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Moral Panics: An Introduction

At times, then, societies are gripped by moral panics. During the moral panic, the behavior of some of the members of a society is thought to be so problematic to others, the evil they do, or are thought to do, is felt to be so wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social, that serious steps must be taken to control the behavior, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage. The threat this evil presumably poses is felt to represent a crisis for that society: something must be done about it, and that something must be done now; if steps are not taken immediately, or soon, we will suffer even graver consequences. The sentiment generated or stirred up by this threat can be referred to as a kind of fever; it can be characterized by heightened emotion, fear, dread, anxiety, hostility, and a strong feeling of righteousness. In a moral panic, a group or category engages, or is said to engage, in unacceptable, immoral behavior, presumably causes or is responsible for serious harmful consequences, and is therefore seen as a threat to the well-being, basic values, and interests of the society presumably threatened by them. These perpetrators or supposed perpetrators come to be regarded as the enemy – or an enemy – of society, "folk devils" (Cohen, 1972), deviants, outsiders, legitimate and deserving targets of self-righteous anger, hostility, and punishment.

The moral panic, then, is characterized by the feeling, held by a substantial number of the members of a given society, that evildoers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behavior and, therefore, "something should be done" about them and their behavior. A major focus of that "something" typically entails strengthening the social control apparatus of the society – tougher or renewed rules, more intense public hostility and condemnation, more laws, longer sentences, more police, more arrests, and more prison cells. If society has become morally lax, a revival of traditional values may be necessary; if innocent people are victimized by crime, a crackdown on offenders will do the trick; if the young and the morally weak, wavering, and questionable are dabbling (or might dabble) in evil,

harmful deeds, they should be made aware of what they are doing and its consequences. A major cause of the problem is, some will say, society's weak and insufficient efforts to control the wrongdoing; a major solution is to strengthen those efforts. Not everyone gripped by the moral panic sees legislation and law enforcement as the solution to the problem, however. Even when there is widespread agreement that the problem exists, the proper solution will be argued about, fought over, and negotiated; eventually, some legal outcome, one way or the other, will be reached – that is, to legislate or not to legislate – as a result of interaction between and among contending parties. Nonetheless, the question of the appropriate social and legal control of the responsible parties *almost inevitably* accompanies the moral panic. And legislation and its enforcement are usually seen as only one step; for those for whom the behavior in question is seen as a threat, measures such as education, socialization, normative changes, prevention, "treatment," and "cures" will be suggested and debated.

It is almost axiomatic in the literature that moral panics arise in troubled times, during which a serious *threat* is sensed to the interests or values of the society as a whole or to segments of a society. What would cause the public, the press, politicians, and the police, to become seized with the idea that a relatively innocuous agent is dangerous and in need of control? At times, these actors are incapable of facing, or are unwilling to face, a very real and concrete threat whose recognition would be painful, inconvenient, or disruptive. Much of the moral panics literature is devoted to tracing out the underlying motives of the various actors on the moral panics stage. In the 1970s, British capitalism was threatened and beleaguered (it still is); to deflect attention away from this very real problem, authorities exaggerated the concrete threat posed to lawabiding citizens by muggers and other street crime (Hall et al., 1978). In Renaissance Europe, with the Catholic hierarchy facing challenges from secularism and the Protestant Reformation, witches were seized upon as a major subversive force, threatening Catholicism from within (Ben-Yehuda, 1980, 1985). Drug scares divert attention away from a society's most serious and pressing problems (Levine and Reinarman, 1988). Panics need not be hoked up or fabricated by cynical, manipulating agents scheming for their own advantage, however, indeed, some of the agents responsible for the moral panic actually *believe* their rhetoric concerning the locus of the problem or threat. The stress and anxiety is said to be *caused by* the putative threat, which would evaporate when the threat is removed. Moral panics arise, the literature tells us, during troubled, difficult, disturbing, threatening times, or to groups or categories who experience trouble, difficulty, disturbances in their lives.

Of course, we must be careful to avoid ad hoc explanations, of a ing t hand coll and l str ust r anti-

cally be present for moral panics to break out. Stress could be defined so broadly that all societies suffer from it. In principle, however, the hypothesis that moral panics are generated by social stress is testable. We suspect that the hypothesis will be supported more often than not, but that, if we define social stress as a dimension that is high in some societies and low in others, abundant numbers of cases of moral panics can be located in societies in which, according to our definition, stress is virtually lacking. We do not wish to pin all our hopes to a single hypothesis. At the same time, social and collective stress should be kept in mind as a hypothesis that has guided much of the literature on moral panics.

Indicators of the Moral Panic

What characterizes the moral panic? How do we know when a moral panic takes hold in a given society? The concept of the moral panic is defined by at least five crucial elements or criteria.

Concern

First, there must be a heightened level of *concern* over the behavior of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behavior presumably causes for the rest of the society. This concern should be manifested or measureable in concrete ways through, for example, public opinion polls, public commentary in the form of media attention, proposed legislation, social movement activity, and so on. Best (1990, p. 160) distinguishes *concern* from *fear*. We agree. The concern felt by the public need not manifest itself in the form of fear, although both have at least one element in common: both are seen by those who feel them to be a reasonable response to what is regarded as a very real and palpable threat.

Hostility

Second, there must be an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behavior in question. Members of this category are collectively designated as the enemy, or an enemy, of respectable society; their behavior is seen as harmful or threatening to the values, the interests, possibly the very existence, of the society, or at least a sizeable segment of that society. That is, not only must the condition, phenomenon, or behavior be seen as threat- e but r ly identifiable group in or segment of the society must

be seen as *responsible* for the threat. Thus, a division is made between "us" – good, decent, respectable folk – and "them" – deviants, bad guys, undesirables, outsiders, criminals, the underworld, disreputable folk – between "we" and "they". This dichotomization includes *stereotyping*: generating "folk devils" or villains and folk heroes in this morality play of evil versus good (Cohen, 1972, pp. 11–12). In a slightly less dramatic fashion, we can see a parallel between the stereotyping process in moral panics and the routine processing of criminal suspects: the suspicion of the police that a crime has been committed or is in progress is aroused in part on the basis of stereotypical characteristics possessed by a suspect, such as age, race, presumed socioeconomic characteristics, physical appearance, location, and so on (Barlow, 1993, pp. 358–61).

Consensus

Third, there must be substantial or widespread *agreement* or *consensus* – that is, at least a certain minimal measure of consensus in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behavior. This sentiment must be fairly widespread, although the proportion of the population who feels this way need not be universal or, indeed, even make up a literal majority. To put it another way: moral panics come in different sizes – some gripping the vast majority of the members of a given society at a given time, others creating concern only among certain of its groups or categories. At no exact point are we able to say that a panic exists; however, if the number is insubstantial, clearly, one does not. It should be stated that we will focus on some society-wide moral panics, but others we look at will be subcultural, local, or regional. Consensus that a problem exists and should be dealt with can grip the residents of a given group or community, but may be lacking in the society as a whole; this does not mean that a moral panic does not exist, only that there is group or regional variation in the eruption of moral panics. Some discussions (for instance Zatz, 1987) do not even posit widespread public concern as an essential defining element of the moral panic, while others (Hall et al., 1978) assume that public concern is little more than an expression of elite interests.

Is it possible to have a moral panic *in the absence of* strong public concern? The elitist conception of moral panics regards public concern as irrelevant, either ignoring it altogether or regarding it as epiphemenonal, virtually an automatic byproduct of a conspiracy "engineered" or "orchestrated" by the powers that be. The problem with this approach is that many campaigns motivated by elite interests and engineered by elite efforts fail to materialize or simply fizzle out. As we point out later in the book (chapter 9), the 1992 Republican presidential campaign in the United States was initially and substantially based on "family values" – with its attendant attacks on homosexuality, abortion, divorce, and other presumed Democratic-tolerated vices – a theme which failed to catch fire with the American voter. And, as we shall see in more detail in later in this chapter and in chapters 9 and 12, and the Epilogue, during the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon launched a campaign against drug abuse which failed to capture the American public's imagination beyond his presidency (although it did have extremely important long-range *institutional* consequences). In addition, the general public, or segments of the public, have interests of their own, and often become intensely concerned with issues that elites would just as soon be ignored – as we shall see, nuclear contamination and fears of satanism offer examples here. To sweep public concern under the rug as an irrelevant criterion of the moral panic is either to fail to recognize a key ingredient in this crucial process or to make a seriously mistaken assumption about its dynamics.

Still, it is important to remind ourselves that definitions of threat or crisis are rarely unopposed in a large, complex society. The question of whether or not a society is seriously threatened at a given time by a given agent or problem is typically debated, argued about, negotiated. To put the matter a bit differently, in some moral panics, the opposing voice is weak and unorganized, while in others, it is strong and united. During the 1900–20 pre-Prohibition period, as we saw, the threat that alcohol posed and the viability of a national ban on alcohol were fought over vigorously. The "dry" forces, however, were far more united, were fired by an unparalleled moral fervor (while the arguments of the "wet" forces were seen by much of the public as motivated by self-interest) and, during and after the First World War, could invoke patriotism in opposition to the enemy beer brewer's German origins (Gusfield, 1955, 1963; Sinclair, 1962; Kobler, 1973).

