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ENTER THE MORAL PANIC

Figure 2   Moral panics often spread from one community to another. Here, the police arrest a young man in Hastings, a seaside town over 100 miles from Clacton, where the disturbances started. (© Mirrorpix)

The place, Clacton, a small seaside resort community on England's eastern coast, with a limited range of facilities and amusements for young people. The time, Easter Sunday, 1964. The weather, cold and wet. Hundreds of adolescents and young adults are milling around on the streets and sidewalks, bored and irritated, seeking fun and adventure. A rumor – perhaps true, perhaps false – that a bartender had refused to serve several young people begins circulating. A scuffle breaks out on the pavement; factions separate out. Youths on motorcycles and scooters roar up and down the street. Someone fires a starter's pistol into the air; someone smashes the windows of a dance hall, someone else destroys several beach huts. The damage, perhaps £500 in value, several times that in today's currency. The police, unaccustomed to such rowdiness, overreact by arresting nearly one hundred young people, on charges ranging from "abusive behavior" to assaulting a police officer (Cohen, 1972, pp. 29ff; 2002).

MEDIA REACTION

While not exactly raw material for a major story on youth violence, the seaside disturbances nonetheless touch off what can only be described as a reportorial orgy of sensationalistic news. On Monday, the day after these events, every national newspaper with the exception of *The Times* runs a lead story on the Clacton disturbances. "Day of Terror by Scooter Groups," screams the *Daily Telegraph*; "Youngsters Beat Up Town," claims the *Daily Express*; "Wild Ones Invade Seaside," chimes in the *Daily Mirror*. On Tuesday, the press coverage is much the same. Pundits pen editorials on the subject of youth violence. The Home Secretary is "urged" to take firm action to deal with the problem. Articles begin to appear featuring interviews with Mods and Rockers, the two youth factions then current in Britain at the time, who were involved in the scuffles and the vandalism. The Mods (the term stood for "modernists") are well-dressed, fashion-conscious teenagers and young adults who frequent discos, listen to the music of the Beatles, the Who, and the Rolling Stones, and, if they are on wheels, ride motor scooters. The Rockers tend to be tougher, more politically reactionary, more classically delinquent, usually stem from a working-class background, and often ride motorbikes.

Experts articulate theories in the press attempting to explain what was referred to as the mob violence. The press reports accounts of police and court actions; local residents are interviewed on the subject, their views widely publicized. The media deem the story so important that much of the press around the world covers the incidents, with major stories appearing in the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, and the European continent. *The New York Times* prints a large photograph of two adolescent girls accompanying its story. The Belgian

newspapers caption one photo, "West Side Story on English Coast" (Cohen, 1972, pp. 31ff.). Youth fights and vandalism at resorts continue to be a major theme in the British press for some three years. Each time a disturbance breaks out, much the same exaggerated, sensationalistic stories are repeated. But by the beginning of 1967, young Britishers no longer identify with the Mods or the Rockers, and the youth violence angle gives way to other issues.

ENTER STANLEY COHEN

In 1964, Stanley Cohen was a graduate student at the University of London searching for a research topic for his dissertation. A South African who left his homeland for political reasons, a radical who was attracted to the causes and activities of underdogs and eager to critique the doings of the smug and powerful, Cohen found society's reaction to the exuberant activities of rebellious youth both disturbing and intriguing.

To Cohen, a major issue was the "fundamentally inappropriate" reaction by much of society to certain relatively minor events and conditions. The press, especially, had created a horror story practically out of whole cloth. The seriousness of events was exaggerated and distorted – in terms of the number of young people involved, the nature of the violence committed, the amount of damage inflicted, and their impact on the community, not to mention the importance of the events to the society as a whole. Obviously false stories were repeated as true; unconfirmed rumors were taken as fresh evidence of further atrocities (Cohen, 1972, pp. 31ff.). During such times of overheated and exaggerated sense of threat, the society generally, including the press and the police, reacted toward the designated behavior and its enactors in a process Cohen referred to as "community sensitization" (1967, p. 280). Once a class of behavior, and a category of deviants, was identified, extremely small deviations from the norm became noticed, commented on, judged, and reacted to. The Clacton disturbances, minor offenses, or even gatherings which might become offenses, were instantly the focus of press and police attention. The process of sensitization was summed up in a headline at the time which read: "Seaside Resorts Prepare for the Hooligans' Invasion" (p. 281). Moreover, on more than one occasion, the over-zealousness of the police resulted in an escalation of the conflict, where, for instance, by insisting that the crowd "move along," some of "the more labile members" of a crowd were provoked to resist, combatants exchanged blows, which led to their arrest (p. 281). To Cohen, the sensitization and escalation processes were central to the public's reaction to the Mods and Rockers.

