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'Moral panic' and moral language in the media

ABSTRACT

This article provides a comprehensive survey of the use of the term 'moral panic' from its coinage in 1972 until the present day. It traces the evolution of the term in academic sociology and criminology, its adoption by the media in the mid-1980s and its subsequent employment in the national press. It shows how and why the term changed its meaning, and how far its use in academic discourse affected its use in the media.

   The article traces the development of 'moral panic' in the media, where it was first used pejoratively, then rejected for being pejorative, and finally rehabilitated as a term of approval. It explains why the term developed as it did: how it enabled journalists to justify the moral and social role of the media, and also to support the reassertion of 'family values' in the early 1990s.

   The article concludes by considering the relationship between 'moral panic' and moral language in general. This is a more speculative analysis of the term, drawing on the work of moral philosophers and attempting to predict how 'moral panic' may develop in the future. 'Moral panic', I suggest, is an unsatisfactory form of moral language which may adversely affect the media's ability to handle moral issues seriously.

KEYWORDS: Media; morality; moral panic

I first encountered the term 'moral panic' at a seminar in early modern history in 1991. As I later discovered, it had been around for nearly twenty years and had already become firmly established in the literature of sociology and criminology; but it was only just beginning to find its way into wider circulation. I was curious, first about its application to the fields of social and cultural history with which I was concerned, then about its background, its original use and its subsequent development. Despite the existence of a sizable body of literature on the subject, most recently Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda's *Moral Panic: The Social Construction of Deviance* (1994), whose useful distinction between three different theories of moral panic ('interest-group', 'élite-engineered' and 'grassroots') I have gratefully adopted here, there is no fully detailed or satisfactory history of the term. This article attempts to provide one, and to suggest, through an

examination of the various meanings of the term, that sociologists need to be more rigorous in its use and more sensitive to its hidden implications. In particular, I doubt whether Goode and Ben-Yehuda are justified in treating it as a homogeneous concept and in attempting to construct a grand unified theory of moral panic. A personal *apologia* seems necessary, as I am a historian, not a sociologist, uneasily aware of the tension between the empirical method in which I was trained and the more theoretical approach which I adopt here. This is intended as an interdisciplinary work, an encounter between two academic traditions that meet too seldom, to the disadvantage of both.

While this article was being written, the problem of 'moral panic' took on a new dimension. The term has appeared occasionally in the national press for at least ten years, but suddenly came to prominence in 1993, as a survey of the broadsheet newspapers demonstrates. FT Profile, a computer database covering most of the national press from the late 1980s, lists eleven uses of the term in 1989, twelve in 1990, eight in 1991 and seventeen in 1992, but eighty-nine in 1993. This, as we shall see, has implications for the academic use of the term, for, as Jean Aitchison has argued, newspapers do not initiate linguistic change so much as 'push the language along further in the direction in which it was already going', and sociologists must therefore bear some responsibility for the use of 'moral panic' in the media. (Aitchison 1994: 19) The media's heightened sensitivity to moral issues may be just a temporary phase, one of a series of media debates about 'moral decline' that have gone on since the 1960s, flaring up and quickly dying down again. But in looking at 'moral panic' in the context of this wider debate on public morals, this article will also consider the possibility that the potent association of morality with panic may have a permanent effect on the moral language used by the media.

1. 'INTEREST-GROUP' THEORY

Discussion of moral panic properly begins with Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), a classic sociological study of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon of the mid-1960s. Cohen offered the following definition of the term:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long

enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.

Several details of Cohen's thesis have proved particularly influential. The first is the idea that every moral panic has its scapegoat, the 'folk devil' onto whom public fears and fantasies are projected. The moral panic must have an object; it must be about something. This does not mean that the folk devil is created by the moral panic. Cohen was at pains to point out that 'despite using terms such as "panic" and analogies from the study of mass hysteria and delusion' he did not mean to imply that the Mods and Rockers would not have existed if there had been no moral panic or 'would have gone away if we had simply ignored them', only that turning them into folk devils was an inappropriate solution to the problem. That 'problem', however, was not the activities of the Mods and Rockers, or only in a limited and temporary sense; the underlying cause of the moral panic was the 'cultural strain and ambiguity' caused by social change. The object of the moral panic was not so much the Mods and Rockers as the post-war affluence and sexual freedom that they represented; consequently, the Mods and Rockers were forgotten within a few years, and new folk devils emerged to replace them. Recent writers have gone further than Cohen in emphasizing the arbitrary selection of folk devils. Nowadays, the term 'folk devil' is more likely to be applied to vulnerable figures such as unmarried mothers or people with AIDS, or to contestable phenomena such as the satanic abuse of children, than to aggressively deviant or anti-social groups such as the Mods and Rockers. One linguistic result of this has been the conflation of the moral panic and the folk devil. Single mothers, wrote Julie Burchill in the *Mail on Sunday* (15 August 1993), 'have taken over from "drug pushers" (an equally florid, unrealistic myth) as society's main folk devil and moral panic'. This implies that the moral panic is not *about* the folk devil; the moral panic *is* the folk devil, or, to put it another way, the folk devil would not be perceived as a problem – might not even exist at all – without the moral panic.

Another influential aspect of Cohen's thesis is the argument that moral panics are generated by the media, or by particular interest-groups (Cohen, following Howard Becker, calls them 'moral entrepreneurs') using the media to publicize their concerns. An example of this approach can be found in Philip Jenkins's recent book *Intimate Enemies: Moral Panics in Contemporary Great Britain* (1992) which identified various interest-groups, including charities, the police and social workers, who made claims about the sexual and ritual abuse of children which were then 'taken up by a significant section of the mass media and presented as factual'. Cohen, however, laid particular stress on the media itself, as an 'especially important carrier and producer of moral panics'. Most commentators, even those

within the media, have tended to agree. As the *Financial Times* commented
on 13 March 1993:

> That the British media exercise a uniquely decisive influence on national
> political life has been notably demonstrated in recent days: in no other
> country would what has been termed the 'moral panic' over juvenile
> crime have provided the basis of such a concerted campaign that led to
> almost instant action on the part of the government.

