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## The Cultural Politics of Contemporary Moral Panic Studies: Reflections on a Changing Research Agenda

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The publication of Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's article on societal reactions to polish labour migrants in the United Kingdom provides an important opportunity to reflect on theoretical and conceptual advances that have been made in the sociology of moral panic. Conventional perspectives conceptualise panic episodes as exceptional rather than ordinary claims-making activities that amplify deviance in a manner that is disproportionate to actual threats. An alternative perspective aimed at revising conventional approaches widens the focus of analysis by conceptualising moral panic as a more routine than atypical expression of moral regulation in everyday life. This discussion paper clarifies how moral panic is conceptualised as a form of moral regulation, and it identifies three specific ways that Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's findings complicate some of the assumptions characterising the changing framework in moral panic studies.

### The cultural politics of moral panic studies

Tracing to Cohen's [2003] iconic depiction of the mods and rockers, moral panic studies has had a profound influence on the ways in which sociologists conceptualise crime, politics, deviance, and social control. Indeed, it is hard to imagine more than a handful of sociologists who are unfamiliar with either the term moral panic or its association with the mods and rockers. Many of the key concepts supporting Cohen's original text continue to inform studies in moral panic—for example folk devils, moral panics, deviance amplification, exaggeration, control cultures—yet the cultural politics that engender episodes of moral panic have continued to change since the 1960s.

Changes to the cultural politics underscoring not only episodes of moral panic but also contributions to moral panic studies are evident from a close read-

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ing of the introductions to Cohen's three editions of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Construction of the Mods and Rockers* (hereafter *FDMP*). The first edition of *FDMP* (published in 1971) places explanatory emphasis on the relationship between (working-class) youth deviance and moral panics. Moral panic as a form of social reaction to putative images of youth deviance is situated in the 'sceptical revolution' unfolding in critical criminology: deviance as a gallery of enacted social types rather than an inherent characteristic of groups and individuals. Drawing from developments in labelling theory, Cohen conceptualises the social construction of folk devils in terms of a moral enterprise indexed to the constitution and reproduction of normative identity categories.

The second edition of *FDMP* (published in 1980) supplements the emphasis on the construction of deviance/outside with a focus on 'symbols of trouble'. Whereas the first edition concentrates on the new sociology of deviance by examining social reactions to putative threats posed by images of the mods and rockers, the second edition qualifies the initial suggestion that panics are timeless phenomena informed by a sequence of processes insulated from politics and culture. If the first edition portends an emphasis on the production of deviance, with a more rhetorical or assumed attention to history and politics, the second edition foregrounds history and politics in the British context. The focus of the second edition remains on working-class youth culture, yet Cohen laments how the labelling aspects of the first edition eclipsed the structural conditions of emergence that were later prioritised in Marxian-inspired models [cf. Hall et al. 2009]. In an attempt to correct for the historical flatness of labelling theory, then, Cohen supplements his earlier application of the transactional theory of deviance with a more explicit focus on the political and economic structure of post-war Britain as a 'political battleground between the classes' [2003: xlix]—a drama of profound symbolic resonances.

The framing of the original text endures a third significant revision in the final edition of *FDMP* (published in 2003). From debates about social reactions to putative threats and the production of folk devils as cultural symbols that derive from British class antagonism emerges a focus on 'moral panics as cultural politics'. Cohen uses the term cultural politics to signify a shift in emphasis from class-based claims about youth transgression to the claims-making activities that a variety of social groups (ranging from disinterested helping professions to hyper-interested corporations) engage in. Bolstered by theoretical advances in social constructionism and discourse theories, moral panics are not only conceptualised in terms of special reactions deriving from and feeding into wider social problem frames [ibid.: xxiii]. The scope of moral panic studies is also broadened to include new modes of governance, changing targets of moralisation, and the possibility of good moral panics. In stark contrast to the first edition's conceptualisation of moral panics as atypical claims made by right-thinking people in the interest of social control, panics are re-conceptualised in terms of more common political struggles indexed to the means of cultural (re)production spanning across diverse social institutions [ibid.: xxxv].

