

# The Idea of Moral Panic - Ten Dimensions of Dispute

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the open and contested concept of moral panic over its forty year history, exploring the contributions made by the concept's key originators, as well as contemporary researchers. Whilst most moral panic researchers are critical, humanist, interpretivist, interventionist and qualitative this paper highlights ten areas of productive dispute within and around the meaning of moral panic theory's 'common sense'. Such diversity of interpretation creates multiple possibilities for convergent and divergent theorization and research within a supposedly singular conceptual framework. This lack of closure and consequent diversity of political standpoints, intellectual perspectives, and fields of empirical focus; rather than representing the weakness of the concept of moral panic, reflects and contributes to its successful diffusion, escalation and innovation.

**Keywords:** Audience Effects, Deviancy Amplification, Folk Devils, Media, Moral Panic(s), Regulation

It is four decades since the emergence of the concept of moral panic. The meaning of the term was not fixed at its inception and it remains open to interpretation and contestation today (as it should be). This is not to say that the term had or has no coherence. Moral panic research continues to invert the traditional focus away from the deficiencies of the deviant and attends more to the definers of deviance, the labellers rather than to those labelled (as well as looking at the interplay between the 'deviants', the agents of social control, the media, and the general public). Moral panic researchers tend to emphasise qualitative interpretation over quantitative measurement, but this is not always so (see Lundström in this volume for example). For some researchers, the agency of moral entrepreneurs is accorded a central role in the creation of moral panics, even as moral panics are also defined most typically through their relationship with dominant social structures and in the protection of powerful institutions. Others explore the relationship between wider social processes on the one hand, and the intentional actions and campaigns of people on the other. Many moral panic researchers work towards the exposure of relations of power, and as such they reject a simplistic consensus model of society and any strongly positivist conception of the role of social science in society. Yet, this is not to say moral panic researchers can agree on what the underlying relations of power in society are, or how best to challenge them. From its earliest manifestations (Cohen, 1972; Young, 1971a, 1971b) differences have existed concerning what constitutes a moral panic, the boundaries of the term 'moral' in this context, and what should be understood by the term 'panic'. A myriad of further differences streamed forth as the term matured and proliferated within the social sciences and beyond into the wider world, not least into the language of the media itself.

Taken together, the work of Chris Jenks, Stan Cohen, Jock Young, Chas Critcher, Catharine Lumby & Nina Funnell, Julia Pearce & Elizabeth Charman, and Ragnar Lundström, illustrates the terrain across which the term moral panic has travelled and highlights its productivity in all its coherences and divergences, the insights and disputes that have marked its history, and its present condition within sociology and beyond. Ten such domains of insight and dispute present themselves most clearly in the work of the above authors. These will be set out over the following few pages as follows: (1) The relationship between moral panic, regulation, normalization and socialization as well as the question of whether some moral panics threaten rather than reinforce the hegemonic order; (2) The scope for moral panics to be generated against actors who are not marginalized underdogs; (3) The possibility that some moral panics can be ‘good’ relative to the claim that ‘panic’, in this context, has generally implied an incorrect and irrational over-reaction; (4) The shifting scope of the term moral panic, particularly its extension to cover themes that might not initially seem primarily moral in character — such as health scares and environmental protection; (5) The extent of continuity or change, both in the media industries that are said to encourage the production of moral panics, and in wider society; (6) The capacity for moral panic theory to hold to the principle of ‘disproportionality’ as a measure by which social, media and legal reactions to supposed threats can be judged either reasonable or unreasonable panics; (7) The measure of audience reaction and/or media influence on policy makers; (8) The definition of success when assessing whether or not a moral panic has taken place at all; (9) The ability of moral panic researchers to intervene effectively in media and political processes, how they set about doing so, and the meaning of such interventions; and finally; (10) The relationship between moral panics and the folk devils which they construct, or as some have suggested increasingly do not construct.

### 1. Moral Panics and Moral Regulation

The papers presented in this special issue highlight one of the most productive tensions to have survived the life of the moral panic concept itself, namely (a) the extent to which moral panics can be understood as reactions by elites and/or interest groups to particular threats to the dominant social order, and (b) the degree to which moral panics can also be grass roots and/or interest group affairs that may or may not act to bolster dominant regimes of everyday moral regulation (see also Hier, 2002a; 2008; forthcoming). Cohen suggests in his article that a key feature of contemporary society is the increasing involvement of social movements, identity politics, and victim advocates within moral panics, involving a growing number of new moral entrepreneurs, including sociologists and feminists, and a growing scope for such non-traditional moral entrepreneurs to gain media exposure. Combined with his suggestion that some moral panics can be seen as good, and his belief in the legitimate extension of the term to a range of issues (in particular, environmental crimes, corporate crimes, and crimes of the state) beyond what might traditionally have been the domain of moral panic research (and its investigations into familiar subjects such as obscenity, intoxication, and violence), Cohen not only suggests that moral panics have proliferated in recent years, but that they are increasingly diverse in being both for and against the maintenance of the status quo.

