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Rebels with a Cause, Folk Devils without a Panic: Press jingoism, policing tactics and anti-capitalist protest in London and Prague

Fiona Donson, Graeme Chesters, Ian Welsh and Andrew Tickle[1]

"Their aim is clear. They want a violent and bloody conflagration on the streets. They want to … cause anarchy." (*The Daily Telegraph* 18.02.01)

Abstract

This paper examines whether anti-capitalist political activists are (mis)constructed as 'folk devils', through an examination of media coverage in the UK and Czech Republic. The construction, of such protestors, as violent criminals and dangerous 'anarchists' has, it is argued, influenced their treatment at protests by public authorities in London and Prague. The paper also offers, in juxtaposition to this representation of the current anti-capitalism movement, a discussion of the accounts of activists themselves. In particular it examines the activists' own perceptions of their engagement in the global social movement against capitalism. The paper is based on evidence drawn from the preliminary findings of interdisciplinary research into global social movements, and in particular the protests against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Prague in September 2000[1].

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Introduction

This paper argues that we are currently witnessing the development of a new type of folk devil thus engaging with Martin's (2002) call for the consideration of social movements to include notions of culture, subcultures and deviance. This claim is advanced through a consideration of the construction of the protest activities of social movement activists and other citizens associated with the anti-capitalist movement as a deviant group and the consequences which flow from that construction. We argue that, in the context of such activism, the idea of the folk devil has been significantly altered from the traditional understanding that sits alongside the criminological account of moral panics. The paper examines the way in which anti-capitalist activists are constructed as a new class of folk devil through the media portrayal of protests and the associated political and expert comment. In this process prominent politicians and senior police officers identify activists as 'violent', 'mindless thugs'[2], views widely reproduced in print and broadcast media. The reasons for, and results of, this construction are varied but it is argued that primary amongst these is the ability to trivialise and dismiss activists through a rejection of their behaviour as simply destructive and dangerous. This then facilitates a silencing of these alternative voices in terms of both wider debates on the pros and cons of citizens rights to protest within neo-liberal capitalist democracy and wider contested issues of social and economic justice.

After outlining these significant shifts in the contemporary anatomy of the 'folk devil' and the importance of 'moral panics', the paper moves on to briefly considers how the participants in these actions understand their own involvement in the protests. Activists' engagement in, and understanding of, their actions allows them to construct their own complex *knowledge* of their participation in political action, as well as offering the potential for some to engage in a process of 'feedback' that is disruptive of folk devil imagery and ideas.

The traditional account of folk devils and moral panics

The classical criminological account uses the notion of 'deviance amplification' (Wilkins 1964) to approach the folk devil as a class of people or group that become constructed, as 'the personification of evil' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) within society. Once a group is successfully identified as a folk devil the associated identity dominates the public sphere producing a primary focus on negative characteristic through media coverage and expert commentary (Cohen 1972).

The result is that someone falling within the folk devil category is understood to have few redeeming characteristics - their identity is fixed in clear and simplistic terms. As Goode and Ben-Yehuda state:

> Once a category has been identified in the media as consisting of troublemakers, the supposed havoc-wrecking behaviour of its members reported to the public, and their supposed stereotypical features litanized, the process of creating the folk devil is complete; from then on all mention of representatives of the new category revolves around their central, and exclusively negative features. (1994:29)

The folk devil is considered as 'evil' and deviant. Their behaviour is harmful to the social order and understood simply as being criminal and/or destructive to the interests of society. They are therefore selfish and dangerous, engaging in actions that do not require any deeper understanding merely the application of appropriate sanctions. As a result, society becomes interested merely in preventing them engaging in their dangerous behaviour. The forces of the state can then be mobilised to stop them – through institutional responses such as enacting legislation, strong-arm policing tactics and prosecution.

The construction of 'folk devils' in one dimensional terms such as 'harmful' and 'evil' effectively precludes more complex explanations of the actions and behaviour of those involved by defining them as 'outsiders' to the established, ordered social system. They cannot then be understood as potentially or actually accepted or respectable members of

society. In the context of the construction of political activists as folk devils this has a particularly significant effect, which we explore below.

Mainstream media constructions

The mainstream mass media often plays a key role in establishing a group as devils. News stories are often led by press releases issued by governments and police forces in a manner which sets the media agenda, particularly where the folk devil is either a person or group that challenges perceptions of the established order of society. The mass media frequently reports on events and behaviour, in a way that, arguably, initiates, reinforces and embeds large sections of the general public's suspicions and fears (Chomsky and Herman, 1988). Arguably, media concerns with circulation figures and market share reinforces this state centric tendency to portray folk devils through stories that shock and engage the public. Cohen's (1972) classic account of moral panics and folk devils points out the media have particular views about which stories can be understood as being newsworthy:

> 'It is not that instruction manuals exist telling newsmen that certain subjects (drugs, sex, violence) will appeal to the public or that certain groups (youths, immigrants) should be continually exposed to scrutiny. Rather, there are built-in factors, ranging from the individual newsman's intuitive hunch about what constitutes a 'good story', through precepts such as 'give the public what it wants' to structured ideological biases, which predispose the media to make certain events into news.' (1972:45)

Evaluating the role of the media in this context, Cohen identifies three central elements - exaggeration, prediction and symbolisation. Thus, events are distorted when exaggerated i.e. in terms of the numbers who take part in the event and the type of damage or violence that occurs. This is emphasised further by the type of language used in reporting the incidents - thus words such as 'riot', 'siege' and 'orgy of destruction' were frequently used in the reporting of events surrounding clashes between Mods and Rockers in the English seaside resort of Clacton in the 1960's. The media also predict that the initial incident will be followed by more events that become yet more violent and destructive.

