

Folk Devils and Moral Panics

The Creation of the Mods and Rockers

3rd Edition

Stanley Cohen

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Moral Panics as Cultural Politics

Introduction to the Third Edition

Folk Devils and Moral Panics was published in 1972. It was based on my PhD thesis, written in 1967–69 and the term ‘moral panics’ very much belongs to the distinctive voice of the late Sixties.¹ Its tone was especially resonant in the subjects then shared by the new sociology of deviance and the embryonic cultural studies: delinquency, youth cultures, subcultures and style, vandalism, drugs and football hooliganism.

When the **Second Edition** appeared in 1980, I wrote an Introduction [‘Symbols of Trouble’, reprinted here unchanged] that dealt almost entirely with the ‘Folk Devils’ part of the book’s title (the Mods and Rockers), especially the developments in subcultural theories of delinquency associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In this Introduction to the **Third Edition**, I deal only with the ‘Moral Panics’ part of the title: reviewing uses and criticisms of the concept over the last thirty years. This is followed by a *Selected Reading List*.

There are three overlapping sources for this review:

First, is the stuff itself, thirty years of moral panics. Whether or not the label was applied and/or contested at the time or afterwards, there are clusters of reactions that look very much like ‘classic’ moral panics.

Second, the same public and media discourse that provides the raw evidence of moral panic, uses the concept as first-order description, reflexive comment or criticism.² These are short-term reactions to the immediate (‘the current moral panic about paedophiles’) and long-term general reflections on the ‘state-of-our-times’.

Third, is the meta-view from academic subjects, notably media and cultural studies, discourse analysis and the sociology of deviance, crime and control. Here the concept has been adapted and adopted, expanded and criticized, and included as a ‘Key Idea’ in sociology and a standard entry in textbooks and dictionaries.³

Calling something a 'moral panic' does not imply that this something does not exist or happened at all and that reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion and illusion or being duped by the powerful. Two related assumptions, though, require attention – that the attribution of the moral panic label means that the 'thing's' extent and significance has been exaggerated (a) in itself (compared with other more reliable, valid and objective sources) and/or (b) compared with other, more serious problems. This labelling derives from a wilful refusal by liberals, radicals and leftists to take public anxieties seriously. Instead, they are furthering a politically correct agenda: to downgrade traditional values and moral concerns.

Carry on Panicking

The objects of normal moral panics are rather predictable; so too are the discursive formulae used to represent them. For example:

They are *new* (lying dormant perhaps, but hard to recognize; deceptively ordinary and routine, but invisibly creeping up the moral horizon) – but also *old* (camouflaged versions of traditional and well-known evils). They are damaging *in themselves* – but also merely *warning signs* of the real, much deeper and more prevalent condition. They are *transparent* (anyone can see what's happening) – but also *opaque*: accredited experts must explain the perils hidden behind the superficially harmless (decode a rock song's lyrics to see how they led to a school massacre).

The objects of moral panic belong to seven familiar clusters of social identity:

1. Young, Working-class, Violent Males

Working-class jobs are the most enduring of suitable enemies. But the roles they played over these decades – football hooligans, muggers, vandals, loiterers, joy riders and mobile phone snatchers – were not represented by distinctive subcultural styles. There is too much fragmentation to identify dominant subcultures. Loyalties – whether to fashion, musical style, or football – are too diffuse to match each other. Under the exclusionary regimes set up in the Thatcher years and adapted by New Labour, the losers drop quietly off the board, too quietly for any public displays like the Mods and Rockers. Each of the 1992 riots on out-of-town council estates (in Bristol, Salford and Burnley) was short-lived and self-contained. Only the identities and barriers of race have been further strengthened. With the constant exception of football

hooliganism, most crowd scenes of these years (mobs, riots, public disturbance) have been organized on ethnic lines (Brixton, Leicester and Bradford).

Away from the crowds two very different cases stand out, both known by the names of the victims. One, the Jamie Bulger story, was utterly unique, yet triggered off an immediate and ferocious moral panic; the other, the Stephen Lawrence case, despite being indeed a harbinger of things to come, produced a late, slow running and ambiguous reaction, never reaching full panic status.

On 12 February 1993, two 10-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, led away 2-year-old James Bulger from a shopping centre in Bootle (Liverpool). They walked with him for some two and a half miles to a railway line and then battered him to death. The number of 'Children Who Kill Children' is minute and not increasing. It was precisely the rarity of the event and its context that made it so horrible. Long before the trial began in November the Bulger story had become a potent symbol for everything that had gone wrong in Britain: a 'breed' of violent children, whether feral or immoral; absent fathers, feckless mothers and dysfunctional underclass families; the exploitation of children by TV violence and video nasties; anomic bystanders – on the grainy screen of the defective CCTV they watch as the toddler (arm stretched up, between the two older boys, one in step, the other moving grimly ahead) is led to his death.

The Sun instantly called for 'a crusade to rescue a sick society'. A few days later, the shadow Home Secretary, Tony Blair, referred to the week's news as 'hammer blows struck against the sleeping conscience of the country, urging us to wake up and look unflinchingly at what we see'. *The Independent* (21 February 1993) used Blair's phrase to headline its leading article 'The Hammer Blow To Our Conscience'. 'Britain is a worried country,' it stated, 'and it has a good deal to be worried about.' By the end of the week, Britain was 'examining the dark corners of its soul' (*The Economist*, 27 February 1993). The only bit of late modernist reflexivity came from someone who makes a living from moralizing: Archbishop George Carey warned about the dangers of 'lapsing into moral panic'.

One such danger is a ready susceptibility to simple explanations. A throwaway remark by the trial judge – 'I suspect that exposure to violent video films may in part be an explanation' – quickly became a factoid that the last video rented by one of the boys' father was *Child's Play 3* (a nasty video indeed in which a child 'kills' a manic doll). This had 'chilling parallels' to the murder of Jamie Bulger; the two boys 'may' have watched it (*Daily Mail*, 26 November 1993). The panic turned on media violence. *The Sun* staged a public burning of horror videos; reports claimed that *Child's Play* had been removed from

video shops; Scotland's largest video chain burnt its copies. Four months later, a senior Merseyside police inspector revealed that checks on the family homes and rental lists showed that neither *Child's Play* nor anything like it had been viewed.

The search for meaning and causes is of course not always spurious, simple-minded or mythical. Public opinion, social scientific theories and poetic imagination⁴ had to strain themselves to make sense of such an event. But during moral panics and media frenzies the atypical case is compressed into general categories of crime control (such as 'juvenile violence'). The explanatory theory is based on too few cases; injustice results by targeting too many cases.

Stephen Lawrence was an 18-year-old black youth from South London. On the evening of 22 April 1993, while standing at a bus stop with a friend he was taunted with racial abuse by a group of five or six white youths. They then stabbed him in the chest and he died some hours later.

This was to become another boundary marking case. It was not as unusual as the Bulger story, but just as rich and received more intense public and media exposure over a much longer period. The visible failure to bring the known group of suspects to trial led to continuous revelations of police incompetence and racism. After six years of persistent campaigning and claims-making (by various civil liberties organizations, anti-racist groups and the local black community including Stephen Lawrence's parents), an inquest, a botched private prosecution, a flawed internal police review, and a Police Complaints Authority investigation, eventually a £3 million Judicial Inquiry was set up (chaired by a retired judge, Sir William Macpherson). It published its 335-page Report in February 1999.⁵ The Report generated enormous public attention and an iconic policy agenda still refers to policing 'after Macpherson' or 'after the Stephen Lawrence Report'.⁶

At first glance, all the ingredients for a moral panic were in place. The Report itself took a moral stand against the persistent racism it had identified. For example: 'Stephen Lawrence's murder was simply and solely and unequivocally motivated by racism. It was the deepest tragedy for his family. It was an affront to society, and especially to the local black community in Greenwich' (Para. 1.11); 'Nobody has been convicted of this awful crime. This is also an affront both to the Lawrence family and the community at large' (Para. 1.12). Professional incompetence and poor leadership were important reasons for the police failure, but the overarching problem was 'pernicious and persistent institutional racism', police failure to respond to the concerns of ethnic minorities and 'discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping' (Para. 6.34).

