'Good Moral Panics' and the Late Modern Condition

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Abstract

The aim of the following paper is to provide and an overview of the concept of 'moral panics', discuss new developments in the sociology of deviance and the possibility of applying the 'moral panic' discourse in analysing 'good' moral panics.

Introduction

As any other tool for sociological analysis, the concept of 'moral panics' should be situated within a set of historical and social changes and its impact and subsequent acceptability within the vocabulary of sociology should in part be seen as a result of the conditions in which it emerged. Earlier and more positivistic criminology was unduly committed to the 'essence' of an act, whereas the breakthrough afforded by 'moral panics' and the new deviancy theory placed the magnifying glass on the 'appearance' of an act in an era when image and representation were becoming primary phenomena within the social sciences (Jenks, 2011).

The new deviancy theory which arouse in the late 1960s and early 1970s utilized the sociological imagination in giving meaning to the 'deviants' by arguing for a symmetrical approach in social research – a dialectical focus that would encompass both deviance and the reactions to it. The moral panics tapped into the core values and social structures at the time, where a shift from gratification and discipline towards a more impulsive and immediate world brought with itself resentment towards the newly emerging culture of short-term hedonism and impulsivity (Young, 2007b). Thus, the moral panics are characterised by a rational irrationality – they 'work' because they 'hit the sore spot', at once tapping into anxieties about social transition, and simultaneously attempting to stymie cultural change. Another perverse rationality arises from the possibility that 'respectable fears' that were initially disproportionate

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may well have encouraged the creation of threats that are now only too real (Young, 2011).

The first reference regarding moral panics can be traced back to Jock Young and his work *'The Drugtakers'* (1971) where the author discussed the public concern about statistics, which indicated an alarming increase in drug abuse. Observing the moral panic about drug-taking, he noted that this led to the establishing of police drug squads and led to an increase in drug related arrests (ibid.). The moral panic that developed, however, was not against the drugs but rather about the people that used them and the reasons behind their use – the hippie culture and the extravagant levels of hedonism, expressivity and the opposition that it actively promoted. The moral panic about drug use was also strongly linked to the massive changes in the value system and the relationships of production and consumption in advanced Western societies. These massive changes were the root cause for both the public condemnation and the newly emerging youth cultures. The mass media at that time also had its stake into the escalation of the moral panic as it amplified the problem and provided explanations and solution for the moral crisis, which in essence re-affirmed the consensual images which society held. This process of amplification created a spiral of resentment, fear and condemnation which prompted control agencies such as the police to create fantasy crime waves. Although the process of deviancy amplification was based on unstable ground, its consequences were real in nature and in some instances resulted in the self-fulfilment of the 'deviant image' (ibid.). Taking this argument further, Thompson concluded that 'it highlights the spiral effect produced by the interaction of the media, public opinion, interest groups and the authorities which gives rise to the phenomenon which has become known as a moral panic' (Thompson, 1998: 7). This kind of interaction is reminiscent of Howard Becker's term 'moral entrepreneurs' and their role in the interpretation of deviance and the application of the label 'deviant' to particular types of individuals and behaviour (Becker, 1963). Supported by the media and leading social movements, these types of crusaders aim at regulating moral values and also, which is far more important, exercising social control upon the masses. The moral crusader is 'fervent and righteous and holding to an absolute ethic; what he or she sees is truly and totally evil with no qualification' (ibid.: 147-8).

Apart from the role of moral entrepreneurs, there are several other relevant points which could be applied in order to profoundly understand a 'moral panic' as a type of sociological phenomenon. Among these are the apparent fragmentation and breakdown of social stability, which itself is linked to the unclear moral boundaries present at this very moment in time. Interestingly, although the moral panics lead to an engagement in a moral-asserting crusade, it actually that fails to address and tackle the issues which caused the social instability in the first place (Thompson, 1998). A good example is Stanley Cohen's account of the Mods and Rockers panic, which served in the preservation of the dominant moral values system at a time of turmoil and anxiety (Cohen, 1972). Thus, the two groups served as the necessary scapegoat in order to engage the public and entrepreneurs in the conflict that followed the initial 'day of terror'. Although no group formations were evident at that time, the 'deviancy amplification' that followed (Wilkins, 1965; 2003) enabled the establishment of the two conflicting youth groups and their further engagement in deviant activities. The work of Stanley Cohen (1972) paid particular attention to the role of the media and the process of symbolization, and the role of moral entrepreneurs in the process of distinguishing and in fact, creating the image of the Mods and Rockers.