The final part of the process involves symbolic interpretation, which sees basic symbols turned into negative indicators of deviancy:

> 'There appear to be three processes in such symbolization: a word (Mod) becomes symbolic of a certain status (delinquent or deviant); objects (hairstyles, clothing) symbolize the word; the objects themselves become symbolic of the status (and the emotions attached to the status).' (Cohen, 1972:134)

So the media have a strong tendency to report those stories they regard as being 'newsworthy', in a way that simplifies the events by focussing on the more sensational and negative aspects. This approach to reporting intensifies as the folk devil persona develops, precluding more sophisticated in depth coverage. The inclusion of elite expert voices offering informed commentary can compound such simplification, or even amplify it in, the absence of voices from within the ranks of those identified as folk devils. Such amplification is particularly notable when the experts concerned originate within institutions associated with the generation of official press releases and policy documents.

When media coverage and expert interpretation develop in ways that create a widespread sense of fear in society, or a key constituency within it, this fuels expectations that firm action will be taken against the folk devil. Clearly, where folk devil behaviour is identified as criminal a strong state response appears necessary and as a result public opinion may be manoeuvred into a position tolerant of measures inimical to wider rights and freedoms. The emphasis of the state is limited to stopping the problem, not resolving deeper issues of interests and rights (Donson 2000).

The identification of a group as folk devils offers an opportunity for vested interests to engage in 'ideological exploitation' (Thompson 1998:39) within which the exploiter 'gains' from their ability to denounce the folk devil via a particular type of deviance. Such gains can be both abstract political goals and more immediate practical considerations including more resources and greater powers for the police, increased newspaper sales, and the reinforcement of normative concepts of authority and discipline

that favour elected politicians. For example, Amanda Webster, Deputy Sherrif of Lancashire, stated that .because direct action has increased: '…so the will to stamp out extreme protest has intensified', producing an 'effective lobby . . . to curb the Movement'. The inclusion of animal rights and similar protests within the Terrorism Act 2000 was part of a 'backlash against extreme protest' adding that 'Similar draconian legislation will not be far behind' (Webster 2002).

Moral Panics

When considering the contexts within which previous analysis of the moral panic/folk devil construction has been undertaken it becomes apparent that we may be dealing with a different type of constructed deviance in this study. Traditionally, criminological and sociological discussion of the folk devil relates to the construction of deviancy (McRobbie 1994) within the context of an associated moral panic. Yet the very *idea* of a moral panic has some important elements that are significant for analysis of the construction of politically engaged activists as deviants.

Since Cohen's initial (1972) formulation, the moral panic has centred upon political issues that have at their core a strong moral dimension conducive to heated debate around acceptable behaviour within society. The danger threatens something that is fundamental to society and therefore poses a serious threat to the very order of things. Thus, we find moral panics arising in relation to, members of ethnic minorities (Hall et.al. 1978) , drug use, raves, single mothers, dangerous dogs (Thompson 1998), and 'out of control youths' (McKay 1998).

The classic construction of the moral panic (Cohen 1972), was thus underpinned by a politics of anxiety theory. This approach understands a panic as serving to reassert the dominance of an established value system, particularly at a time of perceived anxiety and crisis. In this way, the folk devil provides a necessary external threat which the majority can rally against. The typical folk devil is therefore someone on the edge of or even

outside of society – for example teenage single mothers, travellers or asylum seekers. These people do not have a voice; they are already effectively silent within civil society and are therefore an easy target for demonization.

Our discussion of anti-capitalist activists argues that this traditional model of demonization needs to be amended in the light of new approaches and responses to the normative construction of the folk devil. Here we argue that the groups being constructed as folk devils are socially diverse, do not uniformly occupy marginal or external social positions and possess significant means of communication. Further, we ask why this contemporary folk devil has emerged in the absence of a clearly articulated moral panic? Our answer includes the socially diverse nature of the anti-capitalist movement and expressions of wider public ambivalence towards the demonization of activists confronting elements of neo-liberalism.

Whilst Cohen's (1972) arguments were underpinned by the notion of a crisis emerging from post-war tensions within society resulting in 'ritualistic confrontation' (Thompson 1998:40) between the forces of order and morality on the one hand and the deviants on the other the contemporary milieu confronts crises of globalization. Like the Mods and Rockers of England's 1960's, today's targets for demonization are not exactly the usual 'outsiders' having a degree of affluence but a culture amounting to a rejection of traditional values expressed through behaviour, fashion and music. The threat does not come from their outsider status but from the fact that they challenge accepted norms from within.

As Angela McRobbie (1994) succinctly points out:

> '… at root the moral panic is about instilling fear in people and, in so doing, encouraging them to try to turn away from the complexity and the visible social problems of everyday life and either to retreat into a 'fortress mentality' – a feeling of hopelessness, political powerlessness and paralysis – or to adopt a gung-ho 'something must be done about it' attitude.' (McRobbie, 1994:199)

As we demonstrate below, similar effects are working within the construction of anti-capitalist activists as folk devils. Here we develop McRobbie's insight that the traditional approach is outdated – in particular because it relies on a rather old fashioned conception of the media associated with the hyper-dermic model. The complex inter-relationships between the different elements of society that operate in relation to the portrayal of a group as folk devil cannot be understated. In an era of highly differentiated media niches government and police, reporter, editors and the folk devils themselves all play complex roles in the development of public perceptions of such a group. We pursue our account of the panic free new folk devil through a consideration of the image of anti-capitalist protesters constructed by the UK and Czech print media, contrasting this with elements of the classic folk devil case.

Anti-capitalist activists as folk devils

The core of this section revolves around two short case studies that arise out of actions in London on May Day 2000 and May Day 2001 and the Prague protests against the IMF and World Bank on September 26th, 2000. Whilst these case studies provide useful examples of the media coverage and political commentary demonstrating how activists are portrayed as incoherent, chaotic and dangerous they require some brief contextualisation.

