

TRANSNATIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE SINCE 1880: BRITAIN AND THE WIDER WORLD WORKSHOP

Cardiff University, 12 April 2014

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Covering historical subjects that ranged from the ordinary to the extraordinary, this closed workshop gave a unique opportunity for a brainstorming session for a small group of scholars who encompassed diverse fields of study such as law, history and anthropology. Their purpose in gathering was to explore whether a common platform of approach could be developed, that would give direction and unity to their individual endeavours to tackle the question of Child Sex Abuse (CSA) in history. This unity derived in part from foundational thematic aspects of the subject matter under discussion in areas of history that are under researched, and raise many profound yet polarized emotions, with sympathy for victims juxtaposed with revulsion towards those who commit sex crimes. Yet this conference was not about condemnation but rather aimed at understanding society and the victims equally, knowing well that issues around morality are never clearly defined. Over the course of the day, scholars gradually built several important bridges and areas of discussion from which to pursue further research. They aimed to understand why CSA occurs, to devise a means of helping victims attain solace, and to raise awareness of the need for scholarly discussion of CSA, a transnational phenomenon of history which needs to be addressed in order to develop consciousness and to assist in prevention.

The conference was broken into three sessions, first focusing on 'CSA in Modern Britain'. Kim Stevenson (Plymouth University) opened proceedings with a discussion of historical approaches to incest in Britain and the Punishment of Incest Act 1908. She noted that the nature of incest cases remained clouded and ambiguous in the press and public knowledge because of the in camera rule that prohibited the publication of criminal proceedings, and that incest was a gendered discourse before the law, demonstrated by the fact that no cases of incest relating to boys were brought to court. (The 1908 Act penalized sexual intercourse between a mother and son, and between siblings, but not between a grandmother and a boy under the age of 14). These observations on the gendering of sex crimes were also a theme in Julia Laite's (Birkbeck College) paper, which explored the nature of discourse relating to

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the concept of prostitution, an occupation discredited by conservative opinion during the nineteenth century, and the connections between the abolition of prostitution and the issues of sex trafficking. Laite analysed stories discussing girls being lured into prostitution and trafficked abroad, where the construction of the 'girl' within sources played on fears that 'innocent' and 'vulnerable' middle class women would be prostituted if allowed to travel abroad. However, the age of those prostituted was often ambiguous or unknown, with many victims coming from poor backgrounds. Such misconceptions reduced the effectiveness of legislation, e.g. Children and Young Person Act 1933, to prevent sex trafficking. Daniel Grey (Plymouth University) further highlighted the significance of discourse in CSA cases, through using the metaphor of the Minotaur to explore the concept of the demonized child abuser as a prowling, lurking, abstract construction of fear. This image propagated by the press conflicted with evidence gathered by Grey from records of families who had been victims of CSA, which suggested that sex crimes were committed by people known to children within their local communities and familiar environments.

The second session of the conference, entitled 'CSA in the Wider World', was supposed to have started with the paper titled: 'In Denial? The institution of infant and child marriage as child abuse in nineteenth-century British India'. Unfortunately the scholar delivering the paper, Padma Anagol was unable to attend due to a family bereavement. As such, discussion was commenced by Agnes Arnold-Forster (Kings College London), who explored the evolution of the practice of clitoridectomy, providing an analysis of the procedure in Europe and the wider world. In nineteenth century Europe clitoridectomy had been associated with medical benefits and a woman's ability to control her body. However, attitudes towards the practice shifted in the early twentieth century, as colonial discourse, using the welfare of women as a symbol of hegemony, denigrated the practice and condemned cultures that used it as a rite of passage. The final paper was given by Tim Jones (University of South Wales), who discussed CSA in relation to Canon Law, drawing attention to the fact that CSA cases within the church had come under increased scrutiny since the 1980s. While Acts of 1917 and 1983 within Canon Law provide codes which punish bestiality, debauchery, adultery, and sodomy as 'sexual sin', and a significant number of complaints had been raised against the church, no priests (within the Australian context) had been tried by Canonical law for CSA.

