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MORAL PANIC OR MORAL ACTION?

THE APPROPRIATION OF MORAL PANICS IN THE EXERCISE OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Cohen's early work on moral panics has been influential. Its influence, however, has not necessarily been through direct knowledge and adaptation of his work. Rather it has been through the usefulness of the concept of moral panic in reinforcing and extending a traditional view of media function, namely that the media create deviant behaviour by publicising incidents, amplifying their potency, and triggering off a contagion effect. This view of media effect then serves a particular view of social control and resistance.

A number of questions can be raised about the concept of moral panics, its application in particular social situation, and its application to particular media-related events. One is whether developments in media theory since Cohen published his model have rendered his model outdated and generally inadequate. A second ground of question is political. The model creates the possibility of normalising and legitimising the governing classes in society and de-legitimising those who hold alternative positions or experiences by branding them as 'deviant' and associating them with 'panic' behaviour. Because of this, I propose, the model is frequently invoked by those in positions of power in society and in situations where it doesn't apply, in order to discount and defuse legitimate challenges to their power.

I will explore this in relation to the particular case of the public controversy that followed the ABC *Compass* program, 'The Ultimate Betrayal,' which in 1992 brought to public awareness in a dramatic way the occurrence of sexual abuse within churches, a situation that closely fits Cohen's criteria of a moral panic. The dominant response of those who represented institutional interests

in this challenge, particularly male church-leaders, was to dismiss the reaction by portraying it as a panic, without any substance in social reality. I propose that a more thorough consideration of the situation negates that interpretation and raises questions about the political uses of Cohen's model to explain similar occurrences of social reaction.

I propose that what occurred in 1992 should be seen, not as a moral panic but as a breaking of a political silence, resulting in the coherence of a previously suppressed common social experience and the stimulation of significant and legitimate social resistance and moral action. Three things in particular prejudice Cohen's analysis.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'DEVIANCE'

The concept of deviance is central to Cohen's analysis. Cohen attempts to distance himself from the canonical tradition which sees referents such as deviance as accepted, given and unquestionable, and from the position that sees deviance as the justification for structures of social control. His intent was to indicate that alternatives to the dominant social order should not automatically be discounted. But a problem remains in that the model of moral panics requires a structure of norm and deviance as a hermeneutical device. 'Deviance,' Cohen proposes, 'is stabilised as an artefact of social control ... (this is) potentially a richer premise for studying deviance in modern society: that social control leads to deviance.'

His attempts to refine the meaning of deviance, however, do not overcome the structural problem of positioning one group as deviant and the other as normative, and

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the political implications of that positioning – the construct of deviance remains long after the qualifications of deviance are forgotten. Being able to position someone as deviant, even if by innuendo, can be a powerful political device to deflect and diminish the legitimacy of challenges by those whose experiences or world-view do not correspond to those of the dominant classes.

THE CONCEPT OF 'PANICS'

A similar structural problem occurs in Cohen's associations of the term 'moral panics'. He begins his book with a working definition of moral panics:

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. 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 stylised and stereotypical fashion ... ; the moral barricades are manned ... ; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible (Cohen 1972, 9).

But words mean more than their formal definitions – they carry meaning also by virtue of their social history, common uses and associations. The word 'panic' does not have positive social connotations. Psychologically it is associated with being out of control or acting irrationally. Politically, the word is associated with the actions of an irrational and undirected mob in contrast to the measured and rational actions of rulers.

The concept of 'moral panics' is made more problematic by Cohen's indiscriminate associations of the term with a range of both legal and illegal activities: the drug problem, student militancy, political demonstrations, football hooliganism, vandalism of various kinds, crime and violence in general (Cohen 1972, 9). He also associates his study with studies in the field of collective behaviour, including cases of 'mass hysteria and delusion' (Cohen 1972, 11). This lack of discrimination gives no criteria by which to distinguish different kinds of mass action. This lack of clear discrimination, I suggest, encourages indiscriminate and inappropriate appropriation of his concept.

MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Cohen's development of the model reflects a view of society as relatively stable, homogenous and coherent, with a given world-view, order and experience that permeates social institutions and is accepted by all 'norm-al' (= not deviant) members of the society. The few who do not share and live by that common world–view and order are seen as threats and defined as deviants, justifying the use of various measures of social control to protect the norm.

