The COVID-19 Pandemic Series

FOLK DEVILS AND MORAL PANICS IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Edited by Morena Tartari, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, and Cirus Rinaldi

Folk Devils and Moral Panics in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Folk Devils and Moral Panics in the COVID-19 Pandemic analyses the phenomena of moral panics surrounding so-called folk devils in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this volume, internationally recognised moral panic scholars from disciplines including sociology, media studies, criminology, and cultural studies examine case studies of moral panics related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These analyses consider the different social, political, economic, organisational, and cultural contexts within which such moral panics emerged and assess how the concept of moral panic can be deployed to offer novel insights into sociocultural responses to the outbreak. By utilising both classical approaches to moral panic analysis and more recent trends, chapters discuss the utility of the concept of moral panic that is, for the first time, applied to a global-scale event like the COVID-19 pandemic.

This volume will be of interest to students and scholars in the social sciences with an interest in moral panics, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the media and popular culture.

Morena Tartari is Associate Professor of Criminology and Policing in the Department of Social Sciences of Northumbria University, United Kingdom.

Cirus Rinaldi is Associate Professor of Sociology of Law, Deviance, and Social Change in the Department of Cultures and Societies of the University of Palermo, Italy, where he also coordinates the Bodies, Rights and Conflicts Research Group.

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli is Associate Professor of Sociology of Culture and Communication in the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education, and Applied Psychology at the University of Padua, Italy, where he is also the Director of the BD Communication Programme.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Series
Series Editor: J. Michael Ryan

This series examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals, communities, countries, and the larger global society from a social scientific perspective. It represents a timely and critical advance in knowledge related to what many believe to be the greatest threat to global ways of being in more than a century. It is imperative that academics take their rightful place alongside medical professionals as the world attempts to figure out how to deal with the current global pandemic, and how society might move forward in the future. This series represents a response to that imperative.

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Contributors

Zakaria Bendali is currently a PhD candidate in political sociology at the Institute of Political Studies of the University of Lausanne, under the supervision of Olivier Fillieule (Unil/CRAPUL) and Dominique Cardon (Sciences Po Paris/Medialab), and a member of CRAPUL (Research Centre on Political Action, University of Lausanne). His research focuses on the biographical consequences of participation in the yellow vest movement, with a particular interest in the trajectories of first-time activists and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the online-offline aspects of mobilisation.

Joel Best is Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. He studies social problems. His most recent book is *Is That True? Critical Thinking for Sociologists* (University of California Press, 2021).

Jacek Burski, PhD, in sociology, is an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Wroclaw and post-doc in the research project 'COV-WORK: Socio-economic consciousness, work experiences and coping strategies of Poles in the context of the post-pandemic crisis' funded by the National Science Centre in Poland. A graduate of sociology at the University of Lodz, where he defended his doctoral thesis on the social world of football fans. Author of monographs, scientific articles published in peer-reviewed scientific journals and chapters in books devoted to, among others, the issues of social change, modernity, and the sociology of work. Contractor in research projects: including such initiatives as 'Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective' (2014–2018) carried out at the University of Lodz and the PREWORK 'Young precarious workers in Poland and Germany: a comparative sociological study of working and living conditions, social awareness and civic activity' (2016–2019) project.

Jeremy Collins is Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at London Metropolitan University, School of Computing and Digital Media. He is the course leader for the BA Film and Television Production and also teaches on the Foundation year for the School of Art, Architecture and Design. His research interests include the mediatisation of risk, news and news management, political communications

and journalism. He has published a number of journal articles and book chapters including *Moral Panics, Governmentality and the Media: A Comparative Approach to the Analysis of Illegal Drug Use in the News*. In: Critcher C, Hughes J, Petley J, et al. (eds), *Moral panics in the contemporary world*, Continuum. Correspondence can be sent to j.collins@londonmet.ac.uk

Alexandre Dafflon is a lecturer and researcher in political sociology at the University of Lausanne and a member of CRAPUL (Research Centre on Political Action, University of Lausanne). His research focuses on political socialisation and takes an ethnographic approach to political behaviour, with a particular interest in sexuality, class and gender relations. His key publications include: From uprising to secession: a plea for a localised and processual approach to the avatars of the yellow vest movement, with O. Fillieule, Z. Bendali, M. Beramendi & D. Morselli (2022); La socialisation politique des jeunes en milieu rural en Suisse (2018).