## **Widening the focus: towards an understanding of neo-liberal cultural politics**

By the time the final edition of *FDMP* appeared, the focus of moral panic studies had been subjected to several critical analyses. Waddington [1986], for instance, developed the basis for what became a recurring criticism of conventional moral panic studies by arguing that in the absence of a clear understanding of proportional responses to putative threats, reliance on the criterion of a disproportional response is analytically confusing. McRobbie and Thornton [1995] built on the spirit of Waddington's critique by arguing that every component of the original theory requires revision in the age of mass-mediated communications. Thompson [1998] similarly problematised the shifting cultural framework for moral panic studies by drawing attention to the importance of developments in discourse and risk studies. Ungar [2001], too, presented a significant challenge to the viability of moral panic in an era of pervasive real-world threats. Hence, when Cohen framed moral panic as an expression of shifting cultural politics, he was reacting to an existing set of analytical changes as much as he was forecasting them.

Caught up in the critique of conventional moral panic studies, a framework was proposed to link moral panic to a wider conceptual and theoretical foundation associated with the resurgence of moral regulation studies [Hier 2002a, 2002b, 2008, 2011]. By the early 2000s, the assumptions that conventional models made about claims-making, media framing, folk devils, and social control had been problematised and deconstructed. Yet an alternative explanatory framework, linked to a structural and material foundation capable of reaching beyond the parameters of volatile claims-making episodes, was absent from the critical literature. Added to which, sociologists studying social problems construction, moral regulation processes, criminalisation, and media framing tended to either refer to conventional models in a rhetorical manner, accepting conventional theories and arguments as facts, or dismiss moral panic studies altogether as a normatively-informed political project oriented towards debunking claims that analysts disagree with.

To think differently about moral panic studies, moral panic was conceptualised as volatile claim-making activities that represent temporary crises or perceived breakdowns in long-term moral regulation processes. The sociology of moral panic was linked to moral regulation studies because the latter had developed a sophisticated and coherent set of insights into how the moral constitution of society is organised through the mundane activities of everyday life. Despite the importance that morality occupied in the early origins of the discipline, the sociology of morals had fallen out of favour by the mid-20th century [Ruonaarra undated]. The publication of Corrigan and Sayer's [1985] *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* not only rejuvenated interest in morality but also marked the emergence of moral regulation studies.

In their important volume, Corrigan and Sayer argue that the development of the English state from the Middle Ages was coextensive with the formation

of the state apparatus. They argue that the formation of the state was premised on a definitive moral ethos that totalises as it individualises. What this means is that the English state promoted universal social arrangements that legitimised and naturalised particular ways of being human (through education, legal formations, religion, labour suppression), thereby suppressing the inherent diversity among ethnicities, classes, religions, occupational groups, etc. The effect was to normalise and naturalise what are in reality ‘... ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical moral order’ [ibid.: 4].

Corrigan and Sayer’s historical sociology of the state ignited interest in moral regulation studies, finding a particularly strong resonance in Canada (the origins of what Fitzgerald and Smoczynski identify as the Canadian Turn in moral panic studies). Much of the Canadian contribution to moral regulation studies entailed historical investigations into the different ways in which social subjectivity is constructed and constrained through moral reform movements. However, one of the more coherent frameworks that developed from the Canadian Turn not only theorised moral regulation as a form of cultural politics taking place within and beyond state agencies but additionally formulated a conceptual framework that could be applied to contemporary processes of everyday moralisation.

According to Alan Hunt [1999, 2003, 2011], contemporary moral regulation processes assume a distinct, though not definitive, discursive form. During the 19th century, says Hunt, morality was something of a distinct genre. Leading into the 20th century, however, distinctive claims about morality and immorality became less common. Alternatively, moralisation—that is, judgements about what is right and wrong, good and bad, proper and improper—were increasingly transmitted indirectly through proxies. Hunt identifies risk- and harm-based problems as the two most important proxies through which contemporary moralising discourses are transmitted.

Hunt explains how the re-moralisation of everyday life assumes a common dialectical form. On the one hand, moralising discourses commonly call on, address, and/or invite audience members to act responsibly by taking personal actions to manage the risks associated with everyday living. From consumption and leisure activities to crime control and surveillance techniques, risk management as a cultural expression of contemporary politics is framed in terms of an individual moral enterprise. On the other hand, discourses calling on individuals to take personal responsibility to manage risk are situated in relation to discourses that articulate the general dimension of harm (posed by irresponsible others) to be avoided. In this way, moralising discourses are expressed in a dialectic manner: individual and responsible forms of risk management can only be understood in relation to generalised representations of harm posed by irresponsible, yet non-specific others.

