

## CHAPTER 5

# A Fish Rots from the Head

## How Powerful Moral Entrepreneurs Manufacture Folk Devils

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### Introduction

Prejudice, the act of characterizing people in a stereotypical and derogatory fashion to justify their persecution, is literally ‘pre-judging’. Being prejudiced means refusing to allow a judgement based on the facts available to affect your attitudes and actions towards a group of people: insisting on the right to have an opinion based on mythmaking; listening to, believing and telling lies that often add up to conspiracy fantasies that turn reality on its head. Groups of people who are oppressed and less powerful than others are described as either threatening to dominate ‘us’, i.e. the rest of society, or as a risk, through their attitudes, which are alleged to undermine social norms and established cultures. Many sociologists have explored the way in which states categorize groups of people – human figurations – into ‘established and outsiders’ (Elias and Scotson 2008) or more commonly simply label the problem group as ‘outsiders’ (Becker 1963) or ‘hooligans’ (Pearson 1983). One overarching term applied to both 19th-century Paris and the 21st-century global economy that captures the implicit application

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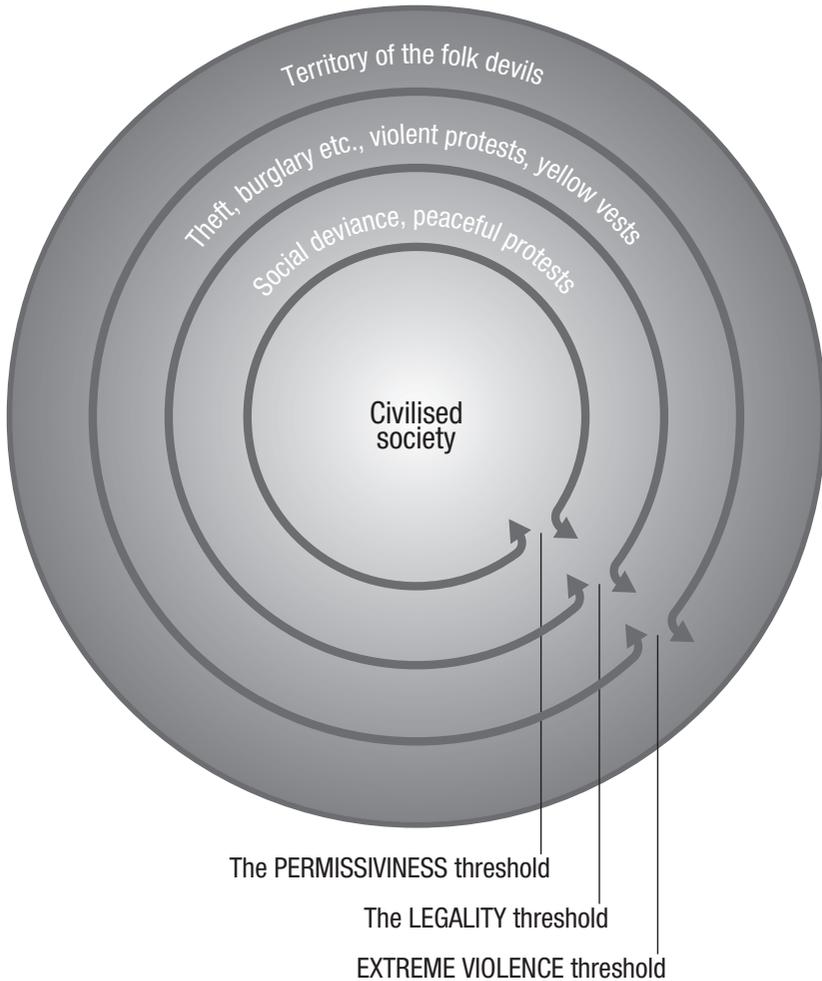
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of the politics of fear is that of the ‘dangerous classes’ (Chevalier 1973; Melossi 2008; Standing 2011).

