Reviews

Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other,
Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, Sydney,
Institute of Criminology Series, 2004

When Stan Cohen published his research into 'mods' and 'rockers', youth culture and conflict, in 1972 he could not have envisaged the extent to which his conceptualisation and naming of moral panics would become established within English language popular discourse. The term, framing how specific acts or identifiable groups — 'folk devils' — are represented as posing significant threats to the social order, has become incorporated into everyday language. Partly due to its ubiquity but also because of academic critiques that portray moral panics as an ideological construction rather than a material reality, its currency has been devalued. Yet folk devils are tangible, in their creation, their promotion and, most significantly, in the social and societal reactions they induce.

Folk devils are projected onto a wide screen, their notoriety gaining public constituency as an essential, purposeful and often contrived element of news manufacture and political opportunism. Behaviours, beliefs and cultures are selected and reconstructed as constituting significant threats to social conventions and moral values 'held sacred by or fundamental to ... society', thus destabilising the 'social order itself or an idealized conception of some part of it' (Thompson 1998:8). There follows an orchestrated, hostile and disproportionate reaction of surveillance, containment and regulation by the authorities. As the sequence of anticipated and predictable events unfolds it becomes self-evident that moral panics cannot be dismissed as ideological constructs. Tangible and material, they are concrete manifestations of response and reaction provoking social, political and economic consequences.

Such manifestations are well illustrated by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994:31) as 'heightened emotion, fear, dread, anxiety, hostility and a strong sense of righteousness'. Closely following the moral outrage surrounding a particular act or sequence of events is a rush to judgement invariably feeding highly publicised demands for increasingly regulatory interventions. The emergent pattern 'entails strengthening the social control apparatus of society — tougher or renewed rules, more intense public hostility and condemnation, more laws, longer sentences, more police, more arrests, and more prison cells ... a crack-down on offenders' (ibid). In this climate of volatile reaction moral panics are 'part of a sensitizing and legitimizing process for solidifying moral boundaries, identifying "enemies within", strengthening the powers of state control and enabling law and order to be promoted ...' (Muncie 1996:55).

Just one month and one day after the tragic loss of life in Manhattan and in Washington the front page headline of an Australian tabloid announced: 'TERROR AUSTRALIS: Bin Laden groups in our suburbs'. With the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Federal Police mounting armed raids on Muslim homes the 'Arab' folk devil was publicly confirmed as the 'enemy within'. The authors of *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* set

themselves two distinct but related and demanding questions. First, how a moral panic, vilifying and terrorising Muslim citizens, could gain an immediate constituency in contemporary Australia. Second, how cultural legacies and identities could give credence to such hateful, popular imagery.

Poynting et al, whose previous collective text focused on the portrayal and policing of 'ethnic crime', open with the assertion that 'in contemporary Australia we are witnessing the emergence of the "Arab Other" as the pre-eminent "folk devil" of our time'. The portrayal of the 'Arab Other' as criminal establishes outsider status and her/his way of life as a profound threat — the embodiment of the fear of crime. It also simultaneously reinforces insider status: 'the project of national belonging'. The mythologizing of the Arab Other, 'is not simply a process of ideological representation by media and politicians, but impacts on policing, the judicial system and social policy'. It amounts to a 'manipulation of the politics of fear'. Ironically, in a society that annually wears its multiculturalism on its sleeve, the consequence is divisive rather than cohesive.

The analysis revisits the authors' previous research on the racialisation of crime and the criminalisation of Arabic-speaking youth, noting the media's more recent construction of an organised and territorial gang culture. Alongside the imagery of gangland runs the reality of a series of several brutal rapes and sexual assaults projected as an 'epidemic of "race rape" ... endemic to Lebanese or Arab or Muslim culture'. While the media and politicians persistently used the term 'ethnic gang rapes' as illustrative of the cultural 'enemy within' they also seized the moment to target and capitalise on the 'enemy without'.

The barbarians, it seems, were at the gates. More accurately, they were 'off-shore'. Refugees and asylum-seekers, recast as queue-jumpers and smuggled people threatened the stability of planned immigration and invited citizenship. The incident in which asylum seekers, mainly from Afghanistan, were rescued by a Norwegian freighter, the MV Tampa, became emblematic as the Australian SAS boarded and diverted the ship from Australian territory. This was one of several maritime incidents in which the Australian Government adopted a hard-line with one eye set on the forthcoming election. It was an approach already institutionalised in the draconian conditions of detention under which asylum seekers were held.

Against this backdrop the events of September 11 2001 occurred. The 'Arab Other' had been 'assembled'. Its component parts were a mix of sexual threat, illegal immigration and terrorism: 'essentially and pathologically evil, inhuman, violent and criminal'. The authors persuasively argue that the 'immediate and violent threat' posed by the 'Arab Other' is portrayed as 'stretch[ing] from the Middle East to our own backyard and endanger[ing] the innocence of the ordinary Australian citizen'. This portrayal with the highly symbolic imagery of people smugglers waiting off-shore to land their illegal catch, was used to mobilise a 'regime of aggressive, domestic policy and security' in the context of the global 'war on terror'.

