GLOBALIZATION: COHEN'S THEORY AND THE MORAL PANIC

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relevance of Cohen's concept to the present age of globalization, in two important parts. In this paper, the contributions of Cohen and other scholars on moral panics as well as the major critiques of the application of the theory was discussed closely. Next, the paper discusses some examples of moral panics related to sex, tourism and migration, paedophilia and their impacts in the age of globalization. The paper concludes in support of Cohen by arguing that in the context of globalization, the presentation of social problems by various interest groups, particularly the media and political actors, has indeed contributed to unnecessary levels of panic and has misled the public, and policy makers regarding particular groups of people, race, gender and nations, with negative implications for political decisions and policy formulation.

Key words: Globalization, Moral Panic, Paedophilia and Sex

Introduction

Since Cohen introduced the term 'moral panic' in 1972, the concept has remained a global phenomenon and attracted a considerable level of debates particularly in discourses across politics, sociology, and mass media due to the multiple effects of its construction and social meanings.

Broadly speaking, the term refers to the way in which some social problems become 'over-constructed', generating exaggerated fear, anxiety or social reactions from the media, politicians, key agencies of social control and the general public, when the 'threats' or activities of individuals or a particular social group are thought to endanger the moral standards or values of society (Cohen, 1972; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Critcher, 2003; Critcher, 2008).

In more specific terms, its meaning can be appreciated by consulting Cohen (1972), who introduced the concept. Thinking about the perceived threats to the social order, Cohen, (1972) observed that the contemporary societies appear to be subject to instances and periods of moral panics. He compares the public outcry about the youth subcultures, that is, the Mods and Rockers to public reactions to natural 'hazards' and thus used the term 'moral panics' to highlight the 'sudden and overwhelming fear or anxiety' which seemed to seize the public discourses on youth in the 1960s. As Cohen observes, it is not that violence suddenly emerged as an issue, rather the public debates about emerging youth lifestyles have propelled a need to identify and blame the 'folk devils' who augured change. Tracing the events in the media's coverage of youthful aggression, Cohen describes the concept of moral panic as follows:

> *A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interest; 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 diagnosis and solutions; ways of coping are evolved (or more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges, or deteriorates and becomes more visible (Cohen, 1972: 9).*

Thus, a moral panic is a reaction of society to certain social groups or subcultures, based on the belief that they constitute a major threat to the broader culture and its social values. Cohen's definition also suggests that episodes of panic originate with interest groups, mainly the mass media and other social institutions which deal directly with people, when the opinions and views which they extensively influence create exaggerated concern in society. It further reveals that society and corresponding interest groups seek to restore the existing mechanisms of social control and make visible the role of individuals or particular social groups identified with deviant behaviours (Cohen, 1972; Hier and Greenberg, 2002).

Another influential aspect of Cohen's conception is that moral panics usually occur when society sees itself as threatened by the values and activities of an individual or a category of people who are perceived to be deviant or a threat to established moral values, ideologies and ways of life. Importantly, Cohen also holds that moral panic is a feature of all societies at one

time or another. This has led to the application of the concept to a diverse range of phenomena across the world (Hunt, 1997: 632). For instance, moral panics have been identified in historical events ranging from witchcraft in the seventeenth century (Demos, 1970), to eighteenth-century juvenile crime and delinquency ('garrotting'; Pears, 1983) and in more recent concerns over drug use (Young, 1971; Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994), homosexuality (Patton, 1985; Epphrecht, 1998), young black men (Glassner, 1999) and mass migration (Pijpers, 2006). It has also been applied to anxieties over diverse 'folk devils' and the increasing concern with youth behaviour, sex and violence: paedophilia, sex on screen, HIV/AIDS among others (Cohen, 1972; Bradley, 1994; Thompson, 1998; Ungar, 2001; Critcher, 2003; Marsh and Melville, 2011).

