



On the concept of moral panic

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Abstract

The article develops a critical analysis of the concept of moral panic and its sociological uses. Arguing that some of the concept's subtlety and power has been lost as the term has become popular, the article foregrounds its Freudian and Durkheimian aspects and explicates the epistemological and ethical issues involved in its use. Contrasting the dynamics of moral panics to the dynamics of culture wars, the author shows that both phenomena involve group relations and status competition, though each displays a characteristically different structure. The piece concludes by situating 'moral panics' within a larger typology of concepts utilized in the sociology of social reaction.

Key words

ethics of attribution; moral panic; social reaction; sociology of moral reaction; theory

INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'moral panic' has had an enormous impact, not just on sociology – where it has spawned a small sub-discipline of moral panic studies – but also on the language of cultural debate and on the practice of journalists and politicians. The claim that a social reaction is, in fact, merely a moral panic, has become a familiar move in any public conversation about social problems or societal risks. In an age of exaggeration, where the mass media regularly converge on a single anxiety-creating issue and exploit it for all it's worth, the utility of a negating, deflationary riposte is perfectly apparent. No wonder, then, that the term has become part of the standard repertoire of public debate. It was Stanley Cohen's classic study (Cohen, 1972) that provided our mass mediated world with this essential argumentative device, this way of saying 'no' to the forces of hyperbole and hysteria; but if Cohen hadn't introduced the term in 1972, it would have been necessary for someone else to invent it.

Before it was a rhetorical move in cultural politics, 'moral panic' was a rigorously defined sociological concept, first developed in an empirically grounded but relentlessly theoretical work entitled *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen, 1972) (one title, two

valuable new concepts – more than many of us manage in a whole book) and it is that sociological usage upon which I will focus here. After a brief description of the range of phenomena to which it refers, I will proceed to make some observations about the concept and its applications.

MORAL PANICS: THE PHENOMENON

So what exactly are moral panics? What do they involve, what brings them about, and what do they cause to happen? Cohen's book, first published in 1972 (with a third edition appearing 30 years later), provides the following introduction to the term:

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 . . . in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (Cohen, 2004: 1)

Cohen doesn't say exactly what he means by 'panic' here, but he clearly has in mind the conventional usage, defined by the OED as follows: 'A sudden and excessive feeling of alarm or fear, usually affecting a body of persons, and leading to extravagant or injudicious efforts to secure safety'.

The qualities of disproportion, exaggeration and alarm are also emphasized in the definition provided by that other classic of moral panic analysis, *Policing the Crisis*, but here the stress is the *consensual* quality of the overblown social reaction, even if that consensus is somewhat strained and artificial:

When the official reaction to a person, groups of person or series of events is out of all proportion to the actual threat offered, when 'experts', in the form of police chiefs, the judiciary, politicians and editors perceive the threat in all but identical terms, and appear to talk 'with one voice' of rates, diagnoses, prognoses and solutions, when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty' above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of . . . a moral panic. (Hall et al., 1978: 16, emphasis in original)

How do we know one of these moral panics when we see one? The standard text on moral panics (Goode and Ben Yehuda, 1994) identifies five key features of the

phenomenon: (i) *concern* (some reported conduct or event sparks anxiety); (ii) *hostility* (the perpetrators are portrayed as folk devils); (iii) *consensus* (the negative social reaction is broad and unified); (iv) *disproportionality* (the extent of the conduct, or the threat it poses, are exaggerated); (v) *volatility* (the media's reporting and the associated panic emerge suddenly, but can dissipate quickly too).

This is a useful summary, and one that has been influential in subsequent studies, but I believe it omits two elements that are essential to the meaning of the concept that Cohen developed: (i) the *moral dimension* of the social reaction, particularly the introspective soul-searching that accompanies these episodes; and (ii) the idea that the deviant conduct in question is somehow *symptomatic*. As Cohen emphasizes in his original case study, the reactions of 'society's guardians' always reach beyond the immediate problem, linking it to other disturbing symptoms of malaise. 'It's not just this . . .' they say, before presenting claims about associated problems and wider implications. Together, these two elements – a moral dimension, a symptomatic quality – are important, because they point to the true nature of the underlying disturbance; namely, the anxious concern on the part of certain social actors that an established value system is being threatened. This fear that a cherished way of life is in jeopardy is central to Cohen's account of moral panics, their nature and their genesis. At bottom, the sociology of moral panics discovers the displaced politics of group relations and status competition.

Here is a story from *The New York Times* in February 2007 (Cowell, 2007) which has all the hallmarks of a moral panic report, and which shows these characteristics quite clearly. It also shows the extent to which politicians have learned to recognize moral panic processes and struggle to manage their fall-out. The story was printed below the following headline: 'Latest Death of Teenager in South London Unsettles Britain':

London, Feb 16 – With an outpouring of soul-searching and public sorrow, British leaders expressed dismay on Friday at a recent spate of gun crime that has claimed five lives, and particularly at the young men in their mid-teens who were shot to death in their homes.

But while some politicians depicted the bloodshed as a sign of deep social malaise, Prime Minister Tony Blair resisted suggestions that the killings reflected a broader crisis among Britain's young people.

The issue has become more urgent this week since a United Nations report, widely reported here, depicted British young people as worse off socially than many of their peers in the world's richest countries.

Acknowledging that the shootings were horrific, Prime Minister Blair insisted that people ought not to overreact:

Let us be careful in our response. This tragedy is not a metaphor for the state of British society, still less of the state of British youth.

The report went on to say that 'the killings have stunned many Britons' and sparked worries about the prevalence of firearms, about crack cocaine, and about

American-style turf wars between drug-dealing gang members. The most recent victim's father is quoted as saying, 'The way they got hold of guns now is unbelievable'. But the alarm that was sounded in the wake of these events went beyond the immediate facts of the murders: 'It has inspired an anguished debate about whether some parts of British society are sliding out of control – an impression Mr. Blair sought to avoid'.

