



Moral Panic Analysis: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

Contemporary news events indicate the continuing relevance of moral panic analysis. Of two versions one is British, formulated by Stan Cohen, exemplified by the 1970s emergence of mugging. The second is American, formulated by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, exemplified by the 1980s missing children campaign. Each model conceptualises the agents and dynamics of moral panics, their causes and consequences. The models have been applied mainly to seven main areas: AIDS, child abuse, drugs, immigration, media violence, street crime and youth deviance. Empirical data have confirmed basic features of the original models and enabled generalisations about the presence and functions of moral panics in capitalist democracies. Critics express reservations about the models' ambiguous terminology, assumptions of media effects, predetermined dynamics, and vague outcomes. Some advocate revision of the models, others their abandonment. Future development of moral panic analysis requires connection to three important sociological themes: discourse, risk and moral regulation.

1 Introduction: Alarmed and dangerous

The major domestic news stories of the summer of 2007 were not untypical for Britain in the early 21st century. There was a prolonged and unsuccessful search for 4-year-old Madeleine McCann, abducted from her bedroom whilst on holiday in Portugal. Initially this was assumed to be a paedophile crime. Eleven-year-old Ryan Jones was shot dead in a pub car park in Liverpool, apparently an innocent victim of a gang-related feud. Both of these became international news stories. More confined to Britain was the continued media and political discussion about 'binge' drinking and the measures taken against it. Government ministers were suggesting that cannabis might be reclassified as a more serious drug, having been downgraded 3 years before. The Prime Minister announced an investigation into the effects of new technologies on children, to be chaired by a TV psychologist. The Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire stated that her force needed more resources to cope with the problems posed by the recent influx of Eastern European migrants working in local agriculture. Several men were convicted of holding an illegal dogfight and a grandmother was acquitted of manslaughter after her

granddaughter was savaged to death by guard dogs at the family's public house.

These otherwise disparate stories can be linked. Each relates to an issue that sociologists might regard as a moral panic: paedophilia, gun crime, binge drinking, recreational drug taking, media violence, immigration and dangerous dogs. Britain appeared to be experiencing orchestrated moral panics. How might the truth of such a proposition be verified? What would be its significance, if proven?

To help answer these questions, we have a tradition of moral panic analysis. In 2007 it was 35 years old, for in 1972 was published the most influential text on the topic: *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* by Stan Cohen. A modest enough study based on his PhD, its influence on sociology, media studies and criminology would be profound. The next section discusses the framework he established. Section 3 outlines a related but distinct tradition from the USA. Section 4 briefly indicates the significant studies of moral panics produced over the years. In Sections 5 and 6, we examine the myriad criticisms of the approach and then some ways forward for it. This article ends where it began: with Stan Cohen and the new introduction to the third edition of his classic work.

2 The processual model: Seaside rocks

Our discussion of Cohen's work begins with its origins and development, moves on to consider the key agents and dynamics of moral panics, and then considers their causes and consequences. The section ends with a later application of his model as an example.

Origins and development

Cohen focussed on what seemed to be a massive overreaction to seaside skirmishes in the early 1960s between members of two youth subcultures: Mods and Rockers. Of the various theories utilised by Cohen, the most important was the labelling theory of deviance, derived from the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism. The orthodox sociological approach to deviance had previously tried to explain what deviance was and how it was caused. Interactionists argued that deviance was not an inherent property of an act. Apparently the same behaviour would be treated differently according to its timing and place. Thus, the key question became who decided to apply the deviant label.

Labelling processes have consequences, not least for the deviant group or individual. Identity is created and sustained by daily encounters, especially with 'significant others'. The individual whose behaviour has been labelled deviant may adopt this deviant identity and behave in ways which confirm the label. The labelling process amplifies the original deviance. If the theory were correct, Mods and Rockers should have

begun to see and define themselves as the warring factions presented in the media. Proving such effects turned out to be difficult. What emerged more clearly was a pattern in the social reaction to Mods and Rockers. Perhaps this was typical of other such moral panics. Cohen thought so:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. (1) A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; (2) its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; (3) the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; (4) socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; (5) ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; (6) 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 folk-lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself. (Cohen 1973, 9, numbers added)

Wary of sequential models, Cohen nevertheless produced one. The sequence is not inevitable; it can be broken or sidetracked. His unique contribution was to provide an account of the key agents in a moral panic and a model of its overall trajectory. This can be called *a processual model of moral panics*. It embodies Cohen's views about the key agents and dynamics of moral panics, their causes and their consequences.

