MORAL PANICS
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF DEVIANCE
SECOND EDITION

Erich Goode and
Nachman Ben-Yehuda

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication
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Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda
To Barbara and Etti
Our Wives
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A crowd gathers at the state capitol and listens to speeches by activists about the wicked deeds of corrupt public officials. Demonstrators stream through the main street of a major city, carrying signs and chanting slogans that denounce the actions of evildoers. In communities around the world, rioters smash windows, attack the police, and burn the straw-stuffed effigy of the leader of a hated nation. Newspapers and broadcast news express concern about a previously unknown cult, the use of a previously unknown psychoactive substance, a fringe political party, the people who enact a particular type of sexual behavior, neighbors who might be spies for an enemy country, or the publication and dissemination to the young of comics books, or the kidnapping of young women into sexual slavery.

These events, and the fear and concern that they express, are about something. And a major sector what it is they are “about” — the reason or motivation that ignites the mass assemblies, the media attention, the political actions — is the subject matter of this book. Some of these fears and concerns are based on very real, present, and concrete threats, while some have a more illusory or symbolic connection with supposed threats. This book is focused on the latter sector of threats: The question we raise is whether and to what extent the connection between the fear and concern-inspired collective behavior on the one hand and the threat that presumably justifies such behavior on the other is materially real and, if not, what else motivates such emotion-laden actions. If people assemble and act out of the fear of a non-existent or trivial threat — why? If people believe that something must be done about a relatively harmless condition — what accounts for that belief? These are the sorts of questions we wish to address in Moral Panics.

We live, says sociologist Barry Glassner, in a “culture of fear” (1999). Yet, he argues, many of our fears are “unfounded,” based on exaggerated notions of their threat or danger. At times when the crime rate is declining, our fear of crime rises (pp. 21–49). We panic over rare, exotic diseases, like “flesh-eating bacteria” (pp. xii–xiii). Violence in schools is declining year by year, yet our media both reflect and encourage a growing fear of violence in schools (p. 69). Pundits and journalists declare
“road rage” to be a “plague,” attracting more public concern than drunk driving, yet nationally, only a couple of dozen motorists die each year as a result of road-rage related aggressive driving (pp. 3, 17, 119), while the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that roughly 16,000 people die each year on American roadways as a result of elevated blood-alcohol levels. Automobile accidents kill vastly more passengers, mile-by-mile, than airline crashes, yet most of us worry far more about dying in a plane than in a car (pp. 193–5). We are living longer, healthier lives than at any time in human history, yet many believe that our lifestyle and diet are unhealthier than they were in the past. In 1976, American officials feared the pandemic outbreak among humans of the swine flu, a disease that infects pigs. A quarter of the American population was inoculated before the program was abandoned as unnecessary, but in the meantime, the issue created a huge level of widespread concern, media attention, and public “buzz.” Just before the turn of the twentieth century, many experts believed that computers, which weren’t programmed for the year 2000, would stop working. This was called the Y2K problem, and it generated, again, a great deal of concern and informal, media, and official attention, but the real-world problems it caused were minor and scattered. “We compound our worries beyond all reason,” says Glassner (p. xii). Few of us, says Glassner, worry about the things that are really harmful and threatening, like poverty, inequality, racism, and gun ownership, but lots of less harmful things obsess us no end.

While we agree wholeheartedly with Glassner’s analysis, our perspective introduces at least one additional dimension: deviance and morality. The intensity of concern about a given issue or condition takes on a special urgency when we introduce the “folk devil,” or one or more persons supposedly responsible for and/or representing exaggeratedly fearful conditions. Heightened fear and concern, misplaced anxiety, a reviled agent responsible for conditions less harmful than we think – all these add up to the moral panic, the subject of this book, now in its second edition. The authors have lived with and thought and read about these issues in the more than a decade and a half since Moral Panics’ first edition, and we now have occasion to put what we’ve learned to good use: the revision of this book.

We coauthored the first edition of Moral Panics, mainly in Israel, in 1993, during Goode’s Lady Davis Fellowship; Blackwell published it early in 1994. Why issue a revision of the book? To us, a second edition is importunate and essential. The reasons leap out at us like tigers pouncing on prey.

To begin with, in the first edition, we inadvertently failed to include a chapter on the media, a central and foundational feature of the moral panic; this edition includes that chapter. The media, perhaps the principal active agent or “actor” in the moral panic, demands attention in any extended discussion of the subject. Chapter 5 provides precisely that discussion.

A second reason for this revision: since 1994, an almost literal ton of books, articles, and chapters has been written on the moral panic, on topics as diverse as crime, child molestation and priestly pedophilia, extraterrestrials, terrorism, flag desecration,
illegal aliens, crack cocaine, designer drugs, Ecstasy, raves, video "nasties," gangsta-rap, horror comics, alien abductions, the "Red Scare," the white slave traffic, conspiracies, and satanic ritual abuse and murder in day care centers. The authors of some of these analyses extend and enrich the moral panics concept while others attempt to critique, undermine, and short-circuit it. In this, the new edition, we discuss these recent developments and attend to some of the criticisms.

A third reason is that, around the globe generally and in the Anglophone world specifically, historical events have swept over all of us like a tsunami, and many of these changes are directly relevant to the topic of moral panics. Consider terrorism. Most of us have become used to procedures that we would have bridled at a decade and a half ago. Earlier this year, Goode heard an announcement over the New York subway public address system to the effect that the police can subject passengers to "random security checks." Fifteen years ago, New Yorkers – a feisty bunch – would have reacted by saying, "You gonna search me? You gotta be kidding! Get outta my face!" (Try that response in any airport; you'd be detained and miss your plane.) Not now. Many of us believe, or have been led to believe, that the threat is so great and we consider it so reasonable that we go along with it. An advertising campaign released by the New York Police Department (NYPD), repeatedly broadcasts the message, over the airwaves, in the print media, and in busses and subways, "If you see something, report something," a directive many would have found offensive in the 1990s. Are such precautions commensurate with the supposed threat of terrorism and crime? Again, that question is relevant to moral panics. And such precautions became relevant especially and crucially after the events of September 11, 2001. Terrorism is only the most pressing and poignant of numerous exploding issues every one of us has had to think about and address in the twenty-first century, each one relevant to moral panics.

In addition to Chapter 5, on the media, we have added three chapters, Chapter 4, "The Moral Panic Meets Its Critics," Chapter 11, "Drug Abuse Panics," and Chapter 12, "The Feminist Anti-Pornography Crusade." Correspondingly, we have condensed and reassembled the former Chapter 1, "A Prelude to Moral Panics," deleted the former Chapter 11, "The Israeli Drug Panic of May 1982," and condensed the former Chapters 5 and 6, on deviance and the criminal law. We have condensed paragraphs and sentences where that seemed to work better and of course we’ve factually, conceptually, and theoretically updated every discussion in the book, where appropriate. The resulting revision is, we believe, more streamlined and readable than the first edition. The former chapter on the drug panic of the 1980s, Chapter 12, is gone; bits and pieces of it appear in the new Chapter 11.

Goode adapted several paragraphs and pages in Chapter 11 from Drugs in American Society (7th edition), McGraw-Hill, 2008; parts of the Prologue and Chapter 2 from "The Skeptic Meets the Moral Panic" from Skeptical Inquirer, November/December, 2008, pp. 37–41; and parts of Chapter 4 from "Moral Panics and Disproportionality: The Case of LSD Use in the Sixties" from Deviant Behavior, Vol. 29, August–September, 2008, pp. 533–43. He extends his gratitude to the
publishers and editors at these publications. He’d also like to thank Barbara Weinstein for her unwavering moral, intellectual, and emotional support during the revision of this book. He’d also like to thank Mike Schwartz, Michael Kimmel, and Naomi Rosenthal for their critical and useful comments on an earlier version of Chapter 12, on the failed feminist anti-pornography moral panic, Carolyn Bronstein for relevant information on the anti-porn movement, and Pat Carlen for reminding me that that chapter is not really a case study about the feminist movement per se but a case study about a moral panic that failed to launch. Lastly, he acknowledges useful discussions on numerous sociological topics with William J. (“Si”) Goode, his dad; Si’s death several years ago caused his son considerable grief.

Ben-Yehuda borrowed or adapted portions of Chapter 10 from his “The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist’s Perspective,” The American Journal of Sociology, 86 (1), 1980, pp. 1–31, and Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists, University of Chicago Press, pp. 23–73. He gratefully acknowledges permission to adapt or reprint this material. He would also like to thank Etti Ben-Yehuda for her continuous support, love, and encouragement, and Tzach and Guy, his sons, for their patience and love. He cannot forget Remko’s love and good nature. He also deeply appreciates Sigal Gooldin’s good advice and initiative.

Greenwich Village, New York City
Jerusalem, Israel
Small, gray creatures from extraterrestrial planets land their aircraft in remote locations, abduct earthlings, and extract sperm from men and eggs or embryos from women (Mack, 1995; Showalter, 1997, pp. 189–201; Clancy, 2005). A drug marches across a continent and up the socioeconomic ladder, leaving devastation and wreckage in its wake (Jefferson, 2005, p. 41). Terrorists devise and attempt to carry out fiendish plots to hijack planes, blow up buildings, and murder ordinary citizens to avenge imagined insults against a supposedly aggrieved people (Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Welch, 2006). An Islamic jihadist videotapes himself beheading an “infidel” while shouting slogans into the camera about a holy war against the West (Sattar, 2007). A wave of violent offenses by members of adolescent gangs—“armed to the teeth, corrupting and enlisting innocent youth in order to dominate illicit drug markets” (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002, p. 5)—force communities across the United States to redefine juvenile offenders as adults (Singer, 1996). Day care providers—from New York to California and from Europe to Australia—torture, sexually abuse, and murder children in unspeakable satanic rituals (de Young, 2004). Men rape and murder women to make pornographic movies (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 142, 384, 400; Russell, 1993, p. 97).

From time to time, in societies scattered around the globe, the anti-Semitic blood-libel panic continues to erupt. In the past decade or two, Jews in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Siberia, Belarus, and Ukraine have been accused of kidnapping Muslim or Christian children and using their blood to prepare Passover matzoh. A notice to parents, anonymously posted in Siberia in 2008, read, in part: “Beware Russian parents. Keep watch over your children before the coming of the supposed Jewish holiday of Passover. These disgusting people still engage in ritual practice to their gods. They kidnap small children and remove some of their blood and use it to prepare their holy food [matzoh]. They throw the bodies [of the Christian children] out in garbage dumps” http://wwwynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3521307,00.html.
What’s going on here? Who’s saying these things? Are any of these claims true and accurate? Did these extravagant atrocities actually take place? And, whether true or false, what do the concern, fear, and hostility of such charges express about the societies in which they are lodged?

This book is about moral panics. The moral panic is a scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or “folk devils,” a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing a society’s culture, way of life, and central values. The word “scare” implies that the concern over, fear of, or hostility toward the folk devil is out of proportion to the actual threat that is claimed.

Who exactly has to be scared to qualify a scare as a panic? Is it the whole society, or simply a part of it? How scared do they have to be? What do they get scared about? And just what is it that they do when they’re expressing that panic? Does the general public have to be scared, or can the “scare” be confined to expressions of fear in the mass media, or to a small collectivity within the society at large?

Some supposed threats are, evidence suggests, entirely imaginary. Carefully and systematically weighed, available data indicate that satanic ritual abuse did not take place, that aliens have not abducted humans, and that “snuff” movies are the stuff of urban legends (Stine, 1999). There is, in other words, a delusional aspect to moral panics (Bartholomew and Goode, 2000). In other moral panics, the supposed threat may be genuine, even harmful, but the alarm raised is disproportionate to that threat, and in ways we’ll explore in this book. Even if approximately true, a claim may be exaggerated: perhaps the number of victims, or the financial cost to society, or how widespread the harm is, or the inevitability of the causal sequence from less to more harmful threats – any of these could be inflated above and beyond what the evidence, carefully assessed, indicates. Methamphetamine, the subject of a recent scare, is a harmful drug, as anyone knowledgeable about substance abuse would attest. But is it as harmful as the media have charged? Does methamphetamine experimentation result in “instant addiction,” as numerous news broadcasts and magazine and newspaper articles have claimed? Is it – or was it – as widely used as many asserted? Is meth among the most lethal of the illicit drugs? Or is it fair to say that a moral panic or “scare” erupted over the use of meth, and one or more of its manifestations, ice, crystal, or crank? Is a post-9/11 terrorist attack as likely as some say? And does finger-pointing about the parties responsible for the terrorist acts demonize the parties named – namely, Arabs and Muslims? Were the laws recriminalizing juvenile delinquency a reasonable and rational effort to control the threat of youth crime? Or was this too an overreaction?

Every society has the moral right – indeed, the obligation – to protect itself from real and present dangers. But not all claims of threats are equally realistic or justified. Moreover, in every society, specific social circles, sectors, categories, or groups feel more threatened by certain behaviors or words than others. For instance, liberals are more likely to feel that flag burning is an expression of freedom of speech, while conservatives value patriotism more strongly, and are more likely to support
laws against flag desecration. Contrarily, liberals are more likely to become upset about and support laws against hate speech – expressions of hostility against minority groups – while conservatives tend to minimize the harm of such threats and oppose their criminalization. In other words, the very concept of what constitutes a threat is controversial, an expression of a diverse, socially divided, and multicultural society. Deviants are not “folk devils” to everyone, and what is regarded as wrongdoing or deviance is itself contested. Indeed, Downes and Rock (2003) point out that ambiguity is a hallmark of deviance. Regarding a particular act, belief, or condition as deviant depends not merely on what the rules are, but temporal and social context, biography, and who’s making the judgment; the same applies to moral panics. Correlatively, moral panics usually break out, when they do, among specific sectors of the society, leaving others untouched, unmoved, even bewildered as to what all the fuss was about. Only occasionally does a moral panic grip the society or the community at large in a vortex of condemnation and outrage. Even the evidence to indicate that a given response is “proportional” to a supposed real-world threat is controversial and weighed according to different scales by members of different social categories.

As dramatic as its manifestations seem, the moral panic rests on quavering, uneven, uncertain, and shifting terrain. As we’ll see in Chapter 4, some critics believe that terrain to be so uncertain that they claim the concept ought to be deleted from the sociological hard drive (Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). Quarantelli (2001) believes that sociologists ought to stop studying and referring to the “panic.” However, his notion of the panic is that it entails headlong, pell-mell flight from an imaginary threat, such as occurs, some observers believe, in a disaster. This is not our meaning of a moral panic at all, and hence, we are forced to disregard Quarantelli’s injunction. The moral panic is an analogy or metaphor borrowed from the disaster panic. Even if panic or irrational, headlong flight during disasters is exceedingly rare, it shares a common denominator with the moral panic: both are emotionally charged social phenomena entailing fright and anxiety. In the moral panic, people fear, avoid, and condemn a specific folk devil and his spawn – this, not flight and stampedes, are what occur. Others feel that the moral panic is a concept of declining significance in contemporary society (Best, 2008; Waiton, 2008). Clearly we disagree. Not only is the moral panic one of the most theoretically illuminating of the sociologist’s concepts, it is also one of the most fascinating.

THE CANUDOS MASSACRE: BRAZIL (1893–7)

For 20 years, a religious mystic who came to be known as Antonio Conselheiro wandered the northeast backlands of Brazil “preaching against ungodly behavior and rebuilding rural churches and cemeteries that had fallen into disrepair in the
forbidding, semiarid interior” (Levine, 1992, p. 2). In 1893, Conselheiro led a pious
group of disciples into a remote mountain valley in Bahia. There, on the site of an
abandoned ranch, he founded a religious community – Canudos. It attracted thou-
sands of followers who were drawn “by Conselheiro’s charismatic madness. He
promised only sacrifice and hard work and asked residents to live according to
God’s commandments and await the coming of the Millennium, when would
come redemption, the Day of Judgment” (p. 2). Conselheiro’s vision was that the
weak would inherit the earth and the order of nature itself would be overturned,
with rainfall blessing the customarily arid region, ushering in an era of agricultural
abundance. Within two years, the settlement became the second largest city in
Bahia. At its height, Canudos’s population was more than a tenth of that of São
Paulo (p. 2).

Landowners did not take kindly to the loss of their labor force; they demanded
government intervention. The Catholic Church, struggling against what it saw as
heterodoxy, apostasy, and the influence of Afro-Brazilian cults, likewise demanded
immediate action. The army dispatched soldiers to capture Conselheiro. The task
proved to be more formidable than any official had imagined. The first three
assaults against the settlement were repulsed by tenacious resistance from his fol-
lowers. The campaign stretched out over two years. Finally, in October 1897, 8,000
troops serving under three generals and Brazil’s Minister of War, encircled Canudos
and bombarded it into submission by heavy artillery.

The repression of the community was violent and bloody. Thousands of
Conselheiro’s followers were killed; the captured survivors numbered only in the
hundreds. Soldiers drew and quartered the wounded or hacked them to pieces
“limb by limb” (p. 190), “killed children by smashing their skulls against trees”
(p. 190), and cut Conselheiro’s head off and displayed it on a pike. (It turns out he
had already died two weeks before the final assault, probably of dysentery.) They
“smashed, leveled, and burned” all 5,000 homes in the settlement (p. 190) and
torched and dynamited the entire grounds of Canudos. “The army systematically
eradicat ed the remaining traces of the holy city as if it had housed the devil
incarnate” (p. 190).

The resistance of Canudos – indeed, its very existence – had generated a crisis in
Brazilian society.

Highlighted by the universal fascination with stories about crazed religious fanatics,
the Canudos conflict flooded the press, invading not only editorials, columns, and
news dispatches, but even feature stories and humor. For the first time in Brazil,
newspapers were used to create a sense of public panic. Canudos appeared daily,
almost always on the front page; indeed, the story was the first ever to receive daily
coverage in the Brazilian press. More than a dozen major newspapers sent war cor-
respondents to the front and ran daily columns reporting events…. Something about
Canudos provoked anxiety, which would be soothed only by evidence that Canudos
had been destroyed (Levine, 1992, p. 24).
In order to understand the intensity of public concern in Brazil in the 1890s over the existence of a religious community consisting of a few thousand souls who, as far as anyone could tell, were not violating any of the country’s criminal statutes, it is necessary to turn the calendar back a century or more and examine events of the time. The country had abolished slavery in Brazil in 1888 and overthrown the monarchy in 1889, introduced a standard, uniform system of weights and measures, and, by decree, had standardized the Portuguese language on a nationwide basis. Brazil seemed to be poised on the threshold of modernity. By forging a fanatical, millennial community, Conselheiro defied government authority, which was in the process of attempting to reach into every hamlet in Brazil. Indeed, Canudos rejected the very civilizing process itself, threatening to plunge the society back into a state of darkness and superstition. The backlanders had defined “the progressive and modern benefits of civilized life” (p. 155). “Urban Brazilians were proud of their material and political accomplishments and felt only shame at the dark, primitive world of the hinterlands” (p. 155). Only one possible solution existed to the challenge posed by Canudos: The movement must be crushed, the community obliterated, and Conselheiro and his followers exterminated.

THE “WHITE SLAVE” TRAFFIC

Early in the twentieth century, the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers ran headlines about Asian conspirators who kidnapped young, vulnerable, small-town and farm women across the United States and forced them into lives of prostitution. Early in the twentieth century, publishers turned out a score of books, some intentionally fictional, others purportedly factual, about the “white slave traffic” (Donovan, 2006). George Kibbe Turner, a journalist, short story writer, and screenwriter, claimed that prostitution was organized “with all the nicety of modern industry,” an industry much like the Chicago stockyards, in which “not one shred of flesh is wasted.” The House of Bondage, a bestselling book by Reginald Wright Kauffman (1911), ran through more than a dozen printings. It contained chapters entitled “The Specter of Fear,” “The Birds of Prey,” “An Angel Unawares,” “Under the Lash,” and “The Serpents’ Den.” In his introduction, the author claimed that the book “is the truth only that I have told. Throughout this narrative, there is no incident that is not a daily commonplace in the life of the underworld of every large city. If proof were needed,” Wright adds, “the newspapers have … proved as much. I have written only what I have myself seen and myself heard.” The Traffic in Souls, a movie, luridly exploited the “white slavery” theme. In 1910, Congress passed the Mann Act, a law making it a crime to assist or entice women to cross state lines for the purpose of engaging in prostitution. Yet for the period during which this scare erupted, no one managed to turn up a single case of kidnapping and enforced
prostitution (Shevory, 2004). “White slavery” proved to be a “perfect storm” of a moral panic – a complete figment of the media’s imagination. The Mann Act remains on the books to this day.

The “white slave” traffic moral panic was inspired by media attention to Chinese immigration to the American West, the fact that a substantial proportion of these immigrants smoked, or were thought to have smoked, opium (Conrad and Schneider, 1980, p. 120; 1992), the fear that whites, especially women, would be corrupted by this “degenerate” Chinese vice, and the subsequent connection between opiate addiction and prostitution (Courtwright, 1982, pp. 70–8). In addition, Chinese immigration created a competition for jobs with the majority white population – hence, the fabrication of a “yellow peril”: the fear that Asians would swamp people of European descent in a “tidal wave” of yellow-skinned hordes who were willing to work for pennies a day. The western states and municipalities passed a series of anti-opium laws, most of which were designed to control and limit the rights of Chinese immigrants (Morgan, 1978). Richard Ashley points out that the 20 Dr. Fu Manchu novels, a series by Sax Rohmer that began in 1913, were very popular because they located the source of the peril to a specific Chinese folk devil: “the insidious Doctor had a plan … to enslave the white world with his evil drugs.” In Rohmer’s novels, it wasn’t clear whether Dr. Fu Manchu peddled cocaine or opium, but no matter: the stereotype linking the Chinese, dope, and involuntary prostitution had been forged (Ashley, 1972, p. 115).

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese imperial army conquered major swaths of the Asian continent. The high command established the practice of forcing Asian, mainly Chinese and Korean, women to become “comfort women” – unwilling prostitutes servicing Japanese soldiers (http://online.sfsu.edu/~soh/cw-links.htm). Interestingly, here, we have the opposite of “white slavery”: While advocates of white slavery claimed that an atrocity took place when it didn’t, the Japanese government denied that an atrocity occurred, even though it actually took place.

A fanciful version of the “sex slave” panic did erupt, however, in France in the late 1960s: employees of six dress shops in Orléans were rumored to drug and abduct young women, under the cover of darkness, taking them through underground tunnels to boats, to North Africa or the Middle East, where they were forced into prostitution. In this particular “urban legend,” the kidnappers were alleged to be Jewish (Morin, 1971). The tale was an extravagant and fanciful fabrication – it mobilized no police action nor was it verified by any mainstream organization or institution – but it shows how lively and credible the “sex slave” story is among certain social circles in certain societies at certain times.

In the early 2000s, a new version of the sexual slavery moral panic emerged, this time in the United States. In testimony given before the House of Representatives, a woman from Nepal stated that she had been “drugged, abducted, and forced to work at a brothel in Bombay.” A State Department official estimated that 50,000 “slaves” were “pouring” into the United States each year, a figure confirmed later by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). A Justice Department official put the
figure at 100,000. Representative Christopher H. Smith, a Republican from New Jersey, spoke of a “tidal wave” of slavery victims. In 2000, Congress enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which created 42 Justice Department task forces and authorized an initial $150 million to find and help the hundreds of thousands of forced prostitution or slavery in the United States. The fifth sentence of the law specifically states that Congress found that 50,000 women and children “are trafficked into the United States each year.” Said Sally Stoecker, representative of Shared Hope International, an anti-sex-trafficking organization, “It’s a huge crime, and it’s continuing to grow” (Markton, 2007).

After more than half a dozen years and millions of dollars expended to fight human trafficking – $28.5 million in 2006 alone – the government has come up virtually empty-handed. Ronald Weitzer, a sociologist, declared “The discrepancy between the alleged number of victims per year and the number of cases they’ve been able to make is so huge that it’s got to raise major questions…. It suggests that this problem is being blown way out of proportion” (Markton, 2007; Weitzer, 2007). Nonetheless, the effort continues. Said Derek Ellerman, cofounder of the Polaris Project, another anti-trafficking group, “There’s huge momentum, because this is a no-brainer issue…. No one is going to stand up and oppose fighting modern-day slavery.” Justice Department officials claimed that there has been a 600 percent increase in trafficking cases. When pressed for “absolute numbers,” one reporter found that representatives of the department could provide no documented figures (Markton, 2007). The Department of Health and Human Services “is still paying people to find victims.” The agency announced an additional $3.4 million in funds for “street outreach” awards to 22 groups nationwide. One of these awards went to Mosaic Family Services, a nonprofit agency in Dallas. “For the past year, its employees have put out the word to hospitals, police stations, domestic violence shelters – any organization that might come into contact with a victim…. Three victims were found” (Markton, 2007). Women are forced into sexual slavery, and almost certainly in large numbers, in many of the poorer countries of the world (Miller, 2008). But in the United States, in spite of claims made by advocates, the practice is extremely rare, virtually nonexistent.

The twenty-first-century version of sexual trafficking emerged without the racial angle: women in general (almost all of them from Third World countries), rather than specifically white women, are supposedly threatened by forced prostitution. In addition, today, the race of the traffickers vis-à-vis their victims is irrelevant. However, the common theme is the relationship between the furor (enormous) and the minuscule number of documented cases: with respect to the early twentieth-century “white slave” trade, none, in the case of contemporary forced prostitution, very few. But unlike the “white slavery” issue in the early 1900s, the contemporary version has produced relatively little public concern and comparatively less media attention. One wonders if the factor of race offers the key to understanding this difference. The earlier version of this myth portrayed Asian
men forcing white women into sexual slavery; in the contemporary version of the myth, the race of the victimizers and the victims is not a relevant factor.

THE SEXUAL PSYCHOPATH LAWS, 1930s–50s

It is November, 1949. The mutilated body of a small girl is found in a neighborhood in Los Angeles. The police are alerted, and relay a description of the crime and the suspect, one Fred Stroble, to nearby cities and counties; blockades along the Mexican border are set up. Hotels, motels, bus stations, and bars are watched. Men matching the suspect’s description are taken off public transportation and brought to police stations for questioning. The media broadcast details of a number of similar past crimes, some stretching back a quarter of a century. There is a sudden increase in the number of crimes involving young girls being molested reported to the police. The body of a drowned man is pulled from the Pacific Ocean; it is initially incorrectly reported as the suspect. After three days, Fred Stroble is spotted getting off a bus by a police officer, and he is apprehended and arrested. The arresting officer’s photograph is printed in scores of newspapers across the country as the “capturer of the sex fiend.” Details of the case and related cases continue to be presented in the news. The Los Angeles District Attorney secures a confession from Stroble, who then meets with assembled reporters; “with beads of sweat standing on his face and neck,” he repeats a confession of his crimes to the press (Sutherland, 1950b, pp. 143–4).

Between 1937 and 1950, a dozen states and the District of Columbia pass “sexual psychopath” laws. In each state, the passage of these laws follows a specific pattern. The process begins with “a few serious sex crimes committed in quick succession” which are “given nation-wide publicity.” National magazines publish articles bearing titles such as “How Safe Is Your Daughter?” “What Can We Do About Sex Crimes?” and “Terror in Our Cities.” Letters to the editor of local newspapers demand action. School superintendents remind teachers and principals to be on the lookout for men loitering around schoolyards; parent–teacher’s associations sponsor mass meetings on the problem of sex offenders. The head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) calls for an all-out war against sex criminals. National leaders are quoted in the press concerning the most effective methods of controlling sex crimes. Victims of sex offenses, and relatives of victims, rise up and make public declarations which are dutifully reported in the media. Politicians demand that legislatures call special sessions to pass laws to deal with the problem. Communities are “thrown in a panic” about the danger that sexual psychopaths pose to women and children. Legislative committees are appointed, and recommendations are made. Relatively little debate or discussion takes place in state legislatures about the proposed bills, though in most yet another version of the “sexual psychopath” law is passed. In no location is either
the fear or the passage of the law related to an increase in the incidence of sex crimes (Sutherland, 1950b, pp. 144–6, 1950a).

HORROR COMICS (1948–56)

The comic books produced in the early decades of the twentieth century featured amusing, benign, or slightly mischievous characters, in strips such as Mutt and Jeff and Mickey Mouse. But by the mid-1930s, cartoonists had begun to introduce adventure, some violence, and more serious themes and adult characters, under titles such as Dick Tracy, Flash Gordon, and Terry and the Pirates. In 1938, when Superman first appeared, “the funny papers just weren’t funny any more. And to some, they were getting steamy and way too rough” (Bjerg, 2006). The May 8, 1940 issue of the Chicago Daily News published an editorial by Sterling North, which stated that the effect “of the pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant.” The comic book reader, fulminated North, is subject to an “injection of sex and murder,” tending to produce “an even more ferocious generation than the present one.” To put the skids on the malefic influence of cartoons, North concluded, parents and teachers throughout America “must band together to break the comic code.”

Initially, North’s diatribe seemed to fall on deaf ears. In the 1940s, with the introduction of heroes such as Batman, Captain America, and Steve Canyon, comic books became even more popular, and World War II opened their readership to servicemen overseas; during this decade, comics sold 60 million copies a month (Bjerg, 2006). While World War II shifted the age of a major sector of comic book readership into adulthood it also delayed the resentment among adults of the unacceptable content of this new medium. The post-war years saw a huge expansion of the pre-teen and teenage demographics, as well as an enormous increase in the affluence of the American population; parents put a historically unprecedented amount of discretionary cash in the hands of their pre-teen children; what better way of spending it than purchasing comic books? Comics were a medium designed specifically for youngsters: bright, vivid, colorful panels, with bold, sharply outlined designs, simplified characters, tales of good and evil with a maximum of rebellion, violence, creepy tales, and dramatic action – not likely to sit well with parents – and balloons containing simple, declarative dialogue.

Of the many actors in the comic book moral panic, two are worth highlighting: the Catholic Church and a psychiatrist named Frederic Wertham. The Catholic Church was probably the institution most hostile to comics. (Ironically, during the war, churches in some 2,000 parishes had purchased multiple copies of the comic book series, Picture Stories from the Bible, published by EC Comics, which later produced Tales from the Crypt, very likely the most horrific of the comic book horror titles.)
By 1952, some 20 publishers released 650 titles a month; between 80 and 100 million comic books sold each week (Hadju, 2008). The popularity of the medium both fanned the flames of adult hostility toward comics and emboldened artists and writers to make their stories and images even more horrific than was thought possible. In 1952, a third of all comics were horror comics with titles such as Tales from the Crypt, Terror Tales, and Chamber of Chills; perhaps a third were evenly divided between crime and romance, and a third were made up of everything else, from Donald Duck and Archie to Sheena, Queen of the Jungle and The Rawhide Kid.

One man in particular, Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist working with young offenders, believed that the “gory violence and lurid sex” of comics caused the delinquency of American youth. In 1948, he delivered a talk before a convention of psychiatrists which argued that comics caused juvenile delinquency. Wertham provided appropriately horrifying examples of boys who read horror comics and turned to a life of crime (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006).

Wertham’s talk ignited a clamorous media chorus denouncing the degeneracy of comics and calling for their censorship. (Wertham himself rejected the policy of legal bans.) Some towns even held “mass comic book burnings”; mass circulation magazines such as Time and Look branded comics as degenerate; Canada banned the publication of crime comics; and in 1950, the U.S. Senate formed a special committee to investigate the link of comics with organized crime. In 1954, Wertham published his polemical and influential book, Seduction of the Innocent, which claimed that Batman and Robin depicted “a dream wish of two homosexuals living together,” that Wonder Woman represented a “lesbian counterpart of Batman,” and that Superman planted the idea that children could fly. Wertham became a “media darling,” speaking around the country and writing for popular magazines. Later that year, he was called before the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, where he spelled out his thesis on the causal connection between comic books and juvenile delinquency (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006).

The exchange between Senator Estes Kefauver, a Democrat from Tennessee, and Bill Gaines, a cartoonist, creator of a series of horror comics, and founder of a comic book company, EC, is especially revealing:

**Kefauver** (holding up the front page of a gory EC comic book): This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman’s head up, which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

**Gaines**: Yes sir, I do for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste might be defined as holding the head higher so that the blood could be seen dripping from it.

**Kefauver**: You’ve got blood coming out of her mouth.

**Gaines**: A little.

In 1954, the hearings resulted in a self-imposed code of standards on comic book producers, called the Comics Code Authority (CCA), and in 1955, the Senate completed
its final report. A stamp on the corner of a comic book certified that the contents were safe for young readers. The code “restricted sex and violence, forbade the criticism of religion, the use of slang words and a long list of unacceptable practices” (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006). The Senate’s report issued a statement to the effect that the government must use whatever means necessary to “prevent our nation’s young from being harmed from crime and horror comics.” Many distributors refused to exhibit or sell a comic book unless it bore the CCA seal; some horror comic book producers went out of business, including EC, the only series of which that survived was Mad magazine.

Horror comics followed much the same trajectory in the United Kingdom. GIs stationed in the UK during World War II brought comics with them whose popularity proved to be enduring. At first, British firms began importing comics from the United States in bulk; before long, however, these firms printed them from matrices or “mats” in runs of 50,000. The goriness of American titles, such as Tales from the Crypt and Haunt of Fear, far exceeded anything the British public had known. Soon, the public became horrified at the content of these “American-style” comics. Magazines and newspapers ran stories with headlines that read: “Drive out the Horror Comics,” “Now Ban this Filth That Poisons Our Children,” “Still Cashing in on Muck,” “Help Us to Fight Sex and Crime a Shilling at a Time.” Dozens of voluntary associations – women’s organizations, churches, parent–teacher associations, trade unions, even the Communist Party – took up the cause, lobbying against the distribution of horror comic books.

“Publicity, pressure, and meetings finally forced the government into action” (Barker, 1984, p. 9). In 1955, Parliament passed The Children and Young Person’s Harmful Publication Act, which forbade anyone from distributing picture books or magazines portraying “the commission of crimes,” acts “of violence or cruelty,” or “incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature” in such a way “that the work as a whole would tend to corrupt a child or young person” (p. 16). Throughout this campaign, no one advanced a shred of systematic or empirical evidence to indicate that exposure to horror comics actually caused any corruption or delinquency – or, indeed, behavior of any kind. Within a few years, the media, public, and legal furor died down, passing into historical insignificance.

THE BOYS OF BOISE (1955–6)

Moral panics may be local in scope rather than national. Beginning November 2, 1955, the citizens of Boise, Idaho woke up to a headline in The Idaho Daily Statesman, which read: “Three Boise Men Admit Sex Charges.” Charles Brokaw, a freight worker, Ralph Cooper, a shoe-store employee, and Vernon Cassel, a clothing-store clerk, were charged with “infamous crimes against nature” (Gerassi, 1966, p. 1), which referred to various homosexual practices. An investigation “was being
launched” into allegations of “immoral practices involving teen-age boys” (p. 1). Although the authorities “had barely scratched the surface,” the article continued, there was evidence that similar acts had been committed by other adults against a hundred boys (p. 2). That day in Boise, the main topic of conversation revolved around the arrests and their disturbing implications. Was it possible “a vast secret organization of perverts” had been operating in Boise and that “every kid in high school” had been corrupted (p. 3)? Citizens called representatives at the high school, police headquarters, the Statesman – and one another – “stressing the acute seriousness of the whole matter” (p. 3).

On the next day, November 3, in an editorial entitled “Crush the Monster,” the Statesman demanded that the “whole sordid situation” be “completely cleared up, and the premises thoroughly cleaned and disinfected” (p. 4). Such an editorial “was bound to generate panic, and it did” (p. 4). However, when the statesman called for all agencies to “crush the monster,” one thing was certain: “there was no such thing” (p. 5). Three “rather unimportant, unassuming, unpolitical individuals had been arrested for doing something either infamous or lewd with some minors” and a probate-court officer claimed that some other adults had done the same thing with as many as a hundred teenagers. “On that kind of evidence, most newspapers would only demand more information” (p. 5).

A week later, Ralph Cooper – who had a long record of arrests and convictions – received an astounding life sentence for his crimes. (He was released after nine years.) The other two men received 15-year sentences. Four days after Cooper’s imprisonment, Joe Moore, vice-president of the Idaho First National Bank, was arrested on felony charges of committing, once again, an “infamous crime against nature” (p. 12). Another Statesman editorial appeared the next day which warned Boise parents “to keep an eye on the whereabouts” of their children because “a number of boys have been victimized by these perverts… . No matter what is required, this sordid mess must be removed from this community” (p. 13).

Men who stopped to talk to adolescent boys, men who paused to look at football practice, even men “who were not good, kind, obedient husbands,” were denounced (pp. 13–14). The county’s prosecuting attorney, Blaine Evans, became a local hero. He vowed to “eliminate” all homosexuals from Boise. Though this sort of talk made the town’s citizens alarmed, at least, they reasoned, “something was being done about the problem” (p. 13). On the morning of November 15, a young teacher, an admitted homosexual, while eating his breakfast of eggs, toast, and coffee and reading his morning Statesman, came upon the news item of Moore’s arrest, accompanied by Blaine’s promise to “eliminate” all homosexuals. He never finished his breakfast. “He jumped up from his seat, pulled out his suitcases, packed as fast as he could, got into his car, and drove straight to San Francisco, never bothering to call up the school to let it be known that he would be absent. The cold eggs, coffee and toast remained on his table for two days before someone from his school came by to see what had happened” (p. 14).
On December 2, Charles Herbert Gordon, an interior decorator, pled guilty to "lewd and lascivious conduct" and was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. On December 11, a dozen men, some prominent citizens, were arrested on homosexual charges. On December 12, the scandal reached national proportions. *Time* magazine ran a story claiming that "a widespread homosexual underworld that involved some of Boise's most prominent men … had preyed on hundreds of teen-age boys for the past decade" (p. ix). On December 19, a curfew was established for minors age 16 and younger. On December 22, the Boise City Council called for the conviction and sentencing of all arrested homosexuals. One December 23, five homosexuals were sentenced to periods ranging from six months to 10 years. In April, the mayor announced that nearly 1,500 persons had been interviewed in the course of the investigation. Over the next year, arrests and sentences continued; by January 1957, locals regarded the scandal as having reached its conclusion.

Why the panic over homosexuality in Boise in 1955 and 1956? Why the ludicrous and almost literally impossible assertion that a "ring" or "organization" of adult men were preying on scores, possibly hundreds, of local boys? Was the issue even homosexuality in the first place? And who regarded it as an issue?

John Gerassi, a journalist, claimed (1966, p. 21) that the investigation, which launched the panic, was undertaken by the city's power elite, the "Boise gang," a circle of rich, powerful, and conservative executives, entrepreneurs, and politicians, to discredit City Hall – "which was then in the hands of a fairly decent, reformist administration" – and one council member in particular whose son had been involved in the activity under investigation. In addition, the intention was to flush out and discredit a member of that powerful inner circle, a man publicly referred to as the "Queen." The irony of the panic was that the individuals who were the real target of the investigation were never named, while the unintended victims, many humble and powerless, were punished. Moreover, not all of the individuals had had sex with underage minors; several, in fact, engaged in homosexual relations with consenting adults, though this was still a crime in Idaho in 1955. Even those who technically violated the state’s statutes against sex with minors had committed acts with a small number of 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old juvenile delinquents and male prostitutes who hustled adult homosexuals for pay and engaged in blackmail against them. The Boise sex scandal proved to be the proverbial "tempest in a teapot."

When questioned a decade later, the prosecution attorney responsible for bringing the cases defended his role in investigating and arresting homosexuals. We had to get "those guys," he said, "because they strike at the core of the society, I mean the family and the family unit. And when you get those guys crawling around the streets, you’ve got to prosecute to save the family" (p. 25). When asked why such a fuss was made at this particular time and why the sentences were so harsh, he replied, "I guess we didn’t know that there were so many of them in the community. You know, when it’s going on in the basement of the Public Library, and in the
hotels, and these guys are soliciting business all over town, you’ve got to do something about it, don’t you?” (p. 24). A Boise Valley farmer put the matter even more simply. When interviewed about it 10 years after the scandal, he said: “We grow them tough out here … and that’s the way we want to grow them. None of this hanky-panky and city stuff for us. Our kids have to be men, just like their forefathers…. ‘There’s no room for these queers. We don’t want them. They should be run out of the state” (p. 129). According to Thompson, the media cast homosexuals into the category of “Otherness” (1998, p. 81); the scare in Boise hugely exaggerated that tendency.

**FLAG BURNING (1989–2000s)**

Tension between veneration and desecration of the American flag reaches back to the early years of the Republic. Even after the Revolutionary War, Old Glory lacked both standardization and public enthusiasm. The U.S. military did not carry the Stars and Stripes into battle until the war against Mexico, in 1846. But in the years following the Civil War, the flag protection movement “gained considerable momentum.” As a result of a series of legal victories between 1897 and 1932, for the first time in American history, the flag “was officially designated a venerated object whose desecration was criminalized” (Welch, 2000, p. 23), and for nearly a century, “thousands of American citizens would be arrested and funneled into the criminal justice system for violating antidesecration laws” (p. 24). During World War I, burning the flag came to represent sedition, treason, and opposition to war. In recognition of the killing by National Guard troops of four Kent State University students in an anti-Vietnam War protest, New York City Mayor John Lindsay lowered the flag at City Hall to half-mast. Construction workers held protests in lower Manhattan, parading with flag decals on their hard hats and holding signs that denounced Lindsay as “a rat,” “a Commy rat,” “a faggot,” “a leftist,” “an idiot,” “an anarchist,” and “a traitor” (Bigart, 1970, p. A1). One construction worker proclaimed to a journalist that he would kill his own son if he defiled the flag; that was the worst thing, he said, the antiwar protesters had ever done (Goldstein, 1995, p. 160).

Following the Vietnam War, the flag burning issue lay dormant, and would have remained so if it had not been for the protests staged by a tiny splinter social movement organization, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), whose actions were designed to “unleash the repressive tendencies of the state” and engender “a sense of martyrdom” (Welch, 2000, pp. 61, 69). In addition to the RCP, the cast of characters in this drama included the conservative Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations (1981–93), American public opinion, and the federal courts. The Reagan and Bush regimes wished to appear patriotic to the American electorate. Given the absence of a state religion, the American public regarded the flag as a symbol of the country’s “shared emphasis on morality, a
construct distinguishing right from wrong and good from evil” (p. 102). But the federal courts demurred. In 1984, Gregory Johnson, a member of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, was arrested for disorderly conduct at a demonstration in which an American flag was burned; the charge was later to be replaced with desecration of a venerated object under Texas law. In 1989, the case was brought to the Supreme Court, which found for the defendant. Media attention “exploded,” resulting in “unprecedented levels of news coverage” (p. 103). Public opinion polls did not support the Supreme Court: Two-thirds of respondents (65%) disagreed with a Supreme Court ruling that held that flag burning was a legal act permitted by the First Amendment, and seven out of ten (71%) supported a constitutional amendment to protect the flag. A *New York Times/CBS News* poll found that 83 percent felt that flag burning should be against the law; and six out of ten (59%) endorsed a constitutional amendment criminalizing the desecration of Old Glory.

To supporters of laws against flag burning, desecrating the symbol of the United States is a serious matter, *by itself* a wrongful act, indicative of the lack of patriotism, as well as behavior that *contributes* to the subversion of America. The “feverish response” to flag burning, compounded by the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Johnson v. Texas*, “featured all the qualities of a classic moral panic” (p. 72). Said Congressman David Applegate before the House of Representatives, “Mr. Speaker, I am mad as hell. We have witnessed the greatest travesty in the annals of jurisprudence when the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the destruction of our greatest American symbol. What in God’s name is going on? Are there any limitations? Are they going to allow fornication in Times Square at high noon?” (p. 72). Senator Bob Dole chimed in with the statement “People who hate the flag … ought to leave the country” (p. 72). Following such rancorous denunciations, Congress passed the Flag Protection Act of 1989, which reads: “Whoever knowingly mutilates, defaces, burns, or tramples upon the flag of the United States shall be fined … or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both” (p. 73). Flag burners became folk devils, in the words of Chief Justice Rehnquist, who spoke for the minority opinion, enactors of “inherently evil and profoundly offensive” behavior (p. 113). Representative William Clinger demonized them as “twisted lowlifes,” “pathetic individuals” who engaged in “cheap theatrics” and were fighting for “sorry causes” (p. 115).

But the skeptic would probably argue that flag burning was little more than a tempest in a teapot, no more than a blip on the radar screen, and was likely to have a largely symbolic impact on the society. In 1989, The Emergency Committee to Stop the Flag Amendment and Laws released a pamphlet, “What’s All This Flag Furor,” that juxtaposed the wording of a law passed in pre-Nazi Germany (1932) prohibiting the public profaning of the “colors or flag of the German armed forces” with a U.S. congressional resolution prohibiting the desecration of the American flag (Welch, 2000, p. 99). Artists created works that mocked the notion that Americans should be legally enjoined to display the flag in a “proper way” (pp. 99ff.). Dread Scott created a display in the School of the Art Institute that forced
museum guests to choose between stepping on the flag while writing comments in a ledger book or walking around it. One guest wrote: “The flag represents our country. You don’t like it – MOVE!” Another wrote: “To[o] many people have given their lives to make this country free. This is not the proper way to display the flag! It should be held high!” The Chicago City Council passed a resolution denouncing the exhibit, and the measure’s sponsor “echoed the growing moral panic,” shouting: “There has never been a more dastardly act in the City of Chicago!” (p. 77).

In the United States, the flag desecration issue has never entirely disappeared; it remains latent, poised to reemerge at the appropriate time. Welch (2000, pp. 157–72) read all speeches entered into the Congressional Record that mentioned flag burning; these speeches reveal the depth of the conflict. Said James Cooper on the floor of Congress “I’m all for punishing sinners, flag burners included…. Flag burners should be placed in jail” (p. 142). Added Senator Orrin Hatch: “why can we not ban in the interest of patriotism and honor and values in this country despicable, rotten, dirty conduct against our national symbol?” (p. 148). Senator John Kerry offered a discordant note with the statement that the flag desecration amendment represents “an extraordinary overreaction to a virtually nonexistent problem,” a “desperate grasp for symbols” that masks “an abject want of ideas” (p. 149). Senator Edward Kennedy agreed. A flag desecration “is hardly the kind of serious and widespread problem in American society that warrants a loophole in the first amendment. Surely there is no clear and present danger that warrants such a change” (p. 150).

This is the heated language of controversy, an exchange that is unlikely to be resolved through reason and logic – a classic symbolic panic that demarcates two immovable positions off from one another. The interested observer of the moral panic eagerly awaits the next round in this hot-blooded struggle.

Interestingly, we see a parallel here with Israel. Many haredim or ultra-orthodox Jews believe that the state of Israel should not be considered legitimate until the messiah manifests himself. Hence, some anti-Zionist haredi factions practice the burning of the Israeli flag on Independence Day, which distresses many secular and other non-ultra-orthodox Israelis. On occasion, when journalists have attempted to photograph such burnings, haredi participants and bystanders have physically attacked them. (A picture of haredi children setting fire to an Israeli flag may be found on p. 12 of the May 4, 2003 issue of Yediot Aharanot.) In 1997, a reporter quoted a haredi teenager observed burning an Israeli flag as saying: “this is not my country so I burned its flag” (Kol Hair, May 16, 1997, p. 23).

**SUMMARY**

From time to time in every society, charges of terrible and dastardly deeds committed by evildoers erupt; sides are chosen, speeches are delivered, enemies are named, and atrocities are alleged. In some such episodes, the harm is alleged but
imaginary, in others, the threat or harm is real but exaggerated. However, when the moral concern felt by segments of the society or the community is disproportionate to the threat or harm, sociologists refer to them as “moral panics,” and the threatening agents, “folk devils.” What do these episodes tell us about the society in which they erupt? This is the question we address in this book.

What are moral panics about? As we’ve suggested, the behavior that ignites them can be “about” almost anything and anyone, from comic book purveyors who “corrupt our youth” to traitors who “stab our country in the back,” from the way people dress to the religion they preach and practice, from rock and roll music to pornography, from “Japs” and Jews to beer-drinking Germans and Mexican “wetbacks.” Thompson (1998) discusses mugging, girl gangs, clubs and raves, and unstable families, and sex on the screen. Critcher (2003) analyzes Ecstasy, child abuse, pedophilia, AIDS, and “video nasties.” Glassner (1999) addresses the exaggerated fear of “monster moms,” “youth at risk,” heroin addiction, the supposed threat of black men, and crime and its representation in the media. Jenkins devotes attention to serial homicide (1994), pedophilia by priests (1996), child molestation (1998), synthetic drugs (1999), child pornography on the Internet (2001), and terrorism (2003a) as moral panics. The point is, moral panics are not “about” specific activities – real or imagined – or social categories, so much as they are “about” the fear and concern about, and the perceived threat from, those activities and categories. It is what those activities and categories represent to some members of the society that stirs up this fear, concern, and sense of threat. And how they get stirred up is what this book is about.

The success of the religious community of Canudos founded by Antonio Conselheiro distressed the Catholic hierarchy, which called for repression of the cult, and the Brazilian government, which dispatched its army to wipe out the movement. In a siege that lasted two years, the army blasted Canudos to smokethens and slaughtered all but several hundred of its inhabitants. Conselheiro and his followers seemed to enlightened Brazilians the very embodiment of backwardness and benighted ignorance; they regarded the cult as a threat to the nation’s progressive image, and annihilation, as the only solution to the threat.

Concern about the “white slave traffic” expressed the early twentieth-century fear that naïve, vulnerable, young women from rural areas and small towns could visit cities and get snatched up and forced onto the street by evil, cunning “Orientals.” In the white slavery scenario, the victim was always a Caucasian and her victimizer, usually a Chinese immigrant. (In Europe, a similar scenario involved an Arab villain.) This panic also commonly entailed the fear of engulfment of the American wage earner by Asian “Yellow Peril” “hordes,” and represented an assertion of the cultural and racial superiority of native-born Anglo-Saxons over Asians. As far as we know, as it was spelled out a century ago, such “sexual slavery” never took place; however, today, the forced prostitution of Asian women has reemerged as a politically volatile issue (Markton, 2007; Weitzer, 2007). The “white slave traffic” moral panic illustrates an instance of a completely nonexistent threat, a set of
events that never took place. In the twenty-first century, the issue of sexual trafficking reemerged, but without the racial angle; massive efforts to locate women forced into prostitution have turned up very, very few cases. Interestingly, however, at least one historical case of sexual slavery has been abundantly documented: Asian women forced by the Japanese imperial army to become “comfort women” for the Japanese troops. In this case, an atrocity actually took place that was for many years denied by the Japanese government.

By the 1930s, cartoons had taken on mature themes, such as violence, horror, and sex, causing teachers, psychiatrists, crusaders, and the media to charge them with causing delinquency and corruption in their youthful readers. While industry-imposed codes prevailed in the United States, in the United Kingdom, certain categories of comics were banned altogether. Throughout the campaigns in both countries, however, no evidence was ever produced that demonstrated that comics caused behavior of any kind in adolescents. While offensive and gory, the comic books that many teens and pre-teens read in the fifties, in all likelihood, did not pose the objective threat that their opponents alleged.

Moral panics sometimes break out at the local rather than the society-wide level. One such scare erupted in Boise, Idaho, in the mid-1950s when a struggle between municipal factions manifested itself in a scandal involving homosexual acts allegedly between adults and minors. The Boise sex scandal proved to be a “tempest in a teapot” and died down as quickly as it arose, but not, however, before dozens of accused were convicted and imprisoned.

By the twentieth century, desecration of the American flag came to represent a traitorous, unpatriotic act, a violation of the nation’s “state religion.” Challenges to this interpretation came from a variety of sectors of the society, including artists and political dissidents. Debate over the legality of flag-burning spilled out onto the floor of Congress, which passed a flag protection act, subsequently overturned by the Supreme Court. Flag-burning is practiced by some ultra-orthodox Jews living in Israel. Only when the messiah manifests Himself will Israel become a legitimate state. Hence, Israel is not “their” country, say some haredi Jews. The debate reveals deep ideological fissures that could erupt into conflict at some time in the future. So far, there is no indication that this has become a moral panic in Israel.

We find it important to point out that many moral panics are about sex. For a variety of reasons, humans are fearful and insecure about their own sexuality and the sexual doings of their neighbors and fellow citizens. Sex is a special and unique sphere in which rules are abundant, and strict, and within which the human drama plays out and the status of wrongdoing and even abnormality is applied (Foucault, 1979; 1999). Elaborate stories are written and interpretations drawn by us about the meaning of sexual behavior. It is no surprise, then, that some of the classic moral panics we’ll take a look at burst forth over the issues of homosexuality (Gerassi, 1966), pedophilia (Critcher, 2003, pp. 99–117; Jenkins, 1998), priestly
pedophilia (Jenkins, 1996), pornography (see Chapter 12, this volume), as we saw in this Prologue, sexual “slavery” and the sexual psychopath laws (Sutherland, 1950a; 1950b), and sex on the film screen (Thompson, 1998, pp. 121–38). As we’ll see, even the Renaissance witch craze contained a crucial component of sexual behavior – the black Sabbath “orgy” between witches and the devil – and so did satanic ritual abuse, a moral panic that exploded in the eighties (de Young, 2004). The role of sexuality in the moral panic calls for close attention.
ENTER THE MORAL PANIC
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-zealously 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 mythmaking 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 stertotypical features litanzied, 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.”
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 dispro-
portion. 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 inter-
ests; 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 legis-
lators, 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 distur-
bance, 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 trou-
bles, 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 misde-
meanors; 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 distur-
bances dovetailed with public attitudes. The older, postwar generation saw the
media’s portrayal of the offenders through a lens of the deprivation it had experi-
enced, 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, mak-
ing proclamations, statements to the press, and speeches that expressed a vindic-
tive, 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.
2

THE MORAL PANIC

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

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

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

In addition, not everyone gripped by the moral panic sees legislation and law enforcement as the solution to the problem. Even when widespread agreement about the problem exists, the proper solution will be argued about, fought over,
and negotiated; eventually, some legal outcome, one way or the other, will be reached – that is, to legislate or not to legislate – as a result of interaction between and among contending parties. Nonetheless, the question of the appropriate social and legal control of the responsible parties almost inevitably accompanies the moral panic. And legislation and its enforcement are usually seen as only one step; some sectors of the society who see the behavior in question as a threat will suggest and debate measures such as education, socialization, normative changes, prevention, “treatment,” and “cures.”

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

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

Of course, we must be careful to avoid ad hoc explanations, of assuming beforehand that collective and social stress must automatically be present for moral panics to break out. Stress could be defined so broadly that all societies suffer from it. Moreover, all that is necessary for a moral panic to break out is that a substantial
number of people in one or more social circles or sectors feel concerned about a particular threat or supposed threat. In principle, however, the hypothesis that moral panics are generated by social stress is testable. We suspect that the hypothesis will be supported more often than not, but that, if we define social stress as a dimension that is high in some societies and low in others, abundant numbers of cases of moral panics can be located in societies in which, according to our definition, levels of stress are seen to be high. We do not wish to pin all our theoretical hopes on a single hypothesis. At the same time, social and collective stress should be kept in mind as a hypothesis that has guided much of the literature on moral panics.

ELEMENTS OF THE MORAL PANIC

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

**Concern**

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

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

Consensus

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

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

Still, it is important to remind ourselves that definitions of threat or crisis are rarely unopposed in a large, complex society. The question of whether or not a society is seriously threatened at a given time by a given agent or problem is typically debated, argued about, negotiated. To put the matter a bit differently, in some moral panics, a particular voice opposing the majority is weak and unorganized, while in others, that oppositional voice is strong and united. In the
United States, during the 1900–20 pre-Prohibition period, the threat that alcohol posed and the viability of a national ban on alcohol were vigorously fought over. The “dry” forces, however, were far more united, were fired by an unparalleled moral fervor (while the arguments of the “wet” forces were seen by much of the public as motivated by self-interest), and, during and after World War I, could invoke patriotism in opposition to the enemy beer brewer’s German origins (Gusfield, 1963). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the United States, the legalization of marijuana as medicine attracts heated debate, especially in California, with the “ineffectiveness” and “foot in the door” arguments mobilizing one side and the “effectiveness” and “compassion” arguments inspiring advocates on the other side, especially those arguing for a form of harm reduction rather than punishment (Grinspoon and Bakalar, 1997; Joy, Watson, and Benson, 1999).

**Disproportion**

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

We want to be very careful about what we mean by the objective dimension because, as we saw in the Prologue and as we’ll see later in the book, some critics question the very viability of the moral panics concept, and regard disproportion as incapable of being measured. As a consequence, they argue, there cannot be any such thing as a “panic,” since we cannot determine the seriousness of the objective threat against which concern we may measure subjective concern – in short, disproportion is an empty, meaningless concept (Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). We strongly disagree, and believe that some features of threat and harm can be measured against claims, and that during certain periods of emotional intensity, will be found wanting. We can have a
great deal of confidence, given the nature of the evidence, that: LSD does not seriously damage chromosomes or cause birth defects; satanists have not kidnapped, abused, tortured, and murdered tens of thousands of children every year in the United States and England; legal drug use is responsible for far more deaths than the abuse of illegal drugs; in Renaissance Europe, hundreds of thousands of men and women did not literally consort with an actual, concrete devil; occasional episodes of flag-burning do not subvert or undermine a country’s patriotic resolve; and so on.

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

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

Volatility

And fifth, by their very nature, moral panics are volatile; they erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside. Some moral panics may become routinized or institutionalized, that is, after the panic has run its course, the moral concern about the target behavior results in, or remains in place in the form of, social movement organizations, legislation, enforcement practices, informal interpersonal norms or practices for punishing transgressors. Other moral panics merely vanish, almost without trace; the legal, cultural, moral, and social fabric of the society after the panic is essentially no different from the way it was before; no new social control mechanisms are instituted as a consequence of its eruption. But, whether it has a long-term impact or not, the degree of hostility generated during a moral panic tends to be fairly limited temporally; the fever pitch that characterizes a society during the course of a moral panic is not typically sustainable over a long stretch of time. In that respect, it is similar to fashion, the fad, and the craze; the moral panic is, therefore, as we see, a form of collective behavior.
To describe moral panics as volatile and relatively short-lived does not mean that, when the panic erupts, structural and historical antecedents do not already exist around the same issue. The specific issue that generates a particular moral panic may have done so in the past, perhaps even the not-so-distant past. In fact, one or another moral panic which seems to have been sustained over a long period of time is almost certainly a conceptual grouping of a series of more or less discrete, more or less localized, more or less short-term panics. The Renaissance witch-craze, for example, was not active during the entire stretch of its three hundred years of existence. It flared up at one time and place and subsided, burst forth later in another location and died down, and so on. A heated, continent-wide, panic-like craze spanning nearly three centuries is simply not sustainable.

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

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

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

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

**THE LOCUS OF MORAL PANICS**

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

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

Here are five indicators of disproportion.

**Figures exaggerated**

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

**Figures fabricated**

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

**Rumors of harm, invented and believed**

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

**Other harmful conditions**

Fourth, if the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another condition, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, we can say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. The use of illegal drugs generates vastly more concern than the use of legal drugs, in spite of the fact that legal drugs cause far more disease and death than illegal drugs. According to the Surgeon General of the United States, in the United States, the use of tobacco cigarettes is responsible for well over 400,000 premature deaths each year, while alcohol use causes over 100,000
deaths; a crude extrapolation from hospital and medical examiner’s data yields premature acute deaths for illegal drugs (including the illegal use of prescription drugs) in the 20,000 or so territory (Goode, 2008a). Again, discrepancies such as these should cause us to speculate that, perhaps, currently or recently, concern over illegal drug use might provide an example of a moral panic.

Changes over time

Fifth, if the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time, without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness, then, once again, the criterion of disproportion may be said to have been met. Between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the incidence of school shootings and killings was plummeting, but it was a time when they attracted an immense volume of media attention (Best, 2002a; Cornell, 2006). Between the middle to the late 1980s, newspaper and magazine articles on the subject of drug abuse virtually exploded, the percentage of Americans saying that drug abuse was the nation’s number one problem skyrocketed from the 2–3 percent range in the mid-1980s to 64 percent late in September 1989, and lawmakers proposed a huge spate of legislation during the 1986–9 period, but far fewer before and after. Yet, during that period of time, the proportion of Americans who used illegal drugs actually declined. This tells us that the criterion of disproportion has been met and that, possibly, a moral panic about drugs gripped the nation in the late 1980s.

MORAL PANICS: AN INHERENTLY IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPT?

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

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

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

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

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

SUMMARY

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

We can characterize the moral panic by at least five criteria or indicators: a heightened degree of concern about a certain threat or supposed threat; hostility toward the agent responsible for that threat, who is regarded as a deviant or “folk devil, a certain level of consensus or high level of agreement in the society at large or a sector of the society that the threat is real and who is responsible for the threat; a disproportion between the level of the threat, as determined by the available evidence, and the level of concern about it; a measure of volatility in a given
moral panic episode, that is, moral panics tend to leap up, prevail for a time, and fade out within a matter of months or a few years.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In a nutshell, these indicators, spheres, “overlapping territories” between moral panics and deviance and crime, collective behavior, social movements, and social problems, along with our three case studies – the Renaissance witch craze, U.S.
drug panics, and the feminist anti-pornography crusade – constitute the subject matter of this book. Each case highlights interesting features not found in the others; each reveals something new about what makes the moral panic so revealing and interesting. First, let’s look at how experts explain the moral panic; and then, how critics attempt to chip away at the conceptual foundation of the moral panic.
THREE THEORIES OF THE MORAL PANIC
Why moral panics? Why do the public, the media, law enforcement, politicians, and action groups in a particular society at a particular time express intense concern over a condition, phenomenon, issue, behavior, or would-be threat that, a sober assessment of the evidence reveals, does not merit such concern? Where, in short, do moral panics come from? What causes them? Scholars and research have proposed many explanations or theories for the moral panic.

Of the many dimensions along which we might array theories of moral panics, the *elitism* versus *grassroots* dimension comes most readily to mind as crucial. Are *many* actors responsible for the creation and maintenance of the panic or just *a few*? Does the panic start from the bottom and progress up, or does it work from the top down, from above? Or, to cite a third and intermediary possibility, does a panic, perhaps, begin in the *middle* of society’s status and power hierarchy rather than from the elite at the top or from the undifferentiated general grassroots public: from directors and administrators of middle-level organizations, agencies, institutions, associations, and interest groups? Or, in an alternate vein, do the many historic and ongoing panics have a variety of origins—different causes, different motives, different dynamics?

**DEFINING OUR TERMS**

Understanding these three theories hinges on knowing what the elite, interest groups, and the grassroots are. To picture the three strata of society—the power elite, middle-level interest groups, and the grassroots—picture a series of overlapping or semi-superimposed pyramids with wide bases and tiny, narrow, pointed pinnacles. These pyramids represent society’s major social institutions: mainly the economy, politics, the military, education, the media, religion, and the family. An “institution” is a set of beliefs, practices, rules, positions, and organizations that cluster around a particular theme or need. These institutions are typically hierarchical: Individuals within them are arranged according to their power and control of resources; in all (except the family), the elite occupy the top echelons and the grassroots occupy the bottom rungs. Members of the top rung in one institution also frequently occupy the top rung in others; for instance, chief executive officers (CEOs) of large corporations can also serve as trustees of major universities. And the previous occupants of the top slots in one institution frequently move into the top slots in another. For instance, major corporate executives frequently become higher-ups in the government. Moreover, power wielders in one institution can also help spearhead efforts by an interest group to achieve its particular aims. Clearly, these pyramidal institutions are not independent of one another nor are their hierarchies separate and independent; the interaction among their members, especially at the elite levels, is anything but separate. Indeed, the elite-engineered theory is based on the argument that elites in one institution frequently and
interactively interact with those in another. Elites across institutions tend to have interests in common, and act to protect those interests; hence, their influence in matters such as the capacity to engineer moral panics – or so argue the advocates of the elite-engineered model.

