MORAL PANIC AND THE POLITICS OF ANXIETY

EDITED BY SEAN P. HIER

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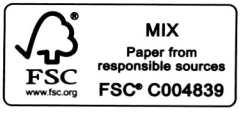

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Moral Panic and the Politics of Anxiety

Moral Panic and the Politics of Anxiety is a collection of original essays written by some of the world's leading social scientists. It seeks to provide unique insight into the importance of moral panic as a routine feature of everyday life, whilst also developing an integrated framework for moral panic research by widening the scope of scholarship in the area.

Many of the key twenty-first century contributions to moral panic theory have moved beyond the parameters of the sociology of deviance to consider the importance of moral panic for identity formation, national security, industrial risk, and character formation. Reflecting this growth, the book brings together recognized moral panic researchers with prominent scholars in moral regulation, social problems, cultural fear, and health risks, allowing for a more careful and critical discussion around the cultural and political significance of moral panic to emerge.

This book will prove valuable reading for both undergraduate and postgraduate students on courses such as politics and the media, regulatory policy, the body and identity, theory and political sociology, and sociology of culture.

Sean P. Hier is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He has authored several articles on moral panic, and he is recognized for his efforts to link moral panic to moral regulation/social problems.

FOREWORD

Kenneth Thompson

Almost 40 years have passed since Stanley Cohen (1972) launched the career of the moral panic concept. In this time period, the concept enjoyed a greater level of acceptance in popular usage than almost any other sociological concept since Max Weber's conception of bureaucracy. The introduction of the moral panic concept, like bureaucracy, was symptomatic of problematical trends in the age in which it emerged, and it has excited critical reactions within the academic community. Some of the criticisms of moral panic studies have been concerned with a suspected negative bias inherent in the concept and with its heuristic value. The ensuing debates are often cogent and productive of clarifications and theoretical developments, as can be seen in the scholarly contributions appearing in this volume.

The initial success of moral panic in the 1970s was due to public and academic interest in problems concerning youth subcultures. Cohen's (1972) study was sparked off by sensationalistic media accounts of clashes between rival youth subcultures—the Mods and Rockers. In terms of sociological interest, it was mainly within the area of studies of deviancy and labeling theory. As Cohen (2003) pointed out in his introduction to the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the term moral panic arose from social reaction theory in the 1960s and from concern with the media's role in stereotyping and misrepresenting deviance. Demands for increased social control or regulation could lead to intensified deviance through an interactive process of psychological adjustment and self-fulfilling social action. It may have been significant that this new generation of deviancy theorists in Britain—including Stanley Cohen (1972), Jock Young (1971), and Jason Ditton (1979), as well as Leslie Wilkins (1964)—were themselves very much closer to the youth subcultures than to the controllers (Garland 2008). This is true regardless of the fact that the new generation drew on the American interactionism of Edwin Lemert (1967) and the ideas about moral boundaries and 'collective conscience' derived from Durkheim by Kai Erikson (1966).

The critique of exaggerated moral reaction was about relatively minor deviancy and delinquency. It was not difficult to show that sensationalist media accounts of youth subcultures, leading to public outrage and calls for greater control, fitted very well the ideal type of moral panic. The concept became more controversial when Stuart Hall and his colleagues used it to refer to reactions to 'muggings'—street robberies entailing violence (Hall *et al.* 1978). Critics began to claim that the moral panic concept was ideologically biased towards tolerance of deviants and against the maintenance of social order (Waddington 1986). For a time in the 1970s and 1980s, the term lost its earlier precision and heuristic value and became caught up in ideological battles about deviance, crime, and social control. This happened not only within academic debates, but also in national politics (Garland 2008). The mounting criticisms led to the concept's falling into relative disfavor in both British and American sociology.

At the same time, from the 1980s onwards, popular usage of moral panic increased and media commentators began to make self-conscious and even ironical use of the term, just as supposed deviant groups were happy to generate actual or simulated moral panics in order to gain attention (Thompson 1998; Garland 2008; McRobbie and Thornton 1995). It is only within the last 20 years that there has been a serious and positive reappraisal of the concept within sociology (beginning with Jenkins 1992 and Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), supplemented with a sustained attempt to relate the concept to other theoretical developments, such as Risk Society, discourse analysis and moral regulation (Thompson 1997 and 1998; Critcher 2003; Hier 2002).

