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Foreword

THE Oxford Modern Britain series is designed to fill a major gap in the available sociological sources on the contemporary world. Each book will provide a comprehensive and authoritative overview of major issues for students at all levels. They are written by acknowledged experts in their fields, and should be standard sources for many years to come.

Each book focuses on contemporary Britain, but the relevant historical background is always included, and a comparative context is provided. No society can be studied in isolation from other societies and the globalized context of the contemporary world, but a detailed understanding of a particular society can both broaden and deepen sociological understanding. These books will be exemplars of empirical study and theoretical understanding.

Books in the series are intended to present information and ideas in a lively and accessible way. They will meet a real need for source books in a wide range of specialized courses, in 'Modern Britain' and 'Comparative Sociology' courses, and in integrated introductory courses. They have been written with the newcomer and general reader in mind, and they meet the genuine need in the informed public for accurate and up-to-date discussion and sources.

John Scott
Series Editor

level of comment. So much so that the *Sun* (23 November 1995) insisted that Fred was 'only the undertaker' (*ibid.*: 178).

The particular point to be drawn from this discussion of the press coverage of the case of the Wests is that the emphasis given to Rose's deviant sexuality, at the expense of any extended consideration of Fred's role in the atrocities committed, potentially serves to secure a position for 'other male abuse' as less shocking or threatening 'by perpetuating the myth of home, fathers and family as safe' (*ibid.*: 178). The more general point is that, in fact, the world is not one where a few deranged individuals are responsible for every rape and sexual assault yet this is the message that the national popular press seems to promote. This world-view is sustained despite decades of feminist research which has consistently demonstrated that women and children are routinely subjected to levels of sexual and violent abuse in their families that most readers of this book would find greatly disturbing.

Moral panics and social theory

So far the discussion has concentrated on a description of crime news content and an account of the structural processes that might produce (and constrain) what can be said in broadcast and print media. The chapter now turns to a more theoretical consideration of the social function of exaggerated crime narratives in the media. From the outset it should be emphasized that arguments over the pernicious effects of media representations of crime have provided a persistent rhetoric of anxiety since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Pearson 1983). The most familiar arguments are advanced by commentators of the Right who condemn the role of the media in encouraging permissiveness, undermining morality, and corroding the national character. According to this view the media sensationalize wrongdoing, glamorize wickedness, and generally erode the hallowed traditions of authority, deference, and respect that characterize the 'British way of life'.

Yet a key theme in liberal and radical criminologies has also been an abiding concern with the power of the mass media, albeit with an altogether different agenda. Since the 1980s, debates surrounding the prevalence of fear of crime (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3) have challenged the more theoretical excesses of this earlier work, which implied that the public are ideologically hoodwinked into misunderstanding crime as a social problem. Whilst there have always been intense episodes of collective anxiety, pious outrage, and organized persecution, with the witch trials of the seventeenth century being the most familiar example and Jewish history providing one of the longer essays in European scapegoating (though African, Indian, and Irish diasporas, amongst others, are no strangers to demonization), it is fair to say that moral

panics are a product of the modern condition, not least because of the significance attached to the role of the mass media in framing social issues. It is equally the case that one of British sociology's more lasting contributions to public discourse is the notion of moral panic. This is now briefly outlined for the purposes of demonstrating not only the theoretical understandings that informed the classic positions but also as a means of questioning the continuing relevance of the concept in the light of changing characterizations and ways of experiencing modernity.

As is well known, the key texts are Jock Young's (1971) *The Drugtakers* and Stan Cohen's (1972) *Folk-Devils and Moral Panics*. Whilst they both, in important ways, were building on the work of earlier American labelling studies (see Becker 1964), one of the main differences in this British work was an emphasis on the conflicts between youth subcultures and Establishment forces and consequently they adopted a much more collective focus than the American perspectives. The model used to explain how moral panics occur is deviancy amplification,² and versions of it are to be found in both books. Cohen (1972: 9) argued that one of the most recurrent types of moral panic in post-war Britain has been associated with various forms of post-war youth culture. Cohen's work showed how the agencies of control, such as the media, the police, and various moral entrepreneurs interacted to create a panic over the Mods and Rockers. He used the notion of deviancy amplification to explain how the petty delinquencies of these groups at seaside resorts were blown up into serious threats to law and order.

Jock Young's (1971) book was based on a participant observation study of marijuana users in the Notting Hill area of London in the late 1960s. Young (1971) also used deviancy amplification to describe how the mass media turned marijuana use into a social problem through sensationalist and lurid accounts of the lives of users. In common with other British approaches produced at around this time,³ Young (1971) regarded drug-taking as a subcultural resolution of problems posed by society. He therefore mounted his critique against the prevalent discourses which viewed drug use as a form of pathology or disease: in his words, 'people do not "catch" drug addiction, they embrace it' (1971: 42, emphasis in original).