This view stands in strong contrast to that articulated by Critcher, both in this volume and in his other writings (2003, 2009). For Critcher the concept of moral panic is best

understood in the context of relations of power and regulation. Both Cohen and Critcher are in agreement that it is essential for the term moral panic to be understood within a broader conceptual framework, rather than simply as a free floating term to be applied to label any expression of outrage or concern whose validity a researcher may seek to question. However, Cohen stops some way short of adopting Critcher's suggestion that part of such a framework should be the restriction of the term moral panic to those forms of misrepresentation by which elites reinforce dominant regulative practices by means of scapegoating outsiders and underdogs. In addition, Cohen accepts the possibility of counter-hegemonic moral panics whereas Critcher does not. Critcher suggests the need to map not only the politics of moral panics, but also the economic factors that limit or promote the scope for moral panic development. Contra Cohen, Critcher maintains that there is a need for a more integrated structural account of moral panics.

Moral panic theorists in the United States (such as Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994) have proposed a 'pluralist' conception of moral panics that goes considerably beyond Cohen's more bounded willingness to accept the possibility of moral panics that challenge elites. Goode and Ben-Yehuda suggest that panics are as likely to come from popular mass hysteria as from elite manipulations. On Cohen's left flank, as it were, Critcher's Marxist critical stance (see also Hier, 2002b) goes even further than Cohen in asserting the essential relationship between moral panic, mainstream media and the reproduction of hegemonic authority. The tension between interpretivist and structuralist critiques of social order is most explicit in the difference between these writers, but this also points to an unresolved contradiction at the core of moral panic thinking in general.

One final, but thought-provoking point regarding the relationship between moral panics and moral regulation comes from Lundström's account of 'benefit fraud' discourses in British and Swedish newspapers. Lundström observes that the Swedish newspapers which he studied covered the topic in waves of high and low intensity, whilst tending to avoid personalized accounts of individual cases, and instead focused upon the system and its general tendencies. By contrast, Lundström suggests, the British newspapers in his study had no general pattern of high and low coverage, exhibiting instead a consistent if somewhat low level of attention to the issue, whilst tending towards a focus upon individual cases and the extreme depiction of indolent, immoral, and dishonest people being caught, tried, and punished. (On the other hand, it does need to be noted that the British press is, from time to time, prone to particularly acute bouts of 'scroungerphobia', a classic account of which is provided by Golding and Middleton [1982].) As such, the very distinction between heightened moments of moral panic, with their intense focus on specific folk-devils, and the integrative normalization of long-term regulative socialization, seems to disappear in the differences of these two cases. Empirical research, even if it does not confirm tidy distinctions, does still highlight the productivity of the conceptual prompts that initiated it.

## 2. Was there a Moral Panic Over the Banking Crisis?

The collapse of the so called sub-prime housing market in 2008, and the subsequent evaporation of collateral upon which, it turned out, a large part of the banking sector was trading, led to a dramatic slowdown in economic activity across the Western

world. This economic recession has cost many millions of jobs, led to huge state bail-out packages, and this transfer of private sector 'bad' debt into public sector 'sovereign debt' has seen many 'advanced' countries brought to the brink of national bankruptcy. Such states have been required to borrow heavily to stabilize their currencies and to maintain basic levels of state spending, even whilst the conditions of such borrowing have been to cut state spending on a wide range of welfare services. Those developed countries that have avoided the need to make emergency applications for funds from such bodies as the International Monetary Fund or the European Central Bank, have done so only by making or promising to make similarly huge cuts to their welfare spending plans. This chain of events has been blamed by most people on 'greedy bankers'. Bankers are said to have been happy to take risks when they knew the benefits of winning would be returned to them privately, safe in the knowledge that any serious losses arising from such risk taking would be covered by the state, because the banks were considered too big, and too crucial to national economies, to be allowed to fail.

