

MORAL PANICS

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION
OF DEVIANCE

SECOND EDITION

*Erich Goode and
Nachman Ben-Yehuda*

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

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To Barbara and Etti
Our Wives

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A crowd gathers at the state capitol and listens to speeches by activists about the wicked deeds of corrupt public officials. Demonstrators stream through the main street of a major city, carrying signs and chanting slogans that denounce the actions of evildoers. In communities around the world, rioters smash windows, attack the police, and burn the straw-stuffed effigy of the leader of a hated nation. Newspapers and broadcast news express concern about a previously unknown cult, the use of a previously unknown psychoactive substance, a fringe political party, the people who enact a particular type of sexual behavior, neighbors who might be spies for an enemy country, or the publication and dissemination to the young of comics books, or the kidnapping of young women into sexual slavery.

These events, and the fear and concern that they express, are *about* something. And a major sector what it is they are “about” – the *reason* or *motivation* that ignites the mass assemblies, the media attention, the political actions – is the subject matter of this book. Some of these fears and concerns are based on very real, present, and concrete threats, while some have a more illusory or symbolic connection with supposed threats. This book is focused on the latter sector of threats: The question we raise is whether and to what extent the connection between the fear and concern-inspired collective behavior on the one hand and the threat that presumably justifies such behavior on the other is materially real and, if not, what else motivates such emotion-laden actions. If people assemble and act out of the fear of a non-existent or trivial threat – *why*? If people believe that something must be done about a relatively harmless condition – *what accounts for that belief*? These are the sorts of questions we wish to address in *Moral Panics*.

We live, says sociologist Barry Glassner, in a “culture of fear” (1999). Yet, he argues, many of our fears are “unfounded,” based on exaggerated notions of their threat or danger. At times when the crime rate is declining, our fear of crime rises (pp. 21–49). We panic over rare, exotic diseases, like “flesh-eating bacteria” (pp. xii–xiii). Violence in schools is declining year by year, yet our media both reflect and encourage a growing fear of violence in schools (p. 69). Pundits and journalists declare

“road rage” to be a “plague,” attracting more public concern than drunk driving, yet nationally, only a couple of dozen motorists die each year as a result of road-rage related aggressive driving (pp. 3, 17, 119), while the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that roughly 16,000 people die each year on American roadways as a result of elevated blood-alcohol levels. Automobile accidents kill vastly more passengers, mile-by-mile, than airline crashes, yet most of us worry far more about dying in a plane than in a car (pp. 193–5). We are living longer, healthier lives than at any time in human history, yet many believe that our lifestyle and diet are unhealthier than they were in the past. In 1976, American officials feared the pandemic outbreak among humans of the swine flu, a disease that infects pigs. A quarter of the American population was inoculated before the program was abandoned as unnecessary, but in the meantime, the issue created a huge level of widespread concern, media attention, and public “buzz.” Just before the turn of the twentieth century, many experts believed that computers, which weren’t programmed for the year 2000, would stop working. This was called the Y2K problem, and it generated, again, a great deal of concern and informal, media, and official attention, but the real-world problems it caused were minor and scattered. “We compound our worries beyond all reason,” says Glassner (p. xii). Few of us, says Glassner, worry about the things that are really harmful and threatening, like poverty, inequality, racism, and gun ownership, but lots of less harmful things obsess us no end.

While we agree wholeheartedly with Glassner’s analysis, our perspective introduces at least one additional dimension: deviance and morality. The intensity of concern about a given issue or condition takes on a special urgency when we introduce the “folk devil,” or one or more persons supposedly responsible for and/or representing exaggeratedly fearful conditions. Heightened fear and concern, misplaced anxiety, a reviled agent responsible for conditions less harmful than we think – all these add up to the *moral panic*, the subject of this book, now in its second edition. The authors have lived with and thought and read about these issues in the more than a decade and a half since *Moral Panics*’ first edition, and we now have occasion to put what we’ve learned to good use: the revision of this book.

We coauthored the first edition of *Moral Panics*, mainly in Israel, in 1993, during Goode’s Lady Davis Fellowship; Blackwell published it early in 1994. Why issue a revision of the book? To us, a second edition is importunate and essential. The reasons leap out at us like tigers pouncing on prey.

To begin with, in the first edition, we inadvertently failed to include a chapter on the media, a central and foundational feature of the moral panic; this edition includes that chapter. The media, perhaps the principal active agent or “actor” in the moral panic, demands attention in any extended discussion of the subject. Chapter 5 provides precisely that discussion.

A second reason for this revision: since 1994, an almost literal *ton* of books, articles, and chapters has been written on the moral panic, on topics as diverse as crime, child molestation and priestly pedophilia, extraterrestrials, terrorism, flag desecration,

illegal aliens, crack cocaine, designer drugs, Ecstasy, raves, video “nasties,” gangsta-rap, horror comics, alien abductions, the “Red Scare,” the white slave traffic, conspiracies, and satanic ritual abuse and murder in day care centers. The authors of some of these analyses extend and enrich the moral panics concept while others attempt to critique, undermine, and short-circuit it. In this, the new edition, we discuss these recent developments and attend to some of the criticisms.

A third reason is that, around the globe generally and in the Anglophone world specifically, historical events have swept over all of us like a tsunami, and many of these changes are directly relevant to the topic of moral panics. Consider terrorism. Most of us have become used to procedures that we would have bridled at a decade and a half ago. Earlier this year, Goode heard an announcement over the New York subway public address system to the effect that the police can subject passengers to “*random security checks*.” Fifteen years ago, New Yorkers – a feisty bunch – would have reacted by saying, “You gonna search *me*? You gotta be kidding! Get outta my *face*!” (Try that response in any airport; you’d be detained and miss your plane.) Not now. Many of us believe, or have been led to believe, that the threat is so great and we consider it so reasonable that we go along with it. An advertising campaign released by the New York Police Department (NYPD), repeatedly broadcasts the message, over the airwaves, in the print media, and in busses and subways, “If you see something, report something,” a directive many would have found offensive in the 1990s. Are such precautions commensurate with the supposed threat of terrorism and crime? Again, that question is relevant to moral panics. And such precautions became relevant *especially* and *crucially* after the events of September 11, 2001. Terrorism is only the most pressing and poignant of numerous exploding issues every one of us has had to think about and address in the twenty-first century, each one relevant to moral panics.