National elites, then, are the people who occupy the top rungs or positions in the economy, the political realm, the military, education, the media, and religion. In the United States, CEOs and presidents as well as members of the boards of directors of major corporations, plus individuals who are extremely wealthy, are members of the economic elite. The president of the United States, the vice-president, members of the president’s cabinet, U.S. senators, governors of states, mayors of large cities, and judges sitting on the Supreme Court are members of the political elite. Generals and admirals are members of the military elite. Presidents and trustees of major universities and chancellors of the school systems of large cities are members of the educational elite. Owners and publishers and editors of large, influential newspapers and magazines and the presidents and CEOs of the broadcast television networks are members of the media elite. Bishops and cardinals and the heads of major denominations are members of the religious elite. This list is incomplete, of course, but it does give us an idea of both the diversity and the power of elites. Elites sit at the top of a country’s major institutions and they make a great many of the decisions that have a great deal of impact on the lives of a substantial number of people.

As we said, in the educational institution, while the top rung consists of presidents and trustees of major universities and the heads of national teacher’s and educational organizations, the bottom level of the pyramid is made up of students, from kindergarten to graduate school; teachers and local administrators occupy the middle level of this hierarchy. In the media, the top echelons consist of the heads and presidents of the major broadcast systems, companies, and corporations and the owners and publishers of the biggest and most influential newspapers and magazines. The bottom of the ziggurat is occupied by the media’s audiences; the in-between or middle level is made up of journalists, reporters, researchers, assistants, and so on. We can arrange individuals within each institution by their degree of power and control of resources, from top to bottom.

Where we draw a line between one category and another cannot be determined with any degree of certainty. Still, we all recognize that a corporate CEO and billionaire stands higher in the economic pyramid than an unskilled worker earning a minimum wage; that an Anglican bishop and a Catholic cardinal stand higher in the religious institution than an ordinary local parishioner and worshipper; that an admiral or four-star general stands higher in the military hierarchy than a seaman third class or buck private. In sum, the occupants of the pinnacles of these pyramids make up the ruling elite of the society, while their bases constitute the grassroots.

Activist groups nestle somewhere in the middle levels of these pyramids, and their representatives often exert considerable influence by lobbying or agitating for
their membership’s material or ideological interests. The elites often form their own groups to articulate their interests. In such cases, these elite interest groups cannot occupy the elite strata because their interests and elite interests are one and the same. Such groups do not express interests separate from and independent of those of the elite. “Middle-level” interest groups truly are expressions of strata in the middle of our hypothetical institutional pyramids. Middle-level professionals usually express and advance their interests through special interest groups or social movement organizations.

THE THREE THEORIES: AN INTRODUCTION

The classic orthodox Marxist approach is an “elite-engineered” model. It argues that the elites “engineer” moral panics so that they will gain some material or status advantage therefrom. According to this model, elites fabricate, orchestrate, or engineer a panic from a nonexistent or trivial threat – usually one about which they themselves feel little concern – in order to gain something of value or divert attention away from issues that, if addressed, would threaten their own interests. Advocates of this theory see the general public or grassroots as possessing relatively little agency on their own; the grassroots are like puppets or marionettes being pulled this way or that by strings manipulated from above, by members of the ruling elite. On their own, they would not stampede into a scare; their participation in moral panics is a result of the machinations of the rich and the powerful (Hall et al., 1978).

Advocates of the interest-group theory hold that occupants of the middle level of power in a society act independent of the elite to either express or maximize their own morality or ideology and/or seek material or status advantage. The interest-group model sees material, status, ideological, and moral interests as crucial but argues that moral panics originate neither from the top nor the bottom rungs of a society, but somewhere in society’s middle strata: professional associations, journalists with a mission, religious groups, social movement organizations, educational institutions, in fact, middle-level associations, organizations, groups, and institutions of every description (Jenkins, 1992). The media, in fact, make up one of these interest groups: a panic is sometimes confined to the media, and the concern they express may not even be shared by owners, publishers, or journalists. Their motives may be to stir up a story, and their efforts don’t always work. The interest-group model does not see society as being controlled from the top down, nor as an open democracy. Members of middle-level groups, organizations, and associations often have interests that contradict those of elites, and the former often initiate crusades, panics, and campaigns in the face of elite opposition or indifference.

In contrast, the “grassroots” model argues that moral panics are initiated and generated from the bottom up and, concomitantly, that morality and ideology are
dominant motives for activists and concerned citizens. To the grassroots theorist, moral panics are more or less spontaneous eruptions of fear and concern on the part of large numbers of people about a given threat or putative threat. This “large number” need not be a majority of the entire population. In fact, it could be a minority yet still make up substantial numbers. Often, a particular issue will enflame members of particular sectors of the society, such as evangelical Christians, conservatives, homosexuals, or feminists. In such cases, the panics that seize the general public are often contrary to the interests of the rich and the powerful, who try – unsuccessfully – to dampen or counteract such concerns. If the elite had so much control over the grassroots that they could generate (or dampen) panics, many scares that have disrupted society would never have taken place. Or so say the advocates of the grassroots theory. The panic and exaggerated fear expressed in many legends, tales, and rumors exemplify a genuinely grassroots dynamic (Morin, 1971; Victor, 1993; Brunvand, 1993, 2000, 2001). Likewise, most conspiracy theories are populist in nature and express fears that begin in society’s socio-economic rank-and-file (Ramsay, 2006; Barkun, 2003; Knight, 2000, 2002).

As we cast our gaze both historically and across nations, societies, and cultures, it seems clear that no single theory or explanation can suffice to explain all moral panics. What works best in one context seems inappropriate in another. One can easily justify a given explanation by picking and choosing a case study that best fits that example. We find it difficult to avoid an eclectic approach in the study of moral panics. No theorist would argue that all panics can be explained by a single model. Still, observers and commentators of scares or panics usually lean in one direction or another, favor one theory over another to explain most panics, or the most important panics. Let’s look at these three theories in a bit more detail.

**THE GRASSROOTS MODEL**

The grassroots model argues that panics usually originate with the general public. The concern the public feels is widespread, even if mistaken, and is touched off by a feeling that something of value to the society at large, or a wide swath of it, is under threat. The expressions of concern in other, more organized, more specialized sectors – the media, politicians, political action groups, and law enforcement – are simply manifestations of more widespread concern. For instance, this position would argue, the media only inflames a sentiment that already exists in the general public; they do not ignite it by themselves. No specific sector of the society was necessary to bring about the concern over a given issue; the potential for that concern was immanent or waiting to happen, and erupted more or less spontaneously as a result of a trigger or catalyst, under the right conditions. Thus, this theory argues, if politicians or the media seem to originate or “stir up” concern about a given issue, in reality, there must have been a general and widespread latent fear or
concern about that issue to begin with. Politicians or the media cannot arouse the public about matters about which they are indifferent to begin with. Politicians and the media may influence the general public’s concerns, but if a latency doesn’t exist to begin with, the grassroots position argues – if a nerve isn’t touched – the public will not respond. Political speeches and articles and broadcasts expressing fear and concern won’t and can’t stir up a public that is indifferent to begin with. Grassroots theories argue that politicians and the media cannot fabricate concern where none initially exists.

In the overt expression of the moral panic, a kind of diffuse anxiety or strain simply explodes at the appropriate time; the panic is the outward or overt expression of what already existed in covert form. Politicians give speeches and propose laws they already know will appeal to their constituency, whose views they have already sounded out. The media print and broadcast stories that journalists, editors, and news managers know that the watching or reading public is likely to find distressing. Activists form and launch social movement organizations which are successful to the extent that their constituency – sectors of the public at large – feels that a given matter needs correcting. What is central to the grassroots theorist, and what explains the outbreak of the panic, is the bedrock of deeply-felt attitudes and beliefs on the part of a broad swathe of the society that a phenomenon or condition is a very real and present danger to their values, their safety, or their very existence. A basic question that the grassroots theorist asks is, “What if they threw a party and nobody came?” In other words, even if the elites, or the media, or politicians, tried to arouse a panic in the public, if the feeling of concern isn’t there to begin with, the panic doesn’t take off. Of course, the media and politicians may help along a given panic, but they are fanning the flames, not lighting the fire.

For instance, in 1969, in Orléans, France, rumors broke out about “sex slave” abductions; the fear was baseless, of course, since no evidence was ever produced indicating that such a thing was going on. The concern and fear that swirled around the city did not originate among, nor was it confined to, the elites or any interest groups in particular, and it was not endorsed by politicians or the media. In fact, belief in the rumor was not in the interests of any specific group, sector of the population, or local influencers. It arose more or less spontaneously and remained an entirely word-of-mouth, grassroots phenomenon (Morin, 1971). The Salem witchcraft trials of the 1600s in Massachusetts have been cited as an example of a broadly-based panic generated by widespread, grassroots sentiment, fear, and concern over the threat of persons who consort with the devil. In cases such as accusations of witchcraft, the “deviant individual violates rules of conduct which the community holds in high respect; when these people come together to express their outrage over the offense and to bear witness against the offender, they develop a tighter bond of solidarity than existed earlier” (Erikson, 1966, p. 4; 2005). What earthly interests could the executives and millionaire shareholders of Proctor & Gamble – or leaders of any conceivable interest group, powerful or otherwise – have
had in propagating the rumor that P&G contributed 10 percent of its profits to the Church of Satan? (Brunvand, 2001, pp. 333–4). The fact is this rumor supported a worldview held among a certain sector of small-town fundamentalist Christians and was launched and supported on a grassroots, populist basis; it was never endorsed by the mainstream media or the powers that be.

**Populism as a factor in the eruption of moral panics**

In short, this position argues, panics often entail populist sentiment. In fact, in episodes of grassroots populism, the threat or supposed threat that generates concern emanates from the concern that much of the public feels about powerful, high-status strata. The latter’s very status and power imparts an ominous quality to their capacity to harm common, hardworking folk. Conspiracies that are thought to be hatched at the upper reaches of society comprise some of the most fertile seedbeds of our most hostile and fearful rumors. Indeed, according to these populist conspiracy theories about the evil doings of elites, the top echelons of the society are so powerful that they are able to manipulate the very content of the rumors themselves. On many issues, the rank-and-file members of Western society mistrust the rich and powerful, and harbor suspicions that they threaten the rest of us in their greedy efforts to line their own pockets.

For example, a rumor or contemporary or urban legend widely narrated and believed in the late 1980s and early 1990s in poor minority communities has it that American corporations (or the CIA, or the FBI) are distributing heroin and crack cocaine in the ghettos to poison and destroy African Americans. This tale works only because the story’s villains are rich and/or powerful (and white). Moreover, these and other race-based conspiracy rumors and panics have a solid historical basis. In the past and even currently, some whites have harmed blacks by means of a wide range of actions, institutions, schemes, and conspiracies. The very real history of lynching makes the drug conspiracy story seem plausible. Believing in this particular conspiracy tale, absurd on the face of it, is actually contrary to the interests of the white power structure and hence, the story is unlikely to have been hatched at society’s elite level. It emanated from the street and so it is a genuinely grassroots phenomenon.

In the British moral panics over threatened women and children that erupted in the 1970s and 1980s, both liberals and conservatives felt it was possible that “the crimes of the upper classes would be concealed by a cover-up by a ubiquitous ‘old-boy network’” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 77). The revelations during those same decades that a number of individuals with elite backgrounds and positions and Oxford and Cambridge educations were Soviet spies – and homosexuals – generated substantial populist sentiment. The scandals “helped condition public attitudes to the image of upper-class perverts whose activities were concealed by their colleagues. This was a powerful weapon in populist rhetoric against the entrenched ruling
elite. Politicians were repeatedly involved in scandals involving homosexuality, pedophilia, or frequenting ... male prostitutes” (p. 78). High society scandals are popular in part because they tell the common man and woman that the high and mighty aren’t so “high” or “mighty,” that even they have feet of clay. Moreover, such scandals show the public that, in spite of all the cover-ups of the unsavory doings of the respectable, occasionally, justice and retribution triumph. Populist sentiment is crystallized in the words of one police officer who, during a particular British scandal involving underage male prostitutes, said: “people always want their paedophiles to be judges or politicians” (p. 78).

Folklore-like stories or urban legends about products sold to the public, which often fan the flames of moral panics, have included the claim that Coca-Cola puts mice in its bottled drinks; Bubble Yum puts spider eggs in its gum; M&Ms puts an aphrodisiac in its candy; McDonald’s puts earthworms in its hamburgers; Jockey shorts puts a chemical in its underpants that makes men sterile; R. J. Reynolds, a tobacco company, owns vast fields of marijuana plants; Uncle Ben’s gives money to the Palestine Liberation Organization; Kentucky Fried Chicken serves fried rat. These and many other similar stories have at least one crucial theme in common: they express a feeling of impotence in the face of the power of corporate giants. Sociologist and folklorist Gary Alan Fine (1992, pp. 141–63) refers to this phenomenon as “The Goliath Effect.” The American public fears and mistrusts “bigness”; they see themselves as victims of the greed and influence of large corporations. Clearly these tales, almost certainly false, arise and are circulated because of populist sentiment; they lend a great deal of credence to the grassroots model, which emphasizes that many moral panics originate and move from the bottom of society’s socioeconomic ladder toward its upper reaches.

**Nuclear energy as a dreadful threat**

A good example of the grassroots perspective toward moral panics and other widespread expressions of concern may be found in the attitudes and actions of the American public toward nuclear power. Since the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, the news of which, though no one inside or outside the plant was injured or killed, touched off the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of residents and brought the building of nuclear facilities in the United States to a standstill. One hundred nuclear plants operate in the United States; not one has had an incident in three decades, and most of the energy consumed in several other industrial countries, such as France and Japan, is generated mainly by nuclear energy. (Of course, a separate issue is the disposal of radioactive waste, a threat which is slow-moving and determined only over long periods of time.)

The cause of the nuclear standstill in the United States, grassroots theorists argue, is the fear on the part of the American public of the dangers of nuclear energy. It cannot stem from the efforts of special interests or elites – principally, the
nuclear power industry and the upper reaches of the U.S. government – to stir up opposition to nuclear energy. Quite to the contrary, it is to the advantage of powerful special interests and elites to provide all manner of support to promoting the nuclear power industry. American energy needs cannot be met by domestic production and “dependence on foreign oil” has become something of a negative watchword in encouraging alternative energy sources. But not nuclear energy; any politician who were to support the interests of the nuclear industry against the wishes of his or her constituency would face an uphill battle in getting reelected. Clearly, the concern is grassroots – not interest group or elite – generated.

At first glance, public opinion polls seem to contradict this assertion. One set of surveys has it that the percentage of the American public strongly favoring the use of nuclear energy “as one of the ways to provide electricity in the United States” has increased from just over 40 percent in 1995 to just under 70 percent in 2006. But these polls were funded by the Nuclear Energy Institute, an organization that serves the interests of the nuclear industry. Independent polls, such as Gallup, the ABC News and CBS News place the support for nuclear energy during the 2000s at somewhere just under to somewhere just over 50 percent. (Most of these polls do, however, show an increase in such support since the 1980s.) Moreover, most Americans do not want a plant located in their community, and a far higher percentage support options other than nuclear, such as wind, solar, and auto and industry emission controls, to generate or conserve energy (Nisbet, 2006). In an era of high gas prices and an almost desperate need for alternate sources of energy, these figures indicate substantial public opposition. They show that a sizable segment of the American public opposes nuclear energy, and suggest that this widespread opposition is likely to be a major reason why no new facilities have been built since 1979.

Fear of nuclear energy is not a moral panic, of course – there is no folk devil and no sudden burst of concern. But it does illustrate the importance of the public as a factor in generating hostility to a given practice or institution. And it does illustrate the importance of disproportionality between the real harm posed by a given supposed threat and the level of fear or concern it engenders. Three decision-research specialists argue that feasible solutions to disposing of nuclear waste have met “overwhelming political opposition.” The reason: “Public perception of the risks of a nuclear waste repository as immense and unacceptable stands in stark contrast to the prevailing view of the technical community, which believes that nuclear wastes can be stored safely in deep, underground isolation.” Public imagery – dread, revulsion, and anger – “that is so strong and so impervious to influence from the pronouncements of technical experts must have potent origins” (Slovic, Layman, and Flynn, 1991, pp. 7, 11). Why this exaggerated concern, this groundless, seemingly irrational fear, this panic?

Perrow (1984, pp. 324–8) and Erikson (1990) locate this panic – this huge and almost unique discrepancy between what the experts say and how the public feels – to a factor they refer to as dread. It turns out that the experts and the public
calculate risk of harm in a drastically different fashion. Experts make use of what Perrow refers to as “absolute rationality”; the public uses “social rationality” (p. 325). The experts’ statistical likelihood is calculated in a straightforward, rationalistic way: what is the statistical likelihood that certain harmful outcomes will occur, and how harmful are those outcomes? For instance, what are the odds of dying while traveling by car from New York to Chicago? By plane? Although the statistical chance of dying in an automobile accident are considerably greater than the odds of experiencing death in an airline accident, far more fear the latter than the former. The expert would regard the public’s fear as misguided and irrational. After all, if more deaths are produced by driving, on a mile-for-mile, passenger-for-passenger basis, then fear of flying – a safer mode of transportation – simply makes no sense. Hence, since such fear is anomalous and aberrant, the expert seeks out an explanation for it. There must be factors other than and in addition to statistical likelihoods of harmful outcomes which make us understand why certain threats are feared more than others. The public fears threats to the extent that they are seen as involuntary, uncontrollable, unknown, unfamiliar, catastrophic, certain to be fatal, and delayed in their manifestation. Accidents as a result of flying, in contrast to driving or riding in a car, although less likely to occur, are seen, from the passenger’s point of view, as involuntary and uncontrollable – the pilot and the weather determine outcomes, not the passenger – unknown and less familiar, catastrophic, and are much more likely to be fatal when they do occur. Only in terms of latent, long-term, or delayed manifestations of harm are these two modes of transportation similar. It is not solely the odds of dying in an accident that generates fear of flying; it is the nature and mode of death that determines this dread.

Nuclear power stands at the extreme end of these dimensions of fear. Its risks are seen as “involuntary, delayed, unknown, uncontrollable, unfamiliar, catastrophic, dreaded and fatal” (Perrow, 1984, p. 325). Aspects that loom extremely large in causing the public to be fearful of nuclear energy are not calculated in the expert’s equation of risk at all. Radiation and other technological toxins “contaminate rather than merely damage; they pollute, befoul and taint rather than just create wreckage; they penetrate human tissue indirectly rather than wound the surface by assaults of a more straightforward kind” (Erikson, 1990, p. 120). Nuclear accidents “elicit an uncanny fear in us.” People find radiation and other toxic substances significantly more threatening than most natural hazards and nontoxic technological hazards; they dread toxic substances far more intensely (p. 120). Instead of assessing danger by calculating odds the way experts do, perhaps we should, Erikson argues, “understand radioactivity and other toxic substances as naturally loathsome, inherently insidious – horrors … that draw on something deeper in the human mind.” Toxic emergencies “really are different” from more routine accidents such as car crashes; “their capacity to induce a lasting sense of dread is a unique – and legitimate – property” (p. 121).

Why do toxic emergencies create so much alarm? Erikson asks. They are “unbounded,” he answers; “they have no frame” (p. 121). Classic disasters, such as
tornadoes and hurricanes, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. An alarm is sounded, destruction follows, and finally, the destruction ends, and then the “all clear” signal is sounded, at which point, the clean-up begins. “Toxic disasters, however, violate all the rules of plot”; they never end. Invisible contaminants remain a part of the surroundings – absorbed into the genetic material of the survivors.” That “all clear” signal never sounds. Radiation and other toxic poisons “are without form. You cannot apprehend them through the unaided senses; you cannot taste, touch, smell, or see them through the unaided senses; that makes them ghostlike and terrifying…. They slink in without warning … and begin their deadly work from within – the very embodiment, it would seem, of stealth and treachery” (p. 122).

Fear of radiation is not engineered by elites nor is it a product of the activism of interest groups. Indeed, business elites and their supporters usually endorse nuclear energy; early in 2008, President George W. Bush made a speech suggesting that, in the face of high gas prices and energy shortages, industry begin constructing and operating nuclear plants in the United States once again. But the public fear of nuclear contamination is not “some exotic form of hysteria that will subside once the media stops fanning the flames and calm returns to public discourse” (Erikson, 1990, p. 125). It stems from deep, primordial feelings that are impervious to machinations from above. It is a genuine grassroots phenomenon.

It is likely that the concept of dread helps explain some aspects of the moral panics that focus on drug abuse. Dread does not explain the timing of drug scares, of course, but it does address why so many panics center on the use of illicit psychoactive substances. The control that drugs seem to have over the user is often seen as diabolical and insidious, one that creeps into the user’s mind and body and takes over. The drug is attributed with a kind of black magic power that dominates and overwhelms the user. The fact that this stereotype is inaccurate – most drug users control their consumption of psychoactive substances, and only a minority become dependent to the point of completely lacking control – is not the point. What counts here is the image, the stereotype, the most visible user, the user that is “available” to the conscious mind of the general public – the out-of-control addict. To the non-using majority, dependence on drugs most decidedly appears to be involuntary, uncontrollable, unknown, unfamiliar, catastrophic, often fatal, and delayed in its manifestation. While not nearly so dreadful as nuclear contamination, drug abuse is believed to exert a power that, at the very least, manifests certain parallels with other insidious, dreadful forces that embody “stealth and treachery,” that invade, contaminate, pollute, corrupt, taint, befoul, “penetrate human tissue,” and “never end,” never quite go away. It would be facile of us to dismiss these fears, grounded as they are in a number of very real, primal emotions. Certainly fear of and concern about LSD in the 1960s – however misplaced or uninformed they seem to us today given what we know about the drug’s effects – was based in part on the dread of a foreign substances entering our bodies and “taking over” our minds and causing a silent genetic catastrophe among uncounted descendents. Certainly the media
had an independent interest in advancing the LSD panic – it was a riveting and terrifying story which sold magazines, newspapers, and air time – but it was the public who found the story riveting and terrifying in the first place.

Not all, or even most, intense public fears or concerns follow the same pattern. What seems highly likely is that moral panics are not explicable by means of a single model. Perhaps we need to specify the nature of the panic before we agree on a theory to explain it. What seems clear is that we cannot dismiss the grassroots model out of hand. Some seemingly exaggerated fears do arise more or less spontaneously; the flames of others are fanned with outside assistance; and with still others, the manifestations of the panic lie largely outside the sphere of public reactions.

THE ELITE-ENGINEERED MODEL

The elite-engineered model argues that the ruling elite causes, creates, engineers, or “orchestrates” moral panics, that the richest and most powerful members of the society consciously undertake campaigns to generate and sustain concern, fear, and panic on the part of the public over an issue that is not generally regarded as terribly harmful to the society as a whole. Typically, this campaign is intended to divert attention away from the real problems in the society, whose solution would threaten or undermine the interests of the elite. Clearly, such a theory is based on the view that elites have immense power. The ruling elite, this model argues, dominate the media, determine the laws that legislative bodies formulate and enact, control the machinery of law enforcement, profoundly influence public opinion, and govern most of the resources on which action groups and social movements depend, and the issues such groups and movements address.

For instance, Chambliss and Mankoff (1976, pp. 15–16) critique Erikson’s grassroots analysis of the Salem witch trials, arguing that crime and the repression of crime play an important role in “enabling the ruling stratum to maintain its privileged position.” According to Gerassi (1966), the witch-hunt against homosexuals in Boise, Idaho, in 1955 and 1956 was specifically launched by members of the conservative local elite on behalf of elite interests – to discredit a moderate, reformist municipal administration. On the other hand, Gerassi admits that the scandal did enjoy widespread support from the man and woman on the street. Ronald Reagan’s “war on drugs” speeches in 1986 prepared the way for the late 1980s American drug panic, including strong public support for his actions. By September 1989, according to a New York Times/CBS News poll, nearly two-thirds of the American public named drug abuse as the most important problem “facing the country today” (Goode, 2008a, p. 116). The elite-engineered theorists believe that this preoccupation would not and could not have taken place solely or mainly as a result of the preexisting fears and concerns of the populace. Instead, they argue,
it was a product of the dominance, interests, and efforts of the ruling elite, who can manipulate public fears and concerns to achieve their own goal: to continue profiting from the status quo by taking the public’s mind off the real problem of society – economic and political inequality (Reinarman and Levine, 1997; Reeves and Campbell, 1994). Interestingly, in the early 1970s, Richard Nixon (president of the United States 1969–74) called for a war on drugs without achieving the same response from the public, indicating the importance of grassroots factors in generating a moral panic.

James Hawdon’s study of the American drug panic of the 1980s (2001) offers a keen and penetrating exemplar of the elite-engineered perspective. Hawdon argues that then-president Ronald Reagan “masterfully incited the public” (p. 438) about the growing threat of substance abuse, thereby almost single-handedly puppeteering the drug panic. His “use of communitarian arguments rallied support for an aggressive war on drugs” (p. 438). Unfortunately, Reagan’s successor, George Herbert Walker Bush, “was less gifted at stirring public emotion” (p. 438). During Bush’s administration, the drug panic languished, practically evaporating, and in the subsequent 1992 campaign, when Bush ran against Bill Clinton, the candidates barely mentioned the issue of drug abuse. Indeed, by 1992, less than 6 percent of the American public considered the use of illicit drugs a major problem (p. 438). A therapeutic and rehabilitative approach to the drug problem had overtaken the punitive approach so common in moral panics (p. 438). Ironically, as Hawdon points out, in the 1980s, public concern had increased at a time when drug use was actually declining (p. 440), strengthening the sociologist’s confidence that social problems and moral panics are not a simple reflection of the objective harm of threats, but are socially and culturally constructed by partly or wholly unfounded fears.

As we saw, Hall et al. (1978) have advanced what is probably the most well-known analysis illustrating the elite-engineered theory of moral panics. They argue that in the early 1970s in Great Britain, the furor over mugging constituted a moral panic. Fear and concern over street crime increased at a time when its actual incidence was not rising at all. Reactions by the courts and the media to muggings were “all out of proportion to any level of actual threat” posed by such crimes (p. 29). Why did British society react to muggings and street crime in the extreme way it did? they ask. Why the public outrage, the extremely harsh sentences in the courts, the mobilization of the police against real and potential muggers, the law-and-order solutions offered by experts and commentators, the harsh glare of the media? Why, in short, the moral panic over mugging? What was this panic really about? “What forces stand to benefit from it? What role has the state played in its construction? What real fears and anxieties is it mobilizing?” (p. viii).

The reaction was, in large part, “not to the actual threat” but to “a reaction by control agencies and the agencies and the media to the perceived or symbolic threat to society – what the mugging label represented” (p. 29).

We have already encountered the critique offered by Waddington (1986), who demonstrates that the criterion of disproportionality does not apply to mugging
or, more generally, to street crime. Contrary to what Hall et al. claim, Waddington argues, the data show that street crime actually did increase in Britain between the 1960s and early 1970s. Whether Waddington or Hall et al. are right about the increase in street crime during this period is not the issue here; it is the nature of Hall et al.’s argument that is crucial, not its validity, and that unambiguously falls into our “elite-engineered” genre.

In the moral panic, the “wrong things” are raised into “sensational focus, hiding and mystifying the deeper causes” (Hall et al., 1978, p. vii). Moral panics, Hall et al. argue, are about matters other than the seeming focus. The themes of the panic “function as a mechanism for the construction” of a definition of things that serve the interests of the powerful (p. viii). The early 1970s panic over street crime served to legitimate a law-and-order criminal enforcement program and to divert attention away from the growing economic recession, which was causing a “crisis” in British capitalism. Britain was facing a “crisis in profitability”: profits were falling, Britain’s share of the world exports of manufactured goods dropped, her level of investment and rate of economic investment remained low, and inflation shot up to unacceptable levels (p. 263). During such crises, Hall et al. argue, the capitalist state is forced to shed its façade of neutrality and independence from special interests and assume “total social authority … over the subordinate classes” in such a way that “it shapes the whole direction of social life in its image” (pp. 216, 217).

Domination not only seems to be “universal” and “legitimate” but exploitation must seem to disappear from view (p. 216). Such is an “exceptional moment” in capitalist society, the coming of “iron times,” during which “an authoritarian consensus” is called for (p. 217). During such times, a moral panic may be hoked up to divert attention from that crisis. In Britain in the 1970s, mugging was just the issue to generate a moral panic and come to the rescue of the ailing capitalist system.

At several points, Hall et al. (1978, for instance, pp. 57, 59, 136, 176, 322) insist that they are not presenting a “conspiratorial” interpretation of these events. Rather than being part of a conspiracy, Hall et al. argue, the ruling elite orchestrates hegemony, that is, they manage to convince the rest of the society – the press, the general public, the courts, law enforcement, special interest groups – that the real enemy is not the crisis in British capitalism but the mugger, the criminal, and the lax way he has been dealt with in the past. In other words, the ruling elite create a “red herring,” a diversionary and false enemy to divert attention away from the society’s real problems.

How is this sleight of hand accomplished? The media are only one of the major means by which a moral panic is transmitted and sustained. How do the media come to serve the interests of the capitalist class during a moral panic? Without being in the pay of the powerful, Hall et al. write, “the media come, in fact … to reproduce the definitions of the powerful” (p. 57); they “faithfully and impartially … reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society’s institutional order” (p. 58). How do the media do this? News media accept prevailing definitions
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of who is in authority – they reflect Howard Becker’s “hierarchy of credibility” (1967). The primary definers of reality are precisely the rich and the powerful or those in their employ. The media over-access individuals “in powerful and privileged positions” (p. 58). The elite frame the issues; all other interpretations of reality must take their cue from and argue against elite formulations. By adopting a neutral and value-free stance, ironically, the media come to reproduce dominant definitions, that is, those that serve the interest of the capitalist class. The media take their cue from the elite: mugging is newsworthy, it is a crime media focuses its attention on, a crime that hurts all sectors of British society, it is becoming increasingly common (when in fact isn’t, say Hall et al.), it has reached epidemic and crisis proportions, and the solution is a “law-and-order” society, in which the police must crack down on the perpetrators. In this, albeit indirect, way, the news media serve the interests of the British capitalist class. They contribute, in their way, to the “control culture” so desperately needed by the elite during this period of crisis.

Even public opinion, say Hall et al., does not exist as an entity separate from and independent of dominant, elite interests. What most scholars and researchers refer to as public opinion is a creature that has been shaped by multiple elite-defining layers and processes. When a new issue is discussed among intimate networks of friends and acquaintances, opinion is informal, disorganized, shaped by “commonsense views and received wisdom” (p. 135). But opinion does not remain on this informal, disorganized level for very long. If the issue is deemed important enough, “the media appropriate it” (p. 135). At which point: “Local communication channels are swiftly and selectively integrated into more public channels.” Public opinion has been crystallized, “raised to a more formal and public level by the networks of the mass media…. The more … an issue passes into the more public domain, via the media, the more it is structured by … dominant ideologies” (p. 136). Public opinion, far from being spontaneous or an expression of popular views, is “structured in dominance” (p. 136).

The law, too, including its enforcers and interpreters, legislators and legislatures, and the police and the courts, serves the interests of the capitalist class. The state, among other things a legislative body, “performs its work on behalf of the capitalist system” (p. 208). The law “preserves public order”; “it frequently secures, in moments of open class confrontation, just that stability and cohesion without which the steady reproduction of capital and the unfolding of capitalist relations would be a far more hazardous and unpredictable affair” (p. 208). “The law remains one of the central coercive institutions of the capitalist state” (p. 177). But notice, the law, the police, the courts, did not conjure up mugging and other street crime out of thin air. “‘Mugging’ was not produced, ‘full blown’ from the head of the control culture; it is not simply a ruling-class conspiracy” (p. 182). Rather, the focus of attention on mugging in Britain at this time – all out of proportion to its concrete threat – the level of sensitization to and mobilization against street crime,
“the scale of the measures taken to prevent and contain it” (p. 184), are what has to be explained. And, as with the media, the explanation lies in the long-range and immediate needs of the capitalist class. Over the long run, “the law will be an instrument of class domination” (p. 196). Within the immediate context of British capitalism in the early 1970s, the law, the police, and the courts reflect the interests of the capitalist class. The law-and-order campaign, using mugging as a pretext and generating a societal moral panic, “had the overwhelming single consequence of legitimating the recourse to the law, to constrain statutory power, as the main, indeed, the only, effective means left of defending hegemony…. It toned up and groomed the society for the extensive exercise of the repressive side of state power” (p. 278).

In short, the moral panic over mugging circa 1970–3 was engineered or orchestrated by the ruling elite – the capitalist class – with the more or less unwitting complicity of its allies, the media, the legislature, the police, and the courts. It did not originate with the masses – indeed, it was contrary to the interests of the masses – nor with specific middle-level interest-group representatives. Hence, the moral panic is not primarily about morality or ideology as such. Rather, it was a means by which the powerful protected their economic interests. Much as Hall et al. try to expunge the word “conspiracy” from their theory, Policing the Crisis (1978) offers a classic example of the elite-engineered model.

In Thompson’s slim volume on the moral panic (1998, pp. 57–71), he appears to support Hall et al.’s analysis that, first, the ruling elite indirectly control or influence the mass media by determining public opinion, and second, by shifting media issues away from society’s most important problems (poverty, unemployment, income and power inequalities), to invented threats – mugging being a prime example – because meaningful social change would threaten the interests of the powerful. We find Hall et al.’s analysis and Thompson’s endorsement of the elite-engineered model to be empirically overdrawn. Today, the news is much more decentralized (or “multi-mediated”) than it was 30 or more years ago when Hall and his colleagues wrote. Members of the public seek out media outlets that verify their own views. The idea that the ruling elite would come up with and be able to execute a scheme that involves their class selecting and endorsing the threat of mugging as a target for media attention and the mass’s interest in order to divert attention away from society’s “true” problems, the solution of which would threaten elite interests, is fanciful – in our view, strictly comic book fare. Actually, as Waddington (1986) points out, street crime was actually rising at a time when Hall et al. claimed it was declining. And in the United States, it has been declining since the early 1990s, and it remains one of the top stories in the news. So what schemes are the elites up to now? In fact, the urban and suburban poor, the working class, the middle class, are directly affected by street crime, it is real for them, and consequently they are interested in stories about it. This does not come about as a result of collusion between the rich and the media, much as that resonates with leftist ideologists as a politically instructive atrocity tale.
INTEREST-GROUP THEORY

By far, the most common approach to moral panics has been from an interest-group perspective. Howard Becker showed us that rule creators and moral entrepreneurs launch crusades, which occasionally turn into panics, to make sure that certain rules take hold and are enforced (1963, pp. 146–63). Not all or even most interest-group analyses have been antagonistic to the grassroots morality argument. Indeed, once attention is focused on a particular issue by interest groups, broad sectors of the public, that is, the grassroots, may become seized by its urgency, appropriating the issue for its own purposes. Most interest-group analyses, however, have contradicted the elite-engineered approach, arguing that the exercise of power in the creation and maintenance of moral panics is more likely to emanate from the middle rungs of the power and status hierarchy than the elite stratum. In the interest-group perspective, professional associations, police departments, portions of the media, religious groups, educational organizations, and so on, may have an independent stake in bringing an issue to the fore, focusing attention on it or transforming the slant of news stories covering it, alerting legislators, demanding stricter law enforcement, instituting new educational curricula, and so on. The interests of these enterprises are often contradictory or irrelevant to elite interests. By saying that interest groups have an independent role in generating and sustaining moral panics, we are saying that they are, themselves, active movers and shakers, that elites do not necessarily dictate or determine the content, direction, or timing of panics.

The central question asked by the interest-group model is: cui bono? For whose benefit is it? Who profits? Who wins out if a given issue is recognized as threatening to the society? To whose advantage is a widespread panic about a given behavior or institution? Who stands to gain?

Material and ideological/moral gains have traditionally been separated; presumably, they represent two entirely separate motivations. Interest-group politics are usually thought of as cynical, self-serving, devoid of sincere conviction. In real life, such a separation is not always easy to make. Interest-group activists may sincerely believe that their efforts will advance a noble cause, one in which they sincerely believe. Advancing a moral and ideological cause almost inevitably entails advancing the status and material interests of the group who expresses or works for them, and advancing the status and material interests of a group or category may simultaneously advance its ideology and morality.

In the United States in 1986, politicians helped stir up a panic about drug use, in part to get reelected (Jensen, Gerber, and Babcock, 1991). But many of them took their cue from their constituency, and most sincerely believed that drug abuse was one of the nation’s most serious problems. The police in Phoenix, Arizona in the late 1970s and early 1980s stirred up a moral panic over Chicano youth gangs to “acquire federal funding of a specialized unit” (Zatz, 1987, p. 129), but in addition,
most police officers working in urban areas at that time sincerely believed that crime, especially youth crime, in the minority community was one of their top priorities. Indeed, even residents in poor, minority communities complain that they don’t have enough police surveillance and law enforcement; hardly any of them want less. Clearly, street crime harms rich and poor alike, and the presence of the police, most believe, is a way of lowering the crime rate. Gusfield (1963) analyzes the controversy over Prohibition as a struggle of a status group to regain lost prestige and respect, but no one questions the sincere wish of the prohibitionist side of this controversy to rid the country of the evils of drink.

Jenkins has shown that the satanic ritual abuse panic that flared up in Britain in the late 1980s “offered ideological confirmation of the limitations of liberal theology. Since the 1960s, the dominant faction in British churches has emphasized social and political activism with a left/liberal slant…. For Evangelicals and Charismatics, this was a lethal distraction from the critical issues of personal holiness and spiritual warfare. During the 1980s the point was reasserted by a new focus on black magic, cults, ancestral demons, and ritual abusers” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 204). Not surprisingly, fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic Christian organizations have been at the forefront of the British (and American) satanic ritual abuse panic from its very inception. For the most part, liberal and mainstream Christians found incredible and implausible the charges of satanic ritual abuse that more conservative Christians regarded as believable. In this case, religious conservatives argued from a certain definition of reality – that satanism is alive and well in contemporary society and inflicting evil deeds on innocent children – which advances both their material and ideological interests.

In addition, in Britain in the 1980s, social workers stood to gain from the satanic ritual abuse panic both in terms of status and as a result of an increase in public funding for social welfare services. “A child abuse crisis … led to perceptions of a major problem requiring the urgent allocation of new resources: A larger and more specialized child protection establishment would mean more investigation and detection and thus more concern. This spiral effect goes far toward explaining the overall growth [of the number of social workers in Britain] during the decade [of the 1980s]” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 201). Public opinion polls have found social workers to be at the bottom among all professions in prestige. “The only way to reaffirm the value of the profession was to show that social workers were dealing with truly menacing problems, which they were uniquely qualified to investigate and combat. Exposing a vast and unsuspected prevalence of child abuse thus fulfilled both ideological and professional needs, and fully justified the need for specialized social service agencies” (p. 202). Again, because an action is undertaken to advance material interests does not mean that it lacks ideological or moral resonance; indeed, they are intertwined.

We are arguing that the theoretical separation between interests and morality is difficult to make in practice. Perhaps rather than picturing these two motives as contradictory it is better to see both as operative but in a given moral panic, one
is more influential than the other. Of course, cynicism and morality come in degrees, and interest-groups need not necessarily display this mix of motives. Some activists may be more or less entirely self-serving. Enough cynics cloak their self-interested motives in pious proclamations for us to be suspicious about the purity of their actions. At the same time, we need not be automatically suspicious about the motives of actors who, while advancing an ideological or moral cause, may also advance their own group’s material or status interests. After all, the two are often found in the same package.

CONCLUSIONS

Can we draw any conclusions about the origins of moral panics aside from the trite, unsatisfying, and almost tautologically true platitude that different theories apply best to different moral panics? Almost certainly, for a widespread panic to take place, some latent fear or stress must preexist in the general public, or segments of the public. Concern over a nonexistent or relatively trivial threat cannot be conjured out of thin air by a cynical elite or by self-serving representatives of one or another interest group. Unlike the criminal law, which needs not express the ideology or views of major segments of the public, moral panics necessitate the concerns of major sectors of the society. It is almost inconceivable that such concerns could be generated in an indifferent public as a result of a media campaign or the efforts of social movement activists about a supposed threat that, in the absence of such stimuli, they would otherwise ignore. The grassroots approach, therefore, can be thought of as calling attention to a dimension or factor, rather than offering a competing or independent explanation, that plays a central role in the moral panic.

In other words, the grassroots model must inevitably be supplemented with another explanation; we cannot regard it as complete. While widespread stress or latent public fears almost necessarily exist in advance of moral panics, they do not explain how and why they find expression at a particular time. These fears must be articulated; they must be focused, brought to public attention, given a specific outlet. And this almost always entails some form of organization and leadership. Although large numbers of people may more or less spontaneously feel fear or dread about a given agent or threat, this fear is sharpened, broadened, articulated, and publicly expressed by organized, movement-like activity launched by middle-level interest groups. During a moral panic, the public writes letters to the editors of local newspapers, not with unfocused, idiosyncratic messages, but in large numbers with consistent themes. Editors become convinced that their newspapers and magazines should publish articles about a given subject, not simply because many readers have expressed concern about it. Large numbers of people hold protests, not as a result of a spontaneous uprising of independent souls but
because these souls have mobilized as a result of the efforts of social movement organizations. Lectures, seminars, meetings are given and attended in large numbers not solely because, independently and separately, the grassroots is concerned about a given threat which is the subject of attention. School boards are pressured because of a given issue, not simply because large numbers of individuals feel a certain way about the curriculum. Public opinion polls reflect dominant fears and concerns not only because each household has, on its own, decided that certain issues are scary and threatening.

These modes of expression coalesce around a particular theme or agent at a particular time in part because activists who feel strongly about the nature of that threat are working to bring it to widespread public attention and are activating a variety of avenues to do so. Thus, the grassroots model cannot be dismissed out of hand, but by itself, it does not offer a complete explanation of moral panics; its influence works as a precondition for the successful efforts of social movement activists. It points to a crucial factor in the dynamics of moral panics. Some moral panics operate exclusively on a grassroots basis – as we saw, they are expressed more or less exclusively on the interpersonal level in the form of rumor and urban legend – but never manage to catapult beyond face-to-face or local constraints. As we saw, the “white slave traffic” rumor that seized sectors of the French public in the late 1960s, not to mention many populist, grassroots rumors and legends, falls into this category. In the explosion of a full-fledged moral panic, we see the grassroots sentiment as the dynamite and the efforts and organization of social movement activists as the fuse and the match. In such cases, there is a dovetailing of the two societal sectors, not a contradiction.

The reverse takes place as well: in some cases, movement activists attempt to mobilize an indifferent public about a given issue, and fail. All activists have to consider the “What if we threw a party and nobody came?” problem: all the organized activity in the world cannot create concerns in the public where no latency for them exists. As we’ll see in Chapter 12, the feminist anti-pornography movement never got off the ground to achieve mass mobilization. At the same time, when contemplating the likelihood that a moral panic will occur about a given supposed threat, it is important to realize that concern needs an appropriate outlet to express itself, and for that, interest-group formation and activity are central. We do not see these two models as mutually exclusive explanations. Grassroots outrage provides context, it provides an issue around which a panic coalesces – the content of the panic. It loads the gun, so to speak. Interest-group activism helps explain the timing of moral panics; they act as a kind of triggering device.

Once again, our argument goes beyond the claim that different models are helpful in explaining different moral panics. It is that the grassroots provides the fuel or raw material for a moral panic; organizational activists provide focus, intensity, and direction. And it is that grassroots morality provides the content of moral panics while interests provide the timing. By itself, the grassroots model is
naïve. And as a stand-alone theory, both the interest-group and the elite-engineered models are cynical and empty. However, the grassroots model enables us to see what fears and concerns are made use of while the interest-group model enables us to see how this raw material is intensified and mobilized. Indeed, the machinations of the ruling elite could conjoin with grassroots concern and instigate a moral panic, fueled by latent, widespread public concerns. No moral panic is complete without an examination of all societal levels, from elites to the grassroots, and the full spectrum from ideology and morality at one pole, to crass status and material interests at the other.

SUMMARY

Observers and researchers have proposed numerous explanations to account for the eruption of moral panics. We can boil most of these explanations down to three general, “meta,” or master theories: the elite-engineered, the grassroots, and the middle-level interest-group models.

Orthodox or “vulgar” Marxism falls into the elite-engineered model: the ruling elite stir up, fabricate, or orchestrate a scare out of a nonexistent threat in order to gain something or divert attention away from meaningful social reform, the latter of which would threaten their interests. According to the elite-engineered theory, the other sectors of the society are sufficiently brain-washed or mercenary to go along with the elite’s machinations. Of course, by definition, the ruling elite wield more power than any other sector of the society, so it seems reasonable to argue that their capacity to touch off moral panics would be substantial. The problem with this explanation usually comes in when its advocates dismiss or downplay the role of agency or independent, individual choice – however misinformed – on the part of members of the grassroots. In many cases, panics that take place in the grassroots sector of the society are contrary to the interests of the elite.

The advocate of the interest-group model argues that moral panics originate neither from the top of society’s hierarchy but in its middle strata: the many voluntary associations that seek ideological or material advantage from a given scare. Indeed, moral panics often grow out of crusades against a given threat, which are usually launched by interests groups; national alcohol prohibition, for example, was engineered by the Women’s Temperance Christian Union (WTCU). The satanic ritual abuse scare was supported not only by the grassroots but also by associations of social workers and ministers in evangelical, charismatic, and fundamentalist church organizations. Clearly, we must seek one major explanation for the moral panic in society’s middle-level interest groups.

The grassroots is made up of the man and woman on the street, the bulk of the society, the ordinary citizens, most of whom have relatively little power, aside from
voting, participating in political campaigns and elections, spending money a certain way, showing up in media polls, speaking out at school board meetings, and so on. A few moral panics are confined to the grassroots, conveyed more or less exclusively by urban legend and rumor, but are not validated by the mainstream media, political or other elite commentary, or interest-group activity. However, the media, elite commentary and debate, and interest-group activism channel and convey moral panics more effectively than one-to-one social interaction. Hence, we run into the chicken-and-egg question: which causes the moral panic – grassroots concern, media attention, elite efforts, or interest-group activity? Advocates of the grassroots model argue that mass concern about a given threat acts as the fuel for the moral panic fire, while media attention, elite efforts, and interest-group activity act as the match that touches off the fire.
4

THE MORAL PANIC MEETS ITS CRITICS
Successful, high-impact theories and concepts tend to attract criticism, for, in the academic world, whoever knocks them off their throne will receive rich accolades and praise. As soon as the moral panic concept entered the social science vocabulary, critics took aim at its utility and viability. Waddington (1986), Cornwell and Linders (2002), Beck (1992), Ungar (2001), and Waiton (2008) have offered critiques that place these critics firmly among the chorus of naysayers who contend that they have the argumentative wherewithal to delete the concept of the moral panic from the current sociological conceptual and theoretical lexicon. The moral panics concept “serves as an analytic distraction,” say Cornwell and Linders, “rather than a useful conceptual tool,” and its foundation-stone, disproportionality, is “so laden with ontological and methodological difficulties as to render it virtually useless as an analytic guiding light” (Cornwell and Linders, 2002, p. 314). Waiton (2008) argues that the “new” panics are “amoral” rather than “moral” panics; hence, the “old” concept has become obsolete.

All intellectual inquiry begins with a puzzle, a question the investigator seeks to answer.

The popularity of the moral panics concept leads us into a seeming contradiction and hence, a puzzle: Why, after such continued endorsement by academia, the media, and the society and culture at large, do some critics argue that the very existence of the phenomenon is chimerical, a phantom without substance, and based on illusory criteria? How is it possible that some critics believe that a concept that is growing in popularity is without utility and is in fact disappearing from the social sciences? Are sociologists who study the moral panic such Don Quixotes that they do not recognize the will-o’-the-wisp quality of the concept on which they base their research? Our answer is no. We argue that the concept has substance and can be measured.

Consider the strident rant from Norris R. Johnson, a disaster specialist (1997), in a review of the first edition of this book. “I am uncomfortable,” Dr. Johnson states, “with the conceptualization of moral panics itself.” Some researchers have devoted, he argues, “disproportional attention to the topic.” The degree of panic and mass hysteria in reports, this critic pontificates, has been “wildly exaggerated”; current sociological accounts, likewise, “may be equally exaggerated.” Finally, Johnson sums up, “the concept of the moral panic further muddles our catalog of concepts to describe varieties of collective responses that appear irrational to the scholarly observer.” He states that social scientists have devoted far too much attention to unusual, atypical events such as collective delusions, moral panics, subversion myths, atrocity tales, rumors, rumor panics, mass hysteria, collective delusions, and urban and contemporary legends (p. 1515). This criticism, we feel, sounds disturbingly similar to a declaration that if most people are healthy most of the time, what’s the point of studying illness? In any case, this new edition refutes Dr. Johnson’s empty and misguided contentions.
WADDINGTON: THE ISSUE OF DISPROPORTION

Clearly, the validity of the concept of the moral panic has not gone unchallenged. Waddington (1986) attacks Hall et al.’s (1978) argument that in the early 1970s mugging represented a moral panic in Great Britain, one engineered by the ruling elite to divert attention away from the crisis in British capitalism. While much of Waddington’s argument is sound – contrary to Hall et al.’s claim, their figures actually do demonstrate the growing severity of street crime, rather than its diminution – this critic’s failure to acknowledge the very existence of the moral panic represents a major weakness in his argument. The moral panic, Waddington claims, “is a polemical rather than an analytic concept.” It implies “that official and media concern is … without substance or justification…. It is, of course, perfectly possible to panic about even the most genuine problem. People may panic in a fire, but this does not imply that the building is not burning nor that there is no threat” (p. 258). The “principal difficulty” of the moral panic is in “establishing the comparison between the scale of the problem and the scale of response to it…. Conceptually, the notion of a ‘moral panic’ lacks any criteria of proportionality without which it is impossible to determine whether concern about any … problem is justified or not” (p. 246). Perhaps, Waddington argues, “it is time to abandon such value-laden terminology” as the moral panic (p. 258).

Clearly much of the field has chosen to ignore Waddington’s attack on the moral panic concept. Whether it is referred to specifically as a moral panic (Ben-Yehuda, 1986; 1990; Zatz, 1987; Thompson, 1990; Ungar, 1990; Jenkins, 1992; 1998; Jenkins and Meier-Katkin, 1992; de Young, 2004; Critcher, 2003; 2006), a “rumor-panic” (Victor, 1989; Gunni, 2005), simply a “panic” (Goode, 1990; Victor, 1993; Miller, 2002), a “menace” (Markson, 1990), a “craze” (Whitlock, 1979; Ben-Yehuda, 1980), or a “scare” (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991; Levine and Reinarman, 1988; Reinarman and Levine, 1989; Johnson, 2004), a substantial number of observers regard the concept as viable. At the end of February, 1993, in an editorial, The Economist dubbed the outrage generated in Britain by the murder of a two-year-old boy by a stranger whose attacker was, moreover, a minor – a “moral panic.” While a concept’s widespread currency is no argument for its viability, it is entirely possible that the argument of the critics of our concept is misguided.

Waddington’s supposed problem of proportionality is readily resolved. How do we know that the attention accorded a given issue, problem, or phenomenon is disproportional to the threat it poses? Is referring to a certain issue as a “moral panic” nothing more than a “value judgment,” an arbitrary claim that it does not deserve to receive as much attention as it has? While we agree with Ungar (1992, p. 497) that, with some conditions, “it is impossible to determine the nature of the objective threat” – and therefore, for that condition, to measure the dimension of disproportion – this is most decidedly not true for many, possibly most, conditions.
Threats that are “future-oriented” and potentially catastrophic, such as the greenhouse effect, the Earth’s shrinking ozone layer, and the risk of nuclear warfare, in all likelihood, are impossible to calculate – at least until we arrive at such time that, such prognosticators predict, these catastrophes will happen. In contrast, threats that are more familiar, ongoing, and based on the behavior of specified individuals and the impact of measurable conditions, are, in our view, more or less calculable.

Contrary to Waddington (1986) and Cornwell and Linders (2002), we believe that the criteria of disproportion can be met. Although we introduced them in Chapter 2, they are worth reiterating because they bear directly on Waddington’s argument; here are several indicators of disproportion.

First, if the figures that are cited to measure the scope of the problem are grossly exaggerated, we may say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. As we saw, in May 1982, a member of the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, and representatives of the police, released figures to the media to the effect that half of all Israeli high school children used hashish. This disclosure touched off a brief flurry of concern in the form of media attention and a demand for investigations. All available evidence indicated that the figures that were cited were fabricated; the actual figures, as indicated by systematic surveys, were in the 3–5 percent range (Ben-Yehuda, 1986; 1990, pp. 101, 104, 106, 129, 133). Figures as discrepant as these provide a clue to the fact that we may have a moral panic on our hands.

Second, if the concrete threat that is feared is, by all available evidence, nonexistent, we may say that the criterion of disproportion has been met. Some fundamentalist Christians claim that satanic kidnap-murders are responsible for the lives of roughly 50,000 children in the United States each year. A careful examination of the factual basis for this claim has turned up no evidence whatsoever to support it (Hicks, 1991; Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). This enables us to argue that satanic kidnap-murders may constitute a moral panic among a segment of fundamentalist Christians.

Third, as we explained in Chapter 2 and we’ll reiterate in Chapter 12, when legends or “tall tales” that confirm are more readily believed than normally, we suspect that panics may be in the works. Note, however, that such tales are not confined to the moral panic. Nonetheless, during moral panics, such tales tend to fly thick and fast. Rumors and urban legends circulate at all times, but they circulate most freely, and are most likely to be taken seriously, at times of moral panic. The panic prepares the ground for tales with a shaky relation to reality to circulate and become accepted. Indeed, often, these tall tales in and of themselves become the basis of a moral panic. Beginning in the mid-to-late 1970s, many anti-porn feminists found believable the “tall tale” that men film the murder of women in order to make “snuff” films (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 142, 384, 400). Unbelievable as it sounds, in the late 1960s, some good people of Paris accepted the tall tale that white women were kidnapped and whisked off via underground tunnels to forced prostitution in the Middle East (1971). Even absent the ludicrously enormous numbers claimed for satanic ritual abuse murders, that anyone
believed that any such killings took place is remarkable; the story is a tall tale of epic proportions (La Fontaine, 1998; de Young, 2004). Extraterrestrial kidnap, difficult for most people to accept, is an extremely tall tale fueled by a moral panic (Clancy, 2005; Showalter, 1997, pp. 189–202). In the 1960s, stories about users of LSD trying to fly off buildings, plunging to their deaths, standing in traffic and trying to stop cars, staring into the sun and going blind, were rife, yet, to some, believable in view of the scare that the new drug stirred up. We find tall tales, rumors, and urban legends, on the one hand, and moral panics, on the other, at the same times and in the same places.

Fourth, if the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second, the criterion of disproportion may be said to have been met. The use of illegal drugs generates vastly more concern than the use of legal drugs, in spite of the fact that legal drugs cause far more disease and death than illegal drugs. According to the Surgeon General of the United States, in the U.S., the use of tobacco cigarettes is responsible for well over 400,000 premature deaths each year, while alcohol use causes 100,000 or so deaths; as we’ve seen, a crude extrapolation from hospital and medical examiner’s data yields premature acute deaths for illegal drugs (or the illegal use of prescription drugs) in the 20,000–25,000 or so territory (Goode, 2008a). Again, discrepancies such as these should cause us to speculate that, perhaps, currently or recently, concern over illegal drug use might provide an example of a moral panic.

And fifth, if the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness, then, once again, the criterion of disproportion may be said to have been met. Between the middle and late 1980s, newspaper and magazine articles on the subject of drug abuse virtually exploded, the percentage of Americans saying that drug abuse was the nation’s number one problem skyrocketed from the 2–3 percent range in the mid-1980s to 64 percent late in September 1989, and lawmakers proposed a huge spate of bills and laws during the 1986–9 period, but far fewer before and after. Yet, during that period of time, the proportion of Americans who used illegal drugs actually declined. This tells us that the criterion of disproportion has been met and that, possibly, a moral panic about drugs gripped the nation in the late 1980s.

CORNWELL AND LINDEES: THE LSD SCARE WAS NOT A MORAL PANIC

Our reading of the concept’s critics indicates that the criterion of the moral panic to which most object is, once again, disproportion – the gap or disjunction between the threat or harm of a given behavior and the fervor or concern that that behavior
generates in the public, the media, and among legislators and social movement activists and members of interest groups. Disproportion, these critics say, cannot be determined or measured and hence, they reason, the moral panic does not exist as an identifiable sociological phenomenon. Here, we’d like to address the issue of disproportion from a slightly different angle or slant.

More specifically we’d like to use the matter of LSD use in the 1960s as a test case of a moral panic. We argue not only that the concern it generated can be measured against its objective threat but also that applying this calibration produces a disproportion that makes this case an instance of a moral panic.

And second, some say, social reactions to the use of LSD in the sixties were proportional to the threat the drug posed to the society. Here, we argue that these critics make certain assumptions that render their argument questionable. More specifically, we’d like to argue that the nay-sayers’ critiques typically offer a logical contradiction in that they say disproportion is impossible to measure since concern and responses to that concern are incommensurable, they are like apples and oranges. But these critics also say that concern and fear over most conditions that generate panics are rational responses to a very real and present danger, as with LSD in the sixties. Logically, you can’t have it both ways; either the threat is incommensurable with concern, or the concern is a rational, measured response to the threat.

As Cohen explained, once a moral panic is launched, the media and the public are sensitized to certain themes and images of deviants as both harmful and newsworthy, and find interesting stories that conform to and confirm this bias. With respect to media representations and claims the public found credible, in the case of LSD in the sixties, the classic clues to the moral panic were present: stereotyping, exaggeration, distortion, and sensitization (Cohen, 1972, pp. 59–65; Critcher, 2003, p. 56). Many of these media claims turned out to be factually false, but the sensitization process influenced their credibility: these are the sorts of things that LSD-crazed people do. In fact, when it comes to stories in the heat of the moment, members of the public often find false and stereotypical stories scarier, more interesting, and truer than empirically true ones.

Many thousands of such instances can be cited, but let’s stick to a few factually false stories about drug use (or supposed drug use) that were fascinating and credible to the public in part because they were false. The media claimed the following as true: Chinese opium addicts were sexually seducing middle-class white women in substantial numbers (from the late 1800s); cocaine caused African Americans to become violent, to seek out white targets for their violence, and to become superhumanly strong, practically invulnerable to bullets (from the late 1800s to early 1900s); marijuana caused users to go crazy and become violent (from the 1930s); LSD use caused chromosome damage (the 1960s); LSD caused six young men to stare at the sun for hours and go blind (the 1960s); PCP caused users to go crazy and become violent and superhumanly strong, again, practically invulnerable to police bullets (the Frankenstein monster theme, but without a racial angle, from the early
PCP caused a youth to gouge out his own eyes (a repeat of the blindness theme, from the early 1970s); not only did an eight-year-old become a heroin addict, but this was common in the inner city (from the early 1980s); crack consumed by expectant mothers was uniquely capable of causing permanent damage to fetuses and newborns (the late 1980s); crack produced “instant addiction,” was “sweeping the country,” “invading every community,” the white upper-middle-class suburbs included (also from the late 1980s); innocent bystander killings by drug gangs was common (the late 1980s); methamphetamine use produced (practically a word-for-word repeat of the crack story) “instant addiction,” the abuse of this drug was “sweeping the country like wildfire,” “invading the suburbs” (the early 1990s).

The media reported these stories – irresponsibly, we now know, and probably should have known then – because they knew that these stories were newsworthy, both from their professional judgment and from what they surmised the public’s reaction would be, and not because they were trying to force them on the public’s attention. They were news because they corresponded to the media representatives’ definition of what’s news (tell a good story, introduce the human interest angle, tell a story with a specific audience in mind) and because publishers, editors, and journalists realized that the public would find these stories interesting. They didn’t check their sources; they assumed these claims to be true because of the prevailing sentiment of the times. Both media representatives and the public should have been able to look around them and been able to see that these claims were bogus. These stories were appealing and credible because they corresponded to incipient notions of what these new, and newly deviant, drugs were supposed to do. And, unlike stories about mad cow disease, botulism, salmonella poisoning, and the spread of the bird flu virus, these now classic drug-related stories took on energy not merely from their putative material threat but also from the fact that they introduced a moral dimension to their subjects and topics.

With respect to LSD, as with the other drug-related moral panics, sellers or dealers are always folk devils; Timothy Leary, the pied piper of LSD, was a folk devil, as was anyone attempting to seduce young people into the psychedelic, turn-on, tune-in, drop-out ideology; spaced-out hippies, as Michael Brown (1969) showed us – even before the invention of the term, “moral panic” – were folk devils. The public did not find these stories believable exclusively because the agents supposedly responsible for the threat could materially harm the society, but also because actors designated as deviant were involved.

Just as alcohol and cigarettes are potentially harmful, so are the subjects of these news stories – opium, cocaine, marijuana, LSD, PCP, heroin, and methamphetamine. However, as Cohen asks in his introduction to the third edition of Folk Devils and Moral Panics (2002, p. xxi), why are statements of the harm caused by condition A ignored, dismissed, or of concern only to a small minority, while the harm caused by condition B quickly becomes the topic of widespread public concern, hostility, outrage, denunciations, investigations, legislation, campaigns, a flood of media attention, social movement activity, and so on?
Why is the sale and use of a substance consumed by expectant mothers that causes irreparable and irrefutable harm to fetuses (we refer to the substance, alcohol, and the harm, fetal alcohol syndrome) “not even made a candidate for moral signification” (Cohen, 2002, p. xxi), while the crack babies syndrome (false, as it turns out) generated an avalanche of media attention and public concern? Or why, again, does the selling or consuming of alcohol, which causes hallucinations, delusions, the tendency to imagine that one is powerful, invincible, invulnerable, capable of flying or jumping off buildings or into the path of speeding cars or stopping a bullet, likewise, not generate widespread public outrage on the order of LSD in the sixties? At some point, we are forced to raise the issue of disproportion. This disproportion does not mean that the activity in question is harmless but that it generates or generated media attention, fear, hostility, concern, and social control out of proportion to those activities that are as or more harmful. There must be a reason for this disproportion and it is the sociologist’s job to explain this discrepancy. (Yes, during the past couple of decades, the society has begun to address alcoholism, drunk driving, and the consumption of alcohol by minors, but this was not true in the sixties, and those concerns assume we can isolate appropriate from inappropriate alcohol consumption, which was irrelevant in the sixties with the use of LSD, since any use of this drug was considered by its very nature inappropriate.) Sociologists are supposed to look for perturbations or disproportions along these lines.

In 1966, the chair of the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Study Commission called LSD “the greatest threat facing the country today ... more dangerous than the Vietnam war” (in Brecher et al., 1972, p. 369). That's not a reckless statement by a random, irresponsible person, it’s a claim the credibility of which is conveyed not only by the supposed responsibility of the official who made it but also by the hysteria of the era.

Why didn’t editors, reporters, or readers ask how many LSD users and in what proportion “went crazy,” jumped off buildings thinking they could fly, or tried to stop cars, imagining that they would not be harmed? As with the fabricated Janet Cooke story of an eight-year-old heroin addict (Reinarman and Duskin, 1999), the LSD panic reveals the gullibility of the media and the public in believing patently outlandish, false, or exaggerated claims. Why did Science rush into print the shoddy research report (Cohen, Marinello, and Back, 1967) that supposedly demonstrated that LSD damages chromosomes, when any responsible reporter could have picked up the phone and asked an expert about the validity of the methodology of this study? Why did news of the results of this research seize the public’s imagination and sweep the country? Why in this case was the most time-honored norm of the journalism subculture (that is, verify a story with two or more sources) so badly violated? Why wasn’t the careful, detailed factual refutation (Dishotsky et al., 1971) of the LSD chromosome study greeted with the same media attention that the original study received? Clearly, LSD pathology was news; non-pathology was not.
LSD use in the 1960s was a moral panic precisely because the heated concern it stirred up was disproportional to its physical threat. We submit that its threat was more panic-driven than materially real; what with the supposed threat of cosmic revelations and an alternate world-view – which never panned out to begin with – the use of LSD seemed to possess a distinctly deviant potential.

Clearly the use of LSD seemed a threat to American society – but what kind of threat? Most commentators at the time argued that the use of LSD posed a threat to the hegemony of the middle-class work ethic, morality, and world view. The very notion of otherworldliness that psychedelic propagandists were peddling, which very few users subscribed to, was what seemed so fearful. It was one heck of a good media story and it made great copy. The fact that the fantasy that LSD would turn young people into hippies and psychedelic zombies (again, Jenkins tells us that the zombie angle is common in synthetic drug panics), not to mention instant mental patients with ravaged chromosomes, was credible to the media, the public, and lawmakers, seems to argue that we were in the midst of a moral panic.

