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Of Women and Witches: A Case Study in Moral Panics

The term “moral panic” conjures up images of mass hysteria, of citizens running amok screaming about global warming or hurricanes. But moral panics go much deeper than superficial, earthly threats; they are external manifestations of internal panics ingrained with deep-seeded moral conflicts and discrimination. Homophobia and racial intolerance leads to blaming AIDS and terrorism on respective populations. A specific example, which I shall use as a case study in moral panics, is the late 16th century and early 17th century witch panic in Europe. This extreme moral panic explicitly labeled witches as female and perpetuated an already sexual discriminatory point of view.

In reflecting on the late 16th century and early 17th century witch panic in Europe, several questions come to mind: How does Stanley Cohen’s concept of “moral panics” relate to the female depiction of witches during the early modern Europe witch-hunts? How can we use this iconic social phenomenon to reconstruct the path a panic takes? In attempting to answer these questions, we must consider that the construction and subsequent diminution of moral panics is a complicated process. Cultural and psychological anthropologist Gilbert Herdt states, “Moral panics expose the ideologies, hierarchies, and social fissures of society, typically registered, as with any human phenomena, along the lines of systemic forms of structural violence. Nowhere is this more pernicious than in the reproduction of sex and gender differences.” (18). By identifying key political, legal, social, and religious ideologies evident during the late 16th and early 17th century witch-hunts in Europe, we can better evaluate how and why gender played a part. Once we analyze this specific moral panic process, I believe we can apply the conclusions to current moral panics and realize why and how they materialize as they do.

MORAL PANICS: A BRIEF DEFINITION

So what is a moral panic exactly? Stanley Cohen, the man who first coined the term “moral panic” observes, “Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (1). This definition may seem very vague, and rightfully so since moral panics take all shapes and forms. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I believe a narrower definition is required. Sociologists Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda suggest five criteria for the formation of a moral panic. These criteria include: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility (156-158). We shall see how each of these criteria factor into the moral panic that gripped early modern Europe and why women were a threat to societal ideologies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The rise of a moral panic begins with fear, anxiety, or concern about a real situation. The concern then turns into a widespread, irrational panic that is “culturally and politically constructed, a product of the human imagination” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 151). With this approach, a look at the cultural and political systems at the time of the witch-hunts can provide insight into the moral panic’s formation. Specifically, the social structure, legal structure, and views regarding the devil at the height of the hunt, roughly 1580-1650, are of particular importance.

*Social Context:* Sociologists Lee Clarke and Caron Chess of Rutgers University suggests that a “panic endures because it illuminates some fundamental aspects of social relations” (993). A panic emphasizes an already established dichotomy within a social structure. In relation to the witch-hunts during the late 16th century and early 17th century, we can distinguish between an educated elite and the general public. Clarke and Chess offer three models regarding elites and panics: elites fearing panic, elites panicking, and elites creating panic (996). Sometimes we see multiple panic relationships acting simultaneously. The witch-hunt panic in early modern Europe is an example of elites creating panic and elites panicking. More clearly, the panic of the elite created a panic in general. Because those higher up in society were just as at risk from witchcraft as the general public, arguably more so if witches were jealous, then their fear of witches was just as justified. And because “elite panic is more consequential than public panic” (Clark and Chess 1006), the fear of witches became more widespread and influential. If the threat of witchcraft lay contained within lower classes, the witch-hunts would not have been as dramatic as they were because the lower classes alone would not have enough power to prosecute, torture, convict, and execute the witches.

*Legal System Changes:*Beginning in the thirteenth century, European legal systems started evolving from an accusatorial methodical system to an inquisitorial one (Levack 69-72). In the accusatorial system, one would accuse another before a judge. If the accuser could not provide substantial evidence or if the accused did not confess, results could be determined on a number of irrelevant conditions (mainly theologically based). The key part to this accusatorial system is that an accuser would be punished if he were not able to accurately condemn the accused. With personal risk on the line, one would be less likely to pursue suspects. With the rise of the inquisitorial system, however, this personal liability was lost. One aspect of the new system involved trial by jury. It was at the jury or judge’s discretion whether someone was guilty or not based on witness testimony, confession, or other evidence; the burden was not on the accuser. The inquisitorial system could itself be a manifestation of moral panic. Levack states that the “main impetus came from the growing realization that crime – both ecclesiastical and secular – was increasing and had to be reduced” (71). Thus, the anxiety felt from the rise in crime (whether real or imagined) led to an institutional change in the legal system. The new legal system now called for namely two criteria to persecute: two eye witnesses to the crime, or a personal confession from the accused. Usually, the lack of eyewitness testimony is positive when accused because it discredits the accuser. With witchcraft, however, most actions were invisible. For example, if a person got sick and blamed a witch, there could be no eyewitness since one cannot see a curse, although one may claim to hear a curse uttered. Hence, the crux of the verdict lay with the confession. The “hostility” component Goode and Ben-Yehuda refer to can be seen in attempts to extract confessions from accused witches. Accused witches were, of course, hesitant to confess to crimes they did not commit. With few eyewitnesses and no confession, a case would normally be dismissed. But the overwhelming panic about witches within the community led prosecutors to extreme means to determine who were witches. They developed extensive, horrendous means of torture to persuade confession and to encourage accused witches to name their conspirators. Once an accused witch confessed, which most did given the extreme torture, they were burned. Burning a witch could alleviate some panic within the community, but using torture to extract confessions confirmed that witches existed and were prevalent, thus perpetuating the accusations.