Why did all this not quite add up to a moral panic? Despite the continued use of Stephen's name, public attention shifted from the victim to the police. With the quick departure from the scene of the suspected offenders (their culture of violence and racism soon forgotten) the police became the *only* object of attention. The Macpherson Report found a divided organization sending out contradictory and confusing messages marked by an 'alarming inability to see how and why race mattered'.⁷ Precisely because of this 'inability' the police could hardly be expected to carry the full burden of the Lawrence fiasco, and even less, the damaging indictment of 'institutionalized racism'. There was no one else to blame – but the police were just *unsuitable as folk devils*. Moreover they had the power to deny, downplay or bypass any awkward claims about their culpability.⁸

The right wing press, especially the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, claiming to speak on behalf of all British society, directly aided the police. These papers applied, with astonishing accuracy, methods that could appear in a manual on '*How To Prevent a Moral Panic*'. The notion of 'institutionalized racism' was denounced as meaningless, exaggerated and too sweeping; the term could stir up resentments among ordinary people (stigma and deviancy amplification theory); it besmirches the whole police force because of a few blameworthy individuals; the British are a tolerant people who have marginalized the far right and allowed racial minorities to be integrated and accepted. The Report, proclaimed the *Telegraph*, could have come from a 'loony left borough'. Some of its conclusions 'bordered on the insane'. Macpherson (a witch finder looking for thought-crimes) was a useful idiot duped by the 'race relations lobby' (*Sunday Telegraph* 21 and 28 February 1999 and *Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 1999).

In the end, the Lawrence case lacked three of the elements needed for the construction of a *successful moral panic*. First, a *suitable enemy*: a soft target, easily denounced, with little power and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics. Clearly not the British police. Second, a *suitable victim*: someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody. Clearly not inner-city young black males. Third, a consensus that the beliefs or action being denounced were not insulated entities ('it's not only this') but integral parts of the society or else could (and would) be unless 'something was done'. Clearly if there was no institutionalized racism in the police, there could not be in the wider society.

2. School Violence: Bullying and Shootouts

The 'Blackboard Jungle' (the name of the 1956 movie) has long served, in Britain and the USA, as a vivid image about the menacing violence of inner-city schools. Violence is seen as a constant daily backdrop: pupils against each other (bullying, playing dangerous macho games, displaying weapons); teachers against pupils (whether formal corporal punishment or immediate rage and self-protection).

There have been sporadic outcries about this backdrop of school violence and related problems such as truancy, large-scale social exclusion into special classes or units and more recently the neighbourhood pusher selling drugs at the school gate. Fully-fledged moral panics need an extreme or especially dramatic case to get going. The age-old rituals of bullying in classroom and playground (girls, for once, getting a fair share of attention) are usually normalized until serious injury or the victim's suicide.

A recent example is the run of high school massacres and shooting sprees. The first images – from the USA in the mid-nineties – were quite unfamiliar: school grounds taped off by police; paramedics rushing to wheel off adolescent bodies; parents gasping in horror; kids with arms around each other; then the flowers and messages at the school gates. In the late nineties, when these events were still rare, each new case was already described as 'an all-too-familiar story'. The slide towards moral panic rhetoric depends less on the sheer volume of cases, than a cognitive shift from 'how could it happen in a place like this?' to 'it could happen anyplace'. In the USA at least, the Columbine Massacre signalled this shift.

On 20 April 1999 two male students dressed in black (one 17 years old, the other just 18) walked into the 1,800 student Columbine High School in the quiet town of Littleton, Colorado. They were armed with shotguns, a handgun and a rifle. They started shooting, initially targeting known athletes, killing a teacher and twelve fellow students and then shot themselves. How could this have happened? As *Time* magazine posed the question: 'The Monsters Next Door: What Made them Do It?' (3 May 1999). British newspaper headings (the archetypal carriers of moral panics) had already covered a range of explanations. On the print day after the event (22 April) the *Daily Mail* went for ideological motivation ('Disciples of Hitler'). *The Independent* preferred psychopathology ('The Misfits Who Killed For Kicks') as did the *Sunday Times* (25 April): 'Murderous Revenge of the Trench-coat Misfits'. *The Guardian* side-stepped the problem of motivation and went for the liberal middle path issue: 'The Massacre that Challenges America's Love Affair with the Gun' (22 April).

This scurrying around for a causal theory – or, at least, a language for making sense – is found in all moral panic texts. If indeed, in President Clinton's words, Columbine had 'pierced the soul of America' we must find out why *this* event happened and how to stop it happening *elsewhere*. Moreover, if this happened in a place like Columbine (and most school massacres do happen in such ordinary places) then it could well happen elsewhere.

As these stories unfold, experts such as sociologists, psychologists and criminologists are wheeled in to comment, react and supply a causal narrative. Their ritual opening move – 'putting things in perspective' – is not usually very helpful: 'Schools Still Safest Place For Children; Many More Dead at Home Than in Classroom.'

3. Wrong Drugs: Used by Wrong People at Wrong Places

Moral panics about psychoactive drugs have been remarkably consistent for something like a hundred years: the evil pusher and the vulnerable user; the slippery slope from 'soft' to 'hard' drugs; the transition from safe to dangerous; the logic of prohibition. New substances are just added to the list: heroin, cocaine, marijuana and then the Sixties drugs of amphetamines (very much the Mod pill) and LSD. Then a string of substances: designer drugs, PCP, synthetic drugs, ecstasy, solvents, crack cocaine and new associations: acid-house, raves, club culture, 'heroin chic' supermodels.

In Britain, Leah Betts joined James Bulger as a melodramatic example of a moral panic generated by the tragic death of one person. On 13 November 1995, 18-year-old Leah Betts collapsed soon after taking an ecstasy tablet in a London nightclub, was taken to hospital and went into a coma. By the next day – for reasons not altogether clear – the story made instant panic headlines: the anguish of Leah's parents; the evil pushers of poison; the insistent message 'it could be your child'. Leah died two days later. Her parents began to appear regularly in the media to warn of the dangers of ecstasy. They became instant experts and moral guardians – disagreeing with them would be insensitive to their grief. The warning was symbolically sharpened by Leah's respectable home background: father an ex-police officer, mother had worked as a drug counsellor. This meant, explained the *Daily Express*, that drugs were a 'rotten core in the heart of middle England'. Leah was the girl next door.

This episode has been much analysed: the story itself, the media reaction, the left liberal counter-reaction (attacking the media-spread panic) and even a left liberal reaction against the counter-reaction for being just a mirror-image, merely inverting one simple message into another equally simple.

Instead of: a monolithic popular youth culture promotes drug use and normalizes other anti-social actions and attitudes, we have: panic coverage by a monolithic media promotes a false consensus that alienates occasional drug users into further marginalization.

This was to be a long-running story. Nearly six months later, anxieties were still being raised: 'Even the best parents, raising the most level-headed children, fear that one of them somehow might be next weekend's Leah Betts, who died after taking Ecstasy' (*Daily Telegraph*, 12 April 1996). Fourteen months after Leah's death, the pop star Noel Gallagher had to apologize to her parents for saying that ecstasy use was commonplace and harmless among some young people. In March 2000, about five years after the event, Leah's mother was widely quoted as 'hitting out' at a Police Federation inquiry that suggested relaxing some drug laws. Leah's father was still a recognizable authority: 'Ecstasy Victim's Dad in Drug Danger Alert' (*Birmingham Evening Mail*, 12 October 2000); 'Leah Drug Death Dad Not here to Preach' (*Bolton, UK Newsquest Regional Press*, 18 May 2001).

4. *Child Abuse, Satanic Rituals and Paedophile Registers*

The term 'child abuse' contains many different forms of cruelty against children – neglect, physical violence, sexual abuse – whether by their own parents, staff in residential institutions, 'paedophile priests' or total strangers. Over the last decade, public perceptions of the problem have become increasingly focused on sexual abuse and sensationally atypical cases outside the family.

