



# MORAL PANICS

The Social Construction of Deviance

ERICH GOODE AND NACHMAN BEN-YEHUDA

SECOND EDITION

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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*Erich Goode and  
Nachman Ben-Yehuda*



**WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# MORAL PANICS

**To Barbara and Etti  
Our Wives**

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A crowd gathers at the state capitol and listens to speeches by activists about the wicked deeds of corrupt public officials. Demonstrators stream through the main street of a major city, carrying signs and chanting slogans that denounce the actions of evildoers. In communities around the world, rioters smash windows, attack the police, and burn the straw-stuffed effigy of the leader of a hated nation. Newspapers and broadcast news express concern about a previously unknown cult, the use of a previously unknown psychoactive substance, a fringe political party, the people who enact a particular type of sexual behavior, neighbors who might be spies for an enemy country, or the publication and dissemination to the young of comics books, or the kidnapping of young women into sexual slavery.

These events, and the fear and concern that they express, are *about* something. And a major sector what it is they are “about” – the *reason* or *motivation* that ignites the mass assemblies, the media attention, the political actions – is the subject matter of this book. Some of these fears and concerns are based on very real, present, and concrete threats, while some have a more illusory or symbolic connection with supposed threats. This book is focused on the latter sector of threats: The question we raise is whether and to what extent the connection between the fear and concern-inspired collective behavior on the one hand and the threat that presumably justifies such behavior on the other is materially real and, if not, what else motivates such emotion-laden actions. If people assemble and act out of the fear of a non-existent or trivial threat – *why*? If people believe that something must be done about a relatively harmless condition – *what accounts for that belief*? These are the sorts of questions we wish to address in *Moral Panics*.

We live, says sociologist Barry Glassner, in a “culture of fear” (1999). Yet, he argues, many of our fears are “unfounded,” based on exaggerated notions of their threat or danger. At times when the crime rate is declining, our fear of crime rises (pp. 21–49). We panic over rare, exotic diseases, like “flesh-eating bacteria” (pp. xii–xiii). Violence in schools is declining year by year, yet our media both reflect and encourage a growing fear of violence in schools (p. 69). Pundits and journalists declare



“road rage” to be a “plague,” attracting more public concern than drunk driving, yet nationally, only a couple of dozen motorists die each year as a result of road-rage related aggressive driving (pp. 3, 17, 119), while the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that roughly 16,000 people die each year on American roadways as a result of elevated blood-alcohol levels. Automobile accidents kill vastly more passengers, mile-by-mile, than airline crashes, yet most of us worry far more about dying in a plane than in a car (pp. 193–5). We are living longer, healthier lives than at any time in human history, yet many believe that our lifestyle and diet are unhealthier than they were in the past. In 1976, American officials feared the pandemic outbreak among humans of the swine flu, a disease that infects pigs. A quarter of the American population was inoculated before the program was abandoned as unnecessary, but in the meantime, the issue created a huge level of widespread concern, media attention, and public “buzz.” Just before the turn of the twentieth century, many experts believed that computers, which weren’t programmed for the year 2000, would stop working. This was called the Y2K problem, and it generated, again, a great deal of concern and informal, media, and official attention, but the real-world problems it caused were minor and scattered. “We compound our worries beyond all reason,” says Glassner (p. xii). Few of us, says Glassner, worry about the things that are really harmful and threatening, like poverty, inequality, racism, and gun ownership, but lots of less harmful things obsess us no end.

While we agree wholeheartedly with Glassner’s analysis, our perspective introduces at least one additional dimension: deviance and morality. The intensity of concern about a given issue or condition takes on a special urgency when we introduce the “folk devil,” or one or more persons supposedly responsible for and/or representing exaggeratedly fearful conditions. Heightened fear and concern, misplaced anxiety, a reviled agent responsible for conditions less harmful than we think – all these add up to the *moral panic*, the subject of this book, now in its second edition. The authors have lived with and thought and read about these issues in the more than a decade and a half since *Moral Panics*’ first edition, and we now have occasion to put what we’ve learned to good use: the revision of this book.

