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“See also Young, 1971: Marshall McLuhan, moral panics and moral indignation”

Eugene McLaughlin, *Theoretical Criminology*, 2014, Vol. 18(4) pp. 422– 431

Author details:

Eugene McLaughlin is Professor of Criminology and member of the Centre of Law, Justice and Journalism at City University London. His current research focuses on trial-by-media, mediatised justice and scandal

Email: e.mclaughlin@city.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite the fact that he introduced the concept into the sociology of deviance, Jock Young never claimed ownership of ‘moral panic’. There is little to no evidence suggest that he felt the need to keep up with the burgeoning literature on ‘moral panics studies’; rather, in much of this literature, his name is all but invisible, reduced to ‘See also Young, 1971’. This essay begins with a review of Jock Young’s original use of ‘moral panic’ before discussing how he subsequently rejected the term, and then reflecting on why and how he re-engaged with it. My position is that Jock Young was ambivalent about how the term was subsequently developed and transformed into what he viewed as: an incredulous ‘left idealist’ reaction to morally challenging issues; a mechanical sociological model used to decide on whether something was or was not a ‘boil-in-the-bag’ moral panic; and finally a dismissive journalistic judgement. In all these ‘moral panic for dummies’ usages, for Young, the volatile energizing moral dynamics of ‘action + reaction’ have been lost as has his nuanced appreciation of the shifting cultural significance of moral panic. Perhaps most significantly, the core dynamic of ‘moral indignation’ and its channelling—concerns that are present in all of Jock Young’s work—have likewise been lost in common usage of moral panic.

Introduction

“This is what a moral panic looks like. And we’re bang-slap in the middle of one right now. Obesity, especially childhood obesity: we are obsessed with it. Who’s fat, why are they fat, who’s to blame, and what are we going to do about it?”

(Belfast Telegraph, 18 July 2014)

“The UK government’s announcement of a public inquiry into decades-old allegations of a paedophile ring operating within public institutions has ramped up fears over the prevalence of child abuse and the extent to which parliament, the police and the judiciary have been ‘covering it up’. So while the inquiry has been packaged as a sober reappraisal of neglected evidence, it has whipped up yet another moral panic.” (Spiked, 1 August 2014)

The DrugTakers

In *The Drugtakers: The Social Meaning of Drug Use* (1971: 169), Young’s study of drug taking in late 1960s Notting Hill, he develops an ‘explanatory framework capable of analysing the moral career of the drugtaker’. He is perplexed by the intensity of the social reaction to particular types of relatively harmless drug takers, namely those supposedly leading hedonistic lifestyles. An explanation was forged out of labelling and anomie theories.

Young turned to Howard Becker’s notion of moral crusaders who manned the moral barricades and perhaps, more importantly, AK Cohen’s (1965: 6) idea of the righteous moral indignation that certain forms of deviance provoke in the law-abiding:

The dedicated pursuit of culturally approved goals, the eschewing of interdicted but tantalizing goals, the adherence to normatively sanctioned means—these imply a certain self-restraint, effort, discipline, inhibition. What is the effect of the spectacle of others who, though their activities do not manifestly damage our own interests, are morally undisciplined, who give themselves up to idleness, self-indulgence, or forbidden vices? What effect does the propinquity of the wicked have on the peace of mind of the virtuous?

Cohen identifies four possible responses of the upright citizen to 'the propinquity of the wicked'. First, s/he can become even more virtuous. Second, s/he can make a virtue of tolerance of the human failings of others. Third, s/he might be tempted into and embrace immorality. The final response is what interests Young. This is where morally indignant others unite

in righteous puritanical wrath to mete out punishment to the deviants, not so much to stamp out their deviant behavior, as to re-affirm the central importance of conformity as the basis for judging men and to reassure himself and others of his attachment to goodness.

(Cohen, 1965: 7)

Young extends Cohen's Durkheimian inspired model by noting how moral crusaders, experts, law enforcement agencies and most importantly the news media feed off and fuel 'moral indignation'. He proceeds to construct one of the first accounts of the pivotal role played by the media in broadcasting and channelling the 'natural' moral indignation generated by certain forms of crime and deviance (Cohen and Young, 1973; Young, 1971, 1974). For Young (1974: 254) the ideological and commercial imperatives for the news media in a capitalist society coalesce around the production of the impression that there is a moral consensus. The news media, are

"the guardians of consensus: that is the major providers of information and actions, events, groups, and ideas they forge this information in a closed consensual image ... they mobilise a specifiable conceptual machinery to maintain the plausibility structures of the consensual universe." (Young, 1974: 244)

In so doing, the news media claim to act as 'the voice of the people' and the diviner of the 'moral centre' of society. For Young (1974: 239) a 'tight network of influences' holds news reporting 'within a tight consensual pattern'. The most important aspect of this is pressure to produce 'newsworthy' stories

"that are atypical, presents them in a stereotypical fashion, and contrasts them against a backcloth

of normality which is over typical. The atypical is elected because the everyday or humdrum is not interesting to read or watch; it has little news value.” (1971: 179)

However statistical unusualness is not in itself sufficient to make something newsworthy.

