Reviews

Outrageous! Moral Panics in Australia, **Scott Poynting and George Morgan (eds), ACYS Publishing, Hobart, 2007**

Although the editors of this collection suggest that it is the first book concentrating on 'moral panics' in Australia, the concept of 'moral panics' is not new. As the editors acknowledge, the sociologist Stanley Cohen popularised the term 'moral panic' in his book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (first published in 1972). In simple terms, a 'moral panic' is a societal response to a perceived moral threat. Since the word 'panic' suggests that the behaviour is 'irrational', it is perhaps unsurprising that the exaggeration of threats has been a major concern of those researching in the area. The contributors to this volume focus on this issue of exaggeration. As one of the contributors, Chris Cunneen, puts it in defining the field of study, 'the concept of "moral panic" refers to a situation where the definition of deviance is applied to the behaviour of a social group, there is hostility towards that group and a level of consensus over the negative deviant definition, and there is a disproportionate and punitive response, usually by the criminal justice system' (p 21).

This collection presents a diverse array of historical and contemporary case studies. As the editors state, '[t]hey range in scope from the contributions that explore particular subcultures and/or forms of social practice ... to notorious incidents, crimes or outbursts of collective violence that have precipitated new moral panics' (p 5). All of the work presented in this collection is specifically Australian. However, the authors also discuss related 'moral panics' in other countries, and take appropriate account of global political issues; Chapters 13 and 15, for example, consider the issue of the Muslim as 'Other' following the so-called '9/11' attacks.

Many of the 'moral panics' discussed in this book concern ethnic minorities. There are several chapters dealing with this topic: some relate to Aboriginal communities (Chapters 1 and 2), while others deal with South-East Asian groups (Chapters 8 and 9), Afghans (Chapter 12), Middle-Eastern communities and Muslims in general (Chapters 4, 13 and 15). All of these chapters deal with depictions of ethnic minority groups as criminals and as threats to Australian society. Anxiety regarding young people is another theme running through many of the chapters of this book, including the ones relating to ethnic minorities. One of the chapters concerns a 'moral panic' about young people in Queensland in the mid-1950s, who, upon listening to 'suggestive' 'rock and roll' music, reportedly behaved as though they had 'ants in their pants' (Chapter 6). Another focuses on media and public concern about ecstasy use at 'raves' in the mid-1990s (Chapter 7), while a third concerns the perceived moral threat posed by mobile telephones and considers matters such as physical and mental harassment and the distribution of pornography (Chapter 11). Concerns about sexuality and young people feature not only in the chapters regarding the perceived dangers of 'rock and roll' and mobile telephones, but also in the contributions dealing with a notorious gang-rape in 19th century Sydney, venereal disease during World War II

Australia, and the issue of children in same-sex families in the contemporary era (Chapters 14, 16 and 17 respectively).

This volume provides a valuable account of a number of 'moral panics' in Australia. Each of the chapters is succinct and easily comprehensible. However, some chapters would have benefited from greater space within which to examine the issues. In discussing the 'moral panic(s)' regarding so-called 'ethnic gang rapes' in Sydney in 2000 and 2002, one of the contributors, Selda Dagistanli, condemns 'racist ideologies that posit the "otherness" of the Muslim' (p 192), and argues that '[i]n cases such as the ones examined in this chapter, it is the demonisation of particular cultural groups based on the actions of the few that is the concern' (p 194). Given more space, she might have provided evidence to support her claim that 'the threat perceived ... is *disproportionate* to the actual threat that exists' (p 194). Since she does not refer to empirical studies about moral values and attitudes within the ethnic minority communities concerned, it is unclear how she reached her conclusion that the concern about those perceived as being 'evil' and not sharing 'Australian' values is disproportionate. This is not to say that it is incorrect; it is merely to point out that providing information derived from relevant studies and accounts would have strengthened her account.

Perhaps more disappointingly, this collection generally lacks an analytical approach to the concept of moral panics. As the editors put it, '[w]hile some contributors have subjected aspects of the moral panic model to close scrutiny, theoretical discussion is not their primary purpose' (p 2). Although the editors use their introduction to explore 'some of the criticisms that have been levelled at the moral panic framework' (p 2), the contributors do not always seem to take account of these criticisms. One such criticism is that it might not be possible to isolate particular 'moral panics', since it is hard, if not impossible, to say when one particular 'moral panic' begins and ends. The validity of this criticism becomes apparent when one considers Dagistanli's chapter. Her chapter shows that there is a significant fear of 'the Muslim' in Australia, but it is not clear whether her contribution relates to one particular 'moral panic' or two separate ones. Dagistanli's reference to 'the media-fuelled moral panic around ... "ethnic gang rapes" in Sydney in 2000 and 2002' arguably suggests that she thinks that there was one 'moral panic' (p 181). However, her statement that '[t]he cycle of moral panic was completed on 15 August 2002, when Justice Michael Finnane sentenced the ringleader of the August 2000 crimes' clearly implies that there were two 'moral panics', the first one occurring as a reaction to the August 2000 crimes and the second one beginning in 2002, when another series of gang rapes occurred (p 184). Dagistanli does not appear to be concerned as to whether there was one 'moral panic' or two of them. Her stated concern 'is to explore the philosophical underpinnings of a moral panic – what drives and necessitates such a heightened social reaction' (p 182). However, as the philosophical underpinnings of the concept of 'moral panic' include the way in which a particular moral panic is identified, the issue of when a particular 'moral panic' begins and ends could usefully have been incorporated into her discussion.

Jesse Elvin

The City Law School London, City University

Reference

Cohen, S (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and Rockers*, MacGibbon and Kee, London.