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Historical And Contemporary Examples Of Moral Panic Criminology Essay

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Published: 23rd March, 2015

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Mod's, rockers, teddy boys, Muslims, the Irish, 'Hoody's', gangster rap, hip hop, raves, ecstasy, Victorian garrotters, 'muggers', video games, gang culture, the Miners, single mothers, children, benefit scroungers and an infinite more have been victims of moral panics. Fundamentally, the concept of moral panic is a tool that is utilised to maintain the social order. Moral panics are an inaccurate or exaggerated accounts of events that are applied to issues that stand outside of the dominant norms and values of society, in an attempt to shape public opinion about an issue, or a type of individual, or a certain group of people which in turn constructs negative identities and behaviours as being located outside of the moral boundaries. This often results in behaviours being criminalised. It also leads to laws and justice

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being redefined in the light of a moral panic. The most obvious one in terms of redefining the law is the trial-by-media case of the James Bulger murder by two-ten-year-old boys who through moral panic, shaped opinion which justified and legitimised the age to be tried as an adult be reduced to ten. Drawing first on Stanley Cohen's deviancy amplification spiral model I will contextualise moral panic in various contexts to provide evidence that moral panics are nothing new and are still a powerful method for maintaining the social order by stigmatising identities and defining the moral boundaries.

On Whitsun bank holiday in the 1960s in Clacton, a journalist observed a 'minor scuffle' between the Mod's in their Mo-hair suits and the leather-clad Rockers. However, this minor dispute was a very different event according to the reports the following day that the severity hit filled the headlines of national papers; The Daily Express; 'Beat Up Town - 97 Leather Jacket Arrests', The Daily Mirror; 'Wild Ones Invade Seaside - 97 Arrests', in Belgium; 'West Side Story on the English Coast' as the story took the mass media by storm on a global scale (Cohen, 2002:18). Such deviancy was amplified as what was fast becoming a youth subculture spiralled out of control thus leading to this initial myth becoming a reality providing justification for the negative label attached as these skirmishes turned to riots on the beaches thereby becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy in the media and subsequently saw the subcultural gangs increasing rivalry.

Similarly, the 1970s produced moral panics surrounding 'race' and ethnicity as the negative stigma attached to Irishmen began to be linked with terrorism and subsequently treated disproportionately in the media. This occurs today towards Muslims who are the focus of intrigue, suspicion and fear following 9/11 attacks in the U.S.A. This is discursively rooted in the fear of the 'Other' from the early 1970s which defined and constructed a new crime 'mugging' and the falsified criminal identity of 'mugger' which were young black men (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson and Clarke, 1978:74). The headline 'A Judge Cracks Down on Muggers In City of Fear' led Hall et al. to argue that the only actors privy to information are the police, the media and the 'ventriloquist' of a Judge upholding the moral framework thus the primary definers are the first-hand and only eye-witness to the said 'crime' (The Daily Mirror, 26 September, 1972 in Hall et al. 1978:75). In sentencing the three (innocent) black youths to three years the judge said it was 'in the public interest' as a deterrent measure. The Daily Mirror's editorial supported this claiming that 'Judge Hines is right... if mugging is not to get out of hand as it has in America, punishment must be swift and certain. This moral panic

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justified new policies giving police the right to stop and search young black men without due reason. In protest, this spiralled into riots which justified the moral panic as a 'reality' and legitimised the subsequent disproportionate black male over-representation in prison. Thompson claimed the underlying reason for this false construction was to distract public attention away from Britain's serious economic downturn which was said to be on the edge of bankruptcy (Thompson, 1997:46).Thus moral panics became attributed to "a condition, episode, person or group of person's emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 1972:9, cited by Hall et al, 1978:16).

The underpinning of moral panic as the articulation of the political, the judicial and the media was toward social control of anything that fell out of alignment with the dominant norms. Britain's exceptionally high rate of 'moral panic' is therefore a political and moral programme created to re-regulate social change specific to social pluralism and fragmentation of identity. Furthermore, moral panics are 'created' when a serious national, political or economic issue needs to be masked as in the stereotyping of black youths and more recently Muslims. Trial by media notably increased in the 1980s and 1990s highlighting the enormity of political implications in terms of the 'Othering' of diverse identities, aided by global media moguls like Rupert Murdoch. However, the tensions between enterprise and heritage undermined the extent to which audiences interpret representations of news or entertainment. While many would be happy to disagree, Thompson argues from the right-wing stance the positives of The Sun newspaper, which represents white working class Britain, overtly supported the ideologies of the New Right thus manipulating its readers to re-elect the Conservative party until 1997 (Thompson, 1997:47).

Parent's who act god like with their children's life underpins parent's moral panic of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) when torn between the damage caused by measles, and the autism said to be inherent in the MMR vaccine. Similarly, moral panic surrounds the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination to prevent a type of cervical cancer in women. Anxiety was exacerbated following the death of a fourteen-year-old who health experts say had a major underlying complication. Yet the alternative is allowing a daughter to contract cancer.