In addition to Chapter 5, on the media, we have added three chapters, Chapter 4, “The Moral Panic Meets Its Critics,” Chapter 11, “Drug Abuse Panics,” and Chapter 12, “The Feminist Anti-Pornography Crusade.” Correspondingly, we have condensed and reassembled the former Chapter 1, “A Prelude to Moral Panics,” deleted the former Chapter 11, “The Israeli Drug Panic of May 1982,” and condensed the former Chapters 5 and 6, on deviance and the criminal law. We have condensed paragraphs and sentences where that seemed to work better and of course we’ve factually, conceptually, and theoretically updated every discussion in the book, where appropriate. The resulting revision is, we believe, more streamlined and readable than the first edition. The former chapter on the drug panic of the 1980s, Chapter 12, is gone; bits and pieces of it appear in the new Chapter 11.

Goode adapted several paragraphs and pages in Chapter 11 from *Drugs in American Society* (7th edition), McGraw-Hill, 2008; parts of the Prologue and Chapter 2 from “The Skeptic Meets the Moral Panic” from *Skeptical Inquirer*, November/December, 2008, pp. 37–41; and parts of Chapter 4 from “Moral Panics and Disproportionality: The Case of LSD Use in the Sixties” from *Deviant Behavior*, Vol. 29, August–September, 2008, pp. 533–43. He extends his gratitude to the

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Ben-Yehuda borrowed or adapted portions of Chapter 10 from his "The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 86 (1), 1980, pp. 1–31, and *Deviance and Moral Boundaries: Witchcraft, the Occult, Science Fiction, Deviant Sciences and Scientists*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 23–73. He gratefully acknowledges permission to adapt or reprint this material. He would also like to thank Etti Ben-Yehuda for her continuous support, love, and encouragement, and Tzach and Guy, his sons, for their patience and love. He cannot forget Remko's love and good nature. He also deeply appreciates Sigal Goidin's good advice and initiative.

Greenwich Village, New York City
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PROLOGUE

Small, gray creatures from extraterrestrial planets land their aircraft in remote locations, abduct earthlings, and extract sperm from men and eggs or embryos from women (Mack, 1995; Showalter, 1997, pp. 189–201; Clancy, 2005). A drug marches across a continent and up the socioeconomic ladder, leaving devastation and wreckage in its wake (Jefferson, 2005, p. 41). Terrorists devise and attempt to carry out fiendish plots to hijack planes, blow up buildings, and murder ordinary citizens to avenge imagined insults against a supposedly aggrieved people (Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004; Welch, 2006). An Islamic jihadist videotapes himself beheading an “infidel” while shouting slogans into the camera about a holy war against the West (Sattar, 2007). A wave of violent offenses by members of adolescent gangs – “armed to the teeth, corrupting and enlisting innocent youth in order to dominate illicit drug markets” (McCorkle and Miethe, 2002, p. 5) – force communities across the United States to redefine juvenile offenders as adults (Singer, 1996). Day care providers – from New York to California and from Europe to Australia – torture, sexually abuse, and murder children in unspeakable satanic rituals (de Young, 2004). Men rape and murder women to make pornographic movies (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997, pp. 142, 384, 400; Russell, 1993, p. 97).

From time to time, in societies scattered around the globe, the anti-Semitic blood-libel panic continues to erupt. In the past decade or two, Jews in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Siberia, Belarus, and Ukraine have been accused of kidnapping Muslim or Christian children and using their blood to prepare Passover matzoh. A notice to parents, anonymously posted in Siberia in 2008, read, in part: “Beware Russian parents. Keep watch over your children before the coming of the supposed Jewish holiday of Passover. These disgusting people still engage in ritual practice to their gods. They kidnap small children and remove some of their blood and use it to prepare their holy food [matzoh]. They throw the bodies [of the Christian children] out in garbage dumps” <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3521307,00.html>.

What's going on here? Who's saying these things? Are any of these claims true and accurate? Did these extravagant atrocities actually take place? And, whether true or false, what do the concern, fear, and hostility of such charges express about the societies in which they are lodged?

This book is about moral panics. The *moral panic* is a scare about a threat or supposed threat from deviants or "folk devils," a category of people who, presumably, engage in evil practices and are blamed for menacing a society's culture, way of life, and central values. The word "scare" implies that the concern over, fear of, or hostility toward the folk devil is *out of proportion* to the actual threat that is claimed.

Who exactly has to be scared to qualify a scare as a panic? Is it the whole society, or simply a part of it? How scared do they have to be? What do they get scared *about*? And just what is it that they *do* when they're expressing that panic? Does the general public have to be scared, or can the "scare" be confined to expressions of fear in the mass media, or to a small collectivity within the society at large?

Some supposed threats are, evidence suggests, entirely imaginary. Carefully and systematically weighed, available data indicate that satanic ritual abuse did *not* take place, that aliens have *not* abducted humans, and that "snuff" movies are the stuff of urban legends (Stine, 1999). There is, in other words, a *delusional* aspect to moral panics (Bartholomew and Goode, 2000). In other moral panics, the supposed threat may be genuine, even harmful, but the alarm raised is disproportionate to that threat, and in ways we'll explore in this book. Even if approximately true, a claim may be *exaggerated*: perhaps the number of victims, or the financial cost to society, or how widespread the harm is, or the inevitability of the causal sequence from less to more harmful threats – any of these could be inflated above and beyond what the evidence, carefully assessed, indicates. Methamphetamine, the subject of a recent scare, is a harmful drug, as anyone knowledgeable about substance abuse would attest. But is it *as* harmful as the media have charged? Does methamphetamine experimentation result in "instant addiction," as numerous news broadcasts and magazine and newspaper articles have claimed? Is it – or was it – as widely used as many asserted? Is meth among the most lethal of the illicit drugs? Or is it fair to say that a moral panic or "scare" erupted over the use of meth, and one or more of its manifestations, ice, crystal, or crank? Is a post-9/11 terrorist attack as likely as some say? And does finger-pointing about the parties responsible for the terrorist acts *demonize* the parties named – namely, Arabs and Muslims? Were the laws recriminalizing juvenile delinquency a reasonable and rational effort to control the threat of youth crime? Or was this too an overreaction?

