Devil's Advocate

Converging claims and
the construction of Satanic ritual abuse

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Abstract

The Satanic ritual child abuse panic of the 1980s and early 1990s is analyzed using Spector and Kitsuse's claims-making theory of social problems. The role of a convergence of claims-making behavior amongst three groups—fundamentalist Christians, the Anti-Cult Movement, and the Child Savers—in establishing Satanic ritual abuse as a social problem is discussed and used to explain how Satanic ritual abuse became a social problem without any abuse taking place. Spector and Kitsuse's theory is found to be successful in explaining the causes of the Satanic ritual abuse panic.

"Social problems are what people think they are."
(Spector and Kitsuse (1977): 73)

From 1980 until the mid-1990s, the United States, and to a lesser extent, Canada and western Europe, were reportedly facing an epidemic of multiple-victim, multiple-offender child abuse in Satanic ritual. Rigorously-organized groups of Satanists were allegedly ritually molesting and murdering children, engaging in cannibalism, and breeding babies, often incestuously, for the purpose of ritual sacrifice.

Using the analytical approach of Spector and Kitsuse (1977) which considers social problems as claims-making activity, I intend to show that the issue of Satanic ritual abuse in the United States served as a mutually- and externally-reinforcing vehicle by which a variety of (often orthogonal) value and interest groups could assert the existence of different but complementary conditions in need of remedy.

The rise of Satanic abuse

No accounts of Satanic ritual abuse can be found prior to 1980. In that year, Michelle Smith, along with her psychologist, Lawrence Padzer, published *Michelle Remembers*, an allegedly true account of Smith's tortuous childhood at the hands of a Satanic cult of which her parents were members. The best-selling book documented in gruesome detail how Smith was sexually abused, imprisoned for months, tortured in houses and mausoleums, forced to drink blood, and caged with snakes (Smith and Padzer (1980)).

Dr. Padzer later admitted that the book was a hoax, its fictional accounts of abuse constructed from his knowledge of African black magic (Victor

(1993)), but the seed had been planted. Accounts from adult women alleging experiences of Satanic ritual abuse in their childhood began appearing immediately after the publication of *Michelle Remembers*; allegations of contemporary ritual abuse appeared from children and parents within a year (Nathan (1991)). There is little doubt that Smith's account served, intentionally or otherwise, as a model in these allegations; the book was widely disseminated, and used as an investigative guide and as a basis for workshops on the ritual abuse problem (Nathan (1991); Victor (1993)).

The Satanic ritual abuse story was quickly taken up by the sensationalist press. Tabloid newspapers, knowing that the story would sell, began reporting abuse allegations from across the nation as factual. Television talk shows picked up the Satanic scent: the *Geraldo* episode on Satanic ritual abuse—which Geraldo would later admit to have been based in speculation—was the most widely watched talk show episode in history (Bottoms and Davis (1997)). Stories of Satanic abuse began to reach the mainstream, "hard news" press by 1983, and a made-for-TV movie, *Something About Amelia*, showed on the ABC network in 1984 (deYoung (1996)). While the mainstream papers were reporting Satanic ritual abuse with skepticism, tabloids were responding with credulity, and television with enthusiasm.

While the complaining parents in the first allegations of contemporary Satanic abuse suffered without exception from mental illness (Nathan and Snedeker (1995)), "copy-cat" but credibly sourced allegations began appearing regularly after the *Geraldo* coverage of Satanic abuse. Children were reportedly being abducted from shopping malls and playgrounds, sold outright, harvested from Satanist-operated orphanages, or bred explicitly for sacrifice by adolescent victims (Nathan (1991)). In her bestselling account

of her own alleged abuse at the hands of Satanists, Johanna Michaelsen
hypothesizes on the pervasiveness of Satanist child-gathering, wondering

> . . . how many runaway kids are never heard from again? What
> about the throwaways that no-one bothers to report missing at
> all? Some of the kids are taken from transient families who
> can no longer afford to support their little ones and believe they
> are giving them away to "good homes," or from unwed mothers
> who innocently give their little ones over to "agencies" and "rep-
> utable" doctors and lawyers who promise to find them a loving
> family. (Michaelsen (1989): 251)

Once in the hands of Satanists, victims claimed to have been molested by
clowns and people in costumes, forced to touch and eat urine and feces,
photographed naked, and forced to take part in ritual acts. The allegations
ran to the absurd, with children claiming to have been tortured by such
improbables as television news anchormen, or actor Chuck Norris (Nathan
and Snedeker (1995)).

