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Moral panics as decivilising processes: Towards an Eliasian approach

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Abstract:

Applying the ideas of Norbert Elias to the sociology of moral panics, this article argues that moral panics are processes of decivilisation; occurring where civilising processes break down and decivilising trends become dominant. Examining the definitions of Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994) and Stanley Cohen (2002), the article compares key characteristics of moral panics with some of the symptoms of decivilising processes as proposed by Stephen Mennell (1990). Proposing two different types of campaigns that may accompany panics – integrative campaigns to 'civilise' the 'other'; and exclusionary campaigns to isolate the 'dangerous' other – the article concludes by outlining how some of the fundamental concepts of figurational sociology can aid in our understanding of the complexities of moral panics.

Recent work on moral panics has begun to explore the relationship between moral panic and moral regulation (Critcher, 2008; Hier, 2002, 2008). Along similar lines, I argue here that the application of the work of Norbert Elias to moral panics is an additional approach, which may indeed be in accordance with this more recent rethinking of moral panics. For example, in his conceptualising of moral panics as "volatile episodes of moral regulation", Hier (2002, 2008) draws upon the work of Corrigan & Sayer (see Hier, 2002, p. 324) and Alan Hunt (see Critcher, 2008, p. 4), both of whom refer to Elias. However, this link between Elias and moral panics has yet to be fully realised: thus far, the only (brief) references to Elias in moral panics publications are to be found in Hier (2002) and Critcher (2008); the latter, in reference to the moral regulation works Hier employs. Consequently, as Hier observes, "Elias has yet to be brought into panic, yet he has a kind of ghostly presence in the literature" (personal communication, June 26, 2008).

Accordingly, I will introduce some of the similarities with moral panics and Elias's concept of decivilising processes, arguing that moral

panics might be conceptualised as short-term episodes of decivilisation; brought about by the temporary dominance of decivilising trends over civilising trends (see also Rohloff, 2007). Drawing upon the work of Cohen (2002) and of Goode & Ben-Yehuda (1994), I will compare the classic moral panics models with Elias's concept of decivilising processes (as developed by Mennell (1990) and others). Finally, I will outline some of the unique contributions an Eliasian approach can bring to moral panics theorising and research.

To understand how moral panics could fit within the framework of *de*civilising processes, we must first examine the theory of civilising processes. Norbert Elias's *The Civilising Process* (2000) traces the historical development of manners and the formation of states, and concludes by bringing these micro and macro levels of analysis together in a theory of civilising processes. Central to his argument is that "there is a connection between the long-term structural development of societies [the formation of states] and long-term changes in people's social character or personality make-up" (Mennell, 1990, p. 207).

During the formation of states a particular region attains more power; that is, a central authority grows. Through this process the 'state' gains monopolistic control over the legitimate use of violence. And so the resolution of disputes and the protection of individuals increasingly come to be seen as the state's responsibility (Pratt, 2005, p. 257). Thus, the legitimate use of violence comes to be restricted to the state and, in part through the establishment of bureaucracies, becomes increasingly hidden from the general public (along with many other functions of the state). This process is assisted by increasing specialisation and sequestration (the latter, as influenced by an increase in shame and disgust, where 'uncivilised', 'barbaric' behaviour and 'uncivilised' persons come to be removed from the public sphere and shifted "behind the scenes"). This specialisation and sequestration contributes to an increased reliance upon experts, as well as mediated knowledge. As the networks that link people together interdependently become more complex, people come to be increasingly reliant upon one another due to them becoming specialists in one field but lay persons in others. This, in turn, contributes to an increase in internal restraint, resulting from the increasing necessity for individuals to control their own impulsiveness and aggression towards

other individuals as they become increasingly reliant upon one another. This tends to contribute towards an increase in 'mutual identification' and a corresponding decrease in 'cruelty' towards others (Elias, 2000).

