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MORAL PANIC

Its Origins in Resistance, Ressentiment and the Translation of Fantasy into Reality

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This paper addresses: the origins of moral panic in the New Deviancy Theory of the 1960s, particularly in the work of Albert Cohen and his notion of moral indignation which is rooted in the Nietzschean concept of Ressentiment; the emergence of the concept in the tumult of 1968 and in the intellectual context of the National Deviancy Conference; the key attributes of moral panic as arising out of fundamental changes in social structure and culture; and issues of moral disturbance because of conflicts in values. It concludes with a critique of recent uses of the concept and a reformulation of the notions of moral disturbance, disproportionality, displacement and volatility.

Introduction

Forty years ago, in 1968, the world seemed, for a moment at least, turned upside down. The tumult in the streets was matched by the tumult in the universities and, though the political consequences—in the West at least—were slight, the intellectual fallout was considerable and the cultural consequences longstanding. It was at this time, and within this social and political context, that dramatic developments occurred within the sociology of deviance, including the emergence of the concept of moral panic. It is within this rubric that both its nature and its potential must be assessed. As it is, there has been, subsequently, a tendency to pluck the concept out of its intellectual context and for the attendant ideas and conceptual structures to be discarded so that both the insights and the political edginess of the time are in danger of being lost.

Let me state first of all that the initial formulations of moral panic suggested that such phenomena arise out of considerable moral disturbances rooted in significant structural and value changes within society, that the subjects of panic are not random but trigger points in such transformations and that the effects of a panic are to some extent self-fulfilling: for ‘if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences’, as W. J. Thomas famously put it. Further, moral panics involve cultural conflict. On the one side, there is resistance, innovation and sometimes provocation; on the other, there is indignation and outrage. That, consequent on the notion of moral disturbance, there is a great deal of emotional energy involved on both sides: the police pursue the deviant with zeal, the media thrive on the controversy, the public avidly follow the outrage and the deviants are galvanized and sometimes reconstituted by the response. There is energy; there is fascination and something edging on enjoyment: moral panics, like crime, are seductive events. In contrast, the phrase ‘moral panic’ has become associated...
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with a rather listless depiction of mass media deception, of audience delusion, of simple mistakes in reason, the random displacement of grievances on hapless and passive targets and on fleeting events, peripheral disturbances in an otherwise regulated universe.

_The National Deviancy Conference_

It was in 1968 that we held the first meeting of the National Deviancy Conference at the University of York, and it was at this antinomian gathering of radical criminologists and deviancy theorists that I gave my first academic paper, rather pompously entitled ‘The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviance, Negotiators of Reality and Translators of Fantasy’ (published in _Images of Deviance_, edited by Stan Cohen in 1971a). It was here that I discussed the moral panic over drugs—a fertile area for social anxiety, which, as Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda note, is ‘almost natural choice for moral panic’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: 203), and which has, as they so graphically illustrate, been the regular subject of such panics in Britain, in the United States, in Israel and all over the world.¹

My research on drug use was based on an ethnographic study of Notting Hill in West London, carried out between 1967 and 1969, combined with a rather rudimentary quantitative measure of the moral panic over drug use (cannabis in particular) conducted in 1967. Notting Hill at that time was far from the salubrious haunt of the chattering classes that it is today; for, long before Hugh Grant, it was an area of high deprivation and with a large immigrant population. It was also the focus in London of hippiedom, of the new bohemianism that had spread rapidly across the Western world. This youth culture had attracted large media condemnation. Indeed, it was evident that the moral panic was about drugs in the context of the new bohemianism. The famous passage in _The People_ of 21 September 1969 bears repetition:

**HIPPIE THUGS—THE SORDID TRUTH:** Drug taking couples making love while others look on, rule by heavy mobs with iron bars, foul language, filth and stench THAT is the scene inside the hippies’ fortress in London’s Piccadilly. These are not rumours but facts—sordid facts which will shock ordinary decent family loving people.