The apogee of the Satanic ritual abuse scare, and the story that broke Sa-
tanic abuse into the mainstream press, started in 1983, and became the
longest court trial the United States has ever seen. In that year, parents
of children who attended the McMartin Preschool in affluent, suburban Los
Angeles began lodging complaints of sexual abuse at the school. Reports
of inappropriate touching quickly expanded into accounts of sadistic animal
killings, sex acts in churches, and exposure to corpses. Parents claimed that
their children had had their mouths taped, had air tubes placed in their rec-
tums, were jabbed with scissors and staples, and were forced to drink the

blood of murdered babies. The Satanist explanation for the alleged abuses, first introduced by McMartin parent Bob Currie only weeks after the airing of *Something About Amelia*, was quickly adopted. Michelle Smith and other celebrated victims of Satanic abuse met with parents and investigators (Nathan (1991)).

No evidence of abuse was found. Extensive searches of residences, businesses, and cars, laboratory tests for blood and semen on everything at the preschool, and archaeological digs at the site of the school for the underground chambers in which the abuse was alleged to have occurred turned up nothing. A $25,000 reward, no questions asked, for one piece of child pornography originating at McMartin was never claimed. At the end of the longest trial ever, all defendants were exonerated.

McMartin was not the only Satanic ritual abuse which did not occur; according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, none did (Lanning (1989)). In his report, Supervisory Special Agent Kenneth Lanning noted that

> Not only are there no bodies found, but also, more important, there is no physical evidence that a murder took place. Many of those not in law enforcement do not understand that, while it is possible to get rid of a body, it is much more difficult to get rid of the physical evidence that a murder took place, especially a human sacrifice involving sex, blood, and mutilation. (Lanning (1989): 20)

By the mid-1990s, many "victims" had been discredited or had recanted their allegations, many of which were found to have originated from leading therapy or investigative techniques based on the original Smith account of

Satanic abuse and early copy-cat accounts (Bottoms and Davis (1997)).

Despite being, according to American folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand, a "witch-hunt based on an urban-legend script" (in Victor (1993): *i*) American opinion found the Satanic scare to be very real. As late as 1992, 63% of respondents in a Texas poll considered Satanic ritual abuse to be a "very serious" problem, with a further 23% found it "somewhat serious;" in Jordan, Michighan, where a preschool staff had been charged with ritual abuse, 80% of residents believed in Satanic ritual abuse even after all charges had been dropped (Victor (1993)). Despite having never occurred, Satanic ritual abuse remained a social problem for Americans.

Claims-making activity

The concept of nonexistent phenomena as social problem does not fit well with traditional sociological conceptualizations of social problems. Traditionally, social-problems theory has centred around the notion that social problems are a kind of condition; i.e., that a social problem is something which exists, or has happened. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) contest this approach, arguing that "any definition of social problems that begins 'social problems are those conditions…' will lead to a conceptual and methodological impasse that will frustrate attempts to build a specialized area of study" (74).

The case of Satanic ritual abuse serves to illustrate the flaw in the conventional approach. There is no question that Satanic ritual abuse was (and, perhaps, still is) a social problem in the United States. As we will see below, a variety of groups with very little in common organized and mobilized

themselves around it. Legislation was enacted to prevent it, accompanied by tax dollars. The archetypal conventional definition of a social problem, according to Fuller and Myers, is that of "a condition which is defined by a *considerable number of persons* as a *deviation from some norm* that they cherish" (Spector and Kitsuse (1977): 74, emphasis mine). Satanic ritual abuse clearly matches the criteria; the entire nation was up in arms over the deviant behavior of the alleged Satanic cults. But having identified the social problem, the traditional approach then concentrates on the condition—a condition which did not exist. We quickly find ourselves at the impasse which Spector and Kitsuse predict.