The emphasis on risk-based problems as a governing cultural rationality or dominant form of cultural politics is important. Risk-based problems offer individuals a set of opportunities to reduce the emotional uncertainty associ-

ated with the undesirable contingencies of everyday life. Risk-based problems are future-oriented—probability assessments pertaining to a dimension of potential harm that has not yet happened (this is why harm is generalised or non-specific), and they are indexed to emotions associated with potential victimhood (e.g. worry, anxiety, fear, and insecurity). By offering individuals information about opportunities to reduce the likelihood of encountering harm, risk-based problems as problematising discourses speak to the capacities of individuals to adopt strategies and techniques to responsibly avoid the harms associated with images of irresponsible others.

Although everyday forms of moral regulation entail dialectical constructions of self and other, contemporary moralisation articulates with, or in the context of, the cultural politics of the neo-liberal, prudent subject. Conceptualising moral regulation in terms of the cultural rationality of risk-based problems addresses the structural conditions of emergence that underscore regulatory discourses by linking the political dimensions of contemporary neo-liberal governance (prudentialism) with the rational components of risk-management and the moral dimensions of personal and collective responsibility. By fusing the cultural politics of prudentialism with the moral dimensions of responsible risk management, moral regulation is understood as a rational, formative process that contributes towards the historically situated formation of certain kinds of subjectivity.

Whereas moral regulation processes hinge on emotions associated with discursive configurations of individual risk management and collective harm avoidance, moral panics are characterised by different cycles of responsabilisation that bring into play a different sets of emotions. The ideological effects associated with risk-based problems are found at the point where individuals are able to identify with discourses calling for prudent forms of risk management, and where they provoke ethical and material changes in the ways in which people think about and act on themselves and others. Moral panic discourses, by contrast, cannot offer individuals the opportunities to manage risk individually because responsibility for transgression/harm rests with—or is commonly allocated to—irresponsible others: those who have not internalised and embraced prudent forms of risk management (Fitzgerald and Smoczynski complicate this component of the model—see below).

In this way, moral panics are fundamentally a form of volatile complaint based on the real or perceived transgressions of others—be those others real or perceived. They do not conjure up primary emotions associated with potential victimhood, but rather ones associated with grievances against the harms that have come about through the irresponsible actions of others (e.g. anger, frustration, rage, and vengeance). As a temporary expression of ongoing moral regulation processes, moral panics entail configurations of risk, harm, and personal responsibility, but the discursive dynamics associated with risk-based problems in everyday life become inverted during panic episodes; panics entail discursive configurations of collective risk management and individualising attributions of

harm. Moral panics are therefore conceptualised as grievance- rather than risk-based problems characterised by discourses that individualise blame for transgression/harm to specific and identifiable others (folk devils) in the interest of fostering a sense of collective safety, security, and risk management.

### **A changing research agenda**

The panic-as-regulation framework was developed to encourage a wider conceptual focus of analysis in moral panic studies. The purpose of widening the focus of analysis is three-fold: first, to explain where panic discourses come from and what they contribute towards (rather than theorising panics as claims-making packages insulated from politics and history); second, to explain panics in the context of routine, rational processes of self-formation (rather irrational processes motivated by an undifferentiated set of anxieties); third, to formulate a set of empirical-discursive criteria to analytically discriminate panic episodes from wider social processes (thereby avoiding charges of normative bias).

Notwithstanding these mutually conditioning aims, the framework has been interpreted and applied in different ways. On the one hand, a group of sociologists has endorsed the conceptual argument that moral panics represent short-term expressions of longer-term moral regulation processes [e.g. Siltaoja 2013; Critcher 2013; Lundström 2011; Rohloff 2008, 2011a, 2011b, 2012]. In this way, moral regulation and other social, political, and economic processes that span beyond the temporal parameters of moral panic episodes have become an important explanatory foundation for the sociology of moral panic. On the other hand, sociologists have either selectively applied portions of the argument in an attempt to supplement the framework with alternative theoretical resources [e.g. Rohloff and Wright 2010], or partially if not entirely ignored (or misrepresented) the political, discursive, and ideological dimensions of the framework in an effort to discredit it [e.g. Dandoy 2014; Critcher 2009].