Reactions to the sexual abuse of children rest on shifting moral grounds: the image of the offender changes; some victims appear more suitable than others.¹⁰ A series of stories over the last twenty years about serious abuse in children's homes and other residential institutions revealed not panic or even anxiety, but a chilling denial. The victims had endured years of rejection and ill-treatment by their own parents and the staff supposed to care for them. Their complaints to senior staff and local authority officials and politicians were met with disbelief, collusion and a tight organizational cover-up. There have been repeated waves of denial, exposure then denunciation. The same pattern applies to those traditional folk devils, paedophile priests.¹¹

In the mid-1980s, however, a succession of highly publicized child deaths under more 'ordinary' circumstances, led to a very different type of panic. Into the familiar criminal triangle – child (innocent victim); adult (evil perpetrator) and bystanders (shocked but passive) – appears the social worker, trying to be

rescuer but somehow ending up being blamed for the whole mess. Social workers and social service professionals were middle-class folk devils: either gullible wimps or else storm troopers of the nanny state; either uncaring cold hearted bureaucrats for not intervening in time to protect the victim or else over-zealous, do-gooding meddlers for intervening groundlessly and invading privacy.

The Cleveland child sexual abuse scandal of 1987 marked the peak of this period and condensed its themes: the tensions between social work, medicine and the law; social workers as anxious, demoralized and particularly vulnerable as a predominantly female profession.¹² For three months from April that year, a cluster of some 120 children (average age between 6 and 9) had been diagnosed as having been sexually abused in their families. In June, a local newspaper published a story about confused and angry parents who claimed that their children had been taken from them by local authority social workers on the basis of a disputed diagnosis of sexual abuse made by two paediatricians in the local hospital. The *Daily Mail* ran the story on 23 June ('Hand Over Your Children, Council Orders Parents of 200 Youngsters').

The resulting moral panic became a pitched battle of claims and counter-claims. So busy were the key players in fingering each other – social workers, police, paediatricians, doctors, lawyers, parents, local and national politicians, then a judicial inquiry – that there was not even minimal consensus about what the whole episode was about.

Another episode was more fictitious and one of the purest cases of moral panic. Superimposed on the very real phenomenon of childhood sexual abuse and incest, came the 'recovered memory' of childhood incest: bitter debates about the existence of repressed (and recovered) memories of childhood sexual abuse. In these therapeutic interstices, came the story of 'ritual child abuse', 'cult child abuse' or 'Satanic abuse'. In around 1983, disturbing reports began circulating about children (as well as adults in therapy who were 'recovering' childhood memories) alleging that they had been sexually abused as part of the ritual of secret, Satanic cults, which included torture, cannibalism and human sacrifice. Hundreds of women were 'breeders'; children had their genitals mutilated, were forced to eat faeces, were sacrificed to Satan, their bodies dismembered and fed to participants – who turned out to be family members, friends and neighbours, day-care providers and prominent members of the community. Claims-making for various parts of this story joined conservative Christian fundamentalists with feminist psychotherapists.

One form of sexualized violence against children does not generate counter-claims about its existence nor any moral disagreement: the abduction and

sexual killing of children, especially girls. This strikes a depth of horror in us all. There is a panicky sense of vulnerability – both in the sense of statistical risk (these events seem to be happening more often) and emotional empathy (How would I feel if this happened to my child?). The script becomes more familiar: child disappears on way home from school; the police set up investigation team; school friends, neighbours, teachers interviewed; frantic, distraught parents make appeals on TV; members of public join police in searching fields and rivers . . .

These offenders are pure candidates for monster status. The July 2000 abduction and murder of 8-year-old Sarah Payne led to the *News of the World* 'crusade' (its own word), a series of classic texts of monster-making. The 23 July front page reads: 'NAMED AND SHAMED. There are 110,000 child sex offenders in Britain . . . one for every square mile. The murder of Sarah Payne has proved police monitoring of these perverts is not enough. So we are revealing WHO they are and WHERE they are . . . starting today.' The lists of names and the rows of photos reflect what the paper assumes and constructs as the primeval public anxiety: 'DOES A MONSTER-LIVE NEAR YOU?' Check the list, then read on: 'WHAT TO DO IF THERE IS A PERVERT ON YOUR DOORSTEP.' The paper called for information about convicted sex offenders to be made publicly available and itself published over the next two weeks photos, names and addresses of 79 convicted sex offenders.

Many obvious and worrying issues were raised: how the list was constructed (partly from Scout Association records: *Scouting Out the Beasts*, the paper explained); how downloading child porn or the seduction of a 14-year-old schoolboy by his mid-thirties female teacher belong to the same category as the sexual murder of a child; the counter-productive effect of driving already monitored offenders underground; the media's own freedom to publish. The special dangers of vigilantism and lynch mobs soon appeared with crowd protests calling for named and shamed offenders to be moved out of neighbourhoods or council housing estates. Attention focused on the Paulsgrove estate near Portsmouth – where each night for a week crowds of up to 300 marched upon houses of alleged paedophiles.

Public figures had to express sympathy with the parents and share their moral revulsion but also distance themselves from the mob. This was easily done by repeating the inherently negative connotations of lynch mob and mob rule, the primitive, atavistic forces whipped up by the *News of the World*.¹³ The rational polity is contrasted to the crowd: volatile, uncontrollable and ready to explode.

5. *Sex, Violence and Blaming the Media*

There is a long history of moral panics about the alleged harmful effects of exposure to popular media and cultural forms – comics and cartoons, popular theatre, cinema, rock music, video nasties, computer games, internet porn.¹⁴ For conservatives, the media glamorize crime, trivialize public insecurities and undermine moral authority; for liberals the media exaggerate the risks of crime and whip up moral panics to vindicate an unjust and authoritarian crime control policy. In these 'media panics', the spirals of reaction to any new medium are utterly repetitive and predictable. With historical incorporation: 'the intense pre-occupation with the latest media fad immediately relegates older media to the shadows of acceptance.'¹⁵

The crude model of 'media effects' has hardly been modified: exposure to violence on this or that medium causes, stimulates or triggers off violent behaviour.¹⁶ The continued fuzziness of the evidence for such links is overcompensated by confident appeals to common sense and intuition. When such appeals come from voices of authority (such as judges) or authoritative voices (experts, professionals, government inquiries) the moral panic is easier to sustain, if only by sheer repetition. The prohibitionist model of the 'slippery slope' is common: if 'horror videos' are allowed, then why not 'video nasties?' Child pornography will be next and finally the legendary 'snuff movies.' Crusades in favour of censorship are more likely to be driven by organized groups with ongoing agendas.

Some recent media panics are more self-reflective – anticipating having to defend themselves against the accusation of spreading a moral panic. The media play a disingenuous game. They know that their audiences are exposed to multiple meanings and respond differently to the 'same' message. They use this knowledge to support their indignation that they could have any malignant effect; they forget this when they start another round of simple-minded blaming of others. The powerful, increasingly homogenized and corporate news media blame *other* media forms. But their own effect is the most tangible and powerful, shaping the populist discourse and political agenda-setting. This has happened most obviously in my next two examples: welfare cheats and bogus asylum seekers.

6. *Welfare Cheats and Single Mothers*

The cutbacks in welfare state provisions during the Thatcher years were accompanied by the deliberate construction of an atmosphere of distrust.

Widespread folk beliefs – the assumption that significant numbers of welfare claims were bogus or fraudulent, made by people taking advantage of ('ripping off') the welfare state – were given official credibility. Governments confirmed the need for institutional practices (laws, administrative procedures) that would firmly and reliably weed out the fake from the real. Legal changes assume, along with the public culture, 'not just that each claimant is *potentially* a fraudster but that he/she is probably so'.¹⁷

'Welfare cheats', 'social security frauds' and 'dole scroungers' are fairly traditional folk devils. So too are unmarried mothers. Over the 1980s, though, there was a 'kind of subdued moral panic' about young, unemployed girls becoming pregnant, staying single and taking themselves out of the labour market by opting for full-time motherhood, becoming dependent on welfare benefits rather than a male breadwinner.¹⁸ The campaign ran most stridently from 1991 to 1993. Conservative politicians explicitly linked the goal of reducing government expenditure with moral exhortation for people to take responsibility for their own lives. 'Girls' were depicted as getting pregnant in order to be eligible for state benefits, even 'extra handouts' or to jump the queue for public housing. The 1993 'Back to Basics' campaign in Britain cynically constructed the single mother as a potent moral threat.¹⁹ The abuse directed at lone parents led an *Independent* editorial (11 October 1993) to note that 'Conservative politicians are subjecting them to a vilification that would be illegal if addressed to racial minorities.'

