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David Frankfurter. *Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. 286.

[1] David Frankfurter has given us an enthralling and complex interdisciplinary treatment of a recurring socio-historical phenomenon - the incarnation of a transcendent “evil” as a tangible threat to human societies. He investigates the Satanic ritual abuse rumors of the 1980s and 1990s in comparison to accusations against Christians in Rome, the Medieval witch craze, contemporary African witch panics and a host of less detailed examples. Though Frankfurter does not engage in a direct analysis of some of our more current popular discourses about organized “evil,” his work paves an interesting analytical path for anyone so wishing to apply it.

[2] According to Frankfurter moral panics from antiquity to the present, have all produced a controlled articulation of evil by framing it in terms of an organized global conspiracy complete with villains, ritual atrocities, and antinomian aims, and in the process these panics themselves perform evil into existence as they incarnate it. Yet the performance of evil is two-fold, since professed victims and expert witch finders not only mimetically perform evil into a tangible, visible reality, but in purging their own conjuration they also ironically motivate the performance of *real* “unspeakable violence, evil” (224), like witch burnings, pogroms, or the false imprisonment of day care workers. Frankfurter utilizes insights and data from history, psychoanalysis, anthropology, folkloristics, and a host of other fields in order to explore the dynamics of this devilish discourse, the roots of which he inevitably concludes are “hardwired” into human culture.

[3] Frankfurter wishes to produce a framework, within which he can interrogate what he calls the “myth,” or master narrative, of evil conspiracy. In his framework “evil” is a discourse, “a way of representing things and shaping our experience of things, not some force in itself” (11). Yet its discursive nature should not put off readers with disinclination towards, for instance, the discursive turn of cultural theory, because in what follows Frankfurter clearly displays the propriety of treating the evil he is investigating most fundamentally as a discourse.

[4] In the second chapter, Frankfurter exemplifies the idea that discourses of evil gain efficacy in no small part by organizing, totalizing, and globalizing their visions, through the literatures and traditions of demonology. This is the “architecture” of evil that in turn becomes useful to the purveyors of panic discussed in chapter three. As charismatic experts of evil, witch finders, ritual experts, religious leaders, and others create and propagate schemes of evil, which only they can countermand - in other words, they facilitate the need for their own unique services.

[5] Schemes of evil do not only gain efficacy through their connection to global conspiracy but also through the imputation of evil rites onto those implicated in the schemes. In chapter four’s discussion of ritual accusations, Frankfurter does a good job of connecting forms of Othering, such as colonial portrayals of “savages,” and accusations of satanic ritual practices through the shared imagery of orgy, cannibalism, and a plethora of other transgressive and usually grotesque behaviors. In *ritually* transgressing, the Other is also imagined to be reinforcing the cohesion of an evil system, both socially, through the bonding of evil community, and ideologically, through a systematic means of enacting an alignment with some evil force, like Satan. This point is worth stressing because, as Frankfurter briefly suggests without exploring in depth, ritual accusations and their countermanding tendencies may have implications to the study of ritual itself. This becomes particularly evident in the later discussion of “*mimetic performances*.”

[6] Before delving into performance, Frankfurter takes us deep into the recesses of the human psyche, confronting us with the gruesome possibility that “various tableaux of evil,” not only demonize others but also function “as projected fantasies of transgression, involving the most basic, primary process images” (158). While such fantasy may be a practical way of organizing otherwise ambiguous fears into a discursively controlled realm of monstrosity, it also establishes an arena for voyeurism and the experience of perversity. To make matters worse, we (or our cultures at least) seem to be hardwired with the propensity to create monstrous realms. The imaginers of satanic conspiracy then are faced not only with the problem of purging their communities but also of purging their minds of these very imaginings. Both, Frankfurter tells us, are most usually done through the bodies of others. One does not have to whole heartedly endorse Frankfurter’s psychoanalytical turn to applaud his effort of dealing with the tension between terror and pleasure that seems so prominent in issues of social and moral transgression.

[7] In chapter six Frankfurter provides us with a three part typology of the “*mimetic performance*” of evil as: 1) direct, 2) indirect, or 3) in direct parody. Direct performances, which embody evil through confessions and possessions, and indirect performances, which provide witness to evil in the bodies of others, both add to the reality of evil by making it more imminent. Without these performances, in fact, it is unlikely that a moral panic underwritten by an imagined realm of evil conspiracy could succeed. The fact that there is something about the mode of performance itself, in such instances, that exceeds the efficacy of purely linguistic expressions, like demonologies, folk tales, and the like, should be of interest to anyone involved in understanding the relationship between performance and knowledge in ritual efficacy, especially given the symbolic implications of ritual in these very same instances.

[8] Given the depth and complexity of *Evil Incarnate* the final chapter comes as a slight disappointment, in that it is barely about “Mobilizing against Evil.” Instead Frankfurter provides an extensive historical rebuttal of cannibalistic, orgiastic, and otherwise transgressive ritual atrocities, as he might rather have done in an appendix. My own expectations were along the lines of an argument that would perhaps lend more agency and motivation to especially the primary mobilizers against evil. Something to counterbalance the psychoanalytic vision of society, as dammed to repeatedly cannibalize itself in its propensity towards voyeurism, violence, and victimization displaced, in this case, through ways of imagining evil. Of course, I have to wonder if my own need to see motivated actors shaping social events is not just a latent addiction to conspiratorial thinking.

[9] Frankfurter’s book is not only a must read for students of religion, culture, and society, but it is a book with broad interdisciplinary, and even extra-disciplinary appeal. Any reader, inside and outside of the academy, who is capable of reading patiently and not being frustrated by nuance, will be rewarded by the insights this book has to offer. Discourses of evil are a very real presence in all our lives, and understanding some the dynamics that not only propagate such discourses, but also turn them at times into unspeakable violence can only help us navigate a more peaceful and safer existence.

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