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FOREWORD

Moral Panics—36 Years On

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The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the birth of many new ideas in the sociology of deviance. While the works of luminaries such as Howard Becker, Aaron Cicourel and Edwin Lemert (to mention but a few) gave a new focus to the subject in the United States, in the United Kingdom, a group of young scholars established the National Deviancy Conference. Foremost among them were Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, both of whom were responsible for introducing the concept of moral panic to a wider audience. Thus, while Young was the first to introduce the concept into the literature, it was Cohen's research on the Mods and Rockers that launched it to its present status as a still central tool of sociological and media analysis, as well as a common phrase in popular discourse.

Cohen's book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, was first published in the United Kingdom in 1972 by MacGibbon and Kee Ltd. I still have that original book on my bookshelf. The pages have yellowed somewhat, but the glorious glossy dust jacket still shines with the picture of what looks like a solemn-looking teenager, wearing a Wehrmacht helmet, presenting such insignias as swastikas, an iron cross, a USA clip, one glove and some other props. The third edition of this book was published in 2002.

Comparatively few books in sociology, or social science generally, have survived from 1972. But Cohen's book made a lasting change in the way social scientists and others think about a variety of social phenomena. The concept of 'moral panics' has become popular as few other sociological concepts have. A contemporary Google search yields a third of a million websites under the entry 'moral panic' plus half that number under the title 'moral panics'. The magic, appeal, usefulness and challenge of the concept have established it in social science, the media and in popular culture generally, as a most acute concept for the analysis of a range of social and cultural phenomena.

The conceptualization of moral panics has benefited from several theoretical innovations. The original model drew mainly on symbolic interaction and labelling theory in relation to deviant behaviour. But it also drew on other psycho-social theories, such as, for instance, those interrogating collective behaviour, social problems and social movements. Consequently, the concept and theory of moral panics present us with a large enough base of analytical power and flexibility to examine a variety of cultural happenings with a theoretically integrated apparatus.

The concept broadly refers to the creation of a situation in which exaggerated fear is manufactured about topics that are seen (or claimed) to have a moral component. Moral panics have to create, focus on and sustain powerfully persuasive images of folk devils that

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can serve as the heart of moral fears. Such imaginary and highly overstated fears have typically focused on gang activities, youth, illicit psychoactive drug usage, pornography, prostitution and the satanic kidnapping of children. But not only on these.

Originally, little attention was paid to the active role of folk devils. Later analyses and developments directed attention to the non-passive role of folk devils and the original model was accordingly enriched by analyses of the interactions between, on the one hand, deviantizers and stigmatizers who try to create folk devils and, on the other, folk devils who attempt rejection or even reversal of stigmatization, though the latter attempts are not always successful. Stigma contests have thus become central to moral panics theorizing, and the theoretical foundations for the theory and concept of moral panics, especially labelling theory, certainly allow interaction between stigmatizers and deviantizers and their targets. Hence, the second phase of studying moral panics paid closer attention to folk devils as active participants in the unfolding drama of moral panics, and researchers began to explore how, where and when folk devils resist and how their resistance is met and processed. One of the more interesting questions asked in this context was when and why attempts to launch moral panics fail. Analytical formulations in the area of politics and deviance (including some of my own) are now able to detail the possibility of reversing processes of deviantization and stigmatization. Additionally, important works in the early 1990s also pointed out that we need to re-think possibilities for the generalizability of moral panics in societies that have become fragmented and multicultural. The original model seemed to have assumed a more or less monolithic moral culture. But what happens to moral panics in multi-cultural societies where morality itself is constantly contested and negotiated? Consensus about morality in such societies is not a simple or taken-for-granted issue and, therefore, the entire issue of launching moral panics within more general processes of moral entrepreneurship, legislation, policing and regulation has had to be re-conceptualized. For instance, rather than a reduction in the number of moral panics in such multicultural societies, there may be many smaller-scale moral panics, launched by various moral entrepreneurs, some of whom may even compete for the moral hearts and minds of different cultural groups. Moral panics, after all, are meant to help specific moral perceptions dominate.

When different moral ideas and concepts struggle for attention and domination in a social and cultural landscape that allows and tolerates such rivalry, more moral panics can be expected to occur. Thus, in a most recent augmentation of moral panic theory, modern theories of risk have prompted some researchers to try and conceptualize moral panics within theorizations of moral risk. Furthermore, researchers interested in the media as creator and spreader of fear (following the newsroom slogan of 'if it bleeds it leads') have also focused on moral panics as an important mechanism for creating and sustaining cultures of fear.

It has also become very clear that the 'panic' in 'moral panic' is only a metaphor and has nothing to do with physical panics. Moral panics are not characterized by fright, flight, freezing, stampede or other behaviours associated—many times wrongly—with 'panics'. Moral panics are characterized by speeches, sermons, preaching, negotiations, arguments, debates, legislation, law enforcement priorities, agenda setting and the like, all focused on moral issues.

Questions relating to fundamental issues about how societies and cultures survive, change or remain stable are as pertinent to criminology as they are to any other social

science. The concept of 'moral panics' is directly linked to these questions. While physical processes or events (e.g. earthquakes, ice ages, global warming, plagues, wars) may cause major cultural changes, the question of how people react to cultural and economic change is one that lies at the heart of moral panic theory. How people struggle over the meaning of different conceptions of morality and social harm is also a central concern of criminology.

Today, researchers interested in moral panics examine the symbolic core of cultures, and also investigate the realm in which people's cognitive maps are formed, and the discourses within which they construct their world views and behaviour. Morality plays a significant and essential role in these constructions and reconstructions. Differences between right and wrong, proper and improper behaviour, good and evil are all preferences of different moral systems. Moral panics help draw the moral boundaries between different symbolic–moral universes, though it is often the nature of the panic itself—whether it should be seen as moral or economic—that is the main point of contestation.

It has frequently been said that moral panics are ephemeral phenomena. And sometimes they are. Yet, however temporary they may seem to be, moral panics, like the Weberian routinization of charisma, may also pave the way to new institutional arrangements, as well as to long-lasting bureaucratic structures. And, even if a specific moral panic does not seem to leave immediate traces of routinization, its very happening may leave memories and cognitive deposits that make the next moral panic achieve longer-lasting effects. Moral panics are therefore neither marginal nor trivial in their effects. As Stanley Cohen pointed out in 1972, moral panics are about representations, images and coercion: about which sector of a society has the power to represent and impose its images, world views and interests onto others as being both legitimate and valid. In other words, moral panics are about struggles for moral hegemony over interpretations of the legitimacy (or not) of prevailing social arrangements and material interests. And, as well as being local, today they may also be cross-national or even global. That the concept has survived for 36 years is therefore not surprising. The papers in this Special Issue reflect the latest wave of theoretical and empirical work inspired by a concept that touches on some of the deepest questions of human and social experience.