Invasion of the Kiddyfiddlers

Mick Wilson

It is arguably one of the hard-won achievements of the women's movement to have placed child sexual abuse, especially incestuous rape, on the political, legal and media agenda (Bell, 1993, p. 154). However, not unlike other achievements of the women's movement, it has been an ambiguous success. The making over of child sexual abuse into a question of paedophilia is an uneasy translation at best. Guy Hocquenhem has argued: "These new arguments are essentially about childhood, that is to say, about the exploitation of popular sentiment and its spontaneous horror of anything that links sex with the child."[1]

Recently, the question of systematic and collusively obscured sexual abuse of minors has become a central media theme in both Europe and North America. Importantly, the emergence of this media-spectacle has been related to the coming to maturity and thus coming to voice of the victims of such abuse. (Just as significant, however, is the fact that the media have not always been willing to address such themes.) In tandem with the spectre of organisationally protected 'paedophile priests', another media-enabled spectre of social-sexual panic has emerged: the 'paedophile-at-large' or the 'paedophile-in-the-community.' Zygmunt Bauman, the social theorist, in his book *In Search of Politics* introduces a discussion of the loss of the possibility of a meaningful politics by citing a spontaneous public protest in response to precisely this spectre of the paedophile-at-large. Bauman retells the story of Sidney Cooke, a paedophile who had been released from prison and returned home. Home, in this case, was Yeovil, in England's West Country. These protests are described as highly charged emotional outpourings from ordinary people: ordinary people who took to the streets, and gathered outside the local police station where it was believed that Cooke was in hiding. Bauman argues that what is at stake in this protest is what seems to be the only space left where spontaneous public action and collective political involvement is available to the citizenry. According to Bauman, the powerlessness felt by these people is overcome for a short period when a sense of community, shared belonging, and shared outrage can be expressed powerfully and publicly.

Bauman invokes the theme of *moral panic* as a way of explaining what is at stake in these protests. Moral panic is a sociological construct developed by British academics in the 1960s to address a media-facilitated fear of such perceived societal threats as the emergence of youth subcultures. Stanley Cohen in his (1972) *Folk Devils & Moral Panics* provides a broad outline:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates... Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (Cohen, 1972, p.9)

This construct has been criticised, not least as a consequence of it passing into greater and non-specialised currency. Pointing to the weaknesses of the concept Simon Watney has argued that:

> To begin with, [moral panic] may be employed to characterise all conflicts in the public domain where scape-goating takes place. It cannot, however, discriminate between either different orders or degrees of moral panic. Nor can it explain why certain types of events are especially privileged in this way. Above all, it lacks any capacity to explain the endless 'overhead' narrative of such phenomena, as one 'panic' gives way to another, or one anxiety is displaced across different 'panics'. Thus one moral panic may have a relatively limited frame of reference, whilst another is heavily over-determined, just as a whole range of panics may share a single core meaning whilst others operate in tandem to construct a larger overall meaning [...] the theory of moral panics makes it extremely difficult to compare press hysteria and government inaction, which may well turn out to be closely related. (Watney, 1987, p. 41)

Accepting the limited power of analyses of moral panic, it is nonetheless interesting to note that the paedophile scare is arguably a classic example of moral panic, and one that is subject to several renewals over the last three decades. Recognising the paedophile narrative as part of a panic response strongly suggests then that it is serving a function of displacement. Thus Bauman and others will argue that the core meanings at play here do not reside in the ostensible content of the stories told and retold. Rather, it is a question of serving some other need. Essentially this proposes a functional reading of the panic as a mechanism for disavowing a broader set of intractable social and political problems by allowing for the symbolic acting out of a proxy anxiety in a way that is amenable to some potential resolution. Such resolution is usually dependent on attaching blame to a localisable, if not proximate, cause. Thus Bauman sees the clutch of panicked people of Yeovil, protesting the presence of an alien in their midst, as a reflex of the felt loss of a public sphere and of a participative politics. However, it may be that these situations are more complex than is allowed by positing a simple opposition between surface content (paedophile

as threat of imminent harm to children) and actual function (reclaim a space of politics / disavow its loss). The need for a more nuanced reading of these panic responses is particularly suggested by the recent upsurge in narratives of child-sex offences which involve celebrities.