After the consumption of a sumptuous luncheon, a round table discussion began, aimed at building theoretical and thematic bridges between aspects of each scholar's work. This developed in part from a grounded sense of the morally and socially unacceptable practices relating to CSA, and a desire to assist in the prevention of such crimes. Yet such a simplistic

approach was not possible, as while it was agreed that from the twenty-first century historian's point of view that CSA could be identified and defined, several grey areas began to be raised surrounding how to understand such instances in historical context.

Several important areas of discussion were raised over the course of the afternoon, such as the issue of autonomy of the body. Autonomy was shown to be a contextually specific concept, which ranged depending on gender, race and class ideas, as well as issues of health and age. For example, the clitoridectomy was once viewed as a benefit to women's health in the same sense that circumcision amongst men is often considered medically beneficial, and continues to be practised upon infants. Questions were raised about whether the health of a person should supersede the agency of humans to decide about issues regarding their body. This theme crucially raised important issues surrounding how we understand sexuality in relation to children. For example, depending on the context, notions of health and morality often determine sex education, with debate still prevailing over the exposure of young people to pornography, and the age of consent.

The issue of consent in sexual acts was shown to be of universal importance in all areas of study. For example, female prostitution is viewed by radical feminists as a product of patriarchal structures of oppression, not as a woman's choice. Thus the term prostitute poorly reflects the lack of agency exercised by the prostituted in shaping their lives. A subversion of the same idea existed within conservative discourses of the nineteenth century, which sought to disempower women through using the idea of the innocent, vulnerable girl to create fear over a middle class women asserting agency. In many ways the concept of consent in sexual acts conflicted with prevalent discourse surrounding CSA, which often presented the child as an unknowing victim in all instances of crime in relation to sexuality. The need to identify, analyse and understand the discourses of race, class, and gender were shown to be crucial for interpreting sources within the specific historical context, as discourse often had profound implications for how CSA was understood before the law, the media and public perception. The most notable examples were how to define a child in relation to sexuality, gendered concepts of criminality, and the construction of stereotyped victims and perpetrators.

A common point of understanding and reference unifying all these areas, never far from the minds and thoughts of each attendee, was that cases of CSA are often marred within the machinery of mass media coverage, which each year follow patterns such as targeting middle class men, 'immigrants' or some 'other' who is demonized. Crucially, all scholars rejected the common assumption that CSA was somehow an unknown issue in the past, or

a normalized practice that has only been brought to attention through 'modernity' of consciousness. Indeed, there was a general consensus that the study of CSA has to acknowledge how attitudes and assumptions have changed over time. Several reasons were discussed about why assumptions might have evolved, such as the imposition in British law of legal barriers and hurdles, the cultural identification of CSA within foreign cultures, and the nature of press or government discourse discussing CSA. Additionally, it is important to take into account the lack of language or understanding a child could possess about sex. This could be due to their age, as knowledge of sexual anatomy is often regarded as a 'taboo' subject, which could limit the ability of a child to communicate instances of sexual abuse to adults.

This brought discussion towards its concluding statements, which focused on the future direction of the project. It was agreed that there was a need for a dialogue between those affected by CSA and scholars involved in the field, in order to make social concerns a primary aspect of the research process. Both academic and non-academic resources need to be produced, in order to provide a platform for broader understanding amongst the public, the media, and an elevation of awareness about CSA aimed at prevention. This also meant creating a balance between work that discussed the victims and those who committed the crimes. Furthermore, several immediate needs were identified, such as the current void of work discussing CSA in Britain between 1920s and the 1970s. However, several hindrances to further development were noted, such as the inability to access information due to data protection legislation which limit a scholar's freedom to browse documents, the lack of documents in certain historical contexts, and the denial of access to documents about institutions such as the church who seek to protect their reputation. As the session concluded, these common issues and themes thus informed the future direction of each scholar's work, within an area of research that has been long neglected despite its relevancy in modern society.

The attendees would like to thank Cardiff University (Padma Anagol) for hosting the workshop, and the University of South Wales (Tim Jones) for funding it.