In the UK, engagement with anti-capitalist protests post 1999 needs to be understood within the context of the foregoing decades during which sections of the UK media denounced environmental activists amidst the vilification of the rave culture - associated with illegal drug use and unlicensed dance events contributing to a moral panic response in the late 1980s (McKay 1998, Redhead 1993, Thompson 1998, Chp. 3, Welsh 2000 Chp.6). The free party/festival culture can easily be confused by the mainstream mass media and general public as something associated with illegal raves. Yet the free party/festival culture has long standing connections with environmental activism (McKay 1996, 1998) blurring the boundaries between cultural movements and engaged political activism. There are also connections between these activists and new age travellers, a

group who has become part of the folk devil group that has for centuries operated around Gypsy communities (Morris 2000).

The apparent ease with which many modern-day activists are now publicly connected with extreme violence and criminality is illustrated by the ritualised May Day protest actions in London. Our discussion illustrates police expectations of anti-capitalist activists' behaviour, foregrounded violence, and criminal intent. Such fear is amplified by politicians and reproduced in the media, facilitating the creation of an environment conducive to suspicion and fear in the mind of the public. Trouble and violence thus become pre-event expectations associated with the anticipated presence of so-called 'rent-a-mob' groups and the *necessary use* of strong policing tactics. It is assumed therefore that the public will be relieved that a robust response has been developed to prevent such criminals 'causing serious harm' to economic/political and social interests.

Arguably, the authority's supposition that the public supports. firm policing serves to insulate both police and political authorities from any charges of heavy handedness in resultant media portrayals of protest events. If tough policing measures are taken, and the 'event' is kept 'under control', then the warnings from the authorities will be seen to have been vindicated and the strong policing strategy justified. If the policing strategy is not successful and violence occurs, then that allows for an even more robust response on future occasions.

Legislative responses to the growth of protest movements in the UK have included the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 which defined new trespassory offences aimed at anti-roads protests and hunt saboteurs.[3] The Terrorism Act 2000 and the 'research' undertaken in the development of that legislation also illustrate the potential of demonization. The Consultation Paper (CM 4178, 1998) on Terrorism Legislation raised the prospect that environmental activists might, at some future point, change their activities and take on the more serious and dangerous actions of 'terrorism'. However, since no evidence was offered in support of this position, it remained speculative, thus

creating an elision and effectively blurring the boundary between activist and terrorist within the new Act.[4] In terms of the wider public sphere it also becomes part of the language used by politicians, police and the media to describe direct action. In this way, the inclusion of largely peaceful actions in the definition of terrorism is now *normal* and allows authorities to justify the development and implementation of extreme legal and policing powers (Gearty 1999). The subsequent 'war on terrorism' has led to an extension of these 'terrorist' tropes, which are increasingly used as a mechanism to secure the hegemonic position of particular political and economic interests, whilst silencing alternative perspectives. The construction of activists as folk devils and the deployment of terrorist tropes effectively silence their voices.

Folk Devils without a Panic

Traditionally this silencing process is part of the establishments' capacity to manage and control political debate and shape public expectations (Middlemass 1979), something made increasingly difficult by modern media technologies (Thompson 1995) where alternative views and accounts can be published on the Internet. Generally though, attempts by activists to gain mainstream media coverage for systematic debate on contested issues such as social justice, rights of assembly and freedom of speech is foreclosed by their 'deviant' construction. Politicians also attempt to trivialise any such claims as naïve, irrational, dangerous, un-democratic, self-interested etc.

The silencing of anti-capitalist activists effectively blocks public engagement with the contemporary equivalent of the 'crisis' identified by Cohen (1972) but extends significantly to include a crisis of public trust in political process and institutions. However, there is no moral panic in relation to this new category of folk devil. There has been no widespread debate on the concerns underpinning activists' behaviour because to do so would raise issues of trust in the context of alternatives threatening to established political systems. It is ironic, therefore, that there cannot be a moral panic in relation to

these folk devils without evoking a wider debate on interest representation within representative democracies.

The process of silencing and demonization is ultimately underpinned by anonymising constituent individuals and reducing their identities as the 'mob'. This is an historically persistent process within which sophisticated grievances and proactive stances in relation to social, economic and political innovation are dismissed through active association with violence in the wider public mind (Thompson 1978 esp. 66-73). The possibility that activists may be respectable employed, thoughtful and committed to positive change within society is not widely engaged As the following discussion of the events surrounding the May Day 2000 and 2001 demonstrations in London will show, when the veil created by the folk devil construction is lifted, the reality can be seen to be something significantly different from that suggested by political spin and associated mainstream media coverage.

Creating 'new' folk devils - May Day 2000 and 2001

On May Day 2000, a celebratory protest was organised in Parliament Square in London. The key part of the day was a 'guerrilla gardening' action intended to create an urban garden in front of the Houses of Parliament. The largely peaceful demonstration degenerated with limited violence and property damage after police allowed protestors to leave Parliament Square and enter Whitehall. Some shops, including a McDonalds, were damaged and, more controversially the Cenotaph and a memorial statute to Winston Churchill were defaced. There were 30 arrests on the day and five people were reported to have been injured. Despite this limited level of injury and the small number of arrests that were made, the events of the day rapidly became labelled as being a 'riot'.

These events dominated the front pages of following days' press. Headlines included 'Anarchy thugs riot in central London' (*The Times*, 02.05.00), 'Rioters dishonour war heroes' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 02.05.00), 'Protests erupt in violence', (*The Guardian*),

'May Day Mayhem' (*Daily Express*), 'Riot Yobs desecrate Churchill Monument' (*The Sun*). The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair reportedly described the protesters as being 'beneath contempt' saying:

> 'The people responsible for the damage caused in London today are an absolute disgrace. Their actions have got nothing to do with convictions or beliefs and everything to do with mindless thuggery.' *The Guardian*, 2.05.00.