We coauthored the first edition of *Moral Panics*, mainly in Israel, in 1993, during Goode’s Lady Davis Fellowship; Blackwell published it early in 1994. Why issue a revision of the book? To us, a second edition is importunate and essential. The reasons leap out at us like tigers pouncing on prey.

To begin with, in the first edition, we inadvertently failed to include a chapter on the media, a central and foundational feature of the moral panic; this edition includes that chapter. The media, perhaps the principal active agent or “actor” in the moral panic, demands attention in any extended discussion of the subject. Chapter 5 provides precisely that discussion.

A second reason for this revision: since 1994, an almost literal *ton* of books, articles, and chapters has been written on the moral panic, on topics as diverse as crime, child molestation and priestly pedophilia, extraterrestrials, terrorism, flag desecration,

illegal aliens, crack cocaine, designer drugs, Ecstasy, raves, video “nasties,” gangsta-rap, horror comics, alien abductions, the “Red Scare,” the white slave traffic, conspiracies, and satanic ritual abuse and murder in day care centers. The authors of some of these analyses extend and enrich the moral panics concept while others attempt to critique, undermine, and short-circuit it. In this, the new edition, we discuss these recent developments and attend to some of the criticisms.

A third reason is that, around the globe generally and in the Anglophone world specifically, historical events have swept over all of us like a tsunami, and many of these changes are directly relevant to the topic of moral panics. Consider terrorism. Most of us have become used to procedures that we would have bridled at a decade and a half ago. Earlier this year, Goode heard an announcement over the New York subway public address system to the effect that the police can subject passengers to “*random security checks*.” Fifteen years ago, New Yorkers – a feisty bunch – would have reacted by saying, “You gonna search *me*? You gotta be kidding! Get outta my *face*!” (Try that response in any airport; you’d be detained and miss your plane.) Not now. Many of us believe, or have been led to believe, that the threat is so great and we consider it so reasonable that we go along with it. An advertising campaign released by the New York Police Department (NYPD), repeatedly broadcasts the message, over the airwaves, in the print media, and in busses and subways, “If you see something, report something,” a directive many would have found offensive in the 1990s. Are such precautions commensurate with the supposed threat of terrorism and crime? Again, that question is relevant to moral panics. And such precautions became relevant *especially* and *crucially* after the events of September 11, 2001. Terrorism is only the most pressing and poignant of numerous exploding issues every one of us has had to think about and address in the twenty-first century, each one relevant to moral panics.

In addition to Chapter 5, on the media, we have added three chapters, Chapter 4, “The Moral Panic Meets Its Critics,” Chapter 11, “Drug Abuse Panics,” and Chapter 12, “The Feminist Anti-Pornography Crusade.” Correspondingly, we have condensed and reassembled the former Chapter 1, “A Prelude to Moral Panics,” deleted the former Chapter 11, “The Israeli Drug Panic of May 1982,” and condensed the former Chapters 5 and 6, on deviance and the criminal law. We have condensed paragraphs and sentences where that seemed to work better and of course we’ve factually, conceptually, and theoretically updated every discussion in the book, where appropriate. The resulting revision is, we believe, more streamlined and readable than the first edition. The former chapter on the drug panic of the 1980s, Chapter 12, is gone; bits and pieces of it appear in the new Chapter 11.

Goode adapted several paragraphs and pages in Chapter 11 from *Drugs in American Society* (7<sup>th</sup> edition), McGraw-Hill, 2008; parts of the Prologue and Chapter 2 from “The Skeptic Meets the Moral Panic” from *Skeptical Inquirer*, November/December, 2008, pp. 37–41; and parts of Chapter 4 from “Moral Panics and Disproportionality: The Case of LSD Use in the Sixties” from *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 29, August–September, 2008, pp. 533–43. He extends his gratitude to the



publishers and editors at these publications. He'd also like to thank Barbara Weinstein for her unwavering moral, intellectual, and emotional support during the revision of this book. He'd also like to thank Mike Schwartz, Michael Kimmel, and Naomi Rosenthal for their critical and useful comments on an earlier version of Chapter 12, on the failed feminist anti-pornography moral panic, Carolyn Bronstein for relevant information on the anti-porn movement, and Pat Carlen for reminding me that that chapter is not really a case study about the feminist movement *per se* but a case study about a moral panic that failed to launch. Lastly, he acknowledges useful discussions on numerous sociological topics with William J. ("Si") Goode, his dad; Si's death several years ago caused his son considerable grief.