Well, he would, wouldn't he? Opposition spokesman Alan Duncan, on the other hand, had no such inhibitions. In a press release reported in the *Daily Telegraph* the following day, Mr Duncan declared that Britain needs to be 'recivilized' and provided the following diagnosis of the social crisis that lies behind the shootings:

Within the EU, Britain is the fattest nation, with the most apathetic voters, the worst energy wasters, the biggest porn addicts, the most violent people and the greatest cocaine users.

As if that indictment were insufficient, he went on – with a Chinese encyclopedia listing worthy of Jorge Luis Borges – to say,

We have the worst kids' allergies, are the biggest binge drinkers, are the most burgled, have the most asthma sufferers, are the worst linguists, have the most premature babies and have the fewest organ donors . . . There has been a collapse of authority.

In his introduction to the third edition of his book, Stan Cohen (2004: xxx) notes that 'successful moral panics owe their appeal to their ability to find points of resonance with wider anxieties'. Clearly Mr Duncan was doing his level best to make the connections.

The Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, was more circumspect, but he too characterized the events as symptomatic, pointing to 'absent fathers' and 'family breakdown' as being 'at the heart' of the problem (Cowell, 2007). In this, he appeared to have captured the public mood, as indicated by a *Guardian*/ICM poll (reported in the Glover and Travis, 2007) which found that 80 per cent of voters agreed with the statement that family breakdown and lack of discipline in the home are partly responsible for the growth of a gun culture.

The New York Times (Cowell, 2007) article went on to note that, despite the surge in media reports and public anxiety, police figures indicate that murders and gun crime are decreasing.¹ Nevertheless, Police Commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, called for new police powers and mandatory sentences of imprisonment for young people carrying guns. The targets of these new powers – the folk devils at the centre of the reaction – are of course violent, drug-dealing, inner-city, black youth, all too familiar to readers of *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al., 1978).

All in all, this episode of outcry, soul-searching, and social reaction – with a troubling form of youth deviance at its centre – describes a classic moral panic. More knowing and self-reflexive than the one described by Stan Cohen from 40 years ago, perhaps, and more politically contested too, but otherwise an exemplary instance of the genre.

Types of moral panic

The English gun crime episode just described is a 'classic' moral panic because it contains each of the defining elements identified by Cohen when he first analyzed the phenomenon. But subsequent research has shown that moral panics come in a variety of shapes and sizes, as do the forms of deviance to which they purportedly respond, and their subsequent effects on the social world. It is perhaps worth pausing to say something about these variations of form and focus.

Moral panics vary in intensity, duration and social impact. Some are minor, transient episodes, leaving little trace behind them: who, other than the participants, now remembers the alarm prompted in 1950s Britain by the Teddy Boys (Pearson, 1983)? Others are major, fateful developments which transform masses of lives and whole social landscapes: the European witch-craze of the 16th and 17th centuries (Trevor-Roper, 1967) or anxieties about 'national decline' in 19th-century Britain (Stedman Jones, 1971) would be cases in point. They can be isolated outbreaks, such as the short-lived panic about freeway shootings in late-1980s Los Angeles (Best, 1999), or form part of a series, each episode building on the other. Drug panics (Reinarman and Levine, 1997) and child abuse outcries (Hacking, 2000) have had this cumulative quality, a 'spiral of signification' (Hall et al., 1978) adding to the perceived significance of each new twist in the continuing narrative of concern.

The problems to which moral panics respond may turn out to be serious, trivial, or a figment of the imagination – although the revealed extent of the problem usually bears little relation to the reaction it produces. Mods and Rockers now appear innocuous. Street robbery or firearm murders much less so. The satanic ritual child abuse panic that struck Britain in the early 1990s seems, like the early modern witch hunts, to have been entirely delusional, but it was altogether real in its effects and there are people still in prison as a result (Showalter, 1998; Hacking, 2000).

The phrase 'revealed extent' in the previous paragraph glosses too quickly over an epistemological problem that always affects the world of social problems and their perception. Strictly speaking, the 'extent' of a problem is never simply 'revealed'. Like the problem's character, or causes, or consequences, it is a property that is subject to dispute and collective negotiation. In some cases, these issues remain forever contentious. In other cases, the nature and extent of the phenomena are subject to broad agreement, based on widely shared interpretations and more or less solid evidence.

Moral panics also vary in terms of proximate causation and patterns of development. They can be spontaneous, grass-roots events, unselfconsciously driven by local actors and anxieties – as the panic over Mods and Rockers at Clacton seems to have been – or can be deliberately engineered for commercial or political gain. Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton (1995) describe how Acid House record producers did their utmost to provoke a moral panic about the use of Ecstasy at raves in a bid to create media attention and free publicity for their product. The strategy of shocking an older generation to generate publicity and court a younger, hipper audience appears throughout the history of modern rock music, from Bill Haley and Elvis Presley to the

Rolling Stones, the Sex Pistols and Marilyn Manson. And if commercially contrived moral panics are innocuous, their political analogues – such as Hitler's burning of the Reichstag in the 1930s or the Zinoviev letter of the 1920s – have altogether more fateful consequences.

The social reaction involved in a moral panic can be more or less consensual, more or less divided. In Cohen's original case study, 'society's guardians' responded to the seaside disturbances with one voice. In my English gun violence example, the politicians and commentators are much more divided in their reaction and in the interpretive frames they seek to impose on the events. (I will suggest, in a moment, that consensual, uncontested social reactions appear decreasingly common in contemporary society.)