For example, in the contemporary Czech Republic, ‘Roma are referred to in mainstream discourse as the “inadaptable” – the term used by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in 1942 when he gave the order to deport all remaining Roma and Sinti to Auschwitz because they were “inadaptable people”’ (Fekete 2018, 18; see also Slačálek, Chapter 9). As this example proves, rather than being a threat, this ‘outsider’ group were themselves the victims of violent persecution. The other lesson, illustrated by the Nazis, is that often those labelling others as folk devils themselves constitute the greatest threat – both to the scapegoated and later to everyone else. This chapter will therefore discuss contemporary folk devils through looking at the perspective from society’s summit – describing the role of the state and corporate media as the actors and institutions doing the victimizing, analysing the mechanisms they employ in an attempt to inflate the climate of moral panic that allows these bouts of emotion-driven reaction that cause so much damage and division in social relations.

The question of the state is clearly very important when considering the manufacture of folk devils. One of the most influential studies that describes this process is the groundbreaking *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Hall et al. 1978). This emerged from Birmingham University’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the direction of the lead author, Stuart Hall. Hall was an innovator who was a major influence in the deconstruction of news media, beginning with his expert analysis of the demonization of anti-Vietnam war protesters in 1968. Through the course of the 1970s, Hall and his colleagues charted the growth of a moral panic around the fear of crime that stigmatized young black men as the ‘mugger’ folk devil. They explain how the state is central by referring to Antonio Gramsci and hegemony, ‘the capitalist state involved the exercise of *both* types of power – coercion (domination) and consent (direction) [which] functioned best when it operated “normally” through leadership and consent, with coercion held, so to speak, as the “armour of consent”’ (Hall et al. 1978, 203). The creation of these folk devils was, for Hall, evidence of a new crisis of hegemony as the post-war boom in the West came to a shuddering halt from 1973 onwards: ‘The forms of state intervention have become more overt. ... The masks of liberal consent and popular consensus slip to reveal the reserves of coercion and force on which the cohesion of the state and legal authority finally depends’ (Hall et al. 1978, 217). Sidney Harring discusses the importance of policing in enforcing the state’s monopoly of the use of violence in the day-to-day, a process that is integral to the successful demonization of black people through disciplinary measures escalating from stop and search to police use of ‘deadly force’: ‘The ruling class institutes disorder when it imposes its power over others ... to which the bourgeoisie respond by creating new social institutions. These institutions, in effect, help to legitimate the new social order by rendering a valued “service” to all classes in society’ (Harring 2017, 15).



**Figure 5.1:** Thresholds of the 'signification spiral'.

**Source:** Author, adapted from Hall et al. (1978, 226).

The process is driven by the state machinery, principally defined here as governments and the institutions gathered around them for the purposes of keeping control of a society divided economically and politically along vectors of social class, gender, nationality and the artificial construct of 'race'. Besides the government, those directing the state include senior figures in control of the army, the police, the judiciary and the civil service. State theorists such as Bob Jessop and Nicos Poulantzas have analysed 'the *normal* form of the capitalist state, that is, the modern representative state, which offers a flexible framework to unify the long-term political interests of an otherwise fissiparous power bloc, disorganize the subaltern classes, and secure popular consent based on plausible

claims to represent the national-popular interest' (Jessop 2021, 286). The corporate media is controlled by key ideological allies of the state, and their propaganda dovetailed with police statistics to create the image of the 'mugger' folk devil. Hall's discussion of thresholds explains: 'In the public signification of troubling events, there seem to be certain thresholds which mark out symbolically the limits of societal tolerance. The higher ... in the hierarchy of thresholds, the greater is the threat to the social order, and the tougher and more automatic is the coercive response' (Hall et al. 1978, 225).

They call the process by which thresholds are crossed in the public mind 'signification spirals' and represent them in Figure 5.1. This is reproduced here in adapted form to include some of the contemporary folk devils discussed in this chapter alongside Hall et al.'s earlier examples.