While this was a cause of alarm to some writers, others were inclined to cel-
ebrate the power of the press to initiate a moral panic on an issue of public
importance. 'Name an issue', wrote Martin Jacques in the *Sunday Times* on
7 March 1993,

> and it is more than likely that the newspapers have been responsible for
> making it happen: the moral panic over the state of society, economic
> policy . . . the royal family . . . It is no exaggeration to say that without the
> press none of these issues would have acquired the importance they have.

Perhaps the most far-reaching aspect of Cohen's thesis, however, is the
remark that 'the processes by which moral panics and folk devils are gener-
ated do not date'. This has encouraged historians to transport the concept
of moral panic into other periods. Rob Sindall, for example, employs the
term as 'a useful analytical tool' in his study of street violence in the nine-
teenth century, on the assumption that 'Cohen's model is . . . applicable
over time', the only precondition for a moral panic being the existence of a
mass media capable of transmitting it. (Sindall 1990: 29) Historians of the
seventeenth century have been particularly receptive to the term, perhaps
encouraged by the fact that a work of seventeenth-century history, Kai
Erikson's *Wayward Puritans* (1966), was one of Cohen's own sources for the
study of deviance. David Underdown describes the Puritan reformation of
Dorchester in the 1620s as 'pursued with an intensity bordering on a state
of "moral panic"', with Puritan preachers and magistrates in the role of
moral entrepreneurs. Moral panics, he suggests, are timeless: 'small towns
are small towns in any time and place', and Dorchester in the 1620s is com-
parable to Brighton in the 1960s. (Underdown 1985: 52, Underdown 1992:
x) John Morrill argues that in the 1650s the gentry were 'caught in a "moral
panic"' which, as in Cohen's model, was media-driven, fuelled by 'the rapid
growth of newspapers and pamphlets at a time of political uncertainty'
(Morrill 1993: 370–1). Christina Larner points out that witch-hunts in early
modern Scotland tended to occur at moments of political tension, often
accompanying the transition to a new regime, as in the late 1650s: 'The
absence of a machinery for law and order . . . seems to have engendered an
anxiety among the ruling classes amounting to a "moral panic".' (Larner
1981: 198–9; see also Larner 1984: 64) Similarly, J.C. Davis argues that in
periods of history

> when moral boundaries are undergoing wholesale reappraisal or
> revision, as, for instance, in the wake of a revolution . . . moral uncertainty

can lead to great anxiety or 'moral panic' and to the demand for a reassertion or redefinition of moral boundaries.

In the 1650s, he believes, there was a moral panic about antinomian and libertine sects such as the Ranters, generated by a variety of interest-groups including printers and publishers, royalist journalists, and conservative sectarians using the image of the Ranter 'to police the sects' own boundaries, to induce conformity'. (Davis 1986: 96–8)

Davis's work exposes one of the weaknesses of the 'interest-group' theory of moral panic: a tendency to concentrate on deep-seated cultural causes – 'religious anxieties', a 'sense of dislocation', a fear of sexual inversion and a 'preoccupation with order and disorder', to quote some of the explanations that Davis offers – and to neglect local and particular causes. As a result, moral panics can appear strangely divorced from reality. An article in the *Independent* in May 1994 assumes that moral panics occur spontaneously and have no connection with real events:

> We are in the grip of a moral panic about crime on television. Quite when it started, or who was responsible, nobody can be sure, but a classic panic it most definitely is. Like some medieval plague, it springs from every sewer in a spontaneous overflow, reaches fever pitch, then mercifully subsides . . . The essential elements of the moral panic are now all in place. No obvious beginning, no single individual responsible . . . And, of course, most important, no evidence at all to support the case.

In interpreting Cohen, Davis makes the revealing assumption that *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* is not about real deviance, or about real activities subsequently classified as deviant, but about 'the manufacture of the chimaera of the existence of those activities'; and this provides the theoretical basis for his controversial argument that the Ranters never really existed. While this is a misreading of Cohen's work, certain passages in the book, such as the remark that the situation 'could take on a mythical, chimerical meaning' (1980: 171), could easily lend themselves to such a misreading.

Cohen has recognized the problem and acknowledges, in the preface to the 1980 edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, that the book is guilty of 'a certain timelessness, an unveiling of a set of consequences insulated from history and politics'. Some historians have also begun to grow uneasy about the indiscriminate use of the term: John Springhall, for example, hesitates to describe the campaign against 'horror comics' in the 1950s as a 'moral panic', on the grounds that 'assigning each successive "crisis" to the inclusive category of "moral panic" risks disregarding particular features of historical context, new technology, or social anxiety' (Springhall 1994). Others, however, continue to present moral panic as historically timeless. The most extreme statement of this view can be found in the preface to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's book, in which the 'fears and concerns' underlying moral panics are said to be 'part and parcel of the human condition', an expression of human frailty. We are all subject to them; all societies are

wracked by them'. The same determinist view of human behaviour, and disbelief in historical change, occur frequently in the media. The *Independent* (3 December 1992) reported the view of the Education Secretary, John Patten, that British society was in a state of moral decline.