Ben-Yehuda borrowed or adapted portions of Chapter 10 from his "The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 86 (1), 1980, pp. 1–31, and *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 23–73. He gratefully acknowledges permission to adapt or reprint this material. He would also like to thank Etti Ben-Yehuda for her continuous support, love, and encouragement, and Tzach and Guy, his sons, for their patience and love. He cannot forget Remko's love and good nature. He also deeply appreciates Sigal Gooldin's good advice and initiative.

Greenwich Village, New York City  
Jerusalem, Israel



**Figure 1** Nosferatu. (Prana-Film/The Kobal Collection)

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# PROLOGUE

Small, gray creatures from extraterrestrial planets land their aircraft in remote locations, abduct earthlings, and extract sperm from men and eggs or embryos from women (Mack, 1995; Showalter, 1997, pp. 189–201; Clancy, 2005). A drug marches across a continent and up the socioeconomic ladder, leaving devastation and wreckage in its wake (Jefferson, 2005, p. 41). Terrorists devise and attempt to carry out fiendish plots to hijack planes, blow up buildings, and murder ordinary citizens to avenge imagined insults against a supposedly aggrieved people (Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Welch, 2006). An Islamic jihadist videotapes himself beheading an “infidel” while shouting slogans into the camera about a holy war against the West (Sattar, 2007). A wave of violent offenses by members of adolescent gangs – “armed to the teeth, corrupting and enlisting innocent youth in order to dominate illicit drug markets” (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002, p. 5) – force communities across the United States to redefine juvenile offenders as adults (Singer, 1996). Day care providers – from New York to California and from Europe to Australia – torture, sexually abuse, and murder children in unspeakable satanic rituals (de Young, 2004). Men rape and murder women to make pornographic movies (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 142, 384, 400; Russell, 1993, p. 97).

From time to time, in societies scattered around the globe, the anti-Semitic blood-libel panic continues to erupt. In the past decade or two, Jews in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Siberia, Belarus, and Ukraine have been accused of kidnapping Muslim or Christian children and using their blood to prepare Passover matzoh. A notice to parents, anonymously posted in Siberia in 2008, read, in part: “Beware Russian parents. Keep watch over your children before the coming of the supposed Jewish holiday of Passover. These disgusting people still engage in ritual practice to their gods. They kidnap small children and remove some of their blood and use it to prepare their holy food [matzoh]. They throw the bodies [of the Christian children] out in garbage dumps” <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3521307,00.html>.

What's going on here? Who's saying these things? Are any of these claims true and accurate? Did these extravagant atrocities actually take place? And, whether true or false, what do the concern, fear, and hostility of such charges express about the societies in which they are lodged?

This book is about moral panics. The *moral panic* is a scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or "folk devils," a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing a society's culture, way of life, and central values. The word "scare" implies that the concern over, fear of, or hostility toward the folk devil is *out of proportion* to the actual threat that is claimed.

*Who* exactly has to be scared to qualify a scare as a panic? Is it the whole society, or simply a part of it? How scared do they have to be? What do they get scared *about*? And just what is it that they *do* when they're expressing that panic? Does the general public have to be scared, or can the "scare" be confined to expressions of fear in the mass media, or to a small collectivity within the society at large?