Every society has the moral right – indeed, the *obligation* – to protect itself from real and present dangers. But not all claims of threats are equally realistic or justified. Moreover, in every society, specific social circles, sectors, categories, or groups feel more threatened by certain behaviors or words than others. For instance, liberals are more likely to feel that flag burning is an expression of freedom of speech, while conservatives value patriotism more strongly, and are more likely to support

laws against flag desecration. Contrarily, liberals are more likely to become upset about and support laws against hate speech – expressions of hostility against minority groups – while conservatives tend to minimize the harm of such threats and oppose their criminalization. In other words, the very concept of what *constitutes* a threat is controversial, an expression of a diverse, socially divided, and multicultural society. Deviants are not “folk devils” to everyone, and what is regarded as wrongdoing or deviance is itself contested. Indeed, Downes and Rock (2003) point out that ambiguity is a hallmark of deviance. Regarding a particular act, belief, or condition as deviant depends not merely on what the rules are, but temporal and social context, biography, and who’s making the judgment; the same applies to moral panics. Correlatively, moral panics *usually* break out, when they do, among specific sectors of the society, leaving others untouched, unmoved, even bewildered as to what all the fuss was about. Only occasionally does a moral panic grip the society or the community at large in a vortex of condemnation and outrage. Even the evidence to indicate that a given response is “proportional” to a supposed real-world threat is controversial and weighed according to different scales by members of different social categories.

As dramatic as its manifestations seem, the moral panic rests on quivering, uneven, uncertain, and shifting terrain. As we’ll see in Chapter 4, some critics believe that terrain to be so uncertain that they claim the concept ought to be deleted from the sociological hard drive (Waddington, 1986; Cornwell and Linders, 2002). Quarantelli (2001) believes that sociologists ought to stop studying and referring to the “panic.” However, his notion of the panic is that it entails headlong, pell-mell flight from an imaginary threat, such as occurs, some observers believe, in a disaster. This is not our meaning of a *moral* panic at all, and hence, we are forced to disregard Quarantelli’s injunction. The moral panic is an analogy or metaphor *borrowed* from the disaster panic. Even if panic or irrational, headlong flight during disasters is exceedingly rare, it shares a common denominator with the moral panic: both are emotionally charged social phenomena entailing fright and anxiety. In the moral panic, people fear, avoid, and condemn a specific folk devil and his spawn – this, not flight and stampedes, are what occur. Others feel that the moral panic is a concept of declining significance in contemporary society (Best, 2008; Waiton, 2008). Clearly we disagree. Not only is the moral panic one of the most theoretically illuminating of the sociologist’s concepts, it is also one of the most fascinating.

THE CANUDOS MASSACRE: BRAZIL (1893–7)

For 20 years, a religious mystic who came to be known as Antonio Conselheiro wandered the northeast backlands of Brazil “preaching against ungodly behavior and rebuilding rural churches and cemeteries that had fallen into disrepair in the

forbidding, semiarid interior” (Levine, 1992, p. 2). In 1893, Conselheiro led a pious group of disciples into a remote mountain valley in Bahia. There, on the site of an abandoned ranch, he founded a religious community – Canudos. It attracted thousands of followers who were drawn “by Conselheiro’s charismatic madness. He promised only sacrifice and hard work and asked residents to live according to God’s commandments and await the coming of the Millennium, when would come redemption, the Day of Judgment” (p. 2). Conselheiro’s vision was that the weak would inherit the earth and the order of nature itself would be overturned, with rainfall blessing the customarily arid region, ushering in an era of agricultural abundance. Within two years, the settlement became the second largest city in Bahia. At its height, Canudos’s population was more than a tenth of that of São Paulo (p. 2).

Landowners did not take kindly to the loss of their labor force; they demanded government intervention. The Catholic Church, struggling against what it saw as heterodoxy, apostasy, and the influence of Afro-Brazilian cults, likewise demanded immediate action. The army dispatched soldiers to capture Conselheiro. The task proved to be more formidable than any official had imagined. The first three assaults against the settlement were repulsed by tenacious resistance from his followers. The campaign stretched out over two years. Finally, in October 1897, 8,000 troops serving under three generals and Brazil’s Minister of War, encircled Canudos and bombarded it into submission by heavy artillery.

The repression of the community was violent and bloody. Thousands of Conselheiro’s followers were killed; the captured survivors numbered only in the hundreds. Soldiers drew and quartered the wounded or hacked them to pieces “limb by limb” (p. 190), “killed children by smashing their skulls against trees” (p. 190), and cut Conselheiro’s head off and displayed it on a pike. (It turns out he had already died two weeks before the final assault, probably of dysentery.) They “smashed, leveled, and burned” all 5,000 homes in the settlement (p. 190) and torched and dynamited the entire grounds of Canudos. “The army systematically eradicated the remaining traces of the holy city as if it had housed the devil incarnate” (p. 190).

The resistance of Canudos – indeed, its very existence – had generated a crisis in Brazilian society.

Highlighted by the universal fascination with stories about crazed religious fanatics, the Canudos conflict flooded the press, invading not only editorials, columns, and news dispatches, but even feature stories and humor. For the first time in Brazil, newspapers were used to create a sense of public panic. Canudos appeared daily, almost always on the front page; indeed, the story was the first ever to receive daily coverage in the Brazilian press. More than a dozen major newspapers sent war correspondents to the front and ran daily columns reporting events. . . . Something about Canudos provoked anxiety, which would be soothed only by evidence that Canudos had been destroyed (Levine, 1992, p. 24).