Related to social control is, of course, the question of *who* decides *whom* to control? We are referring here to the idea of deviance, as explained by Erich Goode in his classic study of deviant behaviour:

All societies on Earth are comprised of social circles, groups of people, or scattered individuals, whose members judge and evaluate what they see and hear about. When they encounter or hear about behaviour, expressed beliefs, and even physical traits or characteristics that should be considered offensive, improper, unseemly, or inappropriate, there's a likelihood that they will punish, denounce, or humiliate the violator. (Goode 2016, 2)

State definitions of the deviant – the 'anti-social' or 'radicalized' person or organization – are, of course, in themselves the products of political ideology. These are not eternal concepts – rather, they tend to shift with the times according to rulers' threat perceptions. French president Macron has let this *deviant* or *outsider* trope guide his language, and the actions of the police force he commands as head of state, towards the Gilets Jaunes or 'Yellow Vests' social movement from the end of 2018 until the time of writing. Another 'dangerous class' of people to European governments are their own Muslim populations, and I will look at how folk devils are manufactured through an Islamophobic discourse and practice. Sometimes the folk devil can be represented by a single person who symbolizes all the marks of stigma that cast them out of the mainstream, and I will also comment on the demonization of the UK Labour Party's leader in the 2019 election, Jeremy Corbyn.

### A Climate of Fear

It is also worthwhile analysing the origins of the word panic. It derives from *Pan*, 'a god native to Arcadia', according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: 'He can induce *panic* – terror (like that of a frightened and stampeding flock or

herd)' (1949, 640). Panic, then, is a condition associated with all living creatures – an irrational, rather than planned reaction. 'Collective fear stimulates herd instinct, and tends to produce ferocity toward those who are not regarded as members of the herd' (Russell 1995, 121). The reference to a flock or herd describes how the scale of mental disturbance becomes amplified – exaggerated by its collective context. In the case of humans, the individual's terror is magnified through the echo chamber of the crowd. Like the proverbial lemmings running over the cliff's edge, moral panics can sway masses of people into acting against their own interests as their fear creates these folk devils – mythical phantoms. There are many advantages to manufacturing states of fear for those in positions of power, as explained by the ancient Roman writer Livy, describing the benefits of replacing democratic governance with authoritarian rule:

When they had named a dictator for the first time at Rome, and men saw the axes borne before them, a great fear came over the plebs and caused them to be more zealous in obeying orders. (Livy *II* 1919, 8)

So a climate of fear has benefits to those that give the orders. This goes beyond the state itself and includes their allies running corporations if they believe encouraging far-right scapegoating and violence will weaken resistance to austerity and tarnish the appeal of the left. Take the case of the Golden Dawn Party in the 2010s: this fascist grouping won seats in the Greek parliament and mass support across the country's police forces as it scapegoated migrants through organizing attacks in markets and local communities along the lines of the anti-Jewish pogroms of the early 20th century; 'it was in the interests of the Greek oligarchs (the shipping magnates, the bosses of the energy and construction groups, and football club owners) to encourage the rise of a far-right political party with a paramilitary wing. It was a kind of political safety net against the radical left' (Fekete 2018, 49). The political benefits of manufacturing fear have led to the election victories of right-wing populist presidents – Donald Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil – and also seen right populists or far-right parties elected in much of Europe.

This new threat moves the politics of many countries further away from the established pattern of governing through parliamentary democracy. Rising inequality and poverty under the existing system has given more extreme critiques greater traction. This raises the spectre of the rise of fascism in the 1930s. 'More than anything else, the Nazis were a nationalist protest against globalization' (Hett 2019, 106). Benito Mussolini's ambassador to London explained this to *The Times* journalist A. L. Kennedy in December 1933:

We must get out of our heads all our old ideas about dictators. ... The new dictator is the representative of the people. He is not against the people. He is against the oligarchy that had got the machinery of government into its hands. (Kennedy 2000, 115)

Strong leaders are better than democracy, runs this argument. Fear makes people more likely to believe they have little choice but to bow to the threats of the powerful – i.e. to become ‘zealous in obeying orders’ (Livy *II* 1919, 8). Thence rulers’ domination or ‘hegemony’ becomes less contested. It may not quell the obdurate opposition from a principled minority, but has a proven history of limiting the horizons of broader groupings through the creation of a ‘climate of fear’. Michael Welch spelled this out:

As a social psychological defense mechanism against confronting the real source of frustration, scapegoating provides emotional relief for people racked with fear and anxiety. That solace is inevitably short term, prompting scapegoaters to step on the treadmill of endless bigotry and victimization. (Welch 2006, 4)