Thus, the occupation of 144 Piccadilly by the London Street Commune was greeted, led as it was by the notorious Dr John, who, by delicious irony, was the _nome de guerre_ of Phil Cohen, later to become a leading subcultural theorist. The welter of public condemnation was fronted by none other than Enoch Powell, who, as Phil Cohen, writing in 1971, put it ‘gave the most classical statement of moral panic’ (Cohen 1997: 30).

My research over this period focused on such a panic. Let me first of all lay out its findings:

(1) That the moral panic was not against drugs per se but the people who used the drugs and the reasons that the drugs were used. That is, it was against a hippie culture that proposed extravagant levels of hedonism and expressivity and opposition to the values of work and discipline.

¹In this article, I will focus largely on the moral panic over drugs; this is an extension of my recent article on Stan Cohen’s _Folk Devils and Moral Panics_ (1972) (Young 2007a).
(2) That the moral panic was rooted in massive changes in the value system and relationships of production and consumption in advanced Western societies, namely a shift from a world of discipline and deferred gratification to one that stressed immediacy.

(3) That both the moral indignation of the public and the youth cultures that challenged it had common root causes.

(4) That the mass media carry a narrative that both titillates and condemns, that it both amplifies the problem and provides explanations and outcomes (particularly ‘the nemesis effect’) that serve to confirm consensual images of society.

(5) That such a media amplification creates a spiral of public fear and indignation, pressurizing control agencies such as the police and magistrates and creating fantasy crime waves.

(6) That this process of deviancy amplification, however fantastic in its premises, is real in its consequences, including, in some instances, self-fulfilment of stereotypes.

The intellectual context of this research was based on the work of the National Deviancy Conference—itself propelled by the rapid developments within the sociology of deviance. Let me briefly contextualize this.

The New Deviancy Revolution

Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior; it is a property conferred upon those forms by the people who came into direct or indirect contact with it. (Erikson 1966: 6)

This is a large turn away from an older sociology which tended to rest on the idea that deviance leads to social control, I have come to believe the reverse idea … social control leads to deviance. (Lemert 1967: v)

The decade 1955–65 was a time of extraordinary creativity in American sociology of deviance. The names alone—Becker, Cicourel, Cohen, Cloward, Erikson, Goffman, Gusfield, Matza, Scheff, and Sykes, to mention just a few—jog the mind and convey the intellectual intensity of the period. It was a time when, for a while, the sociology of deviance became a central focus of sociological debate and when, as Howard Becker reminds us in the introduction to The Other Side (Becker 1964), it regained its connection within the mainstream of sociological theory. For a long period, in the aftermath of the Chicago School, the sociology of deviance had succumbed to becoming a handmaiden of administration—‘… a practical pursuit, devoted to helping society deal with those it found troublesome’ (Becker 1964: 1). Images of pathology had replaced those of verstehen and deviance was viewed as a lacking of culture (because of inadequate socialization) rather than as a culture to be understood and appreciated. For, as Stan

2The immediate research was published in ‘The Police as Amplifiers of Deviance and Translators of Fantasy’ (Young 1971d); it was contextualized in a wider discussion of drugs, youth culture and social change in The Drugtakers (Young 1971c); the relationship between media narratives and deviancy amplification was published in ‘Drugs and the Mass Media’ (Young 1971a); and expanded in a paper given at the 1971 BSA conference, ‘Mass Media, Drugs and Deviancy’ (Young 1971b), whilst the new bohemianism was discussed in ‘The Hippie Solution: An Essay on the Politics of Leisure’ (Young 1972). There are video interviews about the Notting Hill research (Young 2001) and of Stan Cohen’s work on mods and rockers (Cohen 2000).
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Cohen was to note later in the introduction to *Images of Deviance* (Cohen 1971a), the traditional perspective towards deviance involved ‘an annihilation of meaning’ and a whole array of experts were mobilized to achieve this process of deculturation.

