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# MORAL PANICS: Culture, Politics, and Social Construction[1]

*Erich Goode*

Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Stony Brook, Stony Brook, New York 11794

*Nachman Ben-Yehuda*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

## Abstract

Social problems may fruitfully be looked at as constructed phenomena, that is, what constitutes a problem is the concern that segments of the public feel about a given condition. From the constructionist perspective, that concern need not bear a close relationship with the concrete harm or damage that the condition poses or causes. At times, substantial numbers of the members of societies are subject to intense feelings of concern about a given threat which a sober assessment of the evidence suggests is either nonexistent or considerably less than would be expected from the concrete harm posed by the threat. Such over-heated periods of intense concern are typically short-lived. In such periods, which sociologists refer to as "moral panics," the agents responsible for the threat—"folk devils"—are stereotyped and classified as deviants. What accounts for these outbreaks or episodes of moral panics? Three theories have been proposed: grassroots, elite-engineered, and interest group theories. Moral panics are unlike fads; though both tend to be relatively short-lived, moral panics always leave an informal, and often an institutional, legacy.

# INTRODUCTION

On the continent of Europe, roughly between 1400 and 1650, hundreds of thousands of people—perhaps as many as half a million, up to 85% of whom were women—were judged to have "consorted with the devil" and were put to death. Much of Europe, especially France, Switzerland, and Germany, was in turmoil with suspicion, accusations, trials, and the punishment of supposed evildoers. A kind of fever—a craze or panic—concerning witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft swept over the land. Once an accusation was made, there was little the accused could do to protect herself. Children, women, and "entire families were sent to the stake.... Entire villages were exterminated.... Germany was covered with stakes, where witches were burning alive." Said one inquisitor, "I wish [the witches] had but one body, so that we could burn them all at once, in one fire!" (Ben-Yehuda 1985:36, 37).

In 1893, a charismatic religious mystic led a group of faithful followers into a remote mountain valley in the Brazilian state of Bahia and founded the community of Canudos; within two years, the settlement became the second largest city in the state. Canudos was a millenial cult whose adherents believed that the existing order would be overturned with the dawning of a new day. Landowners, the Catholic Church, and political elites resolved to crush the movement. Three military assaults against the settlement were repulsed by tenacious defenders. Finally, in October, 1897, Canudos was encircled by 8000 troops, serving under three generals and Brazil's Minister of War, and was bombarded into submission by heavy artillery. Thousands were killed; the survivors numbered only in the hundreds. Soldiers smashed the skulls of children against trees; the wounded were drawn and quartered, hacked to pieces limb by limb. All 5000 houses in the settlement were "smashed, leveled and burned.... The army eradicated the remaining traces of the holy city as if it had housed the devil incarnate" (Levine 1992:190). Throughout the campaign, news of Canudos flooded the Brazilian press; a sense of "public panic" was created. Accounts appeared daily, "almost always on the front page." More than a dozen major newspapers sent war correspondents to the front and "ran daily columns reporting events." "Something about Canudos provoked anxiety, which would be soothed only by evidence that Canudos had been destroyed" (Levine 1992:24).

These historical episodes represent explosions of fear and concern at a particular time and place about a specific perceived threat. In each case, a specific agent was widely felt to be responsible for the threat; in each case, a sober assessment of the evidence concerning the nature of the supposed threat forces the observer to the conclusion that the fear and concern were, in all likelihood, exaggerated or misplaced. Sociologists refer to such episodes as moral panics. They arise as a consequence of specific social forces and dy-

namics. They arise because, as with all sociological phenomena, threats are culturally and politically constructed, a product of the human imagination.

## Social Problems: Objectivism or Constructionism?

Social problems can be approached from either an objectivist or a constructionist perspective. Objectivists argue that what defines a social problem is the existence of an objective, concretely real, damaging or threatening condition. What makes a condition a problem is that it harms or endangers human life and well-being. Any condition that causes death or disease, that shortens life expectancy or deteriorates the quality of life on a large scale, must be defined as a social problem (Manis 1974, 1976). The functionalist paradigm is a variant of the objectivist model in that it sees social problems largely as a product of dysfunctions, social disorganization, role and value conflicts, and a violation of norms—that is, a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be (Merton & Nisbet 1976). Likewise, the traditional Marxist position accepts the notion that social problems should be defined objectively—by the harm that is inflicted on large numbers of people as a result of injustices such as exploitation, oppression, racism, sexism, and imperialism (Liazos 1982).

On the other side of the debate, representing the constructionist, "subjectivist," or "relativist" position, it is argued that what makes a given condition a problem is the "collective definition" of that condition as a problem, that is, the degree of felt concern over a given condition or issue. To the constructionist, social problems do not exist objectively; they are constructed by the human mind, called into being or constituted by the definitional process (Spector & Kitsuse 1977, Schneider 1985, Best 1989, Holstein & Miller 1993, Miller & Holstein 1993). The objective existence of a harmful condition does not, by itself or in and of itself, constitute a social problem. Indeed, to the constructionist, a given condition need not even exist to be defined as a social problem (Becker 1966:5)—witness the persecution of witches in Renaissance Europe and colonial New England (Erikson 1966, Ben-Yehuda 1980, 1985). In short, a social problem is "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kitsuse 1977:75). Definitions of social problems derive from or are produced by specific sociocultural circumstances, groups and categories, social structures and societies, historical eras, individuals, and/or classes.