The UK Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was keen to draw a distinction between 'legitimate' protest and criminal action by saying that the demonstration was 'criminality and thuggery masquerading as political protest' *The Guardian* 2.05.00. However, this simplification hides the reality of the complex nature of the whole protest and as the events of May Day 2000 began to be unpicked in the days that followed these incidents it became apparent that a construction of all the activists as 'mindless thugs' masks a more interesting and reflexive process.

On May 2nd 2000, *The Daily Mail* printed pictures of protesters under the title 'Do you recognise any of the rioters?'. The following day *The Independent*, led with 'PM asks families to name May Day rioters'. The accompanying article reproduced Tony Blair's expression of 'contempt for the rioters' whilst Jack Straw's[5] comments elided 'criminality', 'thuggery' and political protest' (*The Independent* 3.05.00,p.1).

The protestor photographed spray painting Churchill's statue gave himself up in the midst of a nationwide police hunt for more than 200 people. However, far from being a 'mindless thug' the protestor in question was a 25 year old former soldier who had seen active service in Bosnia. As *The Guardian* pointed out that he did not fit the stereotype of a protester or eco-warrior, views strengthened when he appeared in court. It emerged that the protester had a justification for his 'mindless' act of vandalism which he set out as follows:

> 'The May Day celebrations were in the spirit of free expression against capitalism. Churchill was an exponent of capitalism and of imperialism and anti-Semitism. A Tory reactionary vehemently opposed to the emancipation of women and to independence in India. The media machine made this paunchy little man much larger than life – a colossal, towering figure of great stature and bearing with trademark cigar, bowler hat and

> V-sign. The reality was an often irrational, sometimes vainglorious leader whose impetuosity, egotism and bigotry on occasion cost many lives unnecessarily and caused much suffering that was needless and unjustified.' *The Guardian*, 8.05.00

When the stipendiary magistrate asked what he had wanted to achieve by his actions he replied, 'I thought that on a day when people all over the world are gathering to express basic human rights and freedom of expression it was acceptable to challenge an icon of the British establishment.' (*The Guardian* 10.05.00*)*. However, despite this claim to free expression the court sentenced him to 30 days' imprisonment and a fine to compensate for the damage he had caused. An ex-soldier admitting to vandalising the statue of a figure of the British establishment is quite clearly a challenge to the mindless folk devil portrayed in the British news media. Someone with a sophisticated understanding of the role of political leaders in fostering inequalities in the world cannot be easily dismissed as the stereotypic thug of media portrayals.

Other individuals prominent in the protests also confounded simplifying folk devil epithets as *The Sun* headline of May 4th declared 'Eton Boy is Riot Thug' describing the University Professor's son as a 'Self styled Anarchist' who had apparently thrown a plastic bottle at the police. (*The Sun*, 04.05.00, p.1 & 5). Simultaneously *The Daily Telegraph* reported that from the initial 13 people appearing in court, eight 'were born overseas, others were unemployed and one was a Kurdish refugee (4.05.00).

The initial dominance of images and labels of mindless violence precluded any serious attention to the underlying moral, political or ethical concerns of participants in the event whilst the subsequent focus on a notable individual such as the Eton school boy arguably trivialised the event. Despite the condemnation of politicians we have noted, the majority of the events that took place in London on May Day 2000 were in fact peaceful, resulting in no violence or serious damage. The guerrilla gardening event, which had been the main element of the day's action, passed off peacefully leaving the Metropolitan Police's

decision to permit protestors to leave Parliament Square and enter Whitehall a topic of some speculation, which is discussed in depth below.

Conjuring-up the Folk Devil

It is something of an understatement to note that participant's accounts of the events in Parliament Square on May Day 2000 differ markedly from the mainstream media coverage. Reclaim the Streets, who had been participants in the action, commented on their website – 'We're getting accustomed to being presented with a virtual politics that bears no resemblance to the experience of anyone who was there' (http://www.gn.apc.org/rts/mayday 2k/index.htm accessed 18.10.01). Given the spatial location of the protest the interpretative stakes were high and require some contextualisation.

Firstly, the tendency of the media and politicians to question the merits of allowing such 'protests' at all conformed with widespread public beliefs that a gathering of this kind was legally permissible. And yet surprisingly, it is worth noting that this event was, in fact, always unlawful under the Sectional Order of Parliament, which instructs the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to maintain unimpeded access to the Palace of Westminster. Custom and practice thus effectively forbids any protest in an area approximately one mile in diameter to the north of the Thames, an area including Parliament Square.

Consequently, the massive police operation, unprecedented in thirty years, was as much about managing the political theatre of people staking their claim to this piece of land, as it was about any objective sense of threat posed by 'guerrilla gardening'. The police found themselves in a double bind, compelled by political imperative to defend a particular space, described in police parlance as a 'ditch' in which they feel compelled to 'die' (Waddington 1994:66). Guerrilla gardening thus occurred in one of the few places that are regarded as absolutely sacrosanct and to be protected no matter what. The

prospect of media images portraying riot-suited officers fighting with 'gardeners' beneath Big Ben being broadcast around the world from one of the founding seats of democracy elevated the symbolic stakes associated with any confrontation. Allowing the crowd into Whitehall and the opportunity to take out their frustrations on a McDonalds may therefore count as a carefully choreographed public order strategy, something assimilated within activist perceptions of the event.

As a number of participants observed the crowd was allowed by the police to move up Whitehall past an unguarded McDonalds – for many a particularly significant symbol of corporate capitalism against which they were protesting.

> 'The inevitable happened and for a full quarter of an hour those who wished to had a free hand to smash up the restaurant. It was only when surrounding shops were started on that the police miraculously reappeared and swiftly and easily corralled everyone in that section of Whitehall into the secured pen of Trafalgar Square'.
>
> (http://www.urban75.org/mayday/015.html accessed 18.10.01).