Matthew David is Associate Professor of Sociology at Durham University (UK). He is author of Knowledge Lost in Information (with David Zeitlyn and Jane Bex, 1999), Science in Society (2005), Peer to Peer and the Music Industry: The Criminalisation of Sharing (2010), Owning the World of Ideas (with Debbie Halbert, 2014), Sharing: Crime Against Capitalism (2017), Living in a Vacuum: Regulation and Deregulation in Global Networked Capitalism (2021), and Networked Crime: Does the Digital Make a Difference? (2023). He edited The Sage Handbook of Intellectual Property (with Debbie Halbert, 2015), and co-authored Social Research: The Basics/An Introduction (2005/2011, variously translated).

Olivier Fillieule is Professor of Political Sociology at the Institute of Political Studies of the University of Lausanne, Research Director at the French National Research Centre (CNRS) and member of CRAPUL (Research Centre on Political Action, University of Lausanne). His research focuses on social movements and activism, political socialisation, the police and protest policing, and public problems. His recent books include Activists Forever. The Long-Term Impact of Political Activism, co-edited with E. Neveu (2019), Le malheur militant, co-edited with C. Leclerq et R. Lefebvre (2022), Politiken der Un-Ordnung, with F. Jobard, 2023.

Sean Hier is Professor of Sociology, University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He has written about moral panics for the last two decades.

Graham Knight is Professor Emeritus at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada where he taught Sociology and Communication Studies. His research has focused largely on news media framing of labour, social conflict and social activism. His work has appeared in journals such the *Journal of Communication*, the *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology*, *Studies in Political Economy*, the *European Journal of Communication*, and *Social Movement Studies*. He is currently completing a co-authored book on globalisation,

labour conditions and anti-sweatshop activism. Correspondence should be sent to knightg@mcmaster.ca.

Anita Lavorgna is Associate Professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna. After her PhD at the University of Trento, Anita spent most of her academic career in the UK, where she was Associate Professor of Criminology at the University of Southampton (until 2022). Anita's research pivots around cybercrimes and digital social harms, and is mostly based on interdisciplinary approaches.

Dario Lucchesi (PhD in Social Science) is an adjunct professor at the University of Padua, Italy. His research interests are placed in the field of sociology of new media and in particular in the media representations of migration phenomena and in political communication. His works investigate the discursive construction of discrimination with a focus on practices of normalisation of anti-immigration rhetoric and racism. His recent studies focused on the relationship between immigration and the pandemic in political communication analysing the main discursive shift in immigration discourse in the public sphere.

Catharine Lumby is Professor of Media at the University of Sydney where she was founding Chair of the Media and Communications Department. Before entering academia, she worked for two decades as a print and TV journalist for the Sydney Morning Herald the ABC and The Bulletin magazine. She has written and co-authored ten books and numerous book chapters and journal articles and recently completed a biography of Frank Moorhouse.

Ragnar Lundström holds a PhD in Sociology and is a senior lecturer at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Sweden. Ragnar has previously worked with public discourse about welfare cheating, news media portrayals of crime victims, and political discourse online.

Ester Massa is Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Winchester. She holds a specific expertise on quantitative research, focusing on multiple topics such as juvenile delinquency, immigration and criminalisation processes, prisonisation and gender differences in the criminal justice system.

Clara S. Mey is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. Her research interests include social problems, social media, and law & society.

Brian Monahan is Professor of Sociology at Baldwin Wallace University. His research interests include social problems, mass media, and the cultural forces that underpin social control.

Frida Skog holds a PhD in Sociology. She is a senior lecturer in Sociology at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Sweden. Frida's research investigates how moralising discourse is employed in narratives about public health risks and welfare state moral hazard in Sweden, both in present-time media and print press from the early 20th century. She is currently writing on how

moralising discourses about criminal cases have been part of Sweden's conservative turn.

Milica 'Milly' Stilinovic is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, Australia, where she has lectured on media politics and political communication. Her current research focuses on the communication of violence and the language of violent acts through the lens of far-right, white nationalist and white supremacist groups. She is the Managing Editor of Policy and Internet and an author and journalist whose work has appeared in Forbes, TIME, BBC, and other local and international titles.

Zain Swaleh is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language, and Literature at Macquarie University. His research interests include settler colonialism, cultural constructions of childhood, moral panics and childhood and children's experiences of systemic discrimination and state violence. His PhD thesis engages in a cross-contextual analysis of Indigenous children's resilience and agency in Australia and Palestine.