> Historians might take a different perspective, however, and argue that society has not become less orderly and peaceable, that there have always been areas where gangs of young thugs have flourished. If they are right, Mr Patten and Mr Pascall may simply be a part of one of society's periodic moral panics over an issue that never really goes away.

2. 'ELITE-ENGINEERED' THEORY

The second theory of moral panic is described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda as the 'elite-engineered model' and is developed at length by Stuart Hall and others in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (1978). The authors of *Policing the Crisis* quoted Cohen's definition of moral panic with approval, commenting that the panic of 1972–3, when the national press began to use the term 'mugging' with reference to a perceived epidemic of violent crime, fitted Cohen's definition 'in almost every detail'. However, their model of moral panic was designed to plug some of the gaps in Cohen's use of the term: in particular, to explain where moral panics originated and why they occurred when they did. Cohen implied that moral panics originated in the media, in ways that depended on established patterns of crime reporting, on journalists' own perceptions of a 'good story', or simply on the absence of any alternative news; in short, 'the media created the news and images which lent the cognitive basis for the panic'. Hall and his co-authors agreed that the media were 'among the most powerful forces in the shaping of public consciousness about topical and controversial issues'. But they went on to argue that moral panics about law and order typically originated in statements by members of the police and the judiciary, which were then amplified by the media. The media does not 'create' the news so much as 'reproduce and sustain' the dominant interpretations of it, and can thus be said to function, consciously or not, as an instrument of state control (Hall et al. 1978: 220–2).

The two theories of moral panic differ in other ways. Cohen adopts a studied neutrality in his discussion of moral panic, and although his own sympathies can quite easily be inferred, they are never spelt out. He refrains, too, from drawing firm conclusions about the 'policy implications' of his work, merely commenting that 'different readers can draw different implications' and that 'sociologists do not have the power to stop such implications being made or acted upon'. The authors of *Policing the Crisis*, on the other hand, incorporate in their definition of a moral panic the notion of an irrational or unjustified response. 'When the official reaction to a person, group of persons or series of events is *out of all proportion* to the actual threat offered', and

when the media representations universally stress 'sudden and dramatic' increases (in numbers involved or events) and 'novelty', above and beyond that which a sober, realistic appraisal could sustain, then we believe it is appropriate to speak of the beginnings of a *moral panic*. (p. 16)

This is a much more partisan definition of moral panic, signalling an entirely different purpose; for whereas Cohen is pessimistic about the chances of breaking the cycle of repeated moral panics, Hall and his co-authors regard their work as an 'intervention' in 'the struggle to change the structures and conditions' by which moral panics are produced (p. x).

By laying stress on particular 'structures and conditions', *Policing the Crisis* also calls into question the timelessness of moral panics, their apparently endless recurrence over the whole course of history. It treats the succession of moral panics between the early 1960s and the late 1970s, between the emergence of moral panics and their incorporation into a general panic about law and order, as an 'exceptional moment' in a long-term historical process. To use Marxist (more precisely, Gramscian) terminology, that process is the 'crisis of hegemony', the breakdown of consensus which forces the ruling class to resort to new techniques of exercising control and repressing dissent. This marks another departure from Cohen's original theory. Hall and his co-authors are far stricter in defining the historical circumstances under which moral panics occur, although they share with Cohen a sense of the inevitability of moral panics once the appropriate conditions are met. They do not go so far as to suggest that the 'mugging' panic could not have occurred before the 1970s, but they argue that 'it makes a great deal more sense' than it would have done at an earlier period, because only by the 1970s were all the 'essential conditions' in place. Other left-wing commentators have also tried to give the concept of moral panic greater historical specificity, though with slightly different emphases. Kate Marshall, for example, associates moral panics with the economic recession of the 1980s and the need to transfer the cost of the Welfare State onto private families (Marshall 1985).

Goode and Ben-Yehuda's account of the 'élite-engineered' model is that the ruling classes 'deliberately and consciously' create a moral panic about 'an issue that they recognise not to be terribly harmful to the society as a whole' in order to divert attention from more serious problems. As the *New Statesman* explained in December 1993, moral panics are 'diversions for those in power who prefer that the "social and moral community" is not examined too closely for fear it is found bankrupt'. *Policing the Crisis* actually takes a less conspiratorial view of this process, pointing to 'evidence . . . that in this period the ruling classes themselves substantially believed the definition of an emergent social crisis which they were propagating' (Hall et al. 1978: 220). But the conspiratorial reading alerts us to the fact that, as far as *Policing the Crisis* is concerned, moral panics are political phenomena and are generated, whether 'deliberately and consciously' or not, through political and juridical activity. This is quite different from the

view of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* that moral panics are the product of 'cultural strain and ambiguity'. As Cohen puts it, in reviewing the differences between his theory of moral panic and that of *Policing the Crisis*, the level of explanation 'is shifted from social control agencies or cultures – or vague allusions to the "wider society" – to the specific operation of the state' (Cohen 1980: xxiii).

This distinction between cultural and political models of moral panic may seem dubious. The two categories, after all, are not mutually exclusive: for Cohen, political agents are incorporated in the notion of a control culture, while for Hall and his co-authors, hegemony is as much a matter of cultural as of political dominance. However, Cohen also suggests that 'cases of mass hysteria, delusion and panics' might provide a framework for the study of moral panics, implying that the moral panic was a form of collective irrationality which must have deep cultural or psychological roots, and for which a purely political or ideological explanation would be inadequate. (Cohen 1980:11) This is the sort of language, unattached to any historical period, that leads Hall et al. to reject the concept of a control culture as 'too imprecise', preferring instead to set moral panics in the context of a specific moment in history and 'a specific type of political regime' (Hall et al. 1978: 195).