During the British moral panic of the 1980s that centered around threats to women and children, the forces who *resisted* defining some aspects of these threats as major in scope captured public attention and favor as often as the forces who saw these threats as major and necessitating drastic new measures to deal with them (Jenkins, 1992). On the other hand, one reason why marijuana was criminalized on the federal level and in most states of the United States was that there were few, or scattered, or weak, voices in opposition to the laws. In emphasizing that some measure of consensus is necessary to define a moral panic, we do not mean to convey the impression that a sense of panic seizes everyone, or a majority, in a society at a given time. However, while there is often – usually – disagreement concerning definitions of a condition as a threat, a substantial segment of the public must see threat in that condition for the concern to qualify as a moral panic.

Disproportionality

Fourth, there is the implicit assumption in the use of the term moral panic that there is a sense on the part of many members of the society that a more sizeable number of individuals are engaged in the behavior in question than actually are, and the threat, danger, or damage said to be caused by the behavior is far more substantial than, is incommensurate with and in fact is "above and beyond that which a realistic appraisal could sustain" (Davis and Stasz, 1990, p. 129). More colloquially, one criterion of the moral panic, to quote Jones, Gallagher, and McFalls (1989, p. 4), in a slightly different context, is that "objective molehills have been made into subjective mountains." The degree of public concern over the behavior itself, the problem it poses, or condition it creates is far greater than is true for comparable, even more damaging, actions. In short, the term moral panic conveys the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm. In moral panics, the generation and dissemination of figures or numbers is extremely important – addicts, deaths, dollars, crimes, victims, injuries, illnesses – and most of the figures cited by moral panic "claims-makers" are wildly exaggerated. Clearly, in locating the moral panic, some measure of objective harm must be taken.

We want to be very careful about what we mean by the objective dimension because, as we saw in the Prologue, and as we shall see in chapter 6, a segment of contemporary social scientists (and humanists) – radical relativists or strict constructionists (Aronson, 1984; Kitsuse and Schneider, 1989; Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985) – wish to define the objective dimension out of existence. All views of reality are relative, they say, and equally subjective; there is no "ontologically privileged" position, no view of reality that can be taken as more authoritative or definitive than any other, no set of data or criteria that determine – with more validity than any other – what is true, valid, or accurate. As a consequence, they argue, there cannot be any such thing as a "panic," since we cannot determine the seriousness of the objective threat against which we may measure subjective concern – in short, disproportionality is an empty, meaningless concept. A claim of fire in a crowded theater is simply a claim, they say – whether an actual fire exists or not is both irrelevant and incapable of verification; what's important is how and why that claim comes to be made, and by whom. We are social scientists, they say; to examine the "objective dimension," located in other disciplines, is to be guilty of "ontological gerrymandering" (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985), smuggling objectivist principles into a study of subjective claims.

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clusions from incomplete information. Many scientific studies are poorly conducted; the conclusions of many scientists which have been accepted as true by the scientific community have been shown to be, upon closer inspection, erroneous and invalid. Contrarily, all too often, conclusions eventually accepted as true were regarded as false for years because of factors completely or largely extraneous to the nature of the evidence. (See Ben-Yehuda, 1985, pp. 106–67, Ben-Yehuda, 1990a, pp. 181–219, for a discussion of some of these issues.) Occasionally, scientific fraud – "fudging," "cooking," or fabricating data, or plagiarizing the work of others – is revealed (Ben-Yehuda, 1985, pp. 168–207; Kilbourne and Kilbourne, 1983). All of this is quite true and worth reiterating. Moreover, all of these statements apply with equal force to medicine, the social sciences, and allied fields. In short, the same frailties to which ordinary men and women are subject also befall the expert; no statement by any scientist, expert, or knowledgeable figure should be regarded as definitive or final. All statements based on evidence are tentative; we can never know anything with absolute certainty. All statements, including those made by scientists, are constructions from a particular vantage point.

However, admitting that there are flaws in what is taken as some expert or scientific wisdom should not be stretched and twisted to reach the conclusion that what scientists and other experts say about the nature of the material and social world is untrue, or no more likely to be true than those made by the man and woman on the street. (For an insightful discussion of these and related issues, see Cole, 1993.) Even those who argue for the relativity of scientific, medical, and other expert truth in theory, *in practice* accept the fact that experts know more than the rest of us. (If they, or a loved one, needs an operation, do they seek the services of a respected surgeon – or the 10-year-old kid down the block with a rusty pocket knife in his hand?) The fact is, we place varying degrees of confidence in different statements. We can be almost completely confident that some propositions, accepted by all or almost all practicing natural or social scientists, medical figures or other experts, are true: the earth is round, not flat; species were generated over a period of billions of years through a process of evolution, and not in a single week through divine creation; the existence of the Holocaust – the systematic murder of millions of Jews and other ethnic groups by the Nazis during the 1930s and 1940s – is a verified historical fact, and is not a false claim hoked up by evil Zionists and their agents and dupes; and so on. Likewise, and more to the point of moral panics, we can have a great deal of confidence, given the nature of the evidence, that: LSD does not seriously damage chromosomes or cause birth defects; satanists are not kidnapping, abusing, torturing, and murdering tens of thousands of children every year in the United States and [illegible] drug use is responsible for far more deaths than the abuse of illegal drugs; in 1982, not even close to [illegible] of Isr[illegible]gh

school students abused illegal drugs, nor do they do so now; in Renaissance Europe, hundreds of thousands of men and women did not literally consort with an actual, concrete devil; and so on.

In short, though we must be cautious, modest, and tentative about making statements concerning what is real and true about events in the material world, we nonetheless can be fairly confident that some statements are true and others are false. As Stephen Jay Gould says, "fact" does not imply "absolute certainty." Absolute certainty exists only in mathematics, logic, and theology. Any statements describing the material or empirical world must retain a measure of uncertainty, small though it may be, for statements regarded as facts. Natural and especially social scientists do not make a claim to eternal, perpetual truth. According to Gould, what is called a fact is that which has been "confirmed to such a degree it would be perverse to withhold provisional assent." He adds: "I suppose that apples might start to rise tomorrow [instead of fall], but the possibility does not merit equal time in physics classrooms" (1984, p. 255). We know the difference between claims and verified facts; the fact that we work with both does not distress us, nor cause us to experience a crisis of "ontological gerrymandering." We "smuggle" no objectivist assumptions into the study of subjective claims, but in order to apprehend and understand these claims, we have to make the – for us blatantly obvious – assumptions that the world is real, that we can know the world through our senses, and so on. Without these assumptions, even the strict relativist or constructionist would be put out of business.

It is only by knowing the empirical nature of a given threat that we are able to determine the degree of disproportionality. The concept of the moral panic *rests* on disproportionality. If we cannot determine disproportionality, we cannot conclude that a given episode of fear or concern represents a case of a moral panic. Again: we can only know disproportionality by assessing threat from existing empirical information. But, once again, to repeat: our knowledge of the material world is never definitive, never absolutely certain. We are permitted only *degrees* of confidence. Still, that may be enough, for some issues, to feel fairly certain that what we say is correct.

Volatility

And fifth, by their very nature, moral panics are *volatile*; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside. Some moral panics may become *routinized* or *institutionalized*, that is, the moral concern about the target behavior results in, or remains in place in the form of, social movement organizations,

legislation, enforcement practices, informal interpersonal norms or practices for punishing transgressors, after it has run its course. Others merely vanish, almost without trace; the legal, cultural, moral, and social fabric of the society after the panic is essentially no different from the way it was before; no new social control mechanisms are instituted as a consequence of its eruption. But, whether it has a long-term impact or not, the degree of hostility generated during a moral panic tends to be fairly limited temporally; the fever pitch that characterizes a society during the moral panic during its course is not typically sustainable over a long stretch of time. In that respect, it is similar to fashion, the fad, and the craze; the moral panic is, therefore, as we saw, a form of collective behavior.

To describe moral panics as volatile and relatively short-lived does not mean that they do not have structural or historical antecedents. The specific issue that generates a particular moral panic may have done so in the past, perhaps even the not-so-distant past. In fact, one or another moral panic which seems to have been sustained over a long period of time is almost certainly a conceptual grouping of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics. (For a detailed examination of a panic centered around an accusation of satanic ritual abuse at the local level – yet, at the same time, one that can be framed within the context of the more long-lasting national satanic ritual abuse panic – see Wright, 1993a, 1993b.) The Renaissance witch craze, for example, was not active during the entire period of its 200 to 300 years of existence. It flared up at one time and place and subsided, burst forth later in another location and died down, and so on. A heated, continent-wide, panic-like craze spanning nearly 300 years is simply not sustainable at a fever pitch.

For example, the American drug panic, which at first glance appears to stretch back over a century, upon closer inspection, turns out to be relatively local and time-delimited. One of the most remarkable features of note about the many drug panics that have seized American society over the past century is that, typically, later ones have been built upon earlier ones. That is, organizations and institutions are often established at one point in time and remain in place and help generate concern later on, at the appropriate time. In the early 1970s in the United States, heroin addiction received substantial attention from politicians, especially President Richard Nixon, and the media. But public concern about drug abuse remained at a fairly low level throughout most of the 1970s (at a time, ironically, when drug use was at historically high levels). President Nixon was instrumental in establishing a number of organizations and institutions that played a role during later, more fevered and fearful times, which helped to focus and intensify the drug panic of the late 1980s.

