“Save Our Children from Satanists” : Women, Motherhood, and Satanic Moral Panic

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Abstract: This chapter discusses the role of women in general and mothers in particular in the 1980s Satanic Panic as well as in its new iterations. The chapter argues that SRA narratives regularly address themselves to women, appealing to maternalism, child protection and even certain aspects of feminist rhetoric. The author maintains that the persistence of Satanic Panic-style conspiracies, which today often intersect with the anti-vaccine movement and transphobic ideologies, attests to a need on the part of mothers, particularly in the US, to feel empowered in a society that traditionally disempowers them and refuses to provide families with any meaningful structural or economic support.

Keywords: Satanic ritual abuse, QAnon, conspiracy theories, mothers, gender, 1980s

The last decades of the twentieth century saw a flood of moral panics sweep both the US and the UK, characterized by widespread public alarm around a number of apparent social issues. These panics were perpetuated in part by media stories that depicted a variety of potential moral threats and, in turn, offered a range of potential villains and scapegoats to blame for them. One of the most significant of these came in the form of the moral panic around Satanism, a phenomenon that has since come to be known, in a term coined by sociologist Jeffrey S. Victor in 1993, as ‘The Satanic Panic.’ The Satanic Panic spanned from the late 1960s to the 1990s, peaking during the 1980s in the US before a—briefer, but nonetheless significant—surge in the UK in the 1990s. The Panic promoted a conspiracy theory which claimed

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that secret Satanic cults existed and ritualistically abused children—an act labeled ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse’ or SRA. The Panic resulted in a surge of false allegations and (in the case of the US) convictions of individuals later found to be completely innocent—some spending up to twenty-one years in prison for crimes that never occurred (Dart). By the end of the twentieth century, these allegations had been largely debunked, with both scholars and journalists concluding that the Panic had been a complete hoax (see, for example, Victor; Waterhouse). The Satanic Panic today can be fairly understood as a modern-day witch-hunt.

The Satanic Panic appeared to build a foundation upon several of the existing moral panics and social concerns of the time, combining elements of each to present an ultimate subversive threat to society in the image of the Satanic cult. These included, though were not limited to, “fundamentalism, the anticult movement, child-saving, and the survivor/recovery movement” (Richardson et al. 13). Criminologist Stanley Cohen, who first introduced the theory of moral panic in 1972, notes that they begin when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (1). The Panic therefore appeared to have been grounded in the desire to find a scapegoat for a combination of pre-existing concerns—for both child safety and, more broadly, a sense of loss

of social and moral stability. Today, we have seen a resurgence of Satanic cult conspiracy theories and SRA allegations—perhaps the most famous of these being via the now infamous QAnon movement, which emerged in 2017 promoting "an unfounded conspiracy theory that a 'Deep State cabal of satanic pedophile elites' is responsible for all the evil in the world" (Argentino and Amarasingam 19). Again, we can see these conspiracy theories building upon and feeding into outside moral panics, many of which appear to eerily mirror those of the Satanic Panic. It is perhaps plausible, then, to suggest that we are now experiencing a new, twenty-first-century Satanism scare.

The Role of Women

When exploring the dynamics of Satanism scares, we can see that women take on various roles within their narratives. For example, we see self-proclaimed adult 'SRA survivors' who claim that they themselves were abused by Satanic cults as children. This phenomenon first gained mass attention via psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder and his patient-turned-wife Michelle Smith during the 1980s Panic. Together, they wrote the now widely discredited Michelle Remembers in 1980, which documented Michelle's apparent childhood recollections of SRA. The 'SRA survivor' narrative has also continued into contemporary Satanic cult conspiracy claims, with individuals both sharing their alleged testimonies of SRA to followers online, as well as—in some cases—organizing this support into in-person protests (see Hind). The Panic also furnished examples of villainized women, notably those targeted with allegations of Satanic abuse themselves. Victor notes how it was "mostly women" in prison for false SRA charges during the Panic and draws a parallel with the Salem witch trials (17). Perhaps most prominently, however, we can see concerned women and mothers of children, often taking on proactive roles within conspiracy theory networks as a means to 'spread awareness' and 'protect the children' from the Satanic cult threat (see Peterson; Kelly).

