4

The abuse of childhood

We might rightly suppose that children have been and will continue to be a constant component of human society. Individuals and collectivities reproduce themselves both biologically and culturally and children are practical embodiments of these processes. Children constitute the perpetual renewal of human relations. They are encoded bio-genetically but also imbued with social values and cultural capital through early socialization and formal education.[1] Children are a concrete presence with needs, demands, dispositions and a burgeoning intentionality, but they also comprise analytic trajectories in terms of the psychological projections and collective expectations of the larger, and more powerful, adult group within society. The former is a world created for them through their 'natural' character and the latter a world constrained for them through their 'social' status. The latter is the world that we refer to as 'childhood'.

The vast body of literature written with a concern for the history of childhood, partly reviewed and analysed in the previous chapter, indicates that the socio-cultural context within which the 'natural' child has lived through the ages has varied considerably.[2] The phenomenological outcome of this well-documented diachronic instability has been that childhood itself has not been a constant within the historical process. As a social status childhood has come to be variously recognized and understood through its apprehension

in routinely emergent collective perceptions that are grounded in changing politics, philosophy, economics, social policy or whatever. Such knowledge is a central feature of this chapter, we must envision the child within a broad cultural context.

   The written history of childhood is a territory well charted and populated with persuasive ideas that have, in many senses, burdened us with a vision of the child through modernity that has overwhelmed our capacity to theorize the child in the rapidly transforming conditions of late-modernity. This is an unfortunate consequence in two ways: first, because we all might tend to operate with an outmoded and inappropriate set of expectations and demands on today's child as an existential practice,[3] and second, because we are unreflexive concerning our own relationship with childhood and the compound set of issues in regard to our own individual self-identity, our shared senses of collective value, and our general appreciation of the condition of late-modern society.

AN INCREASE IN CHILD ABUSE?

This chapter is concerned to initiate the articulation of a new and different vision of the child; however, it sets out from a modern social problem. This is the problem of child abuse that we now recognize as an intensively documented aspect of the contemporary practical relationship between adults and children. More specifically then, my starting point is the seemingly unprecedented increase in child abuse in Western societies over the last three decades. Such abuse is not singular in its manifestations, which include physical,[4] sexual[5] and psychological or emotional[6] forms, its etiologies are manifold and its impact on the individually engaged personalities is complex, in every sense. In this chapter, however, I realize 'abuse' as a unitary phenomenon for I am interested in the nature of our collective responses to it rather than in the construction of a morphology of its types or in the production of a causal analysis to account for its occurrence.[7] To this end I attempt an examination of the application and meaning of the very idea of 'abuse' within modern discourses about childhood; that is, I investigate its intentional or purposive character. In this sense actual child abuse is only the beginning of our real topic and the kernel of my theoretical interest in child abuse is the current collective upsurge of interest in it. Finkelhor had prefigured this

perspective in his work, specifically on sexual abuse, when he wrote:

> Whenever a social problem appears suddenly, and of great magnitude, we are apt to wonder why. More than any other social problem in recent memory, sexual abuse has risen precipitously in public awareness from virtual obscurity to extreme high visibility. Why has this emergence been so dramatic?[8]

What I suggest then, is that the phenomenon of child abuse has emerged as a malign and exponential growth towards the conclusion of the twentieth century not because of any significant alteration in the pattern of our behaviour towards children but because of the changing patterns of personal, political and moral control in social life more generally which have, in turn, affected our vision of childhood. Whereas an antique vision of the child rendered abuse unseen or unintelligible, modernity illuminated mistreatment and highlighted the necessity of care. However, the late-modern, emergent vision of the child, discussed here, brings abuse into prominence through scrutiny and surveillance[9] but also through the peculiar structural demands on the constitution of personal identity and social relationships wrought through accelerative social change.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF CHILD ABUSE

The mythology of child abuse must surely begin with the story of Medea. Her grisly legend, as conveyed by Euripides and by Seneca, is instructive of the shock and outrage expressed, both publicly and privately, in response to the spectrum of damage that has been inflicted upon children, by adults, from antiquity up until the present day. It is instructive further in relation to the intelligibility of such abhorrent acts as emanating not so much from devils and stereotypical perverts as from members of that same outraged public…real people.

Medea, a sorceress, who having aided Jason in his quest to obtain the Golden Fleece, became his consort and, subsequently, mother of their two sons. Jason later abandoned her and she, in a ferocious state of negative passion, burned down their palace, murdered the King of Corinth and the princess, her rival, and then fled to Athens with her own children whom she ritualistically slaughtered en route.

This catalogue of carnage and destruction was not, tragically enough, directed specifically at its subjects but rather at Jason for his betrayal. A nemesis with its victim at one remove; the immediate sufferers being secondary to the noumenon of the act, but suffering supremely, nevertheless. This resonates with the diffuse, and often unintended, consequences wrought through the exercise of modern forms of social control.

The classical point of this moral tale is to express the potential magnitude of a woman's desire for revenge; so consuming that she could overcome her maternal drives and kill her own offspring. One point that I wish to extrapolate from this fable is the recognition of, though not justification for, the human possibility of transcending the 'natural', or rather transgressing the 'cultural',[10] that appears to have become utterly routine in the commission of acts of child abuse in contemporary society.

Progressive society provides us with few reasons for indignation, the child abuser, we might suggest, is the last domestic variety. All 'decent' and 'right-thinking' people know that adults regard childhood as a state of dependency that we relate to through strategies of care. Physical, sexual and psychological abuse have no part in either the moral or the material contexts of adult-child relationships. The invocation of the normative assumptions inherent in the notions of 'decency' and 'right-mindedness' is a deliberate device to open up their ideological connotations that I shall latterly expand.