Cohen launched the term moral panic as a means of characterizing the reactions of the media, the public, and agents of social control to the youthful disturbances. In a moral panic, Cohen wrote,

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or … resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself (p. 9).

In short, as Howard S. Becker did in *Outsiders*, his book on deviance (1963), Cohen turned the tables around. He did not ask *why* these disturbances occurred; instead, he asked why mainstream *reacted* to these disturbances, and on the *scale* it did. At least one commentator has written that the term "moral panic" has such a ring, resonance, and relevance that "if Cohen had not come up with the term in 1972, it would have been necessary for someone else to invent it" (Garland, 2008, p. 1).

ACTORS IN THE DRAMA OF THE MORAL PANIC

How is a moral panic expressed? How did Cohen know he had a panic on his hands after the 1964 Clacton disturbances? Cohen looked at the reaction of five segments of society: the press; the public; agents of formal social control, or law enforcement; lawmakers and politicians; and action groups.

The press

The press handled the seaside events with exaggerated attention, inflating incidents, distorting accounts and stereotyping characters and behavior (Cohen 1972, pp. 31–8). As we saw, newspapers "over-reported" the events; the scuffles and minor acts of vandalism that took place were accorded a place in the media far out of proportion to their importance and impact. Not only did the media give the events far more attention than they deserved, but the stories describing the events also overstated their seriousness, repeatedly using phrases such as "riot," "orgy of destruction," scenes being "smeared with blood and violence," "battle," and a "screaming mob." If one boat was overturned, reports claimed that "boats" were overturned. One story claimed that, in one resort, the windows of "all" the dance halls by the beach were smashed, which was true – however, the town only had one dance hall, and some but not all of its windows were smashed by youths (pp. 32–3).

The stories also distorted the events and repeated obviously false assertions. One youth told a judge that he would pay his fine with a £75 check. This was repeated as long as four years after the event, usually to show that the rebellious youths were affluent hordes whom "fines couldn't touch." In fact, the youth made this statement as a "pathetic gesture of bravado." He not only did not have the money, he didn't even have a bank account, and had never signed a check in his life (p. 33). But because the tale confirmed a certain public image of the events and who perpetrated them, it was repeated and believed as true. Although myth-making characterizes all societies at all times, during times of the moral panic the process is especially rapid, and a given myth is likely to be believed on relatively little evidence (p. 33).

The youth violence and vandalism stories that ran in the British press between 1964 and 1967 tended to follow a stereotypical pattern. For the most part, they put together a composite picture, containing a number of central elements. It was almost as if a new story could be written simply by stitching these elements together. There was very little interest in what actually happened; what counted was how closely a news account conformed to the stereotype. The youths were depicted as being part of gangs, even though all of the youths involved were part of very loose assemblies rather than tightly structured gangs. The seaside villages were said to have been victims of an "invasion from London," even though many – in all likelihood, most – were local youths or came from nearby towns and villages. Few stories omitted the fact that many of the offenders were on motorscooters or motorbikes, even though the overwhelming majority were on foot. Offenders were said to come from affluent families, even though those on whom data could be gathered lived in extremely modest economic circumstances. They were said to have come to the resorts deliberately to make trouble, even though, in reality, nearly all came merely hoping that there would be some trouble to watch. The offenses the press described were nearly always violent ones, even though only a tenth of the offenders were charged with violent crimes. And most of the offenses that did take place entailed relatively trivial acts such as petty theft, threatening behavior, and obstruction. The financial loss to local businesses was said to have been drastic. If anything, the reverse was true: more people than usual came to the resorts to observe the action. In short, one indication that a moral panic is taking place is the stereotypical fashion in which the subject is treated in the press (pp. 34–8).

