

Unpanicking States / Unstating Panic

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Reviews

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Roger N. Lancaster:

Sex Panic and the Punitive State

Berkeley: University of California Press 2011, pp. 308 + xii.

— “We have been here before.” (237)

Anthropologist Roger Lancaster’s recent book, co-winner of the Association for Queer Anthropology’s 2011 Ruth Benedict Prize, should be read across the legal and sexuality studies fields. The author surveys what he suggests is a new mode of “punitive governance” (147–149), hardened and consolidated since the late 1970s, informing U.S. sentiments around victimhood and offences. Historicizing contemporary sex offender laws (Part 1) as glaring signposts in a larger American genealogy of punitiveness (Part 2), Lancaster considers today’s sustained punitive turn to mark a break with the more episodic and eventually thoroughly discredited waves of cultural paranoia and hysteria, going from lynching, anti-gay McCarthyism, and 1980’s “satanic ritual abuse” to the *normal science* of sexual abuse victimology (chronicled in chapter 2 and contextualized in chapters 7 and 8). Sex panics preceded, but soon found wide structural sustenance within, a broader neoliberal habituation of suspicion and apprehension.

We have been witnessing “the gestation of a new variation of white middle- and working- class biopolitics” (222). Although internationally felt, it is the American exception for this gestation to have been driven to a manneristic, culture-defining extreme. Something different emerged out of occasional and opportune hyperbole: “a fourth regime of power [...] the mutant offspring of sovereign power and bio-power” (165, 222). After Foucault, with sex remaining “uniquely susceptible to all the shape-shifting techniques that wrest control from disturbance: projection, condensation, contagion, paranoia” (231), sex panics crystallize this broader cultural metastasis, or “routinization” (13), of fear.

Lancaster cites and aligns with established strands of critical commentary on the carceral state and punitive America, addressing neoliberalism’s staging of sex scandal (compare Herdt, ed., 2009), its trauma culture and its familialist *mise-en-scène* of sexual victimhood (compare Harkins, 2009), especially that of minors (compare Kincaid, 1998). Shifts in the orchestration of sexual justice, given due historical attention in works by Chris Jenkins among others, are here taken to inform the wider historical backtracking of what others have broadly glossed “penal populism,” and still others still more broadly, “culture of fear.” Lancaster ventures that, although we are looking at “a concatenation of cause and effect involving culture, politics, and economics [...] the punitive turn prepared the way for the neoliberal turn, not vice versa” (222). Punitive culture importantly anticipated and proved a prerequisite for 1980’s market fundamentalism. Somewhat (and some will argue *too*) polemically put, its rise is Janus-

faced, with left-liberal consecration of the Victim synergizing with right-conservative demonization of the Predator.

Lancaster's engagement with the concomitant leitmotifs of sexual danger and contamination offers a welcome bridge between the topic's many—historical, socio-political, anthropological, critical legal, queer theoretical—dimensions. He covers policy's narrative conventions and character developments, its changes of scenery and bestiary, from the Black urban threat to women from outside, to the White, suburban threat to children from within, with the Lavender Scare as colorful interlude. Although Lancaster usefully extrapolates beyond any discrete anatomy of moral panic, he finds himself reiterating all of its literature's established motifs—that penal reforms catering to angry mobs typically turn out ineffective, inhumane, excessive, and disproportionate; alternatively and more interestingly, that their work is promotional and integral to ascendant, exclusionary definitions of social order and citizenship; finally, that their climate of interdiction and caution paraphrases—concretizes, but also encrypts—more protean and more pervasive social discontents, helps overlooking other, arguably more acute and structural, concerns, and through its canonized idioms and assumptions encroaches, as an “associative logic,” onto hitherto unrelated scenes of cultural diagnostics and repair.

There will always be incidental brutes and tragedies; but contemporary perusal of the “sexual abuse” card undeniably warrants—it certainly *survives*—all of these allegations. And this has implications for how humbled one needs to feel when faced with decade upon decade of scientific rubrication of “abuse.” The empirical lingo of risk here often “masks the surge of an unmodulated associative logic more properly linked to taboo, pollution, and religious danger” (238).

Skillfully juggling mentioned sets of suspicions, Lancaster's essay is of specific note to researchers across the sexualities but especially GLBT

fields, urged onward by an author sensitized by harsh experiences of growing up gay, disclosing a truly heart-wrenching case of false accusation against a befriended gay teacher (chapter 4), duly recalling homosexuality's McCarthyian days, remembering 1980's work on moral panic in the fledging context of GLBT citizenship (Gayle Rubin, Jeffrey Weeks), and discerning persistent homophobic—among racial and class-based—subtexts in sex laws. If “At the murky core of this book is the stigma of homosexuality” (17), the reader is presented with two suspicions—neither of which is new but both of which have long seemed crucial for appreciating contemporary sexual culture: that “overblown fears of pedophile predators represent new ways of conjuring up and institutionally using homophobia” (17), and more radically, that the long-dreaded imaginary of non-heterosexual citizenships and today's specter of the “sex predator” inform importantly kindred—and indeed hastily relayed and eternally “confused”—modes of imagining, invoking and accrediting American sociality: Family, Community, and Nation (93). Either level of analysis invites today's sexual diversity forum to resume something that came to seem political suicide three decades go: a critical stance on what observers on the gay left, already in 1978, noted as a “combative displacement” (Hocquenghem, 1978, 14) of Anglo-American sexual politics from gender and kinship to age. Prefacing the 1978 translation of Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire*, Jeffrey Weeks noted the same “shift in the location of social taboos.”

