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Book Review

THE POLITICS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE: EMOTION, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND THE STATE, by Nancy Whittier¹

JANINE BENEDET²

THE SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN, as a social phenomenon, is something of a paradox. It is considered a grave evil, yet it is also common, affecting a significant percentage of children—disproportionately girls.³ It is widely accepted that sexual abuse causes significant harm to its child victims, yet criminal convictions are still difficult to obtain. At the same time as official sanctions for child sexual abuse expand to include measures such as sex-offender registration and community notification, it is frequently asserted that allegations of abuse are fabricated to support custody disputes or as part of flawed therapeutic techniques.⁴ In formulating public policy on the issue of child sexual abuse, one or more models may predominate; paediatric health, family intervention/social work, education, and the criminal justice system are all forums that deal with child sexual abuse in different contexts.

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1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 260 pages.
 2. Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of British Columbia.
 3. Whittier notes carefully that the prevalence of sexual abuse in childhood varies depending in part on the breadth of the definition adopted. See Whittier, *supra* note 1 at 215, n 1, where she cites a meta-study by Rebecca M Bolen and Maria Scannapieco that adjusts for various methodologies and estimates that 30–40 per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys will be sexually abused before reaching adulthood. See Rebecca M Bolen & Maria Scannapieco, “Prevalence of Child Sexual Abuse: A Corrective Metanalysis” (1999) 73:3 Social Service Rev 281.
 4. The leading proponent of false memory syndrome and parental alienation syndrome was Richard A Gardner. See *e.g.* “The Relationship Between the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) and the False Memory Syndrome (FMS) (2004) 32:2 Am J of Fam Therapy 79–99. For a discussion and critique of this trend in the context of custody disputes, see Nico Trocmé & Nicholas Bala, “False allegations of abuse and neglect when parents separate” (2005) 29:12 Child Abuse & Neglect 1333–45. For an approach to interrogating FMS claims, see Kenneth Pope, “Memory, Abuse, and Science: Questioning Claims about the FMS Epidemic” (1996) 51:9 Am Psychologist 957–74.

What is so impressive about Nancy Whittier's book, *The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse: Emotion, Social Movements, and the State*, is the way that it synthesizes and explains these various intersections and contradictions through a critical historical survey of the roots of the movement against child sexual abuse in the United States, and its eventual institutionalization through the political, medical, and legal systems.

Whittier is a professor of sociology at Smith College. She brings to the topic a wealth of detailed research on the roots of this important movement. In general, her goal is to tell the reader "how we got from there to here" and in so doing consider what that transformation tells us "about ... gender politics, and how social change happens."⁵ She traces the changes in federal funding for initiatives to address child sexual abuse, changes within the survivors' movement, and the way the movement as a whole was shaped by the interventions of law enforcement, fundamentalist Christian churches, the fathers' rights movement, and other groups. Although the book focuses exclusively on the United States, it considers in some detail the relationship of race and class in that setting to the social treatment of child sexual abuse.

The book takes a generally chronological approach, dividing the development of the social response to child sexual abuse into a number of phases. Whittier begins by detailing early feminist theorizing in the 1960s and 70s on the subject of incest and the growth of the incest survivors' movement. She describes the initial state interest in child sexual abuse as guided by activists' concerns, focusing on education and individual support programs. She then maps the political and social transformations that occurred when mass culture discovered child sexual abuse.⁶

While the sexual assault of children has always been part of the criminal law on the books, its public recognition, which began in the 1960s, did not focus on sexual abuse as predominantly a legal or criminal justice problem. Whittier traces in detail the shift in federal funding from a grassroots to a social work model, and then from a social work model to law enforcement. Although feminists were active in resisting the increasing emphasis on policing and incarceration, their justified insistence that sexual abuse was a crime of violence made an increased focus on legal responses inevitable. This was not necessarily a bad thing (the past practice of complete impunity for the perpetrator could hardly be called successful at ending the abuse), but this approach was more vulnerable to the political process as elected officials seized on an issue that was likely to meet with little opposition

5. Whittier, *supra* note 1 at 4.

6. *Ibid* at 111.

so long as it targeted a small group of evil strangers. Whittier resists a simplified account of these transitions, however, noting the ways in which activists continued to influence the shape of public policy throughout these periods.