3. 'GRASSROOTS' THEORY

Goode and Ben-Yehuda identify a third theory which stresses the extent of popular participation in moral panics and which they term the 'grassroots model'. According to this theory, 'politicians and the media cannot fabricate concern where none existed initially', and moral panics must therefore be founded on genuine public concern, reflected or magnified by the media, perhaps, but arising more or less spontaneously. This is a 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' theory of moral panic; the authors of *Policing the Crisis*, by contrast, are sceptical about 'this seemingly spontaneous public opinion' and argue that it is 'transmitted and constructed higher up in the chain of communication' instead of being generated from below (Hall et al. 1978: 137; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: 127).

The 'grassroots' theory resembles the work of so-called 'realist criminologists' such as Trevor Jones, Brian Maclean and Jock Young, co-authors of *The Islington Crime Survey* (1986), who suggest that people's perceptions of crime 'are not based on moral panic and/or a regurgitation of media stereotypes, but bear a close relationship to the real facts about the areas in which they live'. Realist criminologists tend to be unhappy with the term 'moral panic', identifying 'moral realism', rather than panic or hysteria, in people's attitudes to crime. However, they do not simply reject the concept of moral panic. In their view, moral panic and moral realism are symptoms of the same problem, signs that crime really is on the increase.

> The same forces which make for the increase in crime fuel a moral panic about crime. That is, the real fear about crime is intimately related to the moral hysteria about crime. It not only provides a rational kernel for alarm, but its genesis lies at the same source; and the mass media serve and exaggerate such public fears. (Lea and Young 1993: 49, 263)

This leaves the status of moral panic slightly ambiguous. The line between 'fear' and 'hysteria', 'alarm' and 'panic', is a fine one: if it is rational to be alarmed about crime, it may also, perhaps, be rational to panic. One of the most telling objections to *Policing the Crisis* was that it treated the moral panic as an irrational or disproportionate response to a situation, without providing any 'criteria of proportionality' to distinguish it from a rational response (Waddington 1986). The realist criminologists solve this problem rather neatly by eliminating the need for any such distinction.

In shifting the focus of attention away from the utterances of politicians, journalists and other professionals to the attitudes and opinions of the general public, the 'grassroots' model marks a significant departure from previous theories of moral panic. However, it can also be seen as continuing and developing some of the themes of Cohen's original definition. Its proponents have tended, like Cohen, to treat moral panic as a cultural phenomenon. Stuart A. Scheingold, in *The Politics of Law and Order* (1984), argues that moral panics about street crime are rooted in a 'myth of crime and punishment' that has little to do with the actual incidence of crime but is sustained by the pervasive 'cultural presence' of violence in contemporary American society. In a discussion of the moral panic in Sweden caused by a proposal to provide clean syringes to intravenous drug users, Arthur Gould suggests that an analysis of 'political, ideological and institutional factors' is incomplete without reference to the 'wider social structure and culture' and, in particular, the sense that Swedish national identity was under threat. Unlike Cohen, Scheingold and Gould treat moral panics as the product of a diffuse sense of crisis, not obviously in the interests of any particular group. As with Cohen, however, there is a timelessness about their view of moral panic: they emphasize the cultural factors which make it inevitable that similar moral panics will occur again in the future, regardless of social or political trends. Scheingold suggests that there are 'cultural constants' in American society which favour the development of punitive policies on law and order (Scheingold 1984, Gould 1994).

A tentative genealogy of moral panic, then, would depict Cohen's original theory as the parent of two other, mutually opposing theories. One (the 'élite-engineered') theory accepts Cohen's suggestion that moral panics serve the interests of particular groups, but rejects the idea that they have deep-seated cultural causes; the other (the 'grassroots' theory) accepts Cohen's cultural interpretation of moral panics but rejects or severely qualifies the interest-group explanation. The work of David Underdown, discussed briefly above, illustrates the development of the 'grassroots' theory particularly clearly. In locating the moral panic at the level of 'cultural

conflict' and identifying moral entrepreneurs who promote it, Underdown resembles Cohen; yet he argues that there was widespread popular participation in the moral panic, and considers himself to be asserting the autonomy of popular culture, as opposed to historians who 'say that . . . everything of importance in seventeenth-century England happened "from the top down", with the common people always obediently following the lead of their betters' (Underdown 1992: x). Like other 'grassroots' theorists – David Herman, for example, deploring the 'sneering, cynical tone' used by the left to denigrate 'real cultural anxieties' (*New Statesman*, 13 May 1994) – he defines his own position in opposition to the 'élite-engineered' theory.

'MORAL PANIC' IN THE MEDIA, 1985–1995

The evolving use of 'moral panic' in the media parallels its use in academic discourse, though with a marked time-lag. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* came out in 1972 and was reprinted in 1980; by 1984, references to 'moral panic' were starting to appear regularly in the broadsheet newspapers. *Policing the Crisis* came out in 1978 and was often reprinted thereafter; its effect on the media's use of 'moral panic' is not evident before 1988. Lea and Young's *What Is To Be Done About Law and Order?* appeared in 1984, and Waddington's article 'Mugging as a Moral Panic' in 1988; with a few exceptions, journalists did not follow up their critique of the 'élite-engineered' theory until 1993. It may, seemingly, take up to ten years for new developments in sociology and criminology to filter through to the media.

There are, of course, exceptions to this chronology. One of the earliest newspaper articles to use the term, on 18 June 1985, proved to be remarkably prescient in anticipating things to come. Moral panic, Digby Anderson explained to the readers of *The Times*, was '1960s sociologese to refer to public concerns sociologists would prefer to brush under the carpet'. There was 'no social scientific evidence of a moral panic' about AIDS, but in the light of attempts to 'relativize moral standards' and 'extend the incidence of homosexual practice', perhaps there ought to be:

> Should not those within Judaism, the Christian churches, Islam and among half-churched but traditionally inclined parents, and the many homosexuals who do not approve of homosexual proselytization, start to be concerned? In short, what we need is a little *more* moral panic.