There are a number of possible lessons to be learned from studying the debates about moral panic. The first one stems from its 'symptomatic' character—the fact that its rise and development in specific times and locations focused attention on underlying socio-cultural trends that were a source of growing anxiety. Second, analyses of the institutional and cultural processes involved in moral panic events can yield valuable information about changing mechanisms of control and regulation. Third, comparative sociology has much to gain from comparing the content and effects of moral panics in different societies. Fourth, the sociology of knowledge (and sociology in general) can learn from the differences of emphasis in the treatment of the concept within national sociologies and from the efforts to relate this concept to other concepts and theories.

Moral panics provide a prime example of the kind of symptomatic social phenomena that Emile Durkheim recommended sociologists take as their central object of enquiry (Thompson 1998:142). They alert us to possible underlying social trends that may be a cause of individual anxiety and social pathology, just as Durkheim showed that apparently unrelated acts of suicide were symptomatic of changes in factors affecting moral regulation and social integration (Durkheim 1897; Thompson 1982:119–20). It has sometimes seemed that the moral dimension and the symptomatic quality of moral panics are neglected in favor of focusing on other aspects such as immediate causes and consequences or secondary characteristics like 'disproportionality' (the extent to which the conduct or threat it poses are exaggerated), as part of an argument about whether an episode of social drama fitted the ideal type of a moral

panic. Attention to such questions can only be a starting point, a 'means of beginning an analysis' of larger social conditions' of a particular type, 'not the entire analysis in itself' (Critcher 2008:1138). This would respond to the criticism that sometimes the use of the concept of moral panic seems to oblige the user to contrast 'representations' to the arbitration of the 'real' and is therefore unable to develop a full theory concerning the operations of ideology within systems of representation (Watney 1987: 42). As pointed out previously (Thompson 1998: 77), Watney was not so much denying that certain episodes constitute moral panics, but rather wished to broaden the discussion to place the particular panic over AIDS within the broader framework of ideological contestation about how certain groups are represented by the mass media as threats to the cohesion of a unified general public with shared values and characteristics.

In reading these latest scholarly contributions to the literature on moral panics, it is worth considering how they can help to build more rigor into the analysis of moral panics. One criterion might be how far they suggest ways of strengthening the evidential basis by drawing on multiple sources of data, perhaps ranging beyond mainstream media reports to include other documentary sources and even ethnographic work with relevant groups. Of course, broadening the spread of data sources should not come at the cost of carrying out rigorous investigation of the operations of the mainstream media, drawing on the work of media sociologists and others who can reveal the workings of the media complex, with its various pressures and preferences. The tabloid press, especially in Britain, still plays a major role in forming public opinion, and competition within the Press has been a factor leading to a rapid succession of moral panic episodes. However, the proliferation of new and more publically accessible forms of media, such as blogs and Twitter, as well as media representing minorities, are bringing about changes that will radically alter the familiar pathways that were mapped by the sociology of moral panics.

Rival voices putting forward conflicting views make the targeting of folk devils and consensual expressions of concern much more difficult. There may be 'a shift away from moral panics as traditionally conceived (involving a vertical relation between society and a deviant group) towards something more closely resembling American-style "culture wars" (which involve a more horizontal conflict between social groups)' (Garland 2008: 17). Conflicts over same-sex marriage or Muslim girls wearing the hijab in school may have resembled moral panics at one stage, but eventually turned into politically contested culture wars, as the deviant minority resisted their deviant identity labels. When there is a sufficiently strong majority outrage, it can still take on some of the characteristics of a moral panic, even if sociologists are understandably reluctant to use that term about a sensitive issue, as was the case in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. Subsequently some sociologists were prepared to use the term (Rothe and Muzzatti 2004), and in 2010 the outcry against a proposed Islamic community center near New York's Ground Zero was poised between turning into a moral panic or becoming another battle in the culture wars. This may be another example where the moral panic concept cannot stand alone and needs to

be related to other relevant concepts and theories, such as neo-Durkheimian concepts of 'collective effervescence and social solidarity' (Tiryakian 2005) and 'cultural trauma' (Alexander *et al.* 2004).