A strong thread running through the book is war 'as metaphor' juxtaposed to war as reality. This becomes particularly poignant in the discussion of the Bali bombings in October 2002. As the authors state, 'metaphors of war have a decidedly moral and political character, serving to legitimate state action and entrenched interests' and 'to render illegitimate those of the opponent'. The 'Acts of War' chapter is an excellent example of the authors' integration of contemporary events, media coverage and academic sources. They demonstrate how cultural boundary-setting legitimates and maintains the established social order incorporating the appeal to patriotism inherent in the rejection of the 'other'.

Yet, as they illustrate, this is problematic given the 'fragmentation' derived in what Ghassan Hage refers to as 'paranoid nationalism' that has featured in the 'ongoing debates about [Australian] national identity and multiculturalism for many years'.

Building on these foundations, particularly regarding ethnicity and identity, the authors consider the experiences of young men emerging from a childhood influenced by 'two cultures'. Interviews with young men provide a 'view from below' rarely heard and certainly absent from the popular discourse. They demonstrate that the 'two cultures' binary is simplistic, failing to recognise the creative daily negotiations of their lives. It is also revealed as a discourse that promotes inappropriate welfare strategies 'in response to problems which are perceived to be inherent in culture'. Importantly the authors return the analysis to the structural contexts of class inequality and class location.

The story and analysis of the 2001–02 'ethnic gang rape' moral panic notes the racialisation of the brutal attacks and the assumed association 'with the masculinity of Muslim culture and the failure [of young men] to assimilate'. Again, the key theme played out in the media, contributed to by academic and political commentators, is the making of racial and often contradictory assumptions regarding cultural determinants of the 'other'. This is then projected not only into the courts regarding specific cases but also into the arena of 'dog-whistle politics' (Chapter 5) only to be internalised by Arab and Muslim leaders (Chapter 6).

The book concludes with a chapter on 'paranoia in the lucky country' showing how in the prevailing climate of fear a range of unrelated issues, from the 2002–03 bushfires to the war in Iraq, became conflated. Returning the discussion to the material context the authors argue that there cannot be a 'politics of fear' without a 'culture of paranoia' that is ultimately derived in a 'range of wider social, economic and cultural factors'. As their empirical research found, the fear that is promoted is local, immediate and personally threatening. Such is the strength and ubiquity of the threat that its political management becomes the state's concern And so, state policy aligns with the 'commodification of popular fears' to produce a 'peculiar "economy of terror": the promotion of fear and its appeasement'.

The book concludes with reference to the expansion of police and security agencies' powers, increased surveillance and communications interceptions, zero tolerance strategies, growth in private security — 'getting tough on crime and terror'. This 'penal populism' which includes the 'pursuit of security' is played out within the rhetoric of community safety and social inclusion. In this context 'multiculturalism, as the set of policies that come to be the source, rather than the response, to cultural difference, comes increasingly under attack'. More discussion here of the political and material foundations of authoritarian renewal, so much the underpinning of John Howard's administrations, would have strengthened the analysis. Yet, this concluding discussion grounded, as it must be, in Australia's historical legacy of colonial rule and the appalling, continuing marginalisation of its Aboriginal communities, brings together the breadth of empirical and documentary material covered in the earlier chapters. It calls for a renewed 'national identity which questions the apparent neutrality at the heart of Australian identity' and a 'multiculturalism' that interrogates the meaning of what constitutes an 'ordinary Australian'.

This is an excellent review of a defining period in contemporary Australian history. It combines documentary and media content analyses with empirical research to demonstrate how in the creation and reproduction of the 'Arab Other' the global 'war on terror' abroad is matched by the 'war on terror' at home. It returns to the roots of Stan Cohen's definitive

analysis and adapts the theoretical framework from the beaches of Brighton, England in the mid 1960s to the streets of Sydney, Australia in the early 2000s. The framework has travelled well and the authors' theoretical acknowledgements throughout indicate the quality of their adaptation. *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* is accessible and engaging. It deserves an audience beyond the academy and should be read widely on Capitol Hill.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to quote from Ghassan Hage's typically honest and forthright Foreword to the book:

> Contain the Arab or exterminate the Arab? A 'tolerable' presence in the suburbs, or caged in a concentration camp? Exterminate their political will or remove them physically, in their totality, will and body? The politics of the Western post-colonial state is constantly and dangerously oscillating between these two tendencies today. It is a dangerous oscillation that is so lucidly exposed in this book …'

In researching and writing this courageous book the authors exemplify that which is best in critical criminological analysis, challenging the personal and institutional dynamics of social injustice through informed and well-argued scholarship.

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