MORAL PANICS

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF DEVIANCE

SECOND EDITION

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THE MORAL PANIC

An Introduction

Figure 3 1819 "Hep Hep" riots in Frankfurt. (bpk Berlin)

At times, societies, or sectors of them, are gripped by moral panics. During such times, the behavior of some of the members of a society is thought by others to be so problematic, the evil they do, or are thought to do, is felt to be so wounding to the substance and fabric of the body social that serious steps must be taken to control the behavior, punish the perpetrators, and repair the damage. The threat this evil presumably poses is felt to represent a crisis for that society: something must be done about it, and that something must be done now; if steps are not taken immediately, or soon, we will suffer even graver consequences. The sentiment generated or stirred up by this threat or supposed threat is much like a fever: heightened emotion, fear, dread, anxiety, hostility, and a strong feeling of righteousness. In a moral panic, a group or category engages, or is said to engage in unacceptable, immoral behavior, presumably causes or is responsible for serious harmful consequences, and is therefore seen as a threat to the well-being, basic values, and interests of the society, or sectors of the society. These perpetrators or supposed perpetrators come to be regarded as the enemy – or an enemy – of society, "folk devils" (Cohen, 1972; 2002), deviants, outsiders, the "Other," legitimate and deserving targets of self-righteous anger, hostility, and punishment.

During a moral panic, then, a substantial number of the members of a given society harbor and express the feeling that evildoers pose a threat to the society and to the moral order as a consequence of their behavior, and therefore "something should be done" about them and their behavior. A major focus of that "something" typically entails strengthening the social control apparatus of the society – tougher or renewed rules, more intense public hostility and condemnation, more laws, longer sentences, more police, more arrests, and more prison cells. If society has become morally lax, a revival of traditional values may be necessary; if innocent people are victimized by crime, a crackdown on offenders will do the trick; if the young and the morally weak, wavering, and questionable are dabbling (or might dabble) in evil, harmful deeds, they should be made aware of what they are doing and what its consequences are. A major cause of the problem is, some say, society's feeble and insufficient efforts to control the wrongdoing; a major solution is to restrengthen those efforts.

It seems almost superfluous to say that moral panics are always *about* something. That is, the threat of harm refers to a certain condition or behavior. The "actors" in the drama of moral panics point to a particular *issue* that is troubling them. Critcher (2008) refers to these issues as panic "stations"; he mentions seven: AIDS, child abuse, drug use, immigration, violence in the media, street crime, youth deviance. Obviously, specific "stations" grip certain sectors of the society more than others; very few of them are equally panic-inducing to the public at large. And the solution is not the same for all panic "stations."

In addition, not everyone gripped by the moral panic sees legislation and law enforcement as the solution to the problem. Even when widespread agreement about the problem exists, the proper solution will be argued about, fought over,

and negotiated; eventually, some legal outcome, one way or the other, will be reached – that is, to legislate or not to legislate – as a result of interaction between and among contending parties. Nonetheless, the question of the appropriate social and legal control of the responsible parties *almost inevitably* accompanies the moral panic. And legislation and its enforcement are usually seen as only one step; some sectors of the society who see the behavior in question as a threat will suggest and debate measures such as education, socialization, normative changes, prevention, "treatment," and "cures."

It is almost axiomatic in the literature that moral panics arise in troubled times, that researchers hypothesize a serious threat to the interests or values of the society as a whole or to segments of a society. What would cause the public, the press, politicians, social activists, and the police, to become seized with the idea that a relatively innocuous agent is dangerous and needful of control? At times, these actors are incapable of facing, or are unwilling to face, a very real and concrete threat whose recognition would be painful, inconvenient, or disruptive. Much of the moral panics literature is devoted to debunking the *stated* reasons for the concern and tracing out the more substantial or "genuine" underlying motives of the various actors on the moral panics stage. For instance, a team of sociologists argue that in the 1970s, British capitalism was threatened and beleaguered (it still is), and so authorities deflected attention *away* from this very fundamental, real, and pressing problem, to the more immediate, concrete threat supposedly posed to law-abiding citizens by muggers and other street criminals (Hall et al., 1978). In Renaissance Europe, the Catholic hierarchy, facing challenges from secularism and the Protestant Reformation, seized upon witches as a major subversive force threatening Catholicism from within, in order to deflect attention away from the more basic religious problem (Ben-Yehuda, 1980; 1985). Drug scares likewise, some say, divert attention away from the society's most serious and pressing issues, such as poverty, inequality, and racism (Reinarman and Levine, 1995; 1997). The specific, material threat, articulated by "actors" in the moral panic, *symbolizes*, stands in for, or represents the more basic cultural threat.