Morena Tartari (PhD, Sociology) is Associate Professor of Criminology and Policing in the Department of Social Sciences of Northumbria University, United Kingdom. Previously, Morena was a Research Fellow at the Babes-Bolyai University (Romania), a STARS-Grant awardee (Supporting Talent in Research Programme) at the University of Padua (Italy), a Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Southampton (UK), and a Marie Sklodowska-Curie Research Fellow at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). Her early research focused on the emergence of moral panics concerning satanic ritual abuse in the contemporary Italy. Then, during her Marie Sklodowska-Curie Fellowship, she studied the processes of stigmatisation of single mothers and their practices of resistance against familism in institutional contexts. Her research interests include social harms, institutional ethnography, and feminist standpoint theory. Her recent research concerns sharenting and institutional social harms.

Series editor's foreword

J. Michael Ryan

What is right and what is wrong? Where, and how important, is the boundary between 'science' and 'politics'? Are questions of morality really just a debate between cultural imperialism and moral relativism? These questions, and many more like them, are at the heart of many social sciences (and social scientists!). And while none of them have a clear objective answer, they all certainly prompt a lot of subjective questioning and, for many an academic, attempts to provide objective argumentation.

Let me start by saying that one thing this volume does not do is answer any of the above questions. And let me follow that by saying that that is a good thing! What this volume does do, and does do quite brilliantly, is to enlarge, enrich, and enhance our academic, philosophical, and ethical toolkits, all needed to better understand the ethos of such challenging questions.

Brought together under a general framework of moral panics (and one greatly expanded by the work herein), the impressively global scope of contributors to this volume helps us to not only better understand many of the moral dilemmas that have faced our societies during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to equip us with the tools necessary to better understand moral panics more broadly. It is not an overstatement to say that the COVID-19 pandemic changed everything, and this volume addresses that fundamental shift not only by taking the pandemic as a lens through which to understand moral panic (and/or vice versa) but also by simultaneously providing greater nuance and flexibility to the critical concepts of moral panics, folk devils, and other critical concepts related to understanding societal 'dilemmas'. The added value is that it isn't a volume *just* about the COVID-19 pandemic; it is also a broader contribution to the ways in which the pandemic has shown us new ways of understanding long-standing social issues, and the ways in which those issues are interpreted, disseminated, and ultimately impactful. Most importantly, this volume provides insights into how to better address long-needed solutions.

By linking questions of science to sound academic analysis to intimately human moral concerns, this volume adds texture to the roadmap of how to not only understand our ongoing pandemic-related situation, but also of how to potentially build a shared, and hopefully improved, collective moral future.

J. Michael Ryan
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Foreword: Moral Panic Studies and the COVID-19 Moment

Sean P. Hier

The history of moral panic studies is marked by moments. There is an empirical side to these moments, the most famous of which took the form of social reactions to deviant youth cultures and muggings in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively. Other notable empirical moments in the history of moral panic studies include social reactions to Satanism/missing children, video nasties, child murderers, the American drug wars, AIDS, Ebola, ecstasy, paedophilia, pornography, and terrorism.

What is important to understand about the empirical moments that animate the history of moral panic studies – be they confined to a particular time and place or stretched across different times and disparate places – is that they are symptomatic of the historical conjunctures in which they appear. Conjunctures represent broader historical moments when the different parts of society, each with their own unique problems, tensions, contradictions, and developmental trajectories, come together to provide a distinctive shape to social life (Hall and Massey 2010). In this way, the empirical moment of the mods and rockers that Cohen (2003) so famously documented was symptomatic of the tensions and contradictions associated with the conjunctural moment of the post-war British welfare state. By the same token, the empirical moment of the mugger that Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts (2013) enshrined in cultural memory was symptomatic of the tensions and contradictions on display as the post-war social democratic consensus gave way to the neoliberal conjunctural moment. The empirical moments of moral panic that followed in the 1980s and 1990s were, similarly, underscored by the conjunctural moments in which they appeared.

What do the moral panics incited by the rapid transmission of COVID-19, therefore, tell us about our current conjunctural moment? As Best, Monahan, and Mey point out in this collection of essays on moral panics during the COVID-19 pandemic, SARS-CoV-2 was not just a medical crisis that depended on social problems work to narrate its causes, consequences, and resolutions. It was also – and simultaneously – an economic, structural, and cultural crisis that required definition and narrative direction. By any other name, the myriad of claims and counter-claims that were deployed to bring meaning to the COVID-19 moment were symptomatic of a conjunctural crisis. Conjunctural crises arise when the different contradictions at play in every historical conjuncture are condensed at the same time. What this means is that even though conjunctural crises are commonly narrated through

claims-making activities and social problem work as if they are confined to a single institutional domain (e.g., the public-health crisis), they are in actuality always brought on by accumulating contradictions across different levels of society (i.e., economic crises, structural crises, cultural crises).