The theme of the historical rallying of perverts (“the never-ending parade of sex panics”; 12) touched upon by Lancaster has in fact been regularly revisited, as he points out, by queer theorists, as—with increasing regularity—by GLBT historians. It deserves mentioning that many commentators today draw the same, though pristinely delicate, historical analogy between “the homosexual” of the 1950s and “the pedophile” of the 1990s (e.g., Corriveau, 2011, 168–171; Fischel, 2010; Gavin, & Yeadon-Lee, 2011), and there have been entire events, as University of Chicago's

2010 symposium, asking, “What’s Queer About Sex Offenders? or, Are Sex Offenders the New Queers?”

Can the eponymous notion of *sex panic* hope to tackle such a scandalous and broad question? Even in the anthropological and critical hands of Lancaster, and Lancaster certainly is critical at this point (30–32), the phrase risks an apologetic connotation of a heart-felt anger only suspect where excessive and “illogical”—diagnostic commonplaces always potentially detracting from what the author points out throughout is the generative and redemptive function of the affair, namely a theatrics, however cynical, of social concern, order, and survival. The problem is summed up in the sinister, interim conclusion that “The state of panic becomes the normal state of affairs” (103), that it became “the norm, duty, law” (62). Witness troubling dissonances Left and Right: economic deregulation and sexual hyperregulation; civilized sensitivity to child abuse and barbaric sex offender laws; society cohering and contracting but strictly around the mass marketed cicatrices of trauma and the mortification of sexual possibility. An increasingly belabored choreography of emotional singularity: a question of justice, cogency, as well as sustainability.

Lancaster’s book comes a long way in pondering the intrigue of panic’s protraction—an intrigue that has more than once been described as the very core of the “postmodern” condition. Yet what the reader is not offered, in this anthropology of American excess and irrationality, is a comparative anthropology of the normal, and of the symbolic bedrock of any proud society. Where anthropologists complain that “the phantasmic overtakes the rational in jurisprudence and law” (233), what kind of baseline rationality are they eulogizing? To say panic is a state of unreason is not yet to theorize the panicked politics of reasonability. Against which rational background, in comparison and/or in retrospect, need we place the centuries-long “panic” of anti-sodomy/homophobia? Lancaster’s response

comes almost as a speculative afterthought, on pages 233–234: “As moral hierarchies based on race or ethnicity have become inadmissible, and as old variants of homophobia have become progressively more unacceptable in polite society, the pivot has turned to new moral hierarchies based on sex.” These new hierarchies take their cue from the generationality of the “implicitly White, tacitly homosexual” paraphile, and would seek to embolden an unchanged stake: the White family. Is the reader prepared to agree same-sex intimacy remains, tacitly, “at the murky core” of this scenario, or dare we take seriously the hint that, indeed, the world has found itself an importantly new axis (or parametrics) of evil, and that in large parts of the West and apart from sad incidents, “the homosexual” may recognize with horror the new penal profiling but simultaneously knows himself to be subject to no more than a rather indiscriminate regime of suspicion, namely against all men?

While at this uncertain point (too early to tell or much too late?) Lancaster pays passing tribute to queer and otherwise critical theorists as they distilled their theses during the 1990s (citing with approval key authors like Kevin Ohi, Lee Edelman, James Kincaid, Lauren Berlant), a full engagement with these theorists and theses would have put under stress calls for a moratorium on punishment (“Take a deep breath”) that would humanize (United) states’ perennial panics—the suggestion that the persecution of pleasures marked as perverse can ever be “unpanicked” (245); that there is a rational sexology to be definitively saved the risk of “prefascist” (242) escalation and political opportunism—or a real child to be rescued from the overcodification of “the minor.” As for this (Dutch) reader, I wonder whether pondering this stress would have produced a less criminological and reformist, and a more anthropological and radical, reflection. For instance, one could pause much longer on the ubiquitously purported “modernization of taboo” (233), especially the epochal drift in the problematization of sex from race (miscegenation), kinship (incest),

and gender (homosexuality) onto age (pedophilia). This might provide a much more robust accounting for the sense of déjà-vu, specifically the recapitulation of trauma talk across historically disparate “panics.” Such an account remains to be written, and will have to dig deeper into the regulation of sex quite generally, and of young sexualities in particular. It may have to dig deeper into the silences and tacit complicities that make up criminology, anthropology, the sociology of panic, LGBT history, even much of queer theory.

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