To the constructionist, it is not necessary for individuals to formulate or use the precise phrase, "X is a social problem in this society." The problemhood of conditions may be expressed in a variety of ways—including expressed attitudes, activism, voting on issues, participation in social movements, rebellion, consuming media stories about certain issues, and so on. More concretely, to the constructionist, the reality of social problems can be measured or man-

ifested in some of the following ways: (i) organized, collective action or campaigns on the part of some of the members of a society to do something about, call attention to, protest, or change (or prevent change in) a given condition—in short, "social problems as social movements" (Mauss 1975, Best 1990:2–3); (ii) the introduction of bills in legislatures to criminalize or otherwise deal with, the behavior and the individuals supposedly causing the condition (Becker 1963:135ff, Gusfield 1963, 1981, Best 1990:2–3); (iii) the ranking of a condition or an issue in the public's hierarchy of the most serious problems facing the country (Best, 1990:2–3, 151–75, Goode 1993:49–50); and (iv) public discussion of an issue in the media in the form of magazine and newspaper articles and television news stories, commentaries, documentaries, and dramas (Becker 1963:141–43, Best 1990:2–3, 87–111).

The strict or "hard" constructionist focuses exclusively on the nature of claims-making and considers all "objectivistic" accounts, including those of the scientist and technician, as simply yet another claims-making activity (Aronson 1984, Kitsuse & Schneider 1989). In contrast, to the moderate or contextual constructionists (Best 1989), one of the more intriguing features of social problems is the fact that extremely harmful conditions may not be regarded as serious social problems, while relatively benign ones are. The answer as to why people become concerned about certain conditions cannot be found, at least not entirely, in the realm of objective damage. It is the discrepancy between concern and the concrete threat posed by or damage caused by a given condition that forces us to raise the question, why the concern over one issue but not another? Or, why concern now but not previously? If we insist that we have no right to determine the nature of the threat posed by certain conditions, such questions are not problematic—indeed, they are not even possible.

If public concern is a logical, almost inevitable, product of impending or concrete, inflicted harm, then that concern is not problematic, not a phenomenon necessitating an explanation. If, on the other hand, objective harm and public concern vary in large measure independently of one another, then this concern demands an explanation. How do definitions of social problems come about? Why is a social problem "discovered" in one period rather than another? What steps are taken, and by whom, to remedy a given condition? Why do segments of the society take steps to remedy this condition but not that, even more harmful, one? Who wins, and who loses, if a given condition is recognized as a social problem? How do groups, classes, or segments of the society struggle to establish their own definition of social problems? How is problemhood established? And by whom? Constructionism forces us to see the social dynamics behind the creation of conditions as problems. And the moral crusade is one crucial avenue through which certain conditions are constructed and validated as social problems.

## Moral Crusades

In 1930, only 16 states in the United States had laws on the books which made marijuana possession and sale a crime; even in the criminalized states, there was "relatively lax" enforcement of the laws; and few Americans smoked marijuana or knew anyone who did. The dominant attitude toward marijuana use was apathy and indifference (Becker 1963:137, 135). But by 1937, every one of the then-48 states had passed a law outlawing marijuana possession, and during that year, a federal law, the Marihuana Tax Act, was passed. For the first time in history, Americans came to be arrested for marijuana possession and sale in large numbers. During the 1930s, scores of sensationalistic magazine articles, and thousands of local newspaper articles, were published on the horrors of marijuana use, dubbing the drug the "killer weed," the "weed of madness," a "sex-crazing drug menace," the "burning weed of hell," a "gloomy monster of destruction" (Goode 1993:194, 1994:179).

Why this dramatic shift? How was it that this rarely used and relatively innocuous drug attracted legislative, police, public, and media attention? Howard Becker (1963:135–46) argued that the passage of the marijuana laws, and the attendant media and public attention, was a product of the efforts of key moral entrepreneurs, specifically officials in the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), who "perceived an area of wrongdoing that properly belonged in their jurisdiction and moved to put it there" (Becker 1963:138). The Bureau's thrust was made up of two prongs. First, FBN officials worked with state legislatures—including drafting model legislation—to facilitate the passage of the state anti-marijuana laws. And second, they provided "facts and figures" to the media which formed the basis for articles in national magazines. Thus, "through the press and other communications media," the Bureau sought to generate "a favorable public attitude toward the proposed" law (Becker 1963: 139). The "national menace" or threat posed by marijuana use did not have an objective reality. The FBN created a crisis where no basis for it existed, and the campaign created a "new class of outsiders—marihuana users" (Becker 1963:145).

In the campaign to criminalize the sale and possession of marijuana, a specific form of behavior was defined as a major problem by officials, moral crusaders, the press, and/or segments of the public. And a specific form of wrongdoing—deviant behavior—was seen to be responsible for the problem spelled out by the campaign. Specific individuals—marijuana users and dealers—were targeted as deviants. And the furor of intense concern in some quarters that emerged over the issue subsided after a fairly brief period of time. Official, media, and public concern about marijuana faded by the early 1940s and remained at a low ebb throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s.

The moral crusades concept is powerful; it permits the sociologist a pene-

trating look at crucial events and developments of importance. But, as with all sociological concepts, it is limited; it fails to capture some central features of analogous phenomena. Do all moral crusades capture the fervor and concern of substantial segments of the public? If not, may we still refer to them as moral crusades? Are all phenomena that capture this fervor the product of an organized group of key powerful agents and actors? If not, how are we to refer to such a phenomenon? The notion of a crusade requires crusaders, or what Becker (1963:147ff) refers to as "moral entrepreneurs," that is, organizers, do-gooders, movement activists who push for a given cause. To put things another way, the moral entrepreneur creates the crusade: no entrepreneur, no crusade. By definition, the latter is a product of the former. But what if we cannot locate these agents? Clearly, the engineered, consciously created quality of the widespread public concern is an empirical, not a definitional, question. If we have posited widespread concern, in principle that concern could have been triggered by a variety of sources. It cannot, by definition, be a conscious creation of activists. Can a moral crusade grow out of a latent or expressed public concern—rather than, automatically, the other way around? By the 1960s, it became clear that the moral crusades concept had to be extended and built upon.

## Enter the Moral Panics Concept

While certain institutions and behaviors may exist before they are conceptualized and named, these processes permit them to be observed and analyzed. Seemingly irrational mass behavior was certainly noticed in the collective behavior literature as far back as Charles Mackay and Gustave LeBon, but the concept of moral panics as an analytically distinct rather than analogous social form made its appearance only in the 1960s.