Having begun by dismissing the idea of moral panic, Anderson ended up by endorsing it. Over the next ten years, the use of 'moral panic' in the national press would follow the same trajectory.

In the course of the 1980s the term was applied to a wide variety of issues, including AIDS, child abuse, crowd violence at football matches, drug addiction, juvenile crime and surrogate mothers. Moral panic was attributed either to the media alone ('a Fleet Street moral panic') or to a mood of public concern created by the media ('The public's moral panic is

accompanied by a good deal of misinformation'). The term was almost always used pejoratively. 'Moral fervour often breeds and benefits from moral panic', declared one writer in the *Guardian* on 12 July 1985. 'In conditions of such alarm, informed and sustained debate seems to go by the board.' Most of the references to 'moral panic' in the mid-1980s occurred in the *Guardian* or in left-wing weeklies such as the *New Statesman* and *New Society*, but by the end of the decade the term had made its way into other broadsheet newspapers and was beginning to be treated as a commonplace. At first, quotations from academics were used to establish the credentials of an unfamiliar term: ' "What we are witnessing is a moral panic," says Michael Freeman, Professor of English Law at University College, London' (*Guardian* 15 January 1985). Within a few years, journalists felt sufficiently familiar with the term to refer casually to 'the inevitable media moral panic' (*Independent* 6 October 1988) or 'the media-saturated space marked "moral panic" ' (*The Times* 22 February 1992).

The interpretation of moral panic underlying most of these newspaper articles is neatly summed up in an extract from the *Daily Telegraph* (20 March 1991):

> Dr Thompson does not deny the existence of occult crime . . . 'I'm not saying that this sort of abuse could never happen,' he says. 'But so far this bears all the signs of a classic moral panic – a scare promoted by a particular group to achieve a particular end.'

The influence of the 'interest-group' theory can also be detected in articles which suggest, by means of historical parallels, that moral panics are eternal or cyclical in nature. A *Guardian* article on 30 May 1985 recounted 'the extraordinary story of a fourteenth century "moral panic" that swept Europe' at the time of the Black Death, and an article by Roy Porter, published in *New Society* in December 1986, drew similar parallels between the present-day moral panic about AIDS and the panic about cholera in the nineteenth century, or plague in the sixteenth century, noting that scapegoats (Cohen's 'folk devils') were found for each epidemic. Viewing moral panics in historical perspective, there was a tendency to attribute them to cultural rather than social or economic causes. A book review in the *Sunday Times* in June 1992 declared that 'as the last years of centuries seem historically prone to moral panics, it should not surprise us that the Aids epidemic has, with wearisome predictability, been interpreted as an act of God'. Moral panic, agreed *The Times* in a leading article (24 February 1993), was a pervasive element in 'contemporary Western culture' and a 'predictable fixture in fin de siècle life'.

By the late 1980s, however, other theories of moral panic had entered the media. The term was increasingly felt to belong to left-wing polemic rather than detached historical analysis, and there was consequently a reluctance to use it uncritically. Interestingly, this originated in the left-wing media. The *Guardian* commented on 17 June 1988 that recent cases of football hooliganism had provoked 'predictable responses. On the demagogic

right, there are calls for such louts to be locked up for a long time . . . On the jargon-laden left it's all being blamed on moral panic, Mrs Thatcher and social deprivation'. On 28 August 1989 the *Guardian* attacked the 'conventional wisdom', 'widely accepted in Home Office and policing circles', 'that risk of crime is much lower than the public suspect . . . and that the mass media have contributed to irrational fears, particularly amongst women and the elderly'. Again, this was presented as politically bipartisan: 'whilst the Right talks of "irrational fear", much of the Left talks of "moral panic". All of this is palpably untrue for inner city areas and for the more vulnerable members of our society'. These two articles are exceptional in being up to date with the work of realist criminologists; other newspaper articles of about the same date are aware of the 'élite-engineered' theory but accept it uncritically. An article in the *Sunday Times* attacked 'those who wish to whip up "moral panics" and cut back on social spending' (3 December 1989) and an article in the *Independent* reported a claim that 'the police and local authorities' had 'whipped up hysteria in relation to acid house and are using their powers accordingly . . . It's moral panic. They see it as something wicked and they want to stop it' (24 July 1990).

The sudden popularity of 'moral panic' in 1993 was largely due to a single news story: the killing of the toddler James Bulger in February 1993, and the arrest of two other boys who were subsequently convicted of his murder. As *The Times* summed it up eight months later:

> When a toddler was abducted and murdered earlier this year, with suspicion falling on two other boys, the killing inspired a moral panic across Britain. John Major announced a 'crusade against crime', and the numbers who told MORI they were worried about law and order doubled within a month.

As a result of the Bulger murder, the Home Secretary, Kenneth Clarke, announced plans for more custodial sentences for young offenders. A statement by a group of charities, published in *The Times* and widely reported in other newspapers, warned that 'in the atmosphere of "moral panic", there is a danger that all the lessons learned in recent years about the clear link between juvenile custody and high re-offending rates will be lost' (*The Times* 3 March 1995). *The Times* itself commented in a leading article on the same day that 'Britain is in the grip of one of those moral panics that afflicts every nation periodically, usually during recessions' and that young people were being cast as scapegoats. This use of 'moral panic', based on *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, was not at all unusual. Simultaneously, however, the popularity of the term was leading some writers to examine it more critically.