The image of single mothers as irresponsible adults and ineffective parents helps to legitimize and entrench shrinking public provisions.²⁰ There are further causal leaps: 'feckless mothers' get pregnant to obtain state welfare; they raise children who will be the criminals of the future; absent fathers are present somewhere, unemployed and also living off the state. All this points to the same underclass culture that created the problem in the first place. But the real problem is none other than: the future of the nuclear family.

7. Refugees and Asylum Seekers: Flooding our Country, Swamping our Services

In media, public and political discourse in Britain the distinctions between immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers have become hopelessly blurred. Refugee and asylum issues are subsumed under the immigration debate which in turn is framed by the general categories of race, race relations and ethnicity. The framing itself does not necessarily imply racism. There are domains of British society where racism is subdued or at least contested. Conservatives

may well flirt with the idea that 'political correctness' is a leftist moral panic, but political instinct tells them to condemn their members for telling racist jokes.

No such sensitivity is extended to refugees and asylum seekers. Over the 1990s and throughout Europe a 'hostile new agenda' emerged.²¹ At one level, there is the repeated and ritualistic distinction between genuine refugees (still entitled to compassion) and bogus asylum seekers (no rights, no call on compassion). But this distinction hides the more profound sense in which the once 'morally untouchable category of the political refugee'²² has become deconstructed.

Governments and media start with a broad public consensus that *first*, we must keep out as many refugee-type of foreigners as possible; *second*, these people always lie to get themselves accepted; *third*, that strict criteria of eligibility and therefore tests of credibility must be used. For two decades, the media and the political elites of all parties have focused attention on the notion of 'genuineness'. This *culture of disbelief* penetrates the whole system. So 'bogus' refugees and asylum seekers have not really been driven from their home countries because of persecution, but are merely 'economic' migrants, attracted to the 'Honey Pot' of 'Soft Touch Britain'.

In tabloid rhetoric, especially the *Daily Mail* (whose campaign of vilification is too deliberate and ugly to be seen as a mere moral panic), the few nuances in these assumptions disappear: the untypical is made typical; the insulting labels are applied to all. (The bogus/genuine dichotomy appeared also in 58 per cent of all relevant articles over 1990–1995 in *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Times*; one-third of *Guardian* and *Independent* references either criticized this idea or were citing others.²³)

This area is crucially different from my other six examples. First, although there have been intermittent panics about specific newsworthy episodes, the overall narrative is a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection. There is a constant background screen, interspersed with vivid little tableaux: Tamils at the airport, stripping in protest; Kurds clinging to the bottom of Eurostar trains; Chinese suffocating to death in a container lorry. Second, these reactions are more overtly political than any others – not just because the problem is caused by global political changes, but because the reactions have a long history in British political culture. Moreover, successive British governments have not only led and legitimated public hostility, but spoken with a voice indistinguishable from the tabloid press.

The media's lexicon of verbal abuse has kept up a constant level of bigotry. A recent analysis shows Scottish newspapers highlighting the same negative

words and racial stereotypes; presenting asylum myths as fact; openly hostile about the presence of asylum seekers in Britain and openly suggesting they go back to their country of origin.²⁴ (Note though that only 44 per cent of references were judged as wholly negative, 21 per cent as balanced and 35 per cent as positive.)

A socio-linguistic study in a quite different cultural context – Austrian newspaper reports on the Kurdish asylum seekers in Italy in 1998 – nicely identifies the ‘metaphors we discriminate by’.²⁵ Three dominant metaphors portray asylum seekers as *water* (‘tidal waves’), as *criminals* or as an *invading army*. The repetition of these themes in relatively fixed lexical and syntactic forms shows them as the ‘natural’ way of describing the situation. The ‘naturalization’ of particular metaphors can blur the boundaries between the literal and the non-literal.

Similar metaphors – plus a few others – appear in British newspapers:

- Water is represented as *Flood, Wave, Deluge, Influx, Pour(into), Tide* and *Swamp*. As in ‘Human Tide Labour Would Let In’ (*The Sun*, 4 April 1992).
- Refugees are more criminal and more violent: ‘Thousands have already [come to Britain] bringing terror and violence to the streets of many English towns’ (*Sunday People*, 4 March 2001). ‘An asylum free-for-all is a time bomb ticking away . . . that could one day explode with terrifying public violence’ (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 13 April 2000). Their primal dishonesty is that they are *Cheats, Fakes, Bogus* and *Liars*. ‘Fury as 20,000 Asylum cheats beat the System to Stay in Britain; Get them Out’ (*Daily Express*, 30 July 2001).
- Refugees are *Scroungers* and *Beggars*, always looking for *Handouts* and trying to *Milk* the system.
- This is easy because Britain is a *Haven* with generous provisions (*Milk and Honey*) and is such a *Soft Touch*: ‘Don’t Let Britain Be A Soft Touch’ (*Sunday Mirror*, 4 August 2001); ‘Labour has made UK a haven for Refugees’ (*Daily Mail*, 7 August 1999); Britain as ‘the number one destination for asylum-seekers’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 19 February 2001); ‘the Costa del Dole for bogus refugees’ (*Scottish Sun*, 11 April 2000).
- These metaphors and images are usually combined: ‘Soft Touch That Lets in the Refugee Tricksters’ (Press Association, 4 November 1999); ‘Bogus Asylum Seekers That Keep on Flooding Into Britain: Britain a Soft Touch on Asylum’ (*Daily Express*, 26 April 2001); ‘We resent the scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every country in Europe to reach our generous benefits system’ (*The Sun*, 7 March 2001).

- The headlines of ‘Straight Talking’, David Mellor’s regular column in the *People* make up a collage of these themes: ‘Why we must turn back the Tide of Dodgy Euro Refugees’ (29 August 1999); ‘Send Spongers Packing Before We Are Over-run’ (13 February 2000); ‘Kick Out All This Trash’ (5 March 2000). Then, after all this, ‘When Telling the Truth is Called Racism’ (16 April 2000).

The immediate effects of such sustained venom are easy to imagine, but harder to prove. In three days in August 2001 a Kurdish asylum seeker was stabbed to death on a Glasgow housing estate and two other Kurds attacked. The UNHCR issued a statement saying that this was predictable given the ‘climate of vilification of asylum seekers that has taken hold in the UK in recent years’. This branding has become so successful that the words ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘refugee’ have become terms of abuse in school playgrounds.

Because this area is so obviously political, a strong opposition has been generated. Many NGOs – from human rights, civil liberties and anti-racist directions – give explicit attention to combating the pernicious effects of panic discourse. More specialist groups such as the Press Trust and RAM (Refugees, Asylum-seekers and the Mass Media) work only on countering media images and myths.

In May 2002, the Labour government announced a new round of plans under the slogan of ‘zero acceptance’: shut the Sangatte refugee camp on the French side of the Channel Tunnel; intercept boats carrying illegals; speed up deportation procedures. Under the heading ‘Asylum: 9 out of 10 are Conmen’ the *Daily Star* (22 May 2002) launched a typical side panic against ‘turncoat immigration officers’. Immigration officers, trained at the taxpayers’ expense, are quitting their jobs and using their expertise to set up lucrative consultancies to advise waves of bogus asylum seekers on how to beat the system.

Extensions

The concept of moral panic evokes some unease, especially about its own morality. Why is the reaction to Phenomenon A dismissed or downgraded by being described as ‘another moral panic,’ while the putatively more significant Phenomenon B is ignored, and not even made a candidate for moral signification?

These are not just legitimate questions but *the* questions. Like the folk objections against labelling, social constructionist or discourse theory in general, they strengthen the very position they are trying to attack. Such

questions can only be posed if the lack of congruence between *action* (event, condition, behaviour) and *reaction* is correctly understood to be normal and obvious. To point to the complexities of the relationship between social objects and their interpretation is not a 'criticism' but the whole point of studying deviance and social control. Some trivial and harmless forms of rule-breaking can indeed be 'blown out of all proportion'. And yes, some very serious, significant and horrible events – even genocide, political massacres, atrocities and massive suffering – can be denied, ignored or played down.²⁶ Most putative problems lie between these two extremes – exactly where and why calls for a comparative sociology of moral panic that makes comparisons within one society and also between societies. Why, thus, does rate X of condition Y generate a moral panic in one country but not in another with the same condition?