On a cold, wet Easter Sunday, 1964, in Clacton, a seaside resort community on England's southern coast, what would normally be regarded as a minor disturbance among young people broke out on the street. Several scuffles and brief rock-throwing incidents took place; motorbikes and motorscooters roared up and down the street; some windows in a dance hall were smashed; several beach huts were damaged; a starter's pistol was fired in the air. The police, unaccustomed to such rowdiness, arrested nearly 100 youths on charges ranging from "abusive behavior" to resisting arrest.

While not exactly raw material for a major story on youth violence, the seaside disturbances nonetheless touched off what can only be described as an orgy of sensationalism in the British media. On Monday, the day following these events, every national newspaper (with the exception of the staid *London Times)* ran a lead story on the Clacton disturbances. "Day of Terror by Scooter Groups," screamed the Daily Telegraph; "Youngsters Beat Up Town" claimed

the Daily Express; the Daily Mirror chimed in, "Wild Ones Invade Seaside."
On Tuesday, press coverage was much the same. Editorials on the subject of
youth violence began to appear. The Home Secretary was urged to take firm
action to deal with the problem. Articles began to appear featuring interviews
with Mods and Rockers, the two youth factions current in Britain at the time,
who were involved in the scuffles and the vandalism. Theories were articulated
in the media, attempting to explain what was referred to as mob violence.
Accounts of police and court actions were reported; local residents were
interviewed concerning the subject, their views widely publicized. The story
was deemed so important that much of the press around the world covered the
incidents. Youth fights and vandalism at resorts continued to be a major theme
in the British press for some three years. Each time a disturbance broke out,
the same exaggerated, sensationalistic stories were repeated.

The over-heated reaction of the police, the media, the public, politicians,
and, in time, action groups and proto-social movement organizations, caught
the attention of Stanley Cohen. To Cohen, the major issue was the "funda-
mentally inappropriate" reaction by key social actors in key sectors of the
society to relatively minor events. The press, especially, had created a horror
story practically out of whole cloth. The seriousness of events were exagger-
ated and distorted—in terms of the number of young people involved, the
nature of the violence committed, the amount of damage inflicted, and their
impact on the community and the society as a whole. Obviously false stories
were repeated as true; unconfirmed rumors were taken as fresh evidence of
further atrocities. Once the atrocities were believed to have taken place, a
process of sensitization was set in motion, whereby extremely minor distur-
bances became the focus of press and police attention, captured in the headline
at the time: "Seaside Resorts Prepare for the Hooligans' Invasion." And often,
Cohen argued, the sensitization process generated an escalation in the distur-
bances; a minor incident became a more substantial one through overzealous
enforcement.

Cohen launched the term *moral panic* to characterize the reactions of the
media, the police, the public, politicians, and action groups to the youthful
disturbances. Said Cohen, in a 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...
> resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes
> more visible. Sometimes the subject 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. Some times the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in
> folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting

repurcussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself (Cohen 1972:9).

In a moral panic, the reactions of the media, law enforcement, politicians, action groups, and the general public are out of proportion to the real and present danger a given threat poses to the society. In response to this exaggerated concern, "folk devils" are created, deviant stereotypes identifying the enemy, the source of the threat, selfish, evil wrongdoers who are responsible for the trouble. The fear and heightened concern are exaggerated, that is, are above and beyond what a sober empirical assessment of its concrete danger would sustain. Thus, they are problematic, a phenomenon in need of an explanation; they are caused by certain social and political conditions that must be identified, understood, and explicated.

To Cohen, in a moral panic, sensitization occurs. Sensitization is the process whereby harm, wrongness, or deviance is attributed to the behavior, condition, or phenomenon that is routinely ignored when the same consequences are caused by or attributed to more conventional conditions. The "cue effect" of the condition or behavior is much greater during the moral panic; supposed effects are noticed and linked to the offending agents that, in ordinary times for ordinary behavior, would have disappeared in the routines and hubub of everyday life. In addition, the police "escalate" their law enforcement efforts, "diffuse" them from precinct to precinct, and "innovate" new methods of social control (1972:86–91); they operate under the "widening-the-net" principle (1972:94).

If all social fears and concerns entailed reactions to a specific, clearly identifiable, and appropriate or commensurate threat, the magnitude of which can be objectively assessed and readily agreed-upon, such reactions would require no explanation. On the other hand, if, as Cohen argues, the reaction is out of proportion to the threat, we are led to ask why it arises. Why is there a moral panic over this supposed threat but not that, potentially even more damaging, one? Why does this cast of characters become incensed by the threat the behavior supposedly poses, but not that cast of characters? Why a moral panic at this time, but not earlier and not later? What role do interests play in the moral panic? What does the moral panic tell us about how society is constituted, how it works, how it changes over time? Cohen's concept introduces the student of society to a wide range of questions and potential explorations.

## Moral Panics: Definition and Criteria

What characterizes a moral panic? How do we know when a moral panic has taken hold in a society at a specific time? How may we operationalize the concept? The moral panic is defined by at least five crucial elements or criteria.

CONCERN    First, as we saw, there must be a heightened level of concern over the behavior (or supposed behavior) of a certain group or category and the

consequences that that behavior presumably causes for the rest of the society. As with social problems, this concern is manifested or measureable in concrete ways, through, for example, public opinion polls, media attention, proposed legislation, action groups, or social movement activity.

HOSTILITY    Second, there must be an increased level of hostility toward the category of people seen as engaging in the threatening behavior. Members are collectively designated as the enemy of respectable, law-abiding society; their behavior is seen as harmful or threatening to the values, interests, way of life, possibly the very existence, of the society, or a sizeable segment of that society. These deviants are seen as responsible for the threat. A dichotomization between "them" and "us" takes place, and this includes stereotyping—generating "folk devils" or villains on the one hand, and folk heroes on the other, in this morality play of evil versus good (Cohen 1972:11–12).