*Maleficia and Diabolism:*The ideas of “maleficia” and “diabolism” as they relate to the witches of early modern Europe are key to understanding the construction of the panic. What makes the witch-hunts of early modern Europe a unique case study in moral panics is the duality of the panic itself. In the witch-hunts, we can actually observe two panics colliding. On one end, we have the panic of magical deeds. Additionally, we have fear of the devil. At the height of the witch-hunt, the idea that witches were involved in diabolism, or consorting with the devil, was more prominent than the idea of witches as conjurers of maleficia, or evil deeds. Levack notes, “By the end of the sixteenth century most educated Europeans believed that witches, in addition to practicing harmful magic, engaged in a variety of diabolical activities” (27). As mentioned before, an elite or educated panic can lead to a more generalized or intense panic, so the linking of witches to the devil on this societal level is profound. This is the “consensus” part of moral panics, where the elite and the general public conclude that the witch is in league with the devil and the devil is to be feared. The diabolism link to witchcraft leads us to the “disproportionality” phase. Even though fear of maleficia might be considered irrational because evil deeds like casting curses does not exist, there is not a level of disproportionality because the consequences *do* exist. The fact that witches did not cause the plague, for example, does not deny the existence of the tragedy. But panics cannot survive solely on objective problems like plagues; constructed elements must exist to create disproportionality. In fact, constructed problems do not even need real conditions to exist (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 151). During the witch panic, though, both an objective and constructed problem exist, heightening the panic even more. With diabolism, the level of disproportionality rises because witches are accused not only of causing objective problems, like death, but of contracting with the devil, a constructed problem that, in and of itself, poses no concrete threat. Linking the devil to an already established, albeit low intensity, fear of evil deeds, allowed society to condense two fears into one: fear of the witch.

The presence of the devil was essential in linking women to witchcraft. It is not surprising, then, that the height of the witch-hunt coincided with an increased awareness of the devil’s presence in everyday life. The 16th century Protestant Reformation period emphasized the ubiquitous devil, which lead to more intense fear of diabolical temptation (Levack 104). With the devil more prevalent, it was essential to lead a more rigorous moral life to avoid damnation. The fear of divine retribution and demand for moral rigidity was emphasized and propagated by Protestant leader Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses. The Theses undermined the role of clergy and emphasized the direct relationship between man and God. Salvation lay in the hands of the individual and sin could not simply be forgiven by confession. Luther’s 23rd thesis states, “If any entire remission of all penalties can be granted to any one, it is certain that it is granted to none but the most perfect, that is, to very few”. Almost no one had all his or her sins forgiven and thus everyone had to adhere to a stricter moral code. However, with stricter moral rules came increased sense of personal guilt. According to psychoanalytical theories, like those proposed by Sigmund Freud, extreme guilt can cause one to *project* that guilt onto another person. When pressures to act morally intensified, people were more likely to assuage their own guilt by blaming others for immoral deeds. The pressure put on people to avoid the devil through moral purity led to a heighted panic in which people were consciously accused of witchcraft for minor moral indiscretions and unconsciously accused through projection.

“US” vs. “THEM”

A growing concern about the rise in crime and presence of the devil is what drove communities to be hostile toward the “other”. But what determines who is “us” and who is “them”? According to moral panic research Chas Critcher, “A major consequence of the culture of fear is hostility towards those defined as deviants.” and “The deviant other is constructed as threatening the innocent in ways which suppress questions of power.” (271). Thus, the deviant other cannot be one in power, but has to reside in the margins of society and threaten the established power. Goode and Ben-Yehuda observe, “historical episodes represent explosions of fear and concern at a particular time and place about a specific perceived threat. In each case, a specific agent was widely felt to be responsible for the threat” (150). We are not dealing with just a general deviance in society but with a specific deviant that poses a specific threat during a specific time period.

