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**Finding a new folk devil:  
(mis)constructing anti-capitalist activists**

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## **Finding a new folk devil: (mis)constructing anti-capitalist activists**

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*“Their aim is clear. They want a violent and bloody conflagration on the streets. They want to ... cause anarchy.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **Abstract**

The paper will offer an account of how political activists are (mis)constructed as “folk devils” through an examination of recent media coverage in the UK and Czech Republic. It will seek to show how their construction as violent criminals and dangerous anarchists has influenced the treatment of those involved in protests by public authorities in the UK and Prague. The paper will also offer, 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 derived from preliminary findings from interdisciplinary research into global social movements, and in particular the protests against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in Prague in September 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> The Telegraph, 18/2/01

## ***Introduction***

This paper argues that we are currently witnessing the development of a new type of folk devil. The discussion will consider this claim both in terms of the construction of political activists as a deviant group and the consequences which flow from that construction. It will also look at the way in which in the context of political activists the idea of the folk devil has been significantly altered from the traditional understanding which sits alongside the criminological account of moral panics.

In order to consider these issues the paper will examine the way in which anti-capitalist activists can be understood to have been developed into a new class of folk devil through a portrayal of their protests formulated by media coverage and political and expert comment. Thus it will be seen that the government and media have sought to identify activists as 'violent', and dismisses them as "mindless thugs"<sup>2</sup>. The reasons for, and results of, this construction are varied but it is argued that primary amongst these is the ability to dismiss activists through a rejection of their behaviour as simply destructive and dangerous. This then allows for a silencing of these alternative voices in relation to a coherent debate on the pros and cons of neo-liberal capitalist democracy.

Having considered the development of this mis-construction the paper will go on to briefly consider 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 understanding of their participation in political action, as well as offering the potential for some to engage in a process of 'playback' of the folk devil imagery and ideas.

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Blair, *The Guardian*, 2/5/00

### ***The traditional account of folk devils and moral panics***

In the classical criminological account<sup>3</sup>, a folk devil is generally identified as being a class of people or group that become constructed as ‘the personification of evil’<sup>4</sup> within society. Once a group has successfully been identified as fitting the category of folk devil they will automatically and immediately be recognised by society, or at least part of it<sup>5</sup>, in this way. Thus, they will be regarded solely in terms of the entirely negative characteristics that have been identified and developed through media coverage and expert commentary.<sup>6</sup>

The result is that someone falling within the folk devil category is understood to have no 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 behavior 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.<sup>7</sup>

The folk devil is therefore seen as being ‘evil’ and deviant. Their behaviour is harmful to the social order and should be 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 understanding; instead, they need only be condemned. As a result, society

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<sup>3</sup> This arises out of the idea of deviance amplification which suggests that the reaction of society can increase the level of deviancy within a group when it is isolated through its categorisation as deviant. See the work of Leslie Wilkins – *Social Deviance* (1964) London: Tavistock.

<sup>4</sup> Goode, E. & Ben-Yehuda, N. *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, Oxford: Blackwell 1994, p.28

<sup>5</sup> Clearly society as a whole does not behave as a cohesive group and so not everyone will necessarily react in the same way. However, folk devils tend to fall into a category that is strongly recognisable as ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous’ by a significant number within society.

<sup>6</sup> Thus Stanley Cohen in classic account of Mods and Rockers stated that the folk devils are “unambiguously unfavourable symbols”. Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Oxford: Martin Robertson at p.41. See discussion below for a more detailed account of Cohen’s work on folk devils and moral panics.

becomes interested merely in preventing them engaging in their dangerous behaviour. The forces of the state can therefore be mobilised to stop them – this can be through institutional responses such as the passing of legislation, the development of strong police action, or prosecution in the courts. It may also be through a more symbolic response which allows the folk devil to become an issue through which political point scoring can be achieved.

As a result of the construction of the folk devil in one dimensional terms of ‘evil’ and ‘harm’ any more complex elements to and/or reasons for the actions and behaviour of those involved can safely be ignored. Their development as ‘outsiders’ to the established, ordered system means that their voices remain excluded. They are not able to be understood as being possible accepted or respectable participants within society. In the context of the construction of political activists as folk devils, this has a particularly significant effect, as will be discussed below.

