overweight children to eat too much food of the same offence. Parents who educate their children to embrace the family's religion have also been condemned as child abusers by anti-faith campaigners. The vociferous proponent of atheism Richard Dawkins expressed this sentiment when he claimed that 'odious as the physical abuse of children by priests undoubtedly is, I suspect that it may do them less lasting damage than the mental abuse of having been brought up Catholic in the first place'.<sup>16</sup>

In the study of the social construction of problems, the problematisation of issues such as emotional abuse is characterised as an example of what is called *domain expansion*. Domain expansion is a tactic used to link a specific issue to an existing problem. For example, as one sociologist explains, once 'child abuse received general recognition as a social problem, various advocates began claiming that the category ought to include parental smoking, circumcision, not buckling small children into car seats, and so on'.<sup>17</sup>

The continual discovery of new conditions of abuse is paralleled by the tendency to broaden the definition of the problem. Broad definitions

tend to increase the size and weight of a problem. Claims-makers working in the area of child protection frequently claim that society faces an epidemic of abuse. This claim is forcefully advocated in the NSPCC's report *Child Abuse and Neglect in the UK Today*. Published in 2011, the report offers a definition of maltreatment that could include virtually any unpleasant childhood experience. Maltreatment is defined as 'all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power'.<sup>18</sup>

The report defines sex abuse in a way that fails to distinguish between adult predators and the acts of other children. Its definition of emotional abuse is so wide that any parenting strategy of which the NSPCC disapproves can be included in it: emotional abuse 'may include interactions that are beyond the child's developmental capability, as well as overprotection', and 'may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children'.<sup>19</sup> This means that parents with high expectations of their child, as well as those who are too protective of their offspring, are now diagnosed as abusers.

From the standpoint of rigorous social science research, the problem with broad definitions of abuse – such as those advanced by the NSPCC – is that they blur the distinction between troublesome experience, serious victimisation and the deployment of brutal physical and sexual violence. Coupling the rape and physical attacking of a child with the behaviour of a pushy parent has only one merit – which is the construction of large numbers. This methodological synthesis of a variety of otherwise disconnected childhood problems into the category of abuse does not benefit the victim of serious acts of abuse. As Joel Best remarks, 'By adopting broad definitions of victimization and arguing that victimization is both consequential and unambiguous, advocates blur distinctions among different forms of victimization.'<sup>20</sup>

## An ideology of evil

The mobilisation of opinion against abuse, particularly abuse of children, is usefully captured by the cultural sociology concept of a moral crusade. In his classic study of moral enterprise Howard Becker concludes that the 'final outcome of the moral crusade is a police force'.<sup>21</sup> Threats are

represented as not just physical hazards, but a danger to the natural order of things. It was this perception that gave witch-hunters in early modern Europe their mandate and fierce passion. Similarly, the powerful sense of moral repugnance at the practice of 'self-pollution' was inextricably linked to the conviction that this was the most unnatural of acts. Advocates of these causes almost effortlessly make the conceptual jump from unnatural to bad and from bad to evil.

Moral crusaders turn their narrative of evil into an ideology that is hostile to anyone who dares question its claims. In their view it is not sufficient to listen to allegations of abuse – there is a moral duty also to believe them. In the representation of an allegation of abuse as a form of transcendental truth the distinction between allegation and evidence becomes blurred. The readiness with which an unsubstantiated allegation of abuse against Lord McAlpine was interpreted as fact by leading journalists and commentators and a major national institution like the BBC indicates that the usual standards of proof have in practice been dispensed with. That the Prime Minister of the UK would immediately respond by calling for an inquiry into these allegations demonstrates the power of this ideology.

A central thesis of this ideology is that allegations must not be questioned. So when the magician and TV personality Paul Daniels questioned whether all the hundreds of allegations against Savile were true, he was swiftly condemned. A police spokeswoman stated that they were 'not prepared to discuss whether they would investigate Daniels' statement'. Under this pressure the statement was swiftly removed from Daniels's website.<sup>22</sup> The necessity of believing allegations was expressly advocated in a joint report published by the Metropolitan Police Service and the NSPCC in January 2013. It concluded that the 'most important learning from this appalling case' is that 'those who come forward must be given a voice and swift action taken to verify accounts of abuse'.<sup>23</sup>

With so much at stake, moral crusaders are often indifferent to the destructive consequences of a false allegation of child abuse. When the allegation against Lord McAlpine was exposed as false, numerous advocates of this ideology decried the fact that the outcome of this incident would be to question such accusations in the future.<sup>24</sup> Another lamented the fact that the person who made the false accusation – 'a victim of systematic rape – has been forced into a humiliating apology'.<sup>25</sup> One leading moral crusader complained that 'no sooner is child abuse aired than we are warned against witch hunts, obsession and hysteria'.<sup>26</sup>

For a moral crusader the necessity of defeating evil means that the collateral damage caused by false allegations is an acceptable price to pay. The duty to believe trumps other considerations.

The duty to believe even extends to the most improbable of accusations, such as claims about the dark arts of Satanic Ritual Abuse. Campaigners against this peril have charged sceptics with the crime of victimisation on the ground that the worst thing that can happen to the victim of sadistic Satanic abuse is not to be believed. One proponent of this argument stated:

It may be that some accounts which are reputed to be 'satanic' abuse are delusional, and the narrative may indeed be psychotic in some cases. But we must still face the awful fact that if some of these accounts are true, if we do not have the courage to see the truth that may be there ... we may tacitly be allowing these practices to continue under the cover of secrecy, supported also by the almost universal refusal to believe that they could exist.<sup>27</sup>

The attempt to stigmatise the sceptic is underwritten by the belief that the accuser possesses a unique monopoly over a transcendental truth that must not be burdened with conventional norms of proof.

The project of stigmatising the unbeliever and the sceptic is not an incidental feature of a moral crusade. The ideology of a moral crusade is a closed system that cannot entertain the possibility that its version of good and evil is open to debate. Its moral condemnation of disbelief is motivated by the conviction that sceptics help create a climate in which the crime of abuse will flourish. That is why, during the 1980s Satanic Ritual Abuse panic in Britain, the proponents of this cause claimed that an 'insidious and dangerous' disease was sweeping the country – incredulity about the existence of ritual abuse. According to one such account 'this contagion takes the comforting form of sceptical and rational inquiry, and its message is comforting too: it is designed to protect "innocent family life" against a new urban myth of the satanic abuse of children'.<sup>28</sup>

The duty to believe all allegations is a recurrent theme in the narrative of abuse. From this standpoint any doubt cast on the statement of a victim invites moral condemnation. Historically, moral crusades have tended to regard scepticism as the worst form of heresy. During the Middle Ages inquisitors regarded the heresy of not believing accusations of witchcraft as a terrible crime. The publication *Malleus Maleficarum* ('The Hammer of Witches'), published in 1486 in Germany, sought to challenge directly those who were sceptical of the existence of witchcraft. As today, so in



the past the sceptic was the natural target of the moral entrepreneur. The *Malleus* communicated a zealous intolerance towards anyone who questioned the existence of dark demonic forces. The manual included on its title page the epigraph *Haeresis est maxima opera maleficarum non credere* – ‘Not to believe in witchcraft is the greatest of heresies.’<sup>29</sup> This point was echoed by Jean Bodin, the famous sixteenth-century political theorist and jurist whose text *On the Demonic Madness of Witches* played a crucial role in the promotion of the witch scare. Bodin asserted that those who denied the existence of witches were themselves witches.<sup>30</sup>

Although today, in some of its most extreme manifestations (such as lurid claims of Satanic abuse), the demand to be believed has been successfully contested, there is little doubt that in its secular form aspects of this ideology have gained a powerful influence over public life. This was demonstrated in the response to revelations about Savile’s actions. Disbelief about allegations made against him in the past was interpreted as a vindication of the argument for the duty to believe. A report published by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner a few weeks after the story broke asserted that ‘if the recent allegations against Jimmy Savile are true, a conspiracy of silence allowed him and those who acted with him to continue to rape children with impunity for decades.’<sup>31</sup>

As we shall see, the report’s allusion to a ‘conspiracy of silence’ was not simply a rhetorical device to encourage victims to make allegations. The narrative of abuse often contains the implication of a conspiracy. After all, evil does not just happen: it is an affliction intentionally caused by a malevolent agency. In the next chapter the practical consequences of this ideology of evil will be probed.