All this certainly demands a rather clearer definition of the concept. Commentators have distinguished the separate elements in the original definition:²⁷ (i) *Concern* (rather than fear) about the potential or imagined threat; (ii) *Hostility* – moral outrage towards the actors (folk devils) who embody the problem and agencies (naïve social workers, spin-doctored politicians) who are 'ultimately' responsible (and may become folk devils themselves); (iii) *Consensus* – a widespread agreement (not necessarily total) that the threat exists, is serious and that 'something should be done'. The majority of elite and influential groups, especially the mass media, should share this consensus. (iv) *Disproportionality*: an exaggeration of the number or strength of the cases, in terms of the damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored. Public concern is not directly proportionate to objective harm. (v) *Volatility* – the panic erupts and dissipates suddenly and without warning.

I will return to these elements, especially the last two. Before that, a list of more sophisticated theories not available thirty years ago.

1. Social Constructionism

Folk Devils and Moral Panics was informed by the sixties fusion of labelling theory, cultural politics and critical sociology. Today's students of moral panics do not have to engage with this theoretical mix-up. They can go straight into the literature on social constructionism and claims-making.²⁸ This is a well-developed model for studying the contested claims that are made – by victims, interest groups, social movements, professionals and politicians – in the construction of new social problem categories.

Typical cases include: drunken driving, hate crime, stalking, environmental problems, psychiatric categories such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and various dependencies, eating disorders and learning disorders. Moral enterprise comes from many different directions: traditional 'disinterested' forces (such as the helping professions), interest groups (such as pharmaceutical companies) and the rainbow coalition of multi-cultural and identity groups, each claiming its own special needs and rights. The rhetoric of victim-hood, victim and victimization is the common thread in these newer forms of claim-making: secondary victims, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) look for tougher punishment; animal rights campaigners look for the criminalization of cruelty towards victims who cannot speak; putative victims, such as sick Gulf War veterans, want official recognition of their syndrome and consequent compensation.

Social problem construction always needs some form of enterprise. It does not, however, need a moral panic. When this rather special mode of reaction takes place, it may strengthen (and then be absorbed by) the construction process. Or it never reaches this point – remaining a shriek of indignation that leads nowhere.

'But is there anything out there?' Constructionists have a range of well-rehearsed responses to this question. In the 'strong' or 'strict' version there are constructs and nothing but constructs all the way down; the sociologist is merely another claims-maker; in 'weak' or 'contextual' constructionism, the sociologist can (and should) make reality-checks (to detect exaggeration) while simultaneously showing how problems are socially constructed. I would also distinguish between *noisy* constructions – where moral panics appear (usually at an early stage) and may be associated with a single sensational case – and *quiet* constructions, where claims-makers are professionals, experts or bureaucrats, working in organizations and with no public or mass media exposure.

2. Media and Cultural Studies

At their point of origin in the sixties, concepts like 'moral panic' and 'deviancy amplification' were symbiotically linked to certain assumptions about the mass media. Vital causal links were taken for granted – notably that the mass media are the primary source of the public's knowledge about deviance and social problems. The media appear in any or all of three roles in moral panic dramas: (i) *Setting the agenda* – selecting those deviant or socially problematic events deemed as newsworthy, then using finer filters to select which of these events are candidates for moral panic; (ii) *Transmitting the images* – transmitting the

claims of claims-makers, by sharpening up or dumbing down the rhetoric of moral panics; or (iii) *Breaking the silence, making the claim*. More frequently now than three decades ago, the media are in the claims-making business themselves. Media exposures – whether *The Guardian's* tale of government sleaze or *The Sun's* headline 'Would You like a Paedophile as Your Neighbour?' – aim for the same moral denouement: 'We Name the Guilty Men.'

These years have seen major developments in discourse theory and analysis. I would now be expected to *interrogate* the speeches by Brighton magistrates or editorials from the *Hastings Observer* as *texts* or *narratives* in order to *problematize* their *mediated representation* of the *distant other's* stance to a *posited external world*. All this is far away from what I now see as the book's weakest link: between moral panics and folk devils. The many robust critiques of simple 'stimulus/response' and 'effects' models have hardly touched the thin idea of media-induced deviancy amplification. This is not causation in the constructionist sense – moral panics 'cause' folk devils by labelling more actions and people – but causation in the positivist sense and without the inverted commas. This psychology still uses concepts such as triggering off, contagion and suggestibility. Later cognitive models are far more plausible. For those who define and those who are defined, sensitization becomes a matter of cognitive framing and moral thresholds. Rather than a stimulus (media message) and response (audience behaviour) we look for the points at which moral awareness is raised ('defining deviance up') or lowered ('defining deviance down').

These years have also seen some substantive changes in the media coverage of crime, deviance and social problems. One study of crime reporting in Britain over the last five decades finds that crime is increasingly portrayed as a pervasive threat not just to its vulnerable victims, but to ordinary people in everyday life.²⁹ Attention shifts away from offence, offender and the criminal justice process and towards a victim-centred cosmology. If the offenders' background, motivation and context become less salient so they are easier to demonize. This contrast between dangerous predators and vulnerable innocents allows the media to construct what Reiner terms 'virtual vigilantism'. This can be seen throughout the new realities of 'tabloid justice'³⁰ and in the victim culture encouraged by talk shows such as Jerry Springer's.

These Durkheimian boundary setting ceremonies continue to be staged by the mass media. But they have become desperate, incoherent and self-referential. This is because they run against shifts in media representation of crime and justice since the late sixties: the moral integrity of the police and other authorities is tarnished; criminality is less an assault on sacred and

consensual values than a pragmatic matter of harm to individual victims. Above all, crime may be presented as part of the wider discourse of risk. This means that moral panic narratives have to defend a 'more complex and brittle' social order, a less deferential culture.

3. Risk

Some of the social space once occupied by moral panics has been filled by more inchoate social anxieties, insecurities and fears. These are fed by specific risks: the growth of new 'techno-anxieties' (nuclear, chemical, biological, toxic and ecological risk), disease hazards, food panics, safety scares about travelling on trains or planes, and fears about international terrorism. The 'risk society' – in Beck's well-known formulation – combines the generation of risk with elaborated levels of risk management plus disputes about how this management is managed. The construction of risk refers not just to the raw information about dangerous or unpleasant things but also to the ways of assessing, classifying and reacting to them. Newly refined methods of predicting risk (like actuarial tables, psychological profiling, security assessments) become themselves objects of cultural scrutiny. If these methods reach quite different conclusions – Prozac is a safe drug; Prozac is a dangerous drug – the discourse shifts to the evaluative criteria or to the authority, reliability and accuracy of the claims-maker. Even further from the original 'thing' the shift takes a moral turn: an examination of the character and moral integrity of the claims-makers: Do they have a right to say this? Is their expertise merely another form of moral enterprise?

Reflections on risk are now absorbed into a wider culture of insecurity, victimization and fear. Both the technical question of risk analysis and the wider culture of risk-talk, have influenced the domain of deviance, crime and social control. This is self-evident in crime control policies such as *Situational Crime Prevention* that are grounded in the model of risk and rationality. Contemporary crime control ideology has not been wholly taken over by the 'new penology', based on prevention, rational choice, opportunity, actuarial modelling, etc. In one view, these new methods of governance and management are still being 'interrupted' by episodic spasms of old morality. Another view sees the theorists and managers of the criminal justice system employing the rhetoric of risk – while the public and mass media continue with their traditional moral tales.³¹ Neither view does justice to the now stylized (almost self-parodying) screams of tabloid panics nor the real anger, resentment, outrage and fear of the crowd banging the sides of the security van outside the trial of a sex offender.

The global scope of the risk society, its self-reflective quality and its pervasiveness create a new backdrop for standard moral panics. Perceptions of heightened risk evoke images of panic. And in populist and electoral rhetoric about such issues as fear of crime, urban insecurity and victimization, the concepts of risk and panic are naturally connected. The realm of political morality, however, is just about distinctive enough for the BSE ('mad cow disease') or foot and mouth disease panics not to be *moral panics*. Only if risk analysis becomes perceived as *primarily* moral rather than technical (the moral irresponsibility for taking this risk) will this distinction wither away. Some argue that this has already happened. The *story of HIV-AIDS* shows how the clearly organic nature of the condition can be morally constructed and result in *changed value positions about sexuality, gender and social control*. The demography of risk was informed from the outset by the *ascription of moral failures to homosexuals and other groups*.