The public

Cohen's conception of moral panics includes the dimension of public concern. For a classic moral panic to erupt, there must be some latent potential on the part of the public to react to a given issue to begin with, some raw material out of which a media campaign about a given issue can be built. The public may hold a more

sophisticated view of the issue than the press (pp. 65–70), but if the media obsess about a particular issue or condition which does *not* generate public concern, then, according to Cohen's model, we do not have a moral panic on our hands. The media's exaggerated attention must touch a responsive chord in the general public. The disturbances that attracted so much attention erupted in the 1960s, at a time when much of the adult British public, with World War II and the postwar era deprivations still fresh in their minds, saw a younger generation growing up in affluence (they "never had it so good," was a common refrain), responding not with gratitude but with disdain, rebellion, and delinquency. The problem, in the older generation's mind, was that the younger generation had been coddled, indulged, treated with kid gloves; the solution – a tougher parental hand, stricter social control, harsher penalties for transgressions, stiffer fines and jail sentences. In short, the events at Clacton and other seaside communities were focused on and reacted to by much of the public as a symbol for some of the larger problems plaguing British society. The events themselves were not as important as what they seemed to represent. But in order to see these disturbances as central, it became necessary to exaggerate and distort their reality.

Law enforcement

In addition to the press and the general public, the actions of the social (or "societal") control culture demonstrated that a moral panic was taking place in Britain in the mid-1960s over the Mods and Rockers (pp. 85ff.). In a moral panic, segments of a society are sensitized to trouble from certain quarters (pp. 77ff.); the society is said to be faced with a "clear and present danger" the signs of which it is so sharply attuned to. In no sector is this principle more clearly evident than public attitudes about what the police and the courts – law enforcement – ought to be doing about the perceived threat. Local police forces establish and strengthen ties between and among one another, and local and national levels of law enforcement activate connections to one another to more effectively deal with the problems faced by the putative threat (p. 86). Cohen calls this process *diffusion*.

Following diffusion, typically, police officers attempt to broaden the scope of law enforcement and often increase its intensity and justify punitive and overly zealous actions on the basis of the enormity of the threat the society faces (pp. 86–7). Cohen refers to this as *escalation*. In Britain, legislators and the police proposed new methods of control: stiffer sentences, the expansion of police powers, confiscation of motor scooters and motorbikes, the banning of Mod clothing, cutting long hair on youths, drafting troublemakers into the military, and so on (pp. 88–91). To deal with unacceptable Mod and Rocker behavior, the police engaged in previously rarely used punitive practices such as: riding suspicious youths out of town or to the railroad station; keeping crowds moving along;

confiscating studded belts; keeping certain troublesome locations free of Mods and Rockers; verbally harassing adolescents, particularly in a crowd situation, to "show them up" and "deflate their egos" (p. 95), making immediate (and often wrongful) arrests, and so on (pp. 92–8). Agents of social control felt that "new situations need new remedies." Public sentiment, agents of social control, and the media called for drastic solutions to a pressing, troublesome problem, and often, this entailed suspending rights and liberties.

Politicians and legislators

Members of Parliament (MPs) likewise "took an immediate and considerable interest in disturbances in their own constituencies" (p. 133), calling for stiffer penalties for youth offenses. Local merchants were assured that "hooliganism" would not threaten their economic interests and would not be repeated. Statements by MPs were issued to the press; "Jail These Wild Ones – Call by MPs," ran one such story. Some called for a return to corporal punishment for hooliganism. MPs and local police chiefs held joint meetings, and summaries were sent to the Home Secretary. One MP made suggestions that Britain revive non-military national service, such as construction or mining, as a punishment for hooliganism. The House of Lords introduced a suggestion to raise the minimum driving age to 19. The House of Commons introduced and debated a Malicious Damage Bill only a month after the Clacton incident; in further debate on the Bill two months later, the seaside disturbances became the central imagery dominating the discussion. Though some politicians recognized that the concern was exaggerated, and exerted a moderating influence on the discussion, the dominant mood among politicians and legislators toward youth crime in the period following the initial incident was angry, self-righteous, vindictive, condemnatory, and punitive. Politicians and other groups aligned themselves against the devil and on the side of angels; the fact is, they picked an "easy target," one that "hardly existed." What counted was not the nature of the target but what side they were on and what they were against (p. 138). Such symbolic alignments represent one defining quality of the moral panic.