The two strands of the new deviancy theory—subcultural and labelling theory—roundly subverted this. Subcultures, whether these involved drug taking, violence, burglary or vandalism, were seen, in the tradition of cultural anthropology, as human creations, attempts to tackle the problems of material and social existence, whilst labelling theory pointed to the ways in which those in authority attempt to take meaning away from deviant individuals or groups. Both strands are social constructionist in their orientation, stressing that deviance is a constructed category rather than some fixed essence and that both the subculture and the culture of control are necessary subjects of a fully social theory of deviance.

The two strands of the new deviancy revolution involved the rejection of absolutist notions of value and the highlighting of the ironic and self-fulfilling nature of social control. We live in a pluralistic society with a magical cubism of perspectives, where one person’s deviancy is another person’s normality and where there are numerous audiences and evaluators. *Deviance is not inherent in an action but a quality bestowed upon it;* the ascription of deviance demands both actors and reactors. Furthermore, the definitions of those in power are proclaimed as absolutist standards of normality and are given top ranking in what Howard Becker (1967) termed ‘the hierarchy of credibility’. These are imposed with varying degrees of success upon those in lower structural positions through a social control apparatus ranging from the mass media to the criminal justice system. In this rubric of control orthodox criminology, together with cognate disciplines, especially psychiatry, has a key role in *explaining away* deviancy as a lack of values rather than alternative norms and realities (see Young 1971c). In this, the label criminal or deviant carries with it essentialist connotations of undersocialization, irrationality, mindlessness, impulsiveness, etc., often caricatured in positivist terms.

The second strand was that social control frequently has effects that are counterproductive and self-fulfilling. This insight runs through the critical tradition in criminology; it is at the heart of its intellectual enterprise from the discovery of the criminalizing effect of imprisonment to the repeated demonstration of the counter-productive effect of the war on drugs. In this, the new deviancy theory moved beyond a liberalism that insists that images of crime and deviance are mistakes in knowledge, misperception or badly grounded stereotypes to one that suggests that, however true this may be at the origin of a criminal career or the onset of a deviant enterprise, over time such stigmatization can become self-fulfilling. For, in certain circumstances, people become like the label. The folk devils conjured up out of moral indignation and prejudice are actually constructed by the forces of social control. Fantasy is translated into reality. Something like the stereotype of the psychopath is created by the long brutalization of the prison: lockdowns, isolation, alternating with the ever present threat of inmate and warden violence. The amorphous grouping of the young people on the street becomes reconstructed into the hierarchical structure of the gang by the targeting of police patrols and the persuasive narratives of the mass media (see Cohen 1971b; Hallsworth 2007).

Such a reinvigoration of theory did not, of course, occur out of the blue: it was very much a product of the tumult of the time. It is 40 years since 1968—a time when the *world seemed turned upside down*. The sanity of psychiatry, the honesty of the police, the veracity of the mass media, the respectability of the politician, the comfortable world of
the middle classes were all relentlessly questioned. The war in Vietnam, the emergence of dramatic expressive youth cultures, the challenge of new bohemianism and a strident second wave of feminism all raised questions of the status quo, reversing the traditional questions of criminology and the sociology of deviance (see Ferrell et al. 2008). A whole stratum of middle-class youth came into collision with the police on demonstrations, on civil rights marches, and in the policing of their everyday lives (see Lilly et al. 1989). The new deviancy theory and the new criminology that came close after it were organically linked to this. ‘The troublesome’, traditionally located with seeming obviousness in the realm of the deviant and the criminal, become relocated in a polar elsewhere. ‘Trouble’ was the police, the prisons, the mental hospitals, the journalists, the ‘normal’ man in the street. The focus of the problematic shifted; where meaning was taken from the deviant, it was returned appreciated, and whereas the powerful had somehow magically been seen as existing outside of the world of explanation, their activities and the impact—often selffulfilling—of their activities became the centre of attention. Secondary deviance in the vernacular became of greater interest than primary deviance (see Lemert 1967).

Whose Side Were We On? The Sociologist as Advocate

It is important to stress how a younger generation of sociologists identified with the process of cultural change that pivoted around 1968. We were all moved by the times: the possibility of social change, the worlds of diversity that the new bohemia promised, the youthful colonization of leisure and the rejection of austerity and discipline in a world seemingly in fast-forward, all of which made the choice of being on the side of progress well nigh inevitable.