The news media consensus turns on ‘giving the people what it wants’, namely, news items that excite sensibilities, connect with the normative concerns of large sections of the population and confirm existing prejudices and stereotypes. The definition of a primary newsworthy story is an emotionally charged story that aligns with and arouses the righteously indignant ‘moral majority’. Crime, deviance and transgression are primary news stories because of the fascination, fear and outrage that they provoke.

Young held that British society in the 1960s witnessed a media fuelled ‘deviance implosion’ that could trigger moral panics. As with the idea of ‘implosion’, he claimed ‘moral panic’ from Marshall McLuhan. For McLuhan unparalleled, irreversible developments in mass communications were producing a mediatized age of anxiety and uncertainty with an instantaneous and global traffic in information. Human beings lived within and were reconstituted by an entertainment sensorium generating both obsessive fascination and a ‘moral panic’ (McLuhan, 1967: 89) of angst among cultural elites ‘pressing panic buttons every minute’ (McLuhan, 1967: 26). McLuhan identified three stages in the ‘panic’ reaction to the new media revolution: alarm; resistance; and exhaustion. In Young’s (1971: 181–182) reworking of the idea:

“We are immensely aware of deviants in modern urban societies because of the constant bombardment of information via the mass media ... we can no longer have little knowledge of or at least conveniently forget the deviant. He is brought to our hearth by the television set, his picture is on our breakfast table with the morning paper. Moreover, the mass media do not purvey opinions on all deviant groups; they create a universe of discourse for our segregated social world in which many groups are ignored ... The media then—in a sense—can create social problems; they can present them dramatically and overwhelmingly, and, what is most important, they can do it suddenly. What I am suggesting is that the media can fan up very quickly and effectively public indignation concerning a particular deviant group. It is possible for them to engineer rapidly what might call a moral panic about a certain type of deviancy. Indeed, because of the phenomenon of over-exposure—the glut of information over a short space on a topic so that it becomes

uninteresting—there is institutionalised into the media the need to create moral panics and issues which will seize the imagination of the public.

The Drugtakers provides one of the first accounts of the influence exercised by news media on the thinking and practices of agencies of social control, particularly the police. Media initiated ‘moral panics’ have real effects producing ‘deviance amplification’ spirals that intensify both deviance and punitive official reactions to deviance, producing a self-fulfilling ‘translation of stereotypes into actuality, of fantasy into reality’ (Young, 1971: 108–117). For Young (1971: 198–201), a central part of unfolding moral panics are news media campaigns that demand the restoration of moral order and a clampdown on deviants; attack those who would advocate progressive proposals on sensitive social issues like liberalizing drug laws; endorse the views of those who support the status quo; and pressure politicians and opinion leaders to distance themselves from progressive proposals. Such campaigns are conducted on behalf of the moral majority and generate moral alignment.

The hippy drug taker was a deviant of considerable dramaturgical promise who, though numerically insignificant and relatively harmless, activated a significant moral panic by challenging the post-war status quo. The news media’s reporting of a hedonistic lifestyle touched a raw moral nerve among the ‘respectable’ moral majority,

“fascinating because they act out in an uninhibited fashion the subterranean goals which the rest of the population desires, immediately condemnable because they do not deserve any of these rewards. They are a new leisured class; they exist in a limbo which is outside the workaday world of the mass of people. Moreover, they are particularly notorious because they espouse the use of drugs to achieve subterranean goals. And it is on hippy drug use that social reaction focuses ... it is not psychotropic drugs per se that evoke condemnation, but their use for unreservedly hedonistic and expressive ends. Society reacts, then, not to the use of drugs but to the type of people who uses drugs; it reacts against the subterranean values of hippies and the use of drugs to attain these goals.”(Young, 1971: 149)

