Conceptualizing Moral Panic through a Moral Economy of Harm

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Abstract

This paper explicates a critical theory of moral panic, arguing that there is an affinity to be discerned between the sociology of moral panic and the sociology of moral regulation. It is demonstrated how efforts to distance sociological investigations of moral regulation from studies of moral panic have been founded on a narrow treatment of the ways in which the latter have conceptualized panics uncritically as irrational societal overreactions stemming from some variant of 'social anxiety.' Advocating a conceptualization which attends to the complexity of ways in which human conduct is governed, explanatory importance is situated in Valverde's formulation of 'moral capital,' showing how her model not only enables a fusion between a political economy of the state and ethical subjectivity, but more crucial between panics and regulatory projects through the production of a moral economy of harm.

Introduction

Over much of the past decade, it has become commonplace in studies of moral panic to problematize the fact that, far from the restrictive confines of academe, 'moral panic' has entered the lexicon of mainstream society as well as the media. In fact, so dispersed is the conceptual imagery of the concept that, once purported to be the unintended outcome of journalistic practices, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) declare that moral panic has become a goal. The fallout of the increasingly fluid and eclectic usage

of the language and referent of moral panic has been that sociologists have cleaved on their endorsement of the analytic utility of the concept. Whilst those who have sought to employ the referent of moral panic primarily in the context of empirical investigation have tended to do so in an uncritical and indiscriminate manner (cf. Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Thompson 1998; Goode 2000; Doyle and LaCombe 2000; Tavener 2000), the result has been that those concerned with the wider field of moral regulation have rejected the utility of the moral panic concept on the grounds of its purported tendency to import a negative normative judgement pertaining to irrational societal responses stemming from some variant of 'social anxiety' (Hunt 1999; Moore and Valverde 2000).

In light of the conceptual inflation characterizing the sociological literature concerned with moral panic, and in response to the inhospitable reception of moral panic in scholarly research concerned with moral regulation, this paper conceptualizes moral panic *as a form of moral regulation*. More specifically, moral panic is formulated in terms of a critical conception of ideology which allows for the discursive [re]production of a sense of phenomenal security through a 'moral economy of harm.' Conceptualizing moral panic as an ideologico-discursive formation neither negates the fact that it may vary in its specific contents, nor that it may serve to stimulate a variety of 'moral actions' or facilitate a range of 'social functions.' Taking care to explicate what is understood as the affinity between moral panic and moral regulation, an approximation of the conceptual foundation from which moral panics derive is sought, but no attempt is made to reveal anything about the unique features of specific instances of moral panic. Expressions of the latter, it is maintained, are logged in the spatial and temporal parameters of variegated governmental configurations, susceptible to elucidation through the analytic interrogation of the social and political circumstances surrounding each panic's inception and historicity.

The Sociology of Moral Panic

In his classic study, Stanley Cohen (1972:9) explains that

> 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 stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media… Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might

produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives itself.

For Cohen, every moral panic requires the delineation of a scapegoat or 'folk devil,' an identifiable object onto which social fears and anxieties may be projected. As the personification of evil, he conceptualizes folk devils as susceptible to instant recognition as 'unambiguously unfavorable symbols' (p. 41) which are stripped of all positive characteristics and endowed with pejorative evaluations. Cohen is clear in his study of the mods and rockers phenomenon of the 1960s, however, that moral panics come about through a complex chain of social interactions involving claims makers, moral guardians and the media, set in the context of socio-political change and an ensuing climate of 'cultural ambiguity.' What this signifies for Cohen is that, although moral panics center on a particular folk devil, the locus of the panic is not the object of its symbolic resonances, not the folk devil itself. Rather, folk devils serve as the ideological embodiment of deeper anxieties, perceived of as 'a problem' only in and through social definition and construction.

Deriving from the legacy of Cohen's seminal work, the concept of moral panic has predominantly been invoked uncritically in sociological analyses to refer to 'an ideology,' a general set of ideas which are imputed to serve as the foundation for a variety of forms of collective behavior. Employing an uncritical conception of ideology, considerable theorizing on moral panic has unfolded with respect to the media, whereby moral panic has simultaneously been conceived of as a set of ideas and a form of social action brought about through a more generalized state of fear or alarm. Whilst in a practical sense human interaction can be understood simultaneously as an expression of belief and action, recent commentary has affirmed that there is an important analytic distinction to be maintained between what people think and what they do, and an even greater level of analytic care to be exercised concerning what appears in the media and what people accept as factual (cf. Ungar 2001). Disappointingly, the bulk of theorizing contained within the sociology of moral panic has conflated not only media discourse and social perception in an uncritical manner, but has failed to explore fully the relationship between social perception and collective action.

Indicative of this tendency is Victor's (1998) study of ritual child abuse, where, using Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) near-orthodox topology of 'five crucial indicators' as a foil, he defines moral panic as 'a societal response to beliefs about a threat from moral deviants [. . . which represent] a collective form of behavior characterized by suddenly increased concern and hostility in a significant segment of society' (p. 542, 543). At least two problems can be identified in this conceptualization, the first of which

involves measurement. It is a necessary assumption embedded in Victor's definition that moral panic as a collective form of behavior is presupposed by ideological formations understood to envelop 'significant segments of society,' but what exactly is implied by 'a designated segment' of society is vaguely formulated, and the point at which moral panic manifests as a form of collective action is not clear. It was this conceptual problematic that Ungar (2001:278-81) had in mind when he argued that, in the absence of any prima facie behavioral evidence of public involvement (vigilante groups, boycotts, protests), researchers have finessed the problem of tapping into public concern by using media coverage or legislative activity as a surrogate for widespread solicitude. His reasoning suggests that, because both legislative activity and the production of media reporting involve actors several steps removed from the general public, there is no direct link to be imputed between public concern and what appears in the media/legislation. Thus, although it may be conceded that Ungar is justified in his appraisal of a pattern which has come to characterize the literature, in the absence of any attention to a critical theory of ideology (or to critical media theory), his critique remains suspect – a point addressed below.

