

The Risk of Freedom Briefing

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Denormalizing and demonizing

When opponents are not argued with but demonized people hesitate to speak their minds, and often meekly acquiesce in opinions that they know to be wrong. This stifling of free debate jeopardizes other freedoms too — including the most basic freedoms on which civil society depends. For the last twenty years or more discussion of immigration has been impeded by the readiness to convict dissidents of 'racism and xenophobia'. This label is by no means neutral, but, on the contrary, brings with it such a burden of adverse judgement that merely to be accused of the crime is to be remembered thereafter as guilty. The 'guilty' party may be punished by the loss of a political career (Enoch Powell), by the loss of a livelihood (Ray Honeyford), or in the extreme case by execution (Pim Fortuyn). But it is not only individuals who pay the price: the whole of European society is suffering from the fact that the most important issue affecting its future cannot be freely debated.

In this issue of our *Briefing* we consider recent examples of the way in which demonization is adversely affecting the moral and political climate of modern societies, restricting free trade, free discussion, free elections and the personal freedoms of wholly innocent people, in accordance with the whims of fanatics and witch-hunters. Sometimes demonization forms part of a long-term strategy of 'de-normalization', described here by John Luik, in which an activity or industry is subjected to continuous one-sided judgement from people who systematically silence or intimidate those who attempt to put the other side.

The strategy of denormalization is easy to execute when the target is a commercial enterprise, since every attempt by the enterprise to defend itself can be reconstrued as a bid to maximize its profits. The desperate scramble of oil companies to clean up their image in the face of attacks by the environmental NGOs is a case in point. By treating the oil companies as though they had no right to exist, the eco-activists can disqualify every argument in their favour. As a result no meaningful dialogue occurs, and the outcome that all reasonable people would hope for — namely a compromise between the consumption of oil and the protection of the ecosphere — is simply ruled out a priori.

Even higher in the eco-activists' demonology than the giant polluters are those who put the case for the defence. The articulate sceptic is the arch demon, the one who must at all costs be silenced, if neces-

sary by summoning an ad hoc judicial committee to denounce whatever he says. Such has been the fate of Bjørn Lomborg, whose case is described in this issue by John Kay. Probably much of what Lomborg says is dubious or wrong, since he is acting as Devil's Advocate. For his opponents, however, Lomborg is the Devil himself: hence the approach of Martin Lynas, described in his own words below.

The effect of demonization on the political process can be seen in the extraordinary case of the Belgian Vlaams Party, which campaigns for an independent Flanders, free from the corrupt administration of French-speaking Wallonia, and which as a result has been demonized by the Belgian political establishment. The Belgian Government has felt able to bring case after case before the Belgian courts, in order to disqualify the

Vlaams Party as a 'racist' organization, purely on the strength of its popular support — a support which is offered as proof of its 'populist' identity. So far the attempt to outlaw the Vlaams Party has been unsuccessful, but who knows what judgement might eventually emerge, from courts that have assumed the right to put the American President and the British Prime Minister on trial *in absentia*? We might witness the extraordinary result of a majority party being ruled illegal by its opponents, largely on the grounds that it can win an election.

Perhaps the most destructive of witch-hunts, however, are those in which people seek out scapegoats through which to purge their own wicked desires. We have seen this happen in England in the great scares over paedophilia. These scares have arisen among people many of whom have no qualms about dressing their children as sex-objects or exposing them to every kind of obscene display. One woman has even been driven from her home as a known 'paediatrician'! Priests and school-teachers have been relentlessly interrogated as child abusers, on the strength of accusations made by some confused or malicious child. And — as the case of Belgium once again reminds us — the real abusers, who know how to deal with childish things, often go scot free. This new and most virulent form of witch-hunting is steadily poisoning the relations between adults and children all over the Western world. We include a review of Dorothy Rabinowitz's book on the topic, to show how serious the matter has now become in America — home of the Barbie Doll.