The media plays a key role in the development of a group into recognised folk devils. News stories are often led by the press releases issued by government and the police as the establishment engages in its own efforts to control the debate particularly where the folk devil is a person or group who is a challenge to the established order of society.<sup>8</sup> They will report on events and behaviour, habitually in a way that initiates, reinforces and embeds the public’s suspicion and fear. Thus some part of the means by which folk devils are constructed comes out of the primary reporting agendas of mainstream news media - to sell their product by focussing on stories that shock and engage the public. As Stanley Cohen in his classic account of moral panics and folk devils<sup>9</sup> points out the media have particular views as to what 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.

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<sup>7</sup> Goode & Ben-Yehuda, *supra.* at p.29

<sup>8</sup> See discussion below in relation to the development of stories relating to May Day protests in London.

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.<sup>10</sup>

Cohen evaluated the role of the media in this context identifying three central elements - exaggeration, prediction and symbolisation. Thus, events would be distorted when they were exaggerated i.e. in terms of the numbers who took part in the event and the type of damage or violence that occurred. This would be emphasised further by the type of language used in reporting the incidents - thus words such as 'riot', 'siege' and 'orgy of destruction' were found to have been frequently used in the reporting of events surrounding clashes between Mods and Rockers in Clacton. The media would also predict that the initial incident would be followed by more events which would become yet more violent and destructive. The final part of the process involves symbolisation 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).<sup>11</sup>

So the media have a strong tendency to report those stories they regard as being 'newsworthy', in a way that simplifies the events and concentrates the more sensational and negative aspects. This approach to reporting becomes more apparent the stronger the development of the folk devil persona. In this way, society is presented with a limited picture of situations which require more in depth coverage to allow for significant levels of understanding. Yet, even where expert commentary is provided by elites<sup>12</sup> within

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<sup>9</sup> Cohen, S. (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, Oxford: Martin Robertson

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. at p.45

<sup>11</sup> Ibid at p.134

<sup>12</sup> The media make use of expert commentary to develop discussions regarding key events. However, it is rare to find members of the folk devil group themselves being used as commentators. The usual voices heard are academics, representatives of the police, other journalists and politicians.

society the folk devils story remains simplified. Where politicians are called upon to provide expert commentary their views are often those generating the development of the folk devils through press releases and policy development.<sup>13</sup>

Where media coverage and expert interpretation have developed in such a way as to create a sense of fear amongst society, or a part of it, the idea is that the public will begin to expect action to be taken against the folk devil. Clearly where the behaviour is identified as being criminal the action sought will involve a strong state response and as a result society may reach a position in which it will tolerate a more extreme form of action taken against such a group than might normally be expected. The emphasis will be on stopping the problem, not on any balancing of interests and rights.

The effect of developing a group as folk devils offers an opportunity for vested interests to engage in 'ideological exploitation'.<sup>14</sup> The exploiter 'gains' from their ability to denounce the folk devil and their characterisation of a particular type of deviance. That gain can be understood in very practical terms - more resources and greater powers for the police, the press sells papers, politicians reinforce their authority and can be seen to be strong in the face of attacks upon society which can improve electability. However, gains can be seen in ideological and symbolic terms - reinforcement of the credibility and support for the police, silencing of diverse voices which offer difficult challenges to the status quo and resulting reinforcement of the established order of things.

The traditional context within which we find a discussion of the folk devil is in the criminology/sociology area when considering the construction of deviancy.<sup>15</sup> However, the folk devil concept has tended to take second place to a wider discussion of the moral panic which develops around the behaviour of the folk devil. The idea of a moral panic has some important elements to it which are significant for the discussion of the construction of political activists as deviants. When considering the contexts within

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<sup>13</sup> In the context of constructing anti-capitalist activists as folk devils this can also be said of the involvement of the police as will be seen in the discussion below.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, K. (1998) *Moral Panics*, London: Routledge at p.39

<sup>15</sup> 'Radical sociology' has been credited with the development of the concepts of moral panic and deviance amplification. – See McRobbie, A., (1994) "The Moral Panic in the age of the Postmodern Mass Media", in McRobbie, A., *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*

which previous analysis of the moral panic/folk devil construction has been undertaken it becomes apparent that we may be dealing with a very different type of constructed deviancy.