Key agents and dynamics

Cohen identifies four sets of agents as crucial to the development of a moral panic: the mass media, moral entrepreneurs, the control culture and the public. Most important are the mass media. Hence, the emphasis on 'understanding the role of the mass media in creating moral panics and folk devils' (Cohen 1973, 17).

The media are particularly important in the early ('inventory') stage of social reaction, producing 'processed or coded images' of deviance and the deviants. Three processes are involved. First is *exaggeration* and *distortion*, of who did or said what; second is *prediction*, the dire consequences of failure to act; and the third *symbolisation*, the words Mod or Roker signifying threat. The media install Mods and Rockers as folk devils. The cause is not a conspiracy amongst journalists but the normal practice of newsmaking. The media focus most on those events and people disrupting the social order. To interpret such events, they employ 'inferential structures', implicit explanations of what the behaviour is like, who perpetrates it and why it happens (what Cohen calls orientations, images and causation). They are primed for panic.

The second group are 'moral entrepreneurs', individuals and groups who campaign to eradicate immoral or threatening behaviour. Cohen is very interested in their motivations and tactics. The third group, the 'societal control culture', includes those with institutional power: the police and the courts, local and national politicians. In a moral panic they are 'sensitised' to 'evidence' of widespread deviance. Concern is diffused from the local to the national level. Draconian control measures ('innovation') are then advocated.

All this is done in the name of the fourth set of agents: public opinion. Cohen conducted individual and group discussions as part of his research. He was interested in how they could both accept basic media images and be sceptical about them. The complex interplay between these four groups defined the problem and its remedies.

Causes and consequences

The consequences of a moral panic are normally changes in the law or its enforcement. In the case of Mods and Rockers one law about drugs already being passed was strengthened, with another on criminal damage introduced as a direct response. But, Cohen suggests, these measures were as much ritualistic as effective.

Panics happen in part because they fulfil a function of reaffirming society's moral values. Ambivalent feelings about Britain as an 'affluent society' in the 1960s crystallised around young people who were seen to be rejecting adult ideals: 'the response was as much to what they stood for as what they did' (Cohen 1973, 197). Cohen suggests that moral panics are endemic because society will continue to produce the deviants which it then condemns. This process became very visible in the early 1970s.

Exemplar: Policing the Crisis

In 1972–1973, Britain experienced what was either a new kind of crime or a new label for an old kind: mugging. Coverage peaked in March 1973, when three youths from Birmingham were given unusually long detention sentences for a vicious attack some 5 months earlier. The first moral panic about mugging lasted just 13 months but had immediate and long-term impact.

Hall et al. (1978) ultimately locate the mugging panic as a decisive moment in the 1970s struggle over hegemony, helping justify a wider law and order campaign. Mugging fitted Cohen's model almost exactly. They claimed, controversially, that there had not been a statistical increase in street robberies. 'Mugging' did not describe (denote) a problem; it evoked (connoted) a threat from young black males, likely to strike with gratuitous violence at any time.

Hall et al. elaborated four aspects of the media role in constructing the mugging panic. First, the media are dependent on official sources of news, so act as secondary definers of such primary definers. Second, the media translate the statements of the powerful into a 'public idiom', familiar to their readers. Third, the media feed back to primary definers their own reactions as if they were public opinion. Fourth, the media overemphasise violence in order to justify the extent of reaction. The result is a closed circle:

[T]he relations between primary definers and the media serve, at one and the same time, to defined 'mugging' as a *public issue*, as a matter of *public concern*, and to effect an ideological closure of the topic. (Hall et al. 1978, 75–6, original emphases)

Applied first to Mods and Rockers in the 1960s, extended to mugging in the 1970s, Cohen's model would later be applied to yet more cases. However, meanwhile a significantly different model was being developed elsewhere.