Medea's story tells us two other things that I will also subsequently develop: first, that child abuse is nothing new, it has always been an immanent feature of the relationship between adults and the young, concretely the potential resides within the differentials of both power and status. Thus, despite the fact that modern paediatric history would have us believe that Freud invented childhood sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century, that the recommended repression of the twentieth century had driven it underground and that we, collectively, have re-invented it in the face of the coming *fin de siècle,* it will be my contention that childhood libido, along with the innocence and the evil of children have all, in an analytic rather than any positivistic sense, always been with us—just as has adult usage. The erotic in child-adult relationships has been newly articulated in relation to the axes of purity and danger though, as Freud discovered, it has never been a dimension of human experience that dares to speak its name too loudly:

> Naturally the main opprobrium fell on his [Freud's] assertion that children are born with sexual urges, which undergo a complicated development before they attain the familiar adult form, and that their first sexual objects are their parents. This assault on the pristine innocence of childhood was unforgivable. In spite of the contemporary furore and abuses, however, which continued for perhaps twenty years, time worked its way with the book, and Freud's prediction that its conclusions would before long be taken for granted is approaching fulfilment.[11]

Second, and in line with the ideas of the social constructionists,[12] the hermeneutic fecundity of Medea's story, which I have already constituted as instancing 'abuse' and/or 'revenge', enables us to reveal the socially contexted and historically semantic character of this phenomenon, and indeed, any other social phenomenon. This is no slight attempt to depotentiate or trivialize the life-damaging trauma that can so often stem from the experience of 'abuse' in its variety of manifestations, but rather a careful examination of the application and meaning of the very idea of 'abuse' within modern discourses about childhood, that is, its intentional character. Thus, as I have already stated, a large part of my theoretical interest in child abuse is the current collective upsurge of interest in child abuse.

This discursive myth of Medea from which I begin, and the codes that it sets, require unscrambling but not, however, with the confidence that might seem to suggest that such a complex and confusing phenomenon as current-day child abuse can be simply explained. Let us now relocate our encoded concerns within the current myth, that is, the unprecedented explosion in the occurrence of child abuse in Western culture over the last three decades. The sustained application of the concept of myth here is in no sense meant to prejudge or diminish the phenomenon. The concept is reinvoked not as a concrete description of a fictitious story but in the anthropological sense of defining the cultural process, in narrative form, by which a society attempts to render meaningful and coherent the relationship between existing cosmologies and emergent behavioural anomalies. So what are the conventional explanations of the recent 'given' increase, and well-documented increase, in cases of child abuse?

CONTEMPORARY EXPLANATIONS OF CHILD ABUSE

What is clearly true is that a vastly increasing number of cases of child abuse are reported now than was the case thirty, or even twenty, years ago. This primarily indicates a conceptual and methodological discrepancy between 'incidence' and prevalence'.[13] However the increase was, at its inception, viewed by many commentators as a social trend, and initial explanations for this apparent trend were sadly simplistic, a weakness stemming from the face-value positivism at the heart of their grasp of the issue. The face-value explanations are almost universally short-term, they are synchronic and hold synchronic homologies with the phenomenon itself—they refer largely to the modern nuclear family, its transfiguration and the threats to its inherent stability. They are interesting in a variety of ways, both analytic and ideological, but also when read in relation to work by Ferguson, albeit writing in another context, who stated that:

> However exaggerated or oversimplified the claims of a generation of sociologists directly linking the 'emergence' of the modern nuclear family with the rise of the bourgeoisie may be, there seems little doubt that the image of childhood has undergone significant changes during the development of capitalism.[14]

The explanations to which I refer are relatively dispersed in their origins but succinctly assembled by Finkelhor,[15] even though it is clear that he does not necessarily agree with them or their implications for social policy and social change. The primary point would seem to stem from a 'functionalist' position, or what has been referred to elsewhere as a 'New Rightist' view of the family.[16] The argument notes and bewails the seemingly rapid deterioration and enfeeblement of the connubial bond over the last thirty years. What, it is noted, accompanies such a withering, is not a disillusionment with partnering relationships so much as a relentless and relatively uncommitted domestic mobility. People change partners more readily and more often. This means, in turn, that children are more subject to the close and continued company of step-fathers and boyfriends while simultaneously unprotected by the incest taboo, but also children are routinely party to the conflicts and strains that accompany either the forging of new relationships or the breakdown of those already established. With the shift in this

affective centre of modern social life, it is argued, children become less integrated through care and thus subject to higher risk from all forms of abuse.

Parallel with the preceding explanation is the widely held view that the moral, or rather the sexual, climate has altered in modern Western societies since the 1960s. A consequence, and purpose, of this much vaunted period of recent history was the supposed liberalization of collective constraint and individual attitude towards sexual practices. The impact of such a process, it has been claimed, is the diffusion of standards constituting proper sexual conduct and the erosion of the conventional authority behind previously exercised sexual prohibitions. Although much is made through everyday folklore and the mass media about the fixity and the proprietal character of the practices of the past age (and one suspects that this is not the unique province of the generation straddling the 1960s 'sexual revolution'), it is a vast step to proposing a causal relation with, rather than a correlation or elective affinity with, or at most an aggravation of, the problem of child abuse. It is an argument as tenuous as, and indeed of the same order as, that which regards rape as being instigated by pornography.

Finally, an extension of the preceding argument, and one also reviewed by Finkelhor, is that the 1960s also created an ungrounded and thus unrealistic anticipation, on the part of individuals, of a higher level and greater intensity of sexual activity. Such raised expectations, faced with the reality of an unaltered state of availability of willing sexual partners may, it is supposed, divert the falsely inflated desires of some men to the more pliant and subservient object provided by the child.

Much of this psycho-sociological speculation takes the problem as given, the phenomenon as short-term and local and the explanation as available, and readily so, at the level of attitude.

Let us now begin to expand and problematize our topic and place it, more relatively and, I would suggest, more instructively, within the context of changing social structures. Let us, then, set out from a childhood historicity.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHILD AND CHILD ABUSE

In the last chapter we saw that Ariès, DeMause, Shorter and a whole corpus of, what I am referring to as, post- or neo-Enlightenment

historians have generated accounts of the evolution of childhood status that share certain tenets. These tenets are: (a) that once childhood as a category of persons was not part of society's collective perceptions; (b) that childhood and patterns of child care have evolved into being; (c) that such an evolution has harnessed our affections for children but has been directed by the advancement of ideas in relation to philosophies of human nature, theories of education, economies of human capital, and the politics of human rights; (d) that the emotional, physical and psychological needs of children are increasingly well taken care of; and (e) that overall, the experience of childhood in contemporary society supersedes all previous historical manifestations.