Cynical, scheming, manipulative agents need not hoke up or fabricate panics. Indeed, some of the agents responsible for the moral panic genuinely *believe* their rhetoric concerning the locus of the problem or threat. The stress and anxiety, the public, the press, legislators, or social movement activists say, are *caused by* the putative threat, and will evaporate when the threat is removed. Moral panics arise, the literature tells us, during troubled, difficult, disturbing times, or to groups or categories whose members experience trouble, difficulty, and disturbance in their lives.

Of course, we must be careful to avoid *ad hoc* explanations, of assuming beforehand that collective and social stress must automatically be present for moral panics to break out. Stress could be defined so broadly that all societies suffer from it. Moreover, all that is necessary for a moral panic to break out is that a substantial

number of people in one or more social circles or sectors feel concerned about a particular threat or supposed threat. In principle, however, the hypothesis that moral panics are generated by social stress is testable. We suspect that the hypothesis will be supported more often than not, but that, if we define social stress as a dimension that is high in some societies and low in others, abundant numbers of cases of moral panics can be located in societies in which, according to our definition, levels of stress are seen to be high. We do not wish to pin all our theoretical hopes on a single hypothesis. At the same time, social and collective stress should be kept in mind as a hypothesis that has guided much of the literature on moral panics.

ELEMENTS OF THE MORAL PANIC

What characterizes the moral panic? How do we know when a moral panic takes hold in a given society? The concept of the moral panic is defined by at least five crucial elements or criteria.

Concern

First, there must be a heightened level of *concern* over the behavior of a certain group or category and the consequences that that behavior presumably causes for one or more sectors of the society. Such concern can be engendered by a range of factors, including the media, but if it is felt, we can feel confident that we have a moral panic on our hands. This concern should be manifested or measurable in concrete ways, through public opinion polls, public commentary in the form of media attention, proposed legislation, number of arrests and imprisonments, and social movement activity. The concern felt by the public does not always manifest itself in the form of fear, although both fear and concern have at least one element in common: both are seen by those who feel them to be a reasonable response to what is regarded as a very real and palpable threat. Moral panics usually generate widespread *anxiety*, and anxiety is expressed in a range of measurable ways. For instance, the concern that Americans felt following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 9, 2001 expressed itself in talk, emotion, hate crimes and "backlash" violence, a media frenzy, the delineation of stereotypes of who the attackers might be, and an assault on civil liberties (Welch, 2006). Some have raised a legitimate question by asking if this concern has been appropriate to the threat posed. Was this concern proportionate to the magnitude of the threat these attacks posed? Did it constitute a moral panic? These questions raise imponderables, but the *enormity* of the response to 9/11 is unprecedented, at least since Pearl Harbor.

Hostility

Second, there must be an increased level of *hostility* toward the group or category regarded as engaging in the behavior or causing the condition in question. Members of this category are collectively designated as the enemy, or an enemy, of respectable society; their behavior is seen as harmful or threatening to the values, the interests, possibly the very existence, of the society, or at least a sizeable segment of that society. That is, not only must the condition, phenomenon, or behavior be seen as threatening, but a clearly identifiable group in or segment of the society must be seen as *responsible* for the threat. Thus, a division is made between "us" – good, decent, respectable folk – and "them" or the "Other" – the deviants, bad guys, undesirables, outsiders, criminals, the underworld, disreputable folk. This dichotomization includes *stereotyping*: generating "folk devils" or villains and folk heroes in this morality play of evil versus good (Cohen, 1972, pp. 11–12; 2002). As a means of understanding emotionally charged issues, we invite the reader to inspect political cartoons from all over the world and different periods of history, many available on the Internet. How the enemy is depicted contributes to the demonization of that enemy and his cause: Israelis and Jews dressed in Nazi uniforms bearing swastikas; Americans looking very much like pigs or gorillas; bearded Arabs or Muslims wearing a traditional head-dress, throwing a bomb; during World War II, tiny Japanese characters with buck teeth, wire-rim glasses, and slits for eyes. (Note that King's College, University of London, holds a collection of Japanese anti-British cartoons; the faces of their subjects look evil and sport long, thin noses, moustaches, and a sneer.) In a slightly less dramatic fashion, we can see a parallel between the stereotyping process in moral panics and the routine processing of criminal suspects: the suspicion of the police that a crime has been committed or is in progress is aroused in part on the basis of stereotypical characteristics possessed by a suspect, such as age, race, presumed socioeconomic characteristics, physical appearance, and so on – in other words, *profiling*. Hostility is expressed in these stereotypes, and it is one of the components of the moral panic.