The focus of the moral panic in the years since its was first significantly developed by British sociologist Stan Cohen<sup>16</sup> in relation to Mods and Rockers in the 1960s has centred upon political issues that have at their core a strong moral dimension which allows for the development of a heated debate around acceptable behaviour within society. The danger is to something which 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 ‘out of control youths’, members of ethnic minorities<sup>17</sup>, drug use, raves and single mothers and even dangerous dogs.<sup>18</sup>

In the classical construction of the moral panic developed by Stan Cohen, the process was understood in terms of *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 or asylum seekers. These people do not have a voice; they are already silent within civil society. At best, there may be someone to speak for them. They are therefore an easy target for demonisation.

The discussion below considering anti-capitalist activists will argue that this traditional demonization has been altered through the development of a new approach towards an understanding of folk devils. However, it should be noted that even within the traditional account the moral panic allowed for the construction groups challenging the established order of things to as deviant.

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<sup>16</sup> Cohen, S. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, ibid.

<sup>17</sup> In particular youths from such groups – see Hall et al. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, The State and Law and Order*, London: Macmillan

<sup>18</sup> See Thompson, K. (1998) *Moral Panics*, London: Routledge for a full account of moral panics and folk devil construction in the UK.

In his account of the demonization of Mods and Rockers, one of Cohen's central arguments was that the crisis arose out of post-war tensions within society - a period of uncertainty and change fed into a period of "ritualistic confrontation"<sup>19</sup> between the forces of order and morality on the one hand and the deviants on the other. Against this background the Mods and Rockers were anonymous target for demonization, even if they were not exactly the usual 'outsiders':

Traditionally the deviant role has been assigned to the lower class urban male, but the Mods and Rockers appeared to be less class tied; here were a group of impostors, reading the lines which everyone knew belonged to some other groups. Even their clothes were out of place; without leather jackets they could hardly be distinguished from bank clerks. The uneasiness felt about actors who are not quite in their places can lead to greater hostility. Something done by an out-group is simply condemned and fitted into the scheme of things, but in-group deviance is embarrassing, it threatens the norms of the group and tends to blur its boundaries with the out-group.<sup>20</sup>

Although this group had a degree of affluence and were therefore not class-based outsiders, their behaviour, fashion and music were understood as amounting to a rejection of traditional values. Their threat did not come from their outside status but from the fact that they challenged the accepted norms from within.

As Angela McRobbie 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

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *ibid.* at p.40.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *supra*, at p. 195

paralysis – or to adopt a gung-ho ‘something must be done about it’ attitude.<sup>21</sup>

Such effects are working within the construction of anti-capitalistic activists as folk devils as the discussion below will show. However, McRobbie argues that the traditional approach is outdated – in particular because it relies on a rather old fashioned conception of the media. The complex inter-relationship between the different elements of society that operate in relation to the portrayal of a group as folk devil cannot be understated. Government and police, the media and the folk devils themselves all play complex roles in the development of the public perception of how the behaviour of such a group needs to be perceived.

We must now go on to consider the development of what might be understood as being a new type of folk devil, one that does not necessarily fall within the moral panic construction. The classical account of the folk devil within the framework must therefore be contrasted with the construction of anti-capitalist protesters by the media and political communities.

### ***Anti-capitalist activists as folk devils***

In order to consider how it is that anti-capitalist activists can be understood as being constructed as a new form of folk devils I will firstly examine some general features of the discussion surrounding the actions of anti-capitalist protesters before going on to offer two brief case studies. These, arising out of actions in London on May Day 2000 and May Day 2001, provide examples of the media coverage and political commentary which indicate that activists are being portrayed as falling into a category of deviancy.

In the UK, it would seem to have been an apparently easy process to mould the anti-capitalist activist into a folk devil. This process has been assisted by the connections between environmental activists during the 1990s and the vilification of the rave culture

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<sup>21</sup> McRobbie, *supra*, at p.199

which led to a moral panic response in the late 1980s in relation to drug use and unlicensed dance events.<sup>22</sup> The free party/festival culture that the rave scene came out of has long traditional connections with environmental activism.<sup>23</sup> There are also connections between activists and new age travellers, a group who has become part of the folk devil group which has for centuries operated around Gypsies.<sup>24</sup>

The ease with which activists are now publicly connected with extreme violence and criminality can be seen in relation to the ritual protest actions of May Day in London. The detailed discussion below will illustrate that in the context of anti-capitalist activists we have the creation of suspicion and fear in the mind of the public, and the expectation on the part of the police that activists are anarchist thugs. The obvious conclusion to be drawn by the authorities and the media, and therefore passed onto the public is that there will almost certainly be trouble. The result of this pre-event expectation is that strong policing tactics are both necessary and justifiable. 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.