During the height of the witch-hunts, the characteristics of those residing in the margins of society directly reflects the characteristics of those executed for being witches. Between 75-90% of executed witches were women, and most were over 50 and either unmarried or widowed (Levack 133-156). Like the witch problem was constructed, so was a vision of the “other”. The threat women posed was not an objective, real threat to societal wellbeing; rather it was an imagined reaction to the threat of social change. We can see a similar concept in Freud’s idea of latent versus manifest content in dream theory. Freud understands dreams to be the manifest content through which our latent desires or fears materialize (Appignanesi 64). Likewise, the perception of the witch as a devil-worshiper and a woman was a manifestation of the hidden societal fears regarding the devil and female sexuality. Like maleficia and diabolism were linked, so too were the devil and women.

Linking the devil to women was easy because females have a history of involvement with the devil. The most prominent story is recounted in Genesis where a serpent persuades Eve to disobey God and eat from the forbidden tree. The fact that the serpent is never explicitly referred to as the devil hardly matters. What matters is that by disobeying God and causing humankind to fall from His grace, Eve gave the devil power to exist. Eve’s weak nature allowed her to be easily tempted into disobeying God, proving that women in general could easily be coerced into making contracts with the devil.

Witches were not only women, but usually older, single women because that demographic represented an intensified personification of fear regarding women. Older women were past childbearing age and sexually more mature than most. For younger men, and perhaps men in general, this posed a threat to power. While older women could be physically weaker, they no longer had the childbirth or menstruation weaknesses imposed on them by God at the Fall. Freed from these perceived weaknesses, older women now posed a threat to social order; that is, they posed a threat to males. Single women too posed a threat to an established male-dominant society. Single women were not weakened by childcare, nor were they under the direct rule of a husband or father figure. Still another characteristic of witches was their unacceptable personality. Witches were crude, quarrelsome women who rejected ladylike mannerisms. Some of the older women probably exhibited signs of senility as well.

Women were targeted as witches because it was convenient. They were chosen because their powerful sexuality already posed a threat; a threat that was only pacified by perceived weaknesses. Thus, women who challenged the weak female norm posed even more of a threat. By making a deviant of already marginalized women, the witch could now embody fear of evil or unexplained deeds, fear of the devil, and fear of female sexuality. What were previously three social anxieties could now be resolved by destroying one thing: the female witch.

MEDIA

The linking of women and witches may have originated in deep-seeded beliefs about female sexuality, but the idea was exacerbated by more conscious means; namely, media. Cohen emphasizes the role of media in moral panics and suggests that media can be involved in “setting the agenda”, “transmitting the image”, and/or “breaking the silence, making the claim” (xxiv). Cohen’s realization is notable both in the 1960s and 1970s (when Cohen wrote about moral panics) and in 16th/17th century Europe. Of course what we consider media today is very different than the limited media of early modern Europe. Still, literature like the *Malleus Maleficarum* catalyzed and perpetuated an already growing panic, allowing media to take part in all three of Cohen’s roles.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (Latin for “hammer of the witches”) was written by German Dominicans Heinrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger and was published around 1500. Through it “witchcraft was elevated to a pivotal position in the struggle between man and the devil, and was given new responsibility for the world’s ever-increasing ills” (Broedel 19). The authors set the agenda by bringing to the forefront the fears regarding devils and witchcraft. The book then transmitted the idea by relaying personal experiences with witches or experiences of “witnesses worthy of belief” (Broedel 21). However, personal experience, even when no objective evidence could exist, may be problematic. The success of the *Malleus Maleficarum* relied heavily on the rhetorical skills of the authors and the extent of endorsers. Institoris and Sprenger pleaded with their audience to not question their findings since witchcraft was related moral issues and therefore there was “no need to insist upon varied arguments and expositions in everything” (Broedel 20). With disclaimers such as this, the authors made denunciation impossible. Accepting their experiences and those of their informants as real, was to accept that witchcraft and diabolical pacts were real as well. Even if people did have doubts as to the authors’ credibility, “the informed opinion of expert judges serve(d) as a functional alternative” (Clarke and Chess 997). In this case, the most notable “judge” was Pope Innocent VII, who endorsed the *Malleus Maleficarum* and validated the existence of witchcraft.