This is why Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's article is such an important contribution to the developmental project of widening the focus of moral panic studies. Fitzgerald and Smoczynski begin by explicitly breaking from conventional contributions that examine panic episodes by comparing exaggerated social reactions to real threats (often based on newspaper coverage). Instead of explaining the anti-Polish migrant panic in terms of an irrational ethnic bias or elite-engineered campaign, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski explicitly widen the focus of analysis to include the cultural politics that condition reactions to Polish labour migrants in the United Kingdom.

Fitzgerald and Smoczynski conceptualise the anti-Polish migrant panic in terms of continuing cycles of responsabilisation that are expressed at the conjuncture neo-liberal-prudential rule and conditions of employment insecurity reminiscent of the risk society. They argue that the cycles of responsabilisation for

managing advanced liberal employment (in)security assume a definitive moralising form. Labourers in the UK (and beyond) are called upon to take personal responsibility to manage the risks associated with employment insecurity, and these responsabilising discourses of individualising labour market risk management are dialectically situated in relation to a collective dimension of harm (i.e. general images of irresponsible actions that would produce a condition of employment insecurity). In this way, the moralisation of employment (in)security resembles the broader dynamics of moralisation in everyday life.

Beyond the discursive configurations associated with the management of neo-liberal employment risks, however, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski explain that the moral regulation of employment (in)security contains an inherent structural contradiction that conceals or at least obscures the asymmetry between the neo-liberal state and segments of its labouring population. Individual labourers are assigned personal responsibility for managing employment (in)security, especially in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, but the individualisation of responsibility masks the structural contradictions associated with neo-liberal labour market instability (e.g. shorter contracts, growing unemployment, and market competition). The result is a situation, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski assert, where individuals are blamed (and blame themselves) for employment disruption. Rather than inciting a unification of the working class, the destabilising labour market effects associated with the contradictions of neo-liberal capital accumulation in Britain conditioned an antagonism between British and Polish labourers. Essentially, the emotions stemming from the contradiction between prudent management of the labouring self and the market conditions after 2008 manifested at the quotidian level in a defensive, albeit dispersed, response that entailed allocating blame to Polish labourers.

Fitzgerald and Smoczynski therefore conceptualise the anti-migrant panic in terms of a breakdown in the routine cycles of neo-liberal employment responsabilisation. The panic entails discourses of collective risk management situated in relation to an individual or identifiable dimension of harm. The emotions associated with harmful foreigners stealing British jobs (e.g. anger, rage, and frustration) are explained in terms of grievances that British labourers levy against a particular group of Polish labourers in the working-class segments of Northern England. By drawing on superficial characteristics such as language proficiency, the panic discourses that Fitzgerald and Smoczynski observe in locations ranging from toilet stalls to differential wage scales are expressed in terms of defensive reactions on the part of British labourers that entail allocating blame to the harmful actions of identifiable Polish migrant labourers.

What is especially important about this complex argument is how the cycles of responsabilisation characterising blame allocation configure in anti-Polish labour migrant claims-making (as well as the dispersed claims-making activities that they document through the experiences of labour migrants). Consistent with the panic-as-regulation framework, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski are clear that pol-

ish labour migrants have been constructed as folk devils by being blamed for taking jobs away from British labourers, thereby limiting the extent to which British labourers can exercise their liberal right to act responsibly to achieve employment security. They are equally clear that panic discourses represent extensions of moral regulation discourses that in effect conceal the contradictions of neo-liberal employment insecurities. At odds with some of the assumptions of the panic-as-regulation perspective, however, is the argument that the migrant labourers who take up positions in the North of England are responsible citizens who prudently manage their own labour market security. It is not, in other words, the labour migrants' irresponsible actions that pose a putative harm to British labourers, as the panic-as-regulation framework has hitherto suggested—but rather their own prudent actions that are perceived to conflict with the prudent actions of British labourers.

Moreover, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski extend their argument to develop insights about prudent subjects who simultaneously become folk devils (effectively moving beyond an emphasis on social reactions). Remaining acutely aware of the material dimensions of moral regulation in everyday life, they conceptualise the chain of institutions implicated in regulating employment insecurities as akin to ideological state apparatuses. Intriguingly, however, it is not only working-class labourers—be they British or Polish—who are interpellated as individually responsible for negotiating the demands imposed by the capitalist employment market. Rather, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski also identify a dual process of subjectification, whereby Polish migrants are at once interpellated as prudent labourers and deviant outsiders. In this way, they address the oft-neglected effects associated with the victimisation of the folk devil.