The authorities will presuppose that for the most part those who witness the actions through the filter of the media will be unsympathetic to claims that policing tactics may have been heavy handed. If tough policing measures are taken, and the 'event' is kept 'under control'<sup>25</sup>, then the warnings from the authorities will be seen to having been

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<sup>22</sup> See Thompson, supra, Ch 3 – "Moral Panics About Youth" – Club Cultures and Raves. See generally Rietveld, H. "Repetitive beats: free parties and the politics of contemporary DiY dance culture in Britain", in McKay, G. (ed.) *DiY Culture - Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Rietveld, H. (1993) "Living the Dream", in Redhead (ed.) *Rave Off - Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*

<sup>23</sup> See for example McKay, G. (1996) *Senseless Act of Beauty – Cultures of Resistance in the Sixties*, Verso, and McKay G. (ed) (1998) *DiY Culture – Party and Protest in Nineties Britain*, Verso

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of the media portrayal of Gypsies and Travellers generally and press regulation see Morris, R. "Gypsies, Travellers and the Media: Press regulation and racism in the UK", (2000) *Communications Law*, Vol.5, No.6, 213-219.

<sup>25</sup> As was seen on the May Day 2001 event where the police corralled thousands of protesters into a confined space in Oxford Circus and kept them there for a number of hours, only allowing them through police lines if they gave their name and address and consented to be photographed. See UK Newspaper coverage 2/5/01

vindicated and the strong policing strategy justified. If the policing strategy is not successful, then that allows for an even more robust response on the next occasion.

The legislature has also sought to develop legal responses to the growing protest movement in the UK. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 was an early example of this with the development of new trespassory offences designed to deal with direct action protests such as anti-roads protests and hunt saboteurs.<sup>26</sup> However, the passing of the Terrorism Act 2000 and the ‘research’ undertaken in the development of that legislation also illustrate the power of demonisation. Thus, the Consultation Paper<sup>27</sup> on Terrorism Legislation raised the prospect that environmental activists might, at some point in the future, up their activity into the more serious and dangerous action of ‘terrorism’. No evidence was offered in support of this position, and it can be understood as being entirely speculation. However, by its presence in the consultation paper, it became adopted as part of government policy, thus affecting the definition of Terrorism within the new Act.<sup>28</sup> It has also become 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 has become normalised allowing authorities to justify the development and implementation of extreme legal and policing powers.<sup>29</sup>

However, a second significant effect can also be seen - by constructing the activists as folk devils, their voices are effectively silenced. Although activists might not fall so clearly within the traditional type of marginalised group that would be constructed as a

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<sup>26</sup> For example S68 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.

<sup>27</sup> Legislation Against Terrorism Consultation Paper CM4178 (1998)

<sup>28</sup> 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.’

<sup>29</sup> For a critique of the Terrorism Act 2000 see Gearty, C., “Terrorism and human rights: a case study in impending realities” (1999) 19 Legal Studies 367

folk devil, and as such may be less traditional ‘outsiders’ within society, they can be seen as outsiders to the political process, whilst offering a challenge to it and the established political and economic order. By becoming constructed however, as ‘deviants’<sup>30</sup> who seek to cause harm to society their message is prevented from being heard by the public. Thus the central element of the moral panic of encouraging the people to pay no heed to the difficulties of everyday life that might be highlighted by ‘outsiders’ is an important element to the creation of activists as folk devils. The challenges put forward to the established thinking by anti-capitalist campaigners are to be smothered.

Through this silencing process it might be supposed that the authorities are attempting to maintain control of the public political debate. How far such control is in fact achievable is clearly open to dispute. However, it is ironic that part of the method of demonisation can be seen as arising out of the political agenda that activists seek to develop. So, where there is mileage in attacking the message - by rubbishing it as naive, irrational, dangerous, self-interested etc., then it will be focused upon by the politicians and media. But generally, any attempt by the anti-capitalist activists to gain media coverage and forge a debate on the issues they seek to challenge is more often than not silenced by their ‘deviant’ construction.

