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# Horse Maiming in the English Countryside: Moral Panic, Human Deviance, and the Social Construction of Victimhood

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## **Horse Maiming in the English Countryside: Moral Panic, Human Deviance, and the Social Construction of Victimhood**

### ABSTRACT

The societal reaction to a series of horse assaults in rural Hampshire during the 1990s was a rare example of a moral panic about crime and deviance in which animals other than humans occupy, or seemed to occupy, the central role of victim. This paper explores how the nature of the relationships between humans and animals is revealed through authoritative utterances about offenders and victims by the mass media, the police, and the humans who felt they had a stake in the horses' well-being. Analysis of how and when victimhood is ascribed to animals helps to uncover the invisible assaults routinely inflicted on them - in the name of business or pleasure, for example - and against whose human perpetrators the categories of criminalization are almost never applied.

Of the diverse social practices investigated by criminologists and sociologists of deviance, very few have attracted as much attention in the last three decades as those designated by the sociological concept of moral panic. Though why moral panics arise when and as they do is unclear, it is nevertheless true that every so often a society becomes engrossed in a process of public frenzy directed to certain forms of crime and deviance.

Recent and well-documented examples of moral panics include those associated with the McCarthyite communist scare of the 1950s, dope fiends in the 1960s, youth gangs and serial killers in the 1980s, and child molesters and high-school murderers in the 1990s (Cohen, 1972; Cohen & Young, 1973; Jenkins, 1998; Best, 1999).

Though any given moral panic has its own dramatic idiosyncrasies, each also shares certain sociological properties with other such panics. Chief among these common properties are (a) a point of inception at which, for whatever reason, certain social practices or events are identified as a social problem in need of amelioration; (b) the emergence of a vanguard of moral entrepreneurs whose stated purpose is leadership in attacking the problem; (c) the formulation of the vanguard's message about the seriousness of the problem and about attributions of blameworthiness and of victimhood, which are most effectively disseminated to a concerned social audience by the mass media; and (d) a demand for the deployment of agents of social control to identify and apprehend appropriate offenders - or "folk devils", to use Stanley Cohen's (1972) evocative term - and thereby to reaffirm the moral values of the community.

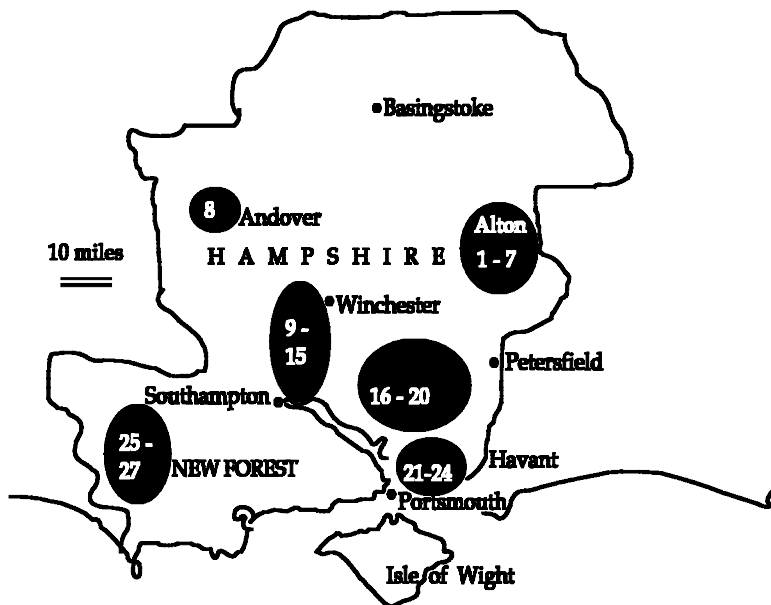
This paper investigates certain aspects of the moral panic associated with a series of horse assaults ("maimings") that occurred in England from the early 1990s onwards. For nearly a decade, a number of horse assaults occurred in fields and stables, mainly, though not exclusively, in southern England, especially in the counties of Hampshire and Surrey. Though the empirical focus of this paper is confined to the moral panic that occurred in rural Hampshire from June 1991 to February 1993 (see Fig. 1), horse assaults also were reported from 1993 to 1997 in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cleveland, and Hull;<sup>2</sup> Dorset;<sup>3</sup> Greater Manchester;<sup>4</sup> Swindon to North Yorkshire ("100 attacks in 12 months"), and Wiltshire.<sup>5</sup> The assaults were extensively reported in the national and local tabloid and broadsheet press. One national tabloid, the *Daily Mail*, added a reward of £10,000 to the £8,000 already pledged by organizations such as the International League for the Protection of Horses, Naturewatch Trust, and the equestrian magazine *Horse & Hound* for information leading to the conviction of those responsible.<sup>6</sup> When a mare named Mountbatten was found dead in her stable with cuts to her genitals, a meeting of concerned citizens in the small village of Four Marks in rural Hampshire

set up the Horsecatch organization in early February 1993; this organization was the first of 85 such groups formed within 18 months.<sup>7</sup> The police then established the Mountbatten Operation, with twelve officers attached to it. Some police officers were designated as Wildlife Liaison Officers in police stations located in the relevant areas.