In order to understand the intensity of public concern in Brazil in the 1890s over the existence of a religious community consisting of a few thousand souls who, as far as anyone could tell, were not violating any of the country's criminal statutes, it is necessary to turn the calendar back a century or more and examine events of the time. The country had abolished slavery in Brazil in 1888 and overthrown the monarchy in 1889, introduced a standard, uniform system of weights and measures, and, by decree, had standardized the Portuguese language on a nationwide basis. Brazil seemed to be poised on the threshold of modernity. By forging a fanatical, millennial community, Conselheiro defied government authority, which was in the process of attempting to reach into every hamlet in Brazil. Indeed, Canudos rejected the very civilizing process itself, threatening to plunge the society back into a state of darkness and superstition. The backlanders had defined "the progressive and modern benefits of civilized life" (p. 155). "Urban Brazilians were proud of their material and political accomplishments and felt only shame at the dark, primitive world of the hinterlands" (p. 155). Only one possible solution existed to the challenge posed by Canudos: The movement must be crushed, the community obliterated, and Conselheiro and his followers exterminated.

THE "WHITE SLAVE" TRAFFIC

Early in the twentieth century, the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers ran headlines about Asian conspirators who kidnapped young, vulnerable, small-town and farm women across the United States and forced them into lives of prostitution. Early in the twentieth century, publishers turned out a score of books, some intentionally fictional, others purportedly factual, about the "white slave traffic" (Donovan, 2006). George Kibbe Turner, a journalist, short story writer, and screenwriter, claimed that prostitution was organized "with all the nicety of modern industry," an industry much like the Chicago stockyards, in which "not one shred of flesh is wasted." *The House of Bondage*, a bestselling book by Reginald Wright Kauffman (1911), ran through more than a dozen printings. It contained chapters entitled "The Specter of Fear," "The Birds of Prey," "An Angel Unawares," "Under the Lash," and "The Serpents' Den." In his introduction, the author claimed that the book "is the truth only that I have told. Throughout this narrative, there is no incident that is not a daily commonplace in the life of the underworld of every large city. If proof were needed," Wright adds, "the newspapers have ... proved as much. I have written only what I have myself seen and myself heard." *The Traffic in Souls*, a movie, luridly exploited the "white slavery" theme. In 1910, Congress passed the Mann Act, a law making it a crime to assist or entice women to cross state lines for the purpose of engaging in prostitution. Yet for the period during which this scare erupted, no one managed to turn up a single case of kidnapping and enforced

prostitution (Shevory, 2004). “White slavery” proved to be a “perfect storm” of a moral panic – a complete figment of the media’s imagination. The Mann Act remains on the books to this day.

The “white slave” traffic moral panic was inspired by media attention to Chinese immigration to the American West, the fact that a substantial proportion of these immigrants smoked, or were thought to have smoked, opium (Conrad and Schneider, 1980, p. 120; 1992), the fear that whites, especially women, would be corrupted by this “degenerate” Chinese vice, and the subsequent connection between opiate addiction and prostitution (Courtwright, 1982, pp. 70–8). In addition, Chinese immigration created a competition for jobs with the majority white population – hence, the fabrication of a “yellow peril”: the fear that Asians would swamp people of European descent in a “tidal wave” of yellow-skinned hordes who were willing to work for pennies a day. The western states and municipalities passed a series of anti-opium laws, most of which were designed to control and limit the rights of Chinese immigrants (Morgan, 1978). Richard Ashley points out that the 20 Dr. Fu Manchu novels, a series by Sax Rohmer that began in 1913, were very popular because they located the source of the peril to a specific Chinese folk devil: “the insidious Doctor had a plan ... to enslave the white world with his evil drugs.” In Rohmer’s novels, it wasn’t clear whether Dr. Fu Manchu peddled cocaine or opium, but no matter: the stereotype linking the Chinese, dope, and involuntary prostitution had been forged (Ashley, 1972, p. 115).

During the 1930s and 1940s, the Japanese imperial army conquered major swaths of the Asian continent. The high command established the practice of forcing Asian, mainly Chinese and Korean, women to become “comfort women” – unwilling prostitutes servicing Japanese soldiers (<http://online.sfsu.edu/~soh/cw-links.htm>). Interestingly, here, we have the *opposite* of “white slavery”: While advocates of white slavery claimed that an atrocity took place when it didn’t, the Japanese government *denied* that an atrocity occurred, even though it actually took place.

A fanciful version of the “sex slave” panic did erupt, however, in France in the late 1960s: employees of six dress shops in Orléans were rumored to drug and abduct young women, under the cover of darkness, taking them through underground tunnels to boats, to North Africa or the Middle East, where they were forced into prostitution. In this particular “urban legend,” the kidnappers were alleged to be Jewish (Morin, 1971). The tale was an extravagant and fanciful fabrication – it mobilized no police action nor was it verified by any mainstream organization or institution – but it shows how lively and credible the “sex slave” story is among certain social circles in certain societies at certain times.

In the early 2000s, a new version of the sexual slavery moral panic emerged, this time in the United States. In testimony given before the House of Representatives, a woman from Nepal stated that she had been “drugged, abducted, and forced to work at a brothel in Bombay.” A State Department official estimated that 50,000 “slaves” were “pouring” into the United States each year, a figure confirmed later by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). A Justice Department official put the

figure at 100,000. Representative Christopher H. Smith, a Republican from New Jersey, spoke of a “tidal wave” of slavery victims. In 2000, Congress enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which created 42 Justice Department task forces and authorized an initial \$150 million to find and help the hundreds of thousands of forced prostitution or slavery in the United States. The fifth sentence of the law specifically states that Congress found that 50,000 women and children “are trafficked into the United States each year.” Said Sally Stoecker, representative of Shared Hope International, an anti-sex-trafficking organization, “It’s a huge crime, and it’s continuing to grow” (Markton, 2007).