As for causation, this may also vary with the nature and focus of the moral panic, but the research literature returns repeatedly to a loose set of causal conditions that are associated with the phenomenon. Facilitating conditions include (i) the existence of a sensationalist mass media (although historians identify moral panic episodes in the mid-19th century and before: see Davis, 1980; Pearson, 1983; Adler, 1996 – perhaps an effective channel of collective communication is all that is needed); (ii) the discovery of some new or hitherto unreported form of deviance; (iii) the existence of marginalized, outsider groups suitable for portrayal as 'folk devils'; and (iv) an already primed, sensitized public audience. As for precipitating causes, the literature suggests that these have to do with transitions in the social, economic or moral order of the society. Threats to existing hierarchies; status competition; the impact of social change upon established ways of life; and the breakdown of previously existing structures of control – these are the deep sources of surface panics most often identified. Erikson (1966) on witch hunts in Puritan New England; Hall et al. (1978) on mugging panics in 1970s England; Williamson (1985) on southern lynching in 1890s America; or Garland (2001) on late 20th-century crime complexes in Britain and America, all supply illustrative examples.

Folk devils and their relation to moral panics

Cohen's original analysis made it clear that moral panics and their folk devils have an interactive relationship – typically one of deviance amplification that occurs because media attention and increased social control prompt a hardening of the original deviance, or even an enhancement of its attraction for potential deviants. Hacking (2000) has described this as a 'looping effect' whereby social reaction interacts with the thing responded to, bringing about the transformation of the latter. This shaping effect of social reaction – the process of 'making and moulding' as Hacking describes it – is subject to empirical variation and by no means always results in 'amplification', as Cohen (2004) concedes in the introduction to the third edition of his book. Depending on context, balance of forces, interaction dynamics, and the ongoing choices of participants, the emergence of a moral panic can cause the deviance in question to be halted, amplified or altogether transformed. (Consider, for example, the organizing, mobilizing and politicizing effects that moral panic reactions have sometimes had on groups such as welfare claimants, single mothers, illegal immigrants, HIV sufferers, gay men, etc.)

What Cohen did not emphasize, although I believe it is implicit in his original analysis and rather more explicit in Hall et al.'s *Policing the Crisis* (1978), is that a specific group of deviants is singled out for 'folk devil' status, in large part, because it possesses characteristics that make it a suitable screen upon which society can project sentiments of guilt and ambivalence. Detailed accounts of this process of denial and projection are developed in Watney (1987) which discusses the societal reaction to AIDS in the early 1980s and Williamson (1985) which analyzes the emergence in the 1890s of the 'black beast rapist' folk devil in the American South.

A vivid example of this unconscious denial and projection is the recurring contemporary panic centered upon pedophile sex offenders. As the 2007 film *Little Children* (Field, 2007) suggests quite clearly, the intensity of current fear and loathing of child abusers seems to be connected to unconscious guilt about negligent parenting and widespread ambivalence about the sexualization of modern culture. Moral panic targets are not randomly selected: they are cultural scapegoats whose deviant conduct appalls onlookers so powerfully precisely because it relates to personal fears and unconscious wishes. In collective nightmares, as in individual dreams, the emergence of a specific *bête noire* is over-determined by pre-existing conflicts. The achievement of the best moral panic analyses is to render these involvements and anxieties conscious and intelligible and to show how they contributed to the outcry in question. (The corresponding weakness of much moral panic analysis is, as Paul Rock (2007) has observed, the failure to provide evidence that these background anxieties truly exist and that they – rather than the deviant phenomenon being reacted to – actually contributed to the emergence of the 'moral panic' in question.)

I have already noted the political uses of moral panics but one should also emphasize that the mass media are typically the prime movers and the prime beneficiaries of these episodes, since the sensation they create – a kind of collective effervescence – sells papers, entertains readers, and generates further news and commentary as the story unfolds, the spokesmen take sides, and the deviant phenomenon develops. Indeed, in an early discussion of the idea, Jock Young (1971) noted that the commercial media have an 'institutionalized need to create moral panics'. On this account, the media 'fan public indignation' and 'engineer' moral panics in order to generate news and appeal to the imagination and concerns of their readers.

The productivity of moral panics

Finally, one ought to mention the *productivity* of moral panics. These episodes make things happen. They create effects and leave a legacy. Think about Hall's account (Hall et al., 1978; Hall, 1980) of how the panic about 'mugging' began the drift to a law and order society, or how the American panic over drugs drove the build-up of mass imprisonment (Garland, 2000). The recurring sex offender panics of the last 10 years have led to an intrusive apparatus of supervision, restraint, and confinement which civil liberties concerns have done little to prevent. As the writers of *Policing the Crisis* put it,

The moral panic appears to us to be one of the principal forms of ideological consciousness by means of which a 'silent minority' is won over to the support of increasingly coercive measures on the part of the state, and lends its legitimacy to a 'more than usual' exercise of control. (Hall et al., 1978: 221)

Moral panics often seem ephemeral but over time their cumulative effect can be to create social divisions and redistribute social status as well as building infrastructures of regulation and control that persist long after the initial episode has run its course. Thus James Marone (2003) has argued that in the USA, where the ideology of limited government usually obstructs the expansion of state institutions, moral panics have repeatedly given rise to a form of reactive state-building that is of major importance. Marone argues that the extraordinary 'politics of sin' in a religious 'Hellfire' nation – prompted by outcries about the deleterious effects of alcohol, the sex trade, and drugs – have led to a build-up of governmental regulation and nationwide enforcement that could never have been achieved by means of normal political processes.

We need, however, to be careful here lest we attribute too much efficacy to 'panics' and too little to rational reactions to underlying problems – although it is often empirically difficult to disentangle the two. Take, for instance, the phenomenon of child abuse, which, as Ian Hacking has observed, is a social problem that has been highlighted, conceptualized and addressed in recent decades. The cumulative social and governmental reactions to perceived child abuse have created, in our societies, a whole new regime of suspicion, supervision and control:

Child abuse has created a world of difference. Children are subjected to education about it, by way of videos, from the earliest years of schooling. Television and movies have a steady diet of it. There are support and confessional groups for abusers modeled on the lines of Alcoholics Anonymous. Abuse has been firmly grasped by the co-dependency movements. By 1985 there were cities – Portland, Oregon, for example – in which anti-abuse activists had been so successful that men were advised never to touch a child in public; if a child not in the family is hurt, be sure there is a friendly witness there before helping in any way. (Hacking, 2000: 160)

It would be a mistake, however, to attribute this new regulatory regime exclusively to 'moral panics'. Unlike the fantasy of 'satanic ritual abuse' – which appears to have been based entirely on unsubstantiated claims – more mundane practices involving the 'abuse' of children (by neglect, mistreatment, mental, physical and sexual violence, etc.) are all too real, and, having been rendered visible, would undoubtedly prompt condemnation and efforts at control with or without hysterical outcries and exaggerated reporting. In such cases, the initial moral panic may serve to attract public attention and force the problem onto the political agenda, but the revealed character of the underlying phenomenon may be sufficient to explain subsequent social reactions.

