

Folk devils and moral panics in the COVID-19 pandemic

An introduction

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This book collects the contributions of renowned scholars in the fields of sociology of deviance, criminology, cultural and media studies, and from different countries. By analyzing the unique conjunctural situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic it offers novel and unusual perspectives on the concept of moral panic that has encountered moments of emphasis and oblivion over the last fifty years, since its creation. Thus, it contributes to better contextualizing the concept in relation to the construction of social problems – and how this construction changes – in the contemporary world.

Some premises are necessary to explain the process that brought to the development of this volume. The idea of a book on folk devils and moral panics in the COVID-19 pandemic comes, first, from the observation of everyday life during the COVID-19 outbreak and the media dynamics that interacted with our everyday life in those months, and then years, by co-creating less or more evident folk devils. Then, it comes from the need that we faced, as scholars, to explain to different audiences what was happening in that particular conjunctural moment of the COVID-19 pandemic while the world around us was fractioned between claims and counterclaims and unprecedented economic, political, cultural and relational scenarios. Properly that crisis by showing at the same time multiple tensions in multiple spheres of everyday life allowed the generation of folk devils and the ignition of moral panics. Such condensation of different tensions in a limited period could have hardly avoided bringing with it moral panics. However, only empirical contributions could have supported this intuition.

While developing it, I was aware that the idea of this volume might have met some opposition among the purist scholars of moral panic as episodes of fear and anxieties related to health issues have often resulted in no real moral panics or such episodes were not considered as moral panics (see for instance [Critcher 2003](#), pp. 33–37). The empirical observation of what was happening in that period offered a twofold aim to this project. First, it allowed proposing an analysis of the fear and anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which eventually might have been categorized as moral panics and thus challenged the common assumptions that health panics are often not moral panics. Second, it highlighted the need to analyze more in-depth the episodes, which showed the construction of folk devils during the COVID-19 pandemic even as a consequence of the regulatory medical advice and restrictions.

Nevertheless, the aim of this book is not only to offer empirical studies but also to contribute by adding new reflections on the use of the moral panic concept from the sociological and criminological perspectives by means of the unique situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Each book or paper on moral panic usually includes a mention of the classic definition of moral panic. This introduction will not make this tradition disappear and thus will settle a common ground for the papers that are part of this book. According to [Cohen \(1972, p. 9\)](#), a moral panic happens when the following patterns emerge.

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. (1) A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; (2) its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; (3) the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; (4) socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnosis and solutions; (5) ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; (6) the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes moral visible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something that 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 the society conceives itself.

It is indeed always worth reminding that Stanley Cohen came to develop the first definition of moral panic through his notorious work on the mods and rockers at the end of the 1960s. He was preceded only by the reflections of Jock [Young \(1971\)](#) on the same theoretical terrain (for a critical discussion of the concept's origins and evolution see also [Young 2011](#)). The originality of Cohen's model – which is commonly defined as the *processual model* of moral panic (see for instance [Critchler 2003](#)) – was thus a landmark for several scholars, from the cultural studies pioneers ([Hall et al. 1978](#)) to the socio-constructionist stances ([Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994](#)). The latter elaborated a different theoretical explanation for moral panics – the *attributional model* – and suggested peculiar dynamics not considered before by Cohen.

[Goode and Ben-Yehuda \(1994, p. 37\)](#) identified five elements or criteria of a moral panic: concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality, and volatility. This model emphasizes the role of claims-making in moral panic and claims-makers' strategies. Moreover, the authors analyzed peculiar dynamics in the construction and maintenance of moral panics, by identifying sub-models like the *grassroots* model, the *élite-engineered* model, and the *interest groups* model ([Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, pp. 127–135](#)).

The processual and attributional models have similarities and differences ([Critchler 2016, p. xxii](#)) and offered analytical tools for empirical research for decades focusing mainly on five topics: child abuse, drugs and alcohol, immigration, media violence, and street crime. However, in the last 20 years, moral panic studies have developed new directions of interest (see for instance [Rohloff et al. 2013](#)). These new directions contemplated the following elements: (1) the debate

about risk society and the role of risk consciousness in igniting moral panics, (2) the value of discourse analysis to analyze moral panics as “discursive constructs”, (3) the concept of moral regulation to analyze the issues that threaten the moral order and offer space to the eruption of moral panics, (4) the possibilities offered by the sociology of emotions and the analysis of psycho-social mechanisms connected with moral panics (about the discussion of these elements, see for instance [Critcher 2003](#); [Hier 2011](#)).

