

**How far can we police the obscurely perverse?  
Reflections on the sacred, the satanic and the State**

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How might we understand the abduction-murders of women? And what is the State's role in preventing such haunting crimes?



In the week of International Women's Day, the second week of March, a national drama, then tragedy, unfolded. We witnessed, first, massive police activity in the South East and then, inevitably, a growing wake of social and public media attention: within a few days a chillingly horrific crime lay exposed – the abduction and murder of a young woman<sup>1</sup> walking alone at night. Soon after, a serving London policeman<sup>2</sup> is charged with her murder.

Early interviews, comments and commentaries in the media had, it seemed – very understandably – given precedence to women. One women's campaigner<sup>3</sup> said, 'Only men can stop male violence'. A female MP<sup>4</sup> elaborated, 'male violence is something that has to be tackled – and the justice system has to wake up to that'.

Other women, while acknowledging the fearsome horror experienced, communicated other perspectives. The Met Police Commissioner<sup>5</sup> at first attempted to calm and console with, 'it is incredibly rare for women to be abducted on our streets'. A criminology professor<sup>6</sup> backed this from a great raft of statistics: many more men are murdered than women, and the ratio of stranger-murders of men is even far greater, too. Such statistical truths did nothing, though, to quell the rising collective tide of angry vulnerability among women. The murdered woman – however statistically insignificant – was immediately, and continues to be, seen as emblematic of the culmination of an oppressive heritage: millennia of patriarchal power, itself derived from aeons of primate ancestry.<sup>7</sup>

So while such murders may remain 'incredibly rare', the ancient culture they seem to symbolise remains perceived as still very active. The current cultural storm is, therefore, like the sea's perilous turbulence where two giant ocean currents meet. Our current turbulence is an immiscible convergence of democratic feminism with perceived coercive patriarchy. Few will now openly challenge the women's expressions of cumulative fear, vulnerability or angry humiliation.

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But as seriously as we should take such understandable distress, we need discernment with some of the expressed explanations and equations. We need, for example, to distinguish much commoner domestic bullying and violence from the extremely rare, grotesque stranger-murder. They have many differences: domestic violence is usually far more accessible to understanding, and so (we hope) to education, sanctions and punishment. Stranger-murder is probably resistant to all of these. How realistic is it to expect that such rare and extraordinary crimes can be prevented by increasing regulations, policing, harsher penalties or gender-attitude education? And how could we possibly identify, detain, contain and re-programme a *future* offender without creating massive secondary problems? In short, we should avoid the expedient error of subjecting these rare yet shocking crimes to the same kind of (often very ineffective) detections, preventions and punishments as the much commoner and more comprehensible crimes that sully and threaten us – bullying, coercive control, burglaries, fraud, intoxicated violence, licence or tax evasion... Such crimes make up a discordant but familiar backcloth to our daily lives – we can generally understand (we think) much of their genesis and motivation: self-serving opportunism, destructive parental modelling, personal revenge, greed and so forth.

But what are we to make of those who wish to take the life of, or sexually invade, others who are not known to them? ‘Mad’ or ‘Monsters’ we may call them, yet these perpetrators are – disturbingly – often otherwise indistinguishably ‘normal’ in their social and personal appearance and history: they often do not conform (in prior conduct) to our ideas of the mentally ill or the criminal.

How can we possibly understand – let alone predict or prevent – such occultly incubating and perverse horrors? The following account illustrates our difficulties.

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A few years ago a man, M,<sup>8</sup> was in prison for downloading a vast quantity of (what we can assume was) the harshest and cruellest kind of child pornography. What was even more intolerable and incomprehensible was the discrepancy of this with what was 'known', what was assumed, about him. He was a well-respected, affectionately regarded clergyman and theological scholar, nourished by an apparently warm (now shell-shocked) long marriage, family and social life.

M was prison-visited by a long-lasting friend<sup>9</sup> and colleague of mine who asked him why he had done what he did. His answer seemed remarkably candid and insightful. His friend recorded it:<sup>10</sup>

'I think most people wouldn't understand, but you might... You see, my interest was never sexual: I never became aroused or excited in that way by the material.