Some supposed threats are, evidence suggests, entirely imaginary. Carefully and systematically weighed, available data indicate that satanic ritual abuse did *not* take place, that aliens have *not* abducted humans, and that "snuff" movies are the stuff of urban legends (Stine, 1999). There is, in other words, a *delusional* aspect to moral panics (Bartholomew and Goode, 2000). In other moral panics, the supposed threat may be genuine, even harmful, but the alarm raised is disproportionate to that threat, and in ways we'll explore in this book. Even if approximately true, a claim may be *exaggerated*: perhaps the number of victims, or the financial cost to society, or how widespread the harm is, or the inevitability of the causal sequence from less to more harmful threats – any of these could be inflated above and beyond what the evidence, carefully assessed, indicates. Methamphetamine, the subject of a recent scare, is a harmful drug, as anyone knowledgeable about substance abuse would attest. But is it *as* harmful as the media have charged? Does methamphetamine experimentation result in "instant addiction," as numerous news broadcasts and magazine and newspaper articles have claimed? Is it – or was it – as widely used as many asserted? Is meth among the most lethal of the illicit drugs? Or is it fair to say that a moral panic or "scare" erupted over the use of meth, and one or more of its manifestations, ice, crystal, or crank? Is a post-9/11 terrorist attack as likely as some say? And does finger-pointing about the parties responsible for the terrorist acts *demonize* the parties named – namely, Arabs and Muslims? Were the laws recriminalizing juvenile delinquency a reasonable and rational effort to control the threat of youth crime? Or was this too an overreaction?

Every society has the moral right – indeed, the *obligation* – to protect itself from real and present dangers. But not all claims of threats are equally realistic or justified. Moreover, in every society, specific social circles, sectors, categories, or groups feel more threatened by certain behaviors or words than others. For instance, liberals are more likely to feel that flag burning is an expression of freedom of speech, while conservatives value patriotism more strongly, and are more likely to support

laws against flag desecration. Contrarily, liberals are more likely to become upset about and support laws against hate speech – expressions of hostility against minority groups – while conservatives tend to minimize the harm of such threats and oppose their criminalization. In other words, the very concept of what *constitutes* a threat is controversial, an expression of a diverse, socially divided, and multicultural society. Deviants are not “folk devils” to everyone, and what is regarded as wrongdoing or deviance is itself contested. Indeed, Downes and Rock (2003) point out that ambiguity is a hallmark of deviance. Regarding a particular act, belief, or condition as deviant depends not merely on what the rules are, but temporal and social context, biography, and who’s making the judgment; the same applies to moral panics. Correlatively, moral panics *usually* break out, when they do, among specific sectors of the society, leaving others untouched, unmoved, even bewildered as to what all the fuss was about. Only occasionally does a moral panic grip the society or the community at large in a vortex of condemnation and outrage. Even the evidence to indicate that a given response is “proportional” to a supposed real-world threat is controversial and weighed according to different scales by members of different social categories.

As dramatic as its manifestations seem, the moral panic rests on quavering, uneven, uncertain, and shifting terrain. As we’ll see in Chapter 4, some critics believe that terrain to be so uncertain that they claim the concept ought to be deleted from the sociological hard drive (Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). Quarantelli (2001) believes that sociologists ought to stop studying and referring to the “panic.” However, his notion of the panic is that it entails headlong, pell-mell flight from an imaginary threat, such as occurs, some observers believe, in a disaster. This is not our meaning of a *moral* panic at all, and hence, we are forced to disregard Quarantelli’s injunction. The moral panic is an analogy or metaphor *borrowed* from the disaster panic. Even if panic or irrational, headlong flight during disasters is exceedingly rare, it shares a common denominator with the moral panic: both are emotionally charged social phenomena entailing fright and anxiety. In the moral panic, people fear, avoid, and condemn a specific folk devil and his spawn – this, not flight and stampedes, are what occur. Others feel that the moral panic is a concept of declining significance in contemporary society (Best, 2008; Waiton, 2008). Clearly we disagree. Not only is the moral panic one of the most theoretically illuminating of the sociologist’s concepts, it is also one of the most fascinating.