Bankers have certainly not been 'flavour of the month' since 2008, but can we argue that there was a moral panic about them? Were they made into elite folk-devils; immoral monsters at the very margins of humanity, living by rules that took no account of the great majority, whose actions cause great distress, and whose lifestyles present an affront to ordinary, everyday, hard-working people who are the wholesome 'victims' of such un-regulated greed? According to Jenks, below, to the rogues' gallery of folk-devils, with its iconic mods and rockers, paedophiles, and drug takers can be added the new public enemies of the banker and the expenses-fiddling politician. Similarly Cohen suggests that corporate criminals have come to join the 'usual suspects' in society's panoply of villainy. However, contrary to the views of Cohen and Jenks, Critcher suggests that it is not possible for there to have been a serious moral panic about bankers as they are too heavily embedded in the dominant mode of regulation to be rendered as folk devils in any sustained fashion. Critcher (PAGE NUMBER) writes:

Consider fraudsters and speculators. Using the examples of identity theft and investment fraud, Michael Levi (2009) has investigated why white collar crimes rarely become the focus of moral panics, even when they jeopardise the entire financial system. Above all perhaps, white collar crime is not seen as threatening the moral order of society and white collar criminals are too powerful to be cast as villains.

For Critcher, and Levi, such white collar criminality is too firmly enmeshed in the fabric of the status quo for any campaign to 'drive them out' to take off within the media or the state apparatus. That rumblings of resentment made the headlines at all does beg the question as to how far such limits to 'banker bashing' do hold. Just how far does such a 'rumbling' have to go before it can be said to constitute a moral panic? For social scientists that do not preclude grass roots campaigns from being moral panics by definition, mass media headlines may not even be a necessary prerequisite for a panic, just as their absence may not be sufficient to preclude the possibility of one.

Perhaps one of the reasons why some authors are reluctant to consider that there was or is a moral panic about bankers is due in part to the debunking, irrational connotations associated with the term moral panic. The banking crisis, like other issues such as climate change, may be regarded by some as a 'real' issue that is of

serious public and indeed global import and is therefore outside the scope of moral panic research because concerned and anxious responses are not in the least 'disproportionate'. Indeed, some may argue that we are not reacting enough – that we are underreacting instead of overreacting.

### 3. Can Some Moral Panics be Good?

It has been Cohen's longstanding contention that the term moral panic is, for all its utility, problematic in so far as the term 'panic' implies an irrational reaction that a researcher is rejecting in the very act of labelling it such. This is of course precisely what Cohen was doing when he studied the media coverage of mods and rockers and when Young was studying the reaction to drug taking in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Nevertheless, Cohen has come to feel uncomfortable with the blanket application of the term 'panic' to any study of reactions to deviance, as he wishes to engage with the possibility of 'good' moral panics (Cohen, 2002, pp. xxxi-xxxv).

The question of what should be included within the rubric of the 'moral' within moral panic research is a pertinent one. In recent years, Cohen recognises that an expanding range of moral entrepreneurs have been successful in gaining media attention for new sets of issues and concerns. These issues include state crimes, corporate crime, feminist issues around gender inequalities in society, and environmental concerns (such as pollution and climate change). Cohen suggests these issues are actually legitimate topics about which concern should be expressed. That he also suggests that moral entrepreneurs have become 'more like us' (that is, highly educated, new middle class, anti-sexist, anti-racist, liberals rather than conservatives, old in every sense) chimes with his view that 'we' should find an increasing sympathy with their concerns. Cohen suggests these issues should be referred to as 'good' moral panics, a term which Critcher would consider an oxymoron.

The notion of 'good' and 'bad' moral panics may be a useful heuristic with which to question assumptions about what is and is not a moral panic — to widen the scope of moral panic studies beyond those examples that are regarded by some as 'inappropriate', 'irrational' reactions in need of debunking. This could potentially go some way towards questioning the notion of irrationality, disproportionality, and other normative judgments that have been inherent to moral panic studies.

At a deeper level, it might even be suggested that the very notion of 'good' moral panic is itself a construction designed to engender just such a moral panic. Should 'we' 'good' people not react with justifiable indignation to misrepresentations of underdogs and outsiders, those unable to speak for themselves, for whom 'we' believe ourselves to be standing up for, and on behalf of whom we react as the moral entrepreneurs? Critcher's suggestion that we have witnessed the rise of a 'culture of fear', in which the media have increasingly come to frame news in terms of fear, cites a number of writers from across the political spectrum, from radicals and liberals to neo-conservatives who believe that liberal-elite doctrines of fear are political correctness, postmodernism, and/or health and safety regulation 'gone mad'. Are we not invited to worry about such a culture of fear? Is this not itself an example of a 'good' moral panic?