The diverse roles of women, and in particular mothers, within Satanism scares have been largely underestimated—both in how they impact on the development of the Satanic moral panic and the dissemination of their associated allegations and conspiracy narratives. Scholars have theoretically stereotyped the 'typical' conspiracy theorist as male (Ward and Voas 104). Yet, researchers exploring contemporary conspiracism—and specifically those pertaining to Satanic cult conspiracy narratives—have recognized a notable audience of women and mothers (see Kelly). This chapter provides some insight into why that may be the case, considering the ways in which the narratives of Satanism scares may appeal to a female audience. In particular, it will explore how these hoax Satanic cult conspiracy theories are able to present themselves under the guise of a seemingly legitimate moral cause, through broad emotional appeals to maternalism and child protection, as well as through the manipulation of feminist rhetoric. These factors demand further research attention when considering how to address the ongoing impact of this current wave of 'Satanic Panic'—specifically regarding the reasons for its continuing appeal, the ways in which it weaponizes morality rhetoric—and the channels by which its theories and allegations are spread.

"Protect the Children": Weaponizing Maternalism

The conspiracy theories and allegations put forward during Satanism scares vary in their details. Victor, in his analysis of the Satanic Panic, categorized it as a collection of local "rumor-panics," which he defined as "a collective stress response to a belief in stories about immediately threatening circumstances" (59). This 'local' element of Satanism scares is one that is often apparent, particularly considering the ways in which Satanic cult rumors spread and stimulate allegations against Othered groups within confined communities. In some cases, however, allegations are focused predominantly upon vast networks of Satanic 'elites'—instead centering celebrities, politicians, and other high-profile figures as the face of the Satanic cult threat (see Yalcinkaya). Similarly, while religious iterations of the conspiracy theory may claim these Satanic cultists are literally harnessing the power of Satan, other public claims defined Satanists as a primarily criminal threat, rather than a spiritual or religious one (Best 95). In this sense, Victor notes, "the presumed satanists can be regarded as either dangerous social deviants, agents of supernatural evil, or both" (232). Yet, while the status of these supposed Satanic cultists varies, the nature of their crimes does not. Notably, the perception that these cults engage in ritualistic child abuse remains a consistent feature across all iterations of the conspiracy theory. The emphasis on children, and more specifically the notion that Satanic cults "focus their evil ambitions on children," has been highlighted by scholars as being the most significant element of the demonology around Satanism (Stevens 29). Through this framing, Satanism scares provoke a sense of duty and urgency to 'protect the children' from this imminent threat.

The Satanic threat to children is generally presented in two ways: abuse and/or corruption (Bromley 61). The conspiracy either asserts that these 'cults' engage in SRA against children, or that they seek to manipulate and coerce children and young people into joining their demonic crusade. More often than not, however, the two theories are presented synonymously. Moral panics around child safety are prominent during times of economic difficulty and rapid social change (Nathan 78). Victor, reflecting on the Panic in the early 1990s, noted:

Over the past twenty years, small town and rural families have experienced a rapidly increasing rate of disintegration […] The pressure of economic stress, on top of changing sex roles, has caused increasing marital conflict and divorce, increasing parent-child conflict, more single-mother parenting, and the increasing departure of youth seeking jobs in distant places. (49)

In this sense, the Satanic Panic appeared to be a direct product of several already underlying social concerns and dynamics of the late twentieth century—several of which directly involved mothers and children. Sociologist Joel Best proposes that the "image of the threatened child" was particularly powerful during this time as "children can be seen as embodying the future"—a future that many people at the time appeared to be lacking confidence in (96).

Journalist Debbie Nathan, writing in 1991, noted how "child protection is now an entrenched cultural value" (78). This preoccupation with child welfare, she argues, focused itself on framing the issue through the lens of social deviancy, rather than focusing on any of the structural problems in families and the economy that contributed to the problem (Nathan 78). This

first became apparent through the introduction of the 1974 Child Abuse Protection and Treatment Act (CAPTA). The CAPTA bill emphasized physical assaults while downplaying child neglect, and in turn placed a focus on 'stranger danger' rather than listening to research that demonstrated that the real problem of abuse lay largely within the family (Nathan 79). Even when abuse within the home was acknowledged, the issue appeared to be misrepresented. Investigating the role of tabloid media during the Satanic Panic, Sarah Hughes emphasizes how the CAPTA bill again noticeably ignored pre-existing scholarly research that demonstrated a link between economic struggle and the presence of abuse (692). Instead, she notes how pediatricians—specifically male pediatricians—"arose as the nation's preeminent experts on child abuse" and, in doing so, reframed the issue of abuse as instead being caused by "bad mothering" (Hughes 692–93). This presented child protection as an issue of 'good parents vs evil strangers,' and of 'good mothers' who protect their children v. the 'bad mothers' who do not. These archetypes then carried on into the narratives of the Satanic Panic itself.

