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Stanley Cohen

# Folk Devils and Moral Panics

*The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*



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## Preface

The exigencies of life in general and academic life in particular have transformed a study which started its life as an instant sociological response to the immediate, into a piece of historical sociology. Who on earth is still worried about the Mods and Rockers? Who – some might even ask – *were* the Mods and Rockers? I too would have preferred this book to have appeared when the phenomenon it describes was still a contemporary one, but sustained by friends and colleagues I carried on writing in the belief that this study has implications beyond its immediate subject matter. For the most part I have resisted the temptation to make such implications explicit or up to date; I will have failed if they are not transparent enough for the reader to make himself. The processes by which moral panics and folk devils are generated do not date.

Some of the research on which this book is based originated as part of a Ph.D. thesis, and I am grateful to Terence Morris who supervised my work during those years. My greatest debt since then is to David Downes for his constant help and encouragement, and subsequently to all my other friends in and around the National Deviancy Conference among whom – most invidiously – I single out Stuart Hall, Paul Rock, Ian Taylor, Laurie Taylor and Jock Young.

Sarah Stubbs typed various drafts with a speed and efficiency which I could never match and my wife Ruth helped me in many ways.



# I Deviance and Moral Panics

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.

One of the most recurrent types of moral panic in Britain since the war has been associated with the emergence of various forms of youth culture (originally almost exclusively working class, but often recently middle class or student based) whose behaviour is deviant or delinquent. To a greater or lesser degree, these cultures have been associated with violence. The Teddy Boys, the Mods and Rockers, the Hells Angels, the Skinheads and the Hippies have all been phenomena of this kind. There have been parallel reactions to the drug problem, student militancy, political demonstrations, football hooliganism, vandalism of various kinds and crime and violence in general. But groups such as the Teddy Boys and the Mods and Rockers have been distinctive in being identified not just in terms of particular events (such as



demonstrations) or particular disapproved forms of behaviour (such as drug-taking or violence) but as distinguishable social types. In the gallery of types that society erects to show its members which roles should be avoided and which should be emulated, these groups have occupied a constant position as folk devils: visible reminders of what we should not be. The identities of such social types are public property and these particular adolescent groups have symbolized – both in what they were and how they were reacted to – much of the social change which has taken place in Britain over the last twenty years.

In this book, I want to use a detailed case study of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon – which covered most of the 1960s – to illustrate some of the more intrinsic features in the emergence of such collective episodes of juvenile deviance and the moral panics they both generate and rely upon for their growth. The Mods and Rockers are one of the many sets of figures through which the sixties in Britain will be remembered. A decade is not just a chronological span but a period measured by its association with particular fads, fashions, crazes, styles or – in a less ephemeral way – a certain spirit or *kulturgeist*. A term such as ‘the twenties’ is enough to evoke the cultural shape of that period, and although we are too close to the sixties for such explicit understandings to emerge already, this is not for want of trying from our instant cultural historians. In the cultural snap albums of the decade which have already been collected<sup>1</sup> the Mods and Rockers stand alongside the Profumo affair, the Great Train Robbery, the Krays, the Richardsons, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Bishop of Woolwich, *Private Eye*, David Frost, Carnaby Street, The Moors murders, the emergence of Powellism, the Rhodesian affair, as the types and scenes of the sixties.

At the beginning of the decade, the term ‘Modernist’ referred simply to a style of dress, the term ‘Rocker’ was hardly known outside the small groups which identified themselves this way. Five years later, a newspaper editor was to refer to the Mods and Rockers incidents as ‘without parallel in English history’ and troop reinforcements were rumoured to have been sent to quell possible widespread disturbances. Now, another five years later, these groups have all but disappeared from the public con-

sciousness, remaining only in collective memory as folk devils of the past, to whom current horrors can be compared. The rise and fall of the Mods and Rockers contained all the elements from which one might generalize about folk devils and moral panics. And unlike the previous decade which had only produced the Teddy Boys, these years witnessed rapid oscillation from one such devil to another: the Mod, the Rocker, the Greaser, the student militant, the drug fiend, the vandal, the soccer hooligan, the hippy, the skinhead.

Neither moral panics nor social types have received much systematic attention in sociology. In the case of moral panics, the two most relevant frameworks come from the sociology of law and social problems and the sociology of collective behaviour. Sociologists such as Becker<sup>2</sup> and Gusfield<sup>3</sup> have taken the cases of the Marijuana Tax Act and the Prohibition laws respectively to show how public concern about a particular condition is generated, a ‘symbolic crusade’ mounted, which with publicity and the actions of certain interest groups, results in what Becker calls *moral enterprise*: ‘... the creation of a new fragment of the moral constitution of society.’<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere<sup>5</sup> Becker uses the same analysis to deal with the evolution of social problems as a whole. The field of collective behaviour provides another relevant orientation to the study of moral panics. There are detailed accounts of cases of mass hysteria, delusion and panics, and also a body of studies on how societies cope with the sudden threat or disorder caused by physical disasters.

The study of social types can also be located in the field of collective behaviour, not so much though in such ‘extreme’ forms as riots or crowds, but in the general orientation to this field by the symbolic interactionists such as Blumer and Turner.<sup>6</sup> In this line of theory, explicit attention has been paid to social types by Klapp,<sup>7</sup> but although he considers how such types as the hero, the villain and the fool serve as role models for a society, his main concern seems to be in classifying the various sub-types within these groups (for example, the renegade, the parasite, the corrupter, as villain roles) and listing names of those persons Americans see as exemplifying these roles. He does not consider how such typing occurs in the first place and he is pre-occupied with showing his approval for the processes by which



social consensus is facilitated by identifying with the hero types and hating the villain types.

The major contribution to the study of the social typing process itself comes from the interactionist or transactional approach to deviance. The focus here is on how society labels rule-breakers as belonging to certain deviant groups and how, once the person is thus type cast, his acts are interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned. It is to this body of theory that we must turn for our major orientation to the study of both moral panics and social types.)

### The Transactional Approach to Deviance

The sociological study of crime, delinquency, drug-taking, mental illness and other forms of socially deviant or problematic behaviour has, in the last decade, undergone a radical reorientation. This reorientation is part of what might be called the *sceptical* revolution in criminology and the sociology of deviance.<sup>8</sup> The older tradition was *canonical* in the sense that it saw the concepts it worked with as authoritative, standard, accepted, given and unquestionable. The new tradition is sceptical in the sense that when it sees terms like 'deviant', it asks 'deviant to whom?' or 'deviant from what?'; when told that something is a social problem, it asks 'problematic to whom?'; when certain conditions or behaviour are described as dysfunctional, embarrassing, threatening or dangerous, it asks 'says who?' and 'why?'. In other words, these concepts and descriptions are not assumed to have a taken-for-granted status.

The empirical existence of forms of behaviour labelled as deviant and the fact that persons might consciously and intentionally decide to be deviant, should not lead us to assume that deviance is the intrinsic property of an act nor a quality possessed by an actor. Becker's formulation on the transactional nature of deviance has now been quoted verbatim so often that it has virtually acquired its own canonical status:

... deviance is created by society. I do not mean this in the way that it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in 'social factors' which prompt