This is not quite the same as claiming that the language of the risk society has taken over or should take over the moral framework.³² Public talk about child neglect, sexual abuse or predatory street crime strongly resists the language of probabilities. Clever statistics about your low risk of becoming a victim are no more consoling than a message from medical epidemiology that you are in a low risk category for the disease that you are actually suffering.

More interesting than 'applying' risk theory to the study of moral panics is to remember that most claims about relative risk, safety or danger depend on political morality. As Douglas originally argued, substantial disagreements over 'what is risky, how risky it is and what to do about it' are irreconcilable in purely objective terms. Moreover the perception and acceptance of risk is intimately tied to the question of who is perceived to be responsible for causing the hazard or damage to whom.³³ This allocation of blame is intrinsic to moral panics.

Criticisms

Armed or not with these newer theoretical extensions, we can approach some recurring criticisms of moral panic theory.

1. Why 'Panics?'

In disputes about definition, the term 'panic' has caused unnecessary trouble. I believe that it still makes some sense as an extended metaphor and furthermore, that there are indeed similarities between *most* moral panics and *some* other panics.

The term is unfortunate, though, because of its *connotation with irrationality and being out of control*. It also evokes the image of a frenzied crowd or mob: atavistic, driven by contagion and delirium, susceptible to control by demagogues and, in turn, controlling others by 'mob rule'. Newspaper reports over the last decade have referred to: *in the grips (or climate) of a moral panic . . . hit the moral panic button . . . a moral panic has broken out (or struck, been unleashed) . . . moral panic merchants (or mongers) . . . seized by a moral panic*. I invited further criticism by using two rather special examples of mass panics: first, collective delusions and urban myths – implying that these perceptions and beliefs were based on hallucinations, entirely imagined realities and second, natural disasters – *evoking images of a hysterical crowd*, utterly out of control, running for their lives from an imminent danger.

After being at first apologetic and accepting the downgrade of 'panic' to a mere metaphor, I remain convinced that the analogy works. Recent sociological literature on disasters and environmental problems has broadened the definition of the social. This is a denaturalization of nature. The contingencies of ordinary social life – the divisions of power, class and gender – influence the risks and consequences of exposure to such events. Models of 'environmental justice' show how dangers such as proximity to nuclear waste are socially determined. And just as Erikson used seventeenth century witch-hunts and religious persecution to understand how deviance and social control test and reinforce moral boundaries (see Chapter 1) he later showed how catastrophes may be treated as social events.³⁴ These 'technical' disasters are 'the new species of trouble', in contrast to traditional 'natural' disasters. They have become 'normal accidents', catastrophes embedded within the familiar: the collapse of a football stand, a rail crash, a bridge falling, the sinking of a channel ferry, a botched cancer screening programme. The resultant reactions are not as homogenous, automatic or simple as they are supposed to be in contrast with the complexities of moral discourse. Indeed the reactions are similar to the highly contested terrain of all moral panics.³⁵

The criteria by which certain media driven narratives are easily recognized as moral panics need more careful explanation: drama, emergency and crisis; exaggeration; cherished values threatened; an object of concern, anxiety and hostility; evil forces or people to be identified and stopped; the eventual sense of the episodic and transitory, etc. Many such criteria are self-evident. Thompson correctly notes, though, that two of them are genuinely problematic: first, *disproportionality* and second, *volatility*.³⁶ While conservatives complain that moral panic theorists use disproportionality in a highly selective way that barely hides their left liberal political agenda, the critique of volatility

comes from radicals to whom the assumption of volatility is not solid or political enough.

2. Disproportionality

The very usage of the term moral panic, so this argument starts, implies that societal reaction is disproportionate to the actual seriousness (risk, damage, threat) of the event. The reaction is always *more* severe (hence exaggerated, irrational, unjustified) than the condition (event, threat, behaviour, risk) warrants. Why is this just assumed? And on what grounds is the sociologist's view always correct, rational and justified?

Even in these limited terms, the assumption of disproportionality is problematic. How can the exact gravity of the reaction and the condition be assessed and compared with each other? Are we talking about intensity, duration, extensiveness? Moreover, the argument goes, we have neither the quantitative, objective criteria to claim that R (the reaction) is 'disproportionate' to A (the action) nor the universal moral criteria to judge that R is an 'inappropriate' response to the moral gravity of A.

This objection makes sense if there is nothing beyond a compendium of individual moral judgements. Only with a prior commitment to 'external' goals such as social justice, human rights or equality can we evaluate any one moral panic or judge it as more specious than another. Empirically, though, there are surely many panics where the judgement of proportionality can and should be made – even when the object of evaluation is vocabulary and rhetorical style alone. Assume we know that, over the last three years, (i) X% of asylum seekers made false claims about their risk of being persecuted; (ii) only a small proportion (say 20 per cent) of this subgroup had their claims recognized; and (iii) the resultant number of fake asylum seekers is about 200 each year. Surely then the claim about 'the country being flooded with bogus asylum seekers' is out of proportion.

This, needless to say, is not the end of the matter: the counter-claim may lead only to another round of claims-swapping. But this does not make questions of proportion, congruence and appropriateness unimportant, irrelevant or out of date (because all there is, after all, is representation). The core empirical claims within each narrative can usually be reached by the most rudimentary social science methodology. It would be perverse to dismiss such findings merely as one 'truth claim' with no 'privileged status'. Claims about past statistical trends, current estimates and extrapolations to the future are also open to scrutiny.

The problem is that the nature of the condition – 'what actually happened' – is not a matter of just how many Mods wrecked how many deck-chairs with what cost, nor how many 14-year-old girls became ill after taking which number of ecstasy tablets in what night club. Questions of symbolism, emotion and representation cannot be translated into comparable sets of statistics. Qualitative terms like 'appropriateness' convey the nuances of moral judgement more accurately than the (implied) quantitative measure of 'disproportionate' – but the more they do so, the more obviously they are socially constructed.

The critics are right that there is a tension between insisting on a universal measuring rod for determining the action/reaction gap – yet also conceding that the measurement is socially constructed and all the time passing off as non-politically biased the decision of what panics to 'expose'.

3. Volatility

Every critique from the 'left' starts by citing *Policing the Crisis*, the 1978 study by Hall and his colleagues about media and political reactions to street violence, especially mugging, carried out by black youth. This critique contrasts labelling theory's supposed separate and free-floating moral panics, each dependent on the whims of moral enterprise (Satanic cults this week, single mothers the week after) with a theory of state, political ideology and elite interests, acting together to ensure hegemonic control of the public news agenda. Far from being isolated, sporadic or sudden, these are predictable moves from one 'site' of tension to another; each move is patrolled by identical and integrated interests.

In some theories, this is less a contrast than a sequence. Discrete and volatile moral panics might indeed once have existed but they have now been replaced by a generalized moral stance, a permanent moral panic resting on a seamless web of social anxieties. The political crisis of the state is displaced into softer targets, creating a climate of hostility to marginal groups and cultural deviance. Even the most fleeting moral panic refracts the interests of political and media elites: legitimizing and vindicating enduring patterns of law and order politics, racism and policies such as mass imprisonment.³⁷ The importance of the media lies not in their role as transmitters of moral panics nor as campaigners but in the way they reproduce and sustain the dominant ideology.

This sequential narrative – from discrete to generalized, volatile to permanent – sounds appealing. But when did it happen? And what exactly was the shift? Thompson's claim, for example, that moral panics are succeeding each other more rapidly does not deny their volatility. His claim that they

are becoming more all pervasive (panics about child abuse extend to the very existence of the family) is not, however, a shift because the appeal to pervasiveness ('it's not only this') was a defining feature of the concept.

The notion of a 'permanent moral panic' is less an exaggeration than a oxymoron. A panic, by definition, is self-limiting, temporary and spasmodic, a splutter of rage which burns itself out. Every now and then speeches, TV documentaries, trials, parliamentary debates, headlines and editorials cluster into the peculiar mode of managing information and expressing indignation that we call a moral panic. Each one may draw on the same stratum of political morality and cultural unease and – much like Foucault's micro-systems of power – have a similar logic and internal rhythm. Successful moral panics owe their appeal to their ability to find points of resonance with wider anxieties. But each appeal is a sleight of hand, magic without a magician. It points to continuities: in space (*this sort of thing . . . it's not only this*) backward in time (*part of a trend . . . building up over the years*) a conditional common future (*a growing problem . . . will get worse if nothing done*). And for a self-reflexive society, an essential meta-message: *This is not just a moral panic*.