It is important to highlight that Elias did not regard his theory of civilising processes as being unilinear: "…often several types of change, even in opposite directions, can be observed simultaneously in the same society" (Elias, 2000, p. 450). Societies which appear to be going through civilising processes can, at times, experience episodes of decivilisation. Decivilising processes are not necessarily the opposite of civilising processes; the increase in bureaucratisation has meant that civilising processes are not so easily reversed. Rather, as has been suggested by others (for example, see Elias, 1996; Pratt, 2005), the bureaucratic nature of modern nation states has enabled civilising and decivilising trends to occur simultaneously. As Mennell and Goudsblom suggest, "[i]t is…likely that both civilising and decivilising tendencies, or pressures, are *always* present" (1998, p. 20). It is only when certain conditions arise that decivilising trends may become dominant and then we could be said to be experiencing a period of decivilisation:

> During the times of social crisis – military defeats, political revolutions, rampant inflation, soaring unemployment, separately or, as happened in Germany after the First World War, in rapid sequence – fears rise because control of social events has declined. Rising fears make it still more difficult to control events. That renders people still more susceptible to wish fantasies about means of alleviating the situation (Mennell & Goudsblom, 1998, pp. 21-22).

One indication of decivilising trends is the weakening (or perceived weakening) of the state's central authority. As a result, (some) people may come to believe that the state is no longer able to adequately protect them and settle disputes for them. This has certainly been the case in the United States, England, and other countries in regard to sex offenders: citizens may come to feel that the state cannot protect their women and children (the state may agree and respond, or merely respond regardless). As a result, several community notification laws and sex offender registries (for example, 'Megan's Law' in the United States) have been introduced and, where the community has not been legally notified, they

have formed their own lists. At times this has resulted in citizens taking the law into their own hands and forming vigilante groups to drive the (perceived to be) 'other' away (Pratt, 2002, p. 191). This may result in previously hidden state functions, such as the use of violence, becoming more visible and acceptable as the trust in the state decreases and so, for instance, punishment must be seen to be done.

A further indication is the (actual or perceived) increase in the level and incalculability of danger threatening people on a daily basis. Such danger may result in increased levels of anxiety coupled with the desperation to find any means necessary to alleviate the dangers, possibly resulting in a decrease in the 'reality congruence' (where belief systems become further removed from reality). This can result in a decrease in mutual identification, where one must employ any means possible to address the danger (Mennell, 1990).

In *The Germans* (1996) Elias showed how decivilising measures can occur during civilising processes. He outlined how decivilising trends, occurring alongside civilising trends, produce what could be termed 'uncivilised' outcomes; for example, how the increased bureaucratisation (a trend of civilising processes), combined with decivilising trends (such as a decrease in mutual identification, further advanced by not only Nazi propaganda, but also the systematic removal of the Jews), contributed to the formation of the Holocaust. As Mennell (1992, p. 249) succinctly puts it:

> That the camps were able to slaughter on such a huge scale depended on a vast social organisation, most people involved in which squeezed no triggers, turned no taps, perhaps saw no camps and set eyes upon few victims. They sat, like Adolf Eichmann…in a highly controlled manner at desks, working out railway timetables…The Jews were first removed ('behind the scenes') to ghettos, breaking their personal contact with their non-Jewish neighbours. Then, under the official pretext of 'resettlement in the east', they were removed to transit camps, labour camps, and finally extermination camps. Significantly, all the *extermination* camps were outside Germany itself…

Similarly, adopting an Eliasian approach Pratt (2002, 2005) shows historically how civilising and decivilising trends have occurred alongside one another to produce current penal trends which, in the past,

would have been termed ‘uncivilised’. He argues that there are civilising trends of increasing globalisation and technisation (including communication), resulting in an increasing strengthening of interdependencies (reliance upon others) and a corresponding increase in tolerance towards others. However, Pratt argues that civilising trends, such as globalisation, have also contributed to decivilising trends, such as a weakening of the nation-state. In addition, increased technological advances have contributed to an increase in risk-profiling and risk-assessment, as well as the general broadcasting of risks. This has resulted in a perceived increase in the level of danger. The weakening, or withdrawing, of the state has reduced its monopolistic ability to protect individuals from these newfound risks and dangers. Thus, protection has increasingly become the responsibility of either individuals themselves or private security firms. This has resulted, it is suggested, in the creation of a less tolerant society – one of zero tolerance – where such penal developments as: the rise of ‘super max’ prisons; the development of sex offender registries; and the introduction (or reintroduction) of shaming punishments, have occurred (Pratt, 2005).