The second problem concerns the difficulty encountered when, in conflating the production and reproduction of meaning with the importance of the mobilization of collective forms of behavior in an uncritical manner, explanatory importance is (perhaps inadvertently) placed on the function, not content(s), of panic discourses. Rather than representational patterns embodying that which is ideologically normative and culturally modular, 'panics' are henceforth inferred to be embedded in the 'collective conscience' of society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994), appearing and disappearing with great regularity in the interests of the 'social control of deviance' (Victor 1998). To put this differently, the central focus is not on the contents of particular ideological formations which find points of resonance within the wider discursive community, but rather on the 'function,' 'intention' or 'purpose' of the discourse. Not only does such an emphasis on functionality serve to broaden the field of deterministic claims about a variety of folk devils in the interests of 'social cohesion' vis-a-vis the indiscriminate labeling of a variety of forms of praxis as 'moral panic,' but it simultaneously narrows the field of deterministic claims in regards to those ideologico-discursive formations which do not precipitate direct behavioral responses. In this regard, it is somewhat of an irony to reflect on the Durkheimian foundation from which such an epistemology is derived in light of Durkheim's (1895) warning that, because too often a functional explanation is invoked to explain social phenomena exclusively,

there exists a danger of substituting the causal explanation of social facts with explanations deriving from their functionality.

The problem of the indiscriminate use of moral panic is only confounded by the realization that, since the mid 1980s a parallel ascendancy in usage of the concept has been observed in the mainstream media. Hunt (1997), for example, informs us that as of 1989 FT Profile listed eleven variations on the usage of moral panic in the national press in Britain, escalating to eighty-nine by 1993. Pointing to its wide-ranging application to everything from crowd violence at football matches to surrogate mothers, he contends that by the close of the 1980s the referent of moral panic was making its way into the broadsheet press at an accelerated rate and was beginning to be treated as commonplace. But what is most telling of Hunt's discussion is that he is able to show how the liberal and sometimes contradictory use of moral panic in the academic literature was (and remains) reflected in the media's application of the concept, though with a marked time delay. Hence, not only was the media's incorporation of the language of moral panic precipitated by its use in academic literature, but this logic can be extended to suggest that the media's use has since encroached on the course of academic theorizing, at least partially removing control of the concept from the sphere of scholarly debate.

In McRobbie's (1994) assessment, the fact that sociologists have lost (or given up) the exclusive title to direct the way(s) in which moral panic is used can be traced to the expansion of the media and the diversification of the ways in which news is reported. What was once a relatively coherent body of theoretical variants revolving around notions of disproportionality and social control primarily in relation to the tabloid press, she explains, has become a familiar if not ridiculous journalistic rhetoric, mediated through a flare for the sensational. 'Used by politicians to orchestrate consent, by business to promote sales in certain niche markets, and by journalists to make home and social affairs newsworthy, moral panics are constructed on a daily basis' (McRobbie and Thornton 1995:565, 560). [1] And yet,

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[1] Contrary to Cohen's argument that societies are subject to periodic episodes of moral panic, McRobbie and Thornton (1995) contend that moral panics have become a central means by which daily events are reported and brought to the attention of the public. With an exceptionally high rate of turnover, they suggest that the propensity for panic narratives to accumulate has not served purposes of 'social control' per se, but has additionally assumed the form of routine marketing strategies which, amongst other things, are geared towards youth transgression. What this implies for McRobbie and Thornton is that '…a tabloid front page *is* frequently a self-fulfilling prophesy. Sociologists might rightly see this in terms of 'deviance amplification,' but youth have their own discourses which see the process as one in which see the process as one in which a 'scene' is transformed into a movement (p. 565).

although such a contention signifies a wider trend in the ways in which news reporting unfolds, it is wise to exercise a degree of caution when branding all forms of sensational coverage with the label of 'moral panic.' For as Eide and Knight (1999) explain, this technique of reporting is caught up in a wider trend towards 'service journalism': the ways in which the news media impart knowledge, information and advice to their audiences on how to negotiate the moral and social problems of everyday living. In the absence of a critical conception of ideology which is capable of engaging the relation between audiences and media narratives, it is difficult to accept the argument that media sensationalism equates *a priori* to 'moral panic.'

Therefore, given that the conceptual ambiguity of the meaning and application of moral panic has resulted in its differential use not only at the level of ideology but also as a variety of collective forms of behavior, it has become exceedingly difficult to discriminate analytically between the production, reproduction and transmission of cultural meanings on the one hand, and the functions to which those meanings and representations extend on the other. That is to say, by exhibiting such a wide-ranging variance it is difficult to establish to what extent the contents of specific media discourses serve to precipitate various social responses – or to constitute various subject positions – without considering more completely the tenets of a critical theory of ideology. It is not only with a formulation of moral panic in terms of a critical conception of ideology that the incorporation of a theory of discourse may be realized, but it is in this theoretical space that an understanding of the conceptual foundations from which moral panics emerge may be approximated more fully.

Ideology, Discourse, Articulation

Whilst contemporary social theory has taken up the question of ideology largely within the parameters of the Gramscian notion of hegemony – namely, to grasp the processes and practices involved in reproducing relations of domination with little recourse to immediate or direct coercion – the application of the concept of discourse has been directed more towards understanding the constitution of individuals as subjects in relation to their intersubjective lifeworlds. Hence, whereas ideology has tended to devolve around how individuals come to perceive (or imagine) their social positions in relation to what is conceived of as the external reality of the material world, discourse has derived more from the view that all social relations are lived and experienced through communicative sign systems (such as language) which serve to constitute subjectivities and associated identities. To put this differently, at a general level 'discourse' is typically adopted to refer to the linguistic if not semiotic dimension(s) of everyday

living through which the organization and understanding of an individual's experiential consciousness may be realized, whereas 'ideology' is invoked in an effort to connect those lived experiences with a broader material existence in such a way as to make existing relations appear not only natural but inevitable.

