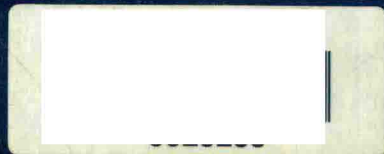


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The Myth of Moral Panics

Sex, Snuff, and Satan

Bill Thompson and Andy Williams



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The Myth of Moral Panics

This study provides a comprehensive critique—forensic, historical, and theoretical—of the moral panic paradigm, using empirically grounded ethnographic research to argue that the panic paradigm suffers from fundamental flaws that make it a myth rather than a viable academic perspective.

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Sex, Snuff, and Satan
Bill Thompson and Andy Williams

To the memory of Tony Ham

Preface

The Dark Side

The concept of moral panic is not only very popular; its proselytizers like to boast about its colonization of other disciplines and the number of hits on *Google* [Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2010: 29 and 33]. Popularity, however, is no guide to validity, and Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* [1973] is no exception. Its account of how horror-headlines turned an insignificant spat between a bunch of bored British teenagers into an irrational societal-wide reaction creating the deviancy that it condemned is a myth. Far from incite widespread alarm, the press was denounced as a "lie factory" by Britain's leading moral entrepreneurs who rushed to the youths' defense, and the horror-headlines were condemned by Parliamentarians who believed that the real trouble makers were the 'law and order' lobby. Instead of panicking and demanding more social controls, the public lined up in an orderly fashion and voted to subsidize the teen's coffee-bar culture at the next general election.

Rather than chart the history of public anxieties since then, the moral panic paradigm reflects and reveals the fears of the mythmakers, telling us far more about the academic construction of reality than the social construction of social problems. Bemused that no one had queried Cohen's account, or the incredible claim in *Policing the Crisis* [Hall *et al.*, 1984] that everyone was panicking about mugging in the middle of a class war; we decided to put the concept to the test by looking behind the horror-headlines about gore-fest horror movies in the third seminal study, Barker's *Vidéo Nasties* [1984]. We then laid our findings before a panel on moral panic at the 1989 American Society of Criminology in Reno [Thompson, 1989]. The paper pointed out that 'moral panic' had become a cliché, a sociological insult thrown at horror-headlines that the author did not like. Although no one applying the label used Cohen's definition, they all subscribed to his consensus model of society even though the UK had long since become a pluralistic one. Case studies not only exaggerated the effects of the horror-headlines, they took public panic for granted rather than demonstrated its existence, and no one considered that the horror-headlines they used

were invariably generated by the increasing value conflict between moral entrepreneurs from all sides of the political divide. As the legislation that followed rarely reflected the entrepreneurs' aims let alone what the public wanted, the alleged effects of 'panics' were equally misleading. We concluded that the panic paradigm's problems followed from the fact it was a political rather than a sociological perspective and that it promoted its adherents' values, evidenced by its selective use. Whereas Barker immediately denounced the campaign to censor the violent videos as moral panic, he ignored the much larger furor over sex stores from which it emerged [Thompson, 1994a]. As that inconsistency followed from accrediting the attack on the 50 horror movies to the New Moral Right and the closure of 500 sex stores to feminism, the paradigm's political bias was undermining the concept's academic integrity.

At that point, we thought the concept might be saved if it was drastically revised, but what happened next suggested that was never going to happen. Despite being inundated with requests for the paper, instead of generating a debate about the viability of the concept, we became subject to moral panic beginning with a *volatile* and *hostile* reaction. Publishing proposals died the moment that they were sent to reviewers. New conference papers questioning other panics were systematically blackballed by organizers. Two early articles were heavily censored, removing references to progressive¹ moral enterprise, and substituting "moral panic" for "moral enterprise" [Annetts and Thompson, 1992; Greek and Thompson, 1992]. In 1993, after another promising book proposal died, the US commissioning editor revealed what had caused all the *concern*. While it may have been sociologically correct to point out that progressives engaged in moral enterprise, the current *consensus* ensured that it was politically incorrect to say so. They would publish *if* we removed all criticism of progressives.

When we finally got into print thanks to Peter Tatchell [Thompson, 1994a; 1994b], the paradigmatic journalist Beatrix Campbell appeared, claiming that she wanted to write a review for *The Observer*, although her questions suggested that she had already written it. Campbell was convinced that anyone who did not believe in moral panic, opposed feminist censorship, undermined satanic abuse allegations, and wore *Yves Saint Laurent* suits was not only an over-privileged, bourgeois, New Right, Thatcherite; they were the font of the UK's "anti-feminist backlash". Rebutting that was easy. As we had been born on housing projects, were lifelong co-operative socialists, ran night-classes for working-class women who wanted better jobs, and bought our suits in sales, she was running on erroneous stereotypes. As for the rest, we merely preferred Weber's approach to scholarship than Marxist's to propaganda [Weber, 1970]. Needless to say, no review appeared. Campbell decided to write a book instead, but as that was even more libelous, it had to be pulped as part of a legal settlement [Campbell and Jones, 1999]. While the thought of being *folk devils* amused us; the *disproportionate* reaction did not stop there thanks to an *amplification of deviancy*.