On the weekend after James Bulger's murder, the *Sunday Times* took a conventionally pejorative view of moral panic ('We are in the midst of what sociologists call a "moral panic", a contagious burst of popular outrage that risks losing sight of reality'), while a leading article in the relatively liberal *Independent on Sunday* mounted a sustained critique of the term:

Moral panic is one of those deflating phrases used by sociologists and other allegedly impartial students of human behaviour to condescend to excitements among the general populace. The phrase usually comes equipped with statistics which demonstrate that alcohol consumption was in fact much larger in the 1840s, or that football hooliganism actually began in 1898 . . . The doctoral message is calming: do not worry, we have been here before, your concerns are an ersatz compound manufactured by the media, a few odd bishops, strident voices from the left and the right, moralists and nostalgists of all kinds. (21 February 1993)

Before the Bulger case, journalists in the right-wing press had occasionally experimented with different theories of moral panic. An article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 3 July 1987 had attempted a reworking of the 'interest-group' theory, arguing that the moral panic about child abuse was caused 'not by the popular press' but by professional social workers and their political supporters, 'people like the Labour MP, Miss Clare Short'. On 18 October 1992 the *Sunday Times* had made an ingenious attempt to commandeer the 'élite-engineered' theory in the cause of right-wing populism, with the suggestion that

the anti-smoking movement . . . is only the latest in a long line of coercive crusades and moral panics, by means of which upper and middle class élites seek to impose their lifestyles and preferences upon the working classes.

These are plausible arguments, playing on fears of left-wing or middle-class élitism and skilfully drawing on the pejorative connotations of 'moral panic', but as interpretations of moral panic, they did not catch on. The *Independent on Sunday* helped to popularize a new theory of moral panic, similarly anti-élitist, but now seeking to endorse moral panic, justifying it as rational and repudiating the pejorative use of the term.

This version of the 'grassroots' theory rapidly gained ground in the broadsheet papers. On 28 February 1993, only a week after the *Independent on Sunday*'s re-examination of moral panic, the *Sunday Times* followed suit with an article by Greg Hadfield which placed Stuart Hall in a sinister pantheon of 'sociologists, criminologists, academics and clerics' whom 'critics blame for the nation's woes': 'In 1978, in *Policing the Crisis*, he argued that concern about mugging was a "moral panic", based on exaggerated evidence.' 'Bring back the voice of authority', pleaded Melanie Phillips in the *Guardian* on 5 March 1993:

Only the ivory-tower middle classes with a bad dose of Utopian myopia could delude themselves that juvenile crime isn't an immensely serious problem . . . Reality suggests that juvenile offending is up, not down. Community anxiety is understandable. The term 'moral panic' is misplaced.

A succession of similar articles appeared in both left-wing and right-wing papers throughout 1993, attacking 'progressive criminologists' for

'dismissing the crime epidemic and crisis in values as "moral panic"'
(*Observer* 19 September 1993) or complaining that alarm about single-
parent families 'has been labelled in progressive circles as mere "moral
panic"' (*Daily Telegraph* 5 November 1993).

Some attempts were made to recapture the term, often by readers
responding, through the letters pages, to applications of 'moral panic' that
they disagreed with. Thus the *Independent on Sunday*'s editorial was followed,
a week later, by a reader's letter castigating it for 'a misunderstanding of
the valuable concept of "moral panic"' and reiterating Cohen's theory of
folk devils: 'popular concerns' (in this case, 'widespread concern about the
state of British society arising from the Bulger case') was taken up by 'poli-
ticians and the media', turned into a moral panic and directed against
'scapegoats'. Forced onto the defensive, the writer was prepared to concede
that moral panics were an exaggerated version of 'popular concerns' about
real social problems. Professor Jock Young put forward a similar argument
in a letter to the *Guardian* on 8 June 1994, in which he attempted, not
altogether successfully, to gloss over the ambiguities of 'moral panic'. 'Soci-
ologists in Britain coined the term', he suggested, to refer to cases

> where public reaction was completely disproportionate to the actual
> problem faced . . . At no point was it suggested that such a term should be
> used to blank out and denigrate genuine fears and concerns about crime.

These attempts to contest and to regulate the definition of moral panic
failed to dispel the ambiguity of the term. It was an ambiguity which could
sometimes come in useful. It enabled the film censor James Ferman, inter-
viewed in the *Independent* (13 August 1993), to offer a sop to both liberal
and conservative readers: 'We seem to go through a wave of moral panics
in Britain, but there's always something at the heart of it.' It helped *The
Times* (leading article, 23 May 1994) to sell the idea of a 'new politics of
social responsibility' to readers who might be suspicious of moral coercion:
'Though it is easy for a nation to slip into moral panic unnecessarily, the
concern which is felt by ordinary people about such issues can no longer
be ignored by those who represent them'. This ambivalence about 'moral
panic' illustrates the writer's doubts about the popular credibility of moral
language – a problem neatly encapsulated in William Oddie's description
of the 'back to basics' campaign as 'a kind of controlled moral panic' (*The
Times* 20 March 1994). At other times, of course, the ambiguity was acci-
dental and simply led to confusion, as different meanings of 'moral panic'
came into collision. Writing in the *London Review of Books* in 1993, Marina
Warner referred to incest as 'one of the dominant focuses of moral panic';
she evidently intended to use the term in a neutral, descriptive sense, but
one reader interpreted it differently, assuming that 'moral panic' was a
pejorative term, and accusing Warner of condoning incest (*LRB* 7 October
and 4 November 1993).