3 The attributional model: A question of proportion

As with Cohen, this approach will be reviewed in terms of its origins and development, key agents and dynamics, and causes and consequences, with a specific study as an example.

Origins and development

In 1994, Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda published *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. This capitalised on a longstanding concern in American sociology with social problem definition. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) had criticised the orthodox assumption that sociology could define, measure, explain and ameliorate social problems. This project was doomed to failure since sociologists and professionals could not agree even basic definitions of such issues as crime, mental retardation and homosexuality. What mattered instead was how problems were constructed.

This constructionism split into two camps. 'Strict' constructionists held that, since the 'objective' existence of a social problem is unknowable, all that can be studied is the process of definition. 'Contextual' constructionists sought to analyse both the process of construction and the reality of the problem being constructed. All agreed on the importance of claims making. Social problems were constructed by how successfully individuals and groups with vested interests made claims about their nature and prevalence.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda reviewed and supplemented theoretical and empirical studies in the constructionist tradition. They identified five defining 'elements or criteria' of a moral panic (1994, 33).

Concern. Any moral panic involves a 'heightened level of concern over the behaviour of a certain group or category' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda

1994, 33) and its consequences. Indices of concern include opinion polls, media coverage and lobbying activity.

Hostility. Moral panics exhibit 'an increased level of *hostility*' towards the deviants, who are 'collectively designated as the enemy, or an enemy, of respectable society'. Their behaviour is seen as 'harmful or threatening' to the values and interests of society, 'or at least a sizeable segment' of it (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 34, original emphasis). Constructing such folk devils is integral to moral panics.

Consensus. In a moral panic 'there must be at least a certain minimal measure of consensus' across society as a whole, or at least 'designated segments' of it, that 'the threat is real, serious and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behaviour' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 35). Consensus can be challenged by organised opposition: 'counter claims makers'.

Disproportionality. This is fundamental since 'the concept of moral panic rests on disproportionality' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 38, original emphasis). It is evident where 'public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, 36). Statistics are exaggerated or fabricated. The existence of other equally or more harmful activities is denied.

Volatility. Panics are by their nature fleeting, subsiding as quickly as they erupt. The same issue may reoccur but individual panics cannot be sustained for long.

This can be called an *attributional model of moral panic* because attributes are the defining characteristics.

Key agents and dynamics

The focus for social constructionists is on who makes claims, how and why. Most influential are 'social movements', organised expressions of reaction to a real or imagined social condition. Movements protest and demonstrate, appeal to public opinion and gain access to the media. In moral panics, they exhibit their worst behaviour: exaggerating the threat, polarising opinion and vilifying opponents. Apparently more scrupulous interests also play a vital role: religious groups, professional associations and the police. The media are sometimes active in moral panics but more often are passive vehicles for others' claims making.

Causes and consequences

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) assess three competing explanations of moral panics. First, the *grassroots model* sees the sources of panics in

widespread anxieties about real or imagined threats. In the second explanation, the *elite-engineered model*, an elite group manipulates a panic over an issue they know to be exaggerated, in order to divert attention away from their own inability or unwillingness to solve social problems. Third, *interest group theory* argues that 'the middle rungs of power and status' are where moral issues are most acutely felt. Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest elites are marginal. The combined forces of grass roots feeling and middle-class agitation lie behind the most effective panics. The wider explanation lies in the nature of collective behaviour.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda divide the consequences of moral panics into two: institutional legacy and normative transformation. The problem is institutionalised by establishing new laws, agencies or professions. 'Normative transformations' alter ideas about the acceptability of behaviour. In so doing, they redraw society's moral boundaries. A classic example was the missing children controversy in the USA of the 1980s.