The Panic ran parallel to a time of rapid social change with regard to gender roles and family dynamics in the US, notably centered on a rise in women—and in particular women with children—entering the workforce (Bromley 66). Scholars have argued that these changes brought about both "cultural unease about structural shifts in the family and […] changes in sex roles and sexual behavior" (Nathan 78) as well as "widespread tensions […] between men and women […] husbands and wives […] and between parents and their children" (Victor 182). Similar changes were also apparent in the UK, where a sharp rise in women entering the labor force during the 1970s and 1980s led to changes in expectations surrounding women's roles within the family, that in turn were then linked to concerns surrounding a rapid growth in divorce rates (Jenkins 33–34). Fears of 'stranger danger' seemingly combined with these tensions around changing family dynamics, causing a broad social landscape of mistrust and guilt amongst parents:

> There is the guilt of mothers over leaving their children at child-care centers. There is the guilt of parents who have little time to spend talking with their children, or supervising them, because both parents are working full-time. There is the guilt of parents who are reluctant to use their authority to guide their children's choice of entertainments and friends. (Victor 179)

This provides a possible basis to understand why allegations within Satanism scares often target individuals or institutions involved in childcare—often outside of the immediate family. As sociologist David G. Bromley notes, "individuals making the initial allegations of satanic subversion were individuals who entrusted their children to daycare facilities about which they had significant reservations and apprehensions" (68). An example of this was the McMartin preschool trial, perhaps the most famous case of the Satanic Panic, in which a McMartin employee (along with his family members) was accused of abusing the children in their care. The targeting of childcare services is also a consistent theme within more recent Satanism scare allegations, such as the 2014 Hampstead Hoax in which a mother alleged that her two sons were being abused by a Satanic pedophile ring operating out of a North London school (see Hoaxtead Research). When

not grounded directly in ritual abuse allegations, the Panic emphasized the dangers of heavy metal music or the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons as supposedly coercing youth into dabbling in Satanism (Best 101). Ultimately, as Victor summarizes, "the ideological targets of the Satanism witch hunters are things which are believed to shape the minds of children" (179). In this way, the narratives that fuel Satanism scares seem to be underpinned by a desire to fight back against a perceived loss of control around parenthood and, in particular, motherhood.

The demonology of the Satanic Panic therefore appeared, at least in part, to be a projection of mothers' wishes to protect their children amid fears that they could not. Appeals to maternalism—symbolizing the empowered mother/woman as one who protects children—is also a theme that we can see within more recent revivals of the conspiracy theory. Annie Kelly, a postdoctoral researcher and UK correspondent for the podcast QAA, highlighted the phenomenon of 'QAnon mothers' in an article for the New York Times. After attending a 'Freedom for the Children' rally—organized in part by followers of QAnon—Kelly noted how "the rally was composed mostly of women, many with young children." Interviewing rally attendees, she also found that "many talked about how they had come out of a sense of maternal duty to protect the innocent." This seems to reflect wider trends across Satanic cult conspiracy rhetoric today, and indeed within wider conspiracy theory discourse and misinformation online. Baker and Walsh, writing in 2022, analyzed the ways in which "the maternal is appealed to, and represented, by anti-vaccine advocates online" (2). They found that many anti-vaccine campaigns appeared to "deliberately target mothers as the primary caregivers of children" (Baker and Walsh 5, 8). Sara Peterson, also writing on mothers in QAnon, notes how involvement in disseminating these conspiracy claims allows mothers a status as "authorities," "truth-tellers," and "maverick thinkers," and in turn, provides them with a sense of purpose and empowerment in a society that typically disempowers them. The focus on child protection therefore reframes the problem of Satanism as a more accessible and familiar social cause, one which allows mothers to take on the role of moral leaders.