What none of these accounts provides is any explanation for the unprecedented occurrence of child abuse in modern Western society. Indeed, if the logic of their arguments were to achieve its telos then our very topic would have disappeared. Their analytic gradient tilting us into modernity rests on a Darwinian aggregate of evolution, growth, visibility, improvement, achievement and rectitude. The only possible explanation for modern child abuse within such a framework would be utterly individualistic, not conceivably an inherent feature of modern social structures, but rather gross individual psycho-pathology or forms of atavism— that is, explanation through the devices of the stereotypical 'pervert' or 'molester' which common sense so readily brings to mind. The kind of creature emerging from such an explanation would be so unrecognizable in our scale of social types that we even permit its placement lowest within hierarchies of pathology—for example, Rule 43 prisoners, the 'nonces' within the British penal system, the sexual offenders nominally segregated but practically prey to the sustained harassment and violence of staff and inmates alike, with the implicit approval of all.

This is, of course, no more than a convenient displacement of the problem and simply not true. The vast majority of child abusers are parents, step-parents, siblings or trusted kin,[17] the evidence suggesting that this covers between 75 and 90 per cent of all recorded cases. So we are not seeking explanation in terms of occasional, random occurrences or shadowy, hyperbolic figures of evil, rather we are seeking the routine and the commonplace—the normal type of people who have mundane relationships with children. It is not public parks and crawling cars that are the primary source of threat to the child, but the family. The family is one of the most dangerous places for children to live in.[18]

The analytic gradient has to be levelled, it cannot be that once there were no distinguishable children, now the world is organized in relation to children, that once abuse of people was rife, now abuse of children is unthinkable. Rather I would argue that child abuse is not an original event, there has never been a historical period nor a particular society in which children were not exploited, sexually molested and subjected to physical and psychological violence.[19] It might be plausible to argue, adopting a long-term historical view, that abuse is declining rather than increasing, that it is better to have been a child in Thatcher's Britain than in that of Dickens, or a child of modern Western Europe than of antiquity in Asia. However, the point remains, child abuse is neither a thing of the past nor is it original—it is a constant feature of human social relations. Freeman[20] argued similarly that abuse is rooted in our earliest myths and history. He produces a socio-legal chronology of the benchmarks in child protection such as the 1883 Report of Commissioners on Employment of Children in Factories which deplored the cruel attitudes and practices of adult workers towards their younger colleagues and made recommendations for positive reform. However, changes and innovations such as these, he suggested, may have appeared to benefit children but have not necessarily meant a decline in the level of child abuse. No evidence that he points to is sufficient to convince us that child abuse is less prevalent today than it has been in previous epochs. Freeman further concluded that the 'discovery' of child abuse as a social problem in more recent years is not necessarily attributable to an increase in abuse itself.

Kempe, an American paediatrician with an established research record in this field (indeed he is often referred to as 'the discoverer' or, rather more ironically, 'the founding father' of child abuse), concurs with the view that child abuse is a perennial feature of human societies. When, in the 1960s, radiologists in certain American hospitals began to publish reports on bone fractures in young children that were either not accounted for or inadequately explained by their parents, it was Kempe who generated the concept of the 'battered baby' and began to make public the syndrome of child abuse. The 'battered baby' became transformed, in the less-accusatory parlance of the British social services, into the 'non-accidental injury', but it was, and remained, Kempe's formulation of a new category of social problem that prevailed. The 'new-ness' of the problem took on a different and more subtle form when Kempe drew a distinction between changing social practices and changing social perceptions in relation to child abuse.

> A book on child abuse could not have been written one hundred years ago. If an investigator from the 1970s were to be transported back to the 19th century so he could survey the family scene with modern eyes, child abuse would be clearly visible to him. In the past, however, it was largely invisible to families and their communities. Before it could be acknowledged as a social ill, changes had to occur in the sensibilities and outlook of our culture.[21]

So from the 'invention' of child abuse in the 1960s Kempe's position seems to transform into a 'dis-covery' of child abuse in the 1970s. The prevalence of child abuse as a social practice, far from spontaneously re-generating in the second half of the twentieth century, had, in fact, been constant, which is testified to by Kempe's renewed interest in the historical dimension of the phenomenon.[22] However, the incidence of child abuse during that period, in terms of reported and recorded occurrence, was to be treated as a novel phenomenon, an expanding phenomenon, and a phenomenon worthy of further explanation in itself.

In many senses we can now see that Kempe has much in common with the post-Rousseaunian optimism concerning the child shared by Ariès, DeMause and Shorter. He is not, however, insisting that our practices in relation to children have become necessarily more refined and less abusive, but that our social attitudes towards children in general have become more alert, caring and loving. What follows from this is that as a collectivity we are more watchful and attentive to the nurture, protection and well-being of our young. It is not essentially that the character or pattern of our actions towards children has altered but that our threshold of tolerance of potentially 'abusive' conduct has lowered, in the same way that yesterday's sexual banter between men and women has become, through a shift in perspective, today's sexual harassment. Now such a lowering of our tolerance, a shift in perspective, does not usually come about at random or through the desires of the people at large, it is usually driven. The forces behind such a switch are the discourses that politicize events and have the power to transform previously held cultural configurations. These forces are primarily intellectual, but eventually governmental and, through the mediation of social policy and legislation, such forces eventually become dispersed and accepted, or 'normalized', in everyday language. As Foucault has stated in relation to incest:

Incest was a popular practice, and I mean by this, widely practised among the populace, for a very long time. It was towards the end of the 19th century that various social pressures were directed against it. And it is clear that the great interdiction against incest is an invention of the intellectuals…. If you look for studies by sociologists or anthropologists of the 19th century on incest you won't find any. Sure, there were some scattered medical reports and the like, but the practice of incest didn't really seem to pose a problem at the time.[23]

THE POLITICIZATION OF CHILD ABUSE

Clearly, as has been cited by Mayes *et al*.,[24] the two primary agencies engaged in the politicization of child abuse were both the Women's Movement and the child protection movement. Both groups were ultimately instrumental in instigating change in relation to public awareness and professional practice, even though both groups formulated the issue of abuse in very different ways and proposed very different remedies.