Exemplar: Threatened children

Although he does not use the precise term, Best's (1990) analysis of the missing children issue is effectively a case study of a moral panic. A national campaign about missing children was boosted by the stranger abduction and murder in Florida in 1981 of Adam Walsh, whose parents became prominent activists. This claimed that 1.5 million children vanished, disappeared or were abducted each year in the USA. Two federal laws set up first (1982) a national system for recording missing persons then (1984) a National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. However, from 1985 onwards, attention to the issue declined, as the media attacked the credibility of excessive claims. Best stresses first the activities of claims makers and their rhetorical strategies; second, the role played by public opinion; and three, why this issue was so salient.

The strategic groups of claims makers were fourfold: the medical professions; social activists, from feminists to the New Right; grass-roots organisations; and official agencies, local and federal. The media – 'secondary' claims makers – seized upon the novelty and drama of the issue. The effects were to privilege accounts from official sources, dramatise specific cases, pathologise and individualise the problem, and suppress argument about the issue or the media's role in it.

For Best, 'claims making is a rhetorical activity' (1990, 24). The objective is to establish 'ownership' of a problem by defining the agenda. Three rhetorical strategies are identified. First, 'grounds' name and characterise the essence of the problem. Second, 'warrants' establish why action is urgently needed. Third, 'prescriptions' define what should be done.

On the second issue of public opinion, Best cites data from mid-1980s opinion polls. Concern over child safety was widespread, though seen to affect others. It was most felt by women, the least educated, and the more religious. The public's perceptions reflected media portrayals.

Finally, Best tackles the salience issue. Goode and Ben-Yehuda advocated asking three questions about any moral panic: the timing, when the panic appears; content, why this issue was selected; and target, which group is singled out for disapproval. Best answers these for the missing children panic (1990). The 1970s saw changes in political strategies, welfare systems and television genres, accompanied by instability in the economy and family life. Anxiety was in and on the air, projected onto the innocent child victim. So much for timing. The target was the psychopath, whose unpredictability reinforced the sense of imminent danger. The content was threatened children, mobilising what has yet to be explained, why 'the endangered child is a powerful symbol for almost all Americans' (Best 1990, 181).

Best offers a carefully researched and conceptually sophisticated account of a moral panic. Other such studies are available, but first the approaches of the two models merit some comparison.

4 Comparing and applying the models: Panic stations

Comparing the processual model of Cohen and the attributional model of Goode and Ben-Yehuda reveals considerable similarities and substantial differences of emphasis. The two perspectives agree that moral panics are an extreme form of more general processes by which social problems are constructed in public arenas. Both see moral panics as recurrent features of modern society which have identifiable consequences for the law and state institutions. Common, too, is the perceived sociological function of moral panics as reaffirming the core values of society.

Although the authors of the two models have expressed admiration for each others' work and stressed their complementarity, there are severe differences between the two approaches. Three in particular stand out. The first is how they assess the role of the media. In the processual version the media are strategic in the formation of moral panics. They are sometimes the prime movers and even when they are not, their support is essential for those who are. In the attributional model the media's role is much more passive. The arguments are conducted in and through the media but they serve mainly as a conduit for the views of others.

The second difference is in who are seen as ultimately the most important agents in determining the outcomes of possible moral panics. In the processual model, state agencies, politicians and legislators do not merely react to moral panics but are frequently complicit in their construction. The attributional model would not deny this role but places much more emphasis on the strategies adopted by claims makers. Their success or otherwise in persuading public opinion of their case is seen as the key to the eventual outcome.

The third difference is about how to conceptualise the language of moral panics. In the attributional model, consistent with their main focus,

the emphasis is on 'claims-making rhetoric', how campaigners adopt particular styles of argument. This micro emphasis is replaced in the processual model by a macro emphasis on moral panics as producing and drawing on wider sets of ideological discourses, such as that around law and order.

Choosing one model rather than the other subtly alters the focus. This has not always been recognised in the many empirical studies of moral panics. Over the last 35 years, these have concentrated on seven areas: AIDS, child abuse, drugs, immigration, media violence, street crime (including guns) and youth deviance in general.