One needs to question whether this moral coherence is as singular as Cohen represents. The view that there is an established social structure in which there are unquestionable governors and questionable deviants to that governance, belies the political reality that society is an amalgam of different and divergent realities and world-views, with order emerging not as a singular moral coherence but as a fragile balance arising out of contestation, manoeuvring, imposition, resistance, compromise and acquiescence. Part of this contestation includes attempts by various centres of power to control or access sources of information and communication, to suppress the voices of oppositional points of view, and to minimise the challenge of the disaffected or dissenting by keeping them isolated, uninformed and in-coherent. The more recent tradition of Freedom of Information legislation reflects this view of social balancing of power. With such a singular view as Cohen's model reflects, where does legitimate mass resistance or minority protest fit in?

The moral panics model also draws heavily on the effects tradition in analysing the role played by the media. Within this view, the media are seen as exercising significant influence as centres of social power outside the normal structures of social order. From this socially independent position, the media produce what Cohen calls 'deviance amplification' – the subtitle of his book is in fact *The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*.

Subsequent developments in media theory call this media effects perspective into question. It is inadequate to see media institutions and messages as somehow separate from or standing over against other institutions of social control and authority, and creating responses in the audience that

were not inherent in the first place. The whole field of audience reception studies suggest that the interaction between audiences and mediated messages is much more complex than the media influence theory which underlies the moral panic hypothesis.

Some of these reservations about the adequacy and political uses of the moral panics model are illustrated, I believe, by the eruption of the issue of sexual abuse by clergy into public awareness in 1992.

'THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL' AND ITS AFTERMATH

On 15 March 1992, the ABC Religious Programs Department telecast a one–hour program in the *Compass* series called 'The Ultimate Betrayal: Sexual Violence in the Church'. The program focused on violence and professional sexual abuse done to women and children by male church-leaders. The program reviewed some major cases of sexual abuse by clergy overseas, particularly in the United States. It then turned to Australia, describing some of the findings of Project Anna, a project of study and education around the issue of sexual violence within church communities conducted under the auspices of the Centre Against Sexual Assault at the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne. The program also interviewed a number of church-leaders on the issue and presented several cameos of situations of abuse.

The program received unusually wide national media coverage for a religious issue. I examined this coverage in detail in an earlier article, from which I have drawn the quotes and details considered here (Horsfield 1993). For more than a week, stories and articles appeared daily around the country in newspapers, magazines, on radio and television. There were three major points of focus in the earliest reports of the program. One was a comment made by an educator-advocate from CASA House, questioning whether the church was a safe place for women. The second was a comment made by a male theologian suggesting that the percentage of clergy in Australia involved in sexual misbehaviour of some sort could be as high as 15%. The third was the reporting of initial official responses from church-leaders to the program and its allegations.

As the week went on, there was further exploration of the issue with further responses from church-leaders, including a counter-attack by one of the church-leaders on the allegations made in the program and the motivation behind them (*Courier Mail* 16/3/92). Further background work was presented on the issue overseas, with comparisons made to the Australian situation. There was also consideration of the effects of such abuse on the women involved, with reporting of first-hand stories and comments from 'experts' working in related areas.

The intensity of publicity given to the issue in that one week has not been repeated. However, through this explosion of publicity, the issue was placed on the public agenda. Since then there has been a steady parade of stories and allegations in public media about various aspects of sexual misbehaviour by clergy: including an Irish bishop who had secretly fathered several children, paedophile priests, adulterous clergy, and sexual and physical abuse of children in church orphanages and agencies.

THE SUGGESTION OF A MORAL PANIC

The initial breaking of the issue and the response it produced in 1992 would appear to qualify as a moral panic according to Cohen's definition. The reactions and comments made by male church-leaders in the week-long controversy that followed – which included denial of the extent of the abuse that had been reported, claims of media exaggeration and amplification, and strong affirmation of the integrity of church governance (Horsfield 1993) – suggest that the model of a moral panic was an influential one, whether consciously or unconsciously, in male church-leaders' understanding of what was happening and in shaping how they responded to it.

It is a common tactic for those in positions of leadership in social institutions who are given the responsibility of managing situations described by Cohen as moral panics, to adopt the public demeanour of calm father figures managing the irrational outburst of an adolescent – once the emotion subsides, it is assumed, the panic will go away. This was apparent in the reaction of church-leaders. None showed outrage at the prospect that some of their

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clergy could be misusing their positions by sexually abusing people placed under their pastoral care. All male church-leaders spoke calmly as if there was no social reality to what was being said and, if there was, it was being properly managed – a common public relations damage control strategy. The public persona of church-leaders was one of rational and apparently informed calm in the face of what was construed as an irrational and unfounded mob response (Murray 1992a, 1992b, Gagliardi 1992).