CONSENSUS    Third, there must be a certain minimal measure of agreement in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing of group members and their behavior. This sentiment must be fairly widespread, although the proportion of the population who feels this way need not even make up a majority. Differently put: Moral panics come in different sizes—some gripping only certain social categories, groups, or segments, others causing great concern in the majority. Some discussions (for instance, Zatz 1987) do not posit widespread public concern as an essential defining element of the moral panic, while others (Hall et al 1978) make the assumption that public concern is little more than an expression or epiphenomenon of elite interests. It is necessary to remind ourselves, however, that many elite-generated campaigns do not capture the public imagination, and never become wide-spread moral panics—witness the "family values" theme on which Republican candidate George Bush initially based his campaign in the 1992 American presidential race, which had little resonance for most voters. In addition, the general public, or segments of the public, have interests of their own, and often become intensely concerned with threats that elites would prefer be ignored, such as nuclear contamination (Perrow 1984:324–28, Erikson 1990) and satanism (Richardson et al 1991, Jenkins & Meier-Katkin 1992, Victor 1993). Public concern cannot be swept under the rug as an irrelevant criterion. Still, in arguing that a measure of consensus is necessary to define a moral panic, we do not mean to imply that panic seizes everyone, or even a majority of the members of a society at a given time. Even during moral panics, public definitions are fought over, and some of them win out among one or another sector of the society, while others do not.

DISPROPORTIONALITY    Fourth, there is the implicit assumption in the use of the term *moral panic* that the concern is out of proportion to the nature of the threat, that it is, in fact, considerably greater than that which a sober empirical evaluation could support; in the moral panic, "objective molehills have been made into subjective mountains" (Jones et al 1989:4). In moral panics, generating and disseminating numbers is important (Best 1990:45–64)—addicts, deaths, dollars, crimes, victims, injuries, illnesses, total cost—and most of the figures cited by moral panic claims makers are wildly exaggerated.

The criterion of disproportionality is not without its critics (Waddington 1986). How do we know that the attention accorded a given issue or phenomenon is disproportional to the concrete or objective threat it poses? Here are four indicators or criteria.

First, if the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are grossly exaggerated, we may say that the criterion of disproportionality has been met (Ben-Yehuda 1986, 1990:97–134, Best 1990:45–64). Second, if the threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, nonexistent, we may say that the criterion of disproportionality has been met (Richardson et al 1991, Jenkins & Meier-Katkin 1992, Victor 1993). Third, if the attention paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another, and the threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, the criterion of disproportionality may be said to have been met (Goode 1993:42–57). And fourth, if the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness, then, once again, the criterion of disproportionality may be said to have been met (Ben-Yehuda 1986, 1990:97–134, Goode 1993:48–53).

VOLATILITY    And fifth, moral panics are volatile: They erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie latent for long periods of time and may reappear from time to time), and, nearly as suddenly, they subside. As we'll see, some moral panics may become routinized or institutionalized, while other moral panics vanish—seemingly—without so much as a trace; the legal, cultural, moral, and social fabric of the society after the panic is essentially no different from the way it was before. But whether it has a long-term impact or not, the degree of fear, hostility, and concern generated during a moral panic tends to be fairly limited temporally; the fever pitch that characterizes a society or segments of it during the course of the moral panic is not sustainable over a long stretch of time.

To describe moral panics as volatile and relatively short-lived does not imply that they do not have structural or historical antecedents. The specific issue that generates a particular moral panic may have done so in the past, perhaps even in the not-so-distant past. In fact, moral panics that are sustained over

long periods of time are almost certainly conceptual groupings of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics. Likewise, describing a given concern as volatile does not mean that moral panics do not, or cannot, leave a cultural and institutional legacy. Indeed, elements of panics may become institutionalized; during panics, organizations and institutions may be established at one point in time that remain in place and help stimulate incipient concerns later on, at the appropriate time.

## Three Theories of Moral Panics

Why moral panics? Why do the public, the media, the police, politicians, and/or social action groups in a particular society at a particular time evidence intense concern about a condition, phenomenon, issue, or behavior that, a sober assessment of the empirical evidence reveals, does not merit such a level of concern? Two dimensions distinguish the theories that have been advanced to explain moral panics.

The first is the morality vs interests dimension, and the second is the elitism vs grassroots dimension. The first dimension addresses the question of motive: Do concern and activism coalesce around a given issue because of world-view, ideology, and morality—that is, deeply and genuinely felt attitudes and sentiments—or because actors stand to gain something of value—jobs, power, resources, respectability, wealth, recognition, ownership of a domain of expertise—if others become concerned about that issue? And second, are many actors responsible for the creation and maintenance of the panic, or few? Does the panic start from the bottom and progress up, or does it work from the top down? Or does a panic begin in the middle of society's status, power, and wealth hierarchy, neither from the elite at the top nor from the undifferentiated general public, but from representatives or leaders of specific middle-level organizations, agencies, groups, institutions, or associations?

When we combine these two dimensions—motives based on morality/ideology vs status/economic interests and levels of power, status, and wealth— theoretically, we have six possible theories, as Table 1 shows us:

**Table 1**   Theories of moral panics: motives and origin

|  | Motives | |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Morality/<br>Ideology | Material/<br>Status interests |
| Levels |  |  |
| Elite | 1 | 2 |
| Middle | 3 | 4 |
| Public | 5 | 6 |

Table 1 is a very rough theoretical delineation of the possible explanations or theories of moral panics. Not all these possibilities are equally likely to have attracted proponents. Cell 1, where elites generate a moral panic out of deep feelings of ideology and morality, independent of their status and material interests, we suspect, may be regarded as a null or empty cell, essentially empirically nonexistent. To our knowledge, it has attracted no proponents; this may be because, in Western society, profoundly influenced as we are by Marxist thinking, it is difficult for us to imagine elite ideology divorced from elite interests. For all practical purposes, when Western intellectuals think of elite ideology, it is part and parcel of elite efforts to justify their self-interests. It is possible, however, that real-world examples of Cell 1 actually do exist. For instance, in Iran after the revolution of 1979, elites (and the masses) waged a war against Western values and behavior for moral, ideological, and religious—not material—reasons. In many ways, in fact, this campaign hurt the material interests of Iran (and her nonreligious elites). In our view, Cell 1 should not be dismissed out of hand.

