
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Moral panics, sex panics: fear and the fight over sexual rights by Gilbert Herdt

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BOOK REVIEW

Moral panics, sex panics: fear and the fight over sexual rights, edited by Gilbert Herdt, New York and London, New York University Press, 2009, 304 pp., \$24.00 (paperback), ISBN 9780814737231

This book defines and describes the workings of sexual and moral ‘panics’, a phenomenon employed by particular social actors to deprive certain groups (mainly vulnerable groups such as gay men, lesbians, sexually active youth or single mothers) of their sexual rights. Examples described are mainly from Western settings: the panic among US religious conservatives about youth sexuality and sex education during the Bush years (Chapters 2 and 7), about the sexuality of lower-class African-Americans in the USA among the middle class (Chapter 3), about HIV/the ‘gay plague’ among heterosexuals in Australia (Chapter 4) and about gay marriage in the USA among heterosexuals (Chapter 5). The only non-Western examples discussed are panics about female sexuality and lesbianism in post-colonial Southern Africa and Indonesia by the ruling class (Chapter 6).

Gilbert Herdt, in his lengthy introduction, defines ‘moral panics’ as ‘large social events occurring in troubled times when a serious threat by evil-doers incites societal reaction’. He notes that sexual panics are often orchestrated in the mass media and are always purposeful or planned, which ‘belies the irrationality implied by the term “panic”, until it is realized that panics can be culturally staged’ (5). Herdt defines six forms of moral panic. What exactly distinguishes a moral panic from ‘moral shock’, or a sexual panic from a ‘great fear’, is not clear and these distinctions are not taken up by the other contributors to the book. Herdt himself seems to use some of the terms interchangeably.

One of the six forms proposed by Herdt is meant as an ‘overhead narrative’ to observe and explain particular structural or historical patterns and trends that exist below the seemingly random and spontaneous occurrences of moral panics. Herdt calls this ‘cultural anger’, defined as ‘the marshalling of intense emotion across diffuse domains and areas of action to unite disparate individuals and groups in political pursuit of a common enemy or sexual scapegoat’ (5). This definition seems to downplay the basis of this pursuit, which is the political and ideological ‘battle for sexual rights’. Gary Dowsett, in his chapter about ‘the gay plague’ in Australia, points out that moral panics can emerge and become ‘political gifts in the hands of the right manipulator’ only if and because they draw on an ‘underlying, extant moral economy’ (139). This ‘moral economy’ seems similar to Herdt’s ‘cultural anger’, however, because it focuses on more than just ‘anger’ it seems to me a more useful concept for an overhead narrative than ‘cultural anger’.

Di Mauro and Joffe show how the arguments used during sexual panics can shift over time. Their excellent chapter focuses on the successful moral panics staged by the religious right in the US in recent decades. After initially advancing a socially traditionalist and pro-life agenda using moral and religious arguments, they have increasingly covered their positions ‘under a veneer of scientific and technical expertise’ (67), while at the same time undermining scientific evidence that contradicts their agenda. How this ‘war on science’ relates to issues of life and death is convincingly illustrated by the example of restrictions

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placed on sexuality and reproductive health education to school-based youth during the George Bush years, leading to an 'ever-increasing sexual illiteracy' among them (77), with rising HIV and STI rates and teenage pregnancies as a result.

Cathy Cohen, in her chapter on Black sexuality in the USA, describes the workings of an 'internal panic', where 'much of the targeting, blaming, and shaming of a group' comes not from a group of outsiders but from a group of black leaders concerned with 'what is thought to be deviant, destructive, and dangerous behaviour and norms, often tied to sex' (108). Cohen believes that these panics emerge out of a sense of anxiety among the Black middle-class about maintaining their relatively privileged and respectable position versus their lower-class peers and competing middle classes of other races, with whom they ally themselves. Cohen describes the role of people like Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey and 'even Barack Obama', who have acquired a level of respectability by openly panicking about and dismissing lower-class Black sexuality, particularly men on 'the down low'. These Black leaders actively perpetuate myths about the sexuality of Black men by 'reconstructing the old narrative that sexuality in Black communities is always deviant, always dangerous, and always irresponsible' (113). The result of the Black middle-class' moral panic is what Cohen describes as a 'baffling' lack of mobilisation of Black communities against the growing HIV epidemic in their midst, which they fear would 'turn the spotlight on drug use, men having sex with men, and sex work in Black communities'; their choice to remain silent about AIDS continues to be 'unforgivable' (122). Cohen calls for greater 'racial literacy', allowing activists to tell 'a nuanced story of sexual rights and moral panics in communities of color' (126).

Moral panics do not only create harm; they can also lead to creative and productive responses on the part of those targeted by them. Gary Dowsett, in his chapter on HIV among gay men in Australia, describes how moral panics about homosexuality and HIV in Australia helped galvanise community-based responses to the epidemic among gay men. The 'global template' for HIV responses that resulted is still replicated around the globe, for which, Dowsett dryly remarks, '[t]here has never been a "thank you"' (143). Dowsett sees direct action, electoral pressure, a claim to solidarity and shared identity and a collective or specifically gay community mobilisation as positive results of moral panics that accompanied the arrival of the HIV epidemic in Australia.

Arguably, the part of this book that I liked best is the final chapter by Janice Irvine. It would have served well as an introduction. It gives a crisp and clear overview of the literature on moral and sexual panics, followed by a discussion about the usefulness of this term and what is lacking in the current literature. Irvine calls for more attention to social theories of emotion, since the 'panic' part is least well theorised at present; most authors tend to ignore this element of the phenomenon as folk ignorance, stupidity or 'hysteria'. Irvine resolutely dismisses the irrationality of moral panics; based on her work related to parental responses to sexuality education in schools, she concludes that panics are social, discursive and, in fact, highly scripted. They are often very cleverly launched and applied. Irvine believes a concept of 'transient feelings' is useful to understand how this works in group settings, as her work shows that 'intense emotional reactions were strategically produced through a discourse of sexual danger and depravity that shaped how citizens throughout the USA spoke and felt about sex education' (238). Irvine calls for scholars of moral panics to move away from using hyperbolic metaphors that reinforce the impression that moral panics are irrational and based in the realm of individual psychology; instead, attention should be given to the specific role of the public and the nature of collective emotion, placing these in the structural, cultural and political contexts in which they play out.

As Irvine adds, 'failure to theorize the public feelings of sex panics makes "the hysterical public" seem not only unified but also anonymous and inscrutable' (242); the 'moral panics' language paints a black-and-white picture of an easily manipulated and irrational mass, on the one hand, and a 'rational public sphere' on the other. The latter is, as Irvine rightfully points out, often equally emotional about panic-related issues. In reality there are nuanced opinions on both sides.

The value of this book lies in its demonstration of links between moral panics played out in the mass media and ideological and political struggles for the expansion or limitation of sexual rights. The key point this book makes is that moral panics and sex panics cannot be assessed in their own right; they have to be seen in their broader historical, political and societal context; they have to be related to other changes that occur in a society – changes that have everything to do with politics, power and ideology.

The big weakness of the term moral panics as a concept in social science is the lack of a theory of collective emotion, as pointed out by Janice Irvine. Without this, the term appears of limited explanatory value. Gary Dowsett dismisses the current use of the term homophobia to describe a social disposition rather than a psychological one as follows: 'The term explains nothing about its construction as a social dynamic, and then, even if we could explain that, how it might be countered. ... [It] cannot provide any avenue for counteraction; it contains no strategy for its defeat' (152). Unless Irvine's suggestions are taken into consideration, the same argument can be made for dismissing the concepts of moral/sexual panics as categories for social analysis.

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