A similar approach was adopted by Hall et al. (1978) who provided a Marxist analysis of the moral panic around 'mugging' – a term introduced from America by the British press in order to describe minor street robberies. This was represented as a new type of crime and a moral panic ensued, whereby people were led to believe that the British streets were as unsafe as those of New York when it came to street robberies. Mugging also took on racial overtones as it was portrayed in the tabloid press as being perpetrated almost entirely by black youths, whom Hall et al. 1978 referred to as 'a false enemy'. In their book 'Policing the Crisis' they pointed out how these problems were first and foremost defined by the press as acts of law-breaking, with practically no consideration given to the possible underlying causes such as poverty or racial inequality.

The concept was also successfully applied to the social concern which ensued around the 'garroting' scare in Victorian England. In her analysis Davies (1980) demonstrates how – the start of the panic preceded any 'crime wave', and that the subsequent increase in the number of recorded street robberies is attributable more to the panic

itself than to the actual increase in robberies with violence, in fact, it was the actions and reactions of the press, public and various government agencies involved in control which created the 1862 'crime wave' rather than any significant increase in criminal activity in the streets. The garrotting panic occurred during a period of intense public debate over the treatment of England's law-breakers. During the 1860s the reformative principles on which England's prison system was based came in for increasing criticism from those who favoured more punitive treatment and stricter control of convicts. It is in the context of this debate that the panic's origins and significance must be located.

The threat felt by the English ruling classes in the 1850s and the 60s was that posed by the release of several thousand convicts who had previously been transported. The 'folk devils' identified during the panic as personifying this threat were the convicts released on tickets of leave, of whom the garotters were perceived as a small but particularly dangerous subgroup. Press and public opinion focused not only on the ticket-of-leave men/garotters, but also on the 'philanthropists' and 'reformer's behind the prison system which had produced this threatening criminal class.

In line with this, Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) assert that moral panics frequently surface in times of social disorganisation, during periods of social change that carry with them transformations in established ways of life. These periods are usually characterized by cultural strain and moral ambiguity regarding normative framework of society, and are vulnerable to challenges from various groups aiming to negotiate their social status within the emerging new framework. The activities of moral entrepreneurs and claim-makers during transitional periods can be seen as a part of a wider process in which moral boundaries are symbolically negotiated and clarified (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994b). 'Moral panics' thus furnishes a site for contests between various approaches and ideas about core moral, ideological and social issues at specific historical moments. Moral panics are embedded with social, political and cultural imperatives and are engaged in a dialogue with wider cultural themes in specific societies (Thompson, 1998: 20). Thus, a moral panic is discursively drawn as a symbol of wider social, cultural and political issues and draws upon pre-existing ideologies and fears (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). One example is the American 'war on drugs' started by President Nixon in the 1970s (ibid.). Between 1969 and

1974 the allocation of the federal budget dedicated to drug abuse was increased nearly ten times. At the time of the rhetoric, a Gallup Poll in 1973 revealed that 20 per cent of the American public considered drug abuse as the number-one problem in the country. After Nixon's departure in 1974 the campaign faded and by the middle of the decade only 2 to 3 per cent considered drugs to be the main problem in the United States. Another example is Jenkins' (1998) analysis of the various moral panics about child molestation, which occurred in the USA at intervals of about thirty-five years throughout the twentieth century. This work demonstrates that their timing was related to a number of factors, such as the level of fear in society, the sense of family stability, and even the size of the current generation of children.

