The word ‘scandal’ sometimes refers to a scandalous offence, to a transgression that invites a judgement of moral opprobrium. Equally scandal can refer to the response of condemnation that greets such a transgression. The study of scandals thus has two principal aspects: the incidence and aetiology of transgressions, and the responses to their disclosure. Often in talk about scandals the two are conflated (Tiffen 1999: 8–11). But there is no necessary symmetry between offence and response. The gravity of the offence is not a good guide to the intensity which the public and political response will acquire. It is the beginning of wisdom in the study of scandals to realize that the dynamics of reaction are separate from and only loosely connected with the nature of the transgressions.

A justly famous landmark in the study of social reactions is Stanley Cohen’s *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972). The case study which Cohen’s analytical scheme is built to illuminate was a rather banal series of events, beginning in Easter 1964. Some English seaside towns saw confrontations between two groups of youths – mods and rockers – distinguished by their dress and musical tastes. The outcome was some limited damage to property and some scuffles between the groups. These prosaic events were framed in melodramatic terms by the media – riot, battle, screaming mob. The extent of the damage and the numbers taking part were grossly exaggerated. The coverage was self-reinforcing. The media were scouring the beachside resorts for more examples that fitted their frame. Various incidents which probably would have been ignored by the media a year earlier, or a few years later, were now hugely newsworthy. Dire predictions of what might happen allowed the commentary to go considerably beyond reporting the facts. Comment was sought from what Cohen called socially accredited experts and right-thinking people, and these moral entrepreneurs, including politicians, further escalated the sense of crisis.

Cohen was struck by the ‘fundamentally inappropriate’ reaction of the police, the media and legislators to these minor incidents (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2013: 25). Control attempts led to more clashes; the broad publicity may have acted as a recruiting drive for other youths, while it possibly hardened the groups’ attitudes to each other.

The tendency to stereotype the youths was captured in the title – folk devils – while the other half of the title – moral panics – has become a widely used term in sociological analysis. Authors of an influential book on moral panics, Goode and Ben-Yehuda have offered a succinct definition: ‘A moral panic is the outbreak of moral concern over a supposed threat from an agent of corruption that is out of proportion to its actual danger or potential harm’ (2013: 26).
Moral Panics

The response to the mods and rockers violence was not just the disorder itself, but its larger moral significance (Best 2013: 69). To qualify as a moral panic, a phenomenon must be seen as ‘a threat to the social order itself’ (Thompson 1998: 8). The deviant conduct is viewed as symptomatic of a wider social malaise (Garland 2008: 11).

A half-century of change

Cohen’s book fed upon and further reinforced the developing discipline of the sociology of deviance. In the words of Cohen’s partner in radical criminology, Jock Young, the work of American scholars – such as Howard Becker, Albert Cohen, Erving Goffman and Kai Erikson – over the previous decade had been ‘a time of extraordinary creativity’ in the study of deviance (2009: 6). The essence of their approach is captured in an often cited quotation from Erikson: ‘Deviance is not a property inherent in certain forms of behavior; it is a property conferred upon these forms by the audiences which directly or indirectly witness them’ (1962). Or as Young himself (2009: 7) put it, deviance is a constructed category rather than some fixed essence.

Before then social problems scholars had largely taken the social labels for granted, and probed – sometimes sympathetically, sometimes judgementally – the reasons for the undesirable behaviour. Now the sociologist’s attention moved away from the actor and the nature of the act, to the audiences judging, evaluating and reacting to them. Now it was the prohibition as much as the breaking of the prohibition that needed to be explained.

The actions and motives of many social deviants were now seen not simply as pathological, but also as embracing alternative values. While previous approaches were seen as annihilating the meanings deviant people brought to their behaviour, the new approach sought to appreciate their world view. This worked best for such relatively sympathetic deviant groups as, for example, Becker’s study of marijuana-smoking jazz musicians in Outsiders (1973) and Young’s (1971) ‘participant observation’ study of marijuana use among bohemian residents in London.

Another achievement of Cohen’s book was to accord the media a central role in amplifying the attention given to deviant groups or issues. Cohen and Young followed this up with a reader (1973) on media and deviance which became one of the most widely used texts in sociology.

So the book was conceived (in the second half of the 1960s) at a time when sociology was in great ferment. Beyond deviance, the sociology of knowledge, perhaps best marked by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s The Social Construction of Reality (1966), was changing approaches throughout the discipline. Apart from theoretical excitement, this was a period of huge increases in sociology enrolments (and hence also in staffing positions) throughout the Western world.