#### 4. What are the Parameters of Moral Panics?

It is interesting to note the continuities and the contrasts within the articles presented in this volume. Whilst general discussion ranges across a wide spectrum, the core objects of analysis are attempts to generate moral panics in relation to illegal drugs and violence (Young), sexual violence (Lumby & Funnell), benefit fraud (Lundström), sex and drugs (Jenks), intoxication (Critcher), and asylum seekers (both Cohen and Pearce & Charman). What these topics have in common is just how close they are to the topics that drew the attention of the earliest moral panic researchers to new deviancy research. Sex, drugs, and idleness, with the ever-present desire to blame outsiders for 'our' difficulties, have remained powerful triggers for igniting the moral indignation of a certain brand of conservative moral entrepreneur. And it is this brand, located predominantly in the ranks of conservative media commentators and policy makers, that appears to retain the attention of moral panic researchers today. This is despite the observation made by a number of contributors to this collection that the domain of panic discourse in a radically expanded media has come to include many previously unheard voices and to address new concern that may or may not best be incorporated under the same umbrella as the standard objects of moral concern (namely sex, intoxication, crime, and being some form of outsider). Critcher documents how a range of new anxieties have found a space within today's media landscape. He shows that such concerns have done so because of the campaigning of particular special interest and lobby groups. He is, however, keen to preserve the distinction between moral panics and other media anxieties, both on the basis of defining the moral (to the exclusion of a range, though not the totality, of health and environmental issues) and over the question of panic potential (linked to the ability to mobilize reactions of one kind or another). Cohen, on the other hand, is less keen to limit the application of the term moral panic quite so strictly. Whilst he expresses agreement with Critcher on the need to define the term prior to researching it, he does not set out with such a strict set of presumptions as Critcher about the character of society's overall power structure (see also Critcher, 2009).

#### 5. Continuity or Change? More or less morality, panics and/or fear?

Jenks suggests that we have entered into a new era of individualization, an era in which a fear of freedom has been replaced by a fear of any kind of collective containment. The concept of moral panic, with its core set of concerns which challenge conservative (over)reactions to un-regulated behaviour that steps outside the bounds of traditional ideals of nation, family, community and enterprise — particularly when such behaviour involves sex, intoxication, indolence or immigration — can be seen as being tied to its origins in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when personal transgressions of whatever kind were seen by the establishment as threatening the fabric of society. For Jenks, today, the very idea that society exists, let alone that its fabric weaves us together in any essential fashion, is much less significant than it once was, and for him this changes the meaning of moral panics in a fundamental way. Thus contemporary outbreaks of moral indignation over the selfishness of particular individuals or groups can only ever be short lived since the very collective character of such mass indignation cannot be sustained in an environment of intense individualism. Not only is our attention lost when an issue does not affect us personally, but also collective engagement in such indignation soon peters out under such conditions.

A number of other authors in this issue note the rise of individualization, as described by writers such as Anthony Giddens (1992) and Ulrich Beck (1992), and use the language of 'risk' rather than 'immorality' inherited from this newer frame of reference. The extent to which this new language of risk is compatible with the notion of moral panics has been much debated (Ungar, 2001; Hier, 2003; see also Critcher, 2003), but here it is necessary simply to point out a noteworthy contrast and parallel. When Cohen and Young first used the term moral panic to describe reactions to youth cultural transgressions four decades ago, as Cohen and Young themselves point out, very similar claims were being made about the breakdown of collective identities and the rise of selfish individualism. Moral panic theorists have long recognised the limited character of moral panics as attempts to hold together a collective order that is permanently proclaiming its own demise in the face of the 'barbarians at the gates'. As such, the question of whether a decline in collectivity in general, and of moral collectivity in particular, represents a new reality or just an eternally recurring assumed reality remains an open one.

Cohen suggests that moral panics appear to be on the increase, with more actors taking up the role of moral entrepreneur and more media space being made available to disseminating their views. Jenks suggests that such bursts of panic have become increasingly short lived. This creates more space for a proliferation of panics to occur in rapid succession. Critcher contrasts the success of the eighteenth century gin ruin panic in encouraging an array of acts of parliament aimed at limiting and regulating public houses and spirit production, with more recent attempts to foster a moral panic around 'binge drinking' in 'booze Britannia'. The later proto-panic failed, it is suggested, because it ran up against too many powerful beneficiaries of the 24 hour alcohol-based economy. This suggests a shift from moral regulation to a purely financialized regulative structure, but Critcher also notes the rise of an increasingly shock-oriented media framing of news in a progressively competitive media market, particularly in the United States. In this kind of market driven news culture, fear sells copy and grabs eyeballs. Are attempts to incite fear always a form of moral panic? Does it make any sense to talk about a 'non-moral panic'? Have we migrated from morality to risk or to fear, or is the question of how risk and fear are represented just as open to moral or non-moral framing as was the case a generation ago? Fear of immigrants 'taking our jobs' and/or living off the back of 'our' hard work, just like our own home grown 'benefit cheats', suggests that it is quite possible for strongly moralized identities to be re-created around nationality and work-based identities, even if the elite/grass roots origins of such constructions of 'us' remain contested.