Consensus

Third, to qualify as a moral panic, we must have substantial or widespread *agreement* or *consensus* – that is, at least a certain minimal measure of consensus or agreement, either in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behavior. This sentiment must be fairly widespread, although the proportion of the population who feels this way need not be universal or, indeed, even make up a literal majority. To put it another way: moral panics are

a matter of degree; they come in different sizes – some gripping the vast majority of the members of a given society at a given time, others creating concern only among certain of its groups or categories. At no *exact* point are we able to say that a panic exists; however, if the number is insubstantial and measured in the heightened emotion and beliefs of scattered individuals, clearly, *as a sociological phenomenon*, a moral panic does not exist. Consensus that a problem exists and should be dealt with can grip the residents of a given group or community, but may be lacking in the society as a whole; this does not mean that a moral panic does not exist, only that there is group or regional variation in the eruption of moral panics. In the United States, polls indicate, roughly 45 percent of the population accepts some form of evolution as an explanation of the origin of the species, while roughly an equal proportion believes in creationism, that in six days less than 10,000 years ago, God deposited humans, animals, and plants on Earth. Each side sees the other as a threat to its world view; each sees the interpretation of the other, especially as it appears in school curricula, as a problem to the society. Society-wide consensus is lacking, but it exists for each sector of the society, separately. Indeed, the concern that each side feels is specifically about the views of the *other* side (Eve and Harrold, 1991; Numbers, 1992; Toumey, 1994).

Some discussions do not even posit widespread public concern as an essential defining element of the moral panic, while others (Hall et al., 1978) assume that public concern is little more than an expression of elite interests. The elitist conception of moral panics regards public concern as irrelevant, either ignoring it altogether or regarding it as epiphemenonal, virtually an automatic byproduct of a conspiracy "engineered" or "orchestrated" by the powers that be. This theory is unacceptable to us because we see the world in more nuanced and complex terms than this approach has it. Many campaigns motivated by elite interests and engineered by elite efforts fail to materialize in the general public or simply fizzle out. In addition, the public, or segments of it, have interests of their own, and often become intensely concerned with issues that elites would just as soon be ignored – as we'll see, the fear of satanic ritual abuse offers an example here (de Young, 2004), not to mention the fear expressed in many urban legends (Morin, 1971; Brunvand, 2000; 2001). To sweep public concern under the rug as an irrelevant criterion of the moral panic or as a reflection of the interests of the ruling elite is either to fail to recognize a key ingredient in this crucial process or to make a seriously mistaken assumption about its dynamics.

Still, it is important to remind ourselves that definitions of threat or crisis are rarely unopposed in a large, complex society. The question of whether or not a society is seriously threatened at a given time by a given agent or problem is typically debated, argued about, negotiated. To put the matter a bit differently, in some moral panics, a particular voice opposing the majority is weak and unorganized, while in others, that oppositional voice is strong and united. In the

United States, during the 1900–20 pre-Prohibition period, the threat that alcohol posed and the viability of a national ban on alcohol were vigorously fought over. The "dry" forces, however, were far more united, were fired by an unparalleled moral fervor (while the arguments of the "wet" forces were seen by much of the public as motivated by self-interest), and, during and after World War I, could invoke patriotism in opposition to the enemy beer brewer's German origins (Gusfield, 1963). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the United States, the legalization of marijuana as medicine attracts heated debate, especially in California, with the "ineffectiveness" and "foot in the door" arguments mobilizing one side and the "effectiveness" and "compassion" arguments inspiring advocates on the other side, especially those arguing for a form of *harm reduction* rather than punishment (Grinspoon and Bakalar, 1997; Joy, Watson, and Benson, 1999).