## Notes

- 1 Quoted in the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- 2 Hacking (1991) p. 259.
- 3 Meyer (2007) p. 98.
- 4 Spitz (1953) p. 140.
- 5 Michael, Gagnon, Laumann and Kolata (1994) p. 161.
- 6 Best (1999) p. 106.
- 7 Quoted in Hacking (1991) p. 279.
- 8 ‘Master Narratives’, Michael Bamberg, [http://www.clarku.edu/~mbamberg/encyclopedia\\_entries.htm](http://www.clarku.edu/~mbamberg/encyclopedia_entries.htm) (accessed 30 November 2011).

- 9 Stein (1967) p. 1591.
- 10 *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) p. 607.
- 11 See *The Times*, 10 and 18 September 1945.
- 12 *The Times*, 21 September 1945.
- 13 American Psychiatric Association (1980) p. 247.
- 14 Young (1997) p. 200.
- 15 'Shocking Scale of Abuse', Graeme Wilson, *The Sun*, 13 June 2012.
- 16 Dawkins (2002) p. 9.
- 17 Best (1999) p. 170.
- 18 Radford, Corral, Bradley, Fisher, Bassett, Howat and Collishaw (2011) p. 10.
- 19 Radford, Corral, Bradley, Fisher, Bassett, Howat and Collishaw (2011) p. 22.
- 20 Best (1999) p. 108.
- 21 Becker (1963) p. 156.
- 22 'Paul Daniels Questions Whether All Savile Accusers "Are For Real"', James Meikle, *The Guardian*, 24 December 2012.
- 23 Gray and Watt (2013) p. 19.
- 24 'Child Abuse Victims "May Feel Unable to Speak Out for Fear of Media Witch-Hunt', Josh Halliday, *The Guardian*, 11 November 2012.
- 25 'Newsnight and the BBC Might Have Screwed Up, but the Real Victims of This Are Being Forgotten – Again', Owen Jones, *The Independent*, 11 November 2012.
- 26 'Our Paedophile Culture', Bea Campbell, letter in *London Review of Books*, 6 December 2012.
- 27 Casement (1994) p. 24.
- 28 'Vortex of Evil', Judith Dawson, *New Statesman*, 5 October 1990.
- 29 Kramer and Sprenger (1487).
- 30 Bodin (1587).
- 31 Office of the Children's Commissioner (2012) p. 4.

# 6

## Modern Demonology: Ritual Abuse, Conspiracy and Cover-up

► **Abstract:** *Revelations about Jimmy Savile's past resonate with a climate hospitable to conspiracy thinking. Conspiratorial thinking has led to the development of a secular form of demonology that resembles phenomena usually associated with a witch-hunt. Since the 1980s the disposition towards conspiratorial thought has been mobilised in crusades against paedophiles. Conspiratorial thinking also influences the workings of the criminal justice system. Police operations that trawl for allegations of abuse are but one example of the way that a crusading zeal leads to distortions of the system of criminal justice.*

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From the outset the dramatic revelations about Savile's past were presented as a story about a conspiracy of silence that protected him from public scrutiny. Hints of a conspiracy involving a shadowy network of powerful individuals signalled fears of a massive establishment cover-up. Conspiracy theories were in circulation within a few days of the story breaking. Some of these conspiracy stories implicated Downing Street, while others suggested that the British Royal Family had close connections to powerful paedophile rings.<sup>1</sup>

Until the discrediting of the charges of child abuse against Lord McAlpine the conspiracy theories regarding powerful Conservative figures were circulated in the mainstream media. The leading promoter of these theories was the Labour MP Tom Watson, who stood up in Parliament on 24 October 2012 and declared that he was in possession of 'clear intelligence suggesting a powerful paedophile network linked to parliament and No 10'.<sup>2</sup> Watson subsequently elaborated his claim and suggested that this secret cabal of abusers represented a mortal threat to anyone who crossed their path.

As a parliamentarian well known for his campaigning activities, Watson enjoyed considerable prestige among his peers. Consequently his claim was initially interpreted by numerous commentators as a statement of fact. But as he began to voice concerns about the personal danger he faced for exposing the network of powerful paedophiles, his story appeared to spin out of control. He stated that 'despite warnings that my personal safety is imperilled', he would continue with his crusade. Watson warned that he had put together a 'detailed log of all the allegations should anything happen',<sup>3</sup> and in a tone of defiance he asserted that he would continue to 'speak out on this extreme case of organised abuse in the highest places'. This was an 'abuse of power by some of the most powerful people', declared Watson.<sup>4</sup>

What is significant about Watson's conspiracy theories is that unlike those circulated by isolated figures on the margins of society, his version of events enjoyed respectability even in the mainstream of public life.<sup>5</sup> Very few questioned his letter to the Prime Minister boasting of his 'experience of uncovering massive establishment conspiracies'.<sup>6</sup> That is because claims about the existence of a secret network of paedophiles had become a well-established and recurring theme in popular culture and public life. By October 2012 it appeared that the mere assertion of a cover-up was likely to lead to a police investigation, if not an official inquiry.

During October and November 2012 similar claims were made in a variety of contexts. Simon Danczuk, Labour MP for Rochdale, 'outed' Cyril Smith, the deceased former Liberal MP of his constituency, as a child abuser. He not only accused the dead MP of the crime of sex abuse, but also alleged that his deeds had been covered up by the British establishment, drawing public attention to 'suspicions that special branch, MI5 and the director of public prosecutions at the time may have covered up the seriousness of this alleged abuse'.<sup>7</sup>

Conspiratorial thinking assumes that nothing happens by chance and is therefore less interested in an act of abusive behaviour than in the networks and forces that are behind it. Behind the evil act lurk vested interests, a hidden agenda and maybe a conspiracy. That is why the story that shook Britain in October 2012 was not so much about Savile as about groups of powerful men and key national institutions – the BBC, the NHS and the police – who allegedly hid his misdeeds.

## A self-fulfilling prophecy

Claims-makers about child abuse are frequently drawn towards conspiratorial thinking and even demonology. The unfortunate tendency to recast this crime in a moralised and quasi-religious form has encouraged the perception that what is at stake is not an individual criminal act but a conspiracy of evil. This doctrine was dramatically communicated by some cultural feminists in the 1970s, who claimed that the sexual abuse of children was an open secret among men who regarded it as an essential component of socialising their daughters to a life of submission to males. Advocates of this thesis insisted that young girls are routinely subjected to some form of sex abuse by family members.<sup>8</sup> Demonising men as sexual predators did not quite add up to an old-fashioned witch-hunt, but it has contributed to a climate of permanent obsessive paranoia about male paedophiles.

The power of a modern secular narrative of demonology was evident during the Cleveland child abuse panic of 1987 when 121 children were forcibly – and in the vast majority of cases, wrongly – removed from their homes by social workers on the ground that they had been abused by their parents. Since the 1980s there have been numerous attempts to uncover networks of abusing parents and rings of paedophiles in Britain. The panic over the mass abuse of children in Cleveland overlapped with

another alarming development – the allegations of Satanic Ritual Abuse of children.<sup>9</sup> An eruption of such allegations led to major investigations into paedophile rings in Rochdale and the Orkneys around 1990. Despite the flagrant miscarriages of justice and the proliferation of false allegations the fantasy of highly organised paedophile rings came to be internalised by the child protection industry and policy-makers. As Jean La Fontaine observed, what began as an ‘evangelical campaign against satanism’ was transformed into a child protection issue.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most expensive attempts to uncover a paedophile ring was the investigation into care homes in North Wales in the 1990s. The investigation and subsequent inquiry into Bryn Estyn, a former children’s home in the region, was fuelled by the conviction that a paedophile ring of staff were systematically abusing those in their care. Press reports, which began to appear in 1991, hinted at a vast conspiracy of abuse which subjected young people to a regime of violence and brutality. Despite a massive police operation there were only six prosecutions, leading to two new convictions for sexual abuse. After the trial in Chester Crown Court in 1995, one Detective Superintendent was quoted as saying that ‘we thought at first that there was a paedophile ring’ but ‘now we know that it was just two evil men.’<sup>11</sup>

The original rumours concerning paedophile rings persisted and were subsequently coupled to rumours of a police cover-up. In 1996 the Conservative government set up the largest tribunal of inquiry in British history, under Sir Ronald Waterhouse. This tribunal, which reported in February 2000, found that there was widespread abuse of children in care homes in North Wales – but it did not find evidence of a police cover-up or of a conspiracy. What it found was not a plot but a number of cases of individual staff members abusing children in their care.

A highly moralised discourse on child abuse encourages a disposition towards conspiratorial thinking. Moreover the assertion that rings of powerful and well-connected paedophiles and abusers have been responsible for the large-scale victimisation of children helps moral crusaders to gain attention for their claims. Hints of institutional complicity and cover-ups intensify the sense of moral outrage. The launch of a new inquiry into the North Wales homes, announced in the wake of the Savile revelations, indicates that rumours of conspiracy often acquire a life of their own.