After more than half a dozen years and millions of dollars expended to fight human trafficking – \$28.5 million in 2006 alone – the government has come up virtually empty-handed. Ronald Weitzer, a sociologist, declared “The discrepancy between the alleged number of victims per year and the number of cases they’ve been able to make is so huge that it’s got to raise major questions... It suggests that this problem is being blown way out of proportion” (Markton, 2007; Weitzer, 2007). Nonetheless, the effort continues. Said Derek Ellerman, cofounder of the Polaris Project, another anti-trafficking group, “There’s huge momentum, because this is a no-brainer issue... No one is going to stand up and oppose fighting modern-day slavery.” Justice Department officials claimed that there has been a 600 percent increase in trafficking cases. When pressed for “absolute numbers,” one reporter found that representatives of the department could provide no documented figures (Markton, 2007). The Department of Health and Human Services “is still paying people to find victims.” The agency announced an additional \$3.4 million in funds for “street outreach” awards to 22 groups nationwide. One of these awards went to Mosaic Family Services, a nonprofit agency in Dallas. “For the past year, its employees have put out the word to hospitals, police stations, domestic violence shelters – any organization that might come into contact with a victim... Three victims were found” (Markton, 2007). Women *are* forced into sexual slavery, and almost certainly in large numbers, in many of the poorer countries of world (Miller, 2008). But *in the United States*, in spite of claims made by advocates, the practice is extremely rare, virtually nonexistent.

The twenty-first-century version of sexual trafficking emerged without the racial angle: women in general (almost all of them from Third World countries), rather than specifically white women, are supposedly threatened by forced prostitution. In addition, today, the race of the traffickers *vis-à-vis* their victims is irrelevant. However, the common theme is the relationship between the furor (enormous) and the minuscule number of documented cases: with respect to the early twentieth-century “white slave” trade, none, in the case of contemporary forced prostitution, very few. But unlike the “white slavery” issue in the early 1900s, the contemporary version has produced relatively little public concern and comparatively less media attention. One wonders if the factor of race offers the key to understanding this difference. The earlier version of this myth portrayed Asian

men forcing white women into sexual slavery; in the contemporary version of the myth, the race of the victimizers and the victims is not a relevant factor.

THE SEXUAL PSYCHOPATH LAWS, 1930s–50s

It is November, 1949. The mutilated body of a small girl is found in a neighborhood in Los Angeles. The police are alerted, and relay a description of the crime and the suspect, one Fred Stroble, to nearby cities and counties; blockades along the Mexican border are set up. Hotels, motels, bus stations, and bars are watched. Men matching the suspect's description are taken off public transportation and brought to police stations for questioning. The media broadcast details of a number of similar past crimes, some stretching back a quarter of a century. There is a sudden increase in the number of crimes involving young girls being molested reported to the police. The body of a drowned man is pulled from the Pacific Ocean; it is initially incorrectly reported as the suspect. After three days, Fred Stroble is spotted getting off a bus by a police officer, and he is apprehended and arrested. The arresting officer's photograph is printed in scores of newspapers cross the country as the "capturer of the sex fiend." Details of the case and related cases continue to be presented in the news. The Los Angeles District Attorney secures a confession from Stroble, who then meets with assembled reporters; "with beads of sweat standing on his face and neck," he repeats a confession of his crimes to the press (Sutherland, 1950b, pp. 143–4).

Between 1937 and 1950, a dozen states and the District of Columbia pass "sexual psychopath" laws. In each state, the passage of these laws follows a specific pattern. The process begins with "a few serious sex crimes committed in quick succession" which are "given nation-wide publicity." National magazines publish articles bearing titles such as "How Safe Is Your Daughter?" "What Can We Do About Sex Crimes?" and "Terror in Our Cities." Letters to the editor of local newspapers demand action. School superintendents remind teachers and principals to be on the lookout for men loitering around schoolyards; parent-teacher's associations sponsor mass meetings on the problem of sex offenders. The head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) calls for an all-out war against sex criminals. National leaders are quoted in the press concerning the most effective methods of controlling sex crimes. Victims of sex offenses, and relatives of victims, rise up and make public declarations which are dutifully reported in the media. Politicians demand that legislatures call special sessions to pass laws to deal with the problem. Communities are "thrown in a panic" about the danger that sexual psychopaths pose to women and children. Legislative committees are appointed, and recommendations are made. Relatively little debate or discussion takes place in state legislatures about the proposed bills, though in most yet another version of the "sexual psychopath" law is passed. In no location is either

the fear or the passage of the law related to an increase in the incidence of sex crimes (Sutherland, 1950b, pp. 144–6, 1950a).

HORROR COMICS (1948–56)

The comic books produced in the early decades of the twentieth century featured amusing, benign, or slightly mischievous characters, in strips such as *Mutt and Jeff* and *Mickey Mouse*. But by the mid-1930s, cartoonists had begun to introduce adventure, some violence, and more serious themes and adult characters, under titles such as *Dick Tracy*, *Flash Gordon*, and *Terry and the Pirates*. In 1938, when *Superman* first appeared, “the funny papers just weren’t funny any more. And to some, they were getting steamy and way too rough” (Bjerg, 2006). The May 8, 1940 issue of the *Chicago Daily News* published an editorial by Sterling North, which stated that the effect “of the pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant.” The comic book reader, fulminated North, is subject to an “injection of sex and murder,” tending to produce “an even more ferocious generation than the present one.” To put the skids on the malefic influence of cartoons, North concluded, parents and teachers throughout America “must band together to break the comic code.”

Initially, North’s diatribe seemed to fall on deaf ears. In the 1940s, with the introduction of heroes such as Batman, Captain America, and Steve Canyon, comic books became even more popular, and World War II opened their readership to servicemen overseas; during this decade, comics sold 60 million copies a month (Bjerg, 2006). While World War II shifted the age of a major sector of comic book readership into adulthood it also delayed the resentment among adults of the unacceptable content of this new medium. The post-war years saw a huge expansion of the pre-teen and teenage demographics, as well as an enormous increase in the affluence of the American population; parents put a historically unprecedented amount of discretionary cash in the hands of their pre-teen children; what better way of spending it than purchasing comic books? Comics were a medium designed specifically for youngsters: bright, vivid, colorful panels, with bold, sharply outlined designs, simplified characters, tales of good and evil with a maximum of rebellion, violence, creepy tales, and dramatic action – not likely to sit well with parents – and balloons containing simple, declarative dialogue.

Of the many actors in the comic book moral panic, two are worth highlighting: the Catholic Church and a psychiatrist named Frederic Wertham. The Catholic Church was probably the institution most hostile to comics. (Ironically, during the war, churches in some 2,000 parishes had purchased multiple copies of the comic book series, *Picture Stories from the Bible*, published by EC Comics, which later produced *Tales from the Crypt*, very likely the most horrific of the comic book horror titles.)