The element of volatility should be studied in two ways. First, why do full-blown panics ever end? My original answers were only guess-work: (i) a 'natural history' which ends with burn out, boredom, running out of steam, a fading away (ii) the slightly more sophisticated notion of cycles in fashion – like clothing styles, musical taste; (iii) the putative danger fizzles out, the media or entrepreneurs have cried wolf once too often, their information is discredited; (iv) the information was accepted but easily reabsorbed whether into private life or public spectacle – the end result described by the Situationists as *recuperation*. A second question concerns failed moral panics. Why despite having some ingredients, did they never quite take off: *alcopops*; *computer hackers*; *cults*, *new age travellers*; *lesbian mums*; *commercial surrogate births*; *the Dunblane school shooting*; *baby-snatching from hospitals*; *cloning . . .*

The volatility issue needs careful steering. If the idea of panic is domesticated under the dull sociological rubric of 'collective behaviour', the political edge of the concept is blunted. In this tradition, a moral panic merely reflects fears and concerns that are 'part of the human condition', or the 'maverick side of human nature' and 'operates outside the stable, patterned structures of society'.³⁸ The opposite is true: *without the 'stable, patterned structures' of politics, mass media, crime control, professions and organized religion, no moral panics could be generated or sustained*.

McRobbie and Thornton are correct that today's more sophisticated, self-aware and fragmented media make the original notion of the spasmodic ('every

now and then') panic out of date.³⁹ 'Panic' is rather a mode of representation in which daily events are regularly brought to the public's attention:

They are a standard response, a familiar, sometimes weary, even ridiculous rhetoric rather than an exceptional emergency intervention. Used by politicians to orchestrate consent, by business to promote sales . . . and by the media to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis.⁴⁰

But surely not quite a 'daily basis'. Moral panic theory indeed must be updated to fit the refractions of multi-mediated social worlds. But the unexpected, the bizarre and the anomalous happen: the James Bulger murder is neither a daily event nor a familiar story. The repertoire of media and political discourses has to design special conventions to translate anomalies into everyday, long-term anxieties. But they still have to remain within the format of the transitory and spasmodic – the essence of news.

The fragmentary and the integrated belong together: moral panics have their own internal trajectory – a microphysics of outrage – which, however, is initiated and sustained by wider social and political forces.

4. Good and Bad Moral Panics?

The criticism that 'moral panic' is a value-laden concept, a mere political epithet, deserves more complicated attention than it receives. It is obviously true that the uses of the concept to expose disproportionality and exaggeration have come from within a left liberal consensus. This empirical project is concentrated on (if not reserved for) cases where the moral outrage appears driven by conservative or reactionary forces. For cultural liberals (today's 'cosmopolitans'), this was an opportunity to condemn moral entrepreneurs, to sneer at their small-mindedness, puritanism or intolerance; for political radicals, these were easy targets, the soft side of hegemony or elite interests. In both cases, the point was to expose social reaction not just as over-reaction in some quantitative sense, but first, as *tendentious* (that is, slanted in a particular ideological direction) and second, as *misplaced or displaced* (that is, aimed – whether deliberately or thoughtlessly – at a target which was not the 'real' problem).

As the term itself became diffused and explicitly used in the media, the liberal/anti-authority origin of its birth made it more openly contested. A popular strand in Thatcherite Conservatism was indeed to uphold *exactly* the

meta-politics and causal theories that fuelled moral panics and to attack the derogatory use of the concept as a symptom of being 'out of touch' with public opinion and the fears of 'ordinary people'. This populist rhetoric remains in New Labour – with the attractive twist that many with roots in *Guardian* liberalism (and who had used the concept earlier) now turn on the 'jargon-laden left' for using the term so selectively.

In the British public arena the debate is frozen at this level of journalistic polemics. An imaginary sequence:

- *The Sun* reports that a 14-year-old school-girl in Oldham attacked a male teacher with a pair of scissors after he reprimanded her for using dirty language. The teacher's wound needed hospital treatment. The girl is 'of Asian origin'; the teacher is white. The police are investigating the incident; the local MP claims that such violent attacks by girls have doubled in this year. The story, with standard elaborations (the girl's father was an asylum seeker; teachers in other schools were too scared to speak out), runs in the tabloids for two more days.
- On the fourth day, *The Guardian* publishes an op-ed article by one of its think-piece journalists. She urges caution before a fully-fledged moral panic breaks out. The police, the school, the education authority and the police deny that such incidents are increasing; no one knows where the MP got his statistics. The teacher's wound was superficial. Such irresponsible reporting plays into the hands of extremist parties running for the local election. The *real* problems in places like Oldham are institutionalized racism in the schools and the special pressures that immigrant parents place on their daughters.
- On the day after, a *Daily Telegraph* editorial denounces the *Guardian* piece for deliberately trying to evade and distort the issue in the name of political correctness. Once again, the label of 'moral panic' is being used to play down the fears and anxieties of ordinary people – teachers, pupils, parents – who have to live every day in an atmosphere of violence. It now appears that the local schoolteachers' union had warned two months ago that school violence was driving teachers into leaving the profession.

This sequence allows for somewhat different readings of the relationships between moral panics and political ideology. (i) The weakest version sees the concept as a neutral descriptive or analytical tool, no different from other terms in this area (such as 'campaign' or 'public opinion'). It just so happens that the term has been used by left liberals (and their sociological cronies) to

undermine conservative ideologies and popular anxieties by labelling their concerns as irrational. But the term remains neutral and its usage could easily be reversed. (ii) In a slightly stronger version, the liberal appropriation of the term has gone too far for any reversal. We cannot expect to find conservatives trying to expose liberal or radical concerns as being 'moral panics'. (iii) A third version goes further. The genealogy of the term, its current usage and its folk meaning allow for one reading only: the term is not just 'value laden' but intended to be a critical tool to expose dominant interests and ideologies. The school violence sequence depicts one round in the battle between cultural representations.

These positions rest on shifting sands. In some cases, the logic of labelling social reaction as a moral panic may indeed lead to varieties on non-intervention (leave things alone): either because reaction is based on literal delusion or because the problem does not deserve such extravagant attention. The difficult cases are more interesting – the existence of the problem is recognized, but its cognitive interpretation and moral implications are denied, evaded or disputed.

Such reactions form exactly the discourse of denial: *literal denial* (nothing happened); *interpretative denial* (something happened, but it's not what you think) and *implicatory denial* (what happened was not really bad and can be justified). Instead of exposing moral panics, my own cultural politics entails, in a sense, *encouraging* something like moral panics about mass atrocities and political suffering – and trying to expose the strategies of denial deployed to prevent the acknowledgement of these realities. All of us cultural workers – busily constructing social problems, making claims and setting public agendas – think that we are stirring up 'good' moral panics. Perhaps we could purposely *recreate* the conditions that made the Mods and Rockers panic so successful (exaggeration, sensitization, symbolization, prediction, etc.) and thereby overcome the barriers of denial, passivity and indifference that prevent a full acknowledgement of human cruelty and suffering.

The pathetic ease and gullibility with which the mass media are lured into conventional moral panics may be contrasted to the deep denial behind their refusal to sustain a moral panic about torture, political massacres or social suffering in distant places. Public and media indifference are even attributed to deep states such as 'compassion fatigue'.⁴¹ Moeller describes a cognitive and moral stupor in which attention thresholds have risen so rapidly that the media try even more desperately to 'ratchet up' the criteria for stories to be covered. In the hierarchy of which events and issues will be covered, a footballer's ankle injury will get more media attention than a political massacre.

Sometimes (as Moeller shows in her analysis of the coverage of the Bosnian and Rwandan stories) the media try to create moral concern, but struggle against a palpable audience denial. This was less compassion fatigue than compassion avoidance: 'confronted with the images of putrefying corpses or swollen bodies bobbling along river banks they looked away – even when they believed that the story was important.'⁴² The shifting thresholds of attention she describes – the bewildering ways in which compassion rises and falls, the blurred boundaries of what is accepted as normal – look just like the volatility of moral panics.