Moral panics represent struggles over symbolic representations; there other such struggles (moral crusades, for example), but we are now focused on one of the more interesting of such struggles, one that perhaps most revealingly exposes social processes and structures. Sectors of the society, or a major swath of the society, become aware of a threat; feel concern and hostility toward supposed perpetrators; name and denounce suitable targets; activate or voice available avenues of denunciation and control, including public opinion, the media, the legislature, and social movement activists and interest groups; and before very long, drop the matter and turn their concern to other issues (Goode, 2008c).

**BECK AND UNGAR: THE RISK SOCIETY**

Since the 1990s, with the publication in English of Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992), one line of attack critics have pursued has fallen under the conceptual rubric of the same name, the “risk society.” A number of observers believe that in the past, even in the worst case scenario, the risks that generated moral panics were bounded and calculable, and stemmed from the actions of specific folk devils. Today, in contrast, we live in a period in which risks are unbounded and incalculable and stem from the behavior of faceless unseen agents and parties. Mostly, this hypothesis goes, these threats are caused by the unanticipated and undesired side effects from new technologies: nuclear, chemical, environmental, biological, and medical. Examples include, genetic engineering, global warming, the resultant shrinking ice cap, the *E. coli* bacterium, the *Ebola* virus, greenhouse gasses, AIDS/HIV, the shrinking ozone layer, nuclear explosions and the threat from nuclear winter, contamination from nuclear power plants – the accidents at the facilities at Three Mile Island, in...
Pennsylvania, which occurred in 1979, and Chernobyl, in Ukraine, which took place in 1986, provide historical cases – and “mad cow disease” (Ungar, 2001).

The argument is clever but glib. It is true that the risk from technologies that have emerged since the Second World War are more difficult to calculate and tend to be more global, more geographically and temporally unbounded, than earlier threats. But if we are paying close attention to the logic of this argument, we are forced to ask the question: “Did somebody change the subject?” The conclusion that because newer threats have emerged in recent years the older threats have shrunk into insignificance and irrelevance is specious and fallacious. Ungar (2001)1 rummages through recent examples of technological threats and finds that they are not moral panics. But that’s precisely the point: Though these “risk society” threats emerged recently, they instill fear in addition to, not instead of, the classic scares. As we write, flames still smolder and bodies are still being buried following riots that took place in Kenya as a result of accusations of a rigged election; methamphetamine distribution and abuse remains a hot button issue in many communities well into the twenty-first century (see the television series, launched in 2007, Breaking Bad, and Valdez, 2006); illegal immigration continues to roil the political waters and enrage citizens living in affected communities (Costelloe, 2006; Welch, 2002); and videogames and Internet stalkers provide media fare for their hostile critics (Reidy, 2007). And Ungar’s argument that disproportion is not part of Cohen’s original definition of the moral panic is spurious, given that the very word “panic” implies disproportion. Without a disparity between public concern and the seriousness of the size of a given threat, a “panic” (or “scare”) would not exist.

It is interesting that disproportion, a criterion about which the critics of moral panics are suspicious, is practically an essential component of the concept of the risk society. Why? Because most members of contemporary society have no idea what the actual likelihood of most of the risks they face. Risk society theorists argue that contemporary risks are incalculable by experts; this is untrue. Most of the important risks attendant on modern life are roughly calculable – expert estimates are less wildly variable than public estimates – and for the most part, the populace badly and incorrectly estimates them. For instance, when the public imagines an accident in a nuclear power plant, in comparison with technical experts, the likelihood of its occurrence, the estimate of its potential damage, and the geographical range of the damage, are all hugely exaggerated. Polls have shown that people imagine, in a nuclear accident, hundreds of thousands, even millions of deaths and catastrophic, irreparable damage to the environment over a vast geographical area (Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein, 1982, p. 486). In contrast, the public’s estimate of the potential harm from the familiar diagnostic X-ray – something

1 Ungar (2001, p. 279) also misreads our position on the measures or indicators of the moral panic, claiming that we said that media coverage and legislative activity are indicators of measures of public concern. We did not make that assertion. What we said throughout the book was that concern is measured by four separate but overlapping indicators: public concern, legislative activity, media attention, and social movement activism. The third of the four does not measure the first – they are parallel and alternative manifestations of the panic.
which nearly all of us receive – is substantially underestimated. In short, a “perception gap” exists, with the public estimating the risk of nuclear catastrophe as much more likely than the experts’ assessment. In any case, the notion that contemporary risks are, in comparison to those in the past, incalculable, is simply false. In a sense, then, ironically, the “risk society” argument supports at least one leg of the moral panic’s argument: disproportion. Experts, including a team of scientists at the United Nations, have documented that even the fallout from the accident at the nuclear facility at Chernobyl resulted in less harm to the population than the continuous pollution from coal-fired plants that many of us breathe every day, and vastly less harm than had at first been believed (Finn, 2005; Jaworski, 2006). For decades, nuclear power has provided most of the energy consumed in western Europe and Japan, virtually without incident. How to safely dispose of the spent nuclear material remains, however, a touchy, controversial, and technically difficult problem, one that will remain with us for centuries to come.

Let’s be more precise about this generalization. To be more specific, the public overestimates certain – calculable – risks and more accurately estimates others. Research has shown that the public’s overestimation of risk is closely related to fear: the more fearful a given threat, the greater that the public will overestimate its likelihood; the less fearful the threat, the more accurately the public estimates its risk. One survey (Quillen, 2008) asked respondents to estimate the likelihood of being burglarized and robbed; their estimates were ten times higher than the actual rate of these crimes in their neighborhoods. In contrast, the respondents’ estimates of the likelihood of losing their job or their health coverage were accurate. Even categories in the population with a high risk of criminal victimization (being black, a member of a family with a low income, having low levels of education, residing in a zip code with a high rate of criminal victimization, etc.) overestimated their own likelihood of criminal victimization, though less so than among residents of white and more affluent neighborhoods. Fear seems to be the driving force behind these overestimations, and fear, likewise, is the main driving force behind moral panics. Clearly, the “risk society” critics of the moral panics concept have an inaccurate assessment of the public’s perception of risk.

**STUART WAITON: THE AMORAL PANIC**

Stuart Waiton (2008) argues that the concept of the moral panic has not only lost its meaning but has been swallowed up by “a new framework of amoral panics” (pp. 103–4). Society’s political framework has been restructured in such a way, Waiton argues, that the issue of morality is no longer relevant (p. 104). At one time “traditional moral values” formed the foundation-stone of concern, fear, hostility, and threat; today, Waiton claims, “safety and the protection of the victim” are the central features of panics and scares. “Rather than panicking being the preserve of
reactionary traditionalists, it seems that to one degree or another we are all in a panic about something” (p. 104).

Waiton’s argument is based on a sleight-of-hand – in fact, two sleights-of-hand. First, he pretends that the moral panic concept is predicated entirely on traditional morality – that is, that hostility and fear once flowed entirely from a conservative ideological stance – then he insists that a calculation of “amoral” risk obliterates the existence of the folk devil or deviant. Neither is the case at all. Calculations of risk, some novel, others the same old risks we have always faced, are analytically separate and independent from fears of subversion from “immoral,” familiar enemies. Further, Waiton’s fanciful exercise confuses the part for the whole, arguing that if the elite-engineered theory of moral panics has become passé, the very concept of the moral panic is irrelevant (p. 105). Again, we have a claim that persuades only if we accept its illusory foundational assumption.

The fact is that the moral panic concept bridges across ideological lines. It is true that, typically, the accusation that a given episode of fear, concern, and hostility about a specific threat is “just” a moral panic – as opposed to legitimate and genuinely threatening – has been more richly nurtured by the left than the right. For instance, in the past, the parties raising the greatest alarm about drug abuse have been mainly conservatives, and the accusations that the alarm over drug use is little more than a moral panic have stemmed mainly from liberals and radicals. (For instance, see the collection in Reinarman and Levine, 1997). In the past, persons who argued that homosexuality is an abomination have been and continued to be on the right wing of the political spectrum, while those who accuse the “abominationists” of narrow-mindedness and bigotry occupy the more liberal wing of the political spectrum. True, almost by definition. Yes, some moral panics seem mainly to have been engaged in by the right, but debunked as a moral panic by the left. But consider a potpourri of moral panics that have attracted both left and right: “snuff” movies; pornography (an issue radical feminists picked up in the 1980s, then dropped); sexual abuse by Catholic priests; school shootings; organized crime. Consider moral panics that have activated the ire of conservatives more: drug abuse; abortion; immigration; homosexuality; “white slavery” (roughly, 1907–17); horror comics (the 1950s); rock and roll (1950s). It is possible that condemnation is a stronger fixture of the thinking of conservatives than liberals, but folk devils constitute a fixture in all ideologies, and all have their own version of the moral panic.

Neither of these activities – neither the fuss over behavior nor the accusations of a “mere” moral panic – is defined by points along a political spectrum, and neither is the property of any political position. The shape of the devil is politically indeterminate, and issues of morality – feelings about the deviantness of behavior and belief – grip persons of every ideology. Political scandals, large and small, engulf candidates of all predilections; bribery knows no boundaries; and bringing down a man of the cloth because of his sexual improprieties is both familiar and interdenominational. Today we are likely to face “amoral” threats in addition to moral ones, but that does not negate the fact that sectors of the society continue to
conjure up and denounce folk devils, call for stiffer punishment of wrongdoers, and support institutions that address their concerns. According to Waiton, the “old” panic was the moral panic, and the “new” panic is the amoral panic. The moral panic, he says, seems to be vaporizing before our very eyes.

Historical cases, Waiton claims, are increasingly irrelevant to what’s going on today. Sociologically (and here, Waiton agrees with the “risk society” argument), the moral panic is being put out of business by the bird flu, genetic engineering, greenhouse gasses, the shrinking ozone layer, global warming, AIDS, lead paint in Chinese-manufactured toys, and radon poisoning. We are actors in a postmodern society, this argument goes, a fragmented social order, a historical stage of “liquid modernity,” a multi-mediated world that recognizes no folk devils, no deviance, no Bible-thumping sermons from the pulpit, no hegemonic struggles over evolution and creationism in the public schools, no political knock-down, drag-out fights over illegal immigration, no drawing of the line between “us” and “them,” citizens and Americans, Anglos and Latinos, “ins” and “outs,” no redefining of juvenile delinquents as adults in order to punish them for heinous crimes. This is a bloodless, antiseptic world we find difficult to recognize.

Interestingly, between 2000 and 2005, Professor Waiton published at least four articles commenting on scares (or “moral panics”) that have emerged in Scotland during the first years of this century. “News headlines ‘1 in 3 Glasgow teenagers carry knives,’” declares the author. “Let’s cut to the evidence,” he adds (2000). In other words, Waiton is attempting to “spike” the possibility of a media panic about youth and violence. “Are scruffy youth so scary?” asks the headline of another of his articles (2001). In spite of the fact that the crime rate on the streets of Scotland have fallen to a 25-year low, the police are targeting and searching “scruffy youth.” In other words, again, Waiton has taken it upon himself to “dampen” a police moral panic about youth and crime. “Leave those kids alone” (a line from a Pink Floyd song, “One More Brick in the Wall”) reads the headline of another of his contributions to the youth panic issue (2002). “Why does the UK government want to stop young people ‘just hanging out’ with their friends?” asks the subtitle of a fourth of his commentaries (2005). Why is Dr. Waiton attempting to quiet down a moral panic – a phenomenon he believes no longer exists? To the skeptic, the actions of Stuart Waiton – critical debunker of the moral panics concept – would seem to be self-contradictory. Contrary to his book, Waiton’s articles strongly support the moral panics concept, they do not undermine it. What happened in the material world to change his mind? Could “amoral panics” have obliterated “moral panics” between 2005 and 2008? To us, this seems unlikely.

Waiton’s “incredible shrinking moral panic” claim is puzzling – and Joel Best’s defense of it (2008) even more so – given that we live in an era teeming with mutual antagonisms, folk devils, moral panics, racial, ethnic, economic, and political and ideological hostility, a planet boiling with jihad, terrorism and alleged terrorism (Jenkins, 2003a), “synthetic panics” (Jenkins, 1999), pedophile priests (Jenkins, 1996), Internet child pornography (Jenkins, 2001), serial homicide
(1994), the “new” anti-Catholicism – “the last acceptable prejudice” – (Jenkins, 2003b), ethnic hostility in Sudan, Darfur, Congo, Bosnia, Serbia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Palestine, Gaza, Israel, Sri Lanka, and India, and in the United States, for example, between right-to-lifers and pro-choice advocates and evolutionists and creationists. We do not live in an antiseptic world in which folk devils have disappeared; inter-group conflict still troubles the waters of nearly every society on Earth, and folk devils continue to be named. In a world in which the American flag and effigies of Uncle Sam are burned in more than a dozen countries around the globe, it is difficult to understand how some scholars can claim that the moral panic has practically vaporized before our very eyes. In our opinion, Waiton’s criticisms of the viability of the moral panics concept do not hold water and do not provide sustenance for the social science community, interested in understanding public fears and concerns. Some sources of the moral panic have disappeared, but the moral panic itself remains, and its constituent components – the dynamics of hostility, denunciation, and disproportion – remain intact.

**SUMMARY**

Popular as it is, the moral panics concept has attracted its share of critics. These critics have leveled two types of arguments: the concept’s validity, and its currency. Given the fact that the concept’s utility, as measured by citations to it both in the scholarly and the popular literature, has grown into the twenty-first century, the interested observer is forced to ask whether these arguments contain any substance.

Disproportionality seems to be a sticking point for some critics: concern in comparison with threat. In the first and second chapters, we proposed five criteria of disproportion: exaggerated harm, invented figures, the proliferation of “tall tales,” comparisons across conditions, and changes over time. Some critics have argued that certain threats (such as the use of LSD in the sixties) are real and hence, do not fit the criterion of disproportionality; therefore moral panics do not exist. The scare over LSD clearly qualifies as a moral panic, since Cohen’s criteria of sensitization, stereotyping, and distortion aptly apply. Even if the case of LSD use did not apply – which it most certainly does – the inapplicability of one case does not address the many other cases that do. This is clearly an argument addressed to an irrelevancy.

Other critics propose that because we live in a “risk society” in which “new” scares have replaced the old moral scares, and new scares do not fit the criteria of moral panics, moral panic does not exist. To such a claim, one is forced to raise the time-honored, evergreen debating question: “Did somebody change the subject?” Because we live in a multicultural society, it has become increasingly difficult to stir up a traditional moral panic; this is a point with which we readily agree – but we
agree with Thompson (1988) that the decline of a traditional hegemony ushers in a multi-mediated world, which increases the likelihood of claims between and among subsectors of the society, each one of which may ignite a mini-panic. Such critics also conveniently forget that members of liberal, Western democracies are part of an increasingly global world in which societies have erupted in moral panics, largely inter-ethnic, inter-religious, inter-tribal, all over the map. Some of the minorities within those societies, moreover, are intent in wiping Western secularism off the map. Worldwide, moral panics remain numerous and fierce, and frequently impinge on our deceptively placid modern landscape. In short, in spite of its critics, the moral panics concept remains viable, useful, and increasingly relevant.
THE MEDIA IGNITE AND EMBODY THE MORAL PANIC

These newspaper, magazine, and broadcast headlines express fear or concern about threats or supposed threats posed by agents. The headlines, or the parties the headlines quote, make claims or assertions that are intended to generate even more fear and concern in their audiences and, perhaps, cry out to the public to mobilize in some way: to contact the appropriate political representatives, demand legislation, join and participate in a relevant social movement, or simply “wax indignant in common” with friends and neighbors (Durkheim, 1893/1964, p. 127) about the evil doings of “folk devils.”

THE MASS MEDIA AND MORAL PANICS

Moral panics began as far back as the existence of organized society itself. Hostility toward and fear of agents of evil probably date to the dawn of humanity, long before television, long before writing, long before the idiographic recording of social and historical events. As we saw, the Renaissance witch craze, which repeatedly exploded hundreds of years before we developed the modern mass media of communications, was a genuine moral panic. Still, the modern mass media provide the most effective spark for the creation of moral panics, as well as an engine for their conveyance. The media “visualize” deviance, concentrate and publicize outrage about wrongdoing, and offer a perspective on social control (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987; Ericson, 1995).

Some moral panics arise on a local or grassroots basis; they percolate up from the fears and concerns of the community at large. Consider urban legends, those remarkable and unlikely tales, “too good to be true,” told by supposedly credible sources and believed and passed on by the man and woman in the street (Brunvand, 2000; 2001) – and a major source of moral panics. Did evil white doctors create the HIV/AIDS virus to infect and commit genocide against persons of African descent? (Turner, 1993, pp. 151–63; Fine and Turner, 2001, pp. 157–66). Was crack “planted” by “big business” (or perhaps the FBI, or the CIA) in the black community to achieve the same genocidal goal? (Turner, 1993, pp. 180–201). Are the Illuminati – or maybe the Masons, or the Vatican, or the Jews, or the CIA – engaged in a conspiracy to control and “take over” the world? (Barkun, 2003). Are evil corporations selling rat meat as chicken/giving money to Nazis/owned by the Moonies/selling candy that explodes/grinding up human flesh in hamburgers/selling food that contains rat hairs/cockroaches/mice/garbage/worms/cat’s eyes and/or poison? (Fine, 1992, pp. 151–2). Such fantastic tales have virtually no credibility among the
major mass media; they usually emerge as a result of ordinary people talking about things that interest and concern them. Media sources that routinely report such stories tend to be the low-prestige tabloids (or “tabs”) such as the *Weekly World News*, the *Globe*, and the *Sun*. However, although many moral panics do have their origin in street (or tabloid) gossip, if the media repeat and convey such stories they will contribute to the intensity and duration of a given moral panic. Moral panics may have multiple origins, one of which is word of mouth emanating from the street, but the media nonetheless remain their most effective source and conveyance.

Clearly, then, moral panics are driven by more than gossip, rumor, and urban legends: today, they are usually expressed in the mass media, and in abundance and great profusion. The fact is, the mass media *thrive* on moral panics; typically, they are “the prime movers and … beneficiaries” of moral panic episodes “since the sensation they create – a kind of collective effervescence – sells papers, entertains readers, and generates further news and commentary as the story unfolds, the spokesmen take sides, and the deviant phenomenon develops” (Garland, 2008, p. 12). In short, the media have an institutionalized “need” for moral panics; the media “fan public indignation” and, to the extent that they can, “engineer” moral panics to generate news and appeal to the concerns of their audiences (Young, 1971).

In short, the concern expressed by the media, by themselves, can both constitute as well as inflame and even generate public concern. In addition, media reports about a troubling phenomenon can influence concern among, and hence, the doings of, politicians, lawmakers, law enforcement officers, social movement activists, or what sociologists refer to as “moral entrepreneurs.” The mass media are both an independent manifestation of moral panics as well as a causal agent in firing up the other manifestations of moral panics, specifically public concern, political and legislative activity, and social movement activism. In short, the media are an expression of panics as well as their spark or cause. They set agendas, focus attention on issues, and turn up the heat of concern in all sectors of the society – the public at large, politicians and legislators, social movement activists, and law enforcement. Agenda-setting during the moral panic is, in fact, is the most important role the media play. They focus attention on an issue and frame it in such a way that the public is made aware of that issue’s emotional significance. In a sense, as a result of this framing and agenda-setting, the public knows its part in the moral panic drama. The beating heart of most moral panics can be found in the media. Not all supposed threats brought on stage by the media catch fire with the public, but the media play a particular role by presenting them to us. Singling out threats, generating alarm, and directing attention to folk devils are among the media’s most important functions.

In the 1940s and 1950s, many intellectuals feared that the “mass” media were turning audiences into zombies – isolated, scattered individuals who had been brainwashed over the airwaves. Television, radio, newspapers, and the other popular means of communication, these early critics argued, *determined* what people thought, felt, and believed. This perspective has not disappeared; many intellectuals and much of the public believe it to this day. But nearly all the research conducted
since the mid-twentieth century or so has shown that media audiences are neither exposed to nor influenced by media messages, content, or slant as atomized, isolated individuals. Most of the public receive media messages as members of collectivities, socially interacting with people close to them about what they have heard, seen, or read. In other words, the media are filtered or interpreted through the reader’s or viewer’s or user’s informal social web or network. Moreover, we live in a multi-mediated society (McRobbie, 1994); all of us are exposed to a variety of media, large and small, print, broadcast, and electronic, conveying an unprecedented array of messages. And when exposed to media messages, people do not abruptly fall into a swoon, suddenly readily hypnotized, docile, and passively receptive, accepting everything they hear, see, or read. Indeed, the majority of media audiences are active, reflexive, and skeptical about these messages. Moreover, audiences tend to gravitate to and choose specific media outlets that appeal to them and cater to their orientation. In such cases, the media reinforce more than cause attitudes, beliefs, and opinions. It seems these early critics had demonized the media, and many critics continue to do so to this day.

The first thing we should know about moral panics is that when the media expresses fear or concern about a threat or supposed threat, that constitutes or is a measure of a moral panic; that is, in a media panic, the expression of media fear and concern is itself a moral panic. In other words, even if the media do not generate or stir up fear, concern, or hostility in the public, the media’s expression of that fear, concern, or hostility is itself a moral panic – a media panic, but a moral panic nonetheless.

And the second thing we need to know is that media attention often, although not always, fans the flames of public fear, concern, or hostility about a given issue. While any one of our four components of the moral panic – media attention; public fear, concern, or hostility; political activity; and social movement activism – can exist without the others, typically, a feedback or interactive relationship takes place among them, with each influencing or reinforcing the others. But as important as the components in addition to media attention are, many observers argue that moral panics originate specifically with the media, spreading out from there (Cohen, 1972; 2002, pp. 7–9; Altheide, 2002; Jewkes, 2004; Critcher, 2006). In most – but not all – cases of moral panics, the media do play a causal or intensifying role.

What do the media do, specifically, when they express a moral panic? In Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972; 2002), Stanley Cohen spelled out specifically and explicitly what he meant by the expression of a moral panic in the media. It entails exaggeration – in the degree of seriousness of the event, the behavior, or the phenomenon (the number of people taking part, the amount of harm or damage), sensationalistic headlines, a melodramatic vocabulary, a heightening of those elements journalists and the public consider news. And, as we saw, such inflamed prose tends to be directed at what Cohen called a “folk devil” – an evil party responsible for the event, the behavior, or the phenomenon. To understand what role the media play in constituting, generating, or reinforcing moral panics, it is necessary
to take a step back and take a look at how the media work. (For an account of the role of the media in igniting and embodying the moral panic in Britain, see Critcher, 2003, pp. 131–42.)

WHAT ARE THE MEDIA?

What are “the media”? Who, exactly, determines their content? The media – technically, a plural noun, although often used in its singular form – are made up of a collection of loosely interrelated but overlapping enterprises, some connected by corporate ownership (for instance, Time Warner owns Time magazine, Warner Books, and Home Box Office, or HBO; Sony owns Columbia pictures; Paramount owns Simon & Schuster, a book publisher), others by year-to-year contractual collaboration (episodically, The New York Times and CBS News collaborate on conducting polls, whose results each outlet reports; The Washington Post and ABC News have the same arrangement), and still others only by virtue of the fact that they belong to the same conceptual category and engage in more or less the same activity. But what exactly is that activity?

The word “media” is shorthand for “mass media of communication.” It principally encompasses eight components: television, radio, film and DVDs; newspapers, magazines and comic books; musical recordings (principally CDs); books and graphic novels; and the electronic media, specifically the Internet. In addition, several associated or support industries, such as advertising, marketing, and public relations, make use of media outlets; they can be thought of as “sidestream” media components.

Some media outlets, such as network television, reach huge audiences – in the United States, tens and in some cases, hundreds of millions of viewers – while most others attract much smaller audiences. It is impossible to draw the line between the “mass” media and more specialized media. For instance, only a tiny handful of books (such as the Harry Potter novels) sell millions of copies, most sell a few thousand, and many never reach sales of more than a few hundred. Some recording artists make their own CDs and distribute copies on the street; their audiences are minuscule. With upwards of 200 or more television channels available to the cable viewer, most will reach extremely tiny audiences. Are these low-audience media outlets part of the “mass” media, or something else altogether? The size of a medium’s audience is a matter of degree, not of kind, and whether and to what extent a given media product reaches a “mass” audience depends on what our definition of “mass” is. We’ll have more to say about smaller, non-mainstream media momentarily.

The size of an audience aside, what do the media have in common? What is the common thread tying together TV, radio, movies, DVDs, newspapers, magazines, CDs, books, and the Internet – not to mention advertising, marketing, and public relations? In a word, communication. In all of them, someone is attempting to convey
a message to an audience. In all communication, a sender conveys a message through a channel or medium to one or more receivers, or an audience. Communication can be direct and face-to-face, as with routine, informal interaction, or indirect, by means of mass communications. Mass communications entail a vehicle, mechanism, or transmission device that conveys the message from sender to receiver. In contrast to direct or face-to-face communication, this vehicle adds a layer – that is, a radio, a television set, the motion picture screen, a magazine, and so on – between the sender and the receiver, but it also enables senders to reach vastly larger audiences. Most conversations take place between two or three and usually not more than six or eight people; occasionally, a politician who makes a speech addresses an audience of a few thousand people. In contrast, television, as we saw, can reach audiences numbering in the tens, and occasionally the hundreds of millions. But a drawback of the mass media is that they are, by their very nature, less interactive than face-to-face communication. The media are very good at communicating messages to audiences, but they are clumsier and far less effective in give-and-take communication between parties. Even the so-called interactive media such as the Internet do not effectively offer the flow of communication that is entailed in most ordinary conversations. Face-to-face communication tends to be two-way interaction, but in the usual case, the mass media entail one-way communication: They are usually not very interactive, at least not directly.

However, audiences can indirectly communicate to the producers and purveyors of the mass media, through public opinion polls, letters to the editor, calls and emails to producers and networks, the sales of a particular product, or simply by watching a television program, listening to a radio broadcast, or purchasing a particular book or CD or an edition of a newspaper or magazine. The media in capitalist countries tend to be profit-based and are made up of overlapping industries that respond to markets: the larger the audience, the larger the profit, and the more that the producers of a particular medium get the idea that they should present programs or products with a particular content and message. But the type of medium partly determines the mechanism by which the magnitude of audience appeal or preference influences content.

Broadly, the media can be divided into two types: the secondary or “minor” media, those that rely on revenue that derives from direct income, that is, the sales of the product itself (a book, a CD, tickets to a movie), in which case, audiences communicate their preferences through their purchases; and the primary or “major” media (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet), those that rely mainly on indirect income, mainly advertising, in which case audience preferences show up in media surveys, polls, and market research, often conducted by advertisers, and in the case of the Internet, the number of “hits” to a site. Only a third of the income stream of magazines and newspapers derives from the sale of the product itself, that is, copies of the magazines and newspapers themselves (Biagi, 2007); the rest derives from advertising. About 80 percent of the media’s total income derives from the “major” media, and most of that is paid for, again, through advertising.
Even though the media tend to be market-driven, most of the communications industry is broken up into market *niches*, and those niches tend to be inhabited by particular outlets. Even producers of network television, the most “mass” of the mass media, conduct polls and surveys to determine the demographics of their audience, and slant their programs to age, educational, and regional sectors of the population.

With respect to the print press, the *National Enquirer*, a supermarket tabloid, occupies a very different niche – mainly celebrity gossip – from the one that is inhabited by, say, *Newsweek*, a weekly news magazine, which in turn does not compete directly with *The New Yorker*, a magazine catering to sophisticated, literary interests. Regardless of how appealing to the public a particular theme or story might be, an article that appears in a particular type of these publications cannot appear in the other type, since they appeal to vastly different interests. Even if a story about a woman being raped by an extraterrestrial helps sell hundreds of thousands of copies of a particular issue of a supermarket tabloid, that will not induce *The Times* of London or *The Washington Post* to publish such a story because the latter newspapers define their mission very differently and attract a very different audience from those of tabloids. In addition, journalism is constrained by a set of ethics that governs some outlets but not others. The publishers of supermarket tabloids are unconcerned about whether a given story is true (although they are very careful not to print stories that will cause them to be sued). In contrast, the publishers, editors, and journalists who produce publications such as *The Times* of London, *The Guardian*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *Der Spiegel*, *Time* magazine, *Le Monde*, and *Newsweek*, are very concerned about getting a story “right,” that is, making sure their facts are valid and accurate. Tabloids are written mainly for relatively unsophisticated, gullible audiences who want to be entertained by fantastic tales; in contrast, the *Times*, *Post*, *Time* magazine, and *Newsweek* are written for more sophisticated, educated audiences, including professional journalists, largely for informational purposes. This does not mean that the latter will not publish stories that are not true; what it means is that for professional reasons, they will not move into the territory already inhabited by tabloids. The fact that a story in one outlet or medium is enormously popular will not necessarily induce another outlet or medium to do a story on the same topic. And the electronic media, such as the Internet, introduce another dimension altogether.

**MODELS OF THE MEDIA’S SELECTION, SLANT, AND INFLUENCE**

Sociologists can measure the focus of media concern on a particular issue with a fair amount of precision; they can, for instance, locate the media with the largest audience, specify the social prestige of the publication and its audience, and determine
the number of articles, column inches, or broadcast minutes devoted to specific folk devils. In other words, to the extent that the media manifest moral panics, we are on comfortable grounds.

However, when the matter becomes what causes this concern to burst forth – whether and how, specifically, systematically, and empirically, the media influence the other components of the moral panic, most importantly, public opinion, and which of these media institutions most effectively fan the flames of the moral panic – sociologists are on less certain terrain. Causality is nearly always more difficult to establish than simple description.

It’s important to keep in mind that the content of the media is extremely diverse. At the very least, we should distinguish between media that are presented as news – the “factual” media – and those that are presented as “fictional” or strictly entertainment. But of course, all news is partly entertainment, and even the “fictional” media announce themselves as partly factual. Boring news loses audiences; all news producers must to some degree entertain their listening, viewing, using, or reading public. Likewise, entertainment skews toward a particular view of the real world. Comic books, novels, songs, situation comedy – any and all entertainment vehicles – present social, political, and economic institutions in a particular way; their content can be read as critical or supportive of the prevailing status quo. Do they insult homosexuals, African Americans, women, persons with a disability? Sling mud at the President of the United States? Seem to glorify random, senseless violence? Is getting drunk and puking in the street presented in an amusing, light-hearted way? Do they pick up on real-world events and themes and impart a certain emotional feeling about them? Again: Entertainment is never merely entertainment. It also looks at society in a certain way.

Even when it comes to news, the media do not take a neutral stance on their stories and how they report or present their stories. They decide what topics or events are important enough to present or report – in other words, what’s important and what the public should pay attention to – and they broadcast or print their stories with a certain angle, slant, or approach. In effect, the media set an agenda and impart to that agenda a certain feeling-tone. They “frame” their stories in such a way that a particular way of thinking about them seems reasonable. When editors and reporters choose the words with which they construct a story, they are involved in translating or representing reality in a particular way. This is inevitable; how could things be otherwise? A mindless “objectivity” that gives any and all sides of a story “equal time” would produce an endless stream of marginal opinions. Try to imagine the American Nazi Party getting equal air time with the Democratic and Republican parties.

What determines the content and slant of the media? Five theories or models hypothesize the reasons for media bias and the impact of the media on audiences: the “market” or “commercial” model; the “mass-manipulative” or “elite-engineered” model; the “professional-subculture” model; the “interest-group” model; and the “multi-mediated” model. Three of these models correspond to the three explanations
or theories of moral panics that we spelled out in Chapter 3: the grassroots theory, the elite-engineered theory, and the interest-group theory. In addition, journalism represents a specific, organized profession that in its stories, promulgates its own interests. And in the last decade or two of the twentieth century, the “multi-mediated” or “postmodern” model has emerged into intellectual, academic, and public discourse about the media.

All five of these models answer the question, “What events or phenomena are regarded as news?” Are the media guided by what the public finds engaging, by what attracts the largest audiences (the grassroots model)? Are the media guided by the interests of the ruling elite (the manipulative model)? Are the media guided (as in the professional-subculture model) by what the norms of journalism tells reporters, editors, publishers is news, not to mention the criteria of good professional entertainment that govern the work of novelists, comedy and song writers, artists? Do various powerful interest groups, each with their own agenda to protect or put forth, set the media agenda and determine their content, the media thereby simply reflecting the agenda of one or another of a vast array of powerful interest groups (the interest-group model)? Or is there no coherence or unifying theme to the media at all? Do the media constitute a hodge-podge, a jumble, a mosaic of diverse and dispersed sources, outlets, and messages that babble past one another at rather than to the public, any member of which is free to choose any one that suits his or her fancy and corresponds to his or her beliefs (the multi-mediated model)?

The commercial, market, or grassroots model, which sees media messages competing with one another for the public’s attention, argues that variety and diversity in both the population and in the media exist, and that the public exercises free choice, actively and selectively perceiving those messages that already fit its existing positions and preconceptions. Media stories are successful to the extent that they appeal to the public’s interests. In this model, the public is rarely converted to a position presented in the media; its views are reinforced rather than determined by the media. In the market model of the media, the primary determiner of the content and slant of the media is the public itself. Rather than passively allowing media messages to be crammed down their throat, rather than following the message of the media-like zombies, the public actively and freely chooses media sources and messages that interest them, which they already support, believe, and have faith in. Far from being an atomized “mass” in this process, audiences engage in it with “significant others” in their social network: family, relatives, friends, acquaintances, associates, neighbors, barroom buddies, the clientele of beauty parlors, participants in Internet chat rooms, fellow employees, club members, and congregants at their house of worship. In this model, the media do not so much create, generate, or ignite a moral panic so much as they tap into or reflect preexisting public hostility, fear, and concern. No sophisticated theory is necessary to predict that media stories about the kidnap, rape, and murder of a small child will arouse a moral panic; the reason why the public is aroused by such stories
is intuitively obvious, the fear and concern are immediately understandable, and the only issue is how substantial the ensuing moral panic will be. According to the grassroots model, the public determines the content of the media, and the public’s reaction to the media constitutes the moral panic.

In sharp contrast, the manipulative (or elite-engineered), or “hypodermic needle” model views the public as an “atomized mass,” made up of little more than “passive receptacles originating from a powerful source.” The ruling elite (including the media elite), this model argues, “use the media to mystify and manipulate the public” (Cohen and Young, 1981, p. 13). The elite are able to shoot the public with a “magic bullet” or a hypodermic needle and have their way with them, brainwashing them simply because, with its power and control, it can slant advertising, public relations, and news stories to its advantage. It is the interests of the rich and powerful that determine the content of the media, and the media, in turn, endorse and reinforce those interests.

Noam Chomsky elucidates this model in his often-quoted book *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (1989). The media, says, Chomsky, do not serve as a watchdog for truth but act as a kind of ministry for propaganda for the ruling elite. The major media are owned by a narrow and self-interested group of billionaires who control the messages transmitted by the press and other outlets and, thus, weed out and marginalize perspectives and news unacceptable to their interests. Managers, editors, journalists, broadcasters, and other media functionaries act as minions of the ruling elite and go along with their directives. In this sense, the media manufactures consent from the public, offering propaganda instead of news. And one means of manufacturing consent is through the invention or social construction of moral panic. A moral panic is a fear generated by a hoked-up, media-generated threat that favors the political and economic interests of the ruling elite. The press follows the dictates of the elite in fabricating scares, or is so saturated with elite values that its practitioners automatically know how to scare the public and divert it from the real problems of the day. The elite-engineered model often adopts a Marxist theoretical position, arguing that the media are undemocratic, little more than an ideological legitimation of capitalism (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972; Hall et al., 1978). The notion that the public freely chooses the films, television programs, and news broadcasts they watch is anathema to the elite-engineered model. This approach argues that the media serve elite interests, and moral panics, likewise, act as a facilitator in that service.

The “professional-subculture” model argues that the media’s content and slant are determined by one middle-level interest group in particular: journalists themselves. (This theory is rarely used to explain the content of non-news, that is, strictly entertainment programs.) The purveyors of the media approach the events of the day according to the norms, expectations, standards, and ethics of the profession of journalism. Four norms in particular shape how stories are communicated in the press: verify a story by checking two or more sources; be accurate; tell a story with a human interest angle in mind; tell a story with a particular audience
in mind (Mencher, 1997, pp. 34, 51, 66–7). Two of these norms (verify your story; accuracy is crucial) push a story away from sensationalism, and tend to be the norm among the more high-prestige media; in contrast, two of them (tell a human interest story; and keep your audience in mind) push a story toward sensationalism, and tend to be the norm among the lower-prestige media.

It is the practitioners of the media themselves, argues this model, who determine the content and slant of the news. The professional-subculture model sees the media as largely benign, and regards their role as informing and entertaining the public. “Give the public what it wants,” this model would say, “but in so doing, follow accepted professional journalistic standards and practices.” Hence, we have a tug in two different directions: the grassroots model, which argues that the public rules, and the professional model, which argues that the standards of the media rule. In either case, in contrast with the manipulative or elite-engineered model, the professional model minimizes the propaganda function of the media. To the professional-subculture model, moral panics are a byproduct, not the aim, of the news about the scandalous, sensational, exciting, important, emotionally arousing events of the day.

As we saw, the twilight of the twentieth century gave birth to the most recent perspective or model. We now live, this perspective argues, in a multi-mediated social world (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995), a world in which the media have multiplied and decentralized far beyond the boundaries of what the above three models conceived. Today, we find far more participants involved in public debates, making use of media sources that barely existed in past decades: micro-media, the gay, lesbian, and feminist press, 200 channels of cable TV, satellite television, public television, niche magazines with a half-life of an issue or two, every imaginable website on the Internet, CDs and DVDs that are produced in garages or living rooms and distributed on the street, and so on. In the late 1970s, the television networks’ share of the prime-time audience was nearly monolithic, over 90 percent; today, it has fallen to hold merely a minority of audience share, below 45 percent (Biagi, 2007). Audiences are now scattered and fragmented among dozens of different outlets.

Media decentralization is important for moral panics because the smaller, more specialized media outlets offer a voice to an array of perspectives that once were completely marginalized. Such outlets often offer an alternative perspective as to what the issues are, what stance their audiences should take on the issues, and, indeed, who the folk devils or deviants are; in some of these media outlets, parties designated as folk devils in the mainstream press are praised as heroes. In other words, it offers folk devils an opportunity to resist being cast into the role of villains and assert the normalcy of their conduct (McRobbie, 1994).

And with the decentralization of the media, it has become more difficult to generate a society-wide moral panic. If one channel or outlet attempts to generate or ignite a moral panic, what causes the others to follow? A more expansive and less hierarchical system of media outlets “has its own porosity, its spaces for
opposition and contestation” (McRobbie, 1994, p. 110). The media’s depiction of the lines between good and evil, black and white, “them” and “us,” in groups and out-groups, have become blurred, fuzzy, ambiguous (p. 114). In a multi-mediated world it becomes harder to define the “Other” or the deviant. Folk devils can fight back “by producing their own media” (p. 114). Moral panics still erupt, to be sure, but they are less likely to assume the “classic” form, and more likely to be blunted and scattered among competing narratives. Not everybody accepts and passes on the tales of good and evil that once gripped the society; such tales are still promulgated, of course, but they tend to be confined to specific and diverse sectors of the society rather than in the society as a whole. Hegemony, or cultural, ideological, moral dominance, has collapsed. We now live in a Tower of Babel, an age of the clash of media sources, outlets, and messages. And part of the reason for this fragmentation is that the media are less centralized and less capable of convincing everyone that evil doings are afoot, that the society as a whole is threatened, and that something must be done about the threat. Hence, the media have to work harder to generate a moral panic; a single scare rarely dominates the press as it once could and did (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995, pp. 567–70). Today, we have many scares (Thompson, 1998); a fragmented media produces fragmented moral panics, although, very possibly, more of them.

The interest-group model nestles somewhere between the elite-engineered and the multi-mediated model. It denies that the media simply express the views of the grassroots, denies that the media are dominated by a single ruling elite, and denies that the media express an almost infinitely varied hodge-podge of scattered and diverse social entities. Instead, its defenders would argue that the media reflect the interests of the most powerful political and economic groups in the society, but that these groups often work at cross-purposes with one another and often cancel each other out. Which entity is capable of channeling the media depends on the issue, specific or local circumstances, and coalitions it is able to amass at a particular time. Interest groups are usually behind moral panics, this model argues, but which ones stir up which panics varies from one time and place to another.

Each of these five models attracts vigorous defenders; each is, correspondingly, attacked by its critics. The manipulative, elite-engineered, “magic bullet,” or “hypodermic needle” model is implausible, since people are not atomized, docile, or passive agents; indeed, most are reflexive, skeptical, critical of and often resistant to messages in the media, and influenced more by their close interpersonal relations than by the media. In its pure form, the grassroots or pure market-driven model is implausible because the public’s choices, attention, and receptivity are constrained by the form, structure, and content of existing media outlets and the interests that they express. Even if the media cannot determine what the public thinks, they can determine what the public thinks about. The assertion that the news media operate mainly according to professional journalistic standards is belied by the sensationalistic content that fuels “trash” journalism; indeed, even prestigious media outlets are influenced by exaggeration and the hasty rush to get
out a good story. The very term, “professional,” implies an objective, impartial stance, but professional journalism leans toward interesting stories, and such stories tend to engage specific audiences. Whichever audience the story leans toward, it supports a particular ideological slant. Today’s huge diversity of media outlets, many of which have sprung up within the past decade or two, might seem to argue for a “multi-mediated” or “postmodern” model. But when we conduct nose counts and compare the influence of one outlet with another, we find that all media are not created equal, that some are vastly more powerful than others, and that a true hierarchy in mass communications does exist. Each of these models offers a partial though flawed picture of the mass media and their influence on public attitudes, behavior, and beliefs.

We do not feel that the mass media are dominated by the ruling elite or any single class, socioeconomic status, or conglomerate of interests (the “elite-engineered” theory). Neither do we feel that all sectors, classes, or socioeconomic strata have equal access to the media or express their culture or interests in the media with equal measure (the “grassroots” theory). And we feel that, in its baldest form, the interest-group model is overly cynical, arguing as it does that beliefs simply reflect interests. We argue that beliefs contradict interests enough to render this perspective questionable. Instead, we argue that each stratum is internally diverse or divided with respect to interests and culture, and for each stratum, the researcher can empirically establish a certain statistical, per-person likelihood of influencing the media’s content. It is almost certain that a certain sector of the upper-middle class – affluent, well-connected intellectuals, academics, journalists, artists – has a greater influence, in proportion to its numbers, than any other strata, but it no more “dominates” the media than the elite does. And hence, the “multi-mediated” perspective presents a model that sees the media as too diverse and fragmented to be empirically satisfying. Again, each of these perspectives has something to offer, but not one of them can offer us the complete picture.

MEDIA EXAGGERATION

Do the media exaggerate? As a qualification, we find it necessary to point out that exaggeration points to the issue of newsworthiness, and novelty is one feature in newsworthiness. When something new and unfamiliar invades our routine, uneventful, quotidian world, it becomes not only interesting but newsworthy. For instance, in the 1960s, the use of LSD was previously unknown to most of the public at large. Hence, it is understandable that the media would have found its widespread use exotic, alluring, and dangerous, interesting as well – worthy of being the subject of an eruption of news stories. Moreover, the novelty of LSD use helps explain the enormous volume of untrue, exaggerated, and unsubstantiated claims about the drug’s effects. But this point merely begs the chicken-and-egg question: whether and
to what extent media exaggeration is a component of newsworthiness. By itself, novelty does not create headlines that read that LSD users go insane, fly out of windows, step in front of moving cars, ravage their own chromosomes and the DNA of their progeny, or gouge out their own eyes. Reports of such supposed effects caused by well-known phenomena (the consumption of alcohol, for instance) would have been checked by reporters, but they often weren’t in the sixties for LSD use. So we are led to the question: in the 1960s with the use of LSD, why weren’t these assertions systematically checked out by journalists? With unusual or unfamiliar drugs, especially those with novel, exotic, and revolutionary effects, such wild, outrageous claims will be assumed, and at their inception, they all-too-often remain journalistically unsubstantiated. But because novelty can lead to hyperbole does not mean that the media do not exaggerate; instead, it argues for novelty acting as a catalyst for exaggeration.

What do we mean by media exaggeration? As we saw in the previous chapter, some critics argue that the concept of the moral panic is meaningless. Much of this criticism centers on the inability of moral panic researchers to devise a systematic test of proportionality. The same criticism applies to media exaggeration. According to Peter Vasterman (2005), to argue that media exaggeration can be defined by paying “too much attention to a matter that is not very important, if not completely trivial,” is “too subjective, it depends on personal views and ideologies that decide what is regarded as important or not” (p. 512). And again, as we’ve seen, a number of other critics have chimed in on the same point (for instance, Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). In contrast, we argue that sociologists and media experts can measure media exaggeration, and fairly specifically, quantitatively, and reliably. In other words, we believe that the moral panic is not a subjective, ideologically-loaded concept.

As we saw, according to Stanley Cohen’s Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972, pp. 19–26), the news stories of the scuffles and minor acts of vandalism that touched off a moral panic over the Mods, Rockers, Teddy Boys, and other representatives of the youth culture, grossly exaggerated the seriousness of the events; exaggerated the amount of damage; seriously distorted the reality of the events; and repeated false stories. In addition, the media used “sensational headlines,” “melodramatic vocabulary” and “deliberate heightening” of the elements in the story that the press and the public consider news. And what stimulated the media frenzy over a minor episode, Cohen argues, is the conjunction of journalistic necessity with telling a good, dramatic story and, if possible, throwing in an instructive morality tale.

Cohen’s early analysis points us to examples and concrete measures or indicators of media exaggeration. Media exaggeration refers to: (1) inflating the size, scope, danger, harm, and seriousness of the phenomenon reported; (2) making untrue claims about phenomenon; (3) devoting considerably more attention to a less serious or dangerous phenomenon than to a more serious one; (4) devoting more attention to a phenomenon at a point in time when it is less serious than when it is
more serious; (5) devoting more attention to a phenomenon among certain groups in which it is less common than those in which it is more common.

Notice that we are not saying that the media always or even usually exaggerate; for routine stories, most news reports are at least approximately accurate. But for certain topics at certain times, the media typically exaggerate. While some sectors of the press are more faithful to the facts than others, overheated press prose tends to be generated in times when certain strata or segments of the society perceive a crisis or a threat to their interests, or a supposed folk devil enters the picture. In other words, if a major development is novel and unprecedented, it tends to be not only news, the media are also likely to exaggerate those aspects of it that are news; and if a folk devil, enemy, or deviant seems to be responsible for it, it is doubly newsworthy and susceptible to press exaggeration.

In other words, the mass media flourish on at least a measure of sensationalism or exaggeration. Whether the audiences are larger or narrower, whether the stories are more, or less, factually-based, whether the outlet be books, TV, or newspapers, audiences are more likely to find exciting stories appealing than dull stories, and exciting is substantially defined by what scares and concerns people. News producers advocate the principle, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Drug, crime, and disaster stories make up most of the local news (Glassner, 1999, p. xxii), and the greater the impact of a supposed threat, the more exciting the story and the greater the potential audience. In a sense, sensationalism is inherent in the very concept of the media, by virtue of the norms of journalism. By that we mean that big stories are more important than little stories; stories about eye-catching, unusual events are more important than routine, boring events.

Because of the norms of journalism, which consider dramatic events as newsworthy, the media are more likely to focus on atypical, unusual events. But in so doing, the journalists exaggerate their statistical importance. Consider crime: Both journalists and the public at large consider violent offenses such as rape, robbery, and murder more newsworthy than nonviolent, property offenses. In fact, homicide is “the most prominent crime in news stories” (Reiner, 2007, p. 309). Hence, it is entirely understandable that journalists focus on violent as opposed to less serious and less newsworthy offenses. The same is true of fiction, including novels and movies (pp. 311–15). But in real life, violent offenses are relatively rare in comparison with property crime: ninety percent of crimes that take place are these boring, quotidian, nonviolent offenses. Crime reporting and dramatization, especially of the most serious offenses, receives disproportionate attention. Tversky and Kahneman argue that this attention misleads the public into thinking that unusual events that receive an disproportionate amount of attention — serious crime included — is more common and widespread than it is (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982; Gilovich, Griffin, and Kahneman, 2002; Quillen, 2008).

Routine, day-to-day crimes make for boring news and boring drama. Who wants to read, hear about, or see story after story on shoplifting, probably the most common type of crime? Yet, in skewing their stories toward violent offenses, much
of the public thinks of them as more common than they actually are. Moreover, in the United States, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, during the past decade and a half, the rate of violent crime has plummeted by more than half. During the period between 1973 and 1993, the yearly violent crime rate in the United States fluctuated around 50 per 1,000 in the population. Since 1994 the rate dropped on a year-by-year basis, and now stands at 20. This is one of the most important stories of the past half-century, but it has received insufficient media attention. Instead, the nightly news features local murders and rapes. Hence, even into the twenty-first century, fear of crime remains high. Some critics (Altheide, 2002; Jewkes, 2004; Lee, 2007) argue that the media consciously create, regulate, orchestrate, and capitalize on the public’s fear of crime victimization. While the bias of the media – a form of exaggeration – is an accurate charge, this is not an entirely bad thing; indeed, these stories are journalistically interesting, and the practice that churns them out is journalistically necessary.

Equally as interesting: the crime that is depicted in the media, and even more, in fiction, is very different from the crime that occurs in real life. Not only is media crime vastly more violent, the violence is skewed – while real murder tends to erupt between young men in brawls (or between a husband and wife in a domestic dispute), to focus on fiction, murder involves motive, calculation, and greed. Moreover, the fictional perpetrator is more likely to be white, older, and of higher status than is true in real life (Reiner, 2007, p. 314). Two additional wrinkles: in fiction, a murder is more likely to be solved, and, moreover, the story to depict the police as honest and hard-working, and dramas now, as opposed to the past, “increasingly focus on the plight of victims” (p. 314).

In addition to exaggerating the incidence of serious crime, especially violence, and most notably, murder, we have the tendency of media invention in reports of disturbing-sounding behavior that never actually took place. When deviant behavior is imagined or invented, by definition, any and all accounts of it are exaggerations. As we saw above, a hierarchy exists, such that the higher-prestige media do not report as true the very same stories on which the lower-prestige media thrive. As we’ve seen throughout, and as we’ll see in more detail in a later chapter, during the 1980s and 1990s, The New York Times and The Washington Post did not report the story on satanic ritual abuse, but many local and lower-prestige newspapers did. And many television broadcasts did as well. Larry King Live (1988, 1991), Oprah (1986, 1988, 1990), Sally Jesse Raphael (1991, 1992), and Geraldo (1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991), TV programs with among the largest talk show audiences in media history – easily numbering into the tens of millions of viewers – all reported the story, on multiple broadcasts, as true (de Young, 2004, p. 233). And yet there was no “satanic underground,” no evil cabal of devil worshippers who kidnapped and sexually abused children for their demonic rituals, no flying witches or bloody sacrifices of giraffes and elephants, no “baby-breeding” factories for monstrous abominations to come. And almost none of these journalistic sensation-mongers have since retracted their outrageous claims; they merely move on to another dubious
story, stirring up yet another moral panic. All of it – nearly every single detail of it – was invented or imagined.

The mass media are an excellent breeding ground for moral panics, and to generate excitement and capture larger audiences they often jump the gun or stretch the truth on the size and extent of the problems they report. The police seizure of a ton of cocaine is a bigger story than a one-kilo seizure; a large year-by-year increase in drug abuse is a bigger story than no increase at all; the claim that every community, including predominantly white, middle-class suburbs, is “infested” with violent gangs is a bigger story than the fact that these gangs are a problem only in certain neighborhoods and locales; an increase in the crime rate is a bigger story than stability; a threat to vulnerable sectors of the population, such as the children and the elderly, is bigger news than a threat to healthy, strapping young adult males; a more substantial predatory threat from strangers is a bigger story than a threat from intimates, such as parents, neighbors, and friends.

As we’ll see in more detail in the chapter on drug panics, in the late eighties and early nineties, the media grossly exaggerated the extent of harm to fetuses as a result of the use of cocaine by expectant mothers; they even created a new and troublesome segment of the population – “crack babies.” In fact, the media at the time were sloppy as to whether they were referring to crack or powder cocaine; reporters blurred the line between these two substances so as to encompass a larger – and exaggerated – user population. And as it turns out, the use of cocaine by expectant mothers was not especially harmful to their newborns, but the media’s exaggerated, sensationalistic, and premature claims helped ignite a moral panic. Hence, the claims the media made about the degree of harm to the fetuses of expectant mothers, evidence showed, were exaggerated. If journalists had checked out their stories more carefully and thoroughly, if they had spoken to more pediatricians and neonatologists, they could have discovered the truth of the matter. Instead, they immediately ran with the most sensationalistic and exaggerated story at hand: crack babies. As it turns out, alcohol is much more likely to produce fetal damage than cocaine, another indication that the media exaggerated the crack story and that the consumption of cocaine circa 1990 constituted a moral panic.

As we’ll see in a later chapter, the media also overstated or exaggerated the threat of methamphetamine abuse. In the mid-2000s, stories about the threat of meth, ice, crystal, or crank exploded in the public’s face. Meth was sweeping the country, climbing up the socioeconomic ladder, becoming the nation’s drug of choice (Jefferson, 2005; The Oregonian, story series between October 10, 2004, to March 3, 2006; “The Meth Epidemic,” Public Broadcasting System video, 2006). Again, scrutiny of the evidence reveals that methamphetamine is rarely used in major geographical regions of the country (the East Coast, for example) as well as most socioeconomic sectors of the society; indeed, it is a small minority preference among high school students; and is extremely rarely implicated in overdose deaths (Goode, 2008a, pp. 281–4). Hence, media claims about the extent of methamphetamine
abuse, evidence shows, were exaggerated. But by the 2000s, certain sectors of the media had learned a lesson: extensive criticism of meth’s widespread use created a contrary clangor to the chorus (Shafer, 2005; 2006; Valdez, 2006; King, 2006), reminding us that, even in the midst of a moral panic, not all sectors of the society join in on hostility, fear, and concern about a supposedly threatening phenomenon or behavior.

Consider too how the mass media exaggerated the incidence of school shootings. Dictionaries define an epidemic as a sudden, widespread occurrence of a disease or an undesirable phenomenon. Referring to an activity which is neither “sudden” nor “widespread” would, therefore, be an exaggeration. During the 1990s and the early 2000s, uncountable stories blared out the news of school shootings; a significant proportion of them were headlined with the chilling word, epidemic. “An epidemic of violence,” headlined CNN News on March 8, 2001, reporting the shooting-spree murder of two teenagers and the injury of 13 others, in Santana High School in Santee, California. “Incidents in Schools Rise Sharply,” the headline announced. Dan Rather agreed; following the Santee killings, the CBS Evening News anchorman stated: “School shootings in the country have become an epidemic.” There seemed to be no doubt about it: School shootings appeared in the news much more than in the past, they were presented by the media as rising in number, and the society was depicted as being in the midst of an epidemic. The multiple killings in Jonesboro Arkansas in 1998; Columbine, Colorado in 1999; Santee, California in 2001; Red Lake Minnesota in 2005; Paradise, Pennsylvania – in an Amish school – in 2006; in Success Tech Academy in Cleveland, Ohio in 2007, seemed to bear out these assertions. The list seemed endless. But the reality was quite different.

Skeptics reminded the public that school shootings may not be as “epidemic” as much of the media claimed. Joel Best, a sociologist, has demonstrated that, although the number of both rose and fell on a year-by-year basis, between 1997 and 1999, the number of stories in major newspapers on school deaths in the United States increased eight times, but between 1998 and 2001, the actual number of violent school deaths (accidents and suicides excluded) plummeted from 35 to 15. We are in the midst, Best says, of a “phantom epidemic” (2002a). Dewey Cornell (2006), a forensic psychologist, points out that the number of juvenile arrests for murder dropped from 3,284 in 1993 to 973 in 2002, and the victims of school homicides dropped from 42 in 1993 to eight in 2001, two in 2002, and 4 in 2003. The fact is, for school children, nationwide, schools are safer places to be than homes; a small number of newsworthy, high-profile cases of violence do not represent the country as a whole; and school violence actually substantially declined between the decade of the 1990s and the 2000s. There is no “epidemic” of school violence, and by using the term, the media exaggerate its incidence; in fact, during this period, the media fabricated a moral panic of school shootings. Again, the media tend to estimate the size and extent of most phenomena fairly accurately. But, somehow, under certain circumstances, journalists seem to take leave of their
senses and abandon all sense of proportion and exaggerate the size and extent of some threats almost beyond recognition. Such exaggerations – including outright fabrications – often result in inducing heightened concern and fear in the general public.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Moral panics began long before the mass media existed, as far back as organized society itself. Centuries ago, moral panics were fueled by rumor, gossip, and legend. Even today, many such scares arise mainly through word of mouth rather than by means of the mass media. Still, the media are usually the vehicle that conveys the stories and claims on which moral panics are based; they are the most effective means by which indignation over a given threat is propagated because, unlike word of mouth, they reach large audiences over a brief time, often even simultaneously.

The media’s expression of concern about a given folk devil is one of several manifestations of the moral panic. In this sense, media attention, by itself, constitutes the moral panic. But many observers also believe that the media are typically the vehicle for setting the moral panic in motion; the media cause or intensify the other manifestations of the moral panic, namely outrage and concern expressed by the general public, social movement activists (“moral entrepreneurs”), and politicians, lawmakers, and law enforcement personnel.

The media, or technically, mass media of communication, are made up of eight principal components: television, radio, and film and DVDs, music – mainly CDs – newspapers, books, magazines and comic books, and the Internet. Although the term “mass” indicates a large or popular audience, the size of a medium’s audience is a matter of degree. All mass media are engaged in the business of conveying a message to an audience by means of a particular transmission device, such as a television set, a magazine, or the motion picture screen. Most mass media are far more effective at communicating a message to an audience than receiving messages from an audience. In other words, most mass media are not directly interactive. However, they do enable indirect interaction. The “minor” media (such as books) sell the product itself, and the feedback comes in the form of sales of that product. The “major” media (such as television) sell advertising; often the feedback comes in the form of market research on the effectiveness of ads or the size of audiences. The mass media tend to divide themselves into “niches,” with each outlet cultivating a more or less specialized and particular audience. Even television, with a huge audience of tens and sometimes hundreds of millions of viewers, is less concentrated, more diverse, more specialized, and more niche-driven than it once was.
The media are neither neutral nor objective in depicting the world. All have a particular slant, skew, or bias. Even the “fictional” or entertainment media, such as television drama, often seems to endorse a view that is markedly askew from the way evidence indicates the world actually is. This does not mean that what the media say is false, only that they pay attention to or focus on or dramatize certain phenomena or events while ignoring or downplaying others.

Five theories or models hypothesize media slant and impact: the market or commercial model; the mass-manipulative or elite-engineered model; the professional-subculture model; the multi-mediated model; and the interest-group model. The market-driven model argues that the public or grassroots freely choose media programs, broadcasts, or products. Moreover, this model argues, the public is only minimally influenced by media content and messages because it gravitates to what they want to see, hear, and read. And the reason why some media are so popular is because they appeal to what the public wants. The elite-engineered model argues that the powers that be dominate the media and control their content to their own advantage and against the interests of the public at large. To a substantial degree, the masses are “brainwashed” by the media so that the elites continue exploiting them. The professional-subculture model stresses that the content and slant of the media are largely determined by journalists themselves. The multi-mediated model argues that the media have become so diverse, specialized, and decentralized that there is no dominant, hegemonic message. There’s “something for everybody.” And the interest-group model, true to its name, argues that the media reflect the interests of the dominant and various entities whose members are protecting or enhancing their own political, economic, and/or ideological agendas.

Some critics of the moral panic argue that the concept of media exaggeration cannot be determined because there is no way of measuring how proportional the media’s representation of things should be. Instead, we agree with Stanley Cohen, who launched the moral panic concept, that media exaggeration is an identifiable, quantifiable, measurable phenomenon. Media exaggeration refers to: (1) inflating the size, scope, danger, harm of the phenomenon reported; (2) making untrue claims about a phenomenon; (3) devoting more attention to a less serious phenomenon than to a more serious one; (4) devoting more attention to a phenomenon at a point in time when it is less serious than one when it is more serious; (5) devoting more attention to the occurrence of a phenomenon among certain groups in which it is less common than to its incidence among those in which it is more common.

Hence, the first form of media exaggeration is seen in the devotion of a great deal of attention to statistically unusual events or phenomena. A measure of sensationalism is inherent in the very enterprise of the media because stories about big, important, dramatic – and hence, relatively atypical – events or phenomena tend to be newsworthy, while stories about more routine, mundane, and common events tend to be less engaging and thus less newsworthy. This source of exaggeration cannot be avoided since everyone agrees that stories about more unusual,
higher-impact events are more interesting and so more newsworthy than stories about hum-drum, run-of-the-mill, ordinary, and more common events. Therefore, the most basic, fundamental, and obvious sense of media exaggeration is how newsworthiness is determined. In other words, media exaggeration cannot be avoided because the media focus on what is atypical, unusual, and newsworthy, which in turn leads the public to believe that the off-beat and somewhat bizarre, which is what the public finds most interesting, is actually more common than it is. In other words, shoplifting (an extremely common crime) is not news unless a celebrity engages in it; a quadruple murder (an extremely rare event) is enormous news. It seems an obvious point, but journalists are not—and shouldn’t be—criminologists or sociologists.

The second form that media exaggeration takes is reporting as true stories of events or phenomena that are imaginary or fabricated. In the realm of moral panics, the satanic ritual abuse scare of the late 1980s and early 1990s very likely provides the most clear-cut example of this tendency.

Third, the media also have a tendency to exaggerate the size and extent of the problems they report, especially if such exaggeration highlights a novel or seemingly threatening phenomenon or event, or one with a real or imaginary deviant or “folk devil.” The degree of harm caused to fetuses by the abuse of cocaine on the part of expectant mothers as reported in the early 1990s provides an illustrative case. The sensitization of the media to deviant, novel behavior encouraged journalists to seize on a small number of scary reports and get the story out before the facts were thoroughly checked. In the early 2000s, the media also overstated or exaggerated how widespread and harmful methamphetamine abuse was. And by labeling a small number of school shootings as constituting an “epidemic,” the media exaggerated the sense of how frequent they were. In fact, in the United States, since the beginning of the 1990s, youth violence in particular and violence taking place in schools specifically have actually declined. As a result of this exaggeration, the media contributed to a moral panic.

As a major vehicle of the moral panic, the media deserve close attention. Even if attention in the press fails to stir the public’s sense of fear and outrage, the origin, nature, and trajectory of media accusations and denunciations by themselves constitute a topic worth understanding.
DEVIANCE, MORALITY, AND CRIMINAL LAW
One man punches another in the face, hard enough to break the second man’s nose, which bleeds all over his shirt. A woman carries her newborn baby to a river, holds it underwater as it struggles; when it drowns, she releases it and lets it float downstream. Two 15-year-old boys pick up a rock, throw it through the window of a jewelry store, grab several watches and necklaces on display, and run away with their loot. Two parishioners in fifteenth-century France sit at a table discussing the sins of the Catholic Church, then conclude that they want to join the newly-formed church of John Calvin. A devout Muslim straps a vest-bomb to his chest, walks into a crowded Jerusalem market, and detonates the bomb, killing himself and three passers-by. A fat high school girl attends a dance where her classmates snigger and whisper derogatory statements to one another about her size; she bursts into tears, rushes out of the room, and returns home in shame.

What do these seemingly diverse things have in common?

Sociologists generally define “deviance” as a violation of a society’s or a group’s norms or rules that calls forth censure, condemnation, or a punishment for the violator. What is regarded as deviant behavior, expressed beliefs, or characteristics varies from society to society, from one sector of the society to another, from group to group, and from one period of time to another, or from one social context to another. To the sociologist, the most crucial feature of deviance is not the act, the belief, or the individual characteristic in question; it’s the audience, the people observing, hearing about, and evaluating it. And deviance is a foundational defining element of the moral panic.