The eyewitness, quoted above, was suspicious as to why such an event had taken place, asking the question 'Who stood to benefit from the day ending with a small, totally contained and 99.9% ineffectual disturbance?'(Ibid). The eyewitness's conclusion was that a kind of 'give them enough rope and they will hang themselves' conspiracy had taken place, because the police, the politicians and McDonalds would all benefit from images of the destruction of yet another McDonalds restaurant. Such a conspiracy, if real, would justify the police tactics, allow politicians to 'rail against those advocating direct action' and give the burger company free publicity.

Although *The Evening Standard* tabloid newspaper incorrectly reported at the time that the McDonalds restaurant had been guarded by '12 police officers' (http://www.indymedia.org.uk/newsite/text=softly_policing.txt accessed 18.10.01) John Vidal reporting in *The Guardian* had noted the inevitability of the scenes of destruction – 'The confrontation had to happen. The first 400 people went past McDonalds barely believing it was there, unboarded and unguarded. The second 300 gathered round it'

(Ibid). The idea that the police would open the stage up to a set piece and stereotypical act of destruction of a McDonalds restaurant was further developed in the report of the events on the Indymedia web page:

> As everyone knows, McDonalds' branches under normal circumstances are protected by police whenever such a crowd is set to pass by. This isn't particularly heavy-handed or provocative – it's just what everyone expects, to prevent them being attacked. ITN's late bulletin reported that police had been chased away from McDonalds leaving the 'rioters' a clear run at their target, using police film of fleeing police to back up the narrative. (Ibid)

In effect, the Mayday 2000 carnival against capitalism became transformed from a 'peaceful celebration of the growing global anti-capitalist movement'[6] into a riot. Francis Wheen, writing in *The Guardian* summed up the incredulity of such a label when he described the events as being a 'Small Riot Near Trafalgar Square: No One Dead' (3.05.00). However, as May Day 2001 began to approach the police and politicians were keen to rely on the portrayal of the 2000 events as a serious riot to justify the policies and tactics employed to deal with the coming event in London. The issuing of public warnings of disorder and violence became a feature of the build up to subsequent actions organised by anti-globalisation activists in London, Prague and Genoa.

Consolidating the Folk Devil: May Day 2001

From early 2001, Sir John Stevens - the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police - launched a police media campaign which portrayed protesters as a dangerous threat to society in particularly stark terms. The *Sunday Telegraph* reported in February 2001 that following on from the previous May Day action the 2001 protests would involve:

> … more than 15,000 dedicated, hardened activists from all over Europe [who] will descend on just one target, central London.… Among the anarchists who are likely to attend are those from the Black Flag movement and German terrorists. These are the same people who caused trouble at the meeting of the G8 group of economic powers … at Seattle…. (18.02.01)

Such accounts were reproduced across the spectrum of mainstream print media (see *The Observer* 29.04.01). Photographs of suspected ringleaders were circulated to the press during April 2001 (Vidal and Branigan 2001), despite none having been identified as offenders. Rather they were described in newspaper reports as people 'suspected' by police of 'intending' to cause violence. Newspaper accounts intoned that anarchists were thousands strong, would carry samurai swords, had links with the Real IRA, had been to training camps in USA, and were 'battle hard' from Seattle.

Whilst the media printed stories condusive to a widespread sense of fear amongst the public in relation to the event, and the police mobilised their resources to deal with 'the problem', politicians were also eager to demonstrate their own condemnation of the new deviant group. Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, warned protesters to stay at home and backed the police in arresting anyone whose intention was 'to engage in criminal activities.' (Vidal and Branigan 2001).

The Guardian, reporting on concern over police and politicians media campaigns against the activists, noted that many seasoned campaigners were anxious about the effect of the coverage:

> …the past month more than 100 often hysterical articles have been printed in the mainstream press hyping the violence, with few suggesting that the protesters have any valid point. The unbalance has been remarkable. No one wants to look at why people are protesting. (Vidal and Branigan 2001)

The events of May Day 2000 were repeatedly described by politicians, the police and media as having been 'a riot', something which the facts do not bear out. The media were therefore undertaking an exaggeration process. By overstating the violent nature of the previous years' event, the media were also more than willing to predict, that given the chance, the protesters would do even more damage the next time around.

Arguably, police tactics on May Day 2001 were a deliberate 'trap' set for the protesters. The police engaged in what they called 'zero tolerance' stance, mobilising 6,000 officers whilst holding a further 3,000 in reserve (*The Independent* 2.05.01). Following the prominent media statements warning of violence from a hardcore of troublemakers within a protest anticipated to be 10,000 strong the actual turn out was estimated at between 3000 and 5,000. Many of the most sophisticated street organisers within activist circles eschewed the event on the grounds that nothing positive could be achieved in such circumstances. Outnumbered, organisers' plans for a mobile day of mixed carnivalesque events, based on the board game Monopoly, ended with protestors surrounded by police lines in Oxford Circus.

Known as 'kettling', this policing tactic is used widely on mainland Europe and its use in London reflected intense collaboration between police and security services. The cordon was held for over six hours with those present not being allowed to leave for any reason what-so-ever unless they volunteered their names and addresses and consented to having a police photograph taken. There were a small number of skirmishes between protesters and the police the majority of which resulted from demonstrators' frustrations at being forcibly corralled.

The tabloid media emphasised the success of the police action. The *Daily Mail* ran under a headline reading 'Day the Law fought back' (2.05.01) with *The Mirror* announcing the result as if reporting on a football match 'One Nil To The Bill' (2.05.01). Both front pages carried the same photograph depicting a protester being beaten over the head by a police baton. *The Sun's* coverage announced 'Mayhem Across The World – Going Nuts in May' depicting the 'Face of hate' as protestors clashed with police in London, Australia, France, Korea, Germany, Pakistan and Russia (2.05.01, 12-13). Participants were variously described as being a 'mob', 'anarchists' and 'thugs'. The broadsheets' carried images of police surrounding protestors in Oxford Circus, with *The Daily Telegraph* headline declaring 'Police quell May Day threat' (2.05.01) whilst *The Times* considered: 'Rain rescues capitalism from spike-haired hoard' (2.05.01). *The*

Independent and *The Guardian* headlines respectively declared 'Scuffles mar May Day protest'& 'Police set trap for protests'(2.05.01).