In this paper, we are far less concerned with answering the question, “Who dunnit?” than we are with uncovering the processes of how various individuals, ad hoc groups, and social organizations in Hampshire tried to make sense of events that seemed deviant, irrational, and/or criminal to an outraged citizenry. In particular, we wish to explore how the nature of the relationships between humans and animals other than humans (hereafter, animals) is revealed through authoritative utterances by the media, the police, and the humans who felt they had a stake in the horses’ well being.

Two preliminary points must be made about the Hampshire horse assaults and the attendant moral panic. First, horses and many other animals have been assaulted in England for centuries, sometimes systematically and routinely so. A large number of related maimings of cattle and horses occurred 150 years ago in Norfolk, Suffolk, and parts of Cambridgeshire (Archer, 1985). However, the social situation and significance of these mid-nineteenth-century maimings differed profoundly from the ones we address here. Information about the former maimings does not seem to have been widely circulated, while the horse assaults of the 1990s were extensively publicized. Moreover, whereas the earlier animal maimings led to several convictions, no one was ever prosecuted and convicted for the assaults discussed here. The discourse of the 1990s moral panic thus was highly speculative about such key questions as the possible identity and characteristics of the offender(s).<sup>8</sup>

Second, the moral panic about horse assaults in 1990s rural England differed from nearly all other moral panics in that many of its central characters were animals. This is not to say that animals have never been visible in other moral panics. Rather, if animals are present in moral panics, then their roles tend to be passive and their voices peripheral to the main script. This typically secondary and socially unproblematic role of animals is evident in the diverse panics associated with bestiality (or sexual assault of animals) in seventeenth-century Puritan New England and elsewhere (Beirne, 1997), rabies among



**Media-identified horse assaults in Hampshire, June 1991 - February 1993**  
 Adapted from *The Times*, 2.6.1993

## KEY

### Alton:

1. May 4 1992. Pony mare assaulted in stable - internal injuries from blunt instrument.
2. Jun 22 1992. Thoroughbred cross gelding stabbed in a stable - cuts to shoulder.
3. Jun 31 1992. Hack gelding cut on the shoulder while standing in a field.
4. Jul 16 1992. Hack gelding cut with sharp instrument.
5. Jan 7 1993. Pony mare found bleeding from the rear.
6. Jan 7 1993. Gelding taken from stable and 'covered in mud'.
7. Jan 22 1993. Mountbatten found dead.

### Andover:

8. Jul 16 1992. New Forest mare - internal bruising and lashed with barbed wire.

### Between Winchester and Southampton:

#### Chilworth:

9. Aug 4 1991. Palamino pony assaulted.
10. Aug 28 1991. Welsh cob mare cut on legs and flanks.

#### Romsey:

11. Mar 17 1992. Arab gelding cut on head.
12. Mar 19 1992. Internal cuts to pony in field.

#### Southampton:

13. Oct 15 1992. Four horses attacked - slashed with sharp instrument - one had spike stuck in chest.

#### Winchester:

14. Jun 13 1991. Pony mare burnt with rope.
15. Aug 13 1992. Hack gelding attacked - rope burns on legs.

### Between Southampton and Petersfield:

#### Botley:

16. Jul 13 1992. Shetland gelding slashed.

#### Bursledon:

17. Feb 28 1991. Pony attacked in field - internal bruising and swelling, external cuts.

#### Droxford:

18. Jul 13 1992. Mare attacked in a field - internal bruising.

#### Durley:

19. Sep 2 1991. Palamino mare attacked - beaten with a blunt instrument.

#### Kilmeston:

20. Jan 6 1993. Mare attacked.

Havant and Portsmouth area:

Havant:

21. Jul 26 1992. Riding pony mare slashed four times under the tail.

Meon:

22. Jun 13 1992. Shetland pony mare assaulted - lacerations internally and externally.

Portsmouth:

23. Jun 14 1992. Welsh cob mare - wounds to hind legs and internal bruising.

Upham:

24. Feb 3 1993. Pregnant mare assaulted.

The New Forest area:

Fordingbridge:

25. Nov 23 1992. Pregnant brood mare assaulted internally - lost her foal.

New Forest:

26. Sep 14 1992. Mare burnt with caustic substance.

27. Sep 17 1992. Gelding cut deeply on the nose.

Source: adapted from *The Times*, 2.6.1993

uncontrolled dogs in late Victorian urban England (Walton, 1979), and variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob (Mad-Cow) disease among cattle in Britain in the 1990s (Kitzinger and Reilly, 1997; Tester, 1997).

However, within the framework of the moral panic addressed here, certain horses and their plight occupied, or seemed to occupy, the central role of victim. An analysis of the circumstances in which victimhood was, or might be, ascribed to horses is the focus of what follows.

