Folk Devils

From Youthful Innocence to Conceptual Maturity

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An old saying often surfaces whenever we ruminate on the nature of evil, namely that 'the greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was to convince us he doesn't exist'. The exact provenance of the phrase is uncertain, but it seems reasonable to give credit to Charles Baudelaire (1975; Culler 1998, 87) who, writing from 19th-century Paris, was sceptical about the enthusiasm with which 'we moderns' sought to do away with old superstitions. In the postsecular moment, there are fewer places to hide (Berger 1996; Habermas 2008; Hadden 1987) and, if it is true that the Devil desires to remain inconspicuous, then this volume has certainly done the Lord's work. With a richness that only ethnographic and anthropological description can deliver, the various contributions contained here reveal a remarkably efflorescent range of 'devilish' manifestations in the contemporary world.

Much of the work contained in this volume takes inspiration from Stanley Cohen's (1972) seminal book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, seeking to both a) redress an asymmetry frequently expressed in the literature with respect to Cohen's central terms (where 'panics' often receive more attention than 'devils') and b) bring Cohen's work *forward* – sketching a much more expansive empirical terrain within which the 'folk devil' concept can find salience.

Rather than attempting to reiterate or extend this valuable contribution, I will instead endeavour to complement it, using these pages that have been generously offered to me to work *backward* – accounting for why the 'folk devil' concept was relatively constrained, in terms of its range of application, within Cohen's original vision. Of course, the various limitations of Cohen's first book have been discussed at length elsewhere, not least by Cohen himself (2002), but most of these relate to *panic* rather than devils. In the following, then, I will zero in on a coupling inherent in Cohen's original conception of the 'folk devil' – its association with 'youth' – as a means of accounting for why the concept never acquired the same level of uptake enjoyed by its more celebrated counterpart ('panic').

It is a strange disjuncture: even though 'scapegoating' is thought to be a universal principle of human conflict (Girard 1986), and even though scapegoating is perhaps most famously associated with the burning of elderly women ('witches') in medieval Europe, its modern social-theoretical descriptor – Cohen's folk devil – is most closely associated with fears about youth – and young men in particular. After performing a close reading of Stanley Cohen's seminal statements in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, I assert that Cohen unwittingly ensured that there would be a close coupling between 'folk devils' and 'youth.' This resulted from, a) his epistemic preference for micro-foundational analyses, and his concomitant b) lack of interest in the macro-historical contingencies that placed young men at the forefront of moral concern at the particular time when he wrote. Despite his intentions otherwise, this approach has paradoxically led to the naturalization of youth deviance (Lesko 1996) and an obfuscation of its fundamental *moral* dimensions (Garland 2008; Joosse 2018a; Reed 2015).

Stanley Cohen and Young Devils

Why are youth so closely associated in moral panic theory? The origins of the relationship can be clarified, I submit, if we give heed to the historical and cultural context surrounding the 1960s, when Cohen was developing the ideas that would find their way into his first book.

This contextualization is something that Cohen himself pointedly avoided. At the time of his writing, Cohen largely refrained, for example, from exploring the larger historical context of the mods and rockers, since he felt himself to be 'too close to the sixties for such explicit understandings [of what he had earlier called the "*kulturgeist*"] to emerge' (1972, 2–3). Indeed, he derisively referred to contemporaries who were making grand epochal pronouncements as 'our instant cultural historians' (ibid., 3). Thus, while he leads off *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* with the oft-quoted observation that 'societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic', this gesture to the

comparative-historical dimension is fleeting and somewhat anodyne, and he quickly scales down the particulars of his empirical case (see, for example, the first chapter, as well as the section entitled 'Contexts and Backgrounds: Youth in the Sixties', 201–17). To be sure, Cohen did make note of the odd historical discrepancy (the centrifugal tightening of the panics during the 1960s, as compared with the 1950s, for example[1]) but these discrepancies are simply stated rather than explored or theorized. In his introduction to the third edition, written 30 years later, he acknowledged the degree to which his original statement was stamped by idiosyncrasies of the moment: his original formulation 'very much belong[ed] to the distinctive voice of the late Sixties' (Cohen 2002, vi).

By holding macro-historical questions in abeyance, it is clear that Cohen was also availing himself of an opportunity to play to his strengths. Cohen had never been interested in the contrivances of grand history, such that, even if a full historical account *were* to have been possible at the time of his writing, such explorations would have been a dalliance from his main (and explicitly stated) commitments to analysis at the level of interactionism (he cites Herbert Blumer and Ralph H. Turner as major inspirations for the work (1972, 252)). His compulsion to take his case and drill *inward* towards the micro-dimensions of day-to-day headlines was valuable precisely because it allowed him to discern the social logics, endogenous to the panics themselves, that accounted for how rules come into being, how they are applied, and how they shore up the social authority of some while depreciating (and ultimately bedevilling) the social status of others. A passing familiarity with Cohen's work is all that is needed, therefore, to sense a certain hollowness in his protestations about being 'too close' to his case – the great strength of his analyses stemmed from the fact that, for him, 'being close' was *the point*.