Cell 2 is, of course, the classic Marxist approach. It would argue that elites "engineer" or "orchestrate" moral panics in order to gain some material and/or status advantage. According to this model, elites fabricate a panic over a nonexistent or trivial threat—and one about which they in fact feel relatively little genuine concern—in order to gain something of value or divert attention from issues that, if addressed, would threaten their own private interests. Or they engineer a panic to reaffirm or maintain their ideological hegemony. To the extent that other sectors of the society—such as the media—are necessary to the scheme, they are merely "pliant" or "cooperative" in expressing elite interests.

Advocates of arguments falling into Cell 3 argue that occupants of the middle status and power levels of the society—the police, professional organizations, the media, intellectuals, and so on—act in large measure independent of elites to express or maximize their own morality or ideology. Proponents of arguments falling into Cell 4 argue that occupants of those same status levels primarily seek material or status advantage. As we shall see shortly, while these two cells can be separated in principle, in real life it is a bit more difficult to distinguish them. The interest group model sees material and/or status interests as crucial, but argues that moral panics originate neither from the top nor from the bottom, but somewhere in society's middle rungs—professional associations, the police, the media, religious groups, educational organizations—middle-level associations, organizations, groups, institutions, sectors, and categories of every description. The interest group model does not see society as controlled from the top down; interest groups often have interests that contradict those of elites, and the former often, perhaps usually, initiate crusades, panics, and campaigns in the face of elite opposition or indifference.

In the interest group model, ideological and moral motives tend to be downplayed, ignored, or subsumed, while material and status interests are focused on as crucial.

Cell 5, usually referred to as the "grassroots" model, argues that moral panics are generated from the "bottom up," and, concomitantly, that morality and ideology are dominant motives for activists and concerned citizens. To the grassroots theorist, moral panics are more or less spontaneous eruptions of concern on the part of a large number of people about a given threat or putative threat. To our knowledge, Cell 6, the argument that the mass of the public generates moral panics primarily out of material or status considerations, does not have any advocates.

While a delineation of the hypothetical models resulting from our combination of these two dimensions may be of interest for speculative purposes, only three are of significance to researchers and theorists—the grassroots model, the elite engineered model, and the interest group model. Let us look at them in a bit more detail.

THE GRASSROOTS MODEL     The grassroots model argues that panics originate with the general public. The concern about a particular threat is a widespread, genuinely felt—if perhaps mistaken or at least exaggerated—concern. The expressions of concern in other sectors (that is, in the media, among politicians, political action groups, and law enforcement) are an expression or a manifestation of more widespread concern. The action of no special group or sector is necessary to generate the public concern that breaks out at a particular time about a specific issue. Instead, the concern may arise more or less spontaneously, although, to be manifested in a public manner, it may require being catalyzed, assisted, guided, or triggered. Thus, if politicians or the media seem to originate or "stir up" concern about a given issue, in reality, the concern must have been latent to begin with. Politicians and the media cannot fabricate concern where none existed initially; all too often, they have tried to stir up concern about a given issue and failed. In the overt expression of the moral panic, a kind of diffuse anxiety or strain simply explodes at the appropriate time, given the requisite triggering event. The panic is simply the outward manifestation of what already existed in less covert form. Politicians give speeches and propose laws they already know will appeal to their constituency, whose views they have already sounded out; the media broadcast stories their representatives know the public, or a segment of the public, is likely to find interesting and, about certain topics, troubling. What is central to the grassroots theorist—what explains the outbreak or the existence of the moral panic—is deeply felt attitudes and beliefs on the part of a broad sector of the society, that a given phenomenon represents a real and present threat to their values, their safety, or even their very existence.

Panics often entail populist sentiment which sees a threat as emanating from powerful, high-status strata. Their very power and status imparts an ominous, dreadful quality to their capacity to harm common, honest, hard-working folk. On many issues, the rank-and-file members of Western society mistrust the rich and the powerful, and harbor suspicions that they are likely to engage in evil deeds that threaten the rest of us with harm in order to line their own pockets. The rumor, said to be rife in African-American communities, that the American corporate elite—all rich, powerful, and white—are supplying Black communities with drugs in order to commit genocide against them (Turner 1993), is an apt example of this principle.

In the British moral panics that developed in the 1970s and 1980s about threatened women and children, both liberals and conservatives felt it was possible that "the crimes of the upper classes would be concealed by a cover-up by an ubiquitous 'old-boy network'" (Jenkins 1992:77). The revelations during the same period that a number of individuals with elite backgrounds and positions and Oxford-Cambridge educations were Soviet spys—and homosexuals—generated substantial hostile populist sentiment. These scandals "helped condition public attitudes to the image of upper-class perverts whose activities were concealed by their colleagues .... Politicians were repeatedly involved in scandals involving homosexuality, pedophilia, or frequenting... male prostitutes" (Jenkins 1992: 78). This sentiment is crystallized in the words of one police officer who, during a particular scandal involving underage male prostitutes, said: "people always want their paedophiles to be judges or politicians" (Jenkins 1992:78).