Instead of concentrating on the *condition* which is defined as a social problem, Spector and Kitsuse focus on the *process* by which members of a society define a condition as a social problem; that is, "as *the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions*" (Spector and Kitsuse (1977): 75, emphasis in original). Here we discover the magic key by which we can examine the Satanic ritual abuse problem: *putative* conditions. The existence of the condition is no longer relevant in and of itself. The existence of claims and the process by which those claims are made (and not the validity of the claims) are the social problem to be approached.

Claims are the means by which members of a society attempt to call attention to situations they find repugnant in order to mobilize institutions to do something about them:

> by defining, giving a name to, and developing a theory to account for this trouble, they make it possible for others to experience as unsatisfactory some aspect of their environment that previously

> they had been unaware of. (Spector and Kitsuse (1977): 82)

It is important to emphasize the distinction between the claim and the phenomenon which led to the claim. In particular, the definition, name and theory may be only tangentially related to the condition, and different members or groups may define, name, and theorize a given set of conditions in different ways. Claims will usually be framed so as to get a response from an agency which will be able to correct the problem to the satisfaction of the group making the claim. In the "social-problems marketplace," groups compete with one another not only to have their problem resolved, but to have their definition of the problem used in its resolution (Richardson (1991)). If no agency is willing to listen to a claim, or if none are able to supply solutions, or if none are even available to take blame, then the claims-makers may reform the claim in order to try to better attract attention. A group making a claim may form it to appeal to the general public as well as to the agency capable of acting on the problem, such that the conditions alleged by the claim make a political issue. They may also form the claim to ride on the success of another group, sacrificing attention being paid to their problem, in exchange for a guarantee of *some* attention directed their way (Spector and Kitsuse (1977)). These last three strategies are particularly relevant to the claims surrounding Satanic ritual abuse.

Groups making claims can be classified by their relationship to the claim being made. When a claim is made on a humanitarian, "principled" basis—that is, the group making the claim is doing so because it is the "right" thing—the group making the claim is a *value* group. On the other hand, complainants who claim to be the victims of the conditions which they allege—that is, they are affected directly by the conditions—form an *interest* group. These

paradigms are seldom found in their pure states. Value groups may find, after making claims, that they have an interest in the issue at hand. Interest groups may find it necessary to frame their problem as a question of values. A group may find that they values and interests overlap, by which interest-based claims can be justified with values. Last, a group may find that the interests and values involved conflict, creating a situation in which values will be sacrificed for interests, or vice versa (Spector and Kitsuse (1977)).

Before examining the groups involved in claims-making activity and their claims around the Satanic ritual abuse problem, it is worthwhile to note one further classification of claims, regarding the objectivity of the claims-makers. Richardson (1997) defines three modes of objectivism practiced by those making claims of Satanic ritual abuse. First, *strict* objectivism bases its claims on the literal existence of the Christian personification of evil, Satan: "Satan exists." Second, *secular* objectivism makes no judgment on the existence of Satan, but bases its claims on the existence of Satanists: "Satanists exist." Third, *opportunist* objectivism makes no claim regarding the existence of Satan or Satanists, but only claims that concern about Satanic abuse is real: "People concerned about Satanic ritual abuse exist."

Armed with these basic theoretical tools, we can now examine the nature of the groups which were involved in making claims about Satanic ritual abuse, in order to determine the forces leading to the claims-making activity in general, and the claims of Satanic ritual abuse in particular.

Fundamentalist Christians

It seems only natural to turn to fundamentalist Christianity to explain a Satanic problem. However, the role of fundamentalist Christians as claims-

makers in the Satanic ritual abuse problem is complex.