The power of conspiratorial thinking is demonstrated by its influence over the workings of the criminal justice system and the police.

Operation Yewtree, the Metropolitan Police investigation into abuse linked to Jimmy Savile, has followed the inquisitorial model of the trawling operations that are usually associated with suspected cases of mass victimisation. Such operations have as their objective the uncovering of large numbers of unreported acts of abuse. Police investigations into events that occurred as long ago as the 1960s are unlikely to find evidence that meets acceptable standards of proof. In these circumstances the case for the prosecution rests entirely on 'the credibility of victims, recounting traumatic events from decades ago'. As one news report about Operation Yewtree stated, the 'chances of prosecutions being brought will be boosted by similar accounts and details being given by victims, where ideally their recollections can be shown to be independent of each other'.<sup>12</sup>

In other words the case depends on the volume of allegations for its credibility. When the prosecution relies on the quantity of evidence, the police are likely to discover large numbers of allegations. Within a week of launching Yewtree the police were claiming to have been contacted by hundreds of witnesses.<sup>13</sup> Their efforts were assisted by legal firms advertising for clients interested in claiming compensation.<sup>14</sup>

The dramatic reorientation of policing indicated here, from solving reported crimes to searching for crimes that have not been reported, is rarely commented upon. Yet large trawling operations such as Yewtree can be interpreted as an exercise in crime construction. It is, of course, likely that such operations will from time to time uncover genuine cases of horrific criminal behaviour, but they will do so at a very high cost to the system of justice.

Trawling for victims and searching for retrospective allegations represents a disturbing development in the way that the criminal justice system operates. Instead of solving crimes the police attempt to uncover them in order to reinforce and strengthen evidence against the targets of an investigation. A trawling operation is not a response to an allegation of abuse voluntarily made by an individual. It is an invitation to people to reinterpret their experience of the past as one of victimisation.

An operation designed to uncover unreported acts of abuse is frequently justified as a sensible and compassionate attempt to help those who, as vulnerable children, were reluctant to come forward in the past. Advocates insist that since it is difficult for adults who claim that they were abused when they were young to make people believe them, contacting their peers to verify their experience helps to ascertain the

facts, and that if large numbers of trawled individuals echo each other's allegations, then the case becomes far more solid. The conviction here is that if many people allege they were abused by the same individual, they probably were.

This sentiment is expressly conveyed by the first Operation Yewtree report, published in January 2013, which concludes that the 'volume of allegations' paints a 'compelling picture of widespread sexual abuse by a predatory sex offender'. Consequently the authors of the report have decided to refer to 'victims' rather than 'complainants' and are 'not presenting the evidence they have provided as unproven allegations'.<sup>15</sup> This casual rebranding of an unproven allegation as evidence represents a radical revision of the relationship between accusation and fact.

Unfortunately allegations obtained by trawling often provide an unreliable version of events from the past. Richard Webster suggests that during the trawling operation carried out by the investigation into care homes in North Wales, police officers and social workers unwittingly steered witnesses in a direction that confirmed what they wanted to hear.<sup>16</sup> Offers of financial compensation sometimes influenced economically insecure individuals to make an allegation, although in most cases false allegations of abuse are not necessarily consciously or systematically fabricated. In a climate in which the media promotes sensationalist accounts of unimaginable horrors, and in which individuals are incited to interpret their current emotional and social problems as a consequence of what might have happened to them in the past, many are driven to embrace the status of a victim.

The moral affirmation of the status of the victim provides young people from a troubled background with a new-found respectability. A powerful account of the 'witch-hunt' surrounding Bryn Estyn argued:

People who have previously felt overlooked and insignificant may suddenly find themselves the centre of attention, concern and sympathy. At the same time the idea that they are now engaged in a battle against evil, in which many other people, including counsellors and social workers, are fighting alongside them, can be a source of great emotional energy. It may give people both a *raison d'être* and a feeling of strength and solidarity which they did not previously have.<sup>17</sup>

Of course not all the allegations dredged up in a trawling operation will be false. However, the imperative of expanding the number of allegations makes it difficult for police officers to assess the quality of the evidence obtained.



The problem that the police may have in sorting genuine from false allegations is compounded when the allegations are tested in court. There the sheer volume of allegations of violent depravity may well have a significant impact on the jury. When numerous allegations are examined simultaneously, the quality of the evidence may well not come under serious scrutiny. The unreliability of the evidence gathered through trawling operations could be magnified in the case of Operation Yewtree. The approach is justified on the ground that in some situations, if crimes are similar to one another they may be tried together under procedures governing 'similar fact' evidence. Thus evidence offered about one case can be used to corroborate another. In this case 'similar fact evidence' is likely to be influenced by the allegations that people read about in the newspapers and see on television. Those asked to corroborate what others have said may well incorporate the highly publicised experiences into their own narratives.

Cases pursued on the basis of the information gathered by trawling operations rely on the argument that large numbers of allegations speak for themselves. Corroborating evidence serves to reinforce each claim, and the use of what is called the 'similar fact principle' transforms repeated allegations into incontrovertible facts. The use of this procedure has been paralleled by the relaxation of standards of evidence. A report by the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee in 2002, titled *The Conduct of Investigations into Past Cases of Abuse in Children's Homes*, cautioned against the increased use of the similar fact principle:

Whilst we accept that the criminal justice system needs to be more sensitive to the needs of victims and witnesses, we are concerned that the proposed removal of safeguards for the defendant... may further prejudice the defendant in historical child abuse trials. We are particularly concerned about the proposed relaxation of the rules of evidence, which may allow for greater admission of 'similar fact' evidence. In our view, given the sensitive and difficult nature of investigating allegations of historical child abuse, there is a strong case for establishing special or additional safeguards for the exclusion of prejudicial evidence and/or severance of multiple abuse charges.<sup>18</sup>

As the Select Committee's report anticipated, since the North Wales children's home scandal the law has been gradually moving further in the direction of relaxing the legal safeguards that presume defendants to be innocent, in order to secure the conviction of sexual abusers whom it would otherwise be very difficult to convict.

Back in 1998 Jean La Fontaine noted that ‘among many who work in the field, believing the victim has become an unquestioned dogma that disregards any need for corroborative evidence.’<sup>19</sup> Sadly since the late 1990s this ‘unquestioned dogma’ has gained powerful influence over the way that crimes involving child protection are investigated and prosecuted. One of the consequences of the tendency to lower standards of evidence in cases of multiple allegations of sexual abuse is that the safeguards traditionally used to protect defendants have been undermined. Sir William Utting, a former Chief Inspector at the Social Services Inspectorate and a past President of the National Institute for Social Work, stated in a television discussion of the Waterhouse report that ‘it may be that innocent people are convicted but we ought to be more worried about the guilty that might get away.’<sup>20</sup> From this perspective a trial is no longer about weighing up the evidence but about acting upon an allegation. The implicit presumption of guilt indicates that prejudice has considerable influence over the conduct of trials involving multiple cases of sex abuse.

In such trials there is a strong likelihood that many innocent defendants will be convicted along with those who are guilty. For some people this collateral damage is a small price to pay for the cause. It is worth noting that apologists for the Cleveland panic still regularly comment that the fact that 27 of the original 121 children diagnosed by the paediatricians as having being abused were ultimately taken into some form of care somehow justifies the events, even though in 96 of the 121 cases the courts dismissed the allegations.

Large-scale trawling operations like Yewtree are always likely to find confirmation for their initial assumptions. The American sociologist Robert Merton developed his concept of the ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ to account for the tendency for people’s definition of what is real to be experienced as real in their consequence. Merton argued that initial assumptions and beliefs about a situation played an important role in establishing the meaning that those assumptions had for its outcome.<sup>21</sup> It is evident that Operation Yewtree is influenced by the conviction that its investigation of the past will uncover more than just the criminal acts of an individual. Consequently it is soliciting witnesses and allegations of sex abuse against individuals whose only connection to Savile is that they worked together or that they may have incidentally known one another.

The arrests of a number of well-known pop stars, radio personalities and celebrities and entertainers, and constant hints that others are being

investigated, have fostered the impression that what is at stake are not the acts of individual predators but the institutionalisation of a culture of abuse. Some of those targeted have been arrested not in connection with child abuse but – in the case of the comedian Jim Davidson (who denies any wrongdoing) – in response to allegations dating back 25 years made by two women who were then in their mid-twenties. In this way it is inevitable that connections between the different cases will be made and networks imagined.