Moral Panic: Theory and Critics

As a sociological theory, the concept of moral panic emerged from a diversity of sociological schools, often with heterogeneous and conflicting roots within the glossary of social theory. As noted in the third edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen, 2004), the concept of moral panic was grounded in social reaction theory of the late 1960s, itself originating in the Durkheimian sociology of deviance, which served to reassert consensual societal values in opposition to the media's depicted threat. In particular, it focuses on the application of an extended labelling theory, which sought to reconstruct the process by which individuals come to be defined in terms of stigmatised group identities in the analysis of the media. Moral panic theory was later appropriated by the emergent field of cultural studies with the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the late 1970s, and more recently with various scholarly arguments within the field of cultural studies, focusing on the role of agencies other than the media and elites (for example, McRobbie, 1992; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995).

The concept of moral panic emerged during the first half of the 1970s. Young (1971), a British sociologist, made the first published reference to it in a chapter on drug abuse and policing in the United Kingdom. This was followed by Cohen's landmark (1972) study. A number of other studies by deviancy theorists of the 1960s and early 1970s notably included Wilkins' (1964) work on deviancy amplification and the ideas of interactionists Lemert (1967) and Erikson (1966). Among these, Cohen (1972) was the first to use the term 'moral

panic' in a systematic way, based on three years of fieldwork on the reactions of the media, agencies of social control and the public to the conflict between the Mods and Rockers in Clacton. He observed that this was predominantly mass-mediated and particularly focused on vulnerable youths, who were viewed as threatening societal moral values and interests (Cohen, 1972). Importantly, Cohen's study explored the role of the media and particular interest groups (politicians and criminal justice practitioners) in fuelling anxiety over the activities of these subcultures.

Using his own study as an example, Cohen (1980:10) asserts that the mass media constructed the Mods and Rockers as the ideological embodiment of moral panics, labelling or defining them in a "stylized and stereotypical" manner as "folk devils". He observes that the media reported the activities of these youth subcultures disproportionately to the actual risks that the event offered. In addition, he characterises press coverage of the events as "exaggerated attention, exaggerated events, distortion, and stereotyping" (Cohen 1972:31-38, cited by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994:24). As Cohen further argues, the mass media often sensitize the general public to problematic social conditions by attributing harm to specific conditions or activities of particular groups, who are stigmatized as deviants or to whom deviant behaviours are attributed. He adds that the media might ignore the same 'deviant behaviour' if performed by more conventional individuals or in other conditions.

Importantly, Cohen emphasizes that moral panic does not mean "that there is nothing there" but only that societal responses are "fundamentally inappropriate" (1972:204). He understands that panics arise from "anxiety in the grassroots of communities" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994:120), while the media's role in representing a particular issue as a threat to safety or cultural strain may lead to rapid escalation in public concern. Such escalation may in turn lead to a clamour for action, prompting a response by interest groups such as governments and other policy makers (Cohen, 1972). This analysis suggests that moral panics arise spontaneously, out of anxiety and fear about a threat which becomes widespread in a community or society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). With reference to the actions of the Mods and Rockers, he observes that while such panics may seem to serve no particular interest group, the anxiety generated as a consequence served to reinforce the dominance of the established value system (Cohen, 1972).

Based on the diversity of his empirical data, Cohen holds that all societies possess a body of ideas about deviance, its nature, causes and remedies, but that in industrial society, the press is predominantly responsible for the promulgation of such ideas. Information is thus processed through the mass media and is served to consumers ready structured, subject to commercial and political definitions of what constitutes news, adequate or appropriate forms of representations and so forth (Cohen 1972:16). Although Cohen does not view the media as the sole source of moral panics, he does borrow Becker's (1963) concept of "moral entrepreneurs" (Cohen 1972:17), a category including key interest groups such as politicians, action groups, legislators, law enforcement agents and the general public; however, he understands the media as occupying a central and privileged position, mediating opinion in the labelling process, particularly in the manner in which they construct and shape public opinion about what they perceive as social problems (Cohen, 1972).