#### 6. Disproportionate Response? Essential Criteria or Unsustainable Concept?

One of the defining characteristics of a moral panic, it might be thought, is the way in which defining it precisely as a panic strongly suggests that it is an irrational and disproportionate response. Certainly the concept of disproportionality has formed a central tenet in almost all conceptions of moral panics and in distinguishing them from 'legitimate' public concerns. More recently, following writers such as Waddington (1986), some have begun to question whether moral panics must, by definition, involve responses that are irrational and disproportionate. And, on this basis, some have dismissed the concept altogether, while others have sought to reformulate the concept to address some of its normative connotations (Hier 2002a,

2008; Rohloff, 2011; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). Cohen, as we have already noted, has contributed to this debate in seeking to remove the stigma from the label moral panic, and in his suggesting the possibility of 'good' moral panics in which the concern expressed is regarded as legitimate and proportionate. As cases in point, we might consider state-sanctioned repression, torture, and genocide. In such cases, Cohen suggests, 'we' are not panicking enough, and perhaps even denying the existence of such issues (Cohen, 2002, pp. xxxi-xxxv). In his article in this issue, Young goes further still in posing an awkward question for moral panic researchers concerning just how far they believe in the power of their own arguments. Young notes that the significance of folk-devils in the study of moral panics has thus far not been generally afforded the centrality which it deserves. Folk-devils are at the core of the conception and yet they have tended to receive far less attention than have those who define them as such. But perhaps this was for very good sociological and ethical reasons. Up until the time the concept of moral panic was originally developed, it was the definers who received very little attention, whilst the folk-devils themselves may have received far too much. Yet the concepts of deviance amplification and labelling, upon which the conception of moral panic theory grew, suggests that those labelled as 'deviant' might come to resemble the very label with which they were being tagged. By means of what Young calls the intimacy of other and otherer, alongside the intimacies of reproduction, resistance, and repression, the outsider/underdog, so labelled, pressed, limited, and channelled may well come to represent precisely the threat that the self-appointed defenders of decency sought to warn of in the first place. Thus the initially irrational over-reaction to a supposed threat may eventually become proportionate if those treated as folk-devils do finally react in demonic fashion

How far such a possibility might run is problematic for moral panic theory. For example it may well be the case that Lundström's benefit recipients, given sufficient castigation for being lazy, and after sufficient insinuation that they are dishonest and criminally minded, might indeed, as classic 'labelling' theory suggests, come to accept such a definition of themselves and become demoralized into a life outside the regimentation of paid employment. Pearce and Charman are careful to limit the suggestion that constant demonization of asylum seekers might have the effect of their being changed by the very force which such a label might impose, yet nonetheless such a label can be said effectively to contain asylum seekers in a double-bind 'trap'. In expressing a desire to work in the country in which they are claiming asylum, they face the distinct possibility of being represented as a threat to indigenous workers. Such a threat looms large, particularly at a time of rising unemployment and economic insecurity. And in so doing, asylum seekers effectively open themselves up to the charge that they are in fact primarily 'economic migrants' rather than political ones. On the other hand, if they follow the law and do not work, they are required to conform to the label of welfare dependents.

#### 7. Audience Effects/Media Change?

That Lumby and Funnell are able to document various attempts to engage with moral panics from within the media itself in part reflects changes in media content, and the increased openness of mainstream media channels to a greater diversity of 'expert' voices. Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton (1995) point to the growing scale and diversification of media, the increasing need for content, and the greater choice available to audiences who are thereby able to switch over from channels that present

the world in a fashion they do not accept. Lumby's position as both feminist academic and journalist is an exemplary illustration of McRobbie and Thornton's point that moral panic messages are often challenged now from within the media itself, both within channels and between them. Nevertheless, as Lumby and Funnell note, this is not to say that powerful moral panic messages are not still manufactured and distributed.