The hippy lifestyle provoked moral indignation in the majority whose lives were governed

by conventional morality because it represented

“a Dionysian culture: it puts extreme emphasis on sexual pleasure, physical euphoria and enjoyment. Moreover, it demands this pleasure now. It does not find the notion of pleasure in the future, deferred gratification, as being a worthwhile goal. This involves not only an emphasis on pleasure, but a totally different conception of time.” (Young, 1971: 150)

Of course, this striking deviant lifestyle imaginary is one of the contradictions that the news media have to ‘resolve’. The commercial requirement to publish the most sensational details and the morally indignant reaction triggers a moral panic that threatens the image of a conformist society by publicizing and amplifying a seductively permissive lifestyle (Young, 1974: 245). Mediatized visibility inevitably generates more deviance because it provides potential deviants with information about how they should dress, think and behave. For all the moral opprobrium, the deviant master status is desirable. Importantly, reflexivity enables the news media to sense and articulate any decisive shift in the public mood permitting it to come to terms, for example, with the incorporation of the object of the moral panic into a commercialized popular cultural ‘revolution’:

What is initially deprecated is also in the long run necessary in order to provide fuel for the leisure industries and copy for the art, music and fashion sections of the media. Here media and commerce combine to turn the execrable into the saleable—and thus resolve the contradiction. For the leisure industry, like the mass media, is constantly in search of the new and just as the media perform a symbolic diffusion of alternative realities, commerce delivered a more subtle blow—it buys the style of revolt, lock, stock and barrel.(Young, 1974: 252)

In so doing the news media and commerce unintentionally transform the nature of the deviance, official reactions and the societal consensus.

The Manufacture of News

The conceptualization of the media presented in *The Drugtakers* formed the basis for Jock Young’s contribution to *The Manufacture of News: Deviance, Social Problems and*

the Mass Media, the 1973 volume he co-edited with Stan Cohen. However, in this seminal media criminology text, the idea of moral panics is not discussed or developed except for the recommendation that ‘a significant area for social research is to uncover the conditions under which the media are or are not successful in creating moral panics’ (Cohen and Young, 1973: 344). Given how central and energizing it was to his early work, it is surprising that Jock Young did not continue with news media and deviance research other than by reference to a book, *Media as Myth*, planned for 1975 publication but never materialized. It was left to Cohen (1972) and Hall et al. (1978) to incorporate and expand his ideas on ‘moral panic’ and ‘folk devils’.

As Jock Young developed his version of Marxist criminology, he returned to and worked with the theme of ‘moral indignation’. For example, in ‘Working class criminology’ (Young, 1975: 79), he outlined his new realist position for taking the unfolding UK urban crime crisis seriously:

“It is a simple fact that the majority of working-class crime is intra- and not inter-class in its choice of target, area of activity and distribution. Working-class people suffer from crime, confront daily the experience of material desperation, undergo the ravages of disorganization and competitive individualism. The ideology that plays on this—bourgeois ideology—contains an element of truth, and touches on the genuine interests of the class—albeit in a distorted fashion.”

Hence, moral indignation about crime is connected to everyday experiences of injustice, inequality and exploitation and is not simply a ‘problem of mis-categorization and concomitant moral panics’ (Young, 1975: 89, 1979). An emergent left realism viewed ‘moral panic’ as a hindrance to critical analysis and the politics of hard knowledge.

Left Realism

In the ‘left realist’ manifesto ‘What Is to Be Done about Law and Order’, Lea and Young (1984; see also Kinsey et al., 1986; Young, 1983) condemned what they defined

as the ‘left idealist’ ‘moral panic theory of crime’ (1984: 31) that viewed the rising crime rate as a fabrication:

Left idealism saw the official crime rate as used — intentionally or otherwise — by powerful groups such as the police and the media to create a ‘moral panic’, to mislead the public as to the real social problems they faced, and to divert attention away from the crimes of the powerful — including the police — towards seeing the poor as the main threat. This served as part of a conspiracy to blame the poor for poverty and to portray the rich and powerful as the protectors of society against crime. The war against crime was seen, largely, as an ideological smokescreen behind which the police could siphon off resources in their mobilization against the working class. (Young, 1984: 115)

Lea and Young (1984: 49) argued for a ‘moral realism’ that understood that ‘the media are effective because they take real problems of everyday life and re-contextualise them in a framework which is supportive to the status quo’. The response of working class communities to predatory criminal victimization, in the form of fear, anger and a demand for punitive law and order policies was not an irrational, inappropriate, disproportionate over-reaction. For Lea and Young (1993: 264) the incredulous left idealist ‘it’s just a moral panic’ response had transformed ‘moral panic’ into a technique of neutralization that was deployed to deny the destructive impact of crime on working class communities. Liberal-left journalists were using the term in the same way and this had resulted in the under-reporting of the extent and nature of crime and anti-social behaviour in working class communities. Lea and Young also suggested that victim survey data indicated there should be a moral panic about the under-reported and under-recorded extent of violence against women and the consequences for society.