Disproportion

Fourth, there is the implicit assumption in the use of the term moral panic that there is a sense on the part of many members of the society that a more sizeable number of individuals are engaged in the behavior in question than actually are, and the threat, danger, or damage said to be caused by the behavior is far more substantial than, is incommensurate, above and beyond what a realistic appraisal could sustain (Waddington, 1986; Jenkins, 1998, p. 6). The degree of public concern over the behavior itself, the problem it poses, or the condition it creates is far greater than is true for comparable, even more damaging, actions. In short, the term moral panic conveys the implication that public concern is in excess of what is appropriate if concern were directly proportional to objective harm. In moral panics, the generation and dissemination of figures or numbers is extremely important – addicts, deaths, dollars, crimes, victims, injuries, illnesses – and most of the figures cited by moral panic "claims-makers" are wildly exaggerated. Clearly, in locating the moral panic, some measure of objective harm must be taken.

We want to be very careful about what we mean by the objective dimension because, as we saw in the Prologue and as we'll see later in the book, some critics question the very viability of the moral panics concept, and regard disproportion as incapable of being measured. As a consequence, they argue, there cannot be any such thing as a "panic," since we cannot determine the seriousness of the objective threat against which concern we may measure subjective concern – in short, disproportion is an empty, meaningless concept (Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). We strongly disagree, and believe that *some* features of threat and harm can be measured against claims, and that during certain periods of emotional intensity, will be found wanting. We can have a

great deal of confidence, given the nature of the evidence, that: LSD does not seriously damage chromosomes or cause birth defects; satanists have not kidnapped, abused, tortured, and murdered tens of thousands of children every year in the United States and England; legal drug use is responsible for far more deaths than the abuse of illegal drugs; in Renaissance Europe, hundreds of thousands of men and women did not literally consort with an actual, concrete devil; occasional episodes of flag-burning do not subvert or undermine a country's patriotic resolve; and so on.

In short, though we must be cautious, modest, and tentative about making statements concerning what is real and true about events in the social world, we nonetheless can be fairly confident that some statements are more likely to be true than others. We smuggle no objectivist assumptions into the study of subjective claims, but in order to apprehend and understand these claims, we have to make the – for us, blatantly obvious – assumptions that the world is real, that we can know the world through our senses, and that concrete evidence can lead us to certain conclusions about that materially real world.

It is only by knowing the empirical nature of a given threat that we are able to determine the degree of disproportion. The concept of the moral panic *rests* on disproportion. If we cannot determine disproportion, we cannot conclude that a given episode of fear or concern represents a case of a moral panic. True, our knowledge of the material world is never definitive, never absolutely certain; we are permitted only *degrees* of confidence. Still, that may be enough, for some issues, to feel fairly certain that what we say is correct.

Volatility

And fifth, by their very nature, moral panics are *volatile*; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside. Some moral panics may become *routinized* or *institutionalized*, that is, after the panic has run its course, the moral concern about the target behavior results in, or remains in place in the form of, social movement organizations, legislation, enforcement practices, informal interpersonal norms or practices for punishing transgressors. Other moral panics merely vanish, almost without trace; the legal, cultural, moral, and social fabric of the society after the panic is essentially no different from the way it was before; no new social control mechanisms are instituted as a consequence of its eruption. But, whether it has a long-term impact or not, the degree of hostility generated during a moral panic tends to be fairly limited temporally; the fever pitch that characterizes a society during the course of a moral panic is not typically sustainable over a long stretch of time. In that respect, it is similar to fashion, the fad, and the craze; the moral panic is, therefore, as we see, a form of collective behavior.

To describe moral panics as volatile and relatively short-lived does not mean that, when the panic erupts, structural and historical antecedents do not already exist around the same issue. The specific issue that generates a particular moral panic may have done so in the past, perhaps even the not-so-distant past. In fact, one or another moral panic which seems to have been sustained over a long period of time is almost certainly a conceptual grouping of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics. The Renaissance witch-craze, for example, was not active during the entire stretch of its three hundred years of existence. It flared up at one time and place and subsided, burst forth later in another location and died down, and so on. A heated, continent-wide, panic-like craze spanning nearly three centuries is simply not sustainable.