To put it succinctly, Cohen's analyses divide moral panic stories into phases. The first, which Cohen identifies as the most relevant, is the 'media inventory phase', where the press takes the form of 'exaggeration and distortion; prediction and symbolisation'. Cohen gives examples from his study of the clashes between the Mods and Rockers, where the media consistently used plurals when only single instances had occurred. He also notes some distortion of the story by the use of emotive and inflammatory language, such as "riot, orgy of destruction, screaming mobs", as well as misleading headlines, using the term "violence" where no violent act had occurred (Cohen, 1972: 31-2). He then refers to the theme of prediction. This is the 'implicit assumption' presented in every virtual report that what had happened was inevitably going to happen again" (Cohen, 1972:38). In this sense, the media see a particular event, social problem or condition of panic as a trend rather than an isolated phenomenon. Finally, there is the process of symbolisation, whereby "symbols and labels eventually acquire their own descriptive and explanatory potential" (Cohen, 1972: 40-41). For instance, the word 'Mod' in Cohen's study acquires a symbolic status, representing a deviant or delinquent. In this way, the appearance of certain symbols (or objects such as hairstyles) comes to connote the threat as a whole.

While Cohen's theory has been recognised for its contribution, some of his basic ideas have been widely criticised. For instance, while Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) expand Cohen's analysis of moral panics within a grassroots model, they contend with Cohen's focus on

media and interest groups in instigating moral panics. As these authors argue, a panic cannot arise where there is no existing sentiment on the part of the public, and that the seeds must exist within the general population and that "politicians and the media cannot fabricate concern where none existed initially" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994:127). However they postulate five elements characterising any episode of moral panic which support Cohen's ideas. As they argue, these criteria most accurately describe society's reaction to the threat and the media's interpretation of it. First, there is often a high level of concern over the threatening behaviour of a certain group of people; second, moral panic arouses or increases hostility towards a category of people or an identifiable group, who become stigmatised as social outcasts; third, there is usually a wide consensus across society that the threat is real and is caused by members of the offending group. The fourth element, the key to moral panic, is disproportionality, meaning that society's reaction to threats and the media's interpretation of social problems are out of proportion to the actual harm. Finally, they note that moral panics are volatile and sporadic in nature, occurring suddenly and then subsiding. They observe, however, that some social problems may become routinized or institutionalized in enforcement services, methods of punishment and legislation (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). Taking the Salem witch trials, fear of drug trafficking, nuclear risks and rising crime levels as examples, they list three categories of moral panic, such as elite, interest group and grassroots, which they note are difficult to separate. This paper argues in the next section, where it discusses the relevance of moral panics to the age of globalization.

Meanwhile, Hall et al. (1978) criticise Cohen's explanation of the origins of moral panic primarily in terms of perceived threats to moral values and cultural strains. They argue instead that each moral panic must be understood within its political context. Thus, Hall et al. (1978) view moral panics as predominantly orchestrated by elites for commercial or political gain. Importantly, their analysis suggests that those who hold power require 'influence' in order to maintain their position and avoid recourse to explicit coercion, which might ultimately undermine their legitimacy. In other words, the elites maintain power through fortification of hegemony and social inequality, using the "process of capital accumulation" (Hier and Greenberg 2002:141). Thus, in order to draw society's attention away from the inherent crises of capitalism, they create media attention to perpetuate what Hier and Greenberg (loc. cit.) refer to as "structures and relations of domination" by instigating moral panics. Although they appear to support Cohen's view that the media play a crucial role in

disseminating and perpetuating the message, they maintain that moral panics are 'engineered' by elites to maintain their dominant position. They cite the example of the moral panic regarding mugging in Britain in the early 1970s, suggesting that it served to displace attention from an acute crisis in British capitalism. While Hall et al (1978) question what function this panic served and whose interests it benefited, they conclude not that it was instigated, but that the media's interpretation of events was heavily influenced by the dominant culture. In a situation of economic crisis, rather than question the accepted social and economic order, which might have caused the crisis, the media focused instead on the symptoms of the crisis and fears of a resultant breakdown in law and order (Hall et al, 1978).