Late Modern Moral Panics

In a series of publications including *The Exclusive Society* (1999) and *The Vertigo of Late Modernity* (2007b) Young offers a noticeably Mertonian-inspired structuralist reworking of ‘moral panic’. This view is subsequently developed in publications championing

‘cultural criminology’ (Ferrell et al., 2008; Young, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, 2011). Jock Young’s initial re-engagement with ‘moral panic’ was stimulated by McRobbie and Thornton’s (1995) trenchant critique of how ‘moral panic’ had been developed and used. They argued that as an explanatory concept, ‘moral panic’ was effectively exhausted because of the transition to a multi-mediatised, fragmented popular culture in which everyone was conscious and ‘knowing’ about what a moral panic was and how it was supposed to unfold. For McRobbie and Thornton moral panics could no longer be described as discrete events, having definite beginnings, stages and ends, in which the news media promote and society embraces and enforces a moral viewpoint. Many more moral panics arise because young people desire ‘authentic’ panics about their ‘inauthentic’ youth cultures; cultural industries attempt to incite panics for commercial reasons, and pressure groups attempt to instigate panics to mobilize public outrage. However, moral panics are also contested. Media debate whether something is or is not a moral panic, with a plurality of contradictory viewpoints and agents of social control conscious about needing not to over-react. It is much more difficult to trigger moral panics because hard and fast moral boundaries between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ have broken down. Ideas of ‘conformity’, ‘public concern’ and ‘moral majority’ have altered so that much of what was once deemed to be deviance has been relativized and/or normalized. It is practically impossible for a youth subculture to shock. Media literate ‘folk devils’ desire to be recognized within the mass communication process, embracing, amplifying or defying, subverting and/or riding the wave of any media or public outrage. In such an environment, it is impossible to determine ‘real’ moral panics from ‘fake’ moral panics.

Jock Young (1999: vii) agreed with much of this critique, not least because McRobbie and Thornton were making similar points about the commercial fetishization of youth subcultures to those that he made in 1971. While Young accepted that it is now more difficult to trigger major moral panics and create folk devils, he disagreed with McRobbie and Thornton’s belief that the ‘end’ of youth subcultures meant a ‘post’ moral panic society. For him, the opposite pertained. Extreme cultural strains and sharp contradictions

ensure that we now live in the era of the ‘permanent moral panic’ (Young, 2005: 104). Moreover, Young insisted, contemporary moral panics are not misconstructions or distortions fabricated by the mass media with no connection to reality. On the contrary, the sheer number of ‘panics’ indicated, beyond sensational reporting, that raw nerves had been touched by accident or design, thereafter producing powerful social reactions:

When moral panic occurs, then, it often involves a displacement of another fear, or a mystification of a deeper threat—but it is collective panic nonetheless, and if ‘read’ carefully, can teach us much about the cultural dynamics of fear and the structural crises that underlie it. Further it can reveal the degree to which such deep crises operate on the level of meaning, symbol, and emotion. (Ferrell et al., 2008: 50).

The emotional strength of a ‘real’ late modern moral panic lies in its relationship to unprecedented structural and normative disruptions and convulsions in the post-social order. The subjects of the structural moral panic are not random: the group or event chosen as a focus of moral panic relates closely to, and is a symptom of, underlying anxieties. Not all ‘folk devils’ are arbitrarily selected as scapegoats, nor are folk devils necessarily blameless. Their behaviour can be deliberately provocative, seeking an equally intense reaction from news media and society (Young, 2011, p.253)