Moral panics and cultural conflicts

Recent scholarship (for example, by McRobbie and Thornton, 1995) emphasizes the relative scarcity today of consensual social reactions and the importance of oppositional

voices in the media and in the public domain. In the early 1960s, when the events described by Cohen took place, a relatively cohesive establishment and a narrowly focused mass media could give the impression of a unified public reaction. In the decades since then, the growth of publicly accessible media, together with the emergence of an alternative youth press, the existence of counter-experts who contest alarmist claims, and activists willing to speak out on behalf of targeted folk devils, make consensual expressions of concern much more unusual.

These changes in the conditions and possibilities for public expression have implications for the nature of moral panics. They suggest a shift *away* from moral panics as traditionally conceived (involving a vertical relation between society and a deviant group) towards something more closely resembling American-style 'culture wars' (which involve a more horizontal conflict between social groups). If this is the case, it suggests that the UK may, in this respect, be growing closer to the USA, where it is difficult to find any public issue on which there is broad public agreement and an absence of dissenting voices. The pervasive appearance of racial, religious and regional divisions, fostered by identity politics and given expression by public access media, ensures that most social or moral issues prompt markedly polarized responses, even if the terms of political and economic debate are quite narrowly drawn.

There are, no doubt, occasions where genuine moral panics occur in America (the panic over child abuse is a good example) – where broadly shared societal values are disturbed by a deviant group's conduct. But this is much less common than moral crusades, symbolic politics and culture wars, where specific social groups engage in moral politics in order to redistribute social status and declare one form of life superior to its rivals. Sociologists like Joseph Gusfield (1986) and historians like James Marone (2003) have described this phenomenon in detail (see also Garland, 2007).

If there has indeed been a shift from consensual moral panics to conflictual culture wars then the meaning and value of the conduct in question will tend to be much more contested, and the power balances between contending groups much less asymmetrical. Instead of becoming folk devils who are powerless in the face of public outrage, and are forced to desist or else adopt the tainted identity imposed on them, the targets of today's moral campaigns will sometimes have the capacity to resist deviant identities and assert the social value and normality of their conduct. In moral conflicts of the latter type, the outrage expressed by one set of onlookers prompts not a public panic but instead a defiant (and equally outraged) response from the 'folk devils' whose conduct was brought into question. Recent conflicts involving same-sex couples and the question of gay marriage, or illegal immigrants and law reform, or Muslim women and the wearing of the *hijab* in school, have sometimes begun as moral panics and ended as politically contested culture wars – suggesting that these dynamics may be affected by normative evolution and changes in the status of the deviant group as well as by media proliferation and political fragmentation.

Finally, the recent scholarship (Thompson, 1998) has also emphasized the extent to which the processes of moral panic have become familiar so that participants are now much more self-conscious and deliberate than previously. The media's handling of moral panics has become somewhat routine and predictable. The rules of the game

are well known. Players align themselves with escalation or de-escalation, depending on their interests, while the media reflexively comments on its own practice, often making a story of the story. Thus, in the example I quoted concerning gun violence in London, David Cameron and Alan Duncan were pursuing a maximization strategy, seeking to stoke the panic, to generalize the problem, and to shape the public outcry to their own ends. At the same time, Tony Blair was urging calm, trying to 'keep things in perspective', seeking to localize rather than generalize, hoping to downplay the problem without being caught in the trap of being seen to be 'out of touch' with popular experience. Meanwhile, media commentators – such as Melanie Phillips (2007) in the *Daily Mail* – commented on the commentators, talking about 'the predictable signs of panic'. In a different context, columnist Simon Jenkins (2007) satirized the media's standard panic process – which he labeled 'mad publicity disease' – ridiculing the 'stoked hysteria' and 'hullabaloo', and urging public skepticism in the face of alarming reports and pontificating experts. The tendency of a self-involved media to ironize its own sensationalism, pointing out its alarmism at the same moment that it sounds the alarm, together with the new possibilities of resistance discussed earlier, tend to reduce the mobilizing power of moral panics today, at least compared with the reported situation three or four decades ago.

THE CONCEPT AND ITS USES

As a sociological idea, the concept of a moral panic is at once more Durkheimian and more Freudian than is usually supposed. Its psychoanalytical aspects – the symptomatic character of panics, the projective nature of folk devil construction, the social and psychic conflicts that underlie these processes – are relatively straightforward and don't require further elaboration, but it is worth highlighting its Durkheimian dimensions since these are sometimes overlooked. The Durkheimian elements of Cohen's theory relate not just to the boundary-defining nature of moral panics – which, in this respect, represent an extension of Durkheim's (1982) theory of deviance reaction albeit in neurotic form – but also to the 'collective effervescence' that moments of moral panic typically exhibit. One needs to bear in mind the excitement and energy that are unleashed by moral panic episodes, as well as the enjoyment generated by these collective wave of righteous condemnation – for participants and onlookers, if not for the targets of reaction. A precondition for the recurring investment of the mass media and the political class in panic-producing processes is, no doubt, the emotional energy and collective excitement that are unleashed whenever a mass public can be provoked into feeling passionate outrage, together with all the opportunities that this energy provides.