While not a moral panic according to the criteria of volatility and the evil doings of "folk devils," the fear of nuclear contamination qualifies as a moral panic, or so say some experts (Slovic et al 1991:7, 11), according to one specific criterion—the disjunction between the likelihood of harm (which is supposedly extremely small) and public fear of and concern with that threat (which is enormous). Extreme and, supposedly, exaggerated fear and concern have made it impossible for the nuclear industry to build new power plants in the United States for the past decade, as well as in the foreseeable future. Clearly, this fear is not generated by elite interests—taken as a whole, the business elite favors nuclear energy. This concern is grassroots generated and sustained. Perrow (1984:324–28) and Erikson (1990) locate this panic—this huge and almost unique discrepancy between what the experts say and how the public feels—to a factor they refer to as dread. It turns out that the experts and the public calculate the risk of harm in drastically different ways. Experts make use of what Perrow refers to as "absolute rationality"; in contrast, the public uses "social rationality" (1984:325). The experts' calculation is made in a straightforward, rationalistic fashion: What is the statistical likelihood that certain harmful outcomes will occur, and how harmful are these outcomes?

But to the public, factors other than and in addition to statistical likelihoods and degrees of harm enter into the picture. The public fears threats less according to their statistical likelihood than to the extent that they are seen as involuntary, uncontrollable, unknowable, unfamiliar, catastrophic, certain to be fatal, and delayed in their manifestation.

Nuclear power stands at the extreme end of all these undesirable dimensions of fear. Its risks are seen as "involuntary, delayed, unknown, uncontrollable, unfamiliar, catastrophic, dreaded and fatal" (Perrow 1984:325). Aspects of risk not judged to be crucial in the experts' evaluations loom extremely large in the public's assessment. Radiation and other technological toxins "contaminate rather than merely damage; they pollute, befoul and taint rather than just create wreckage; they penetrate human tissue indirectly rather than wound the surface by assaults of a more straightforward kind" (Erikson 1990:120). Instead of assessing danger by calculating odds in the way experts do, perhaps we should, Erikson argues, "understand radioactive and other toxic substances as naturally loathsome, inherently insidious horrors ... that draw on something deeper in the human mind." Toxic emergencies "really are different" from more routine, mechanical accidents, such as car crashes; "their capacity to induce a lasting sense of dread is a unique—and legitimate—property" (1990:121). Fear of radiation is not engineered by elites or a product of the activism of members of interest groups. It is not "some exotic form of hysteria that will subside once the media stops fanning the flames and calm returns to public discourse" (1990:125). It stems from deep, primordial feelings that may be impervious to machinations from above. It is a genuinely grassroots phenomenon.

It is quite likely that drug abuse possesses some qualities similar to those of nuclear contamination: The control that drugs wield over users is seen as insidious, one that creeps into the user's mind and body and "takes over"; the drug is attributed a kind of diabolical or "black magic" power that overwhelms and dominates the user. It exerts a power that manifests parallels with other dreadful agents that embody "stealth and treachery," that "invade" the user, that "contaminate, pollute, corrupt, taint, and befoul," that "penetrate human tissue" and "never end," never quite seem to go away. The public finds widespread drug abuse riveting and terrifying in part because of these genuine primal fears. However misplaced they are, much of the public dreads a foreign substance entering the body, causing a silent genetic catastrophe among uncountable generations (in the case, supposedly, of LSD), or rendering the user an uncontrollable addict (in the case, supposedly, of heroin and crack cocaine).

Certainly no advocate of the grassroots model would argue that, by itself, public sentiment is sufficient to generate a moral panic. In every case, this sentiment necessitates a vehicle to elevate a latent fear or concern into widespread, mutual awareness; the feelings of scattered, isolated individuals must be given an appropriate expression. This vehicle may take the form of the mass

media, political speeches, action groups, and so on. Still, to the grassroots theorist, the organizational vehicle that translates fears and concerns into the public arena is not the primary explanatory variable. Fears and concerns cannot be foisted off on an indifferent public; whatever the vehicle that expresses it, moral panics cannot be launched without widespread public support.

THE ELITE-ENGINEERED MODEL    The theory that moral panics are elite engineered argues that a small and powerful group or set of groups deliberately and consciously undertakes a campaign to generate and sustain fear, concern, and panic on the part of the public over an issue they recognize not to be terribly harmful to the society as a whole. Typically, this campaign is intended to divert attention away from the real problems in the society, whose genuine solution would threaten or undermine the interests of the elite (Reinarman & Levine 1989). Such a theory is based on the view that elites have immense power over the other members of the society—they dominate the media, determine the content of legislation and the direction of law enforcement, and control much of the resources on which action groups and social movements depend.

Hall et al (1978) have advanced what is probably the most well-known and detailed analysis illustrating the elite engineered model of moral panics. They argue that fear of mugging in the early 1970s in Great Britain qualifies as a moral panic, since fear and concern over street crime increased at a time when its actual incidence was not rising. (For a contrary view, see Waddington 1986.) Reactions by the courts to mugging offenses, by the media to muggings and the sentencing of their offenders, and by the public to news of muggings, were "all out of proportion to any level of actual threat" posed by these muggings (Hall et al 1978:29). Why did British society react to mugging in the way it did? Why the public outrage, the extremely harsh sentences in the courts, the mobilization of the police against real and supposedly potential muggers, the law-and-order solutions offered by experts and commentators, the harsh glare of the media? Why the moral panic over mugging? What was the panic really about? What did mugging "represent" to the society?

Hall et al (1978) argue that the themes of the panic "function as a mechanism for the construction" of a definition of social and political reality that serves the interests of the powerful. The early 1970s panic over street crime served to legitimate a law-and-order criminal enforcement program and to divert attention from the growing economic recession, which was causing a "crisis" in British capitalism. During such crises, Hall et al argue, the capitalist state is forced to shed its facade of neutrality and independence from special interests (Hall et al 1978:217) and assume "total social authority... over the subordinate classes" in such a way that "it shapes the whole direction of social life in its image" (1978:216). Domination not only seems to be "universal" and "legit-

imate," but exploitation must seem to disappear from view (1978:216). Such is an "exceptional moment" in capitalist society, the coming of "iron times," where "an authoritarian consensus" is called for (1978:217). When capitalism is in crisis, extraordinary times are called for; during such times, a moral panic may be hoked up to divert attention away from that crisis. In Britain in the 1970s, mugging was just the issue to generate a moral panic and come to the rescue of an ailing capitalist society.