Thus, one step of ‘othering’ can lead to another, especially as the far right’s political rivals ‘shift the window’ of acceptable prescriptions and solutions towards ever more radical hate speech and actions in order to demonstrate their political virility. Examples from the 1930s demonstrate a more extreme version of the manufacture of folk devils and an accompanying rationale that justifies the persecution of the dreaded outsider group. Journalist Aubrey Leo Kennedy’s diary recounts conversations with Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop on a visit to Berlin in 1936:

In regard to Jews, von Ribbentrop’s main contention was that the Jews must not be allowed to dominate. I think that what the Germans want is to be unmistakably top dogs in their own house. They are afraid of Jews getting into key positions. Once they have got them under they may leave them in peace. (Kennedy 2000, 194)

The last statement reflects the hopeless wishful thinking of those who wished to appease, rather than oppose, the dictators. It was as if they believed there was no alternative: ‘I am afraid that the drive against the Jews is so strongly backed that nobody can stop it for the present’ (Kennedy 2000, 199). History tells us how this group paid the ultimate price – leading, of course, to many other groups also being persecuted and invaded.

There were many voices of opposition that sought to expose and explain the rise of anti-Semitism. For example, the German Jewish sociologist Norbert Elias wrote in 1929: ‘The Christian German middle class faces a struggle. ... In the form of anti-semitism it is fighting against those of its competitors & bourgeois opponents of its own interests who seem easiest to strike against & render harmless’ (Elias 2006, 82–3). Elias could clearly see the need to fight this poisonous nationalistic anti-Semitism, while the establishment view, reflected in Kennedy’s diaries, was a mixture of mild concern combined with positive approval towards the ‘sense of purpose’ he saw in the Nazi regime:

I understand now that the Germans regard Teutonism as something sacred and something that is vitiated by the inmixture of Jewish blood or Jewish influence. This Teutonism is quite terrific. I am more impressed by it the more I look into German life. (Kennedy 2000, 199)

### French Lessons

A contemporary example of scapegoating and manufacturing folk devils comes not from the right but from the 'extreme centre' (Ali 2018) of neo-liberalism, the government of French president Emmanuel Macron. This admirer of Tony Blair and Margaret Thatcher defeated Marine Le Pen of the far-right Front National in 2017. The spectre of Le Pen's racist party, one with clear fascist affiliations, winning the presidency corralled the bulk of French voters into supporting Macron, but an incident during the election campaign highlighted the risk Le Pen's message could undermine this former banker – unashamedly wedded to neo-liberalism and 'free market' policies (Tonneau 2017). Macron is from Amiens, northern France, and during the election campaign had agreed to meet union representatives at the Amiens chamber of commerce to discuss the proposed closure by the US corporation Whirlpool of their tumble dryer factory, threatening 300 jobs:

Enter, stage left, Marine le Pen, the so-called people's candidate for president, in town to upstage Macron, speak out for workers and join the picket line. To whistles and calls of 'Marine for president!', she turned to the microphones, attacking Macron as being 'with the oligarchs, with the employers'. (Fekete 2018, 95)

This was a warning that Macron would face becoming a target for populist rhetoric if he stuck to the neo-liberal script of austerity and the imposition of labour market restructuring. Indeed, the very fact that he formed his own new party – En Marche – to contest the election, and abandoned his position as finance minister in the previous government of Francois Hollande, shows the degree to which all the established parties in France have been tarnished by their ties to the existing state of society. After becoming president, Macron continued the path he had taken as a minister, of arguing for extensive 'labour market reform' – which means in short more flexibility and an anti-welfare discourse that seeks to blame the poor for their fate. Novelist Édouard Louis describes an example:

27 May 2017 In a town in France, two union members – both in T-shirts – are complaining to President Emmanuel Macron in the middle of a crowded street. They are angry, that much is clear from how they talk. They also seem to be suffering. Emmanuel Macron dismisses them in a

voice full of contempt: ‘You’re not going to scare me with your T-shirts. The best way to afford a suit is to get a job.’ Anyone who hasn’t got the money to buy a suit he dismisses as worthless, useless, lazy. He shows you a line – the violent line – between those who wear suits and those who wear T-shirts, between the rulers and the ruled, between those who have money and those who don’t, those who have everything and those who have nothing. This kind of humiliation by the ruling class brings you even lower than before. (Louis 2019, 74–5)