Finally, the silencing effect of the ‘crisis’ around anti-capitalist activists has had the effect of removing the moral panic element of the construction in this case. As we have already seen, the folk devil traditionally operates in relation to a moral panic where the group is in some way to blame for the decline of morality, law and order, or generally the smooth operation of society. However, there is no moral panic in relation to this new category of folk devil. The media has not been debating the morality surrounding the behaviour of the activists, because to do so would require a debate about the political and economic issues the activists are trying to raise. It is ironic that in fact there cannot be a moral panic in relation to these folk devils.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> As the discussion below will illustrate labels such as ‘anarchist’, ‘thug’ and ‘terrorist’ appear to be used by the media to reinforce the idea of deviancy in relation to such activists.

<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that post the G8 summit protests in Genoa in July 2001 the British media did in fact engage in a more critical issue orientated analysis of anti-capitalist actions – although it

The silencing element of the process is further enhanced in the context of the activists as a result of the way in which demonisation removes the identity of the individuals in the group. Once developed an individual who falls within the folk devil construction will be identified by their negative stereotypical elements only. Thus activists are ‘anarchists’<sup>32</sup>, ‘violent hooligans’<sup>33</sup> even ‘terrorists’. They certainly are mindless and their aim is simply to destroy.

The idea that these activists may be respectable, employed, thoughtful and committed to positive change within society does not appear to form part of the vision which the press and politicians want passed onto the public. As the following discussion of the events surrounding the May Day 2000 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 created by the media coverage.

### ***Creating ‘new’ folk devils - May Day 2000 & 2001***

On May Day 2000, a carnival against capitalism was organised in Parliament Square in London. The key part of the day was a “guerrilla gardening” action which involved activists turning the grass in front of the Parliament buildings into an urban garden. However, as the day progressed the largely peaceful demonstration disintegrated and pockets of violence broke out leading to criminal damage and some scuffles with the police. Some shops were damaged, including not surprisingly a McDonald’s restaurant. Prime Minister Tony Blair described the protesters as being “beneath contempt” saying

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might be argued that one of the reasons for such an approach arose out of the policing of the protest by *Italian police*.

<sup>32</sup> The term is not used to denote any understanding of the political position of the activists, many of whom would indeed see themselves as being anarchists in terms of their ideology. Instead, the term is used in a pejorative, derogatory way to conjure up images of black clad, balaclava wearing maniacs bent on the destruction of society.

<sup>33</sup> Note the reference to ‘hooligans’ mirrors some elements of the construction of football fans into ‘violent hooligans’.

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.<sup>34</sup>

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 have since become generally described in the media as being a ‘riot’. However, this simple account of the days events, is just that – too simple. In the discussion below the mainstream media account of the events of the day will be placed alongside the experiences of those present.

The level of condemnation of the events on May Day 2000 was especially high following two separate incidents in which paint was daubed on the Cenotaph and a statue of Winston Churchill was splattered with red paint and a grass turf provided him with a Mohican hair cut. The Home Secretary at the time, Jack Straw, was keen to draw the significant distinction between ‘legitimate’ protest and criminal action by saying that the demonstration was “criminality and thuggery masquerading as political protest”.<sup>35</sup> However, this simplification hides the reality of the complex nature of protest. And as the events of May Day 2000 began to be unpicked in the days that followed the incident involving Churchill’s statue can be seen as being a very clear illustration of how a construction of the activists as “mindless thugs” masques a more profound and thoughtful process.

On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2000, the Daily Mail printed pictures of protesters under the title “Do you recognise any of the rioters?” One photograph was of a young man spray-painting Churchill’s statue. As a result of the article, the protester concerned confessed to his actions on the day. However, far from being the “mindless thug” the newspapers had been quick to portray him as, it emerged that he was in fact a 25 year old former soldier who had seen service in Bosnia. *The Guardian* was keen to point out that he did not fit the stereotype of a protester or eco-warrior, but was more a stereotype of a soldier.

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian* 2/5/00

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian* 2/5/00

Things moved even further away from the typical media representation of activists when he appeared in court. It emerged that the protester had a well thought out 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 leaver whose impetuosity, egotism and bigotry on occasion cost many lives unnecessarily and caused much suffering that was needless and unjustified.<sup>36</sup>

When asked by the Stipendiary Magistrate 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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 folk devil construction found in the British news media. Someone who has a sophisticated understanding of the role of political leaders in fostering inequalities in the world cannot be so easily dismissed as the faceless thugs normally blamed for engaging in protests. Indeed, this protester offered a difficult paradox for the media portrayal of the May Day activists.

Other activists were more easily categorised. Another protester who caught the media’s attention was a 17-year-old Eton schoolboy whose father is a University professor.