Be that as it may, when theoretical constructs are extruded through narrow empirics they are vulnerable to malformation. That is, to the extent that the 1960s became widely recognized as a 'creature of the youth', and to the extent that the social processes of moral panic were in those times almost exclusively associated with youthful perturbances of the social order, the 'folk devil' as a theoretical device stood in danger of being needlessly particularized – constituted in a way that would obfuscate the family resemblances that could comprise a larger, viable set of causally coherent social phenomena. The phantasmagoric procession of 'folk devils' that rush past the reader in Cohen's original description is indeed populated almost exclusively by 'depraved youth' (1972, 45), be they 'the Mod, the Rocker, the Greaser, the student militant, the drug fiend, the vandal, the soccer hooligan, the hippy, the skinhead' (ibid., 3; see p. 45 for a similar list), and it was inevitable that legions of others would offer up more recent cases to file strictly in this line (say, with punks, Goths, gang members, ravers, bullies, young Muslims etc.). But what the history of moral panic research has actually shown is that this list, which is overwhelmingly young and male, represents only a narrow band in the concept's wider spectrum of

applicability (Cohen 2002, 2011; Critcher 2008; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Hall et al., 1978 [2013]; Hier 2002, 2011; Joosse 2012; McDermott, 2015; McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

A macro-historical contextualization – of the youth-obsessed 1960s and more broadly of the century in which 'youth' itself emerged – thus is precisely what would allow for a deconstruction of needless conceptual boundaries that threaten to limit the availability of the 'folk devil' as a tool that would be well-placed for explicating a wide array of empirical phenomena. Such a deconstruction would also, in turn, help to clarify the *principally* moral (as opposed to the gendered, generational or youthful) basis for the panics that devils inspire, thereby availing the concept to new dimensions of complementarity with other theoretical models, as the present volume demonstrates.

Historicizing and Denaturalizing 'Youth'

Even by Cohen's time, such a contextualization was becoming possible – and in fairness it must be said that some of those who were undertaking these efforts were far more serious than the unnamed 'instant cultural historians' that he dismissed (Cohen 1972, 3). One leg upon which this project stood was a growing awareness about the social construction of 'youth' itself. Whereas G. Stanley Hall had been celebrated in the early part of the century for 'discovering' adolescence (1904/1907), towards the mid-century social scientists were becoming increasingly critical of the biological reductionism that underpinned that work, particularly Hall's support for Ernst Haeckel's notion that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'.[2] In 1967, anthropologist Victor Turner had given a much more convincing culturalist account of 'liminality' that did not rely on such biological underpinnings. In 1960, Philippe Ariès had published *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (English translation *Centuries of Childhood;* Ariès 1962), which leveraged a broad historical perspective to service the stunning conclusion that 'the child' – so familiar, and so *natural* to us – is a fairly recent invention.

From here, it was only a short distance to the recognition that, as mutable cultural objects, the child and the adolescent exist 'at the pleasure' of a variety of interests that align with social power. Three years prior to Cohen's book, Anthony Platt's *Child Savers: The Invention of Delinquency* (1969) described late 19th- and early 20th-century social movement actors as being every bit as much motivated by the desire to establish and advance their own their own positions in American society as they were seeking to improve the lives of New York's tenement children. A full historiography of childhood and adolescence is well beyond the scope of what can be provided here, but these few examples should suffice to illustrate that, within the intellectual climate of the social sciences at the time when Cohen wrote, the tide was turning in a way that was giving new-found confidence to culturalist, historicist and constructionist

approaches to youth and youth deviance. Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* was undoubtedly a leading example of this trend in the sociology of youth.

The upshot of this historicization is that it helps to clarify the fact that the moral panics Cohen described hewed to youth subcultures not because of some inherent turpitude in the 'youthful spirit' (indeed, this would be the opposite of his argument), nor solely because of the interactions among media, politicians, and other social authorities (which Cohen described so well), but also because, in the *cultural moment* in which Cohen was operating, 'youth' had, largely as a result of macro-historical contingences, become the main troubler of the traditional social order. Put in another way, 'youth' had risen to equal if not displace other categories of distinction (such as class and religious affiliation) that had traditionally served as the locus of struggle for leading moral controversies. If moral panics were 'youthful' phenomena for Cohen and his immediate followers, this was because when he was writing youth were a particularly salient (but by no means solitary) cipher for decoding the moral economy itself.

As the present volume attests, we can now stretch for a much more expansive vision; an effort that dovetails with my own research into the ways that charismatic populism draws heavily on xenophobic, racist and gendered notions of what threatens society (Joosse 2018a, 2018b; Joosse and Willey 2020). In this afterword, I have sought to provide some historical context for the rather limited empirical course that 'folk devils' would take in social theory after Cohen's seminal work. But, since social reality is both deep and wide, history is only one dimension within which we may broaden our theoretical scope. Just as the past is a foreign country, heretofore underexplored social contexts – so many of which are brought to light in this volume – do much to open our eyes to the many ways through which 'the devil' can become known in the world.

Notes

[1] '[U]nlike the previous decade which had only produced the Teddy Boys, these years [the 1960s] witnessed rapid oscillation from one such devil to another' (Cohen 1972, 3).

[2] Haeckels's influential theory posited that individual biological/developmental processes are a microcosm of the evolutionary development of the species as a whole. Hall maintained that the "Sturm und Drang" of puberty was particularly prone to involve the expression of atavistic, 'beastly' natures.

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