A more serious criticism of Cohen's analysis is that he considers moral panic a universal condition. As Springhall has argued (1998:159), "assigning each successive 'crisis' to the inclusive category of moral panic risks disregarding particular features of historical contexts, new technology or social anxiety". Thus, the supposed universality of moral panic blunts the clarity of the concept, allowing many disparate phenomena to count as moral panics (see also Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

Other scholars have identified a problem with the use of moral panic based on the extent to which Cohen's analysis is indebted to a proposed schism between reality and media representation. For example, McRobbie (1992) argues that the analysis is not useful in the context of deriving a schema for identifying panic narratives, since Cohen depends on analysts (media theorists) possessing better knowledge of the issues than the journalists who are the primary sources of information. In another study, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) also contest Cohen's idea of 'folk devils' as marginalised group, arguing that such groups of young people have learnt how to defend their own interests and to use the media strategically. They further insist that, such group identified as 'folk devils' may even support moral panics to promote certain styles, tastes or cultures.

In sum, Cohen's (1972) idea of moral panic, by virtue of its history and application, cannot easily be described or evaluated within the confines of any single approach. Moreover, Cohen's conceptualization and analysis of the concept has remained influential, despite the recurring criticisms and attempts by scholars to expand the theory beyond Cohen's analysis. In the following section, this paper shall examine the relevance of Cohen's contribution to the

age of globalization with specific examples that illuminate its implications to key developmental aspects of this global era.

Moral Panics in the Age of Globalization

Within the context of globalization, the concept of moral panic has become a key feature in the analysis of different aspects of life in the global village. Globalization has been described as "the ways in which the world is being knitted together" (Cohen and Kennedy, 2000:10). In other words, it is that process of integration involving an increasing volume of cultural interactions or variety of transnational transactions in goods and services, in international capital flows, in human migration, and through a rapid and widespread diffusion of technology. This is manifested in the ever-greater uniformity of certain consumption patterns and lifestyles, that is, the emergence of cosmopolitan culture, cultural symbols and transnational modes of behaviour that was not evident in pre-modern societies. For example, rapid technological development in communication enhanced cross-cultural interaction which embodies cultural diffusion and people's participation in a "world culture" (Friedman, 1994; 2000). In particular, people now enjoy freedom of movement, a media-based culture such as internet and the worldwide dissemination of certain cultural practices such as sport events, arts across countries with very different cultures. These apart, people around the world now interact and communicate (in words, images such as photo sharing) as well as enjoy foreign products, exchange ideas and practices. Even in the developing countries such as south Asia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, technological progress provided consumers in these regions with a wide range of goods and services (enjoyed in the developed world) which would have ordinarily not been accessible to them by virtue of their location or development status (Ajayi, 2004). For instance, people are now able to watch 'friends' on TV, buy modern types of clothing, enjoy popular music, films, video shows, dance, fast food, among others.

Importantly, globalization has been argued to be a major force which provides key contributions to global progress and prosperity. It has been seen as having raised productivity and employment, increased standards of living, transformed communication and information systems, fostered competition, boosted global economic growth and interdependencies through trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows as well as facilitating scientific discoveries which help people to live longer and healthier lives (DFID, 2000; World Bank, 2002a). In the political domain, it has also been considered to promote international

corporations, migration and the flow of remittances(Piper, 2004), as well as providing the basis for a global awareness, where crucial instruments like the Millennium Development Goals and the G-20 agenda have flourished (World Bank, 2002a; 2002b).

While it could be observed that the process of globalization has been accompanied with these various levels of transformations and developments, such developments have generated increased anxieties over a number of issues at different levels across the globe. For instance, one of the prominent contemporary moral panics includes immigration in receiving countries. While we tend to view globalization as lifting the geographical constraints on people's movement around the world, geographical barriers seem to be reinforced with the levels of anxieties or panics expressed over immigration for different reasons.