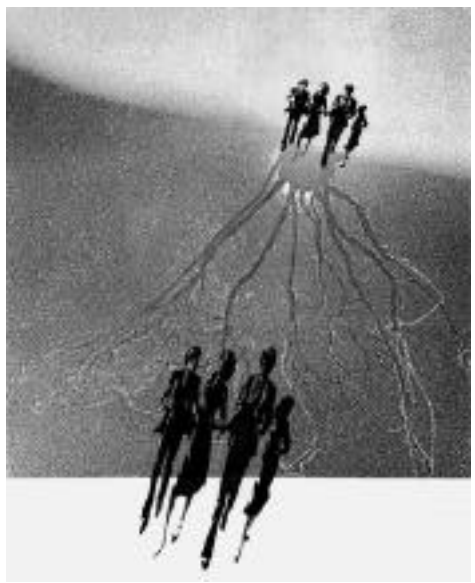
These recent narratives provide a further twist on this narrative of perversity and violence with the emergence of the celebrity paedophile in the British and to a lesser extent in the Irish media. Such cases as the Gary Glitter conviction, the Tim Allen conviction (husband of a famous Irish TV chef), the Jonathan King prosecution, the Pete Townshend story and more recently the false accusation of Matthew Kelly are indicative of an emergent trend in the media which forges a relationship between celebrity and child-sex perversity. (It may be that there is a genealogy of these recent narratives to be found in the earlier history of Hollywood and the notorious crimes of stars such as Fatty Arbuckle.)

However, it is not just conventional celebrity that is at issue here: it's not simply about stars,it's primarily a question of media visibility. When the two Soham children were abducted and murdered in the late summer of 2002, the unfolding media coverage culminated in the revelation that the police spokesperson (who had anchored much of the TV coverage) had been named in an FBI report on UK-based, internet child pornography viewers. As has happened many times before, a public image of civic and moral probity and a private 'truth' of perversity collided. This collision took place in the, arguably already *pornographic*, context of a daily news narrative of trauma.(A trauma that was made over into soap opera by a news industry apparently starved of other hot content during the August holiday period.) The extra charge of sensation generated by this case was the proximity of the compromised police officer to a massively exploited story of child-murder.

Media exposure becomes, in these cases, an integral aspect of the narrative of paedophilia: the paedophile is in a sense already famous and becomes infamous, is already exposed in the media and is then subsequently further exposed, *outed* as a pervert.

Central to this renewed currency of paedophile stories is the trope of 'child pornography on the internet' and the organised networks of child abuse. Certain cases in the US and in Belgium were given international media prominence in the 1990s and thus established a very strong relationship between the internet, consumption of child pornographic imagery and organised networks of child abduction,trade and sexual abuse. In 1996 the FBI established its *Innocent Images* programme which addresses child porn on the internet. This programme has garnered international media coverage because of the exchange of information about consumers of child pornography with other governments and police forces. Thus child porn has become the object of international police collaboration, similar to earlier initiatives to collaborate internationally around drugs trafficking and terrorism. This is indicative of the perceived scale of the threat.

In one famous exposé of the threat of the internet as a medium of paedophile activity a group of North American Police Chiefs were presented in a seminar with an FBI agent posing as a twelve-year-old girl in an online chat room. The 'girl's' cover story was that she was away from school with the flu. Very quickly, she became the target of enquiries from ostensibly older men who made enquiries about her sex activities and requested pictures of her. One interlocutor sent a digital image of his genitals. In other versions of this story the interlocutor arranges a meeting with the child under the pretence of being a same-age-group peer only to emerge as a middle-aged predator. A key trope in the discussion of organised networked paedophiles is the description of their ability to engage with the child in the child's domestic sphere, since the internet-enabled computer is in the bedroom or sitting room, and is



thus a gateway into the home, a gateway that can often be unpoliced and unprotected. It is important to note that these scenarios of adults recruiting younger children and teenagers online, are cited as examples of child pornography. The argument thus made is that there is a smooth and uninterrupted continuum between the consumption of imagery and the actualising of predatory sexual assaults on children. The smooth continuity of this spectrum is guaranteed by the figure of the paedophile: only a paedophile would look at such images, and a paedophile by definition is one who actively sexually assaults children.(There are interesting parallels with earlier concerns for the deleterious effects of the cinema on children, especially as these pertained to perceived sexual threats to the child in the darkened space of the cinema, and the presumed inherent promiscuity of the cinematic image itself (See Hansen, 1990).)