Quite how audiences react to such a new plurality of media voices is a crucial theme, and as a number of the authors in this special issue point out, moral panic researchers have too often neglected actual research into audience reactions, preferring instead to engage simply with media texts and the responses of control agencies. Pearce and Charman set out specifically to redress this imbalance in their investigation of the relationship between media representations and audience constructions of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. What their research suggests is that mainstream media framing of the issue does appear to have a significant affect on the way in which audiences themselves frame the issue. Such effects take place at the level of specific forms of language and representation — particularly in relation to 'their' taking jobs, not taking jobs, rejecting 'British culture', and engaging in violent criminal behaviour. In such a fashion, asylum seekers are constructed, and come to be perceived, mainly as 'illegitimate' and a 'problem'. Pearce and Charman conclude that on questions where audiences have little or no direct experience of the issue being presented to them in the media, it remains the case that media have a distinct capacity to foster disproportionate beliefs, fears, and indeed moral panic in audiences. Even their finding that readers of different newspapers present different constructions of 'asylum seekers' could be used as evidence of the power of the media, with newspapers which present positive or simply neutral images of asylum seekers producing positive or neutral impressions in their readers, and newspapers which present negative images similarly producing negative impressions. Equally, however, it could be argued that readers tend to choose newspapers whose views — and not simply on asylum seekers — concur with their own. This is an area urgently in need of further research — not simply within the ambit of moral panic theory but within the wider context of the role played by the media in the construction of social reality, an area which, curiously, remains significantly under-explored. Most sociologists today would probably reject a crude 'hypodermic' model of 'media effects' but would presumably not wish to go to the other extreme and assert that the media have no influence at all upon the way in which people think about their own society and the wider world. Jenny Kitzinger, a former member of the Glasgow Media Group, which contains some of the few academics who have attempted in any theoretically informed and empirically detailed fashion to ascertain the degree of this influence, puts it thus:

Media power is certainly not absolute, nor does it exist in a vacuum, and audience reception is not an isolated encounter between an individual and a message. The media do not operate as a single force in a hermetically sealed ideological conspiracy. However, there can be a powerful interaction between media messages and broader contextual assumptions and the media still influence the way we think (1998: 211).

Young notes that in his early writings he assumed a transition from pre-modern community to modern, urban, anomic fragmentation, in which individuals are isolated and therefore prone to the binding force of media influence un-mediated by wider social factors. Moral panic researchers have, for similar reasons, tended to assume that audiences are susceptible to relatively strong media influence, as a number of

authors in this collection serve to attest. Young, however, suggests that such a model of socially un-mediated influence is insufficient, and thus that we should attend to the complexity of audience reactions and interpretations. It is, therefore curious to note how current constructions of the individualization thesis, whilst paralleling older versions, also suggest the possibility that an individualized and de-moralized population, far from being more prone to reacting to moral panic discourse, may in fact remain unmoved. However, for the media to have an influence, the general population does not necessarily have to be 'moved'. If the media and the actions of a few can be utilised to represent the opinions of the whole of the general public — as in the case of 'penal populism' — something can be presented as 'popular' or as representing 'public opinion' whether or not the population has ever really been engaged with the issue. It is all a question of whose opinions are listened to, and by whom. Newspapers habitually invoke 'public opinion' as backing their particular partisan causes, but this is an act of the purest ventriloquism: 'public opinion' on these occasions is quite simply whatever newspapers say it is. However, the crucial point here is that, in Britain at least, it is this 'opinion' to which politicians and administrators are most sensitised and to which they are most likely to respond by framing policies and enacting legislation. What we have here, then, is less a circuit of communication, in which the press circulates distorted or indeed false stories and proposes reactionary solutions, the public believes the stories and endorses the solutions, and the state is then able to secure consent for actions which might otherwise appear unacceptably oppressive, than a symbiotic process involving, for the most part, just two sets of actors: the press and politicians. In other words, it's a short-circuit of communication. It is in this respect that Critcher has argued that 'the media are an integral part of a "deviance-defining elite"' (2003: 138), and that Richard Ericson et al claim that, outside this hermeneutic circle, 'everyone else is left to watch, listen to or read the distant representations that form this symbolic spectacle' (1987: 351). However, the extent to which publics react and policy reactions can be managed without some level of public 'demand', however contrived, remains an open question. Such complexity demands sustained empirical research, as no single universal model of moral panic will suffice.