The best-selling texts of the time echoed this. Thus, Howard Becker, reflecting recently on the immense popularity and influence of his 1963 book, Outsiders, commented:

I wrote about musicians, who worked in bars and other lowly places, playing music that had a sort of romantic aura, and I wrote about the marijuana some of them smoked, the same marijuana that many of those students were experimenting with and whose effects they were learning to enjoy (just as the analysis in the book suggested they might). These topics, intersecting more or less with their own lives made the book one that teachers, many of whom shared the student interest in drugs and music, liked to assign to students to read. And so the book became a sort of standard text in classes of younger students. (Becker 2005: 2)

And, of course, this new generation of sociologists became advocates for the emerging subcultures of youth and fierce critics of the conservatism of the various agents of social control. David Garland picks up on this nicely when he writes of ‘the cultural source’ of the concept of moral panic as:

… deriving from the characteristic social attitudes of young 1960s sociologists like Cohen, Young and Ditton and their colleagues in the National Deviancy Conference. This was the outlook of the hip, deviance-appreciating, participant observer who was often culturally closer to deviants than to their controllers, and who saw criminal law as a misplaced form of repression, at least as it applied to the soft deviance of drug taking and club-cultural style. In the face of what they regarded as uninformed, intolerant and unnecessarily repressive reactions to deviance by conservative authorities, these sociologists developed a standard critical response, a critique with which to counter oppressive social reaction.
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Their critique had two aspects. The first pointed to an empirical mistake, prompted by misplaced anxiety: ‘Straight society is over-reacting,’ they implied, ‘the problem is much less serious and much less threatening than people think. Relax, don’t panic, no one here is getting hurt’. The second aspect was more normative in character, more focused on the form of the social reaction, and more critical of its moralizing, judgmental stance: ‘The real problem is not the deviant behavior, it s your compulsive need to moralize. Be more tolerant, more open to difference and diversity. Forget about your up-tight, out-of-date morality. Relax, don’t panic, no one here is doing wrong’. The term ‘moral panic’—as much catchphrase as concept in its typical usage – captured these responses perfectly, neatly condensing analysis and attitude. (Garland 2008: 19)

The first level of advocacy was, thus, the appreciation and defence of subculture; the second was to question the nature of social reaction. This corresponded to the rule of symmetry: that, in order to explain deviant behaviour, it was necessary to explain action and reaction and then, of course, subsequently, the impact of reaction upon action. As such, it invoked a notion of *subcultures in collision* and the necessity of a ‘fully social theory’ of deviance to explain both, say, the subcultures of youth and those of control, whether the police, journalists, lawyers, etc. But there was, as we have seen, a third level of advocacy, and that concerned the impact of social reaction, namely that secondary deviance was often more severe than primary deviance, secondary harm more of a problem than primary harm. This was the basis of the critique of the whole process of criminalization, of prison as producing the criminal just as the mental hospital constructed madness and treatment clinics produced addicts and alcoholics, etc. Irrationality was, therefore, shifted from the supposedly wanton youth or mindless drug taker to the agents of control themselves, for the actions of authority through the process of deviancy amplification only made things worse.

*From Moral Indignation to Moral Panic*

The culmination of this intense period of creativity in the American sociology of deviance was Albert Cohen’s 1965 article, ‘The Sociology of the Deviant Act: Anomie Theory and Beyond’. In this, he made an imaginative attempt to synthesize the two strands of deviancy theory—anomie and labelling—and set up the groundwork for the British endeavours to create a ‘fully social theory of deviance’ that were to follow in the early 1970s. Of direct relevance to moral panic theory was Cohen’s evocation of moral indignation. This is of fascinating genealogy arising from Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, utilized by Max Scheler and Werner Sombart in the first two decades of the twentieth century, famously evoked by Svend Ranulf in *Moral Indignation and Middle-Class Psychology* (1938) in his explanation of the attraction of National Socialism to the German petit bourgeois, emerging in Merton’s *Social Theory and Social Structure* in the 1950s, and thence to Albert Cohen before it came to influence Stan Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, and *The Drugtakers* in the early 1970s. In essence, moral indignation is concerned with punitiveness (whether in terms of penal law or informal fury) about the behaviour of groups who do not directly harm one’s interests. Albert Cohen, in a brilliant passage, sums up such ‘disinterested’ moral indignation:

