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BOOK REVIEW

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

Frank Furedi, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013

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Frank Furedi's exposition of the Jimmy Savile scandal is a self-styled offer of a "sociologically informed explanation" of the drama, as it unfolded. Its publication date of 2013 is significant, because even a year is a long time in the dismal saga of child abuse revelations in 21st century Britain.

Professor Furedi is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent and a high-profile commentator in print, both academic and popular, as well as in broadcasting. He itemises a number of modern manifestations of what he believes is a general loss of authority, when public institutions are no longer trusted and instead substitutions must be found. The resultant "moral crusades" created by politicians in concert with the media gain a momentum of their own but, he argues, analysis often reveals that these are nothing more than ineffectual responses to a problems which have been exaggerated or are even illusory.

Jimmy Savile was a hugely influential British celebrity in the 1970s and '80s, known for fronting Top of the Pops on BBC television, while frenetically raising money for medical charities. By the time of his death in 2011 he had been knighted by the Queen, had earned an audience with the Pope, not forgetting the café named after him at Stoke Mandeville Hospital. In 2012 evidence began to emerge which substantiated older suspicions, that Savile had in fact been a prolific sexual predator, abusing the vulnerable of both sexes and all ages; usually gaining access to his victims through both his performing and charity activities. Among formal responses, the Metropolitan Police instituted Operation Yewtree which extended on beyond Savile the net of inquiry on historic child abuse. What has ensued has been described, variously, as a long overdue recognition of past wrongs or a "witch-hunt".

Professor Furedi believes that scandals such as this tell us more about today than yesterday. Studying what he calls a "retroactive attribution of meaning" can reveal "the way a community understands itself". In this instance, the outrage exhibited against Savile is actually a form of psycho-cultural displacement of moral concerns. In 21st century Britain, he argues,

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childhood is “sacralised”; that is made the subject of sentiment, veneration and profound emotional investment. In our diverse and fragmented society, the one crime about which there is consensus is that against children. A measure of Durkheimian unity is provided by a phenomenon which is much more than criminal; the existence of child abuse constitutes “moral pollution”.

Furedi proceeds to posit an “inflation of abuse”, leading to a “demonology of ritual abuse, conspiracy and cover-up”. Allegations of Satanic Ritual Abuse, which were largely discredited in both the USA and the UK, are used to show how Western society, unable to manage the vast uncertainties of 21st century life, finds some comfort in the belief that there are forces with a conspiratorial plan, however malign. However his own arguments are actually similarly conspiracy-based; only here they are perpetrated by what he calls “moral crusaders”.

The ever more frequent resort to the device of the judicial inquiry by governments faced with public disquiet on issues ranging from the decision to go to war in Iraq to press regulation is explained by Furedi in terms of a profound loss of trust in authority and public institutions. The inquiry is the current solution to what Max Weber identified as modernity’s search for legitimacy. Furedi must have been amused to note the events of summer 2014. The Home Secretary Theresa May was compelled to announce not one but two judicial inquiries into aspects of child abuse. Chosen to chair a wide-ranging review of alleged cover-ups of abuse in the BBC, the Church and other major institutions was the retired judge Baroness Butler-Sloss. Her appointment caused an outcry by those who believed that her family connections meant that her objectivity would appear compromised. Following her decision to decline the position, it began to appear almost impossible to find any putative chair whose would not be questioned. Effectively, judicial inquiries are now next on the list of public institutions found wanting.

The history of the words “victim” (used sparingly even in press accounts of the concentration camps in 1945) and “abuse” are traced and it is noted that the usages have been so broadened that the distinctions between degrees of suffering have been lost. Recent dissention over the possible criminalising of forms of emotional abuse in the domestic context would support his argument. Further, his moral crusaders are said to be seeking to achieve “domain expansion” by portraying different forms of abuse as pervasive in society; by an ideology hostile to anyone who dares to question it. “Scepticism the worst form of heresy.” But this is where the cracks begin to appear in the Furedi argument.

The plot thickens. 2014 saw the convictions of other high profile abusers including Rolf Harris and Max Clifford, while the Lampard NHS Report revealed a considerably wider scale to Savile’s activities than had been guessed at the time Furedi wrote. These developments do not in themselves diminish the central point he is making. However, more threatening to his

fundamental thesis are the ongoing revelations about the grooming, exploitation and rape of thousands vulnerable young girls preyed upon in cities such as Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxford. Here, as in the Savile story, the key theme is not so much secrecy but the fact that victims and others who tried to reveal what was going on, were ignored at all levels of police, social services and local politics: a gross under-response. The status of the male perpetrators are very different from the “Operation Yewtree” cases – taxi drivers and kebab sellers rather than powerful celebrities, but yet again the victims were all vulnerable and their stories notably “inconvenient”.

Furedi in no way excuses or condones Savile’s activities, which are duly condemned, however he implicitly characterises the scandal as a unique event from which it is dangerous to draw wider assumptions. He alleges that an overreaction to such cases has increased intergenerational mistrust; now there exists a cultural of suspicion which actually diminishes the safety of children. This is not a new observation but it is one which does a huge disservice to the increasingly evident reality that there exists a minority of men who pose a very real threat to the vulnerable, both at home and on the streets.

The book ends rather inconclusively, with the fundamental understatement that, “It is still too early to determine the scale of fallout from Savile”. The exploitation of the vulnerable is an unfortunate example chosen to illustrate a thesis with some very thought-provoking aspects. Furedi’s concise analysis provides valuable conceptual tools with which to objectively assess societal reactions but it would be interesting to see if they can be applied to an under – rather than allegedly over – reaction. The biggest mistake that can be now made is to allow the Savile case to be historicised – pushed into the past and disavowed, with hollow claims that “lessons have now been learned”. The phenomenon of the voiceless and inconvenient victim endures and remains to be addressed by academics, policy makers and society.