By 2018, Macron was considering his next step on ‘the treadmill of endless bigotry’ (Welch 2006, 4). In order to win support from the growing climate of French patriotism that had benefited Le Pen, he risked the rehabilitation of Marshal Pétain, saying during the First World War armistice centenary celebrations ‘I consider it entirely legitimate that we pay homage to the marshals who led our army to victory. ... Marshal Pétain was a great soldier in world war one’ (Reuters 2018). This attracted much criticism, as the ‘patriot’ Pétain went on to betray his people in the Second World War by heading the pro-Nazi collaborationist Vichy government in occupied France, but it may also signal Macron’s desire to ride the wave of the far-right surge by claiming he shares their values.

That was in November 2018, and Macron has since followed up this rightward shift by authorizing the police’s merciless attitude towards the new protest movement of the *Gilets Jaunes* or Yellow Vests. One recent report had:

as of the 30th of January counted 144 verifiable cases of *gilets jaunes* and journalists severely injured by the riot police. At least 14 victims have lost an eye and 92 of the 144 have been shot by flashballs. Flashballs are rubber bullets fired from a tube like weapon with the stopping power of a .38 calibre handgun. (Haynes 2019)

Just in case the reader believes the president cannot be held responsible for police violence, Macron recently went out of his way to assure the public that he backs them, even in the controversial case of a 73-year-old pensioner who sustained a fractured skull after riot police charged demonstrators in an off-limits area of Nice. When asked for his reaction, Macron replied:

When one is fragile and risks being shoved, one does not go to places that are declared off-limits and one does not put oneself in that kind of situation. This lady was not in contact with the forces of law and order. She put herself in a situation where she went, quite deliberately, to an area that was off-limits and was caught up in a movement of panic. I regret this deeply, but we must respect public order everywhere. I wish her a speedy recovery ... and perhaps a kind of wisdom. (Willsher 2019a)

The ‘panic’, if that is what it was, was the action of the police themselves as they rampaged through the streets, injuring citizens regardless of age or intention. The fact that this new and powerful social movement continues to attract hundreds of thousands to its Saturday demonstrations across France week after week is clearly infuriating Macron and his government colleagues. As well as sanctioning violence, they have also resolved to change the law to brand these folk devils as an outrage to respectable citizens. In January 2019, the French PM, Edouard Philippe, attempted to separate off the ‘legitimate’ protesters on the streets from those folk devils – the *Gilets Jaunes*. This was reported by foreign correspondent Kim Willsher:

Speaking after the weekend’s violence at *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) demonstrations, Edouard Philippe said tough new public order measures were necessary to protect those wishing to exercise their fundamental right to protest from the ‘scandalous’ behaviour of thugs and vandals. ... He would set up a register of rioters, similar to that used to deter football hooligans, to force them to report to police and prevent them from joining demonstrations. (Willsher 2019b; emphasis in original)

This demonizing measure is, of course, completely impractical to implement. Who would decide who were the legitimate and illegitimate protesters and how would they be forced into registering? Such realities are hardly the point, which appears to be to justify state repression through a process of stigmatization.

The fact that politicians perennially seek approval from the public makes them all potentially ‘populist’. This causes the situation to be doubly confusing when the term itself is understood as an insult, an undesirable and manipulative form of politics. Thus some scholars have suggested that the term should not be used:

Indeed, we would suggest that the term ‘populism’ is a misnomer precisely because it fails to capture the empirical complexities that exist when new belief systems emerge (or old belief systems re-emerge in new ways). If we recognize the pluralistic nature of political dissent/assent, then the term populism becomes a tool through which legitimate, democratic expressions (of concrete, local problems) become ‘boxed-off’ as illegitimate forms of political utterance, for example as populist attitudes which must not be platformed. In effect, such a rhetorical strategy only reifies the contradiction – of people’s concerns versus the hegemonic political centre – without resolving its necessary conditions for existence. (Pollock, Brock and Ellison 2015, 161)