Any yet despite these provisional differences, there has persisted in sociological inquiry a paradoxical treatment of ideology and discourse as simultaneously similar and different: similar in that both have been understood to devolve around, or apply to, the same field of social relations; different in that ideology derives from a Marxist interpretation of the social world which holds that ideology 'functions' to mystify subordinate-superordinate relations. That is, the notion of ideology has been invoked in an effort to counterpose various forms of experiential consciousness to the arbitration of 'the real' in an otherwise instrumental attempt to formulate a conception of power presupposing a human subject '...endowed with a consciousness which power is then thought to seize upon' (Foucault 1980:118). Analyses of discourse, on the other hand, have tended to eschew the epistemology of the truth/falsity dichotomy in the interests of conceptualizing power as a *set of phenomena* distributed across a multiplicity of discursive sites, though remaining self-consciously neutral about whether various discourses derive from a form of materiality extending beyond lived experience (Purvis and Hunt 1993)

What is advanced here is a critical conception of ideology which recognizes that the various ways people conceptualize themselves and their social positions are situated within the normative and historical parameters of a particular social and moral order, but one that remains detached from any ontological certainty as to what those positions will be. The critical conception of ideology can be discerned from a general understanding of discourse in that it is concerned to expound the relationship between forms of consciousness and material existence. One of the crucial ways in which the critical perspective is to be differentiated from other treatments of ideology is that it attempts to locate the reproduction of dominant/subordinate relations at the level of social action. That is, the critical conception of ideology has been oriented towards explaining how forms of consciousness generated in and through *the lived experiences of dispersed social groups* contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic social relations. What the critical approach adds to otherwise undifferentiated conceptions of ideology, then, is the criterion of directionality: the stipulation that ideology always works in the interests of some to the delimitation of others (Purvis and Hunt 1993). It follows that the presence of ideology is to be discerned from its social consequences or

effects, not from any claim to a 'real' or ontological material presence. [2] Hegemony, in consequence, cannot simply be understood to come about through the organic cohesion of political and civil society at the level of the consciousness of those who rule and those who are ruled, but rather through what Gramsci referred to more prophetically as 'feeling-passion': that point where individuals' understandings of how the social world 'is' intersects with their lived experiences in such a fashion as to fuse perception/understanding of 'reality' with lived experience in a manner which is emotionally and normatively resonant.

It is in this sense that a more complete appreciation of the interconnected relation between ideology and discourse is achieved by considering Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion of articulation. Breaking with Foucault's insistence on the separation of the discursive from the non-discursive, Laclau and Mouffe develop the notion of 'articulation' to refer to the coming together of dispersed elements within various discursive configurations which give rise to, or facilitate, the ideological significance of specific discursive formations. Put differently, articulation is used to displace the view that there exists a pre-given class-based ideological formation (variations of which are constituted as 'hegemony') which exists for, or at the exclusive convenience of, the dominant class/group. Laclau and Mouffe maintain that all forms of knowledge are discursively constructed within interim articulations, and it is this configurational character of articulation which allows them to move beyond the view that ideology is somehow fixed, fast and frozen. Sequently, the articulation of interacting discursive fields is understood to never achieve a state of absolute finality, but rather holds that discourses are always subject to struggle and contestation, engagement and subversion. Stipulating that all objects are constituted in and through discourse does not negate the epistemology of an external ideological-material

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[2] It is in this regard that the critical approach operates at considerable distance from the epistemological underpinnings of structuralism. Concerned to elaborate Marx's conception of ideology and the state, for example, Louis Althusser theorized a compelling evidentness about ideology as an object demanding of total assent – 'ideology,' Althusser (1971:164) maintained, 'is always already there.' He argued that the evidentness of ideology operates as an instrument which serves to conceal from the subject the imaginary character of his/her relations to the object of experience. What this signified for Althusser was that there exists an eternal, omni-present character to ideology, and it is this insistence which serves to eclipse his otherwise instructive commentary on subjectivity and subjectification where a critical conception of ideology is concerned. Put simply, caught up in a broader concern to comprehend how relations of domination are reproduced, he insisted that the actor must be reconciled to class structure and to the position s/he has come to occupy in that structure. Whilst not without merit, what is of interest to a critical formulation is how ideology actually becomes internalized, lived and acted upon.

reality, but simply maintains that it is through discourse that any external reality is mediated to the end of either consolidation or reconfiguration.

Hence, the significance of the notion of articulation is that discursive formations are never unitary, but that they are constituted in dispersion (cf. Foucault 1972). Ideology in the critical sense is neither reducible to the conception of discourse alluded to above, nor is it reducible to an undifferentiated set of ideas about how the world 'really is.' Rather, it assumes that the ways people comprehend their social surroundings have an immediate application to how they act in the social world.

> It is precisely the 'spontaneous' quality of common sense, its transparency, its 'naturalness,' its refusal to examine the premises on which it is grounded, its resistance to correction, its quality of being instantly recognizable which makes common sense, at one and the same time, 'lived,' 'spontaneous' and unconscious. We live in common sense – we do not think it (Purvis and Hunt 1993:479).