In examining the recent and current use of the term, several features
stand out. The first is the assumption that moral panic is a cultural

phenomenon. As *The Times* put it, in a leading article on 8 August 1994:

> Few now feel comfortable with the notion of a zeitgeist or spirit of the age. Common sense dictates, however, that moments in history are defined in part by moods, attitudes and propensities for action. Future historians of Britain will look back on the two years after the 1992 general election as a period of moral panic, cultural uncertainty and political disorientation. They may also record that a subtle shift in the national mood took place during 1994.

Even those who used the term pejoratively tended to accept the idea of a 'national mood', and to use phrases like 'moral panic grips the nation' (*Guardian* 3 June 1994) or 'the latest moral panic to sweep Britain' (*Guardian* 13 June 1994). Even *Living Marxism* conceded in November 1994 that moral panic affected 'not only the media and a small circle of reactionaries', and 'not only those in authority', but 'society as a whole'. A second, and related, aspect of the term's recent use is the increasing prevalence of the 'grassroots' theory. The American conservative Charles Murray, writing in the *Sunday Times* on 22 May 1994 in the first of a much-publicized series of articles on the 'British underclass', argued that Britain needed to return to the traditional values of marriage and the two-parent family in order to ensure social stability, and claimed to detect a 'changed public mood' on the current social crisis. The academic associations of 'moral panic' were now used to discredit rather than to support the term. 'Most intellectuals are still holding out: all but a handful of the academics I met continued to dismiss problems of rising crime and single parenthood as a "moral panic". But concern was evident everywhere else'.

Murray was correct to suggest that 'moral panic' was on the retreat. Writers who used the term in a manner consistent with the 'interest-group' or 'élite-engineered' theories did so more cautiously, even apologetically. 'Though the concept of the moral panic has been somewhat discredited of late (or at least found wanting), it still has its uses', ventured a reviewer in the *Guardian* on 28 January 1995. The growing recognition of the 'grassroots' theory led to its appearance in the *Daily Mail* on 11 March 1995, one of the first occasions on which the term 'moral panic' had appeared in a tabloid newspaper. Following Murray, the subject under discussion was, once again, the threat to the two-parent family.

> Perhaps the time has come when we should not be ashamed of standing up for old-fashioned values, merely because of taunts that we are succumbing to a 'moral panic'. We need, for the sake of all our children, to foster a sense of community which depends on these traditional values.

The term 'moral panic' is rejected; but the phenomenon, redefined as 'standing up for old-fashioned values', is presented more positively than ever before. Several journalists had already started to use 'moral panic' as a term of approval: Suzanne Moore wrote that the problem of feckless

fathers, not single mothers, was 'what we should have our moral panics about' (*Guardian* 27 May 1994); Nick Hornby wrote that on seeing a controversial work of art inspired by the Bulger murder 'I found that I could participate much more directly in the moral panic' (*Independent on Sunday* 5 June 1994).

CONCLUSION: THE MEDIA AND MORAL LANGUAGE

Supporters of 'moral panic' have argued that the term is every bit as relevant to the media in the 1990s as it was to the relatively unsophisticated reporting of the Mods and Rockers in 1964 and 1965. Moral panics have evolved and developed, admittedly, but the species is in no danger of dying out. Now that the term has established itself in the media, professional theorists of moral panic no longer have sole control over the way it is used; but its popularity across the political spectrum and among journalists as well as academics only goes to show, as Goode and Ben-Yehuda remark, that the concept is generally agreed to be valid. The media has become more self-conscious about participating in moral panics, and it could be argued that recent moral panics have been more self-referential, even theatrical in character, as well as being more open to criticism from within the media; but the result, in the words of Angela McRobbie, is that 'the model of the moral panic is urgently in need of updating and revising precisely because of its success'. McRobbie's examination of moral panic is a good example of the 'evolution, not extinction' school of thought. She suggests that we live in an era of postmodern moral panics, when the moral panic can no longer proceed unchallenged and cannot, therefore, be used to justify new measures of social control. But she sees James Bulger's murder as the catalyst for a moral panic of a thoroughly old-fashioned kind, 'where a horrific event gives rise to a spiral of anxieties and leads to punitive measures being taken'. For all its sophistication, postmodern journalism takes us full circle, back to a theory of moral panics and folk devils hardly changed from Cohen's original model (McRobbie 1994: 198–219).

But there is a need for a much more searching critique of the concept. Recent writing on moral panic incorporates several highly questionable assumptions: first, that moral panics are timeless, common to 'all societies' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: x) and 'subject to eternal recurrence' (Downes and Rock 1988: 96); secondly, that they are embedded in the 'collective conscience' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994: 202) as part of the 'landscape of the public imagination' (McRobbie 1994: 203). The presence of these assumptions is not particularly surprising, as recent histories of the sociology of deviance have shown that the theory of moral panic has descended from functionalism and ultimately from Durkheim (Downes and Rock 1988: 96; Summer 1994: 263). But while they can be found in Cohen's original model of moral panic, it is in the 'grassroots' theory of moral panic developed by the realist criminologists, and even more in the

simplified version of that theory that took root in the media, that they become most prominent and most damaging. Colin Sumner describes Cohen's model as a blend of Marx and Durkheim,

> suggesting that we could rely on Durkheim for insights into general societal changes/evolution and on Marx for the internal, detailed, dynamics of that change; an approach that was not uncommon in British sociology in the 1960s. (Sumner 1994: 263)

In the 'grassroots' theory, Marx drops out of the picture, and one is left with a theory of moral panic that is disengaged from the immediate political circumstances in which a panic occurs. There is a worrying lack of historical specificity (as in Goode and Ben-Yehuda's 'eclectic approach' applied to phenomena as diverse as the Renaissance witch-craze and the American drug-panic of the 1980s) and a facile optimism (compare, for example, McRobbie's sympathetic depiction of pressure groups with Cohen's much harsher treatment of moral entrepreneurs and Jenkins's highly critical account of the role of the NSPCC and other 'claims-makers' in the panic over child abuse).