Most church-leaders attempted to give the impression that there was no social reality underlying the allegations (eg Baxter 1992). All the male church-leaders acknowledged that the issue occasionally emerges, but portrayed the figure of 15% of clergy involved as fanciful. When it did occur, they said, the problem was dealt with seriously and with concern for those involved. They also affirmed the integrity of the vast majority of clergy. Common among these was the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, who said in a press release that the figure 'is totally at variance with my twenty years experience as a bishop. In my dealings with both clergy and church members the kind of matter raised is extremely rare' (Anglican Press Service 1992). The one exception to this was the only woman church leader quoted, who said that 'sexual offences committed by clergymen in the Uniting Church were as frequent as sexual offences committed in the wider community' and 'we are talking abut a very serious problem' (Kirk 1992).

When explaining the widespread publicity and public interest that had followed the program, most church-leaders drew explicitly or implicitly on the concept of 'deviance amplification' to explain it. The ABC, as producer of the program in the first instance, was a central target in this criticism. (Father) James Murray, religion writer for the *Australian*, wrote that 'it (the program) relies so much on innuendo and quasi-accusation as to question the motivation of the program itself' (Murray 1992a). The archbishop of Brisbane also attacked the program as 'appalling and sensationalist'. He publicly questioned the motivation behind the program and demanded that the ABC broadcast an apology to all clergy in Australia for calling their integrity and good work into question (Gagliardi 1992).

The moral panics model assumes the position of deviants as those presenting this 'threat to societal values and interests'. Who were the deviants in this issue of clergy sexual abuse? This identification has changed. In the first instance the ABC was targeted, but particularly 'feminists' within the ABC. James Murray in the *Australian* wrote, 'The presentation seems ill-conceived and made in response to those more feminist agendas to which the ABC, or certain members of its staff, seem so committed (Murray 1992a).

As the issue has progressed, other deviants have been proposed in various ways and contexts. The women who were speaking out with complaints were demonised for going public with matters that, it was said, had no substance and should have been dealt with privately within their churches (Morey 1988). The male theologian was attacked as being sensationalist and disloyal to his church and calling (Horsfield 1993). Women identified as 'feminists', particularly within the Centres Against Sexual Assault, Survivors' Support Groups, and those 'pushing the agenda' of domestic violence and sexual harassment, were also accused of trying to undermine churches and stirring up Christian women to take action against churches that they otherwise wouldn't have taken (Horsfield 1993).

The gendering of the concept of deviance in this particular issue is apparent. Even though the behaviour being named clearly contradicted formal expectations of behaviour for clergy, women bringing complaints of sexual abuse have found it extremely difficult to gain appropriate recognition of the abuse they have suffered and to receive appropriate redress for it (Fortune 1989). Mythologies of women's complicity or responsibility for their own assault, even as children, have served as powerful constraints against women naming violent actions appropriately and gaining an effective and just response. The act of speaking out about what has happened to them has often been seen as the deviant behaviour. This was apparent in some public statements but was more common in the private responses women have received within churches (Morey 1988). This innuendo of deviance, that is encouraged by the moral panics model, still emerges for women who bring forward complaints.

It was not until male victims of clergy paedophilia began to come forward in increasing numbers that churches began to stop their denial and clergy perpetrators themselves began to be named as the real threat to 'societal values and interests'. Although women are the more common victims of abusive paedophilia, it has been incidents of male paedophilia which have attracted the greater publicity and attention.

MORAL PANIC OR MORAL ACTION?

Although this particular series of events fits Cohen's definition of a moral panic, there are a number of features which call Cohen's model into question or which highlight particular political uses that can be made of Cohen's model in situations of social resistance or political suppression.