Morality – a view of right and wrong – can be looked at from two radically different perspectives: it may be taken as relative, as subjectively problematic, or as absolute – objectively given (Rubington and Weinberg, 2007, pp. 1–3). The absolute or objectively given approach is the traditional, conventional perspective; it assumes that we all know – or should know – what is good and bad, right and wrong, virtuous and evil. The quality of evil or immorality resides in the very nature of an act itself; it is inherent, intrinsic, or immanent within certain forms of behavior. If an act is wrong, it is wrong now and forever; it always was and always will be evil, wrong here, there, and everywhere. It is evil in the abstract, an offense against nature, science, medicine, God, or the universe – depending on the appropriate rhetorical vehicle which conveys the argument. Behavior is wrong if it violates an absolute, eternal, final law. It need not be seen or judged by external human observers to be regarded as wrong; its immorality is a simple, objective fact, even if it takes place in a society or group that condones it. The belief held by anti-abortion pro-lifers that abortion is murder is an example of this line of thinking. So is the fundamentalist Christian’s belief that homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of God and the anti-pornographer’s view that, in and of itself, pornography represents an assault against women. It matters not to these denouncers of evil that the activities or phenomena in question are seen, defined, or conceptualized in different ways in other quarters; they see them as inherently, abstractly, immanently evil – wrong everywhere and at all times, irrespective of social and cultural definitions of right and wrong.
Moreover, the objectively given approach assumes that “evil causes evil,” or “the doctrine of evil consequences,” that is, that consequences universally agreed to be negative and harmful inevitably flow from immoral practices; it is inherent in the very nature of the behavior itself that addicts die of drug overdoses, homosexuals contract AIDS (a “retribution from God” for engaging in immoral behavior, some say), pornography causes men to brutalize women, alcoholics contract cirrhosis of the liver, illegal drug use causes moral degeneration and criminal behavior, and so on. The harmful consequences of evil actions are self-evident and verify what the absolutist already knows: that there is a moral economy in the universe, that punishment – of oneself or of others – is to be expected from violating the rules of morality. Wrongdoing is harmful and pathological in ways that conventionality is not; harm and pathology are immanent or inherent in evil actions. It is not possible to fool around with immorality; eventually, wrongdoers have moral dues to pay and negative consequences to deal with. Importantly, most people who hold the view of immanent evil deny that theirs is a “moralistic” approach because that implies a particular type of judgment; they would say that the wrong is immanently within the phenomenon itself, not in their view of it. This “moral economy” is the idea behind the Hindu concept of karma and the Christian notion of sin: that retribution follows wrongdoing.

RELATIVITY

Taking morality as relative or subjectively problematic looks at matters the other way around: it attempts to understand how and why behavior is regarded as evil or deviant. The “subjectively problematic” perspective regards deviance as a social construct rather than an objective reality. The focus is on the definition or understanding that members of a society hold with respect to the acts designated as undesirable. The existence of the evil in the indwelling, objectively given, or immanent sense is not so much negated as put aside for a focus on how morality is defined and acted out. What is regarded as evil in one place or situation, or at one time, may be acceptable or even rewarded in others. Morality, to repeat an oft-used cliché, is relative. Put another way, designating certain behaviors and individuals as deviant is problematic, not commonsensical, and it is the members of the society who decide, not the external observer.

Morality is relative geographically and culturally, historically and temporally, situationally and subculturally. Adulterers could be stoned to death in Iran, yet in Sikkim, adultery is tolerated, often encouraged and even, upon occasion, rewarded. An assassination on one side of a border or against the member of a particular group is seen as murder, a brutal act of butchery and cowardice; on the other side, or against the member of another group, the same killing may be regarded as laudable, an act of heroism, liberation, and triumph. Ancient Aztec
priests cut open the chest of a human sacrifice and tore out his still-beating heart; in contemporary Mexico, the same act would be cause for arrest, prosecution, possibly commitment to a mental institution. In 1940, in Mexico City, an assassin killed communist renegade Leon Trotsky with a pickaxe. Although his assassin, Ramón Mercador, spent 20 years in a Mexican prison, in the Soviet Union, he was hailed as a hero. Tyrannicide is a form of assassination intended to liberate a nation or society from the domination of a tyrant; in all such societies, in some social circles, it is regarded as an act of heroism. Ben-Yehuda (1993) discusses historical cases of political assassinations by Jews in the Palestinian Territory and Israel; some Jews regarded these murders as acceptable, justified, cloaked in righteousness. Within a given society, there is considerable variation from one group, category, and subculture to another in evaluations of and reactions toward certain behaviors. As we’ll see, among the members of Women Against Pornography, the consumption of pornographic material is an evil in itself — a blasphemy against women — that presumably causes men to engage in even more seriously evil actions; such material, they say, must be excised from the society altogether. Even if the consumption of porn does not cause such behavior, these women would say it expresses or manifests a contemptuous view of women. Among the readers of Playboy, Penthouse, and Hustler, consuming pornography is regarded as a harmless, pleasurable activity that expresses and satisfies a simple, natural male impulse or need. To the pro-life movement, abortion is murder. To most feminists and sexual and sex-role liberals and libertarians, abortion is the removal of unwanted tissue, an expression of a woman’s free choice and control over her own body.

To the adherent of the relativist or subjectively problematic approach, no quality of absolute evil lurks immanently or inherently in adultery, homicide, human sacrifice, pornography, or abortion. What is crucial is how the behavior is defined, judged, and evaluated in a particular context. What counts are these varying definitions and evaluations; it is they and they alone that determine the status of an act with respect to morality and immorality. It can be determined that such relativistic definitions and evaluations exist, are believed, and are acted upon; we can investigate and determine the religious practices of the ancient Aztecs, the attitudes of contemporary Iranians, the views of Women Against Pornography, how pro-lifers view abortion. On the other hand, in the abstract, how do we know that adultery is immoral, killing is evil, abortion is murder? Who says? According to whose perspective? What measurable criteria will allow us to establish these positions? The relativistic position says that an act is evil or immoral not in the abstract but according to a particular perspective, from someone’s (or some group’s) point of view.

Our view is that the relativistic, subjectively problematic perspective is far more fruitful in helping us to understand morality than is the objectively given approach. We take evaluations of behavior as our point of departure. In doing so, we insist on two points: one, that the subjectively problematic dimension is worthy of study in its own right, and two, that it is impossible to predict the subjective dimension from the objective. Definitions of morality arise as a consequence of factors that
are to some degree independent of the objective consequences of behavior. The populace is not outraged at a killing *solely* because it results in the loss of human life; many types of killing are condoned. Drug use, possession, and sale are not condemned and criminalized *exclusively* because they – supposedly – cause users to commit crime and violence, get sick, and die. It is our contention that something else is at work here, and we intend to understand what that something else is. Judgments of evil or immorality cannot be reduced to or subsumed under objective harm.

To qualify the relativity notion, it is necessary to point out that on the cross-societal level, it is clear, worldwide, that some actions are more likely to result in condemnation and punishment than others. A willful, unprovoked, unmotivated killing of a member of one’s own group is highly likely to result in negative sanctioning just about everywhere; to say that *some forms of killing* are tolerated in one place and punished in another does *not* mean that *other forms of killing* are not punished in all, or almost all, cultures of the world. Incest has been widely, nearly universally, condemned. There are a very few exceptions, as there are to any rule: In the past, a few societies encouraged brother–sister marriage in the royal family, the reason being that the society’s highest-ranking members should marry the society’s other highest-ranking members. Robbing members of one’s own group is accepted by almost no peoples on Earth, the few exceptions of the “Robin Hood” syndrome – taking from the rich and giving to the poor – notwithstanding. Betraying one’s own country or society when it is at war with another is regarded by *most* citizens as heinous, and is punished, just about everywhere. Of course, again, there are exceptions, spelled out by Ben-Yehuda in his book on *Betrayals and Treason* (2001). To the extent that radical relativity implies no patterns whatsoever in the moral codes from one society to another, it is fallacious. Social dynamics dictate why these rules exist; the toleration of too much objectively harmful behavior would tear apart society’s social fabric, render it unstable, and life in it short-lived.

Even within the same society, the idea of relativity has its limits. Different categories and groups in a society, each with its own views of right or wrong, are not equally powerful or numerous in the population. Consequently, someone who enacts behavior that is opposed by a small number of relatively powerless individuals stands a low likelihood of being condemned and punished, whereas someone who enacts behavior that is opposed by large numbers of relatively powerful individuals is highly likely to be condemned. Thus, a literal reading of the radically relativistic, “Everything is relative” cliché is wrong because not all individuals who enact different sorts of behavior stand the same chance of being condemned as deviant. A priori, one can predict that, when detected, in Western society, say, murdering an infant in its crib, is more likely to result in punishment than is chewing gum. The number of circumstances which would excuse the former action and seriously punish the latter is extremely limited. Still, let’s remember, infanticide has to be socially and historically *constructed* as an evil, a social problem in need
of being addressed by the society. Under extreme circumstances, such as mass starvation, the killing of unwanted babies has been tolerated and widely practiced, although usually sub rosa, that is, in an unacknowledged fashion. And in many societies of the world, infanticide is widely practiced as an alternative to birth control, or as a means of having a boy rather than a girl.

Attitudes toward and reactions to potentially deviant behavior are held and expressed by differing numbers of people, as well as people with differing quanta of power. We are not interested in a mere patchwork mosaic of different beliefs and customs in a given society. Rather, we have to direct our attention to the dominant moral codes. Looking at different definitions of deviance as if they exist side-by-side without impinging on one another in a kind of ethical “free enterprise system” belies the hierarchical nature of deviance. What we want to know here is which forms of behavior have a high likelihood of being condemned and punished. To each form of behavior enacted by specific individuals we can attach a certain probability of exciting moral outrage or censure. To the degree that radical relativity implies that, within a given society, any and all actions are equally likely – or unlikely – to be condemned or punished, it is fallacious.

At the same time, we must always focus on the specific audience that is relevant to the behavior under scrutiny. It is one thing to say that certain behaviors stand a low likelihood of being condemned in a society generally; it is an altogether different matter to focus on the dynamics of censure within a given setting or context. The likelihood that members of Western society generally will be censured, for example, for engaging in mixed-sex dancing is small; therefore, we can say that dancing is not a deviant act – to most Westerners. On the other hand, if it is behavior within the context of extremely strict, orthodox, fundamentalist religious sects in which we are interested, their definition – that coed dancing is a degenerate, immoral practice – becomes relevant. Some forms of behavior may be deviant to very small, relatively powerless audiences, but to someone subject to their definitions of right and wrong, such definitions are central, because they determine the likelihood of censure.

**AUDIENCES**

Sociologists refer to behavior that is widely condemned, which, if someone engages in it and it is observed, is likely to attract or generate hostility, condemnation, or punishment from others, deviance or deviant behavior. How widespread does this condemnation have to be? There cannot be a clear-cut answer to this question; what is clear, though, is that the more widespread the condemnation, the more a given form of behavior qualifies as deviant. Deviance is not an either–or proposition; “deviancy” is a matter of degree. The important point is, to the sociologist, the characteristic of deviance is defined not by the quality of the act
but by the nature of the reaction that the act engenders or is likely to engender. To most people, the terms “deviance” and, even more, “deviant,” are pejorative and condemnatory; they imply that there is something wrong, sick, or pathological about the behavior and the person being referred to. In contrast, to the sociologist, these terms are simply descriptive; they imply nothing whatsoever about the behavior or the person referred to except that such behavior or person has attracted widespread public scorn. No condemnation whatsoever is implied by the use of the terms “deviance” and “deviant”; they refer to behavior that, or persons who, are widely condemned – that, and nothing more.

Hence, the sociologist’s focus on deviance as subjectively problematic implies the importance of an audience, that is, those individuals who directly or indirectly witness, hear about, and evaluate the behavior or the individuals in question. Audiences can include parents and other relatives, teachers, employers, a spouse, friends, acquaintances, neighbors, psychiatrists, the police, eyewitnesses, onlookers, and bystanders – anyone who can and does evaluate what one is doing and who one is. In fact, one can even be an audience to oneself and one’s own behavior. Again, what counts with the subjective or relativistic approach, is that audiences evaluate behavior and other individuals. To answer the question of whether a certain form of behavior is deviant, we are forced to ask a series of questions: Deviant to whom? Whose evaluation is relevant? Which audience’s reaction are we interested in? The issue of deviance is completely meaningless without reference to a specific, relevant audience. To audience X, behavior A is evil and immoral; to audience Y, it is not.

The crucial importance of audiences in defining deviance implies the importance of the distinction between “societal” and “situational” deviance (Plummer, 1979, p. 98). “Societal” deviance is made up of widely condemned classes or categories of behavior. It would be difficult to argue that, in Western society generally, transvestism, stealing, adultery, illicit drug use, child abuse, and alcoholism are not widely regarded as censurable, unacceptable, deplorable behavior. Try to imagine a candidate for political office stating in a speech that he or she engaged in adultery, and will continue to do so. Hence, “societally,” the behaviors mentioned above must be regarded as deviant. One need not even agree with this judgment to recognize that it is generally true.

In contrast, “situational” deviance examines negative judgments of behavior and individuals in specific contexts. The sensitive observer can find social contexts or locales in which certain forms of behavior are tolerated, given latitude or even encouraged. For instance, in homosexual circles, homosexuality is “normalized” (Plummer, 1979, p. 99). To factory management and in the society at large, worker laziness, inefficiency, and slacking off is deviant and hence, an example of societal deviant. However, among many factory workers, it is working too hard and too efficiently, not laziness, that is regarded as deviant (Homans, 1964), in our terminology, an instance of situational deviance. Among feminists, watching pornography is regarded as oppressive to women and hence, a form of wrongdoing – according to
our definition, deviant. Most Americans would agree, at least in principle, though few are likely to get much worked up about it. However, in the context of many college fraternities, refusing to join one’s “brothers” in viewing porn is to attract derision and ridicule, in other words, to engage in deviant behavior. Norms defining a form of behavior as wrong may not be accepted or acted upon everywhere, in all social contexts. In order to determine whether an act is “situationally” deviant, it is necessary to observe actual, concrete reactions in specific, real-life, micro-interactional settings and situations (Plummer, 1979, p. 98). What is defined as deviance in the society at large (“societal” deviance) may be acceptable or even praiseworthy in certain social contexts, while refusing to engage in the societally deviant act may attract condemnation and hence, represent an example of “situational” deviance.

DEVIANCETE AND MORAL PANICS

By viewing deviance as subjectively problematic, we raise the possibility of the concept of the moral panic. If the condemnation of certain behavior as deviant is not an inevitability, but grows out of the characteristics of a particular society and the social structure of a certain time and place, we admit the possibility that intense public concern can emerge to some degree independent of a condition’s objective threat. Indeed, we must agree that the members of a society can become wildly hostile to a certain category of people, or a certain form of behavior, that does not endanger them in any serious, concrete way, and yet remain indifferent to others that represent a very clear and present danger to them.

More broadly, the key ingredient in the emergence of a moral panic is the creation or intensification of hostility toward and denunciation of a particular group, category, or cast of characters. The emergence or the reemergence of a deviant category characterizes the moral panic; central in this process is the targeting of new or past “folk devils.” In the 1950s, as we saw, in Boise, Idaho, homosexuals, including those who had sex with underage boys, were members of a category that already existed but to which, in all likelihood, few residents gave much thought. Prior to the panic that erupted in the early decades of the nineteenth century in the United States, the chances are, very few citizens would have spontaneously thought of “sexual slavery” as an category of evil, immoral behavior, a form of behavior that was worthy of their hostility and condemnation. The new category brought together a collage of stereotypes, prejudices, biases, and fears to form claims about a supposed threat that generated a moral panic.

During moral panics, suddenly, witches are burned at the stake; abortion clinics are bombed; sex shops are picketed; propagandists for psychedelic drugs are denounced; homosexuals are beaten; laws criminalizing marijuana possession and sale are passed, and users are arrested; suspected or known communists are
dismissed from their jobs; pamphlets explaining how to protect children from stranger abductions are distributed to parents; the police use more repressive measures against misbehaving or delinquent adolescents. In most cases, a deviant category or stereotype already exists, but is latent and only routinely activated. During the moral panic, the category is either created out of thin air, making use of already-existing cultural materials, or, more often, relocated, dusted off, and attacked with renewed vigor. New charges may be made, old ones dredged up and reformulated. In the case of child kidnap-murders by satanists, an ancient charge (found in many societies with two or more conflicting groups, lodged by the ancient Romans against the early Christians) is put together with novel features. In the case of marijuana in the 1930s, charges against other forms of drug use (mainly cocaine and to a lesser extent, opiates) were transferred to the use of a previously-unknown substance. During the AIDS crisis, a new charge – in this case, empirically true – was lodged against a category of people whose members have been regarded as deviant for centuries.

During times of crisis or panic, deviants may serve as scapegoats, secondary targets to deflect attention away from some of society’s most pressing but insoluble problems. Just before Prohibition, conservative, small-town, native-born, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants feared an erosion of their prestige and power; brewers and drinkers became folk devils and deviants whose defeat would restore positive values to American society (Gusfield, 1963). The sexual psychopath laws emerged during two crises in American history, the first (1937–40), when the country was struggling with the most serious economic depression in its history, and fearful of the gathering storm of war, and the second (1949–54), during the Cold War, when two superpowers faced one another across the chasm of nuclear destruction. The period during which hostility toward satanic ritual abuse emerged (roughly, post-1980) marked a time when small-town, working-class, fundamentalist Protestants experienced joblessness, deskillling, an erosion in their standard of living, and challenges to their traditional way of life (Victor, 1993; de Young, 2004). Of course, deviants have always existed, and the hostility toward certain categories is notable far more for historical continuity than decade-by-decade variation. Yet, as we saw, deviant categories are often refurbished over time; the reasons for hating them vary according to temporal circumstances. Moral panics provide one important context for the understanding of variations in the denunciation of deviants.

**DEVIANCE AND THE CRIMINAL LAW**

Deviance – the appearance and denunciation of the folk devil – is a defining and crucial component of the moral panic: no folk evil, no moral panic. However, the enactment of legislation, or the criminal law, is but one manifestation of the moral panic; others are public concern and fear, media attention, and social movement
activism. In other words, while it is possible to have a moral panic without the enactment or enforcement of the criminal law, it is not possible to have a moral panic without deviance. Still, defining behavior as a crime is a frequent accompaniment of the moral panic.

In fairly small, relatively homogeneous societies – those based on a hunting and gathering technology – the collective conscience that Emile Durkheim argued held societies together tends to be strong, there are few serious challenges to society’s moral universe, and there is usually a single moral “center” (1893/1964). Moreover, in such small societies, even when members are tempted to violate the norms, surveillance and informal social control tends to stifle that temptation; everyone knows everyone else, members care about the opinions of others, and it is difficult to do anything outside the gaze of the fellow members of one’s band or village. Moreover, members of the society are dependent on others for a variety of services, activities, and life-sustaining functions; angering certain parties may mean doing without, exile, or even death. Hence, the bonds of social relationships tend to keep wrongdoing in check. Violations of the norms tend to be handled informally, on a face-to-face, interpersonal basis by the aggrieved party or parties or their representatives. A violation, for the most part, is against a specific, aggrieved, private party – that is, a family’s grain has been stolen, a man’s husband or wife has been seduced, a couple’s son has been beaten. Some form of compensation is called for, and that is adjudicated on an informal, case-by-case basis.

In large, complex, pluralistic, agrarian, and, especially, industrial, societies, the collective conscience tends to be weaker, at least, far from universal; society’s moral universe is often challenged, and there almost always exist a number of competing moral “centers.” In larger, more complex societies, formal, interpersonal social control is no longer sufficiently strong to ensure that norms are followed and the social order remains unchallenged. Members of such societies can more effectively ignore or discount others’ views of them or their behavior; they may not care about how others view them, and they are less likely to be dependent on their favors. Consequently, some form of formal social control becomes necessary to ensure that normative violations do not threaten the social order. This includes criminal law, the police, the courts, and, eventually, jails and prisons. In a given act of wrongdoing, the representative of the members of the society, the state, has been aggrieved, not simply a private party; an abstract rule has been violated, regardless of its impact on private parties. Agents who, in principle, have no direct stake in the sanctioning process – and may not even know the parties involved – are called upon to administer abstract justice. In becoming larger and more complex, societies move from relying on informal social control to relying more and more on formal social control. A crime is not merely an offense against a specific private party; it is an offense against the state – that is, the collectivity, the society as a whole.

Thus, when societies make this transition, the crucial question is how behavior becomes criminalized. By what process do crimes get defined, the criminal law
created, and violators punished? Are definitions of crimes a natural outgrowth of a society’s system of morality? In this process, does deviant behavior automatically become defined as criminal? Is a society’s criminal code a reflection of its moral code? How do laws get passed? Why are they enforced? The approaches to the criminal law fall into two categories: the objectivist or protectionist approach and the special interest or social constructionist approach.

The traditional, objectively given or “protectionist” approach to deviance and morality adheres to the following points with respect to the process of deviance and criminalization. First, societies define as deviant behavior that is intrinsically harmful, that is, harmful acts tend to offend the common conscience; second, this tends to be true regardless of whether the society is more complex or less; third, to the extent that behavior is harmful to a society, it will be defined as a crime; and fourth, as a consequence, the criminal law tends to represent an expression of the culture of a society, the “collective conscience,” widespread public sentiment, and objective harm.

The objectively given approach harbors a grassroots approach to the emergence of law, in that notions of right and wrong somehow “percolate” up from the general population and become translated into the criminal code; the criminal law is the natural extension of the culture of a given society. No particular effort on the part of special interest groups is necessary to form, shape, or crystallize the moral views of the members of a given society into the law. What is defined as a crime is simply a natural and inevitable extension or outcome of people’s views in general. The grassroots assumption sees a close connection between morality and law: The laws a society passes criminalizing certain behaviors are the expression of the views of right and wrong held by the majority; law is a “barometer of the moral and social thinking” of the society (Friedmann, 1964, p. 143). What is harmful is widely condemned; what is widely condemned is legislated against and criminalized. Another way of saying this is that, for the grassroots perspective, the creation of the criminal law is not problematic; it is not a process that needs much explaining. How laws come into being is intuitively obvious and commonsensical. To the extent that there are exceptions – laws that neither protect the society from objective harm nor are supported by the majority of the population of a society – in all likelihood, they are laws that are on the books but are not enforced, laws that have either fallen into disuse or were not intended to be enforced even when they were passed.

In contrast to the objectively given approach, with its protectionist and grassroots assumptions, the subjectively problematic view argues that definitions of crime and morality represent a distinctly political phenomenon (Schur, 1980, pp. 3, 25ff.). Designating certain acts as criminal serves at least three functions: first, it legitimizes a certain category’s definition of right and wrong; second, it symbolizes the respectability of one category vis-à-vis another; and third, it punishes members of one category for engaging in behavior that has been proscribed by another.
Definitions of right and wrong do not drop from the skies, nor do they simply ineluctably percolate up from society’s mainstream opinion; they are the result of disagreement, negotiation, conflict, and struggle. The passage of laws raises the issue of who will criminalize whom (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, p. 55). Each definition attracts adherents who attempt to persuade others that their view is right and that of their opponents, wrong – and, failing persuasion, each side will impose its version of right and wrong on the other. Criminalization is the explicit use of political power to impose the view of one specific symbolic-moral universe on other universes (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, p. 65). Adherents contend with one another in attempting to establish their view as acceptable, legitimate, and valid. If possible, each side attempts to crystallize its views into the legal structure – to pass laws compatible with, or prevent the passage of laws incompatible with, its own ideological, moral, and political-economic system. Where groups, categories, or “symbolic-moral universes” meet, compete, negotiate, and clash, each is “vitaly interested” in demonstrating its moral superiority. This entails attempting to “widen the basis of its legitimacy,” which inevitably entails controlling the criminalization process (p. 65). The dissemination and acceptance of a particular view of morality as crystallized in the criminal code represents the victory of one group or category over another.

Groups and categories in the population do not have equal access to the powers of persuasion or the legal process; some are, for example, more likely to influence the media, the political process, legislators, and the educational system, than others are. Views of right and wrong do not triumph by becoming widely accepted in a society simply because they are objectively true or because they best preserve the social order or generate the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people. The power to “define and construct reality” is linked to the “structure of power in a society” at a particular time; constructions of crime and the law, as with deviance generally, are linked to the dominant control institutions in society (Conrad and Schneider, 1992).

The subjectively problematic perspective sees morality and immorality, crime and law-abiding behavior, not as a quality contained in certain actions, but as the outcome of a process – a process of definition on two levels: (1) defining a certain class of actions as criminal, and (2) defining certain specific individuals as criminals. Behavior and individuals are criminalized that is, made criminal by the definitional process, defined as against the law. In Western society, a class of behavior is criminalized by the legislative process, and the behavior of specific individuals is criminalized by the judicial process.

Far from the law representing a crystallization of custom, it is in many ways the antithesis of community consensus, that is, the collective conscience. A legal order that sits above the community becomes necessary when the solidarity and cohesion of the community has disappeared, when the community has disintegrated into competing and conflicting factions. Prior to the emergence of the modern state, custom was sufficient to maintain order. Everyone, more or less, either
believed in the righteousness of custom, or at least was motivated to please others in their life who did believe in it. Societies were held together by common interests and common beliefs. The more complex societies became, the more divergent belief, behavior, and custom became. And the less concerned each person became about the opinions of others – the less one cared about the condemnation of others, the more one could discount the negative things others said about what one did.

Where societies have become internally divided, custom has lost its hold on the population. What was needed was an externally imposed set of edicts administered by a body of specialists hired specifically for the purpose of law enforcement. Where primary social control – custom, interpersonal contact, gossip, ridicule, personal disapproval – began to break down, secondary social control (the law, courts, and the police) assumed importance. The criminal law, then, may be seen not as an outgrowth of a grassroots social and cultural consensus, but as an outcome of social and cultural dissensus, hostility between groups, a clash in ways of life, social conflict. The legal order becomes necessary when community solidarity breaks down and society is broken up into competing and conflicting factions and interests (Diamond, 1971).

MORAL ENTREPRENEURS AND MORAL PANICS

It must be emphasized that the concept of the moral entrepreneur applies not only to the definition of behavior as deviant and the creation (and enforcement) of the criminal law, but also to the moral panic as well. (And to definitions of conditions as social problems, as we shall see shortly.) That is, though strengthening society’s social control apparatus through legislation is certainly one way of expressing a moral panic, there are others. Moral entrepreneurs operate on a wide range of fronts. The many efforts of moral entrepreneurs relevant to the generation and maintenance of moral panics include: attempting to influence public opinion by discussing the supposed extent of the threat in the media; forming organizations and even generating entire social movements to deal with the problems the threat presumably poses; giving talks or conducting seminars to inform the public how to counter the threat in question; attempting to get certain views approved in educational curricula; influencing legislators to allocate funds which would deal with a given threat; discrediting spokespersons who advocate alternative, opposing, or competing perspectives.

At the same time, attempting to criminalize certain behaviors is one of the central features of the moral panic. Participants in almost all panics aim to influence the content and enforcement of the law. Cohen’s Mods and Rockers stimulated proposals at both the municipal and parliamentary level, and the police made more vigilant use of laws that were already in place. The sex scandal in Boise, Idaho, in 1955–6
resulted in the arrest of nearly two dozen men accused of homosexual acts, some with minors, and the imprisonment of over a dozen of them. Fear of Canudos, a millenarian sect in Brazil in the 1890s, touched off a military campaign that obliterated the entire group and killed thousands of adherents. Intense concern about satanic ritual child abuse has resulted in arrests and highly publicized trials of day care workers from North Carolina to California on charges that, many observers feel (Nathan and Snedeker, 1995), are entirely groundless. Whenever the question, “What is to be done?” is asked concerning behavior deemed threatening, someone puts forth the suggestion, “There ought to be a law.” If laws already exist addressing the threatening behavior, moral entrepreneurs will call for stiffer penalties or a law-enforcement crack-down. Legislation and law enforcement are two of the most obvious and widely resorted to efforts to crush a putative threat during a moral panic. No examination of the moral panic is complete without a consideration of legislation and law enforcement.

POWER

The more power a group or social category has, the greater the likelihood it will be successful in influencing legislation which is consistent with the views, sentiments, and interests of its members, which its members support. Small, weak, unorganized social categories are less likely to have their views translated into the criminal law; large, powerful, well organized groups are far more likely to do so. For instance, street crime – robbery, rape, murder – is more often committed by lower- and working-class individuals than by members of the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes; typically, these crimes call for harsh penalties and long sentences. White collar and corporate crime – embezzlement, fraud, stock market swindles – are committed by individuals located at the higher end of the socioeconomic ladder; typically, these crimes (assuming that such actions are defined as crimes in the first place) call for, and usually result in, comparatively mild punishment – 30 days in jail, 60 days, even more often a fine and no jail or prison sentence at all (Coleman, 2005; Ermann and Lundman, 2001; Weisburd et al., 1991). Since the corporate scandals that broke out in the late 1990s and early 2000s – at WorldCom, Tyco, Global Crossing, Enron – have drawn substantially longer executive sentences, this tendency has begun to break down. Yet, even today, corporate criminals usually draw briefer sentences than street criminals. This difference cannot be attributed solely to socioeconomic differences between offenders – most of the public condemns robbers more than white collar criminals because they are more likely to fear being harmed by the former than the latter – such differences cannot be discounted. As a number of observers have pointed out, every police force has a vice squad and narcotics squad, but virtually no police force has a professional squad, a medical squad, or a lawyer squad. It is felt that doctors, lawyers,
and other professionals should police themselves, and hence, their criminal activities
do not often become officially categorized as crimes. In contrast, the lower classes
are policed by the police.

Some observers have argued that the reason why national alcohol Prohibition
failed was because the groups who supported it (small-town, middle-class, native-
born, southern, fundamentalist Protestants) suffered a decline in national power
during the course of the 1920s, while the groups who opposed it (urban, foreign-
born, or native-born of foreign-born parentage, northern, secular or liberal
Protestants, Catholics, and Jews) gained more power on the national scene during
this decade (Gusfield, 1963). In the United States, the liquor lobby has more power
than the cocaine lobby; the pro-gun lobby is stronger than the anti-gun lobby; in
most of the industrial world, industrialists, who oppose pollution controls, are
more influential than environmentalists, who support them. If women were to
wield more power than men, it is possible that the rape laws would be stiffer and
more vigorously enforced. Laws are passed at least in part because they reflect the
views, ideology, sentiment, interests, and demands of the more powerful and
influential groups and categories in the population; less powerful and less influ-
ential groups and categories tend to be less successful in criminalizing behavior
they oppose.

We are not saying, with Wellford, that “crime is a form of behavior defined by
the powerful to control the powerless” (1975, p. 335). This formulation is alto-
gether too simplistic and crude. “The powerful” may not always get their way in
defining the content of the criminal law; the criminal law is not an attempt to
control categories of people (“the powerless”), but behavior that categories of
people – or the entire population – may or may not engage in; law is a result of
conflict, struggle, negotiation, and political compromise, and not an edict, ukase,
or fatwa handed down from above. The greater power and influence of elites, the
wealthy, and the politically well-placed in the legislative and policy spheres is a
relative, not an absolute assessment. We are not saying that the more powerful get
their way on every issue, that the less powerful lose out in every debate, question,
or struggle against the more powerful in defining what should be against the law.
Who triumphs on which issues is an empirical question, and through a variety of
means, including alliances between and among factions, groups, or categories with
seemingly little power may manage to prevail. Abstract, general power is not nec-
essarily translated into the power to criminalize behavior or influence policy in
each and every instance. Seemingly powerless groups or categories can, under cer-
tain circumstances, generate the power to criminalize or influence policy on cer-
tain specific issues. A study of the exercise of power can only be fully understood
on a case-by-case basis. Still, the same formula applies: other things being equal,
the more power a coherent social group or category wields, the more likely it is to pass
legislation favorable to its interests.

In Israel, one outstanding example is the haredim, or ultra-orthodox, who make
up less than 12 percent of the total population. For the most part, individually,
the haredim lack financial resources – the majority are in the bottom half of the economic hierarchy in Israeli society – nearly always lack a secular education, and very rarely hold positions of power or influence in Israeli society generally. Moreover, in principle, ultra-orthodox beliefs – and in practice, many, perhaps most haredi – do not even acknowledge the legitimacy of the Israeli state (arguing that the Jewish state should be instituted only when the Messiah manifests himself), and most haredi sects do not permit the teaching of Israel’s official language, modern Hebrew. (Hebrew is to be used for the study of sacred texts, not in everyday language.) Yet, on numerous key issues, the haredim have managed to influence Israeli law and policy to the point where their will prevails over the far wealthier and more powerful secular majority. They prevail, when they do, through a combination of moral suasion, protests and demonstrations, the formation of political alliances, and compromise.

For instance, while the vast majority of Israeli Jews must serve in the armed forces (three years – and decades of reserve duty – for men, and two years for women), the ultra-orthodox do not have to serve at all. (Or may serve a very brief token alternative service, with no reserve duty.) While other Israelis must support themselves financially when they pursue a secular education, haredi males who study the Talmud in approved yeshivas may receive stipends from the state for an indefinite period of time. When ancient Jewish gravesites are uncovered in an archaeological or construction site and this fact is discovered, the haredim will mount protests that, in a substantial proportion of cases, have managed to call a halt to the digging. All marriages and divorces that take place in Israel must be sanctified by a religious ceremony; no religious intermarriages are allowed. In all cities except Haifa, public transportation is shut down on the Sabbath; likewise, in Jerusalem, nearly all stores and places of public entertainment are closed on the Sabbath. Non-kosher food is extremely difficult to obtain in all of Israel, especially Jerusalem, the Holy City. Public streets – paid for by all taxpayers – in predominantly haredi neighborhoods are closed off to vehicular traffic from an hour before sundown Friday to sundown Saturday.

All of these laws, practices, and restrictions are the result of haredi protests, demonstrations, lobbying efforts, threats, and political pressure. The haredim exert influence out of proportion to their numbers for several reasons. Why? First, they are highly organized and very cohesive on many issues. Second, they represent the last piece of the political puzzle in an extremely complex coalition government. Third, in certain struggles, they can count on an alliance with some orthodox organizations and sects. (And on some issues, even a substantial number of secular Jews support the ultra-orthodox position, at least in principle if not in practice.) And last, they hold their beliefs much more strongly than the seculars and are willing to fight much harder to translate them into policy and practice. These existing laws and policies represent a triumph of ultra-orthodoxy over secularism, in spite of the fact that secular Jews are wealthier, much more numerous, and hold far more powerful positions than the haredim. Thus, which groups or categories win
out in a legal or policy struggle cannot always be predicted from political and economic power bases alone. Power must be regarded as a major factor in criminalization and legal policy, but it is not the only factor. How power is wielded within a complex matrix of power-wielding often determines its effectiveness.

**MORAL CRUSADES AND MORAL PANICS**

During some moral panics, the criminal law legislates against specific forms of behavior. Certain officials, authorities, moral crusaders, and/or segments of the public defined these acts as a social major problem and the legislature enacts criminal laws against their enactment. Such actions took place with Prohibition (1920–33), with sexual “psychopathy” (1930s–50s) and, as we’ll see, the possession and sale of certain psychoactive substances (the 1910s, the 1930s, and the 1980s). More than a social problem was generated and sustained in these cases, for the intensity of the concern that was aroused was greater for these behaviors than is usually the case for most social problems. In each case, some form of wrongdoing, some form of deviant behavior, was seen to be responsible for the problem. Some specific individuals were targeted as deviants – drinkers, purveyors of liquor, drug dealers and users, child molesters. In each case, the furor or intense concern that emerged over the issue in question subsided after a time: public sentiment often soured on Prohibition not long after it had been instituted; the sexual psychopath laws, once they were passed, were rarely applied; and, in the case of marijuana, official, media, and public concern about the drug waxed and waned over the years, and has faded to the point where, in more than a dozen states of the United States, small-quantity possession has become decriminalized, that is, not considered a criminal matter.

These cases represent historical examples of moral crusades. A moral crusade is not necessarily a moral panic. The two concepts overlap, of course; there are both similarities and differences between crusades and panics. The campaign against and massacre of Canudos in Brazil in the 1890s and the hysteria over and persecution of homosexuals in Boise, Idaho, in the 1950s were both moral panics and moral crusades. But as we saw, the 1969 rumor in Orléans, France, about the “white slave” traffic represented a case of a moral panic that broke out which did not become a moral crusade. On the other side of the coin, what is most noteworthy about the campaign against alcohol sale and consumption prior to (and even after) 1920, the campaign against marijuana in the 1930s, and the campaign to secure the passage of the sexual psychopath laws between the 1930s and the 1950s, is that they are clear-cut cases of moral crusades. The panic they generated is one of their interesting but secondary features. Activists used widespread (or local) concern over the behavior campaigned against in the service of their crusades.

The moral crusades concept implies that the activists who are working to bring about change are motivated by moral and not rational and protectionist interests.
Still, the two could coincide, as both Becker (1963, p. 148) and Gusfield (1955, p. 223) emphasize; moreover, because of the nature of their moral positions, crusaders could very easily mistake the first for the second. Thus, calling a campaign a moral crusade does not preclude rational and protectionist interests as well. In contrast, the moral panic concept, as we’ll see, implies a certain disassociation between protectionism and concern. In addition, the notion of a crusade necessitates crusaders, or what Becker (1963, pp. 147ff.) refers to as moral entrepreneurs – that is, organizers, activists, do-gooders, movement advocates who push for a given cause. Moral panics, in contrast, are often, even usually – but not necessarily – initiated by activists. To put things another way, the moral entrepreneur creates the crusade: no entrepreneur, no crusade. By definition, the latter is a direct product of the former. In contrast, the engineered, consciously created quality of the moral panic is an empirical, not a definitional, question. It may have been initiated anywhere – by crusaders, by the general public, by political or economic elites, by the media. For instance, moral crusaders may have recognized an incipient panic and jumped on a bandwagon that was already in motion. The panic implies fairly widespread public concern – whereas the crusade does not – and that concern could have been triggered by a variety of sources. The moral panic is not by definition a conscious creation of activists; while the campaign against Canudos in Brazil in the 1890s and the furor over homosexuals in Boise, Idaho, in the 1950s were generated by elitist crusades, the rumor about “sexual slavery” in Orléans was more spontaneous and accompanied by no active crusade whatsoever.

Many cases of moral crusades do not exemplify the moral panic. For instance, Gusfield is emphatic about the fact that the concern over the passage and enforcement of the Prohibition law represented a “symbolic crusade,” that is, was not primarily about drinking per se, but represented a conflict between two contrasting lifestyles, specifically, which was to be represented by or legitimated in the law: a sober, ascetic, abstemious, small-town, native-born, white-collar or farming, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant way of life, versus a more immigrant-derived, urban, Catholic, working-class and a more cosmopolitan, hedonistic, college-educated, “new” middle-class way of life whose representatives had ceased to be tied to a local community. Hence, to the temperance movement, the enemy was as much a way of life as it was a specific form of behavior – drinking.

And the marijuana panic of the 1930s was not covered extensively in the media; only a few dozen articles appeared on the subject in national magazines (Himmelstein, 1983), although those published in local newspapers were far more numerous and equally as lurid; thus, the concern over marijuana use in the 1930s may have been more a local and regional panic than a national panic (Bonnie and Whitebread, 1974). Moreover, the Marihuana Tax Act and most of the state laws were passed without much notice or fanfare. Some evidence even exists to suggest that the Federal Bureau of Narcotics did not generate the marijuana scare of the 1930s (Musto, 1987, pp. 210–29); instead, it may have been more of a grassroots concern than Becker’s classic analysis suggests (Bonnie and Whitebread, 1970; 1974; Himmelstein, 1983).
And the sexual psychopath laws of the late 1930s and the 1940s represented a genuine, if misguided and unrealistic – and ultimately futile – effort to provide what some segments of the psychiatric profession regarded at the time as humane, scientific treatment rather than punishment for the sex offender. Thus, although the concern over alcohol consumption in the first two decades of the twentieth century, marijuana in the 1930s, and sexual psychopathy in the 1940s, do not provide perfect examples of what we refer to today as moral panics, it was out of such concerns that our contemporary understanding of the moral panic grew. And even more instructive: The legislation that grew out of such concerns tended to fall into disuse since the enthusiasm that brought about the legislation in the first place could not be sustained over the long range. What it takes to generate the moral panic and the moral crusade on the one hand and that of the routine enforcement and prosecution of the law on the other are, in many ways, contradictory.

**SUMMARY**

The moral panic hinges on deviance; no deviance, no moral panic. The multitude of technological disasters and threats – global warming, genetic engineering, planet-wide oil spills, nuclear contamination – constitute a new form of panic, the amoral panic. A faceless threat that may have no real enemy, folk devil, or enemy, the “amoral” panic may not be a “panic” at all but a very reasonable concern to a very real and present danger.

Sociologically, what is or is not deviance depends on a judgment that something or someone is bad, wrong, evil. This is a “subjectively problematic” definition, one based on the notion that deviance, as deviance, does not exist until an audience decides that there’s something wrong. This subjectively problematic approach to deviance contrasts sharply with the “objectively given,” the traditional, commonsense view, that regards behavior or other phenomena as intrinsically, inherently, immanently wrong. The objectively given approach does not necessitate an audience; it argues that a higher power makes this decision, independent of human judgments. The position that abortion is murder and therefore an evil act is an example of the objectively given approach; the claim that pornography is an assault on womanhood itself, likewise, adopts the objectively given approach, the view that the evil is contained in the very nature of the act.

The sociological or subjectively problematic approach accepts a measure of relativity in its definition of deviance. This means that, as we cast our gaze from the distant past to the present, from one society to another across the globe, and from one social category to another in the same society, we see substantial variation in judgments of deviance.

*It is a fact that* in the Dominican Republic, cockfighting is, to cite Pedro Martinez, a major-league baseball pitcher (and from that country), legal, acceptable, normative,
and widespread, just as it is a fact that it is illegal, condemned, and *deviant* in the United States (Thomas, 2008). The advocate of cultural relativity does not attempt to assess whether cockfighting is "really" deviant – cosmically, objectively, in the abstract – but instead looks at the norms, the behavior, and the reactions of real people in the material world to the practice. In some circles in the United States, purchasing and using pornography is a deviant act, punishable by social condemnation and shunning; in others, it is an acceptable practice, a matter of individual choice. To the evangelical Christian, abortion is murder, an evil act; to the feminist, it is of no particular moral significance – in fact, the wrong lies in denying women the right to a safe, legal abortion. In ancient Mexico, ritual human sacrifice of captives was not only acceptable but the foundation stone of the society; such behavior is illegal and deviant today and would be regarded as the act of a criminally insane person. In other words, to determine what's deviant, the subjective problematic looks at how the behavior or other phenomena are judged by specific audiences or observers.

The concept of relativity has limits, although they are broad. To begin with, *certain* acts are condemned nearly everywhere: the unprovoked and unmotivated murder of an in-group member, the rape of an in-group member, unjustified robbery of an in-group member. Moreover, certain acts are harmful to the viability and survival of the society; if they are not discouraged or published, those social collectivities in which they take place will be short-lived. Indeed, historically, many societies and social units have perished, and one reason is undoubtedly their tolerance of harmful behavior.

Sociologists make a distinction between "societal" and "situational" deviance. *Societal* deviance is that which is widely condemned, in the society as a whole; it is behavior, beliefs, or characteristics that are regarded as deplorable and condemned as *categories*. We know, in advance, that, as a category of behavior, in the United States, transvestism, adultery, and child abuse will be viewed negatively, and their enactors wisely keep their participation in such behavior from others, knowing that they would be condemned or shunned. The exceptions need explaining, not the generalities. In contrast, *situational* deviance is behavior, beliefs, and conditions that are defined in specific, micro-interactional settings, such as definitions of right and wrong among delinquent boys, homosexual priests, and corporate criminals.

Deviance is, as we've said, the centerpiece of moral panics. Episodes of extreme fear about a particular threat come and go; what causes this fear may remain the same over time, but it is the panic that requires an explanation, not the nature of the threat. Indeed, some of these threats may be imaginary, such as witches in Renaissance Europe (Ben-Yehuda, 1985, pp. 23–73), satanic ritual abuse in Anglophone societies in the 1980s (de Young, 2004), and extraterrestrials in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in the United States (Clancy, 2005). In most moral panics, folk devils – even invented ones – help explain some of the feelings of stress, anxiety, and anomie felt by members of a particular society or its constituent members; in many ways, the projected threat serves as a kind of scapegoat.
7

COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR
Stanley Cohen not only launched the term “moral panic,” he was also the first to notice its collective behavior-like quality (1972, pp. 11–12, 144ff.). Collective behavior is defined as behavior that is relatively spontaneous, volatile, evanescent, emergent, extraitstitutional, and short-lived; it emerges or operates in situations in which there are no, or few adequate, clear-cut definitions as to what to do from mainstream culture. Collective behavior operates outside the stable, patterned structures of society; it reflects the “maverick” side of human nature. Compared with conventional, everyday life, collective behavior is less inhibited and more spontaneous, more changeable and less structured, shorter-lived and less stable (Goode, 1992, pp. 17–21). In short, the field examines social dynamics (Aguirre, 2007).

From day to day, week to week, year to year, and even decade to decade, we can make certain predictions about the behavior of the members of a given society. We know – within broad limits – that a certain proportion of the population will vote in a given election, purchase specific products, show up for work, attend religious services, go to sleep at night and wake up in the morning, attend class, and obey traffic laws. We can refer to this type of behavior as “conventional” or “everyday” behavior. On the other hand, certain behavior is more labile from day to day, week to week, or year to year. The stock market is a great deal more volatile – the price of a given stock, the overall industrial average, the total number of stocks traded – than are, say, supermarket purchases; this is especially the case during feverish “boom” and “bust” trading periods (Kindleberger, 1987; Galbraith, 1990). The purchase of certain novelty products or fad items, such as the Whacky Wallwalker, Cabbage Patch dolls, and Pet Rocks, is considerably more unstable and either fluctuates far more from year to year, or bursts forth and fizzles out, than is the purchase of refrigerators, washing machines, or vacuum cleaners. The movement of a tale through the rumor mill is far more unpredictable than the description of a historical event in scholarly books and articles. Although social movements tend to be far more stable than collective behavior, still, support for most social movements is a somewhat chancy affair, and rises and falls more quickly, than it does for mainstream political parties. The unpredictability and disorderliness of charismatic authority in contrast to bureaucratic authority has been a staple of sociological analysis since the pioneering work of Max Weber early in the twentieth century (Goode, 1992).

The forms of collective behavior Cohen mentioned as having direct relevance to moral panics were: mass hysteria (1972, p. 11), mass delusion (pp. 11, 148), disasters (pp. 11, 144ff.), including the convergence process during disasters (p. 159), riots (p. 11), including race riots (p. 155), crowds (p. 11), especially the milling process that takes place during crowd assemblies (p. 154), mass vilification (pp. 11–12), rumors (pp. 155–6), and legends (p. 156). It must be emphasized that public opinion is itself a site of collective behavior phenomena. It is volatile; it mutates, shifts, evolves, and is subject to hearsay, hype, circular feedback, synergy, fear, panic, outrage, protests, crashes, and crazes (van Ginneken, 2003). It is subject to all of the
mechanisms Cohen discussed. Let’s look at the most basic collective behavior processes and their relation to the moral panic.

RUMOR

Rumor is both a process and a product, an accelerant of collective behavior, and a form of collective behavior itself, both a mechanism that pervades collective behavior and an instance of collective behavior. Rumor is popularly taken to be stories that are by definition false. Actually, experts define rumor not by its falsity—nor its content at all—but by its lack of substantiation. By definition, rumors are told without reliable factual documentation; at some later point in time, they could turn out to be verified, or shown to be false—what counts is that, at the time of their telling, their veracity is unverified. Rumors are hearsay; they are told, believed, and passed on not because of the weight of the evidence but because of the expectations by tellers that they are true in the first place (Rosnow and Fine, 1976).

Four factors facilitate the rumor-mongering process: topical importance or “outcome-relevant involvement”; uncertainty or ambiguity; personal anxiety; and credulity. When these four factors are high, many rumors are likely to fly about; when they are low, rumors are unlikely to be circulated (Rosnow, 1988; 1991).

As a general rule, a story about a situation that is felt to be inconsequential in its implications is not a source of speculation (Rosnow, 1988, p. 23). Rumors about events that are felt by listeners to be unimportant, to have little or no relevance for their lives, are far less likely to be passed on and are more likely to be dead-ended if told than rumors about events that are felt to have important consequences, both good and bad. People in the United States simply do not spread rumors about the price of camels in Tajikistan because the subject does not have any importance for them. Other things being equal, the more subjectively important a given topic is for an audience, the greater the likelihood that rumors will be told about it; the less important a subject is regarded as being, the lower that likelihood is. Rumor tends to fly thick and fast under conditions when topical importance is maximized: wartime, disasters, the stock market, politics, mass produced products, race and racial tension, the doings of friends and other intimates, an especially sensationalistic crime, the doings of celebrities. Remember, we are talking about subjective importance. In the grand scheme of things, that is to say, objectively, what celebrities are doing makes no difference whatsoever to the lives of most people—it has no direct, concrete impact on their lives—but it is deemed or felt to be subjectively important to the public; hence, it is of importance to them.

For the most part, rumor contexts are those that are problematic, that is, about which not enough is known, or which present a puzzle or a problem to audiences; thus, the second “rumorgenic” (Rosnow and Fine, 1976, pp. 22ff.) factor is uncertainty
or ambiguity, a state of mind “produced by doubt, such as when events are unstable, capricious, or problematical” (Rosnow, 1988, p. 20). Rumor thrives on doubt.

The third factor that feeds the rumor process is a state of anxiety or apprehensiveness, an emotional, negative state “produced by apprehension about an impending, potentially negative outcome” (Rosnow, 1988, p. 20). Anxiety is both a personal and a structural variable – that is, some individuals are more prone to anxiety than others, and some conditions are more likely to generate anxiety in nearly everyone than others. Another way of saying this is that “rumor flies on fear” (Goleman, 1991). Individuals who are fearful are more likely to believe and pass on rumors than individuals who are not (Kimmel and Keefer, 1991). And situations that maximize fear are those in which rumors are more likely to be told and believed.

And lastly, there is the factor of credulity, that is, a willingness to believe, to suspend disbelief, to hold one’s critical faculties about the validity of a story in abeyance. This is an individual not a structural variable. Rumors must seem to particular individuals or audiences to be true; if they are clearly false to a listener, then they tend to be dead-ended rather than passed on. A critical set (Buckner, 1965) is the enemy of rumor – a tendency to be questioning and skeptical about the truth of a rumor, or stories one hears in general – while credulity is a friend of rumor. As a general rule, the more knowledgeable one is both about the subject of the rumor and about topics in general, the lower the likelihood that one will pass on a rumor one hears.

Moral panics represent periods during which all of these four factors are maximized. Shibutani argues that rumor is “improvised news”; it is a substitute for news, it replaces news when established or institutionalized channels of communication have broken down, or are silent or unreliable concerning events of importance. For Shibutani, rumor is an effort at collective problem solving; it allows people to cope with the uncertainty of life (Shibutani, 1966; Rosnow and Fine, 1976, pp. 12, 30). Where the unsatisfied demand for news is moderate, and degree of interest or excitement about a given subject, likewise is moderate, people generally engage in some form of critical deliberation; they check assertions and verify the reliability of their sources. However, when unsatisfied demand for news is great, and the subjective excitement and interest in a given subject likewise is great, rumor is more spontaneous and extemporaneous. Here, rumors are more likely to be taken at face value from almost any source. Shibutani claims that such conditions are very rare.

Shibutani’s theory has been criticized for over-emphasizing the cognitive and rational factors in rumor (Goode, 1992, pp. 284–6). Certainly information-seeking is only one of an array of motives for rumor-mongering. Moreover, under certain conditions, the last thing people who tell rumors want is verified information; the “reality testing” that Shibutani posits as central to rumor transmission (1966, pp. 148–55) may not characterize the actions of many rumor tellers and listeners. Much of the time, rumor is a distinctly “irrational” process, that is, it often represents
the need to verify deeply-held beliefs and values far more than concrete facts. Often, rumor affirms in-group membership, virtue, and victimization, and out-group exploitation and wickedness. Although Shibutani’s theory was developed well before the moral panics concept came into being, it is clear that one of the conditions that is likely to inhibit critical deliberation is the moral panic. During moral panics, many people define a putative threat to be of personal importance to them, they are uncertain about its impact on them, the subject makes them apprehensive and fearful, they hunger for more news than is available, and they tend to suspend or lower their level of disbelief.

As we’ve seen, in the 1980s, many fundamentalist Christians were both more likely to believe that satanists were sexually abusing and killing tens of thousands of children in the United States yearly, and they were more likely to tell rumors to that effect, than was true of agnostics, atheists, and religious skeptics. This was especially likely to be the case with less educated, rural, more traditional persons who were distressed by the secular trend of contemporary society, couples among whom the wife worked, who had children in a day-care center, and who felt guilty about the arrangement. When tradition has broken down or is no longer possible and the sources of information that are customarily sought (the government, the media, big business) are seen as the very forces that are causing the problem, alternative sources will be sought out and legitimated (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991).

Individuals living in communities that are strongly racially divided and conflicted are more likely than those living in more racially harmonious communities to see threat in the actions of another racial category and to believe and pass on atrocity stories concerning what evil things a representative of that other racial category did to one of their own members. During periods when conflict flares up and the press is seen as an unreliable source of information – by many whites and conservatives as being too sympathetic to rebellious African Americans, and by many blacks and liberals as too sympathetic to the government, the police, and established interests – rumors are likely to fly thick and fast (Rosenthal, 1971; Knopf, 1975).

Stories about what drug dealers are doing are more likely to be countenanced on the basis of less evidence in neighborhoods whose residents feel threatened by drug abuse than in those in which drug abuse is felt to be a more distant or less common phenomenon. The fact that the press, the government and, again, big business are often seen by some members of such communities as deeply implicated in contributing to the problem makes statements which issue from their representatives suspect and rumor-mongering more likely.

Rumor is one of the basic processes that both fuels and is fueled by the moral panic. A moral panic sets the stage and provides a context for rumor-mongering; when rumors take place, they provide the justification for fears, exaggeration, and a sense of threat. Rumor is a vital element in the moral panic. It is one of the reasons why the moral panic must be regarded as a form of collective behavior.
There is a particular type of rumor that is so important it deserves special mention: the “urban” or contemporary legend. Like rumor, contemporary legends have an unauthorized, unofficial, subterranean quality. They arise more or less spontaneously, they are told with great frequency and intensity for a time, after which they subside; some are reborn in a somewhat different guise at another time in another place. Like rumor, urban legends are dynamic, evanescent phenomena. Contemporary legends are stories that are told as true, and are widely believed, but lack factual verification – which means that they qualify as rumors. On the surface, they seem to be about specific people and events; in reality, they have an abstract, general, or cartoon-like quality. In the run-of-the-mill, garden-variety rumor, what counts are the details of the subject of the story – the fact that the story is about specific events or a particular person. In contrast, the tales told in contemporary legends are stereotypical; they have a standard, dramatic form, they adhere to a fairly fixed formula; they contain a fairly simple plot and readily recognizable characters. They represent a “folk soap opera” in miniature and thus, have a widespread and almost timeless appeal. Unlike classic fairy tales or ancient myths, which are fantastic tales about magical events or superhuman characters in a far-off, nonexistent land, modern legends are mundane, seemingly plausible events which took place in the recent past, usually in the local area, to perfectly ordinary people (Brunvand, 1999; 2000; 2001). The details of the legend are altered so that they apply to the near social, geographical, and neighborhood context within which they are told.

Urban legends circulate for much the same reasons that rumors are told, believed, and passed on; the factors that encourage them include topical interest, ambiguity, anxiety, and credulity. However, since the urban legend tends not to be about concrete people whom the listener is likely to know or know about or events with which he or she is personally familiar it has, unlike gossip, to have to some additional factors which propel it into circulation. A few such factors include telling a strong, interesting, dramatic story; telling a story with a meaningful moral or message; reflecting contemporary fears; containing a grain of truth with respect to what is currently believed; supplying supportive detail or local color; supplying or pointing to a credible source (Brunvand, 1981, pp. 10–12; Mullen, 1972).

Many urban legends contain an element of threat; they tend to be about events that were, or nearly were, harmful to the subject of the story. They often infuse the everyday, mundane world with shock, apprehension, wonderment, and fear; they exploit the fear that many people have that danger is lurking around every corner. These stories make that fear a seeming reality. As we saw, anxiety or fear is a major component of rumors; it is one of the forces that propel them. As a general rule, the more frightened listeners are when they hear a rumor (and, it can be assumed, the same applies to legends, a form of rumor), the greater the likelihood
they will repeat it. One of the motives for repeating a scary story you’ve heard is to discover facts from the listener that contradict it. Very often, however, the story is believed and one’s fears escalate (Kimmel and Keefer, 1991; Goleman, 1991; Rosnow, 1991).

Moral panics are the perfect breeding ground for urban or contemporary legends. They arise in spheres of life about which threat is perceived and insecurity is rife. As we saw, urban legends are rumors, but they are more than rumors in that they pretend to be about actual, real-life individuals while, in reality, they have an abstract, cartoon-like, substitutable quality. A given contemporary legend could be about anyone – or anything – with the appropriate characteristics. For instance, in the early 1980s, a legend circulated that Proctor & Gamble, a large, international household products corporation, contributed 10 percent of its profits to the Church of Satan. Something quite specific made P&G the target of the urban legend – its logo, the face of the man in the moon on a field of 13 stars, was capable of being interpreted through satanic imagery – but, in principle, the rumor could have been told about any large corporation. To many small-town fundamentalist Christians, such corporations were both a symbol and a cause of bewildering social change and the decline of a traditional way of life (Anonymous, 1985).

One special type of urban legend that most successfully propels and expresses the moral panic is the “atrocity tale” (Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia, 1979) or “horror story.” In a moral panic, horror or atrocity stories “help identify the threat” (Thompson, King, and Annettes, 1990, p. 3). The ideology of specific social categories, subgroups, or social movements provides a framework that make certain horrifying (but empirically unlikely) events seem possible, plausible, or even likely; tales about such events are believable because, in certain circles, they give life to fears and threats that have been articulated on a more abstract or general level. Legends narrating atrocity tales express and validate what tellers and listeners believe and want to hear in the first place. As we’ll see in more detail in Chapter 12, an apposite example of an atrocity tale in the form of a contemporary legend is the story that was circulated in the late 1970s and early 1980s among certain feminist circles of the existence of “snuff” films, movies in which women or girls were actually raped, mutilated, and killed on camera for the entertainment of male viewers. Although no solid documentation exists that any such films are authentic, the fact is, their existence and circulation was believable among feminist separatists who were willing to believe that man’s deepest desire is to brutalize and kill women – or, failing that, to watch other men brutalize and kill women (Dworkin, 1981; 1982). Stories of “snuff” films provided the documentation for that belief (Thompson, King, and Annettes, 1990).

Best (1990, pp. 131–50) takes the existence of urban legends as one indication of fear and concern about a given perceived threat. Certain conditions generate social movements; the response to others is less organized, less institutionally-based, more “subterranean.” Certain themes can be regarded as “unconstructed social problems” when they become the subject of legends and folklore (pp. 144–8). The fact
that legends are told, believed, and widely disseminated measures or indicates the degree or extent of the seriousness with which the problem is taken. The number of actual incidents involving serious harm to children as a result of “Halloween sadism” (putting razor blades in apples, for instance) was quite small, indeed, practically nonexistent. This means that there was a diminished likelihood that a social movement would have emerged to deal with it in a concrete, practical way. At the same time, the fear that such a claim tapped was sufficiently strong and widespread to launch a score or more legends conveying the message that children were acutely vulnerable to such a threat. This argument applies even more strongly to moral panics, which generate intense fear for a period of time, but do not necessarily grow into full-fledged social movements. Indeed, the fact that a number of contemporary legends are circulated about a given perceived threat provides an important clue that we may have a moral panic on our hands.

MASS HYSTERIA AND COLLECTIVE DELUSION

A great deal has been written about hysterical contagion, epidemic hysteria, mass panic, or mass hysteria. Note that at least one observer (Bartholomew, 1990) has objected to the term, “mass hysteria,” holding it to be pejorative and inappropriately pathology-oriented. He prefers the terms “collective exaggerated emotions,” and “mass” or “social delusion” (Bartholomew and Goode, 2000). According to Miller (2000), there are three qualities necessary to define mass hysteria: a mistaken belief concerning the threat from a certain agent, heightened emotion, particularly fear, and mobilization, especially flight, on the part of a substantial proportion of the population supposedly threatened by the agent.

If we are quite strict and literal about applying these three criteria, mass hysteria is so rare as to be virtually nonexistent. The classic cases of the mass hysteria literature – including reactions to the radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds in 1938 – virtually never entailed mass mobilization. While a substantial proportion of the population has sometimes felt threatened by a nonexistent agent and, upon occasion, even felt fearful as a consequence, it is practically never the case that such a belief or emotion has triggered irrational, mass, headlong flight. If the mobilization that mass hysteria triggers is restricted to flight, then the phenomenon is extremely rare, practically nonexistent.

On the other hand, mass mistaken beliefs or collective delusion, the belief component of mass hysteria, are quite common. As we saw, the moral panic is predicated on an exaggerated fear, “taking alarm without due cause” (Rose, 1982, p. 29), or, at least, taking more alarm at a supposed threat than is warranted by a sober assessment of the evidence. Panic arises both from “a nervousness about catastrophic possibilities” and “an inability or reluctance to check” the facts (p. 29). Taking only the belief component of the mass hysteria, then, by definition, all cases of moral
panics are based on an aspect of mass hysteria. One of the essential defining aspects of the moral panic is an exaggerated fear; in this sense, the moral panic is a kind of mass hysteria. In the early 1980s, certain segments of the American public feared that tens of thousands of children were being kidnapped by strangers, when the real number was no more than a few hundred (Best, 1990). As we’ve seen, beginning in the early 1980s, many fundamentalist Christians came to believe that satanists were torturing and killing children in the tens of thousands each year, when very little, if any, evidence has been unearthed to support the contention that any such practices ever occurred (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991). Americans fear a greater threat from illegal drug use than from the use of legal drugs, when the latter kills more than 20 times the number of the former (Goode, 2008a). If we understand mass hysteria to be based on a grossly exaggerated sense of threat, then the frequent outbreak of moral panics disproves the contention that at least one element of mass hysteria is practically nonexistent.

But moral panics are made up of far more than a mass collective delusion. Note that the criterion of irrational mass, headlong flight is sometimes used to define panic or mass hysteria, and some suggest that the term has outlived its utility (Quarantelli, 2001). As we pointed out, while it is true that such irrational or self-destructive headlong flight in the face of a nonexistent threat is practically unknown in human history – or, at least, in the sociological literature – there are other forms of mobilization based on some form of delusion which are extremely common: rallies, protests, marches, speeches, petitions to politicians, organizing a social movement, giving and attending talks, speeches, seminars, and publishing articles and books about the putative threat. If the mobilization in response to an exaggerated sense of threat can include a wide range of activities to avoid or deal with the supposed threat, then the phenomenon of mass hysteria is quite common indeed. Some components of mass hysteria, then, form building blocks of the moral panic.

**DISASTERS**

The disaster is a form of collective behavior (Miller, 2000). There are some strong parallels between disasters and moral panics, as Stanley Cohen (1972, pp. 22–9, 144–8; 2002) pointed out. A true panic, as we explained in Chapter 1, which entails irrational, destructive, headlong flight, is so rare as to be virtually nonexistent (Clarke, 2002; Tierney, 2003). This is not what Cohen refers to in naming the moral panic, nor is his use of the disaster analogy literal.