Critically, moral indignation continues to lie at the source of contemporary moral panics. What has changed now is the focus of the moral panic and the fact that feelings of moral indignation affect a significant percentage of the population, crossing class boundaries. Jock Young’s move to New York allowed him to see and experience this shift most clearly and associate with the sociologically explosive fall-out from the imploding American Dream. A chaotic neo-liberal class structure has been constructed out of a morally corrosive ‘money for nothing’ and ‘bait and switch’ mentality that seemingly unites the ‘unproductive’ classes—the underclass, the criminal class, the celebrity class, the uberwealthy and corporate elites. The lived experience of the squeezed working and middle employed classes consists of ‘an iron cage’ of harder work, further self-sacrifice, strict restraint and constrained rewards and opportunities. This hyper-strained, increasingly ontologically

insecure and anxious lived experience is contrasted with the seeming moral intransigence, defiance and impunity of others who live outside these constraints and pressures. What is truly significant is that mediatization ensures that we are all witnesses to the ‘dream-world’ lifestyles of the rich and famous as well as that of the ‘welfare world’ of the underclass. This ‘sets off every trigger point of fear and desire’ (Young, 2007a: 43) in a significant segment of people panicked across class boundaries about their prospects. A generalized feeling of injustice, moral indignation, resentment and ‘righteous puritanical wrath’ are channelled towards those who attempt to ‘short circuit the whole marketplace of effort and reward’ (Young, 2007a: 45). This sense of relative deprivation and anomie is heightened daily by ‘a veritable chaos of reward, where wealth is seemingly distributed willy-nilly without rhyme or reason’ (Young, 1999: 152).

The moral indignation of the ‘squeezed middle’ can focus on the outrageous unscrupulous behaviour of the wealthy as a few disgraced bankers, politicians and celebrities have found. However, for Young, the underclass remains a focal point of indignation because the middle classes are only too aware that their position in the social order is increasingly precarious amid ‘the ever present possibility of downward mobility, of a descent into the underclass, a loss of control, of dignity’ (Young, 2007a: 44). Media amplified caricatures of the underclass are the late modern folk devils ‘cast with the stigma of trouble, contamination and danger’ (Young, 2005: 104) and subject to the ‘searchlight of condemnation, the object of stigmatisation, surveillance and blame’ (Young, 2005: 104):

material and ontological precariousness is a fertile soil for projection and moralism. Social blame and recrimination ricochets throughout the social structure: single mothers, the underclass, blacks, new age travellers, junkies, crackheads—the needle spins and points to some vulnerable section of the community to whom we can apportion blame, and who can be demonised ... Each day the normative contours of our society, in chat show, soap opera, news item or sport are discussed in intimate detail. At no time in human history have so many people gazed at so many others and has every normative nuance been so measuredly scrutinized. (Young, 1999: vii, vi).

The news media know intuitively there is ‘a ready market in agitating audiences; they themselves have institutionalised moral indignation with self-righteous enthusiasm’ (2007b: 49). Consequently a defining characteristic of late modernity is ‘trial by media’ television shows which mobilize audience feelings of outrage, resentment and disgust against a cast list of morally debased ‘others’ in the attempt to shore up ‘normality’ in a world which is increasingly morally uncertain.’ Such freak shows, founded as they are on indignation, intolerance, defiance, mortification, shame, humiliation and cruelty, are a profitable form of late modern mass entertainment. Identifying dangerous individuals has also become a key activity for the popular news media as has hunting ‘for the deviant way ahead of the police, and often hold the police responsible for inadequately dealing with the case’ (Young, 1999: 115). In this context, the ‘paedophile’ has become the most feared and reviled of late modern folk devils. Consequently, for Young, late modern moral panics accomplish a considerable amount of moral work, pinpointing, hardening and legitimizing social divisions and scapegoating, while also providing vengeful ‘naming and shaming’ entertainment.

Conclusion

This essay has briefly charted Jock Young’s ambivalent relationship with the concept of ‘moral panic’. The turn to cultural criminology facilitated final reconciliation with the concept that he had pioneered in 1971, rejected by 1980 and began to use again from the late 1990s. Ferrell et al. (2008: 48) went so far as to declare that moral panic theory was ‘an essential model today for cultural criminologists and others ... moral panic theory anticipates the phenomenology of transgression and vindictiveness’ that is at the heart of cultural criminology. His return to the sociology of crime and deviance also enabled Jock Young (2009: 13) to formulate his own classic retro-definition of a moral panic that can now sit alongside that of Stan Cohen. However, for me, it is his recognition of the potency of ‘moral indignation’ (in all of its visceral manifestations like shock, resentment, outrage, injustice and righteous anger) and the issues and people that trigger such a reaction, rather

than ‘moral panic’, that unites Jock Young’s work from Notting Hill to Brooklyn Heights. If only he had written a book with the title of ‘Moral Indignation’. Equally important is Jock Young’s insistence that the social reaction to morally troubling incidents, issues and developments needs to be taken seriously and researched and understood on its own finegrained and often disconcerting terms rather than to be dismissed in a flippant, condescending fashion by academics, journalists and commentators as ‘just another moral panic’.

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