Politicians had sought to declare the stakes in advance with Prime Minister Tony Blair, reprising the threat of violence, questioning the legitimacy of protestors concerns and upholding the democratic right to peaceful protest:

> The limits are passed when protesters, in the name of some spurious cause, seek to inflict fear, terror, violence and criminal damage on people and property…. There is a right way to protest in a democracy and there is a wrong way. Britain and its people are not just tolerant of peaceful protest but see it, rightly, as part of part of our democratic process. (*The Guardian* 1.05.01)

On the day itself one of the organisers reportedly addressed the crowd echoing this call for peaceful protest whilst making it clear that any attempt at heavy handed policing would be met in kind:

> Let me tell the police: we are not here for a violent confrontation. But if you fuck with us we will not stand back. We want no trouble or aggression but the democratic right to protest peacefully and that is what we are going to exercise. (*The Guardian*, 2.05.01, 4).

Although there was little criticism of the police tactics on the day by mainstream media organisations, by mid June the civil rights group Liberty had informed the police that they could be sued for 'unlawfully detaining' activists in the police cordon on Oxford Street (*The Guardian* 12.06.01). Later the same year The Wombles, part of the tutti bianche or white overall movement, subsequently challenged the tactic of kettling more directly. Seven wombles were arrested and brought to court where five were released after it was ruled that arresting officers had acted unlawfully (*The Guardian*, 4.05.02, 13).

However, the police were clearly engaged in what they perceived as a win-win situation in their treatment of the protesters. Had violence on the day been extensive, then police

warnings to this effect would have been justified. As it was, a relatively peaceful day, with the police largely maintaining control arguably demonstrated the wisdom of being prepared. Conversely, it might be argued that the police faced a lose-lose situation: having been widely condemned for under-policing May Day 2000 whilst appearing heavy handed in 2001. At face value this counter argument has some merit but, as we have demonstrated, during the vital high profile post-event coverage such criticism was not part of the dominant discourses within print media coverage. Further, it is clear that the prior demonization of the protest movement by sections of the press, police and politicians meant that the odds were stacked against a policing strategy congruent with the carnival atmosphere sought by the organisers despite the Metropolitan Police Force's decades of experience of such policing at the annual Notting Hill Carnival. In 2002 the Met's position remained virtually unchanged with assistant commissioner Mike Todd reportedly instructing officers to use 'in your face' tactics with protestors regarded as potential rioters (Hopkins et.al. 2002).

Within activist circles there is a strong sense of being 'policed out' resulting in residual frustrations and the search for further innovations in repertoires of action. The kettling, containment and harassment detailed here coincided with anti-terrorism and public order legislation which has arguably further eroded rights of assembly and expression in line with Tony Blair's post May Day 2002 statement that:

> If you have got something to say, say it democratically. Come out and vote, but don't end up trying to beat the place up because your politics aren't shared by the vast majority of people. (Hopkins et.al. 2002).

Such views resonate with U.S. government thinking which has seen the introduction of 'free speech zones'[7], specially designated areas, frequently far-removed from the source of protestors' concerns, within which dissent can be voiced.

'Feedback' – Playing the Game in Prague

In this final section we demonstrate how the construction of anti-globalisation activists as folk devils is transmitted across national boundaries producing interesting modalities

arising from the interaction of various national policing and protest cultures. Following May Day 2000 the IMF / WB summit to be held in Prague on September 26th was widely seen as a significant event in terms of such protests. Preparations for the event included detailed briefings of the Czech police and security forces by the deputy director of the FBI Thomas Packard (*Pravo* 29.08.00 p.2) and European security services. Given the Czech Republics recent emergence as a 'democracy' there was little experience of policing civil demonstrations and significant know how and equipment specifications were imparted in this process to the satisfaction of US agencies (*Lidove noviny* 31.08.00, p.2). *Lidove noviny* also reported the operations of 'radicals from the USA' and 'west European countries' who were 'training their Czech colleagues' (Ibid) for an event characterised by the headline 'Police and demonstrators are preparing for a "war" (*Lidove noviny* 21.09.00, p.2). A number of interviewees reported that the citizens of Prague were advised to leave the city with schools being closed to facilitate this. On the day there was an overwhelming display of force from the Czech police that included blocking the route of the main march towards the conference centre with two Armoured Personnel Carriers and a number of rows of riot police kitted out in full Kevlar body-armour.

Despite the demonization of activists the Prague event reveals that the targets of the folk devil construct are not without power however, having an ability to appropriate and subvert the discourses of marginalisation. This is a significant shift from traditional accounts of the folk devil. For example, during the protests, we find groups such as the Italian social activists 'Ya Basta!'[8] elaborating the outlaw theme and embracing their role as 'outsiders'. Using their understanding of the dynamics between media, police and activists, Ya Basta! provided a form of 'feedback' – a distorted amplification of the folk devil image that sought to re-orient the debate about criminality and civil disobedience. Ya Basta! embraced the outsider motif and used it to their own advantage in their literature and in the development of their activism - thus at the Prague protests they claimed that they would 'liquidate' the International Monetary Fund. This 'liquidation' was not about using violence but using water pistols and water bombs instead:

> We are criminal, delinquents, and outlaws: using our weapons we shall take what is ours. And if the booty we are after is a universal citizens' income, where should we strike, if not at a meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund? And if we want to liquidate them, what better weapons than water filled weapons?[9]

The confrontation between the white overalls of Ya Basta! and the black riot uniforms of the police conjured up the classic binary opposition of black/white that has symbolically denotes good and evil. News footage of this clash was difficult to 'consume' in the same way as images of violence featuring protestors in black balaclavas. This interaction required explanation and some measure of the appropriateness of the state response, the joke here appeared to be on the police.