Despite repeatedly telling another progressive journalist, Damian Thompson, that satanic abuse was *not* a moral panic, he claimed that we said otherwise to validate his own account to his editor [*Daily Telegraph*, 20.3.91]. Although we had clearly said the opposite in another 200 newspaper stories and on a dozen radio and TV shows, a panic proselytizer jumped on that single article and blamed us for turning the concept into a cliché even though they listed our Reno paper in their bibliography! While that claim was removed from later editions, it had become part of panic folklore [Hunt, 1997:639], and the damage was done. It provided an excuse for our detractors at Reading University to cut off research and conference funding, block funds we secured elsewhere, exclude our achievements from the Annual Proceedings of the university, and ‘encourage’ prospective and current post-graduate students to study something else; several students even left. This caused no end of problems, not least the amount of time and effort we could spend on righting miscarriages of justice, our major preoccupation at the time.

When a new head of department tried to stop that display of authoritarianism by backing our research projects and a new criminology stream based around them, he discovered that he could not. Instead of becoming academic heroes for seeing off a Third Party Disclosure Order, making the UK safe for ethnographic research unlike the US [Ferrell and Hamm, 1998], the university’s ethics committee banned our new students from talking to folk devils. We were then raided by the infamously incompetent Thames Valley Police who seized our research data anyway. Because that action was based on an anonymous phone call, the police had to apologize, pay our legal costs, and return our files; but the university refused to investigate who had made the malicious call and for why. Worse: despite being granted leave to pursue a judicial review which could have forced magistrates to exercise far greater diligence when considering search warrants in future, our travails meant that we did not have the funds to deposit with the court in order to proceed, losing the opportunity to secure much needed reform.

Although these experiences did not shape our critique, they proved that the paradigm was far from politically neutral [Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2010: 46–47]. They also confirmed that the claim that “academic politics are so vicious because the stakes are so small” is false, no matter who said it first, [Keyes, 2006]. On the contrary, apart from ruining more than one PhD student’s promising career, it ensured that the first half of this book which could and should have been published 20 years ago was not, and helps explain why Reading University’s Sociology Department no longer exists. While that may not amount to much in the wider course of history, it is indicative of the approach adopted by many academics today. Despite paying lip service to Kuhn’s concept of paradigm shifts, sociology is no different. As well as failing to apply its findings to itself, it only flips when it is useful to do so. Its approach to scholarship is shaped by its politics, rather than the other way around, although it likes to pretend otherwise. Anyone who suggests otherwise, engages in free inquiry uncovering the

vagaries of social life, or considers *all* political ramifications of what they find may as well have discovered tectonic plates. In the case of moral panic, the paradigm has spent 40 years defending a concept that was flawed from its inception, and was not even justified by the case study it was based on. This was no cover up. It was worse. No one had bothered to check the original sources because they were too busy using the concept for a political purpose. We have never been able to make up our mind what was the bigger scandal: the original published study, or the fact that thousands of professors and their students took its claims for granted.

We would have preferred to restrict this volume to the foundation of the panic paradigm in the UK, and left the critique of the paradigm shift that followed the colonization of the US and elsewhere to a separate volume as there is so much to cover. However, as our reviewers and publisher thought otherwise, we have tried to squeeze in as much as possible into a single volume. While we are grateful to Routledge for publishing a critique, the amount of space allocated has led to excluding as many issues as we cover, and covering *none* to the depth that we would have preferred. Consequently, we have elected to concentrate on the theoretical and evidential problems that follow from the paradigm's politics, and have adopted a polemical style as it is more economical. We are aware that doing so may offend some hypocritical sensibilities, and will ensure that we will not be invited to the 40th anniversary party; but we are not going to beat about the bush. We have uncovered fraud as well as conceptual confusion, and a preference for political propaganda rather than a regard for evidence. Otherwise, our conclusion and intent remains the same. As the paradigm constructs moral panics rather than uncovers them, any academic concerned with the origins and application of moral legislation would be better served by going back to Becker and starting over by reviewing, critiquing, and updating the concept of moral enterprise [1963].² While it is now far too late to warn the US not to buy a pig in a poke, we hope that this volume will finally initiate a real debate about the viability of moral panic rather than another attempt to save a label that has long since made no sense; though that, of course, is up to you.