A further problem is that no theory of moral panic has yet provided a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between the media and public opinion. McRobbie criticizes existing theories for assuming 'a clear distinction between the world of the media and the world of social reality', in other words, between what 'really' happens and what the papers say. It is a valid criticism, as we shall see in a moment; but one could argue just the reverse: that the problem with 'moral panic' is that it *fails* to distinguish between the media and social reality, between what the papers say and what the public thinks. Keith Tester has criticized the assumption that 'simply because there was a moral panic in the media there must also have been a moral panic among the viewers and readers' (Tester 1994: 85). Colin Sumner puts it more bluntly: 'Was there actually a moral panic about mugging?' Press cuttings, as he points out, are an unreliable guide to public opinion, and 'it is quite conceivable that the public statements made by journalists, policemen, and politicians did not have much impact on the public at large'. (Sumner 1981: 282–3) The seeds of this problem were sown in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, where there is said to be 'little doubt that the mainstream of reaction expressed in the mass media – putative deviance, punitiveness, the creation of new folk devils – entered into the public imagery', despite Cohen's finding that some sections of the public perceived the media as having over-reacted (Cohen 1980: 70). Once again, however, the problem is most acute in the 'grassroots' theory of moral panic, with its assumption that the media reflects, though in a distorting mirror, 'real' public fears about crime, and in the thoroughly self-serving versions of this theory that have appeared in the media itself.

Tester doubts the social reality of moral panic because he doubts whether the media is capable of communicating issues of moral significance. 'Media significance means moral insignificance.' In other words, the media is less

likely to create moral panics than 'moral boredom and dullness'. This is an extreme statement of the increasingly common view that we are experiencing a moral crisis which is, in essence, a crisis of moral language. Among moral philosophers, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that moral language has become devalued or dislocated, and Mary Maxwell has identified a 'moral inertia' resulting, in part, from 'the unavailability of words needed to express certain concepts . . . [or] to portray the relationship of responsibility and blame in particular situations'. (MacIntyre 1981, Maxwell 1991) This sense of moral crisis helps to explain the sudden popularity of 'moral panic' in the media. 'Moral panic' was not only a way of diagnosing the crisis; it also appeared to provide a moral vocabulary to meet it. Interviewed in the *Guardian* on 22 February 1995, the right-wing journalist Matthew D'Ancona explained that Britain had

> experienced a sort of moral panic between the case of Jamie Bulger and the death of John Smith, which was seemingly alleviated by the arrival of Tony Blair. You see, Blair has a linguistic project which is to construct a language that his party can win with . . . by appropriating some thinking from conservative and liberal traditions.

The remedy for moral panic, according to this argument, was the language of citizenship, community and 'civic responsibility', of a 'moral order' stressing duties rather than rights, 'a coherent vocabulary', as *The Times* leader-writer called it on 23 May 1994, 'with which to develop these emerging ideas' of moral renewal. As part of this 'linguistic project', the term 'moral panic' itself had to be redefined as a form of civic consciousness, an expression of public anxiety rather than a conspiracy of élites or interest-groups.

Cohen's original set of synonyms – 'moral panic . . . moral crusades or moral indignation . . . moral campaigns' – made it clear that a moral panic was a temporary burst of moral excitement, a diversion from serious moral discussion. *Policing the Crisis* similarly contrasted moral panic with 'sober, realistic appraisal'; and journalists in this tradition have done the same, stressing the need to 'separate the wheat of real moral concern from the chaff of moral panic' (Michael Ignatieff in the *Guardian*, 12 May 1981). McRobbie's criticism of the distinction between moral panic and the 'real' world is extremely telling here, and in this respect the 'grassroots' theory does mark a significant advance on its predecessors, in its integration of moral panics with the continuous process of moral discourse and practice. What we are dealing with, as Simon Watney observes, is not a string of 'discontinuous and discrete "moral panics", but rather the mobility of ideological confrontation across the entire field of public representation' (Watney 1987: 42). But there are obvious difficulties in transplanting the language of 'moral panic' into this radically different context, as, for example, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, in his sermon on Easter Day 1993, equates moral panic with the instinctive human response to evil. Morality, it seems, naturally takes the form of panic:

> There is a battle in the world, and we all know it, between good and evil.
> It is within each one of us and it is in each society . . . Evil: it fills us with
> horror and a kind of moral panic.

It is hard to see how this form of moral language could incorporate notions
of moral reasoning or decision-making. It makes morality appear danger-
ously volatile, as in Paul Johnson's prediction that popular discontent would
'reach a critical mass and detonate a moral explosion' (*Sunday Times* 2
January 1994), and the result is an attitude of moral helplessness.

Many of the metaphors used to describe moral behaviour reflect a pre-
occupation with moral aggression, as if to echo Goode and Ben-Yehuda's
observation that the concepts of moral panic and moral crusade have
tended to overlap (1994: 19). Susie Orbach's 'new moral consensus'
requires nothing less than 'a secular moral crusade' (*Guardian* 15 April
1995); Will Hutton's 'moral economy' involves 'a call to arms in a world in
which time is running short' (Hutton 1996: 26). The concern with shared
moral values is laudable, but by conflating morality with panic, these writers
(both, ironically, on the political left) have committed themselves to repro-
ducing moral panics uncritically. If, in Cohen's words, 'more moral panics
will be generated', it will be because of a moral language that admits no
other possibility.

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