Cohen’s book is therefore a product of its time, but many of that time’s key social features only became clearly visible in retrospect. It was written at a pivotal moment with a cracking religious hegemony and the emergence of youth culture. The basis for that youth culture was the prolonged adolescence brought on by teenagers spending much longer in education than previous generations. Both of these were made possible by the onset of what J. K. Galbraith called the ‘affluent society’.

As the economic historian Angus Maddison (1995) has documented, the years from the late 1940s to 1973 were the period of the greatest economic growth in history. Moreover, in many Western countries it was a time of tangible improvement in the quality of life. More people owned their own homes than ever before. They were the first generation in which the benefits of having a car, a washing machine and a television were widely diffused. While their parents had grown up in times of depression and war, the youth of the 1960s took affluence for granted.
Although in subsequent generations new youth cultures provoked new sets of outrage – and indeed from Bill Haley and Elvis Presley on, youth cultures often sought to shock and provoke older generations as a marketing ploy (Garland 2008: 13) – it is plausible that the later ones did not generate such widespread moral panics.

As Garland (2008: 17) points out, the mid-1960s when Cohen was developing his theories of moral panics, a relatively cohesive establishment and a narrowly focused mass media could give the impression of a unified public reaction. The growing secularization of society and the greater cultural pluralism meant that attitudes to some types of social deviance changed and became more varied.

An area that the sociology of deviance illuminated, and that was a frequent source of scandal, was victimless crimes. This has seen considerable reform in the decades since. Victimless crimes should more accurately be called crimes without a complainant, as – in contrast for example to the victim of a robbery – there is often no-one willing or able to report them, and this is the key factor affecting their policing.

Traditionally, victimless crimes – including abortion, prostitution, illegal drugs, illegal gambling, restrictions on alcohol consumption and homosexuality – were the most prolific area for institutionalized police corruption (Morris and Hawkins 1970). They were areas where a strong constituency, often religious, sought to enforce personal moral standards through legislation but where outlawing the activity or substance did not stop the demand for it. Even when there existed a strong will to do so, police found these types of crime almost impossible to eradicate. These laws were expensive to enforce, and typically the high expense only delivered limited effectiveness.

The legal prohibition greatly increased the prices that could be charged, so the supply of illicit goods and services typically provided a lucrative industry for the criminal organizations involved. Cosy and mutually profitable arrangements with the police, aimed at containment, often replaced normal law enforcement. Prosecution was marked by a high degree of inconsistency, sometimes subject to the payment of bribes and even police partisanship for favoured criminals against their rivals.

In the decades since the 1960s, in different countries at different times, corruption in these areas – and hence the number of scandals – has been reduced principally through legal liberalization. Opportunities for legal gambling and consumption of alcohol have been greatly increased. Policies regarding prostitution have become more flexible. Homosexuality – where some of the worst instances of police entrapment and blackmail occurred – is no longer a crime in Western societies; indeed many countries now have marriage equality, symbolizing the official acceptance of gay relationships. Coalitions – often tacit – of civil liberties groups, of those concerned with reducing corruption, and those who saw a business opportunity in a legalized market encouraged liberalization. The old tendency to generate moral scandals/panics in these areas has given way to policy pragmatism.

There are some areas where restrictive laws are still in force, including most significantly illegal drugs. Even here though attitudes seem to be changing. Young (2008: 5) in his study of drug takers in the 1960s thought that the moral panic was not against drugs per se, but against a hippie culture that proposed extravagant levels of hedonism and opposition to the values of work and discipline. The narratives surrounding drug taking now though are less about opposition to illicit pleasures and more about addiction and crime.

Four unresolved epistemological issues

Cohen’s case study and analytical framework were a perfect fit – its major lines of argument were coherent and persuasive. The strengths of the original study, though, conceal some...
unresolved issues which became more important as scholars have sought to use moral panics as a general model.

An inbuilt pejorative judgement

To label something a moral panic is not just to say it is socially constructed, but also that the constructed reality is wrong. Since the advent of the sociology of knowledge, there have been recurring issues about people wanting to embrace constructivist relativism, but also wanting to assert counter-judgements, to critique the prevailing social reality. It is probably impossible for anyone to live consistently within relativist assumptions, nor for anyone to assume that all realities have equal validity. Molotch and Lester (1974), for example, began their influential article unpromisingly by suggesting we suspend our belief in an objective world. It makes a considerable difference, though, whether the socially constructed weather forecast conforms to the subsequent weather.