How, then, does this relate to moral panics? Moral panics are defined as processes whereby a real, or imagined, social problem becomes highlighted, or manufactured. The problem may be seen as a threat to ‘traditional’ values and morals. The mass media and other channels of communication (sometimes incorporating rumour and urban legends) may typify and stereotype the problem, potentially creating folk devils in the process; folk devils (‘they’) that ‘we’ may come to feel we need protecting from; or, rather, others may claim we need protecting from. Moral entrepreneurs and others claiming to speak on behalf of ‘the public’, along with the media, may further disproportionately extrapolate the problem and propose (sometimes extreme) measures as solutions to the problem that must be dealt with “before it is too late”. As a result, new laws may be implemented, some of which may survive even once moral panics have faded away (Cohen, 2002).

The opening sentence of Stanley Cohen’s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* reads as follows: “Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic” (Cohen, 2002, p. 1). To word it another way, perhaps, those societies appearing to be predominantly following trends of civilising processes can experience, from time to time, periods

of decivilisation. This comparison between moral panics and decivilising processes (as summarised in Table 1) can be outlined as follows:

Table 1: Possible symptoms/outcomes of moral panics as compared directly with those of decivilising processes[1]

MORAL PANICS	DECIVILISING PROCESSES[2]
Initial concern, possibly symptomatic of other underlying anxieties	Perceived, or actual, weakening or inaction of central state authority
Disproportionality	Perceived, or actual, increase in danger; increased incalculability of danger, precipitated by experts – a direct outcome of increased specialisation and differentiation (characteristic of civilising processes[3])
Creation of folk devils; the 'other'	Decrease in mutual identification; increase in cruelty
Decrease in degree of rational decision making in terms of logically and critically assessing the reality of the situation and the suitability of proposed solutions Increase in emotional involvement and/or influence of public opinion upon decision-making	Increase in fantasy content; decrease in reality congruence; increase in susceptibility to wish fantasies Freer expression of emotions
Emergence of 'law and order society'; decrease in state's monopoly over power; taking law into own hands	Re-emergence of violence into public sphere; freer expression of individual aggression

1. Moral panics cannot be generated unless there *appears* to be a degree of concern over a real or imagined threat. For this to occur there must exist the *perception* that governmental organisations – for example: Police, Corrections, Justice, Courts – are either unwilling or unable, at present, to alleviate the problem; that is, the state's

[1] It is important to note that decivilising processes and moral panics are not unilinear
[2] Several of the terms in this column have been borrowed from Mennell (1990, p. 206)
[3] This is just one characteristic of civilising processes that could potentially enable decivilising trends to occur

central authority is seen as being weak, or weakened, in regard to the particular problem.

2. During moral panics, through various means, the problem may become amplified and exaggerated; Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) notion of 'disproportionality'. An outcome of the civilising process itself may aid in this development: increased bureaucratisation, specialisation and differentiation means that every person becomes a lay person except for in their chosen area(s) of specialisation. This process of expertisation entails a great deal of trust; trust that the expert information one receives is valid (Giddens, 1990, 1991). Where the expertisation of knowledge coincides with a monopolisation of knowledge, there may exist the potential for the exaggeration, distortion or invention of claims. If there exists only limited, or mediated, access to such knowledge, it may be increasingly possible for moral panics to "take off" – there may not exist the opportunity for alternative sources of knowledge to be created and communicated, and so danger may come to be seen as greater than it actually is. Alternatively, where there exists doubt in expert systems of knowledge, and where there exists more readily accessible media, both to create and disseminate knowledge, there may occur a rejection of expert knowledge for 'alternative' knowledges, or alternative explanations. Indeed, the awareness of uncritical 'belief' in expert systems may lead to increased scepticism towards claims. This may contribute to failed panics or the 'denial' of social problems (for example, see McRobbie & Thornton, 1995; Ungar, 2001). Paradoxically, this too can make the level of danger threatening people in their daily lives increasingly incalculable (see also Rohloff, 2008).
3. The mass media, moral entrepreneurs, and other experts may also contribute to the stereotyping of the problem and, in the process, assist in the creation of folk devils. During this process, folk devils may come to be increasingly dehumanised and seen as the 'other'; where there occurs a decrease in mutual identification between the folk devils and 'the rest of us'. This decrease in mutual identification makes it increasingly possible for more 'cruel' measures to be used in these exceptional times.
4. The mass media, moral entrepreneurs, and other experts may call on various means to alleviate the problem, however unrealistic, inappropriate or misdirected. It is here that we may witness an increase in the 'fantasy content' and a decrease in the 'reality congruence' – where, due to the inherent increased "involvement" during such crises, advocates, interest groups and policy makers may be more susceptible to 'wish fantasies' about means to alleviating

the identified problem. This is not to say that the "problem" may not be a reality. However, the difficulty for those involved in the panic to "step back" and take a more detached, informed approach to the problem, may result in unrealistic solutions proposed, which may, indeed, further contribute to the problem.