Between 1969 and 1974, the federal budget devoted to all aspects of drug abuse increased nearly *ten times* (Goldberg, 1980, p. 25). In June 1971, Nixon declared an "all-out global war on international drug trafficking" (p. 37). In 1972, Congress passed the Drug Abuse Office and Treatment Act, centralizing the federal drug effort and expanding its budget (p. 40). In 1974, the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) was established (p. 45); one of the most important federal agencies which deals with drug abuse, it sponsors drug-related research, gathers and publishes drug abuse data, and publishes and disseminates anti-drug literature. President Nixon's effort to generate a moral panic was partly successful: largely as a result of his speeches and institutional initiatives, by February 1973, according to a Gallup Poll, fully 20 percent of the American public regarded drug abuse as the number one problem facing the country at that time. However, after Nixon left office (in disgrace; in 1974), the initiative fizzled out; between the mid and the late 1970s, a negligible proportion of Americans (in the 2–3 percent range) saw drug abuse as the nation's most important problem. More important, however, Nixon created a number of institutional mechanisms during his administration that remained in place, to serve their role at a more opportune moment. Thus, although Nixon's crusade against drugs had a short-lived impact *as a moral panic*, it paved the way for later, even more intense drug panics.

We believe that these criteria spell out a more or less definable, measureable social phenomenon. Certain social concerns may come to mind, but which lack one or more of these defining characteristics. Certainly the American public is fearful of and concerned about AIDS. But is their concern disproportionate to the threat posed, or harm caused, by the disease? Certainly not if we measure that threat or harm by number of years of working life (that is, before the age of 65) lost to the disease. In this sense, the seriousness of AIDS ranks above heart disease, on the same level with cancer, and only slightly below accidents; by this measure, AIDS is one of the three leading causes of death in the United States, and in the rest of the world as well (Eckholm, 1992).

Some threatening or supposedly threatening conditions which qualify according to the criterion of disproportionality lack the "folk devil" element – for instance, the swine flu scare that took place in the United States in the 1970s. At the same time, often, parties who are accused of keeping a supposed threat which is lacking in a folk devil hidden from the public may themselves become designated as deviants or folk devils.

Other supposed threats do not attract sufficient fear or concern felt by any substantial social group to qualify as a moral panic – that is, the criterion of consensus is lacking. Making a somewhat different point, Spector and Kitsuse (1977, pp. 80–81) mention the case of a st[illegible]

who seemed inordinately concerned about the number of reflector panels on the back of post office trucks; expressing "outrage," he accused various parties of being responsible for "waste, poor planning, and excess" (p. 80). Unless and until this student's outrage is shared by substantial numbers of individuals, in our view, it cannot qualify as a moral panic.

Likewise, if a given fear is a more or less constant and abiding element in a society, it lacks the element of volatility; according to this criterion, therefore, it does not qualify as a moral panic. As we saw, however, volatility is a matter of degree. Some panics burst forth and disappear within a fairly delimited period of time. The LSD scare was confined almost exclusively to the late 1960s. (Will it make a comeback on the same scale? We doubt it.) However, more broadly, one or another drug scare has burst forth and subsided on the American landscape for over a century. The satanic witch craze gripped Europe for nearly three centuries. The fact that certain concerns are long-lasting does not mean that they are not panics, however, since the intensity of these concerns, both locally and society-wide, waxes and wanes over time.

In short, the concept, moral panic, does *not* define a concern over a given issue or putative threat about which a given cynical observer is unsympathetic, or feels is morally or ideologically inappropriate. (At least one of the authors is intensely concerned about a threat – nuclear contamination – about which the experts claim public concern is excessive. And one of us has argued that concern over illegal drug use may have some objective foundation.) The moral panic is a phenomenon – given its broad and sprawling nature – that can be located and measured in a fairly unbiased fashion. It does not matter whether we sympathize with the concern or not. What is important is that the concern locates a "folk devil," is shared, is out of synch with the measureable seriousness of the condition that generates it, and varies in intensity over time. As we shall see, if that concern is focused exclusively on moral or symbolic issues as ends in themselves, it cannot be regarded as a moral panic. The point that the moral panics concept is scientifically defensible, and not an invidious, ideologically motivated term of debunking, needs to be stressed in the strongest possible fashion.

The Locus of Moral Panics

We must never lose sight of the fact that fear and concern are expressed in specific actions taken, beliefs held, or sentiments felt *by specific individuals* in a society or community. *Who* is "panicked" by the condi[illegible] [illegible]uestl [illegible]ome [illegible]l pa[illegible]re w[illegible]end [illegible]t the[illegible]

substantial numbers of the members of a given society; others are more geographically localized, or characterize only representatives of specific categories, groups, or segments of the society. *To whom* is the panic "a panic"? is an ongoing question that demands an answer. We would be naive to assume that panics somehow suffuse the society as a whole to the extent that all the members of a given society are obsessed about the issue, and they are obsessed about it all the time. While some of the actions taken as a result of a moral panic are society-wide in their impact or implications – federal laws, for instance – they are always the product of what specific individuals or members of specific groups do. There may be intense disagreement in a given society about whether or not a given condition or issue represents a valid cause for concern. As Jenkins (1992, pp. 16–18, and passim) shows, in Britain in the mid to late 1980s, while some saw *threats* to women and children as a major cause for concern and action, others saw *exaggerated reactions to supposed threats* to women and children as a cause for concern. As in all topics social, *interpretations* of conditions as threatening, benign, or neutral form the core of the subject matter of moral panics.

A Critic of the Moral Panics Concept

The validity of the concept of the moral panic has not gone unchallenged. Waddington (1986) attacks Hall et al.'s (1978) argument that in the early 1970s, mugging represented a moral panic in Great Britain, one engineered by the ruling elite to divert attention away from the crisis in British capitalism. While much of Waddington's argument is sound – contrary to Hall et al.'s claim, the figures actually demonstrate the growing severity of street crime, rather than its diminution – its failure to acknowledge the very existence of the moral panic represents a major weakness. The moral panic, Waddington claims, "is a polemical rather than an analytic concept." It implies "that official and media concern is . . . without substance or justification . . . It is, of course, perfectly possible to panic about even the most genuine problem. People may panic in a fire, but this does not imply that the building is not burning nor that there is no threat" (p. 258). The "principal difficulty" of the moral panic is in "establishing the comparison between the scale of the problem and the scale of response to it . . . Conceptually, the notion of a 'moral panic' lacks any criteria of proportionality without which it is impossible to determine whether concern about any . . . problem is justified or not" (p. 246). Perhaps, Waddington argues, "it is time to abandon such value-laden terminology" as the moral panic (p. 258).

Clearly much of the field has chosen to ignore Waddington's attack on the moral panic concept. Whether it is referred to specifically as a moral panic (Ben-Yehuda, 1986; 1990a; Zatz, 1987; Aizenstadt, 1989; Thompson, 1990a; Ungar, 1990; Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins and Meier-Katkin, 1992), a "rumor-panic" (Victor, 1989), simply a "panic" (Goode, 1990; Victor, 1993), a "menace" (Markson, 1990), a "craze" (Whitlock, 1979; Ben-Yehuda, 1980), or a "scare" (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991; Levine and Reinarman, 1988; Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Ungar, 1992), much of the field regards the concept as viable. At the end of February, 1993, in an editorial, *The Economist* dubbed the outrage generated in Britain by the murder of a two-year-old boy by a stranger who was, moreover, a minor – a "moral panic." It is possible that our critic of the moral panic has overreacted.

Criteria of Disproportionality

Waddington's supposed problem of proportionality is readily resolved. How do we know that the attention accorded a given issue, problem, or phenomenon is disproportional to the threat it poses? Is referring to a certain issue as a "moral panic" nothing more than a "value judgment," an arbitrary claim that it does not deserve to receive as much attention as it has? While we agree with Ungar (1992, p. 497) that, with *some* conditions, "it is impossible to determine the nature of the objective threat" – and therefore, for that condition, to measure the dimension of disproportionality – this is most decidedly not true for many, possibly most, conditions. Threats that are "future-oriented" and potentially catastrophic, such as the greenhouse effect, the earth's shrinking ozone layer, and the risk of nuclear warfare, in all likelihood, *are* impossible to calculate. In contrast, threats that are more familiar, ongoing, and based on the behavior – and impact – of many individuals are, in our view, far more readily calculable.

Here are four indicators of disproportionality.

Figures Exaggerated

First, if the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are grossly exaggerated, we may say that the criterion of disproportionality has been met. In May 1982, a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, and representatives of the police released figures to the media to the effect that half of all Israeli high school children used hashish. This disclosure touched off a brief flurry of concern in the form of media attention and a demand for investigations. All available evidence indicated that the figures that were cited were fabricated; the actual figures, as indicated by systematic surveys, were in the 3–5-percent range (Ben-Yehuda, 1986, 1990a, pp. 101,

104, 106, 129, 133). Figures as discrepant as these provide a clue to the fact that we may have a moral panic on our hands.