Action groups

At some point, moral panics generate appeals, campaigns, and finally, "fully fledged action groups" (p. 119) which arise to cope with the newly-existing threat. The leaders who launch these groups are "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker, 1963, pp. 147ff.) who believe that existing remedies are insufficient. Action groups can be seen as "germinal social movements" (Cohen, 1972, p. 120). Often, participants have something personal to gain from rallying against a problem, but this is not a necessary determinant. The Mods and the Rockers generated two local action groups, one

of which proposed that convicted Mods and Rockers be subjected to a penal-style program of discipline and hard labor (p. 121), and the other of which favored the reintroduction of a variety of harsher penalties, including whippings of young offenders with a birch rod (p. 125). These action groups did not grow into social movements, nor did they survive the demise of the Mods and the Rockers.

FOLK DEVILS AND MORAL PANICS: ADDITIONAL FEATURES

Two additional features characterize moral panics, two developments that inform the observer that a society is in the grip of a moral panic: the creation of *folk devils* (pp. 40ff.) and the development of a *disaster mentality* (pp. 144ff.).

Folk devils

A folk devil is a "suitable enemy," the agent responsible for the threatening or damaging behavior or condition. To actors caught in the coils of the moral panic, folk devils are the personification of evil. And to such actors, some sectors of the population make better enemies or folk devils than others. Drug dealers are excellent suitable enemies – they're poisoning our children. Child molesters are terrific and instantly recognizable candidates for the role of folk devils. "What to Do if a Pervert is on Your Doorstep?" reads one headline. To conservatives, leftists and radicals are great as folk devils; even today, they do terrible things like desecrate the flag, the symbol of our country. In the 1950s, comic purveyors qualified. During the same era, juvenile delinquents. Today, especially, terrorists. Muggers, robbers, murderers – the list is long and their crimes horrendous. Folk devils permit instant recognition; they are "unambiguously unfavorable symbols" (Turner and Surace, 1956, pp. 16–20; Cohen, 1972, p. 41), that is, stripped of all favorable characteristics and imparted with exclusively negative ones. In such a symbolization process, "images are made much sharper than reality" (Cohen, 1972, p. 43). Folk devils provide authoritative concepts capable of rendering situations meaningful by constructing *suasive images* by which meaning can be sensibly grasped and which can arouse emotions and direct mass actions toward objectives which promise to resolve existing strain.

While all folk devils are created out of some existing and recognizable elements, a full-scale *demonology* takes place by which the members of a new evil category are placed "in the gallery of contemporary folk devils" (p. 44). Once a category has been identified in the media as consisting of troublemakers, the supposed havoc-wreaking behavior of its members reported to the public, and their supposed stereotypical features litanized, the process of creating a new folk devil is complete; from then on, all mention of representatives of the new category revolves around their central, and exclusively negative, features, rendering them demonstrably

deviant and stigmatized. All moral panics, by their very nature, identify, denounce, and attempt to root out folk devils. A condition that generates such widespread public concern must have had a personal agent responsible for its inception and maintenance. Such evil does not arise by happenstance or out of thin air; there must be a circle of evil individuals who are busily engaged in undermining society as we know it. In short, folk devils are *deviants*; they are engaged in wrongdoing; their actions undermine and subvert the moral order and harm the society; they are selfish and evil; they must be stopped, their actions neutralized. Only an effort of substantial magnitude will permit us to return to normal.