There are some supposedly threatening, dangerous, or risky conditions which qualify according to the criterion of disproportion but lack the "folk devil" element: nuclear energy, swine flu, bird flu, *E. coli*, global warming, the shrinking ozone layer, diseases of every description, accidents, the "military-industrial complex," and so on. The fact is most people have *no idea* of the risk of certain negative outcomes (Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman, 2002); they fear them *independent* of their knowledge of the objective or concrete risk. The processes that cause them to be concerned are only loosely related to harm and threat. Certain conditions may cause anxiety, concern, or fear but in the absence of folk devils or evildoers do not touch off *moral* panics. Some observers argue that sociologists should shift their agenda away from moral panics to these broader, more amorphous supposed threats (Ungar, 1990; 2001; Waiton, 2008; Best, 2008). We disagree and believe that the implications of moral panics have barely begun to be understood, suggesting that the subject needs a great deal more attention and nuance, not less.

Some supposed threats do not attract sufficient fear or concern felt by any substantial social group to qualify as a moral panic – that is, the criterion of *consensus* is lacking. Making a slightly different point, Spector and Kitsuse (1977, pp. 80–1) mention the case of a student who seemed inordinately concerned about the number of reflector panels on the back of post office trucks; expressing "outrage," he accused various parties of being responsible for "waste, poor planning, and excess" (p. 80). Unless this student's outrage is shared by substantial numbers of individuals, in our view, it cannot qualify as a moral panic. Since this one person's disproportionate concern was not shared by others, it did not constitute a *social* panic.

Likewise, if a given fear is a more or less constant and abiding element in a society, it lacks the element of volatility; according to this criterion, therefore, it does not qualify as a moral panic. As we saw, however, volatility is a matter of degree. Some panics burst forth and disappear within a fairly delimited period of time. The LSD scare was confined almost exclusively to the late 1960s. (Will it make a comeback on the same scale? We doubt it.) However, more broadly, one or another drug scare has burst forth and subsided on the American landscape for over a century. The satanic witch craze gripped Europe for nearly three centuries. The fact that certain concerns are long-lasting does not mean that they are not panics, though, since the intensity of these concerns, both locally and society-wide, waxes and wanes over time.

In short, the concept "moral panic" does *not* define a concern over a given issue or putative threat about which a given cynical observer is unsympathetic or feels there is a moral or ideological inappropriateness. The moral panic is a phenomenon – given its broad and sprawling nature – that can be located and measured in a fairly unbiased fashion. It does not matter whether we sympathize with the concern or not. What is important is that that concern locates a "folk devil," is shared, is out of synch with the measurable seriousness of the condition that generates it, and varies in intensity over time. As we'll see, if that concern is focused exclusively on moral or symbolic issues as ends in themselves, it cannot be regarded as a moral panic. The point that the moral panics concept is scientifically defensible, and not an invidious, ideologically-motivated term of debunking, needs to be stressed in the strongest possible fashion.

THE LOCUS OF MORAL PANICS

We must never lose sight of the fact that fear and concern are expressed in specific actions taken, beliefs held, or sentiments felt by collectivities or communities of *specific individuals* in a society. *Who* is "panicked" by the condition in question? Some moral panics are widespread in that they grip substantial numbers of the members of a given society; others are more geographically localized, or characterize only representatives of specific categories, groups, or segments of the society. "*To whom* is the panic 'a panic'?" is an ongoing question that demands an answer. We would be naive to assume that panics somehow suffuse the society as a whole to the extent that all the members of a given society are obsessed about the issue, and they are obsessed about it all the time. While some of the actions taken as a result of a moral panic are society-wide in their impact or implications – federal laws, for instance – they are always the product of what specific individuals or members of specific groups do. There may be intense disagreement in a given society about whether or not a given condition or issue represents a valid cause for concern. As Jenkins (1992, pp. 16–18, and passim) shows, in Britain in the 1980s, while some saw *threats* to women and children as a major cause for concern and action, others saw *exaggerated reactions to supposed threats* to women and children as a cause for concern. As in all topics social, *interpretations* of conditions as threatening, benign, or neutral form the core of the subject matter of moral panics.

CRITERIA OF DISPROPORTION

How do we know that the attention accorded a given issue, problem, or phenomenon is disproportional to the threat it poses? Is referring to a certain issue as a moral panic nothing more than a "value judgment," an arbitrary claim that it does not deserve to receive as much attention as it has? While we agree with Ungar (1992, p. 497) that with *some* conditions "it is impossible to determine the nature of the objective threat" – and therefore, for those conditions, to measure the dimension of disproportion – this is most decidedly *not* true for many, possibly most, conditions.

Here are five indicators of disproportion.