In its standard usage (although not in Cohen's original use) we tend to emphasize the overblown social reaction that these events involve and to focus upon the actors and agencies that benefit from the exaggerated response. This is hardly surprising, given the concept's roots in the radical interactionist's critique of social control, and given its continuing value as a critical tool with which to discredit overzealous law

enforcement and moral conservatism. But this focus on power and profit and self-interested manipulation has tended to overshadow the moral and psychological connotations of the concept – which seem to me to be essential to its meaning. I will now develop this observation by addressing the concept's origins, its uses, and the attitudes that it implies for an observer using a moral panic framework.

Origins

As Cohen points out in his introduction to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2004), the term 'moral panic' emerged from late 1960s social reaction theory, especially the concern with the media's role in stereotyping and misrepresenting deviance and the perception that such reporting might contribute to a deviancy amplification spiral. A new generation of deviancy theorists in Britain, including Jock Young (in his 1971 study of police as amplifiers of drug-taking deviance), Stan Cohen (in his 1972 *Mods and Rockers* study), and Jason Ditton (in developing his ideas on 'controlology' – see Ditton, 1979) took up Leslie Wilkins' (1964) 'deviancy amplification model', together with the interactionist ideas of Edwin Lemert (1967) and Kai Erikson (1966) to develop an approach that emphasized that social control can lead to intensified deviance through an interactive process of psychological adjustment and self-fulfilling social action.

These were the concept's most immediate theoretical origins, although of course one can trace others, going further back in the sociological past.² But the idea that developed in the work of Cohen and his colleagues also had what one might call a cultural source, deriving from the characteristic social attitudes of young 1960s sociologists like Cohen, Young and Ditton and their colleagues in the National Deviancy Conference. This was the outlook of the hip, deviance-appreciating, participant observer who was often culturally closer to deviants than to their controllers, and who saw criminal law as a misplaced form of repression, at least as it applied to the soft deviance of drug taking and sub-cultural style. In the face of what they regarded as uninformed, intolerant, and unnecessarily repressive reactions to deviance by conservative authorities, these sociologists developed a standard critical response, a critique with which to counter oppressive social reaction.

Their critique had two aspects. The first pointed to an empirical mistake, prompted by misplaced anxiety: 'Straight society is over-reacting,' they implied, 'the problem is much less serious and much less threatening than people think. Relax, don't panic, no one here is getting hurt'. The second aspect was more normative in character, more focused on the form of the social reaction, and more critical of its moralizing, judgmental stance: 'The real problem is not the deviant behavior, it is your compulsive need to moralize. Be more tolerant, more open to difference and diversity. Forget about your up-tight, out-of-date morality. Relax, don't panic, no one here is doing wrong'. The term 'moral panic' – as much catchphrase as concept in its typical usage – captured these responses perfectly, neatly condensing analysis and attitude.

We ought to note, however, that labeling theorists like Cohen and Young were mostly talking about deviance, minor delinquency and 'victimless' offences rather than

hard-core crime. Their critique of exaggerated moral reaction was directed primarily towards shallow-end phenomena such as soft drug use, sexual deviance, and juvenile offending rather than to murder, rape or robbery. Consequently, when Stuart Hall and his colleagues applied the term 'moral panic' to the social reaction prompted by English 'muggings' – which is to say, to urban street robberies, which entail violence, fear, and bodily injury – they were pushing the analysis further than it had gone before. This move quickly drew criticism, notably from criminologist P. J. Waddington (1986), who disputed not just Hall et al.'s analysis of the robbery statistics but also their judgment about what is the appropriate moral response to incidents of violent crime and to the suffering of its victims.

Despite these criticisms, the appeal of moral panic analysis was so powerful for many criminologists in the 1970s that its debunking attitude was frequently generalized, and it became a way of dismissing claims that real crime rates were increasing or that members of the public ought to feel insecure. As the decade wore on, and recorded crime rates continued to increase, this radical stance was pilloried by conservative supporters of 'law and order' as out of touch with public experience and overly tolerant of dangerous criminals. By the end of the decade, a group of left-wing criminologists, led by none other than Jock Young (possibly the first writer to use the phrase 'moral panic' in his published work, albeit without the conceptual elaboration it would later receive in Cohen's writings), developed a quite different position, which they called 'realist criminology' or 'left realism' (Kinsey et al., 1986; Matthews and Young, 1986). Young describes this criminology as being built upon the injunction to 'take crime seriously'. As he wrote later,

[Left realism] emerged as a critique of the predominant tendency in left wing and liberal commentaries which down-played the problem of crime, talking about media-instigated moral panics and irrational fears of crime. (Young, n. d.)

As often happens when a concept seems especially powerful or illuminating, the care and precision of its original application were forgotten as its use became more general and indiscriminate. Analysis was subordinated to attitude, and, for a brief period in the late 1970s and 1980s, the term was caught up in ideological battles in which the social meaning of deviance and reaction, crime and control, became important stakes not just in criminological debate but also in national politics (Garland, 2001). (For an excellent discussion of moral panic analysis and its cultural contexts, see Young, 2007.)

Actors, observers, and skeptics

Despite reflexive commentary by the media and knowing exploitation by politicians, the term 'moral panic' is almost always an outside observer's category, not a self-description of the participants, at least not while they are participating. It is an ascription, an attribution, a label applied by outsiders. The label insists that the reactive behavior it describes is inappropriate, ill-judged, lacking proportion. One must suppose that the people whose conduct is being described in this way do not believe that they are

engaged in a moral panic and would typically contest that description. It is, in that sense, a negative label applied to those who engage in negative labelling, the analyst's revenge on the forces of social reaction.

To ascribe this label to the conduct of others, to describe a social reaction as a moral panic, implies more than an empirical judgment about conduct: it also implies a definite stance on the part of the analyst, a specific orientation. The primary attitude of the sociologist of moral panics is not detached realism, or rationalism, or even just-the-facts empiricism. It is the attitude of *skepticism* – an attitude of knowing disbelief, an urbane refusal to be taken in or carried away. If moral panics sometimes have a religious zeal to them, even an old-fashioned fundamentalism, the task of exposing them as moral panics falls to doubters, agnostics, and unbelievers.

