The Philpott Trial, Welfare Reform and the Facialisation of Poverty

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*How emotive images of victims and perpetrators strategically divert attention from systemic injustice*

The British Right celebrates the personality cult of its heroine Margaret Thatcher this week, at a time when an obsessively individualised personality-​politics dominates the press and is increasingly redefining the terms of political debate and proffering mandates for legal change. The creep of the personal ‘face’ (alternately vile, heroic or innocent, but almost always signifying some unbearable shock or outrage) imposed on a public debate or perceived social problem has been insidious and constant since Thatcherism supposedly redefined Britain as a nation of individuals. This month, in an immediately notorious front-​page splash, a right-​wing British tabloid, the *Daily Mail,*showed Mick Philpott sitting surrounded by his six children (Duwayne, Jade, Jayden, John and Jessie Philpott, aged from 13 to 5) as he was convicted with his wife Mairead of their manslaughter. ‘VILE PRODUCT OF WELFARE UK’, screamed the headline above: not only Philpott but the children themselves were implicated in the general moral disgust (Dolan and Bentley 2013).

In an act of truly hyperbolic generalisation, Philpott was presented as ‘a perfect parable’ (Wilson 2013) for welfare claimants throughout Britain, when the facts of his life and crime (a bizarre revenge plot designed to frame the ex-​girlfriend who had deserted him with their five children) make clear that he was representative of no one but his own arrogant and abusive self. His family was clearly highly unusual both in its living arrangements, with wife in the house and girlfriend confined to a caravan in the back garden, and the number of children Philpott had fathered (17 in all; only 8% of UK families claiming unemployment benefits has more than 3 children [Observer 2013]). The ‘doomed brood’’s (Dent 2013) status as objects of public mourning was thus ambivalent from the offing.

Unlike other favoured tabloid victims such as Madeleine McCann or ‘Baby’ Peter Connolly, they represent what Eggers (2002) has called the ‘less dead’ (quoted in Seal 2009, 61), to a reading public apparently itselfvictimised by the social evil of ‘scroungers’ and their ‘broods’. (In fact, comparison with the tabloid treatment of Baby Peter, who died of abuse and neglect at the hands of his stepfather, mother and a lodger, demonstrates how in a few years [Peter died in 2008] the debate surrounding families on welfare has hardened and coarsened: Peter was himself part of a family of four children raised on benefits, but press coverage generally focused on his innocence, the perceived incompetence of social workers and doctors, and the tragedy of his loss — although press and political commentary on his mother Tracey [as detailed below] somewhat anticipated the pillorying of Philpott as monstrous scrounger/​criminal.)

The British Chancellor, George Osborne immediately picked up the Philpott story, obliquely suggesting that state ‘subsidising’ of the family’s ‘lifestyle’ had somehow influenced the crime (Helm 2013). Prime Minister David Cameron swiftly backed up the Chancellor’s statement (stating that Philpott himself ‘was to blame’, as if this needed emphasising; ibid.); and former Tory party chairman, David Davis, took the opportunity to make clear what the legal discouragement of irresponsible breeding might mean in practice, when he raised once again the idea of limits to the payment of Child Benefit (probably to two or three children). A limitation to two children has already been mooted by Minister for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith (Eaton 2013; Ramesh 2012).

The swift and politically motivated personalisation of perceived social problems is a form of politics and lawmaking most strongly associated with the Republican right in the USA, although it is not entirely unprecedented in the UK. Serious crimes involving children, such as the James Bulger and Peter Connelly murders and the Shannon Matthews kidnap, have been used by Tony Blair (in a speech to the Wellingborough Labour Party in 1993) and Cameron himself to make sweeping statements about the ‘moral chaos’ (Blair) of our ‘broken society’ (Cameron 2008), with Cameron in Parliament incorrectly labelling 27-​year-​old Tracey Connelly a teenage mother, as if that might have explained something about her crime (Sparrow and Glendinning 2008). Blair’s very well-​received speech, highlighting the need for the state to demand moral accountability and responsibility from its citizens, anticipated a raft of quintessentially neoliberal ‘responsibilising’ reforms mostly aimed at a recalcitrant underclass, notably the Antisocial Behaviour Act 2003.

According to Berlant, “the continual placing of a personal, individual ‘face’ on an otherwise abstract issue” results in a ‘facialization’ of injustice that “enables further deferral of considerations that might force structural transformations of public life. Such ‘facialization’ of public, systemic crisis “can only symbolize (but never meet) the need for the radical transformation of national culture” (1997, 187, 220). The lure of facialisation is compounded in the legal arena, since ‘‘law’s insistence on reducing events to manageable categories has the effect of collapsing their complexity and plurality’’ (Aristodemou 1997, 46): thus, although frequently one-​dimensional and simplified, the ofﬁcial, legal and medical/​psychiatric definitions and diagnoses of disorder and criminality tend to the bureaucratically impersonal.