## Twenty-first-century demonology

The meaning of evil has changed with the passing of time. As one important study points out, in previous times ‘evils were divided into matters of nature, metaphysics, or morality’. Since modernity evil has been confined to what was called ‘moral evil’, which is the product of human will; it is intentional, malicious and meaningless.<sup>22</sup> Behind evil lurk vested interests, a hidden agenda and maybe a conspiracy. That is why the story is not so much about Savile as about groups of powerful men and important institutions who bear a share of responsibility for his misdeeds. As Webster argues, ‘once child abuse had been redefined not simply as a social ill, which it undoubtedly was and is, but as the supreme evil of our age, it was perhaps inevitable that ancient demonological fantasies would be mobilised again.’<sup>23</sup>

The ‘discovery’ of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) shows how the ideology of evil constructed around child abuse can draw on the resources of pre-modern demonology. In the US since the 1980s Satanic myths have been internalised by sections of professions such as psychotherapy, social work and law enforcement. One American survey of 2,272 clinical psychologists found almost 3,000 cases reported by 802 psychotherapists who claimed that they had encountered at least one case of SRA. A 1995 national survey of a sample comprising 706 district attorneys, 1,037 social service workers and 2,912 law enforcement agents found that 302 respondents had encountered at least one SRA case.<sup>24</sup>

In the 1990s, a significant proportion of Americans believed that SRA accusations were ‘real and serious’. One 1994 survey reported by *Redbook* magazine found that 70 per cent of Americans ‘believe that at least some people who claim that they were abused by satanic cults as children, but repressed the memories for years are telling the truth.’<sup>25</sup> Other surveys

indicated that a significant percentage of American and British psychotherapists, social workers and counsellors accepted that 'SRA accusations are more or less accurate accounts of Satanic cult crime'. A small survey conducted in a county in southern California among 53 child protection social workers who held master's degrees and had 3–15 years' work experience found that 45 per cent of the respondents agreed with the claim that 'satanic ritualistic abuse involves a national conspiracy or network of multi-generational perpetrators where babies, children and adults are sexually assaulted, physically mutilated, or killed'.<sup>26</sup> As one 1998 American sociological study of this phenomenon noted, 'This research means that thousands of professionals who claim authority in understanding human behaviour believe that there exists a real threat from satanic cult abusers.'<sup>27</sup>

In Britain claims-making about Satanic abuse gained respectability when the NSPCC circulated 'Satanic indicators' to help social workers to recognise the profile of a likely Satanist.<sup>28</sup> In the 1980s many child protection professionals were convinced that organised groups of Satanists were preying on youngsters, and numerous children were taken into care. A network of child protection 'experts', therapists and social workers were instrumental in promoting the idea that SRA was a significant threat to British children. Nottinghamshire Social Services played a leading role in promoting the crusade against Satanist child abusers, helping to launch RAINS (Ritual Abuse Information Network and Support), an organisation designed to publicise the perils of Satanism.

A series of inquiries ultimately concluded that the claims of SRA made by Nottinghamshire Social Services were without substance. But by that time numerous families faced the nightmare of their life being destroyed by zealous witch-hunters who took their children away. Others faced long jail sentences for crimes that were figments of the scaremongers' imagination. And although in many of the legal proceedings prosecutors failed to make the charges stick, many innocent parents – in the UK and especially in the US – were framed for a crime that they did not commit and that did not exist.

It is important to recall that scaremongering about SRA was uncritically internalised by the mainstream British media. *Community Care*, one of the most influential professional magazines for social workers, carried an article titled 'When the Truth Hurts' in March 1989. It reported on a case in Nottingham in which children had been used as a 'tool for the promotion of ritualistic acts that could only be described as satanic'.<sup>29</sup>

What the enlightened social worker readership of *Community Care* made of allegations of children being abused by 'adults in strange costumes; being forced to eat excreta, drinking blood from animals' is far from evident. But over time the reporting of dreadful Satanic abuse cases in social work publications must have had an impact on these professionals' imagination.

Credence to the danger posed by ritual abuse rings was also provided by an article that denounced those who were sceptical about this threat, published in *The Guardian* in 1990.<sup>30</sup> In the same year an article titled 'Vortex of Evil' in *The New Statesman* warned of this dark peril.<sup>31</sup> This was followed up by an article titled 'Satanic Claims Vindicated'.<sup>32</sup> An article in *The Independent* titled 'Former High Priestess Tells of Her Satanic Life' reported that she 'makes her living at "Devil busting", visiting schools throughout Britain to warn of the dangers of Satanism'.<sup>33</sup> And in October 1990 the Channel Four documentary series *Dispatches* attempted to prove that Satanic cults existed and were active.

The belief that SRA was widespread persisted well into the 1990s. The belief justified the veritable witch-hunt waged by moral crusaders against what they perceived as organised rings of Satanist parents and adult collaborators. It was not until 1994, when a government-commissioned research report, *The Extent and Nature of Organised Ritual Abuse*, was published, that this crusade was discredited. The author of this report, the anthropologist Jean La Fontaine, reviewed 84 alleged cases of ritual abuse and found that, in fact, 'there was no evidence of Satanic abuse'.<sup>34</sup> The then UK Secretary of State for Health, Virginia Bottomley, declared that La Fontaine had 'exposed the myth of Satanic abuse'.<sup>35</sup>

Echoing Bottomley, the sociologist John Pratt wrote of a similar pattern at work in Canada. He described how some of the alarmist themes associated with the idea of organised child abuse had been 'largely discredited', how 'there are, after all, no paedophile rings; there is no ritual abuse; recovered memories cannot be trusted; not all victimization claims are legitimate'.<sup>36</sup> However, the exposure of the myth of one conspiracy theory does not necessarily negate the power of conspiracy thinking as a whole. And of course the fears of the past do not disappear from the imagination.

Our moral universe continues to be framed through ideas about good and evil. Myths of pure evil from the distant past are sometimes refracted through the cultural idioms of modern society. That is why it was possible for Satan to come alive and frighten ordinary folk in some

of the most modern Western societies. As one observer noted, Satan's comeback was achieved through the 'transfer of his story to children and child sexuality'. With a note of sarcasm, he stated that this was effected by 'boldly redrawing his whole act' and 'ditching the Faustian stage effects and emerging as a child molester'.<sup>37</sup> The emergence of Satanic Ritual Abuse as a source of public fear occurred through the cultural adaptation of the Devil to late twentieth-century anxieties about child abuse, demonstrating how an ancient superstition could be revitalised and turned into a very modern panic by fuelling apprehension about the molestation of children. According to one study there were more than 60 North American Satanic rumour panics between 1982 and 1992.<sup>38</sup>

There is little doubt that this heightened sense of insecurity about Devil-worshipping cults was a by-product of an unprecedented climate of paranoia about child molestation. Outwardly these rumour panics appeared as merely the updated version of an old theme. One observer stated that depictions of these Satanic rituals were 'like identikit pictures, slightly varied combinations of precisely the same elements found in the charges against heretics, Jews, witches and their scapegoats of the past'.<sup>39</sup> But such similarities notwithstanding this was a panic that was fuelled by apprehensions and concerns whose meaning is quite distinct from the frenzy that sometimes captured communities in the late Middle Ages. It is the obsessive regime of child protection characteristic of our era which has fostered a climate hospitable to fantasies about Satanic cults.

Conspiracy theories built around medieval themes of Satanism were always likely to invite scepticism from secular quarters. But more secular variants of organised child abuse, such as Internet paedophile rings and organised networks of predators, continue to communicate the message of conspiracies. The belief that abuse is organised by a carefully orchestrated conspiracy of child abusers explicitly devoted to this cause is widespread. Such conspiracist imaginings have influenced official reaction to the Savile scandal. This disposition was demonstrated by David Gray, one of the authors of the first Operation Yewtree report, when he stated that although there was no evidence to suggest that Savile was part of a paedophile ring, he might have been part of 'an informal network' of predators.<sup>40</sup> Speculative comments of this nature are sadly likely to be interpreted as facts.

One possible reason contemporary society continues to be unusually hospitable to conspiratorial thinking is that it is experiencing what I

have described elsewhere as a ‘crisis of causality’.<sup>41</sup> The certainties of the modern era of scientific thinking have given way to a time when society finds it difficult to manage uncertainty. Consequently the world is perceived as a perilous, out-of-control environment that we find difficult to grasp. Without the guidance of knowledge world events can appear to be random and arbitrary acts that are beyond comprehension.

This crisis of causality does not simply prevent society from grasping the chain of events that has led to a particular outcome. It also diminishes the capacity to find meaning in what sometimes appear to be series of arbitrary events. One of the most important ways in which the sense of diminished subjectivity is experienced is as the feeling that the individual is being manipulated and influenced by hidden powerful forces. That is why we frequently attribute unexplained physical and psychological symptoms to unspecific forces in the food we eat, the water we drink, an extending variety of pollutants and substances transmitted by new technologies and other invisible processes.