AIDS as a moral panic has been most thoroughly researched in the UK. Berridge (1996), Watney (1988) and Weeks (1989) have debated the relevance of the model.

Child abuse has had three different phases. First was physical abuse. Nelson (1984) provides a constructionist account for the USA whilst Parton (1985) explicitly tests out the model for 1970s Britain. Jenkins (1992) compares the two countries. Second came sexual abuse by intimates, notably allegations about 'satanic' abuse in day care centres across the USA, analysed by de Young (2004). The third phase of paedophiles has been documented for the USA by Jenkins (1998) and for the UK by Kitzinger (2004).

Drug issues are of two kinds: soft and hard. Reaction to dance drugs, especially ecstasy, was charted for the UK by Collin and Godfrey (1998) and for the USA by Jenkins (1999). The scare about crack cocaine in the USA has been exhaustively studied. Reeves and Campbell (1994) never use the term *moral panic* but theirs is the most comprehensive study.

Immigration has been a longstanding source of social tension in many developed countries, most recently in the form of asylum seekers. Very little has been written about the issue as a moral panic until quite recently (Bailey and Harindranath 2005; Welch and Schuster 2005).

Media violence, though often up for public discussion, has only occasionally been fully analysed as a moral panic, video nasties in the UK being an exception (Barker and Petley 1997).

Street crime including guns has generated several moral panics, especially in the USA. During the late 1980s and early 1990s themes around the inner city, drug use and ethnicity coalesced into the perceived problem of gun crime related to crack cocaine, analysed by Chambliss (1995) and Chiricos (1996). Critcher (2005) has suggested why there has yet to be a British equivalent. Studies of periodic school shootings in the USA include Killingbeck (2001).

Youth deviance is a generic category, its development traced by Osgerby for the UK (1998) and Schissel (1997) for Canada. There is no equivalent for the USA.

In addition to these seven, there are apparently obvious panics that rarely attract the interest of moral panic analysts, such as social security (Golding and Middleton 1982). Conversely, there are cases where many

of the necessary elements would seem to be in place yet no panic is forthcoming. Examples are Internet pornography (Jenkins 2001) and rape (Lees 1996). The obvious omission from the list is terrorism (Jenkins 2003). A moral panic model designed for single nation-states may not stretch to cover terrorism's historical, geographical and political dimensions.

Most applications of the model are restricted to contemporary events in a small number of countries. More historical studies are needed like Springhall (1998). Slower to appear are studies from outside Anglophone and North European societies. Meylakhs (2006) has analysed a moral panic about drugs in Russia. Others from Eastern Europe may follow. The concept is also being applied to tensions over crime and ethnicity in South East Asia.

The detailed findings for all the case studies cannot be reviewed here. But the knowledge they have accumulated (Thompson 1998) has confirmed basic features of the models as recurrent:

- the strategic roles occupied by identifiable groupings: pressure groups, accredited professionals, the mass media and politicians;
- the nature of the institutional legacies they leave behind, especially changes in the law, though often symbolic;
- the distorting effect of panics on the quality of public debate about social problems; and
- their apparent function, in times of rapid or unsettling social change, of reaffirming the basic moral values of society.

Empirical generalisations are also viable.

- In capitalist democracies, moral panics appear to be endemic; it is not a question of whether, but when, the next one will appear.
- The relationship between the alleged problem and its actual occurrence or significance varies, from almost total fabrication through exaggeration of a relatively minor problem to systematic distortion of a major one.
- The media play a crucial role in moral panics, but there are important differences between types of media: local and national, press and television, upmarket and downmarket.
- Moral panics can easily be exploited by party politicians.
- Threats to children or from youth have become pervasive themes in moral panics.
- Factors identified as causing the decline of a moral panic include the following:
 - ◆ its displacement by other more novel and dramatic problems, especially in the media;
 - ◆ its apparent or symbolic resolution by legal and related measures;
 - ◆ a decline in the symptoms of the problem as a result of social control initiatives; and
 - ◆ the emergence of counterclaims that challenge or discredit the originators of the moral panic.