The pressing questions that need to be asked are 'why do moral panics occur when they do?' and 'what is their function?' Cohen (1972: 192-3) insisted that moral panics were a product of 'boundary crises' (the term is Erikson's (1966)). They occur when a society has some uncertainty about itself. This ambiguity is resolved through ritualistic confrontations between the deviant group and the community's official agents, whose duty it is to define where the boundaries lie and how much diversity can be tolerated. In effect they clarify the normative contours at times when the boundaries are blurred. In this way moral panics

tend to occur when society is undergoing rapid change, when the need to define boundaries is particularly acute.

Young's (1971) argument was that in small-scale societies deviancy amplification was much less likely as everyone has at least some face-to-face contact with deviant members of traditional societies and the information about members is rich and multi-dimensional, whereas modernity produces a significant drop in this sort of information. With severe social segregation there is a lack of direct information about those labelled deviants. This creates a great reliance on the mass media for information. The media's need to give the public what it wants and maintain a circulation in competitive markets means that they constantly play on the normative worries of large sectors of the population, often employing outgroups on which collective fears and anxieties are projected. There is a strong Durkheimian theme here, in that the boundaries of normality and order are reinforced through the condemnation of the deviant. But what Cohen (1972) and Young (1971) both were emphasizing was that this process only occurred in modernity through a considerable distortion of reality.

It is this last point that was to be substantially developed through a theoretically sophisticated, neo-Marxist understanding of ideology by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in their (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. The book can be regarded as the landmark text bridging critical criminology and cultural studies, and it is here that the somewhat vague Durkheimian notion of social control is replaced by a more rigorous neo-Marxist concern with state power. Hall et al. (1978) introduced Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony to understand the timing of the moral panic that emerged in the early 1970s around mugging. In much of the secondary commentary in criminology on the text, their analysis has been dismissed for claiming that the criminality crisis over mugging was contrived by ruling elites to deflect attention away from the economic crisis facing the British state, whilst ignoring the impact of crime on the working class. For instance, the moral panic identified by Hall et al. was criticized as 'a polemical rather than an analytical concept' (Waddington 1986: 258). Whilst making his case for a 'realistic' approach to crime and control in the 1980s, Jock Young (1987: 338) accused the text of Left 'idealism' and located it in the 'Great Denial' of crime as a force of social distress in decaying inner cities.

The difficulties arise in part from the idea of a moral *panic*, which implies an extraneous, excessive, irrational response to a situation. To be sure Hall et al. insist that the official 'reaction to "mugging" was out of all proportion to any level of actual threat' and that this 'ideological displacement' is their definition of a moral panic (Hall et al. 1978: 29). Nevertheless, what they do painstakingly demonstrate is how the police, media, and judiciary interacted to produce what they termed 'ideological closure' around the issue, in which black youth

were cast as folk devils in dominant images of the archetypal mugger, as a scapegoat for all social anxieties produced by the changes to an affluent, but destabilized society. In many respects, the real strength of the book is the way in which it attempts to deconstruct the politics of representation in ways that had not yet been attempted in such an extended fashion. Of course, to many a reader now the discussion of the 'social production of news' will be too conspiratorial, but the focus on the sites of textual construction is one of the lasting legacies of the book.

Regardless of their theoretical orientations these classic studies indicate the *complexity* of explanation. But these accounts were produced nearly 30 years ago, and in many ways describe a very different world from that in which we now live. To address this point, the chapter now turns attention to some defining features of moral panics in late modern Britain that will require considerable theoretical work in the near future if the concept is to have any lasting relevance.

Moral panics and late modernity

There have been a series of criticisms levelled at moral panic theory, which would include McRobbie's (1994) and McRobbie and Thornton's (1995) significant interventions and Young's (1999: 24-6) subsequent questioning of the scapegoating function of moral panics in late modernity. The central themes can be summarized as follows.

The first point concerns their frequency—moral panics have an extremely short shelf life and a rapid rate of turnover, making it extremely difficult to cling to a model that points to their episodic quality, spirals, and flows. Indeed, Sheila Brown (1998: 46-52) goes so far as to say that the 1990s witnessed a 'total panic' around young people from Alcopops through to the film *Trainspotting*, via riots on peripheral council estates to children murdering children. One need not agree with all of her characterizations, but the point remains that we live in very different times from when there was a discrete succession of 'panics'.