This style of protest presented a challenge to dominant media representations of the anti-capitalist protesters. Unable to place them easily into the violent category, sections of the British press described their actions as a 'surreal' battle in which 'Ya Basta threw coloured balloons at the police, who popped them' (*The Independent* 27.09.00, p.2). To the Czech press however, Ya Basta! represented an Italian 'hard left' faction intent on destruction (*Pravo* 27.09.00, p.2). Ya Basta!'s ability to re-orient the framing of the interaction between police and protesters was clearly mediated by reportage categories prioritised by different elements of the media. Irrespective of this, Ya Basta!s 'presentation of self' demonstrates the reflexive capacities developed within global movements based on direct communication, dedicated movement media channels which render tangible the diverse constituencies present within such events (Chesters and Welsh, 2004, 2005).

Prague empirically demonstrated this diversity, further illustrating the point that mass gatherings are not homogeneous 'mobs', by staging three colour coded marches, pink, blue and yellow, with each colour symbolically denoting a particular orientation towards the event. The avowedly carnivalesque 'pink' march (see Chesters and Welsh 2004)

navigated through the streets probing weak points in the police fortifications of the conference centre. 'Pink' coalesced from elements of the British direct action scene, including Earth First! (Wall 1999) and Reclaim the Streets central to events in London. Their commitment to forms of carnival as street protest originated in activists desire to confuse and disturb the familiar drama of police/protester relations that was seen to be increasingly ritualised, violent and inhibiting. In Prague, street tactics included a simple navigation system using bicycle outriders to reconnoitre the immediate route and to report back upon the possibilities for movement and action, which were then decided upon through consensus processes. To key Czech observers' the ensuing pattern of movement appeared chaotic and incoherent 'because they didn't have any Czechs with them' (Interview 12.09.01). Far from being chaotic the movements were systemic and achieved the objective of gaining access to the conference enclave by exploiting weaknesses in police lines.

As we have shown the same simplifying themes of violence and the mob were widely reproduced within the Czech print media. As a former Czech dissident colleague of President Vaclav Havel commented, despite his best attempts to achieve a 'win – win' outcome for the Prague event:

> Czech media failed in informing the public um … I mean, you know at the end I think it was 26 shop windows broken. The next morning all major dailies used the word "war" in the uh . . headlines on the front pages so hell for Czech's 26 shop windows equals war. Um ... this was revolting. (Interview 12.09.01)

One report reproduced police estimates that 80% of participants had been 'aggressive persons willing to provoke clashes with police and destroy property' detailing almost 900 arrests, criminal charges against 18 'foreigners' and 2 Czech nationals, 142 injured demonstrators, 123 injured police and damage estimated at CZK 20m (*Lidove noviny*, 29.09.00, p.1).

Against such simplification, central to the construction of a folk devil lies a range of complex interactions reflecting the diverse, purposive, expressive and reflexive activities of a movement that cannot be simply reduced to violence and the mob. The means by which Ya Basta! regained some control over their image and challenged the media portrayal of activists and the mobile reflexivity of the 'Pink' march suggests that there are significant differences between the anti-globalisation movement and the traditional national folk devil.

Historically, many activists have had the sophistication to challenge their demonization but their means of communication have remained confined to limited circles insufficient to counteract mainstream press representations. Now, within the contemporary milieu, the Internet offers a significant tool that allows activists the opportunity to take some control over the way news is reported (Pickerill, 2003) and becomes a key resource for mainstream media commentators. Groups such as Indymedia (Atton, 2003), Undercurrents, and journals such as UK based *Do or Die* (Atton 2002), all provide an alternative view of the public and political sphere. Although large sections of the public may not directly hear these alternative voices, it remains the case that, moral panic or not, this group of folk devils is very unlikely to be a silent and passive target of vilification and marginalisation.

Conclusions

In this paper we have traced attempts to construct anti-capitalist protestors and their actions in a manner consistent with the treatment of folk devils as initially defined by Cohen (1972). Whilst Cohen's emphasis on the media practices of exaggeration, prediction and symbolisation are clearly present in relation to each of the events detailed here we have argued that this is in effect a 'new' and problematic type of folk devil.

Traditional folk devils become powerfully associated with a moral panic through the attachment of simplifying deviance frames and the ensuing public engagement with the

threat to established order via expert interpretation. We would suggest that there is an absence of such associated crisis in the case of the anti-capitalist movement which requires analysis and explanation. There is little evidence of the accompanying moral outrage from the familiar source of expert commentators such as academics and religious leaders. In our introductory section we noted the extension of terrorist tropes to an increasingly wide range of environmental and social justice actors prior to events of 9/11 and the subsequent 'war' on terrorism. Given the degree of overlapping membership between anti-capitalist and anti-war movements, the endorsement of anti-war stances by 'experts' such as the Arch Bishop of Canterbury reflects a wider social ambiguity over the stakes articulated by such activism. The distance between public and activists orientations towards protest activities asserted by Tony Blair, in the wake of May Day events in London, is far less clear cut than his formulation suggests.

In the aftermath of May Day 2000, speculation within movement circles focussed upon whether London EF! And RTS would ever have the credibility to mount a major event ever again. Whilst activists were questioning their continued viability in the face of the barrage of media condemnation public attitudes were somewhat less clear cut. A Democratic Audit survey (http://www.fhit.org.democratic_audit) sought responses to the statement 'If governments don't listen, peaceful protests, blockades and demonstrations are legitimate ways of expressing people's concerns'. Amongst respondents 49% agreed strongly whilst a further 32% tended to agree a combined total of 81%. Such polling evidence leaves interpretation of 'peaceful' open but taken with other indicators, such as not guilty jury verdicts in trials involving activists from Trident Ploughshares charged with criminal damage on military bases, point to a public sphere which resonates with aspects of the anti-capitalist movements' case and moral principles.