In truth, the Yellow Vests are ‘populist’ in that they are a social movement ‘of the people’ – the representatives of the poorest part of French society who

have taken to the streets as the only way to make their voices heard. As a result, there is a mixture of political views within the movement, from the anarchist and far left youth who graffiti-tagged the Arc de Triomphe and smashed up-market shop windows in Paris in December 2018, through to right-wing elements who have called for 'Frexit' and attempted to blame migrants for their plight. But these 'fake yellow vests' have been challenged and marginalized within the popular mobilizations, which often make common cause with migrants and certainly target the rich. Some trade union groups have gone on strike alongside the movement on occasion and the attacks on welfare and working conditions have been the fuel that brought the whole movement to the fore in the first place. It is precisely because the government and the media have been unable to break this movement through denouncing them as undesirable and outside the law that they have turned to more blanket forms of police violence and incarceration in order to break the spirit of today's *les misérables*. Throughout December 2019 and early January 2020, these 'dangerous outsiders' fought alongside their trade union allies in a series of mass strikes and huge demonstrations against Macron's proposed reforms to pensions, which would raise the retirement age. With so many workers striking, much of the country was severely affected by these stoppages; the government's popularity sunk so far that they announced a government climbdown (Mallet 2020). The outcome is still uncertain, but the lesson from France is that action in a united fight for social justice can weaken the divisive discourse of demonization.

### Britain's 'Suitable Enemies'

The world's most powerful states continually manufacture their enemies through their economic domination, often facilitated by wars of conquest and occupation. In the UK, those labelled as ethnic folk devils have often been those minorities: the Irish, from Britain's oldest colony; the Jews; those of Caribbean origin; and Muslims. Despite centuries of mixing together and the diversity of today's UK cities, which are often the most multicultural in Europe, elements of racism still stain our everyday language and customs, such that even those communities that feel the most 'integrated' can experience the reality of Jewish graves being desecrated, black footballers being subject to 'monkey chants' or even the residual racist resentment of sections of the press at British paratroopers facing criminal charges for shooting an unarmed Irish teenager on a civil rights protest nearly half a century ago.

But the group most blatantly stigmatized as folk devils in recent years is undoubtedly the Muslims. This is far less about 'them', i.e. the Muslim religion, culture or attitude of Muslims themselves; rather, it reflects the mindset of all those who do not share that label. These social divisions describe how hierarchical attitudes shape societies:

All over the world groups of people, great and small, huddle together as it were, with a gleam in their eye and a nod of intimate understanding, assure each other how much greater, better, stronger they themselves are, than some particular other groups. (Elias 2007, 7–8)

The UK has made a substantial contribution to the manufacture of such a Muslim moral panic with the infamous diatribe of Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The title of his August 2018 article in the *Daily Telegraph* looked progressive: ‘Denmark Has Got It Wrong. Yes the Burka Is Oppressive and Ridiculous – but That’s Still No Reason to Ban It.’ Johnson initially appeared to be claiming to explain why he would not ban the burka, but his real intent was revealed when he included two or three phrases he knew would be amplified and repeated ad nauseam across the media. These were: ‘it is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes’ and ‘If a female student turned up at school or at a university lecture looking like a bank robber’ (Johnson 2018). This was a classic piece of ‘dog-whistle’ politics: a senior statesman describing Muslim women wearing the burka as looking like letterboxes and bank robbers. This racist and provocative language is designed to encourage others to express their disapproval and prejudice, and feel legitimized by his description of the item of clothing as ‘oppressive and ridiculous.’ There have since been incidents where someone tried to ‘post’ a letter into a woman’s head-gear in Leicester. This hate crime of assault would never have happened in that form had it not been for Johnson’s irresponsible scapegoating of an economically marginalized group of women by a white man from Britain’s most privileged enclave.