"Sometimes demonization forms part of a long-term strategy of denormalization"

Our theme

Denormalization

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No Crueler Tyrannies: Accusation, False Witness: Carol Iannone reviews Dorothy Rabinowitz

The Witch-craft trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 are an appallingly fascinating episode in our history. Thanks to Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible* (1952), they have also become a supposedly essential piece of our national self-understanding — essential, that is, from the liberal point of view. In representing the Salem trials as a proxy for the McCarthy hearings of the early 1950s, Miller suggested that America was a country prone to inquisitorial rampages, ever on the lookout for imaginary malefactors to punish in order to satisfy the simplistic worldview of good versus evil.

With that in mind, one might have thought that the country's most prominent progressives would have leaped to the bars, benches and barricades to defend the falsely accused when allegation of mass sexual abuse against children erupted in the 1980's and 1990's. These were cases, after all, in which outlandish, ever-escalating charges were levelled at totally innocent people, in which gross violations of due process and constitutional rights were committed, and in which terribly wrongful convictions were obtained.

But one would have been wrong. Instead, it was left to a single reporter, the heroic Dorothy Rabinowitz, to undertake in-depth investigation of the worst of these cases and to bring their horrifying transgressions of justice to the attention of a wider public. Eventually her work helped to secure the legal and financial assistance necessary to free most of the victims — but not before lives were shattered, livelihoods lost, savings exhausted, families destroyed, and miserable years passed in prison.

The ordeal of sixty-year-old Violet Amirault and her adult children, Gerald and Cheryl, began in 1984. Worried about the behaviour of her young son, a mother at the Fells Acres Day School, which the Amiraults had successfully operated together for many years, prodded the boy to tell of anything strange that might have been done to him. The child dimly recalled an instance in which Gerald had changed his underwear (as it would later emerge, the child had wet himself). Then, after months of questioning, the boy began to talk about sexual acts.

The mother called the child-abuse hotline. In short order, the police arrested Gerald and closed down the school, and began coaching parents on how to elicit charges of molestation from their children, instructing them not to accept denials and to see such ordinary problems as bed-wetting and loss of appetite as signs of abuse. Charges began pouring forth and Violet and Cheryl were also arrested.

The district attorney and prosecutors enlisted the help of therapists, social workers, and abuse experts who spent months interviewing the three-, four- and five-year-

old children and preparing them to testify. Tapes and transcripts of the session reveal that the tykes did their best to hold on to the truth, but that their implacable inquisitors eventually managed to break them down. A paediatric nurse, Susan Kelley, was especially gifted in these techniques, promising rewards and telling children that they were 'helping' the adults by making charges. Armed with anatomically correct dolls and puppets, Kelley refused to rest until the weary tots finally pointed to a penis, vagina, or rectum.

All three Amiraults were convicted of multiple counts of rape and indecent assault and battery. Violet and Cheryl spent eight years in prison before their convictions were overturned, only to see them reinstated a year and a half later. At that point, seventy-three-year-old Violet passed from this world, bitter and broken. In 1999, after fifteen years of living hell, Cheryl was able to get her sentence reduced to 'time served,' though she remains on probation. Gerald, sentenced to a term of 30 to 40 years, is still in jail, his young family having grown up during his incarceration.

Rabinowitz relates these incredible stories with spare, controlled intensity. She pours scorn on the fools and zealots of the legal system while making vivid the devastation that they wreaked upon the victims and their families.

But the hall of shame is much larger. In the Amirault case alone, the villains include the obsessed, unappeasable district attorneys and prosecutors of Middlesex County; the disgraceful dolts of the supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, who frustrated at least a half-dozen attempts to exonerate or free the Amiraults; and Jane Swift, who as acting governor of Massachusetts, yielded to obscure political pressure and turned down the recommendation of the notoriously tough Massachusetts parole board to release Gerald Amirault and put an end to this dreadful case.