The disaster analogy

And lastly, in moral panics, Cohen argues, preparations are taken very much like those taken before, during, and after a natural disaster, such as a hurricane, a volcano eruption, or an earthquake. As during disasters, in the moral panic, there are predictions of impending doom, a "warning phase," sensitization to cues of danger, coping mechanisms, frequent overreactions, the institutionalization of threat, rumors speculating about what is happening or will happen, false alarms, and, occasionally, mass delusion (pp. 144–8). The perceived threat to, and subsequent reaction by, conventional society to the projected invasion of hordes of dangerous deviants and delinquents has many strong parallels with the steps taken before, during, and after a natural disaster. But by alluding to disasters, Cohen is *not* feeding off the myth that people frequently panic during disasters. Outright panicky, irrational, destructive behavior during disaster is, as numerous experts have pointed out, quite rare (Quarantelli, 2001; Clarke, 2002; Tierney, 2003). Cohen argues that we can locate parallels between behavior during disaster and behavior in an episode of moral threat. In other words, the "panic" part of the moral panic is an analogy or a sensitizing concept, not a literal, point-for-point parallel. In fact, in a panic or a disaster, people flee *away* from a perceived physical threat, whereas in a moral panic the threat or harm is rarely directly physical, and people are fascinated by it, gravitating to it almost like a moth to an electric light. Moreover, in the moral panic, the folk devil or deviant makes up a defining element, whereas in a physical disaster, folk devils are rare. But the term "panic" is such a strong metaphor that it conjures up the image of flight and terror, which attracts attention to the concept. In other words, it is as much a literary as a scholarly success.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE MORAL PANICS CONCEPT

The concept of the moral panic expands our understanding of social structure, social process, and social change. It integrates concepts from a variety of disparate areas – deviance, crime, collective behavior, social problems, and social movements.

Moral panics are likely to "clarify [the] normative contours" and "moral boundaries" of the society in which they take place, demonstrate that there are limits to how much diversity can be tolerated in a society. Focusing on moral panics emphasizes the fact that reactions to unconventional behavior do not arise solely as a consequence of a rational and realistic assessment of the concrete damage that the behavior in question is likely to inflict on the society. Without resorting to conspiratorial thinking, an investigation of the moral panic emphasizes that social reaction to a new and seemingly threatening phenomenon arise as a consequence of that phenomenon's real or supposed threat to certain "positions, statuses, interests, ideologies, and values" (Cohen, 1972, p. 191). The cast of characters Cohen locates in the moral panic – the media, the general public, the agents of social control, lawmakers and politicians, and action groups – are distressed by a certain perceived threat for a reason. If all panics entailed a public reaction to a specific, clearly identifiable threat, the magnitude of which can be objectively assessed and readily agreed upon, then such reactions would require no explanation. On the other hand, if, as Cohen argues, the reaction is out of proportion to the stated threat, we are led to ask why it arises: the panic is problematic – it demands an explanation.

Why a moral panic over *this* supposed threat, but not *that*, potentially even more damaging, one? Why does *this* cast of characters become incensed by the threat the behavior supposedly poses, but not *that* cast of characters? Why a moral panic at this time, but not before or after? How and why do moral panics arise? How and why do they die out? What role do interests play in the moral panic? Are the dynamics of the moral panic different during different historical time periods, or different from one society to another? What does the moral panic tell us about how society is constituted, how it works, how it changes over time? Cohen's powerful and persuasive concept introduces the observer of society to a wide range of questions and potential explorations.

Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972) was a great academic hit. An enormous volume of social science literature has made use of the concept; dozens of books and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of academic articles incorporated its central ideas, and even the mass media have adopted the term. Most books don't get quoted at all in the academic literature – they go out of print and no one cites them – and of those that do, citations drop off precipitously after a year or two. Cohen's book, in contrast, has attracted an *immense* number of scholarly citations. And, over the years, though we find a year-to-year wobbling of citations to Cohen's book, references to it have increased into the 2000s. In 2002, Routledge put out *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* in a third edition, an extremely rare event for a scholarly volume. In 2003 and 2006, Chas Critcher published a textbook and accompanying book of readings specifically designed for course use, an unusual development for a sociological concept. Moreover, the moral panic is one of the few concepts developed by sociologists that has escaped the academic ghetto and suffused into the popular and media vocabulary. As of November 2007, Google listed 303,000 sites under the entry "moral panic" and 139,000 for "moral panics."

CULTURAL POLITICS

Disproportion, we emphasize, addresses the central issue of our age – indeed, of history itself: a struggle for cultural power. More specifically, it represents "a battle between cultural representations" (Cohen, 2002, p. xxxiii). All modern moral panics encompass claims and counterclaims by competing sectors of the society, each of which attempts to establish dominance over the others, to mark off boundaries, in their own terms, as to where the respectable mainstream leaves off and the margins – the "outsiders" – begin. "Them" represents the folk devils and their minions and dupes, and "us" represents those who are threatened by the parties named in the moral panic. Of course, in the past three or more decades since the appearance of Cohen's book, the distinction between "them" and "us" has been eroded by challenges to official and dominant perspectives; a multiplicity of clashing voices is what happens when "folk devils fight back" (McRobbie, 1994).