The crisis of causality is experienced as a world where most important events are shaped and determined by a hidden agenda. Conspiracy theory constructs worlds where everything important is manipulated behind our backs, and where we simply do not know who is responsible for our predicament. In these circumstances we have no choice but to mistrust.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, ‘David Icke Identified Savile as a Procurer of Children for the Royal Family Years Ago’, *Before It’s News* website, 14 October 2012, <http://beforeitsnews.com/eu/2012/10/david-icke-identified-savile-as-a-procurer-of-children-for-the-royal-family-years-ago-2455358.html> (accessed 28 January 2013).
- 2 See a well-documented analysis of Watson’s role in ‘Is Tom Watson in Danger of Fuelling a New Paedophile Panic?’, Nelson Jones, *The New Statesman*, 9 November 2012, <http://www.newstatesman.com/nelson-jones/2012/11/tom-watson-danger-fuelling-new-paedophile-panic> (accessed 21 January 2013).
- 3 ‘10 Days That Shook My World’, Tom Watson, *Tom Watson MP* blog, <http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/2012/11/10-days-that-shook-my-world> (accessed 21 January 2013).
- 4 ‘Threats Will Not Stop Me Digging, Vows Tom Watson’, Tom Watson, *The Star on Sunday*, 4 November 2012.

- 5 For a more extreme version of conspiratorial thinking, see David Icke's 'Jimmy Savile ... Doorway to the Cesspit', 3 November 2012, <http://simianpress.com/tag/harold-wilson> (accessed 24 November 2012).
- 6 Tom Watson's letter is reproduced on his website at <http://www.tom-watson.co.uk/2012/11/letter-to-david-cameron-regarding-child-sex-abuse-investigation> (accessed 28 January 2013).
- 7 'Cyril Smith Rumours Were Known to Liberal Party', Robert Booth, *The Guardian*, 30 November 2012.
- 8 See discussion in Webster (2005) p. 570.
- 9 La Fontaine (1998) p. 58.
- 10 La Fontaine (1998) p. 169.
- 11 Webster (1998) p. 12.
- 12 'Throwing the Net Wide – Jimmy Savile: How the Police Investigation Grew', Vikram Dodd, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2012.
- 13 'Throwing the Net Wide – Jimmy Savile: How the Police Investigation Grew', Vikram Dodd, *The Guardian*, 28 October 2012.
- 14 See, for example, 'Stockport Solicitors Launch Appeal for Jimmy Savile Abuse Witnesses', Quality Solicitors website, <http://www.qualitysolicitors.com/abneygarsden/news/2012/10/stockport-solicitors-launch-appeal-for-jimmy-savile-abuse-witnesses> (accessed 3 December 2012).
- 15 Gray and Watt (2013) p. 4.
- 16 Webster (2005).
- 17 Webster (2005) pp. 131–2.
- 18 Home Affairs Select Committee, *The Conduct of Investigations into Past Cases of Abuse in Children's Homes*, Fourth Report (HC 2001–02, 836-I).
- 19 La Fontaine (1998) p. 103.
- 20 Quoted in Webster (2005) p. 549.
- 21 Merton (1948).
- 22 Neiman (2004) pp. 267–8.
- 23 Webster (1998) p. 39.
- 24 Victor (1998) p. 545.
- 25 Ross (1994) p. 88.
- 26 Victor (1998).
- 27 Victor (1998) p. 545.
- 28 Jenkins (1992) pp. 189, 192.
- 29 'When the Truth Hurts', Christine Johnston and Judith Dawson, *Community Care*, 30 March 1989.
- 30 'Secret Lives', Valerie Sinason, *The Guardian*, 3 November 1990.
- 31 'Vortex of Evil', Judith Dawson, *The New Statesman*, 5 October 1990.
- 32 'Satanic Claims Vindicated', Bea Campbell, *The New Statesman*, 9 November 1990.
- 33 'Former High Priestess Tells of Her Satanic Life', *The Independent*, 2 October 1990.



- 34 La Fontaine (1994).
- 35 'Satanic Abuse Dismissed as "Myth" by Government Inquiry', Rosie Waterhouse, *The Independent*, 3 June 1994.
- 36 Pratt (2009) p. 70.
- 37 Kincaid (1998) pp. 175 and 176.
- 38 Cited in Kincaid (1998) p. 176.
- 39 Briggs (1996) p. 410.
- 40 Cited in 'Savile Spent Every Waking Minute Thinking about Abuse', Martin Robinson, *The Daily Mail*, 11 January 2013.
- 41 Furedi (2005) ch. 4.

# 7

## The Crisis of Authority and the Cult of the Judicial Inquiry

**Abstract:** *Jimmy Savile's betrayal of his fans converged with the crisis of trust that prevails in society. Since the 1970s most public institutions have experienced a loss of authority. However, this loss of trust is not confined to the way that the public relates to institutions. Mistrust also pervades the relationships between people. In turn those in authority are uncomfortable with their role and are often defensive in their behaviour. That is why important disputes are increasingly managed through a judicial inquiry. The authority of the independent inquiry is used to compensate for the loss of trust in public institutions.*

Furedi, Frank. *Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. DOI: 10.1057/9781137338020.

'You have to understand that Jimmy Savile was part of my childhood,' stated one respondent to my question 'What did he mean to you?'<sup>1</sup> He, like others who had grown up in the 1970s, expressed a sense of personal betrayal. One reason Savile has served as a conduit for society's anxieties is that as someone who is so much a part of society's collective memory, his abusive behaviour has focused attention on the broader question of whom you can trust. The Savile scandal and the reaction to it are part of a larger story about the uncertainties that surround both personal and wider social relationships. This chapter argues that a legacy of personal and institutional mistrust provides the cultural script through which this scandal was and continues to be interpreted.

## **An abuse of trust**

The capacity to trust friends, neighbours, colleagues and public institutions is essential for engaging with an uncertain future. Sociologists distinguish trust from confidence in that 'the latter rests on knowledge or predictability', while 'trust is necessary to maintain interaction in the absence of such knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> Trust works best when people can take it for granted that their fellow citizens will do the right thing. As the American author Francis Fukuyama notes, 'Trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of that community'.<sup>3</sup>

In most circumstances these expectations are challenged by the confusions and misunderstandings of everyday life. Conflicts of interest and disagreements over values frequently limit the variety of relationships in which trust expectations can be realistically assumed. Nevertheless within most communities there exists a system of formal and, more importantly, informal understanding about what people can expect from one another.

One of the most dramatic manifestations of the erosion of relations of trust is the all-pervasive regime of suspicion regarding adult motives towards children. As I have argued elsewhere, the crisis in intergenerational trust has reached the point where adult men feel that their interaction with children is subject to constant suspicion. Apprehension about their motives has reached pathological proportions, leading to a situation in which literally millions of British adults who work with children

or whose work means that they might come into contact with children must be vetted by the police.<sup>4</sup> Our interviews indicated that because of the ascendancy of a climate of mistrust:

Adults today would probably not dream of offering sweets to strange children – they even think twice about comforting a distressed toddler, or helping a child in trouble, in case their action is misconstrued. And this anxiety about spontaneous action is not confined to the elderly, but evident among people actively engaged in children's activities; even parents themselves.<sup>5</sup>

The formal and informal policing of adult–child interaction indicates that the current preoccupation with abuse is fuelled by a powerful sentiment of mistrust.

How trust works is influenced by numerous variables, but at its most fundamental level it represents a statement about how communities regard people. Ideas about personhood and human behaviour are mediated through cultural beliefs about people's moral integrity and capacity and willingness to play a constructive role in their community. It is evident that the narrative of abuse emphasises human attributes that are selfish, irrational and destructive. This bleak account of human motives also transmits the idea that mistrust of other people is the sensible response to a world where abuse is so rife. That is why, in the twenty-first century, relationships between people come with a health warning. The idea of moral pollution associated with abuse is often communicated through the metaphor of toxicity. The frequent use of such terms as 'toxic relationships', 'toxic childhood', 'toxic parents' and 'toxic families' indicates that our closest and most intimate relationships are now subjected to a vocabulary that emphasises their destructive and damaging consequences. People – whether strangers or intimates – are presented as potential carriers of polluting agents who infect their unsuspecting targets.

The language of toxicity and abuse conveys a fundamentally misanthropic interpretation of personhood. If we look back over the centuries, it appears that the last time there was so much concern about the malevolent passions afflicting humanity was during the era of the witch-hunts in the late Middle Ages. Fear and suspicion of human motives has acquired an expansive dimension. As a result people's capacity for destructive and toxic behaviour influences our view of one another. In popular entertainment, from literature and films to television, the criminals that excite the cultural imagination are the serial killer, the child abductor, the

sexual predator and the stalker. These are all monsters who are driven by unimaginable emotional urges. Many of them are presented as the product of the same violent and abusive encounters that they will go on to perpetrate on others. The cumulative impact of these representations of human passions and drives is to estrange people from one another and legitimise the attitude of mistrust.