The dedicated pursuit of culturally approved goals, the eschewing of interdicted but tantalizing goals, the adherence to normatively sanctioned means—these imply a certain self-restraint, effort, discipline, inhibition. What is the effect of the spectacle of others who, though their activities do not manifestly
damage our own interests, are morally undisciplined, who give themselves up to idleness, self-indulgence, or forbidden vices? What effect does the propinquity of the wicked have on the peace of mind of the virtuous? (Cohen 1965: 6)

So, here, we have the facts of life: the disciplines of work and reward, the just allocation of distributive justice according to merit the pressures and discontents experienced at certain points of the social structure and the lassitude and gratuitous rewards—at least in the perception of the indignant—occurring in others. It is a formula of tension, of self-control and lack of it, of discipline and ill discipline. But Cohen goes further than just indicating the negative features of indignation; he also points to the way in which the virtuous can gain from such contrasts:

In several ways, the virtuous can make capital out of this situation, can convert a situation with a potential for strain to a source of satisfaction. One can become even more virtuous letting his reputation hinge on his righteousness, building his self out of invidious comparison to the morally weak. Since others’ wickedness sets off the jewel of one’s own virtue, and one’s claim to virtue is at the core of his public identity, one may actually develop a stake in the existence of deviant others, and be threatened should they pretend to moral excellence. In short, another’s virtue may become a source of strain! One may also join with others in righteous puritanical wrath to mete out punishment to the deviants, not so much to stamp out their deviant behavior, as to reaffirm the central importance of conformity as the basis for judging men and to reassure himself and others of his attachment to goodness. One may even make a virtue of tolerance and indulgence of others’ moral deficiencies, thereby implicitly calling attention to one’s own special strength of character. If the weakness of others is only human, then there is something more than human about one’s own strength. On the other hand, one might join the profligate. (Cohen 1965: 6–7, italics in original)

It is clear from this that Albert Cohen conceived of moral indignation as what would now be described as a form of ‘othering’—a process both of threat to identity and of confirmation. Further, that such a moral disturbance had an intensity of emotion, that it was a function both of attraction and repulsion. It was out of such an analysis of moral indignation (supplemented of course with notions of the moral entrepreneur (Becker 1963), and moral passage (Gusfield 1963)) that the concept of moral panic arose. Indeed, if moral indignation depicts the chronic condition of moral disturbance, moral panic is its acute form.

Disinterested Intervention?

In The Drugtakers, I was greatly influenced by Albert Cohen and, behind him, the work of Max Scheler and Svend Ranulf. The concept of moral indignation involves questioning the reasons for supposedly ‘disinterested’ social intervention—moral anger, where the interests of the party infuriated are not directly affected. Following this line of thinking, I noted that there were three reasons for social intervention:

(1) Conflict of interests: where a powerful group has its interests directly threatened or where there is an advantage in intervention (in the case, for example, of drug squads, treatment centres, etc.).

(2) Moral indignation: where there is a moral conflict of interests and where the subculture concerned threatens the moral values of a more powerful group. I was concerned here with the emotional and indeed visceral responses to drug users from police officers and other spokespeople of respectable society.
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(3) Humanitarianism: here, a powerful group seek to curb the activities of another group in their own better interests. Thus, if one manifestation of moral indignation may be anger, another may be what appears as its exact opposite—humanitarianism. Indeed, one might go a step further and suggest that such humanitarianism may be a cloak (a technique of neutralization if you want) to cancel moral discomfort and indignation.