Figures Fabricated

Second, if the concrete threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, nonexistent, we may say that the criterion of disproportionality has been met. Some fundamentalist Christians claim that satanic kidnap-murders are responsible for the lives of roughly 50,000 children in the United States each year. Careful examinations of the factual basis for this claim has turned up no evidence whatsoever to support it (Hicks, 1991; Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). This enables us to argue that satanic kidnap-murders may constitute a moral panic among a segment of fundamentalist Christians.

Other Harmful Conditions

Third, if the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, the criterion of disproportionality may be said to have been met. The use of illegal drugs generates vastly more concern than the use of legal drugs, in spite of the fact that legal drugs cause far more disease and death than illegal drugs. According to the Surgeon General of the United States, in the US the use of tobacco cigarettes is responsible for well over 400,000 premature deaths each year, while alcohol use causes some 150,000 deaths; a crude extrapolation from hospital and medical examiner's data yields premature acute deaths for illegal drugs (or the illegal use of prescription drugs) in the 20,000 or so territory (Goode, 1993, p. 117). Again, discrepancies such as these should cause us to speculate that, perhaps, currently or recently, concern over illegal drug use might provide an example of a moral panic. (But for another side to the issue, see Goode, 1990.)

Changes over Time

Fourth, if the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness, then, once again, the criterion of disproportionality may be said to have been met. Between the middle to the late 1980s, newspaper and magazine articles on the subject of drug abuse virtually exploded, the percentage of

Americans saying that drug abuse was the nation's number one problem skyrocketed from the 2–3 percent range in the mid 1980s to 64 percent late in September 1989, and lawmakers proposed a huge spate of bills and laws during the 1986–9 period, but far fewer before and after. Yet during that period of time, the proportion of Americans who used illegal drugs actually declined. (Again, see Goode, 1990.) This tells us that the criterion of disproportionality has been met and that, possibly, a moral panic about drugs gripped the nation in the late 1980s.

Determining Harm: The Anti-pornography Movement

Is the anti-pornography crusade a moral panic? Is the concern that anti-pornography activists feel in excess of what it "should" be, given pornography's objective harm or threat? This may not have a clearcut answer. At least three questions have to be answered before this issue can be addressed; their answers would determine whether the movement can be characterized as a moral panic. First, are the movement's adherents primarily concerned about, and motivated by, the concrete, objectively determinable harm they attribute to pornography? Second: does pornography *in fact* cause the concrete harm that anti-pornography crusaders attribute to it; that is, is the concern expressed by anti-pornography factions appropriate to or commensurate with the actual damage it causes? And third, do anti-pornography activists characterize the *nature* and *extent* of pornography acurately?

Reading the anti-pornography literature, especially that portion of it produced by a certain wing of feminism, one gets the feeling that the primary concern of its authors is that pornography is a *blasphemy against women*, that each manifestation of pornography, each photograph, novel, film, video, each issue of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*, is *itself, by its very nature*, an assault against womanhood. Each manifestation of pornography announces that women are to be regarded – even if only within the context of the pornographic material itself – primarily as sexual objects, objectified and exploited, leered at and ogled; it is an affirmation that, again, even if only in their pornographic depictions, all women are whores. The very representation of women in pornography is empirical evidence that women are exploited and oppressed – in a sense, the image is regarded as real life, as *itself* an instance of oppressive behavior, a form of violence.

Thus, the concern of anti-pornography crusaders may be less about what pornography *does* than what it *is*. The concern over the pornography issue by its opponents seems almost religious in its inspiration. The obvious parallel here is reactions to blasphemy among religious funda-

mentalists. In 1989, Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, was greeted by riots, effigy-burnings, and a million-dollar bounty on his head by some religious leaders of the fundamentalist Muslim world, whose faithful found the book an offense against the prophet Muhammad and against Islam generally. Not because it was likely to arouse anyone to do anything evil, they said, but because the *very existence* of certain phrases in the book was inherently offensive to Allah and his earthly representatives. In a like fashion, the impact of pornography is beside the point to many, possibly most, anti-pornography crusaders.

Suppose it were demonstrated, conclusively and definitively, that pornography does not have the consequences attributed to it by its critics? Most anti-pornography crusaders would say it doesn't matter. The issue of the impact of porn is, in reality, empirical window-dressing, a logical-sounding argument to shore up a deeply felt moral and ideological position. Pornography, the anti-porn crusader would say, *does not deserve to exist* – regardless of its impact. *Its very existence* is an offense against women, they say, and for that reason alone, it should be wiped off the face of the earth. The obliteration of pornography is an end in itself. Hence, we cannot determine whether such concern is disproportionate to the actual harm imputed – one defining element of the moral panic – since that harm is secondary. The harm in this case is the very existence of pornography; such "harm" cannot be measured or quantified and hence, the concern over it cannot be referred to as a moral panic.

Even the answer to the question of the concrete impact of porn – does exposure to pornography cause men to inflict physical harm on women? – cannot be entirely straightforward. Contemporary research suggests that men who are exposed to violent pornography tend to act in a more aggressive fashion toward women in an experimental laboratory situation than men who are not so exposed, they tend to have less empathetic feelings toward women who have been raped, and they are more likely to believe in rape myths, for instance that women are responsible for having been raped – but the same is true of men who have been exposed to depictions of violence against women which is lacking in pornographic content. In contrast, men who have been exposed to non-violent pornography, as opposed to those who have not, are not more likely to manifest these differences. (For an insightful discussion of some of the methodological and conceptual problems in the study of pornography and violence, see Jarvie, 1986, pp. 390–475.) It seems that it is the violence, not the sexual content, that causes these behaviors, feelings, and beliefs (Donnerstein, Linz, and Penrod, 1987). It is possible that, from a strictly causal perspective, then, the focus of anti-pornography feminists on pornography of all kinds, non-violent and violent alike, might seem to be misplaced. However, when we

consider the fact that the opposition of groups such as Women Against Pornography to porn is not simply on its causal impact but its very nature, its very existence, such a focus might seem quite rational indeed. In short, we cannot refer to the anti-pornography crusade as a moral panic; for this movement and many of its sympathizers, the obliteration of what they regard as anti-female depictions is an end in itself. Hence, there is no concrete means of measuring the dimension of incommensurability.

Third, do anti-pornography activists characterize the phenomenon they attack accurately? Or do they typify its nature and extent in a wildly exaggerated fashion? Do they, for example, see pornography for sale on every street corner and ensconced in every household with one or more males in America? Do they see all, or most, pornography as violent? Do they see violent porn as a trend toward which all pornography is tending? Do they see kiddie porn as a major proportion of all pornography? Do they see most minor runaways as victims of kiddie porn entrepreneurs? If the answer to these questions is a consistent yes for many or most anti-pornography activists, or characteristic of its leadership, it is possible that the nature and extent of pornography has been exaggerated and the movement has elements or aspects of a moral panic.

To put the matter in a nutshell: *to the extent that* the anti-pornography movement activists' motives are primarily protectionist and rational, *to the extent that* pornography does *not* have the harmful effects attributed to it, and *to the extent that* its nature and extent are exaggerated by activists, according to the criterion of proportionality, the anti-pornography movement represents a moral panic. To the extent that these motives express the view that pornographic depictions are an evil in themselves, an affront to or an assault against women, *or* to the extent that these motives are rational and protectionist and pornography *does* have the harmful effects attributed to it, and to the extent that activists see pornography's nature and extent accurately, the anti-pornography movement is *not* a moral panic. (See Zurcher and Kirkpatrick, 1976; Zurcher et al., 1971.) In short, the designation of the activities of the anti-pornography movement as a moral panic is not a simple matter. In some ways it is not; in other ways it is.

Determining Harm: The Anti-abortion Movement

Can we say that the concern felt by the anti-abortion forces constitutes a moral panic? In this case, somewhat more definitively, we cannot. If we were to accept the pro-life definition of human life as beginning at fertilization, then it follows that every abortion represents the actual

murder of a human being. Pro-lifers argue that over 28 million babies have been "exterminated" in the United States since abortion became legal in 1973. The validity of this claim rests entirely on whether fetuses should be defined as fully-fledged human beings. To the extent that they are, abortion represents one of the most pressing and serious problems of our age; to the extent that fetuses are not considered full human beings, and therefore abortion is not murder, abortion will not be seen as a serious problem to society. The determination of objective harm in this case cannot be resolved without the resolution of what is an essentially unresolvable definitional problem. Since we cannot determine the extent of the objective damage to measure subjective concern against, the criterion of disproportionality cannot be met. Hence, the protests of the anti-abortion forces do not qualify as a legitimate example of a moral panic. Clearly, the example of abortion illustrates that the measure of "objective" or "concrete" harm is not always straightforward, and may itself be constructed. To be more specific, some measures are widely agreed upon as indicating objective or concrete harm (the death of children and adults from disease), while others may be more controversial (the death of zygotes, embryos, and fetuses). When we use the term "objective" or "concrete" harm, we will always refer to harm that is widely or nearly universally agreed upon as harm.

On the other hand, when the anti-abortion movement grossly exaggerates certain aspects of abortion – for instance, that a far higher proportion of women who undergo abortions suffer physical and psychological damage than actually do – we may very well have a moral panic-like phenomenon on our hands. The line between moral panics and phenomena we have no right to refer to as panics is, as with most social phenomena, not entirely clearcut. But, just as we might have some difficulty in distinguishing between dusk and night-time but none in distinguishing between noon and midnight, marginal cases do not prevent us from recognizing more classic cases of moral panics when we have one on our hands.