As in the case of the history of the concept of 'bureaucracy' (Albrow 1970; Thompson 1980), so too with 'moral panic': a highly serviceable and popular sociological concept can stimulate new insights into contemporary social problems and lead to productive theoretical developments. But there has to be a continuing effort to refine the concept and to revise it to fit in with other relevant theoretical developments. The contents of this volume represent the latest contributions to achieve that goal.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Daniel Béland is Canada Research Chair in Public Policy and Professor at the Johnson-Shoyama School of Public Policy (University of Saskatchewan campus). As a sociologist studying politics and policymaking from a historical, political, and comparative perspective, he has published eight books and more than fifty articles in peer-reviewed journals. *www.danielbeland.org*

Nachman Ben-Yehuda is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; he has also taught at Stony Brook and the University of Toronto. Ben-Yehuda is the author of eight books, including *Deviance and Moral Boundaries* (University of Chicago Press), *Moral Panics* (Blackwell), and, most recently, *Theocratic Democracy* (Oxford University Press).

Joel Best research focuses on deviance and social problems. His current research concerns awards, prizes, and honors in American culture. He is a former President of the Midwest Sociological Society and the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and a former Editor of the journal *Social Problems*.

Chas Critcher is Visiting Professor in Media and Communications at Swansea University and Emeritus Professor of Communications at Sheffield Hallam University. He originally co-authored *Policing the Crisis* (Macmillan 1979), a study of social reaction to mugging. His most recent publications include *Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press 2003) and *Critical Readings in Moral Panics and the Media* (Open University Press, ed. 2006). His current research interests focus on exploring the relevance to moral panic analysis of the concept of moral regulation.

Mary deYoung PhD is Professor of Sociology at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI. She has presented papers at national and international conferences

and published extensively on the nexus of trauma, memory, and culture. Her two most recent books are *Madness: An American History of Mental Illness and Its Treatment* (McFarland, 2010), and *The Day Care Ritual Abuse Moral Panic* (McFarland, 2004).

Frank Furedi is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent in Canterbury, England. During the past fifteen years, Furedi's studies have been devoted to an exploration of the cultural developments that influence the construction of contemporary risk consciousness. He has published widely about controversies relating to issues such as health, parenting children, food, and new technology. His *Invitation to Terror: Expanding the Empire of the Unknown* (Continuum 2007) explores the way in which the threat of terrorism has become amplified through the ascendancy of possibilistic thinking. At present he is engaged in a study of the changing cultural forms of authority.

Erich Goode is Sociology Professor Emeritus at Stony Brook University. He has taught at half a dozen universities, including New York University, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Goode is the author of ten books—including one on moral panics—mainly on deviance and drug use, and is the editor of six anthologies. He is currently at work on a book on deviance in memoir and another on the domestication of drugs.

Sean P. Hier is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology, University of Victoria, Canada. He has published several articles and book chapters on moral panic, surveillance, and social theory. He has also published six edited volumes. His recent book, *Panoptic Dreams: Streetscape Video Surveillance in Canada*, was published with the University of British Columbia Press (2010).

Alan Hunt is Chancellor's Professor at Carleton University. He is the author of *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge University Press 1999) and *Governance of the Consuming Passions* (Macmillan 1996). Previous books include *Foucault and Law* (with Gary Wickham, 1994), *Explorations in Law and Society* (1993), *Marx and Engels on Law* (with Maureen Cain, 1979), and *The Ociological Movement in Law* (1978).

Graham Knight is Professor and Chair of Communication Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University. His current research interests lie in the area of communication and public relations in regard to climate change. His recent work has appeared in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Social Movement Studies*, and the *International Journal of the History of Sport*.

Dan Lett is a PhD student at the University of Victoria, Canada. His recent publications appear in *Media, Culture and Society* (2007, with S. Hier, J. Greenberg, and K. Walby) and *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (with S. Hier and K. Walby). He is

also co-editor of *Racism and Justice: Dialogue on the Politics of Identity, Inequality, and Change* (with S. Hier and S. Bolaria, 2009, Fernwood Press).