Figures exaggerated

First, if the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are *grossly exaggerated*, we may say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. In May 1982, a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, and representatives of the police, released figures to the media to the effect that half of all Israeli high school children used hashish. This disclosure touched off a brief flurry of concern in the form of media attention and a demand for investigations. All available evidence indicated that the figures that were cited were fabricated; the actual figures, as indicated by systematic surveys, were in the 3-to-5-percent range (Ben-Yehuda, 1986; 1990, pp. 101, 104, 106, 129, 133) – an exaggeration of over 10 times. In the 1980s, missing children activists claimed that tens of thousands of children were being kidnapped and harmed by strangers (Best, 1990, pp. 46–8); careful research indicated that this figure is not more than a few hundred. As we saw, a number of spokespersons have claimed that 50,000 or more sexual "slaves" were "pouring" into the United States; after spending millions of dollars to find these victims, law enforcement and the government have been able to locate only three. Figures as discrepant as these provide a clue to the fact that we may have a moral panic on our hands.

Figures fabricated

Second, if the concrete threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, nonexistent, we may say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. Some fundamentalist Christians claim that satanic kidnap-murders are responsible for the lives of roughly 50,000 children in the United States each year. Careful examinations of the factual basis for this claim has turned up no evidence whatsoever to support it – no satanic rituals, no satanic kidnappings, no murders of children by satanists (Richardson,

Best, and Bromley, 1991; de Young, 2004). This enables us to argue that satanic kidnap-murders may constitute a moral panic among a segment of fundamentalist Christians.

Rumors of harm, invented and believed

Third, when atrocity stories of "tall tales" are told and believed about non-existent harm, it is safe to say that disproportion prevails. Often, statistics are not supplied, but a legend is narrated as having happened anyway. For instance, following the release of *Snuff*, a horrific, misogynist movie in which a woman was depicted as butchered, a rumor was circulated and believed among feminists that the woman actually *was* murdered on camera. (It turns out that the producer of the film circulated the rumor, in order to increase ticket sales.) The rumor resulted in a protest and demonstration by feminists in front of a theater screening the movie (Bronstein, 2008). No one has been able to find concrete evidence that a single "snuff" movie has ever been made; the "snuff" movie, a device for whipping up movement support, was a "tall tale." In the 1980s, an assertion circulated that sadists were giving apples that had been poisoned, or into which razor blades had been inserted, to children on Halloween; it almost need not be said that such an assertion, when believed, generated a substantial measure of concern. But journalists and researchers were not able to locate a single instance of Halloween sadism (Best, 1985). Many urban or contemporary legends entail tall tales of harm to an innocent public inflicted by evil villains (Brunvand, 2000; 2001; Fine and Turner, 2001), again, indicating that such false assertions are indicators of disproportion and may provide a clue that a moral panic is brewing. And if many such rumors or tales or legends circulate *about* a particular issue *in* specific social circles, that *may* indicate that something significant, something very much like a moral panic, is about to launch. Let's be clear: Many movement leaders and rank-and-file members *believe* these "tall tales." But most outsiders do not, and the available evidence does not support them.

Other harmful conditions

Fourth, if the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another condition, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, we can say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. The use of illegal drugs generates vastly more concern than the use of legal drugs, in spite of the fact that legal drugs cause far more disease and death than illegal drugs. According to the Surgeon General of the United States, in the United States, the use of tobacco cigarettes is responsible for well over 400,000 premature deaths each year, while alcohol use causes over 100,000

deaths; a crude extrapolation from hospital and medical examiner's data yields premature acute deaths for illegal drugs (including the illegal use of prescription drugs) in the 20,000 or so territory (Goode, 2008a). Again, discrepancies such as these should cause us to speculate that, perhaps, currently or recently, concern over illegal drug use might provide an example of a moral panic.

Changes over time

Fifth, 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 disproportion may be said to have been met. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the incidence of school shootings and killings was plummeting, but it was a time when they attracted an immense volume of media attention (Best, 2002a; Cornell, 2006). Between the middle to the late 1980s, newspaper and magazine articles on the subject of drug abuse virtually exploded, the percentage of Americans saying that drug abuse was the nation's number one problem skyrocketed from the 2–3 percent range in the mid-1980s to 64 percent late in September 1989, and lawmakers proposed a huge spate of legislation during the 1986–9 period, but far fewer before and after. Yet, during that period of time, the proportion of Americans who used illegal drugs actually declined. This tells us that the criterion of disproportion has been met and that, possibly, a moral panic about drugs gripped the nation in the late 1980s.