These feelings of superiority are validated by the superior position society accords to the ‘established’ group over the ‘outsider’ other. The price the former pay for this privilege is their conformity:

The self-enhancing quality of a high power ratio flatters the collective self-love which is also the reward for submission to group-specific norms, to patterns of affect restraint characteristic of that group and believed to be lacking in less powerful ‘inferior’ groups, outsiders and outcasts. (Elias 2008, 30)

Of course, if this superiority played out simply as a form of ‘self-love’ in the established group, it would not necessarily be so damaging in its impact upon the group they excluded. But it tends to lead to what Ruth Wodak calls ‘victim-perpetrator reversal’ (Wodak 2015, 67; Clement and Mennell 2020). The more powerful group, or figuration, claim that they are the victim of the malicious intent of those they are in fact marginalizing. A good example of this is the actions of the established UK Conservative government towards one Muslim teenage mother, Shamima Begum, who went to Syria, aged 15, to join the Islamic State group. In early 2019, she expressed her wish to return to Britain

and her willingness to face justice for her membership of a banned organization. The response of Home Secretary Sajid Javid was to refuse her entry and revoke her UK citizenship. This was an illegal action as it made her stateless and denied her fundamental human rights, but it serves the purpose of gratifying the emotional needs of the 'established' group by exaggerating the threat of allowing Shamima to retain her citizenship and sanctioning casting out the Islamic folk devil. Media coverage of the affair has tended to amplify the venting of hate speech directed towards her. Unattributable secret service sources claimed to have interrogated terror suspects who maintain Shamima stitched on bombers' suicide vests and patrolled ISIS camps with a rifle, although the article admitted 'However, there are concerns that such evidence may not meet the legal threshold for trial in Britain due to complications over whether it would be permissible in court' (Cole 2019). Evidence that does not 'meet the legal threshold' is, of course, not evidence at all.

Besides the predictable rush to judgement on social media that overwhelmingly condemns Begum and endorses her punishment, another concerning trend is illustrated by a recent news headline in *The Independent*:

Shamima Begum: Isis Bride's Face Used as Target at Merseyside Shooting Range

A spokesperson for the company who produced the targets, the Ultimate Airsoft Range, explained, 'after watching Ms Begum being interviewed, there was a lack of empathy that she had shown and we decided to listen to our customers and use them as targets' (Dearden 2019).

Making targets of folk devils to gratify those wishing to punish them with a symbolic outlet for their aggression has gone on throughout history. Muslims may be the chief 'scapegoats of 9/11' (Welch 2006) but the 21st century has seen the revival of another perennial hate figure. The communist/radical leftist/bearded demagogue folk devil, conjured up by the voices of the establishment as a dangerous threat to the status quo, has been with us since the moral panic over the first populists in ancient Rome, which climaxed with the death of Julius Caesar (Clement 2021; Parenti 2003). In the UK today it has taken the form of the ex-leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn. The election of this left-wing leader in 2015 was followed by a tirade of scaremongering and accusations in the mainstream press. One of the incidents mirrored the persecution of Shamima Begum: in April 2019, the army announced an '[i]nquiry after soldiers use Corbyn as target practice'. Not literally, the reader will be relieved to hear, but 'footage shared on social media shows guardsmen attached to the Parachute Regiment ... firing their weapons [at] an image of Mr Corbyn' (Stubbs 2019).

As soon as Corbyn was elected, a serving British Army general claimed that in the event of his becoming prime minister, there would be 'the very real prospect' of 'a mutiny'.

Feelings are running very high within the armed forces. You would see a major break in convention with senior generals directly and publicly challenging Corbyn over vital important policy decisions such as Trident, pulling out of Nato and any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces. The Army just wouldn't stand for it. The general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardise the security of this country and I think people would use whatever means possible, fair or foul to prevent that. You can't put a maverick in charge of a country's security. (Shipman et al. 2015)