Whilst McRobbie and Thornton offer a relatively positive account of how a wider number and diversity of media channels have increased the scope for counter voices which are potentially capable of defusing conservative moral panic messages, Critcher observes that increased market competition between media outlets has also encouraged a 'sound-bite' culture in which the instant appeal of the 'fear' frame encourages the exaggerated, distorting, negative and confrontational reporting of issues. Rather than addressing whether concerns are warranted or not, significant sections of the media report merely the views of those who claim to be afraid of X, Y, or Z. An increased array of experts, counter-experts, victim support groups, and other advocacy and campaign groups ensures a never-ending supply of 'news' without the veracity of the claims ever being adequately checked. The resultant endless stream of fear-framed stories may or may not generate decisive reactions, whether amongst the public or by policy makers, but the influence of such stories may be more diffuse, reinforcing a general feeling of distrust and anxiety. That the proto-panic over 'Booze Britain' led to no new laws does not necessarily mean that the frame had no significant impact in a wider sense

## 8. What Counts as a Successful Moral Panic ?

If the gin ruin stories of 200 years ago led to eight acts of parliament whilst 'Booze Britain' headlines did not lead to any legislative change, does this require us to conclude that the former was a 'success' whilst the later was a 'failure'? In terms of standard moral panic theory, the short answer is a resounding 'yes'. Cohen's 1972 account of mods and rockers set the trend in focusing attention first upon media content and then upon correlating it with the reactions of the control agencies in passing new laws or extending old ones, or enforcing the latter more aggressively. As Critcher's account of the 'culture or fear' suggests, it may be that a more diffuse reaction might be defined as 'success' even if it does not generate clear and direct reactions in the form of policies and laws. As Pearce and Charman suggest, the 'success' of scapegoating asylum seekers may be measured in the extent to which audiences think within the frames set out by the media. Lundström's account similarly suggests that media coverage may be significant in influencing audiences, and this too might be deemed a 'success'.

Yet, 'success' is increasingly slippery as a term in conditions in which older assumptions about the relative coherence of media, audiences, and control agencies are less widely held. If, as McRobbie and Thornton suggest, alternative voices can challenge traditional moral entrepreneurs in a more diverse media landscape, might the 'failure' of one moral panic be evidence of the 'success' of attempts to generate concern about it by others? For instance, as Lumby and Funnell describe in their article, Lumby was accused of trying to label others as moral panic mongers in media debates over sexual assaults by Australian rugby players. Where she found more success, however, was in identifying common ground (in her identification of herself as a mother) with 'child protection' moral entrepreneurs in debates over the alleged 'sexualization' of girls in art and the wider media. Identifying herself as a mother, Lumby was able to reject the moral panic discourse of alleged sexualisation whilst avoiding the claim that a defence of artistic freedom was somehow the same as an indifference towards the needs of children. The example serves to highlight how, in certain contexts, neutralization of a moral panic might be defined as success. Lumby's engagement within the media debate may be said to have succeeded if it contributed to neutralizing a panic and subsequent legislation or policy.

As several authors in this special issue note, the number of candidates for moral panic status appears to be on the increase, even as their character as moral and/or as generating intense reactions at any number of levels of social action (for example, individual, collective, and legal) appears to be in decline. Perhaps, more panics simply cancel out one another. Or perhaps counter-experts who are deemed not to be 'peddling' panics are making themselves heard more. Alternatively, perhaps individualization has robbed moral panic discourses of their assumed force since they simply take their place on the conveyor belt of infotainment that has become characteristic of today's media marketplace. Another alternative is that it may now be easier to distinguish between those panic invitations that are maintained and acted upon and those that do not chime with deeper concerns. The perennial themes of sex, idleness, criminality, and outsiders appear more readily able to mobilize sustained moral panics. Polluters, bankers, corrupt politicians, and the sexual exploitation of women have emerged onto the media agenda, but arguably do not sustain themselves in the same way. The question remains of whether such new themes can be defined as

successful moral panic topics in the way that previous themes established themselves. As a case in point, intoxication has been a staple in the canon of moral indignation, but appears ostensibly to have declined in prominence over the course of recent decades. Arguably, the language has shifted in line with the changing status of intoxication as it has become increasingly understood and framed within discourses of health and individual responsibility as opposed to discourses of morality. Thus, it may perhaps be more productive to understand intoxication not so much as a declining concern, but as a shifting one. Moreover, morality itself is not a monolithic unchanging constant but is itself continually re-negotiated, particularly in relation to the competing domains of moral and medical concerns.

## 9. Moral Panic Theory as/and Intervention

Lumby and Funnell's article in this collection is the most explicit example of moral panic research as direct intervention in the media representation of a number of issues. As has been noted above, the act of intervention requires the identification of points of entry into a particular debate and the acceptance of elements of existing 'common ground' within the debate, even if this means suspending certain constructionist dispositions characteristic of moral panic researchers. This tension between an implicit political orientation towards the underdog and the explicit social constructionism that might otherwise tend towards relativism is identified by Cohen as central to the symbolic interactionist sociology of Becker, Lemert, Kitsuse, and Goffman from whose work Cohen's own ideas about moral panics were first developed. The differences that emerged over the subsequent decades over the political standpoint from which 'committed' moral panic theorists intervened are highlighted in this collection in the different approaches to the question taken by Jenks, Cohen, Young, Critcher, Lundström, Pearce & Charman, as well as by Lumby & Funnell. Liberal constructionists, more detached social researchers, investigative journalists, and radical critics of capitalism, have all constructed different standpoints.