Disproportionality: A Recapitulation

Thus, each of the concrete indicators mentioned above – figures on the objective seriousness of the problem are exaggerated, the existence of a materially nonexistent problem, gross differences in concern among various conditions, and radical fluctuations in concern over time without corresponding material changes in seriousness – provides a criterion for disproportionality, the fourth element in our definition of the moral panic. Contrary to Waddington, the concept has objective validity; it is not a value judgment, but a phenomenon in the material world that can be located, measured, and analyzed. If we define the concept out of existence, we will fail to notice major social processes that have had an impact on human societies, possibly, for the duration of human history. Given the ubiquity and influence of the moral panic, it demands attention.

In recent years, some radicals who, in the 1960s and 1970s, downplayed the objective threat posed by lower-class street crime, have revised their views and now argue that street crime has real victims. Jock Young, for instance (1987), has developed a perspective that is referred to as "left realism," which emphasizes ways of protecting citizens from predatory street crime and urges that more effective yet less repressive means of administering the criminal justice system be instituted. Taking the fear of crime seriously, Young argues, avoids the "idealist" fallacy that certain concerns arise out of thin air and are not grounded in human experience.

Our reading of this approach would agree that certain fears and concerns must be grounded in the conditions of social and economic life; they do not arise for no reason at all. At the same time, these concerns *may* be fueled by specific threats that are materially nonexistent or grossly exaggerated. As we'll point out a number of times, fundamentalist Christians are fearful about satanic ritual abuse in substantial numbers, the evidence for which, most experts agree, is nonexistent (Hicks, 1991; Victor, 1993). At the same time, the very real conditions of the lives of believers in the material reality of this threat – marginality, the erosion of traditional Christianity and conservative values, the growing power of secularization, economic decline – may help explain this belief. These *conditions* are real, and so is a threat *of some kind*, but not necessarily the specific threat that is believed in. Many African-Americans believe that the whites who run food and drink companies that sell in the black community are trying to poison their bodies with contaminated products (Turner, 1993). The fact that no evidence has ever turned up to support this contention is secondary – *but nonetheless relevant*. What is crucial here is the fact that whites have inflicted, and continue to inflict, harm to the bodies of Black folk, a very real and concrete fact that helps make these conspiracy beliefs and rumors seem plausible to some. The point is, yes, fear and concern *do*, for the most part, grow out of the very real conditions of social life. But no, they need *not* be commensurate with the concrete threat posed specifically by that which is feared – indeed, that threat may not even exist in the first place. At the same time, concern is almost certainly based on *some* concretely real phenomenon – even though that which is feared, specifically, may be only tangentially related.

Moral Panics: An Inherently Ideological Concept?

It should be made clear that the moral panic is not inherently an ideological concept. It is true that most analyses of moral panics have in fact been made by social scientists of a liberal, left-leaning, or radical persuasion (Jenkins, 1992, p. 145). Clearly, the concept dovetails neatly with the view that the government, the media, and the public are excessively concerned with trivial or nonexistent problems identified as being caused by "underdogs" about which a major fuss is raised, whereas those which the "top dogs" are responsible for causing do not generate such concern or attention – for instance, muggings (Hall et al., 1978) versus corporate crime.

This supposed leftish accompaniment is not, however, one of its necessary, inherent, or defining features.

For instance, some factions of feminism, whose adherents claim some affiliation with leftish politics, seem to have taken up the satanic child molestation and murder cause in the United States (Rose, 1993). In addition, some British feminists and members of the political left supported the satanism-child abuse cause, briefly, in 1990 (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 173–6). In both cases, we have examples of adherents of a supposedly liberal or radical stance supporting what seems to be a nonexistent threat and thereby becoming participants in a moral panic. Another example: experts claim that the risk of contamination from nuclear power plants is minuscule, a proposition that the overwhelming majority of the public refuses to accept (Slovic, Layman, and Flynn, 1991; but see Perrow, 1984, pp. 324–8 and Erikson, 1990). In this case, therefore, the facts of the case presumably support a pro-industry (that is, a "conservative") position, and the exaggerated or disproportionate fears of the public (that is, the "panic") support an anti-industry or "liberal" position. Clearly, there is no *intrinsic* leftist slant to the moral panics concept.

Cohen (1988, pp. 260–3) argues persuasively that (while there are significant differences), many of the same arguments that the 1960s and early 1970s radicals and liberals advanced to trace out the social, political, and economic origins of the moral panics and crusades they opposed (against marijuana, homosexuality, the consumption and sale of alcohol, and so on) could be used to understand the moral panics and crusades now supported by some contemporary liberals and radicals (for instance, against industrial pollution, smoking, and pornography). Just as the moral entrepreneurs of earlier decades would have found the analyses of moral panics theorists offensive and critical of their efforts, likewise, the liberal and radical moral entrepreneurs of today resist such an approach to their efforts, again, sensing a subversion of their cause. In each case, the analysis of the backgrounds of these campaigns seems to *delegitimate* the cause; it seems to argue that the individuals who took up the cause, and worked to criminalize the behavior in question, were motivated not by the harm inflicted by the behavior itself, but by moral, political, economic, and ideological issues.

In fact, the legitimacy of a cause is – in principle, in any case – independent of its social, economic, and political origins. Thus, while, as a general rule, analysts of moral panics have *tended to be* leftish in their political views, observers of any political stripe could use the concept to understand the mobilization and social organization of exaggerated social fears. In the abstract, the concept is politically neutral, but using it to critically examine widespread fears usually regarded as conservative in their import, or the elite manipulation of latent public fears, has characteristically been the rule since the concept's inception. While the moral panics concept has at times degenerated into "mere debunking" (Whitlock, 1979), debunking for political ends is neither one of its necessary nor its principal features; it is measurable, it can be applied to cases supporting a wide range of political views, and it has no *inherent* political slant.

Moral Panics: An Overview

Societies everywhere have at times been gripped by moral panics and yet, as Cohen says (1972, p. 11), they have received insufficient systematic attention. More research has been devoted to the moral panic in the past decade than was true of the decade following Cohen's introduction of the concept. Still, we need to know far more about them than we do. Focusing on moral panics raises a number of questions. Who is it, exactly, whose expression of concern defines the moral panic? How much concern in how many individuals constitutes a genuine case of moral panic? Why do some panics occur among certain segments among the public but not others – that is, why are some panics socially and subculturally localized, while others grip a people society-wide? How do they get started? What, exactly, is the active agent responsible for their genesis? Do they arise as a result of enterprise – that is, the conscious efforts of the few – or do they emerge on a more widespread, grassroots, populist basis? If it is the former, is there any such thing as a moral panic without popular support? If it is the latter, are specific agents necessary at all, or can moral panics erupt without specific agents, leaders, or entrepreneurs? How do the efforts of the few effect concern among the many? Is it possible for certain incipient moral panics to fail to take hold? Why do panics over a particular issue burst forth at one time but not another – that is, why

are they patterned according to a specific *timing*? Are certain individuals, types of individuals, or segments of society more likely to initiate the moral panic? If certain individuals, types of individuals, or social categories attempt to launch a moral panic, is it more likely to be successful – that is, to take hold – in comparison with the outcome of the efforts of other individuals, types of individuals, or social categories? Once started, do moral panics take on a life of their own, or do they require sustained nurturance? Why do panics over certain issues grip specific groups or categories in a society but leave others indifferent? Whose values are being expressed by the panic? Whose interests does the moral panic serve? Are certain behaviors more intrinsically frightening than others – and more likely to generate moral panics? What is the role of the media in reporting and sustaining a moral panic? What is the role of the state or the government in the generation and maintenance of the moral panic? Why do moral panics die out? What is their long-term legacy or impact? What characterizes those that have a long-term impact versus those that do not?

Moral panics frequently erupt in modernizing and modern society, a fact that should cause us to question their sophisticated, tolerant, *laissez-faire* stance toward nonconformity. In fact, it is entirely likely that moral panics serve as a mechanism for simultaneously strengthening and redrawing society's moral boundaries – that line between morality and immorality, just where one leaves the territory of good and enters that of evil. When a society's moral boundaries are sharp, clear, and secure, and the central norms and values are strongly held by nearly everyone, moral panics rarely grip its members – nor do they need to. However, when the moral boundaries are fuzzy and shifting and often seem to be contested, moral panics are far more likely to seize the members of a society (Ben-Yehuda, 1985).

Moral Panics: Four Overlapping Territories

The moral panic takes place when four territories overlap: *deviance*, *social problems*, *collective behavior*, and *social movements*. The territory occupied by deviance accounts for the *moral* part of the moral panic: behavior regarded as immoral is more likely to generate public concern and fear than is more traditional, conventional behavior. The territory that is occupied by social problems accounts for the *public concern* part of the moral panic: when much of the public is aware of and concerned about a given condition, regardless of its objective status, sociologically, it must be regarded as a social problem – and certainly the panic represents an extremely heightened form of awareness and concern. The territory occupied by collective behavior accounts for the *volatility* o[illegible]al pr[illegible] the f[illegible]iat, [illegible] like f[illegible] they [illegible] suddenly and usually unexpectedly, and, in a like manner, fairly swiftly subside and disappear – or lose their fervid quality in the process of becoming institutionalized. The territory occupied by social movements addresses the issue of the organization and mobilization of concerned segments of the population to address and change specific social conditions. Although many moral panics do not generate full-scale social movements or social movement organizations, all activate proto-, incipient, or "germinal" social movements or social movement organizations which may or may not reach complete institutionalization.