Put otherwise, 'common sense' does not involve the invocation of a traditional ideological formation which serves as a sort of blunt instrument of repression, but more precisely what Geertz (1973) terms 'retraditionalism': a meeting of the old and the new in such a way that 'common sense' is reputed to stand for a taken-for-granted social resource, recontextualized as that which is actively engaged, shaped and lived through everyday negotiations in the social world, organized around the dualism of praxis/consciousness. Although this contention lends itself to the continuance of a certain distance between ideology and discourse, the critical theory goes some distance to explain how discourse is able to coexist with ideology to facilitate the possibility for, but by no means mandate the unfolding of, particular 'ideological effects.' It does so by reinvigorating the Althusserian notion of interpellation as an ideological mechanism which situates subjects within specific discursive contexts (Purvis and Hunt 1993; Greenberg and Hier 2001). By invoking a set of normative epistemological assumptions about the ontology of the social world, interpellation facilitates the ascendence of a set of discourses by which and through which individuals see themselves as subjects constituted in and through narrative, but set in the context of a wider (but flexible) ideological framework.[3]

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[3] The notion of interpellation – an interpellative hailing – was used by Althusser to refer to the processes whereby individuals are constituted as subjects by the mere presence of ideology – ideology as always already there. For present purposes, usage of the concept is oriented towards understanding how a set of discourses serve to constitute subjectivities in ongoing, developmental, interactive ways, based on wider ideological assumptions about the ontology of the material world. In this sense, interpellation does not passively 'hail'

With reference to news reporting and moral panic, interpellation can be observed along at least two (often overlapping) axes of identification. The first concerns a *socio-personal axis*, where the consumers of news stories are addressed through socio-personal identifications such as parents or members of racialized/gendered communities, who hold a vested interest in the welfare and security of their immediate surroundings. The second, the *political-economic axis,* involves the constitution of identities such as tax payers or consumers motivated by facets such as personal accumulation and the protection of what is understood as a common right to property, who are interpellated through their shared interests concerning how the political affairs of the state unfold (cf. Knight 1998). Processes of interpellation, then, are contingent on how successfully social actors can find points of identification embedded in media discourses, as news discourse must be able to amplify those features of reporting which tap into individuals' experiential domain to enable actors to see themselves represented in and through narrative. What this framework suggests is that individuals are not passive recipients of the ideological contents of news reporting, but that they actively participate in their own interpellation. [4] And it is this discursive conception of ideology *as a form of*

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subjects, but rather 'invites' individuals to actively and imaginatively decode the contents and meanings of fragmented, fluid, complex discourses embedded with multiple meanings. Hence, interpellation is formulated here as the processes by which individuals are addressed and constituted as subjects through their emotional connectedness to a specific discourse, and the ways in which discourses confront indiivduals with the realization that the issue at hand will carry real life, material consequences.

[4] Neither is this to imply that the active reader is a resistant one, nor that an active reading implies some form of subversion. How reporting is framed, whose points of view are predominant, page layouts and the manner in which news stories unfold are among the many important factors involved in producing an ideological effect. Indicative of the latter is Welch, Fenwick and Roberts' (1997) work on crime and moral panic, where attention is directed towards the importance of primary definers in the construction of news text and how experts and state managers contribute to the consolidation of dominant ideology, not through conspiratorial relations, but based on the media's reliance on primary definers as a product of the structure of news reporting itself. More recently, Greenberg and Hier (2001) have taken up the issue of how news reporting is structured in the context of moral panic, arguing that privileging of dominant viewpoints is not based on a dominant group's structural position as gatekeepers of specialized knowledge so much as it is on their overall accessibility and the mere fact that the very essence of their positions as politicians, police personal, etc. facilitates the material demands imposed upon the newsmaking process itself – deadlines, constant turnover, quoting sources, etc. But where their analysis differs is in the fact that they advocate a 'dualistic' framework, whereby the contents and structure of news are analysed alongside the style of reporting. Hence they explore the discursive and rhetorical patterns of news coverage using the technique of critical discourse analysis within the more general parameters of structural analysis. In this way, the interpretive aspects of

social action that reveals interpellation as an active and imaginative set of processes which 'invite' social agents to decode the contents of ideologico-discursive formations based on their normatively and emotionally charged experiences unfolding in and through the production of everyday living.

Moral Panic as Critical Ideology

Moral panic as a critical theory of ideology initially found fertile ground in Hall et al.'s (1978) classic study of 'muggings as a social phenomenon,' where it was argued with reference to Great Britain of the early 1970s that moral panic culminated around what was mediated primarily in the mainstream press as the criminality of black youth. Diverging from Cohen's (1972) otherwise indiscriminate usage of the construct of social control, Hall et al. provide a more integrated understanding of moral panic as an envoy of the dominant ideology, geared towards the consolidation of hegemony conceived of through the discursive regulatory apparatus of 'law and order.' As an exceptional moment in the governmental history of British capitalism, they incorporate Gramsci's notion of common sense to argue that moral panic was one way in which the state was able to penetrate below the surface of civil society by tapping into shared anxieties concerning social order and legal transgression in an ultimate attempt to secure consent by drawing attention away from, and thereby 'policing,' real crises in the capitalist mode of production (see also Hall 1985, 1987).

More recently, Colin Hay (1996) has advanced on Hall et al.'s model in a wider effort to rehabilitate a critical conception of ideology which treats subjects as more than passive vessels of ideological indoctrination. Parting company with Hall et al., who perhaps inadvertently conceptualize the consumers of news stories as ideological dupes, Hay explicitly advocates a theory of ideology capable of understanding individuals as active and imaginative agents, whose emotional connectedness to specific discursive formations is the basis on which s/he actively participates in her/his own interpellation. As Hay explains, the interpellative strength of moral panics as ideologico-discursive formations rests on their ability to find points of identification capable of unambiguously attributing causality and responsibility to the discursive mediation of a particular signifier embodying a more generalized ideological state of social or moral disintegration (e.g. racialized folk devils vis-a-vis increasing immigration; the stigmatization of youth crime vis-a-vis single mothers). In his own words,

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news text are considered *alongside* the structural aspects of reporting to approximate more fully an understanding of how interpellation works.