As features of globalization, Hier and Greenberg (2002) link the moral crises around immigration and racialization to neoliberal citizenship. They examine the expression of fears and anxieties by many Canadians concerning the increasing movement of Chinese immigrants in Canada and related uncertainties stemming from globalization and the rise of neoliberal ideology. Thus, they apply Cohen's analysis by taking a grassroots approach to the notion of moral panic, examining news discourse surrounding the arrival by boat of 600 migrants from Fujian province in 1999. The authors argue that through news reports of the incident, a moral panic arose within which narratives of Canadian national identity and constructions of "who and who is not a true Canadian" were played out (Hier and Greenberg, 2002:138). Similarly to the labelling of folk devils in Cohen's study, these Chinese migrants were immediately and simultaneously racialized and illegalized in the news media as "boat people", "human cargo", "aliens" and "detainees", as well as being linked to health risks and criminal behaviour (ibid:151). In this way, Hier and Greenberg (2002) argue that the media played on existing moral unease among the general public concerning Canada's immigration and refugee policy, so that the principles which underpin democratic liberalism were undermined by the racialization, objectification and criminalization of the migrants. This in turn led to the instigation of deportation proceedings and to the igniting of a national debate on the state of Canadian immigration and refugee policy (ibid:161). Importantly, the moral panic over the arrival of the migrants derived its particular strength from the fears and anxieties of many Canadians concerning the growing presence of the Chinese in Canada and

from related uncertainties stemming from globalization and the rise of neoliberalism (ibid:156).

In similar vein, Pijpers (2006) reflects the consequences of fear of migration for bordering processes, which to a large extent are rooted in high levels of intolerance, exaggeration and political opportunism (Pijpers, 2006:91). Using a case study of the media coverage and parliamentary debates in the Netherlands surrounding the expansion of the European Union and accompanying freedom of labour, Pijpers examines the influx of immigrants from other European countries searching for work; and how such movements generate fears and anxieties expressed by the popular press and political actors. It was observed that immigrants were highly stigmatised and assumed to pursue 'evil' agendas of collective action – phrases such as 'stealing our jobs' and 'welfare shopping' were used to describe them as a threat to the country's economic stability. Such panics also assume that immigrants threaten the moral order of society. Like Hier and Greenberg, Pijpers (2006) concludes that moral panics result from dislocation and "uncertainties" attributed by the public to globalization. From the local to global, "moral panics articulate beliefs about belonging or not belonging, about the sanctity of territory and the fear of transgression" (ibid: 92). Consequently, local-global relationships have mediated panics in a variety of ways, through which Pijpers rightly emphasize the importance of the dichotomy of private and public space, the relationships between racial discourse, territorialisation and spatial scale.

In the same vein, during the first few decades of HIV/AIDS, concerns about the spread of the infection were focused on particular groups, countries, or continents to the detriment of adequate attention being given to the important role of contextual factors that shape the sexual practices of individuals. As a result of the influential media campaigns and official policies which concentrated on particular groups of people – sex workers, homosexuals, Africans and intravenous drug users – who were generally classified as 'high-risk groups'. 'Western' heterosexuals were not deemed as high risk, with the consequence that transmission of HIV among this population remained unchecked (Patton, 1985). Such racist stereotyping becomes entangled with fears about immigration and open to manipulation, as long as suggests: 'Authoritarian political ideologies have a vested interest in promoting fear, a sense of the imminence of takeover by aliens while the fear from the general public is the

notion of infection from dirty foreign prostitutes traversing borders and polluting the nation (Sontag, 1989:62).