THE VALIDATION OF THE SOCIAL REALITY

At the same time that church-leaders were denying that incidents of sexual abuse by clergy were common, an unprecedented number of women around the country were ringing Centres Against Sexual Assault after the *Compass* program to report that they had been sexually abused by a male church-leader. A media release from the Centre Against Sexual Assault in Melbourne said that in the forty hours following broadcast of the programme 'upward of 270 calls were received by 9 of the 40 sexual assault centres across Australia' and more than half of these were 'first contact calls' (CASA House 1992). A large percentage of these women reported it was the first time they had told anybody about the experience. In the 48 hours following the program, the Religious Programs Department of the ABC also received an unprecedented response of more than 50 phone calls from women who said they were a victim of clergy sexual assault and to express gratitude for the program. A common theme among the callers was that they had felt isolated in their experience The program helped them realise that they were not alone and that there were steps they could take to redress their grievances. So significant was the response that the ABC produced a follow-up to the program for the following week.

Cohen suggests that the media create moral panics by publicising the events, stimulating publicity-seeking behaviour, causing a triggering-off or contagion effect,

providing specific roles for people to adopt, and creating polarities in the community (Cohen 1972, 175-76). The media, it is proposed, create realities that aren't otherwise there. In this view, the responses of all these women were generated by the media, creating an illusion among them that what they saw or heard on various media outlets had really happened to them, even though it hadn't. A similar line of argument is sometimes put forward to explain the increase in domestic violence and sexual harassment cases after sexual harassment and domestic violence legislation was brought in. A lot of women, it is suggested, now interpret innocuous experiences or harmless, well-intentioned approaches as harassment.

Such an interpretation is, in my opinion, theoretically inadequate and succeeds only if one infantilises or creates folk devils out of women as a class. An alternative way of viewing this data is to see that the media provided information about a common experience that was different to the official version of reality, which had kept the common experience suppressed, isolated and incoherent. Myles Breen, in his response to my earlier article, proposed that the situation illustrates the 'Spiral of Silence' theory proposed by Elisabeth Nolle-Neumann, a theory that suggests that, in groups, people will remain silent about their experience and beliefs if they feel these beliefs are not held by the majority. This creates a spiral of silence – what may be a quite common experience is denied reality and appropriate moral action (Breen 1993). This understanding is supported by work done in conscious-raising groups, such as are common in feminist activism, which provide the context for more appropriate naming of women's experience than has been possible within dominant patriarchal discourses (Bowles & Duelli Klein 1986).

Similar support comes from Stewart Hoover in his ethnographically based study of the place of evangelical uses of media, such as televangelism, in the growing social and political influence of Christian evangelical groups and the new right in the USA. Hoover rejects the 'direct effects' explanation, even though many evangelical groups themselves draw on that theory and derive much of their political clout from promoting that view. 'Mass media,' Hoover

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notes, 'seem to be least effective in contexts where they must provide entirely novel ideas or beliefs, as would be the case were they ... presenting a new political agenda to a dubious audience.' That does not mean the media have no part. Rather, Hoover concludes, the influence of the evangelical broadcasters has come from providing coherence and identity to what was previously a widespread but undervalued and previously incoherent religious and political experience.

> The significance of the electronic church is not in its power to change minds and lives. Rather, it represents the transformation of the evangelical tradition itself. Religious broadcasting has helped integrate formerly isolated and dogmatic evangelicals and fundamentalists into the mainstream (Hoover 1988, 231).

I propose that it is inadequate and politically contrived to name the energy that is released by the naming and cohering of a widespread social experience (that previously has been silenced) as a 'moral panic'. One needs a more sophisticated media theory and social analysis to understand the processes by which media contribute to the construction of particular dominant discourses and the way they interact with alternative discourses. I suggest that what Cohen's model calls a 'moral panic' may well be the liberating and therapeutic release of personal and social energy, generated by the breaking of a cycle of silence.

THE IDEA OF PANIC IS DISCOUNTED
BY ITS CONTINUANCE IN OTHER SOCIAL ACTIONS

The demise of a moral panic is generally attributed to the fact that the energy of amplification is largely irrational and not based in social reality and therefore begins to subside once the initial stimulus is withdrawn. In explaining the disappearance of the Mods and Rockers phenomenon, Cohen draws on the analysis of pop historian George Melly, who sees a similar pattern in pop fads and fashions: 'What starts as revolt finishes as style-as mannerism'. Thus, Cohen notes, 'The cycle mirrors the stage of the adolescent breaking from his family, once this is through, the impetus is lost. The state is one of instant obsolescence' (1972, 201).

Certainly the intensity of the issue of clergy sexual abuse did decline in the public media after the first week. One could interpret this as support for Cohen's explanation: that once the initial impetus was over, the process followed the path of instant obsolescence. That is the impression that some church-leaders have sought to convey. The moral panics paradigm gives them a framework for the construction of that interpretation.