Still, in many natural disasters, there is a period of advance warning during which the threat of imminent danger is perceived and communicated within the community. Tornados can usually be predicted with some degree of precision,
although no one knows for sure just how damaging one will be. Volcanoes often
give off signs of future eruptions; such advance warning may have saved hundreds
of lives in 1980, when geologists predicted that Mount St. Helens, located in
Washington State, was about to erupt. There is, then, in some natural disasters, a
“warning phase” and a “threat,” a period when the community fears that it will be
hit, although, again, it does not necessarily know the precise nature or scope of
the oncoming events. In the warning phase (Cohen, 1972, pp. 22, 144–8; 2002), the
community is sensitized to cues of trouble. In the moral panic, sensitization some-
times exacerbates the seriousness of the problem. For instance, in the Mods and
Rockers disturbances in England in the 1960s, increased police presence and readi-
ness (“we will crack down on them immediately”) often brought on an escalation
in violence; a slight scuffle easily turned into a full-scale melee (pp. 146–7).

In both the disaster and the moral panic, there is the “impact” phase, during
which the threatening agent strikes the community, and its residents must take an
“immediate and unorganized” response to the damage that follows (p. 23). And in
both, there is an inventory of the damage, a “rescue” of the survivors, a “remedy”
proposed, and a period of “recovery.” In the disaster literature, during the past
generation or so, there has been a stress on the formal organizations that have
been set up to cope with future disasters, which maximize preparedness and mini-
mize surprises; in this way, the original reaction to a novel disaster, one for which
a community is not prepared, will be organized, effective, and community-wide
rather than “immediate and unorganized.” Likewise, in a moral panic, authorities
in a community organize against the threat so that not only do the threatening
agents know the community is ready for their onslaught, but the members of the
community know that steps are being taken against the threat as well. In time,
relations between the threatening agent and the community become institutio-
nalized and routinized.

Another parallel between natural disasters and the moral panic is that there is
something of a community overreaction to the threat. Researchers have identified
the phenomenon of convergence in many, possibly most, disasters. In a widely pub-
licized disaster, people and supplies typically converge on the stricken area, often to
the point where coordination and distribution becomes itself another disaster; in
addition, all too often, curious onlookers also converge on the scene, impeding
rescue operations (Goode, 1992, pp. 210–11; Miller, 2000). In a moral panic, like-
wise, as we’ve already seen, the community – or a segment of it – overreacts to a
given condition, issue, phenomenon. And in both, public attention on the event or
issue is usually fueled by media focus; often, when that media focus fades, public
attention fades as well.

Disasters and moral panics share a number of dilemmas and conflicts in com-
mon. They both raise the issue that the magnitude of the threat may not be as
substantial as some claim. That the solution to the threat or problem proposed by
some parties may be at odds with that proposed by others. That the services of
organizations that traditionally do not deal with such threats – like schools,
churches, and businesses – may be inadequate to solve the problem or allay the threat. That the media may be regarded by different observers as allies in the struggle, a resource for communicating the correct position, as impartial observers – or as the enemy. That enlisting the government’s help and avoiding its interference may be problematic. That the proper role of the police is a contentious issue. That who should be designated as an expert, a spokesperson for a given position, and given the authority to make crucial decisions, isn’t as clear-cut as one or another side might claim. That designating which specific agencies and organizations should be funded and given the authority to coordinate the operation of dealing with the crisis is probably a political rather than a commonsensical matter. And when the crisis has passed, the matter of which organizations should stay in place and continue to be funded and which ones dismantled is likely to be hotly contested. These are precisely the sorts of issues that have to be grappled with in both the disaster and the moral panic as well. And in both, how they are answered in a specific case is to some degree unknowable in advance, which is one of the reasons why the field of collective behavior is so fascinating.

Of course, as anyone knows, moral panics are not exactly like disasters. It’s obvious that in some ways, the differences are stronger than the similarities. Some critics of the moral panic concept (Cornwell and Linders, 2002) have put forth silly arguments based on the premise that because Cohen (1972; 2002) relied so heavily on the disaster analogy, moral panics don’t exist. As with most analogies, there are similarities and differences between disasters and moral panics. With disasters, the agent is generally far more clear-cut and identifiable – a hurricane, a volcano, a tidal wave, an earthquake – and universally agreed to be damaging and undesirable; just how the agent damaged the society is fairly unambiguous – it generates a substantial level of consensus. With moral panics, in contrast, there is usually less agreement as to just who the agent is and what damage, if any, it inflicts. In the natural disaster, there are fairly clear-cut phases – the threat, the impact, the post-disaster or recovery phases. With moral panics, these phases are not so clear-cut. And with disasters, there may be disagreement as to whether the society responded in a fashion commensurate with the threat, but that is not a necessary component of the disaster; with the moral panic, by definition, the response is out of proportion to the threat of the issue, behavior, or condition being responded to. And in natural (as opposed to technological) disasters, there is no “folk devil,” no deviant, no human agent responsible for the suffering they inflicted. (At least, not until the post-disaster, recovery, or clean-up phase; for accusations of inappropriate behavior in the recovery phase, see Goode, 1992, pp. 227–33.) Actually, the parallels between moral panics and technological disasters – especially those involving contamination by toxic substances – is much stronger than those with natural disasters. In technological disasters, there is often no period when the threat has subsided, and there may be a “folk devil” or human agent responsible for the suffering the disaster inflicted; there is, in short, a moral dimension to the technological disaster not found in most natural disasters.
As Cohen pointed out more a third of a century ago, moral panics are a form of collective behavior; as such they are sustained by many collective behavior processes: rumor, gossip, collective delusion, mass hysteria, the conveyance of contemporary or urban legends, and some of the dynamics that sustain behavior during disasters. The field of collective behavior emphasizes the shifting, volatile, dynamic quality of moral panics. As we’ve seen throughout this book, and especially in the previous chapter, the “charisma” of moral panics is difficult to institutionalize into stable structures; hence, they leave less “residue” than would be predicted from the intensity of the passion that generates them.
8
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS
The emergence of social action groups – “germinal social movements” – is a frequent accompaniment of the moral panic (Cohen, 1972, p. 120). In fact, social movement organizations or movement-like groups represent one avenue through which many moral panics are expressed. Many, indeed, most, of these “germinal” social movements die on the vine; a few years after they break out, no lasting legacy, inheritance, or trace of the furor that had once been mobilized remains. The two action groups discussed by Cohen that sprang up in the wake of the concern over the Mods and Rockers never became full-scale social movement organizations, and did not survive past the late 1960s. Some other moral panics generate social movements and social movement organizations that manage to survive beyond the period of excitement into the more temperate period that inevitably follows. For instance, in spite of the fact that illicit drug use stirs up considerably less excitement today than it did in the late 1980s, scores of activist organizations that were put together at that time remain in existence.

Social movements are defined as organized efforts by a substantial number of people to change, or to resist change in, some major aspect of society (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Jasper, 2007, pp. 44–3). Social movements, by their very nature, express dissatisfaction with the way things are or with the way, some fear, others want to make them. They express protest about the state of affairs (Meyer, 2006). Thus, they require three conditions to come into being. First, some real, potential, or even imagined condition to which some people may object; second, a subjective feeling on the part of some that this condition is undesirable and should be changed; and third, an organized means for making this dissatisfaction collective, that is, a social movement organization. The participants of social movements feel that their own values, needs, goals, or beliefs are being threatened by certain conditions or people, and they wish to “set things right” (Goode, 1992, pp. 407–8). For the most part, social movements entail “passionate politics” (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta, 2001).

The principal aim of social movements is to establish the legitimacy of a specific claim about a social condition and to put that interpretation of reality into action, through legislation and other reforms. Social movement activists believe that a given condition does not receive enough attention and is not regarded as a sufficiently serious social problem in a society; no steps, or insufficient are being taken, they believe, to remedy the supposed problem. Members of the various animal rights groups believe that animals have the same rights as humans, and should be protected from pain and exploitation. To that end, they protest animal experimentation, the use of animals for fur, and factory-like farms that cause cows, calves, sheep, pigs, and chickens needless suffering. In the Middle East, members of Hamas and Hezbollah, fundamentalist Muslim organizations, believe that Israel should be driven out of existence and that orthodox, Iran-like Islamic states be established throughout the region, indeed, eventually, throughout the entire world. Toward that end, some of their members kill Israeli Jews, especially soldiers, and Arabs whom they believe cooperate with Israel. On the other side of the ledger,
several Jewish Israeli terrorist groups (for instance, Terror Against Terror and The Fist of Defense) believe that Israel must absorb and incorporate occupied lands once inhabited by the ancient Jews, including Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, and that these lands be “Arab free.” To that end, they have placed bombs on Arab busses, attempted to assassinate mayors of some Arab towns, planted a bomb in at least one Islamic university, and conspired to blow up mosques on the holy site of Temple Mount (Cromer, 1988).

INTEREST GROUPS: INSIDERS VERSUS OUTSIDERS

Although all social movements and social movement organizations are interest groups in that they seek to advance the cause or interests of a specific social group or category, or a cause that a specific group or category deems important, not all interest groups are social movements. This distinction is especially crucial for the study of moral panics and other collective behavior phenomena.

Some interest groups may be referred to as *established lobbies* or *established pressure groups* (Useem and Zald, 1982; Best, 1990, pp. 13–16). They are “insiders” in the political process. They have direct access to policy-makers, legislators, and politicians. They employ a paid professional staff that represents their interests, or the interests of their clients. Their representatives can call a senator, a governor, or the head of a federal or state agency, arrange a meeting or conference, explain their mission, and possibly have some influence on the political process. In addition, they have continual access to the media; a major statement issued by the head of a large, established pressure group or lobby is usually broadcast in the press and often on television news. Examples of established lobbies or pressure groups include the National Rifle Association, the American Medical Association, and the Sierra Club. In effect, established pressure groups are an integrated component of the mainstream political process, the “Fourth Estate,” nearly as central as the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government.

*Social movements* are somewhat different from established pressure groups. They are, of course, pressure groups, but of a distinct sort. Their activists are “outsiders” in the mainstream political process. They do not necessarily have direct access to policymakers, nor do their statements receive automatic attention in the media. In effect, they have to “try harder.” In the absence of being integrated into political and media institutional networks, social movements and movement organizations, for the most part, have only four methods of attracting members, acquiring resources, and achieving some of their goals: violence, protests and demonstrations, access to the media, and direct appeals to the public.

For most social movements, violence is an extremely risky method of achieving movement goals; only a small proportion of activists are willing to engage in it, it usually backfires, and it entails a high likelihood of arrest and imprisonment
Protests are unconventional, unorthodox, and occasionally illegal mass actions against undesirable targets, institutions, organizations, establishments, or symbols. They sometimes achieve movement goals, but at least as often, they alienate the very factions that movement activists wish to appeal to. Gaining access to the media usually represents an attempt to appeal to the public directly and thus generate attention for a cause, define a problem or issue in a certain way, recruit new members, and generate funds. This may entail, again, holding a protest or a demonstration, or even initiating a riot, getting arrested, holding a press conference, making a statement challenging the position of a politician or some other mainstream figure, appearing on a talk show, or granting an interview for a feature story (Best, 1990, p. 14). Public campaigns – direct appeals to the public – usually take place through the media, but they may also be launched through a mass mailing of movement literature.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: CLAIMS AND ARGUMENTS

All social movements begin with a premise; more specifically, they begin with the claim that something is wrong that can and should be remedied. Thus, the claims that movements make fall into two parts: “What’s wrong?” and “What is to be done?” As we saw, the conditions that social movements address – “What’s wrong?” – may exist and be as serious as they say, may exist but not be as serious as they say, or may not even exist at all. It barely matters: in order to attract recruits and donations, motivate activists, gain media attention, and move lawmakers to enact favorable legislation, social movement leaders and publicists must formulate an argument and marshal evidence supporting their position. Claims-making is one of a variety of methods social movements have to help them achieve their goals. It is part of the struggle for the hearts and minds – and consequently, the time and the pocketbooks – of the public, legislators, and the media (Goode, 1992, p. 434).

In other words, social movements are engaged in “the politics of reality” (Goode, 1969), that is, using evidence (or supposed evidence) as a means of defining for others how things are and how they ought to be. Convincing others that one’s definition of reality is correct – that the condition really is serious and in need of solution – represents a kind of victory for a movement, one milestone along the way to achieving its goals. Definitions of reality are fought over and debated in public forums. Much of the struggle and the give-and-take among social movement representatives and their constituents, their opponents, the public, the media, and legislators entail the attempt to legitimate a certain view of the reality of the condition being addressed. Indeed, even getting others to pay attention to certain previously ignored conditions represents a major victory for a social movement. Another way of saying this is that movements attempt to define their cause as “politically correct,” and opposition to their program – or even simple inaction – as
politically incorrect, almost unthinkable. Anti-abortion groups refer to abortion as “killing babies,” a form of murder; in this society at this time, what crime could possibly be worse than murdering babies? Who could possibly be in favor of such monstrous behavior? The animal rights people refer to favoring humans over animals as “speciesism,” a sin no less wrong than racism and sexism. Clearly, much social movement activity represents a struggle over what certain actions should be called, how they are to be defined or referred to (Goode, 1992, p. 435).

Arguments put forth by social movements very rarely weigh the pros and cons of both sides in a reasoned, scholarly fashion and come out with the conclusion, “On the one hand ... but on the other ....” They nearly always “make a case,” much as a trial lawyer does in arguing for or against a defendant in court. Typically, the evidence is presented in a one-sided fashion. Evidence suggesting that the other side might have a point is presented – if it is – as a foil, a device to demolish its claims. Movements are more likely to formulate an argument in black or white, either–or terms than in shades of gray. The wrong they struggle against must be seen as an atrocity, not simply a condition that is bad in some respects and not so bad in others. This technique of argumentation is not unique to social movement participants, of course; the opponents of a position taken by a given social movement, likewise, tend to engage in one-sided arguments. Just as the environmental movement is likely to exaggerate the extent and damage of an oil spill, in a like fashion, industry spokespersons are very likely to minimize them. Much of the process of claims-making in social movements is taken up with validating the view of one’s own group and discrediting those of one’s opponents.

It is extremely rarely the case – although it sometimes happens – that the conditions a movement focuses on are worse than its activists claim. With most conditions, nearly all the time, movement participants must make them out to be worse than they are; they tend to focus on the worst aspects of the condition as if they were typical. In this sense, the justifications that social movements construct to support their position are similar to gossip, rumor, legends, and paranormal beliefs – that is, they “tell one hell of a good story.” In order to grab the observer by the throat, get his or her attention, and insist, “This condition is important, it is bad, and something must be done about it!” it is almost always necessary to lie or at least exaggerate a little. It would be difficult to contest the point that, while some participants in some social movements accurately describe the conditions they wish to change, taken as a whole, social movement participants and activists tend to exaggerate their extent and seriousness. To be plain about it, exaggeration is a great deal more effective as a movement strategy than the complex task of literal, point-for-point truth-telling. Movement claims-making makes demands on people’s limited time and attention; there are many issues to deal with, and movements must convince potentially interested parties that this particular issue needs dealing with (Goode, 1992, pp. 435–6). This is likely to be especially the case with recycled problems or conditions, which must insinuate themselves into an already crowded social problems agenda.
For instance, in their attack on pornography, anti-pornography groups focus almost exclusively on violent pornography and pretend not to know, or explicitly deny, that the overwhelming majority of it is nonviolent – or they arbitrarily define all nonviolent pornography as violent – and ignore or dismiss evidence that suggests that nonviolent pornography does not cause or influence men to become violent toward women. To say that a tiny percentage of all pornography depicts violence against women is to elicit a “ho-hum” response from an audience; to say that pornography depicts women being “bound, gagged, sliced up, tortured” (Dworkin, 1982, p. 255) is to stir up a sense of outrage. To say that the evidence suggests that, over the short run, witnessing violent films with sexually explicit content is correlated with men inflicting simulated pain in a laboratory setting, but watching nonviolent films probably is not, does not cause many women to run out and enlist in the anti-pornography crusade. In contrast, chanting “Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice” – which was the slogan of Women Against Pornography – is far more likely to generate that movement-joining fervor.

Anti-abortionist groups claim that abortion is not simply harmful to the fetus, it is also extremely dangerous to the woman who aborts a fetus; after an abortion, women supposedly suffer a serious “syndrome” of “physical or emotional trauma” (Garb, 1989). In contrast to this claim, the evidence is clear-cut: a woman is more than 10 times more likely to die in childbirth than as a result of undergoing an abortion, according to statistics gathered by the National Center for Health Statistics. Anti-abortion forces never mention the increased risk of childbirth to the mother when discussing the issue of the impact of abortion on a woman’s health. They do mention that there is a medical risk when undergoing an abortion; they do not mention that that medical risk is greater for childbirth than abortion. (Of course, in a parallel fashion, the pro-choice forces underplay the fact that, by definition, abortion always results in death to the fetus – which is, after all, at the very least a potential human being.) Bringing in all the facts, in all their complexity, makes strong advocacy of a given cause more difficult (Goode, 1992, p. 436).

Exaggerated and one-sided claims stimulate more outrage, attract more attention, and generate more resources for the cause than assertions that are nearer the literal truth. To an activist, carefully weighing the evidence is tantamount to saying that the condition isn’t really terribly serious and isn’t much in need of remedy. It is seen as a betrayal of the cause. Activists may challenge those who insist on factual correctness by claiming that they are petty, nit-picking, missing the main point – as if facts are little more than a distraction from their goal. Indeed, in terms of movement activity, this is often the case. Unfortunately for some movements, exaggerated claims can often backfire, generate a reaction that is harmful to movement goals if they prove to be wildly off the mark. This is precisely what happened to the “missing children” movement which at one time claimed that there were some 50,000 child victims of stranger abductions yearly, when more disinterested estimates based on available evidence yielded no more than 600 annual child kidnapings by strangers that lasted more than 24 hours, or which entailed a kidnapping
harm to the child (Griego and Kilzer, 1985; Gentry, 1988; Best, 1990; Forst and Blomquist, 1991). The exposure of this fabricated, exaggerated, and wildly inaccurate claim dealt a damaging blow to the “missing child” movement (Best, 1990, pp. 49–50; Jenkins, 1992, pp. 142–4). Systematic data sources (a national household survey, a survey of police records, and an analysis of FBI data) estimate that in the United States each year, roughly 200 to 300 “stereotypical” kidnappings took place, that is, those in which a stranger perpetrator took a child overnight, or to a distance of 50 miles or more, or killed or ransomed the child, or demonstrated a desire to keep the child. Somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 children were kidnapped by strangers according to the legal definition of a kidnapping, but these acts lacked all elements of the stereotypical kidnapping – that is, children were “moved, detained, or lured over shorter distances or time periods, usually in the course of other crimes like sexual assault” (Finkelhor, Hotaling, and Sedlak, 1992, p. 238).

As we said above, not only do social movement representatives attempt to establish the validity of certain claims about the seriousness of a given condition, they also engage in discrediting their opponents, or individuals or agencies they see or define as their opponents. To many movement activists, it seems obvious and self-evident that their cause is important and just; they simply cannot see why anyone would disagree with their position. There must be an explanation for why others put obstacles in their path. Two readily come to mind: those who do so are either stupid or evil. In an argument with them, this basic fact must be pointed out; bystanders must be made to realize that this is the case. Thus, anti-AIDS activists publicly charge that AIDS workers or commentators are liars and guilty of “murdering” AIDS patients through neglect. In a similar vein, the animal rights lobby accuses fur trappers, ranchers, garment manufacturers, the employees of stores that sell fur garments, and purchasers of furs of being “murderers.” Likewise, anti-abortionist or pro-life advocates claim that abortionists, women who undergo abortions, and pro-choice advocates are, once again, guilty of “murder.” Of course, murder is the most extreme charge that movement activists can hurl at their opponents. Practically all movements charge opponents with a wide range of crimes and outrages in an effort to discredit them, their character, their arguments, their behavior, and their position. One of the most important claims-making activities that social movement participants engage in is vilification (Vanderford, 1989).

**SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND MORAL PANICS**

In sum, the social movement – or at least, the incipient or “germinal” social movement or action group – is one manifestation of the moral panic, one means by which the panic is expressed. A threat is perceived; members of the community discuss that threat and organize to deal with it. They make demands on their local,
state, and national political representatives; they appeal to the public, usually through
the media, to recognize the threat and join in the struggle against it; they confront
the threat directly through pickets, demonstrations, boycotts, even acts of violence.
Proctor & Gamble, which, as we saw, was in the 1980s thought by some small-
town fundamentalist Christians to contribute 10 percent of their profits to the
Church of Satan, received 6,000 calls a month protesting this offensive practice.
In the early 1980s, the photographs of missing children appeared on milk cartons
all over the country. In the late 1980s, new penalties were proposed for drug
offenses by hundreds of politicians from coast to coast. Under such conditions,
speeches are made, lectures are given, members of Congress receive letters, calls,
and telegrams, government subcommittee meetings and hearings are held, books
and articles are published, stores are picketed, products are boycotted, and bills
and laws are proposed – these and countless other activities are generated and coordi-
nated largely by social movements and other action groups rather than by isolated
individuals. One cannot understand the moral panic without understanding the
role of social movements and movement-like organizations.

It is entirely possible that “germinal” social movements and social movement
organizations thrown up in the wake of moral panics represent a somewhat differ-
ent type of movement than those that arise during less heated periods. It is possi-
ble, for instance, that their claims are less likely to be checked by credible evidence,
that the vilification of “folk devils” is sharper and less restrained, that matters of
technical expediency and material resources are less likely to be considered by
activists in attempting to achieve their goals. In short, it is entirely likely that such
movements deserve special and sustained attention.

SUMMARY

Along with public opinion, the doings and speeches of legislators and politicians,
and attention in the media, the activity of social movement organizations makes
up a major manifestation of moral panics. Moral panics demand social movement
organization (SMO) attention because both express the sentiment that a condition
threatens the society and is in need of correction.

The main aim of SMOs is to establish the legitimacy of a particular claim about
a given social condition and to put that interpretation into motion. SMOs often
use moral panics to stir up concern about a given threat they wish to address and
establish domain over. But such a linkage is a risky proposition, since moral panics
tend to be volatile and usually soon die out. Most members of SMOs also sincerely
believe that a given condition is a threat both to their interests and those of the
society as a whole, but they try to “engineer” widespread public concern to their
advantage. One major channel that maximizes this effort is the media. Larger,
older, more entrenched, and more successful SMOs tend to have more media access and legitimacy than smaller, newer, and less successful ones. SMOs tend to exaggerate conditions to make things seem worse and more in need of remedy than they actually are. They also tend to vilify parties they regard as impeding the solution they feel society needs to address problematic conditions. Such claims form the heart and soul of SMOs. Above all, social movements attempt to define the nature of and solution for society’s problems, and to establish domain over these problems.

To become successful, SMOs need not appeal to the entire swath of society; all that is necessary is to attract enough members, activists, and donations from a sector of the society to ensure their continuation. What defines a movement’s success is not solving the problem they’ve defined – indeed, to solve this problem may very well spell doom for the SMO – but survival.

Moral panics often churn up SMOs in their wake, but not all activist organizations are formed during scares or moral panics. The ones that result from panics may be more extreme and less stable than those that result from more long-term social processes. Evanescent SMOs born during heated moments include the women’s anti-pornography movement, the movements that attacked satanic ritual abuse, and Stanley Cohen’s anti-Mods and Rockers movements, each of which eventually evaporated. Once again, the emotional charisma of the heat of the moment is difficult to crystallize into a stable, long-term organizational structure.
What is a social problem? How should the social problem be studied? In what ways is it similar to the moral panic? There are two basic perspectives on or approaches to social problems: the objectivist and the constructionist. Clearly, they parallel the “objectively given” and the “subjectively problematic” approaches toward morality and deviance we spelled out in Chapter 6.

**OBJECTIVISM**

Most people would define a social problem as a condition that is harmful to the society (Kerbo and Coleman, 2007, p. 363). This is the perspective that is referred to as objectivism. Objectivists argue that what defines a social problem is the existence of an objectively-given, concretely real, damaging or threatening condition. What makes a condition a problem is that it harms or endangers human life and well-being. People need not be concerned or even aware of such conditions; what is important is that they do damage to our lives in some clear-cut, non-ideological fashion. Any condition that causes death or disease, which shortens life expectancy or deteriorates the quality of life on a large scale, must be defined as a social problem (Manis, 1974; 1976; Loseke, 1999, pp. 7–13). Presumably, the greater the number of people so damaged or threatened, the more important the social problem. According to this view, the final arbiter of the reality of social problems is the expert, armed with empirical evidence and scientific insight, and not the untrained general public. To cite Manis, a proponent of the “objectivist” school: “Social problems are those social conditions identified by scientific inquiry and values as detrimental to human well-being” (1976, p. 25). The objectivist model is a variant of the functionalist paradigm, in that it sees social problems largely as a product of dysfunctions, social disorganization, role and value conflicts, and a violation of norms – that is, a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be (Merton and
Likewise, the traditional Marxist position accepts the idea that social problems should be defined objectively – by the harm that is inflicted on large numbers of people as a result of such practices as exploitation, oppression, racism, sexism, and imperialism (Liazos, 1972; 1982).

**CONSTRUCTIONISM**

On the other side of the debate, representing the more contemporary or *avant-garde* approach, we find the “constructionists,” “subjectivists,” or “relativists,” who argue that what makes a given condition a problem is the “collective definition” (Blumer, 1971) of a condition as a problem, the degree of felt public concern over a given condition or issue. The constructionists see parallels between social problems and moral panics, while the objectivists do not. To the objectivist, a social problem is defined materially and physically, by the measurable negative impact of a given condition, while a “panic” implies a totally different dimension – fear and concern, and irrational fear and concern at that. To the constructionist, in contrast, objective conditions become social problems only when they are defined as or felt to be problematic – disturbing in some way, undesirable, in need of solution or remedy (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977).

To the constructionist, social problems do not exist “objectively” in the same sense that a rock, a frog, or a tree exists; instead, they are *constructed* by the human mind, *called into being* or *constituted* by the definitional process (Spector and Kitsuse, 1973, 1977; Kitsuse and Spector, 1973). The objective existence of a harmful condition does not, by itself or in and of itself, constitute a social problem. Merely because a disease kills the members of a society does not mean that it constitutes a social problem among these people; if they do not conceptualize or define the disease as a problem, according to the constructionist, to these people, it is not a social problem. (Of course, the consequences of that disease may produce conditions that are defined as a social problem, but that is an entirely separate matter.) Indeed, to the subjectivist, a given objective condition need not even *exist* to be defined as a problem – witness the persecution of witches in Renaissance Europe and colonial New England (Erikson, 1966; 2005; Ben-Yehuda, 1980, 1985). In the words of Fuller and Myers: “Social problems are what people think they are, and if conditions are not defined as social problems by the people involved in them, they are not problems to these people, although they may be problems to outsiders or scientists” (1941, p. 320). Spector and Kitsuse define social problems as “the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions” (1977, p. 75).

In sum, to the constructionist, a social problem exists when: (1) a group or social sector of the society regard a given condition or phenomenon as wrong; (2) they are concerned about it; and (3) they urge or take steps to correct it. Thus, in this sense,
a social problem exists not only when substantial numbers of individuals in a society consider something wrong; it must also be seen as a remediable condition – something should be done to correct it. If the members of a society believe that nothing can be done about a condition – say, it is regarded as their fate, an act of God, or the whim of nature – constructionists do not see it as a social problem. To the constructionist, social problems are defined by claims-making, not materially harmful conditions (Best, 1995; Loseke, 1999, pp. 13–21, 191–209).

But note: even if not defined as a problem, a condition may still be objectively serious in that it kills or harms many members of a given society. To the constructionist, that does not make or define it as a social problem; what makes a condition (whether it is concretely real or “putative”) a social problem is the degree of felt concern about that condition, whether it is objectively serious or not, and what is said about it and done to correct it. During much of human history, infanticide, or the killing of unwanted babies, was widely practiced and was hardly ever considered a problem; in that sense, to the constructionist, infanticide was not a social problem. Today, infanticide is widely considered a problem, and in all nations of the world, it is a crime, punishable by law. To the objectivist, to the extent that it results in the loss of human life, killing unwanted babies has always been a social problem; to the constructionist, killing unwanted babies became a social problem only when it was recognized as a problem and action was taken against it.

Put another way, a given condition (or “putative” condition) becomes a social problem when individuals or groups engage in claims-making activities with reference to that condition. Claims-making represents “a demand made by one party to another that something be done about some putative condition” (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977, p. 78). So, if a rally is held by a thousand demonstrators in a square in front of the governor’s mansion to protest a state tax hike, then rising taxes can be seen as a social problem to those who are assembled. If a march is held through the streets of a white neighborhood in which a black youth was assaulted, then violence by whites against African Americans can be taken as a social problem to these marchers. If seminars are held and talks given which claim that tens of thousands of children are being kidnapped and killed by satanists each year in the United States and that the police must crack down on those fiends, once again, such activity manifests the existence of a social problem for those who hold, give, and attend such seminars and talks. In each case, certain parties are making a claim about the injustice of a certain aspect of the society as well as a demand that steps be taken to end it. It is in such claims-making activities that the existence of social problems can be determined.

It should be emphasized that referring to such demands as “claims” neither denies or affirms their moral validity or material facticity; a “claim” may be empirically valid or not, but the claim itself represents a kind of reality that is socially structured and is in need of examination. For instance, drug abuse is both a problem objectively in that it kills a great many people and subjectively in that it is widely regarded as a problem. To say that drug abuse is a condition that is constructed
into a problem does not deny that it also has objective consequences. Too often, observers seem to belittle the drug problem by emphasizing its constructed character. Of course, as to whether it is more, or less, objectively harmful than other conditions – ones that attract less concern – is an entirely separate matter.

Note that it is not necessary for individuals to formulate, utter, or use the exact phrase, “X is a social problem,” or “X is a social problem in this society.” The identification of conditions as problems is expressed in a variety of ways – including expressed attitudes, activism, voting on issues, participation in social movements, rebellion, revolution, consuming media stories about certain issues or conditions, and so on. More concretely, to the constructionist, the subjective reality of social problems can be measured or manifested in some of the following ways: (1) organized, collective action or campaigns on the part of some members of a society to do something about, call attention to, protest, or change (or prevent change in) a given condition – in short, “social problems as social movements” (Mauss, 1975; Best, 1990, pp. 2–3); (2) the introduction of bills in legislatures to criminalize, outlaw, or otherwise address the behavior and the individuals supposedly causing the condition (Becker, 1963, pp. 135ff; Gusfield, 1963, 1967, 1981; Best, 1990, pp. 2–3); (3) the ranking of a condition or an issue in the public’s hierarchy of the most serious problems facing the country (Best, 1990, pp. 2–3, 151–75; Jensen, Gerber, and Babcock, 1991) – what Manis derisively calls “the public opinion paradigm” or the *vox populi* approach (1976, pp. 18–20); and (4) public discussion of an issue in the media in the form of magazine and newspaper articles and editorials and television news stories, commentary, documentaries, and dramas (Becker, 1963, pp. 141–3; Himmelstein, 1983, pp. 152–4; Best, 1990, pp. 2–3; Jensen, Gerber, and Babcock, 1991).

Why do certain conditions come to be thought of as social problems while others do not? Why are certain conditions looked upon as problems at one point in time, and considered as neutral or benign in their impact at another?

Why was alcohol accepted as little more than a wholesome beverage (referred to by Increase Mather, a seventeenth-century theologian, as “the good creature of God”) in the United States until the turn of the eighteenth century, when consumption was quite high, while by the turn of the nineteenth century, when consumption had declined considerably, sizeable segments of the American population defined alcohol as an unmixed evil, a scourge – “demon rum” itself (Lender and Martin, 1987)?

Why is the teaching of evolution a problem in one community and banning the teaching of evolution a problem in another? Why, in one West Virginia community in the 1970s, were certain books that were assigned by the school board considered so damaging to schoolchildren that some local residents attempted to remove them from the curriculum? Why did different members of that same community struggle to reinstate those books back into the community’s school curriculum (Page and Clelland, 1978)?

How did the use of psychiatry to silence political dissidence, particularly in the former Soviet Union, come to be regarded as a problem to the members of the American Psychiatric Association (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977, pp. 97–129)?
How did smoking come to be seen as a major social problem in the 1970s and 1980s (Markle and Troyer, 1979; Troyer and Markle, 1983; Troyer, 1989)? What were the dynamics behind this definitional process? What sorts of steps have been proposed to reduce or eliminate it?

Why was child abuse not thought of as a serious problem before the 1960s? How and why did it get recognized as problematic? Who “discovered” it? Publicized it? What was the outcome of this definitional process (Pfohl, 1977; Nelson, 1984)?

To the constructionist, it is the social construction or subjective interpretation of conditions that defines a social problem, not the nature of the condition itself. How do conditions come to be defined or felt or seen as problematic? Why does public concern emerge over one condition but not another? Why do the members of a given society get aroused about certain issues? Why are there year-to-year or decade-by-decade fluctuations in how seriously the public regards certain social conditions? These are some of the focal questions of constructionists.

It is important to note, with Best (2002b), that the majority of social problems texts, and hence courses devoted to the study of social problems, adopt the old-fashioned objectivistic approach. This means that these books and courses offer a theoretical jumble, a hodge-podge of topics thrown together without rhyme, reason, or coherence, with nothing to tie them together other than the fact that, according to some criterion, they are considered harmful to the society. In this volume, we do not follow the objectivistic approach to social problems. Instead, we are constructionists: a problem is what is socially constructed as a social problem, by the society as a whole or by certain sectors of the society (Spector and Kistuse, 1977; Best, 2002b). We look at the problem-defining process. We do not declare what a problem “is”; instead, we look at how a condition or behavior comes to be designated or regarded as a problem.

THE “DISCOVERY” OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

It is absolutely crucial for the constructionist position to understand exactly how, and by whom, social problems are “discovered.” Awareness of and concern about certain conditions as a problem does not arise spontaneously from the social body; millions of people do not wake up one day and realize that a given condition is a serious problem that must be addressed. Members or representatives of certain categories, organizations, or groups are more likely to be moved to bring a condition to public awareness than others.

Who “discovers” social problems? No single generalization applies to all social problems. Still, constructionists emphasize the role of interests, resources, and legitimacy in this process (Gusfield, 1981; Best, 1990, pp. 11–13; Jenkins, 1992, p. 3). Members or representatives of organizations or groups that stand to profit from
the discovery of a problem are likely to be motivated to do so; organizations or groups that can command resources—many members, access to the media or to influential political figures, financial resources, and so on—are likely to be more successful in defining a condition as a social problem; and spokespersons who are considered credible, reliable, and respectable, likewise, are more likely to be taken seriously as the definers of a new problem.

Some conditions are discovered as problems by a single crusader who, initially, had little or no access to organizational resources. Such a crusader, for example, may write a book that touches a responsive chord and places a condition squarely in the public consciousness—witness Rachel Carson’s discovery of pollution in her influential best-seller Silent Spring. Sometimes a single crusader who has been personally harmed by a condition, or by someone’s behavior, launches a social movement and manages to define a social problem for much of the public. A good example is drunk driving. In 1980, the 13-year-old daughter of Candy Lightner, a divorced homemaker, was struck and killed by a drunk driver. The man’s absurdly light sentence (21 months in jail and a community halfway house) moved Lightner to start an organization to ensure that her daughter’s death had some meaning. By the early 1990s, Lightner’s organization, MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) had managed to define drunk driving as a major social problem, was instrumental in raising the drinking age to 21 in all states, and influenced stricter legislation against drunk driving, likewise, in all 50 states (Reinarman, 1988). Today, MADD boasts a membership of a million, a full-time staff of 40 workers, and an annual budget of over $13 million.

In being “discovered” by more or less isolated outraged individuals rather than organizational representatives of a group or cause, environmental pollution and drunk driving represent exceptions to the rule. Most social problems are brought to public awareness by representatives of institutions or organizations whose interests are advanced in some way by the discovery.

In some cases, the discovery is made by professionals who act as an interest group in promoting a certain condition as a social problem. Child abuse existed for millennia, but, as we saw, it was not regarded as a major social problem until the 1960s. Within a scant four years, it became universally regarded as a problem, legislation was passed in all states criminalizing the abuse of children by their parents or caretakers, and physicians and social workers were henceforth alerted to the possibility of abuse in their clients. The abuse of children by parents and other caretakers was not prompted by an increase in abuse itself. What forces brought about the “discovery” of child abuse as a major social problem?

The condition was recognized not by family or general practitioners or hospital physicians, but by pediatric radiologists. One analysis (Pfohl, 1977) suggests that family practitioners did not bring the condition to public awareness because of the strength of the norm of confidentiality between physicians and their clients, because of the fear of liability in violating the norm of disclosure, because the parent, not the child, is regarded as the real patient, and because of the unwillingness
of physicians to get drawn into the judicial process. On the other hand, these restraints did not apply to pediatric radiologists; they do not interact directly with the family, do not have parents as clients, and are not legally liable for violating the confidentiality of the doctor–patient relationship. Moreover, as the discoverers of an important medical condition, pediatric radiologists were able to establish legitimacy over a major domain and advance the position of what was then a comparatively marginal medical specialty (Pfohl, 1977).

In short, in the discovery of any condition and its advocacy as a social problem, we must be alert to the matter of whose interests are being advanced in the process. Asking who profits does not mean that, if such motivation can be found, the problem that is being attacked is therefore inconsequential and trivial. Pediatric radiologists were simultaneously advancing a worthy cause by diagnosing child battering and their own interests in bringing child abuse to the fore. Locating special interests does not disqualify a claim—it only locates its source and dynamics. Moreover, though some causes are advanced by more or less disinterested parties—witness Rachel Carson’s discovery of environmental pollution—others may be personally involved, such as Candy Lightner in her efforts to control drunk driving. At the same time, we fail to understand the problem-definition process if we fail to consider who “discovered” a given harmful condition and why. Organizational self-interests are often at work in this crucial process.

**STRICT CONSTRUCTIONISM**

The social constructionists split into two camps—the “hard” or strict constructionists and the “moderate” or what Best (1989a; 1995) calls the contextual constructionists. Both are concerned with the social construction of social problems. Where they differ is in the relevance of the objective dimension. The moderate constructionists do not hold that social problems are defined by the objective severity of social conditions, but they do argue that they can be determined, and that the subjective definition of conditions is to a large measure independent of the objective seriousness of those conditions. In contrast, the strict constructionist argues that it is impossible to determine the relationship between objective damage and subjective concern because there is no such thing as objectivity in the first place. Even scientists are involved in making claims about the social problems status of certain conditions (Aronson, 1984). All claims to objective reality are equally subjective, equally motivated by the impulse to define conditions as social problems. Scientists, armed with empirical data concerning the objective seriousness of a given condition, have no special or privileged position to define the nature of concrete reality.

To the moderate or contextual constructionists (for a representative sampling of the view of this camp, see the selections in Best, 1989a; 1995), one of the most intriguing features of social problems is the fact that extremely harmful conditions...
are not always defined or regarded as social problems, while, objectively speaking, relatively benign conditions frequently are. The answer as to why people become concerned about certain conditions cannot be found—at least not entirely and exclusively—in the realm of objective damage. Something else is at work, and the moderate constructionists intend to unearth just what it is. As we saw, in the 1980s, the absurd rumor that the Proctor & Gamble logo—the face of the man in the moon on a field of 13 stars—was seen as proof of the corporation’s support of satanism; this rumor generated some 6,000 calls a month to the company, which finally had to drop the logo from its packages (Anonymous, 1985). Was the P&G logo a social problem? From the constructionist perspective, it was—to the people who were concerned about it and to the executives of P&G, who had to come up with a new logo. To the strict constructionist, the only thing that can be determined about this issue is the public or subjective concern it inflamed; the sociologist is not permitted to determine whether and to what extent this issue was a problem objectively. To the contextual constructionist, subjectively, in the 1980s, the P&G logo was a problem—again, to the persons concerned about it—but it wasn’t a problem objectively, that is, the belief that the logo indicated that the rumor that P&G contributed to the Church of Satan was clearly false. (Of course, the fact that some people believed this was a problem objectively to the executives at P&G.) The contextual constructionist is allowed to determine contradictions between the objective and the subjective definitions of what constitutes a problem, while the strict constructionist isn’t.

Why did crime against the elderly attract major media attention and social concern in the 1970s, at a time when this age category was—and today, still is—the least criminally victimized sector of the population (Yin, 1980; Fishman, 1978; 1980, pp. 4ff.)? Why is the issue of illicit drug use couched in legal and moral terms while the use of alcohol and cigarettes is regarded as a social and health matter? Is animal experimentation a social problem or is opposition to animal experimentation the problem? Which is the bigger problem: environmental pollution or government controls over environmental pollution? Should we banish religion from the public school classroom? Or does that create more of a social problem than introducing religion into the classroom? The problematic nature of these questions can only be appreciated if we have some concretely determinable standard against which to measure public concern. To the contextual constructionist, it is the discrepancy between such subjective concern and the concrete or objective threat posed by or damage caused by a given condition that forces us to raise such questions. If we insist that we have no right to determine the nature of the threat posed by certain conditions, such questions are not problematic—indeed, they are not even possible.

In contrast, the strict constructionist does not recognize the existence of the objective dimension at all; all dimensions are equally subjective. When scientists determine and publicize the objective seriousness of a given condition, they are simply engaged in a “claims-making activity” (Aronson, 1984), essentially no different in any important respect from someone standing on a street corner handing out
leaflets denouncing the use of fluoride in the water, claiming that UFO abductions are the major problem of our time, or that blacks are inferior to whites, dangerous, and should be rounded up and placed in concentration camps. To the strict constructionist, objectivity does not exist; there is no possibility of stepping outside the definitional process. We are all involved in defining social problems; we are all making claims about the seriousness, or lack of seriousness, of certain conditions, and there is no scientific way of resolving these conflicting claims, because objectivity is a myth. All claims are constructed, including the scientist’s. Or so say the strict constructionists.

The factual correctness of a given statement – to the extent that such could be determined – of a given position is irrelevant; what counts is where that statement stands in relation to the social problem defining process. Strict constructionists cannot determine or even inquire about the relationship – whether causal or independent – between the objective and the constructed dimensions because for them, the objective dimension simply does not exist. It does not matter – indeed, sociologically, it cannot even be determined – whether in Renaissance Europe, women did, or did not, consort with the devil; charges of satanic kidnappings, ritualistic torture, and murder are, or are not, true; legal, or illegal, drugs kill more people; listening to rock and roll music and reading comic books in the 1950s did, or did not, cause or encourage moral decay and juvenile delinquency; and so on. What counts – and that alone – is how such charges come to be constructed, believed, and acted upon. To the strict constructionist, the effort by contextual constructionists to privilege a scientific version of reality over a popular or public one represents a fallacy, a bias, an inappropriate mixing of levels of analysis, a case of “ontological gerrymandering” (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985). It is an improper sociological enterprise, they argue.

More important to our concern in this book, to the strict constructionist, the moral panic does not exist. Indeed, it cannot exist, because the objective dimension cannot be determined and hence, the criterion of disproportion cannot be applied. Consequently, if we are interested in moral panics, we cannot approach it from the perspective of strict constructionism. We can study concern (although it is not clear exactly how this can be done if we do not accept the empirical reality of the material world), but we cannot, for any given condition, compare levels of concern against levels of concrete threat. Thus, to the strict constructionist, the moral panic does not exist; therefore, this book is about a nonexistent topic. Clearly, the authors of this book do not, and cannot, accept the validity of strict constructionism.

**CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: CONCERN VERSUS HARM**

Our position conforms closely to contextual constructionism rather than to objectivism or to strict constructionism. A number of crucial assumptions flow from this position.
Contextual constructionism does not imply that a study of the objective seriousness of certain conditions is, in and of itself, fallacious or uninteresting. On the other hand, for us, the objective dimension does not define the social problem, nor does it strictly determine subjective concern. People become concerned about objectively trivial conditions, or conditions that don’t exist, and remain unconcerned about objectively serious conditions (Loseke, 1999, p. 9). Contextual constructionists do not see the objective and the subjective dimensions as contradictory so much as independent. For us, definitions of and concern about conditions are far more sociologically relevant, while the objective threat that conditions present stems from a wide variety of sources – medical, ecological, economic, geological, pharmacological, and so on. If we were to focus on the conditions themselves and the threat they pose as our primary concern, we would be wandering in a theoretical wilderness, an unfocused, uncentered hodge-podge. While we do not deny the existence of the objective dimension, we do not believe that the objective seriousness of a given condition – not that alone – determines the public’s reaction to it. Social movement activity, legislation, a prominent ranking on the public’s list of society’s most serious problems, and media attention, are all generated by a variety of factors, each of which needs to be investigated (Rubington and Weinberg, 2003, pp. 279–354; Best, 1995, pp. 337–54).

In a nutshell, public concern need not reflect objective seriousness. (Although media attention to the objective seriousness of a given condition may be a factor in influencing some of the public to be more concerned about it.) Why should we assume that the public has an accurate notion of how serious certain conditions are? Few people have even a rough idea of the size or extent of many of the harmful – or not-so-harmful – conditions that exist in a given society. Which causes more deaths – accident or disease? In one survey, they were judged to be equally frequent, in spite of the fact that disease takes about 15 times as many lives as accidents (Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein, 1980b). Events that are dramatic and easy to recall are judged to be more common, other things being equal, than those that are less dramatic and difficult to remember; this is referred to as the “availability” heuristic (Tversky and Kahneman, 1982). The media play a role in this process; more dramatic events are more newsworthy, more likely to be recalled by viewers and readers, and therefore more likely to be thought of by the public as frequent. Though disease takes 100 times as many lives as homicide, newspapers contain three times as many articles on death from homicide as death from disease (Slovic, Fischhoff, and Lichtenstein, 1980b). The extent of fear of crime in a community is less strongly correlated with the actual crime rate than with the amount of news about crime – and the nature of that news – in the media. How can the public possibly assess the relative objective seriousness of various conditions if their capacity to estimate that seriousness is fatally flawed by biases and systematic judgmental errors (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky, 1982)?

Public concern and action about a certain issue rise and fall in part for political, ideological, and moral reasons. There is, in other words, a “politics of social
problems.” As we saw, the public may be stirred up as a result of the efforts of a “moral entrepreneur” or moral crusader—an individual who feels that “something ought to be done” about a supposed wrongdoing, and takes steps to make sure that certain rules are enforced (Becker, 1963, pp. 147–63). At times, issues emerge as social problems because a social class, an industry, a professional group, or specific segment of the public will profit—or lose—as a result of certain changes in the society. Clearly, the American tobacco industry’s failed attempts to define restrictions on public smoking as violations of the public’s constitutional rights (invoking the Bill of Rights in this attempt) falls into this category. Politicians may make speeches about a particular issue and generate concern in the public that a problem exists where none was previously suspected. Events may take place in the lives of celebrities that publicize a condition and galvanize public sentiment toward seeing it as a serious problem; clearly, the death of Rock Hudson from AIDS in 1985 is a dramatic example. An especially horrifying murder may electrify the public and convince millions that a social problem of a certain type exists that needs to be rectified. While one or another of these various factors has been emphasized by different observers, they all play a role in generating subjective perceived crises at different times and in different places.

In short, in looking at social problems, our focus will be on public concern and only secondarily on the objective nature of conditions themselves. We believe that the relation between objective conditions and subjective concern is problematic, that is, there is no automatic, one-to-one correspondence between the two dimensions, and how they are in fact related is something that has to be investigated in specific cases, and is likely to be systematically connected to a variety of crucial factors and variables.

However, the contextual constructionist position holds to a second point as well. It most emphatically necessitates regarding the objective dimension as being capable of verification. Independent of the interests of those who make claims in a given controversy, we can determine, in a more or less objective and definitive fashion, that cigarettes cause cancer, that automobile accidents claim more victims than mountain climbing, that AIDS is not transmitted by hugging or kissing an infected party, that hundreds of thousands of women are raped in the United States each year, that most of the children who are kidnapped in the country are abducted by their parents, that urban residents are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime than small-town, suburban, or rural dwellers. To argue, as some have (Kitsuse and Schneider, 1989; Aronson, 1984), that such statements cannot be validated empirically (or that sociologists, as sociologists, have no right to play a part in this validation process), that making such statements is qualitatively no different from claiming their opposite, and places one squarely in the social problems-defining fray, reduces the study of social problems to an examination of a series of claims by contending parties, their social origins, and the struggle over their validation. To adherents of the strict constructionist view, there is no way of empirically verifying or refuting any such claims. (Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how social
origins and struggles among contending parties can be studied, given that they too can be types of claims.)

For instance, can we seriously argue that the claim that extraterrestrials have abducted and now inhabit the earthly bodies of thousands of humans worldwide, and that this represents the most serious problem of our age, cannot be disconfirmed? That such a claim is on an equal footing with – and is no less a special claim than – saying that little if any evidence supports the claim of extraterrestrial abductions? Is the claim by white supremacist groups that Jews represent a conspiracy to corrupt and destroy the Christian nation of the United States really no less valid than the mountains of evidence demonstrating the conclusion that Jews are involved in no such conspiracy? These are rhetorical questions, of course, but they express our feeling that strict constructionist position is inhibiting, chilling, and paralyzing. It makes a critical perspective toward contemporary society impossible.

In addition, it is impossible to ignore the question of the objective size and scope of a given problem, an issue which the strict constructionist believes to be indeterminate. As we saw, claims-makers attempt to maximize the size and scope of the problem to legitimate their claims; presumably, the larger the problem, the more attention it deserves, they will argue. As Best shows, “big numbers are better than little numbers” (1989a, p. 32; 1990, p. 61; 2001; 2004). For the most part, the public, lawmakers, the mass media, and the other problem-validators agree that size is a measure of seriousness. However – and this is where the strict constructionist runs into difficulty – when exaggerated size estimates are made by claims-makers and they are not validated by the available evidence, a movement will be seriously hurt.

The problem is that size is one of those elements in an argument which has widespread acceptance; nearly everyone in a given debate pays some homage to it as a relevant factor. And, likewise, certain types of evidence have widespread, nearly universal, acceptance as legitimate. Consequently, when experts who gather such evidence declare that the size of the problem is drastically smaller than movement advocates claim, this invalidates their claim and damages the movement. This is not a simple matter of “who says what,” as the strict constructionist seems to be saying, but drawing conclusions from certain empirical evidence. Size estimates may be an important rhetorical device in an argument, but there must be some rough correspondence in the material world with one’s claims, otherwise, one’s cause ends up worse off than if one had made no such estimates. For a social movement organization’s ship to float, it usually needs more than activists’ support, and the general public does not take kindly to empty, flatulent claims. Of course, if no credible, externally-validated evidence exists in the first place, and no potential challenges to one’s size estimates are possible, almost any potentially believable estimates can be offered. On the other hand, as we saw, the missing child movement was seriously damaged when its original, exaggerated claims as to the size and scope of the problem were successfully challenged; the exposure of the “numbers gap” returned to haunt the movement (Best, 1990, pp. 48–50). Fears of “Halloween sadism” assaults against children (putting razor blades in trick-or-treat
apples, for instance) never materialized into a social movement, in part because evidence supporting claims as to the serious size and scope of the problem simply never existed (Best, 1990, p. 147). On the other hand, one of the strengths of the ritual child abuse movement is that the phenomenon simply does not exist; hence, no evidence can be gathered to challenge its claims – until specific supposed offenders are accused, of course. Likewise, eventually, the feminist anti-pornography movement disbanded, in part because of opposition (the "pro-sex" faction of feminism) and in part because of evidence against some of its false claims (that "snuff films" really do murder women, that producers of porn movies routinely coerce women to act in pornography, that pornography causes the rape and murder of women). But this is a game of SMO (or social movement organization) "chicken," because exaggerated or false claims generate support for movements that otherwise might enlist no support at all. Hence, SMO activists walk a tightrope between raising support by issuing claims that exaggerate the seriousness of conditions and alienating support by issuing palpably and verifiably false claims.

In addition, the strict constructionist argument runs into difficulty when we consider the fact that it accepts the validity of certain kinds of empirical evidence but rejects other kinds. More specifically, it is acceptable to the strict constructionist to make claims about the social construction of claims, which have to be studied sociologically, but not about their validity. But how do we know that such struggles or contradictory claims exist and what their social locations are? The strict constructionist says that sociologists have the right to study the empirical nature of the construction of claims, but we cannot know the empirical nature of the validity of such claims. In so doing, strict constructionists privilege access to one domain of inquiry but close off another. We can determine the existence and dynamics of claims in the same way that we know that certain claims are more valid than others: we look, we listen, we investigate, we apply evidence, logic, and our reasoning powers to understand social phenomena. Why we are allowed to study one class of sociological phenomena but not another is contradictory (Best, 1993). To most sociologists, the strict constructionist approach simply makes no sense whatsoever.

**MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

It is absolutely necessary to emphasize that, as with deviance, there is enormous variation in definitions of social problems. If social problems are what the members of a society think are social problems, it follows that what is considered a problem can vary from one individual to another, and from one segment of society to another. There are “multiple definitions of social problems by various interested groups” (Becker, 1966, p. 10). Moreover, although social problems are nearly always defined within a particular society or country, increasingly, social problems have been looked at from an international or global perspective (Ritzer, 2004). It is
not merely the existence and the extent of a problem that are socially constructed, but the nature of the problem as well. Conditions are seen and presented as problems in particular ways and not in others. One or another aspect of the condition will be focused on as the problem. For instance, is the use of marijuana a problem of hedonistic indulgence, temporary psychosis, chemical dependence, the prelude to even harder drugs, or the dampening of motivation (Best, 1991, p. 327)? The answer is likely to vary from one party, audience, or group to another.

Likewise, Gusfield (1981) argues persuasively that the problemhood of drunk driving is not inherently locatable to a single aspect of the phenomenon. What is the problem in drunk driving? Is it the fact that specific improperly socialized individuals drink too much and have accidents while driving? Is it a matter of law enforcement? Is it a traffic problem? Do we need more sobriety checkpoints on the road? Or is it caused by lax enforcement of the laws governing serving liquor in public bars and restaurants, forcing us to seek a very different solution? Or, instead, is the problem one of permitting the manufacture and sale of unsafe cars—that is, not having strongly enforced state laws governing seat belts or safety bags? Or is it a matter of unsafe or improperly maintained roadways? Or perhaps the problem is an inadequate public transportation system—too many cars and not enough busses, subways, and trains? After all, fewer cars, fewer drivers, fewer drunk drivers, fewer traffic accidents and fatalities. Exactly what the specific problem buried in the drunk driving issue or phenomenon is a matter of definition or construction. It is not, as the objectivists would have it, a matter that indwells in the issue itself, a property that imposes itself on the consciousnesses of all reasonably well-informed observers.

So crucial is the multiple definition of social problems that certain conditions can be interpreted as problems in almost precisely the opposite fashion. Is the environment a problem? Industrialists think that the government meddles too much in the affairs of industry and that environmentalists exaggerate the extent to which industry pollutes the water and contaminates the air. Environmentalists think that the government should regulate industry more than it does and stop the unregulated pollution that industry is allowed to engage in. Many white males believe that blacks and women are given preference in hiring, and that this is a major problem facing the society today; a substantial proportion of blacks and women argue that discrimination against them is, and historically has been, one of the most important problems in American society. To the pro-choice advocate, the abortion problem is that abortion is difficult to obtain and unavailable in many areas; to the right-to-lifer, the abortion problem is that abortion is legal and available in the first place. Few conditions will be viewed in precisely same way by the overwhelming majority of the population.

Was slavery a social problem in the United States prior to the Civil War? Slavery certainly was a problem to African American slaves. Many resisted it in numerous ways, large numbers escaped from plantations, some even engaged in armed rebellion against it. If valid public opinion polls had been conducted on the attitudes of
slaves toward slavery, can anyone doubt that the vast majority would have seen slavery as undesirable, onerous, exploitative, and oppressive, an institution that should be destroyed? The fact that thousands of ex-slaves fought on the Union side in the Civil War to defeat the South and put an end to slavery is a certain indication that it most decidedly was a problem to them. In addition, a not-inconsiderable number of northern whites joined abolition movements to end slavery, again, a measure of the social problemhood of the institution for them. Thus, to much of the African-American population in the slave-holding South and to some northern whites, slavery was a problem prior to and during the Civil War (Geschwender, 1990, p. vii).

On the other hand, to landowning southerners, slavery was not a problem. Indeed, the election of a northerner, Abraham Lincoln, to the presidency in 1860 was a problem to many of them, because that event spelled the first step toward the elimination of slavery in the United States. The action taken by the Confederacy as a result – cession – indicated the problemhood of Lincoln’s election, at the very least, to political figures in the South and, in all probability, the mass of the white population generally. Once again, the same condition, slavery, was defined as a problem by some Americans, and its inevitable end was seen as a problem to others. (But once again, saying that slavery had a constructed or socially viewed and acted-upon aspect does not deny that it was a concrete, real-world institution that exploited, harmed, maimed, and killed uncountable numbers of human beings. One of the authors – Goode – attended a conference at which an African-American writer objected to looking at slavery as a constructed phenomenon, arguing that that denied the objective harm that it inflicted. In fact, the constructionist perspective does not deny objective harm, but only insists that objective harm neither defines what it is to be a problem, nor determines social concern.) The vastly different conceptions that are held by different members of a society of what constitutes a problem underscore the constructed character of social problems.

In fact, as a general rule, what is referred to as a social problem is simply a condition or an area into which is read one or another interpretation of what the problem is (Becker, 1966, p. 7). To the educator, the problem of education may be getting more money out of legislators; to the legislator, the problem may lie in educating more students better on a shrinking budget; to the teenager, the problem of education may be in making sure that academic work does not interfere too much with an active social life; to parents, the problem of education may be as basic as ensuring the physical safety of their children while they attend school. Each party may designate “education” as an important problem, but each may have a somewhat different interpretation as to exactly what the problem is within that broad area. To many AIDS sufferers and to homosexuals generally, the AIDS problem is getting the government to devote a larger budget to curing and treating the disease; many heterosexuals may see the problem as avoiding contamination. However reasonable or unreasonable the designation of something as a problem may appear to one or another party, all social problems are broad areas of concern.
which may be interpreted differentially according to the audience. At the same time, consensus is a matter of degree, and some social problems attract more consensus than others. During the moral panic, a higher than usual degree of consensus about the problem and its solution tends to grip the members of a society or segments of that society.

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS AND MORAL PANICS**

Clearly, social problems and moral panics overlap. From the constructionist perspective, both are generated by a specific definition of the situation; both are measured or manifested by attitudinal and behavioral concern about conditions that are widely regarded as undesirable; with both, steps are taken to eliminate those conditions; both entail “claims-making” about a condition and its solution; and with both, the concern need not encompass all or most members or all or most segments of a given society. However, while there is a heavy overlap between moral panics and social problems, there are at least three basic differences between them.

First, there is no necessary *folk devil* in the social problem (although there may be) while it is an essential component of the moral panic. While some social problems are based on the harmful behavior of certain individuals who may be designated as deviant (criminals, rapists, murderers, drug addicts, pornographers, child molesters, etc.), many social problems do not contain the deviance or “folk devil” component – for instance, aging, the threat to the ozone layer and the resultant greenhouse effect, and the world-wide population problem. For many of our humanly-created conditions, no specific deviant individuals or groups have materialized as being responsible; with social problems, we cannot always heap scorn and condemnation on the head of a particular “folk devil.”

A second difference between the social problem and the moral panic is, as we saw, the discrepancy between the degree of concern over a given issue or condition and the magnitude of the supposed threat it poses. The term “panic” implies that the concern is disproportionate in relation to its concrete threat, or in comparison with a similar, or objectively even greater, threat. People are not said to “panic” over a real and present danger; they are said to panic when their reaction is excessive or unwarranted. However the social problem is defined, there is no necessary disjunction between a condition’s “objective” threat and the fear or concern it generates; in contrast, this is an essential and defining element in the moral panic.

Third, the concept of the moral panic also implies that huge *fluctuations* take place in the degree of concern over a given issue over time, from one year or decade to another. For a substantial stretch of time, little or no (or a routine, stable level of) concern is expressed; then, the condition is “discovered” (or rediscovered) and a moral panic breaks out; concern is feverish for a time; and, finally, for another
stretch of time, the concern subsides, and the issue lies dormant or greatly diminished in terms of public concern. In contrast, there is no necessary fluctuation in the seriousness of a social problem (although there often is empirically); such fluctuations in social problem magnitude are not one of their defining elements. In principle, a social problem could remain at the same level of seriousness – however that is defined – decade after decade. In short, the social problem is not necessarily volatile; by definition, the moral panic is.

SUMMARY

We can define social problems in three contrasting ways. First, objectivism, which sees a social problem as a materially real condition that is harmful to many people. This is what might be called the “common sense” approach, the view of social problems that the man and woman in the street would come up with. The flaw in the objectivist approach to social problems is that the material conditions that harm people have little or nothing in common. They do not have the same sorts of causes or the same sorts of consequences; there is no way of integrating a perspective toward them that has any measure of internal consistency (Best, 1995, p. 5). They are a theoretical hodge-podge. “Common sense” is not always the best way of looking at a sociological issue.

Second, strict constructionism, which sees a social problem as a “putative” or supposed condition that is defined in a certain way, about which certain claims are made, and against which certain actions are taken. Strict constructionism remains strictly within the definitional real; its advocates avoid making any assumptions or references to objective reality. For instance, they refuse to validate a specific claim about a given condition. The sociologist’s description about the material world is just another instance of claims-making, no more “privileged” than that rendered by anyone else. The strict constructionist is a philosophical phenomenologist: “all we know about the world is a social construction” (Best, 1995, p. 342). But the strict constructionist’s position “is internally inconsistent” since it is impossible to make claims about claims without any prior assumptions about the world (p. 341). For instance, how do we know that claims-making is a product of a political process? How do we know anything about the processes that produce claims unless we know about the social locations of the claims-makers? In other words, strict constructionism is “an elusive, unattainable goal” (p. 343).

And third, contextual constructionism, which “falls somewhere between the two extremes” of strict constructionism and objectivism (Best, 1995, p. 345). Claims-making about a given condition remains the contextual constructionist’s central concern; what defines a social problem is definitions, claims, and activities about a putative condition. But the contextual constructionist argues that claims can be validated or refuted with the available evidence, and more importantly, arise out
of systematically varying social, historical, economic, and political contexts. Calling a statement about a given condition a “claim” does not discredit its validity; contextual constructionists argue that any claim can be evaluated with available data. (Moreover, the available data must be critically and carefully scrutinized to determine their validity.)

For instance, the evidence suggests that extraterrestrials are not abducting and medically experimenting on the people who make this claim (Clancy, 2005); the Holocaust – the systematic Nazi murder of millions of Jews during the Second World War in concentration camps – is a historical fact, not a hoax or a delusion (Lipstadt, 1993); the satanic ritual abuse of children in day care centers did not actually take place (de Young, 2004); “the government” (variously, the CIA, the FBI, the “powers that be”) is not importing cocaine or heroin into African-American communities in order to destroy black people (Turner, 1993, pp. 180–201; Fine and Turner, 2001, pp. 138–46). But to the contextual constructionist, whether and to what extent these claims are literally true is secondary. What makes them important is that they are made, and they are made by members of specific sectors of the society, and the belief that they are true defines them as a social problem. It is the claim, and the social construction of the claim, that is sociologically interesting, not the truth value of the claim. Wildly false claims are interesting in part because they are so contrary to the available evidence.

What members of different sectors of the society define as a social problem varies systematically from one social collectivity to another. There are, in the words of Howard Becker, “multiple definitions of social problems by various interested groups.” In addition, social problems are defined differently even by members of the same social category. Some audiences define drunk driving, for example, as a health problem, others as a traffic problem, and still others a problem of law enforcement. Industrialists believe that the problem with factory emissions is that the government meddles far too much in commerce and business; environmentalists believe that factory emissions are a problem of environmental pollution. What is referred to as a social problem is a condition into which is read one or another interpretation of what the problem is or, indeed, whether one even exists in the first place. Such a concern does not claim that the objectivist, factual, or scientific dimension is irrelevant, but that facts do not automatically lead to social concern or the definition of “problem.”