[w]e inject our own subjectivities into the empty senarios constructed within a mediated discourse. We recognize ourselves (as mothers, fathers, or guardians) as we position ourselves as subjects within the narrative structure constructed within such reported events. It is in this moment of identification, empathy and recognition (*connaissance*) that the point of resonance is secured, as we find our 'hailing' and become subjects *through it*, and thus subject *to it* (Hay 1996:208).

Crucial to Hay's formulation is the argument that moral panics are symptomatic of a more general situation of protracted state and economic failure, but one not (yet) perceived of in terms of 'crisis.' That is, as a point where the old is dying but the new cannot be born (Gramsci 1971:276) moral panic represents one manifestation of *indecisive* intervention, 'where a great variety of morbid symptoms appear' (ibid). In this regard, struggles around changes in political and cultural consensus are understood to unfold, not at the level of state structure but at the level of everyday consciousness (Gitlin 1980). Crises, then, are conceptualized by Hay as processual narratives subjectively perceived of, lived and acted upon; they are constructions or mediations of state contradictions or failures.

Accordingly, in the intermediary spaces where social antagonisms are variously articulated through the antithetical tensions of liberty and restraint, freedom and regulation, politics and the transgressive emerges a style of authoritative intervention which assumes the form of a highly emotive and rhetorical discourse that appeals to the established sentiments of stigma and prejudice (Knight 1998). By constituting the individual as subject within the discursive confines of variegated governmental configurations, interpellation is henceforth revealed to constitute subject positions in a manner that reinforces, reproduces and recontextualizes dominant social relations through 'common sense.' It does so, not by attributing to folk devils causality and responsibility for moral deviations/transgressions in a highly structured discursive environment, but rather, while remaining fluid and elusive in their application, panic discourses must be understood to tap into popular sentiments at the phenomenal level of everyday consciousness, carrying a universal appeal pertaining to something which is uncritically and unproblematically received as problematic. For as both Hall (1983) and Hay (1996) recognize, ideology does more than merely interpellate individuals as subjects; ideology penetrates below the level of consciousness to become internalized and lived, day in and day out.

For purposes of illustration, consider the discourses centering on child sexual abuse to emerge following the Supreme Court of British Columbia's decision in 1999 to strike down a law prohibiting the possession of child pornography. With the closure of the legal grievance levied against Robin John Sharpe, a Vancouver man charged with possessing child pornography, Doyle and Lacombe (2000) provide an analysis of how

the ruling set in motion a moral panic through the discursive linkage of child pornography, paedophilia, child sexual abuse and homosexuality (Sharpe happened to be of homosexual orientation). Irrespective of the fact that their analysis revolves around the notion that the case was narrated in the news media in terms of the dangers of child abuse despite such occurrences having been on the decline for the past three decades (i.e. representation versus 'the real'), what is most telling about their discussion is the identification of a discursive space in which the problematization of grievance intersected with the problematization of risk/danger. As they explain, the discursive mediation of danger allegedly posed by Sharpe came to be rearticulated in the form of the mediation of harm-avoidance, whereby the processes involved in regulating Sharpe – and, by corollary, supposed child molesters more generally – gave way to the discursive rearticulation of an apparatus of safety. That is, by projecting a symbolic dimension of harm onto a panoply of risk factors facing children in the contemporary world, the explanatory challenge reached beyond understanding the processes and practices involved in the expurgation of the Other (Sharpe) to the more fundamental issue of understanding how various narratives conjoin with the discursive signification of 'dangerous' populations to amplify the threat posed by 'the Other' largely by ideologically redefining what precisely that threat is. By intuiting a level of harm believed to be posed by a particular person or population through an externally defined object (e.g. threat of disease, strangers, crime), the discursive conflation of the dangerous Other with the symbolic signification of harm precipitates the development of an *apparatus of security* and the symbolic fortification of an inclusive sense of collective safety. Not only does this make rearticulation of 'the threat' more amenable to definition and regulation, but it legitimates amplification of the threat insofar as the object of rearticulation almost always takes the form of normative ideological constructions of fear or danger. To put this schematically, the otherwise nebulous identification of 'the Other' finds stable points of articulation in variations on the ideologically normative constructs of safety and security, as various discourses become appropriated through the sensitivities and sensibilities of what must be conceptualized as creative and imaginative social agents. Whilst remaining detached from any deterministic conception of the ideological nature of panic narratives, such a contention affirms that discourses become ideological insomuch as their active appropriation serves to establish various subjectivities through one's emotional connectedness (as parents, tax payers, citizens, etc.) to discourse and narrative.

The necessity therefore presents itself to probe the wider normative foundations from which moral panics emerge to articulate as concerns

which are deemed worthy of sustained attention and extended debate. In doing so, it is essential to engage the relationship between panics and regulatory projects. Although no effort is made to establish a clear conceptual distinction between these two central concepts, it is demonstrated below how moral panics represent a form of moral regulation and, as such, why it is a more prosperous analytic endeavor to interrogate the specific configurational formations through which regulatory projects manifest and panic episodes emerge. In this regard, it is affirmed that moral panics and regulatory projects are mutually reinforcing, though there does exist certain key differences and subtle complexities which need to be brought to light to achieve a more complete understanding of the workings of contemporary moral politics.

The Sociology of Moral Regulation

The concept of moral regulation originally appeared in Corrigan's (1981) preliminary statement, soon to be developed more completely in Corrigan and Sayer's (1985) exploration of the history of English state formation. For Corrigan and Sayer, moral regulation refers to a '… project of normalizing, rendering natural, taken for granted, in a word, 'obvious,' what are in fact ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order' (p. 4). They explain that for a particular state structure to exist, it needs to be legitimated by a particular form of 'moral ethos.' That is, as a mechanism of state legitimation, moral regulation serves to facilitate the consolidation of state power by having certain epistemological social arrangements appear to the citizenry as both natural and inevitable. Under the tenets of this conception, the state is understood to facilitate various hegemonic representations which are taken up by social actors through the state's ability to penetrate the institutions of civil society and affect cultural transformation vis-a-vis the constitution of social agents as moral subjects.