## **Horse-Maiming Matters**

It is impossible to speculate with any degree of confidence about whether, before the emergence of the moral panic that brought them widespread attention in the early 1990s, horse assaults in Hampshire were very rare phenomena or, instead, quite commonplace. Indeed, because an isolated incident can be easily denied or declared relatively unimportant, the primary definers in this moral panic were consistently at pains to claim that the horse assaults were not isolated incidents but a sequence of events with an observable pattern. One therefore cannot identify the precise conjuncture of time, place, and assault in Hampshire such that it can in retrospect be identified

as the first case in a series of horse assaults that occurred there during the 1990s.

According to one account, the series of horse assaults in question started in Hampshire at some time before 1983,<sup>9</sup> although a Horsecwatch official claimed that horses had been mutilated there as far back as 1966.<sup>10</sup> Another claimed “the ‘horse rippers’ first came to public attention during the Eighties, though attacks had occurred before that.”<sup>11</sup> In 1993, *The Times* identified 27 horse assaults in Hampshire. Basing its figures on comments from a police spokesperson, *The Times* referred to “scores of reports” that it had received about the assaults.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, for whatever reason, the Hampshire horse assaults were portrayed as serious events. The notion of seriousness and its differing degrees may of course be understood in several ways, one of which is through straightforward descriptions of the physical injuries sustained by the horses. Reports in *The Times*, for example, refer to the following cases:

1. a pregnant Welsh cob mare named Daphne who was attacked with a Stanley knife strapped to a pole;<sup>13</sup>
2. a twenty-three-year-old mare named Chiltern Hills who had her genitals mutilated;<sup>14</sup>
3. a thirty-one-year-old mare named Gay Minstrel who was slashed across the quarters and had her genitals mutilated;<sup>15</sup>
4. an eleven-year-old thoroughbred named Kerry who was stabbed in the genitals;<sup>16</sup>
5. a twenty-year-old mare cut into by a five-inch knife;<sup>17</sup>
6. a four-year-old ‘working horse’ stabbed in the shoulder;<sup>18</sup>
7. a mare named Chrissie had her genitals slashed and a fencepost driven inside her;<sup>19</sup>
8. ponies burnt with caustic soda;<sup>20</sup> and
9. an Irish hunter mare named Mountbatten found dead in her stable with cuts to her genitals.<sup>21</sup>

Despite routine media dramatization and hyperbole, which are hardly conducive to reliable estimates of incidence, some unknown number of horses unquestionably experienced pain, sexual assault, and - in one or two cases - death. Yet, not all such harms inflicted on animals are taken seriously. Why did the Hampshire assaults reported above matter? To whom? How should they be understood?



An obvious feature of the societal reaction to the Hampshire horse assaults is that they were universally regarded as reprehensible. The public condemnation of the nameless and faceless horse maimers was just as unequivocal as it was later to be for the "Yorkshire Ripper," Peter Sutcliffe, and for the notorious murderers, Thomas Hamilton and Fred West (Collier, 1997; Cameron & Frazier, 1987, pp. 124-138). No one publicly tried to justify the horse assaults. Was this simply because the British are a nation of animal lovers? Clearly, the assaults prompted a line of questioning meant to understand events that, though known by all as abhorrent and aberrant, were chiefly seen as senseless.

As ethnomethodologists and others have observed (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 42), those who initially regard an event as senseless, are liable, if it concerns them enough, to spend a great deal of time and energy trying to make sense of it. But we must ask again: Why did anyone care about these assaults? The citizenry was invited to care because the media described the assaults as simultaneously both systematic and random: systematic because it seemed that each of the horse assaults was one act in a series of assaults, random because no one had any idea when or where the perpetrator would strike next.

But why should the citizenry - and we - care about these horse assaults? One reason for caring is that the media conveyed the message that horse assaults are a serious matter. They are serious because many people seem to think them serious. Certainly, important sections of the local community in Four Marks seemed to take them seriously. The local paper, *The Alton Herald*, informed its readers that at the inaugural Horsecatch meeting "hundreds of people crowded into Four Marks village hall, whilst others were forced to stand outside straining to hear through open windows."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, some residents started to employ private security companies, while others blocked the police switchboard in search of advice. The horse-keeping community was understandably most anxious and insisted that the police apprehend the culprit. Horse owners expressed their feelings of loss and fear and repeatedly and resolutely stated their unwillingness to suffer a similar experience again.

The police certainly took the horse assaults seriously, and they established the "Mountbatten Operation." Of course, regardless of any given officer's

feelings for horses, these events provided the police with a heaven-sent opportunity to be seen to be responding to demands placed upon them by the national and local press and by significant members of the local community. Referring to the “overwhelming response” from the public, the police spoke of a general need for the police and the public to bond together. As Crime Prevention Officer Bill Slater told horsekeepers, “the police are the professionals in detecting crime, but you are our eyes and ears of the equestrian community.”<sup>23</sup> In response, the Horsewatch coordinator declared “hopefully, by all of us being a bit more vigilant, we can start to make a hole in the crime rates of Hampshire.”<sup>24</sup>

The respective interests and concerns of each of the main protagonists in this drama coalesced around the numerous sound bytes and column inches devoted to one key question: What sort of person could assault horses? As Fiona Broderick, daughter of Mountbatten’s owner, Robert Broderick, asked, what “drives people to do this to an animal?”<sup>25</sup> This is a valid and meaningful question. It remains so. Yet, no one was ever convicted of these horse assaults or even prosecuted for them. Public discourse about such key questions as the assailants’ identity, characteristics, and motives therefore tended to be highly speculative, its protagonists almost off-guard when giving voice to their opinions or vent to their prejudices.

