



Families and crime: Kompromat 102

Description

“My wife, my daughter and my son have my first loyalty and always will,” said convicted felon Michael Cohen, “I put family and country first” ([ABC article](#)). This is clearly no legal defence, but an attempt at public sympathy at least. He loves his wife and kids. How bad can he be?

Loyalty to family is apparently a virtue. I remember a stand up comic talking about someone who annoys the neighbours, manipulates, gossips, messes up other people’s lives: “well at least she’s a good mum.”

Putting family first is no extraordinary virtue. It’s a norm. We are hard wired to have an affinity to those in our clan. It’s more extraordinary to say I share my loyalties with that crowd over there I don’t understand, people outside my clan – the other.

To exaggerate superior regard for the other, you could even heed the Christian message, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Horror stories

From a Darwinian perspective, those communities with strong familial bonds get to outcompete, and out-reproduce, those with less affinity within their group. By a Freudian reading, *family* is a stand-in for the warmth of union or reunion with the mother or at least motherliness. To be wrenched from that safe bond is the first trauma.

Horror stories for children, and family viewing, derive their menace not from monsters, ghouls and murderers, but abductors – agents that split up families. Horror is defined in familial terms as separation from family. That’s the worse thing that a child can imagine, and it lingers as a memory or a possibility even into adulthood.

Hence the relentless reference to the virtues of family in the ABC-Disney Netflix series *Once Upon a Time*. In this time-travelling fairy tale world everyone in the friendship circle seems to be tied by some

genetic link: not two parents with children, but adoptees, extended families, and partnerings. Rumpelstiltskin's father turns out to be the forever youthful Peter Pan. That kind of thing.



Crime families

Why is Kompromat a family affair? By some lights, families have secrets, which helps keep them together. Keeping secrets is one of the ways that trust circulates in the clan. The other trust medium is the exchange of gifts. Giving without expectation of anything in return heightens further the sense of invisible and informal commitment and duty.

The whole business of family rankles when domestic practices and obligations are projected outside of family relationships. Hence the discomfort we feel when people get trapped in webs of informal contractless obligation. The favouring of family members while in the company of those outside the clan is **nepotism**. Gifts become **bribes**. When they move beyond the family the trust relations inherent in secrets turn into **blackmail**.

See posts: [Crowdfunding in the gift society](#), [Individual-1: Kompromat 101](#), [Howling at the moon](#), [Secret listening: Private, personal, portable podcasts](#) and [Bloodlines](#).

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