We make no apology for the amount of space devoted to UK cases for three reasons. As the two seminal studies that established the paradigm were British, we had to dissect them in detail. As our US reviewers did not know what video nasties were, or how Barker's account popularized the politics of panic, we think that it is time that they did. As the new politics of panic was exposed by the myth of the Paulsgrove riots, which like mods and rockers went global within hours, we have no need to plead its case. Although we address more than enough panics from elsewhere to demonstrate particular points, we must apologize to readers 'down under'. The ramifications of Cronulla beach had to go; but as this critique was always intended to be a wakeup call from the home of moral panic, we hope that you will consider this a first step in a worldwide critique, which includes putting our claims to the test too.

Acknowledgments

This account of the moral panic myth would not have been possible without the help of our favorite folk devils: Shaz and the Paulsgrove Vigilantes, the Macs and the Orkney Satanic cult, and Eileen Jones and the New Moral Right. Our accidental ethnography was facilitated by: the mods, Chris and Pip; the Purbrook Park class of '73; Stace and Nik and the *Hawkwind* road crew. We owe a debt to Jason and Roberto for their support, and our moral panic classes at Reading University who debunked the myths about Devil Dogs, Raves and all the rest, so that we could keep our promise about the mods and the rockers. We would like to thank Jane Higgins, whose art is well worth stealing; Vicky for the car, and much more besides; and Eve for Harvard skills.

We send our best wishes to: FACT and United Against Injustice; Honey Kasoy, Dennis, and the habitués of the Empire House for those private showings; Remi Gaillard for the street theatre; Max and Stacey for the tireless tirades; the Seneca nation for Blue100; Joel Ward and the crew of the good ship Pompey for 7 April 2012; Joel and Phil for their advice, though we are saving it for next time.

This version was written to the sounds of *Dead Skeletons*, *Cherry Poppin' Daddies*, *Tame Impala*, *Plan B* and *Saida Karoli*; also, watching *Heisenberg* WW for light relief.

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Introduction

Moral Panic for Dummies

DESCRIPTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

The popularity of moral panic can be explained by the passage in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* cited by most papers, essays, dissertations, theses, journal articles, and books on the subject:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; its nature is presented in stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians, and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other time is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk lore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself [Cohen, 1973: 11].

Having noticed that one or more of these facets appears in the report below the horror-headline that caught their attention, the authors claim to have uncovered another moral panic even though that *description* can not distinguish between a moral panic and an overreaction to horror-headlines in any other model of the social construction of social problems. In order to do that the author needed to demonstrate that the reaction conformed to Cohen's *definition* of moral panic, with its:

- Three distinct but interlocking phases;
- Nine elements of: media exaggeration and distortion, prediction, symbolization; orientation, images, and causation; the subsequent

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sensitization of the public and social control agencies to this media frame; and an increase in the control culture paralleled by the rise of an exploitative culture;

- Dozens of other features, including the 'must have' deviancy amplification, the diffusion and escalation of innovative forms of control culture, the public dramatization of evil and widespread public demand for even more social controls which proved that a panic was in progress;
- Explanation of why the deviants became the symbolic target of the unaddressed but projected fears that facilitated the panic;
- Evidence that the deviants accepted and acted out their ascribed role;
- Demonstration that the phases, elements, and features were mutually reinforcing [Cohen, 1973: 38–39, 87, 95, 11–12, 161–162, 192].

As most of the 'must have' features are also germane to social group value conflict claims-making [Best, 1989]; it was the three-phase, nine-element, transactional process which separated Cohen's moral panic model from other explanations of the same phenomena and *not* the description.

The inability of academics to differentiate between a description and a definition, let alone cover the phased interaction ensures that no one else has ever uncovered a moral panic as Cohen defined them: the societal-wide projection of subconscious fears onto a group of folk devils during a symbolic boundary crisis following horror-headlines about a precipitating event, amplifying the deviancy and increasing the control culture in the process. On the contrary, with the solitary exception of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (hereafter CCCS) [Hall *et al*, 1984], everyone else claiming to have identified a moral panic in the next 25 years was merely slapping the label on a set of horror-headlines that they did not like. As it took three decades before anyone else noticed that the description was "not a very accurate reflection of the book's contents" [Cricher, 2000: 1], it is no surprise that no one ever explained why they ignored the definition, or why moral panic became so popular.

When those working in other disciplines discovered that it took a lot less research time or analytical effort to boost one's publication record by sticking the label on any reaction they did not like, moral panic became one of the most successful academic fads in history. It spread far beyond the confines of sociology and cultural studies to: criminology and criminal justice [Murji, 1998; Tonry, 2004; Garland, 2008]; feminism [Gelsthorpe, 2005]; gay studies [Herdt, 2009]; geography [Aitken 2001a and 2001b]; history [Abbott, 2007; Dreher, 1997; Lemmings, and Walker, 2009]; law and cyberspace [Akdeniz, 1997; Welch, 2000; Patry, 2009]; media history [Hunt, 1997]; music [Wright, 2000]; nursing and midwifery [Pateron and Stark, 2000]; popular culture [Barker, 1994a; Springhill, 1998]; social work [Parton, 1985; 1991; Winter, 1992]; and youth [Schissel, 1997;

Krinsky, 2008]. In short, the paradigm's popularity reflects its proponents' lack of academic standards.