## THE CANUDOS MASSACRE: BRAZIL (1893–7)

For 20 years, a religious mystic who came to be known as Antonio Conselheiro wandered the northeast backlands of Brazil “preaching against ungodly behavior and rebuilding rural churches and cemeteries that had fallen into disrepair in the



forbidding, semiarid interior” (Levine, 1992, p. 2). In 1893, Conselheiro led a pious group of disciples into a remote mountain valley in Bahia. There, on the site of an abandoned ranch, he founded a religious community – Canudos. It attracted thousands of followers who were drawn “by Conselheiro’s charismatic madness. He promised only sacrifice and hard work and asked residents to live according to God’s commandments and await the coming of the Millennium, when would come redemption, the Day of Judgment” (p. 2). Conselheiro’s vision was that the weak would inherit the earth and the order of nature itself would be overturned, with rainfall blessing the customarily arid region, ushering in an era of agricultural abundance. Within two years, the settlement became the second largest city in Bahia. At its height, Canudos’s population was more than a tenth of that of São Paulo (p. 2).

Landowners did not take kindly to the loss of their labor force; they demanded government intervention. The Catholic Church, struggling against what it saw as heterodoxy, apostasy, and the influence of Afro-Brazilian cults, likewise demanded immediate action. The army dispatched soldiers to capture Conselheiro. The task proved to be more formidable than any official had imagined. The first three assaults against the settlement were repulsed by tenacious resistance from his followers. The campaign stretched out over two years. Finally, in October 1897, 8,000 troops serving under three generals and Brazil’s Minister of War, encircled Canudos and bombarded it into submission by heavy artillery.

The repression of the community was violent and bloody. Thousands of Conselheiro’s followers were killed; the captured survivors numbered only in the hundreds. Soldiers drew and quartered the wounded or hacked them to pieces “limb by limb” (p. 190), “killed children by smashing their skulls against trees” (p. 190), and cut Conselheiro’s head off and displayed it on a pike. (It turns out he had already died two weeks before the final assault, probably of dysentery.) They “smashed, leveled, and burned” all 5,000 homes in the settlement (p. 190) and torched and dynamited the entire grounds of Canudos. “The army systematically eradicated the remaining traces of the holy city as if it had housed the devil incarnate” (p. 190).

The resistance of Canudos – indeed, its very existence – had generated a crisis in Brazilian society.

Highlighted by the universal fascination with stories about crazed religious fanatics, the Canudos conflict flooded the press, invading not only editorials, columns, and news dispatches, but even feature stories and humor. For the first time in Brazil, newspapers were used to create a sense of public panic. Canudos appeared daily, almost always on the front page; indeed, the story was the first ever to receive daily coverage in the Brazilian press. More than a dozen major newspapers sent war correspondents to the front and ran daily columns reporting events.... Something about Canudos provoked anxiety, which would be soothed only by evidence that Canudos had been destroyed (Levine, 1992, p. 24).

In order to understand the intensity of public concern in Brazil in the 1890s over the existence of a religious community consisting of a few thousand souls who, as far as anyone could tell, were not violating any of the country's criminal statutes, it is necessary to turn the calendar back a century or more and examine events of the time. The country had abolished slavery in Brazil in 1888 and overthrown the monarchy in 1889, introduced a standard, uniform system of weights and measures, and, by decree, had standardized the Portuguese language on a nationwide basis. Brazil seemed to be poised on the threshold of modernity. By forging a fanatical, millennial community, Conselheiro defied government authority, which was in the process of attempting to reach into every hamlet in Brazil. Indeed, Canudos rejected the very civilizing process itself, threatening to plunge the society back into a state of darkness and superstition. The backlanders had defined "the progressive and modern benefits of civilized life" (p. 155). "Urban Brazilians were proud of their material and political accomplishments and felt only shame at the dark, primitive world of the hinterlands" (p. 155). Only one possible solution existed to the challenge posed by Canudos: The movement must be crushed, the community obliterated, and Conselheiro and his followers exterminated.