The child protection lobby tended to promote accounts in terms of family dysfunction, theories traceable to Parsonian systems theory. Here the basic model was that of the homeostatic unit generating social stability through the allocation and maintenance of roles, and psychological stability through the satisfaction of need-dispositions. An explanation of abuse might occur in relation to the failure of appropriate allocation or satisfaction, thus within such a holistic explanatory mode all members of a family were potentially complicit in the exercise of abusive practice.[25] So, for example, a spouse's withdrawal from sexual activity with their partner might divert anger or desire towards the children. The alternative, or often supplementary, mode of explanation within the child protection movement was that in terms of a 'cycle of abuse'. Here, emanating from an essentially behaviouristic model, it was argued that the abused grow up to practise abuse, indeed they become skilled abusers. The theorizing within the child protection movement sanctified the family and a view of the necessary role of the properly patterned relationship between men and women in promoting a healthy and thriving environment for the child. As a consequence it tended to recommend the preservation of the family through

remedial therapy. What it also achieved was a shift in focus from the victim to the abuser and thus also made available the possibility of directing attention, if not blame, towards the mother. The politics of the child protection movement were essentially rooted in the conservation of the existing social order and as such it contained no concerted analysis of power relations within that order.

It was precisely this last omission that was the point of leverage for the women's movement. Across a variety of feminisms child abuse became identifiable as part of a continuum of male violence. Families were analysed in terms of two axes of power, namely gender and age—the vast majority of abusers were found to be men. The patriarchy thesis burgeoned, it was argued that there exists within modern Western society a dominant ideology of male supremacy and that the organization of families, accepted patterns of socialization, the occupational structure and the very formation of identity are regulated in relation to it. Child abuse could be seen then, as an instance of the patriarchal maintenance of social relations.[26] Sexual abuse is nothing more, nor less, than rape[27] and is like all forms of abuse in that they flow largely, it was argued, from men and are to be interpreted as a necessary accompaniment to the secondary status that is ascribed to both women and children within the culture. Rather than seeking to conserve the family such feminist arguments were far more radical in terms of recommending a dissolution of the existing order, as well as the protection of victims and the criminalization of abusers:

> Turning the earlier sociological discussions on their head, therefore, feminists argue that it is not the incest prohibition but, rather, the actual occurrence of incest which provides a key to a sociological understanding of social structure and culture.[28]

Corby,[29] writing to produce a theoretical basis for our understandings of child abuse rather than adding to the available repertoire of 'quick-fix' solutions that the urgency of child-protection practice demands through day-to-day pragmatics, provided an interesting account of the recent political history and policy context of the phenomenon. He stated that:

> child abuse is not a new phenomenon…. Nevertheless, fresh attempts to tackle child mistreatment are usually accompanied by the declaration that it is a new and as

yet undiscovered problem. This 'newness' is seen as an important part of the process of establishing it as an issue requiring resources to tackle it. Often what is new about the problem is the way in which it is being defined or interpreted. This in turn can be linked to wider issues and concerns in society.[30]

While not wholly agreeing with the materialist reduction at the heart of this passage I fully concur with the acknowledged persistence of the phenomenon, with the idea that its topicalization is a hermeneutic issue, and with the structuralist assertion that such a reinterpretation is bound through homology with the wider network of configurations that make up the society.

Williams[31] has stated that the quality of our system of education, and by implication our child-rearing practices, reflect upon the quality of our culture. I would certainly hold to the view that the texture of adult-child relationships in any historical period can be seen as indicative of the condition of the social bond. Bronfenbrenner took this position as axiomatic in the opening of his important, and surprising, 'coldwar' thesis on the *Two Worlds of Childhood* when he said:

> How can we judge the worth of a society? On what basis can we predict how well a nation will survive and prosper? Many indices could be used for this purpose, among them the Gross National Product, the birth rate, crime statistics, mental health data etc. In this book we propose yet another criterion: the concern of one generation for the next. If the children and youth of a nation are afforded opportunity to develop their capacities to the fullest, if they are given the knowledge to understand the world and the wisdom to change it, then the prospect is bright. In contrast, a society which neglects its children, however well it may function in other respects, risks eventual disorganization and demise.[32]

We need then to attend seriously to this phenomenon of supposedly increasing child abuse in as much as that it refers to the wider state of the society. If the child is an icon of the condition of the social structure at any particular time, and thus currently emblematic of our collective responses to the impact of late-modernity, how do

we seek to explain the increased attention paid to the abuse of today's children in relation to the altered circumstances of late-modern society?

THE CHILD IN MODERNITY—'FUTURITY'

Both as professional social scientists and also as members of the lay public we are now very much aware of the impact that child protectionists and feminists have had upon our thinking about the child—but is that so, has child abuse not rather become symbolic of other things? In the same way that Medea was practising revenge, effectively stabbing at Jason 'through' their children, child protectionists are upholding the family and feminists are attacking male power. The child, in this instance as the recipient of abuse, can be seen as revealing of the grounds of social control.[33] Therefore when Donzelot[34] describes the child as the interface between politics and psychology he is producing the child as a metaphor for the strategies and functioning of control in modern life. The contemporary state no longer addresses the polity directly, governmentality like the discourse of morality has become oblique, the family is now the basic unit of control. All ideas and practices concerning the care of, justice for, and protection of the child can be seen to be instrumental in the ideological network that preserves the going order. The 'tutelary complex' that Donzelot describes, is one that has become established through the politicization of child abuse, for example, and institutionalized through the routine practices of social workers and professional carers. This complex, masked in the form of care and concern, intrudes into 'difficult' families but treads a careful line between repression and dependency such that the family is preserved as the unit of attention, for the dispersal of mechanisms of control, and also the house of the child.

The historical liberation of the child from adulthood, argued for by Ariès and others, may simply have rendered abuse less visible, or considerably more subtle. The freeing of the child from adult identity has not freed the child from adult society, instead it has led to the necessity of its constraint by collective practices. The obvious visibility and high profile of children in our contemporary patterns of relationship has made them subject to new forms of control.

This control, or governing, is both concrete and analytic. We actively govern real children, just as described, but we also handle, massage and manipulate images of children in, it could be suggested,

abusive ways, either consciously or unconsciously, to achieve ends wildly in excess of particular, embodied children. I am thinking here of a range of phenomena as discrepant as pornography, advertising, children's fashion, the 1981 International Year of the Child, the Dutch parliament lowering the age of consent from 16 to 12 in 1990, the UK Government introducing a National Curriculum in state schools during 1988, and the extraordinary reportage of and response to alleged 'ritualistic Satanic abuse' in the British Isles during 1990 and so on. Just as the delineation of the child's particularity has given rise to specially fashioned forms of control so also has the diminution of public ignorance towards the child introduced new and intrusive forms of symbolic violence, extending from neurotic families[35] and parental sexual abuse, to commercial exploitation and projections of national identity. The child has become emblematic.