As will soon become clear, behind this sometimes-frenzied rhetoric lie hidden strongly held beliefs about the nature of criminality and of how and under what circumstances victimhood may be ascribed to animals. In the specific cultural context of animals and racialization, for example, Elder, Wolch, and Emel (1998) have argued that “animals and their bodies appear to be one site of struggle over the protection of national identity and the production of cultural difference” (p. 184). Indeed, the whys, hows, and whens of the process of victimhood construction occupy an often hotly contested cultural landscape at the nexus of struggles that may involve kaleidoscopic issues of class, gender, race, and age.

## **Offenders**

As soon as the horse assaults were constituted as a series of serious deviant events, questions inevitably were raised about the identity and motivation

of the offender(s). The horse owners (henceforth often self-identified victims whom we term “owner-victims”),<sup>26</sup> the police, and various experts attached to the investigation or consulted by the media were the key voices speculating on these questions in public and in the media.

The majority of the authoritative definers of knowledge of the horse assaults immediately assumed, albeit with varying degrees of sophistication, that the offender had a pathological character. This assumption, when voiced from the dominant perspective of owner-victims, tended to be articulated in statements such as, “It would have taken two strong men, one to hold Daphne, the other to cut the terrified horse. What kind of person would do that? . . . Sick. They are sick.”<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps this pathological male - all seemed to have assumed the horse assailant was male - came from that pathological world beyond the normal and pleasant world of village halls and country fêtes? The police warned the public to be on the look-out for “shady-looking characters” and they were reportedly seeking information on “unfamiliar cars” parked in the “wrong place”<sup>28</sup> As owner-victim Anna Sheldon’s mother commented, “it is a sick society we live in today,”<sup>29</sup> from whose ailments, presumably, even Four Marks - the small Hampshire village in which the ten-year-old Irish mare Mountbatten was killed - and similar places were not immune.

One interpretation of these events is that they were a metaphor - the evil world of shady characters was insinuating itself into the hitherto solid and respectable world of Middle England. There was a fear of the enemy without, the “New Age Travellers”, “Hunt Saboteurs”, “Eco-Warriors”, “Refugees” and “Asylum Seekers”. However, alongside this fear was something even more worrisome - might the enemy not be within? One frightened resident of Four Marks speculated that perhaps “somebody could be living next door to this person or just down the road from them.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, a speaker at Four Marks’ village hall put it in classic Agatha Christie vein: “The person carrying out these attacks could be anyone. They could even be in this room tonight.”<sup>31</sup>

The openly stated consensus view about the offender’s (or offenders’) identity, though, was clearly the pathological one. The designation of offenders as pathological precluded further consideration as to the conceivable ration-

ality of their actions. Certainly, it is simple for those neither professionally nor personally involved in any specific case to dismiss some acts as purely pathological, especially when their perpetrators remain at large and unknown. Moreover, a descriptive term that was often attached to the as-yet-unknown assailants - "horse rippers"<sup>32</sup> - invoked not only the dubious skills of an amateur, if wayward, surgeon (a medical student, perhaps, or a crazed aristocrat?) but also a bygone era in London's East End when another Ripper reigned with similarly unpredictable psychological terror. Thus, in the course of a conversation that could flow smoothly into a discussion of the state of world soccer or the latest Hollywood blockbuster, the horse assaults could easily be dismissed as the work of a "maniac,"<sup>33</sup> a "psychopath,"<sup>34</sup> "lunatic,"<sup>35</sup> a "pervert,"<sup>36</sup> or a "disturbed,"<sup>37</sup> or "sick"<sup>38</sup> person who "needs help."<sup>39</sup> We raise our eyebrows in horror and express our contempt for those whom the *Sunday Times* termed "a madman or madmen . . . the most hated men in Britain."<sup>40</sup> But having done so, we soon pass on to other matters.

The closer a given person was to the horse assaults, the greater was the need to reflect on the meaning of it all. At the very least, people wanted some sort of understanding about the precise nature of the pathology. Such reflection tends to evince a simple polar dichotomy of sane/insane. But this polarity is clearly only a starting point. Thus, one horse owner spoke of the perpetrator as "dreadfully sick mentally."<sup>41</sup> A Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals spokesperson reflected that "whoever is doing this must have a sick, disturbed mind."<sup>42</sup> Obviously, the sane/insane dichotomy is altogether too neat in the sense that, in practice, people offer viewpoints that allude to their awareness of the kernels of rationality that might lie within the pathology. Given an individual's "crazed assumptions," a sort of reason might well be exercised in order to guide crazed actions. If one insanelly believes X, then the flow of thought, which leads to insane action Y, might internally be quite rational. Moreover, personally motivated and professional investigators of truth, when confronted by an insane act, may pursue the insane beliefs that are held to explain that act. Thus, with regard to the horse maiming cases, Tony Black, a retired chief psychologist at Broadmoor Hospital, speculated that the offender was a person who suffered from "bizarre mental delusions" and who, furthermore, "saw horses as devil-carriers."<sup>43</sup> In other words, the delusional belief that horses were devil-carriers led to a somewhat rational wish to destroy them. From the offender's perspective, Black

seemed to imply, it was not really the horses who were victimized but the Devil!