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian* 8/5/00

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in *The Guardian* 10/5/00

According to media coverage, he was charged in relation to throwing a plastic bottle at the police. How can a public school boy be rejected as a serious challenge to the established order? Trivialization of activists is another theme that can be seen to arise from time to time in media coverage of actions. The media are keen to show protesters as simply amounting to either thugs, or middle class kids playing at being hard for a while before going off and becoming respectable members of society.

Media coverage from *The Telegraph* in the days following the protest illustrates the other type of protester – the one more easily understood by media and politician alike. Thus the paper was quick to point out that of 13 people appearing in court, “eight of them born overseas”<sup>38</sup> – foreigners. Some were unemployed and one was a Kurdish refugee.<sup>39</sup>

The politicians were generally in agreement in their condemnation of the protests labelling all the actions of the day as being criminal and nothing to do with the basic right to protest in a democratic society. Yet, the majority of the events 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 actions was able to be dismissed by association with the small amount of damage and violence done on the day. The message of the protest was lost within the construction of all those involved in the events as ‘criminals’ and ‘thugs’.

Accounts of the events of the carnival against capitalism on May Day 2000 by those present in Parliament Square are somewhat different from the mainstream media coverage. Reclaim the Streets, who had been at the heart of the action, commented on their website – “We’re getting accustomed to being present with a virtual politics that bears no resemblance to the experience of anyone who was there...”<sup>40</sup> The events of the day had been designed to avoid violence and for much of the day the atmosphere was reported to be positive. The guerrilla gardening in Parliament Square passed peacefully until riot police closed all exits from the Square and negotiations then began between organisers and the police. After much activity the police line was miraculously broken by

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<sup>38</sup> *Daily Telegraph* 4/5/00

<sup>39</sup> Whom it emerged had lived in the UK for 12 years. *Daily Telegraph* 4/5/00

the samba band which proceeded to lead a large section of the crowd up Parliament Street and into Whitehall.

One participant observed that the crowd was allowed by the police to move up Parliament Street past and empty and unguarded McDonalds –

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.<sup>41</sup>

The eyewitness 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?”<sup>42</sup> Their conclusion was that the police, the politicians and McDonalds would all benefit from images of the destruction of yet another McDonalds restaurant. It 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* incorrectly reported at the time that the McDonalds restaurant had been guarded by “12 police officers”<sup>43</sup> 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 ...” 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 Indy media 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

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.gn.apc.org/rts/mayday2k/index.htm> - accessed 18/10/01

<sup>41</sup> A. N. Other, “Mayday 2k – McConspiracy?!” – <http://www.urban75.org/mayday/015.html> - accessed 18/10/01

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> As reported in Indymedia, “Softly, softly’ policing: was it just a euphemism for police entrapment” – [http://www.indymedia.org.uk/newsite/text.php3?text=softly\\_policing.txt](http://www.indymedia.org.uk/newsite/text.php3?text=softly_policing.txt) - accessed 18/10/01

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.”<sup>44</sup>

The Mayday 2000 carnival against capitalism thus became transformed from a “peaceful celebration of the growing global anti-capitalist movement”<sup>45</sup> 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”.<sup>46</sup> However, as the May Day 2001 began to approach the police and the politicians were keen to rely on the portrayal of the 2000 events as being a serious riot in order to justify their policies and tactics employed deal with the coming event in London.

Sir John Stevens, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, launched a police media campaign at the beginning of April 2001<sup>47</sup> which clearly and very unsubtly sought to portray protesters as a dangerous threat to society. Photographs of suspected ringleaders were circulated to press during April 2001<sup>48</sup>, despite none having been identified or charged with offences. Newspapers printed stories that anarchists were thousands strong, would carry samurai swords, had links with Real IRA, had been to training camps in USA, and were ‘battle hard’ from Seattle. The *Sunday Telegraph* had 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

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Reclaim the Streets leaflet Guerrilla Gardening 2000

<sup>46</sup> Wheen, F. “Small riot: no one dead”, *The Guardian*, 3/5/00

<sup>47</sup> See for example “For one Day only...” *The Observer* 29/4/01 – the Focus article reported on the media coverage of the upcoming May Day action.