Problems with the concept of 'moral panics'

The first contributions which employed the use the concept paid little attention to the active role of folk devils in the whole process of deviance and amplification (Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Later analyses directed attention to the non-passive role of folk devils and the original model was accordingly enriched by analyses of the interactions between the stigmatizers, who attempted to create folk devils, and the deviants, who attempted to reject of reverse the process of stigmatization. This indicated a second change in the development of 'moral panic' theorizing, in which close attention was paid to the folk devils as active participants in the process. Works in the 1990s resulted in yet another shift, which led to the re-thinking of possibilities for the genelizability of moral panics in societies that have become fragmented and multicultural. As the original analysis was based on a culturally monolithic society, it was questioned whether a consensus could be reached in a pluralistic society and thus the whole issue of launching moral panics and the mechanisms through which this was achieved had to be reconsidered (ibid.). Despite moral panics being classified as ephemeral phenomena, they might also lead to the establishment of new institutional arrangements and long-lasting bureaucratic structures. Even in cases when there are no immediate traces of routinization, the very happening of a moral panic might create cognitive deposits and memories that might have an impact of the next moral panic to have a longer-lasting effect. For this reason, no moral panics should be considered as trivial or marginal (ibid.).

More recent analysis has shifted the focus from moral panics towards a political economy of a culture of fear (Critcher, 2011). This new development is bound to works on the risk society (Beck, 1992) and the application of moral panic analysis in this society (Ungar, 2001). The post-modern culture of fear in its essence is paradoxical – a safer society produces more fear; each 'fear' discourse is different from the previous and is symbolically constructed; it generates hostility towards the 'outsiders' and is influenced by the media and popular culture, a dependence that results in the distortion of social reality (Critcher, 2011).

Instead of a reduction in the number of moral panics in such multicultural societies, moral panics, at least in theory could be launched by various moral entrepreneurs. Thus, in the most recent application of the concept, it has been applied parallel to risk theories and the role of media in the process of creating and sustaining the establishment of a widespread 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 2006). Along with this, contemporary research also examines the symbolic core of cultures, the formation of cognitive maps and their impact of people's world views and behaviour. This process of construction and reconstruction is linked to the application of morality and the use of moral panics in essence is used to draw the boundaries of moral universe (Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

In the early 1960s, when the events described by Cohen (1972; 2002) took place, a relatively cohesive establishment and a narrowly focused mass media could give the impression of a unified public reaction. Since then, however, the growth of publicly accessible media, together with the emergence of an alternative youth press, and the expertise of counter-experts and activists who are willing to speak out on behalf of targeted folk devils, make consensual expressions of concern much more unusual (McRobbie and Thorton, 1995). The changing nature of the media indicates a shift towards American-style 'cultural wars', which are characterized by a horizontal conflict between social groups.

Recent scholarship (Thompson, 1998) has also emphasised the extent to which the processes of moral panic have become familiar so that participants are now much more self-conscious and deliberate than previously. The way in which the media in general tends to handle moral panics has become routinized and predictable.

In their analysis of the heuristic nature of the 'moral panics', Rohloff and Wright (2010) note that the concept developed in the turbulent political and intellectual context of the 1960s, its principal aim was to expose the processes involved in creating concern about a social problem, concern that bore little relationship to the reality of the problem, but nevertheless provided the basis for a shift in social of legal codes. Since then it has enjoyed a great deal of academic interest and has been applied to 'everything from single mothers to working mothers, from guns to Ecstasy, and from pornography on the Internet to the dangers of state censorship' (Miller and Kitzinger, 1998: 221). It has gained popularity but this cross-transfer has ultimately resulted in the loss of its original complexity (Innes, 2005).

As Rohloff and Wright (2010) point out, the concept of 'moral panic' has several problems. The first one is the problem of normativity. Since its introduction the concept has been used as a form of social critique where panics were characterised as social reactions that are 'irrational' and misdirected (Rohloff and Wright, 2010). Hier (2002a) argues that it is the concept's normativity that has made it unappealing to newer developments in social theory. Second comes the problem of temporality, according to which moral panics can be characterized as shot-lived episodes (exceptions are Hall et al.'s (1978) analysis of the mugging panic and Jenkins' (1998) study on child molestation). In other words, the moral panics studied do not focus on the historically structured processes that have an impact on the development of the moral panics in the first place. Subsequent revisions have led to the acknowledgement of the necessity for a time-frame and contextual analysis: '…Moral panics are a crucial element of the fabric of social change. They are not marginal, exotic, trivial phenomena, but one key by which we can unlock the mysteries of social life…' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994: 229).