A Representative Moral Panic: LSD in the 1960s

Psychedelic drugs were taken, in the form of peyote, the psilocybin (or "magic") mushroom, and the bark of the yagé vine, mainly for religious and ceremonial purposes, by North and South American Indians long before the coming of Europeans to the western hemisphere. Although some intellectuals and bohemians in Europe and America experimented with mescaline and peyote around the turn of the nineteenth century, it was not until well into the second half of the twentieth century that hallucinogenic drug use became fairly widespread. This development was predicated on the synthesis of, and experimentation with, a specific psychoactive chemical – lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD.

In 1938, Albert Hofmann, a Swiss chemist, synthesized LSD in a lab. At the time, he merely noted its existence and set it aside. In 1943, he accidentally inhaled an extremely minute quantity of the drug, felt dizzy, and left his lab to go home and lie down. He experienced a "stream of fantastic images of extraordinary plasticity and vividness . . . accompanied by an intense, kaleidoscopic-like play of colors." Hofmann was, in fact, experiencing the first LSD trip in human history. He suspected that his unusual experience was the result of a chemical he was working on. The following Monday, he returned to the lab and ingested 250 micrograms of the drug, a dose that, for most drugs, would have had no measureable or noticeable effect whatsoever. He was, once again, forced to discontinue his work and, accompanied by an assistant, go home and lie down. The effects included most of those he experienced the first time, as well as a feeling of timelessness, depersonalization, and a loss of control. "I was overcome with fears that I was going crazy," Hofmann said. "This drug makes normal people psychotic!" he declared. During the 1940s and 1950s, a few researchers picked up on Hofmann's insight and speculated that the hallucinogenic drug experience might be the key to insanity. In time, they found the differences outweighed the similarities, and this line of research was eventually abandoned.

The use of LSD might have remained almost totally confined to hospitals and laboratories had it not been that in 1954, a British novelist and essayist, Aldous Huxley, famous for his classic novel *Brave New World*, took mescaline and described his experiences in a slim, poetic volume entitled *The Doors of Perception*. Though he did draw the parallel with insanity, he also added a new angle to the growing literature on hallucinogenic drug use. Being normal, Huxley wrote, is learning to shut out or eliminate most of the distracting, ovewhelming, disturbing, confusing stimuli that explode all around us. Psychedelic drugs, he claimed, wash away the many years of rigid socialization and programming we have been exposed to, and permit us to perceive that which we have learned to ignore. Taking psychedelic drugs like mesaline, psilocybin, and LSD, Huxley wrote, can bring about a kind of transcendence, much like religion.

Huxley's book was read by Timothy Leary, a PhD in psychology and lecturer at Harvard University. Vacationing in Mexico in 1960, he took a dose of the psilocybin mushroom and had what he described as a "visionary voyage." "I came back a changed man," he declared. With several colleagues, he administered doses of hallucinogenic drugs to hundreds of volunteers, including Harvard undergraduates, theology students, and convicts. With all of them, Leary claimed, it "changed their lives for the better." The experiments, many observers felt, were casually administered, unscientific, and aimed mainly at proselytizing; usually, a physician was not present. By the fall of 1962, Harvard's administration voiced grave concerns about the experiments, which Leary brushed off as "hysteria" that was hampering his research. In the spring of 1963, Leary was fired, an event that touched off headline news.

One indication of the excitement stirred up by the use of LSD and other psychedelic drugs was the enormous number of articles that were published in popular magazines and newspapers on the subject. It is a phenomenon confined almost entirely to the 1960s. The first article listed in *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* was published in *Look* magazine and was entitled, ominously and prophetically, "Step into the World of the Insane." In 1962, a popular article appeared reporting that LSD was being used on the street. In the entire decade before February 1963, only 11 articles on LSD had been published in all of the popular magazines indexed by the *Guide* – only one per year (not counting those appearing in *Science*, which although listed in the *Reader's Guide*, is not really a popular magazine).

However, beginning with Leary's dismissal from Harvard, the stories on LSD quickly mounted. From March 1966 to February 1967, 50 popular articles were published on LSD and indexed in the *Reader's Guide*. In March 1967, a research article appeared in *Science* which purported to demonstrate that LSD damaged human chromosomes.

(Later, it was revealed that the research was flawed and its conclusions fallacious.) That angle proved to be a major theme in the 33 articles published in the subsequent year. But by 1968, LSD had declined in newsworthiness; only 13 articles appeared from 1968 to 1969, and less than half that in each subsequent year. Only one article on LSD was published in 1974 and 1975. Clearly, as news, acid had had it.

The pre-1967 magazine (and newspaper) articles on LSD conveyed the distinct impression that those who ingested the drug stood an unwholesomely strong likelihood of losing their minds – temporarily for sure, and possibly permanently as well. The effects of LSD were described as "nightmarish;" "terror and indescribable fear" were considered common, routine, typical. *Life* ran a cover story in its March 25, 1966, issue entitled "The Exploding Threat of the Mind Drug That Got out of Control." *Time* ran a feature essay on LSD emphasizing the drug's "freaking out" aspect. "Under the influence of LSD," the story declared, "non-swimmers think they can swim, and others think they can fly. One young man tried to stop a car . . . and was killed. A magazine salesman became convinced that he was the Messiah. A college dropout committed suicide by slashing his arm and bleeding to death in a field of lilies." Psychic terror, uncontrollable impulses, violence, an unconcern for one's own safety, psychotic episodes, delusions, and hallucinations formed the fare of the early articles on the use of LSD.

The newspaper articles on LSD were even more sensationalistic, lurid, and one-sided than were those published in popular magazines. Newspaper headlines screamed out stories such as "Mystery of Nude Coed's Fatal Plunge," "Strip-Teasing Hippie Goes Wild on LSD," and "Naked in a Rosebush" (Braden, 1970). A story that circulated about two teenagers under the influence of LSD who went blind staring into the sun was later revealed to have been a hoax; it was widely reported and believed because, it was felt, "anything can happen" with this terrifying and mysterious new drug.

After 1967, the chromosome breakage angle dominated the popular press. One article, which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, displayed photographs of distorted babies, explaining that "If you take LSD, even once, your children may be born malformed or retarded" and that "new research finds it's causing genetic damage that poses a threat of havoc now and appalling abnormalities for generations yet unborn" (Davison, 1967). This wave of hysteria was not quite so strong or as long-lasting as the "insanity" theme, but it did convince many users – and authorities – that the drug was extremely dangerous in yet another way. The whole LSD-chromosomes episode illustrates Stanley Cohen's thesis about "sensitization" during moral panics, since the research on which that conclusion was based (Cohen, Marinello, and Back, 1967) was extremely shoddy, based on very few cases, and

poorly conducted – and yet it "demonstrated" the toxic danger of this panic-inducing drug. As we now know, the whole issue proved to be a false alarm. LSD is an extremely weak gene-altering agent, exceedingly unlikely to cause chrosomal anormalities in the doses typically taken (Dishotsky et al., 1971).

In the 1960s, LSD appeared to many observers to pose a uniquely damaging potential; to some, the threat it seemed to pose was massive. In 1966, the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Study Commission declared LSD "the greatest threat facing the country today" (Brecher et al., 1972, p. 369). Two facts make this hysteria truly remarkable. First, LSD is a drug that is taken with almost unique infrequency. Of all widely used recreational drugs, it is the one taken by users most episodically and occasionally, least regularly and chronically; users typically take LSD, when they do, on a once-in-a-while basis – once or twice a year, once a month, very, very rarely every week. And second, the use of LSD was at an extremely low level in the 1960s; at the peak of the drug's publicity, no more than 1 or 2 percent of adolescents and young adults had ever taken LSD. Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the publicity about the drug was declining, use was rising, and fairly sharply. (For a detailed discussion of these assertions, see Goode, 1993, ch. 8.) Here, once again, we see a strong disparity between at least one measure of concern and objective threat.

And yet, this panic evaporated in what was probably record time. Today, the use of LSD and the other hallucinogens is no longer a public issue, at least, not apart from the use of drugs generally. LSD has been absorbed into the morass of drug-taking generally – less seriously regarded than heroin or crack use, but more so than marijuana. LSD never *materialized* into the threat to society that many people claimed it was. The drastic, dramatic, cosmic, philosophical, and religious claims for the LSD experience that were made in the 1960s now seem an artifact of an antiquated age. The psychedelic movement, which never made up a majority of users, even regular users, of LSD, simply disappeared. The fear of the conventional majority that users would go crazy, drop out, or overturn the social order also never came to pass. LSD has become just another drug taken occasionally by multiple drug users for the same hedonistic, recreational reasons they take other drugs – to get high. Interestingly enough, expressions of fear over the use of LSD were recycled in the early 1990s (Seligmann et al., 1992; Orcutt and Turner, 1993, p. 201) by turning an extremely small increase in the use of this drug into a major threat. This new fear is unlikely to generate another full-scale panic, but it shows that some threats never seem to disappear for good; if they managed to stir up concern at one time, why not another? Some moral panics manifest what communications expert Jean-Noel Kapferer refers to, with respect to rumor, as "the eternal return" (1990, pp. 113ff).