Here, I was interested in Alex Comfort’s *The Anxiety Makers* (1967), which charted the way in which the medical profession had repeatedly translated their moral indignation over certain ‘abuses’ into clinically backed humanitarianism. Thus, masturbation was once seen as causing psychosis, listlessness and impotence and various barbaric clinical devices were evolved to prevent young people from touching their genital organs. Indeed, I suggested, a ‘nemesis effect’ (see Young 1971a), where deviance is seen to lead to various types of misery unless humanitarian interventions are pursued (marijuana use escalates to heroin addiction, premarital sexual intercourse to VD, teenage pregnancy to poverty, etc.).

Looking back on this, it is clear that moral indignation does involve a conflict of direct interests, in so far as morality itself is manifestly threatened. Ranulf’s distinction is, therefore, unviable (see also Cohen 1972: 16). But, even in the more prosaic sense of an instrumental conflict of interests, moral indignation very frequently involves the assertion of threat (the drugs that endanger our children, the violence that threatens the respectable citizen, etc.). Indeed, the key argument centring on the disproportionality of social reaction usually revolves around the confirmation or refutation of such responses.

As for humanitarianism, here, moral indignation is concealed and the intervention is justified on behalf of the offender. Indeed, the ‘offender’ is seen as the victim, witness the ‘binge drinker’ as an alcoholic, the teenage mother as irrational and the ‘sick’ drug user. Interventions arising from moral indignation are thus justified either by assertions of violation of public safety or the safety of the deviant. In retrospect, the two justifications correspond to what I have termed ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ othering (see Young 2007b). The first demonizes, insisting the deviant is alien from us, and the second suggests that deviance is sick or immature behaviour; and the deviant lacks our norms and values. Either way, they represent the polarity of conventional responses to drug use: the alternatives of punishment or treatment where the possibilities of genuine liberalization are blanked out and ignored.

The Moral Equation

A fundamental source of legitimacy in advanced industrial countries is the nexus between merit and reward. This evocation of a meritocracy that work, discipline and effort find their own reward in worldly success, ease of life and enjoyment is central to our societies. Yet, herein, as Merton pointed out in his famous article, ‘Social Structure and Anomie’ (Merton 1938), lies a major contradiction. Because, in a class society, the cultural goals of meritocracy are not matched by the distribution of rewards. In a grossly unequal society, the dreams of success, of mobility, of reward are constantly dashed against the experienced reality of the world as it actually is. A massive array of institutions—the mass media, education, the work place—preach meritocracy, yet the system is palpably unequal both in its workday pressures and in its everyday rewards. Such tectonic plates of inequality generate crime, disturbance, moral indignation and, at times, moral panics. The system ‘calls forth deviance’, as Merton put it, but it just as inevitably calls forth moral indignation and punitiveness.
There are certain sensitive parts of the social structure and there are others that are definite trigger points for the crystallization of feelings of unfairness and despair. The sensitive points are well known in the literature; they are where those precariously included in the social order face those who are tantalisingly excluded (see Young 2007b). The petit bourgeois striving to make sense of a meritocracy that they are only just part of, who, in a world of unstable employment, are only a pay cheque away from poverty, and those who Elliott Currie (1998) calls ‘the overemployed’—the working poor with two, or sometimes more, jobs who must constantly run themselves ragged to make ends meet. And the triggers? As always, it is youth in their role as portends of the future, in their situation of relative freedom between families with disposable income in their pockets and with aspirations as yet uncrushed by the realities of life. They are the triggers and they are the targets in their supposed indolence, their violence, their drug use, their dress, and of course their sexuality. They have played this role throughout history, as Pearson (1983) so graphically demonstrated, and do so today with their binge drinking, gangs, undergraduate sex and belligerence: the boys violent and the girls pregnant.

The two classic targets of moral panics epitomise this. The hippies pressed every button in the character armour of discipline and control; the ‘mods’ prefigured a world of consumption and immediacy which undermined the austerity and discipline of post-war Britain (see Cohen 1972; Hebdige 1979).