One hungers to know more about the larger forces that permitted these outrages to occur. Rabinowitz lays some of the blame, in passing, on "advanced political opinion," which has created an aura of piety around claims of violation made by women and children. On this view, as Rabinowitz writes, to side with the falsely accused would have been "to undermine the battle against child abuse; it was to betray children and all other victims of sexual predators." Even to raise questions about these cases would have been tantamount, in the opinion of one of the Amiraults' tormentors, to victimizing the children all over again.

It would take far more than the modest, politicized talent of an Arthur Miller to do justice to the range of human failings and vices on display in these cases.

An abridged version of a review by Carol Iannone published in *Commentary*, May 2003.

Parent Scares Mick Hume

There is only one respectable campaign in Britain today demanding more legal discrimination against a minority. It wants the law changed to single out parents of young children for special measures.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, supported by legal and childcare authorities, advocates legal changes that would deny the right to silence specifically to carers in charge of a child who is injured.

The campaign's catch-all slogan — '**Stop Parents Getting Away with Murder**' — captures the way in which the obsession with child abuse has led to the creeping demonization of the entire 'parenting community'.

Behind the emotive focus on abuse, these sort of campaigns are promoting a more poisonous message: that parents cannot be trusted to care for children. The underlying assumption is that abuse is the norm in adult-child relationships, that any exercise of adult authority is suspect, if not dangerous. As the modestly-titled NSPCC Ambassador Lady Walmsley said last year, every child death caused by violence or neglect 'starts with a smack'. A clip round the ear in the supermarket, and we are apparently on the slippery slope to the Tesco chainsaw massacre.

The Government and many quasi-state agencies claim that their aim is to 'support' parents, but we might be forgiven for thinking 'like a rope supports a hanging man'. The casting of a permanent shadow of suspicion over parents provides these bodies with an open invitation to interfere in the private sphere. After all, if you have nothing to hide, how could you object?

Not only does this demonization make life difficult for parents, undermine adult solidarity, and teach children to mistrust grown-ups. It also disorients society from dealing with the far smaller minority of real abusers.

In a memorable display of brass neck, the NSPCC tried to exploit the Victoria Climbié case to further its anti-smacking crusade, arguing that the little girl's killers started abusing her as a form of family discipline. In fact the NSPCC's failure to save Victoria, despite its close involvement in the case, illustrates the dangers of its blanket "a smack can kill" approach. The crusaders behind the child abuse panic are so busy lecturing normal parents, and imagining signs of abuse in ordinary adult-child relationships, that it seems they cannot see murder being done in front of their faces.

To use the only language these people appear to understand:

It's Time to Stop Zealots Getting Away with Abusing Parents.

Mick Hume is the editor of *spiked*: www.spiked-online.com and a columnist for *The Times*.

Just Deserts? The case of Bjørn Lomborg

'You really fucking pasted me man,' gasped Bjørn Lomborg, wiping the cream from his face with paper towels hastily provided by the staff of Borders bookshop, where the hitherto little known Danish statistician was promoting his new book. I had indeed. A basic sponge cake topped with two inches of spray-can cream met its target with a satisfying splat...."

Mark Lynas, unrepentant, wages the campaign. His perspective published in *The Ecologist*...

The Skeptical Environmentalist: measuring the real state of the world, is a weighty, scientific-looking tome, full of graphs and tables, with 2,900 references and published by Cambridge University Press.

Lomborg was a new breed of contrarian. For a start, he was anything but pompous. With his casual clothes, relatively youthful looks and informal delivery, his opponents were the ones who looked outdated and stuffy.

John Rennie, the editor of *Scientific American* magazine, said '[Many scientists] spoke to us about their frustration at what they described as Lomborg's misrepresentation of their fields. His seemingly dispassionate outsider's view, they told us, is often marred by an incomplete use of the data or a misunderstanding of the underlying science. Even where his statistical analyses are valid, his interpretations are frequently off the mark.'