However, while the intensity of the publicity surrounding the issue declined in the public media after that first week, the issue continues to recur in the media. Church-leaders, whose first reaction was one of denial, have been forced to acknowledge the reality and address it within their institutions. Public statements by church-leaders reported in the media in recent years are quite different in character from those made when the issue first broke publicly. It is still, five years on, an active, disturbing and at times very disruptive issue within churches, and still erupts publicly every now and then. The figure of 15% of clergy being involved in sexual misbehaviour of some sort, which was first dismissed by some church-leaders as exaggeration (or, in Cohen's terms, amplification), has been demonstrated to be accurate, even an underestimation. A growing number of church-leaders are now acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the problem. National conferences have now been held, including the First Australian and New Zealand Conference on Sexual Exploitation by Health Professionals, Psychotherapists and Clergy, held at the University of Sydney in April 1996, linking clergy abuse within a broader social pattern of sexual abuse within all professions. Most churches in Australia have, or are drawing up, guidelines of ethical behaviour for clergy and lay leaders, establishing structures and protocols for handling complaints of sexual abuse, and requiring clergy to undergo compulsory professional education.

DIFFERENCES IN THE PUBLIC AND
PRIVATE RESPONSES OF CHURCH-LEADERS

A third reason why the concept of a moral panic is an inadequate one for applying to the issue of clergy abuse lies in the contrast between what church–leaders were doing privately while publicly invoking the model of a moral panic.

With the exception of the one female church–leader, all church–leaders quoted reacted publicly to the breaking of the story of widespread clergy abuse by denying the allegations, minimising the extent of the problem, and reassuring the public that if ever cases such as these came to light they were dealt with seriously and effectively. These appear to support the appearance that what was happening socially was, in Cohen's terms, a moral panic.

However the private responses of church–leaders were frequently quite different. The Anglican Bishop of Geelong was quoted as saying that in his two–and–a–half years as a bishop he had not dealt with one such incident, yet in smaller, less public gatherings prior to the controversy he had made a number of strong statements about the enormity of the problem of sexual violence in the church. The Archbishop of Brisbane spoke out most strongly in denying that clergy abused their positions because 'during training, clergy learn to deal with private and intimate situations'. The following day, however, he was reported as saying that 'he would meet his bishops and heads of churches to discuss improved pastoral training for clergy' (Gagliardi 1992). Other church–leaders admitted they had failed to deal adequately with the problem in the past (Dunlevy 1992) and the Uniting Church indicated that it had been working on regulations to deal with 'growing reports of sexual abuse by clergymen' (Campbell 1992).

An alternative to the moral panics model for understanding the phenomenon described by Cohen as a moral panic, may be drawn from the studies that have been, and are being, done on institutional reactions to whistleblowers and the place of media in that, particularly when the problem highlighted by the whistleblower generates a 'moral panics' reaction. Commonly in whistleblower situations, organisational leaders publicly deny the reality, and attempt to portray the whistleblower as deviant and public concern as irrational and impulsive. Yet at the same time the problem revealed by the whistleblower provides the means, and the public exposure provides the motivation, for the institution to privately remedy the situation that it has publicly denied. It is commonly found that whistleblowers frequently bring about productive change in institutions for which they receive no credit and for which they commonly suffer personally and professionally (Martin 1986).

CONCLUSION

A study of the publicity following the exposure of the issue of clergy sexual abuse in 1992 indicates that the paradigm of a moral panic was employed, consciously or unconsciously, by church–leaders as an explanatory and in some cases a management device for defusing the revelation of the sexual abusiveness of many clergy, to suppress the experiences of a significant minority of women and men in churches, and in an effort to contain the challenge which these revelations posed to the social power of the church and the leadership of the clerical class.

Some consideration of what followed, however, reveals that the moral panic explanation is inadequate, both politically and in terms of media theory, to explain what was happening. In contrast to the dominant effects model adopted by Cohen in understanding the media, this case suggests that the media in situations such as this may exert an influence by providing information about common social experiences that previously have been suppressed, and by providing the means of connection and coherence to scattered individuals and groups who previously remained disconnected and isolated from each other. This understanding may have relevance to a number of similar situations in which the model of moral panic is invoked to defuse a legitimate action of social resistance or moral action.

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