Ressentiment

In such a meritocratic society, the individual’s inability to live up to the American Dream, or its just-as-pervasive European equivalent, can be ascribed to the failures of the system or failures of the individual. But either radical politics or self-blame are only two alternatives. Just as likely are those who blame a particular section of society for their misfortune, who see rewards being distributed unfairly. This evokes feelings of ressentiment that Merton characterized so vividly when he wrote:

This complex sentiment has three interlocking elements. First, diffuse feelings of hate, envy and hostility; second, a sense of being powerless to express these feelings actively against the person or social stratum evoking them; and third, a continual re-experiencing of this impotent hostility. The essential point distinguishing ressentiment from rebellion is that the former does not involve a genuine change in values. Ressentiment involves a sour grapes pattern which asserts merely that desired but unattainable objectives do not actually embody the prized values—after all, the fox in the fable does not say that he abandons all taste for sweet grapes; he says only that these particular grapes are not sweet. Rebellion, on the other hand, involves a genuine transvaluation, where the direct or vicarious experience of frustration leads to full denunciation of previously prized values—the rebellious fox simply denounces the prevailing taste for sweet grapes. In ressentiment, one condemns what one secretly craves; in rebellion, one condemns the craving itself. (Merton 1957: 155–6)

The bohemian drug user was both a threat to the hardworking citizen steeped in the morality of discipline and restraint, whilst, at the same time, the vociferous condemnation of the hippie was a powerful reaffirmation of the values of ‘normality’. The process was both a threat and an affirmation. But this alone did not explain the intensity of the reaction. For, underlying this is the process of ressentiment, of sour grapes, the rejection of that which we secretly desire.
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A moral panic is a moral disturbance centring on claims that direct interests have been violated—an act of othering sometimes expressed in terms of demonization, sometimes with humanitarian undertones that are grossly disproportionate to the event or the activities of the individuals concerned. It is presented in stereotypical terms. In the modern period, this involves the focusing of the mass media, buttressed by scientific experts and other moral entrepreneurs, and the mobilization of the police and the courts and other agencies of social control. Such a process of mass stigmatization involves a widely circulated narrative on the genesis, proclivity and nemesis of a particular deviant group that tends to amplify in intensity over time (particularly in terms of the number of supposed incidents) and then finally extinguishes. It very frequently results in a process of deviancy amplification, a translation of fantasy into reality, where, in certain aspects, the initial stereotypes are self-fulfilled. Let us unpack this statement in terms of our previous analysis:

(1) Moral disturbance: moral panics are moral happenings. They are not simply panics, media engendered or otherwise, that provide false information, whether about the perils of drink or the danger of pit-bull terriers. That being said, the rapid spread of such narratives is very often an indication of moral disturbance and the moral entrepreneurs, themselves, may frequently present their assertions as of a scientific or technical nature, devoid of moral consideration. Thus, the alarm about pit-bulls may well be vested in the fears of an underclass, of ‘chavs’, the pronouncement on the dangers of binge drinking may well relate to a moral dislike of the hedonism of modern youth, and the ‘dissolute’ nature of the night-time economy (see Talbott 2007).

Such a moral disturbance is characterized by a feeling of anxiety, of emotional energy; it is not merely a fiction or a puzzling anomaly. It must also be reasonably widespread: although, in the present period, this must not be confused with the notion of a large consensus facing up to a small deviant minority and successfully reaffirming its borders. For, first, a moral panic does not occur when hegemony is successful, but rather when it is in crisis. Indeed, the cases both of the panic over hippies and mods involved the disintegration of a consensus around the relationships between discipline and reward that was slipping away to make way for late-modern consumer societies where there is an emphasis on immediacy and short-term hedonism (see Young 2007a; Hayward 2004). Further, in modern hyper-pluralistic societies, which tend towards a ‘majority of minorities’, the possibility of such successful othering is greatly diminished (see Young 2007b; McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