The third problem is the one of (un)intentionality which ultimately is concerned with the question of responsibility. In Cohen's (1972) original analysis, the moral panic surrounding the mods and the rockers was presented as unintended and unanticipated, with focus being placed on the media as medium for deviancy amplification and stigmatization. In contrast, the analysis of the mugging moral panic (Hall et al. 1978) presented the scare as a strategy on behalf of the ruling elites in order to divert public attention from the crisis in the capitalist system. Last but not least, Goode and Ben-

Yehuda (1994) constructed the problem as one of intentional actions versus unintentional developments. Their approach distinguished between grassroots, interest groups and elite-engineered moral panics. The first model based the problem onto sentiments that were present in society in the general. The second model suggested that the reaction should be considered as an outcome of the efforts of specific moral entrepreneurs and particular interest groups in society. The last model, the elite-engineered panic, was presented as a deliberated organised propaganda campaign aimed at diverting attention from real structural problems. Revision of these 'ideal types' (ibid.) of moral panics have moved towards the more rigorous appreciation of the plurality of reactions that might accompany the process of moral assertion and an appreciation of the resistance efforts which might occur in line with the panics (Hier, 2002b; McRobbie & Thorton, 1995; de Young, 2004). Even with such contribution being made, the concept has been criticised for falling short of providing alternative means of explanation and theorisation (Hier, 2008). Attempts have been made to tackle the 'heuristic' nature of the concept by incorporating the developments in risk theory and the works of Norbert Elias (Rohloff and Wright, 2010).

A fourth problem is the one of anthropomorphizing. The claim that a society can engage in hysterical, panic-stricken behaviour has been criticised on the grounds that collective social processes cannot be rendered as individual psychological ones. Some of the earlier analyses of moral panics discussed 'society' and 'social reaction' as if they were unified and undifferentiated, when in fact the interests of the police, the media and the public were quite different (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995).

Another problem, outlined by Garland (2008) is concerned with the ethics of attribution, according to which the critical ascriptions which the concept carries also have an impact on its use. This creates situations in which the conditions for the analysis of a moral panic exist, but due to ethical consideration such an inquiry is not pursued. An example is the post-9/11 response of the media and the government (ibid.). The aftermath of the tragedy contained all the necessary conditions included in the definition of the concept – expressed concern, hostility, disproportionality, consensus and a moral dimension was attached to all of the above, yet the episode itself was not categorised as a moral panic. The commentators involved into the analysis of the terrorist attack avoid the use of the term and considerable caution was

exercised when discussing the event (Walker, 2002). According to Garland (2008) one explanation is the widespread uncertainty of the nature of the attack itself. Secondly, and what he considers more important, the reluctance of applying the label 'successfully' was based on ethical reasons. The use of the concept would clash with the prevailing moral sentiments of fear and grief that drove the reaction to the attack. Thus it took some time for the first academic publication considering the post-9/11 as an example of a moral panic to be published (Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Welch, 2006). Even though Garland (2008) himself notes that the ethical inhibitors might not be as important, they will have some impact on the way in which tragedies and disasters are approached by 'moral panic' scholars. What is shows, however, is the relationship that exists between the analysts and the social actors and the way in which the influence each other.

A shift towards 'good moral panics'

It has been Cohen's longstanding contention that the term moral panic is, for its utility, problematic insofar as the term 'panic' implies an irrational reaction which a researcher is rejecting in the very act of labelling it such. That was the case when he was studying the media coverage of the Mods and Rockers and when Young was studying the reaction to drug taking in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Currently, Cohen has started to feel uncomfortable with the blanket application the term 'panic' in the study of any reactions to deviance, as he argues for its possible use in 'good moral panics' (Cohen, 2002: xxxi-xxxv).