5. Moral panics (or decivilising trends) may contribute to the development of a 'law-and-order society', where the state must use extreme measures, such as the temporary abandonment of the types of civil liberties that would usually be celebrated, and prepare itself for the 'iron times' that lie ahead (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, pp. 322-323). Conversely, some may be of the belief that the state may not 'stamp down' on the problem as desired. In such situations, we may see the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere; for example, vigilantism.

It is important to reiterate that the above conditions are not necessarily representative of widespread behaviour or belief. Central to a figurational approach is that "society" and "people" are not reified as a single monolithic entity. Instead, figurationalists conceptualise research as the investigation of relations *between* interdependent individuals, who together form figurations; societies *of* individuals (see Elias, 1978).

Having illustrated that moral panics might be conceptualised as decivilising processes, let us now examine two different types of campaigns, which might occur during times of crisis, during moral panics. In accordance with Hier's (2002, 2008) approach, moral panics might be conceptualised as crises in the 'civilising' of the self and the other; where attempts to bring about changes in behaviour may seen to be failing (at least with some groups), or where a drastic change in behaviour may be seen to be required in order to address a potential crisis.

It is during such "crises" that we may witness civilising offensives: more explicit campaigns to bring about changes in behaviour. Examples might include campaigns against smoking (including both the dangers to the self of smoking, and the dangers to/from the other via second-hand smoke), as well as campaigns that seek to avert global warming by calling for an increase in self-restraint towards behaviour that is believed to contribute to carbon emissions (and anthropogenic climate change; see Rohloff, 2008). Alternatively, where the identified "problem" behaviour

is seen as endemic and unchangeable, we may witness attempts to isolate the "uncivilised" other. This may be in the form of sequestration via incarceration or deportation, or, in more extreme cases, extermination.

What is needed here is an investigation into how and why these different types of responses develop. Perhaps the figurational approach may prove of some use in this regard. The emphasis upon 'societies' being composed of figurations of *interdependent* individuals, along with the accompanying focus on changing power relations (see Elias, 1978), may help to illustrate this. For instance, the more interdependence there exists between 'us' and 'them', and the more even the power ratios, the more likely it may be that campaigns may take the form of a civilising offensive; more inclusive campaigns, seeking to make 'them' like 'us'. Whereas the less the interdependence and the greater the imbalance in power ratios, the more likely there would be exclusionary campaigns; particularly in times of crisis (Elias's concept of "established-outsider relations" may prove of some use here; see Elias & Scotson, 1994). This is notably evident in the work of Ungar (2001) and McRobbie &Thornton (1995), both of whom argue that power ratios between groups are becoming more even and, consequently, folk devils are becoming increasingly more difficult to create; "'folk devils' are less marginalised than they once were" (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 559).

Importantly, the analysis of moral panics should not be limited to the study of short-term campaigns (see Rohloff & Wright, 2008). It is in this regard that figurational studies' focus on the formation of habitus and its relationship to the formation of states may also prove insightful. The relationship between those who create and enforce the campaign, and those who are on the receiving end, is a complex one, and it is one that has developed over time. The relationships between the self-identified groups – 'us' and 'them' – does not begin with moral panics; it is something that has been developing and changing over time. Therefore, bringing the historical component of figurational sociology, along with the concepts of "figurations", "habitus", and "power ratios", may aid in future research and theorising of moral panics.

To conclude, this preliminary investigation has illustrated that the concept of moral panics, with some revision, appears to be compatible with Elias's theory of civilising and decivilising processes. Moral panics

could possibly be seen as decivilising trends arising alongside, and partly as a result of, civilising processes. The approach of figurational sociology in general, and its characteristic concepts and research focuses, may prove highly influential for the development of moral panics. Time will tell how successful this approach may be and how receptive the sociology of moral panics will be to Eliasian sociology.

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