Fundamentalist Christianity was, until the mid-1970s, considered to be an anachronistic, rural culture. Based on the literal interpretation of the Bible, Christian fundamentalism lends itself to a traditional and extremely conservative world view, one that often conflicts with late-twentieth-century America.

The late 1970s and early 1980s brought an unusual turn: fundamentalist minister and politician Jerry Fallwell's Moral Majority became a strong conservative political force in the United States. Both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan ascended to the presidency with the support of the Moral Majority, as did a considerable number of congressmen (Nathan and Snedeker (1995)). Fundamentalist Christianity was no longer the backwater religion of the uneducated. It had gathered a great deal of political clout. This rise to power was a reaction to dramatic changes in American society. Divorce was becoming commonplace; the sexual liberation movement of the 60s had changed the sexual landscape of society; women were leaving the home to take on jobs, often leaving the children in the care of strangers (Bottoms and Davis (1997)).

To the fundamentalist Christian, everything wrong with the world—that is, everything in disagreement with traditional Christian values—is the work of Satan. Satan is, first and foremost, a Christian idea, the personification of all things evil, but in fundamentalist Christianity, the phrase "the work of Satan" is taken literally (Bottoms and Davis (1997)). Unfortunately for fundamentalist politicians, this idea was poorly accepted by more liberal minds. The idea that Satan's literal influence on society needed addressing would, and did, fall on deaf ears.

The fundamentalist Christians found themselves in an awkward situation. Strict objectivism and value orientation do not mix; claiming that Satan walks among us would alienate the general population, but the only suitable explanation for the rampant liberalism which they wished to remedy was that it was Satan's work. They needed a way to sell Satan to the masses.

With the publication of *Michelle Remembers* in 1980, a solution presented itself. Smith herself was a fundamentalist Christian; in her book, she claimed that she had been literally rescued from her tormentors by the Virgin Mary (Smith and Padzer (1980)). But Smith's story didn't sell because it reflected Christian values; it sold because people believed enough of it. As other groups began to mobilize against the Satanists who allegedly were committing these gruesome acts, an opportunity arose for the fundamentalists: the public might not believe in Satan, but it certainly believed in Satanists. Moreover, the anti-Satanist movements were implying claims against many of the things that the fundamentalists were prepared to claim as social problems, if for different reasons: in particular, the threat of abuse in daycare carried with it a strong sentiment that children belong home with their mothers (Bottoms and Davis (1997)). As anti-Satanist support gained momentum, the fundamentalist Christians could downplay the literal religious basis of their claims, without getting rid of it entirely. Not only could they join in decrying daycare and modern lifestyles which led to Satanic ritual abuse, but they could still make the connection between evil and Satan without alienation (Best (1991)).

It is important to note that the fundamentalist Christians would probably not have been able to mobilize on their own. Without the secularization of Satan provided by other, secular anti-Satanists, they would have remained

the Moral Majority, staunch conservatives who, despite considerable political power, did not have their beliefs treated particularly seriously by the public at large. The original claims made by fundamentalist Christians—that the shift to liberal values was Satan's doing, and would lead to the breakdown of society—attracted little positive attention, but by reframing it to emphasize the Satan in Satanic ritual abuse, they were able to direct it to a public who wanted to believe.

The Anti-Cult Movement

The secularization of Satan which helped the fundamentalists make their claims is to a degree a result of the efforts of the American Anti-Cult Movement. The Anti-Cult Movement rose in the early 1970s, as a response to the increasing popularity of religious groups such as the Moonies, Hare Krishnas, and New-Agers (Victor (1993)). Taking a zero-tolerance approach to religious cults, the Anti-Cult Movement portrayed cults as manipulative and violent organizations, whose members were often coerced to join, and brainwashed to stay. The 1978 mass-suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in which Reverend Jim Jones ordered 911 of his People's Temple flock to kill themselves by drinking cyanide, served as powerful evidence that the Anti-Cult image of manipulative and violent cults was an accurate one; after Jonestown, the benign meaning of "cult" would be all but lost to the average citizen.