By 1952, some 20 publishers released 650 titles a month; between 80 and 100 million comic books sold each week (Hadju, 2008). The popularity of the medium both fanned the flames of adult hostility toward comics and emboldened artists and writers to make their stories and images even more horrific than was thought possible. In 1952, a third of all comics were horror comics with titles such as *Tales from the Crypt*, *Terror Tales*, and *Chamber of Chills*; perhaps a third were evenly divided between crime and romance, and a third were made up of everything else, from Donald Duck and Archie to Sheena, Queen of the Jungle and The Rawhide Kid.

One man in particular, Frederic Wertham, a psychiatrist working with young offenders, believed that the “gory violence and lurid sex” of comics caused the delinquency of American youth. In 1948, he delivered a talk before a convention of psychiatrists which argued that comics caused juvenile delinquency. Wertham provided appropriately horrifying examples of boys who read horror comics and turned to a life of crime (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006).

Wertham’s talk ignited a clamorous media chorus denouncing the degeneracy of comics and calling for their censorship. (Wertham himself rejected the policy of legal bans.) Some towns even held “mass comic book burnings”; mass circulation magazines such as *Time* and *Look* branded comics as degenerate; Canada banned the publication of crime comics; and in 1950, the U.S. Senate formed a special committee to investigate the link of comics with organized crime. In 1954, Wertham published his polemical and influential book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed that Batman and Robin depicted “a dream wish of two homosexuals living together,” that Wonder Woman represented a “lesbian counterpart of Batman,” and that *Superman* planted the idea that children could fly. Wertham became a “media darling,” speaking around the country and writing for popular magazines. Later that year, he was called before the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, where he spelled out his thesis on the causal connection between comic books and juvenile delinquency (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006).

The exchange between Senator Estes Kefauver, a Democrat from Tennessee, and Bill Gaines, a cartoonist, creator of a series of horror comics, and founder of a comic book company, EC, is especially revealing:

KEFAUVER (holding up the front page of a gory EC comic book): This seems to be a man with a bloody ax holding a woman’s head up, which has been severed from her body. Do you think that is in good taste?

GAINES: Yes sir, I do for the cover of a horror comic. A cover in bad taste might be defined as holding the head higher so that the blood could be seen dripping from it.

KEFAUVER: You’ve got blood coming out of her mouth.

GAINES: A little.

In 1954, the hearings resulted in a self-imposed code of standards on comic book producers, called the Comics Code Authority (CCA), and in 1955, the Senate completed

its final report. A stamp on the corner of a comic book certified that the contents were safe for young readers. The code “restricted sex and violence, forbade the criticism of religion, the use of slang words and a long list of unacceptable practices” (Nyberg, 1998; Bjerg, 2006). The Senate’s report issued a statement to the effect that the government must use whatever means necessary to “prevent our nation’s young from being harmed from crime and horror comics.” Many distributors refused to exhibit or sell a comic book unless it bore the CCA seal; some horror comic book producers went out of business, including EC, the only series of which that survived was *Mad* magazine.

Horror comics followed much the same trajectory in the United Kingdom. GIs stationed in the UK during World War II brought comics with them whose popularity proved to be enduring. At first, British firms began importing comics from the United States in bulk; before long, however, these firms printed them from matrices or “mats” in runs of 50,000. The goriness of American titles, such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *Haunt of Fear*, far exceeded anything the British public had known. Soon, the public became horrified at the content of these “American-style” comics. Magazines and newspapers ran stories with headlines that read: “Drive out the Horror Comics,” “Now Ban this Filth That Poisons Our Children,” “Still Cashing in on Muck,” “Help Us to Fight Sex and Crime a Shilling at a Time.” Dozens of voluntary associations – women’s organizations, churches, parent-teacher associations, trade unions, even the Communist Party – took up the cause, lobbying against the distribution of horror comic books.

“Publicity, pressure, and meetings finally forced the government into action” (Barker, 1984, p. 9). In 1955, Parliament passed The Children and Young Person’s Harmful Publication Act, which forbade anyone from distributing picture books or magazines portraying “the commission of crimes,” acts “of violence or cruelty,” or “incidents of a repulsive or horrible nature” in such a way “that the work as a whole would tend to corrupt a child or young person” (p. 16). Throughout this campaign, no one advanced a shred of systematic or empirical evidence to indicate that exposure to horror comics actually caused any corruption or delinquency – or, indeed, behavior of any kind. Within a few years, the media, public, and legal furor died down, passing into historical insignificance.

THE BOYS OF BOISE (1955–6)

Moral panics may be local in scope rather than national. Beginning November 2, 1955, the citizens of Boise, Idaho woke up to a headline in *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, which read: “Three Boise Men Admit Sex Charges.” Charles Brokaw, a freight worker, Ralph Cooper, a shoe-store employee, and Vernon Cassel, a clothing-store clerk, were charged with “infamous crimes against nature” (Gerassi, 1966, p. 1), which referred to various homosexual practices. An investigation “was being

launched” into allegations of “immoral practices involving teen-age boys” (p. 1). Although the authorities “had barely scratched the surface,” the article continued, there was evidence that similar acts had been committed by other adults against a hundred boys (p. 2). That day in Boise, the main topic of conversation revolved around the arrests and their disturbing implications. Was it possible “a vast secret organization of perverts” had been operating in Boise and that “every kid in high school” had been corrupted (p. 3)? Citizens called representatives at the high school, police headquarters, the *Statesman* – and one another – “stressing the acute seriousness of the whole matter” (p. 3).

On the next day, November 3, in an editorial entitled “Crush the Monster,” the *Statesman* demanded that the “whole sordid situation” be “completely cleared up, and the premises thoroughly cleaned and disinfected” (p. 4). Such an editorial “was bound to generate panic, and it did” (p. 4). However, when the statesman called for all agencies to “crush the monster,” one thing was certain: “there was no such thing” (p. 5). Three “rather unimportant, unassuming, unpolitical individuals had been arrested for doing something either infamous or lewd with some minors” and a probate-court officer claimed that some other adults had done the same thing with as many as a hundred teenagers. “On that kind of evidence, most newspapers would only demand more information” (p. 5).