These could be regarded as substantial outcomes. However, many have been unimpressed by such empirical studies or their conceptual underpinning.

5 Critiquing the models: Late reservations

Specific criticisms of moral panic models are of four kinds.

Basic terminology

Some have objected to the term *moral panic* (Boethius 1994; Cornwell and Linders 2002; Miller and Kitzinger 1998). *Moral* prevents links to other kinds of issues, such as health scares. *Panic* imputes irrationality, that those involved react emotionally to largely mythical fears.

Media and public opinion

The model allegedly fails to explain the role of the public as media audiences or a body of opinion (Cornwell and Linders 2002; de Young 2004; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Miller and Kitzinger 1998). It implies erroneously that the audience believes and acts upon the messages it receives from the media. Public opinion polls are a poor source of evidence.

Dynamics

The analysis apparently denies agency, as the main actors follow a predetermined script (Cornwell and Linders 2002; de Young 2004; Miller and Kitzinger 1998; Parton 1985; Watney 1988). The contestation of a moral panic, not least by the putative folk devils fighting back, is permitted in theory but ignored in practice. The triggers of moral panics are admittedly complex but more coherent accounts are required of why they end when they do.

Effects and consequences

The emphasis on legal reaction distracts from unintended or ambiguous effects (de Young 2004). Effects on public discourses are habitually underrated (Watney 1988).

Some critics advocate a wholesale revamp of the approach. McRobbie and Thornton argue that, whatever its original merits, Cohen's model needs updating. Political and media systems now exhibit greater plurality of views and more contestation of attempts to define outgroups. This makes it 'impossible to rely on the old models with their stages and cycles, universal media, monolithic societal or hegemonic reactions' (1995, 560).

More recently, Jewkes constructs then debunks five basic propositions about moral panics. She identifies six problems. Two are familiar: the

looseness of the terminology and the assumed effects on the audience. Two more widen the debate. Governments do not always welcome moral panics. It is unproven that there is a generalised social anxiety at large amongst the public. That leaves the final two. One is that the concept has been used so widely that its specifics have been lost. The other is that youth, a traditional focus of moral panics, is now so amorphous as to defy categorisation. Jewkes's final position is ambivalent. There are 'fundamental flaws' with moral panic analysis but it should not be rejected as 'invalid or unhelpful' although it needs careful reformulation in order to provide a 'sound conceptual basis' (2004, 85).

More extreme is the position of Cornwell and Linders. Based on the LSD issue in the USA in the 1960s, they argue that insufficient attention has been paid to the interpretative work of groups and organisations in the alleged moral panic. They conclude that the concept 'is so laden with ontological and methodological difficulties as to render it virtually useless as an analytical guiding light' (2002, 314).

Ungar's (2001) doubts are of a different order. Essentially, old-style moral panics are being supplanted by new kinds of anxieties around environmental and biological issues. Whereas moral panics were local, often steered from above and had apparently viable remedies, the new issues are global, often driven from below and lack definitive solutions. More sophisticated models are required to analyse these new, pervasive and diffuse anxieties, characteristic of risk societies. Hier (2003) demurs. The two types of issues are more similar than Ungar makes out. The moral panic model retains its viability. Contrary to Ungar's expectations, the risk society is likely to generate more rather than fewer moral panics.

These are all complex debates that defy simple resolution. One verdict (Citcher 2003) is that many criticisms of moral panic analysis are limited to single case studies. The expectation that the models fit the details of a chosen case undermines their relevance to a wider range of issues. Moral panic analysis is better understood as an ideal type: a means of beginning an analysis, not the entire analysis in itself. And for that no better tool has yet been devised. The wider critiques often misrepresent moral panic analysis, which does not, for example, assume anything about the reactions of media audiences; or they exaggerate the extent of change (youth looking less amorphous in a hood). Critics are often objecting to careless use of the models which cannot be held against the originals.