The early 1980s brought trouble for the Anti-Cult Movement; the supposed threat of Moonies and Krishnas had not materialized, and American concern over cults was beginning to dry up (Victor (1993)). Those working in the Anti-Cult Movement found their interests at stake: with no cult threat to

oppose, many would find that their source of work would disappear. In order to continue, the Anti-Cult Movement needed a new cult threat.

The populist concern over Satanism that resulted from *Michelle Remembers* and subsequent press attention filled that void. Here was the new threat to America. All of the evidence that the Anti-Cult Movement needed existed. Satanists certainly existed. Anton LaVey's Church of Satan had some 5000 members, and offshoots such as the Temple of Set had a few hundred (Richardson (1991)). Satanists were certainly a cult: a radical, minority religious group. Their ties with Satan, from Christian mythology, reinforced the common-sense notion that cults were manipulative and violent, and the allegations of Satanic ritual abuse fit the cult stereotype well.

By linking the various local phenomena—everything from vandalism by teenage dabblers in Satanism to the alleged multi-victim, multi-offender ritual abuse—to a nationally organized, intergenerational, hierarchic cult, the Anti-Cult Movement were able to construct a new enemy to fight. Theories abounded as to the "evidence" of this nationwide organization, or, more accurately, to excuse the lack of evidence. Their size and subversiveness made avoiding detection easy, as they had infiltrated the law-enforcement, judicial, governmental, and even mental-health professions; the potential for having to participate in rituals kept out legitimate undercover investigators; they targeted children so that their stories would be dismissed as fantasy (Bromley (1991)).

The idea that the Satanists were committing such horrible crimes, and that they were manipulating and otherwise forcing people to remain involved with the cult, was central to the Anti-Cult Movement's position. The emphasis on civil liberties inherent to American ideology causes problems for

anti-cult activism, in that opposition to cults goes against American guarantees of freedom of religion and assembly (Nathan and Snedeker (1995)). By portraying cults in such a way that members are no longer acting of their own free will, the civil-liberties hurdles can be overcome. Cult members would have to be forcibly kept from participating until they can be "deprogrammed." When the cult in question is also involved in criminal activity, the justification is easier still: since these large, subversive cults make it near-impossible to stop the *crime*, the only prevention is to stop people from becoming *members* of the cult in the first place (deYoung (1996)).

The Satanists provided a perfect new crusade for the Anti-Cult Movement in the wake of a drop in public concern over cults, and the allegations of Satanic ritual abuse provided the sensational evidence of the evils of the new American menace. Again, the Anti-Cult activists could not have raised the Satanic ritual abuse panic alone; the ritual abuse allegations served only as support to the Movement's claim of a need to rid America of the subversive Satanist threat.

The Child Savers

As the name might suggest, the Child Savers are a loosely-organized group of child-welfare workers, mental health professionals, law enforcement agents and others who actively work to prevent child abuse. The particular forms of child abuse which they emphasize is that of "stranger danger;" while presented as a question of value, an examination of the history of the group presents two means by which their campaign against Satanism is, for them, a question of interest.

The American effort against child abuse has its contemporary origins in the late 1960s, when studies began to link child abuse to social problems such as joblessness, poverty, and housing. As the results of these studies were publicized, demand for legislation to remedy the problem increased; Washington responded with the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth, chaired by Senator Walter Mondale. The Subcommittee found itself in an awkward situation: unquestionably, most child abuse was occurring in the home, often in the form of neglect, but they knew that President Nixon's conservative government would oppose it if it challenged traditional values about parental authority, corporal punishment, and the effects of poverty and inequality (Nathan (1991))—opposition similar to that which would be exerted a decade later by the fundamentalist Christians of the Moral Majority.