In its earliest manifestations, the anti-incest movement, as it was then called, was a movement of adult women and some men who, in most cases, were speaking out about acts of abuse that took place when they were children rather than abuse happening at the time to their children or other children. It was hardly surprising then that the critique of the patriarchal family and state would be so prominent, since there was considerable focus on the dynamics that led to the culture of silence about child sexual abuse. Much of that early focus was on individual healing through public recognition of the wrong itself. It is equally unsurprising that once public attention turned to current acts of child abuse, legal, medical, and social work approaches gained strength. At that point, questions of how to assist “at risk” families or guide children through the criminal justice system became much more relevant. *The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse* provides detailed evidence of how this process unfolded and argues that it would be too simplistic to understand these transitions as merely a sidelining of the feminist agenda or analysis.

One of the particularly welcome features of this book is that it convincingly rebuts a number of claims about the feminist movement and its relationship to the issue of child sexual abuse. Whittier takes on the thinly supported but increasingly accepted claims that the women’s movement’s involvement in the campaign against child sexual abuse has led to overzealous prosecutions, questionable therapeutic techniques, and co-opting politicians.⁷ She argues persuasively not only that these narratives are largely inaccurate, but also that the analysis and insight generated by early feminist activism continues to influence the more institutionalized initiatives against child sexual abuse. She points out, however, that this is more than just a story of feminism and anti-feminism and that social change took place in ways that activists could not always have predicted or determined.⁸ Her approach to these questions is thoughtful, substantial, and not argumentative.

7. *Ibid* at 160-66.

8. One of the most interesting outcomes is the apparent decline in the number of cases of child sexual abuse in the United States during the late 1990s and into the 2000s. David Finkelhor, a long-time researcher in this area, suggests that this represents a real decline in the number of cases occurring, rather than just a failure to report. If that is true, it may be the most important marker of success in this movement as a complex whole. See David Finkelhor & Lisa Jones, “Explanations for the Decline in Child Sexual Abuse Cases” *Juvenile Justice Bulletin* (January 2004) NCJ1919028, online: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Department of Justice <<http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/199298.pdf>>.

In particular, Whittier rejects the characterization of social responses to child sexual abuse as a “moral panic.”⁹ The moral panic label is popular with the civil-libertarian Left, and is often applied to public campaigns and corresponding state intervention in issues such as drug use, prostitution, and gambling.¹⁰ The label is dismissive of a host of important (but undoubtedly imperfect) attempts to deal with behaviours that cause real social harm and are often rooted, at least in part, in various forms of systemic inequality. That the moral panic label would be applied to child sexual abuse is particularly puzzling since there is no credible argument that child sexual abuse is harmless or victimless, as is sometimes claimed about these other issues.¹¹

Whittier also interrogates persuasively the association between the women’s movement and the therapeutic process, which has come to be seen as distorting the phenomenon of child sexual abuse into a scenario in which repressed memories can only be brought to the surface in adult treatment, leading to false allegations and wrongful prosecutions. Whittier demonstrates that the earliest expressions of the movement tended to treat the naming of abuse and theorization about its root causes as themselves constituting the therapeutic process. These early writers and organizers understood child sexual abuse as a complex social problem rather than a simple narrative of gendered evil.

One small concern I have about the utility of this book as a piece of historical research comes from the author’s use of pseudonyms, apparently for reasons of liability and for consistency because some respondents did not want to be identified. Whittier notes that while some of the people she interviewed are identified by name (if, for example, they founded organizations or authored books), other respondents are identified only by pseudonym. In some cases the same individuals are identified by their real name in relation to public actions, but by pseudonym elsewhere. At times I found this practice confusing and less than clear. This complaint is a minor one for what is otherwise an important book that makes a real contribution to the field.

9. *Supra* note 1 at 129-32.

10. For a survey of some of the moral panic literature from one of its endorses, see Chas Critcher, “Moral Panic Analysis, Past, Present and Future” (2008) 2:4 *Sociology Compass* 1127.

11. In the United States, the moral panic analysis is rooted in a series of satanic ritual abuse claims, many of them against child care providers. Almost all of the convictions that resulted in these cases have since been overturned, but the question of whether ritual satanic abuse occurs at all remains deeply contested. One of the many books criticizing the prosecutions as a moral panic is Mary de Young, *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004).

The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse serves as an important presentation of the historical record but also a reframing of the issues at stake. It should be read by anyone with an interest in the women's anti-violence movement or in children and the law in the United States. In particular, it provides convincing evidence of how courageous, insightful, and influential those early activists were. Whittier points out, however, that only by uncoupling the movement against child sexual abuse from feminism could it become mainstream.¹² The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusion about whether this sacrifices the possibility of real social transformation for watered-down accessibility.

12. *Supra* note 1 at 132.