Contained in Corrigan and Sayer's analysis is a Marxist emphasis on the consolidation and reproduction of hegemony, combined with a Foucauldian emphasis on the construction and constitution of social subjectivity. Attempting to overcome the epistemological primacy of 'the social' as a sociological *a priori*, they argue that processes of state-formation are interlinked with citizen-formation in a manner that is reminiscent of Elias' (1978) writings on the civilizing process, and it is the latter problematic which constitutes the impetus for Dean's (1994) refutation of Corrigan and Sayer's state-formation thesis. Asserting that the Corrigan-Sayer argument falters on the stipulation that the boundary between state and non-state agencies is far from clear, he argues that their analysis not only leaves little room to allow for agencies with dissonant strategies

falling outside the realm of the state, but additionally for conflicting if not antithetical policies and practices found within and between different state agencies. Nor is the state the only 'moral regulator' in regulatory projects, Dean continues. Moral regulation, he explains, involves a much more fragmentary process than Corrigan and Sayer recognize, making it exceedingly difficult to distinguish between the centrality of the state and 'outside' bodies.

> This is illustrated by the multiple and overlapping jurisdictions involving local, regional, national, international and global authorities within which actors are located. It is evidenced by the widespread development of non-profit community and social services in advanced liberal democracies which are funded partially by the national state but run by citizen associations, and by the neoliberal use of corporations, charities, and families, to achieve governmental objectives (e.g. the provision of welfare and domestic care, the establishment of prisons, job-centres, etc.) (Dean 1994:152, 153).

In Dean's assessment, to frame the question of moral regulation in terms of the duality of structure and experience is to advocate a dual-level framework of experience and meaning, situated in a 'culturalist conception' of moral regulation which presupposes a realm of experience grounded in material relations. Not only does the emphasis on a dualistic conception invoke a naturalism that belies the attempt to examine the naturalization process, says Dean, but it unduly takes the form of a 'philosophical anthropology' of the human subject as a cultural being. What is left, he interjects, is an insufficient degree of attention to practices of self-regulation and ethical subjectivity. Sequently, Dean insists on a more sustained examination of what he terms ethical self-formation: the processes and practices whereby individuals come to act upon the self independent of the state or external materiality. Although he is clear from the beginning of his discussion that his interests rest in elucidating the interconnection between ethical self-formation and political and governmental practices and processes ('governmental self-formation'), he nevertheless comes to place predominant emphasis on the latter in an effort to better appreciate those domains of self-formation that operate at distance from the state.

The value to be derived from Dean's analysis can be found in his effort to divorce a state initiated conception of moral regulation as in Corrigan and Sayer from the processes and practices involved in ethical self-formation. Dean's insistence on differentiating 'morals' apropos the state from 'ethics' according to Foucault is a useful analytic manoeuver with respect to the 'Eliasian nature' of Corrigan and Sayer's thesis, but it should be noted that there is no inherent danger in conflating morals and ethics so long that it is understood that the movement of an external 'moral

ethos' does not move in tandem with internal processes of self-formation (cf. Hunt 1999). In this regard, Dean's advocation that we cast aside the concept of moral regulation in favor of the construct of governmentality is best approached with caution, and his contention that Corrigan and Sayer's 'culturalist' account somehow places limitations on the analysis of self-formation is suspect. For projects of moral regulation are always socially constituted in that they involve one group of persons seeking to act upon the conduct of others in some manner. As such, the pertinent analytic task is to appreciate how specific instances of regulatory activity stimulate processes of self-governance which need not correspond to any governmental authority, not on how governance of the self unfolds *sui generis*.

Towards a Moral Economy of Character

In an innovative attempt which goes some distance to reconcile the dissonance between Corrigan and Sayer's culturalist account of human subjectivity and Dean's neo-Foucauldian emphasis on ethical self-formation, Valverde (1994) invokes Bourdieu's (1984) notion of 'cultural capital' in an effort to expound what she terms a 'mixed economy' of forms of regulation (see also Valverde 1995). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) distinction between economic and cultural capital, Valverde adds to this social field a third concept: 'moral capital.' Reflecting Bourdieu's attempt to surpass what he understands to be the analytically debilitating opposition between objectivism and subjectivism, she contends that neither are these circuits '…separate from relations of power originating in and sustaining the state, nor are they reducible to the latter' (p. 218). Rather, argues Valverde, the administration of the population in civil society must be understood as the cross-articulation or interaction of the three circuits of capital.

By moral capital, then, Valverde designates an 'elusive inward essence' oriented towards considerations of how others come to judge one's moral worth, but it is an essence that is '…usefully conceptualized as oriented towards the maximization of both the individual moral capital of the recipient and the aggregate moral capital of the nation-state' (p. 215). Whilst it was Bourdieu's objective to reveal the various social processes involved in creating, certifying and maximizing various kinds of cultural capital, Valverde attempts to explicate what she identifies as a parallel process through which certain dispositions and habits are constituted and naturalized. The central feature of moral regulation in this sense is not that certain behaviors are acted upon in an ultimate attempt to change or delimit the actions of the moral deviant(s), but rather to generate certain kinds of ethical subjectivities that appear to social agents as inherently or naturally 'moral.' Essentially, what Valverde is advocating is a sort

of 'moral economy of character,' whereby social agents are called upon by spatially and temporally situated governing bodies (the church, special interest groups, professional organizations) to engage in morally refined practices to 'care for the self.'