As a result, the work of the Committee, the 1974 Child Protection and Treatment Act, severely downplayed neglect and social factors in favour of physical and sexual abuse by strangers (Nathan (1991)), despite empirical evidence that the majority of child abuse, from neglect and outright physical or sexual abuse, occurs in the home, from family members (Bottoms and Davis (1997)). This presented an unusual problem for Child Savers: they needed to organize around the government position on child abuse, which did not reflect the actual scenario. In order to preserve their interests, they had to reform their value-based claims around the official portrayal of child abuse.

The first generation of Child Savers targetted an alleged worldwide child pornography and prostitution ring. The means by which this ring was alleged to exist are particularly relevant to the Satanic ritual abuse allegations. In the mid 1970s, self-appointed spokespeople began promoting claims of an

international male prostitution and pornography ring involving hundreds of thousands of minors. Law enforcement officials repeated the claims; some short time later, antidrug activist and later Child Saver Julianne Densen-Gerber arbitrarily doubled the claims and included girls (Nathan (1991)). After an NBC News story claiming that over two million American youngsters were involved in the child porn industry—some four percent of American youth—the stranger-danger explanation of child abuse was ingrained into popular American opinion.

By the beginning of the 1980s, the Child Savers found themselves in a situation mirroring that of the Anti-Cult Movement: people were beginning to doubt their claims. Despite Child Saver efforts, child abuse was still as much of a problem as it had been ten years previous (unsurprisingly, since the Child Savers weren't addressing the root of the problem); the public could no longer justify the stranger-danger approach, and would have to start directing their concern to the real source of the problem (Nathan and Snedeker (1995)).

Where the Anti-Cult Movement were able to use ritual-abuse allegations to attack Satanists, the Child Savers did the reverse. The wave of Satanic ritual abuse allegations in the 1980s provided an opportunity to continue their emphasis on physical and sexual abuse over neglect, and on abuse by strangers over familial abuse. In doing so, they could maintain their own positions, and ride on the efforts of the other groups involved. The Satanic element of their claims is of little relevance; they needed a new industry of child-abuse, and the Satanic ritual abuse panic provided one.

Discussion

By looking at the means by which claims are made by claims-makers, we can see how claims of Satanic ritual abuse became so widely supported; more importantly, we can see that Satanic ritual abuse, in and of itself was seldom the original claim being made. More often, it was discovered as a suitable claim when an original claim was not successful in gaining attention.

The fundamentalist Christians' basic claim is that society is entering a stage of breakdown brought on by Satan himself, as evidenced by a preponderance of liberal values, and that a return to traditional values is necessary to prevent Satan from succeeding. The literalist-Christian nature of this claim found little support; by reframing the claim in terms of Satanic ritual abuse, they were able to secularize Satan; to give evidence of the harm caused by liberal values (in particular, the effects of leaving children in contractual care instead of in the family (Bromley (1991)); and to take advantage of the claims-making of otherwise-unrelated groups. Unlike other groups, the fundamentalist Christians were able to make claims based on values throughout, but had to sacrifice their own interest (in literal Bible interpretation) to reach their audience.

With the Anti-Cult Movement, the original claim of the inherent evils and dangers of religious cults was losing popularity. The cult scare had dried up, and an industry of activists was facing the possibility of being out of work. With the rise of Satanic ritual abuse in the popular press, anti-cult activists were able to revitalize the evil portrayal of cults and the Anti-Cult Movement. By reframing their claims against cults as claims against Satanic ritual abuse, they were able to campaign against Satanists by implication, reestablish the manipulative, violent and subversive stereotype of cults in America,

and ride on the claims made by other groups claiming against Satanic ritual abuse for different reasons. This group found themselves with interests to protect—their jobs in the Anti-Cult industry, and the popular perception of cults which kept them there—and were able to use Satanic ritual abuse to construct value-based claims around those interests.