It is noteworthy also that these recent narratives of paedophilia have become, not just part of 'news' and 'documentary' programmes, but also the stuff of explicitly 'entertainment' TV production (accepting that these distinctions are slight anyway). Thus the US TV series *Law & Order Special Victims Unit* in its 2002 season featured a preponderance of storylines centred on child-sex offenders.(This series signals its remit as a considered commentary on the moral and legal dilemmas of contemporary US society by referencing specific topical social issues in the storyline and providing context setting dialogue. Thus it echoes and reinforces the broader currency of the paedophile narrative in the media.) Interestingly these storylines generally entail murder scenarios as the logical extension of the child-sex offence. The abuse stories are generally situated in the context of non-biological family relations or of state care and welfare initiatives. In one instance the victims are non-US citizens imported as part of an organised trade in children-for-sex, in another instance the victims are children from dysfunctional families where the primary carer is a drug addict or otherwise incapacitated. There is in one storyline a specific address to the North American Boy Love Association, an advocacy group for paedophiles. This organisation is cited in the course of a standard context-setting aside by one character. The effect of this device is to reinforce the topicality of the theme and underline the broad social urgency of the issue.

These narratives of child sexual abuse,whether in the news or in detective shows, refer ultimately, and however heavily mediated, to actual events in the world. What they describe does in some critical sense take place. On the other hand these are not the only stories that might be told about child sexuality or child sex assaults. These narratives clearly service a moral panic reflex. These stories narrate child sexual violence by forging a series of linkages between child sexual assault and several key themes: the individualised,pathological type 'the paedophile'; the extra-familial networks of these otherwise remote, isolated types (enclaves of clerics or networks of tech-savvy online predators); the pervasive threat, yet extraordinary nature of the pervert; the danger of new technologies (digital imaging, digital networks) as vehicles bringing these, otherwise externalised,threats into the home (the putatively safe place of childhood); the vulnerability of non-traditional family constructs. These stories tell us that child sexual assault is a pathology of *the contemporary, of modernity*. It should be remembered that when feminist authors began to produce narratives of sexual assault on children, among the key themes were the family, male authority, incest, the construction of femininity as child-like, and the collusive societal repression of these stories of abuse. For earlier feminist accounts child sexual abuse was thus a *pathology of patriarchy, of authority*.

Returning then to the moral panic interpretation, it appears that the paedophile scare is overdetermined. It is symbolically operating many and various anxieties but also displacing and obscuring other dilemmas. It obscures the simple fact that children are primarily vulnerable to sexual exploitation in their family homes at the hands of their parents, their carers, their siblings, their relatives and other figures of trust. It obscures the simple fact that children,internationally, are subject to all manner of chronic and fatal abuses, under systems that are collusively maintained by a whole host of international players. It displaces our profound ambivalence for this historically recent construct, the child, and does not allow us to ask why the child can be so sexually charged, for so many 'ordinary people'. It obscures that which is arguably the primary locus of most violence, of most sexual pain and dysfunction,the family. It services the recurrent anxieties that have traditionally emerged in the face of technological change. And indeed, as Bauman notes, it does seem to enable a fleeting sense of community, identity and belonging in the face of horror.

The paedophile scare appears to brook no dissenting positions, no hesitant critique or even anything that obliquely suggests that the whole spectrum (from internet imagery to child-murder) is not an absolute,integral and uniform evil. Indeed if the child-sex question was properly a question, a topic on which publicly reasoned exchange and dialogue could proceed, the moral panic would be punctured. It requires the quenching of all and any ambiguity, all and any scruple, so that an absolute and binding consensus may hold. It may be that this is the one point at which moral panic responses and some feminist accounts of child sex offences converge: there must be no confusion, the juxtaposition of sex and the child is always and everywhere monstrous. But of course historically children have not been listened to, or believed in respect of these matters, while adults have often been protected by family collusions and the support of other social structures, and so the fear of slippage is understandable.Ambiguity in these matters, it is believed, will accrue benefit only to offenders and predators.

Notes

1. Foucault, Michel (1988) *Politics,Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, L. Kritzman [ed.] New York: Routledge. p. 273.

References

Bauman,Zygmunt (1999) *In Search of Politics*, London: Routledge.

Bell, Vikki (1993) *Interrogating Incest: Feminism, Foucault and the Law*, London: Routledge.

Cohen,Stanley (1972) *Folk Devils & Moral Panics*, McGibbon & Kee.

Hansen, Miriam (1990) "Early Cinema - Whose Public Sphere?"in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.) *Early Cinema: Space, Frame,Narrative*, London: BFI.

Parker, John (2000) *Total Surveillance*, London: Piatkus.

Watney, Simon (1987) *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, London: Cassell.