(2) Proportionality and displacement: as all commentators agree, the disproportional reaction to a particular deviance is a key attribute of any moral panic. The calculation of such a disproportionality is dependent on an accurate assessment of the problem and of the intensity of the reaction. This, in itself, is a difficult matter, dependent both on empirical accuracy and normative evaluation (see Garland 2008). The continued heated debate over the last 40 years over two of the major foci of moral panics—youth and drugs, and youthful violence—amply illustrate this. The recognition of the criminological discourse around moral panic as an act of advocacy sensitzes us to two problems: that of underestimating the problem and over-
estimating the disproportionality of reaction. As Garland notes, such an advocacy was more easily achieved and more readily convincing in the areas of soft drugs and minor youth violence as characterized in the two initial studies of moral panics, The Drugtakers (Young 1971c) and Folk Devils and Moral Panics (Cohen 1972). It was much less convincing in areas such as street robbery (and would not, of course, be countenanced in respect of crimes such as rape and racist attack). 3 As I have argued, the third area of advocacy introduces an important and more subtle dimension. For it interests itself not in the static assessment of deviance as a social problem, but the extent to which intervention actually generates a disproportionate problem. That is where, although the primary harm of a particular problem is acknowledged, the secondary harm occurring from intervention is seen as making matters considerably worse. Nowhere in the labelling theory/constructionist literature is this better illustrated than in the use of drug control (e.g. Duster 1970). Thus, the ‘inherent’ harm of, say, heroin, is contrasted with the secondary harm of the punitive interventions set up in order to control its use.

Moral panics are often portrayed as involving displacement. Social anxieties are displaced upon a scapegoat: a group unrelated to the source of the anxiety. Rather, I have argued that the trigger groups are not chosen by accident; the anger is not a misapprehension. For the group or event chosen as a focus of moral panic is closely related to the source of anxiety. It is a symptom of the underlying moral uneasiness. Furthermore, the notion of disproportionality is something of a paradox. For the response to the event is somewhat proportional to the anxiety, otherwise it would simply not be a fully fledged moral panic. What is disproportionate is the reaction to its immediate manifestation. It is proportional to the anxiety, not to the actual event. It is, on the surface of things, a mistake in reason, but it is not, on a more in-depth level, a mistake in emotion. Now, as a matter of fact, one might well disagree with this emotion—it is, after all, too frequently a feature of ressentiment, a creature of reaction, an obstacle to progress. But this does not deny its energy and its authenticity.

(3) Volatility and transgression: my argument is that a key to the strength and indeed existence of a moral panic lies in their relationship to fundamental structural and normative problems of social order and that it is these forces that call forth both the panic and the folk devil, indeed that folk devils are not arbitrarily selected as scapegoats, but flagrantly exacerbate the discontent of the panickers. Such behaviour is transgressive: it involves the energetic attempt to enforce rules and the provocative attempt to break them. These panics, if they are of any significance, will reappear again (very often, of course, in terms of the two tropes, ‘youth and drugs’ or ‘youth and violence’; see Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). They are not simply one-off disturbances, isolated at one point in time. Yet, they often appear in the textbooks like isolated moments of irrationality. Rather, if panics are ‘successful’, they connect up to fundamental shifts in the tectonic plates of order, each occurrence like a volcanic atoll. It is their reappearance that confirms their status as moral disturbances of any significant order.

3 Important here is the realist critique that points to the way in which crime is often locally and socially focused in its impact so that it is easy to forget, for example, the blight of hard drug use on the projects or the sink estates, and the way in which violence impacts on vulnerable populations and on women (see Lea and Young 1984; Hallsworth 2008).
MORAL PANIC

Moral Panics and the Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills famously talked of the sociological imagination. This imagination involves putting the personal in the context of the wider social structure—of placing biography in structure and in history (see Young forthcoming). It is a two-way process, connecting psychodynamics to structure and structure to psychodynamics. The study of moral panics necessitates us moving from the problems engendered by the disciplines of structure and historical events as they impinge upon a particular strata of society to the mass psychology of ressentiment and othering that this engenders in encounters with other subcultures that themselves are the product of particular structural situations and the projects of the actors involved. In this, it takes us to the heart of the social system, to the continuous beat of disruption and disturbance.

References

——— (1967), ‘Whose Side are We On?’, Social Problems, 14: 239–47.


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