

Moral Panics: Then and Now

In 1972, Professor Stanley Cohen FBA published his seminal work *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. On 9 March 2007, Professor Cohen was joined at the British Academy by Professor David Garland, and Professor Stuart Hall FBA, in an evening meeting to reflect on what has happened to the notion of 'moral panic'. In the edited extract below, **Professor David Garland** discusses the phenomenon of moral panic and its characteristics.

If you Google the term 'moral panic', you find about 1.5 million entries. I found 1,230,000 the other day when I checked and after tonight there will be more still. What I think this tells us is that the concept has an enormous impact not just in sociology, where it has found a sub-discipline of its own, but also in the language of cultural debate and the practice of journalists and politicians. To claim that a social reaction is in fact a moral panic has become an essential move in any public conversation about social problems or societal risks. In an age of exaggeration where the mass media regularly focus on a single anxiety-provoking issue and exploit it for all it is worth, there is obviously a necessity for some kind of deflating, bubble-bursting comeback, so no wonder that the notion of moral social panic has become part of the standard rhetoric in the exchange of

public debate. It is an essential argumentative term, a way of saying 'no' to the forces of hyperbole, so if Stan Cohen had not come up with it in 1972, it would have been necessary for us to invent it.

Before it was a rhetorical move in cultural politics, moral panic was a rigorously defined sociological concept. If you read *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* again, you will be struck by how thoroughly theoretical that book is, every other sentence is a kind of generalising claim that is theoretical all the way through, despite the book's empirical grounding and its case study form. It is that sociological usage of moral panic that I want to discuss now.

What exactly is a moral panic? Let me describe to you a *New York Times* story from last month, which has all the hallmarks of a moral panic report and shows all its characteristics quite clearly. It also shows the extent to which politicians have learned to recognise moral panic processes and try to manage their fall-out.

The story was printed below the following headline: 'Latest death of teenager in South London unsettles Britain: With an outpouring of soul-searching and public sorrow, British leaders expressed dismay at

Photograph © PA Photos.

the recent spate of gun crime.' The report then describes the murder of a teenager, the fifth one to be shot to death. While some politicians depicted the bloodshed as a sign of deep social malaise, Prime Minister Tony Blair resisted suggestions that the killings reflect a broader crisis among Britain's young people. Acknowledging the shootings were horrific, Blair insisted we should be 'more careful in our response, the tragedy is not a metaphor for the state of British society, still less for the state of British youth.'

The report went on to say that the killings have stunned many Britons and sparked worries about the prevalence of firearms, about crack cocaine and about American-style turf wars between drug-dealing gang members. It has inspired an anguished debate about whether some parts of British society are sliding out of control, an impression that Mr Blair has sought to avoid. Opposition spokesman, Alan Duncan, on the other hand, had no such inhibitions. Duncan declared that Britain needs to be 'recivilised' and provided the following diagnosis of the crisis that underlies the shootings. Duncan said that within the EU, Britain is the fattest nation with the most apathetic voters, the worst energy wasters, the biggest porn addicts, the most violent people and the greatest cocaine users. Like a Chinese encyclopaedia that would be worthy of Jorge Luis Borges, he continues: we have the worst kids' allergies, the biggest binge-drinkers, we are the most burgled, have the most asthma sufferers, are the worst linguists, have the most premature babies and, oddly, have the fewest organ donors. There has been he said, in short, a collapse of authority.

Stan Cohen notes recently that successful moral panics owe their appeal to their ability to find points of resonance with wider anxieties – I think Mr Duncan is trying a little too hard to make the connection. The Conservative Party leader, David Cameron, was more circumspect, but he, too, characterised the events as symptomatic, pointing to, in his case, absence fathers and family breakdown as being at the heart of the problem.



The *New York Times* article went on to note that despite the surge in media reports and public anxiety, police figures indicate that murders and gun crime are decreasing. Nevertheless, Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair called for new police powers, and mandatory sentences of imprisonment of five years for young people carrying guns. The target of these new powers, the 'folk devil' at the centre of the reaction, are familiar figures: violent, drug-dealing, gun-toting, inner-city black youth. Perhaps it is time for a new edition of Stuart Hall's *Policing the Crisis*.