Satanic cult conspiracy narratives are grounded in Christian fundamentalist demonologies—in this sense, they provide a "Christian form of a body of beliefs of a universally standard type […] an ideology of evil" (Stevens 21). Therefore, while seemingly centered in the more universal cause of child protection, the conceptualization of Satan as the enemy means that these conspiracy narratives often also project more traditional, conservative Christian values of morality throughout their rhetoric. In part we can also see this reflected within its appeals to the maternal, where motherhood is depicted as the intrinsically virtuous pinnacle of womanhood, while the notion of 'bad motherhood'—or the rejection of motherhood—becomes a form of moral subversion. Peterson notes, for example, how QAnon narratives online promote the "implied moral goodness" of—typically white and American—motherhood. She describes the reality of motherhood in America as "gaslit," one where mothers are "celebrated for our supposedly innate maternal goodness" whilst simultaneously "wholly unsupported in meaningful structural ways." It may be for this reason, then, that Satanic cult conspiracy theories are able to provide an illusion of power, as well as signaling morality, amongst

audiences of women and mothers. This idea of the "perfected maternal" was also identified by Baker and Walsh in the promotion of anti-vaccine rhetoric online (5). Here, the maternal was communicated "in a way that presents the mother as perfected and idealized," with rhetoric drawing on interrelated representations of motherhood as "intuitive," "protective," and "doting" (Baker and Walsh 5, 7). A mother who 'spreads awareness' of supposedly underacknowledged threats facing children is therefore seen as a mother who embodies these traits. Satanic panic narratives—and indeed any conspiracy narrative that presents itself as a campaign 'for the children'—therefore provide a similar means of signifying 'good motherhood.'

"Believe the Children": Weaponizing Feminism

The Satanic Panic occurred at a significant moment in the development of the feminist movement, particularly in the UK (Jenkins 35). The 1980s saw a growing emphasis on the importance of rape survivors identifying themselves and sharing stories that had previously been overlooked, ignored, or denied (see Serisier). While this was certainly a positive progression, the landscape of feminism at this time was extremely complex. Serisier notes how there was often "a shift from seeing survivors who do speak as heroic to seeing those who do not as bearing a disproportionate level of blame for their own and other women's victimization" (56). Narratives of survivor empowerment through speaking, listening, and believing were therefore also embedded with a sense of guilt around bringing down the movement for those who felt unable to speak. There was a sense of collective responsibility amongst survivors, who felt they needed to share their stories and encourage others to do the same as a means of mutual protection. While providing communities of support for survivors, this then also created the potential for emotional coercion. Alongside this, the issue of ritual abuse began to also be framed as being about believing survivor testimonies—with an organization called 'Believe the Children' being foundational in bringing the "issue of SRA" to public attention (Victor 15, 104). This then translated more literally into an emphasis on the testimonies of adult women themselves through the 'SRA survivor' phenomenon.

The rhetoric of Satanism scares therefore linked perceived threats to children directly to threats women themselves faced. In this sense, Satanic cult conspiracy narratives not only framed women as protectors, but also as potential victims—the two roles commonly intertwining. Through this, SRA survivor narratives were able to falsely depict an image of anti-Satanism—and the dissemination of its associated hoax conspiracy claims—as a form of feminist activism. Victor highlights how SRA claims were framed by this analogy of "the past hidden victimization of women and children" (222), with the fact that abuse testimonies had historically been ignored, serving to stress the importance of advocating for SRA cases. Any public skepticism regarding the reality of SRA was then viewed simply as a further "attempt to discredit testimony about sexual aggression against women and children" (Victor 222). As many survivors of sexual assault and rape had no doubt experienced their own very real stories of abuse being disbelieved or ignored, concern around the 'unbelievability' of SRA cases was seen as a key reason to advocate for justice. The Satanic Panic then saw, as noted by Jenkins, an "unlikely common front" formed between feminists and Evangelicals,

highlights, while this frame may superficially appear as “an expression of some kind of feminist ideology,” it was simply a manipulation of feminist rhetoric (223). These narratives did not actively seek to critique society or comment on any broader issues facing women and children, instead they simply centered on protection from “vaguely defined evil forces” (Victor 223). This lack of moral authenticity only furthers the potential for harm caused by the dissemination of false Satanic cult claims.