In many instances, this amoral skepticism is all that there is, and the exercise is one of exposure and debunking. Most journalistic writing about moral panic adopts this mode. But in the work of sociologists like Cohen or Hall, the skepticism that permits the initial observation gives way to a different attitude – one that is more analytic, more explanatory, or perhaps better, more diagnostic. Recall that the ascription is of a 'panic' and not merely a mistake or a misjudgment. To that extent, the analyst is pointing not just to an overreaction but to a form of neurotic behavior, a hysteria, a psychopathology and, by implication, to an underlying conflict that is producing the moral panic as its acting-out expression. When this analytical lead is followed through systematically it can produce an in-depth account of the underlying processes that converge to over-determine the panic outburst. Typically, a fully developed diagnosis explanation will operate at the levels of *symbolic meaning* (why this folk devil, construed as this kind of monster, with these specific connotations and associations?), *social relations* (why this group, with these interests, in this place?) and *historical temporality* (why at this moment, after these events, in this period?). *Policing the Crisis*, with its layered explanatory framework and its multi-dimensional empirical inquiry, still stands as something of an exemplar in this regard – not least in its range and ambition, and in its predictive insights about Britain's drift to a law and order society.

Conceptual problems and limitations

Moral panic analysis attracts a number of recurring criticisms (for a discussion, see Thompson (1998) and Goode and Ben Yehuda (1994)). None of these altogether undermines the value of the concept, but, as Cohen (2002) himself acknowledges they identify problems and limitations that ought to be borne in mind by analysts who use the concept in their work. Rather than repeat Cohen's thoughtful discussion, I shall merely highlight the chief concerns.

Proportion

The point of departure for any moral panic analysis is a claim that a particular reaction is somehow disproportionate to the deviance it condemns.³ This assumption of disproportionality immediately invites empirical disputes about the real nature and extent of the underlying problem – 'is the reaction really disproportionate, or is the problem

bigger than you think?’ But disputes here tend to be somewhat intractable because the thing being measured is usually not just actual conduct (How many muggings? How many rioters? How much damage?) but also the size of a potential threat and a perceived moral endangerment.

Proportionate to what?

The difficulties of measurement and evaluation are practical ones that can often be managed by careful use of appropriate data and methods of investigation. But, for some critics, the idea of a measurably proportionate response is not one that makes sense. Skeptical relativists such as Simon Watney (1987) have observed that when the sociologist claims to find a social reaction out of proportion, he or she is not measuring the reaction against some hard reality, but merely against his or her own representation of the way things are. In this framework of understanding, there is no resort to the empirical facts that are available to the analyst, nor any appeal to reason – just a contest of representations that is ultimately determined by power and interest. As I noted earlier the epistemological question here is as follows: Can the object of concern (the problem, the deviance, the behavior) ever be known with any objectivity, or are there only various subjective interpretations and representations? To the extent the question is empirical, I take the former position. In the event that it is normative, the pluralism of judgment is largely unavoidable.⁴

Moral judgments

This leads us directly to the normative aspects of moral panics, their element of moral condemnation. While the sociologist can find solid ground – or something close to it – when measuring rates of conduct, the extent of material damage, or even the size of a risk, it is more difficult to assess the validity of the moral judgments made by others. When someone describes an episode as a moral panic, it is always possible to suppose that he or she is simply refusing to take seriously the moral viewpoint of those who are alarmed. What the analyst sees as a hysterical overreaction may be seen by the participants as an appropriate response to a deeply troubling moral evil. Popular fears may be well-grounded, moral concern appropriately expressed. How can we choose between these viewpoints, other than by choosing to take sides on moral issues and thus stepping outside our role as sociologists?

Perhaps this is why one reads of very few instances of ‘moral panic’ analysis being applied to episodes where the underlying moral concern appears to be shared by the sociologists who invoked the term. Consider the case of Philip Jenkins and his book, *Beyond Tolerance: Child Pornography on the Internet* (2001), which shows quite clearly how the moral judgment of the analyst can affect the analysis. Jenkins, the author of several books on moral panics, tells us that he set out to write a book on internet-related moral panics that would debunk the claim that web-based child pornography is a major problem. His investigation led him to the opposite view:

I initially believed that [child pornography] was rare on the Web. I was wrong. It is a substantial presence, and much of the material out there is worse than most of us can

imagine . . . Having spent a decade arguing that various social menaces were vastly overblown . . . I now found myself in the disconcerting position of seeking to raise public concern about a quite authentic problem that has been neglected. (pp. 8–9)

Jenkins describes himself as a libertarian who believes that criminal law ought not to invade issues of personal morality; but this was too much, beyond even his tolerance.

Unhinged reaction

The conceptual breakthrough that initiated the study of social reaction phenomena – of which moral panics are one category, along with control waves, law and order campaigns, zero tolerance, defining deviance down, and so on. – was the insight that social reaction is not fully determined by the deviance to which it purportedly responds, that such reaction has its own dynamics, and that social reaction can be studied in its own terms. As Paul Rock (2007: 1) observes,

‘Moral panic’ in particular captured the capacity of control waves to achieve a phenomenological and social autonomy, acquiring their own life and developing seemingly independently of the phenomena on which they fed, yet shaping those phenomena as they evolved.

The study of moral panics is thus part of an important research agenda that hardly existed prior to the 1960s.

But if the idea of the autonomy of social reaction was liberating and instructive, it can also be a trap insofar as most social reaction really is related to (or is at least triggered by) some underlying deviant phenomena, however contested and constructed that deviance may be, and however tenuously the reaction relates to it. In its cruder applications, moral panic analysis tends to lose sight of this relation, making the underlying problem disappear and disregarding the concerns of those adversely affected by it. The trick is to think not in terms of an absolute distinction (studying reaction but not deviance, punishment but not crime) but in terms of relative autonomy – studying the multiple dynamics of reaction, only some of which relate to the deviance being addressed. The links between deviance and reaction, crime and punishment, may be tenuous and under-determining, but they usually exist.