Cohen (2011) discusses the changes that have occurred in society and how this has had re-directed the 'moral panic' analysis and has contributed to the development of the concept. To begin with, the modern moral entrepreneurs have adopted a status similar to the social analyst (in terms of class, education and ideology) and the likelihood for the two of them to perceive the problem in the same way has increased substantially. Secondly, the alliances between the various political forces has become more flexible and as a result, panics about 'genuine' victims (of natural disasters or terrorist attacks) are more likely to generate consensus that the 'unworthy' victims (the homeless). Thirdly, whereas the traditional moral panics where in nature elite-engineered, the contemporary ones are much more likely to populist-based, giving more space for social movements' and victims' participation in the process. Fourthly,

in contrast to the old moral panics, the new ones are interventionist-focused. The new criminalizers (Cohen, 1988) who address the moral panics are either post-liberals who share a common background with a decriminalized generation, or are from the new right who argue for increased focus on private morality (sexuality, abortion, lifestyle). In addition, Cohen (2011) considers the possibility of certain moral panics being understood as 'anti-denial' movements. In contemporary times the denial of certain events, their cover-up, evasion and tolerance is perceived as morally wrong, and such denied realities should be brought to the public attention, which would result in widespread moral condemnation and denunciation. In this sense, it could be argued that certain panics should also be considered as 'acceptable' and thus a binarity between 'good' and 'bad' moral panics can be developed. Such as heuristic between 'good' and 'bad' can be useful as such a distinction in effect widens the scope of moral panic studies beyond those examples that are regarded as 'inappropriate' and 'irrational'. Potentially, this could also lead to the questioning of the notions of rationality, disproportionality and other normative judgements that have characterised the studies of moral panics.

Such an approach of analysing 'moral panics' is in contrast with the work of Critcher (2003, 2009; 2011), to whom the concept of can be best understood in the relations of power and regulation. Whereas both Critcher and Cohen agree that each moral panic should be seen in a wider conceptual framework, the latter does not adopt Critcher's suggestion that the term 'moral' panic should not be applied in cases where dominant elites reinforce dominant practices by way of scapegoating outsiders. By contrast to Critcher, Cohen accepts the possibility of counter-hegemonic moral panics. In addition, Critcher stresses the need to focus not only on the politics of moral panics, but also consider the economic factors that might limit or promote their development.

Moving beyond moral panics, Hunt (1999) has argued that a shift has taken place in the processes of moral regulation over the past century, whereby the boundaries that separate morality from immorality have been blurred. As a result, an increasing number of everyday activities have become moralized and the expression of such moralization can be found in hybrid configurations of risk and harm. The moralization of everyday life contains a dialectic that counterposes individualizing discourses against collectivizing discourses and moralization has become an increasingly

common feature of contemporary political discourse (Garland, 2001; Biressi and Nunn, 2003; Haggerty, 2003). Moral panics (Hier, 2002a, 2008) can also be seen as volatile manifestations of an ongoing project of moral regulation, where the 'moral' is represented as practices that are specifically designed to promote the care of the self. With the shift towards neo-liberalism, such regulatory scripts have taken the form of discourses of risk, harm and personal responsibility. As Hier (2008) the implementation of such a 'personalization' discourse is not straightforward due to the fact that moral callings are not always accepted. The moral codes that are supposed to regulate behaviour, expression and self-presentation are themselves contestable and their operation is not bound in a time-space frame. Thus, 'moralization' is conceptualized as a recurrent sequence of attempts to negotiate social life; a temporary 'crisis' of the 'code' (moral panic) is therefore far more routine than extraordinary. The problems with such an argument for expanding the focus of moral panics to encompass forms of moral regulation is that it is too broad (Critcher, 2009) and a more specific scope of moral regulation should be defined in order to conduct such analysis.

Conclusion

The aim of the following paper was to provide an overview of the concept of 'moral panics' and the possibility for applying its analytical tools in the study of 'good moral panics'. As the focus of the concept was expanded significantly over the past 40 years, it can be argued that such a task is within the scope of academia due the changing nature of the contemporary world and social relation. In fact, in such a world full of insecurity and one that is characterized by a constant fear of falling (Young, 2007a) such an approach of putting reality on trial would be much appreciated.

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