Valverde's invocation of the concept of moral capital was primarily directed towards understanding late Victorian philanthropy, though she maintains that the concept extends beyond a mere antiquarian application. Counterposing philanthropy of the nineteenth century to various forms of charity, she explains that the former involved a long-term project oriented towards an overall improvement in, or restoration of, the moral character of the urban poor, whereas the latter represented a social practice entailing the donation of various sums of money with little interest in how it was actually used. That is, in contrast to s/he who contributes to charity, the philanthropist is purported to invest little economic but doses of moral capital to the end that s/he receives in return a particular 'moral gain' in the form of character development and habit reform. Crucial to this argument is the fact that, because the primary objective of philanthropy was the maximization of moral capital in the form of the transformation of the individual attributes of the pauper or moral degenerate (as opposed to sweeping and impersonal state measures aimed at alleviating poverty), those who 'managed' moral capital had to individualize as they managed. To put this differently, whilst it was the role of the state to engage in a form of 'moral architecture' which saw the construction of sewers, housing reform and public health initiatives aimed at reversing the moral decay of the *misère*, scientific philanthropy involved a more concerted effort directed inward towards the character reformation of *paupérisme* by dealing with the poor 'as individuals and by individuals.'

It is this reciprocal or dialectical element of ethical subjectification introduced by Valverde that enables us to understand more fully the fluid and historically variable nature of the 'mixed economy' of forms of regulation. As is evident from her discussion, it was through the processes involved in acting upon the moral character of the poor in a manner intended to induce ethical subjectivities that the identity and moral capital of the philanthropist was simultaneously constituted, reconfigured and confirmed. That is, whilst Valverde explains moral regulation in terms of the constitution of, or the effort to generate, certain discursive channels of ethical behavior to be adopted and emulated on the part of the 'morally degenerative,' it is important to remain cognizant of the fact that those behaviors were presupposed by, or derived from, socially constituted ideologico-discursive representations of what can for purposes of convenience be designated as 'moral righteousness.' That the constitution of ethical subjectivity is explained by Valverde not only as

involving an imperative to care for the self, but more specifically an engagement with 'individuals by individuals,' we may appreciate moral regulation apropos 'moral capital' as an amalgamation of discourses which are lived, experienced, internalized and acted upon. It is for this reason that I dismiss Ruanavaara's (1997) contention that Valverde's model is not able to account for why the philanthropist is obsessed with obtaining a moral return as limited in its appreciation of the complexity of Valverde's conceptual offering, for projects of moral regulation reveal as much about the identity those who seek to regulate as they do about those who come to serve as the object of regulation.

Hence, one of Valverde's most valuable contributions is that the circuit of moral capital is divorced from any necessary or deterministic conception of the state, oriented towards the dialectics of self-formation in a reciprocal theory of ideology vis-a-vis mixed discursive economies and/or configurations of governance. Not only does this formulation facilitate a deconstruction of the binary opposition between state/civil society to reconfigure the public/private dichotomy into a more complex web of relationships under the auspices of the mixed economy (cf. Valverde 1995), but it allows for the possibility that the moral circuit may serve as a space where the articulation of social antagonisms unfold under the wider umbrella of state authority and hegemonic consolidation (cf. Hall et al. 1978). Indeed, it is this interlinkage between state and civil society which facilitates a more in-depth understanding of how regulatory projects unfold through the lived experiences of social agents, in addition to allowing for the elucidation of moral panic as a form of moral regulation.

Towards a Moral Economy of Harm

Fundamentally, both moral panic and moral regulation involve one set of persons seeking to act on the conduct of others, and they both contain an inherent linkage between the identity of the regulator and the identity of the regulated. Put differently, moral regulation shares in common with moral panic the central feature that they both involve a disturbance in the processes of regulating the conduct of others, as well as processes concerning how to conduct oneself. But this is where they diverge in a crucial way. In each of the three perspectives on moral regulation reviewed above, there exists one common thread: an emphasis on the moral deviant/degenerative to engage a morally responsible 'ethos' which is imputed to translate into a refashioning of the self. Whether conceived of 'from above,' 'the middle' or 'below,' moral regulation is understood to entail long-term processes of normalization concerning some field of moralized conduct to the end of the 'character enhancement' of those persons subjected to regulation on the one hand, and the self-

[re]affirmation of the identity of the regulator on the other. It can be imputed, then, that moral regulation involves a *dialectic of subjectification*, irrespective of where the regulatory projects commences (i.e the state, the self, private organizations).

Moral panics, conversely, do not involve any character reformation of moral deviants, and thus entail a different kind of dialectic. As a more convulsive and volatile disturbance in the course of moral governance, panics tend to be short-lived, concentrated on limiting the action/agency, not ethic, of specified 'folk devils.' Moral panics in this sense represent a particular manifestation of moral regulation, whereby processes and practices involved in constituting the self/inclusive community intersect with variegated governmental configurations to delimit the actions of the Other in the interests of fortifying the identity of the self/inclusive community. Through a dialectical process of signification (discursively articulated in terms of 'us'/'them'), moral panics operate as political technologies vis-a-vis the discursive construction of an apparatus of security, and they are concentrated on a more immediate form of regulatory intervention. Hence, while moral regulation hinges on a dialectical process of subjectification to the extent that the regulated are purported to internalize codes of moral conduct shared by the regulator, moral panics may be understood in two discrepant ways: first, as those moments when the subjectification of the Other is deemed to be in a state of 'crisis' or breakdown (i.e. when the regulated do not adequately respond to a call to care for the self); and second, when the subjectification of the Other is not possible. In either case, moral panic culminates at that point where moral regulation is perceived to be in a state of failure or dislocation, giving rise to a more immediate or explicit manifestation of regulatory intervention where the processes and practices involved in constituting the self/inclusive community intersect with an uncertain mix of political configurations of ruling.