It is perhaps surprising to think that, whilst becoming increasingly adopted by sections of the media, the term moral panic has also become bound up with the political interventions of neo-conservatives, as documented in Critcher's account of those who argue that 'liberal elites' have pressed 'political correctness', post-modernism, human rights, identity politics, health and safety, and litigation/compensation culture beyond 'reasonable' (conservative) bounds of 'common sense'. It is worth noting that similar critiques of such a culture of fear also come from the allegedly radical left. At the same time, Cohen and others in this collection suggest that wider media access has allowed 'good' moral panics to be fostered by environmentalists, feminists, and other voices that were formerly more marginalised.

## 10. Moral Panics Without Devils?

As can be seen in his article in this issue, Lundström identifies a key contrast between British and Swedish accounts of welfare 'cheats'. In the British press, significant attention is given to individual cases. The more lurid and outrageous the story can be made to be, the more space newspapers will devote to it. In short, significant sections of the British press are very keen to construct individual welfare 'cheats' as folk

devils, personifications of all that is wrong and wrong with contemporary British society. In Sweden, on the other hand, there appears to be reluctance to personalize stories about welfare ‘cheating’. Instead, stories focus upon institutions, the overall loss to the state budget and to society, as well as the conditions that appear to have encouraged or condoned such actions, and which may be seen as indicative of a general failing in the wider society. The Swedish press, it appears, has not created folk devils out of ‘benefit cheats’. This is despite the fact that the Swedish press appears more prone to intense periods of coverage of the topic relative to the British. However, Lundström’s research leads one to conclude that these differences in reporting arise largely from the differences between the British and Swedish national press, the former predominantly liberal and the latter overwhelmingly conservative and frequently decidedly illiberal. It is thus not particularly surprising that the former has managed to discuss the issue of benefit ‘cheating’ without creating folk-devils whereas the latter has succeeded in creating folk devils without managing to shed much light on the societal and structural reason for such behaviour. The finding with regard to the Swedish press brings into focus an issue addressed by a number of authors: that of whether contemporary moral panics have less need for ‘folk devils’ as concerns are increasingly directed towards diffuse issues which are in some ways ‘depersonalised’. It would follow, then, that as the correlate of an increased diffusion of moral entrepreneurship, the distinction between the righteous and the rest diminishes. ‘We’ might just as easily be enraged as ashamed, and on some issues, such as climate change, we may very well find it hard to discern which we should feel, if not both at the same time. Is such ambiguity new? The very notion of a folk-devil, in the creation of a scapegoat who is driven out is designed to exorcise an evil within us, suggests the relationship between a diffuse ‘evil’ and the need to have it embodied in some identifiable target is not as simple as now and then.

### What the Devil?

The theory of moral panic has straddled the fault lines between general explanation and particular description, between radical constructionism and structural theories of power in society, between a picture of social fragmentation and an account of the maintenance of moral order. Clearly, moral panic researchers draw from a range of different theoretical traditions and backgrounds. However, such researchers tend, but not universally so, to have in common a critical social science approach to challenging power, a humanist orientation to the co-construction of social relations through meaningful interaction, an interventionist approach to changing rather than simply describing social reality, and a qualitative interest in cultural interpretation. This critical, humanist, interventionist, and largely qualitative approach to social science and society, whilst creating much scope for dispute and disagreement, has also been highly productive, especially in recent years, when there has been increasing dialogue between those who disagree, and efforts have been made to develop connections and to reconcile differences. Whilst disputes concerning the meaning and limits of the terms ‘moral’ and ‘panic’ have led to sharp differences and a degree of isolation between emerging perspectives, more recent engagements between camps have shown how the open-ended character of the concept of moral panic, something that has caused much difficulty and confusion in the past, may be taken in more creative directions in the future. The power of the term has resided as much in this concept’s ability to provoke challenges to taken for granted ways of seeing, as it has in providing a unified way to view the world. Questions concerning

the relationship between panics and normality, the scope of anti-elite panics, 'good' panics, the limits of the moral, continuity or change, disproportionality, audience effects and media diversification, notions of success, intervention, and the idea of panics without devils, highlight the diversity within moral panic studies, as this Introduction has made abundantly clear. Nevertheless, the foregoing account of key sites of dispute also highlights powerful continuities across time and between authors.

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