<sup>48</sup> See for example Vidal J. & Branigan T. “Backlash against May Day zero tolerance” *The Guardian* 30/4/01. *The Guardian* publishing a letter which voiced the concern that “The publication of photographs of people ‘suspected’ by police of ‘intending’ to cause violence by newspapers ... is witch-hunting, not journalism.”

movement and German terrorists. These are the same people who caused trouble at the meeting of the G8 group of economic powers ... at Seattle....<sup>49</sup>

Whilst the media printed stories which created a sense of fear amongst the public in relation to the event, and the police mobilised their resources to deal with ‘the problem’, the 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.”<sup>50</sup>

*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 -

In 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.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed many experienced activists chose not to attend the organised events in London expecting both police tactics on the day to be aggressive, and that the media predictions of violence would be self-fulfilling prophesies. The events of May Day 2000<sup>52</sup> 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.

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<sup>49</sup> Bamber, D. “‘Monopoly’ anarchists plan May Day havoc in bid to wreck polling”, *Sunday Telegraph*, 18/2/01

<sup>50</sup> In the lead up to the carnival against capitalism in 2000 Livingstone had been campaigning to become mayor and had been much criticised after he came out in support of direct action. See Vidal, J. & Branigan, T., “Backlash against May Day zero tolerance”, *The Guardian* 30/4/01

<sup>51</sup> Quoting David Jones, “a former organiser for Reclaim the Streets”, Vidal, J. & Branigan, T., “Backlash against May Day zero tolerance”, *The Guardian* 30/4/01. Reclaim the Streets were not involved in the organisation of the 2001 May Day action.

<sup>52</sup> Discussed below.

May Day 2001 turned out to have amounted to a “trap” set for the protesters. The police engaged in what they called “zero tolerance” which in the end amounted to the implementation of a tight cordon of police containing protesters in a confined area in Oxford Street. The cordon was held for over six hours with those present not being allowed to leave until they had given their names and addresses to the police and having their photograph taken. There were limited skirmishes between protesters and the police with much of the limited outbreaks of violence occurring after the police had implemented their corralling tactic.

The tabloid media’s response to the police action was summed up by the *Daily Mail*’s headline on May 2<sup>nd</sup> – “Day the Law fought back” – which was accompanied by a photograph of a protester being beaten over the head by a police baton.<sup>53</sup> The campaigners were variously described as being a “mob”, “anarchists” and “thugs”. Politicians also sought to make their voices heard against the activists. In the immediate aftermath of the May Day action 2001 the Prime Minister, Tony Blair was quick to condemn the protesters:

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 our democratic process.<sup>54</sup>

Yet on the day itself one of the organisers had addressed the crowd saying:

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.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Daily Mail* 2/5/01

<sup>54</sup> *The Guardian* 1/5/01

<sup>55</sup> “A day of skirmishes then stalemate”, *The Guardian* 2/5/01

In fact there was a degree of criticism of the police tactics on the day. Although they were considered, in the immediate aftermath of May Day, to have been a success 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.<sup>56</sup> However, the police clearly were engaged in a win-win situation in their treatment of the protests. Had violence on the day been extensive then the police could have said “we told you so”. As it was, a relatively peaceful day with the police largely maintaining control justified all their strategies and warnings.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional approach to the folk devil and the moral panic to which that character is attached is summed up by Stanley Cohen, the original developer of the concept:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight, Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious repercussions and might produce such changes as

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<sup>56</sup> “May Day legal threat”, *The Guardian* 12/6/01

those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.<sup>57</sup>

The established account of the role folk devils play within society requires the presence of a moral panic within which the threat to society is demonised. Yet, the common type of folk devil within this context is more often than not an outsider to established society - for example Gypsies, asylum seekers and juveniles. They are groups without power and influence which are regarded as engaging in deviant behaviour which threatens the order of society. By identifying such groups and developing a cohesive negative response to their behaviour, the established positions and hierarchies within society can be seen to be maintained as the outside threat is 'dealt with'. Central to the development of such people as folk devils is the role that the media play in constructing their behaviour as deviant and threatening.

The development of anti-capitalist activists as folk devils has some similarities to the traditional construction, but also offers some new elements for the way we can understand the idea of folk devils, outside of the confines of moral panics. As we have seen the activist folk devils are not part of a moral panic. The debate that surrounds such crises requires society to engage in a process of examination of the moral issues highlighted by the panic. If we look at the development of protesters as demons there is none of the accompanying moral outrage from the usual commentators in the press such as academics and religious leaders. The silencing process which is a key part of the development of this new folk devil is central to this. If a debate is opened up about the moral and ideological elements that might operate in relation to the actions of the activists this would require an exploration of the very issues which they are trying to draw the public's attention to. In order to maintain the silencing process there needs to be no accompanying debate about the activists other than in the context of their deviancy and naïveté.