Attempting to launch a moral panic indicates an effort to invoke a consensus that the beliefs or acts that are denounced "are not insulated entities" but can infest, infect, undermine, and subvert the healthy social body "unless something is done" (Cohen, 2002, p. xi), that is, it mobilizes right-thinking and acting members of the society to counter what is socially constructed as an ominous threat. The denunciation that issues from the moral panic provides a bulwark against the "slippery slope" leading from the misdemeanor to the felony, from experimentation to the slavery of addiction, from flirtation to adultery, from heterodoxy to heresy and treason (p. xvii).

Singling out and denouncing folk devils is designed to strike "a depth of horror in us all. There is a panicky sense of vulnerability" in the threat to the rest of us that they represent (p. xvi). "Suitable targets" – individuals or social circles who can be named as folk devils – are identified, and "suitable victims," individuals or social circles who are specifically under attack by folk devils, are likewise identified. In the case of the disturbances Cohen investigated, the quiet, good, peaceful, conservative residents of Clacton collectively comprised a suitable victim. And the adult British population was also a suitable victim: those mature, responsible citizens who had worked so hard during and after World War II and suddenly found themselves set upon by hairy, lazy, affluent, spoiled, overindulged, rowdy, rebellious youths. In general, a suitable victim is usually an especially vulnerable segment of the population. Children make excellent suitable victims; so do the elderly, especially in the case of crimes against the elderly. Honest, law-abiding citizens, teenagers, earthlings, white folks, black folks, Jews, Bible-believing, God-fearing Christians, women. The list expands, contracts, and shifts around, depending on the observers or the "actors" in a particular incident that generates concern and emotional turbulence to segments of the population.

All stereotypes housed in the paradigmatic moral panic are exaggerations. Folk devils are made into "pure candidates for monster status," "the untypical is made

typical," "the overall narrative is a single, virtually uninterrupted message of hostility and rejection." In short, the "allocation of blame is intrinsic to moral panics" (p. xix). And all of it – the exaggeration, the stereotypes, the hostility, the unified, uninterrupted narrative – is in the service of achieving a single goal: protecting (or de-legitimating) a particular cultural representation, held by specific social sectors of the society, who believe, or claim that they believe, that they are acting on behalf of the society as a whole, or one or more major sectors of the society. Moral panics are about how a moral threat or supposed threat is *represented* or *expressed* by the contending parties in a moral dispute. Moral panics are exhibited or manifested in *claims-making*, with contending parties in a dispute attempting to establish their own version of what the threats, and who the folk devils and deserving victims, are. And contending parties attempt to *valorize* their views among their followers, and to the broader society, to *vilify* their putative folk devils and *neutralize* the legitimacy of their enemies' claims. According to Cohen (2002), *this* is what the moral panic is all about: *cultural politics*.

Cohen's main point is worth reiterating: moral panics are not ignited by the direct, physical harm that the fuss seems to be about. The monetary damage at Clacton was minuscule. The fear and concern that explode in the moral panic are more symbolic; they reflect or grow out of issues more basic than and prior to the charges made against the supposed transgressors. In the case of our disapproving seaside townspeople, the denunciation of the Mods and Rockers was fueled by core normative values far more pervasive and basic than regarding vandalism and property damage as deviance. What riled the good folks of Clacton was the Mods and Rockers' contempt for authority and restraint, their abandonment of materialism, lockstep careerism, and middle-class discipline. The actions of Cohen's scuffling young folk devils struck at the heart of British society and culture, generating a tidal wave of denunciation. In every moral panic, suggests Cohen, we should look beyond the tangible, the immediate, and the material, and try to understand, symbolically and culturally, what the panic represents to the participants involved. All combatants in a pitched battle of cultural politics seek to pin down their objections to the concrete, harmful actions of their enemy in terms that are understandable to us all. What we have to understand, as sociologists, is what the battle means to the participants in deeper, more fundamental terms (Young, 2007).