In response, colourful images of evil and victimhood with direct and titillating appeal to emotions such as fear, pity and disgust come to circulate in the fields of speculation and controversy generated by signal trials such as the Philpotts’. As Sparks notes, “questions about culture and representations are essential for grasping how structural forces or factors become mobilised within the political arena” (2001, 196) and it is thus that we must urgently question how emotive and generalising media and political representations of ‘risky’ people and groups appears to have become inextricably bound up with state lawmaking and regulation, as the public are portrayed as in various forms of immediate danger — whether from people with ‘personality disorders’, terrorists, ‘feral youth’, welfare ‘skivers’, ‘failing’ NHS hospitals, etc.

There is a troubling contemporary synchrony between stories of individual danger and victimisation, vivid scaremongering in the media and action within Parliament or government agencies. The Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorders programme (Seddon 2011, 135 – 148) inspired by isolated but heavily-​reported crimes such as the murder of Lin and Megan Russell by Michael Stone in 1997, is one example, as is the sustained rise in children taken into care following the Peter Connelly murder (CAFCASS2009).

Thus, in facialised policy-​making, the ‘scare story’, often organised around the image of a suitably photogenic victim or victims, is deployed as an urgent and apparently inarguable basis for regulatory change. The methodology of legal and political facialisation is both mawkishly sentimental in its appeal to the innocent vulnerability of the victim(s), and utterly ruthless in the way that the imagery of vulnerability (or evil) may be marshalled to command restrictions of liberty or withdrawals of rights from entire groups tainted by the spectre of harmfulness. The ‘face’ of the victim or perpetrator represents the materialisation of an unbearable risk. In the case of Philpott and his children, the faces are those of joint victim-​perpetrators: ‘we’, the taxpaying public, are the (future) victims of Philpott and his ‘brood’, born to die because of their overly subsidised existence.

Through facialisation and related processes such as ‘celebrity culture’ and the dominance of the owner/​consumer as limit-​point of political organisation (Hall et al 2008), the significance of certain bodies and ‘personalities’ expands to fill cultural space left empty by the retreat of collective politics and any concepts of social, rather than individual, power and responsibility (Hall et al 2008; Lasch 1979). The “complex of marketization, autonomization and responsibilization” which absorbs contemporary subjects (Rose 2007, 4) is reinforced not only through lawmaking and penal punishment but through subtly powerful narratives and images of toxic irresponsibility. It is in this troubling political context that the most vulnerable parents are configured as the most dangerous to their own children and, given that children born and raised by them will carry the supposed taint of dangerousness, to the national future.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, political and journalistic scare-​stories on the ‘dependent’ of the West have increased in frequency and volume, with the supposedly useless and proliferative poor and disabled portrayed as ‘benefit scroungers’. It is hardly a novel political move to identify poverty with depravity and degeneracy, and welfare payment has long been deemed to cause the poor to ‘breed’ out of control (Wintour and Dodd 2013). Inadequate parenting, identified with poverty, has been identified as at the heart of the ‘cycle of deprivation’ within the ‘problem families’ identified by post-​war British governments (Welshman 2012). Failures of parenting are now portrayed as immediately harmful, not only to the child but to others, and to what is left of the social fabric. Legislation aimed at reforming ‘inadequate’ parents expanded greatly in the era of New Labour (1997 – 2010), and in that era, risk-​management was targeted at families living in the recalcitrant margins of British society: lower-​income, single parents, usually mothers, in social housing, perceived as the usual progenitors of ‘anti-​social’ children (Holt 2008).

The Coalition government has made far less noise about ending poverty than its predecessor did, and has instead launched a massive programme of welfare cuts, enacted in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and passed through a protesting House of Lords using ‘financial privilege’. The stringent welfare reform measures — many of which came into force on ‘Black Monday’, April 9th, just before the Philpott story conveniently broke — have been accompanied by a noticeable proliferation in the popular media of tales of individual monstrosity and abjection, representative of an underclass deemed ever more irresponsible, parasitic and toxic. Other cases picked out by Cameron (2008; Sparrow and Glendinning 2008) — those of Tracey Connelly, mother of murdered ‘Baby’ Peter, and Karen Matthews, who with an accomplice organised the fake kidnapping of her daughter Shannon — were touted as symptomatic of the moral decline of ‘Broken Britain’, and the mothers themselves portrayed as degenerate monsters.

Philpott’s case demonstrates a particularly vicious aspect of contemporary class hatred in that, like Connelly and Matthews, he is clearly coded as a ‘chav’ (Tyler 2008); a working-​class or unemployed person who assumes the right to consume conspicuously, or at least refuses to look respectably and invisibly indigent. Visual markers of ‘inferiority’, such as obesity and cheap clothing, have become perhaps the most loaded signifiers of social marginality or poverty and as such, people (usually women) demonstrating such stigmata of failure and irresponsibility are consigned to the useless/​dangerous residuum, who refuse to self-​improve.