Child abuse is real, but it is equally a device for constituting a reality. As Stainton Rogers has pointed out: 'Social problems like child abuse are not things that happen but rather are ways of making sense'.[36] But this revelation is not the end of the issue, it is the beginning of the real issue. We started out from a myth and proceeded to a newer myth concerning the apparent epidemic of child abuse in contemporary Western culture. Why has child abuse recently become 'a way of making sense' of such vivid dimensions?

Let me unpack some of these assertions and then attempt to analyse what I see as the new liminality of the post-modern child. First, where did the modern child arise from? It was Rousseau who promulgated the manifesto of the child in modernity through *Émile* (1762), with its immanent, idealist, rational characteristics. Since that time Western society, it is generally supposed, has not looked back. Rousseau forged an uncontestable link between our understanding of the child and the emotions of the heart. He announced that humankind is naturally good and that it is only the constraints implicit in certain social structures or the corruption of some forms of social institutions that renders it bad. Children, who Rousseau regarded as the bearers of this 'goodness' in a primal condition, were to be educated properly and socialized according to 'natural' principles. Rousseau's 'savage' (a being wholly without the anthropological connotations of primitiveness), is a child highly charged with dispositions to love and to learn, and equipped with the propensity to become a good spouse, parent and citizen. Such an ideal being, the very image of modernity's child, is a stranger to avarice and is imbued with a natural altruism and kindliness. More

than this, Rousseau's already overburdened creature is simultaneously the repository of all necessary wisdom. This child embodies an affective certainty which need not answer to objective, external criteria, and which is further insulated from scrutiny by Rousseau's implicit relativism and thus privatization of beliefs. We witness here the distillation of the principle of 'care' governing the modern relationship between adults and children but more than this we see the inauguration of the powerful commitment to childhood in Western society as a form of 'promise': a 'promise' of unimagined action, but also an extension of our own plans and a hedge against our own action as yet incomplete. Such a commitment has, for several generations, enabled us to indulge in pleasant reveries concerning tomorrow.

Once, it is assumed, we were unutterably beastly towards children,[37] at one time we did not attend to their specificity and difference at all,[38] and for whole epochs we routinely abandoned them.[39] But following the optimistic illumination of the Enlightenment children have become our principal concern, we have become their protectors and nurturers and they have become our primary love objects, our human capital and our future.

All of the neo-Enlightenment histories of infancy and maturation, only some of which we have reviewed, attest to this grand conceit, their analyses encourage our modern complacencies by regarding the archaeology of child-rearing with a disdainful backward glance. The brevity, ignorance, brutality and general ugliness of antiquity's parenting, we imagine, has been supplanted by a vision and attitude which has become crystallized into the form of a rational machine for nurture, the family and its macrocosm, the state. The modern family has become the locus for the confluence of politics and individual psychology, but beyond this it has emerged as both the primary unit for and also the site of governmentality, that is, it both absorbs and, in turn, distributes social control.

Through modernity childhood has gradually sequestered adult experience, it has claimed a greater duration within the total life experience, it has usurped and assumed greater and yet greater segments of adult labour: cognitive, affective and manual. Beyond this childhood has absorbed increased material provision and it has established this patterning of acquisitions as a 'natural' right policed by an ideology of care, grounded unassailably in the emotions. Adults (though primarily women) 'sacrifice everything' for their children and they, in return, are expected to experience 'the best time of their lives'. Adults have relinquished this space and this

power in relation to a strictly moral dimension epitomized through the concept of 'dependency', but this, perhaps, disguises motivations of optimism, investment, and even a contemporary re-working of Weber's 'salvation anxiety'. Parental love and benevolent adult paternalism in general are not in question here, but rather the forms of social structure that accelerate their intensity and expand their currency. It is no great leap to see the absolute necessity and centrality of the modern nuclear family as the pivotal social space in this system of socialization.

The organization of this patterning of relationships and the emergence of a quasi superiority in the affectual attitude has, of course, not occurred in isolation, nor simply through the grand inspiration of Rousseau's romantic vision. The reconstruction of human relationality into the architecture of the modern family has been a recognizable compliment to the division of labour through industrialization, not cynically planned, but not 'naturally' evolved either. The modern family has become the basic unit of social cohesion in advancing capitalism, and though loving and supportive in its self-image it has become the very epitome of the rational enterprise. Families are cellular, mobile, manageable and accessible to emergent forms of mass communication, unlike the extended families that preceded them. They are also self-sustaining, self-policing, discrete yet wholly public in their orientation and, as I stated at the outset of this chapter, both biologically and culturally reproductive. They are a major component in the exercise of the contemporary principles of adaptation and integration; they are instrumental in their rationality by facilitating change while demonstrating stability to their members.

The modern family enabled the modern state to invest in 'futures'. The ideology of care both lubricated and legitimized the investment of economic and cultural capital in the 'promise' of childhood. Childhood is transformed into a form of human capital which, through modernity, has been dedicated to futures. The metaphoricity through which the discourse of childhood speaks is predicated on the absent presence of a desired tomorrow; with 'growth', 'maturation' and 'development' writ large at the level of individual socialization, and 'pools of ability' and a concern with the 'wastage of talent' at the level of formal state socialization. As children, and by way of children, we have, through modernity, dreamt of futures, and in so doing we have both justified and sought justification for modernity's expansionist urges in the post-Darwinian conflation of growth and progress.

The extant vision of childhood through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had become one of 'futurity', and the much vaunted accretion of a 'caring', 'helping', 'enabling', 'facilitating' mode of nurture instances both the explicit awakening of a collective attitude more sensitive to children's needs, but also an implicit recognition of their worth and thus appropriate usage. The apparent gradual diminution of child abuse through the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century can be seen as a considered shift from immediate to deferred gratification on the part of an increasingly enlightened adult society.

THE CHILD IN POST-MODERNITY—'NOSTALGIA'

I now continue to view our phenomenon in the context of wider structural changes. Just as modern patterns of consumption have outstripped nineteenth-century economics, the late-modern division of labour and its accompanying social structures have mutated beyond the communities and solidarities described by classical sociology. Thus everyday late-modern modes of relationality have outgrown the mid-twentieth-century nuclear family. Things are not as they used to be and this is not a consequence of the erosion of the family, although this is what the rhetoric of contemporary politics often suggests in a variety of attempts to divert the level of problematic from the global and national to the local, and indeed the personal. Families have changed, as have the character of the relationships that they used to contain, and which, we should note, used to contain them.[40] However this change is not causal, it is part of the set of emergent conditions that have come to be appraised as late- or post-modernity.[41] It is within this context that, I argue, a new vision of childhood has arisen and one of the signposts towards this new vision is the unprecedented increase in child abuse from which this paper began. It is a vision very different from the 'futurity' of modernity.