### **Emerging challenges**

Fitzgerald and Smoczynski have presented a complicated, nuanced, and multi-layered argument. They have worked cumulatively and comprehensively to highlight the strengths and limitations (or at least contingencies) associated with conceptualising moral panic as a form of moral regulation. In contrast to other writers who have worked with portions of the framework or ignored it altogether [e.g. Thompson and Williams 2014; Waiton 2008], Fitzgerald and Smoczynski weave together the ideological, discursive, and political dimensions of the framework to account not only for how the anti-migrant panic is expressed through risk- and grievance-based problems but also for the underlying historical conditions of emergence and articulation.

Beyond interpreting and applying the panic-as-regulation framework in a comprehensive manner, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's empirical analysis poses three specific explanatory challenges to sociologists aiming to widen the focus of analysis by conceptualising moral panic as a form of moral regulation.

- *Focus.* The conventional focus of moral panic studies interrogates the misguided claims-making activities of moral entrepreneurs. Whether moralising claims are characterised as irrational or exaggerated, the focus is trained on how moral entrepreneurs inappropriately represent how the world really is. Important revisions to conventional perspectives emphasise the agency that folk devils exercise in resisting dominant claims. As the focus of analysis widens to consciously explore the underlying cultural politics that condition both moral panic claims and counter-claims, attributes like irrationality and exaggeration are displaced in favour of an analytical emphasis on the rational dimensions of why claims-makers represent the world in the way they do and how folk devils are implicated in the same socio-historical mentalities, rationalities, and governing logics that moral entrepreneurs are. To put this plainly, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's analysis is, in one significant way, suggesting that the target for critical analysis should be focused as much on neo-liberal market conditions as it is on the agents who are implicated in webs of prudential subjectification. The object of critique, then, is not the irrational or conspiratorial intentions of claims-makers but rather the broader field of neo-liberal cultural politics.
- *Duration.* Following from the first challenge, and reminiscent of Watney's [1987] general arguments about the relationship between moral panic and the signification of HIV/AIDS and male homosexuality, Fitzgerald and Smoczynski contend that the post-2008 anti-migrant panic is properly understood as a permanent site of representation—a perpetual crisis. Rather than conceptualising moral panic as a temporal and volatile (that is, a one-time) claims-making episode, they intriguingly point to the 'non-volatility' of the anti-migrant panic and the ways it is embedded into the structural foundations of the neo-liberal labour market. The latter hints at the complex interplay between the cycles of responsibilisation associated with risk- and grievance-based problems that we are only beginning to understand.
- *Articulation.* The implications that Fitzgerald and Smoczynski's analysis pose to the ways that panic scholars conventionally understand focus and duration impacts how panics are articulated at the level of discourse (that is, conceptualisation). In contrast to the set of dynamics identified in the panic-as-regulation model, whereby panics are ignited by the putative irresponsibility of harmful others, the anti-migrant panic entails a more inclusive process of responsibilising both claims-makers and folk devils (in addition to a dual subjectification of the Polish migrant as responsible and harmful). In this sense, it is not a condition of irresponsibility to align with the normative codes of responsible conduct that incites panic, but more simply a putative material threat that divides a segment of the working class through the mystifying forces of the state. If there's merit to Cohen's [2003] suggestion that moral panics can be good and desirable, the anti-migrant panic might be better directed towards the contemporary conditions of late capitalism—identifying and exposing a prudential form of labour market risk management as a specific dimension of harm that necessitates collective labouring-class risk management.

The panic-as-regulation framework was never presented under the guise of a definitive statement on how contemporary moral panics are expressed. Nor did the framework ever suggest that risk- and harm-based problems are the exclusive way in which panics should be conceptualised. Rather, the purpose of the framework was (and remains) to use wider developments in political sociology and sociological theory to refine moral panic studies by, among other things, formulating a way to address enduring criticisms pertaining to measurement, conceptualisation, and politics. Fitzgerald and Smoczynski have contributed to this project in a progressive—and exceptional—way, identifying a number of challenges that confront the changing research agenda in moral panic studies.

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