The Malleus Maleficarum’s goal was “to take the witch constructed by learned theologians, the witch of traditional legend, folktale, and rumor, and the old woman huddled before the inquisitor’s bench and to blend them into a single being” (Broedel 21). The success of this goal broke the silence and made the claim that witches were in league with the devil and since only women could be in league with the devil, only women could be guilty of witchcraft.

Media like the *Malleus Maleficarum* acted as catalyses for moral panic. Not only the content of the media but the medium itself influenced spread of panic. The invention of a new medium, the printing press, around 1435 played a large role in the spread of panic. The printing press “added much to the cult of individualism. The private, fixed point of view became possible and literacy conferred the power of detachment, non-involvement” (McLuhan and Fiore 50). Consequently, Institoris and Sprenger’s ideas were more accessible and referenced. Similarly, during the Reformation, Protestant leader Martin Luther took advantage of the printing press to distribute his Ninety-Five Theses, which propelled the Protestant Reformation and contributed greatly to witch-hunting. Without the printing press, both the *Malleus Maleficarum* and Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses would not have received the attention and credit they did. It is just as important to analyze the medium as it is to analyze its content because the medium determines how the content will be distributed. The invention of the printing press gave power to those concerned with witches, women, and the devil and catalyzed that fear into a widespread moral panic.

DECLINE

Eventually all things come to an end. Since the rise of a moral panic begins with fear, anxiety, or concern about a real situation, that situation needs to be mollified before panic can subside. Many situations were present during the rise of the moral panic that gripped early modern Europe and we know that social hierarchy, legal systems, religion, and media all played a role in the rise and persistence of witch hunting. Interestingly, the same factors that led to the rise in the panic, contributed to its decline. This is important to note because it lets us focus on what factors contribute most to moral panics. We also know it was not just these facets themselves but the *changes* they underwent during that time period. Likewise, subsequent changes contributed to the witch-hunt decline.

Socially, the hierarchal dichotomy was changing. The printing press encouraged literacy among those previously illiterate, narrowing the gap between educated and uneducated. Media, in this instance, initially perpetuated the panic with documents like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses*, but ultimately allowed more counterarguments to surface. Through the printing press, more people could share their views with the increasingly literate population and during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, views that focused more on science and rationality challenged and even replaced those based on theology. Books by astronomers like Copernicus and physicists like Newton educated the masses and questioned what was formally taken as truth. Events like the plague could be attributed to natural causes and were not so easily blamed on witches. On a smaller scale, individual deaths of people and animals could be identified as the result of natural causes as well. Less witch accusations resulted from this lesser need to place blame on a particular person or type of persons. Accusation stemming from internal guilt also eventually decreased. As the height of the reformation declined and focus turned to science, the pressure put on moral rigidity relaxed, which lowered the instance of projected accusation.

The legal system also changed slightly when people realized that torture could produce false confessions. This realization came mainly from uncovering conscious fraud. In some cases, accusers were interrogated (though not tortured) when the wives and mothers of prominent men were accused of witchcraft. The interrogations sometimes led to a confession by the accuser where they admitted to falsely accusing a woman of witchcraft. These cases increased the need for conclusive evidence, which for witchcraft was hard to come by.

As we can see, a myriad of factors encouraged the decline of witch-hunting much like they encouraged it previously. However, calming a panic does not mean solving the root of the problem. We need to remember that women were specifically targeted victims of this panic.

Practical Applications

Now that we have analyzed the process a moral panic can and did take, we need to consider how it can apply to our current state. In early modern Europe, women were victims of the panic for reasons explained earlier. Who are the victims now? Many would argue, and I would agree, that women are still very much victims. Even in developed countries like the United States we see women both scrutinized and applauded for their sexuality. But women are not the only victims. Homosexuals, transsexuals, and intersexed individuals all face adversity based on sexual or gender discrimination. A lot of this discrimination is justified by religion, as was the case in early modern Europe. Although it is not legal to burn people at the stake for being a witch, we still see hate crimes and legal prejudices against those who deviate from established, Christian norms. We also experience moral panics about the spread of AIDS and presence of pedophiles that place blame on these currently marginalized sexual scapegoats. When social or political problems can be blamed on a select group of people, that problem can be controlled more easily. It is no wonder, then, that we see the same groups of people blamed for multiple problems. But unlike the Europeans of the 16th and 17th century, we can recognize that these moral panics are shaped by deeper conditions and are not real, objective threats. We realize that panics occur during times where there is “a clash between mechanisms of control and the free expression and individual elaboration of sexuality” (Herdt 32). Only once we realize that what we are panicking about today is really the manifestation of internal panics, we can stop directing the blame at collective groups of people and work on solving real problems.

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