Moral panic is a term that only outsiders, and critical outsiders – not those who are involved in mobilizing the ‘panic’, or who are sympathetic to it – will use. This negative judgement is too easy to assume rather than argue through, and leaves unaddressed any good values that the reaction may be manifesting.

Perhaps ironically, the inbuilt negative judgement means that the term can be used as part of a strategy to contain a scandal. Horsfield (1997) found that following the issue of clergy sexual abuse in Australia in 1992, church leaders used a moral panic paradigm to defuse the revelations and to suppress the experiences of lay people who had suffered.

Can there be a ‘good’ moral panic (Wright Monod 2017)? The original idea conjoined two dimensions, which do not necessarily go together: (1) an unrealistic sense of threat, plus (2) the irrationality of the response. Sometimes the urgency of the threat or problem may be real, but a panic response is ineffective in countering it. The sense of panic may make things worse, as can happen during a fire in a crowded theatre, when casualties are also caused by the trampling of people in their desire to escape. Conversely, the sense of threat may be exaggerated, but the response well directed. It is sometimes claimed that public health authorities have exaggerated the threat of a pandemic, but the preventative measures then taken have effectively reduced the spread of the threat. A similar example was the intense and some said overly sensational ‘Grim Reaper’ advertising campaign in Australia in the late 1980s to combat HIV/AIDS (Gorman 2016). This featured a giant bowling ball knocking people over in a campaign that cost the government more than $3 million. However, it was part of generating a sense of urgency that arguably helped Australia’s relatively effective response to the AIDS threat.

Failing to address issues in judging proportionality

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2013) argue that disproportionality is the key feature of a moral panic. Proportionality is often the most contentious issue in news coverage of scandals. It does not involve issues of accuracy in a narrow sense but rather judgements about the amount of coverage and the degree of intensity that the scandal assumes.

Issues of proportion cannot be arbitrated according to some absolute standard. This issue was first crystallized for me when visiting Thailand after a right-wing military coup in 1976. There was much resentment among conservative Thais at what they saw as the liberal, left-wing bias of the Western media covering the coup. One contentious issue concerned the killing of 29 student demonstrators at Thammasat University. The critics did not dispute the accuracy of the reports of the killings but rather that they had received too much attention. But what
was the right amount of attention that such an event deserved? The answer will depend at least partly on the values of the observer.

Garland (2008) cited the case of Philip Jenkins, a moral panic scholar, who began a study of child pornography on the internet, intending to portray it as a moral panic. Instead his investigation led him to the opposite view, that it was an authentic and awful problem that had rather received too little attention.

The disproportion in the responses to mods and rockers in Cohen’s original study is all too evident. But the theory as first constructed offers no guide for judging proportionality, and few people using it since have made any progress in what precise criteria may help in doing so.

**Presuming rather than demonstrating consensus**

Cohen was impressed by the degree of consensus in responding to the mods and rockers moral panic, that politicians, press, experts and public opinion were all pressing in the same direction. It may be that there is less consensus on such issues now, but more fundamentally the degree of consensus needs to be traced empirically.

It is particularly hard to gauge consensus because media often act as if they are speaking for the public, when their views are in fact not widely shared. It is a fallacy to mistake vocal opinion for public opinion. How widely shared are the views of the loudest voices?

With the greater cultural pluralism in contemporary societies, and the rise of more sectarian journalism, especially promoting right-wing populist agendas, there are more likely to be contested panics. Indeed ‘culture wars’ have become part of contemporary politics and media, and among conservative media these are marked by attempts to manufacture ‘moral panics’, to mobilize outrage against those on the other side of the political spectrum. An annual feature at America’s Fox News is the ‘War on Christmas’, where Fox blows up ‘typically insignificant local incidents into nationwide controversies’. In December 2010 Fox reported that an elementary school in Florida had banned ‘traditional Christmas colours’. Several programmes covered the story, but no-one called the school district – the entire story was a lie; all the bluster and outrage had no basis. In December 2012, *The O’Reilly Factor* devoted more than three times as much airtime to the ‘War on Christmas’ as it did to actual wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya and Gaza (Tiffen 2014: 240). The confected outrage rarely reaches beyond Fox’s own narrow constituency.

**Resorting to invisible explanatory factors**

A recurring theme through the moral panic literature is the strong indignation towards the deviant behaviour. Cohen and Young, building most immediately on the work of Albert Cohen, posit the idea that self-restraint and self-discipline create resentments that lead to ‘righteous puritanical wrath’ (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2013: 29).