There may still be a case that the models lag behind cultural change. New media systems and forms ('mediascapes') and modern social movements may obstruct the efforts of conventional media or pressure groups to create folk devils. But more test cases are needed to prove the point. These may not be forthcoming since those sceptical about moral panic analysis are the last to want to apply it. Until then, expect sociological opinion to remain polarised.

6 Future prospects: Model answers

All this begs a bigger question: what, if anything, are moral panics extreme examples of? Answers in the originals were: the process of labelling and deviancy amplification (Cohen 1973); the struggle over hegemony (Hall et al. 1978); collective behaviour prompted by social movements (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994); and the rhetorical and allied strategies employed by claims makers (Best 1990). New answers may come from recent theoretical developments within sociology, especially two highly influential perspectives, risk society and discourse analysis. Separately, they impinge on moral panic analysis. Together, they could move it to a new level.

Social science has undergone a 'linguistic turn'. Language can no longer be regarded as the means (form) by which ideas (content) are expressed. The term *discourse* indicates that what is said and how it is said can no longer be analytically separated. The most influential discourse theorist has been the French philosopher–historian Michel Foucault (Mills 2004). From his voluminous, complex and controversial work, two immediate connections can be made to moral panic analysis. One is through the idea of a 'discursive formation'. In particular times and places there emerge ways of speaking about social problems that assume dominance and privilege their terms and conditions over others. The second is through the idea of 'governmentality'. Much of Foucault's work is concerned with reactions to the problematic behaviour of the criminal, the mentally ill or the sexually deviant. He demonstrates how the exercise of control over these others becomes simultaneously a means for the normal population to exercise control over themselves, the crux of governmentality.

For the present purposes, the lesson is a disarmingly simple one: moral panics should be conceptualised as forms of discourse. Discourse analysis reveals how ways of speaking about an issue are constructed to subsume all other versions. Discursive formations prescribe who has the right to speak, on what terms and to which ends.

But moral panic discourses, if that is what they are, have particular kinds of objects. We can ask what is common to modern varieties of issues and folk devils: asylum seekers and immigrants, paedophiles and muggers, videos and Internet sites, drug addicts and street gangsters. One answer is that they all pose or embody risks. Lupton (1999) remains the best guide to the various proponents of the risk society thesis, that late modern society is characterised by a heightened consciousness of risk.

This has two causes. First is the disintegration of old cultural identities and practices that ensured stability and continuity. Second is the advent of new types of risk, scientific and environmental, which appear to be beyond the control of everyday life yet continuously threaten its integrity. Individually and collectively populations worry more about risks: to

themselves, their families and communities, or the planet and humanity as a whole. Moral panics, then, may reflect and reinforce this risk consciousness, of which they are an extreme but symptomatic example.

A third perspective to develop moral panic analysis comes from a hostile source. Hunt dismisses the moral panic concept in familiar terms. It is pejorative, prone to conspiracy theses and biased in its selected case studies. Still, moral panic analysts may appreciate Hunt's argument that the concept of regulation, more familiar in economic or politics, applies elsewhere: 'moral regulation is a discrete mode of regulation existing alongside and interacting with political and economic modes of regulation' (1999, 17). Moral regulators object to immoral behaviour by other people which they seek to control, by legal or other means. All projects of moral regulation have five elements: agents, targets, tactics, discourses and political contestation. Regulatory movements have traditionally focussed on alcohol, sex, gambling and, more recently, the media. Thus, moral panics may be an extreme form of moral regulation, most prevalent at times of perceived cultural crisis.

If we conjoin all three lines of conceptual development, then we can see an overall trajectory, redefining *moral panics as extreme forms of risk discourses integral to the process of moral regulation*. In a complex argument, Hier (2008) has explored the implications of introducing theories of discourse, risk and moral regulation into moral panic analysis. An example must suffice here. Since the early 2000s, the British government, mass media and various pressure groups have been much exercised by the problem of 'binge drinking'. Groups of young people drink heavily at the weekend and frequently dominate late-night city centres with their drunken antics. A conventional moral panic analysis (for the beginnings of which, see Critcher 2008) would apply the two models to the issue. From Cohen's processual model the emphasis would be on when the problem emerged and was given a name, the way the media stereotyped the perpetrators, the moral entrepreneurs and experts invited to speak about it, the measures adopted, and the recurrent nature of the concern. From the attributional model of Goode and Ben-Yehuda we would focus on the level of concern about the problem, the extent of consensus, the folk devils singled out for hostile treatment, whether the concern has been disproportionate to the actual effects of binge drinking, and the volatility of the whole issue.