MORAL PANICS: AN INHERENTLY IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPT?

We want to make it clear that the moral panic is not inherently an ideological concept. It is true that most analyses of moral panics have in fact been made by social scientists with a liberal, left-leaning, or radical persuasion (Jenkins, 1992, p. 145). Clearly, the concept dovetails neatly with the view that the government, the media, and the public are excessively concerned with trivial or nonexistent problems identified as being caused by "underdogs" about which a major fuss is raised, whereas those which the "top dogs" are responsible for causing do not generate such concern or attention – for instance, muggings (Hall et al., 1978) versus corporate crime.

This supposed leftist accompaniment is not, however, one of its necessary, inherent, or defining features. For instance, some factions of feminism, whose adherents claim some affiliation with leftist politics, seem to have taken up the satanic child molestation and murder cause in the United States (Rose, 1993; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997). In addition, some British feminists and members of the political left supported the satanism–child abuse cause, briefly, in 1990 (Jenkins, 1992, pp. 173–6). In both cases, we have examples of adherents of a supposedly liberal or radical stance supporting what seems to be a nonexistent threat and thereby becoming participants in a moral panic. One sociologist has used moral panics analysis to scrutinize flag-burning as an issue on which a disproportionate concern has been focused (Welch, 2000). Likewise, we might raise the issue that the U.S. government has devoted excessive concern to investigating illegal aliens, given the remote possibility that one or another might harbor a terrorist plot (Welch, 2002; 2006). Another example: Experts claim that the risk of contamination from nuclear power plants is minuscule, a proposition that the overwhelming majority of the public refuses to accept (Slovic, Layman and Flynn, 1991). In this case, therefore, the facts of the case presumably support a pro-industry (that is, a "conservative") position. Clearly, there is no *intrinsic* leftist slant to the moral panics concept.

Cohen (1988, pp. 260–3) argues persuasively that, while there are significant differences, many of the same arguments that the 1960s and early 1970s radicals and liberals advanced to trace out the social, political, and economic origins of the moral panics and crusades they *opposed* (against marijuana, homosexuality, the consumption and sale of alcohol, and so on) could be used to understand the moral panics and crusades now *supported* by some contemporary liberals or radicals (for instance, concern about the threat of industrial pollution, smoking, and pornography). Just as the moral entrepreneurs of earlier decades would have found the analyses of moral panics theorists offensive and critical of their efforts, likewise the liberal and radical moral entrepreneurs of today resist such an approach to their efforts, again sensing a subversion of their cause. In each case, the analysis of the backgrounds of these campaigns seems to *delegitimate* the cause; it seems to argue that the individuals who took up the cause, and worked to criminalize the behavior in question, were motivated not by the harm inflicted by the behavior itself, but by moral, political, economic, and ideological issues.

In fact, the legitimacy of a cause is – in principle, in any case – independent of its social, economic, and political origins. Thus, while, as a general rule, analysts of moral panics have *tended to be* leftist in their political views, observers of any political stripe could use the concept to understand the mobilization and social organization of exaggerated social fears. In the abstract, the concept is politically neutral, but using it to critically examine widespread fears usually regarded as conservative in their import, or the elite manipulation of latent public fears, has characteristically been the rule since the concept's inception. While the moral panics concept has at times degenerated into "mere debunking" (Whitlock, 1979), debunking for political ends is neither one of its necessary nor its principal features; it is measurable, it can be applied to cases supporting a wide range of political views, and it has no *inherent* political slant.

MORAL PANICS: FOUR OVERLAPPING TERRITORIES

The moral panic takes place where four territories overlap: *deviance*, *social problems*, *collective behavior*, and *social movements*. The territory occupied by deviance accounts for the *moral* part of the moral panic: behavior regarded as immoral is more likely to generate public concern and fear than is true of more traditional, conventional behavior. The territory that is occupied by social problems accounts for the *public concern* part of the moral panic: when much of the public is aware of and concerned about a given condition, regardless of its objective status, sociologically, it must be regarded as a social problem – and certainly the panic represents heightened form of awareness and concern. The territory occupied by collective behavior accounts for the *volatility* of moral panics: the fact that, much like fads, they erupt suddenly and usually unexpectedly, and, in a like fashion, fairly swiftly subside and disappear – or lose their fervid quality in the process of becoming institutionalized. The territory occupied by social movements addresses the issue of the organization and mobilization of concerned segments of the population to address and change specific social conditions. Although many moral panics do not generate full-scale social movements or social movement organizations, all activate proto-, incipient, or "germinal" social movements or social movement organizations which may or may not reach complete institutionalization.