Clearly, moral panics and social problems overlap heavily: both are social constructions, both entail claims-making, and both indicate that sectors of the society feel that something is rotten in the state of Denmark. But they differ in that the social problem does not require a folk devil; the moral panic does. Though the social concern expressed about a given condition defines the social problem, that concern need not be disproportional to the threat the condition poses or the harm it causes; the opposite is true of the moral panic. And the social problem need not be volatile over time, whereas the moral panic is.
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THE RENAISSANCE WITCH CRAZE
Imagine a society whose landscape is aflame with bonfires that consume screaming, writhing human beings. Imagine a quarter of a million people being drowned, hanged, or chained in dungeons, tortured, stabbed, dismembered – literally hacked to death – in short, subjected to indescribable horrors, for crimes they did not commit. Imagine the populace of an entire continent seized by the terror of diabolical deeds that we, in our more enlightened times, know could not have happened, accusing friends, neighbors, fellow community residents, of unspeakable crimes, subjecting their hapless victims to hideous pain to extract bogus confessions, and executing them in the most agonizing fashion possible. That time and place was Renaissance Europe, and the name we give to this madness is the witch craze.

The persecution of supposed witches in Europe between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries is a classic historical instance of the moral panic. It remains one of the pivotal events in human history, ironically ushering in the modern era. The witch craze is the “mother” of all moral panics, and in two senses: one, that it provided a model for subsequent scares – in fact, we still use the word “witch-hunt” for contemporary versions of organized, unjust accusations – and two, that it was one of the most horrific of all panics in human history. Yet the fear and hysteria that gripped the populace in that era burst forth without benefit of the mass media. (Earlier eras had their own media, of course, such as word of mouth, ecclesiastical and secular preaching, and the distribution of pamphlets, but they were not the modern media of communication: They did not permit the simultaneous broadcast of messages to audiences all over a society or around the globe.) This might seem to contradict what we said in Chapter 5 about the crucial role of the media in moral panics, but this is not the case at all. Recall what we said there: “Moral panics began as far back as … organized society itself. Hostility toward and fear of agents of evil probably date to the dawn of humanity, long before television, long before writing, long before the idiographic recording of social and historical events…. Still, the modern mass media provide the most effective spark for the creation of moral panics, as well as an engine for their conveyance.” Wherever and whenever human collectivities are rent by diversity and conflict – and this includes ancient Africa, the Middle East, China, Egypt, Greece, and Rome – panics have flared up. Even though the modern mass media facilitate the birth and spread of the moral panic, they are not absolutely necessary.

**THE RENAISSANCE WITCH CRAZE: AN INTRODUCTION**

The Renaissance witch craze is the classic and most dramatic instance of a moral panic. In its most pestilent form, the craze stretched from the early decades of the fifteenth century until about 1650, an unusually long time for a moral panic. During this period, a novel crime came into being: conspiring with Satan in a fiendish plot against God to engage in evil, demonological deeds. In continental Europe during this period, hundreds of thousands of accused witches, roughly 85 percent of them women, were executed.
The European witch craze raises some intriguing sociological questions, three of which stand out most prominently. The first is timing: Why did the witch craze begin in the fifteenth century? Why did it become widespread and especially poisons between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries? And why did it end in the seventeenth century? Second, we have the issue of content: Why the sudden, increased attention to sorcery, witchcraft, black magic – in fact, all manner of consorting with the devil? How to explain the emergence of a religious ideology that implicates witches in wicked acts and the promulgation of world-view antithetical to true Christianity? Why did this ideology give rise to the widespread and murderous persecution of witches? And third is the target of the witch-hunts: Why were women singled out as its main victims?

We suggest that the vested interests of the Catholic Church – mainly supported by the Dominicans and the Inquisition – and the collapse of the authoritative framework of religion and the feudal social and political order address the issue of timing. The dissolution of the medieval cognitive map of reality, which brought about utopian expectations, skepticism, and the rise of scientific rationality, experimentation, and exploration, address the content issue. Changes in the economy, demography, and the family, especially with respect to changes in the role of women, explain the nature of the target of the craze. The answer to the target question is given in the spatial distribution of the witch-hunt in continental Europe during this era.

Changes in social boundaries offer an answer to our riddles. Medieval society crumbled during the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, and historically novel social, political, economic, scientific, and religious institutions came into being. New and innovative arrangements in the economy, family, science, polity, and religion emerged. These changes transformed the social order; with the shattering of tradition, custom, and limitations, new patterns of behavior – for instance, in art and science – appeared. As a result of these changes, religious and political authorities mounted a ferocious backlash that attempted to redraw societal boundaries and restore the status quo.

To understand the cultural foundation of this backlash, it is worth mentioning that most Europeans strongly believed in the reality of witchcraft, Satan, and demonology. Some of the greatest minds of the seventeenth century – including Isaac Newton (1642–1727), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), John Locke (1632–1704), and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) – firmly believed in the reality of witchcraft. As Jeffrey Burton Russell (1980, p. 79) put it, “Tens of thousands of [witchcraft] trials continued throughout Europe, generation after generation, while Leonardo painted, Palestrina composed, and Shakespeare wrote.”

**WITCHCRAFT, WITCH-HUNTS, AND THE WITCH CRAZE**

The belief in witchcraft and witches has existed throughout history. Until the time of the European witch craze, the basic conception of witchcraft was largely technical: witchcraft could be used for good or evil. In Max Weber’s terminology,
“magicians” looked for “ad hoc” answers to troubling and problematic questions (1964). Two important points merit our attention here. First, the witch/sorcerer/magician possessed a special and powerful position vis-à-vis the deities. Her technological knowledge of such matters as spells, charms, potions, and the like enabled her to force deities into action. The witch held a specific key to unlock godly powers. Everyone believed that witches possessed a technological knowledge that granted their clients control over the universe. And second: we can divide the power that witches held into forms: white magic, which was blessed and welcome, and black magic, which was condemned.

Thomas O’Dea, a sociologist of religion, defines religion as “the manipulation of non-empirical or supra-empirical means for non-empirical or supra-empirical ends.” In contrast, he defines magic as the “manipulation of non-empirical or supra-empirical means for empirical ends” (O’Dea, 1966, p. 7). O’Dea’s definition recalls Weber’s view of witchcraft as a type of technology. The magician’s principal function was to address human interests and tensions and serve human needs through the magician’s use of formulas.

Some time during the fifteenth century, society’s conceptualization of witchcraft transmogrified from a neutral technology that witches used to attain both good and evil ends to a completely evil force that created rather than solved social problems. The distinction between “good” and “bad” magic also vanished. Toward the fifteenth century a conception of magic and witchcraft crystallized into something entirely evil. In 1486 Heinrich Sprenger and James Kramer, two Dominican friars, wrote and, in 1487, published the most influential book of the witch craze: *Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Witch’s Hammer”). This now-notorious handbook instructed witch-hunters on the fine points of determining how to discover witchcraft and interrogate and punish witches. Between its covers, the authors had crystallized and accelerated the Inquisition, which now defined witchcraft as more than a technology. Sorcery had become a quasi-religion – indeed, an anti-religion. And during this period, the witch had lost her special relationship with the deities; instead, she had become totally subservient to the devil. She had become Satan’s tool. This new conception granted inquisitors a license to launch investigations, trials, and persecution of troublesome women as witches.

The ceremony

The history of European sorcery and witchcraft extends well into Greco-Roman times. However, as the formalization of an elaborated belief system, witchcraft was unknown in the fifteenth century. The core ideology of the witch craze served as a kind of anvil on which the moral panic was forged. What was this ideology? Between 1450 and 1650, witchcraft “was conceived as a virulent and dangerous blend of sorcery and heresy.” Sorcery was “anything that aims at negative supernatural effects through formulas and rituals.” The second element, heresy, was expressed in “the pact with the devil, the witches’ Sabbath in the form of a black or inverted Mass” (Monter, 1969, p. 8).
The main feature of the European witch craze, the “black” or “witches’ Sabbath,” was climaxed in a huge orgy between the devil and witches. Lea (1901, vol. 3, pp. 401–8) reports that Teutonic tradition held a belief that witches were cannibals and that once a year on May 1, St. Walpurgis’s Night, witches held a nocturnal gathering, ate, and sang. Late in the 1400s, Dominican inquisitors partly created and partly formalized the theme of the black Mass, which included riding on broomsticks or beasts at night to attend the witches’ Sabbath.

Inquisitors conceptualized the Sabbath as a ritual performed by the devil and his helpers together with the witches. In that ceremony, witches paid homage to and professed their pact with the devil, received new recruits, and signed their pact with the devil’s mark. In addition, the black Sabbath included a banquet, dancing, and sexual intercourse.

After the ceremony, nothing would grow on the spot where it had been held because the hot feet of the demons and witches scorched the soil so badly that the earth could never be fertile again. Witches rode to this gathering place on broomsticks (in France and England) or, in the shape of he-goat, the devil himself, whose back grew according to how many witches he wanted to accommodate. When all the witches had arrived – those who did not attend were severely punished by demons – the infernal ceremonies of the Sabbath began. Satan had assumed the shape of a large he-goat, with one face in front and one on his haunches; all present kissed his face-behind. Tradition documents this infamous kiss; most authorities featured it prominently in their writings. Robbins (1959, p. 420) quotes from an eminent contemporary lawyer, Jean Bodin: “There is no greater disgrace, dishonor, or villainy than that which these witches endure when they have to adore Satan in the guise of a stinking goat, and to kiss him in that place which modesty forbids writing or mentioning.” This completed, the assembled appoint a master of ceremonies, and Satan examines the witches to determine if they bear the secret mark. The devil stamps those who lack the mark. This done, they all begin dancing and singing. Then they stop, deny their salvation, kiss the devil’s behind, spit on the Bible, and swear obedience to the devil in all things. Once again, they begin dancing and singing (Mackay, 1852/1932, p. 470). In the midst of the ceremony, the witches look around and notice their friends and neighbors, whom they had not previously suspected to be witches. The devil himself, the imperious master, reigned above the festivities, dominating all in attendance. Although he usually appeared as a he-goat, he might also take the form of a big, black-bearded man or a huge toad. The witches danced to the point of exhaustion to the sound of macabre music made with curious instruments – horse’s skulls, oak logs, human bones, and so on.

After kissing the devil, the witches sat down and recounted the evil deeds they had committed since their last meeting. The devil punished those who had not been sufficiently malicious to satisfy his evil standards (Mackay, 1852/1932, p. 471; Trevor-Roper, 1967, pp. 94–5). After that, thousands of toads sprang out of the earth, ready to obey Satan’s commands and, standing on their hind legs, danced
while the devil played the bagpipes, the trumpet, or some other instrument. The toads talked and entreated the witches to reward them with the flesh of unbaptized babies, a command the witches obeyed. After that, they settled down to a feast. All agreed that the food was always quite tasteless. Having finished eating, and at the command of the goat, witches and demons threw themselves into promiscuous sexual orgies. Again, these orgies were not pleasurable. Robbins mentions that sexual intercourse was indiscriminate and included acts such as incest, bestiality, unnatural sexual positions, and the like; according to most demonologists, most witches found it quite painful. Robbins (1959, p. 423) quotes the account of 16-year-old Jeanette d’Abadie: “She said she feared intercourse with the devil because his member was scaly and caused extreme pain: furthermore, his semen was extremely cold.”

After the feast, the dance began again but not as intensively as before. The assembled called the toads and everybody amused themselves by mocking the sacrament of baptism. They sprinkled the toads with filthy water and while the devil made the sign of the cross, all the witches and toads cursed the cross. When the cock crowed, everyone disappeared, and the Sabbath was over (Mackay, 1852/1932, pp. 469–71; Robbins, 1959, pp. 414–24).

WITCHCRAFT AS A COUNTER-RELIGION

What are the main features of the European witch craze ideology and demonology? The most important is the detail and complexity of demonological theory. The totally negative description of the witch, as well as the entirely new perception of witchcraft and demonology, dramatically changed from the previous dominant perception of witchcraft as technology. The kind of witches that demonologists of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries described differed from their predecessors. Witchcraft had lost its neutral technological character, and the complex image of an anti-religion had replaced it. This new ideology served as the cognitive base for the moral panic as well as providing what Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia called “atrocity tales” (1979): “An event which is viewed as a flagrant violation of a fundamental cultural value. Accordingly, an atrocity tale is a presentation of that event (real or imaginary) in such a way as to (a) evoke moral outrage by specifying and detailing the value violations, (b) authorize, implicitly or explicitly, punitive actions, and (c) mobilize control efforts against the alleged perpetrators” (p. 43). This ideological transformation in the perception of the witch was crystallized, authorized, and accepted by the fifteenth century. Hence, one crucial question centers on how and why this transformation took place when it did.

What was the nature of this new conception of witchcraft? We pointed to the central role of the Sabbath in this definition. However, we must add three additional components.
First, in the new conception of witchcraft, the witch lost her special position with respect to the deities. Instead of controlling them, the deities controlled her. Demonologists conceptualized the witch as Satan’s puppet, someone from whom no good could come.

Second, as we’ve said, in demonological theories, witches were characteristically women. The *Malleus Maleficarum* specifically mentions that “witchcraft is chiefly found in women” because they are more credulous and have poorer memories and because “witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable.” In addition, there were more women than men witches “because women have a slippery tongue and tell other women what they have learned” (Robbins, 1959, p. 41). Demonologists went to great length to link witchcraft with perverted sexual practices and the seductive behavior of the devil’s legions. Witch craze theologians laid great emphasis on the fact that women had an “insatiable” sexual appetite. Hence, incubi (male demons who served the devil by seducing women) outnumbered succubi (female demons who seduced men) by a factor of ten to one because women’s lust could be satisfied only by that many more male demons.

Third, the theory of witchcraft represented a reversal of Christian theology. Hence, the practice of witchcraft transcended mere magic, assuming the form of a religion or quasi-religion. It possessed a coherent, unified, rationalized system of beliefs, assumptions, rituals, sacred texts, and the like. The Dominicans who, more than any other order, developed and helped popularize the conception of demonology and witchcraft, based their beliefs on a Manichean or dualistic assumption which viewed the world as a battlefield, one in which a struggle between the godly sons of light and the satanic sons of darkness played out. They feared that Satan might win this battle and turn the world into Hell. From this perspective, we can regard the myth of witches as the exact qualitative opposite of the conception of God and their stories and theology the exact opposite of the true faith, that is, Christianity. The confessions of witches strongly reinforced this conception.

Likewise, demonology inverts the Catholic dogma of the birth of Jesus, which states that a spirit entered into the womb of a virgin, causing the conception and birth of the Son of God. In contrast, demonology charges, in the “black” or witch’s Sabbath, the devil and the witch engage in perverted, barren sexual intercourse. We are further told that the devil, in the form of either the succubus or the incubus, appeared before male or female humans and seduced them. But because the incubus did not possess his own sperm, the human female had to steal it from her unsuspecting husband in order to copulate with the devil. These tales, set against the idea of the birth of Jesus, who was born from a nonsexual, holy union between a woman and a holy spirit, narrate the perverted, painful, and infertile sexual intercourse between the devil and the witch.

Contrary to the day when Christians meet to pray, Sunday, the devil and his legions preferred nighttime, between Friday and Saturday. Christians meet in a holy place, the church; the devil and his minions met in unusual and frightening places. In church, people kissed the crucifix; at the black Sabbath, worshippers
kissed the he-goat’s posterior. The symbols and objects used in the ceremony in
the church (wine, wafers, water) were mocked at the black Mass. Jesus was the
pure good; the devil, the pure evil. In contrast to the holy baptism and the holy
water sprinkled onto the suppliant, the devil made his own form of baptism: a
mark stamped on the witch by the devil and filthy mock holy water, usually sprin-
kled by toads. Christians associated Jesus with light, purity, and a feeling of seren-
ity, and the devil with darkness, stench, and fear. Parishioners heard organ music in
the church; during satanic ceremonies, the music was macabre and played on
strange instruments. In church, worshippers tasted holy symbols of Jesus’ body
and blood; in the black Sabbath, they feasted on unbaptized, roasted baby’s flesh.
In short, the black Mass represented an inverted or upside-down version of the
true faith and practice.

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN
WITCH CRAZE

Initially the church rejected the possibility of witches with demonic powers. In
1230, officials charged a scholastic committee with the task of investigating the
matter. By 1430, the investigation was complete; it suggested the possibility of a
sect of sorcerers and witches (Monter, 1969, p. 59). Most historical researchers
place the timing of the witch-hunts soon after the release of the church’s report on
witches. Their reasoning is worth attention.

After the disintegration of the Roman Empire and the emergence of Christianity
into dominance, the church tried to convert the conquered northern, barbaric,
pagan tribes. Christian missionaries found that these societies already possessed a
spectrum of local deities. Astutely, missionaries canonized these deities into
Christian saints, thereby ensuring continuity with their ancestry. In addition, their
Roman conquerors converted local temples into churches so that they could cele-
brate Mass in familiar places of worship (Eckenstein, 1896, pp. 6–32, 484). Their
magical practices were tolerated because the Romans felt that eventually, they
would fall into disuse and their previously pagan practitioners would forget them
and become truly Christian (Lea, 1901, vol. 3, pp. 485–96). Thus, in the years
between the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Renaissance, the
church remained tolerant of sorcery and witchcraft. Action was taken against sor-
cerers only if the sorcery resulted in murder or the destruction of property (Lea,

During this era, when the church remained tolerant of sorcery, the casting of
spells, and astrology, its officials held that belief in witchcraft was itself an illusion.
This statement appears most prominently in the well-known Canon Episcopi (Kors
and Peters, 1972, pp. 28–31), issued in the ninth or tenth century, whose statement
on witchcraft later canonists adopted as official policy. For over five centuries this
policy, namely that witchcraft is an illusion, served to discourage those in the church who might have wanted to destroy the belief in witchcraft by sheer force. The *Canon Episcopi* put a brake on any sought-for change in the conception of witchcraft as an illusion. As long as the *Canon* was regarded as basic church policy, no mass scale witch craze could take place. Beginning in the fifteenth century (Robbins, 1959, pp. 143–7, 1978), various writers began attacking the policy endorsed in the *Canon Episcopi*. First, authors launched attacks on the authenticity and validity of the text itself (Robbins, 1978, pp. 21–2). Second, they claimed that contemporary witches were different from those described in the *Canon*. In 1450, Jean Vineti, a French inquisitor, identified witchcraft with heresy. In 1458, Nicholas Jacquier, an inquisitor in France and Bohemia, identified witchcraft as a new form of heresy, radically different from the type of witchcraft mentioned in the *Canon Episcopi*. In 1460, Visconti Girolamo, an inquisitor and provincial of Lombardy, stated that defending witchcraft was itself heresy. And as we saw, in 1487, Sprenger and Kramer published the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, in which they advanced a theory of witchcraft which calcified into the rigid and stereotypical form that predominated for three centuries (Robbins, 1959, p. 146).

The moral panic involving witches began in Switzerland in 1427, when over 100 people were tried by secular judges for murder by sorcery, stealing milk from cows, ruining crops by hailstorms, worshipping the devil, and using counter-magic against other witches. As time went by, the witch craze spread over Europe. In France, a judge bragged that he had burned 800 witches in the span of 16 years; in Geneva, 500 persons were burned during several months in 1515; in Trevez, France, over the course of “several years,” 7,000 (Bromberg, 1959). The *Malleus* itself (Sprenger and Kramer, 1968, pp. 220–1) reports that in the district of Como, Italy, 1,000 persons were put to death in one year. Remigius, an inquisitor, boasted that he had put 900 witches to the flame during a period of 15 years.

Midelfort lists some of the results of the witch-hunts as follows:

Between 1587 and 1593 the Archbishop-Elector of Trier sponsored a witch-hunt that burned 368 witches from just twenty-two villages. So horrible was this hunt that two villages in 1585 were left with only one female inhabitant apiece. In the lands of the Covenant of Quedlinburg, some 133 witches were executed on just one day in 1589. At the Abbey of Fulda, Prince Abbott Balthasar von Dembach ... boasted of having sent over 700 witches to the stake.... At the Furstprobstei of Ellenwagen, ecclesiastical officials saw to the burning of some 390 persons between 1611 and 1618.... In just eight years Bishop Philipp Adolph von Ehrenberg executed some 900 persons including his nephew, nineteen Catholic priests and several small children. In the Prince Bishopric of Eichstatt some 274 witches were executed.... The Duchy of Braunschweig-Wolfenbuttel executed fifty-three between 1590 and 1620 while Duke August of Braunschweig-Luneberg eliminated seventy between 1610 and 1615.... [The] Duchy of Bavaria probably executed close to 2,000 witches. (1981, p. 28)
In the continental witch-hunts, children, women – indeed entire families – were sent to be burned. The historical sources are full of the most horrible, diabolic stories of the tortures these witches endured, the lies they were told by judges and inquisitors. Whole villages were exterminated. As Hughes (1952) reports, the area that is now Germany was covered with stakes, where witches were burning alive. “Germany was almost entirely occupied in building bonfires…. Travellers in Lorraine may see thousands and thousands of stakes.” Bogue, a noted cruel inquisitor, cried that “I wish they [the witches] had but one body, so that we could burn them all at once, in one fire!” (Trevor-Roper, 1967, p. 152). “During the 1580s, when the Catholic Counter-Reformation began to reconquer the territories they had lost to the Protestants a decade earlier, the Catholics became dedicated witch-hunters too. Many of the persons accused were Protestants who refused to flee or convert. In France, witches were found primarily in Huguenot areas such as Orleans, Langedoc, Normandy and Navarre. In Lorraine, Judge Remy boasted of having executed over a thousand witches. Along the Rhine in the 1590s whole villages were depopulated” (Trevor-Roper, 1967, pp. 142–5).

In Bamberg, there were a number of cases of political executions as well, for some of the accused belonged to the town’s elite. The pace of the trials was shocking. Frau Anna Hansen was arrested on June 17, 1629, put to torture between June 18 and June 28, and on July 7, less than a month after her arrest, was beheaded and burned. It seems clear that the prince-bishop ignored orders from the emperor to release some of the witches. Ferdinand’s order to release Dorothea Block, for instance, was disregarded, as was his order to release Dr. Haan and his family because “their arrest was a violation of the law of the Empire not to be tolerated.” Bamberg’s witch craze ended when King Gustavus of Sweden threatened the city (he had invaded Leipzig in 1630). This, along with the death of the prince-bishop in 1631 and local opposition to the torture ended the mania (Robbins, 1959, pp. 35–7).

In Bamberg, the prince-bishop built a “witch house,” complete with torture chamber adorned with appropriate biblical texts. In his 10-year reign, he is said to have burned 600 witches. It is interesting to note that one of his victims was the bishop’s chancellor, Dr. Haan, who was burned in 1638 for showing leniency as a judge. Here we have one of the most touching stories of the witch craze. Under torture, Dr. Haan confessed to having seen five members of the city’s elite participating in the black Sabbath, all of whom were duly burned. One of them, under fierce torture confessed that he had renounced God, given himself to the devil, and seen 27 of his colleagues at the witch’s Sabbath. But afterwards, from prison, he contrived to smuggle a letter out to his daughter, giving a full account of his trial: “Now my dearest child,” he wrote, “you have here all my acts and confessions, for which I must die. It is all falsehood and invention, so help me God…. They never cease to torture until one says something…. If God sends no means of bringing the truth to light our whole kindred will be burnt” (Trevor-Roper, 1967, p. 157).
As Trevor-Roper (1967, p. 145) points out, the wars of religion in the seventeenth century added fuel to the fire of the witch craze and introduced the worst period of persecution. Protestants and Catholics zealously accused one another of witchcraft; the witch craze reached a climax in the early decades of the 1600s. It also seems that the Thirty Years War (1618–48) brought with it a renewed and vicious wave of witch-hunting. In their most devastating form the witch-hunts ceased after the end of the Thirty Years War, with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. While we can mark the beginning of the terror in the 1490s, just after the publication of the \textit{Malleus Maleficarum}, so we can date its end when the Thirty Years War ended. During this period between 200,000 and 500,000 people were tortured and executed by burning, drowning, and hanging.

As we saw, evidence indicates that the majority of the witch craze’s victim’s were women. In one specific area of southwest Germany, females constituted 85 percent of all victims (Midelfort, 1972, pp. 179–80). Monter (1969) asserts that nearly 90 percent of the hunt’s victims were women. Lea (1957, p. 1090) reports that in Switzerland, “almost every woman” was considered a witch. In some areas of Germany, between 90 and 100 percent of the victims were women. While at the beginning of the craze, we often find that accused witches were widows, spinsters, or “strange” old women, later on, married women and young girls were persecuted as well. The various historical sources on the European witch craze suggest that neither social status nor age made a significant difference. Rather, the crucial variable was gender: Everywhere, most of the victims were women. In \textit{The Path of the Devil}, Gary Jensen (2007) examines how women emerged as suitable targets for victims of the persecution because they were, according to prevailing stereotypes, more susceptible to offering themselves up as servants of, and therefore more likely to consort with, the devil; because they were more likely to be midwives and were closer to the folk medicine tradition and hence, often came into competition with physicians; because they supposedly were more likely to gossip (to have a “scalding tongue”) and hence, tell tales about others – in short, because they ran afoul of the patriarchal traditions of both secular and religious society. Monter (1976, p. 110) notes that “sex seems to have been more important than wealth.” His data clearly undermine the notion that it was overwhelmingly poor, widowed, or otherwise strange women who were persecuted. Monter also notes (1976, p. 124) that “compared to sex, poverty and other factors seem to be secondary.” The major weight of empirical data supporting the inaccurate view that witches were old, deviant women comes mainly from British cases (Thomas, 1971), but the British witch craze was unlike that which took place in continental Europe.

In England, the witch craze began and ended later than in continental Europe, and it was much milder. A demonological ideology did not prevail there, and persons accused of witchcraft were considered to have committed crimes against other people and not God. It is very likely that the lack of inquisitorial machinery, the clear-cut relationship between church and state, and a strong monarchy rendered the craze less virulent there. Furthermore, in England the judicial system
was more humane than in Europe. Its political system lay somewhat outside many of the controversies that tore the Continent apart. Scotland, however, experienced much more religious turmoil, which affected the judicial foundations of the law and, together with the King James VI’s personal encouragement, enabled the occurrence of a vicious witch craze there. Larner states: **“The Scottish witch-hunt was arguably one of the major witch-hunts of Europe. During its peak it was matched only by those of the German principalities and Lorraine”** (1981, p. 197).

The available sources suggest that, on the Continent, the worst witch-hunts occurred in Germany, Switzerland, and France, and only to a much lesser extent in other areas (Cohn, 1975; Trevor-Roper, 1967; Midelfort, 1972).

A number of observers have noted that the witch-hunts were conducted in their most intense form in regions in which the Catholic Church was weakest and most threatened (Lea, 1957). In those areas with a strong church, such as Spain, Poland, and Eastern Europe, the witch craze was negligible (Lea, 1957; Robbins, 1959; Monter, 1980, p. 33). However, the Scandinavian countries (Robbins, 1959; Midelfort, 1981) and Russia (Zguta, 1977) present us with an additional dimension. In these areas, a strong supernatural, pagan belief system existed alongside the church. In Russia and the Scandinavian countries belief in sorcery and demons was well-established, which helps explain why such a low rate of witchcraft cases existed there. Taken together, these points imply that the coexistence of Christianity with widespread belief in demons and paganism could conceivably counteract the persecutions, prevent them, or have a strong moderating effect on them. This contrasts with Western Europe, where paganism was largely eradicated. The evidence strongly supports the view that the witch-hunt ideology – demonology – was invented, but not to combat popular cults or pagan groups. Rather, it was to shore up the crumbling ideological and institutional structure of the orthodox Catholic Church and the traditional medieval social order. In sum, where the church was strong, witchcraft cases were relatively rare.

**TIMING: WHY DID THE WITCH-HUNTS BEGIN?**

The witchcraft myth was invented by Dominican friars. As we saw, until the thirteenth century, the church’s official position regarding witchcraft was summarized in the aforementioned *Canon Episcopi*, promulgated around 900, which regarded beliefs in witchcraft as mere illusion. The Inquisition was founded in the thirteenth century in order to combat heresy. In 1216, Pope Innocent III formally sanctioned the Dominican order, which was established to win back heretics to the church. The pope’s expectations were not realized, and the lost sheep he had hoped to bring back to the fold never returned. Medieval Europe abounded in heretical movements, religious prophets, and dissident groups, including the Cathari, who rejected the authority and institution of the church and believed in asceticism as
the path to spiritual perfection; the Waldenses, a Protestant sect that rejected the papacy and the Catholic Mass and urged believers to interpret the Bible for themselves; the Hussites, who rejected sainthood and favored a classless society and the abolition of private property; the Lollards, who rejected priestly celibacy and favored evangelical poverty and the believer’s direct relationship to the Bible; and the Flagelants, who saw flogging as a source of divine inspiration and an expression of ascetic purity. From the point of view of Catholic dogma, these groups truly were heretical. And for the most part, all were exterminated, marginalized, driven to remote regions, or had become so small in number as to constitute no threat to the church. The last trials and persecutions ended in the mid-fifteenth century.

As a result, the Inquisition’s legal machinery began casting about for fresh apostates to investigate. “When the Inquisition had crushed the religious deviation … it had little justification to continue to exist. Its work was done. The Inquisition, however, set about to introduce and develop the parallel heresy of witchcraft, thereby widening its scope” (Robbins, 1959, pp. 107–208). The Inquisition appealed to Rome to extend its jurisdiction to the infidel Jews and the Moors of Spain, an appeal which was successful. This persecution continued into the seventeenth century (Roth, 1971), which helps explain the virtual absence of witch-hunting there. In the same period, the Inquisition demanded that its authority be expanded to include the witches and sorcerers it claimed to have discovered in the Pyrenees and the Alps; Pope Alexander IV rejected the Inquisition’s plea, insisting that the Canon Episcopi remained in effect and that such a search would divert the church from its primary task, the search for organized heretics. But the inquisitors continued with their appeal, and a century later Pope John XXII issued an edict authorizing a limited search in the Pyrenees and the Alps for witches. “Some people,” said John, “Christian in name only, have forsaken the first light of truth to ally themselves with death and traffic with hell. They sacrifice to and adore devils; they make or obtain figurines, rings, vials, mirrors … by which they command demons …, asking for their aid [and] giving themselves to the most shameful subjection for the most shameful of ends” (Robbins, 1959, p. 288). This document declared that all who used the services of sorcerers were to be punished as heretics and all books on the subject were to be burned (Lea, 1901, vol. 3, pp. 452–3).

The Inquisition continued its limited witch-hunt for roughly a century and a half. During that period, although dozens of major books on witchcraft were published, the Malleus Maleficarum, as we saw, printed in the 1480s, “opened the flood-gates” to “inquisitorial hysteria.” Sprenger and Kramer’s book refuted the argument against the existence of witches and instructed inquisitors on how to help discover and prosecute them; it was “the most important work on demonology ever written” (Robbins, 1959, p. 337). Interestingly, Sprenger and Kramer submitted the book to the University of Cologne’s faculty of theology for its endorsement, but the faculty condemned it as illegal and unethical. (Legend has it that in 1490, the Catholic Church placed the Malleus on its list of prohibited
books, even though Pope Innocent VII had already endorsed its authors as inquisitors.) Undaunted, in the volume’s subsequent editions, the authors forged and inserted the claim that the University of Cologne had endorsed the book and its argument. It is crucial to emphasize that, in contrast to the heresies of earlier centuries, the witchcraft charges spelled out in the *Malleus* were fictional – largely or totally invented.

In 1484, before the *Malleus* was published, Sprenger and Kramer petitioned Pope Innocent VIII to appoint them general witch hunters in the Rhineland. In response to their petition he issued his witch Bull, the *Summis Desiderantes* (Lea, 1901, Vol. 3:540; Kors and Peters, 1972:107–13). In this bull, the Pope asserted official church belief in witchcraft and the church’s duty – with the help of its tool, the Inquisition – to exterminate it:

> It has come to our ears … that … many persons of both sexes, unmindful of their own salvation and straying from the Catholic faith, have abandoned themselves to devils, incubi and succubi, and by their incantations, spells, conjurations, and other accursed charms and crafts, enormities and horrid offenses, have slain infants yet in their mothers’ womb, as also the offspring of cattle, have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine, the fruits of the trees, nay, men and women, beasts of burthen, herd-beasts, as well as animals of other kinds, vineyards, orchards, meadows, pastureland, corn, wheat, and all other cereals; these wretches furthermore afflict and torment men and women … with terrible and piteous pains and sore diseases; they hinder men from performing the sexual act, women from conceiving, whence men cannot know their wives nor wives receive their husbands; over and above this, they blasphemously renounce that Faith which is theirs by the Sacrament of Baptism, and at the instigation of the Enemy of Mankind they do not shrink from committing and perpetrating the foulest abomination and filthiest excesses to the deadly peril of their own souls, whereby they outrage the Divine majesty and are a cause of scandal to very many.

The most significant sections in the *Malleus* were its claims that detecting witches can be demonstrated with argumentation rather than facts; that someone who does not believe in witches is a witch; and that women were more likely to be witches than men.

Sprenger and Kramer’s volume, one of the first books printed by Gutenberg’s new invention, the printing press, immediately became the textbook of the Inquisition; it ran through more than 20 editions in the matter of just a few decades. The Inquisition found itself in possession of a very powerful instrument of judicial power. It authorized inquisitors to uncover and punish offenders whose crime was, by its very nature, unobservable, unprovable, and unfalsifiable except by the offenders’ confessions, and that could be obtained thought torture. Both the Dominicans and the Inquisition had a stake and a professional interest in exercising their power and expertise on investigating and prosecuting heresy. Hence, the longevity of the witch-hunts.
THE END OF THE MEDIEVAL ORDER

The professional and organizational interest of the inquisitors explains why they began, as moral entrepreneurs, to focus on the witches as early as the thirteenth century. But the extremely detailed elaboration of demonological theology did not take place until the fifteenth century, and only at that time did the general public begin to share the interest of professional inquisitors in hunting down and punishing witches.

During the Renaissance era, medieval society began crumbling, changes occurred that utterly and completely transformed European culture and society. Among the many changes that took place, the most significant were the growth of cities, a form of industrial production, an increase in the size of the population, the systematization of the monetary system, the mapping of undiscovered lands, the expansion of international trade, the development of ore-mining, a more detailed class system and a more specialized division of labor. Pirenne (1937, pp. 189–90) puts the change in the following words: “the development of industry and commerce completely transformed the appearance and indeed the very existence of society…. [Continental] Europe was covered with towns from which the activity of the new middle class radiated in all directions…. [The] circulation of money was perfected…. [New] forms of credit came into use.” Among the changes that took place, culturally perhaps the most remarkable was the discovery of new lands. “The exploration and exploitation of non-European areas by Europeans during the 15th and 16th centuries form one of the greatest phenomena of the Renaissance” (Penrose, 1962, p. vii) and, no doubt, forced “a re-evaluation of the idea of Europe as a model Christian society” (Rattansi, 1972, p. 7).

These radical and relatively rapid changes in European society’s economic, commercial, and urban spheres made deep inroads in the hierarchical structure of feudal society, which was sanctioned and legitimized by the Catholic Church. In the medieval tradition, the moral boundaries of society were clearly defined. Rome ruled Christendom and structured the feudal order in a strictly and uniformly hierarchical manner, one that was firmly embedded in a finite cosmic order ruled by God. The heretical Jews and Muslims threatened this order, but their heresies already had a place in Catholic theology in that religious duty demanded that Catholics attempt to convert and save these heretics; if recalcitrant, Jews and Muslims must be fought and suppressed.

But the city increasingly threatened this stable, hierarchical order because the social and economic relations it produced did not fit into the feudal scheme of things; the growth of contact with non-Christian peoples, likewise, did not fit into the conversion–conflict model; and the growing industrial and capitalist economic and political transactions, autonomous from theological guidance, threatened the church’s authority. Further, as Peter Brown (1969) points out, during the twelfth century, the sacred increasingly became disengaged from the profane, and increasingly, the secular wielded influence over the collective conscience.
In addition, external catastrophes exacerbated the stress and confusion created by these developments, especially the plague and cholera that decimated the population of Europe and lasted throughout the fifteenth century. Even the climate of Europe underwent severe changes in temperature during these fateful centuries, as evidenced by the Little Ice Age, which, except for occasional periods of normalcy, lasted well into the eighteenth century (Russell, 1972, pp. 51–2). In addition to these stressful physical conditions, in 1456, Halley’s Comet appeared in the sky. Interpreted as an evil omen, it created anxiety, fear, and unrest. Further, as Griggs (1980, pp. 81–2) points out, massive population changes were not matched by technological developments, especially in agriculture, putting a strain on food supply. All this created to feelings of an impending doomsday.

Rosen (1969, pp. 154–5) describes the “feeling of melancholy and pessimism which marked the period. A sense of impending doom hung over men and women, intensified by a belief that the end of time was approaching and that the last days were at hand.” Foucault (1967, p. 15) adds a most picturesque description: “Up to the second half of the 15th century, or even a little beyond, the theme of death reigns alone. The end of man, the end of time, bear the face of pestilence and war. What overhangs human existence is this conclusion and this order from which nothing escapes.” Stress and confusion were only one aspect of these developments (Holmes, 1975). There was confusion about the moral boundaries of society and the cognitive map of the world. This often translated into a sense of impending doom.

But there was also an opening up of new possibilities and a rise in standards of living in the wake of the great catastrophes of the fourteenth century. Those who survived the epidemics inherited the wealth of the deceased, and even those who had to maintain themselves by their work could obtain far better wages than before because of the shortage of manpower. Thus the fifteenth century was an epoch of great enterprise, bold thought, innovation, as well as one of deep confusion and anomie, a feeling that the society had lost its norms and boundaries and that the uncontrollable forces of change were destroying all order and moral tradition. These developments allowed many contemporary thinkers to overstep the boundaries of reality and enter the realm of magic, fancy, and make believe. “The disengagement of the sacred from the profane opened up a whole middle distance of conflicting opportunities for the deployment of human talent compared with which the society of the early Middle Ages appears as singularly monochromatic” (Brown, 1969, p. 135). Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries there was frequently no clear demarcation between rational science and magic.

The inquisitors formed their demonological theories in the early years of the scientific revolution (Rattansi, 1972), when pseudo-science was often indistinguishable from proto-science. Many scholars were preoccupied with secret or esoteric knowledge, also referred to as the hermetica, which “focused attention on … extra-powers of nature and mysterious forces” (Rattansi, 1972, p. 5). This explains why the “growth of demonology and of the witch-hunt paralleled that of the scientific revolution” (Kirsch, 1978, p. 152) as well as the array of the utopias and ideal societies
that arose (Cohn, 1961), another reaction to the dissolution of the cognitive and moral boundaries of the medieval world. The anomie resulting from the uncontrolled changes called forth positive and progressive as well as negative and persecutory reactions. The expansion of horizons and the instability of social conditions, the Reformation, the beginnings of the scientific revolution, and Renaissance art and humanism, took advantage of the disappearance of many traditional norms and boundaries for the creation of greater cultural diversity and freedom, giving rise to a new, infinitely more differentiated culture than that of the Middle Ages. On the negative side, these changes produced the witch craze, the purpose of which was to strengthen the Inquisition, counteract and prevent change, and to reestablish traditional religious authority. Parsons (1966, 1971) contends that the traditional feudal system began to differentiate during the eleventh century, beginning a process that led, by the seventeenth century, to an increasing autonomy of the religious, governmental, and economic institutions. The new social order, based on relatively autonomous institutions, replaced a previous rigid, religiously defined, and more or less unified social system. Social change affected the very center, the collective conscience of society (Durkheim, 1893/1964) or, to use Parsons’ terminology, the definition of the “societal community,” which for him was the “salient foci of tension and conflict, and thus of creative innovation” (1971, p. 121). Parsons (p. 45) notes that the European Renaissance was the first era during which the secular culture was differentiated from the religious matrix. This produced a newly felt need for redrawing the moral boundaries of the society, producing in turn a need to search out and punish threats to the social and moral order. By persecuting witches, this society, led by the church, attempted to redefine its moral boundaries, one of many instances where deviance served the social functions of emphasizing and creating moral boundaries and attempting to enhance solidarity. So strong was this need that society created a fictitious form of deviance for this purpose.

Until the Renaissance, the Catholic Church was at the peak of its power. The dominant thinkers of the era treated social problems as theological or theosophical, and society’s moral boundaries were sharply defined and lacking major threats to their outlines. This is why during the Middle Ages we find virtually no record of witch-hunts.

In the fifteenth century, when the results of the institutional differentiation process and a sharp decline in the church’s authority became visible, “the church began to need an opponent whom it could divinely hate” (Williams, 1959, p. 37) so that a redefinition of moral boundaries could take place. This differentiation process represented a challenge to the society’s moral and cognitive map and was seen by the religious hierarchy as undermining the church’s authority and legitimacy. While the church needed deviants, only a very special type of deviance would serve, one which would be seen as directly threatening the religiously defined societal community and the Christian worldview. Clearly, witchcraft served this purpose. And it was specifically in societies in which the Catholic Church was weakest – France, Germany, and Switzerland – that experienced the most virulent witch craze. Where the church
was strong (Spain, Italy, and Portugal), hardly any witch craze worth mentioning took place. Although this was not the first time that the Catholic Church was threatened – witness the various heretical prophetic movements we mentioned, that had arisen earlier, such as the Cathari and the Waldenses – this development, culminating in the Reformation, was the first time that the church had to cope with a large-scale threat to its legitimacy and very existence (Elton, 1963).

For this reason, Protestants persecuted witches with almost the same zeal as the Catholics, despite many objective differences between them. Protestantism resulted from differentiation but Protestants, as much as Catholics, felt threatened by this process. “The Reformation shattered the unity of Christendom, and religious conflicts [as well as] … the Wars of Religion … destroyed the illusion of the perfect Christian societies” (Rattansi, 1972, p. 7). Luther himself believed in witches and believed that his own mother had been bewitched. He “often felt sick when he visited Wartburg and attributed this to spells cast by his adversaries there” (Lea, 1957, vol. 3, p. 417). Calvin was more skeptical of the Dominican witch beliefs than Luther. He believed that the devil could do nothing without the permission of God and that he could never conquer the faithful. However, Calvin led a campaign that resulted in the execution of 31 witches. Calvinist missionaries succeeded in spreading the craze to Scotland in 1563. When James VI of Scotland, a Calvinist, became king of England, he revised the lenient statutes dealing with witchcraft and wrote his own handbook for witch-hunters (Trevor-Roper, 1967, p. 142; Robbins, 1959, p. 277).

This interpretation makes plausible why such a strange and esoteric phenomenon as witchcraft was chosen for elaboration into a myth and why it was so widely accepted at the dawn of the modern era in Europe. Dominican theory portrayed witchcraft and witches as the negative mirror or inverted image of the true faith. As Clark (1980) pointed out, in a world characterized by dualism, the Dominican theory made a great deal of sense. This made it possible to attribute all the undesirable phenomena of the age to a conspiracy between Satan and witches against Christianity. By associating everything negative, evil, and vicious with witchcraft, the church could highlight the ideal components of the true faith. In his religious tracts, King James gave this notion direct expression when he stated “since the Devil is the verie contrarie opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God than by the contrarie” (quoted in Clark, 1980, p. 117). In the sociological sense, then, the witch craze can be thought of as a “collective search for identity” and the authors of the Malleus Maleficarum as “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker, 1963, pp. 147–63), taking part in a “moral crusade” (Gusfield, 1963), all of which tending toward a restoration of the traditional religious–moral community. Witches represented the only deviants who were thought to attack the very core of the social system, through an anti-religion.

This helps explain why a number of theologians and intellectuals found in the demonology of witches a cognitively satisfactory diagnosis of the moral ills of their time. It still has to be explained how and why this abstruse theory was accepted by the masses.
As a result of the socioeconomic stress, the crumbling of the feudal social order, aggravated by the climatological and demographic changes, and a disruption of family and communal life, a feeling of doom pervaded the land. Further, “the individual was confronted with an enormously wide range of competing beliefs in almost every area of social and intellectual concern, while conformity-inducing pressures of a mainly ecclesiastical sort were weakened or discredited” (Rattansi, 1972, pp. 7–8). The existential crisis of individuals – expressed in terms of anomie, alienation, estrangement, powerlessness (O’Dea, 1966) and anxiety – created a fertile soil in which the Dominican mythology could prevail.

What better explanation for the strain felt by individuals than the idea that they were part of a cataclysmic, cosmic struggle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness? Their personal acceptance of this particular explanation was further guaranteed by the belief that they could assist the sons of light to overcome and defeat the sons of darkness – the despised witches – and thus play a decisive role in ending the cosmic struggle to bring their own salvation nearer. Thus, the differentiation process not only threatened the macroinstitutional level but also the micro-level, that is, each individual’s cognitive map. Hence, a redefinition of moral boundaries and a restructuring of cognitive maps would be most welcome. For this reason the moral panic that was based on a new demonology and expressed in the witch craze gained extensive support.

WITCHCRAFT AS AN IDEOLOGY: CONTENT AND TARGET

Demonological theory was ideologically attractive to the masses because of the need for a cognitive and moral reinterpretation differentiating the religious institution from the polity. Such a differentiation creates a disturbing discrepancy between what the reality is and what it should be. The function of ideology is to provide concepts capable of rendering such a discrepancy meaningful and to arouse emotion about why such a discrepancy exists, specifically, to point to agents responsible. This strain was inexplicable by means of traditional concepts; a new and different ideology revealed why witches, and specifically women, were responsible for the discrepancy. How women became a symbol can be explained by means of three processes: structural and functional changes in the family; changes in the status and role of women; and demographic changes.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE FAMILY

Ariès (1962) points out that the medieval family was a property-holding unit and the heart of the industrial life of the community. The woman held the central place in the home, as a housekeeper, a breadwinner, and a mother. For example,
prior to the twelfth century, the textile industry was wholly carried on by wives and daughters of the family, roughly at this time, however, time weaving became a skilled craft and was increasingly taken over by men. In addition to her domestic and economic activities a woman’s function was to provide male heirs for the family’s property and to make her husband richer by the treasures she was supposed to bring as her dowry and through her work.

Most observers accept that a woman’s status was subordinate to that of a man; indeed, she was regarded as little more than man’s possession. As a result, women had little control over their destiny. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the universities taught that women were biologically inferior to men and extremely dangerous. Scholars emphasized that menstruating women kill little children, insert chemicals in their vagina to wound the penis of their husband, and feign virginity and conceal pregnancy.

Some exceptions to the almost uniformly inferior status of women include the Virgin Mary cult, which regarded women as more spiritual beings; the upheaval that commerce, industry, and urban life brought about, often resulting in a rise in women’s power and prestige; and the occasional scholar calling for more rights for women. Other changes wrought by social and economic change included high rates of unemployment for peasants moving into urban areas, low wages among workers, and fluctuation in wages due to market prices of products. When such conditions prevail, insecurity rises and many couples cannot get married.

Changes in the status and role of women

The changes described above created strong pressure on women to enter the job market. The fate of the unmarried woman remained unchanged; some were sent to religious or secular convents, hospitals, “charitable houses,” or poor houses; others remained with their families and worked to help out. Still others were forced to turn to prostitution; evidence attests to sharp increases in prostitution during this era (Bullough, 1964; La Croix, 1926). In any case, the entrance of large numbers of women into industrial roles introduced substantial changes in the place of women in the society, their part in the family structure, and their role as unmarried workers.

Demographic changes in the fourteenth century

During the fourteenth century, Europe experienced severe demographic changes that bear directly on women as victims of witch-hunts. In particular, the Black Death (1347–51) had devastating and far-reaching consequences. Although the most serious phase of the epidemic had abated by 1350, the disease reappeared intermittently in various locales until the end of the century. The mortality rate
was particularly high in cities due to the density of the population and the absence of hygienic conditions. People who ran from the cities back to the villages only spread the disease to rural areas. Lea (1901) reports of areas where, out of every 1,000 people, barely 100 survived. A widely accepted estimate is that roughly one-third of the population of Europe perished.

Ironically, after the major plagues had passed, the peasant and wage-labor survivors found themselves in a highly favorable and advantageous position. As a direct result of the shortage in manpower, their real income was tremendously increased, food supplies improved, and job security magnified. In addition, a substantial number of survivors had inherited wealth from their deceased relatives. Chojnacki (1974) notes in particular that women enjoyed increases in economic success and wealth (p. 198), documenting the fact that females became increasingly active in the economy and gained considerable economic power.

Given increases in standard of living, one might expect an increase in the population, but this did not happen (Nelson, 1971). The real increase in the population did not take place until the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. This phenomenon can be explained in part by the sporadic, unpredictable appearance of disease as well as the continuation of the Hundred Years War. But the most basic reason lies elsewhere.

The decrease in the population in the second half of the fourteenth century was due to a significant increase in the use of contraceptive techniques and infanticide (Helleiner, 1957, p. 71). The motive seems clear. The sector of the population that was exposed to a suddenly and dramatically higher standard of living did not want to share their new prosperity by raising large families. Moreover, in the fourteenth century, life expectancy rose sharply for women, so that it is possible that they outnumbered men and marriage became more difficult for them. Furthermore, the economic, monetary, commercial, and urban revolutions that accompanied the Renaissance and Reformation probably also gave a powerful stimulus to the rise of individualism and egoism. Persons who married took care to limit the number of their offspring, while those who did not marry made efforts to prevent pregnancy (Spengler, 1968, pp. 436–7, 440). Church representatives complained of the widespread use of coitus interruptus by married and single persons alike as a means of preventing pregnancy (Wrigley, 1969, p. 124). Although historical research on infanticide is still in its infancy and cannot yet provide us with reliable numbers concerning the actual scope of the phenomenon in the twelfth through fifteenth century, a growing number of scholars have suggested that the rate and scope increased sharply during the period under question. The abandonment of children was responsible for the spread of foundling homes in the late Middle Ages and extensive legislation by the church to fight this practice (Trexler, 1973, p. 99). This problem began even before the fourteenth century. By the end of the twelfth century, Innocent III had established a hospital in Rome “because so many women were throwing their children in the Tiber” and “there were as many infanticides as there were infants born out of wedlock” (Trexler, 1973, p. 99).
Coleman notes that “many children were left abandoned at a church’s door, and they were accepted in order to prevent their death at the hands of their parents” and “the purpose of ... infanticide was to regulate children, not eliminate them” (1976, pp. 57, 69). It was exceedingly difficult to prove the crime of infanticide; indeed, “the unwed mothers and the presumed witches ... were to bear the brunt as examples and admonitions” (Langer, 1974, p. 350).

It is clear that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries brought with them one of the most severe demographic changes Europe had ever experienced. Hajnal demonstrates how the patterns of European marriage date roughly from this period. “The marriage pattern of most of Europe as it existed for at least two centuries up to 1940 was, so far as we can tell, unique ... in the world.... The distinctive marks ... are (1) a high age of marriage and (2) a high proportion of people never marry at all” (1965, p. 101). Hajnal notes in particular that the rate of single women in the population was high. The marriage rate, he adds, “is tied in very intimately with the performance of the economy as a whole.” In addition, he adds, “wealth may ... cause late marriage.” Some observers have noted “that people married late because they insisted on a certain standard of living ... as a prerequisite of marriage. More single men married late because they could not afford to marry younger” (1965, pp. 117, 132–3). He suggests that the origin of this marriage pattern lies “someplace about the sixteenth century [and] became quite widespread ... in the general population ... in the seventeenth century” (p. 135). Lichtfield (1966) gives us additional figures that exemplify changes in family structure and function. He reports that the age of marriage for males rose to over 25. He also indicates that among the upper middle class in Florence in the sixteenth century, larger dowries were required for marriage. This both delayed marriages and motivated more of the ruling classes in Catholic countries to send their daughters to convents, which required smaller dowries (pp. 202–3). The parallel development in Protestant countries was an increase in the number of spinster. Midelfort (1972) adds that in some places, the age of marriage rose to a high of 27. He also reports that the proportion of persons remaining single rose to as high as 20 percent. Wrigley notes that “between two-fifths and three-fifths of the women in childbearing age 15–44 were unmarried” 1969, p. 90). These changes took place progressively over Europe. In some areas, these developments began as early as the fourteenth century (Wrigley, 1969).

The significance of a high proportion of unmarried people in the population is significant in a society in which a strong stigma attaches to being single. In particular, the appearance of a large number of unmarried women produced serious problems and it is no coincidence that early on, a significant number of accused witches were either widows or spinsters. Later, however, married women and young girls were persecuted as well (Midelfort, 1972).

These changes suggest corresponding changes in the role of women. Assuming urban, industrial roles forced women to move away from their traditional place in medieval society. Ironically, by entering a labor market characterized by a depletion
of manpower strengthened misogyny (Bainton, 1971, pp. 9–14; Midelfort, 1972, p. 183). Two centuries earlier many women could not get married because many men could not afford marriage; in the fifteenth century, they were unable to marry because of men’s reluctance to marry.

As we have seen, infanticide and contraceptive use were widespread and vigorously denounced by the church. According to Trexler, “child-killing has been regarded almost exclusively as a female crime, the result of women’s inherent tendency to lechery, passion, and a lack of responsibility…. Infanticide was … the most common social crime imputed to … witches … by the demonologists” (1973, pp. 98, 103). Moreover, Piers notes (1978) that as large waves of migrants poured into the expanding towns, many of whom extremely poor, many women had no choice but to prostitute themselves. Often, these women followed armed forces that traveled throughout Europe fighting wars. Because they were poorly paid, prostitutes had to have many customers. They thus became bearers of venereal diseases. Even the higher-status job of a servant meant that a woman was at the disposal of her master’s (and his friends’) sexual appetite. Piers points out that the servant’s unquestioning sexual availability was often the only thing between her and abject poverty and starvation. These conditions created high rates of pregnancy, which often resulted in infanticide.

Infanticide was not only a result of the fact that many children were born out of wedlock. Many rich women could not breast-feed their offspring, or did not wish to. Consequently wet nurses were sought. Indications point to the fact that wet nurses were poor women who hired themselves out after their infants died naturally or were killed (Piers, 1978). Trexler suggests that it is possible that in many cases, becoming a wet nurse was a planned course of action; it provided a safe, comfortable living. No wonder, then, that midwives were among the chief suspects in accusations of witchcraft. The Dominicans suspected, and probably rightly so, that midwives were experts in birth control and abortion, and no doubt helped with infanticide as well. The Malleus voices this suspicion quite explicitly: “No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives.”

Under the conditions described here – large numbers of married men and women, sexual license, sinful contraception, infanticide – the relationship between the sexes must frequently have been one of mutual exploitation fraught with deep feelings of guilt and resentment. Because of the powerlessness of women under both secular and religious law, along with their inferior status, it was convenient to project onto them this resentment and guilt. The ideology of the witch-hunt made use of these emotions and made it possible for men who indulged in sex that proved unhealthy for them to accuse women of taking away their generative powers. Those who were party to contraception through coitus interruptus could project their guilt on women for stealing their seed. The fantasies about the unlimited sexual powers and depravity of women might very well have been a reflection of the fear engendered by the large number of unmarried women not subject to the authority of fathers or husbands.
Hence, it is clear why women were the principal victims of witch-hunts. The witch craze paralleled profound changes in women’s roles and in the structure of the family. The images of the prevailing demonology reflected tensions that must have been widespread among men; just as clearly, many men took advantage of the prevailing sexual freedoms. Among married women, who, typically, almost certainly did not or could not indulge in illicit sex, there must have been feelings of resentment against “bad” women who might have bewitched their husbands and sons. Therefore, the female witch, using sex to corrupt the society, was a “suasive image” of great power in an ideology that aimed to rid the world of Satan’s power. Understandably, these forces of social change put pressure on church authorities to restore society’s moral boundaries.

**TIMING: TERMINATION OF THE WITCH CRAZE**

How did the European witch craze end? In their most devastating form, the witch-hunts lasted until the seventeenth century, concluding more or less coterminously with the end of the Thirty Years War (1648). Several factors contributed to the termination of the craze. First, the invasion of foreign armies from the north contributed to the end of the craze (Nelson, 1971; Robbins, 1959). Second, the sheer terror, scope, and nature of the witch craze helped to undermine the process itself. The terrible persecution of the 1620s caused a crisis within the very order which did so much to direct it: the Jesuits. Already by 1617, Tanner, a Jesuit in Ingolstadt, in Bavaria, raised some basic objections to the persecution. Friedrich Spee, another Jesuit, became critical of the persecution after his experience as a confessor in Wurtzburg, also in Bavaria. That experience, he claimed, had turned his hair white and “convinced him that all confessions were worthless” (Trevor-Roper, 1967, p. 158).

Third, the number of executions and the organization they demanded represented an enormous social and economic burden. The witch craze caused havoc in Europe; as a result of the destruction of enormous swaths of real estate and their occupants, commerce had been severely harmed. “Germany was almost entirely occupied with building bonfires…. Switzerland had had to wipe out whole villages in order to keep them [witches] down” (Trevor-Roper, 1967, p. 152). The cost of the craze was mounting; officials must have recognized that it was too high a price to pay; too many people were burned, a substantial segment of the population had been eliminated, and the atmosphere the persecutions created had become unbearable.

Fourth, although some contemporary critics of the witch craze spoke out, none doubted the existence of the devil or of witches. They leveled their principal criticism against the use of torture. During the sixteenth century, most believers understood that the church was engaged in a life-and-death struggle against Satan. In the
seventeenth century, critics began questioning even this foundational dogma and hence, the very justification for the persecution itself. Clergy and laypeople alike attacked the cruelty of torture, the implausibility of confessions, and the identification of witches.

As Midelfort points out (1972), the fact that the witch-hunt used the secular courts also undermined the craze. This took place in the seventeenth century because of changes in the law, which broke accusations down into discrete and separable parts. For example, the law came to distinguish poisoning as a distinct form of murder, and infanticide was cleaved apart from witchcraft. Eventually, witchcraft as a distinct category prosecutable in criminal adjudication disappeared.

Thus, growing doubts as to the ideological basis for the witch-hunts clouded the trials’ legitimacy, just as believers criticized the technologies of identifying and the methods of torturing witches. Eventually the authorities took power away from the courts and dismantled the inquisitorial machinery, and the persecution of witches came to an end. The conjunction of the termination of the witch craze with the close of the Thirty Years War is not a chance occurrence. The Peace of Westphalia gave official recognition and legitimacy to religious pluralism and symbolically ended the struggle to redefine the moral system of Europe. The stresses, insecurity, and instability people living in war-stricken areas experienced provided fuel to the burning furnace of the final phase of the witch craze. But once Europe achieved stability and accepted religious pluralism, the witch-hunts weakened and eventually disappeared altogether.

By the seventeenth century, new cognitive maps and institutional arrangements had emerged, demarcating science, magic, and religion from one another and recognizing – in England, at least – the autonomy of government and the economy, and settling secular and spiritual relationships elsewhere in such a way that recognized the political sphere as supreme. In short, European society had visibly and triumphantly created a new social order. The Age of Reason lay at hand, with its new model of the rational man. In this era, the modern nation state emerged in which the people’s primary loyalty shifted from the church to the state; the age of secularism had begun. And the basis for the moral panic against witches evaporated, the reasons for its eruption and its continued support had ceased to exist. A new definition of society’s moral borders began taking shape.

The persecution of witches was a failure: It had failed to restore the crumbling medieval order. Medieval society was not reconstituted or restored – nor could it conceivably have been restored. The attempt to do so was futile, and later scholars could not plausibly justify the sacrifice of countless precious lives, even in instrumental terms. Whether and to what extent joining in witch-hunts psychologically enabled participants to survive this period of uncertainty and transition is a separate question. If so, it failed to make the persecutors better Christians, even in their own terms, which had been its stated purpose.
SUMMARY

The Renaissance witch craze exemplified a moral panic that was greeted by strong grassroots support. At the same time, it was a byproduct of the European transition to modernity. Moreover, it provides a clear instance of an invented form of deviance in the sense that the condemned behavior did not exist. Witches did not consort, engage in a pact, or copulate, with the devil, did not sacrifice and cannibalize children, and did not engage in ghoulish rituals with other witches. The question scholars and researchers must answer, then, is why? Why were witchcraft allegations made, why they begin in the fifteenth century, why were they made mainly against women, and why did these allegations end in the seventeenth century?

This era that gave birth to the witch craze opened with significant innovations in the scientific, political, and religious realms. Many church leaders branded these innovations as heretical and deviant, yet they introduced flexibility and complexity to a rigid social structure, providing the basis for a new era. The Inquisition, sensing the crumbling of the traditional medieval order, launched the witch-hunt to prevent social change.

Here, we attempt to address three issues.

1 Timing: Why did the witch craze begin when it did? why did it end when it did? why was it so widely accepted? and why was it distributed in the way that it was? The witch craze began in the fifteenth century because the Inquisition, sociologically the moral entrepreneur in this drama, had a vested interest in launching it. The Inquisition had to find new goals for itself or remain without purpose and slowly lose power and disintegrate. In addition, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Europe experienced the birth pangs of a new social order. In the conceptualization of Emile Durkheim, what took place was a kind of differentiation process. This sowed the seeds of confusion and powerlessness among much of the populace, exacerbated by severe climatological and demographic changes and hitherto unimaginized geographical discoveries, all of which caused the decentering of European Renaissance culture. These feelings of anomie, helplessness, and confusion, however, also gave rise to progressive utopian expectations and bold scientific exploration. The witch-hunt can be explained as a desperate attempt on the part of both the church hierarchy and the populace to recapture and restore the previous moral and social order.

2 Content: Why a witch craze and not something else? How do we explain the virulent attempt to crush an anti-religious ideology that focused on its supposed purveyors, demonological witches? By emphasizing the negative – demonology as the negative mirror twin of the perfection of Catholic ideology and practice – the Inquisition pointed a finger at precisely the threat that undermined the medieval order. No other heretical group, imaginary or real, threatened Christian legitimacy.
The elaboration of witchcraft theories into a complex religious ideology was a direct result of the need for a theoretical construct to explain the turmoil and anomie of the period. This ideology culminated in the actual persecution of witches, first because it was devised for that purpose and second, because the trials and executions represented the endeavor to redefine moral boundaries. Demonology provided the theoretical justification for the craze; the persecutions were its manifestation. We also looked at the effectiveness and success of the witch craze ideology. Clearly, the persecutions did not, indeed, could not achieve their primary purpose – to retard or reverse social change.

3 Target: Why were women the main victims of the craze? Our analysis of changes in the economy, demography, and the structure of the family, specifically changes in the role of women, clarified the nature of unmarried women, the incidence of prostitution and infanticide, and the use of contraception formed a salient complex of problems that seemed to arouse strong feelings. These conditions explain the suitability of the female symbol of the witch as a central element in demonological ideology. Further, women offered a weak, relatively safe target for the emotional zeal of the craze. Women held an inferior status to begin with; their lack of power and organization rendered them a soft target of widespread persecutions.

The moral panic expressed in the witch craze ended when the conditions for its emergence no longer existed. The spatial distribution of the witch-hunts was a direct result of the existence of these conditions. The witch craze took place, especially in its most virulent form, in countries or regions in which the crisis was most deeply felt and where the church was weak. Where the church was strong and where progressive changes had barely occurred, hardly any witch craze broke out. The disappearance of these conditions everywhere marked the end of the craze.

A look at the witch craze emphasizes the role of stigma contests and the use of power (Schur, 1980). We’ve already seen in the work of Stanley Cohen (1972; 2002) that moral panics are largely about symbolic representations – contending parties struggling to locate folk devils and define their doings as evil. In Renaissance Europe, few people questioned the reality of the devil or his evil deeds, but at the dawning of the fifteenth century, many observers did not accept witchcraft as materially real or as a palpable threat to the society. Societies fought over the reality and threat of witchcraft, and the outcome of this battle is the carnage we spelled out in this chapter: the hunt for and persecution of witches during a period of nearly three centuries. The outcome of this struggle was not decided because all the members of the society as a whole were suddenly and inexplicably seized by the reality of a threat from witchcraft. It was decided because the demonologists seemed to have the more powerful argument, the more powerful alliances, and the most powerful structural changes on their side.