James Meades is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at Carleton University. His research interests include: moral panic, critical realism, Marxism, public sector unions, and social movements.

Amanda Rohloff is a PhD Candidate at the Department of Sociology and Communications, Brunel University. Her PhD research is exploring the long-term development of climate change as a perceived social problem, drawing primarily from moral panic and Norbert Elias's theory of civilizing processes. She has published articles on moral panic in *Current Sociology* and *New Zealand Sociology*, and is currently working on several other publications on Elias, moral panic, climate change, and civilization.

Juliet Roper is Associate Dean, Sustainability, for the University of Waikato Management School, and Professor of Management Communication. She is also the President of the Asia Pacific Academy of Business in Society (APABIS), an organization dedicated to providing a platform for collaborative engagement and action amongst academic, business, NGO, and government sectors of the Asia Pacific region. Juliet is a current board member of the International Communication Association, and in 2006 she was a finalist for the Aspen Institute's Beyond Grey Pinstripes Faculty Pioneer award.

André Smith is Assistant Professor in the Sociology Department at the University of Victoria. His primary area of research concerns mental health and illness.

Dale Spencer research and teaching areas include sociology of the body, sociology of sport, organizational sociology, social problems, sociology of emotions, and criminology. He has published articles in *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, *Canadian Review of Sociology*, *Punishment and Society*, and *Body and Society* and has forthcoming articles in *Journal of Youth Studies* and *Sociological Research Online*. Dale Spencer, Kevin Walby, and Alan Hunt are editors of a forthcoming collection entitled *Emotions Matter: For a Relational Approach to Emotions* (University of Toronto Press).

Kenneth Thompson is Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Open University. He is author of *Moral Panics* (Routledge 1998).

Sheldon Ungar is a Sociology Professor at the University of Toronto at Scarborough. He has researched real world events that have produced social scares, including the nuclear arms race, emerging diseases (Ebola), global climate change, and bird flu. His studies of climate change have resulted in regular invitations to research institutes in Germany. Beside his continued interest in the nuclear threat and climate change,

his current work also focuses on an examination of knowledge and ignorance and seeks to identify how popular culture and new media affect 'cultural literacy'. As part of his study of the cultural production of ignorance, he has examined instances of the 'silencing of science.' Indeed, he has experienced 'silencing' himself, as papers he has done on climate skeptics have been rendered impossible to publish by reviewers who allow no sentence to pass unremarked. In the past few years, he has published papers on ignorance as a social problem (*British Journal of Sociology*), global coverage of bird flu (*Communicating Science*), total war, and faculty moral panics over students.

Kevin Walby is an SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre of Criminology, University of Toronto and Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Victoria. He has a PhD in sociology from Carleton University. Peer reviewed articles include *International Sociology* (2011, with Sean Hier), *Qualitative Research* (2011), *Social Movement Studies* (2011, with Jeff Monaghan), the *British Journal of Criminology* (2011, with Justin Piché), *Punishment & Society* (2011, with Justin Piché), *Criminology and Criminal Justice* (2010, with Nicolas Carrier), *Social & Legal Studies* (2007), *Qualitative Inquiry* (2007), and *Critical Sociology* (2007). Walby is working on an edited volume entitled *Brokering Access: Power, Politics and Freedom of Information Process in Canada* with Mike Larsen, (University of British Columbia Press), and an edited volume entitled *Emotions Matter* with Alan Hunt and Dale Spencer (with University of Toronto Press). He is the prisoners' struggles editor for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

Contents

1

INTRODUCTION

Bringing moral panic studies into focus[1]

Sean P. Hier

Moral panic studies traces back to Jock Young's (1971) analysis of the social meaning of drug taking and to Stanley Cohen's (1972) canonical investigation of the construction of the Mods and Rockers. Significant developments took place through the 1970s and 1980s, focusing primarily on the role that claims makers, moral guardians, and the media play in the construction, amplification, and exaggeration of deviance. Critical revisions invigorated moral panic studies in the 1990s, and some of the most recent contributions have widened the conventional focus of research by incorporating advances in risk communications, discourse studies, cultural sociology, and moral regulation.