As a process of identity affirmation, therefore, we may foremost conceptualize moral panic as the *volatile local manifestation* of what can otherwise be understood as the *global project of moral regulation*. Moral panic tends to take the form of a periodic 'crisis' or breakdown in the field of moral governance and, as such, the articulation of moral panic remains dependent on the ability of various discursive formations to unambiguously attribute causality and responsibility to folk devils which are understood to embody a more general state of social/moral harm. Not only does this reveal moral panics as inherently individualizing in the sense that they designate as unproblematically problematic the agency of the folk devil, but it paradoxically exposes panic narratives as socializing in that they operate

through various governmental rationalities (e.g. risk and responsibility; neoliberalism) which are temporally and spatially specific.

This summons forth a second crucial difference between moral panic and moral regulation. While moral regulation involves long-term processes of normalization, moral panics as volatile local manifestions of wider anxieties at once articulate a moment of problematization (i.e. the attribution of causality/blame) and a moment of solution (i.e. how to resolve the problem). That is, whilst moral regulation involves one set of persons acting on the conduct of others over a wide range of discursive sites with the ultimate goal of ethical reconstitution at some future point, panic narratives as political resources reduce the field of regulatory intervention to the extent that a tangible object is designated for immediate intervention, set in the context of a far more immediate moment of closure. It is for this reason that recent commentary has suggested the fate of moral panics depend on the ability for folk devils and oppositional groups to respond immediately to claims making in a highly differentiated public sphere (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Hier 2002).[5] Through the distribution of the politicization of causality, the ideological consolidation of 'common sense' comes to be structured around a victim-centered discourse in that s/he who is able to retain the ability to legitimately speak for and about victims (designating who is a victim) remains contingent on making claims that resonate in what Knight (1998) terms a 'moral economy of harm.' What this concept implies is not that moral panics unfold based on the objective assessment of harm stemming from some activity or behavior, but how effectively claims making is able to tap into the 'feeling-passion' or 'common sense' of those who are subject to the ideological contents of panic discourses and, in the words of Hay (1996), become subjects through it.

Contextualized as such, it is crucial to reiterate that hegemony does not simply come to be reproduced in direct reference to the state or official authorities, nor is hegemony the inevitable product of dominant claims making embedded in media discourses. Whilst moral panics usually involve some form of authoritative intervention (though their origins often

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[5] McRobbie and Thornton (1995) argue that with the diversification of the mass, niche and micro media – flyers, fanzines, pirate radio, internet web sites, email distribution lists – the relationship between media reporting, folk devils and social control is far more complex than traditional formulations allow for, as folk devils can and do fight back. Using empirical data to substantiate McRobbie and Thornton's theoretical claims, Hier (2002) has recently demonstrated how folk devils are able to engage a diversity of media outlets (niche television, internet, music outlets) to challenge and subvert dominant claims-making in a highly differentiated public sphere centered on the notion of rational-critical debate and victim-centered discourses.

derive from domains outside the state), the narration of moral panic is equally susceptible through the political dispersion of causality/blame to turn against those who emerge as authoritative claims makers in a moral economy of harm. Again to borrow from Knight, what this means is that '…the political economy of power is confronted openly by the moral economy of harm in which ordinary victims, and their supporters and representatives, enjoy a degree of discursive influence over the grounds on which hegemony is contested and negotiated' (1998:124). For Knight, this implies a still more differentiated moral economy of harm, where 'victims' struggle to make resonant claims about their 'worthiness' as victims (one might wish to extend this even further to a 'moral economy of innocence'). The ideological effect, then, is that the moral/mixed economy takes the form of the redistribution of blame in an ultimate attempt to charge antagonistic social agents with a more aggravated degree of harm. That is, the more harm that is imputed to emanate from the folk devil, the more innocent the victim is perceived to be, in turn making the mobilization of authoritative intervention that much more imminent.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has sought to formulate moral panic in terms of a critical conception of ideology. The value to be derived from conceptualizing moral panic as critical ideology is principally found in the fact that it renders as problematic the contention that moral panic has become a central means by which the news is reported. For as has been argued, an analytic separation between 'moral panic' and what has been identified as a more rudimentary form of 'media sensationalism' must be maintained. But equally as important is the fact that such a conceptualization goes considerable distance to reconcile the tension between ideology and social action (i.e. media narrative and public concern) to the disenchantment of the analytic utility of moral panic in sociological research. Put simply, ideology in this sense is understood as, and conceptualized in terms of, a form of social action, situated firmly within the popular – but ironically mystifying – dualistic antagonism of consciousness and action. Moral panics bring into play a number of normative presuppositions about social subjectivity, but they do so through the discursive mediation of those aspects of everyday living which serve as points of condensation for wider anxieties – criminality, health risk, sexual deviance and general perceptions of public/personal safety. Conceptualized in these terms, it is unfortunate to consider that those who have sought to expound the highly influential concept of moral regulation have been quick to dismiss moral panic on the alleged grounds that it imports a negative normative judgement from the outset, in turn limiting rather than

enhancing conceptual understandings of the complex and multifaceted ways in which human conduct is governed.

As such, the intention of the foregoing analysis has not been oriented towards approximating 'truth' in any final instance, but rather to chart new conceptual territory oriented towards the compatible nature of the sociology of moral panic and the sociology of moral regulation. Although it has been maintained that there persists certain key differences, the differences sketched between moral regulation and moral panic should be received in the context of a more generalized attempt to formulate a critical theory of moral panic as a form of moral regulation. Indeed, it seems as though the convulsive power of the 'panic,' combined with the long-term reserve of regulatory projects, is where the real thrust of moral governance (of the self as well as others) is to be located. Both moral panic and moral regulation operate through ideologico-discursive formations, but they differ in the ways in which they articulate to common sense: one as a sustained dialectical process of subjectification, the other as a volatile moment of failure or dislocation. What the analysis suggests is that moral panics are in no danger of dying out (as some observers have recently suggested), and what a theory of moral panic as critical ideology necessitates is a more integrated understand of the workings of contemporary moral politics.

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