Furthermore, scholars have also considered the effects of the moral panics surrounding trafficking on female migration. The global debate on trafficking has been linked to the moral panic of the late nineteenth century surrounding the 'white slave trade', in which concerns over European women used in prostitution in South America, Africa and Asia were brought to public consciousness (Doezema, 2000). The metaphor of slavery within is located at the crux of the contemporary campaign. Around the time of the 2007 anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Britain, media commentators and anti-trafficking NGOs asserted that far from having been abolished, the institution existed in many modern forms, taking sex slavery as an example. This connection with slavery is an example of moral panic associated with sex trafficking. While Doezema (2000) agrees that the issue of slavery might serve as a reminder of current wide-scale exploitation as a result of global capitalism, this discourse contains a number of negative discursive connotations. Female migratory experience is homogenised through the assertion that prostitution – and by default all female migration – entails a degree of enslavement. Through this symbolism, women are rendered passive objects of exchange. Due to intense media interest, sex trafficking or migration for sex work has emerged as a global moral panic that governments must tackle. Doezema (2000) further asserts that the restrictions imposed as a result of government response can have disastrous consequences for the women whom they are supposed to protect.

Kapur (2002) seek to address the problem of trafficking by locating it as a labour issue and advocating the rights of women as migrants. She suggests that the uproar over prostitution and trafficking in India, fuelled by a particular brand of Indian nationalist feminism in line with a conservative protectionist government has invited responses that justify restrictions on women. She also cites the example of rulings in Nepal which prevent women under thirty from leaving the country without the permission of their husbands. Such restrictive measures, she argues, demonstrate underlying moral panic about female identity.

In addition, the trafficking discourse has also seen as stemming in part from a "fear of the foreign" (Gould, 2001:443) in terms of immigration issues in receiving countries and panics about an influx of foreigners. This can also be understood as embodying fears about changing

gender roles, as has been noted in historical moral panics over the 'white slave trade' (Doezema, 2000).

Meanwhile, moral panics as a global phenomenon has also manifested in the high level of anxieties express on paedophilia in the modern society. Mathews and Limbs (1999), for example, examine media-driven moral panics surrounding the safety of children in our global village. They contend that a moral panic is reformulating the meanings and divisions between public and private space with particular implications for children. As these authors observes, despite the fact that "children are more at risk in private space and from people they know, the media-driven moral panic of "stranger-danger" is leading parents to encourage children of both sexes to spend most of their free time either at home with friends or taking part in activities organized by adults.

In another example, Aitken (2001) considers the moral panic about the safety of America's schools, associated with the 2001 school shootings in San Diego. Aitken contends that the foundations of this moral panic were laid by a very broad "set of social and spatial transformations" throughout the second half of the 20th century. In other words, panic did not ensue from the shootings alone, but rather embodies broader discourses about racism, masculinity and "whiteness" in the United States (2001: 599).

Similarly, Thompson, (1998) emphasises the way in which sensationalist news reporting in the British press have instigated panics or emotional responses from the general public regarding paedophilia. One of such responses have resulted in several vigilante mobs taking to the streets and terrorising innocents citizens who appeared to resemble or share similar name with the supposedly sex offenders.

In conclusion, this essay has concentrated mainly on issues of moral panic across different societies through attention to the body of literature responding to Cohen's analysis of the concept. Importantly, it provides an understanding of the relevance of moral panic as it relates to the context of globalization as well as revealing the powerful role of the media to impact on the behaviour or values and ideologies of the general public.

As discussed above, the contemporary society has a high rate of turnover of various levels of anxieties and moral panics across the entire world. In particular, the presentation of different

issues by various interest groups particularly the media has further led to the concept of moral panic becoming a key feature of the contemporary society. It is important to conclude with the note as Cohen admitted that there are of course, some levels of real situations of concerns and social problems within the modern societies (such as with the issue of migration, HIV/AIDS, internet crimes, paedophilia and so on). However, the presentation of these issues by various interest groups, particularly the media and political actors has indeed contributed to the heightened levels of panics expressed on these various issues. Such representation has misled the public regarding particular social groups or people of different race, gender, sexual orientation and different socio-cultural backgrounds. At global level, it has also implicated on economic and political actors in the area of key decision making and policy formulation on how to eliminate or at least minimise these social problems in the way that could promote the realisation of the full potential of globalization.

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