I concluded my book with a vague prediction that more 'nameless' folk devils would be generated. The current causes of delinquency are clearer now: the climate of distrust and Darwinian individualism generated by Thatcherism and sustained in New Labour; under-regulated market economies; privatization of public services, welfare state cutbacks, growing inequality and social exclusion. Delinquents are nameless not in the banal sense that I meant (not being able to predict the names of the subcultural styles that would replace 'Mod' and 'Rocker') but because they remain as anonymous as the schools, housing estates, urban sprawls from which they came. Pictorial and verbal imaginations are applied more readily to the naming of social controls: Crime Watch, Situational Crime Prevention, Closed Circuit Television, Zero Tolerance, Three Strikes and You're Out, Anti Social Behaviour Orders. Social policies once regarded as abnormal – incarcerating hundreds of asylum seekers in detention centres, run as punitive transit camps by private companies for profit – are seen as being normal, rational and conventional.

The idea that social problems are socially constructed does not question their existence nor dismiss issues of causation, prevention and control. It draws attention to a meta debate about what sort of acknowledgement the problem receives and merits. The issue indeed is *proportionality*. It is surely not possible to calibrate exactly the human costs of crimes, deviance or human rights violations. The shades of intentionally inflicted suffering, harm, cruelty, damage, loss and insecurity are too complex to be listed in an exact, rational or universally accepted rank order of seriousness. But some disparities are so gross, some claims so exaggerated, some political agendas so tendentious that they can only be called something like, well, 'social injustice'.

Sociologists have no privileged status in pointing this out and suggesting remedial policies. But even if their role is relegated to being merely another claims-maker, this must include not only exposing *under-reaction* (apathy, denial and indifference) but making the comparisons that could expose *over-reaction* (exaggeration, hysteria, prejudice and panic). These 'reactions' may be

compared to the perceptual realm occupied by the sociology of risk: assessing not the risk itself nor its management, but the ways it is perceived. Even if there is no question of physical danger (death, infliction of pain, financial loss), the drawing and reinforcement of moral boundaries is as similar as Mary Douglas's comparison between physical and moral pollution. People's perceptions of the relative seriousness of so many different social problems cannot be easily shifted. The reason is that cognition itself is socially controlled. And the cognitions that matter here are carried by the mass media.

This is why moral panics are condensed political struggles to control the means of cultural reproduction. Studying them is easy and a lot of fun. It also allows us to identify and conceptualize the lines of power in any society, the ways we are manipulated into taking some things too seriously and other things not seriously enough.

Notes and References

- 1 The term 'moral panic' was first used by Jock Young in 'The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviancy, Negotiators of Reality and Translators of Fantasy', in S. Cohen (Ed.), *Images of Deviance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 37. We both probably picked it up from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, published in 1964.
- 2 Between 1984 and 1991 (inclusive) there were about 8 citations of 'moral panic' in UK newspapers; then 25 in 1992, then a sudden leap to 145 in 1993. From 1994 to 2001, the average was at 109 per year.
- 3 Kenneth Thompson's *Moral Panics* (London: Routledge, 1998), appeared in the Routledge 'Key Ideas' series. For definitions, see Allan G. Johnson, *Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) and Karim Murji, 'Moral Panic' in *Dictionary of Criminology*, London, Sage, 2001.
- 4 Blake Morrison, *As If* (Cambridge: Granta, 1997).
- 5 Sir William Macpherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (London: HMSO, 1999).
- 6 Two useful examples: Eugene McLaughlin and Karim Murji, 'After the Stephen Lawrence Report', *Critical Social Policy* 19 (August 1999), pp.371–85; Alan Marlow and Barry Loveday (Eds), *After Macpherson: Policing After the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing, 2000).
- 7 McLaughlin and Murji, op. cit. p.372.
- 8 As *The Sun*'s front page proclaimed: 'Britain Backs Our Bobbies: Sun Poll Boosts Under-Fire Cops' (1 March 1999).
- 9 Karim Murji, 'The Agony and the Ecstasy: Drugs, Media and Morality', in Ross Coomber (Ed.), *The Control of Drugs and Drug Users: Reason or Reaction?* (London: Harwood Publishers, 1998).

- 10 Phillip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998).
- 11 See Phillip Jenkins, *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).
- 12 For two different, but complimentary, views see Beatrix Campbell, *Unofficial Secrets: Child Sexual Abuse – The Cleveland Case* (London: Virago, 1989) and Nigel Parton, *Governing the Family: Child Care, Child Protection and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1991), especially Chapter 4 ‘Sexual Abuse, the Cleveland Affair and the Private Family’.
- 13 For an analysis of newspaper coverage of the series of ‘anti-paedophile crowd actions’ in Britain over summer 2000, see John Drury, ‘“When the mobs are looking for witches to burn, nobody’s safe” talking about the reactionary crowd’, *Discourse and Society* 13, 1 pp. 41–73.
- 14 On the history of media panics about the appearance of new forms of media, see Kirsten Drotner, ‘Modernity and Media Panics’, in M. Skovmand and K.C. Schroder (Eds), *Media Cultures: Reappraising Traditional Media* (London: Routledge, 1992) and ‘Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity’, *Pedagogica Historica* 35, 3 (1999), pp. 593–619.
- 15 Drotner, op. cit. p.52.
- 16 For a recent review (concentrating on highly publicized violent crimes) see Martin Barker and Julian Petley (Eds), *Ill Effects: The Media-Violence Debate* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 17 Grainne McKeever, ‘Detecting, Prosecuting and Punishing Benefit Fraud: The Social Security Administration (Fraud) Act 1997’, *Modern Law Review* 62 (March 1999), p.269.
- 18 Angela McRobbie, ‘Motherhood, A Teenage Job’, *Guardian* (5 September 1989).
- 19 A. Ward, *Talking Dirty: Moral Panic and Political Rhetoric* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1996).
- 20 P.M. Evans and K.J. Swift, ‘Single Mothers and the Press: Rising Tides, Moral Panic and Restructuring Discourses’, in S.M. Neysmith (Ed.), *Restructuring Caring Labour: Discourse, State Practice and Everyday Life* (Oxford, OUP, 2000).
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- 22 Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others* (London: Longman, 1994).
- 23 Ron Kaye, ‘Redefining the Refugee: The UK Media Portrayal of Asylum Seekers’, in Khalid Koser and Helma Lutz (Eds), *The New Migration in Europe: Social Constructions and Social Realities* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), pp. 163–82.
- 24 See the report by Oxfam’s UK poverty programme in Scotland, *Asylum: the Truth Behind the Headlines* (Oxfam, February 2001). This project monitored six

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- 25 E. El Refaie, ‘Metaphors we Discriminate by: Naturalized Themes in Austrian Newspaper Articles about Asylum Seekers’, *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, 3 (August 2001), pp.352–71.
- 26 Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
- 27 For example, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
- 28 See **Selected Reading List** below for references on constructionism.
- 29 Robert Reiner, ‘The Rise of Virtual Vigilantism: Crime Reporting Since World War II’, *Criminal Justice Matters* 43 (Spring 2001).
- 30 Richard.L. Fox and Robert Van Sichel, *Tabloid Justice: Criminal Justice in an Age of Media Frenzy* (Boulder: L. Rienner Publishers, 2001).
- 31 David Garland, *The Culture of Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- 32 Sheldon Unger, ‘Moral Panic versus the Risk Society: Implications of the Changing Sites of Social Anxiety’, *British Journal of Sociology* 52, pp. 271–292.
- 33 Mary Douglas’s main publications on the subject (*Risk and Culture* and *Risk and Blame*) are presented in Richard Farndon, *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp 144–67.
- 34 Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).
- 35 See Phil Scraton, *Hillsborough: The Truth* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2001).
- 36 Thompson, op. cit. pp. 8–11.
- 37 See William J. Chambliss, ‘Crime Control and Ethnic Minorities: Legitimizing Racial Oppression by Creating Moral Panics’, in Darnell Hawkins (Ed.), *Ethnicity, Race and Crime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
- 38 Goode and Ben-Yehuda, op. cit. p.104.
- 39 Angela McRobbie and Sarah L. Thornton, ‘Rethinking “moral panic” for multi-mediated social worlds’, *British Journal of Sociology* 46 (December 1995), pp. 559–74.
- 40 *ibid.* p. 560.
- 41 Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 42 *ibid.* p. 306.

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