Orthogonal in orientation to the Anti-Cult Movement, the Child Savers found themselves in the same situation: the claimsmaking upon which their movement and industry depended was beginning to become transparent and ineffective. The Satanic ritual abuse panic revitalized the concept of stranger danger and gave the Child Savers movement a new enemy against whom to make claims. By making claims against Satanic ritual abuse, the Child Savers could, by establishing a new faceless menace out to corrupt American youth, maintain the redirection of child-protection efforts out of the home and socioeconomic spheres, maintain the child-protection industry, and share in the gains of other groups making claims against Satanic ritual abuse. Like the Anti-Cult group, what is presented as a value-based claim, "protecting the children," closely involves the interests of the claimsmakers.

To an extent, all of these groups sacrificed their own positions somewhat by reframing their original claims around Satanic ritual abuse. Fundamentalists said "Satanic ritual abuse" when they meant "Satan and liberals;" the Anti-Cult Movement said "Satanic ritual abuse" when they meant "cults including Satanists;" and the Child Savers said "Satanic ritual abuse" when they meant "physical abuse by strangers." This invites the question: Why did Satanic ritual abuse claims work so well for these groups?

The merit and effectiveness of the Satanic ritual abuse claims was not a direct result of widespread press attention; to assume so would be to reverse

causality. The press, especially the sensationalist press, sells stories that people want to hear. In this case, the success of the Satanic ritual abuse claims in obtaining press attention, and the subsequent attention of the general public, resulted from contemporary occurrences of classic legends. Satanic ritual abuse was, after all, the stuff of urban legend, tales which, in folklorist Bill Ellis's words, "are presented as 'news' freshly arisen, to deal with a situation requiring urgent attention; a fundamentally political attempt to gain social control over an ambiguous situation" (Ellis (1998): 2). Contemporary ("urban") legend allows anxieties to be focused on a specific, if imaginary threat, a collective catharsis which allows social strain to be funnelled off or at least temporarily redirected.

The effectiveness of the claims against the Satanists relied on two classic myths. The first, the myth of blood libel, dates to antiquity: just as the Satanists were accused of ritual cannibalism and drinking of blood, so were Christians in ancient Rome (Victor (1991)), Jews by medieval Christians (Stephens (1991)), and Witches by early Americans (Nathan and Snedeker (1995)). The blood libel myth tends to rise when a society is undergoing a deep cultural crisis of values (Victor (1991)). In all of the above instances of claimsmaking, that is exactly the case: fundamentalists opposing liberal values, Anti-Cult activists opposing religious diversity, and Child Savers opposing social-welfare explanations of the child abuse problem.

Moreover, the blood libel myth appeals to the general populace; American society as a whole was dealing with the aftershocks of the value crises originating in the 1960s and 1970s. The myth functions, like war, to reinforce the essential goodness of a society ("us," *ego*) against a known or unknown source of evil ("them", the other, *alter*), providing an externally-located

scapegoat for internal tensions (Victor (1993)). The agencies which were engaged in claimsmaking against Satanic ritual abuse were able to direct the aggression and stress of a society in moral crisis towards their own causes.

The Satanic ritual abuse claims also relied on another common contemporary-legend theme, that of childhood innocence. Children in Western society are regarded as priceless, as a manifestation of the hope a generation has for the continuation of their legacy (Stephens (1991)). Children symbolize innocence; unable to understand let alone give consent, they guarantee that blame will be directed against the parties allegedly corrupting that innocence. By combining the blood libel myth with the symbolic innocence of children, the claims-makers construct claims which, by relying on such universal themes, not only generate little skepticism, but generate hostility towards skeptics in a sort of self-enforced hegemony.

In analyzing the social problem of Satanic Ritual Abuse in terms of Spector and Kitsuse's claims-making activity model, we quickly see why the veracity of claims of Satanic abuse are less than relevant. Satanic ritual abuse, in relying on effective, universal themes, was a welcome target at which to direct social tension. As such, by reframing their claims in terms of Satanic ritual abuse, diverse interest and value groups could support one another and ensure that their claims gained the attention of the American people. Satanic ritual abuse served as the vehicle by which these divergent claims could be united and mutually reinforced.

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