It has become a truism in political sociology that conjunctural crises are 'overdetermined' by accumulating contradictions with different developmental trajectories. But as Clarke (2010) reminds us, they are also simultaneously 'underdetermined' in the sense that their narrative forms and orientations are not determined from the outset. It is at the intersection of the overdetermining and underdetermining tendencies of crises where we learn about the symptomatic nature of moral panics in the COVID-19 conjuncture.

When COVID-19 began to spread across the globe, a reasonable observer (at least in the North American and Western European contexts) could not have been faulted for expecting a high level of compliance with the regulatory advice provided by medical experts. In the years leading up to the COVID-19 conjuncture, the public had already been subjected to years of expert warnings about a coming global health crisis (e.g., HIV/AIDS, BSE, West Nile, Zika, H5N1, H1N1, SARS, MERS). Many millions of people were also familiar with the outbreak narratives cultivated by Hollywood blockbusters depicting sorrow and death (e.g., *Outbreak*, *Contagion*). Against the backdrop of the quickly emerging pandemic culture – that is, a complex social imaginary anchored by a pervasive sense of uncertainty that devasting infectious diseases cannot be contained in a globally interconnected microbial world bursting at its seams (Mitchel and Hamilton 2018) – it was reasonable to assume that the onset of the pandemic would encourage people to don masks, remain physically distanced, roll up their sleeves, and care for their elders.

In many instances, the advice that medical experts offered was heeded. As the papers comprising this volume illustrate, however, the social, political, moral, and medical regulation of the pandemic did not entail a steady stream of seamless compliance with expert public-health advice. Instead, the stories told in the pages to follow are ones of claims-making competitions anchored by blame, defiance, misinformation, denial, discrimination, and, at times, belligerence. Stilinovic, Swaleh, and Lumby, for example, show how 'freedom protesters' in Melbourne co-opted moral panic in 'a deep swell of global anti-vax protesting to provide a counter-narrative aimed at the mainstream [mask-wearing, socially distancing, eager-to-be-vaccinated] status quo.' Similarly, Knight explains how Canada's version of the international 'lockdown' protests represented a social drama, whereby a diverse cast of characters struggled over representation and responsibility as a trucker convoy descended on the country's capital city. And Lavorgna punctuates a theme running through many of the contributions by exploring the growing prominence of polarisation, contested narratives, and misinformation in digital media spaces.

In these ways (and beyond), the volume makes an important, if understated, contribution to contemporary moral panic studies – a field of scholarly inquiry in the midst of its own intellectual crisis. On the one hand, a large number of contributions to moral panic studies remains committed to conventional theories and methods that hinge on reductively negative normative judgements to denounce

ostensibly regressive moral panics. On the other hand, revisionist perspectives aimed at deconstructing and reconstructing the basic assumptions of conventional perspectives have grown in popularity over the past two decades. Among the many problems that revisionists attribute to conventional perspectives is that the latter are unable to effectively adapt to changing social, historical, and material conditions by developing new ways to address novel challenges. At the same time, however, conventional perspectives persist as a popular if not preferred way of conducting moral panic research. Given the apparent standoff in moral panic studies, I believe that Stilinovic, Swaleh, and Lumby are right to argue that moral panic scholars need to move beyond extant debates about the utility of the moral panic concept, just as Best, Monahan, and Mey are right to point out how the novelty of COVID-19 tells us something about the contemporary infrastructure of social problems claims-making and how it fosters polarisation and division as much as consensus and accord. The essays to follow move us one step closer to reconciling the tensions running through moral panic studies.

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Folk devils and moral panics in the COVID-19 pandemic

An introduction

Morena Tartari

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.