There was an alternative and contradictory version of this sort of symbolic hypothesization. One Horsewatch official noted that many local residents believed the attacks might be the work of Satan-like cults intent on sacrificing innocent horse victims to the Devil.<sup>44</sup> Such sacrifices might make sense to believers in Satan. A police officer suggested that perhaps the perpetrator was a Hunt Saboteur (presumably, for anti-hunting fanatics it would be rational to leave a series of animals dead and maimed around the countryside of southern England!).<sup>45</sup>

This brings us to rather less publicly voiced suspicions held by some owner-victims as to the meaning of these crimes. This was the notion that they, rather than the horses, were the real targets. An interview conducted by one of the authors with a Horsewatch representative indicated that, while uniformly rejecting any idea that they had done anything which might somehow justify revenge attacks, several people were worried that the perpetrator's real target was their way of life. Such anxieties are a manifestation of the "respectable fears" that are an endemic feature of middle and upper-middle class life in contemporary rural England (Pearson, 1983).

Commonsense theory on deviance takes an act and then pursues assumptions about the actor's characteristics. The ideological function of the process is to render highly suspicious those sections of the population that seem to have those characteristics. In the case at hand, this may have negative implications not only for Satanists but also, perhaps more seriously, for those opposed to the norms, values, and practices of rural England's upper-middle class.

## **Victims**

The problem of the victims' identity and status is one issue arising from these cases. Victim identification should never be assumed. A victim must be successfully constituted as such. Victimhood, therefore, is not an objective juridic or sociological condition. It is an ascribed social status. Because effective claims-making can instigate victimhood, some sections of society have acquired the ability to establish that their suffering is unnecessary, serious,

and caused by dangerous criminals. This process of victimhood-in-the-making is both quickened and intensified if the innocence of the would-be victims can be dramatically contrasted with the malevolence of their assailants. Put bluntly, some victims are worthy, others are not. Moreover, the worthier the victim, the more reprehensible the offender.

With regard to humans, modern law assumes a principle of individual worth and rights, even if political and sociological factors routinely amplify the worthiness of some claims and render invisible that of others. However, if as a matter of principle and legal parchment all humans have legal rights, what of animals in general and of horses in particular? Can a horse be a victim? Why should we care about a horse's suffering?

Certainly, in the sense of animal welfare legislation, it is illegal to cause horses unnecessary suffering. However, the master status of horses is that of humans' property (Francione, 1995; Wise, 2000). In practice, the police interpreted the horse assaults as constituting acts of "criminal damage"<sup>46</sup> (i.e. property offenses), and victimhood was legally ascribed to the property owners.<sup>47</sup> It is very likely that the horse owners in question tended to be situated in the higher, if not the highest, echelons of their communities and that they had a very comfortable amount of income, status and social influence. They were well situated in terms of the local hierarchy of credibility. It is their victimhood that, in one sense, enables the horse assaults to be treated seriously. This is logical. After all, the humans, not the horses, can and do complain. Yet, on whose behalf do humans complain?

Clearly, malicious injury to a horse is usually not regarded as equivalent to the intentional infliction of damage to other forms of fast transport such as cars and motorcycles. Yet, why not? Car and motorcycle owners invest much time and money in their machines and arguably obtain emotional satisfaction from them. Indeed, their respective owners might use some very similar and easily transferable phrases to describe the purely instrumental qualities of horses and cars. Some statements by horse owners included the following: "Last season, he did well in dressage. Obviously, this is going to slow things down a bit,"<sup>48</sup> "He was a very expensive show jumper,"<sup>49</sup> "a well-bred potential superstar";<sup>50</sup> and "wonderful to ride."<sup>51</sup> However, often combined with such transferable observations by horse owners are utterances

that, if used by car owners to refer to their cars, would sound absurd. Would people comment tearfully about a damaged or wrecked car that “Her death left a great gap in my life” or “I’d owned her since she was a yearling” or “She was almost a member of the family”? Even if such comments might conceivably be made about cars, they surely would involve additional claim-making on the behalf of owner-victims. On the surface at least, they also create doubt about whether the horse assaults were only about property. To understand the importance of this ambiguity, we must return to the meaning of English animal welfare legislation, which contains an explicit acknowledgment of animal sentience (Radford, 1999).<sup>52</sup> As noted, this legislation is based on the concept of “unnecessary suffering” (and before that on the notion that animals could not be “cruelly” treated). English law seems to recognize, therefore, that animals can be victims or, at least, the suffering recipients of cruelty. It may posit that animals are sentient beings; yet, harming an animal puts one at no greater legal risk than being charged with minor property damage. With regard to assaults on animals, it is possible, in law, to violate the property rights of persons<sup>53</sup> whether or not unnecessary suffering is caused to the property in question. In this sense, any suffering caused to the animal becomes a matter separate from the original property offense and secondary to it. Animals, like human slaves before them, are afforded, in law, the strange status of sentient property.