The military are not alone in their determination to make a scapegoat out of Corbyn. The media ran articles ad nauseam portraying the prospect of a Corbyn government in apocalyptic terms. Moreover, the fact that the most economically powerful are also dominant in terms of the circulation of ideas meant that Corbyn's relatively mild reform programme with some limited nationalization and a promise of a degree of tax redistribution towards the poorer mass of the population led to apoplectic outbursts like the *Mail on Sunday's* '8-page wealth pull-out' on 'How to protect your cash from Corbyn' (Prestridge 2019). The problem here, however, is that on occasion the public's opinion of those doing the scapegoating, or their view of the issue in question, can run counter to the 'common-sense' view of the government and the media. Thus, in the 2017 general election, Corbyn actually defied the experts and won a lot for support for his socialist views, summed up by Labour's manifesto slogan, 'For the Many, Not the Few'. The establishment realized that in any future election they would do well to manufacture other negative labels and slanders about Corbyn personally in order to toxify Labour's message. One of the most effective methods employed was to campaign aggressively to assert that Corbyn – probably one of Labour's most anti-racist and principled leaders ever – was himself anti-Semitic. This began as soon as Corbyn became Labour leader in 2015, as proven in a devastating critique by media analysts published in summer 2019:

A search of eight national newspapers shows that from 12 June 2015 to 31 March 2019, there have been 5497 stories on the subject of Corbyn, antisemitism and the Labour Party. (Philo et al. 2019, 1)

The authors of this study, 'Bad News for Labour', carried out focus groups showing voters believed the coverage had been so substantial that the scale of anti-Semitism within Labour – clearly, a very good reason for anyone being reluctant to support such a political party – was high: 'the answers ranged from 25–40 per cent of members. The interviewees also gave clear reasons for their judgements which mostly focus on the very high level of media coverage, which they assumed meant that many people were involved' (Philo et al. 2019, 2) The reality is that, at the most, 0.3 per cent of members have been identified as

needing to answer such charges. The mismatch is far too great to be anything other than a product of a media ‘moral panic’ (Philo et al. 2019, 50).

Judging by the reactions of the focus groups, this tactic worked, not least because so many Labour MPs who were to the right of Corbyn politically, such as deputy leader Tom Watson, were more than willing to buy into the moral panic and ceaselessly endorse claims about its scale and seriousness. The actors involved included the Conservative government, many Labour MPs, the UK media and indeed the Israeli government and media, who also believed their interests benefited from the demonization of any leader advocating sanctions against Israel’s military occupation of Palestinian territories. These powerful groups constituted what Howard Becker (1963, 19) calls the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ who promote the creation of ‘folk devils and moral panics ... to control the means of cultural reproduction’ (Cohen 2011 [1972], 8). The spirals of amplification surrounding Corbyn, branded a deviant and an anti-Semite by his former cabinet colleague and new Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, led to his suspension from the party he led. Many of his supporters – some of them Jewish – have followed (Harpin 2020).

## Conclusion

Folk devils are manufactured, but they are more than mythical. Those who create them want them to appear real to the mass of the population. Since Stanley Cohen’s groundbreaking study of how and why they come into being, any number of groups have been made visible by the processes of stigmatization and demonization he observed, as he himself recognized in his introduction:

To a greater or lesser degree, these cultures have been associated with violence. ... There have been parallel reactions to the drug problem, student militancy, political demonstrations, football hooliganism, vandalism of various kinds and crime and violence in general. (Cohen 2011 [1972], 2)

The examples cited here – French welfare claimants and the social movement clad in yellow vests, British Muslim women and the leader of the UK Labour Party – have all been associated with threatening violent disruption to the social fabric and thus fit Cohen’s typology:

In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be. (Cohen 2011 [1972], 2)

The purpose of this chapter is to extend Cohen’s original examination of folk devils by looking at stigmatization processes initiated by those running the

state and the corporate media that acts in their interests. The irony here is that it is these representatives of the ruling institutions – prime ministers, presidents and generals – who themselves uphold a violent system of exploitation that constantly divides one section of society against another. The victor in the UK 2019 election, Boris Johnson, used his position as both prime minister and journalist to remind his readers that:

the modern Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn ... detest the profit motive so viscerally – and would raise taxes so wantonly – that they would destroy the very basis of the country's prosperity ... they point their fingers at individuals with a relish and a vindicateness not seen since Stalin persecuted the Kulaks. (Johnson 2019)

On 6 November 2019 – the day the Conservative government launched its election campaign – on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*, a large photo of Johnson pointing his finger accompanies this quotation in very large typeface. For the establishment, for now, their mission has been accomplished and the folk devil is cast out into the wilderness.

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