While this presentation of the moral panic concept and its evolution settles a common theoretical background for the papers that are part of this book and that chose to develop distinct and autonomous reflections and uses of these notions, some important premises are still to be stressed about the application of the moral panic concept in the COVID-19 pandemic context. These premises concern mainly what should be considered a health (moral) panic, the role of risk society in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the “conjunctural” crises that characterized the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, there has been a wide debate among moral panic scholars about which health panics can be considered moral panics or not. The career of health panics in the moral panic literature is not as fortunate as common sense would suggest. Some authors argued that medical issues cannot be considered as issues of moral panic because they represent objective harms (e.g., [Ungar 2001](#)) or because the risk is mainly medical and technical and not moral ([Cohen 2002](#), p. xxvi). However, [Hunt \(2011, p. 55\)](#) argues that moral panics can involve a medical content and a moral value and this explanation allows some health panics to be considered as moral panics.

Even [Critcher \(2003\)](#) argues that if the health threat is real and the response in terms of health policy legislation is not disproportional, the response to a specific phenomenon (in the case of his analysis, AIDS) cannot be considered a moral panic. Furthermore, he argues that the absence of folk devils like in health epidemics or food contamination cannot determine a moral panic. Once more, [Hunt \(2011, p. 59\)](#) argues that the connection between “health scares” and “moralized reactions” allows for constituting moral panics and identifying folk devils like in the case of homosexuals in the AIDS outbreak.

One of the new directions in the development of analyses of moral panics – the dialogue with the concept of risk society ([Beck 1992](#)) and its global manifestations ([Beck 2000](#)) – suggests how some health panics can be analyzed as moral panics.

The global characteristic of the risk society, its self-reflexivity and its pervasiveness have created a new setting for moral panics in which health panics are related to the perception of health risks. Cohen himself suggests that health panics could become moral panics only if certain conditions are satisfied. He argues ([2002, xxvi](#)) that the realm of politics and morality is still distinct from that of risks for health: only if these risks are perceived primarily as moral rather than technical (this means that people should perceive the moral irresponsibility of not having considered a specific risk) this distinction will disappear.

The case study of HIV-AIDS infections proposed by [Critcher \(2003\)](#) shows how this distinction can disappear when the biological nature of a condition like that of

the HIV+ or AIDS patients can be morally constructed and bring about a change in the disposition of values concerning sexuality, gender and the need of social control. Homosexuals and other groups thus become labelled as morally deviant categories to which the contagion can be traced back. Moreover, [Cohen \(2002, xxvi\)](#) argues that most claims related to risk, safety or danger depend on the politics of morality.

Even [Hunt \(2011\)](#) stresses the moral component of these panics: he argues that despite the scientization of risk assessment, the explanation of risks is frequently based on moral discourses that refer to ethnicity, sexuality and other social stereotypes. The recurrent example is that of the HIV+/AIDS outbreak in which moral discourse concerned the “disease of homosexuals”, while the discussion relating to risks was emphasized as the risk of heterosexual transmission.

According to [Hunt \(2011, p. 63\)](#), discourses about risk and discourses about morality are often closely connected, in such a way that discourses on morality are often taken for granted, discounted or deemed implicit. The result of the interconnection between discourses of risk and moral discourses is a sort of hybridization: the combination of two types of discourses such that their characteristics emerge in a new form. Examples of full health moral panics with the presence of objective risks come from several studies (e.g., [Lakoff and Collier 2008](#); [Mannion and Small 2019](#)).

Beyond the theoretical discussion on the incorporation of the concept of risk society into moral panic studies, it becomes evident that the events surrounding COVID-19 pandemic in the context of 21st-century risk society ([Beck 2000](#)) allow locating the COVID-19 panic in a series of health panics (e.g., HIV/AIDS, BSE, West Nile, SARS, obesity, etc.) that have emerged, disappeared, and then resurfaced in the last 20 years (e.g., [Muzzatti 2005](#)). However, like AIDS, COVID-19 can be considered a powerful “condenser” for different kinds of anxieties and a coherent and univocal moral panic on COVID-19 cannot be expected nor analyzed (about AIDS and moral panic see also [Watney 2006](#)). COVID-19 thus can be treated as a mobilizer of wider and more numerous social anxieties and threats to individuals and societies. Actually, during the preparation of this volume, studies on moral panics connected to the COVID-19 pandemic started appearing even if scattered among different local societal contexts (see for instance [Capurro et al. 2022](#); [Cârstocea 2022](#); [Çobaner et al. 2022](#); [Hier 2023](#); [Silva 2020](#)).

