

Institutions and the Banality of Evil: Learning from Rotherham and Saville

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'...the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them. And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureaucracy truly is....we have become very much accustomed by modern psychology and sociology, not to speak of modern bureaucracy, to explaining away the responsibility of the doer for his deed in terms of this or that kind of determinism'.

Hannah Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963)

In the House of Commons Teresa May, the Home Secretary, blamed 'institutionalized political correctness' as a fundamental factor in the Rotherham child abuse scandal. Yet, it is important this explanation does not end up as a smoke-screen masking the deeper, underlying causes of this horrific case. For, if we look elsewhere to the recent example of Jimmy Saville, it does not seem to have been the case that political correctness stopped the BBC, the NHS, the Local Council or the police ignoring the evidence of abuse. As early as 1963 someone reported being raped by Saville but was told to forget it. This was not the result of any decision about race relations but an institutional failure to deal with the sexual abuse of vulnerable people.

The media has not made the link between the Rotherham child abuse case and the abuses of Jimmy Saville. In fact, the similarities are striking. In both situations the scale of abuses was enormous and persisted over many years. In the Saville case, there were at least 450 victims but probably many more and in the Rotherham the initial figure is 1400, with more apparently coming forward. Also shocking, was that people in authority had some knowledge of the abuse but often saw it as unseemly but legitimate (that is, within the bounds of acceptable) sexual behaviour. Saville was seen as 'indulging' with women and girls who were thought of as 'groupies' and, in the Rotherham case, those abused were frequently referred to as being 'in relationships' with their abusers, even when victims in both cases were below the legal age of sexual activity.

Perhaps the most striking and disturbing aspect of the cases is that when victims reported their crimes they were ignored, told to forget it or in the Rotherham case regarded as liars and fantasists and the evidence they produced 'lost' or ignored. As the [Jay Report](#) into the Rotherham abuse found: 'a CID officer claimed that it should not be categorised as sexual abuse because the (under-age) girl had been "consensual in every incident"'. In another case a 12 year old girl was found being abused – and she was arrested, not the abuser. Sustained abuse on this scale did not simply happen; it was allowed to continue with the knowledge of people in key positions of authority.

The fact that sexual abuse of young and vulnerable people continued – both in Rotherham and by Jimmy Saville and other entertainers who took advantage of their

social and cultural resources - over many years suggests that institutional political correctness won't work as an explanation.

A better explanation maybe that of institutionalized sexism and classism, (and one would think that institutionalized political correctness would include beliefs about gender as well as race). Most of the victims in Rotherham were young, working class girls who because of their gender and class were not believed or were regarded as willing accomplices – and their 'willingness' seems to have absolved the state of its duty of care. The Jay Report illustrates that the victims were viewed with contempt. What we are seeing in these cases is a display of power in which those in authority feel able to trivialise and dismiss crimes committed against the weak and marginalised.

Parallels here can be made with what Hannah Arendt's essay on the 'banality of evil'. For Arendt, evil occurred because it was normalized and in both the Saville and Rotherham examples, the sexual abuse of children was normalized by both abusers and officials. Bizarrely the abusers were normal and the victims deviants. As Arendt said in her writings about Eichmann: "The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together." What is frightening in these current, desperately tragic cases is that the behaviour of abusers was if not regarded as normal, was as at least allowed to go unchallenged.

At the heart of the Rotherham case was not 'political correctness' but the problem of institutions that are allowed to judge their own codes of behaviour in ways that allow the normalizing of evil, whether this is prisons, the police, the church or banks. Again as Arendt aptly saw: 'When all are guilty, no one is; confessions of collective guilt are the best possible safeguard against the discovery of culprits, and the very magnitude of the crime the best excuse for doing nothing.' The fact that officials could specialise by function and hierarchy meant that no one was to blame; decisions occurred elsewhere.'

Institutional failure is a result of institutions, operating to their own logic and to their own internal rules about what is 'normal' and acceptable. It is a logic more concerned with protecting the organisation's interests and reputation than the interests of the people they are supposed to be serving. Concern about their own survival has allowed for evil to be normalized and ignored. What is striking is that for years the abuse went with the knowledge of authorities but at the point of revelation everyone is shocked that such things occur. When the context changed, the normal behaviour again appeared as evil.

The over-riding issue is of course one of power, or its abuse; those in positions of authority – in government, bureaucracies and agencies - ignored the interests of the weak and vulnerable. Victims lacked resources. They did not have access to the media, the legal profession and they did have 'contacts in high places'. Rotherham and Saville fit with the other cases (Rochdale, Kent or child abuse in the Catholic Church)

where weak accountability and closed institutions have led to unlawful decisions. In the cases of Saville and Rotherham, no one has been able to say ‘we did the right thing at the time’ despite the fact when the abuse was occurring those who ignored the crimes were not evil people, they were following an institutional logic.

The point is the ease with which closed institutions can normalise appalling, abusive behaviour. The core lessons to be learned from these tragic events are of course in relation to child protection. But they are also about how our public institutions, the ones that are there to uphold the law and serve the public, have been allowed to operate. As we argue in *Institutional Crisis in 21st Century Britain*, we need to move away from a culture that has overtime allowed institutions to ostensibly define their own rules and behaviour based on being closed and secretive to a new tradition of true openness and real accountable. To return to Hannah Arendt, this would help nurture an environment in which public servants would be more likely to make reflexive, critical judgments about their intended actions and in so doing help avoid descending into future banalities of evil.

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