Bell,[42] and later Touraine,[43] were perhaps the first to awaken our attention to the alteration in the traditional fabric of relations that made up modernity. Both these liberal, or indeed neo-Conservative, theorists revealed that traditional secular beliefs and taken-for-granted categories of community membership no longer prevailed. Bell, proclaiming an end to ideology, arguably instigated the era of the 'post-' with his thesis describing a change in both the mode and relations of production. The productive base, Bell and also Touraine

informed us, had transmuted, through market forces and advances in technology, into the 'post-industrial', and the system of social stratification, long since recognizable in terms of polarization had, through a series of social movements, thickened at the waist to contain a middle-ing service class such as to diffuse conventional class antagonisms, thus becoming 'post-capitalist'. These two concepts, Bauman stated, 'have served the purpose well: they sharpened our attention to what is new and discontinuous, and offered us a reference point for counter arguments in favour of continuity'.[44]

Previously assumed points of attachment of the individual with the collective life, like social class, work group, local community and family, were now seen to be losing their adhesion in line with the demands of a post-Fordist mode of production, global economies and networks of communication, and the exponential inroads that techno-science continues to make into the previously located centres of knowledge and authority. Individuals are now much more recognizable through their immediate location and project than through their group affiliations or previously established identity. The new experience of history at both the individual level and the level of institutions, is one of discontinuity rather than of continuity.

The living through of modernity, a practice stemming from a firm belief in enlightenment and emancipation, gave rise to a confident cultural attitude of 'being in control'. This was a control based on: the possibility of objective knowledge through rational process; the primacy of centred, communicating selves; and the conviction that difference was reconcilable through analysis and discourse. Such bases ensured that the ensuing attitude was both sustaining and comfortable. This attitude was deeply rooted in the necessity, the viability, and the moral certainty of 'progress'. Human progress committed social action to the perpetual struggle for higher forms of life. Contingency, the condition that ruled the pre-modern (the 'savage' before Rousseau), was now part of a strategic calculus weighted in the favour of *homo sapiens* by the guarantees provided by our applied sciences.

The excitement and the purpose of social being, the dreams and the promise embedded in our children, was to reach for the stars, to control more and more of the wantonness of the cosmos, and to produce human culture as the triumph of finitude over infinity. What could not be achieved today could be set in train for tomorrow. The sufferings and deprivations and ignorance of our parents were certainly not going to be visited on the next generation, our future,

our children. There would be no repeat of the Holocaust, but instead mass education and mass consumption. The ironies of this latter 'advancement' have not gone unnoticed:

> Consumerism pits the generations against one another. The all-knowing media child is the corporate terminal in families and schools without authority. Such children are accustomed to all the scarcities that derive from the out-stripping of family income by family outgo, including their own part-time incomes. The result is that their own childhood is shortened, while its quality is thinned.[45]

But the striving to acquire, achieve and control sustains.

That the natural has become tamed, through modernity, ensures that all phenomena become both social and historical. In this sense the pre-modern contingency inverts and all phenomena become dependent upon human conduct, including their forms of knowledge and interpretive procedures. Despite the fact that nature occasionally strikes back, with a Los Angeles earthquake for example, its character is anticipated and its impact minimized. A new omnipotence was released into the human attitude, instancing perhaps a 'second passing' of the deity: the first recorded by Nietzschean irrationalism; the second etched onto the public memory by Hiroshima. However, as Heywood stated:

> This is not just to do with the problems attendant on the nature of modern weaponry and warfare, of global industrialization, of the revolutionary, 'deconstructive' impact of capitalist market systems on all aspects of human relationships…. At a deeper level it is related to the termination of nature and tradition in late-modernity.

And he continued that this has been expressed,

> in terms of the appearance of a fully socialized nature, marking the emergence of human power as globally decisive and unchallenged, without equal, limit, confining shape or *telos,* its old adversaries—nature and the 'second nature' of traditional cultures now having been vanquished. The possibility, indeed the necessity, of radical self-formation confronts individuals,

institutions and whole societies. Opportunities to fulfil the emancipatory promise of enlightenment are balanced by the potential for social, ecological, political and cultural calamities on an unprecedented scale.[46]

These observations are informed by Beck's[47] concept of a 'risk society', and they exemplify Giddens'[48] tightrope between 'ontological security' and 'existential anxiety'. Within these tendencies of late-modernity, personal actions and personal aspirations take on a different form. The previously centred, continuous self of modernity becomes more of a reflexive project involving disparate interactional planes rendered coherent through a revisable narrative of self-identity. And, in the same manner that institutions hold together through the ingenious practice of 'crisis management', the reflexive project of the self sustains through the artfully renewable strategies of auto/biographical stories. The late-modern calls forth a constant, reflexive, re-presentation of self.[49] This is, of course, critical to the experience of being a child but more significantly, in the context of my argument, critical in terms of how adults now understand and relate to children.

The social spaces occupied by adults and children have changed, not just in place but in character, and the spaces previously allocated to fixed identities of adults, and children, and families have transmogrified. But this spatial dimension of social experience is not alone in its new-found versatility, its pacing has changed as well. Following a stable period of historical inevitability, we are now also witnessing innovations in the vocabulary of time which drastically alter our relation to a whole set of cultural configurations, established under modernity's motif of 'progress'. As Virilio has put it:

> The loss of material space leads to the government of nothing but time…. In this precarious fiction speed would suddenly become a destiny, a form of progress, in other words a 'civilization' in which each speed would be something of a 'region' of time…. The violence of speed has become both the location and the law, the world's destiny and its destination.[50]