Let us be clear about this: Witches seemed to be a threat to early Renaissance society because the medieval social order really was under siege. The Catholic
Church faced competition from Protestantism, and skepticism and scientific reason threatened both branches of Christianity; rural dwellers moved to cities, where the feudal order was upended; commerce overtook farming in importance, placing the economy on a more fluctuating and more cosmopolitan foundation; women began entering the economy in substantial numbers, some amassing considerable wealth and economic power, thereby undermining traditional familial and sexual roles; new lands were discovered, populated with peoples whose culture threatened Eurocentric notions of reality. Beginning in the fifteenth century, these and other changes threatened to undermine the medieval social, political, and religious order and erase the moral boundaries of European society. Demonologists won out in the struggle to assign blame; witches caused society’s miseries, it was claimed, and they should and must be punished. Johann Gutenberg’s timely invention of the printing press in the 1430s and the extraordinarily opportune publication of Sprenger and Kramer’s *Malleus Maleficarum* 50 years later put the technology for discovering evidence of witchcraft and rooting out and punishing witches in the hands of every literate demonologist and inquisitor on the Continent, thereby accelerating and intensifying the witch-hunt. Ironically, the very instrument of disseminating enlightenment – the printed book – facilitated the persecution, oppression, mayhem, torture, and death of over a quarter of a million imaginary criminals.

The era abounds in such ironies. The Renaissance witch-hunts exploded precisely at a time when European society was emerging from its medieval torpor, when the Catholic hegemonic symbolic-moral universe of the Middle Ages was under siege, when competing notions of true and false, good and bad, beautiful and ugly emerged – when European society became more multicultural, more tolerant of diverse views, more urban, cosmopolitan, and complex, in a sense, more “modern.” It was precisely in this whirlpool of interaction between and among bearers of disparate symbolic–moral universes that the witch craze, one of the most virulent of moral panics in human history, erupted. It was the very emergence of cultural diversity that threatened the dominant institutions and ignited the persecution of the witch scapegoat.

The example of the Renaissance witch craze provides a lesson for contemporary society: Multiculturalism does not eradicate the moral panic. Indeed, the more diverse the society, the larger number of moral panics, as competing symbolic–moral universes produce their own folk devils, each with exaggerated fears and anxieties. In turn, these folk devils resist such definitions, drawing, as they will, on the support from members of competing symbolic–moral universes. The modern scene of moral panics thus witnesses a larger number of moral panics, some in conflict, some potentiating each other, and some flourishing and fading as quickly as they have come into being. The modern, complex moral structure of societies may very well create a social setting which gives rise to a multitude of moral panics.

Given the increasing complexity of moral orders so characteristic of postmodern society, it is likely that we will witness a multitude of moral panics in our
future. Most will bubble up on a smaller scale than the moral panics that characterized the European witch craze or even Cohen’s moral panic that centered on the Mods and Rockers. The differentiation of the mass media, multi-channel television, and the seemingly endless universe of Internet communications, almost guarantees that this proliferation of moral panics is certain to accelerate. Thompson (1998, p. 2) points out that in the contemporary era, moral panics erupt with “increasing frequency” and “catch many more people in their net” than was true in the past. In fact, he says, “all advanced industrial societies manifest periodic outbreaks” of moral panic (p. 11). Indeed, he insists, it is the very “rapidity of social change and growing social pluralism” that creates an “increasing potential for value conflicts and lifestyle clashes between diverse social groups,” which in turn result in group members mobilizing “moral enterprise to defend or assert their values against those of other groups” (p. 11). Within a morally complex society, moral panics have played – and will continue to play – a major role in the manner in which competing symbolic–moral universes define their boundaries and the identities of persons inhabiting these universes.
11

DRUG ABUSE PANICS
When a previously unknown drug begins to be used on a widespread basis, or a drug begins to be taken up by a category in the population that had not previously used it, the media all too often indulge in sensationalistic reports of this brand-new “scary drug of the year” (Akers, 1990), the public gets readily aroused and fearful about the threat that its use poses, and politicians make speeches and propose legislation to control its distribution and use. The details are different, but the common element are the panic, fear, and hysteria generated over the use of a novel substance, initially believed to be far more harmful than it eventually turns out to be. More specifically, new drugs are usually, although not always, attributed with a criminogenic effect – that is, many more people than is normally the case believe that they cause violence and crime.

Even though the specific drug that is the focus of media stories, public fear, and legislative attention changes, the structure of fear and panic remains the same. A few untoward episodes, whether alleged or real, are presented as if they were the typical, characteristic, or paradigmatic experience with this new drug. In the heat of a drug panic or scare, such episodes come to be regarded as summary events, representing or standing in for the experience most or many users have with the substance. The worst case scenario is depicted and believed as if it were common, even usual. This pattern has prevailed for over a century, beginning with alcohol, opium, and cocaine in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, carrying through to marijuana in the 1930s, LSD in the 1960s, PCP in the 1970s, crack cocaine in the 1980s, Ecstasy beginning in the late 1980s, and methamphetamine in the twenty-first century.

One of the more interesting features of the efforts to stir up moral panics about drug use is that such efforts are not always successful in generating public concern. For many of these cases, media attention was substantial – and moral entrepreneurs typically used that attention to stir up public concern – and legislative action was swift and dramatic. But for some, concern on the part of the populace was not nearly so forthcoming. For instance, in the 1930s, a moral entrepreneur, Harry Anslinger (Anslinger and Cooper, 1937), wrote and placed fear stories about marijuana use that failed to garner widespread support, but he was able to use media attention to the matter to convince lawmakers to pass legislation against its possession and sale. In fact, marijuana use was insignificant at the time, and remained so until the 1960s. Likewise, tales of the horrific effects of indulgence in LSD, PCP, Ecstasy, crack cocaine, and methamphetamine exploded like fireworks, but considering the nature of the scare stories, public sentiment continued to be remarkably restrained. At the same time, legislation targeted the specific drug that was in the media spotlight, and some polls indicated remarkably strong fear and concern. For instance, late in 1989, drug abuse was named by two-thirds of the respondents in one poll as the “greatest problem facing the country today.” Anti-drug legislation tends to be passed during such periods and tends to be seen in the public interest. In contrast, drug users have no social movement constituency, and, unless lawmakers seriously step on constitutional guarantees, civil libertarians characteristically lay low during drug panics.
Marijuana’s use stretches back thousands of years, to pre-agrarian humans. Historical research suggests that the practice began in the United States on the Mexican border among working- and lower-class Mexican immigrants, particularly migrant farm workers. From there, it spread to New Orleans among some members of the African-American working-class community to the jazz world and from there to black and white jazz circles and then to bohemians, intellectuals, gamblers, prostitutes, and criminals. During the 1920s and 1930s, when this diffusion was taking place, the image of marijuana use that was depicted in the media and accepted among law enforcement and in the general public was so unrealistic as to be amusing today. At the time, users were said to be “addicts” and to become violent, dangerous, and insane under its influence. In the decades that followed, during the 1940s and 1950s, the furor died down only to erupt again in the 1960s, when the use of marijuana became popular. However, by this latter era, the image of the marijuana user had shifted from that of a violent, deranged criminal psychopath to a hippie, a drop-out, a shiftless ne’er-do-well (Himmelstein, 1983, pp. 121–36).

The story of the moral panic over marijuana is worth a close look. “An entire family was murdered by a youthful [marijuana] addict,” claims a typical – and much-cited – article authored by Harry Anslinger, the commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) during the 1930s and a notorious moral entrepreneur (Becker, 1963, pp. 142–4). “When officers arrived at the home, they found the youth staggering about in a human slaughterhouse.” The boy was “pitifully crazed.” The cause? Marijuana! (Anslinger and Cooper, 1937, p. 19). As it turns out, the young man was mentally ill before using marijuana, but this fact was conveniently forgotten in this sensationalistic story.

The 1930s was a fascinating era in the history of drug use and legislation. Beginning in 1934, the FBN lobbied each state to adopt the Uniform Narcotic Drugs Act. (In the early 1930s, interestingly enough, the FBN had resisted proposals to criminalize marijuana.) To generate public and legislative support for this act the FBN had to “conjure up the specter of a marihuana ‘menace’” (Himmelstein, 1983, p. 59). Once committed to this cause, the agency launched a moral crusade against the drug. “Policymakers and the media faithfully adopted the bureau’s image of marihuana, repeating [its] examples of marihuana-related violence and ignoring the data that the bureau chose to ignore…. Marihuana was believed to be not just dangerous but a menace. Its … effects on consciousness were said to lead … to a manic behavior in which the user was likely to commit all kinds of unspeakable crimes” (p. 59).

In an analysis of the articles on marijuana published in popular magazines between 1935 and 1940, Himmelstein found that 95 percent depicted the drug as “dangerous,” and 85 percent specifically mentioned violence as an effect of its use;
three-quarters of these articles (73%) regarded moderate use as impossible (1983, pp. 60–7). “Addicts [meaning marijuana users] may often develop a delirious rage during which they are temporarily and violently insane,” states Anslinger; “this insanity may take the form of a desire for self-destruction or a persecution complex to be satisfied only by the commission of some heinous crime” (Anslinger and Cooper, 1937, p. 150). Violence was the central guiding principle of the media’s depiction of marijuana’s effects. “In short,” says Himmelstein, “nearly every effect imputed to marihuana was also linked to violence and was interpreted in its light. Insanity, destruction of the will, suggestibility, distortions of perception, and alterations of consciousness all carried the connotations of violence and crime. The image of the violent criminal tied these disparate effects together and gave them coherence” (p. 65).

Marijuana does not cause or induce users to violence, of course, as an examination of the scientific literature will tell you. By the 1960s, anti-marijuana propagandists and the media quietly dropped the violence theme and emphasized almost exactly the opposite effect – passivity. In short, between the 1930s and the 1960s, marijuana had become transformed “from killer weed to dropout drug” (Himmelstein, 1983, pp. 121ff.). Nonetheless, Harry Anslinger used his atrocity-oriented articles on marijuana in popular magazines as a bully pulpit from which to argue for the passage of the Uniform Narcotic Drugs Act. In the mid-1930s, only 10 states had passed the act. But by 1937, all of the then-48 states had enacted an anti-marijuana law, and the federal government had approved the Marihuana Tax Act. Harry Anslinger’s media-driven campaign to convince the public of the “menace” of marijuana was successful, and his effort to criminalize the possession and sale of marijuana was a complete triumph.

Judging from comments in newspapers and by lawmakers in the 1920s and 1930s, members of the white majority were almost entirely critical of the “vicious weed.” An army botanist who observed Mexican railroad workers and prison inmates’ use of marijuana said that “under its baleful influence reckless men become bloodthirsty, trebly daring and dangerous to an uncontrollable degree.” Said an American consul stationed in Nogales, a border town, the use of the drug “causes the smoker to become exceedingly pugnacious and to run amuck without discrimination” (Bonnie and Whitebread, 1974, p. 37). Lawmakers responded with legislation. By the early 1930s, practically every state west of the Mississippi River had passed anti-marijuana legislation, practically without publicity, debate, or opposition (pp. 39, 52).

This era, roughly 1914–31, can be referred to as the “local” phase of marijuana prohibition (Bonnie and Whitebread, 1974, p. 51). During this period, a distinctly grassroots opposition to the drug developed that was rooted in anti-Mexican racism and an association of marijuana with ethnic minorities and otherwise “immoral” populations, such as, as we saw, criminals, prostitutes, longshoremen, gamblers, and jazz musicians. In this era, marijuana was regarded as an alien presence, an addictive narcotic no different from opium, and a stimulant to violence,
lawlessness, and crime. Moreover, there was fear that the marijuana habit would spread from society’s fringes and underworld to respectable whites, especially women and schoolchildren (p. 52).

As early as 1915, lawmakers and law enforcement officers in the Southwest urged that marijuana be included in the Harrison Act, anti-narcotics legislation passed in 1914. But interestingly, federal authorities rejected these appeals, believing that Washington “had its hands full with the enforcement of the Harrison and the Volstead Acts” (p. 55). In 1930, the FBN was created, with Harry J. Anslinger, a former Prohibition agent, as its first commissioner. One of the first items on the Bureau’s agenda was to pass a Uniform State Narcotic Act, ensuring that the same drug laws were enacted in all states of the United States. However, at first, marijuana was not on the FBN’s radar screen.

But Anslinger’s mind was changed some time in 1934, thereby shifting efforts at marijuana prohibition into its “national” phase. During the mid-to-late 1930s, the Bureau undertook a major, comprehensive media campaign, as well as lobbying in legislatures, to convince the public of the evil effects of the “killer weed.” Anslinger wielded anecdotes and stories about the drug’s supposed criminogenic and violence-inducing effects to convince voters and legislators that marijuana had to be criminalized. For instance, he widely publicized a letter the Bureau received, published in the Alamosa Daily Courier, which described an attack by a Mexican American, presumably under the influence of marijuana, on a young girl. It read, “I wish I could show you what a small marihuana cigaret can do to one of our degenerate Spanish-speaking residents. That’s why our problem is so great; the greatest percentage of our population is composed of Spanish-speaking persons, most of who are low mentally, because of social and racial conditions” (p. 101). Anslinger piled one fanciful tale on another, all with the same moral: marijuana causes users to become violent. In his classic “Marihuana – Assassin of Youth,” published in 1937, he describes a young man “walking along a downtown street after inhaling a marihuana cigarette.” Suddenly, “for no reason, he decided that someone had threatened to kill him.” Spotting an elderly man, a shoe-shiner, in the vicinity, he decided that he had found his assassin. Rushing home, he got a gun and shot the man, killing him. “I thought someone was after me,” the young man babbled. “That’s the only reason I did it. I had never seen the old fellow before. Something just told me to kill him.” Today, observers agree that Anslinger’s documentary evidence for the drug’s violence-inducing properties was anecdotal at best and bogus at worst – but at the time, it was taken very seriously.

In short, the moral panic over the use of marijuana, and the material realization of that panic in the form of the resultant federal Marihuana Tax Act, as well as the state laws banning the drug, were engineered by a moral entrepreneur who was the head of a relatively minor government agency who engaged in a crusade by planting and stirring up media coverage about the (mostly imaginary) baleful effects of the drug. Accompanying that fear of what the drug would do was a more or less explicit racism about Mexicans and Mexican Americans, who, supposedly,
introduced an alien presence in the bosom of American society and threatened its innocent youth with a substance that caused violence and sexual licentiousness. Interestingly, this campaign did not seem to have enlisted a substantial segment of the American public, but that ingredient was not necessary: Harry Anslinger, the crusader who stirred up the panic, could wave newspaper and magazine clippings in legislative hearings and nonetheless achieve his goals of seeing a law passed to ban the possession and distribution of the substance and hence, diminish its use and, presumably, the supposed effects attendant upon that use.

LSD IN THE 1960s

“Under the influence of LSD,” read a June 17, 1966 article from Time magazine, “nonswimmers think they can swim, and others think they can fly. One young man tied to stop a car ... and was killed. A magazine salesman became convinced that he was the Messiah. A college dropout committed suicide by slashing his arm and bleeding to death in a field of lilies.” Before 1967, the media theme for LSD’s effects was psychosis. The danger posed by users of LSD was not so much crime and violence to others but insanity and self-destruction. The pre-1967 media stories conveyed a distinct impression that anyone who ingested LSD stood an unwholesomely strong likelihood of losing one’s mind – temporarily and possibly even for good. We’ve already looked at LSD through the lens of disproportion. It’s time to think about the turmoil the use of this drug generated, and the attention it received in the media. Parallel as it is with other cases, in many ways, LSD plays an unprecedented role in the history of moral panics.

The effects of LSD were described in the media as “nightmarish”; “terror and indescribable fear” were considered common, even routine. Life magazine ran a cover story on March 25, 1966, entitled “The Exploding Threat of the Mind Drug That Got Out of Control.” Psychic terror, uncontrollable impulses, unconcern for one’s own safety, psychotic episodes, delusions, illusions, hallucinations, and impulses leading to self-destruction: these formed the fare of the early articles on the use of LSD.

As sensationalistic as magazine articles were, those published in newspapers were even more lurid, sensationalistic, and one-sided. While magazine stories usually qualified their scare stories by saying that not everyone “freaked out” when they took the drug, newspaper articles rarely offered such qualification. Newspaper headlines screamed out stories such as “Mystery of Nude Coed’s Fatal Plunge,” “Thrill Drug Can Warp Minds and Kill,” “Strip-Teasing Hippie Goes Wild on LSD,” and “LSD: For the Kick That Can Kill” (Braden, 1970). Public hysteria at the time was summed up in the statement by the New Jersey Narcotic Drug Study Commission in 1966; LSD, the Commission declared, “is the greatest threat facing the country today” (Brecher et al., 1972, p. 369).
Today, as measured by the data on untoward emergency department (ED) episodes, LSD’s role in causing panic or psychotic reactions is minuscule. Since the 1970s, the United States federal government has sponsored a program, national in scope, designed to monitor, record, and tabulate two untoward indicators of drug abuse: ED episodes and drug-related “overdose” deaths. Its acronym is DAWN, which stands for the Drug Abuse Warning Network. In 2005, DAWN recorded only 1,864 LSD-related episodes requiring medical intervention, out of a total of 1.5 million ED visits, or 0.13 percent. This is only a bit more than a thousandth of all ED episodes. And, based on the total number of users and the average number of times the drug is taken, this is one untoward LSD episode out of 10,000 incidents of use. (Keep in mind, however, that DAWN is not complete in its enumeration of all untoward drug episodes.) In other words, today, ingesting LSD hardly ever leads to the kinds of extreme episodes that were reported in the media in the 1960s. (Unfortunately, DAWN did not exist in the 1960s and, hence, could not have collected such data at that time.)

Why the discrepancy? One possible explanation is that the media seized upon and reported the very small number of untoward LSD-related episodes that did take place and ignored the immense volume of peaceful experiences that users had with the drug. Another possible explanation is that, over time, users learned to handle the novel, strange, and unsettling LSD experiences they had and hence, no longer “freaked out” under the drug’s influence (Becker, 1967). Evidence available today – and even that which existed at the time – suggests that in the sixties, the media were guilty of sensationalistic coverage of the effects of LSD. Certainly the fact that LSD does not typically cause untoward effects has not received the same amount of attention that was given to the story that it did. Once again, media bias rears its ugly head. Clearly, in the context of the 1960s, LSD “freak-outs” were news; stories that LSD does not cause psychotic outbreaks were not news.

In March 1967, the prestigious scientific journal *Science* published an article about the research of a geneticist and two of his associates who found that when human blood cells were placed in a culture containing LSD the cells underwent some chromosome breakage. In addition, one schizophrenic mental patient who was treated with LSD 15 times in a therapeutic setting was found to have a higher than normal rate of chromosome breakage (Cohen, Marinello, and Back, 1967). Within 24 hours, news of the study had swept the country like wildfire. The findings from this research report became translated into the inescapable fact that LSD would damage one’s offspring. News stories intimated that if youth began taking the drug, uncountable generations of infants would be born deformed. Numerous articles in popular magazines appeared, explaining that the drug would cause genetic mutations and birth defects. “If you take LSD, even once,” intoned an August 1967 article in *Look* magazine, “your children may be born malformed or retarded.” Just below the title of this article was this statement: “New research finds it’s causing genetic damage that possessed a threat of havoc now and abnormalities for generations yet unborn” (Davison, 1967, pp. 19–22).
An indication of how seriously these early findings were regarded is the fact that even in the decidedly pro-marijuana underground newspapers, such as *The East Village Other* (EVO), a number of articles appeared during the summer of 1967 affirming that genetic damage would take place in anyone who ingested LSD. One such article published in EVO was entitled “Acid Burned a Hole in My Genes.” Anti-drug propaganda campaigns rarely failed to mention LSD’s supposedly “monster-producing” properties. The National Foundation-March of Dimes distributed a leaflet containing photographs of deformed, legless, or armless children pitifully attempting to perform simple tasks such as writing or picking up toys with their flipper-like limbs or artificial hands or feet. The text contains the warning that “there is evidence that LSD and other similar drugs may cause chromosome damage.” Though the leaflet contains the qualification that “there is no proof that chromosome breaks cause birth defects in humans,” the impact of the photographs was so devastating that the caveat was completely lost on the reader.

As it turns out, the media seized on the *Science* article, broadcasting its findings as if they were clear-cut evidence of LSD’s harmful effects on human chromosomes. Just four years later, a team of four scientists conducted an exhaustive survey of the findings reported in nearly 100 scientific papers on the subject of LSD and genetic damage (Dishotsky et al., 1971); again, the report appeared in *Science*. These researchers, however, reached the opposite conclusions: “We believe that pure LSD ingested in moderate dosages does not produce chromosome damage detectable by available methods.” Clearly, the media stories reporting that the drug caused damage to human chromosomes represented a premature rush to judgment. Interestingly, the story that LSD does not damage chromosomes was not given the fanfare that was given the earlier stories that it does.

In short, the panic generated by the early use of LSD led many reporters to find plausible the conclusions of a questionable piece of research that supposedly indicated that the drug is harmful. Had the same findings been published on the effects of alcohol, it is unlikely that reporters would have written stories on the findings of a similar study. Given that, in the context of the 1960s, the subject of the article was LSD, the findings that the drug had horrendous effects made the story newsworthy, threatening, and believable. It is out of the raw material of, first, the introduction of a new drug into the society, second, claims of unusual, damaging effects, and, third, a resultant scare, that sensationalism in the media is born.

Media attention to LSD triggered criminal legislation. The federal Drug Abuse Control Amendments, which penalized the manufacture and sale of hallucinogens, including LSD (along with barbiturates and amphetamines) was passed in 1965 and became effective in 1966. In May of 1966, Sandoz, the only pharmaceutical to manufacture LSD, withdrew the drug from the market. In 1966, California and New York passed state laws criminalizing LSD. In 1968, the Drug Control Amendments were revised, rendering the sale of LSD a felony and its possession, a misdemeanor. And in 1970, the Controlled Substances Act declared LSD a Schedule I drug, indicating that the lawmakers presumed that it had a high potential
for abuse and no medical utility. The current federal law criminalizing the possession of LSD for personal use calls for a one-year penalty; possession with intent to sell draws a minimum of a five-year imprisonment, a maximum of 40 years. However, less than 10 percent of all drug cases are prosecuted in the federal courts. Since 1970, nearly all the states have adopted their own version of the federal act, and for a number of them, penalties are even more severe than under the federal law. For instance, currently, in New York State, possession of 25 milligrams or more of LSD draws a penalty of three years to life; the sale of one milligram or less, up to seven years; and the sale of five or more milligrams, three years to life imprisonment.

Whether intentionally or unwittingly, the media hysteria brought forth criminal legislation that penalized the possession and sale of LSD.

**PCP IN THE 1970s**

PCP, or phencyclidine (whose trade names are Sernyl and Sernylan) is an animal tranquilizer and anesthetic, whose use is not medically approved for humans. PCP began to be used illegally on the street in substantial numbers in the second half of the 1970s. During that period, the media devoted enormous attention to the drug and its effects. Two researchers examined 323 newspaper and 23 magazine articles, as well as a number of television news broadcasts and dramatic television dramas on the use of PCP (Morgan and Kagan, 1980). Most of the coverage of PCP took place in the single year 1978; after that date, the number of stories dropped off sharply.

In the 1970s, media accounts of PCP were extremely narrowly focused. In a quarter of the newspaper articles, “violent or shocking themes” predominated, and in one, an especially gruesome story appeared. In 1971, a Baltimore student named Charles Innis blinded himself in jail. This real-life event served as the inspiration for 17 newspaper articles in which a person under the influence of PCP gouged out his (or her) eyes. The story also appeared in seven out of the 23 magazine articles on the horrors of PCP as well as a large number of television broadcasts. The identity of the person who supposedly did this horrific act of self-mutilation changed from story to story. In one, the victim was a woman, arrested for assault, who gouged out her eyes in jail; in another, a young man, arrested for indecent exposure, who, again, gouged out his eyes in prison; in other versions, he was (correctly) a Baltimore college student, the son of a Massachusetts congressman, a man from a Midwestern city, and a man from San José (Morgan and Kagan, 1980, p. 197). These different identifications suggest that the tale, though based on an initially true event, is as much an urban legend as a real-life event. It became a story that was a little “too good to be true” (Brunvand, 1999), moving “from anecdote to apocrypha” (Morgan and Kagan, 1980, p. 201). Years after the supposed event, the story is “exhumed, polished and transformed into part of the PCP mythology” (p. 202).
In the other “horror stories,” a “nude, unarmed man refuses to halt on police command” and is killed “after a varying number of bullets are fired” (13 stories); a “person drowns in a shower stall with four inches of water” (12 stories); a “young man shoots and kills his own father, mother and grandfather” (9 stories); a “person sits engulfed in flames, unable to perceive danger” (9 stories); a “person amputates a bodily part: a nose, breast or penis” (9 stories); a “man crosses an eight lane freeway, enters a house, randomly stabs a pregnant woman and toddler” (8 stories); a person “pulls out his own teeth with pliers” (7 stories). And so on. The theme in each of these stories is that, under the influence of PCP, the user becomes deranged, psychotic, completely unconcerned for his or her safety, and engages in horrific self-destructive and/or violent behavior.

Fictionalized television dramas made especially strong use of this “mindless violence and self-destructive acts” theme. In one, a young woman, attempting to evade her pursuers, tries to fly off the roof of a building. In another, the “strength and invincibility” of a PCP-high youth is stressed. In yet another, the police have to fire “multiple bullets” into the user’s body to halt his advance. In still another television drama, a young man, high on the drug, breaks the handcuffs and leg shackles that were used to restrain him.

The way the PCP story was reported in the media bears strong parallels with how other drugs have been covered by the news. According to Morgan and Kagan,

Every new drug experience in America is handled in a stereotypical fashion by the media. Emphasis is placed on individual tales of dangerous, criminal or self-destructive behavior by the drug-crazed. The myth is newly erected and slightly embellished with each new drug, and the stories come to resemble the myths, ballads and folktales previously generated and transformed by oral transmission. Indeed, the best model seems to be the Frankenstein monster who advances impervious to pain, bullets and… fire in order to murder, dismember or bugger men, women, children and the household pets. The myths are compelling because they touch an emotional core that has meaning in the individual and the culture, and they exploit our fascination with horror…. The monster must die bizarrely: drowning in inches of water, attempting to fly from a building or trying to halt a speeding two-ton vehicle with its bare hands or body. If it lives it should commit the most… meaningful of self-mutilations – removal of the eyes or castration. These tales are the archetypical expressions of human inner terrors and exist in the preserved ballads and epic tales of most languages (p. 201).

Were some of the anecdotes that were narrated in the news about persons who, high on the newly-introduced drug, committed terrible acts of violence and self-destruction, actually true? Almost certainly! But “myth feeds on fact nearly as well as it feeds on fancy” (p. 201). The fact is, PCP is extremely dangerous, very possibly the most dangerous currently used drug in the United States. But in the 1970s, the horrifying effects attendant upon use of this drug were sometimes fabricated – and nearly always exaggerated. In 2005, according to DAWN, the federal
government’s national data-collection effort, hospitals reported 7,535 visits to hospital EDs as a result of the ingestion of PCP – out of a total of 108 million such visits – indicating that it isn’t quite as harmful as the media claimed or, as with LSD, the subculture of users has learned to handle and deal with its bizarre effects. One study estimated that in the late 1970s, out of the roughly 20 million instances of use experienced each year by some 300,000 regular users, only about 5,000 to 6,000 resulted in such unpleasant or life-threatening effects that they required a trip to an ED – approximately 0.03 percent of all such episodes (Newmeyer, 1980, pp. 214–15).

Clearly, the media sensationalized PCP use and exaggerated the most violent and bizarre effects of the drug to the point where what is actually unusual and atypical is described as common and routine. While one does take a certain psychological and physical risk by ingesting PCP, and while that risk is probably higher on an episode-by-episode basis than it is for any other illicit drug currently in use, at the doses that are usually taken, the risk is quite small. Once again, we have the same formula: New drug equals media exaggeration. And, just as new drug equals media sensationalism, media sensationalism leads to criminalization.

CRACK IN THE 1980s

Beginning late in 1985, a substantial number of Americans began using an old drug in a new form. On November 17 of that year, in what was the first mention of this drug in the mass media, The New York Times journalist Donna Boundy described a substance referred to as “crack” as “rock-like pieces of prepared ‘freebase’ (concentrated) cocaine.” Crack is neither freebase nor concentrated, but the brief piece was the first in an avalanche of over 1,000 stories that appeared in the media in less than a year. In the following year, two major television stories, CBS and NBC broadcast “48 Hours on Crack Street” and “Cocaine Country.” Within six months, over 400 television broadcasts on the same topic were aired. Crack became what was probably the biggest drug story of all time (Inciardi, 2002, pp. 145–6).

Just as previous media constructions of drugs focused around a core theme, the earliest stories on crack concentrated on a theme: the drug’s supposed addictive property. A March 17, 1986 Newsweek article quoted one drug expert as saying “Crack is the most addictive drug known to man.” Smoking the drug, he said, produces “instantaneous addiction.” “Try it once and you’re hooked!” “Once you start, you can’t stop!” Using crack, claimed a June 16, 1986 Newsweek story, immediately hurls the user into “an inferno of craving and despair.”

A theme in media stories about crack that emerged slightly later than the addiction theme emphasized that the use of crack was becoming widespread and threatened to turn into a virtual “tidal wave” of substance abuse. Crack now “infested”
every community and group in the country, these stories announced, and had become a “plague” comparable to the Black Death in fourteenth-century Europe. The use of metaphors and mental images often leads audiences to think about something in a particular way. The common use of the term “plague” to refer to the emergence of a new drug and to refer to crack use in the second half of the 1980s is especially revealing (Reinarman and Levine, 1997, pp. 33–6). When in 1986, both *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report* compared the devastation of illicit drug use to that of medieval plagues, we realize that the reader is asked to regard substance abuse as a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions.

In the sixth century, the bubonic plague killed about 100 million people in Europe and the Middle East. In the fourteenth century, the bubonic plague returned in the form that is referred to as the “Black Death,” killing roughly a third of the population of Europe, or about 75 million people. Each of these episodes came and went in a matter of a couple of years. Since the use of all illicit drugs in the United States is associated with a total of no more than 25,000 deaths a year, the comparison seems remarkably biased, and exaggerated – indeed, one is tempted to say, sensationalistic. Even cigarette use (which kills 440,000 smokers in the United States each year), and alcohol consumption (which kills nearly 100,000 annually) are positively benign in comparison with the genuine medieval plagues.

A third theme found in the media made the claim that not only was crack use becoming “pervasive,” “universal,” it had also become as common among the educated, middle-class sectors of the society as among unemployed, poverty-stricken, school dropouts. In its March 17, 1986 issue, *Newsweek* proclaimed that crack “is rapidly spreading into the suburbs.” Three days later, *The New York Times* stated that crack was spreading from the inner cities to “the wealthiest suburbs of Westchester County.” Said a representative of the New Jersey Health Department, “It’s all over the place.” On June 8, the *Times* ran a story that proclaimed “Crack Addiction Spreads Among the Middle Class.” Three weeks later, the *Times* announced the “growing use of crack” in several suburban counties; in them, the newspaper stated, the “per capita use of cocaine is the heaviest in the state.” On August 11, referring to crack use, *Newsweek* declared that “nearly everyone now concedes that the plague is all but universal” (Reinarman and Levine, 1997, pp. 3–4).

And the fourth theme that emerged in the media to capture the reality of crack use was the “crack babies” phenomenon. Between 1989 and 1991, following the announcement of several medical reports, a flood of news stories indicated that if pregnant women smoked crack (or used powder cocaine – the distinction was often not made clear), their children would be born with a range of neurological and anatomical defects. These children would be permanently impaired, the stories indicated, and would cost society many billions of dollars in hospital bills, remedial educational programs, and, ultimately, other immense expenses in the form of criminal offenses and incarceration. It became an established fact that “crack babies” represented a major social and medical problem.
William Bennett, then federal drug "czar," claimed that in the late 1980s, 375,000 crack babies were born each year – one out of 10 of all births! This figure was echoed by respected Washington Post columnist Jack Anderson and New York Times editor A. M. Rosenthal (Gieringer, 1990). The medical care of crack babies, stated one of the most widely quoted articles to appear in a mass magazine on the subject, is 13 times as expensive as that of normal newborns – $7,000 versus just under $500 (Toufexis, 1991). The fear was that these youngsters would become "an unmanageable multitude of disturbed and disruptive youth. Fear that they will be a lost generation" (p. 56). A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist described the crack baby crisis in dramatic, heart-wrenching prose: "The bright room is filled with baby misery: babies born months too soon; babies weighing little more than a hardcover book; babies that look like wizened old men in the last stages of a terminal illness, wrinkled skin clinging to chicken bones; babies who do not cry because their mouths and noses are full of tubes…. The reason is crack" (Quindlen, 1990). According to common media wisdom that sprang up in the late 1980s, crack cocaine use among pregnant women causes serious, in all likelihood, irreparable, medical problems in babies. This condition is extremely widespread, we learned from the news, and will be extremely costly to the society.

What of these four media crack themes – universal addiction, widespread use, use as great in the middle classes as among poor, inner-city residents, and devastating, irreparable harm to children born to crack-using expectant mothers, or the so-called "crack babies syndrome": Were these assertions actually true?

First, crack never became a popular drug, even at its height of popularity. And after the early 1990s, its use declined rather sharply. According to the Monitoring the Future survey, even at its height, no more than 5 percent of American high school seniors had even tried the drug, and between 0.1 and 0.2 percent used in the previous 30 days. (Of course, let's remember, this survey does not include drop-outs and absentees.) According to the National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2005, only 0.3 percent of respondents ages 12 to 17 had used crack in the previous 30 days. In 1992, just after crack's use had peaked, only 0.6 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds, 3.2 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds, 3.3 percent of 26- to 34-year-olds, and 0.4 percent of prisons age 35 and older said that they had ever used the drug – even once. Statistics on use in the past year were 0.3, 1.1, 0.9, and 0.1 percent, respectively. In other words, this "tidal wave" of use never developed. Crack never became a drug of widespread use, and most users experimented with the drug then stopped using it.

The fact is, precisely the opposite of widespread use was true. Crack use was, and remains, anything but universal. In addition, not only did – and does – a very small proportion of the population use the drug, but also its use tends to be very strongly patterned according to social class and education. The higher a person and their family are on the occupational and educational ladder the lower the likelihood that they will use crack cocaine; the lower on this continuum, the higher that likelihood is. Crack use is relatively rare – although it does exist – among
middle-class, suburban youngsters. Its use tends to be concentrated mainly in poverty-stricken, inner-city communities. There are plenty of exceptions to this rule, but as a pattern, this generalization is sound.

Going back to the 1992 National Household Drug Abuse Survey, among 18 to 25 year olds, the percentage who had at least tried crack was 7 percent of high school dropouts, 3 percent high school graduates, 1.6 percent of those with some college, and only 0.6 percent of college graduates. In other words, as education increased, the likelihood of crack use decreased. The same pattern prevails for the older age categories, for more frequent use, and for later and earlier surveys as well. In other words, the media’s claim that crack abuse was as common in the middle-class suburbs as in the inner cities was bogus.

What about the “crack babies syndrome”? To be fair to the media, the view of the press reflected the opinion of the researchers who published the early articles in the medical literature. However, even in the late 1980s, a few experts challenged the veracity of the crack babies story. But it was not until the early 1990s that enough medical evidence was assembled to indicate that the crack babies syndrome is, in all likelihood, mythical in nature. By 2001, in an article published in the most prominent medical journal in the country, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), a panel of experts summarizing the entire research literature on the subject concluded that there is “no consistent negative association between prenatal cocaine exposure and physical growth, developmental test scores, or receptive or expressive language” (Frank et al., 2001, p. 1613). The problem with the earlier studies, these researchers argued, is that they had no controls, that is, they did not sort out the many other factors that could have caused impairment, such as cigarette smoking, alcoholism, inadequate or nonexistent medical care, the use of other drugs, and poor diet. Mainstream medical opinion now holds that these other factors had caused the medical problems that had been observed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In all likelihood, they were not caused by their mother’s ingestion of cocaine. In short, it is entirely possible that the crack babies issue was a hysteria-driven rather than a fact-driven syndrome.

Interestingly, while the media were quick to pick up on and publicize the early research that seemed to show that powder and crack cocaine caused medical problems in newborns, infants, and school-age children, very little media attention was devoted to correcting this – in all likelihood – mistaken view. One rare exception is the Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman (1992). Says Goodman, it turns out that crack babies was “a syndrome seen in the media more often than in medicine.” Dr. Ira Chasnoff, whose work originally pointed in the direction of indicating problems for these children, was quoted by Goodman as saying, “Their average developmental functioning level is normal. They are no different from other children growing up.” Says Dr. Clair Coles, another researcher cited by Goodman, the crack baby story became a “media hit” in part because crack is not used by “people like us,” that is, well-educated, middle-class people who constitute the principal audience for the majority of the print media (Goodman, 1992). “Why all
the hullabaloo about crack babies?” asks Dr. Wendy Chavkin in a commentary on the Frank et al. summary of the available medical literature. Crack babies, she argues “have become a convenient symbol for an aggressive war on drug users because of the implication that anyone who is selfish enough to irreparably damage an innocent child for the sake of a quick high deserves retribution. This image, promoted by the mass media, makes it easier to advocate a simplistic, punitive response than to address the complex causes of drug use” (Chavkin, 2001, p. 1627).

How did the media’s coverage of the crack story influence the drug law? Drug bills and drug legislation followed in the wake of the 1980s’ media panic over drug use generally and crack abuse specifically. In June 1986, Ed Koch, then mayor of New York City, urged the death penalty for any dealer convicted of possessing at least a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of cocaine or heroin. In August of that year, Mario Cuomo, governor of New York State, called for a life sentence for anyone convicted of selling three vials of crack—which had, at that time, a street value of $50. Neither of these proposals became law, but they reflect the hysteria that gripped the country at the time. In September, in the debate over a newly proposed federal drug bill, Claude Pepper, then a Florida representative said cynically and somewhat hyperbolically, “Right now, you could put an amendment through to hang, draw, and quarter” drug dealers. “That’s what happens when you get any emotional issue like this,” he added (Kerr, 1986).

In a series of speeches between June and September 1986, President Ronald Reagan called for a “nationwide crusade against drugs, a sustained, relentless effort to rid America of this scourge.” His proposed legislation added $2 billion in federal monies to fight the problem, including $56 million for drug testing of federal employees. In September 1986, the House of Representatives approved, by the overwhelming vote of 393 to 16, a package of drug enforcement, stiffer federal sentences, and penalties against drug-producing countries that do not cooperate with United States-sponsored drug eradication programs. Approved by the Senate in October 1986, the drug bill, ultimately costing $1.7 billion, was signed into law by President Reagan. In it, a death penalty provision (unlikely ever to be carried out) was included for drug kingpins. Except for some anti-drug provisions enacted in 1984, the 1986 legislation represented the first effort by Congress in 15 years to enact a major anti-drug law. Much the same was happening at the state level all over the country. In addition, it was the crack baby stories which inspired the many court interpretations, beginning in 1989, that ruled that pregnant women be convicted of delivering a drug to a minor, that is, the fetus they are carrying. In addition, in 1986, the federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed, which dictated that the same 10-year penalty be imposed for the possession of 50 grams of crack cocaine as for the possession of 5,000 grams of powder cocaine. “Crack cocaine is the only drug for which there exists a mandatory minimum penalty for a first offense of simple possession” (Kennedy, 1997, p. 364). Almost certainly, the media hysteria surrounding drugs—and more specifically crack cocaine—was instrumental in the punitive legislation that followed.
METHAMPHETAMINE: THE LATE 1980s TO THE 2000s

Beginning in the late 1980s, the media began reporting on a terrifying epidemic of another new form of another old drug – methamphetamine. The drug was sweeping the country “like wildfire.” Within a few short years, the United States would be “awash” in “ice” – recrystalized methamphetamine sulfate. Methamphetamine was, according to the media in the late 1980s, the drug of choice for a “new generation.” Methamphetamine would replace heroin, cocaine, and even marijuana as the nation’s premier problematic drug. Law enforcement was put on notice; “crystal meth,” “crank,” “crystal,” or “glass” (other terms for illicit methamphetamine sulfate) was the drug to watch. Or so the media announced in the late 1990s (Young, 1989; Lerner, 1989). But the media drumbeat to the meth epidemic did not fizzle out, as it did for PCP and LSD; it continued well into the 2000s. Between October 2004 and March 2006, The Oregonian ran a series of over 250 stories on the horrors of methamphetamine. Steve Suo, the key reporter in these stories, became the chief advisor for the Public Broadcasting System’s sensationalistic 2006 broadcast, “The Meth Epidemic.” In its cover story of August 8, 2005, Newsweek proclaimed methamphetamine “America’s Most Dangerous Drug.”

To make the public acutely aware of the dangers of meth, some members of the press quoted officials who compared methamphetamine with crack cocaine. “Meth makes crack look like child’s play,” declared one law enforcement officer to veteran New York Times reporter Fox Butterfield, “in terms of what it does to the body and how hard it is to get off” (Butterfield, 2004). “It makes the crack epidemic of the 80s look like kids eating candy” (Williams, 2006) said another law enforcement official to a South Carolina reporter. In neither case did the official present any corroboration or empirical evidence of his claim; in a climate of fear, a mere assertion, it seems, is sufficient. The public’s – largely distorted – knowledge of crack became a measuring rod against which to compare the new drug menace. And like crack cocaine, methamphetamine was said to be instantly addicting. Said a Milwaukee law enforcement official: “If you use it once, you’ll become an addict” (Zielinski, 2005).

In addition to methamphetamine’s supposed crack-like addictive properties, news stories stressed the drug’s inexorable march across the country from coast to coast and up the socioeconomic ladder. On December 31, 2004, The Oregonian ran a story entitled “East Coast Horror Stories Reflect New Map of Meth,” implying that communities east of the Mississippi had been invaded by methamphetamine and were now as swamped as those in the West and Midwest. The Newsweek story proclaimed that not only had the drug “marched across the country” but had also moved “up the socioeconomic ladder” (Jefferson, 2005). The implication of the story was that the meth epidemic is so widespread that it is not confined to poverty-stricken rural whites but can also strike a “good” family “with two children, a six-figure income, a dog and a Volvo in the garage” (King, 2006, p. 17).
As of the first decade of the 2000s, methamphetamine remains a regionalized drug— it has not “invaded” the east coast to any appreciable degree; its use and abuse remain below that of at least a half-dozen more commonly-used illicit drugs; its use has not risen in the past half-dozen years or so; among high school students, use has actually declined somewhat (King, 2006, pp. 2–3). Make no mistake about it: considering the fact that it is one of the most dependency-producing drugs known to humanity, and its abuse causes a wide range of medical pathologies, methamphetamine is a harmful, dangerous drug. But most of the claims of the hysteria-driven news stories—including its “instantly addicting” property, its widespread use nationwide, its invasion into all communities, and the recent massive increase in its use and abuse, not to mention huge increases in overdose deaths—turned out to be false. (One possibility: the hysteria kept the use of methamphetamine down.) As a result of these media exaggerations, a media “boomerang” took place, with dozens of stories refuting the original claims. (A few of them include Valdez, 2006; Shafer, 2005; 2006; King, 2006).

ECSTASY AND THE OTHER CLUB DRUGS

“Club drugs” is an informal name given to a group of illicit substances that are commonly consumed in night clubs, at parties, raves, and concerts, and other gatherings where teenagers and young adults gather to have a good time and alter their consciousnesses. The term is not scientific, but the drugs that are most commonly included in the category include Ecstasy, Rohypnol, ketamine, and GHB (or gamma hydroxyl butyrate). All became at least modestly popular only in the 1990s; the Monitoring the Future survey added Ecstasy and Rohypnol to its questionnaire in the 1990s, and ketamine and GHB were added in 2000. These four drugs make up a chemically and pharmacologically diverse lot: Rohypnol is a sedative-hypnotic similar to lorazepam; GHB is analogous to an extremely concentrated form of alcohol; ketamine is most similar to PCP, although with milder effects; and Ecstasy is an “empathogen,” in a category by itself. All are synthetic chemicals. (For an analysis of Ecstasy, raves, and the club drug scene in the United Kingdom, see Critcher, 2003, pp. 48–63.)

During the 1990s, the use of club drugs increased substantially. Fearful that the use of what he referred to as “designer drugs” would become epidemic in his state, Florida governor Jeb Bush gathered a team of drug experts to search for proof that these deadly drugs were “stalking nightclubs and the rave scene.” In 2000, in the state capitol, Jim McDonough, the state’s chief of The Office of Drug Control, announced the team’s report, “a very thorough, autopsy-by-autopsy review” of club drug-caused deaths. Club drugs, they said, “were killing many more youngsters than anyone had suspected.” The report’s tally of rave drug deaths in the state of Florida since 1994 was given as 254.
That claim, it turns out, was bogus. A few months after the report’s unveiling, *The Florida Sentinel* ran a story by reporter Henry Pierson Curtis which examined each of the 254 supposed club or designer-drug-related deaths. The reporter found at least half the claims of a club drug connection completely unfounded. The flaws in the report were myriad. To begin with, the study included a remarkably broad total of 20 drugs in its definition of “club drugs,” including fentanyl, a narcotic, nitrous oxide, or “laughing gas,” and amphetamine, a stimulant. And many of the cases of deaths had little or no connection to what the research team referred to as designer drugs. Rose Pope, age 82, of St. Petersburgh, died eight days after being hit by a car; she was included among the club drug deaths. A 74-year-old cancer patient in Miami-Dade County Hospital was given an overdose of morphine; he too was also included in the tally. A 41-year-old Orlando man who shot himself after losing his job tested positive for amphetamine; he was included as well. Tavani Smith, a four-year-old, had a day-long headache, so his mother took him to the hospital; he stopped breathing after being administered a dose of sodium brevital, an ultra-fast acting sedative, and ketamine. Sodium brevital is used to euthanize dogs and execute death penalty prisoners in some states. Ketamine does happen to be a club drug and so Smith’s death was also included.

When the flaws of this study were revealed by the press, McDonough, Florida’s “drug-fighting chief,” asked “why a reporter would question shortcomings in the research instead of helping his staff fight drug abuse…. We are trying to get the facts,” he added. “We’ve discovered that we have a club-drug problem in this state that is immense, and we want to do something about it” (Curtis, 2000).

Synthesized by a biochemist working for a chemical company, MDMA, an analogue of amphetamine, was never manufactured or officially approved for medical use. Though it was originally used in psychotherapy, in 1985, the FDA provisionally classified it as a Schedule I drug, a classification making all possession and sale of the substance illegal, except for federally-sanctioned research; in 1988, this classification was finalized. MDMA’s dominant effect is empathy, that is, it generates a feeling of identification with others. “I love the world and the world loves me” says one user (Gahlinger, 2001, p. 340).

GHB, a sedative, once prescribed as a sleep aid and an anti-anxiety agent, produces a state of relaxation and drunkenness without the hangover. It is also used by some bodybuilders to help increase muscle mass. At higher doses, like alcohol, it inhibits breathing and heartbeat and can starve the body of oxygen. In 2000, the federal government classified GHB as a Schedule I drug.

Ketamine (trade names, Ketelar, Ketajet, Ketaset, and Vetelar) is, like PCP, a “disassociative anesthetic” and, like PCP, began its career as a drug for both humans and animals. It works as a painkiller without inhibiting breathing. During the Vietnam War, ketamine was used in battlefield medicine, but patients complained of hallucinations and “bizarre thoughts” – the very qualities that make it popular as a recreational drug (Gahlinger, 2001, p. 187).
Rohypnol (generic name, flunitrazepam) is a sedative drug, a benzodiazepine like Valium, Librium, and Xanax. Benzodiazepines are anti-anxiety agents and muscle relaxants, but Rohypnol is roughly 10 times as potent as Valium and, in high doses, can cause unconsciousness and short-term paralysis and amnesia – all effects that make it an attractive “date rape” drug.

Not only is the use of club drugs recent, it is confined to a fairly small – and declining – minority of teenagers and young adults. In 2001, 9 percent of high school seniors had used Ecstasy during the past year; only 3 percent did so in 2005. In 2001 the figure for those using it in the previous month was 3 percent, and in 2005 1 percent. For Rohypnol, in 2005, the number was too small to calculate; ketamine and GHB did not even appear in the 2005 Monitoring the Future’s tables, indicating that use for these drugs had dropped below 0.5 percent. In other words, the latest indication is that club drugs, which became popular in the 1990s, had faded from prominence by the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

DAWN, the Drug Abuse Warning Network, has tallied club drugs since the turn of the millennium and found that for several of them, their untoward, nonlethal ED mentions have substantially increased during this period. Keep in mind that when numbers are very small to begin with, even a tiny numerical increase produces a huge percentage increase. Still, the numbers seemed to be alarming. Between 1994 and 2001, ED mentions for ketamine increased 36 times, Rohypnol, 36 times, for MDMA, 22 times, and for GHB, an astounding 60 times! These numbers did not consistently increase, however, into the twenty-first century, as we can see from Table 11.1: For drugs, between 2001 and 2005, ED visits increased only modestly or, in the case of GHB, decreased. In any case, for all of them except for Ecstasy, the numbers were always quite small, considering the media attention paid to these drugs.

Ecstasy was synthesized early in the twentieth century and patented by Merck as a possible appetite suppressant, as which it lay on a shelf for decades. Then the army tested it in 1953. In large doses, it turns out, MDMA kills animals. Because of its mind-altering properties, most notably, its capacity to induce empathy and a sense of “newness” in subjects, quietly, during the 1970s, psychiatrists began using it on their patients as an adjunct to therapy; according to one estimate, at that time, some 30,000 doses were being administered per month (Klein, 1985, p. 42). By then, it had attracted the attention of authorities. In 1985, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) temporarily classified it as a Schedule I drug, indicating that the authorities believed it had a high abuse potential and no medical utility; in 1988, this classification became permanent. Anyone selling the drug could face a 15-year prison sentence. Classifying MDMA as a Schedule I drug, says one observer, “may well have been one of the most criminal acts of our recent U.S. government” (Stafford, 1989, p. xxii). As we’ll see, not all experts agree.

Ecstasy, also referred to as “XTC,” “Adam,” or simply, “E,” is MDMA, a synthetic analog of the amphetamines. While it has some effects that are similar to those of
the amphetamines, such as jaw clenching and tooth grinding, most observers classify Ecstasy as a psychedelic or hallucinogen. Actually, this designation is misleading, since the drug has none of the major effects of the hallucinogens. For instance, its effects lack the powerful imagery, and hallucinations (true or pseudo) never make their appearance. However, as a mind-transformer, a drug that powerfully alters the user’s consciousness, it can be regarded as a psychedelic. Some observers prefer the term “empathogen” (Eisner, 1989, pp. 3, 33ff.) to refer to Ecstasy, that is, a drug that facilitates empathy or a close emotional bonding with others. Several experts object to the term “Ecstasy” to refer to MDMA, arguing that the drug produces not ecstasy in users, but empathy, “an ability to feel trust, a lowering of psychological barriers” (Seymour, 1986, p. 9), serenity, a feeling that all is well with the world, openness, self-awareness, peacefulness, euphoria, and a “noetic” feeling – “the experience of seeing the world in a fresh way, as if for the first time” (Eisner, 1989, p. 3).

In a series of experiments on rats and guinea pigs, psychopharmacologists Lewis Seiden and Charles Schuster discovered that Ecstasy may cause long-term, possibly irreversible, damage to the brain. A neurotransmitter, serotonin, which helps to send signals to various organs of the body and regulates sleep, sex, aggression, and mood, was found to be at “alarmingly low levels.” The brain had been depleted of its supply of serotonin, and eight weeks after the conclusion of the experiment, the researchers saw no indication of its return. Based on their animal experiments, Seiden and Schuster conclude that doses harmful to the brain are only two to three times those taken on the street (Roberts, 1986, p. 14).

In another set of experiments, doses of Ecstasy were administered to monkeys and baboons, and the primates suffered damage to the cells that produce dopamine, a neurotransmitter that regulates coordination, pleasure, and emotion; two of the 10 monkeys and baboons died of heatstroke (Ricaurte et al., 2002). Critics charged that the dosages of Ecstasy that were administered to the primates were many times higher than the doses that are taken by users on a recreational basis. Una McCann, a coauthor of the study denied the charge, claiming that their doses were “actually slightly less” than a human would take (McNeil, 2002). But a year later,
Science magazine, where the findings of this study were reported, made a shocking admission: somehow, the samples of Ecstasy administered to the primates in the experiment had been switched with methamphetamine, making the conclusions of the study completely invalid. Science retracted the results of the study, forcing Ricaurte, its senior author, to withdraw four other papers whose drug samples were also switched. As of this writing, there is no scientific evidence that Ecstasy causes brain damage in humans (McNeil, 2002; Avalania, 2003). Still, the controversy is likely to be with us for the foreseeable decades to come.

**SUMMARY**

A substantial number of media stories on drug abuse throughout the period during which a specific substance attracts sensationalistic coverage contain a single message: “Be afraid – be very afraid.” Such stories tend to exaggerate the harmful effects of the drug in question, the number of its users, and the social circles or geographical areas in which its use is common. True, such exaggerations sell newspapers, magazines, advertising, and air time and hence, are understandable. And moralists would say it’s better to be safe than sorry, to warn the public away from a potentially harmful substance even if reporters and writers don’t quite get the details of their facts right. But whether such claims make pragmatic sense or not, they do reveal that we are in the midst of a moral panic.

In the United States, the media have paid attention to particular drugs during particular decades; almost inevitably, legislators follow suit by enacting laws criminalizing the possession and sale of these substances. This took place with marijuana in the 1930s, LSD in the 1960s, PCP in the late 1970s, crack cocaine and Ecstasy in the 1980s, and methamphetamine between the late 1980s and the early twenty-first century. Media claims charged that these substances are criminogenic, instantly addictive, and/or madness-inducing, which generated fear and concern among the general public. Media attention has often, although not always, ignited intense public concern, but during such periods, the public is almost always interested in and attentive to such stories. But exaggerated claims are often followed by skepticism from critics who show that the drug is less addicting than the media originally claimed, is less widely used, and tends to be confined to specific sectors of the society.
Lurid, titillating, shocking, offensive, disgusting, degrading, immoral, oppressive, violent – some observers have used these and even stronger adjectives to describe pornography. As we might infer from this list, most of these adjectives harbor condemnation rather than a description of porn. And most definitions are not only negative, they are essentialistic: They spell out an abstract quality that presumably pornography possesses. Such a definition refers to a specific, objective quality that dwells within its core, its very essence or inner being. It is what it is: there is no room for disagreement.

Definitions are neither wrong nor right; they are useful for a particular purpose but may not be useful for another, different, purpose. Objectivistic definitions rely on the assumption that all of us can locate the designated intrinsic quality within a given phenomenon, whether that quality is violence, sexual coercion, sexism, or “smut.” If all or most reasonable, empirically-oriented observers could readily find the characteristics that theorists, pundits, ideologues, and moralists claim it contained, and such a definition were useful in guiding us to patterns, regularities, and generalities in human behavior, we’d follow an objectivistic definition. Unfortunately, no such agreement prevails regarding the inherent properties of pornography; not everyone sees the same thing in porn. What purports to be an objectivistic definition turns out to be very subjective indeed.

We could take another path and decide to define pornography as obscenity. True, different audiences define obscenity in very different ways: What is obscene to person A is not obscene to person B. Still, why not simply admit that obscenity is subjective, varying as it does from audience to audience, and let it go at that? The problem with a totally subjective or constructionist definition is that the word “obscenity” is so loose that it encompasses phenomena that lack sexual content. As the 1986 Attorney General’s Commission stated, some observers have labeled war and intoxicated vehicular homicide as obscene (p. 230).

A very different definition of pornography depends on utility. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines pornography not by what it presumably is but what it
does – its function: “printed or visual material intended to stimulate sexual excitement.” Pornography is material that is primarily intended to sexually arouse the consumer, while “erotica,” which may also be sexually explicit, is less exclusively focused on the sexual arousal function – for instance, it may also be art. In contrast to erotica, porn is consumed mainly for the purpose of solitary masturbation (Hardy, 2007, p. 3540), while consumers of erotica are moved by a number of motives. To a sociologist, the issue of who intends to use the material is incorporated into the definition because, by this definition, porn is how it is used; hence, our view is that the observer is obliged to start with the modal or most commonly used types of porn. (A clinical psychologist who treats sexual dysfunctions is likely to have a different approach.) This definition avoids the distracting, red herring issue of the fact that a wide range of materials can be pornographic to somebody. To the shoe and foot fetishist, pictures of women’s shoes and feet are sexually arousing and may be an aid in stimulating sexual excitement. Still, if we were to examine material that is widely used for the purpose of sexual arousal, we are likely to find commonalities.

In addition, major genres of material are used for the purpose of sexual excitation, types or subtypes that appeal to substantial minorities of varying sizes: interracial sex, women with huge breasts, men with a huge penis, anal sex, sado-masochism, once again, women’s shoes and feet, and so on. Still, to repeat, the sociologist is most interested in modal, mainstream porn. And while child (or “kiddie”) porn does represent a genre of pornography, it is a minority genre and its manufacture and distribution is everywhere a crime. As the Report of the 1986 Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography stated, child porn is child abuse, since children are not legally capable of granting sexual consent and hence, sex with them is a form of rape (pp. 405–18; Jenkins, 2001). Hence, to discuss child porn as a major form of pornography is a distraction; it muddies the conceptual waters.

The “how many” or numbers question raises the issue of what these materials are likely to look like. The greater the number of people whom pornographic materials sexually arouse, the more closely they correspond to an ideal type or archetype. Producers of porn are in it for the money; to earn a profit, they have to satisfy customers; to maximally arouse the greatest number of customers, porn has to look a certain way. Mainstream porn is what turns on multitudes. And to turn on multitudes, it is necessary for materials to correspond to a stereotypical formula. Hence, the definition we find most useful is this: sexually-oriented material that is used for the purpose of arousal.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, a wing of feminism launched a crusade against pornography. In their view, porn viewed women as sexual commodities rather than as sexual subjects in their own right. In spite of the seeming furor over pornography, however, in most respects, the feminist anti-pornography crusade was, at best, a marginal instance of a moral panic. As a movement, it attracted neither mass support nor enormous media attention, and the public never got particularly riled up about the issue. The fact is, a highly educated, radical, and strongly politically
engaged group of urban feminists protested against a phenomenon that the public didn’t regard as a major threat. On paper, pornography appeared to be a moral panic poised to launch. A number of prominent and intelligent feminists wrote inflammatory denunciations of pornography’s role in brutalizing woman. These ideologues commanded a visible stage and received a respectful audience, but the legislation they proposed never became permanent law (that is, it was everywhere vetoed by officials, or declared unconstitutional in court), and the feminist organizations dedicated to the eradication of pornography were eventually disbanded as a result of failure to achieve their goals or for lack of support. Anti-pornography feminism produced a great deal of heat within a short period of time, but its legacy was decidedly mixed and its successes minimal. Pornography is vastly more available than it was a generation or two ago, and the culprit—the Internet—was not sociological but technological. Yet, somehow, the predictions that anti-porn feminism made about the dire and disastrous consequences of such an eventuality never took place. The trajectory of this drama is the subject of this chapter. More specifically, and relevant to our definition of the moral panic, the feminist anti-pornography crusade was a panic among a small sector of the society, but it failed to launch among the general public. Why?

WHAT IS FEMINISM?

The porn panic failed to move much beyond writers, academics (and their students), and ideological activists. Still, in these circles, during this era, pornography was the dominant issue under discussion, both interpersonally and in organizational meetings, as well as on the street, in political rallies. No other issue came close. Between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, a wing of the feminist movement launched a major offensive against pornography. But not all feminists were on the same side, for therein lies our tale. In fact, feminism was deeply divided on the issue. During this period, feminists split into factions: the anti-porn feminists, who fervently believed that pornography is a violent expression of woman-hating—the very essence and basis of woman-hating, indeed, of all sexual oppression and discrimination—versus the “pro-sex” or “sex positive” (or “anti-anti” porn) feminists (Ziv, 2004), most of whom were not fond of pornography but believed that the cure (taking legal steps to get rid of pornography) was worse than the disease (the possible harms that pornography might, and probably does not, cause). The denunciation on both sides of the conflict was furious and intense; friends were alienated from one another, books, articles, and op-eds were written, social movement organizations were formed, and demonstrations and protests were held. For a committed few, it was an intoxicating period in which to live and express one’s political commitment. This was all-out war, a conflict that was dubbed as the “sex wars” (Duggan and Hunter, 2006) or the “porn war.” Did it constitute a moral panic?
At the time, the “porn wars” seemed to threaten the viability of feminism itself, but the feminist movement endured the sectarian struggle that burst forth a generation or more ago. Feminism is a theoretical position, an ideology, and a political movement united by the conviction that “women experience subordination on the basis of their sex” (Gelsthorpe and Morris, 1988, p. 224). Feminists argue that, intellectually, they are the equal of men and hence, deserve equality under the law and in power, resources, and cultural standing. It is their mission, they feel, to rectify the structural inequalities that millennia of discrimination and cultural biases have put in place and that are reinforced by institutional structures and everyday practices.

Women suffer from three major, overlapping and interpenetrating sources of bias: sexism, androcentrism, and patriarchy. Sexism is a system of attitudes or practices that discriminate against women as a sexual category; patriarchy is the institution of male dominance; and androcentrism is a male bias, the tendency to view men as the center of the universe. It is the goal of feminism, its adherents aver, to eliminate these sources of bias and discrimination and help usher in an era of sexual equality.

The history of feminism is commonly described as taking place in three “waves.” The first was centered mainly on suffrage, or the full and equal right to vote, a goal that was achieved in the United States in 1920 and in the United Kingdom in 1928. The second wave culminated, in the United States, in the formation of NOW, the abolition of laws against abortion, and the ongoing struggle to achieve educational, hiring, job, and income equality with men, public funding for day care, and an end to rape and domestic assault. And the third wave began somewhere between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, when the generation that was born in the 1960s and 1970s came of age.

In comparison with second wavers, the cohort of the younger feminists, the third wavers, are more likely to be infused by an appreciation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights and the nuances of “queer theory”; see sex and gender as a continuum or a spectrum rather than binary or a dichotomy; appreciate popular culture, along with its expressions of sexual differences – some of them stereotypical – and celebrate Madonna, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Riot Grrrl, and Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Bitch as manifestations of female empowerment; prioritize the personal over the political and the economic; reconsider or question or reject feminism’s earlier judgment of sex work and pornography as pernicious and brutalizing. And they are less likely to see sex and womanhood in a universalistic, essentialistic fashion, rejecting the view that the same categories and proscriptions apply equally well the world over.

Clearly, the perspective of anti-porn feminists grew out of second-wave feminism. It views sex and gender in dichotomous, essentialistic terms; represents an attempt to control a cultural product or practice (pornography) through the political process (legislation); regards homosexual practices and representations (for instance, the domination depicted in S/M porn) as a mere reflection or representation
of hierarchical male–female heterosexual practices and representations (the domi-
nation of women by men); and regards free, liberated, un compelled women as inca pable of freely choosing to make or participate in pornography.

It was during this second wave – in which conservative Ronald Reagan was

el ected president (1980) and the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated (1982) –

that the turmoil that came to be known as the “porn wars” erupted. But the anti-
porn feminists and the “sex positive” feminists who opposed them grew up in the

same generation. Sociologists who studied an earlier conflict over pornography

(which broke out during 1969–70) found both age and socioeconomic status to be

central in determining whether a given person opposed pornography or opposed

its control (Zurcher and Kirkpatrick, 1976, p. 18). But the story of the feminist

f uror over pornography a decade later – the subject of our tale – is neither a story

of generational differences nor of social class, but one of schismatic political and

ideological differences. Many of the “second wavers” rejected relativity and the

postmodern sensibility, and rejected porn as one out of many equally legitimate

“readings” of the relations between the sexes, while the majority in that same gen-

eration moved beyond that position. Many of the latter view a substantial propor-
tion of pornography as repugnant, true, but they saw censorship and the stifling of

the freedom of expression as even more repugnant. And, unlike the anti-porn

movement activists, they did not regard porn as the foundation-stone of female

oppression.