Anthropomorphizing

The claim that a society (as opposed to an individual or individuals) can engage in hysterical, panic-stricken behavior seems, to some critics, to involve an illegitimate rendering of collective social processes as individualistic psychological ones. And in some of the earlier moral panic analyses there was a tendency to talk of ‘society’ and ‘social reaction’ as if these were undifferentiated, unified, and personified, when in fact the activities of actors within the media, the police, the government and the public, are liable to involve very different interests and motivations (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995). An increasing awareness of political fragmentation and media proliferation make such anthropomorphized accounts less credible, and less common, in the contemporary literature.

Policing the Crisis (Hall et al., 1978) represents an interesting attempt to claim *both* that there is diversity and conflicts of interest within the state, the media, and the ruling bloc as well as within the population at large *and* that a moral panic about mugging could help shape a more or less unified 'public opinion' about law and order. The processes that produced this unified representation within a complex and contradictory field of power relations are a major focus of the book, conceived within a Gramscian theoretical framework that focused on the ideological and institutional work that gave rise to this 'spontaneous' public response. As the authors put it,

Public opinion about crime does not simply form up at random . . . it is the awakening of lay public attitudes, and their crystallizing in forms which underpin and support the viewpoints already in circulation, which help to close the consensual circle, providing the lynch-pin of legitimation. (Hall et al., 1978: 136–7)

The ethics of attribution

I noted earlier that 'moral panic' is always an ascribed term, attributed from the outside, usually in a critical manner. Although the problem has not previously been acknowledged, it seems to me that this relation of critical ascription brings with it what one might call *an ethics of attribution* that shapes the use of the term, and occasionally restrains analysts from applying it. In other words, there may be situations in which the empirical conditions seem to invite 'moral panic' analysis but where ethical considerations make the attribution seem tactless, morally insensitive, or otherwise inappropriate. What are these ethical considerations and how do they shape analysis? Perhaps the most important are questions of scale and intensity, and considerations of those harmed by the deviance in question.

Think of the massive and sometimes hyperbolic media and governmental response to the attacks of 11 September 2001. This was an episode of social reaction that seems clearly to meet the criteria of a moral panic attribution – exhibiting *concern*, *hostility*, *consensus*, *disproportionality*, and *volatility*, as well as a definite moral dimension and a sense that a way of life is being threatened – and yet there is a definite reluctance to describe this episode as involving a moral panic.

In the aftermath of 9/11 it was noticeable that commentators carefully avoided describing the reaction as a moral panic – even when the conduct of the press, the control apparatus, and the public seemed to invite precisely this kind of analysis. Indeed, there was an article published six months after the events (Walker, 2002), interviewing a number of 'moral panic' sociologists – Joel Best, Philip Jenkins, Eric Goode – all of whom took great care to refuse the attribution of this term to the reaction, even though, as they noted, it appeared to fit the model in most respects.

Why was this? In part, no doubt, it was due to uncertainty about the nature of the threat involved. In early 2002, following the plane attacks and an outbreak of anthrax poisoning, no one was sure about the scale of the danger or the likelihood of subsequent attacks. But the primary reason for this reluctance to invoke the idea of 'moral panic' was, I think, an ethical one. These sociologists were unwilling to challenge the moral sentiments that drove the social reaction. They were unwilling

to play the debunking skeptics in the face of such intense grief and fear and so many murdered victims. It seems likely, at least to me, that they saw the attribution of 'moral panic' as analytically appropriate but ethically taboo.

Interestingly, six years on, articles and books have begun to appear that do make the attribution, describing the response to 9/11 as a gigantic moral panic with massive consequences for those caught in its repressive hysteria (Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Mueller, 2006; for a more nuanced application, see Welch, 2006). Now that emotions have cooled, and fears receded, analytical skepticism seems more feasible, although many will still regard it as scandalous and irresponsible.

The ethical inhibitions I have described may not be very important in practice – although they will tend to prevent the social reactions to major events and large scale disasters being studied within a moral panic framework, at least for a time. More important is what this point reveals about the critical relationship that moral panic analysis sets up between the analyst and the social actors analyzed. Whether intended or not, moral panic analysis carries with it a certain aggression and critical disparagement that cannot be fully concealed beneath the guise of scholarly objectivity.

IN CONCLUSION: CONTRASTIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY CONCEPTS

For a concept to be both meaningful and capable of precise application it has to operate within a network of other concepts, against which it can be distinguished or opposed. The broader analytical context within which the concept of moral panic operates is the study of social reaction, and the analysis of 'social reaction' – a generic name for a very varied and complex set of phenomena – clearly lends itself to more than one concept. I conclude this note by identifying some contrastive and complementary concepts that might be used to sharpen the focus and extend the range of moral panic analysis.

Denial

An important contrastive concept that operates in the same general framework as moral panic is the idea of 'denial' – a topic on which Stanley Cohen has also written extensively (Cohen, 2000). As a psychological concept, denial is the refusal to permit a disturbing event access to consciousness, but as Cohen has shown, denial also has sociological dimensions and can be analyzed as a set of social practices. Discussing the conduct of state agencies and other authorities, he distinguishes '*literal denial* (nothing happened); *interpretive denial* (something happened but it's not what you think) and *implicatory denial* (what happened was not really bad and can be justified)' (Cohen, 2004: xxxiii). If moral panic is an excessive or disproportionate moral reaction, denial is the inappropriate *absence* of such reaction. It is not a hysterical outburst but rather a hysterical (or deliberate) silence, a determination (conscious or unconscious) not to speak of the disturbing events or episodes.