For Garland, the ‘psychoanalytic aspects – the symptomatic character of panics, the projective nature of folk devil construction, the social and psychic conflicts that underlie these processes – are relatively straightforward’. He argues that ‘a specific group of deviants is singled out for “folk devil” status, in large part, because it possesses characteristics that make it a suitable screen upon which society can project sentiments of guilt and ambivalence’ (2008: 18, 15).

To some extent, this emphasis on the psychoanalytic roots of socially aggressive attitudes recalls the work on seeking to explain the appeals of fascism through the authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1950), a body of work criticized for its ahistorical nature and for its psychologizing and reductionist approach to macro-social phenomena, and which is now largely abandoned.
Cohen (2011: 13) offers a somewhat different emphasis when he argues that ‘a moral panic does not occur when hegemony is successful, but rather when it is in crisis’. Then, he says, the moral panic is proportionate to the anxiety not to the actual event.

The propositions that moral panics reflect cultural anxiety, and that moral panics are proportionate to the anxiety, are all but unverifiable. It is not obvious, especially given later developments, that in the prosperous 1960s hegemony was in crisis, and it would be interesting to know in what recent periods Cohen thought hegemony was most successful.

However plausible different people find these arguments, little evidence is produced to support them. While the sociological imagination should not be confined to what is easily researched, neither should scholars be content with making broad assertions with no attempt to argue in detail for them.

Cohen’s book was originally prized for the new insights it offered, but since then a research genre has been built around moral panics. Now that it is a mature research and analytical paradigm, we need to ask whether it has been a fruitful orthodoxy. What research achievements and traditions has it produced? How well does it extend to areas beyond its original concerns? At best the result is mixed, as the following two examples show.

Hunt compiled an ‘assemblage’ of moral panics centred on health threats. He writes about tobacco thus (2013: 63):

The whole field of smoking is hegemonized by the powerful discourses of health . . . There is a persistent moral aspect to the idea that the smoker needs to be segregated from the virtuous non-smoker. This moralization is explicit in the degradation ceremonies daily imposed on smokers as they are forced to stand outside their places of work or recreation in order to demonstrate their failings to all who pass by. These prohibitions were given the most profound impetus through the “discovery” of second-hand or passive smoking that transformed the cigarette from an object of pleasure and attraction to a symbol of personal disregard for the health of others and thus a sign of personal weakness.

There are two notable features of this passage. The first is that although there are many (problematic) empirical propositions it is an evidence-free zone. It makes several claims about motives and perceptions and effects without any supporting data. The second is the way it imposes moral panic frames on actions, without considering others. Are they ‘degradation ceremonies’ or is this simply the only practical way to give people smoke-free work places? It is curious that the author puts quotation marks around the ‘discovery’ of the dangers of passive smoking. Does he deny the science?

Furedi (2015: 208), like Garland (2008: 17), in his article ‘The Moral Crusade against Paedophilia’ believes the ‘panic over child abuse’ is an example of a ‘genuine moral panic’. He thinks it has become a ‘permanent panic’, and takes as a precedent for such an ongoing moral anxiety the fear of witchcraft and hence demonology in earlier centuries. He argues that exaggerating the prevalence of the dangers of paedophilia to children has led to an enveloping mistrust of adults working with them. He concludes that ‘arguably, the permanent moral crusade against paedophilia bears comparison with the targeting of witchcraft in the early modern era’ (2015: 210).

There are less than subtle differences between witches and paedophiles. Witches in the Western world did not have victims; the victims of paedophilia often had their lives ruined as a result of the abuse they suffered. People punished for being witches were innocent; the overwhelming bulk of people convicted of paedophilia are guilty. Witches were tried by primitive
methods ruled by superstition, such as trial by ordeal, while paedophiles are tried according to codified procedures and rules of admissible evidence. Furedi’s conclusion may have shock value, but adds nothing to analytical understanding. It suggests that on issues of moral gravity, such as paedophilia, the moral panic approach may have little to contribute.

**Conclusion: abandon the concept, continue the agenda**

*A science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost.*

(A. N. Whitehead)

Cohen, conceding that he had no objective baseline for the claim, has the ‘strong impression’ that since the mid-1990s there has been a significant increase in ‘the sheer number of new moral panics’ (2011: 239). On the other hand, Goode and Ben-Yehuda think ‘it has become increasingly difficult to stir up a traditional moral panic’ (Best 2013: 74). Altheide, reviewing the growing use of the concept not only in the scholarly literature but in the mass media, thinks ‘the range of topics associated with moral panics seems limitless’ (2009: 90). As we have seen the topics range from tobacco smoking to paedophilia, although the proliferation may simply be testimony to scholars’ capacity for conceptual stretch.