The second point is that moral panics are contested. There has been a growth of interest groups and pressure groups who respond to and question media demonization of various social issues and the categorization of people as problems. The influence of such groups allows the media to portray reporting as responsible and providing 'balance'. One example of this is how it is no longer possible to ideologically vilify single mothers without strong voices of dissent. McRobbie (1994: 213) gives the example of the National Council for One Parent Families that played a leading role in diminishing the Conservative Party's demonization of young single mothers and the attempt to further penalize young mothers for having children without being married.

The third point concerns reflexivity. The notion of moral panics now pervades media and political rhetoric. For instance, Sue Cameron on BBC2's *Newsnight* asked 'Is it not the media itself that has helped to create this phenomenon?', the phenomenon being 'new juvenile crime' (cited in McRobbie 1994: 198). It is now a question directly aimed at politicians when, for example, they are perceived as deliberately trying to whip up a moral panic over an issue, as Ann Widdecombe routinely faced over the Conservative Party's use of asylum-seekers as a threat in the run-up to the general election in 2001.

The fourth point is that moral panics have become vital marketing strategies. Thornton (1994: 183) provides a detailed account of the ways in which disapproving 'tabloid coverage legitimates and authenticates youth cultures'. In particular she and McRobbie (1995: 565) have demonstrated how moral panics 'are one of the few marketing strategies open to relatively anonymous instrumental dance music'. Yet it is also the case that the success of a film like *Natural Born Killers* was due largely to the moral panic that accompanied its release in Britain on the back of a number of alleged 'copycat' murders in the United States and Europe—indicating that it is not only subcultural industries that have become versed in the art of selling through 'panic'.

The fifth point is that moral panics can now easily rebound. A good example is Conservative Prime Minister John Major's fraught attempt to take the nation 'Back to Basics' in the mid-1990s, a strategy which famously backfired amid stories of financial sleaze, and a lamentable lack of adherence to 'basic values' by his cabinet colleagues, which were exposed through close media inspection: 'Mistresses abounded, broken families were commonplace, sexual peccadilloes scrutinized, the moral panic rebounded back upon itself' (Young 1999: 25). An illustration of the general point here is that the series of news revelations about political sleaze and corruption were not presented to nor received by the public in terms of a moral panic but rather in terms of a cynical weariness about the apparently routine nature of such 'revelations'.

The sixth and final point relates to diversity in that the 'hard and fast boundaries between "normal" and "deviant" would seem to be less common' (McRobbie and Thornton 1995: 572–3). In many ways this is the most important point that a late modern reconceptualization of theory has to deal with. For whilst the various authors that have been discussed here point to the above changes as being a result of the vast expansion and diversification of the mass media, it is important to recognize that a more wide-ranging account is needed of the social changes that have occurred over the last 30 years that have undermined boundaries, some of which have been detailed in Chapters 3 and 4.

Furthermore, the proliferation of communication technologies has meant that whilst there are new spaces for diverse niche interests there has also been a broader tendency towards the merging of news and entertainment. Yet it is

difficult to underestimate the significance of the changes that have occurred in the cultural sphere. These are multi-faceted and include the undermining of the moral certainties that accompanied the pre- and immediate post-war era. As David Garland (2001: 88) puts it, there have been 'radical changes in the norms governing such matters as divorce, sexual conduct, illegitimacy, and drug taking'. In some respects, these changes were wrought by the cultural politics of the 1960s and the formation of new social movements associated with feminism, race, sexuality, and youth culture—though arguably the key legacy of the 1960s is the 'triumph of the individual over society' (Hobsbawm 1994: 334), which would come to be expressed in Margaret Thatcher's infamous insistence that there 'is no such thing as society, only individuals'. Nevertheless, the championing of an egoistic, competitive individualism also sits with a liberal recognition of the right to be different and the development of a potentially more pluralistic politics of 'multiculturalism', albeit one fraught with difficulties (Bhabha 1997). Accompanying these changes has been the emergence of consumption as a primary site of expressing one's identity through lifestyle choices, the elevation of the culture industries as central markers of social change and the declining relevance of church, state, family, and neighbourhood in instituting moral regulation.

In order to grasp the significance of these changes for moral panic theory a number of authors (Jewkes 1999; Reiner et al. 2001; and Thompson 1998) have recently turned to the concept of 'risk society', as formulated by the theorist Ulrich Beck (1992) to understand the anxieties provoked by these transitions from modern to late modern social formations. For instance, it has been argued that the increased frequency of dramatic moral narratives in the mass media in the 1990s (as documented above) is partly a response to the increased pressures of market competition, but is also a key means by which 'the at-risk character of modern society is magnified and is particularly inclined to take the form of moral panics in modern Britain due to factors such as the loss of authority of traditional elites, anxieties about national identity in the face of increasing external influences and internal diversity' (Thompson 1998: 141). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to assess whether Beck's (1992) conceptualization of risk is the most appropriate for understanding the contemporary character of moral panics. Instead this section will conclude with some signposts indicating how future theoretical, and perhaps more importantly, empirical work might best be orientated.