This episode of public outcry, soul-searching and social reaction with a troubling form of the youth deviant at its centre, describes a classic moral panic: more knowing and self-reflective than the one described by Stan some 40 years ago perhaps and more politically contested too, but otherwise an exemplary instance of the genre.

These moral panics come in a variety of shapes and sizes, as do the forms of deviance to which they purportedly respond. They can be minor, frenzied episodes leaving little trace, or they can be major, fateful developments. They can be isolated events, or they can form part of a series, each one building on the other. If we think about drug panics or child abuse panics, for example, they have a cumulative quality which is always building on itself. The problems to which they respond may be serious or trivial or even a figment of the imagination: satanic child abuse rituals would be an example of the last. The problem when it is fully unveiled typically bears little relation to the reaction it provokes.

Moral panics can be spontaneous grass-roots events, unselfconsciously driven by local actors and local anxieties, as I believe the panic Stan Cohen described about Mods and Rockers in Clacton was, or they can be deliberately engineered for commercial or political gain. Similarly, the social reaction involved in a moral panic can be more or less consensual, more or less divided. In Stan's original case study, society responded to the seaside disturbances with one voice, more or less. In the gun violence example that I just quoted, politicians and commentators are much more divided in their reaction.

As for causation, this also varies with the nature and the focus of the moral panic. It takes a variety of enabling, facilitating, proximate conditions, the existence of a sensationalist mass media, the discovery of some new or hitherto unreported form of deviance, the existence of marginalised outsider groups suitable for portrayal as a folk devil, and usually an already sensitised, already primed reading public. The basic causal forces usually have to do with transitions or disruptions in the social, economic or moral order of society: threats to existing hierarchies, status competition, the impact of social change upon established ways of life, the breakdown of previously operative structures of control. These, I believe, are the deeper sources of moral panics that produce this surface expression.

Stan's original analysis made it clear that moral panics and folk devils have an interactive relationship, and he has discussed already the deviancy amplification aspect of this, the idea that social control prompts a hardening of the original deviance and, ironically, enhances its attraction for the potential deviants. However, there is another aspect of this relationship too which he also mentions, although it has not been picked up on or developed to the same extent. Implicit in the analysis is the idea that a specific group of deviants singled out for folk devil status is selected because it has characteristics that make it a suitable screen upon which the society can project sentiments of guilt and ambivalence. In other words, there is an internal relationship of that kind involved.

A good example of this unconscious projection is the current and persistent public panic centred on paedophile sex offenders. The recent Kate Winslet movie *Little Children* shows quite clearly the intensity of our fear and loathing of child-abusers, owing a large amount to unacknowledged guilt about negligent parenting and our own ambivalence about the sexualisation of modern culture. There is a relationship there which is not accidental.

I have already mentioned the political uses of moral panics but one should also emphasise the mass media, which is often the prime mover and the prime beneficiary of these

episodes since, of course, the sensation not only sells papers and entertains readers, it generates further news in a kind of unfolding story as people take positions, commentators disagree and so on. Yet when Professor Jock Young (University of Kent) used the concept, he claimed that commercial media have 'an institutionalised need to create moral panics' – it was intrinsic to the money-making, news value-seeking quality of the media.

Finally, we ought to mention the productivity of moral panics: they make things happen, they create effects and they leave legacies. Consider Stuart Hall's account of how mugging panics enabled the drift to a new law and order society, or how American panics over drug use have allowed the build-up of mass imprisonment, or indeed think about the recurring sex offender panics today, and the way that they have justified an enormous new apparatus of repression and restraint designed to control anyone deemed to be a 'sex offender'. Moral panics may sound somewhat ephemeral, but repeated over time, they can facilitate important extensions of the criminal justice state.

David Garland is Arthur T. Vanderbilt Professor of Law and Professor of Sociology at New York University. He is the author of *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford University Press, 2001) and is currently working on a book about American capital punishment. An extended version of Professor Garland's talk will appear in the journal *Crime, Media and Culture* in 2008 under the title "On the Concept of Moral Panic".

Professor Stanley Cohen FBA, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, London School of Economics, is author of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Routledge, 30th anniversary edition, 2002). Professor Stuart Hall FBA, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Open University, is author of *Policing the Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1978).

Professor Adam Kuper FBA, Professor of Social Anthropology, Brunel University) was in the Chair.

You can listen to the full presentations and discussion on line via the Academy's web site at <http://britac.studyserve.com/home/default.asp>
