Moral panics as a Trojan horse for social control of the underclass

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The front page of the *Daily Mail* in Britain today reports on the conviction of Mick Philpott and others for the manslaughter of his six children in a house fire in 2012. It shows a picture of Philpott with his six – now deceased – children under the headline deceased – children under the headline *Vile Product of Welfare UK*. Of three sub-headlines, the one that interests me most reads *Social Workers did Nothing Despite his Boasts on TV of Sordid Lifestyle*. I think these headlines illustrate something important about the links made in certain media stories between the actions of ‘evil’ parents, their position in terms of social class, and the perceived failure of social workers to respond appropriately.

Using a moral panic framework to analyse the connection between these three elements – ‘evil’ parents, their class status, and social work responses – we can see how stories of the tragic death of a child can operate as a ‘Trojan Horse’. Such stories immediately grip us because the tragic outcome is known and the details about how it came about often fascinate. But, as I intend to highlight, the moral disturbance evoked by these stories goes beyond simple recognition of the brutality or ruthlessness of the individuals involved and the appalling outcome.

We see perhaps the most notorious recent example of ‘evil’ parenthood in the form of Tracy Connelly who was convicted in 2008 of killing or allowing her son ‘Baby P’ to die at the hands of her boyfriend and/or their lodger. In my in-depth analysis of the press coverage of the case, it is clear that the intense moral disturbance about Baby P was not only about the brutal way he had died. Extensive coverage was also concerned with the living standards to which he had been exposed during his life and in many reports the accounts were characterised by a visceral disgust directed at this ‘underclass’, welfare-dependent, lifestyle:

…how is it that this disgusting piece of humanity, in the shape of the mother, was ever allowed to have the child in the first place? She came from a family of drunks, never worked and watched porn all day. Her council house – she had to have one didn’t she? – stank. Why wasn’t the child taken away from her at birth? (MacKensie *The Sun*, 13 Nov 2008)

Moral disturbance about Tracey Connolly’s lifestyle was not limited to the tabloid press but was evident across broadsheets:

The unspeakable case of Baby P raises profound questions about the state of Britain today. The welfare state has created some communities with no morality […] this is not just a story about Haringey, or the child protection system. It is a story about Britain today [...] The story of Baby P provides a glimpse into the colossal failure of community, in which dependency on the State is a way of life (*The Times* 13 Nov 2008)

This moral disturbance about shifting class formations fits with Jock Young’s recent (2011) analysis of moral panics and the way they will inevitably coalesce around widespread economic insecurity. But the ‘moral panic’ about Baby P was not only concerned with his life as an ‘underclass’ child and his subsequent death. There was also profound moral disturbance
and a widespread, furious response to the perceived failings of the social workers that had been involved with the family.

Social workers and their manager (Sharon Shoesmith) were constructed in press reports about Baby P as evil ‘folk devils’ in the form defined by Stan Cohen as ‘cold-hearted bureaucrats’. They were presented as lacking in common sense and failing in their task of moral regulation, primarily because of their preoccupation with ‘ticking boxes’ and lack of basic humanity. The Daily Mail in its Comment on the death of Baby P stated: ‘The correct boxes had been ticked, rules followed. To hell with the common sense that could have saved Baby Ps life’ (15 Nov 2008). The Lead Article in the Daily Telegraph asserted that ‘No one is capable of making a decision that is based on common sense rather than what is in the rule book’ (15 Nov 2008). Social workers had failed to act as ‘you or I’ would, not just in relation to an (as yet unknown) impending catastrophe but the ‘here and now’ of Baby P’s existence:

You have to brace yourself to even imagine the smell that greeted police as they entered the council flat where baby P lived and died. There was dog mess and human faeces on the floor, along with the bodies of dead chicks, mice and dismembered rabbit – food for a hungry Rottweiler and three other dogs. The living room was littered with pornography. In short it was the sort of place that would make you want to scoop up a child and get it out as quickly as possible. But when Maria Ward, Baby Ps social worker, saw him for the last time four days before his death, she simply noted that he smiled and ‘appeared well’. (Driscoll, Ungoed-Thomas & Foggo The Sunday Times 16 Nov 2008)

There was a virtual consensus across press reports that the threshold for removing a child had been entirely wrong, not simply because of what we now know about the fate that was to befall Baby P, but because of what we now know about the standard of care which he had experienced on an everyday level. This is in evidence again in the Philpott case, where the Daily Mail today asserts:

Incredibly, the tragic Philpott children were not being regularly monitored by social workers despite dangerous living conditions and their father’s notorious appearances on national television where he boasted of sex-obsessed and benefits-funded lifestyle.

My argument is that narratives in the media about children who die at the hands of their parents can serve as a vehicle for powerful messages about ‘new’ and dangerous underclass formations in Britain. In their identification of underclass parenting with ‘evil’, such stories can be used to invoke social control at its fiercest and most punitive (as Chas Critcher has indicated), with social workers the putative agents of that control.

(This blog draws on the ideas in my recent paper, ‘Social work, class politics and risk in the moral panic over Baby P’, published online 1st March 2013.)

Jo Warner, 3rd April 2013
References