In relation to the idea that folk devils in moral panics should be understood in terms of the outsider - the idea is that the new use of the folk devil category does not fall so clearly

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<sup>57</sup> Cohen, *supra* at p.9.

into the outsider/insider approach. The development of political activists as a category of folk devil serves a number of aims. The activist as demon may clearly 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 are the source of a direct challenge to the established system in a more systematic and dangerous manner than we find in the 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. The process by which they become a folk devil intensifies their outsider status but in fact says more about the interests of the elite than it does about them as folk devils. Their status is not self-selected and they pose a threat to society only through the unacceptability of their behaviour, not their ideology. 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. But it is that voice, and the message it is trying to deliver, that parts of the established political and economic system want to exclude. Thus, one of the key effects of the construction of activists as folk devils is the more extreme marginalization silencing voices of opposition to the system.

Finally, the demonization of activists prevents 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 put forward.

The development of a new type of folk devil in the form of anti-capitalist activists therefore offers some new challenges for our understanding of the construction of deviancy. Although there are similarities with the more traditional approach, the effect of creating this new folk devil is more complex and multi-faceted than the usual practical results of moral panics. Thus, we would normally expect to see new legislation and increased power and resources going to the institutions within society that uphold order.

As one participant in the May Day 2001 action was quoted as saying – “They are consciously [constructing] a moral panic to justify the fact they will be tooled up on the day”.<sup>58</sup> As well as a re-legitimization of the established interests. These things are part of the construction of activists as folk devils but as we have seen there is also a significant benefit in allowing a high degree of control over what voices can be heard in political debates.

However, by demonising activists the target of the folk devil construct is not itself without power, thus offering a further significant shift from the traditional account. Thus as we find groups such as Ya Basta!<sup>59</sup> playing on the outlaw theme and being willing to embrace their outsider role. As a result of their understanding of the dynamics of media and police interaction with activists, Ya Basta! engage in a form of playback of the folk devil image. They embrace the outsider motif and use it to their own advantage in their literature and development of their activism - thus at the Prague anti-IMF protest in September 2000 their claim was that they would ‘Liquidate the International Monetary fund. The joke on the police was that would be done not through violence but through the use of water pistols and water bombs:

We are criminal, delinquents, 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?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> John, spokesman for Socialist youth group Revolution, quoted in Vidal & Branigan, “Backlash against May Day zero tolerance”, *The Guardian* 30/5/01

<sup>59</sup> An Italian group which is very visible at anti-capitalist actions throughout Europe. They regularly catch the media’s attention largely because of the strong spectacle element to their protest - they dress in white with many wearing padding made of foam rubber and cardboard. Their presence has a strong visual effect which the media are keen to use but they do not fall within a construction that would see them as violent. They use humour and strong images to undermine and deconstruct the expected dynamics of protest and political engagement through civil disobedience. Their style of protest has been copied throughout Europe including the Wombles at the London May Day 2001 action.

<sup>60</sup> *Ya Basta!* Agit-prop.

Ya Basta!'s style of protest presented a challenge for the media representation of the anti-capitalist protesters. Unable to place them easily into the violent category, the press were only able to describe their actions as a 'surreal' battle in which "Ya Basta threw coloured balloons at the police, who popped them".<sup>61</sup>

The ability of Ya Basta! to take some control over their image and challenge the media portrayal of activists is an important distinction from the more traditional folk devil who would possibly not even recognise their designation as such, let alone have the ability to make a direct challenge to their construction as deviant.

It is also the case that activists have both the sophistication to challenge their demonization as well as access to mechanisms that can counteract the stranglehold on political debate. Thus, the Internet offers a significant tool which allows activists the opportunity to take some control over the way news is reported. Groups such as Indy Media,<sup>62</sup> Undercurrents,<sup>63</sup> and zines such as Earth First! UK based Do or Die, 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 this group of folk devils is not going to be a silent and passive target of vilification and marginalisation.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Independent* 27/9/00, p.2

<sup>62</sup> This group operates an independent activist media Internet site which protesters have use to place their own reports and accounts of events.

<sup>63</sup> This group of activists produces videos of protests using footage shot by protesters.

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