At more than a half-dozen points, Hall et al (for instance, on 57, 59, 136, 176, 182, 322) insist that they are not presenting a "conspiratorial" interpretation of these events. Rather than being part of a conspiracy, Hall et al argue, the ruling elite "orchestrates hegemony," that is, manages to convince the rest of the society—the press, the general public, the courts, law enforcement—that the real enemy is not the crisis in capitalism, nor capitalism itself, but the criminal and the lax way things have been dealt with in the past. The media come "to reproduce the definitions of the powerful" (1978:57) by over-accessing individuals "in powerful and privileged positions" (1978:58). The media "appropriate" public opinion, thereby having it "structured by... dominant ideology" (1978:136). Likewise, the legislature "performs its work on behalf of the capitalist system" (1978:208), the law being "an instrument of class domination" (1978:196). In short, the moral panic over mugging in Britain circa 1970–1973 was engineered by the elite, by the capitalist class, with the more or less unwitting complicity of its allies, the media, the legislature, the police, and the courts. This fear did not originate with the masses—indeed, it is contrary to the interests of the masses—nor with representatives of specific middle-level interest groups. And morality or ideology are not what the panic is primarily "about." More specifically, ideology is a mechanism in the service of elite hegemony, that is, it is a means by which the powerful protect their interests, primarily economic interests, and maintain their rule and the stability of the capitalist system. Hall et al's analysis of the British moral panic over mugging is a classic example of the elite engineered theory.

INTEREST GROUP THEORY    By far, the most widely used perspective on moral panics has been the interest group approach. As we saw, Howard Becker (1963:147–63) argued that rule creators and moral entrepreneurs launch moral crusades—which sometimes turn into panics—to make sure that certain rules take hold and are enforced. In the interest group perspective, as we saw, professional associations, police departments, the media, religious groups, educational organizations, and so on, may have a stake in bringing to the fore an issue which is independent of the interests of the elite. By stating that interest groups have an independent role in generating and sustaining moral panics, we are saying that they are, themselves, active movers and shakers—that elites do not dictate the content, direction, or timing of panics.

The central question asked by the interest group approach is: cui bono?—
for whose benefit? Who profits? Who wins out if a given issue is recognized
as threatening to the society? To whose advantage is the outbreak of a
widespread panic about a given issue, behavior, or phenomenon? Who stands
to gain?

Material and ideological/moral gains have often been separated; presum-
ably, they represent two entirely separate motivations. Interest group politics
are often thought of as cynical, self-serving, devoid of sincere belief. In real
life, such a separation is not always easy to make. Interest group activists may
sincerely believe that their efforts will advance a noble cause. (And one, it
might be added, that will also help advance their status, power, and material
resources.) Advancing a moral and ideological cause almost inevitably entails
advancing the status and material interests of the group who believes in it;
likewise, advancing the status and material interests of a group may simulta-
neously advance its morality and ideology.

Jenkins shows that the satanic ritual abuse panic that flared up in Britain in
the late 1980s:

> offered ideological confirmation of the limitations of liberal theology. Since the
> 1960s, the dominant factions in British churches have emphasized social and
> political activism with a left/liberal slant.... For Evangelicals and Charismatics,
> this was a lethal distraction from the crucial issues of personal holiness and
> spiritual warfare. During the 1980s, the point was reasserted by a new focus on
> black magic cults, ancestral demons, and ritual abusers (Jenkins 1992:204).

Not surprisingly, fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic Christian orga-
nizations have been at the forefront of the British (and American) panic about
satanic ritual abuse from its very inception. In this case, religious conservatives
are arguing for a certain definition of reality—that satanism is alive and well
in modern society and working its evil to corrupt righteousness—which ad-
vances both their material and ideological/moral interests.

We are arguing that the separation between interests and morality, so easily
done in theory, is often difficult to make in practice. Perhaps, rather than
picturing these two motives as contradictory, it is more fruitful to see both as
operative, but, in a given moral panic, one as more influential or dominant
than the other. Cynicism and idealism come in degrees; some activists may
display a mix of motives, while others are more or less entirely self-serving
or, possibly, entirely idealistic. Enough cynics cloak their self-interested mo-
tives in pious proclamations for us to be suspicious about the purity of their
actions. At the same time, we need not be automatically suspicious about the
motives of actors who, while advancing an ideological or moral agenda, also
advance their own group's material or status interests. After all, the two are
usually found in the same package.

## Conclusions

Can we draw any conclusions about the origins of moral panics aside from the trite, unsatisfying, and almost tautologically true platitude that different theories apply best to different moral panics or different aspects of a given moral panic? Almost certainly some latent fear or stress must pre-exist in the general public, or segments of the public, for a widespread panic to "take off." Concern over a nonexistent or relatively trivial threat cannot be fabricated out of whole cloth by a cynical elite or by self-serving representatives of one or another interest group. Advocates of the elite engineered model argue that elites can read or package or construct issues in such a way that the public will find something fearful in them, but this model assumes an extremely gullible public. Unlike the criminal law, which need not express the ideology or views of major segments of the public (see Hagan 1980), moral panics do necessitate the concerns of segments of the society. It is almost inconceivable that certain concerns could be foisted off on the public, that the public becomes intensely concerned about a supposed threat that, in the absence of these machinations, they would otherwise ignore. The grassroots approach, therefore, can be thought of as calling attention to a dimension or factor—rather than offering a competing or independent explanation—that plays a central role in the moral panic.