The regime of mistrust that influences the conduct of personal relationships is not confined to private life. A lack of faith in people has significant implications for the conduct of public affairs. Those who have a positive valuation of human nature are likely to have trust in the behaviour of public servants and their institutions. In contrast those who believe that people are driven by narrow self-interest, greed and other destructive passions may well be inclined to focus their suspicions on the public institutions that affect their lives. That is one reason the scandal surrounding Savile led so swiftly to the condemnation of so many leading public institutions of British society.

## **An abuse of authority**

It is still too early to determine the scale of the fallout from the series of scandals unleashed by the Savile affair. However, it is evident that the credibility and institutional authority of the BBC was only the first casualty of this scandal. The defensive and confused nature of its response to accusations of covering up the misdeeds of its former star entertainer indicated that this was an insecure institution that was ill at ease with exercising its authority. The BBC's panicked reaction to the pressure it faced for initially cancelling the *Newsnight* programme on Savile indicated that this institution did not trust itself. The very visible display of the loss of authority of a once highly esteemed organisation shows how swiftly a loss of trust can overwhelm public institutions.

Back in January 2008 the then Director-General of the BBC, Mark Thompson, responded to a series of relatively minor scandals facing his organisation with a lecture titled 'The Trouble with Trust'. At that time he could assume that his organisation still enjoyed a higher level of trust than institutions in other spheres of life. He lost no time in pointing out that 'survey after survey showed that the public's trust in broadcasters and in radio and TV news was much higher than it was for politicians, for print media, indeed for virtually all other British institutions'.<sup>6</sup> But

he conceded that for the BBC, the trust of the public was essential for its survival. 'Public trust is the life-blood of the BBC,' he asserted, adding that 'without it, it has no value as an institution.' The aim of Thompson's talk was to demonstrate that his organisation had learned the lessons of the recent scandals and was addressing the problem of trust.

What is interesting about Thompson's lecture is its premise that the BBC was not so much the problem as the solution. He diagnosed the problem as rooted in 'an anxiety about truth-telling and the gulf that exists between this country's technocratic elite and much of its population', and he assigned the BBC the mission of helping to bridge this gulf. He was relatively upbeat about the capacity of the BBC to play this role, stating, 'Our reach and the public's relatively high trust in us gives us the opportunity to make a real difference,' He concluded with the statement 'I would submit that this adds up to one of the most powerful reasons for having a BBC, both now and in the future.'<sup>7</sup>

It is unlikely that in the aftermath of the Savile affair, the head of the BBC could give a lecture boasting of the high level of trust in this media institution. A survey carried out in November 2012 indicated that more people distrusted BBC journalists (47 per cent) than trusted them (44 per cent).<sup>8</sup> However, the corrosion of trust did not affect only the BBC. The problem of trust was widely recognised in the 1980s, grew in the years that followed and acquired a powerful momentum during the Blair era. This was a time when the term 'spin doctor', with its connotation of the dishonest manipulation of information, became part of the public's vocabulary. In subsequent years numerous scandals implicating Members of Parliament, bankers and businesspeople, the press and other key institutions dominated proceedings in public life.

A few months before the outbreak of the Savile scandal, an editorial in a major British daily newspaper stated:

The age of deference to distant and unseen authority has long passed. Indeed, Parliament is by no means the only institution that can no longer rely upon almost unconditional respect. The Church, the police, the media, the judiciary, the BBC, the Civil Service, doctors, teachers and, of course, bankers: just a generation ago, these would have been considered pillars of society. Yet they are all, to a greater or lesser extent, suffering a crisis of trust.<sup>9</sup>

By all accounts the problem of trust afflicts virtually every sphere of public life. During the past decade trust has declined dramatically across

the board. During this period trust in senior police officers has fallen 23 points, from 72 per cent to 49 per cent. Even traditionally highly trusted professionals such as doctors and teachers have seen double-digit falls, down from 93 per cent to 82 per cent in the case of doctors, and from 88 per cent to 70 per cent for school teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Trust should be perceived as a cultural accomplishment. Relations of trust are influenced and shaped by the values and beliefs that prevail in society. They flourish when they enjoy cultural affirmation. Historically a lack of cultural support for trust has been associated with a crisis of authority. For example, the vanishing of traditional authority in the post-Reformation era was preceded by a period of disenchantment with the moral standing of the clergy. The perception that the Church had become corrupt and failed to live up to its own doctrine fostered a mood of suspicion and distrust towards this institution. One consequence of this development was that people's trust tended to shift from the Church to secular institutions.

In modern times the focus of the public's trust has changed in line with its disappointments, expectations and experience. Often the erosion of authority in one domain (such as religion) has led to its reconstitution in another (such as science). One striking feature of the contemporary era is that the problem of trust has assumed a general, all-pervasive character. Today authority as such has a very bad press. Unmasking authority has become a fashionable enterprise that resonates with popular culture. Those who hold positions of responsibility and power – politicians, parents, teachers, priests, doctors, nursery workers – are regularly 'exposed' for abusing their authority. The fact that the word 'authority' is associated so readily with the act of abuse is symptomatic of Western society's disenchantment with the so-called authority figure.

The general loss of trust in authority is not confined to a particular institution or particular individuals. In recent decades some of society's most treasured institutions have experienced a loss of prestige. In the UK the welter of marital strife and scandal surrounding the monarchy has led to a widespread questioning of its role. The Catholic Church has lost significant moral capital as a result of the involvement of a few of its clergy in a series of child abuse scandals. There is a palpable cynicism directed at the political class of virtually every Western society. Institutions such as the media, business, banking and the civil service have also suffered from a significant erosion of trust.

Many of the professions – for example, doctors, teachers and scientists – have also lost prestige and authority, concomitant with the decline of trust. The explosion of litigation in the field of medicine indicates that the image of the trusting patient unquestioningly accepting the doctor's advice has been overtaken by events. Scientific opinion is often queried as people look for a hidden agenda.

And the loss of trust in authority does not pertain only to the domains of politics, religion and culture. Parental authority – indeed all forms of adult authority – has been called into question. The late twentieth-century stigmatisation of adult authority is historically unprecedented. The belief that parents, teachers and other adults cannot be trusted to behave responsibly with children takes the problem of authority into a new territory of suspicion and fear.

The mistrust towards authority encourages incredulity and even cynicism regarding the actions of public institutions. Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his famous 'feral beast' speech of June 2007, stated that 'what creates cynicism is not mistakes; it is allegations of misconduct', and he compared the media to a 'feral beast, just tearing people and reputations in a pack'.<sup>11</sup> Although Blair's comments were directed at the relationship between the media and public life, the corrosive impact of allegations can be diagnosed as a malaise that afflicts all forms of authority. Since Blair's speech the evident misbehaviour of public figures in key institutions has encouraged the expectation of dishonesty and cover-up. In these circumstances allegations quickly migrate into the realm of likely facts.

The tendency to regard an allegation of misconduct as possessing some inner truth is paralleled by a presumption of doubt about the veracity of any statement issued by an institution. An allegation may not be synonymous with proof, but allegations are frequently interpreted as proof of something that must be taken seriously. The very act of making an allegation is often represented as a moral statement that must be affirmed. That is why so many commentators came to the rescue of the man who made a false allegation about Lord McAlpine. 'A survivor of abuse who bravely spoke out now faces a smear campaign against him,' complained one media observer.<sup>12</sup>

During the weeks following the ITV documentary on Savile the mere alleging of a cover-up was enough to gain the endorsement of public opinion. In this context a programming decision made on editorial grounds, or an organisational mistake made by a producer, would soon



take on the complexion of a cynical attempt to hide the truth. Nor was incredulity confined to media critics. Those ‘in authority’ appeared to be distinctly uncomfortable with their own role. That is why, in line with a practice adopted during the past decade, they so readily opted to launch yet another inquiry.

## The inquiry

Discussions that merely emphasise the loss of faith among the public in their institutions tend to overlook an equally significant development, which is that those who are in authority also do not trust themselves. The unprecedented swiftness with which Prime Minister David Cameron responded to a single claim of abuse allegedly perpetrated by a senior Conservative politician decades ago speaks to a political culture in which authority has become remarkably defensive and insecure. In this context the slightest hint of denial invites the further allegation of a cover-up. That is why, as the editor of one newspaper remarked, ‘it was not an option for David Cameron to do nothing’.<sup>13</sup>

All it took was a single person to make a false allegation against a ‘senior Tory’ on the BBC programme *Newsnight* for the Prime Minister of the UK to announce two inquiries into it. The power of one individual’s false allegation to gain so much credibility is not unconnected to the defensive and insecure response of those in authority. In the eyes of the public Cameron’s response appeared to suggest that what was at issue was not simply an allegation but a matter that touched on the affairs of the state. What the launching of an inquiry by the Prime Minister signalled was that whatever was at stake, it transcended an act of crime.