A week later, Ralph Cooper – who had a long record of arrests and convictions – received an astounding life sentence for his crimes. (He was released after nine years.) The other two men received 15-year sentences. Four days after Cooper’s imprisonment, Joe Moore, vice-president of the Idaho First National Bank, was arrested on felony charges of committing, once again, an “infamous crime against nature” (p. 12). Another *Statesman* editorial appeared the next day which warned Boise parents “to keep an eye on the whereabouts” of their children because “a number of boys have been victimized by these perverts... . No matter what is required, this sordid mess must be removed from this community” (p. 13).

Men who stopped to talk to adolescent boys, men who paused to look at football practice, even men “who were not good, kind, obedient husbands,” were denounced (pp. 13–14). The county’s prosecuting attorney, Blaine Evans, became a local hero. He vowed to “eliminate” all homosexuals from Boise. Though this sort of talk made the town’s citizens alarmed, at least, they reasoned, “something was being done about the problem” (p. 13). On the morning of November 15, a young teacher, an admitted homosexual, while eating his breakfast of eggs, toast, and coffee and reading his morning *Statesman*, came upon the news item of Moore’s arrest, accompanied by Blaine’s promise to “eliminate” all homosexuals. He never finished his breakfast. “He jumped up from his seat, pulled out his suitcases, packed as fast as he could, got into his car, and drove straight to San Francisco, never bothering to call up the school to let it be known that he would be absent. The cold eggs, coffee and toast remained on his table for two days before someone from his school came by to see what had happened” (p. 14).

On December 2, Charles Herbert Gordon, an interior decorator, pled guilty to “lewd and lascivious conduct” and was sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment. On December 11, a dozen men, some prominent citizens, were arrested on homosexual charges. On December 12, the scandal reached national proportions. *Time* magazine ran a story claiming that “a widespread homosexual underworld that involved some of Boise’s most prominent men ... had preyed on hundreds of teen-age boys for the past decade” (p. ix). On December 19, a curfew was established for minors age 16 and younger. On December 22, the Boise City Council called for the conviction and sentencing of all arrested homosexuals. One December 23, five homosexuals were sentenced to periods ranging from six months to 10 years. In April, the mayor announced that nearly 1,500 persons had been interviewed in the course of the investigation. Over the next year, arrests and sentences continued; by January 1957, locals regarded the scandal as having reached its conclusion.

Why the panic over homosexuality in Boise in 1955 and 1956? Why the ludicrous and almost literally impossible assertion that a “ring” or “organization” of adult men were preying on scores, possibly hundreds, of local boys? Was the issue even homosexuality in the first place? And *who* regarded it as an issue?

John Gerassi, a journalist, claimed (1966, p. 21) that the investigation, which launched the panic, was undertaken by the city’s power elite, the “Boise gang,” a circle of rich, powerful, and conservative executives, entrepreneurs, and politicians, to discredit City Hall – “which was then in the hands of a fairly decent, reformist administration” – and one council member in particular whose son had been involved in the activity under investigation. In addition, the intention was to flush out and discredit a member of that powerful inner circle, a man publicly referred to as the “Queen.” The irony of the panic was that the individuals who were the real target of the investigation were never named, while the unintended victims, many humble and powerless, were punished. Moreover, not all of the individuals had had sex with underage minors; several, in fact, engaged in homosexual relations with consenting adults, though this was still a crime in Idaho in 1955. Even those who technically violated the state’s statutes against sex with minors had committed acts with a small number of 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old juvenile delinquents and male prostitutes who hustled adult homosexuals for pay and engaged in blackmail against them. The Boise sex scandal proved to be the proverbial “tempest in a teapot.”

When questioned a decade later, the prosecution attorney responsible for bringing the cases defended his role in investigating and arresting homosexuals. We had to get “those guys,” he said, “because they strike at the core of the society, I mean the family and the family unit. And when you get those guys crawling around the streets, you’ve got to prosecute to save the family” (p. 25). When asked why such a fuss was made at this particular time and why the sentences were so harsh, he replied, “I guess we didn’t know that there were so many of them in the community. You know, when it’s going on in the basement of the Public Library, and in the

hotels, and these guys are soliciting business all over town, you've got to do something about it, don't you?" (p. 24). A Boise Valley farmer put the matter even more simply. When interviewed about it 10 years after the scandal, he said: "We grow them tough out here ... and that's the way we want to grow them. None of this hanky-panky and city stuff for us. Our kids have to be men, just like their forefathers.... There's no room for these queers. We don't want them. They should be run out of the state" (p. 129). According to Thompson, the media cast homosexuals into the category of "Otherness" (1998, p. 81); the scare in Boise *hugely* exaggerated that tendency.

FLAG BURNING (1989–2000s)

Tension between veneration and desecration of the American flag reaches back to the early years of the Republic. Even after the Revolutionary War, Old Glory lacked both standardization and public enthusiasm. The U.S. military did not carry the Stars and Stripes into battle until the war against Mexico, in 1846. But in the years following the Civil War, the flag protection movement "gained considerable momentum." As a result of a series of legal victories between 1897 and 1932, for the first time in American history, the flag "was officially designated a venerated object whose desecration was criminalized" (Welch, 2000, p. 23), and for nearly a century, "thousands of American citizens would be arrested and funneled into the criminal justice system for violating antidesecration laws" (p. 24). During World War I, burning the flag came to represent sedition, treason, and opposition to war. In recognition of the killing by National Guard troops of four Kent State University students in an anti-Vietnam War protest, New York City Mayor John Lindsay lowered the flag at City Hall to half-mast. Construction workers held protests in lower Manhattan, parading with flag decals on their hard hats and holding signs that denounced Lindsay as "a rat," "a Commy rat," "a faggot," "a leftist," "an idiot," "an anarchist," and "a traitor" (Bigart, 1970, p. A1). One construction worker proclaimed to a journalist that he would kill his own son if he defiled the flag; that was the worst thing, he said, the antiwar protesters had ever done (Goldstein, 1995, p. 160).