Such public ambivalence is key in understanding the importance of the silencing process we have argued is central in the construction of this new folk devil. If a debate is opened up about the underlying moral and ideological elements that might explain the actions of the activists this would require an exploration of some of the very issues which they are

trying to draw public attention to. In order to maintain the silencing process, there needs to be no accompanying debate about the activists beyond their deviancy and naïveté.

Compared to traditional 'folk devils' as outsiders the new use of the folk devil category does not fall so clearly into the outsider/insider approach. The development of anti-capitalist activists as a category of folk devil serves a number of aims. The activist as demon may offer a way for the established system to re-entrench the dominance of the primary political, constitutional and economic system, something understood by the traditional account. However, the political dynamic between the established system and the ideological challenge from outside is more complex than this anxiety theory approach suggests. Anti-capitalist activists represent a systemic challenge to the established system compared to traditional folk devils.

'Normal' folk devils are marginalized by their pre-existing marginal position in society and are therefore an easy and often convenient target. On the other hand, anti-capitalist activists are marginalized for their very dangerousness and their self-identification. They do not start out silent within civil society; they do have a voice, albeit a voice from the political outside. Thus, one of the hoped for effects of the construction of activists as folk devils is to silence voices of opposition to the system. This is important because it re-affirms Melucci's (1996) argument that most political discourse seeks to deny the existence of fundamental conflicts about the production and appropriation of social resources by reducing everything to a question of grievances or political claims. Finally, the demonization of activists militates against large sections of society identifying with their actions. By removing the identity of the individuals and focussing on the group as 'anarchists' and 'thugs' they become associated with the violence that the media chooses to focus upon, not the message their activism seeks to advance.

The development of a new type of folk devil in the form of the anti-capitalist activist, therefore, offers some new challenges for our understanding of the construction of

deviancy. Although there are similarities with the more traditional approach, the effects of creating this new folk devil are more complex and multi-faceted than the usual results of moral panics. The degree of reflexivity demonstrated by activists and movements and the accompanying desire to subvert established encounters with the police have already catalysed hybrid repertoires of protest that seek to exploit the possibilities of 're-framing' how these events are communicated (Welsh and Chesters, 2001). The addition of the social forum movement (Sen *et. al*., 2004) to the anti-capitalist movements repertoires represents a further strengthening of the proactive elements of these movements making it increasingly difficult to present these protests as solely the product of a new 'folk-devil'.

One possible outcome is that politicians will seek the social-democratic assimilation of these movements through some new political settlement. It seems more likely that the criminal justice systems will be left to 'police the new crisis of interest representation' in democracies confronted by the pressures of neo-liberal globalisation. In the UK, New Labour is reported to have created more than 600 new criminal offences since 1997 (Kettle 2004) whilst media reportage on terrorism since 9/11 has proliferated despite there being fewer actual terrorist events per year since 2001 (Lewis 2004). It would appear that the extension of terrorist tropes to more and more, far from marginal social locations, is set to construct more rebels with a cause who will appear within the criminal justice system leaving judges and juries confronted with the task of reconciling underlying motivations, 'deviant' behaviour and what constitutes legitimate forms of protest.

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[1] Methodologically the data used in preparing this paper is based on a processual approach emphasizing pre-event, event and post-event frames derived from mainstream media and movement media. Czech print media were collated; headlines translated into English and selected items translated in full. One of the authors made direct observations and video capture during May Day 2000 and Prague during September 2000. Limited use has been made of interview material with Czech, American and UK participants in the Prague protest. These interviews covered key actors involved in organizational tasks including street

actions, legal briefings and media work. This work was supported by ESRC grant R000223486. Further details of this approach can be found in Chesters and Welsh 2004 and Welsh and Chesters 2001. This work will be elaborated in full in Chesters and Welsh 2005.

[2] Tony Blair, *The Guardian*, 2/5/00

[3] For example Section 68 created the offence of aggravated trespass, which includes the requirement of intimidating or disrupting a lawful activity and was thought originally to have been created to deal with hunt saboteurs, the first arrest under the powers being used against such activists, although has since been used against a variety of direct action activists – e.g. with was widely used by police at the Newbury bypass protest.

[4] The definition of terrorism under the new legislation is a threat or use of action which under S2 - (a) 'involves serious violence against a person, (b) involves serious damage to property, (c) endangers a person's life … (d) creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public … or (e) is designed seriously to interfere with or seriously disrupt an electronic system' where such actions are under S1(b) 'designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public', and (c) 'the use or threat is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.'

[5] Jack Straw also sought to shift some blame for damage to public memorials onto English Heritage and the Royal Parks Agency for not having them boarded up prior to the event.

[6] Reclaim the Streets leaflet Guerrilla Gardening 2000

[7] The irony of this Orwellian term was not lost on Congressman Barney Frank who commented: 'As we read the First Amendment to the Constitution, the United States is a "free speech zone!"' – www.house.gov/frank/scprotester2003.html

[8] 'Ya Basta' (Enough!) and the closely affiliated 'Tute Bianche' (White Overalls) have been highly visible at anti-capitalist actions throughout Europe, latterly metamorphosising in to the broader 'disobbedienti' network (the disobedients) They regularly caught the media's attention because of the theatrical element to their protest - they dressed in white with many wearing padding made of foam rubber and cardboard to demonstrate their need to be protected from police assault. Their presence provided a strong visual effect which was actively coupled with humour to undermine and deconstruct the expected dynamics of protest and political engagement through civil disobedience. This style has since been copied throughout Europe including the Wombles at the London May Day 2001 action.

[9] *Ya Basta!* Agit-prop.