How far does this status help us to explain police officers who stress the property nature of the offenses and owners who emphasize the non-instrumental qualities or characteristics of their horses?

Why else does Mountbatten’s owner bother to tell reporters: “I hate the thought that a helpless animal, who has grown to trust and love in their own little way, could suffer at the hands of a human like this?”<sup>54</sup> Why does another owner-victim tell journalists: “He was a nice horse”?<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps, after all, the horse is the victim? Certainly, the Detective Superintendent investigating the assaults implied this by his observation that “the victims can’t talk to you.”<sup>56</sup> Nor can human murder victims talk. Their victimhood is socially recognized and usually extended and transported beyond themselves. Their family and friends suffer, so too might their “community,” and, on occasions, we are told that “the nation grieves”.

It also has been argued that the whole world (at least the decent bit of it) shares the pain of the Kosovo dead. In theory, we recognize the right of people to draw attention to others' victimhood; in practice, we usually depend on their doing so. With regard to the Hampshire horse assaults, there was considerable ambiguity about the victim's identity. This ambiguity, in practical terms, is partially smoothed over by consensus that something very wrong had occurred, but it also indicates the unsettled nature of the relationship between horses and humans and between humans and all other animals. As Thomas puts it: "If we look below the surface we shall find many traces of guilt, unease and defensiveness about the treatment of animals" (1983, p. 50).

There is yet another way in which we are invited to take the horse assaults seriously. This resided in the popular belief that an assault on a horse might be a precursor to an assault on a human. Thus, just after a local girl had been stabbed, one media commentator mused, "it was only a matter of time before these attacks turned from horses on to people."<sup>57</sup> Another noted that the attacks against the horses were, in themselves, sinister enough; but from the beginning, police were predicting that horse rippers also might turn on children. Could that now have happened?<sup>58</sup> This view might be credible, regardless of whether the perpetrator is perceived as "purely pathological" or as "pathologically rational." A psychopath sufficiently deranged as to assault horses may well be inclined to turn his attention to humans. Or perhaps (s)he had already assaulted humans before turning to animals. Alternatively, a resentment of privileged people might mean that the "real" victims would likely be targeted next time around, not just their horses as property or indeed their proxy. This sort of ad-hoc theorizing implies that the meaning of the horse assaults needed to be taken even more seriously than the assaults themselves.

Because a killer is a killer is a killer - so goes the logic - vulnerable young, especially female, owners received strident warnings not to take risks by watching over their horses and ponies during the night.<sup>59</sup> If seriousness cannot be accorded on a principled basis, perhaps it can on pragmatic self-interest.

Clearly, this sort of projection functions to sharpen broader perceptions and intensify the magnitude of the sense of threat and anxiety. At the same time,



it dulls our ability to see assaults on horses as serious in their own right. From a speciesist perspective, "it's all about us".

## **Discussion**

For all the confusion that surrounds them, both the horse assaults and the moral panic described above attest to the fact that humans sometimes are allowed to assault, injure and kill horses. Not only this, but sometimes they are even rewarded for doing so. The assaults within the moral panic described above, however, go beyond such lawful or socially acceptable situations.

Assaults where crime/deviance categories are invoked usually involve claims about the wrong person, the wrong place, the wrong reasons/intentions, the wrong methods, the wrong time and the wrong targets. The hand wringing that accompanies popular explanations of such deviance might lead to broader inquiry into the ways in which humans use animals, though in practice it tends to distract us from further exploration. It must be stressed, however, that a variety of institutionalized social practices in which horses are routinely and systematically assaulted generally are not characterized as unlawful and socially unacceptable behavior. Moreover, in these other locations of horse assaults - such as laboratories, farms, racetracks and abattoirs - it somehow seems much harder and much less appropriate to pathologize the perpetrators of the harms committed there. As such, it appears ethically and ontologically incorrect to ask about these social practices, "what drives the humans involved to do what they do?" or "who could do such an awful thing?" It even seems to cast a shadow on the putative logic within the claim that a killer is a killer is a killer.

Why is the harmful nature of some horse assaults condemned while that of others is condoned? This thorny question has no simple answer, though during the Hampshire moral panic about horse assaults, members of the public, the police, criminal psychologists, and animal welfare officials admitted only particular sorts of abused horses into their circle of concern. The focus of their analyses and utterances was not horse assaults in general but individual animals, individual acts of animal abuse, and individual perpetrators of harm. Indeed, precisely the same sort of methodological individualism has

tended to dominate recent social scientific thought about the relationships between society and animal abuse.