At the point where answers to these initial questions have been formulated, the new theoretical framework would generate additional questions adding a further dimension to the analysis. A concern with discourse would ask if the discourse being employed is indeed about drunken behaviour in public places or whether other concerns intrude; and if it relates to wider discourses about, for example, youth and/or public space. Risk analysis would ask who has defined the risk and especially who is perceived to be at risk from what and why. Do binge drinkers pose a risk

to themselves and/or to agencies who have to deal with their behaviour or is the 'risk' of an altogether more abstract kind, like the risk to public order? The approach of moral regulation would immediately identify alcohol as a very longstanding object of moralistic campaigns. The moral dimension would need to be explored: who has defined this as immoral behaviour and on what grounds? Which parts of the population are being exhorted to change their behaviour and what are the implications for the rest of the population? The concept of 'governmentality' might be useful here; promoting 'responsible' drinking would seem to be an invitation to 'subjects' to monitor and adjust their own behaviour.

A potential thematic link between discourse, risk and moral regulation might be through pleasure. Constructed as a discursive field, defined as a risk and requiring regulation is the issue of illegitimate pleasure in public places – as opposed to the heavy drinking characteristic of other sections of the population which takes place in private (undoubtedly including politicians, judges and police officers). How far such ideas might radically alter our overall conception of moral panics cannot be assessed until they have been applied to a series of case studies.

This is for possible future development. In taking stock of where moral panic analysis is now, Stan Cohen may be entitled to the last word, since he had the first. In his conclusion to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (2002), Cohen reviews the state of moral panic analysis in the 30 years since its first publication. He categorises the topics to which it has been applied, assesses the criticisms made of it, and identifies questions it has yet to answer. Three points in particular reassert the validity of moral panic analysis.

First, moral panic analysis has been designed to test whether an issue is being distorted and exaggerated, prompting massive overreaction. This does not mean the problem is non-existent. Second, whatever arguments there may be about the complexity of their messages or their effects on their audiences, the media remain instrumental in creating moral panics, with all the exaggeration, distortion and overreaction this entails. Third, moral panic analysis is ultimately based on the view that social science has as one of its core functions an ability to assess the claims made about the status of a social problem or deviant group. This is never easy and always challenging but should not be abandoned. Cohen concedes the intangible. We cannot calibrate the emotional and symbolic power of a child's violent death.

And that is where we came in, with the domestic news stories dominating the British summer of 2007 when two such deaths loomed large, attributed to paedophilia and gun crime. How and why these issues have been selected for public and policy attention, who are consulted as claims makers and experts, what kinds of discourses are generated, and which remedial measures advocated – all this, and more, moral panic analysis can deliver. That may no longer in itself be enough for full and proper

explanation but it remains overall an impressive achievement, worthy of celebration on this anniversary.

Short Biography

Chas Critcher is Visiting Professor in Media and Communications at Swansea University and Emeritus Professor of Communications at Sheffield Hallam University. He originally studied at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham where he co-authored *Policing the Crisis* (Macmillan, 1979), a study of social reaction to mugging. Amongst his most recent publications are *Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press, 2003) and the edited collection *Critical Readings in Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press, 2006). He has contributed articles on moral panics to *Journalism: Critical Issues* (Open University Press, 2005) edited by Stuart Allan and *Pulling Newspapers Apart* (Routledge, 2008) edited by Bob Franklin. He has written on the history of reactions to the effects on children of new mass media in *The International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture* (Sage, 2008) edited by Sonia Livingstone and Kirsten Drotner. His current research focus is to reconnect moral panic analysis to recent theoretical developments in sociology.

Note

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