At the same time, the grassroots model must inevitably be supplemented with another explanation; it cannot be regarded as complete. While widespread stress or latent public fears almost necessarily pre-exist in moral panics, they do not explain how and why they find expression at a particular time. These fears must be articulated; they must be focused, brought to public attention or awareness, given a specific outlet, harnessed to a mechanism of expression. And this almost inevitably entails some form of leadership and organization. Although large numbers of people may spontaneously feel fear or dread about a given agent or threat, to become a moral panic, this fear must be sharpened, broadened, articulated, and publicly expressed by organized, movement-like activity launched by middle-level interest groups. All activists have to consider the question: "What if we threw a party and nobody showed up?" All the organizational efforts in the world cannot create public concern where none exists to begin with. At the same time, concern needs an appropriate triggering device and a vehicle to express itself in a moral panic, and for that, interest group formation and activity are central.

Once again, our argument goes beyond the claim that different models are helpful in explaining different moral panics. It is that the grassroots provides fuel or raw material for a moral panic, while organizational activists' issues of morality provide the content of moral panic, and interests provide the timing (Ben-Yehuda 1986). While the elite engineered model does not seem to work

for most moral panics, the grassroots model enables us to see what fears and concerns are made use of, and the interest group model enables us to see how this raw material is mobilized and intensified. By itself, the grassroots model is naive; by itself, the interest group model is cynical and empty. Together, the two help illuminate the moral panic; interest groups coopt and make use of grassroots morality and ideology. No moral panic is complete without an examination of all societal levels, from elites to the grassroots, and the full spectrum from ideology and morality at one end to crass status and material interests at the other.

## Epilogue: Moral Panics, Demise, and Institutionalization

Although the rise of moral panics has received some attention, their demise has been virtually neglected. The question of the demise of moral panics is linked intimately with the issue of their impact: What impact do moral panics have? Do moral panics promote substantial, long-term social change? Or is their impact much like that of fads, which flare up, are popular for a time, and vanish without a legacy or, seemingly, a trace?

The excitement stirred up during a moral panic is strikingly similar to the charisma possessed by certain leaders. This excitement, like charisma, is volatile and unstable. The feelings that are generated during its period of influence tend to be intense, passionate. But they do not last. How to ensure that the willingness of individuals gripped by this temporary fervor to follow certain rules or pursue certain enemies continues over time? How to translate the vision stimulated during the moral panic into day-by-day, year-by-year normative and institutional policy? How to continue the aims and goals of moral entrepreneurs, action and interest groups, leaders, and much of the public, in "doing something" about the threat that seems to be posed during the moral panic, after the emotional fervor of that panic has died down? What we are suggesting is that, as with charismatic leaders, some moral panics are, almost unwittingly, particularly successful in routinizing the demands for action that are generated during these relatively brief episodes of collective excitement.

Do moral panics have an impact on the society in which they take place by generating formal organizations and institutions; do they, in other words, leave an institutional legacy in the form of laws, agencies, groups, movements, and so on? If so, what is the nature of that legacy? Do moral panics transform the informal normative structure of a society? If so, what is the nature of that transformation?

Some panics seem to leave relatively little institutional legacy. The furor generated by the Mods and Rockers in England in the 1960s resulted in no long-term institutional legacy; no new laws were passed (although some were proposed), and the two germinal social movement organizations that emerged in its wake quickly evaporated when the excitement died down.

In contrast, other panics result in laws and other legislation, social movement organizations, action groups, lobbies, normative and behavioral transformations, organizations, government agencies, and so on. For example, the periodic drug panics that have washed over American society for a century continue to deposit institutional sediment in their wake. President Richard Nixon's mini-drug panic of the early 1970s hugely expanded the federal drug budget, placed the drug war on a firm institutional footing, and created several federal agencies empowered to deal with drug abuse in one way or another. The drug panic of the mid- to-late 1980s left a substantial institutional legacy in the form of two packages of federal legislation, passed in 1986 and 1988, a substantially larger federal budget, dozens of private social movement organizations, and public sensitization to the drug issue. In this way, not only are successive moral panics built on earlier ones, but even in quieter, nonpanic periods, the institutional legacy that moral panics leave attempts to regulate the behavior that is deemed harmful, unacceptable, criminal, or deviant. The earliest, nineteenth century, drug panics defined drug abuse as deviant and, eventually, criminal; in this sense, they generated social change. The later drug panics, in contrast, reaffirmed the deviant and criminal status of drug abuse after a period of drift toward normalization, and thus they prevented social change.

Even seemingly inconsequential panics leave behind some sort of legacy; even those that produce no institutional, organizational, or formal legacy are likely to have had some impact in the informal or attitudinal realm. With the eruption of a given moral panic, the battle lines are redrawn, moral universes are reaffirmed, deviants are paraded before upright citizens and denounced, and society's boundaries are solidified. In Durkheimian terms, society's collective conscience has been strengthened. The message of the moral panic is clear: This is behavior we will not tolerate. Even seemingly transitory panics are not "wasted": They draw more or less precise moral boundaries. Panics emphasize the contrast between the condition or behavior that is denounced and the correctness of the behavior or position of the righteous folk engaged in the denunciation. The satanic ritual abuse scare, for example, reaffirms the moral correctness of the fundamentalist Christian way of life. The Mods and Rockers scare of 1964 to 1967 prepared the way for a later (early 1970s) moral panic in Britain over juvenile delinquency, street crime, and mugging (Hall et al 1978). The Canudos massacre reminded Brazilians that they were citizens of a modern, progressive, industrializing, and culturally unified nation.

In short, panics are not like fads, trivial in nature and inconsequential in their impact. Even those panics that seem to end without institutional impact often leave normative or informal traces that prepare us for later panics or other events. Some, for example, leave cultural residue in the form of folklore (Best 1990:131–50; Turner 1993). A close examination of the impact of panics forces us to take a more long-range view of things, to see panics as long-term

social process rather than as separate, discrete, time-bound episodes. Moral panics are a crucial element in 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.

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