This impacts directly upon our vision of the child. Through modernity time itself was measured and contained, it came to be expressed in minutes, days, weeks, years and in categories such as

generations. We marked out our personal ability, responsibility, functionality, mortality and general expectations of self, and others, through such divisions. We elected a periodic framework within which we might assemble unconnected events and ascribe to them the status of achievement or 'progress'. Generations have been gathered by such devices and the coincidental accumulation of social action has been defined under the detached title of a particular era[51] —like, for example, the 'swinging 60s'. Although the formal divisions on the clock and calendar are unchanged our collective expectations of appropriate chronological advancement have altered: people make late entry into education; marriage is not a necessary temporal goal and is also a repeatable experience; some families are established at the limit of a woman's band of fertility; some men become fathers at an age ensuring that they will not see their children through adolescence; occupational careers are interrupted and individuals opt for early retirement; vast numbers of people experience a lifetime of unemployment. The previously indelible normative markers of social experience (in the form of 'achievement' and 'status') are becoming relativized, sometimes through the pressure of material circumstances but equally because of the expression of a proliferation of new and different senses of 'purpose'. Indeed, 'purpose' is no longer linked to 'progress'. The higher forms of life, to which modernity since enlightenment aspired, were the utopias of freedom, equality, goodwill, peace and prosperity, all long recognized for their unattainability and their ideological content. Such utopias are now treated as mere ciphers, as hazy images deriving from the reveries of 'futurity', the dreams dreamt through children and through their childhood promise. When we return to real, active people, we witness not dreams, nor yet the realization of nightmares, but a pragmatic state of disenchantment. Rather than a life spent in pursuit of utopias the late-modern condition is one of the avoidance, or minimization, of dystopias. Horizontal strategies for the annulment of convention occur, a process of de-traditionalization. Alternative life-styles are so common and widespread as to find difficulty in expressing their alternativeness 'to'. For example, gross financial materialism lives alongside holistic medicine, health foods, body culture, astrology, narcotic addiction and dealing, arcane 'new age' belief systems, serial killers and single-parent families. This is no list of pathologies but a glimpse of the many facets of the late-modern experience, some are bizarre and criminal, others are benign or simply diverting. All of these expressions, and many others, are met in the street and all are now shadows of the mainstream.

In the context of this decline in collective aspiration, or 'disenchantment'[52] with the sense of purpose previously exercised by the concept of 'progress' (what Lyotard refers to as the death of a meta-narrative) people are resourceful in their search for both alternative reasons for being and also new points of attachment to a collective life. Although, as Giddens[53] argues, the late-modern individual may be less well imbued with a strong sense of the fixity of the inside and of cultural inheritance and may therefore have developed a robust adaptive strategy of bargaining and negotiation with the outside, it is nevertheless the case that members of a late-modern society continue to seek out both coherence of self-identity and continuity with the past.

It will be recalled that the classical sociological actors who populated Durkheim's emergent 'organic solidarity' at the end of the previous century, were perpetually insecure in the face of the potentially destructive 'anomic' forces inherent in modernity's form of the division of labour. Their external response was to develop a secular credo of interdependence but their internal response was to re-establish a supportive mosaic of 'mechanical solidarities' in the form of work groups, professional guilds, churches and families. This inward search for coherence and continuity sustains into late-modernity but, as I have argued, these nineteenth-century sources of integration are not so readily available. However, there are two visible indices of the maintenance of an inward pilgrimage within late-modernity. The first, I suggest, is the obvious growth and, at the same time, destigmatization of psychotherapy in Western societies. Psychiatric and psychotherapeutic regimes tend to be conducted through regressive narratives with individuals 'finding their way' through the excavation of roots and attachments from the past—the 'inner child'. The second index is the real child, that is our new vision of the child and our practical relationship with it.

Late-modern society has re-adopted the child. The child in the setting of what are now conceptualized as post-modern cultural configurations, has become the site or the relocation of discourses concerning stability, integration and the social bond. The child is now envisioned as a form of 'nostalgia', a longing for times past, not as 'futurity'. Children are now seen not so much as 'promise' but as primary and unequivocal sources of love, but also as partners in the most fundamental, unchosen, unnegotiated form of relationship. The trust that was previously anticipated from marriage, partnership, friendship, class solidarity and so on, is now invested more generally in the child. This can be witnessed empirically in a

number of ways: through the affectual prolongation of adolescence; the disputed territory that children constitute during parental divorce; the uprating of children's status through the modern advances in children's rights (like the 1989 Children Act in the UK); the modern iconography of the child in Third World aid politics and in Western campaigns against addiction and criminality.

The instability and necessary flexibility of all forms of relationship, other than that between adult and child, through late-modernity make them unreliable repositories for 'the inside', whether in the form of feelings, altruism or sociality itself. As Beck has stated:

> The child is the source of the last remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays. Everything that is desired, but not realizable in the relationship, is directed to the child. With the increasing fragility of the relationship between the sexes the child acquires a monopoly on practical companionship, on an expression of feelings in a biological give and take that otherwise is becoming increasingly uncommon and doubtful. Here an anachronistic social experience is celebrated and cultivated which has become improbable and longed for precisely because of the individualization process. The excessive affection for children, the 'staging of childhood' which is granted to them—the poor overloved creatures—and the nasty struggle for the children during and after divorce are some symptoms of this. The child becomes the final alternative to loneliness that can be built up against the vanishing possibilities of love. It is the private type of reenchantment, which arises with, and derives its meaning from, disenchantment.[54]

Oddly enough, children are seen as dependable and permanent, in a manner to which no other person or persons can possibly aspire. The vortex created by the quickening of social change and the alteration of our perceptions of such change means that whereas children used to cling to us, through modernity, for guidance into their/our 'futures', now we, through late-modernity, cling to them for 'nostalgic' groundings, because such change is both intolerable and disorienting for us. They are lover, spouse, friend, workmate and,

at a different level, symbolic representations of society itself. As Scutter stated in an analysis of children's literature:

> the child is characteristically associated with values that *seem* to be in opposition to those ascribed to adults, just as Peter Pan seems to be set in antithesis to the adult growing world. But the contemporary child and adolescent…again and again proves to be a superior repository of those values the adult world ascribes to but falls short of. The child makes a better adult.[55]

Although this work is from within a literary textual world it is highly instructive. Peter Pan's Never Neverland is no longer a recalcitrant state from which children have to be prised to get on with 'futures'; it is, what was: love and care, reciprocity and sociality. Scutter continued: 'Neverland is actually not a child realm but an adult realm.'[56]

We need children as the sustainable, reliable, trustworthy, now outmoded treasury of social sentiments that they have come to represent. Our 'nostalgia' for their essence is part of a complex, late-modern, rearguard attempt at the resolution of the contradictory demands of the constant re-evaluation of value with the pronouncement of social identity.