Another of the pioneers, Charles Critcher, has argued that the pervasive consciousness of risk in modern society lends itself to a moral panics approach (2015: xxx–xxxi). Others are more doubtful – ‘Risk Issues or Moral Issues’ asks Wright Monod (2017: 13), while Best ponders ‘moral panics or moral panics’ (2013: 69). Jock Young is unequivocal about the centrality of the moral dimension: ‘moral panics are moral happenings. They are not simply panics’, and they are ‘characterized by a feeling of anxiety, and emotional energy’ (2009: 13).

All political issues have emotional and moral dimensions but that does not mean that a moral panics approach is a fruitful way of understanding them all. How the media and political system respond to risks is clearly a central issue of contemporary democratic politics. Even when the risks are exaggerated, as the scholars above suggest, it does not signify a moral panic. Moreover risk has uncertainty and prediction at its core. While some risks are exaggerated, others are underestimated. ‘At the other pole [from moral panics] is the phenomenon of “denial” where the problem is the opposite – a tendency to silence [and] a pattern of under-reaction’ (Garland 2008: 26).

The range of phenomena to which the moral panics paradigm fruitfully lends itself is quite limited. The desire to extend it to a wider range of phenomena on balance has not been analytically helpful. It has generated a prolific literature on moral panics, but much of the time it seems the effort goes into making the case fit the model, rather than the model throwing new light on the case. For all the value of the original case study and theorizing, it has not generated a fruitful and cumulative research tradition.

However, the analytical concerns that animated the original studies are still pertinent. The study of scandals is the study of social reactions, and Cohen’s work points to what should be continuing concerns in the dynamics of reactions:

**Moral polarization.** Cohen argued that the social reaction stereotyped the mods and rockers, making no effort to appreciate or understand what appealed to them. Newsworthiness and moral simplicity tend to go together. In a running scandal, there often is a process of ‘othering’, of casting the offenders in a wholly negative light, where any ambiguities or compensating positive attractions are eliminated. An ongoing task for scholars of scandals is not simply to accept the stereotypes and labels used in the public controversy. Of course sometimes scandals have at their centre terrible villains, but nevertheless probing stereotypes and value judgements should always be part of the analysis.
Moral entrepreneurs. A central part of Cohen’s analysis was the way that various ‘moral entrepreneurs’ fanned the reaction. The publicity interests and strategies of those promoting condemnation and outrage should always be examined. Sometimes they will be heroic; sometimes they are driven by self-interested ulterior motives. There are occasions when there is political kudos and no immediate, tangible costs for inflating a problem, where judgements of newsworthiness and political expedience push in the same direction.

Prevalence and proportion in media coverage. The disproportion in media coverage of the mods and rockers was obvious. It was a telling demonstration that media attention does not follow actual trends in a problem’s incidence, but rather that the social reaction follows its own peculiar dynamics affected by changing newsworthiness and the mobilization of concerned groups. Factors shaping the volatility of news coverage should be a central concern in the study of scandals.

News concentrates on the reporting of particular actions. There are many disciplines in news reporting about individuals and individual events, but there are far fewer when they are making generalizations. Anomalously, to say a specific police officer is corrupt may be defamatory and enormous care would be needed before making such a claim. But to say the police force is full of corrupt officers means no-one can sue for defamation. Similarly often there are few authoritative statistics about a phenomenon’s prevalence, and the vacuum is filled by self-interested projections.

Policy ‘solutions’. Cohen was struck by the inappropriate and counter-productive responses to the mods and rockers. The analyst must always critically probe responses to scandals – whether the punishment of individual offenders or of policy reforms to stop future abuses. Even when the problem may be acute, and the need for action clear and urgent, remedial actions can have unintended consequences.

The aim may be less substantive than symbolic, as Gusfield’s (1963) work on the status politics of the American temperance movement so eloquently demonstrated. McConnell (2010) distinguishes between programme success (how well the policy achieves the objectives of policymakers) and political success (whether it provides political and electoral benefits for the government). The success of the Reagan administration’s war on drugs was more political than programme, but perhaps its framers always thought it would be.

Cohen’s work on moral panics is properly celebrated as a landmark study on media and scandals. It has been endlessly cited by others since, and has inspired many studies and social commentaries using the central concepts. Nevertheless when used outside situations like the one that inspired it, the theory of moral panic has intrinsic problems. The concerns it raised are enduring and these should be pursued in their own right.

References