PANICS FOR DUMMIES

The three major problems with what we call descriptive panics can be illustrated by Newburn's summary of the 1984 Video Nasties panic in the UK:

The campaign had all the classic ingredients of a moral panic: a stereotypical threat to societal values (the stereotype constructed by the mass media); the manning of the barricades by moral guardians or 'right thinking' people; and the construction of a legislative 'solution' which allowed the panic to subside [1992: 183].

First, as the only reason those three 'ingredients' had become 'classic' was that they were the only three facets being used, that habit exposed descriptive panics' lack of theoretical and analytical integrity. Second, as 'the public' were watching the videos rather than panicking about them, the experts and moral guardians publicly disagreed about the threat, and the legislation *decriminalized* hardcore pornography as well as the gory horrors, descriptive panics had no evidential veracity either. The video nasties episode did not even fit the description! Third, the reference to a 'campaign' highlighted the 20-year failure to quantify the differences and similarities between the effects of moral enterprise and the process of moral panic [Thompson, 1994a]. While the majority within the growing panic paradigm ignored these problems, Goode and Ben-Yehuda [1994], the concept's US boosters, did not. They tried to circumvent them by creating a 'new, improved' definition which helped initiate "the age of moral panic" [Thompson, 1998] not because it was, but because academia had gone moral panic mad. Rather than engage in a real academic debate about theory and evidence, those applying the concept opted for a definitional free-for-all, illustrated by the highbred that emerged on *onpedia*:

A moral panic is a *mass movement* based on the perception that some individual or group, frequently a *minority group* or a *subculture*, is dangerously deviant and poses a menace to society. These panics are generally fuelled by *media coverage* of social issues (although semi-spontaneous moral panics do occur), and often include a large element of *mass hysteria*. A widely circulated and new-seeming *urban legend* is frequently involved. These panics can sometimes lead to *mob violence* . . . A factor in moral panic is the *deviancy amplification spiral*. Recent moral panics in the UK have included the ongoing tabloid newspaper campaign against pedophiles, which led to the assault and persecution of a pediatrician by an angry, if semi-literate, mob in August 2000, and

that surrounding the murder of James Bulger in Liverpool, England, United Kingdom in 1993 [*italics our emphasis*—eds. *onpedia*,¹ 2002].

If the video nasties panic was the point when it *should* have been impossible to ignore the paradigm's lack of intellectual rigor, quality control, and evidential standards; *onpedia*'s reference to that “semi-literate mob” *was* the point when it became impossible to deny that the paradigm was being used as a political rather than a sociological perspective. As the vigilante lynch mobs were a myth created by a government agency to justify denying the public the Megan's Law that they wanted; logic dictated that the horror-headlines about the riots that never were should have been denounced as a moral panic about phantom vigilantes. Yet the paradigm switched sides, and promoted the myth that the Portsmouth public had panicked and rioted about a nonexistent pedophile threat even though the CCTV tape shown during the government's show-trials proved otherwise, and the peaceful protesters were found ‘not guilty’ as a result [Silverman and Wilson, 2002; Hughes and Edwards (Ed.), 2002]. The reference to the attack on the pediatrician, which was another myth about another nonevent a month later, 150 miles northwest of Portsmouth, also demonstrated that the paradigm was based on the same media methods that it condemned [Williams, 2004; see Chapter 7 this volume].

Readers raised within the paradigm will object and point to numerous “theoretical developments” and revisions that make our criticism redundant. However, as the friendly critics like McRobbie and Thornton never questioned the concept [1995] and the more critically minded believed that *everyone* was in a permanent state of panic [Ungar, 2001; Furedi, 1997; Waiton, 2008], moral panic continues to avoid the critical scrutiny and debate that academic concepts were subjected to in our youth. As we will demonstrate those claims in the Conclusion, we will concentrate on the most influential ‘development’ here.

‘NEW, IMPROVED’ MORAL PANIC

Rather than arrest the descent into conceptual chaos, or correct the problems that followed from the panic paradigms political bias, the ‘new, improved’ moral panic conceived by Goode and Ben-Yehuda [1994] encouraged both; and it is easy to see why. Moral panic was now applied to *any* reaction by the members of *any* social group over *any* issue that exhibited:

- *Volatility*, by erupting and subsiding in a sudden fashion;
- A heightened level of *concern* about the issue;
- A *consensus* “that a problem exists and should be dealt with”;
- An increased level of *hostility* towards the folk-devil; and
- A *disproportionate* fear “in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm” [Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 33–39].