The potential for the coercion of sexual abuse survivors into advocating for Satanism scare narratives becomes apparent when considering the details of ‘SRA survivor’ cases, such as that of Michelle Smith. Bromley notes how accounts of “Satanic material” were largely introduced by the ‘survivors’’ therapists—not by the clients themselves (63). In the UK, it was also found that two psychotherapists had been paid a government grant to try to produce evidence of SRA from the testimonies of their existing trauma patients (Brindle). Many proclaimed ‘SRA survivors’ may then have been very real survivors of sexual assault—their stories manipulated in order to push the continuing narrative of Satanic moral panic. This may also be the case for many women who advocate for the truth of SRA claims today. Kelly reports how an attendee at the ‘Freedom for Children’ rally had explained her own past experience of being sexually abused as a child, stating her presence at the rally as being “to show solidarity with other victims.” In wanting to defend children and women’s safety and stress the importance of survivor testimonies not being ignored, we can therefore see well-meaning and often vulnerable individuals drawn in by the hoax narratives put forward by Satanism scares.

The co-optation of feminist language is also prominent when looking at how Satanism scare rhetoric latches onto external moral panics—particularly conservative panics regarding sex and gender—both in the 1980s and today. This more overtly reflects the traditional conservative Christian underpinnings of the demonology of Satanism scares. Writing at the time of the Panic, Victor notes how many traditionalists were “morally appalled” by “pornography, the acceptance of premarital sex, the tolerance of homosexuals, and the easy availability of abortion” (65). ‘Deviant’ notions of sexuality—notably “extramarital, nonmonogamous or gay sex”—were at the center of these perceived threats (Nathan 78). In the UK, Jenkins notes similar developments where, alongside the concern with changing gender roles, there came backlash against the growing gay rights movement that had emerged during the 1970s (36). Politicians allied “political conservatism” with “traditional morality, the family, and even heterosexuality” (Jenkins 37) —all of which, as in the US, were perceived by ‘traditionalists’ as being under imminent threat. Today, Satanic cult allegations have bled directly into the emerging far-right ‘groomer’ panic that seeks to associate the LGBTQ+ community with child abuse and pedophilia (see Romano; Gallagher and Squirrell), with a particular emphasis on targeting the transgender community. The ongoing moral panic around the trans community in particular often attempts to directly frame itself under a guise of feminism; an article by Amery and Mondon notes how “organized transphobia trades heavily in images of trans violation of violence thresholds—often specifically stated as a violence against women threshold.” These panics seek to present transgender women as a potential violent threat to children and cisgender women—creating yet another imaginary depiction of the ‘evil kind of

woman.' Altogether, the framing of sex and gender panics as somehow being 'pro-women' are evidently being revived in the rhetoric used by contemporary Satanism scare rhetoric, again being used to target and scapegoat innocent individuals and communities.

Conclusion

Satanism scares appear to appeal to women and mothers through framing the crusade against Satanism as a form of female activism and empowerment. They also present an ultimate subversive scapegoat in the image of 'the evil woman,' or 'the bad mother,' that others can measure their virtues against and signify their opposition to through joining the moral crusade 'for the children.' Women also provide a clear benefit to the anti-Satanist crusade, particularly in the internet age, where communities of mothers represent a vastly influential online network (see Kelly). Conspiracy theories that present their enemies as those that harm children, even if entirely unfounded, will likely always find a supportive audience. Appealing specifically to women and mothers, particularly when enfolding conspiracy claims within the rhetoric of female activism is a means for these narratives to then gain a sense of further legitimacy, purpose, and cause—one that connects the Satanism scare to wider social issues and falsely veils its traditional conservatism as some form of progressive political movement.

It is extremely easy to see those disseminating false SRA claims and advocating for their truth as participating in some form of intentional political or moral grift, but the reality is not always this clear cut. SRA accusations are undoubtedly extremely dangerous and harmful. It is important to condemn the spreading of false allegations and conspiracy theories and advocate for the truth. Yet, in doing so, it is also crucial not to fall into the same view of the conspiracy theorist by creating new moral villains in those who promote false SRA narratives. Often, we find bad faith actors—those who intend to target vulnerable communities, spread disinformation, or harm others via false allegations—standing alongside those who hold genuine belief and concern in the false narratives being fed to them in the form of Satanic cult rumors. Differentiating between these stances is not easy, and the two are certainly not always mutually exclusive—but recognizing individual differences in belief and intent amongst Satanic cult conspiracy theorists is a necessary step in beginning to combat the harm caused by these allegations. Looking at how Satanism scares co-opt well-intentioned feminist or child-protection narratives for harmful causes, and considering how some individuals disseminating these theories have themselves also been manipulated by this rhetoric, is an important step in achieving this.

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