If we take these two aspects of Cohen's work together, it becomes apparent that the study of moral panics ought to be considered not as a stand-alone undertaking,

but instead as one moment in a larger concern with what one might call the sociology of moral reaction. Taken as a whole, Cohen's work analyzes a variety of types of social reaction, tracing a continuum of collective responses to social and moral deviance. Moral panics, his first venture into that territory, came to represent one pole of that continuum. It is, as I have shown, the skeptical pole, emphasizing over-reaction, noisy clamor, and unnecessary moralizing. At the other pole is the phenomenon of 'denial', where the problem is the opposite – a tendency to silence, a pattern of under-reaction, a failure of the moral imagination.⁵

Interestingly, this rudimentary sociology of moral reaction has not yet developed any category designed to identify or describe what one might term *morally appropriate social reaction* – although such a category seems logically integral to the project. (Cohen (2000) identifies 'acknowledgement' as the opposite of 'denial' but he is referring to the recognition of atrocities by state actors, which is why the category is so lacking in affect and moral tone.) Indeed, as critics of moral panic analysis point out, a guiding sense of what a morally appropriate social reaction might look like is implicit in any judgment that a specific reaction was excessive, or disproportionate, or panicked. In other words, an implicit, unarticulated concept of the well-judged moral response is always present in such work, although rarely articulated or defended.

It seems to me that the need for an explicit conception of this kind is what Cohen is pointing to in the last pages of his introduction to the third edition (2004: xxxiii) where he talks about cultural politics that involve 'stirring up "good" moral panics', although here the word 'panic' gets in the way inasmuch as it implies over-reaction and ill-judged response. Perhaps Durkheim's notion of a righteous, morally toned, 'passionate outrage' (Durkheim, 1997) would be closer to the mark. Given pre-existing social divisions, disputes about the interpretation of events and the attribution of responsibility, and also the occupational preference for critique rather than moral endorsement, sociologists are unlikely to find many empirical instances of 'morally appropriate social reaction'. Sociologists – and even exponents of the 'sociology of morals' such as Durkheim and Cohen – tend to be more comfortable addressing deviant cases. But the existence of such a category must logically be accepted, if only as a heuristic device in the analysis of deviant cases.

Cultural trauma

If the concept of 'moral panic' was developed to deflate social reaction by pointing to a neurotic over-reaction or a symptomatic hysteria, then perhaps its antithesis is the concept of 'cultural trauma', intended to mark a profound moral event and its lasting cultural consequences. Jeffrey Alexander et al. (2004) have recently developed this concept of 'cultural trauma' to identify events that provoke deep moral concern and societal response and to trace the wounds that these traumas leave in a culture. The Nazi Holocaust and America's experience of slavery are events of this kind. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the political scandal of Watergate may also fit the category. But the use of this term carries no challenge to the integrity or the proportionality of the social reaction. On the contrary, it unquestioningly accepts that

some events are so profoundly disturbing to the moral order that they traumatize a culture and the collective life of its members. Alexander et al. (2004: 1) put it thus,

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Thus, when criminologists discuss the social reaction that followed the murder of Theo Van Gogh in the Netherlands, and argue over whether it should be classified as moral panic (see Downes and van Swaaningen, 2007) or as cultural trauma (see de Haan, 2007) they are, in part, assessing the scale and gravity of the event, and the moral integrity of the responses to it.

Risk society reactions

The voluminous literature that has recently grown up around the issue of 'risk' and the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) has many dimensions (Garland, 2003) and not all of these issues are directly relevant to our discussion here. But to the extent that this literature discusses risk perception, risk communication, risk management and the general politics and sociology of risk, there are clearly important overlaps with the moral panic literature (and, of course, with the research literature on disasters, which was an important source for Cohen's first book). One can distinguish moral panics from the kind of social reaction produced by the threat of global warming, or nuclear disaster, or biological hazards by pointing to the issues of scale and integrity that I discussed earlier, and also by observing that the latter tend to involve risks to the health and welfare of a population, rather than threats to the moral code of a particular group. Moral panics involve anxious disapproval of moral threats, whereas risk society threats involve fearful uncertainty about material hazards.

With this in mind, writers such as Ungar (2001) have sought to draw a sharp distinction between the phenomena (and associated theory) of moral panics and the phenomena addressed by the risk society literature:

Moral panics usually focus on a social control processes aimed at the moral failings of dispossessed groups. Risk society issues tend to involve diverse interest groups contending over relatively intractable scientific claims.

But this distinction can be overdrawn (Welch, 2006), and it would be a pity if the new research on risk and risk perception were not used to deepen our understanding of moral panics, for example, on the question of the relationship between 'subjective risk' and 'objective risk' – a topic that has been subjected to sophisticated theorizing and research in the risk literature (see Garland (2003) for a discussion and citations) but which has often been neglected in moral panic studies. We might also note that while risk society reactions typically begin with health dangers and threats to life, they often end by questioning the morality of specific ways of life. Where this is the case, there may be little to distinguish moral panics from risk society reactions except the scale of the perceived issue and the moral attitude that we bring to bear upon it.

Notes

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- 1 This reference to a decreasing murder rate simplifies a rather complex picture. Although the murder rates in Britain fell in the last year, the larger trend of the last two decades is one of increasing murders, with lower class young men aged 20 to 24 being the most frequent victims. Murder by firearms has increased but remains much less common than murder by other means, such as strangulation or stabbing. See Dorling (2005).
- 2 Paul Rock (2007) has pointed out that Stan Cohen's conception is similar in some respects to ideas that were current in American sociology: see the discussion of 'pseudo-disasters' in Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) and Gerassi (1965/2001). Best's discussion of 'urban legends' (Best and Horiuchi, 1985) cites several earlier studies reporting various episodes of collective hysteria and rumor-driven reaction.
- 3 As Jock Young (2007, personal communication) pointed out to me, for the moral panic analyst, the reaction is viewed as 'proportionate' not to the deviance being condemned but to the underlying anxieties being expressed.
- 4 As Paul Rock (2007) notes, the same problems of evidence and evaluation apply to the 'underlying anxieties' that the moral panic analyst claims are the real cause of the social reaction.
- 5 Somewhere between these extremes of over-reaction and under-reaction lies the focus of Cohen's work in *Visions of Social Control* (1985) which addresses the problem of moral misclassification and the self-deluding amorality of control talk. For a discussion of both poles of Cohen's work, see Welch (2007).

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