SUMMARY

From time to time, societies are seized by a "wave of indignation" about nonexistent or relatively minor threats. Often, these waves have "deep resonance with [cultural] archetypes" (van Ginneken, 2003, pp. 203, 205). This indignation may remain at the level of the expression of feelings and opinions, or it may manifest itself in overt action, such as legislation, escalating arrests, the appearance of stories in the media, letters to the editor of newspapers and magazines, and/or pickets, protests, and demonstrations. In extreme cases, angry crowds have exploded into riots and lynchings. Sociologists refer to such episodes as moral panics.

We can characterize the moral panic by at least five criteria or indicators: a heightened degree of *concern* about a certain threat or supposed threat; *hostility* toward the agent responsible for that threat, who is regarded as a deviant or "folk devil, a certain level of *consensus* or high level of agreement in the society at large or a sector of the society that the threat is real and who is responsible for the threat; a *disproportion* between the level of the threat, as determined by the available evidence, and the level of concern about it; a measure of *volatility* in a given

moral panic episode, that is, moral panics tend to leap up, prevail for a time, and fade out within a matter of months or a few years.

Some critics have charged that no objective criteria of disproportion can be established, that it is an ideologically biased notion. We disagree. Disproportion exists where numbers indicating harm are invented or exaggerated, claims of harm are invented, where "tall tales" or legends are more readily believed than usual, on the basis of flimsy or contradictory evidence – often, though not necessarily, by social movement activists and members – where harm is greater with other threats that attract relatively little concern, and where harm is greater during other times when relatively little fuss is made over the supposed threat.

One of the features of the moral panic is that it stands at the intersecting territory of four concepts: deviance and the social construction of the law, social problems, collective behavior, and social movements: Deviance is inherent in the moral panic, since both designate a folk devil. The moral panics also spell out a condition in need of correction, about which something must be done – hence, the social problem. Likewise, moral panics necessitate collective behavior: both are examples of volatile spheres of human behavior. Like fads, both suddenly and unexpectedly erupt and likewise fairly swiftly subside and disappear. And one manifestation of the moral panic is that it is addressed by organized action groups or social movement organizations.

We argue that moral panics are marked by concern about a given threat, hostility toward a given folk devil, a measure of consensus about the nature of the threat, and a degree of disproportion between the concern and the objective threat. Of these criteria, disproportion has been at least moderately controversial. We offer several criteria of disproportion: in a moral panic, combatants are likely to offer exaggerated and invented figures, invented claims, and more horrific claims than for other times and other conditions. While not one of these clues definitively indicates that we have a moral panic on our hands, they provide evidence that panic-like outbreaks are taking place.

Let's reiterate the basics of the moral panics concept.

First, we have five components or *elements* of the moral panic: (1) concern or fear; (2) hostility toward the folk devil; (3) a certain level of consensus about the nature of the threat; (4) a disproportion between the concern and the threat; and (5) a certain degree of volatility of the concern, an evanescent or coming-and-going quality that does not characterize more ongoing threats.

Second, there are five *spheres* within which moral panics are expressed or *actors* who express them: (1) the general public; (2) the media; (3) social movement activity; and/or (4) political activity, such as speeches and laws proposed by legislators; and (5) law enforcement, mainly the police and the courts.

In a nutshell, these indicators, spheres, "overlapping territories" between moral panics and deviance and crime, collective behavior, social movements, and social problems, along with our three case studies – the Renaissance witch craze, U.S.

drug panics, and the feminist anti-pornography crusade – constitute the subject matter of this book. Each case highlights interesting features not found in the others; each reveals something new about what makes the moral panic so revealing and interesting. First, let's look at how experts *explain* the moral panic; and then, how critics attempt to chip away at the conceptual foundation of the moral panic.

3

THREE THEORIES OF THE MORAL PANIC

Figure 4 Republican campaign billboard with slogan "Make Our Homes and Streets Safe!" Photo by Charles "Teenie" Harris, 1949. (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Gift of the Estate of Charles "Teenie" Harris. Copyright © 2004 Carnegie Museum of Art, Charles "Teenie" Harris Archive)