Following the Vietnam War, the flag burning issue lay dormant, and would have remained so if it had not been for the protests staged by a tiny splinter social movement organization, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), whose actions were designed to "unleash the repressive tendencies of the state" and engender "a sense of martyrdom" (Welch, 2000, pp. 61, 69). In addition to the RCP, the cast of characters in this drama included the conservative Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush administrations (1981–93), American public opinion, and the federal courts. The Reagan and Bush regimes wished to appear patriotic to the American electorate. Given the absence of a state religion, the American public regarded the flag as a symbol of the country's "shared emphasis on morality, a

construct distinguishing right from wrong and good from evil” (p. 102). But the federal courts demurred. In 1984, Gregory Johnson, a member of the Revolutionary Communist Youth Brigade, was arrested for disorderly conduct at a demonstration in which an American flag was burned; the charge was later to be replaced with desecration of a venerated object under Texas law. In 1989, the case was brought to the Supreme Court, which found for the defendant. Media attention “exploded,” resulting in “unprecedented levels of news coverage” (p. 103). Public opinion polls did not support the Supreme Court: Two-thirds of respondents (65%) disagreed with a Supreme Court ruling that held that flag burning was a legal act permitted by the First Amendment, and seven out of ten (71%) supported a constitutional amendment to protect the flag. A *New York Times*/CBS News poll found that 83 percent felt that flag burning should be against the law; and six out of ten (59%) endorsed a constitutional amendment criminalizing the desecration of Old Glory.

To supporters of laws against flag burning, desecrating the symbol of the United States is a serious matter, *by itself* a wrongful act, indicative of the a lack of patriotism, as well as behavior that *contributes* to the subversion of America. The “feverish response” to flag burning, compounded by the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Johnson v. Texas*, “featured all the qualities of a classic moral panic” (p. 72). Said Congressman David Applegate before the House of Representatives, “Mr. Speaker, I am mad as heck. We have witnessed the greatest travesty in the annals of jurisprudence when the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the destruction of our greatest American symbol. What in God’s name is going on? Are there any limitations? Are they going to allow fornication in Times Square at high noon?” (p. 72). Senator Bob Dole chimed in with the statement “People who hate the flag ... ought to leave the country” (p. 72). Following such rancorous denunciations, Congress passed the Flag Protection Act of 1989, which reads: “Whoever knowingly mutilates, defaces, burns, or tramples upon the flag of the United States shall be fined ... or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both” (p. 73). Flag burners became folk devils, in the words of Chief Justice Rehnquist, who spoke for the minority opinion, enactors of “inherently evil and profoundly offensive” behavior (p. 113). Representative William Clinger demonized them as “twisted lowlives,” “pathetic individuals” who engaged in “cheap theatrics” and were fighting for “sorry causes” (p. 115).

But the skeptic would probably argue that flag burning was little more than a tempest in a teapot, no more than a blip on the radar screen, and was likely to have a largely symbolic impact on the society. In 1989, The Emergency Committee to Stop the Flag Amendment and Laws released a pamphlet, “What’s All This Flag Furor,” that juxtaposed the wording of a law passed in pre-Nazi Germany (1932) prohibiting the public profaning of the “colors or flag of the German armed forces” with a U.S. congressional resolution prohibiting the desecration of the American flag (Welch, 2000, p. 99). Artists created works that mocked the notion that Americans should be legally enjoined to display the flag in a “proper way” (pp. 99ff.). Dread Scott created a display in the School of the Art Institute that forced

museum guests to choose between stepping on the flag while writing comments in a ledger book or walking around it. One guest wrote: “The flag represents our country. You don’t like it – MOVE!” Another wrote: “To[o] many people have given their lives to make this country free. This is not the proper way to display the flag! It should be held high!” The Chicago City Council passed a resolution denouncing the exhibit, and the measure’s sponsor “echoed the growing moral panic,” shouting: “There has never been a more dastardly act in the City of Chicago!” (p. 77).

In the United States, the flag desecration issue has never entirely disappeared; it remains latent, poised to reemerge at the appropriate time. Welch (2000, pp. 157–72) read all speeches entered into the *Congressional Record* that mentioned flag burning; these speeches reveal the depth of the conflict. Said James Cooper on the floor of Congress “I’m all for punishing sinners, flag burners included... . Flag burners should be placed in jail” (p. 142). Added Senator Orrin Hatch: “why can we not ban in the interest of patriotism and honor and values in this country despicable, rotten, dirty conduct against our national symbol?” (p. 148). Senator John Kerry offered a discordant note with the statement that the flag desecration amendment represents “an extraordinary overreaction to a virtually nonexistent problem,” a “desperate grasp for symbols” that masks “an abject want of ideas” (p. 149). Senator Edward Kennedy agreed. A flag desecration “is hardly the kind of serious and widespread problem in American society that warrants a loophole in the first amendment. Surely there is no clear and present danger that warrants such a change” (p. 150).

This is the heated language of controversy, an exchange that is unlikely to be resolved through reason and logic – a classic symbolic panic that demarcates two immovable positions off from one another. The interested observer of the moral panic eagerly awaits the next round in this hot-blooded struggle.

Interestingly, we see a parallel here with Israel. Many *haredim* or ultra-orthodox Jews believe that the state of Israel should not be considered legitimate until the messiah manifests himself. Hence, some anti-Zionist *haredi* factions practice the burning of the Israeli flag on Independence Day, which distresses many secular and other non-ultra-orthodox Israelis. On occasion, when journalists have attempted to photograph such burnings, *haredi* participants and bystanders have physically attacked them. (A picture of *haredi* children setting fire to an Israeli flag may be found on p. 12 of the May 4, 2003 issue of *Yediot Aharonot*.) In 1997, a reporter quoted a *haredi* teenager observed burning an Israeli flag as saying: “this is not my country so I burned its flag” (*Kol Hair*, May 16, 1997, p. 23).

SUMMARY

From time to time in every society, charges of terrible and dastardly deeds committed by evildoers erupt; sides are chosen, speeches are delivered, enemies are named, and atrocities are alleged. In some such episodes, the harm is alleged but