This discourse has conceived of “society” as an amalgam of atomized individuals apart from questions of race, gender, and social class. So, too, the animals admitted to the acceptable circle of concern tend only to be those considered as individuals with, as Cazaux (1999) rightly points out, “a visible and acknowledged personality and biography” (p. 121). In contrast, she argues, millions of other animals are exploited in large-scale commercial processes in which the individual is lost in production quotas and mortality rates. Without being identified as individuals, millions of animals are rendered invisible. Cazaux is among a growing number of scholars and activists who adopt a non-speciesist approach in which the types of assaults we have detailed here are placed in a wider context that explores the myriad of human-animal relationships.<sup>60</sup>

In the case of horses, such a view would identify the extensive commercial exploitation of animals and the myriad ways in which their natural and social worlds are thereby routinely harmed and devalued (Lawrence, 1984; Elder, Wolch and Emel, 1998, pp. 188-189).<sup>61</sup> With this wider perspective in mind, let us briefly describe how, in the name of business or pleasure, horses (known as “racehorses”) used in the large British racing industry are routinely assaulted.

Annually, more than 200 horses die on racetracks in Britain (Gold, 1995, p. 115). Flat racing depends on the use of young (two-year-old) horses, on whose developing limbs great pressure is placed. The racing of horses at a young age results in a high burn-out rate and “near epidemics of tendon and ligament damage” (ibid.). In steeple-chases (racing over fences), the chance of injury is heightened because the horses run longer races and can suffer many falls. It is rare even for showpiece events such as Liverpool’s annual Grand National - where standards are closely monitored and enforced due to the attention of the media and the animal protection movement - to pass without fatalities. At the prestigious Cheltenham race meeting, as many as 10 horse deaths have occurred in one week (Saunders, 1996, p. 8).

The practice of firing horses’ tendons still is commonplace in the racing industry (Davies, 1998, p. 9). Davies explains that the aim of the practice, which

involves placing red-hot irons around areas of tendon damage, is to strengthen and support a horse's leg with the formation of scar tissue near the weakened areas. She notes that, like all athletes, a tendon-damaged horse requires rest. However, resting a racehorse may be costly; therefore, tendon firing is sometimes regarded as an alternative. Thoroughbred racehorses are often treated like machines: "they have a job to do" (Davies). Sometimes the scar tissue holds up and allows a horse to run. However, sometimes firing may be done in order to get a horse looking fit enough to be entered in a race; then, if she "breaks down" and is "destroyed" on the track, insurance payments may be claimed. Because racehorses are valuable financial assets, the industry invests up to £1 million annually through the Racehorse Betting Levy Board to protect them. This expenditure includes a large sum for the commissioning of vivisection experiments on lesser-valued horses. For example, at the Animal Health Trust in Newmarket (the site of a famous English race course) in 1993, twelve pregnant Welsh mountain ponies were injected with equine herpes, a practice that resulted in aborted pregnancies and paralysis. Following the experiments, the ponies were killed so that post mortem examinations could be performed on them. The researcher who performed these experiments - who was not constructed as insane or perverse or at risk of committing other violent or harmful actions - explained that they were conducted for economic reasons, namely, because "equine herpes is an important source of loss to the horse industry" (Gold, 1993, p. 2). "Loss" here, of course, refers to horseowners' financial losses - no less, no more. Further experiments are carried out on horses to study their reproduction processes and to investigate the treatment of racing-induced injuries (Gold, 1996).

The plight of ex-racing horses, moreover, may be "a debilitating downward spiral of sale, resale and neglect" (Gold, 1995, p. 115), including being sent to one of the three British abattoirs licensed to slaughter horses or being sold to overseas slaughterhouses. Annually, 25,000 horses are killed for meat in Britain, and 3,000 are withdrawn by their owners from British racing (Davies, 1998, p. 9), their value quickly plummeting. Though legislation stipulates that horses worth less than £175 cannot be exported, horsemeat dealers avoid this restriction by claiming that horses are being sent overseas to race. Once abroad, they are diverted to abattoirs (Wood, 1995).

## Conclusion

This paper has identified some of the key themes of the moral panic associated with a series of horse assaults in rural Hampshire during the early 1990s. These events are a rare example of a moral panic about crime and deviance in which animals occupy, or seemed to occupy, the central role of victim. In particular, we have tried to uncover how the nature of the relationships between humans and other animals is revealed through authoritative utterances about offenders and victims by the mass media, the police, and the humans who felt they had a stake in the horses' well being. We suggest that understanding how and when victimhood is ascribed to animals helps uncover the invisible assaults that are routinely inflicted on animals and against whose perpetrators the categories of criminalization are almost never applied.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Correspondence should be sent to Piers Beirne, Department of Criminology, University of Southern Maine, 96 Falmouth Street, Portland, ME 04104-9300. The authors are grateful to Ken Shapiro and to two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their encouragement and helpful comments.
- <sup>2</sup> See *The Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 6.23.1997.
- <sup>4</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 9.19.1997.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Observer*, 10.12.1997.
- <sup>6</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993; *The Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>7</sup> *Alton Herald*, 2.4.1993; and see *The Times*, 4.9.1993.
- <sup>8</sup> Contrary to the traditional view that animal maiming was simply a vicious form of rebellion by rural laborers against the landed gentry, Archer shows how in practice it was a peculiar, complex, and quite varied activity. Animal maiming was sometimes undoubtedly a form of social rebellion, as in the maiming of their masters' horses by horsekeepers. Typically, however, it was a form of psychological terror, of symbolic murder, that resulted from personal feuds between members of the same social class. Thus, the maiming of donkeys and asses tended to indicate a dispute between one craftsperson and another - such as blacksmiths, cordwainers, butchers and laborers - since they were the chief owners of such animals. But the poisoning of cats and dogs, for example, suggests a conflict between farmers and gamekeepers over the rearing of game birds (Archer, 1985, pp. 152-153).