Cameron’s response to the BBC fiasco can also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the problem of mistrust by outsourcing its management to institutions that can still claim to possess authority. The one institution in British society that is regarded as authoritative and independent is the judiciary and its inquiry. In public life the pronouncements and conclusions of a public inquiry are regarded as more authoritative than those of a prime minister, Church leader or newspaper editor. Historically the launching of a judicial inquiry was a rare and exceptional event. But in current times the routine demand that ‘something should be done’ almost seamlessly leads to a call for an inquiry.

A veritable explosion of inquiries followed the ITV revelations of Savile's predatory behaviour. The subsequent accusations levelled against a cabal of senior Tory politicians also led to the launching of numerous investigations. In addition to inquiries into North Wales children's homes and into Savile, numerous police investigations were announced into allegations of abuse. Three hospitals initiated inquiries into the behaviour and activities of Savile on their premises. The Department of Health launched an investigation into its own role in the affair. The BBC alone initiated three inquiries into issues raised in the Savile scandal, one of which had a wide brief to investigate allegations of sexual harassment. In Jersey an independent inquiry was charged with re-examining old claims that Savile abused youngsters at Haut de la Garenne children's home.

The announcement of so many inquiries follows a pattern that was established in the 1990s. One of the most unremarked-upon yet remarkable developments in British public life has been the phenomenal growth of the inquiry as a key institution of governance. One study remarks that ours is an 'age of inquiry', noting that of the 59 inquiries launched in the field of health between 1974 and 2002, 'there were two in the 1970s, five in the 1980s, and 52 between 1990 and 2001'.<sup>14</sup> This pattern is reproduced throughout the different sectors of society. In 2005 the Home Office Permanent Secretary Sir John Gieve warned that the 'pressure for public inquiries is increasing all the time', and that 'there is a risk that we overdo it'.<sup>15</sup>

Often the very plea for a public inquiry endows the individual demanding it with moral authority. The demand signals a determination to seek the truth, expose the lies and learn why something has gone wrong. That is why, instead of demanding that the government adopt a particular policy or pursue a certain form of action, critics prefer to call for an inquiry. One review of such calls observed that 'Labour's default response to scandal is, increasingly, to demand an independent inquiry'.<sup>16</sup> The call for an inquiry appears to legitimise opposition criticism of government action; in turn governments use inquiries to show that they, too, are interested in the truth, and thereby legitimise their standing.

The inquiry thus plays a significant role in addressing an issue that Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology, believed constituted a fundamental problem of modernity. Weber believed that the process of legitimisation – that is, how order is rendered valid – was the main political challenge facing modern society.<sup>17</sup>

Inquiries, particularly those led by senior members of the judiciary, are far less likely to be criticised for their conduct than most other public institutions. The judiciary is perceived as independent and impartial and relatively immune to the influence of vested interests. As one sociological analysis of the recent proliferation of inquiries notes, 'Major inquiries draw upon judicial independence to restore political authority'.<sup>18</sup>

The ascendancy of the judicial inquiry as a front-line instrument of governance is an expression of the loss of legitimacy of public institutions. Time and again the judiciary is called upon to play the role of a neutral and disinterested honest broker because politicians, policy-makers and representatives of different interest groups cannot be trusted to do the right thing. So during the phone-hacking scandal that preceded the Savile affair, the judicial inquiry was invested with the authority to put right a wrong. *The Economist* magazine, in its discussion of the 'great crisis of trust', noted that 86 per cent of the population wanted a public inquiry, and editorialised, 'the British may dislike politicians, but they still have faith in a probe led by a judge'.<sup>19</sup>

The reliance on judicial independence to restore political authority is not without its contradictions. The mushrooming of inquiries threatens to politicise the courts and expose the judiciary to conflicting interests. One barrister argues that judicial activism, which draws judges into the full glare of public life, is likely to put the institution under greater scrutiny. He contends that 'the likelihood is that the judiciary itself, as an institution, will also start to suffer the forms of fragmentation and loss of support that have affected other institutions'.<sup>20</sup>

Nor are inquiries immune to criticism from competing groups of moral entrepreneurs. In recent years criticisms have been made about the remit, conduct and conclusions of inquiries carried out in the past. A few weeks before the outbreak of the Savile scandal, the Hillsborough Panel published its report about the disastrous loss of life at a British football stadium in 1989. Its findings called into question the conclusions of the official public inquiry conducted by Lord Justice Taylor. The launching, in October 2012, of an inquiry into the original Waterhouse inquiry into abuse at North Wales children's homes indicates that the authority of judicial independence is not beyond question. It is evident that the publication of a final report by an inquiry does not mean the end of discussion and debate. The emergence of the 're-inquiry' suggests that this institution may well suffer the same reputational fate as other public organisations.

The politicisation of the inquiry threatens to turn it into an instrument of moral enterprise. Moral crusaders often regard an inquiry as an instrument for drawing attention to their cause and promoting their agenda. In November 2012 numerous politicians and child protection advocacy groups demanded that the government launch an 'overarching' general inquiry, one that took on board the lessons of the nine ongoing abuse investigations linked to the Savile scandal. Andrew Flanagan, Chief Executive of the NSPCC, advocated this general, all-purpose inquiry in order to promote the charity's message. He noted that revelations about Savile had given his cause great momentum and urged that 'we must maintain this momentum and use this opportunity to fundamentally change how we help children and young people to talk about abuse'.<sup>21</sup>

Attempts to harness the authority of the inquiry to raise awareness about a particular cause or to change the way people think are likely to compromise the reputation for independence of the judicial inquiry. Moreover, with the proliferation of inquiries there is a danger that they will be seen as vehicles for competing interests and will become targets of mistrust. Instead of fostering a climate of trust, it is likely that an inquiry will fail to satisfy the demand for the truth.

Arguments about the kind of inquiry needed to deal with post-Savile allegations indicate just how thoroughly politicised the institution of the inquiry has become. Labour MP Tom Watson responded to Home Secretary Theresa May's announcement of two inquiries into allegations of sexual abuse by a senior Conservative politician by condemning it as the 'next stage of a cover-up'. He claimed that May's proposal 'would guarantee that many sickening crimes will remain uninvestigated and some of the most despicable paedophiles will remain protected by the establishment that has shielded them for 30 years'.<sup>22</sup> In effect what Watson called for was what one commentator characterised as a 'virtually unlimited inquiry into establishment paedophile networks'.<sup>23</sup> There was a time when this type of inquiry went by the name of the Inquisition.

What the exchange between May and Watson indicates is that the inquiry is not just about truth-seeking but about affirming an existing vision of what constitutes the truth. In this case the truth that is to be conveyed is that mistrust provides a sensible orientation to the conduct of public life.

## Notes

- 1 Interview carried out 22 October 2012. This was one of a series of interviews conducted with 13 men and women between the ages of 47 and 53 about their childhood memories of Savile.
- 2 Seligman (1998) p. 391.
- 3 Fukuyama (1995) p. 26.
- 4 Furedi and Bristow (2010).
- 5 Furedi and Bristow (2010) p. 52. These interviews were conducted in 2009, during the course of carrying out research for this report.
- 6 'The Trouble with Trust', Mark Thompson, *BBC News, The Editors*, 15 January 2008, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/mark\\_thompson/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/mark_thompson/) (accessed 14 October 2012).
- 7 'The Trouble with Trust', Mark Thompson, *BBC News, The Editors*, 15 January 2008, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/mark\\_thompson/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/theeditors/mark_thompson/) (accessed 14 October 2012).
- 8 'The Problem of Trust', Peter Kellner, 13 November 2012, <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/11/13/problem-trust> (accessed 18 November 2012).
- 9 'The Corrosive Crisis of Trust in Our Institutions', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 2012.
- 10 'The Problem of Trust', Peter Kellner, 13 November 2012, <http://yougov.co.uk/news/2012/11/13/problem-trust> (accessed 18 November 2012).
- 11 Blair's 'feral beast' speech, given on 12 June 2007, is reproduced at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6744581.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6744581.stm) (accessed 5 December 2012).
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- 13 'Editorial: A Public Inquiry Is Not Always the Right Answer', *The Independent*, 7 November 2012.
- 14 Burgess (2011) p. 9.
- 15 Burgess (2011) p. 3.
- 16 'How Many Independent Inquiries Has Labour Called For?', George Eaton, *The New Statesman*, 16 October 2012.
- 17 Weber (1978) p. 31.
- 18 Burgess (2011) p. 3.
- 19 'Britain: Shaken but Not Broken: A Third Great Crisis of Trust Hits British Democracy – and David Cameron in Particular', *The Economist*, 24 July 2011.
- 20 'Public Inquiries in the Dock', Jon Holbrook, *Spiked-online*, 13 November 2012, <http://www.spiked-online.com/site/article/13078/> (accessed 28 January 2013).
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12-11-08-flanagan-comment/flanagan-comment\_wda92690.html (accessed 16 November 2012).