Whatever stands outside of the dominant norms that define 'natural', 'normal' and 'moral' is vulnerable to moral panic (Thompson, 1998:72). Homosexuality is no exception and the moral panic surrounding HIV and Aids threw aside all taboos when mediating exaggerated tales that blamed a highly

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promiscuous gay culture. Prostitutes and drug addicts sharing needles posed an equal threat as by 1995, 75 per cent were 'infected via heterosexual transmission' (World Health Organisation, in Benson, 1997:152). Benson argues that although stigma of HIV and AIDs is prevalent everywhere, in western societies it attaches to a particular stigmatised identity such as an 'addict', a 'prostitute' or a 'gay' man which is subsequently classified as 'symbolic' by 'association' and not 'accidental' as in other locations such as Africa. Ultimately, it elevated anxieties as the risk of partners being secretly bisexual, unfaithful or gay. These anxieties were imbedded in media portrayals of the disease thereby creating an 'epidemic of signification' (Treichler, 1987, in Benson, 1997:153).

This anxiety was well-founded as by the end of 2008, women represented 50% of the 33.1 million infected adults worldwide (http://www.avert.org/worldstats.htm). Again, moral panic surrounding sexual deviance is not a new phenomenon as syphilis was rife in the Victorian era alongside the Victorian gin drinkers which can be likened to the binge drinkers of today.

Drugs also form contemporary moral panics, this time Ecstasy which emanated from the death of Leah Betts, daughter of a police officer. As Daly (1997) reports the campaign that emerged took form in giant posters with a smiling Leah and the words 'Sorted' as well as a picture of Leah on her deathbed. This circulated to all the national press to convey the harms of ecstasy, despite coroner's reports claiming ecstasy was not a cause to her death. Soon after, musician Brian Harvey became the scapegoat when claiming he enjoyed Ecstasy which promptly saw to the demise of the musical band East 17. This was despite research by BBCs Horizon team proving that alcohol, tobacco and even aspirin are more dangerous than ecstasy and that if these were rated within the ABC classification, alcohol would become a Class 'A' drug (Horizon, 2008, Ecstasy or Alcohol www.bbc.co.uk).

Alcohol underpins moral panics surrounding the 'Street Rats,' as defined by one teenager's description of the Bluewater shopping centre's stereotypical drinking, smoking, swearing 'Hoody' (Barkham, The Guardian, 14th May 2005). Britain's youth are constantly demonised and alienated by ongoing moral panics that have justified the installation of pigeon alarms in shopping centres which send out a low frequency noise that only the under-25s can hear thus driving youths out of the area, in which they once congregated (Barnett, 2006, in Mooney and Talbot, 2010:49). The demise of youth clubs, recreation centres and prohibition from parks renders young people with nowhere to go. There is no coincidence therefore that moral panic coupled with increasing policing and surveillance has justified the current incarceration of 60,000

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children throughout Britain (Goldson and Coles, 2005:1).

Alongside stern penalties for the parents of truanting children and antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) are the demonization of parents of teenage mothers. The William's sisters all got pregnant during school, with the first being just twelve (The Evening Standard, 23rd May 2005). The other two daughters were fourteen and sixteen respectively followed suit and all shared the three bedroom house with their divorced mother who blamed school-based sex education. The moral panic focused on their collective annual receipt of thirty thousand pounds in benefits and absence of financial support from the fathers. Currently in today's society the mediating of moral panics have taken on new forms like TV chat shows such as Jeremy Kyle and Trisha.

Ultimately, moral panics are deployed in an attempt to divert attention from the inequalities both structural and material that are inherent within neo-liberal societies such as the UK (Drake, Muncie & Westmarland, 2010:27). Thus they target on the less privileged in society and seem to ignore the seemingly untouchable elite members of parliament who are proven to have transcended moral boundaries when stealing tax payers hard-earned money when fiddling their expenses as revealed through much publicised unravelling throughout 2009.

In conclusion, the evidence above reveals that moral panic's are not a new phenomena as they have been a tool utilised to negatively construct stigmatised identities in conjunction with media and political rhetoric that shapes public opinion, that justifies the subsequent policies that discursively marginalise such social groups to prevent the normalisation of such 'deviance' that would drain society. Many think it is a strange world that prefers children and young people to be cold and no longer wrap up warm to avoid being demonised or arrested for loitering in charge of a Hoody - an item of clothing. It is dangerous when making parents gamble on their children's lives. Nevertheless, when analysing society in relation to moral panic, it just goes to show that the deregulated press are able to write anything about minority groups in society that demonises, targets, punishes and criminalises discursively according to class, 'race', gender, age, religion and sexuality. Overall it would appear that moral panic is not a new concept; it has been around for centuries with people accepting it as society's aberrant ways. Today we have given it a name, but it does not alter the fact that it is nothing new.

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Bibliography-'Moral Panic is nothing new'. Discuss this statement using historical and contemporary examples of mora panic. Word Count 1,843

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