'As you know, I have long been interested in the complex coupling of the sacred and the profane... (I have higher degrees in the sacred!) ... so I thought I should be familiar with my adversary – I would encounter the profane – I would explore it...

'What I found in the images nauseated, repelled yet fascinated me. The nausea and repulsion I expected; the fascination I did not. What was it? What was I encountering in myself? I realised I was intensely excited by my contact with the severely forbidden; I experienced a buzz – an intense thrill – with this secret and silent transgression that no-one else knew about. It was so different from what anyone – including myself – expected of me. I felt euphoric, knowing I could secretly break the taboos ... I felt strangely liberated. And the danger definitely added excitement: I knew this was really hazardous and that, strangely, made me feel more alive ... It is certainly strange: I wonder now if my attraction to the profane is something like the kind of thrill some people get from very dangerous activities: solitary extreme sailors or solo rock-climbers, that sort of thing...

‘Yes, it was very perverse and I must acknowledge it: I secretly hungered for the forbidden and transgressive ... it was that, certainly, but it was never sexual.’

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So the irresistible allure for M was in the very forbiddenness of his sequestered activity: the more delinquent, the greater the possible penalty, the greater the attraction. Avoiding detection also provided not only a surge of danger-excitement, but then a sense of Olympian triumph – over conventions, expectations, the knowledge and authority of all others! How much more exciting and immediate was the rapid descent into the profane than the long, hard, disciplined climb to catch the fleeting presence of the sacred!

M may be – hopefully – very rare, but he is certainly not alone. Severe drug and gambling addictions, dangerous sexual perversions, extreme death-defying physical pursuits all play at the threshold of life and death, citizenship and social ruin. Dr Harold Shipman, the GP serial killer, was similar, too, in several respects: a publicly good man who found addictive relief and release in serial deceptions and transgressions. But Shipman’s sacrifice of others’ lives for such satisfactions was to cost his own, by suicide, rather than ever talk about his split self. M, another publicly good man, mercifully kept his transgressive-highs confined to a virtual world (for him): the split in his self was not so profound that he would prefer death to disclosure.

The motivation for such perverse corruption certainly lies outside what we normally think about and share with others. Indeed, the word ‘perverse’ is often used with that which is not readily comprehensible and arouses our sense of unease. In medieval times such deviance (together with much else) would have been readily explained and despatched as manifestations of satanic possession. M with contemporary language and candid insight is, in many ways, talking of his enthrallment with, and to, a kind of ‘satanic charisma’ – an

enthrallment with illusory Old Testament God-like powers – the watcher, the dispenser and withholder of All...

Such normality-wrapped victim-perpetrators of satanic charisma have – quite rightly – no special plea in the courts. Nor can they find justification or help from medical science or psychiatry. But they can find an encouraging home elsewhere: in misanthropic theocracies and state dictatorships – those who have power there are enjoined – en masse – to gorge on transgressions. The transgressive becomes the privileged norm of *Übermenschen*: Hitler's SS became satanic charisma for Aryan Everyman. There are many other, if less iconic, examples.

While academic psychology and psychiatry cannot readily extend understanding to such human undertows, we can see how story tellers, since Ancient Greece at least, are not so restricted. In our own era, for example, novelists, dramatists and film-makers<sup>11</sup> conjure the fictional in order to arouse consciousness of, interest in, the disturbing and obscured real: those puzzling aspects of ourselves that we avoid in our usual thoughts and discourse. The more enduring works do not concern us so much with our much commoner and more comprehensible offences; they take us to much rarer, but more intriguing, concealed descents into compulsive yet obliquely motivated madness and murderousness.<sup>12</sup> On the page, on the screen, on the stage, such satanic charisma is safely distant in the Other: we have remote control. Yet somehow – somewhere inside of us – we recognise that familiar-yet-so alien. It is the shadow of our humanity: it will always follow us. If we do not contemplate it in art-forms, it will find us in our nightmares.

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Such are the understandings of depth-psychology of our horrors-in-humanity: these notions are always speculative, inferential, and neither provable nor disprovable. Can they help us? Well, not directly, for if these acts are, to a large degree, gambling acts of perilous defiance

then usual methods of punishment, education or rehabilitation are likely to have inverse paradoxical results because the greater society's abhorrence, the more draconian the penalty, so the greater the motivating excitement and enticement of the crime becomes...