As we need children we watch them and we develop institutions and programmes to watch them and oversee the maintenance of that which they, and they only, now protect. We have always watched children, once as guardians of their/our future and now because they have become the guardians. Our expanded surveillance has, needless to say, revealed more intrusions into their state of well-being. Child abuse, from which we began, has clearly 'increased' through the magnification and breadth of our gaze. This is evidenced from two sources.

First, as we noted earlier with reference to a shift in Kempe's perspective,[57] the 'invention' of child abuse in the 1960s seems to transform into a 'dis-covery' of child abuse in the 1970s. The prevalence of child abuse as a social practice, far from spontaneously regenerating in the second half of the twentieth century, had, in fact, been constant, which is testified to by Kempe's renewed interest in the historical dimension of the phenomenon. However, the incidence of child abuse during that period, in terms of reported and recorded occurrence, was to be treated as a novel phenomenon,

an expanding phenomenon, and a phenomenon worthy of further explanation in itself; as I have attempted here.

The second source is Dingwall *et al*.[58] who, in making an essentially ethnomethodological point concerning the routine practices of rate-producing agencies, examine the psychological and social processes by which social workers decide whether or not children are being abused. Dingwall *et al*. develop the concept of professional strategies and put forward two models, the 'pessimistic' and the 'optimistic'. The former, it is suggested, is that which is adopted by social workers in the face of governmental, media, local and public pressure (for example, during the moral panic created by the 1987 Cleveland 'affair' in the UK) and consists of a 'better safe than sorry' approach, involving all children being regarded as potentially abused, which in turn leads to a dramatic increase in reported cases. The 'optimistic' strategy which derives from a different climate of expectation, or, ironically, emerges as a reaction to the backlash often caused by the former strategy, involves actual abuse being regarded, by social workers, as the least plausible diagnosis of a family problem.

Nevertheless, the dramatic increase in the reported occurrence of child abuse during late-modernity is not reducible solely to the improved technology of our scrutiny nor just to our diligence, however enforced. It is, as I have sought to argue, due to the intensity of the collective response to those very late-modern conditions. What is being so jealously preserved through the new, 'nostalgic', vision of the child is the meta-narrative of society itself. The story of the post-modern child and its abuse makes up a palimpsest.

To abuse the child today is to strike at the remaining, embodied vestige of the social bond and the consequent collective reaction is, understandably, both resounding and vituperative. The shrill cry of 'abuse' is a cry of our own collective pain at the loss of our social identity. The source of blame for this abuse whether projected into the form of psychopaths, perverts, devil-worshippers, colluding mothers, men, or even incompetent social workers should really be sought in the way that we have, over time, come to organize our social relationships.

CONCLUSION

With the acceleration of the pace of social change towards the end of the twentieth century, the individual witnesses a diminution of

their points of attachment to a collective life, or at best a recognition of the utterly transitory nature of such points of attachment. With the dispersion, fragmentation and detraditionalization of established sources of judgement, such as the cognitive, the ethical and the aesthetic, the individual experiences increasing discontinuity between previously held interests, beliefs and commitments and those of any coherent group. Politics becomes mediated by speed and authority by risk. Where classical sociology had pointed to the remedy for disintegration resting with the establishment of an ethic of interdependency, no such positive altruism or pragmatic reciprocity are now available options. The current experience of subjectivity is a fierce tension between dependency and independency.

> It was specifically in bourgeois society that an association between age and dependence was established…. Liberated from the necessity of labour yet excluded from the adult social world, childhood became an increasingly puzzling phenomenon. Its sequestration was justified on the grounds of children's 'immaturity' and 'helplessness', on their evident need to be 'looked after'.[59]

However, dependency is no longer a taken-for-granted feature of the relationship between adults and children, what with demands for charters of children's rights, with children 'divorcing' from parents, and the increasingly cynical backdrop of 'abuse', topicalized here, policing the exercise of all and any control between adults and children. And it is certainly the case that dependency is no longer a respectable feature of any relationship between adults. Independence, it would seem, has become the dis-located mark of personhood in the post-modern life, a criterion which frees the self from the outmoded constraints of the old order but precludes an analysis of the successful mechanisms of cultural reproduction inherent within that structural order. As Coward put it:

> We apply the term 'abuse' so widely that we are in danger of misrepresenting modern relations of social power…. Excessive concentration on abuse puts a question mark over dependency but does not allow us to understand or criticise power. Instead it criticises character types—the abuser and the abused, the perpetrator and the victim—

and pathologises their relationship. Abusers are now seen as the ultimate villains, more sinister than any who benefit from the real inequalities of society.[60]

Dependency rests on a need and an authority in the provision of that need—abuse requires the misuse or corruption of that authority. The post-modern diffusion of authority has not led to democracy but to an experience of powerlessness, this is not a potential source of identity but a prescription for victimization. Children, I am suggesting, figure largely as symbolic representations of this welter of uncertainty, both literally and metaphorically.

Political correctness, another post-modern regulator of experience, is a blanket strategy for the resistance to the imposition of any form of authority (primarily in linguistic form) and the current 'climate of abuse' derives from a sustained confusion between power and its legitimation.

Children have become both the testing ground for the necessity of independence in the constitution of human subjectivity and also the symbolic refuge of the desirability of trust, dependency and care in human relations. In this latter role 'childhood' sustains the 'meta-narrative' of society itself and abuse, both real and supposed, expresses our current ambivalence towards and impotence in the face of constantly emergent structural conditions. As we see less coherence and sustained meaning in the experience of our own subjectivity and our relationships with others, we witness more symbolic abuse of children.

> We are compelled to care about the well-being and prospects of other people's children as a condition of preserving our nationhood. If the value placed on national life recedes, displaced by an ethos of autonomy and dissociation, our relations with children and each other change profoundly. Children lose their collective status, and are no longer the ancestral and progenitorial bond of national continuity. Instead, they become the private presences whose entry into the world is occasioned by the pursuit of private fulfilment. The child of choice becomes the responsibility of the adults who choose. The life quality and life chances of children increasingly reflect the arbitrary fortuities of family origin and genetic endowments.[61]

On what criteria could we possibly judge Medea today?

NOTES

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