ANTI-PORNOGRA PHY FEM INISM MOBILIZ ES

The advertisements for Snuff, a movie in which a woman is raped, tortured, dis-
membered, and murdered, read “Made in South America where life is cheap!” In

one scene, a man ejaculates as the woman victim’s uterus is ripped from her body –
an image so irredeemably hateful and horrifying that several dozen feminists

joined forces, formed Women against Violence against Women (WAVAW), and,
on the sidewalk in front of the theater, protested the ads for and screenings of the
movie. And as if the depiction of the action were not gruesome enough, the dis-
tributor of this sleazy production launched the rumor that the film’s leading lady

was literally butchered on camera. Predictably, WAVAW’s demonstrations pro-
vided free publicity for the film – a low-budget film producer’s dream scenario.

Three months later, in June, 1976, workers hoisted a huge billboard of a bound
and bruised woman above Sunset Strip. Advertising the Rolling Stones’ album,
Black and Blue, the advertisement’s copy was self-explanatory: “I’m Black and Blue
from the Rolling Stones and I Love It!” The ad for the Stones’ record expressed the
stereotypical conjunction between sex and violence, “reinforcing the dangerous
idea that women like it when things get a little rough and that physical abuse can
bring out repressed female sexuality” (Bronstein, 2008, p. 419). California feminists
decided to take their case directly to the Los Angeles representatives of Atlantic Records, the Stones’ label.

As a result of meeting with executives at WEA (Warner, Elektra, and Atlantic) and receiving mixed signals, WAWA representatives flew to New York and met with East Coast feminists, including Gloria Steinem, editor of Ms. magazine, and Susan Brownmiller, author of the influential Against Our Will, a book that argued that all men gain from rape by keeping women in their place (1975). In January 1977, WAWA organized a coffee house talk and slide show. The group had gathered together an impressive collection of rock and roll album covers, including the Stones’ Black and Blue, all of which depicted the sexual abuse and degradation of women. WAWA’s campaign linked up with an ongoing effort by a cognate East Coast feminist organization, Women Against Pornography (WAP), thereby forming a coast-to-coast network of activists dedicated to the eradication of pornography, on the grounds that it instigates violence against women (Bronstein, 2008).

WAWA and WAP launched a boycott, a letter-writing campaign protesting offensive record covers and music as well as the companies’ ad campaigns and billboards, distributed leaflets, contacted recording artists sympathetic to their cause, held street theater performances, and gave slide show lectures on the horrors of woman-hating in the world of rock and roll and popular music. They paid special attention to Warner, considered the principal offender. Says historian Carolyn Bronstein, a chronicler of WAWA’s struggles against the music industry, “The Warner boycott and the campaign to achieve a corporate policy represented the apex of national WAWA activity and the organization’s most influential period” (2008, p. 431). Once the national boycott ended, however, “most WAWA chapters turned to local projects.” In the absence of WAWA’s constant monitoring, “the music industry had little incentive to police its artists and advertising.” By the early 1980s, violence against women, once again, “was evident in industry product, particularly within the lyrics, videos, and promotional materials associated with heavy metal and rap music artists” (p. 431).

WAWA argued that a relationship exists between the consumption of sexually explicit images, particularly violent images and images that present women as subordinate to men, and acts of sexual violence that men commit against women, particularly rape and murder. The organization was “one of the first feminist groups to articulate to a national audience the idea that the presentation of women as victims of aggression, as in Black and Blue, reinforced gender stereotypes that encouraged sexual violence.” As a result of the campaigns launched by WAWA and other anti-porn feminist activist groups, the historian of this chronology argues, it became evident to everyone that “sexualized media violence against women” contributes to “everyday acts of domestic abuse and rape” (Bronstein, 2008, pp. 431, 433).

A crusade is an organized campaign to achieve a specific social, political, or religious goal. Beginning in 1976, a wing of feminism launched a concerted, organized crusade against pornography. As we saw, however, not all crusades are moral
panics. With some crusades, the fear and concern expressed by its conveyors are commensurate to the charges made about behavior in question or a condition’s threat and harm: a given horror story or morality tale actually took place, a given relationship can be documented, the harm is there for all to see and experience. Moreover, a crusade need not arouse public outrage, although it helps. However, some crusades are also moral panics: the fear, hostility, and concern about the behavior or condition are out of proportion to the threat and harm. At its inception, the eruption of the feminist crusade against pornography appeared to its participants be a “perfect storm” of a righteous social movement. The outrage and anger expressed early on was palpable and, to many, its charges felt demonstrably true. But the vehement outrage expressed by activists would morph into bitterness, dispute among former ideological allies, and, eventually, successes so limited as to seem catastrophic failures. Civil libertarians, free speech constitutionalists, “pro-sex” or “sex-positive” feminists, booksellers and magazine distributors, and librarians launched a backlash against anti-porn feminists, and within a decade and a half or two of its inception, practically all the air had escaped from the anti-pornography movement. Why did the anti-porn movement fail to stop the dissemination of pornography in its tracks? Why was the movement dismantled? Why did the outrage the crusaders felt for this cause expressed fail to ignite the general public? And was this crusade also a moral panic, or was it lacking in too many dimensions even to be regarded as an incomplete approximation to a Weberian ideal type?

**PRO-SEX VERSUS ANTI-PORN FEMINISM**

To anti-pornography feminists, pornographers represented a folk devil, an evil force that oppresses, brutalizes, and subjugates women. To the sociologist, there’s no surprise when members of the society denounce a particular form of behavior as deviance. But the pornography uproar produced denunciations by feminists of feminists, and these denunciations involved charges that feminists who in fact opposed pornography were actually supporting it. Ziv (2004) summarizes and analyzes the conflict and disagreement between the anti-pornography feminists and the anti-anti-pornography forces. The “anti-porn” feminists accused the “anti-anti-porn” feminists of being “pimps,” and accused men of turning women into “whores.” Hence, pornography proved to be substantially different from the ordinary, run-of-the-mill controversy. The explosion within the ranks of feminism made the issue a genuine (although incomplete) moral panic. The porn issue ignited a degree of vehemence that stretched far beyond the range of the ordinary debate. And much of the heat, the emotion, the maelstrom of controversy over the pornography issue, erupted as a result of conflicts within feminism. Each side claimed to represent feminism and denied the emblemification of the other’s
politics. Each devoted almost as much time, energy, and resources to attacking one another as attacking their common enemy – gender inequality and its most egregious manifestation, male violence against women. But the division within feminism proved to be a chasm too yawning to bridge. Eventually, the issue was swamped by a tidal wave of technological innovation – the almost infinite availability of porn over the Internet – and deflated by a substantially indifferent public at large.

One clue to the hot-bloodedness of the porn controversy can be found in the denunciations of Andrea Dworkin, one of the anti-porn position’s staunchest, most infamous, and most polarizing figures. At her death in 2005, users of the Reason.com Hit&Run blog chimed in with descriptions of Dworkin that seem more appropriate to Hitler and Stalin than a cultural feminist who is hostile to pornography. Says Marty Beckerman, “I’ve said for a long time that the day Andrea Dworkin dies will be the happiest of my life…. Dworkin was easily the craziest of the Femi-Nazis, a true lunatic who brainwashed millions of young women with her radical man-hating agenda…. She was pure evil, she hated freedom, and the human race should rejoice over her death.” Said “Steve,” “Dworkin was an enemy of freedom in every sense of the word, a censor right down to her blue nose and her black heart.” “Mike” contributed the following: “I hope she is buried with her pointy hat and broomstick.” Offered Mike Cavanaugh, editor of the blog: “Villainess of the porn wars, ur-feminazi, foe of heterosexual intercourse…, signifier of all things PC [politically correct]/radical-feminist/anti-patriarchal/insane, and irresistible target for reasonable people everywhere, has died at age 58.” Looking over “the range of people from the left, right, and center who came together to despise her, we begin to see Dworkin’s real legacy: She was a uniter, not a divider” (http://www.reason.com/blog/show/109119.html).

Dworkin represented the most extreme of the angry anti-pornographers. She possessed an almost unique talent for alienating audiences – as Cavanaugh says, at every point along the political spectrum – nonetheless, it might be worthwhile to examine some of her divisive statements, those that characterized her position and defined the turmoil over pornography as an instance of a moral panic. What did Andrea Dworkin write that caused her and her work to be so castigated and polarizing?


The penis, Dworkin writes in an often-quoted book on pornography, “is the hidden symbol of terror” and terror “is the outstanding theme and consequence
of male history and male culture.... Men,” she stresses, “are giants who soak the earth in blood” (1981, pp. 15, 16). The male “says that the female wants to be raped; he rapes. She resists rape; he must beat her, threaten her with death, forcibly carry her off, attack her in the night, use knife or fist; and still he says she wants it, they all do. She says no; he claims it means yes” (p. 18). In a book that purports to characterize sexual intercourse (1987), Dworkin says: “Romance is rape embellished with meaningful looks.... Heterosexual intercourse is the pure, formalized expression for women’s bodies.... Marriage as an institution developed from rape as a practice.... Rape is the primary heterosexual model for sexual relating.... Seduction is often difficult to distinguish from rape. In seduction, the rapist bothers to buy a bottle of wine.”

One could continue, and at great length. The point is not to deride Ms. Dworkin’s views – to many readers, her statements offer parodies of themselves – but to appreciate the fact that she wrote in hyperbolic, overheated, enormously exaggerated prose; her tracts were rants (Willis, 1981, p. 18) and had the result of stirring up heated denunciation of her subjects – rape and pornography. But she never quite managed to launch her crusade into orbit and she never attracted large numbers of followers. In fact, very possibly because of her, the feminist anti-porn movement was distinctly elitist: it attracted a small band of highly educated, upper-middle-class adherents, and practically no working-class or minority women.

Dworkin’s trajectory (at its height, roughly, between the late 1970s and the early 1990s) represented a kind of apogee of heated controversy within feminism. But the internecine controversy between different brands of feminists had not always characterized feminist dialogue. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists came together in their support of NOW (the National Organization for Women), the Equal Rights Amendment (which failed to be ratified by Congress), and the repeal of the abortion laws (which took place in 1973), and their opposition to the depiction of women in the media, especially in women’s magazines such as Ladies’ Home Journal, the Miss America pageant, and, a few years later, homosexual rights. Only a detailed day-by-day insider account of the women’s movement can pinpoint the exact moment when the anti-porn (or “cultural”) feminists and the “pro-sex” or “sex positive” feminists irretrievably split from one another, but certainly the WAVAW demonstrations of 1976 catalyzed this mutual hostility and estrangement. Several conferences later the movement was even more definitively and irretrievably split apart. It is possible that the controversy over porn weakened, even eviscerated, the feminist movement.

In 1978, Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) sponsored a conference in San Francisco; its proceedings, published in hardback in 1980 and in paper in 1982 as Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography (Lederer, 1980/1982), articulated an uncompromisingly anti-porn position. Men are brutes, they love pornography, and in porn – as in rape – men use violence to keep women in their place and keep them from enjoying equality. The position that porn is the
basis for women’s oppression was a major ideological contribution of the anti-porn movement, and a possible reason for its downfall.

In 1982, “Towards a Politics of Sexuality,” a more moderate and less anti-male conference was held at Barnard College in New York. Women Against Pornography mounted a picket of that conference, which led the participants to later organize themselves into a group opposed to the anti-porn position. During the conference, the picketers handed out leaflets denouncing the conference and its speakers as “morally unacceptable and beyond the pale of feminism.” The Barnard administration seized key documents relevant to the conference, including 1,500 copies of the conference diary, planning committee minutes, paper abstracts, bibliographies, and graphics; and the Helena Rubenstein foundation, which had financially supported the conference, withdrew further support (Barale, 1986). Eventually, the conference proceedings were published in the form of two collected volumes, Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality (Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, 1983), and Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality (Vance, 1984), in which the contributors emphasized that women’s sexual experience in a male-dominated society is ruled by both desire and danger, a more sophisticated and nuanced view than the one-sided perspective offered by the anti-porn feminists. There was no overlap between the authors of the chapters that appeared in Take Back the Night and those whose work was published in the two Barnard conference volumes (with one exception: Adrienne Rich). Clearly these two factions were at war with one another.

In the fall of 1983, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin began teaching a course at the University of Minnesota on the role of pornography in the oppression of women. They believed that porn is the source of “every form of oppression and discrimination of women” (Turley, 1986, p. 83) – an astonishing charge, since women’s oppression has existed since the dawn of humanity, while porn has existed only a few hundred, or at most a few thousand, years. Members of the municipal government approached MacKinnon and Dworkin to testify at hearings on the zoning of business establishments that sold pornography. MacKinnon and Dworkin argued that rather than control porn, the city should try to eliminate it. They fashioned then submitted a city ordinance declaring pornography to be a human rights violation; Indianapolis, Madison, Wisconsin, Los Angeles, Bellingham, Washington, Suffolk County, New York, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and the State of Massachusetts followed. In the narrow sense, these ordinances did not ban porn so much as recognize “the concrete violations of civil rights done through pornography as practices of sex discrimination and gave the survivors access to relief through a law they could use themselves.” The “relief” MacKinnon mentioned was a series of laws that would permit an individual alleging a violation of her civil rights to bring a civil action against a person or persons who: coerced women into a pornographic performance; used women to make pornography; sold, distributed, exhibited, or trafficked in pornography; forced pornography on a person; or attacked a person “due to” pornography (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 426–61). In effect, a woman who...
believes that she has been harmed in some way by any form of male violence which was allegedly caused by pornography can sue anyone responsible for the production and distribution of said pornographic material, without limitation. Indeed, a woman could claim that she has been harmed by the subordination of all women – which the statute alleges pornography causes – and hence, under this law, can legitimately seek compensation.

The hearings for these ordinances, held on December 12, 1983 in Minneapolis, April 16, 1984 in Indianapolis, and April 22, 1985 in Los Angeles, presented testimony from victims (or “survivors”) of pornography. A husband “forces pornography on” his wife and pressures her into the acts that are depicted in the magazine; a father threatens children “with pornography” so that they will shut up about the abuse their mother experiences, “audibly …, at night”; a brother “holds up pornography” while his friends gang-rape his sister; a boyfriend forces his girlfriend to assume the poses in pornographic material and “forces sexual access”; serial murderers use pornography “to prepare and impel them to rape and kill”; men “plaster” pornography on the walls of their workplace; therapists “force pornography” on their patients; motorists re-enact videoporn by raping an Indian woman at a highway rest stop (MacKinnon, 1997, p. 6).

In 1984, during the Suffolk County hearings, a group of Boston and New York feminists formed FACT, the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce. In 1985, the anti-porn faction decided to shift tactics by appealing directly to the local electorate. During the Cambridge campaign in 1985, the anti-porn faction, named WAAP (Women’s Alliance Against Pornography), gathered signatures to vote on whether the pornography ordinance could be placed within the ambit of the city’s human rights law. The city council voted against the measure, five-to-four. Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon spoke “on the local publicity circuit,” arguing in favor of the measure. In a speech given at Harvard’s Schlesinger Library on October 29, 1985, Dworkin called the members of FACT “cynical slime,” “insane, demented feminists,” and “pimps.” FACT was not truly feminist, she charged, and was nothing but a front for the pornography industry (Turley 1986, p. 86). Notice the device, commonly used in heated arguments, to deny legitimacy to one’s opponents’ argument by attributing crass (“a front for the pornography industry,” “pimps”) or pathological (“insane, demented”) reasons for their statements. The media capitalized on the “seething polarization” (p. 86) within the feminist movement over what had become the most controversial issue since its founding.

In response to the Los Angeles hearing, critics, whom the anti-porn feminists referred to as the “pro-pimp lobby” – which included the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) as well as “a tiny, noisy elite of women who defended pornography” (p. 11) – made statements that “contrasted with testimony” by “survivor after survivor” (p. 11). Meanwhile, the media, adopting the “pornographers’ tactic of choice,” emphasized the conflicts among women. In Boston in 1992, “speaking almost entirely through female mouthpieces, the corporate interests of the entertainment
industry came out of the woodwork for the first time weighing in on the issue of pornography” (p. 12). Again we see discrediting and vilifying devices used in this debate: phrases such as “pro-pimp lobby,” “noisy, elite women,” “mouthpieces,” “corporate interests,” and so on – indicating elements and factions that attacked the “testimony” of these brave “survivors.”

“The buying and selling of human flesh in the form of pornography” says MacKinnon, “has given scholarship on slavery a new dimension” (p. 16). Because of these hearings, she continues, the “cultural legitimation of sexual force, including permission for and exoneration of rape and [the] transformation of sexual abuse into sexual pleasure” is now being considered in a new way (p. 17). “For those who survived pornography,” she says, “the hearings were like coming up for air.” But now “the water has closed over their heads once again. The ordinance is not law anywhere” (p. 17). The mayor of Minneapolis vetoed the bill, twice; the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals declared the Indianapolis ordinance unconstitutional; a federal court invalidated a Bellingham, Washington ordinance; the city council defeated the Los Angeles ordinance; and the state legislature never got to vote on the Massachusetts ordinance. “The victims have been betrayed,” declares MacKinnon. The public “can go back to “masturbating to the violation of their [that is, pornography’s survivors’] human rights.” (p. 18). The pornographers and their allies, says MacKinnon, have made fighting against the measure almost impossible. “The silencing is intentional, and it is effective. In this atmosphere, few stand up and say what they know” (p. 19).

These are the words of a fervent activist, a vehement opponent of pornography, and a devoted believer that pornography represents – and reinforces – enslavement, oppression, and brutality, that it both is and justifies rape and sexual abuse. Their author is furious that her, and Dworkin’s, recognition of the abuse embedded in pornography failed to arouse the public to sufficient outrage as to terminate the manufacture, distribution, and sale of such materials. But the fact is, the crusade that the anti-pornographers launched was incomplete, and their legal efforts to shut down the pornography industry produced a stillborn child.

THE FEMINIST ANTI-PORNOGRAPHY ARGUMENTS

In spite of (perhaps even because of) the collapse of the feminist anti-pornography movement, the charges it made three decades ago are still revealing. The episode raises the issue of whether and to what extent social movement claims need to be verifiably true to be believed and whether the articulation of bogus claims has anything to do with a movement’s demise. The anti-porn movement advanced three arguments: one, that pornography is violence against women; two, that pornography is caused by violence against women; and three, that pornography causes violence against women.
The bulk of pornography is created with the lustful male gaze in mind. In visual porn, typically, a man or an adolescent boy stares at the naked body of a woman, becomes sexually aroused, and uses it as an aid to fantasy sex and, ultimately, masturbation. Such use reduces the model or actress to a sex object. Very little aside from the sexual allure of the woman’s body – her intelligence, her personality, her charm – weighs in as consequential. Even her willingness to have sex with the observer is irrelevant; indeed, her very nakedness represents, to many male observers, an implied contract to have sex. It is this objectification and the one-sidedness of this implied contract that many feminists regarded as coercive, even violent in nature. Her nakedness graphically depicts the vulnerability of all women to the embrace of unwanted sex, and sends a message to males: Women can be taken at will. The female subject desires the male’s sexual advances, even if the male’s gaze captures her seemingly unawares. The absence of reciprocity, many feminists feel, entails the male imposing his sexual will on the female – hence, the “porn is violence” charge.

But the harm that porn supposedly inflicts on women is more concrete and immediate than the inherent lack of reciprocity between the model or actress and her viewer. Feminists also charged that pornographers physically coerce women to pose or act in sexually explicit material, and inflict physical harm, torture, and even murder on models and actresses – indeed, that porn documents such violence against women – and, moreover, that that is its primary appeal to male consumers, that men and adolescent boys are sexually aroused specifically by violence against women. Moreover, feminists in the seventies and eighties alleged, pornography offers a passive model or actress, hence, incites men to inflict violence, particularly rape, against women. Here we have a claim of “monkey see, monkey do.”

If these charges are true, quite obviously the concern about and furor over pornography that exploded among the ranks of feminists were entirely justified; hence, the anti-pornography movement was not a moral panic. On the other hand, if these assertions are false and pornography does not cause any of these harms, the flap over porn was inappropriate – indicating a disproportion between concern and harm – and hence, the anti-porn brouhaha was, in all likelihood, a moral panic.

Let’s look at the interlocking claims that feminists made about the harm of pornography – that pornography is coercion, domination, brutalization, and violence; that pornography is caused by coercion, domination, brutalization, and violence; and that pornography causes coercion, domination, brutalization, and violence.

Porn is violence. The seventies and eighties anti-porn feminists strongly believed that pornography expresses misogyny or woman-hatred. This is the ideational manifestation of concern: representations of women in porn are by definition acts of violence. This charge reaches into the essence of what porn supposedly is and declares: According to my reading, this is what porn means – this is what porn is. Here we have the “violence is defined by the eye of the beholder” argument. It’s
a lot like racism: Even if racist depictions of minority groups do not change a white person’s behavior, they are expressions of brutality in and of themselves.

Andrea Dworkin, the most outspoken, visible, and flamboyant of the 1980s anti-porn spokespersons, conveys this thought in the following words. Pornography, she explains, is “the graphic depiction of vile whores,” in other words, “sluts,” “cows,” and “cunts.” The word “does not have any other meaning than the … graphic depiction of the lowest whores. Whores exist to serve men sexually. Whores exist only within a framework of male domination…. The force depicted in pornography is objective and real because force is so used against women” (1981, pp. 200, 201). Pornography is not only analogous to rape, it is a form of rape. One of the “charms” of pornography, says Elizabeth Janeway, “is that it records session after session of guiltless rape in which the powerful are licensed to have their will of the weak because the weak ‘really like it that way’” (1974, pp. 197–8).

In other words, pornography consists of harm to women; it is, by its very nature, violence against women.

The problem is, if we were to attempt to assess whether the feminist anti-porn uproar over porn was disproportional to the harm such material presumably caused, we’d run into a road-block: The “porn is violence” assertion is not empirically testable, since the harm asserted is not objectively measurable. Just as anyone can assert, anyone can challenge, the view that pictures of naked, posed women or a videotape of couples having intercourse is, by its very nature, a depiction of violence. Being non-empirical, this meaning of pornography – that, by its very nature, porn manifests violence against women – lies outside the scope of any discussion on the moral panic.

Porn is caused by violence. Women do not voluntarily choose to pose for pornographic pictures or act in pornographic movies, anti-porn feminists claimed. They are forced to do so by men who want to sell, buy, and consume depictions of their naked, vulnerable bodies in graphic materials. A number of “victims” of pornography gave testimony at the hearings pursuant to the Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles anti-porn legislation in 1983, 1984, and 1985, as well as in Massachusetts in 1992. In her introduction to the collection of reading made up by these hearings (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997), Catharine MacKinnon refers to the women “who have escaped the sex factories” who “describe the forms of force required” to produce pornography (1997, p. 5). This proposition, unlike the “porn is violence” charge – but like the “porn causes violence” claim – is (at least in principle) empirically testable. From the available, though far from systematic, evidence, are most of the women who model or act in pornography coerced into participating? We’ll examine the validity of this claim in the next section.

Porn causes violence. This assertion is encapsulated in the slogan, “Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (Morgan, 1982, p. 131). Diana Russell, a sociologist, argues that pornography has a direct causative impact on male violence against women. Not all cigarette smokers develop lung cancer, not all drunk drivers get into an accident, and not all men exposed to pornography inflict violence
on women; nonetheless, she asserts, pornography causes violence (1988, 1993). To
many feminists, the causal link is misogyny: pornography teaches men that women
enjoy being abused and taken by force. “Pornography,” says Susan Brownmiller,
author of Against Our Will, an influential study of rape, “is the undiluted essence of
anti-female propaganda” (1975, p. 394). Say Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien,
“Men are not born thinking women enjoy rape and torture…. They learn it from
pornography” (1985, p. 3). In short, pornography corrupts men and thereby causes
them to mistreat, dominate, and commit acts of brutality against, women; it causes
misogyny, which in turn causes physical acts of violence. This is a positivistic or
empirical statement, claim, or hypothesis; in principle, it is testable. The lynchpin
of this argument is that porn ideologically legitimates and reinforces men’s domina-
tion over and brutality toward women; the more that pornography is consumed,
the more that men will commit violence against women.

The anti-pornography legislation that Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin
formulated to control and reduce men’s access to porn explicitly expresses the
“porn causes violence” thesis. The Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Los Angeles
versions of this ordinance stated that pornography adversely affects the health,
welfare, peace, and safety of the community and injures the public welfare, and
harms women’s opportunity for equality and promotes injury and degradation
such as rape and prostitution, and inhibits full enforcement of the laws and under-
mines women’s free speech. It is the policy of each of these jurisdictions, the leg-
islation read, to prevent such discrimination. Any person who has a cause of action
under this law may seek punitive damages (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1988).
Notice the active verbs: “affects,” “injures,” “harms,” “promotes,” “inhibits,” and
“undermines.” Clearly, both in their definition and in their legal construction, anti-
porn feminists found pornography objectively damaging. This proposition makes
an empirical assumption about the effects of porn, and we can test such assump-
tions with evidence. Hence, it is possible to determine whether and to what extent
the concern about pornography was proportional to the threat of harm that this
material supposedly caused. If porn does not cause the harmful effects that anti-
porn feminists claimed and predicted, then according to one criterion, the furor
such material ignited constituted a moral panic.

DOES THE PORN INDUSTRY RELY ON COERCION
AND VIOLENCE?

Linda Marchiano (“Linda Lovelace”), lead actress in Deep Throat (1972), describes
her “imprisonment” during which she was “forced through physical, mental, and
sexual abuse and often at gunpoint” and threats on her life, “to be involved in
pornography.” Her husband threatened to kill her, her parents, and “each and
every member” of her family, she asserted, with a .45 automatic and an “M-16
semi-automatic machine gun.” She was beaten and forced into acting in a porn movie, she claimed on a national television talk show, whose host, Regis Philbin, laughed at her claim. When a grand jury in California asked why she acted in a porn movie, she replied: “Because a gun was pointed at me.” The authorities did not file charges against her husband for the threat on Marchiano’s life. To force her to act in *Deep Throat*, she said, her husband also beat her, causing bruises to appear on her body in the film. “No one ever asked me how those bruises got on my body” (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 60, 61, 62).

Most informed observers say that there is more than a grain of truth to Marchiano’s testimony, as well as the statements she makes in *Ordeal*, the horrifying memoir she wrote of her experiences (1980). Her message is clear: No woman freely chooses to participate in pornography. Anyone who believes she is free is suffering from delusion, false consciousness, and the “Stockholm Syndrome,” or the tendency to identify with one’s oppressor. But is Ms. Marchiano’s story of victimization about pornography as such? Or is it a different kind of story? And does it address the experiences of the vast majority of women whose pictures populate the pages of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler* and those who appear on camera in porn videos and the thousands of sites that sell Internet pornography?

Marchiano’s first book, *Inside Linda Lovelace*, describes how much she loves making pornographic movies. Her second, *Ordeal*, tells the reader about the violence her husband inflicted on her to force her to act in *Deep Throat*. In *The Other Hollywood*, a collection of oral testimony on the pornography business (McNeil and Osborn, 2005), as well as *Inside Deep Throat* (2005), a documentary about the making of *Deep Throat*, colleagues of Ms. Marchiano question the complete truthfulness of her statements in *Ordeal*. For instance, Gloria Leonard, a pornographic actress, director of four porn movies, and editor of *High Society*, an erotic magazine, says: “Linda describes being beaten up on the set of *Deep Throat*. But the truth of the matter is that … she was beaten up at night by Chuck Traynor in the privacy of their hotel room. It was her own poor, shitty choice of a companion that got her beat up. Nobody in the porn business – that had anything to do with the film – laid a hand on her except in a loving way” (p. 268). While Ms. Marchiano’s testimony as a battered wife is entirely credible, hers is a narrative of spousal abuse, not about the violence necessary to force women to make pornography. To quote Gloria Leonard again, “The devil made me do it” is a psychologically self-serving device to avoid taking responsibility for one’s own actions (p. 267). In addition, in her interview in *The Other Hollywood*, Marchiano does not express reluctance to engage in pornography *per se*, only to engage in one particularly degrading sex act on camera, which Traynor did coerce her into doing – which, indeed, he candidly admits to having done (pp. 48–51).

One of the keynote features of a moral panic is arguing that a threat is depicted as fearsome by publicizing the most extreme cases as if they were representative of the general tendency. MacKinnon and Dworkin’s collection of the testimony of “victims” of pornography (1997), a number of whom say they were coerced into
making porn, is a classic instance of “seek and ye shall find” reasoning: it is entirely anecdotal, as is the earlier Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography (1986), whose testimony MacKinnon and Dworkin largely coordinated and on which they based their later publication (1997). Still, lacking a survey on the matter, one must rely on anecdotes and unsystematic accounts. Aside from the MacKinnon–Dworkin hearings – which were solicited explicitly because they provided testimony on abuse – of the hundreds of memoirs and personal statements written or issued by the people in the porn industry, a small minority describe force, coercion, or violence as instrumental in causing them to enter their line of work. As a description of how the pornography industry typically works, Ordeal is misleading, but it does tell us a great deal about how moral panics work.

Catharine MacKinnon argues that even if porn is not made by physically abusing, coercing, or inflicting violence on its female participants, the industry does exploit these women by taking advantage of their relatively powerless position: “Empirically, all pornography is made under conditions of inequality based on sex, overwhelmingly by poor, desperate, homeless, pimped women who were sexually abused as children” (1993, p. 20). This is a slippery argument. The argument that no woman, the less powerful party in any interaction with a man, can truly be free, is by now a tired cliché; according to that criterion, no one except a white, upper-middle class male exercises free will. As an empirical statement, MacKinnon’s claim is clearly false. (Yes, some porn models and actresses conform to her claim; no, most don’t.) Consider the following – admittedly anecdotal – testimony.

Sharon Abbott, a sociologist who studied careers in the pornography industry, found that the actresses she interviewed chose their line of work for money, fame, sociability, “freedom and independence,” and to be “naughty” and “have sex” (2000). Nina Hartley, who calls herself a “feminist porn star,” explains that acting in pornographic films “provides a physically and psychically safe environment for me to live out my exhibitionistic fantasies,” secondly, she says, it “provides a surprisingly flexible and supportive arena for me to grow in as a performer,” thirdly, “it provides me with erotic material that I like to watch for my own pleasure.” And finally, she claims, “the medium allows me to explore the theme of celebrating a positive female sexuality” (1998, p. 142). For the book, XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography, Wendy McElroy (1995) interviewed a substantial number of women who work in the pornography industry. One question she asked all of the six women whose interviews she summarizes was whether they knew anyone who “had been coerced into porn.” Not one said she did, though several said that some women are vulnerable to the subtle peer pressure of the industry to go along with acts they may not have wanted to engage in (McElroy, 1995, pp. 151–2, 160, 165, 175, 181–2, 188). And in the dozens of interviews in The Other Hollywood (McNeil and Osborne, 2005), totaling some 600 pages, only the interview with Linda Marchiano describes coercion and violence, and that, as we said earlier, was to force the actress to perform an atypical, bizarre sex act in which she was unwilling to engage – an act which was not shot for, and did not appear in, Deep Throat. No one
who reads these interviews doubts two things: one is that Linda Marciano was brutalized and beaten, although not to make the film for which her Linda Lovelace persona is famous; and two, the coercion she experienced was atypical of the industry generally. Indeed, a systematic investigation verifies that coercion and violence are unusual, even rare. The portrait that the anti-porn feminists draw of force, brutality, and violence as a means of coercing women to engage in pornographic acts is clearly false. Such methods were (and remain) unusual. Depicting them as common, even typical, violates the reality a wide-screen look at participants in the industry would verify. Stirring up concern about and hostility toward pornographic material because its purveyors force actresses and models to make it tells us that the controversy over this issue constituted a moral panic.

DID SNUFF FILMS REALLY MURDER WOMEN ON CAMERA?

Clearly, the ultimate and most extreme instance of the charge that women are harmed in the making of pornography is the phenomenon known as “snuff” movies. As we saw, Snuff, the original snuff film, galvanized the feminist anti-pornography activists to take to the streets. The movie was supposedly inspired by the 1969 murder of pregnant actress Sharon Tate, who was killed, along with four of her companions, by the followers of Charles Manson, an ex-convict with a deranged scheme to launch a race war. In The Family, a book detailing the Manson killings (1971), author Ed Sanders introduces the term, “snuff film” to refer to the intentional murder, on camera, of actors (usually actresses) for the viewer’s pleasure and the filmmaker’s profit. Originally shot by Michael and Roberta Findlay in Argentina in 1971 and released under the title Slaughter, the movie that became Snuff ran in three theaters and then closed down. In 1975, a distributor named Allan Shackleton bought the rights to Slaughter, retitled it Snuff, launched an advertising campaign based on the claim that an actress was actually killed on camera, and invented an activist organization (which, as happenstance would have it, actually existed) that protested the opening of the film. After the ads ran and the protests began, Shackleton filmed, in a loft in the East Village (not in South America, “where life is cheap!”), the notorious, brutal, low-budget scene of a woman being raped, dismembered, and killed, and tacked that footage onto the end of the original movie. (The actress who played the murder victim did not even remotely resemble the heroine in the earlier part of the film.) The Findlays had not been informed of Shackleton’s addition to their film; they did not approve it and they threatened to sue the distributor, eventually settling out of court. During three of the weeks it ran, Snuff grossed more revenue than most of the then current big-budget Hollywood movies, such as One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

Did Snuff depict the actual murder of a young woman on camera? This movie, a piece of meretricious yet profoundly disturbing trash, was, according to anyone who
has seen it, an obvious fake, its gory effects, strictly “bargain basement” (Walker, 2003). But soon after its release, law enforcement officials claimed they had reliable sources who could document that Snuff’s murder was real. In point of fact, it was Shackleton himself who had launched this rumor, one of several he floated to promote the film. And so the “snuff movie” legend was born. The New York and Los Angeles Police Departments investigated the matter and were unable to locate a single instance of a snuff movie. Several reporters looked into the rumor – gold-mine of a story though it was – and likewise came up empty-handed (Stine, 1999, p. 32). Over the years, rumors of genuine snuff movies continued to resurface. In 1991, one of a series of a violent Japanese films collectively entitled Guinea Pig (1990), prompted actor Charlie Sheen to notify the Motion Picture Association of America to the effect that, in his opinion, a murder had been committed on camera; subsequent investigation yielded no such evidence. Several major Hollywood films, including, Hard Core (1979) and 8 mm (1999), have dramatized the snuff theme.

Most observers argue that the claim of the reality of snuff movies is an urban legend (Stine, 1999; Thompson, 1994, p. 267), a tale both widely told and widely believed that turns out to have no basis in fact. Nonetheless, in the 1980s and beyond, feminists argued that makers of snuff movies intentionally murdered women on camera to increase the pornographic appeal of these movies (LaBelle, 1982; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 142, 384, 400; Dworkin, 1989; Russell, 1993, p. 97; Steinem, 1983).

If the charge is true, the designation of moral panic as applied to the feminist anti-porn crusade during the 1980s is not accurate, since the murder of actresses for pornographic effect represents a clear and present harm – in the case of the murdered actress herself, the ultimate harm. On the other hand, one feature of the moral panic is that horrifying claims of nonexistent harm are made and believed on the basis of very little evidence, and hence, we may have a case for the moral panic status of pornography, on the ground that imaginary phenomena do not constitute a genuine threat of harm. Hence, if the snuff charge is false, as with the satanic ritual abuse panic during the same era (Richardson, Best, and Bromley, 1991; La Fontaine, 1998), we may have a case of a moral panic on our hands.

Do snuff movies exist? Have filmmakers murdered actresses on camera for pornographic effect?

Human deaths have occurred on camera, of course – for instance, Abraham Zapruder’s 8 millimeter home movie of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Likewise, we can locate reels and reels of war footage in which soldiers meet their bloody demise. Islamic jihadist videos of the beheadings of “infidels” have been announced from time to time (Sattar, 2007; “Video Shows Beheading of American Hostage,” CHINAnews, September 21, 2004), and can be viewed by the sufficiently motivated. Several actors have died while making a movie, a few of a heart attack, and their earthly departure was captured on film. Several serial killers have recorded the torture and murder of their victims, and aficionados of grotesque film fare mention these movies in various venues.
Moreover, it is inconceivable, given the unsettled political situation in locales around the globe, the widespread availability of video technology, and the poverty that prevails in many countries, that snuff films have never been made. Snuff is not one of those films, however, nor, as far as experts are able to determine, has any movie that has been commercially released in the English-speaking world. The charge by anti-porn feminists of the existence of snuff movies looks very much like one manifestation of a genuine moral panic – except for one thing, which a few observers who have leveled the charge have emphasized (for instance, Russell, 1993, p. 98): what the making and popularity of sadistic depictions of the (simulated) torture and murder of women for the sexual arousal of viewers means in a society that purports to value sexual equality and justice. While the claim of real-life snuff movies is powerful, effective propaganda fueling a moral panic, telling, as it does, a horrific story, the making, sale, and pornographic consumption of bogus snuff movies as if the on-camera murders were real tells a more complicated story, but one that is ultimately as revealing of the sexism in our society as is the unsubstantiated feminist claims of the authenticity of such films. Moreover – and this is going to seem extremely cynical, but it is true nonetheless – a faked death, like a faked orgasm, is more likely to look and sound realistic and convincing to audiences than the real thing. Hence, the question arises: What’s the point of killing anyone?

DOES PORNOGRAPHY CAUSE RAPE AND MURDER?

To the sociologist, the feminist anti-pornography proposition calls for evidence. The title of an essay by Michael Kimmel expresses one manifestation of harm and violence against women: “Does Pornography Cause Rape?” (1993). In another article, Kimmel, with coauthor Annulla Linders (1996), examines the evidence bearing on states in the United States in which porn had been banned, versus the states in which it hadn’t, and in those in which magazine porn had lower subscription rates versus those that had higher subscriptions, and found no difference in rates of rape. The authors also found that porn magazine circulation declined in five states at a time when rates of rape actually increased. These findings would make not sense if pornography causes rape.

Because Kimmel’s data end in 1989, we are led to ask about what has happened since the eighties, in both crimes against women and the availability and use of pornography. The 1980s anti-porn feminists made a prediction about the impact of greater availability and use of pornography – namely that it would cause increases in domination, brutality, and violence against women. Hence, we are led to ask about the actual empirical consequences of this availability and use. Whole shelves of books have been written on the drop in crime rates in America in the past generation. A few factors that caused the crime rate – including the rate or male violence against females – to drop between the eighties and nineties into the 2000s
include: the aging of the population, the decline of the crack trade, and the incarceration of the most crime-prone sectors of the population (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000; Zimring, 2006). But all of that dissolves into insignificance in the face of the sheer magnitude of the flood of porn that is currently available. We are led, as was Kimmel’s argument, to the conclusion that a real-world, on-the-ground increase in pornography does not cause or influence men to brutalize or commit violence against women.

The availability of pornography has increased on an almost unimaginable and literally unprecedented scale. “Whereas pornography was once furtively glimpsed at dimly lighted newsstands or seedy adult theaters, today it is everywhere. It pours in over the Internet, sometimes uninvited, sometimes via eagerly forwarded links” (Paul, 2004, p. 99). A computer network was opened to commercial interests in 1988; the World Wide Web began in 1991. Today, a quarter of the world’s population – between one and two billion people – have accessed the Internet. When the Attorney General published the Final Report on pornography in 1986, a few thousand porno parlors were scattered around the country, in the seedier areas of blighted urban landscapes and along the nation’s dreary, honky-tonk highways. Today, more than half of all Americans households (55%) own at least one computer, about 30 percent of which have Internet access. That’s thirty to thirty-five million porno parlors, to which 2.57 people per household (the average household size in the United States) have access. Excluding the 14-year-old-and-younger sector of the population reduces the total number by a fifth. Likewise, we have to consider the gender factor: Only 20 percent of people who consume porn are women, and most of them do so in the company of a man. In any case, tens of millions – roughly fifty to seventy million – of Americans have direct, immediate access to an almost infinite variety of pornography. A few keystrokes will call up a volume and range of material that did not exist in any porno parlor 20 years ago. (The data in this paragraph can be found in the appropriate sites on the World Wide Web.)

But not only is porn more accessible than it was 20 years ago, it is consumed more often and by vastly more people (see Table 12.1). The validity of some of these figures has been challenged by several media outlets, such as Forbes magazine, ABC television news, and Newsweek magazine. These statistics come mainly from Top Ten Reviews, which is posted by the porn industry itself, which attempts to hype its magnitude by increasing its legitimacy and to attract advertisers and entrepreneurs. Whether somewhat over-hyped or not, what these statistics say is that the use of pornography has exploded since the eighties. And these increases are not confined to electronic material. For instance, there are pornographic home movies, where amateurs video-record their own sexual activity, or that of their friends, for their private viewing, and some of them put these tapes on the Internet. There is also pay-for-view access on hotel TV screens, the revenues of which have quadrupled since the late 1990s. The industry estimates that two-thirds of all rented pay-for-view hotel movies are pornographic. Between 1988 and 2005, the number of hardcore pornography movie titles increased 10 times, from 1,300 to 13,588.
There has also been a marked shift in the past 20 years from print pornography to videos and DVDs and the Internet. All the major so-called “men’s” porn magazines have dropped in sales (see Table 12.1). Partly this is because there is less interest in the magazine or printed format, as there is for print media in general. And partly it’s because the protests by anti-porn feminists (and Christian activists) have convinced local magazine distributors not to handle them. (Note that Kimmel measured pornography consumption by magazine subscriptions.) Still, currently, Playboy and Maxim, two porn magazines, remain in the top 25 selling consumer magazines. My speculation is that magazine media have declined because video and DVD and the Internet are much more graphic, more effective, and more dynamic means of achieving the central purpose of pornography – sexual arousal. (Though

Table 12.1  Availability and Use of Pornography, 1970s–80s–90s to 2000s, U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1970s–80s–90s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playboy’s peak monthly sales (early 1970s)</td>
<td>6–7 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playboy’s current monthly sales</td>
<td>under 3 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screw’s peak weekly sales (early 1970s)</td>
<td>140,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screw’s current weekly sales</td>
<td>under 30,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of hard-core pornographic movie titles released:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988: 1,300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005: 13,588</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenues of “adult” movie sales and rentals:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992: $1.1 billion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996: $3.9 billion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006: $4.0 billion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of “adult” movies sold or rented:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992: 400 million</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006: 950 million</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of daily pornographic search engine requests:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1991: 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006: 68 million</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of pornographic websites:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1991: 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007: 4.2 million</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proportion of Internet users who view porn:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1991: 0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005: 42.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly pornographic downloads:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1991: 0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005: 1.5 billion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com; Wikipedia; Google “business of pornography” and “pornography business” and surf sites; articles by Corliss, Stein et al. in Time, Forbes, Newsweek, the Wall Street Journal, and ABC News question some of these figures.
there will always be some demand for the portability of magazines – holding them in one’s hand, taking them wherever one wants to go, and consuming them in a locale of one’s choosing.)

So, in a nutshell, here’s what the evidence says: Since the 1980s, the availability and use of porn has increased many-fold. For the eighties’ anti-porn argument to be valid, some sort of increase in crimes by men against women would have to have taken place. This argument predicted that, given an increase in porn, rape correspondingly would increase. And the murder of women by men would also increase. As we’ll see in the next paragraph, this prediction has not occurred; hence, the thesis that pornography causes rape or any other kind of violence by men against women is questionable, undermined by the available evidence. Of course, everyone knows that crimes reported to the police – official police statistics – are far from complete; specifically, most rapes, especially date rapes, are not reliably reported to the police as crimes. (Though nearly all criminologists would agree that rape is more likely to be reported today than it was in the past.) In contrast, criminologists are agreed that murder is the most reliably reported of crimes. And we all know that many factors cause violence against women. Still, if porn did cause men to commit sexual violence against women, it would be born out by the available data – and in fact, the reverse is true.

In addition, every six months, the Bureau of Justice Statistics conducts a victimization survey, asking respondents if they have been victims of specific crimes. Victimization surveys, nearly all criminologists agree, are much more valid than police statistics. In 1984, the rate of rape in the United States, as reported to victimization surveys, was 2.5 per 1,000 of the population. After that date, the figure, with some year-by-year variation, declined. In 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, it was 0.4 to 0.5 per 1,000 in the population – a quarter of what it was twenty years before. (See Table 12.2.) What we find is precisely the opposite of what the anti-pornography feminists predicted: vastly more pornography, substantially less rape.

Of course, as we said, the decline in rape reflects the decline of crime in general (Blumstein and Wallman, 2000; Zimring, 2006). In any case, just looking at the on-the-ground epidemiological data, clearly the “more porn causes more violence against women” argument has not been supported by developments since the eighties. On the one hand, we have an enormous increase in the availability and consumption of pornography. On the other hand, there is no corresponding increase in the two most serious crimes against women; indeed, there seems to be something of a decrease.

One might object that perhaps men treat women more callously or in a more sexist fashion in everyday ways than is indicated by rape and murder; there may be other ways of measuring changes over time. That’s a good point and a testable proposition; such a study ought to be conducted. Still, presumably, rape and murder would represent extreme endpoints of a continuum of domination and brutality. In any case, the evidence most certainly does not support the anti-pornography feminist thesis that “porn causes violence against women.”
### Table 12.2  Criminal Violence Committed by Men Against Women


**Rapes Reported to the Police, Uniform Crime Reports**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Rate (per 100,000 in the population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>88,670</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>92,455</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Source: FBI, UCR, Crime in the United States)*

#### Rape Victimization: National Crime Victimization Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rate (per 1,000 in the population)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


#### Murder and Non-Negligent Homicide by Sex, Uniform Crime Reports*

**1985**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offender/Killer:</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6,359</td>
<td>1,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2,517</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. murder rate: 8.0/100,000

Of the total number of homicides, percent that are committed by men against women: 24%

Population, U.S.: 237,924,000; male, 115,730,000; female, 122,194,000

**2006**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offender/Killer:</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4,710</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1,735</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

U.S. murder rate: 5.7/100,000

Of the total number of homicides, percent that are committed by men against women: 24%

Population, U.S.: 299,398,485; male, 147,434,940; female, 151,963,545

*Single killer, single victim, where sex is known and recorded (about 75% of all homicides)

*Source: FBI, UCR, Crime in the United States, yearly*
More specific to the “porn causes violence toward women,” two developments are worth emphasizing. First, in the United States between the 1980s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, the overall number of criminal homicides, and their rate, declined precipitously. If porn had triggered a flood of violence in American society, it does not appear in its criminal statistics. As we saw, there are many reasons for this decline, but if exposure to pornography were as potent as the anti-porn feminists said, we would see a measurable increase in male violence and aggression, and we don’t. We cannot explain away this disassociation with a vague, glib resort to “other factors.” More specifically, second, the total number of criminal homicides by men against women decreased by more than a quarter, and the percentage of criminal homicides in which males killed females remained stable (24%), in other words, just under a quarter of the total homicide figures.

The conclusion seems inescapable: In contrast to the findings of artificial laboratory experiments (Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984), epidemiological evidence indicates that pornography does not cause aggression and violence toward women. Hence, by this criterion, the concern, hostility, and denunciation of anti-pornography feminists proved to be out of proportion to its objective threat. The prediction that they made about the catastrophic consequences of more widespread availability and use of pornography did not come to pass. Hence, the anti-pornography uproar qualifies as a moral panic, at least according to the crucial criterion of disproportionality.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

To many skeptics, bystanders, and even fellow feminists and sympathizers, the central charges the anti-porn activists made simply didn’t make sense. Quotidian, run-of-the-mill pornography didn’t match up with the extremely grotesque and unrelentingly brutal image that anti-porn feminists presented in their slide shows and speeches. True, a market existed – and still does – for the more extreme, bizarre, and brutal forms of porn, but they represented exotic, marginal expressions of the pornographic impulse. More central to the harms that porn supposedly inflicts, it seemed implausible to many informed observers that exposure to pornography caused rape; after all, rape existed millennia before porn came into being, and in some locales, such as Japan, porn was (and still is) rife but rape, rare. Yet to attract attention, movements often have to make charges that, to some observers, feel true, for which documentation is beside the point. Perhaps the most remarkable fact about this crusade was its spectacular and abrupt collapse. It is difficult, says Ariel Levy, a journalist, “to think of an American movement that has failed more spectacularly than anti-pornography feminism” (Levy, 2005, p. 37). Today’s debates about porn seem a feeble echo of yesterday’s furious, full-throated dispute.
In most respects, the feminist anti-pornography crusade was, at best, a marginal instance of a moral panic. In fact, it represents something of a negative case of a moral panic. As a movement, it attracted neither mass support nor sufficient media attention, and the public never got particularly riled up about the issue. The question the researcher and student of moral panics should ask is: why not? On paper, pornography appeared to be a moral panic poised to launch. Its crusaders were committed and intelligent, and had their hands on what they saw as a righteous cause. A substantial number of feminists wrote inflammatory denunciations of pornography’s role in brutalizing women. These activists commanded a readily visible stage and received a respectful audience but, once again, the legislation they proposed never became (or remained) law, and for the most part the feminist organizations dedicated to the eradication of pornography were disbanded as a result of failure to achieve their stated goals or lack of support. Anti-pornography feminism produced a great deal of heat within a short period of time, but its legacy was decidedly mixed and its successes minimal. Today, pornography is vastly more available than it was a generation or two ago, and the culprit was not sociological but technological. Yet, somehow, the predictions anti-porn feminism made about the disastrous consequences if such an eventuality were to come to pass never took place.

Contrary to the claim of at least one historian of the feminist anti-porn movement, most well-informed observers have actually failed to conclude that pornography, including sexualized media violence, contributes to “everyday acts of domestic abuse and rape” (Bronstein, 2008, p. 433). Of course, one could argue that if porn causes so much as one instance of sexual violence, that is one too many, but that is very different from arguing, empirically and systematically, that higher rates of porn consumption produce higher rates of violence against women. In fact, the failure of anti-porn legislation, drawn up by MacKinnon and Dworkin (1988, 1997, pp. 426–61) and designed to permit “victims” of pornography – in effect any and all women who feel they have been harmed by the exposure of men in their lives to porn – to sue porn out of existence, is due in part to the lack of convincing evidence that these materials cause violence against women. Macro or epidemiological data demonstrate virtually no relationship between the consumption of pornography and the commission of violence against women. Between the 1980s and 2009, the availability and use of porn have virtually exploded; in contrast, rates of rape and murder by men against women have substantially declined.

The bogusness of the charge that female participants in pornography are frequently and typically coerced and harmed – indeed, sometimes killed – in its making, likewise indicates that the crusade against porn was, in all likelihood, a moral panic, albeit the proverbial “tempest in a teapot.” These worst case scenarios never check out to be true, and pretty much all the time, the telling of and belief in such stories reveal themselves to be urban legends (Stine, 1999). Such legends are nonetheless useful to social movements, but especially so to those needful of shocking proof based on scanty evidence – movements that, in short, have stirred up moral panics.
It is entirely possible that the fear of pornography, prominently debated by feminists between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, was based on issues other than the matter of direct physical harm. As Stanley Cohen forcefully pointed out in the mid-seventies, moral panics are about representations: which sector of the society has the power to represent itself and its interests to others as legitimate and valid. Pornography valorizes the lustful male gaze upon a vulnerable, naked female whose sexual acquiescence is taken for granted. Her very appearance implies her compliance; by appearing in porn, she announces her sexual availability — or that she wouldn’t mind being taken by force. Moreover, at least in some feminists’ scenario, she expresses precisely this posture for all women. Such a woman is objectified, reduced to a ripe, available female with no other relevant characteristics than a sexual body.

The threat of pornography, then, is not that it is a product of harm, or that it will cause harm to females. A cultural reading of the position that the female is sexually available to any and all male comers violates the feminist’s conception of femaleness. Unfortunately for the anti-porn feminist’s position, this charge proved to be too amorphous and diffuse to stir up and sustain the public’s fear, hostility, and concern. Hence, we find them lodging the more concrete and specific charges — which do not hold up under empirical scrutiny. The argument that porn causes objective harm will probably not generate another moral panic in the foreseeable future, but the unease that many feminists feel about the message sent by women’s participation in pornography is likely to remain for generations to come.

While most of Western society are likely to agree that pornography is squalid and degrading for its participants, especially the women, and, in many cases, social pressure is applied to convince women to take part in undesired activities (now, increasingly, anal sex), the evidence indicates that porn does not cause violence against women, and overt, physical violence is rarely used to force women to make porn. It is clear that the concern that some movement activists felt was disproportional to the objective threat that porn posed. In that sense, the porn uproar of the seventies and eighties constituted a moral panic, although outside feminist circles, a minor, almost nonexistent one. The threat that porn posed was more symbolic (which is an appeal that is less likely to attract the unconverted) than physical (which is more appealing to the unconverted). Again, anti-porn feminism walked the tightrope between “hot” or sensationalistic appeals, which tend to be temporarily effective, and the possibility of a cold, calculating consideration of their claims, which turned out to be largely unsupportable and hence, subversive of the movement. As a result of a variety of factors, including the massive increases in the availability of porn and no concomitant increases in crimes against women, the anti-porn movement virtually vaporized.
EPILOGUE

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

In raising this issue, our investigation parallels Max Weber's concept of the “routinization of charisma” (1968a, pp. 1111–57, 1968b). Charisma, meaning the “gift of the spirit” invested in leaders by their followers and by which these leaders rule. Followers do not obey the commands of these leaders because the leaders inherited a position by birth (as is the case with kings and queens), or because they occupy bureaucratic positions of authority (as is the case with presidents and prime ministers), but because of this special, almost magical, sacred, and supernatural quality that followers attribute to them. Fidel Castro, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mao Zedong, Malcolm X, and Joan of Arc are examples of charismatic leaders. The problem with charisma is that it is unstable: it cannot be passed on to another leader who lacks it. Who is to be the movement’s or government’s leader? How to ensure that the leader’s commands and injunctions are captured in the form of rules or laws that have power over followers even after he or she is gone? How, in other words, to capture or routinize that charisma – to compel followers to obey the leader’s injunctions (or what is taken to be the leader’s injunctions) in the absence of the leader himself or herself? Will followers obey the rules simply because these rules, presumably, were once enunciated by the revered leader? How to enshrine the leader’s vision into rules and organizational structures? How to succeed the leader with bureaucratic (rather than charismatic) authority? Leaders who govern by bureaucratic rules and laws rather than the force of their personalities do not generate as much excitement, but their reign tends to be more stable. Often, when charismatic leaders die, the movement (and, occasionally, a government) with which they are associated dies, too.

The excitement stirred up during a moral panic is similar to the charisma possessed by certain leaders. This excitement, like charisma, is volatile and unstable. The feelings that are generated during its period of influence are intense, passionate. But they do not last. How to ensure that the willingness of individuals who are gripped by this temporary fervor to follow certain rules or pursue certain enemies continues over time? How to translate the vision stimulated during the moral panic into day-to-day, year-by-year normative and institutional policy? How to continue the aims and goals of moral entrepreneurs, action and interest groups, leaders, and much of the public, in “doing something” about the threat that seems to be posed during the moral panic, after the emotional fervor of that panic has died down? What we are suggesting is that, as with charismatic leaders, some moral panics are, almost unwittingly, more successful in routinizing the demands for action that are generated during these relatively brief episodes of collective excitement.
Let us be more specific about our investigation. Four questions can help sharpen our inquiry. First, do moral panics have an impact on the society in which they take place by generating formal organizations and institutions? Do they, in other words, leave an institutional legacy – in the form of laws, agencies, groups, movements, and so on? Second, if so, what specifically is the nature of that institutional legacy? Third, do moral panics transform the informal normative structure of a society? And fourth, if so, what is the nature of that transformation?

With respect to the first question, in principle, moral panics can have two potential outcomes: They can end leaving little or no long-term institutional legacy, disappearing, as with fads, without a trace. They may generate or stimulate no new laws, lasting social movements, or government agencies. On the other hand, the intensity of the concern that was expressed at the height of moral panics can, in principle, become captured, routinized, or institutionalized into ongoing, long-lasting organizational structures. In other words, one possibility is that moral panics can, in principle, generate social change; they can either leave a substantial institutional legacy, or none. And with respect to the second question, these institutional structures can be a diverse lot: laws but no social movements; social movements but no government agencies; and so on.

What is the impact of moral panics on a society’s informal normative structure, views of right and wrong? on its visions of reality? its storehouse of myths, legends, tales, and stories? Again, do moral panics come and go without leaving long-lasting traces? Ben-Yehuda (1985, pp. 1–20) discusses the Durkheimian “double bind”: Does deviance, on the one hand, promote stability or, on the other, does it encourage flexibility and hence, prepare the way for social change? He suggests that the answer is dependent on which sorts of deviant behaviors are under discussion in which sorts of social systems. The same question may be raised for moral panics: Does a sudden, relatively brief outburst of fear, concern, and anger over a given condition, threat, or behavior rigidify the moral boundaries of the society – or segments of the society – and hence, promote stability? Or does it transform the norms and institutions of the society in such a way as to make it a different place than it was before?

As we have seen throughout this book, moral panics make up a diverse collection of events. We do not find that they go through specific, predetermined stages, with a beginning, middle, and a predictable end. Their locus may be society-wide, or local and regional; more specifically, a broad, society-wide panic may be evident in all or nearly all communities nationally, may or may not explode in certain specific locales, or, alternatively, a panic may break out entirely on a local or only community-wide level. Panics may be extremely brief, lasting as little as a month or two, as with the 1982 Israeli drug panic or the “sexual slavery” panic in Orléans, France. Or they may be more long-term and run their course only after several years. Some of the longer panics may represent the temporally limited portion of a much longer-range concern, as we saw with the drug panic in the United States, which is in fact a series of moral panics that have come
and gone over a 100-year period. It should come as no surprise that the outcomes of moral panics vary as much as their nature.

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

In contrast, other panics result in laws and other legislation, social movement organizations, action groups, lobbies, normative and behavioral transformations, organizations or governmental agencies, and so on, are set up or arose to sustain some of the fervor that prevailed earlier. For example, the periodic drug panics that have washed over American society for over a century continue to deposit institutional sediment in their wake. President Nixon’s mini-drug panic of the late 1960s to the early 1970s hugely expanded the federal drug budget, placed the drug war on a firm international footing, and created several federal agencies empowered to deal with drug abuse in one way or another, most notably NIDA, the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The latest, 1986–9, drug panic left a substantial legacy in the form of two packages of federal legislation, passed in 1986 and 1988, a substantially larger federal budget, dozens of private social movement organizations, and a public sensitization to the drug issue. (Recall that the “crack babies” mini-panic arose at the very time – 1990 and 1991 – that the larger drug panic was dying down. If crack cocaine had been “normalized” as with alcohol, it is unlikely that this later panic would have taken hold.) In this way, not only are successive moral panics built on earlier ones, but even in quieter, non-panic periods, the institutional legacy that moral panics leave attempts to regulate the behavior that is deemed harmful, unacceptable, criminal, or deviant. Thus, the earliest drug panics – those that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – redefined drug abuse as deviant and, eventually, criminal; in this sense, they generated social change. The later drug panics, in contrast, reaffirmed the deviant and criminal status of drug abuse after a period of drift toward normalization and thus, prevented social change.

Thus, we argue that moral panics may produce both effects – toward social stability and social change – under specific circumstances. Moreover, we argue, even seemingly inconsequential panics leave behind some sort of legacy. To put the issue another way, the question of the legacy of moral panics is a matter of degree. The impact of a seemingly inconsequential panic, one which produces no new laws or organizations to deal with the supposed threat it addresses, is likely to be felt, at the very least, in the informal or attitudinal realm. With the eruption of a given moral panic, the battle lines are redrawn, moral universes are reaffirmed, deviants are paraded before upright citizens and denounced, society’s moral boundaries are solidified; in Durkheimian terms, society’s collective conscience has been strengthened. The message of the moral panic is clear: This is behavior we will not tolerate. Through the extreme reactions manifested in panics, a loud
and clear moral message is sent and received. In this sense, even relatively transitory panics that do not lay down an organizational legacy, from the point of view of deviance and morality, are not “wasted”: they draw precise moral boundaries. The panics which are about imaginary threats emphasize the contrast between the condition or behavior that is denounced and the correctness of the righteous folk engaged in the denunciation. The satanic ritual abuse scare, for example, reaffirms the moral correctness of the fundamentalist Christian way of life. The outbreak of a moral panic may result in a legacy so prosaic or mundane as a newspaper file or archive that can be dug up by reporters when, in the future, a string of stories on the same topic begins to break. Though, in the later panic, stories are unlikely to represent a mechanical repetition of stories reported in the earlier one, the very existence of such an archive may help shape later ones.

Even the stir over the Mods and Rockers, a relatively inconsequential moral panic, reminded conventional, law-abiding, middle-aged, middle- and lower-middle class segments of English society in the 1960s of the moral correctness of their way of life. Indeed, it is entirely possible that some of the collective excitement generated by the Mods and Rockers was transferred to juvenile delinquents, the basis of a later, early 1970s moral panic in Britain (Hall et al., 1978). Even extremely short-lived panics may leave some attitudinal legacy that may lie dormant, ready to fuel a later panic under the right conditions. As we saw, in Orléans, France in 1969, though the furor over “sexual slavery” died down after its initial eruption, many citizens continued to think that something peculiar was going on that was being kept hidden from them (Morin, 1971). Under the right conditions – for example, an economic depression resulting in the need for a scapegoat, the rise of an anti-Semitic, xenophobic candidate, the eruption of a sex scandal – the sensitization resulting from this nonexistent threat could very well aggravate a new moral panic. Thus, even though moral panics may leave no organizational or institutional legacy, the collective excitement that citizens experience while it lasts prepares them for future panic-like experiences. The fact that a society experienced a given panic may reshape its normative, attitudinal, and value landscape.

The more longer-lasting panics that do set up an institutional and organization structure to deal with the issue, problem, threat, or behavior under attack are clearly more consequential in their impact than those whose impact is confined mainly to the informal realm. To many observers, the 1960s and 1970s represented a drift toward permissiveness and moral laxity, especially with respect to drug use. As we saw, the late 1970s witnessed an all-time high in illegal drug use, tolerance and acceptance of drug use, and support for the decriminalization of at least one illegal substance, marijuana. The drug panic that was set in motion in the early 1980s and exploded in the late 1980s, in a sense, “brought the country back” from the drift toward accepting, and using, illegal drugs. In this sense, then, the American drug panic of the 1980s prevented social change and acted to preserve social stability.

While more short-term panics are most likely to be restricted in their impact to reaffirming moral boundaries, a series of panics focused on the same threat over a
long period of time is likely to bring about institutional change as well. The
dramatic change over the past century with respect to how American society con-
trols, or attempts to control, the use – and users – of psychoactive substances rep-
resents an outstanding example of the latter process. These changes have ramified
into institutional spheres as diverse as the criminal justice system, health and med-
icine, the family, politics, government, and the military, the economy, and educa-
tion. In the United States, a hundred years ago, psychoactive substances were freely
available; today, access to certain categories of drugs is tightly controlled. Over the
past century, some drug panics have left a strong institutional legacy, as we saw, in
the form of laws, government agencies, social movements, and so on; once these
institutional structures were in place, the moral panics that followed typically
strengthened the status quo. Moreover, once a bureaucratic structure emerges to
routinize forms of social control, actors within those structures hold a vested inter-
est in ensuring that the moral basis of the institution within which they work will
not be eroded. In short, the many moral entrepreneurs who have played a role in
this drama needed a century, and at least a half-dozen discrete panics, to reach the
current state of affairs.

A similar process occurred with witchcraft: the early panics transformed the
very definition of witchcraft; once that transformation was achieved, later moral
panics resulted in preventing changes in existing moral boundaries. It is important
to stress that, in discussing moral panics, we are not focusing on a single, brief,
discrete episode lasting a few months or a year or two. We are, in fact, discussing a
series of events – a process. In the case of witchcraft, clusters of panics stretched
out over several centuries. Moral entrepreneurs needed an entire decade to con-
vince the papacy to support the anti-witchcraft campaign, and the impact of that
decision stretched out for centuries afterwards.

In short, panics are not like fads, trivial in nature and inconsequential in their
impact. (For an argument that fads are not trivial and inconsequential, see Best,
2006.) Panics do not always or even usually come and go, vanishing, as it were,
without a trace. Even those that seem to end without impact often leave informal
traces that prepare us for later ones. A close examination of the impact of panics
forces us to take a more long-range view of things, to look at panics as social proc-
есс rather than as separate, discrete, time-bound events. Moral panics are a crucial
element of the fabric of social change. They are not marginal, exotic, trivial phe-
nomena, but a key that unlocks some of social life’s most intriguing mysteries.


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