Reviewers in the journal *Nature* complained that Lomborg's book 'reads like a compilation of term papers from one of those classes from hell where one has to fail all the students'. 'It is,' *Nature* said, 'a mass of poorly digested material, deeply flawed in its selection of examples and analysis... Lomborg's text relies heavily on secondary sources. Out of around 2,000 references, about 5 per cent come from news sources and about 30 per cent from web downloads... [these sources are] readily accessible... but frequently not peer reviewed.'

Back in Denmark, a group of Lomborg's own colleagues were so aghast at all the attention he was receiving that they established a website dedicated to refuting his claims. The site is based on the server of Lomborg's own university – Aarhus.

Hence the recent judgement by the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty, which concluded – after a full year of consideration – that *The Skeptical Environmentalist* is 'clearly contrary to standards of good scientific practice'. Although the committee members (all independent scientists; the committee's parent body is the Danish equivalent of Britain's Royal Society or the American National Academy of Sciences) did not feel able to convict Lomborg of deliberately misleading his readers, this was only because they couldn't rule out the possibility that he simply hasn't understood what he was looking at. Ouch. In reality, the committee's judgement was about as damning as it gets: 'Objectively speaking,' it concluded, 'the publication of the work under consideration is deemed to fall within the concept of scientific dishonesty.'

See *The Ecologist*, March 03, for the full version

John Kay, in *Prospect*, feels that tribal loyalty explains the desire to discredit Lomborg:

The reactions to Lomborg were, from the beginning, odd. Criticism was aimed not at his work, but at Lomborg himself. E.O. Wilson and other American scientists attacked Cambridge University Press for publishing it. *Scientific American* published a symposium which contained much sound and fury, but signified very little. In Oxford, someone threw a custard pie in Lomborg's face.

But the most peculiar response came from the Danish 'Committee on Scientific Dishonesty'. I have to admit that my first reaction was to assume that this organisation was a spoof. But it really exists, and I suppose such organisations are necessary in the light of scandals such as Cyril Burt's falsification of intelligence research data and the supposed invention of cold fusion.

The Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty did not undertake any investigation of Lomborg's primary research, reasonably enough, since he did not claim to have undertaken any. Less reasonably, it did not undertake any investigation at all, simply reproducing verbatim assertions made in *Scientific American*. The style of its approach can be illustrated with one example from the committee's report.

Lomborg claims that a widely cited estimate by Norman Myers — that species are becoming extinct at the rate of 40,000 a year — has no scientific basis, and was simply a number made up in order to attract attention. This is a serious accusation, but it appears to be in all essentials true. In the current state of knowledge, there is no means of estimating how many species exist in the world or the numbers of them which disappear. More recent estimates have tended to focus not on the absolute number of extinctions, but on the ratio of that number to some base level — although the evidentiary basis of these figures also seems to be extremely weak.

Myers is close to the line in terms of scientific dishonesty, but since he does not claim that his number is based on substantive research, he probably falls on the right side of it. Incredibly, however, the committee levelled its charge not at Myers for making up the number of 40,000, but at Lomborg for pointing out that he had done so.

It is kinder at this point to leave the Danish committee alone. One might have

expected that serious scientists would have denounced its absurd proceedings but, in fact, the only public comments from the scientific community seem to have been supportive. The principal criticism of the committee's report has come from economic journalists — the *Economist* magazine and Martin Wolf in the *Financial Times*. And for a well-argued criticism of Lomborg's conclusions on climate change you should look not to *Scientific American* but to the critique in *Prospect* (May 2002) by Adair Turner, economist and banker.

What is going on? The proceedings of the committee, and the rants in *Scientific American*, have nothing to do with the evaluation of scientific evidence: they are affirmations of tribal loyalty. For the Danish committee, as for George W Bush, the world divides into good guys and bad guys and all that matters is which side you are on. If you are on the wrong one, off to Guantanamo Bay: evidence and due process are for wimps.