One of the main problems with the classic formulations and the recent attempts to refine the concept of moral panics is captured in Richard Sparks's (2001: 199) telling criticism that they remain committed to a 'style of analysis which treats the detailing of media "contents" or "mythologies" (depending on methodological preference) as a largely self-sufficient activity, and which tends

to enter grand and mostly unsustainable generalizations about their hold on public opinion or their ideological predominance'. In other words, how audiences interpret and use the media demands far more attention than has hitherto been received in criminology (notwithstanding the voluminous literature on 'fear of crime')—a point returned to later in this chapter. Nevertheless, the questions raised by this critique can only be answered through detailed empirical research.

The chapter now turns to a consideration of the representation of crime in popular culture. It should be emphasized that this is not intended to be an exhaustive coverage of all forms, nor a comprehensive historical survey. Instead what is offered is a sense of the range of representations whilst indicating some continuities and discontinuities in theme and form. The more general intention is to provide the reader with a glimpse of the diversity of criminal narratives that can regularly be encountered through television viewing, cinema-going, and reading popular literature, which powerfully shape understandings of crime.

Watching the detectives

The origins of detective fiction

Of all the genres of popular fiction the detective story is probably the most studied, partly because its beginnings can be fixed with relative certainty. It is generally agreed that Edgar Allen Poe's 1841 story 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' provides the distinct innovation of organizing the narrative around the intellectual genius of a detective hero, Auguste Dupin, who reconstructs the scene of a crime and catches the guilty party through the clues and traces left behind. It was this innovation that Conan Doyle was to translate into a commercially successful formula in his Sherlock Holmes stories, the first of which appeared in 1887 (Bennett 1990: 212).

However, it has also been rather grandly claimed that the mystery that marks the beginning of all detective stories has been seen as a basic and universal function of all narratives. For instance, the process of discovery has been compared to the myth of Oedipus, whose discovery of his origins is also a discovery of his crimes (McCracken 1998: 51). So in some respects the detective narrative can be seen as a new form of an old story. In the example of Poe (1980), it is clear that he was also a gifted author of the Gothic horror genre, which can be seen at work in such stories as 'The Pit and the Pendulum', 'The Masque of the Red Death', and 'The Fall of the House of Usher', to name just a few. This was a

genre that had emerged in the eighteenth century and was organized around such motifs as suspense, the supernatural, and the pre-modern. Consequently, it has been argued that the innovation that Poe performed was to transform these motifs into his detective fiction in the 1840s. Simultaneously, there was also a 'flourishing trade in broadsheets, ballads, "memoirs" and novels about the exploits of highwaymen like Dick Turpin, Jack Sheppard, and thief-takers like Jonathan Wild' (Reiner 1992: 183) in the eighteenth century, which is explored in illuminating detail by Rawlings (1992).

However, if the focus remains restricted to narrative conventions in the abstract then there will be a failure to understand the historical conditions that produced them (Thompson 1993: 43–4). In other words, an account of the development of detective fiction needs to recognize its social articulations, rather than simply celebrate the individual genius of a particular author. One historical shift that has been understood as particularly important for the emergence of detective fiction is the transformation from arbitrary power to the rule of law. In other words, this genre of fiction emerged at a time when Western countries had recently moved from a judicial process based on torture and confession to one centred on trial by evidence (McCracken 1998: 51). This point can be taken further through an examination of the ways in which detective fiction articulates discourses of individualism, science, and rationality, which were all set in motion in the Enlightenment and in many ways define modernity. Detective stories can also be read as narratives on the urban experience and the development of policing and surveillance. To develop these arguments the work of the literary critic Walter Benjamin is particularly instructive.

For Benjamin, the origins of detective fiction are to be found in the rapid expansion of cities in the nineteenth century and the impersonality this urban sprawl brought to social relations. He suggests that the original concern of the detective story lay with the 'obliteration of the individual's traces in the big city crowd' (Benjamin 1983: 43). On the one hand, the genre lifts the veil of anonymity that the urban mass provides the criminal, through making him knowable by the traces he leaves behind, such as fingerprints, cigar ash, and so on. In other words, the fictional detective subjects the city to a controlling and individualizing gaze in which there is no hiding place for the criminal. But at the same time, the gaze reduces the value of individuality, in that the tell-tale clues left behind are seen not as the product of a unique human being but rather as statistical effects.

The literary context in which Benjamin (1983) discusses Poe's detective stories is through the figure of the *flâneur*, in his broader study of the poet Charles Baudelaire. Historically, the term *flâneur* referred to a group of writers and journalists who in the serial feature sections of Paris newspapers, and in books