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*God, grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change,  
courage to change the things I can,  
and wisdom to know the difference.*

– Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

But such understanding may help indirectly, in helping us keep any reforming project within realistic expectations; to desist from draconian and doomed attempts to prevent or police an absolute extinction of those destructive acts we find so disturbing and repulsive. In the face of so much fear, shock and alarm, the mounting cry of 'something must be done!' is easy to understand and socially hazardous to resist. But *what* should be done? Our best answers to this will seek dual anchorage: in understanding both proportionality and the elusive nature of the problem.

Proportionality: criminologists tell us that male-on-male violence and murder is far greater than that of male-on-female; where the assailant is a stranger that difference is even greater. Other statistics show us the rareness of the horror. Women (and men) are far more likely to be killed by other kinds of human activity: for example, by traffic, air pollution, domestic accidents and outdoor recreational activities. There is no outcry or urgency to curtail these because they do not (usually) derive from our human Shadow: the Satanic-in-Man.

Elusiveness: as we have seen, camouflage makes detection difficult amidst the otherwise sane and law abiding; education is often an irrelevant tool with these kind of killers (M, Shipman and Wayne Couzens<sup>2</sup> previously showed no evidence of ignorance of the law and



'correct' attitudes); increasing already severe punishments is unlikely to deter those whose hunger is to inflict and elude danger – for them, the greater the penalty, the greater the thrill and satisfaction.

So what can we/should we usefully do? We are, in some ways, in similar territory here to our problems with radicalised terrorists. We can provide some surveillant and environmental safeguards, yet acknowledge that these will sometimes fail: the determined offender will find the guile and ingenuity to succeed. That, for them, is a large part of the challenge and the satisfaction. Even the most draconian police-state cannot completely eliminate this.<sup>13</sup>

To return to the question: we can implement some of the suggestions we have heard in the media from pundits, politicians and engaged citizens. For example, increasing street and park-thoroughfare lighting and CCTV, prohibition of kerb crawling, more frequent police patrols, even longer imprisonments – these are probably affordable. They might deter some offenders; quite as important, they would convey a feeling of greater safety and care amongst those feeling vulnerable, exposed and disregarded. Like the medical placebo it will often (unwittingly) benefit many who find the idea of placebos objectionable...

But we must beware: there is a great difference between a wise yet (mostly) effective police-presence and a paranoid, socially destructive police-state. Being right is conditional and tempered; ramped-up righteousness often blinds itself to such conditions and caveats. We must take care to ensure that the heat of the right-ness of our vulnerable, fearful anger does not fan itself into a fire-ball, then fire-storm, of righteous, mistrustful, fear-fuelled pre-emption. Like many incendiary campaigns of elimination, the collateral damage can be huge: it is never only the guilty, the targeted, who are burned.

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## Dramatis personae and notes

1. Sarah Everard
2. Metropolitan PC Wayne Couzens
3. Julie Bindall
4. Jess Phillips MP
5. Dame Cressida Dick
6. Professor Marian Fitzgerald
7. Chimpanzee and Gorilla social groups, for example, show instructively similar features to our own human and genetically hierarchical patriarchies that are often difficult for us to dissolve.
8. M is kept anonymous here. After serving his prison sentence he has, with difficulty, rebuilt a worthwhile life. The anonymity used here is a protective and stabilising contribution to that.
9. This friend is personally well-known to this author.
10. M was not audio-recorded. Instead the friend hand-wrote what he had said immediately after the meeting.
11. An example of each: Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*), Bella Bartok (*Bluebeard's Castle*), Francis Ford-Copolla (*Apocalypse Now*).
12. Apart from the more enduring classics, many of the more commercial horror genre novels, films and (often Scandinavian) crime-noir TV dramas reliably exploit the 'popularity' of this theme.
13. The ineffective, sometimes counterproductive, fate of excessive State-regulation and policing is well illustrated by the (alcohol) Abolition campaign in 1920s USA: this unleashed an unprecedented rise in alcoholism and secondary criminality. The rate of coercive sexual transgressions in sexually repressive societies is another, more timeless example.

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