A Representative Moral Panic: Satanic Ritual Abuse

Beginning roughly in 1980, a tale has been told on a national scale that qualifies as a contemporary legend, a collective delusion, a moral panic, and, when told among believers, a rumor panic as well (Victor, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993; Jenkins and Meier-Katkin, 1992; Thompson, King, and Annetts, 1990; Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). It seems that, in the United States and England, a conspiracy of satanists is kidnapping (and breeding) children in order to use them in satanic rituals, which includes sexually molesting, even torturing, mutilating, and murdering them. Most or at least a significant proportion of cases of missing children, sexual molestations, and child pornography, the legend claims, have a satanic connection (Nathan, 1990, 1991). Geraldo Rivera, a popular talk-show host, summed up – and endorsed – the tale when he opened one of his many shows on satanism with the following words: "Satanic cults! Every hour, every day, their ranks are growing. Estimates are there are one million satanists in this country. The majority of them are linked in a highly organized, very secret network. From small towns to large cities, they've attracted police and FBI attention to their satanist ritual child abuse, child pornography, and grisly satanic murder. The odds are this is happening in your town" (*Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground*, NBC television documentary, October 25, 1988).

These practices are taking place on a vast scale, these observers claim. Some 50,000 to 60,000 (even up to two million, some estimates have it) children are being murdered each year in satanic rituals. This conspiracy is being covered up at the local and national level because of ignorance, fear, and complicity on the part of authorities. Police officials, teachers and day-care workers, newspaper editors, and even judges and politicians are part of the conspiracy, this legend proclaims. Evidence of satanic ritual child abuse and murder is all around us, its supporters aver. Satanists use animal sacrifices before murdering their victims; the dead, mutilated bodies of animals may be found in communities all across the country, they argue. Hundreds of thousands of children are missing each year, and hardly anyone is doing anything about it. Sexual molestations, satanic rituals, and animal sacrifices are taking place on a routine basis in day-care centers from coast to coast, and, again, officials are silent. Accounts by dozens of cult "survivors," detailing their coerced childhood participation in satanic rituals, have been given on such American talk shows and television news programs as *Geraldo*, *Oprah*, *20/20*, and *Sally Jesse Raphael*. Dozens of books demonstrating the link between satanism and child murders have been published in the 1980s and 1990s and have received widespread atten-

tion; even *Ms.* magazine, which usually expresses a liberal, enlightened, feminist perspective, published a "survivor" account endorsing the legend (Rose, 1993). Who could doubt such convincing evidence?

The ritual sacrifice of children by evil outsiders is a tale with roots extending back in history at least two thousand years. In ancient Rome, during the time of the early Christians, ironically, Christians were said to be kidnapping Roman children and murdering them in their unholy rituals (Ellis, 1983). In the Middle Ages, Jews were said to perform blood sacrifices on Christian boys (Ridley, 1967). The fact that a nearly identical story crops up independently a number of times does not necessarily or automatically mean that the story is false. However, it does force us to wonder whether it might have been similar historical and cultural circumstances that made the story plausible to some members of a society – or the fact that it tells a gripping, dramatic tale – rather than that the story represented an accurate rendering of literal, concrete events.

Evidence

It should be said at once that, as with the historical stories of the ritual sacrifice of children by evil agents, the contemporary version of the tale has not received evidentiary corroboration of any kind. No solid physical evidence, or, in fact, evidence of any of these claims has ever been confirmed to support the satanism–child sacrifice link. Circles of satanists do exist, of course, a number of extremely tiny cults with a total national membership of no more than a thousand, not counting scattered satanic "dabblers," unconnected to any organized cult. (Actually, at least in its stated policy, the Church of Satan specifically forbids its members from abusing children, drugs, and animals.) And children are sexually molested, and in substantial numbers; roughly one in six to one in seven American children have been sexually molested at least once by their eighteenth birthday (Russell, 1986, p. 10; Finkelhor, 1979, p. 53). However, these molestations very, very rarely take place in day-care centers or organized groups of any kind; most often, they are committed by relatives, neighbors, or older friends. And child pornography rings do exist, of course, but evidence of their link with satanism has never surfaced. And all of the numbers on missing children and child murders by the advocates of the satanism claim are almost literally impossible. The official yearly number of criminal homicides – the total number of all people from all sources – in the United States given by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, is roughly 25,000. According to the FBI, over the past five years, less than 500 stranger-abducted children are still reported as missing. In contrast, about 2,000 children are murdered by their parents each year.

Not a single satanist child murder claim has been borne out by the facts.

Characteristics of Believers

However, the most interesting aspect of the satanism story to researchers and students of the moral panic (as well as other social phenomena, such as collective behavior) is not its concrete falsity. The fact that it departs *so radically* from what we know to be the facts should lead us to ask why and how it arose, circulates, and is believed. The fact that, unlike many feverish concerns – which are simply *exaggerations* of the importance of certain threats – the satanic child abuse and murder stories and fears represent a case of "imaginary deviance" (Victor, 1993) should lead us to wonder about their origin. The social setting in which this panic is located – especially when contrasted with those social circles in which it has no currency at all – tell us a great deal about its appeal where it is felt. Sociologists know, for example, that rumormongering is most likely to take place under conditions of maximum anxiety and ambiguity among people who are likely to be highly gullible and uncritical (See chapter 7.)

In which social circles are we most likely to find these conditions? There are exceptions, of course. As we saw, *Ms.* magazine, whose readers are, for the most part, secular, urban, and well educated, seems to endorse the tale (Rose, 1993). However, on the whole, believers of the satanism tale are largely fundamentalist Christians, live in rural areas or small towns, and tend to have relatively low levels of education (Victor, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993). The story typically takes root in areas that are hardest hit by an economic recession; individuals most likely to be gripped by the satanism panic are those who have experienced a serious erosion of traditional values in recent years, especially those pertaining to religion and the family (Victor, 1989; Bromley, 1991). The characteristics and ideology of those subject to fear of the satanism tale give us a powerful clue in understanding why such a belief has currency nowadays. It is the life circumstances of certain individuals and circles of individuals that make the satanism claim "culturally plausible" (Bromley, 1991, pp. 50, 64). It should be emphasized in the most forceful terms possible that not all or even most small-town fundamentalist Christians believe the satanist child murder and abuse legend or are consumed by a panic, concern, or fear about this nonexistent phenomenon. However, each factor mentioned above – education, fundamentalism, residence, a perception of the erosion of traditional institutions and values – increases the likelihood that a given individual will do so. (For discussions of the fundamentalist Christian world view, see Flake, 1984 and Ammerman, 1987.)

Literal Reality versus Metaphor

To us, the satanism story may be taken not so much as a literal description of concrete phenomena that exist and events that are taking place in the world – which is, in fact, how it is taken by its believers – but as a *metaphor*, a tale that represents, stands for, or symbolizes an actual state of affairs. That is, "the satanism claims may be *metaphorically* true even if *empirically* false" (Bromley, 1991, p. 68; our emphasis). To individuals with a certain kind of background living in certain life circumstances, the fear appears to be based on concrete events, the story on which the fears are based appears to be true because of events that are really happening that, to them, very much *represent* events that happen in the story. People are receptive to stories to the extent that those stories resonate with their notion of the way things are. Indisputable evidence tells some relatively uneducated, blue-collar, rural and small-town fundamentalist Christians that the satanism legend is true. The myth explains a great deal about things they know to be true. In other words, certain assertions about satanic happenings will be relatively unaffected by the lack of evidence on these events (Bromley, 1991, pp. 64, 68) because a very different form of evidence will be taken as supporting those assertions. And it will be the ideology and life circumstances of such individuals that will convince them that evidence that fails to satisfy most other individuals is true.

Subversion Myths

The first and most important fact about the panic over the satanism legend is that it is a *subversion myth* (Bromley, 1987, 1991; Victor, 1991, 1993). It is a story that explains to members of certain social circles *why* things are going wrong, why their way of life is being undermined or subverted. It also explains who has introduced the practices they regard as an abomination. Subversion myths (some of which may be at least partly concretely true) *demonologize* certain individuals or categories of individuals, holding them responsible for the evil that has rained down on the heads of the righteous; these individuals have been characterized as metaphorical devil – "folk devils," in Stanley Cohen's terminology (1972). These individuals are depicted as subversives; satanists "embody quintissential evil" (Bromley, 1991, p. 58). Such individuals become scapegoats for the troubles of the members of the social circles who propagate such myths.