See *Prospect*, April 03, for the full version

Lynching of Lomborg Robert Satchwell

John Kay [above] is right about the way in which Bjørn Lomborg has been pilloried by his fellow Danes. It is actually even worse than Kay imagined. There are three Danish committees concerning scientific dishonesty, covering health, social affairs and natural sciences. All reviewed Lomborg's book *The Skeptical Environmentalist*. Although they found the book guilty of dishonesty, they specifically failed to find Lomborg himself personally guilty. Quite how the eminent scientists managed to distinguish between the words of a book and the author who wrote those same words was never made clear; but the end result certainly gave support to the *Economist's* description of the case as 'Orwellian.' Kay describes the committees' findings as evidence of 'tribal loyalty.' Living in Denmark, I very much agree. Lomborg is young, articulate (in both Danish and English), media-savvy, free-thinking and daring in his willingness both to range beyond his field and speak his mind loudly. The last two traits in particular break the unwritten rules of Denmark's well-organised, but pigeon-holed, society.

A reader's letter published in *Prospect*, June 2003, in response to John Kay

Should 'denormalization' worry us? John Luik

One of the most interesting trends in tobacco control is the use by both anti-smoking activists and governments of 'denormalization' campaigns. The goal of denormalization is to change the social norms governing the use of tobacco through portraying the tobacco industry as deceptive, manipulative and criminal. Activists believe that such a change will alter not only the judicial environment hearing tobacco litigation, but the wider social and legislative environment, so creating support for more draconian policies.

The tactics include: highlighting the alleged past behaviour of the industry with respect to marketing, product manipulation and smoking risks; refuting the industry's 'myths' about not targeting youth, safer cigarettes, ETS and addiction; attacking the industry's current efforts to style itself as a responsible corporate citizen; portraying the industry as a moral outlaw outside the bounds of the regular business community; emphasizing the impossibility of the industry changing in any fundamental way; changing the guilt that smokers have about smoking into an anger against the industry for targeting and addicting them as children.

The core assumption is that the way to change the behaviour of smokers is to change the behaviour of the industry. However, most of the academic research about preventing smoking or facilitating quitting, particularly by young people, suggests that interventions to change the behaviour of smokers are the crucial ingredient of effective tobacco control programmes.

Most studies fail to show that denormalization has any direct effects on smoking and it is impossible to find that any 'anti-industry' effort has changed smoking behaviour. The two largest studies of denormalization in California and Massachusetts found no statistically significant effect on youth smoking.

Furthermore, we might question whether a democratic government can justifiably engage in a campaign of stigmatization of a legal enterprise for the purpose of social engineering. Governments routinely provide information to their citizens about health matters. Governments also routinely attempt, again in the interests of health, to persuade their citizens to do one thing or to avoid another. Denormalization is different in character from both provision of information and persuasion. It is not simply that so much that is said

as a part of denormalization is demonstrably false, e.g. the claims about the purposes and effects of advertising, the nature and consequences of addiction, and the risks of secondhand tobacco smoke, but that the purpose of saying such things is to render both an industry and a class of individuals first aberrant and then abhorrent. And it is this artificially generated sense of aberrance and abhorrence that is outside the scope of responsible government.

It is too easy to reply that what we are dealing with here is the tobacco industry, as if this ended the need for moral rigour. Suppose that the government decided, in the interests of preventing AIDS, that it would denormalize homosexuality through a campaign designed to portray such conduct as aberrant and abhorrent. Whatever our views about AIDS or sexuality we would find such actions to be morally objectionable. A democratic government should censure its citizens and its corporations not by denormalization but by the criminal law. To forget this is to forget that the last century's experiments in denormalization ended in the concentration camp and the gulag.

But denormalization falls short of legitimacy in a second way. It represents a vast and unacceptable instance of social engineering. For it is designed to manipulate the social and intellectual environment so that the central aspect of democratic life — individual autonomy, the right to shape one's own mind, behaviour and life — is effectively suppressed.