The last premise concerns the need to underline the societal elements or conjunctures that surrounded the COVID-19 outbreak, which are structural, economic, cultural, and historical. First, moral panics are a product of our contemporaneity. They did not occur in premodern societies and have not happened in closed societies (except for the witch-hunts). They are indeed a prerogative of open societies (see also [Cricher 2016, xxvii](#)), and the more societies are open the more it is possible to see the emersion of moral panics. This means that in the COVID-19 outbreak and its globalization, culturally open societies had the structural preconditions to host a greater number and varieties of moral panics. Second, the role of the conjunctures of different elements in society in particular historical moments

as triggers of change and reshaping of social life are well-presented by Sean Hier in his foreword to this volume. Therefore, the emergence of health panics over the last decades as a sign of a collective sensitization towards specific health risks seems to have prepared the ground for the societal responses to the COVID-19 pandemic then triggered by the specific local and global conjunctures (Hall and Massey 2010).

However, each of the chapters included in this book presents an original analysis of the tensions and conjunctural crises in relation to the specific context analyzed during the COVID-19 outbreak by offering, at the same time, insightful reflections on the value of the moral panic concept as an analytical tool.

Starting with [Chapter 1](#), Matthew Davis offers a provocative discussion about the ten dimensions of the dispute concerning moral panics and how they can be applied to the COVID-19 pandemic by following the path of a collaborative discussion published over 10 years ago on the future of the concept (see [David et al. 2011](#)). In [Chapter 2](#), Joel Best, Brian Monahan and Clara S. Mey propose an analysis of the claims and counterclaims offered in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic from a socio-constructionist standpoint and by highlighting the implications for social problems theory. Milica Stilinovic, Zainul Swaleh and Catharine Lumby, in [Chapter 3](#), analyzing the dynamics of COVID-19 lockdown protests in Melbourne, in 2021, present a novel way of considering the mechanisms of igniting moral panic, the role of digitization in amplifying moral panics and revisit the concept of folk devils. In [Chapter 4](#), by examining the emergence and development of protest movements against the COVID-19 public policy in France, Zakaria Bendali, Alexandre Dafflon and Olivier Fillieule combine the socio-constructionist grassroots model with a middle-level model to test the moral panic toolbox for the study of social movements.

The [Chapter 5](#), by Anita Lavorgna and Ester Massa, discusses how the notion of moral panic is challenged in the digital context, in which the relationships between moral entrepreneurs and folk devils can become much more complex and fluid because of digital affordances that create shifts in the distribution of power within the media. The [Chapter 6](#) written by Graham Knight analyses news framing of the 2022 Canadian trucker convoy protest against COVID-19 public health measures and it considers moral panics and protests as forms of social drama that involve breaches of the normal and the normative.

In the [Chapter 7](#), Jeremy Collins considers the news media framing of the debates around the merits of masks in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. By adopting critical discourse analysis as a tool, Collins investigates a sample of over 2400 UK national newspaper items, and identifies, through the analysis of the media, two competing moral panic discourses and the corresponding folk devils. Frida Skog and Ragnar Lundström, in [Chapter 8](#), explore content produced by scientific and expert actors in relation to the pandemic in Sweden. Through a discourse analytical approach guided by the moral panic conceptual framework, they analyze the relationship between moralizing discourse and the discourse of science in such context.

In [Chapter 9](#), Jacek Burski examines the narratives prevalent in the Polish press during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. Using moral panic and critical discourse analysis, the author analyzes how major Polish newspapers spread concern about the economic crisis through the amplification of business elites' voices and the marginalization of workers.

Finally, in [Chapter 10](#), Dario Lucchesi analyses the immigration discourse produced by politicians during the pandemic in Italy. By applying the tools of critical discourse studies, the analysis explores which differences and convergences, in terms of lexicon and discourse, allow structuring and developing the articulation of a moral panic.

It is thus evident, from this short presentation of the chapters' analytical tools and key topics, that authors have applied mainly, from one hand, critical discourse analysis, and, on another hand, a socio-constructionist toolbox to analyze the construction of moral panics in the specific situation of the COVID-19 outbreak. All of them contribute to refreshing the moral panic model and conceptual tools and to stress the process of the creation of folk devils during the pandemic.

These contributions thus materialize, empirically and theoretically, the analysis of conjunctural crises and moral panics in the COVID-19 pandemic and offer a response to the call for keeping updated the conceptual instrument created by Stanley Cohen. Bringing the moral panic concept into the "pandemic" daily life is not merely a theoretical exercise, but it is a way to ensure a sophisticated sociological and criminological critical analysis of our contemporaneity and to suggest different paths to (re)thinking critically about moral panic.

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