Institutional Crisis

The second crucial aspect of the satanism story and panic about it is that members of certain segments in American society are facing what Bromley (1991, p. 50) refers to as an *institutional crisis*. That is, events are sweeping over them that make previous desirable traditions and practices difficult, untenable, or impossible. In nearly all social change, there are winners and losers. Over the course of the twentieth century, and especially since the end of the Second World War, many traditional institutions have been eroded or undermined. Families have gotten smaller and there has been a decline in domesticity, a loss of family control, prestige, and power; government and business have become larger and more impersonal, more powerful and bureaucratized; traditional religion has lost influence and prestige, become less integral to mainstream culture, and markedly secularized. In the eyes of many traditionalists, there has been a virtual explosion of drug use, pornography, teenage sex, abortion, crime and delinquency, and non- and anti-Christian cultures. The nation is wallowing in filth, corruption, and depravity, some feel. Many traditionalists feel that they are witnessing the death throes of a once-viable, meaningful, and worthwhile way of life that stood at the center of their existence. It is the decline of that which is regarded as good and the recent, immense growth of that which is regarded as evil, that convinces many fundamentalist Christians that the satanism tale must be true and that it is a cause for serious concern for the country as a whole. It is the "institutional crisis" in some quarters that has generated the moral panic over satanic ritual child abuse and murder.

Abortion

Perhaps the most prominent among these evil practices is abortion; fundamentalist Christians are deeply concerned about the legalization (in 1973) and growing legitimacy of abortion. Although not in itself a moral panic (as we saw), the concern over abortion has helped fuel one or more moral panics. In a way, if we grant some basic fundamentalist Christian assumptions, children *are* being slaughtered in extremely large numbers in the United States each year. If we agree that the fetus is a fully-fleged human being, a child in the same way that an infant is, then it follows that abortion represents the murder of children on a very large scale. Since 1973, when abortion was fully legalized in the United States, nearly a million abortions have been performed each year, more than 20 million – nearly 30 million, by some counts – during this

period. Legal abortion can be seen as the triumph of a kind of conspiracy of secular humanists – who are seen as being in league with Satan – who have managed to wield their influence over God-fearing and God-loving Christians. In this sense, children *are* being slaughtered by "the forces of Satan" – not literally, of course, but metaphorically. To the fundamentalist Christian, it is a very small step from the metaphor to the concrete reality, from believing that abortions are legally performed by physicians on women who voluntarily request the operation, to believing that children are being kidanpped or bred by an organization of satanists for the purpose of unholy ritual slaughter. In short, abortion is a "concession to the Devil *little less overt* than actual ritual sacrifice" (Jenkins and Meier-Katkin, 1992; my emphasis).

Women Working

Another trouble recent change has wrought for some traditional, relatively uneducated, blue-collar, fundamentalist Christians has been in the area of women working. In the past 40 years, the proportion of women with preschool children who are employed outside the home has increased five times, from 12 percent in 1950 to 60 percent in the 1990s. To the traditionalist, this development is a catastrophe. A woman's place is in the home, caring for her young children, teaching them traditional values. By taking a job, the woman is neglecting her most important function and exposing her children – and herself – to danger. To a fundamentalist Christian mother with old-fashioned values, being forced to work because of difficult economic circumstances represents the triumph of evil over good; of secularism over religious values; of having to give up power and autonomy and independence to an alien, uncaring, godless world. To the religious right, the trend toward an abandonment of women's traditional role as homemaker in favor of a job outside the home can only erode the strength of traditional Bible religion, and strengthen the hand of modernism and secularism – tools of corruption in the hands of Satan.

Day Care

Almost as important as the legalization of abortion is the recent explosion of children in day-care centers. The decay of the family is nowhere as evident as in the proliferation of day-care centers for preschool children. Instead of remaining at home with their mothers, children are now being cared for and raised by strangers. Half of all preschool children are being cared for during a significant period during the day by someone other than their parents. Who are these people? Where do they come from? What are they doing with our children? What are they teaching them? What are their beliefs? Can we trust them? Such fears are likely to breed insecurity, powerlessness, paranoia, a suspicion that one's loved ones are being hurt and corrupted, and a receptivity to subversion myths, susceptibility to a panic that centers around children. By emphasizing that satanic ritual abuse is widespread, traditionalists are invoking a metaphor to demonstrate that day-care centers are "an extremely dangerous place for the young" (Jenkins and Meier-Katkin, 1992).

Atrocity Tales

The satanism legend represents an example of an *atrocity tale* – a real or imagined *summary event* that represents all that is wrong with one's opponents and enemies and is intended to evoke moral outrage and generate action against the alleged perpetrators (Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia, 1979, p. 43). As we shall see in chapter 8, atrocity tales are routinely disseminated by social movements whose aim is to galvanize support for their cause. Such stories describe *extreme*, rather than routine examples, aspects, or practices of target groups of behaviors. Ironically, to gather support for the *typical* conditions they oppose, social movements must invoke *atypical* ones. Stories about the satanic ritual abuse and slaughter of innocent children serve as "atrocity tales" for Christian fundamentalists. It is not enough to argue that American society has become secular, irreligious, and humanistic. Most audiences listening to such a statement are likely to respond with, "So what else is new?" The satanic legend offers a dramatic and extreme realization of the fears of religious traditionalists. It provides a concrete reason for the fundamentalists' opposition to secular humanism, documentation of the fruit of contemporary developments. It declares, "You see what happens when godless secularism is allowed to fester?" And it purports to describe in graphic terms what most of us would regard as just about the worst thing that could possibly happen: the unpunished murder of countless numbers of our children. Such an appeal, if true, cannot fail to galvanize outrage, a call to action, and, in some circles, renewed support for the fundamentalist Christian cause. The fact that no solid evidence exists to support such claims makes it difficult for most individuals who are not located in rural or small-town, blue-collar, relatively uneducated, fundamentalist Christian social circles to accept the legend and get caught up in the panic.

The Ritual Abuse Panic in Great Britain

The satanic ritual child abuse and murder panic erupted in Great Britain in the late 1980s, almost a decade later than in the United

States. By fall 1990, "ritual abuse had become a national scandal"; even *The Times* devoted 25 items to the topic in September of that year alone. But unlike the United States, the concern over ritual abuse in Britain both captured much of the general public and declined fairly swiftly; by late 1990, a backlash emerged in the press and significant segments of the public, and by some time in 1991, the panic had almost totally fizzled out, the defenders of these remarkable assertions having become pretty much completely discredited (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 151ff).

The panic emerged, roughly in 1988, as a result of a coalition of American moral entrepreneurs and a "network" or British evangelical and fundamentalist religious groups. Groups and organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance Committee and the Christian Exorcism Study Circle took up the ritual abuse cause. Occult survivors, women who claim to have been abused by satanic cults in their childhood but managed to escape with their lives, were given respectful interviews in the media (pp. 166–7). A claim, put forth by Christian representatives of two social welfare agencies, Childwatch and Reachout, to the effect that, each year in Britain, some 4,000 babies "are born into covens to be used for sacrifices and cannabilism" (p. 169), was widely circulated in the press.

Within a very brief span of time from its introduction, the satanic ritual child abuse idea had become "domesticated" and "increasingly adopted by social work and child protection groups anxious to assert the serious and pervasive nature of child abuse" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 158). Lists of symptoms or "indicators" of ritual abuse, originating from the United States – most of which are common and normal preoccupations of small children – were photocopied and widely circulated by child welfare investigators. Efforts were made to make these "essentially medieval allegations palatable to . . . progressive left/feminist" circles (p. 175). By 1990, an "odd coalition of religious and radical groups . . . emerged," thereby creating "an atmosphere conducive to the rapid spread of ritual abuse allegations" (p. 176).

But by the end of 1990, a series of court cases involving baseless allegations on which dubious evidence had been gathered began to discredit the ritual abuse cause in Britain; "it became apparent" to much of the British public, the press, the police, and representatives of the judiciary "that the panic had little substance" (p. 181). Draconian seizures of children from their homes on flimsy evidence began to harden public opinion and the media against the idea of ritual abuse (pp. 183, 185). Social workers were depicted as "obsessed with finding evidence of satanic abuse," and "browbeating children in custody" (p. 184). Charges of ritual abuse were made in small, remote, close-knit communities where such practices would have been impossible without general knowledge of it. In one rural Scottish village, "children from four families suddenly found their lives interrupted without even the opportunity to take a few toys with them." The action was justified by the authorities on the ground that the coven posed a grave threat to the community. Evidence seized included a shepherd's crook, academic gowns, a cloak, and a book with a goat on the cover (p. 186). The charges were deemed preposterous and they, along with belief in ritual abuse generally, were dismissed and discredited.

In the late 1980s, in Britain, "a panic had been manipulated into existence out of practically nothing." But by late 1990, "the press with few exceptions launched an uncompromising attack against the ritual theorists, and the police and social workers who had accepted their views" (p. 187). By the spring of 1991, the press was involved in a "strident campaign against the social work profession in general" (p. 188). The images that emerged in the press "were of innocent families persecuted by incompetent, heartless, and ignorant social workers, who knew so little of children that they could wrench such sinister meanings out of their families" (p. 189). The press reported on "gestapo tactics," "bureaucratic rape" of communities, and "power mad" social workers snatching children from innocent parents (p. 190). Consistently, social workers "were depicted as gullible victims of propaganda by religious theorists, who employed ritual abuse to establish their social and sectarian agenda" (p. 190). By 1991, the whole notion of ritual abuse had been "thoroughly undermined;" belief in it was "almost wholly discredited" among media, policy-makers, and much of the public (p. 193). While the concern over satanic ritual abuse is still felt in fundamentalist circles in Britain, it is essentially dead outside those circles.