Moreover, while de-legitimizing an industry, denormalization legitimizes a public policy technique for use in other settings. There is increasing discussion by public health officials and activists about making food the new tobacco. One leading food policy expert recently began her book on food policy by explicitly outlining the similarities between food manufacturers and tobacco manufacturers. This has led to calls for changing the behaviour of the food industry through denormalization, as well as calls for the denormalization of fat. Denormalization is worrisome not simply because it represents a failure to address the root causes of a problem — whether smoking or poor diet — but because it represents a new and dangerous assault on our core democratic traditions.

John Luik is a public policy advisor based in Canada.
He is currently writing about the war on obesity.

Fancy Free Press Alexandra Colen

The Vlaams Blok party is slowly but surely on its way to become Flanders' major party but has been branded by its enemies in the Belgian establishment as an extreme right-wing anti-immigrant party. On what grounds? Well, during the 1995 electoral campaign, the Vlaams Blok slogan was 'Nu afrekenen.' Sarah Helm, the Brussels correspondent of *The Independent*, wrote an article in her paper under the title 'Racists dream of a golden era for Flanders — Vlaams Blok stickers proclaim 'No Africans'' (*The Independent*, 16 May 1995). In fact, 'Nu' is the Dutch word for now, while 'afrekenen' is to settle an account. 'Nu afrekenen' means: it is time to settle accounts — the accounts in question being the political scandals in Belgium.

Although I myself am an immigrant, I am an MP for the Vlaams Blok. As English is my native tongue, I wrote to Helm to point out the correct meaning of 'Nu afrekenen'. I also sent a copy of my reply to all of the English language newspapers in Brussels. This led John Palmer, the Brussels correspondent of *The Guardian* to ring me up. He conceded that perhaps 'nu afrekenen' did not mean No Africans in Dutch, but told me that No Africans was exactly what we stood for. 'Lady,' he said, 'you want to pretend that your party is not a racist party. I will tell you what you want to do with immigrants: you want to round them up; put them in camps and forcibly evict them.' Our attempts to deny this kind of lie are in vain. The US/Francophone media never mentions the Vlaams Blok without the adjective 'fascist' and never interviews us because 'they do not talk to fascists'. QED

Alexandra Colen is an MP for the Vlaams Blok in Belgium

exposed. See Radio Islam <http://abbc.com/protocols/indexen.htm>

Google for 'Denormalization Efforts' and you will be taken to: <http://www.ncth.ca/NCTHweb.nsf/0/544580F49129E68852569BC0071ECC6?OpenDocument> listing sites devoted to denormalization of the tobacco industry. Canadian government sites lead the way.

<http://www.spiked-online.com/> Asks why 'smokeless tobacco' is being targeted with the same zeal as conventional cigarettes? With this *Briefing*, we argue that it is because of the campaign to 'denormalize' the tobacco industry.

<http://www.vlaamsblok.be/index.shtml> the site of the Vlaams Blok party in Belgium.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1502076.stm> BBC report: 'What really riles me about his book is that it is so damned reasonable', Alex Kirby, summing up a documentary on Bjørn Lomborg and *The Skeptical Environmentalist*.

No Crueler Tyrannies: Accusation, False Witness, and other Terrors of our Times, Dorothy Rabinowitz, Free Press, 2003. A book based on Rabinowitz's investigative articles for the *Wall Street Journal*, describing the collective hysteria that has led to witch-hunts of imaginary paedophiles in the US.

Dream Children, A N Wilson, W. W. Norton & Co, 1998. A chilling novel which shows the interpenetration of fantasy and reality about paedophilia.

Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health Marion Nestle, University of California Press, (2002). Widely reviewed as an 'expose' of a food industry conspiracy to make us eat more. The industry's implicating activities include: sponsoring professional societies and meetings, hiring consultants, and participating in advisory groups.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion alleged to have been compiled in 1897 by Theodor Herzl: a paradigm of demonization in which the enemy is situated in an imaginary conspiracy whose outreach is infinite and which therefore can never be finally