## THE "WHITE SLAVE" TRAFFIC

Early in the twentieth century, the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers ran headlines about Asian conspirators who kidnapped young, vulnerable, small-town and farm women across the United States and forced them into lives of prostitution. Early in the twentieth century, publishers turned out a score of books, some intentionally fictional, others purportedly factual, about the "white slave traffic" (Donovan, 2006). George Kibbe Turner, a journalist, short story writer, and screenwriter, claimed that prostitution was organized "with all the nicety of modern industry," an industry much like the Chicago stockyards, in which "not one shred of flesh is wasted." *The House of Bondage*, a bestselling book by Reginald Wright Kauffman (1911), ran through more than a dozen printings. It contained chapters entitled "The Specter of Fear," "The Birds of Prey," "An Angel Unawares," "Under the Lash," and "The Serpents' Den." In his introduction, the author claimed that the book "is the truth only that I have told. Throughout this narrative, there is no incident that is not a daily commonplace in the life of the underworld of every large city. If proof were needed," Wright adds, "the newspapers have ... proved as much. I have written only what I have myself seen and myself heard." *The Traffic in Souls*, a movie, luridly exploited the "white slavery" theme. In 1910, Congress passed the Mann Act, a law making it a crime to assist or entice women to cross state lines for the purpose of engaging in prostitution. Yet for the period during which this scare erupted, no one managed to turn up a single case of kidnapping and enforced

prostitution (Shevory, 2004). “White slavery” proved to be a “perfect storm” of a moral panic – a complete figment of the media’s imagination. The Mann Act remains on the books to this day.

The “white slave” traffic moral panic was inspired by media attention to Chinese immigration to the American West, the fact that a substantial proportion of these immigrants smoked, or were thought to have smoked, opium (Conrad and Schneider, 1980, p. 120; 1992), the fear that whites, especially women, would be corrupted by this “degenerate” Chinese vice, and the subsequent connection between opiate addiction and prostitution (Courtwright, 1982, pp. 70–8). In addition, Chinese immigration created a competition for jobs with the majority white population – hence, the fabrication of a “yellow peril”: the fear that Asians would swamp people of European descent in a “tidal wave” of yellow-skinned hordes who were willing to work for pennies a day. The western states and municipalities passed a series of anti-opium laws, most of which were designed to control and limit the rights of Chinese immigrants (Morgan, 1978). Richard Ashley points out that the 20 Dr. Fu Manchu novels, a series by Sax Rohmer that began in 1913, were very popular because they located the source of the peril to a specific Chinese folk devil: “the insidious Doctor had a plan ... to enslave the white world with his evil drugs.” In Rohmer’s novels, it wasn’t clear whether Dr. Fu Manchu peddled cocaine or opium, but no matter: the stereotype linking the Chinese, dope, and involuntary prostitution had been forged (Ashley, 1972, p. 115).

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese imperial army conquered major swaths of the Asian continent. The high command established the practice of forcing Asian, mainly Chinese and Korean, women to become “comfort women” – unwilling prostitutes servicing Japanese soldiers (<http://online.sfsu.edu/~soh/cw-links.htm>). Interestingly, here, we have the *opposite* of “white slavery”: While advocates of white slavery claimed that an atrocity took place when it didn’t, the Japanese government *denied* that an atrocity occurred, even though it actually took place.

A fanciful version of the “sex slave” panic did erupt, however, in France in the late 1960s: employees of six dress shops in Orléans were rumored to drug and abduct young women, under the cover of darkness, taking them through underground tunnels to boats, to North Africa or the Middle East, where they were forced into prostitution. In this particular “urban legend,” the kidnappers were alleged to be Jewish (Morin, 1971). The tale was an extravagant and fanciful fabrication – it mobilized no police action nor was it verified by any mainstream organization or institution – but it shows how lively and credible the “sex slave” story is among certain social circles in certain societies at certain times.

In the early 2000s, a new version of the sexual slavery moral panic emerged, this time in the United States. In testimony given before the House of Representatives, a woman from Nepal stated that she had been “drugged, abducted, and forced to work at a brothel in Bombay.” A State Department official estimated that 50,000 “slaves” were “pouring” into the United States each year, a figure confirmed later by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). A Justice Department official put the