Despite consistent interest in the concept of moral panic, debate about the purpose, application, and scope of moral panic studies persists. For instance, scholars within and beyond the panic literature commonly conceptualize moral panics as exceptional rather than ordinary phenomena to explain seemingly irrational reactions to putative threats. Conceived of in this way, critics charge that panic researchers deploy vague explanatory criteria to speculate disapprovingly about the underlying causes of random (even trivial) claims-making episodes. A small number of critical assessments of moral panic studies has started to demonstrate how moral panics are properly conceptualized as rational and routine forms of social action and how moral panic studies can contribute to and benefit from broader scholarship concerned with regulation, deviance, civilizing processes, and social control (e.g., Rohloff and Wright 2010; Hier 2008; Critcher 2009; Rohloff 2008; and see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). Efforts to widen the conventional focus of research are gaining momentum, but moral panic studies remains divided among varying analytical orientations.

With some simplification, three analytical orientations characterize the moral panic literature: conventional, skeptical, and revisionist. Conventional analyses (the primary source of criticism for external observers) are based on selective readings of Cohen's original work and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994, 2009) summary statement.

Regardless of the complexity of argumentation found in these studies (see below), the aim of empirically informed conventional analyses is to show how various social problems frames qualify as moral panics by applying Cohen's stages or testing Goode and Ben-Yehuda's five crucial indicators of panic (e.g., Rothe and Muzzatti 2004; Welch, Price, and Yankey 2002; Doyle and LaCombe 2000; Victor 1998).

By contrast, skeptical analyses tend to rely on selective readings of conventional models as a source of criticism to dismiss the explanatory power of moral panic. They do so by pointing to so-called amoral phenomena (e.g., assumed real-world, tangible threats) to qualify the explanatory power of moral panic or by arguing that specific responses to putative concerns are proportional and rational responses to empirically verifiable threats (e.g., Waiton 2008; Cornwell and Linders 2002; and see Ungar 2001 and Waddington 1986). Both skeptical and conventional orientations focus on a more or less agreed upon set of theoretical, methodological, and conceptual parameters that were institutionalized between 1972 and 1994; they rarely engage analytically with (or even acknowledge) studies that fall outside the conventional scope of analysis.

Revisionists approach moral panic studies in a different manner. Although revisionists recognize the continuing significance of conventional approaches (and endorse some of the insights offered by skeptics), they nevertheless seek to rethink (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Hier 2003), reappraise (deYoung 1998; Thompson 1998; Critcher 2003), think beyond (Hier 2002a, 2002b, 2008), or widen the focus (Rohloff and Wright 2010; Critcher 2009) of conventional analyses. Revisionists simultaneously retain many of the defining components of conventional analyses and strive to link panic episodes to broader explanatory models in the sociologies of deviance, regulation, culture, and control. They do so to address persistent limitations with applications of conventional approaches and to enhance the analytical purchase of moral panic studies beyond a relatively narrow range of concerns in the sociology of culture. The project of revising moral panic studies by widening the focus of research traces to the 1980s (e.g., Ben-Yehuda 1986, 1985), yet what is unique about the resurgence of revisionist efforts is the cumulative and interactive debate that is starting to take hold.

As a contribution to the ongoing project of revising moral panic studies, the aim of this collection is twofold. The first aim is to critically assess theoretical, conceptual, and methodological debates among panic scholars, past and present, to bring the purpose and scope of moral panic studies into focus. Although revisionists are beginning to move beyond the limitations of conventional analyses, disagreement remains about the substantive scope and conceptual parameters of moral panic studies (see, for example, Rohloff and Wright 2010; Critcher 2009; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009; Rohloff 2008).

One reason why moral panic studies lacks clear focus concerns the popular use of the moral panic concept among journalists and politicians (Altheide 2008; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Hunt 1997). Sociologists no longer enjoy exclusive control over how moral panic is applied and the concept is indiscriminately used for a broad range of purposes (far beyond social control processes). A second, related reason concerns