SUMMARY

On Easter Sunday of 1964, in a seaside resort community in England, two youth groups engaged in a small disturbance involving a few hundred pounds' damage to property. The police overreacted by arresting a hundred young people, and the press reported the incident as if it had been a major riot. Stanley Cohen, a sociology graduate student at the University of London, was struck by the "fundamentally

inappropriate" response by law enforcement and the media. He began studying the scuffle and its aftermath, using the term "moral panic" to describe this disproportion. During the moral panic, said Cohen, a "condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to social values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coming are evolved or … resorted to" (1972, p. 9). Usually, the concern evaporates in a matter of months or a few years, and the media and the public turn their attention to another supposed threat.

Cohen designated the media, the public, law enforcement, politicians and legislators, and social movement activists as the primary "actors" in the moral panic. He regarded the press as the key and most important actor in the moral panic drama. It usually activated the public's and politicians' concern by exaggerating the seriousness of the phenomenon, taking obviously false stories and claims as true and refusing to verify the veracity of claims. In the case of the Clacton disturbance, the media told a streamlined, stereotypical tale, usually mentioning gang involvement even where none existed; teenagers on motorbikes and scooters, even when most were on foot; the affluence of the participants, even though most came from working or lower-middle-class backgrounds; that most came to Clacton from London, even though most were local; that most came to the resort to stir up trouble, even though most came to observe the trouble that might have broken out; that most were engaged in violent actions, even though most were minor misdemeanors; and that the local business community had suffered disastrous losses, even though the disturbances attracted more business than it turned away.

The media's portrayal of the causes and consequences of the Clacton disturbances dovetailed with public attitudes. The older, postwar generation saw the media's portrayal of the offenders through a lens of the deprivation it had experienced, in contrast with coddled, affluent, undisciplined, rebellious young people who had too much time on their hands, too much money, and too little control over themselves. In other words, the media's overheated depiction of the scuffles resonated with much of the public's feelings about some of the larger problems facing British society at that time. Law enforcement, likewise, saw the offending youth as far more threatening than it in fact was, necessitating a more repressive reaction than was necessary. Cohen saw a diffusion of repressive enforcement tactics spreading from one local community to another, as well as an escalation of enforcement tactics against the behavior of youth, including stiffer sentences, banning certain garb associated with youth gangs, and the enforced cutting of long hair.

Politicians and legislators joined the bandwagon against offending youth, making proclamations, statements to the press, and speeches that expressed a vindictive, self-righteous, punitive stance toward youth crime. Some called for more stringent laws to deal with hooliganism, including raising the minimum driving

age to 19; corporal punishment for offenders; and enforced military service. The Clacton disturbances dominated the discussions in both houses of Parliament. Action groups, likewise, climbed on the moral panic bandwagon, issuing appeals, launching campaigns, proposing solutions, and organizing to fight the threat of delinquent youth. Like law enforcement and political legislation, action group remedies often revolved around more rigorous punishment of offending among young people, including whipping with a bitch rod and a penal-style program of discipline and hard labor.

One of distinctive features of Cohen's analysis of the moral panic is its emphasis on the "folk devil" or deviant. In the type of scare Cohen examines, the actors involved engage in a quasi-religious demonology, that is, the creation of a new or refurbished evil category, complete with unambiguously and stereotypically negative features wreaking havoc on the decent, honest members of the society at large. Such characterizations serve to animate the actors to struggle against the threat in their midst. Cohen also likens the moral panic to a disaster in that actors perceive a threat and take action to combat it, often transmitting rumor and occasionally falling victim to mass delusion about it.

The moral panic has proven to be a durable and useful concept, generating a textbook, an accompanying book of readings, the third edition of Cohen's monograph, an increased number of academic citations into the twenty-first century, and hundreds of thousands of websites devoted to it. One of the reasons for the concept's success is that it is centrally "about" a struggle for cultural representations, that is, where the respectable mainstream of society leaves off and the margins or "outsiders" begin. The moral panic divides the society into "them" and "us," deviants and law-abiding citizens. Who is empowered to depict who we are and how we should be represented? Michel Foucault, the influential French philosopher, refers to the capacity to define reality as *discursive practices*, arguing that experts – including psychiatrists and agents of social control – exercise authority over the way we name and discuss issues, problems, and conditions, and hence, what we *do* and *think* about them (1999). The moral panic addresses these and related issues.