- <sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 1.5.1993. *The Times*, 1.5.1993.
- <sup>10</sup> *Sunday Times*, 10.31.1993.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Observer*, 10.12.1997.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 11.31.1993.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 1.5.1993.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Times*, 5.23.1997.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> *Alton Herald*, 7.10.1992.
- <sup>19</sup> *The Observer*, 11.12.1997.
- <sup>20</sup> *Borden Times & Mail*, 2.2.1993.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Times*, 1.25.1993; *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993.
- <sup>22</sup> *Alton Herald*, 2.4.1993.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3.6.1996.
- <sup>26</sup> See further n. 48, *infra*.
- <sup>27</sup> Angie Johnson, *Sunday Times*, 11.31.1993.
- <sup>28</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993.
- <sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 6.23.1997.
- <sup>30</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993.
- <sup>31</sup> *Alton Herald*, 2.4.1993.
- <sup>32</sup> For example, see “Horse rippers run to ground”, *The Observer*, 11.12.1997.
- <sup>33</sup> “Horse hit by attack”, *Alton Herald*, 7.3.1992; *The Times*, 1.5.1993.
- <sup>34</sup> *The Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Observer*, 11.12.1997.
- <sup>36</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993, p. 1.
- <sup>37</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993, p. 2.
- <sup>38</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 3.6.1996.
- <sup>39</sup> *The Sunday Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>41</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993, p. 1.
- <sup>42</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993, p. 2.
- <sup>43</sup> *The Times*, 1.25.1993.
- <sup>44</sup> *Sunday Times*, 11.31.1993.
- <sup>45</sup> *The Times*, 2.6.1993.

- <sup>46</sup> *Sunday Times*, 1.31.1993, p. 31. In Germany it appears that horse attackers may be charged with “animal torture”, which has a maximum sentence of two-years imprisonment (*The Times*, 8.2.1997, p. 16).
- <sup>47</sup> Daly (1973, p. 118) has also alluded to the transportability of victimhood. In a case of sexual assault, for example, the victim is sometimes seen as an abused woman’s spouse. However, this shared victimhood is often derived not from a male’s assumed empathy towards a woman’s suffering, but from how *his property* has been damaged or polluted by sexual assault, thereby depicting him - the property owner - as the real victim.
- <sup>48</sup> *Alton Herald*, 7.10.1992.
- <sup>49</sup> *Alton Herald*, 7.3.1992.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993.
- <sup>52</sup> Ministers of the European Union also agreed in 1997 to adopt a legally-binding Protocol which transferred the status of animals from “goods” or “agricultural products” to that of “sentient beings” (D’Silva, 1997).
- <sup>53</sup> See Protocol (no. 33) on the protection and welfare of animals (1997) annexed to the Treaty establishing the European Community.
- <sup>54</sup> Some commentators have noted with irony that, while corporations and cities may be regarded as persons in law, animals other than human are not. Further, ‘the law . . . can, if it chos, create persons’ (Midgley, 1985, p. 54).
- <sup>55</sup> *Alton Herald*, 1.29.1993.
- <sup>56</sup> Personal interview of a Horsecatch representative by Chris Powell, 7.30.1998.
- <sup>57</sup> *Borden Times & Mail*, 2.2.1993.
- <sup>58</sup> Anita Jones, *The Times*, 2.6.1993.
- <sup>59</sup> Angie Johnson, *Sunday Times*, 10.3.1993.
- <sup>60</sup> For example, see the front page report “Home Counties horse owners mount a 24hr guard against attackers” (*The Times*, 6.2.1993).
- <sup>61</sup> See further, for example, Beirne (1995; 1999). Of all the media commentaries on the horse assaults, only Professor Andrew Linzey seems to have addressed this wider context. He stated that the assaults must be understood in the context of horses being regarded as “little more than things” in Christian thought (*The Times*, 6.23.1997).
- <sup>62</sup> For example, Elder, Wolch and Emel (1998: 188-189) document how in the U.S. the practice of “horse tripping” in Mexican-style rodeos deeply affronts the cultural sensibilities of Anglo-Europeans who see horses, either as pets or, in the wild, as symbols of freedom, nobility, beauty, grace and power.

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