Beverley Skeggs (2005) writes intriguingly about the public shaming and disciplining of such citizens on reality TV, referred to by Henry Giroux as neoliberalism’s ‘theatre of cruelty’ (2008, 611) — a phrase fitting the drama made from Philpott’s crime. Media articles on the unnatural mothers Connelly and Matthews emphasised not only more traditional features of abjection, such as their apparently voracious sexuality and lack of domestic skills, but their weight and clothes (thus, bizarrely, the *Telegraph*criticised Tracey Connelly’s ‘ill-​matched’ wedding outfit in an article describing, among other markers of depravity, her weight gain in prison [Gammell 2009]. Philpott as underclass ‘breeder’ is also, unusually for an able-​bodied male criminal, described in terms of physical disgust and abjection as a person of voracious and ‘depraved’ sexuality [Robson 2013] and dubious hygiene: ‘house blaze suspect Mick Philpott ‘did not bathe for 12 WEEKSbefore fatal fire and wore the same boxer shorts every day’ [Bentley and Robinson 2013]).

The flattening of debates about personal morality and socioeconomic status into caricatures of bodily abjection, and the continual intrusion of this sort of discourse into the reporting of crime, is one of perhaps the most powerful contemporary ways in which deprivation is individualised, in economies where buying power and bodily attributes manifest worth; the facialisation of social class in a country where ‘class’ is rarely named as such, and is rather codified as a series of personal failures (Gillies 2005).

Philpott had particular form to become the ‘face’ of welfare reform: he was already a minor celebrity, known as ‘Shameless Mick’ after a British television character. He had appeared on the Jeremy Kyle chat show to justify his ‘lifestyle’ and been the subject of a documentary starring Tory politician Anne Widdecombe. The ‘lifestyle’ was in fact based on forcing his wife and mistress to work for him, subsidised with tax credits for low-​earning individuals in work. If he was a vile ‘product’, the vileness was produced by a fantasy of becoming famous and powerful without effort, which is continually marketed to those citizens who have least hope of ‘making it’ through more conventional channels (Hall et al 2008).

As well as being a fantasist and attention-​seeker, Philpott was a serial and violent abuser of younger, vulnerable women, a point which was clearly noted by Mrs Justice Thirlwell at his trial. When he is looked at in detail, the claim that he is representative of welfare claimants *en masse* is comically untenable. Thus, we can see that the facialisation of the individual victim or perpetrator is about ‘individualisation’ only insofar as a story about that individual can be deployed to ‘prove’ unprovable generalisations. Attention to the *really* personal details of stories of ‘evil’ too often results in troublesome nuance and complexity.

A better term for the political use of individualising narratives might be strategic atomisation, as the individual has context stripped away from him/​her and is made to personify politically expedient risk. It is precisely when the social context is becoming more pernicious to the most vulnerable that facialising narratives attain their greatest political expediency.

Nonetheless, the ambivalent status of Philpott’s children as ‘doomed benefit brood’ marks perhaps the greatest inconsistency in this facialised narrative of ‘welfare evil’. In a stark illustration of what Giroux (2008) calls the new ‘biopolitics of disposability’, their very existence itself is called into question — not only in the depersonalising rhetoric which dismisses them as Philpott’s ‘meal ticket’ (Dolan and Infante 2013), but in the proposed legislation called to public attention in their name, with its clear eugenic overtones.

Restrictions to benefits for large families would have deprived all but two or three of Philpott’s children of what little they had. The faces of these un-​victims are thus hypocritically and confusedly invoked to justify the proposed expulsion of excess children of the underclass to a form of economic illegitimacy. The neoliberal vision of a state freed from the evil of welfare dependency would have resulted in the Philpott children never being conceived at all; or, the life following their ‘illegitimate’ conception would have been one of intense hardship and poverty.

We can only speculate as to the future which awaits economically illegitimate children, and others currently afforded the (limited) support of the welfare state who will find themselves without suitably supportive families or work opportunities in a shrinking economy: the ‘advanced marginality’ described by Loïc Wacquant (2007), who has outlined the precarious existence of the poorest US citizens cycling in and out of prison, unemployment, and conditional and limited welfare systems, is one likely long term result.

Philpott the depraved criminal/​scrounger is thus the ‘face’ of a critical historical and legal moment in which the UK switches from social security to a conditional welfare regime backed up with increasing surveillance, moralising and punishment. His companion stereotype, the ‘striver’, represents an equally mendacious attempt to revive the Protestant work ethic in a context where labour will be increasingly precarious, and decreasingly rewarded.

As to the children, in this grotesquely flattened debate they become depersonalised avatars of Philpott’s transmissible sins of economic inadequacy and irresponsibility. The moral outrage at their existence (and their deaths) play-​acted by a government eager to dehumanise those due to suffer most from welfare reform warns of a new kind of sub-​citizenship awaiting its most vulnerable ‘products’.

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