- 22 ‘“Sick Crimes Will Go Uninvestigated”: Fears of Child Sex Abuse “Cover-up” as Theresa May Rejects Calls for Super Inquiry’, James Lyons, *The Daily Mirror*, 6 November 2013.
- 23 ‘Is Tom Watson in Danger of Fuelling a New Paedophile Panic?’, Nelson Jones, *The New Statesman*, 9 November 2012. See also ‘How Many Independent Inquiries Has Labour Called For?’, George Eaton, *The New Statesman*, 16 October 2012.

# 8

## Conclusion: How the Moral Crusade Harms Us All

**Abstract:** *It is likely that the concerns unleashed by the Jimmy Savile affair will intensify the climate of mistrust and encourage moral crusaders to expand their activities. Although the promoters of such crusades are motivated by good intentions, the effect of their activities is to disrupt intergenerational relationships. Suspicion directed towards adults means that they become more distanced from young people. Yet the exercise of adult responsibility is essential for the security of children. Society needs to question zealous moralising in order to restore a more constructive intergenerational dynamic.*

Furedi, Frank. *Moral Crusades in an Age of Mistrust: The Jimmy Savile Scandal*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. DOI: 10.1057/9781137338020.

We are still in the midst of the unfolding of the Jimmy Savile drama. But it is already evident that the culture of mistrust which preceded the unmasking of Savile, and which has been amplified by the scandal, will continue to dominate public life into the indefinite future. The elevation of child abuse into the main focus of moral anxiety has far less to do with the risks facing children than with the way that society has adapted to a regime of mistrust. Paradoxically Savile, who was called upon to strengthen the authority of the establishment in the past, now serves to remind it of its fragility.

In December 2012 the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre stated that there had been a 30 per cent rise in reports of abuse fuelled by the 'Savile effect'.<sup>1</sup> The police also noted an increase in reports of abuse, some of which were related to Savile and most of which were not. The cumulative outcome of connecting historical allegations of abuse with current ones, and those linked to Savile with others which were not, is to transform individual cases into a mass crime. The Savile effect provided a powerful object lesson that acting on the basis of suspicion and mistrust is the sensible way of behaving towards others. This message was explicitly formulated by the NSPCC, which stated that it 'was important to act even if people had only suspicions that abuse was happening'.<sup>2</sup> This message was repeated in January 2013 when the NSPCC launched a campaign titled 'Don't Wait Until You Are Certain'.<sup>3</sup> This cultural validation of mistrust, which is systematically promoted in the world of children, has sadly pervaded society as a whole.

For moral entrepreneurs the Savile scandal strengthens the case for their argument that 'something must be done'. It provides opportunities for moral positioning against the one evil that all of us can agree on. The moral entrepreneur is a rule creator who, explains Becker, 'feels that nothing can be right in the world until rules are made to correct it'. However, since evil is omnipresent, every new rule serves only as a prelude to the next. A moral crusader is a 'professional discoverer of wrongs to be righted, of situations requiring new rules'.<sup>4</sup> Although moral crusaders are often 'fervent' and 'self-righteous', they are motivated not by cynicism or opportunism, but by the impulse to help others.<sup>5</sup> However, their zealous crusades often incite confusion and moral disorientation.

The canvassing of mass allegations of abuse provides a paradigmatic example of the corrosive legacy of a moral crusade. The practice assumes that the active canvassing of such allegations will encourage more victims to speak out, which in turn will help society to become more aware



of the evil it faces. It is based on the conviction that not enough people speak out and that the institutions of society discourage victims from having a voice. There are many individuals who feel too powerless and isolated to demand that those who violated them should be punished. Advocates of Operation Yewtree justify the campaign on the basis that it helps victims by providing them with an opportunity to make their voices heard. This allegedly has a therapeutic or cathartic effect.

Yet such alleged therapeutic benefits are a matter of dispute. Take the case of someone whose experience of an episode of childhood sexual abuse in the distant past is believed to have caused long-term and profound psychological damage. It is difficult to see how this damage could be remedied by the sort of public confession involved in appearing before a judicial inquiry or on a television programme. Indeed, although some may claim such declarations to be beneficial, others may find them more distressing, simply exacerbating long-standing psychological problems such as depression or anxiety.

Or take an alternative scenario involving someone who recalls a remote episode of childhood sexual abuse as distressing but as an event from which they recovered to carry on with their life without regarding it as 'life-changing' or causing lasting psychological harm. It is difficult to see how reliving this event in the course of a judicial inquiry could be beneficial (particularly when the perpetrator has died). Such an experience is more likely to provoke distress, perhaps nurturing grievances and resentment against the past failures of others to provide protection, but having no positive consequences (apart, perhaps, from the quest for some form of financial compensation).

The tactic of mass canvassing will do little to help individuals. When the net is thrown wide, the specific needs of an individual are overlooked by those in charge of an operation focused on making a large moral statement. Worse still, large trawling operations invariably lead to innocent people being caught up in a nightmare that is not of their own making. The injustice done to the abused is not put right by the injustice perpetrated against the falsely accused.

The fear of false accusation has become a tangible reality in many walks of life. In schools there has been a rise in the number of malicious allegations against teachers. According to figures released by the NASUWT, the vast majority of accusations against teachers are unsubstantiated. Less than 1 in 20 accusations made against teachers in 2011 – including assault serious threats and sexual abuse – resulted in court

action.<sup>6</sup> A survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers found that a quarter of the respondents had been falsely accused by a pupil or the pupil's family.<sup>7</sup> The very fact that the subject of false allegations has become a regular topic of discussion at an annual conference of teachers indicates that the problem of mistrust afflicts even the classroom.<sup>8</sup>

Yet organising community life around the principle of mistrust is neither an effective way of protecting children nor an enlightened approach to dealing with the problems of society. Under these conditions people become careful about the words they use and how they appear in the eyes of others. They do not take the kinds of risk that might lead others to misinterpret their actions. Teachers and adults who used to absorb some of the risks faced by children are now less inclined to do so, in case their behaviour is misinterpreted. Many teachers and nursery staff confide that they often feel self-conscious in their relationships with children in their care. They understand that frequently an unintended remark or a physical gesture can be easily misinterpreted by others and that they will be judged guilty until they can prove their innocence.

As I have argued elsewhere, adults have become estranged from the task of taking responsibility for the younger generations.<sup>9</sup> It is no exaggeration to state that a growing number of adults feel awkward and confused when they are in close physical proximity to children they do not know. Nor is this sense of unease confined to intergenerational interaction between strangers.

Throughout history the security of children has relied on adults assuming responsibility for their welfare. The mistrust that now envelops intergenerational relationships threatens to discourage many adults from assuming this responsibility. Indeed there is now a generation of adults who have acquired the habit of distancing themselves from children and young people. Moral crusaders, whatever their intentions, have helped create a world where many adults regard intergenerational relationships as an inconvenience from which they would rather be exempt. Arguably the disengagement of many adults from the world of children represents a far greater danger than the threat posed by a – thankfully – tiny group of predators. The best guarantee of children's safety is the exercise of adult responsibility towards the younger generation. It is when adults take it upon themselves to keep an eye on children – and not just their own children – that youngsters can learn to feel genuinely safe.

The perverse outcome of the transformation of mistrust into a value associated with virtuous behaviour is to undermine the security of

those whom it purports to protect – children. The culture of suspicion that governs intergenerational relationships should be interpreted as symptomatic of the wider crisis of authority that prevails in all domains of public life. There are no simple solutions to this crisis. But resisting paedophile-obsessed crusaders who hijack our moral imagination would be a good place to start.

## Notes

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- 6 'False Allegations: "Every Teacher's Worst Nightmare"', NASUWT website, [http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/Whatsnew/NASUWTNews/PressReleases/NASUWT\\_008982](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk/Whatsnew/NASUWTNews/PressReleases/NASUWT_008982).
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- 8 Sikes and Piper (2009).
- 9 Furedi (2009) p. 3.

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