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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 Critcher 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 (Critcher 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 s 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 Critcher 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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1 Ten dimensions of dispute over moral panic theory in an age of COVID-19

Matthew David

Moral panic theory emerged in the early 1970s (Young 1971; Cohen 1972) within the symbolic interactionist tradition but was soon taken up by 'political economy' perspectives mapping ideological relations in capitalist society (Hall et al. 1978). These divisions, the diversification of traditional print and broadcast media, and the rise of new media saw the waning of interest in moral panic theory. Where earlier accounts focused on panics maintaining regulation by elites, an alternative foundation arose in the United States (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) focused on moral panic arising from below due to the failure or lack of elite social regulation. In the 2000s, renewed interest in moral panic theory arose but earlier divergences remained. The state of the field, outlined ten years ago (David et al. 2011), set out 'ten dimensions of dispute'. These ten dimensions still offer a useful framework to examine reactions to the COVID-19 epidemic. These dimensions are as follows: (1) Can 'moral panic' describe 'top down' regulative strategies and 'bottom up' reactions?, (2) when is criticism of another state's elites a sustainable moral panic, and does sustained criticisms of elites within countries challenge established moral panic theory?, (3) is reaction to COVID-19 a 'good moral panic'?, (4) can the term 'moral panic' apply to biological facts?, (5) can moral panics exist when morality is, allegedly, less significant?, (6) is it still possible to discuss 'disproportionateness' when risk consciousness varies?, (7) does new media and more sophisticated media effects research undermine moral panic theory?, (8) does a moral panic require 'success'?, (9) does moral panic assume intent?, and (10) can a microbe be a folk devil? In today's age of global interconnectedness, conceptions of regulation, elites, the good, anxiety, morality, proportionality/risk, media effects, success, intention, and protagonist (the folk devil) have to be reimagined. These changes require that we rethink the concept of moral panic. Nevertheless, in thinking about the hybrid reality of populations, states, flows of goods, people and ideas, media, and social and biological systems made manifest by the COVID-19 epidemic, moral panic theory usefully contributes to such a necessary reconceptualisation.

COVID-19 moral panics: top down or bottom up?

For Stan Cohen and Jock Young, moral panics were exaggerated accounts of threats from below (or outside); accounts directed by moral entrepreneurs keen to bolster

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the status quo. For Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), moral panics are just as often generated from below and directed at the perceived privileges of elites or caused by a breakdown in elite authority. What has COVID-19 shown us in relation to this dispute? Campaigns regarding physical distancing/lockdown measures and those over COVID-19 vaccination stand out.

Policies enforcing physical distancing, mask wearing, travel restrictions, and restrictions on public and family gatherings required public cooperation. Even the most authoritarian states lack the kinds of policing and surveillance agencies necessary to enforce such action without significant levels of public consent. Raising public concern may be seen as actively seeking to generate 'panic', if that concern is perceived to be unwarranted; exaggeration being one key element in Cohen's definition of a moral panic. 'Anti-lockdown' protest groups certainly made this claim that, for example, mask wearing was unnecessary, often linking this supposed 'exaggeration' of risk with allegations of deeper hidden agendas. As such, anti-lockdown protestors might readily be identified as moral entrepreneurs engaging in classic moral panic actions, if one assumes them to be wrong in their evaluation of risk. Such actors themselves believed that they were resisting a 'moral panic' by authorities.

The same can be said regarding vaccination campaigns and anti-vaccination campaigners. The 'mechanics' of generating concern that characterise moral panics might be the same, but the question remains whether one side or the other is simply wrong (exaggerating) in their claim that the problem being addressed is real or as big as they claim. Both sides claim that the other side is engaged in a moral panic. Contrary to 'classic' moral panic accounts, today's candidates for the status of moral entrepreneurs arm themselves so readily with the claim that their opponents are engaging in 'moral panics' and that such 'moral panics' are what it is that 'we' (responsible citizens) should be worried about. Such alleged moral panics are either spreading the virus (by reducing vaccination rates/undermining physical distancing measures) or spreading authoritarian state control, so what we have are a series of symmetrical moral panics about moral panics. Whether being right about the problem being worried over is sufficient to disqualify a campaign from being a moral panic will be returned to in part three below: message management as good moral panic.

One final complication to the distinction between top down and bottom up conceptions of moral panic has been the use of populist rhetoric by some politicians in relation to COVID-19. Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil embraced populist rhetorics questioning the medical and scientific 'establishment'. They are themselves elites, further complicating the issue of top down/bottom up foundations for (and agents in) the generation of moral panics.

Can critiques of elites be sustained?

COVID-19 related claim and counterclaim regarding origin and containment included accusations made by political leaders in various countries regarding the responsibilities of other countries' political elites. Donald Trump claimed the origin and spread of COVID-19 was the 'fault' of the Chinese communist government,

their supposed failure to address the issue in the earliest days of the virus's outbreak in Wuhan and the suggestion that the virus was created in a laboratory in that city. This may be seen as a moral panic to deflect attention away from Trump's own shortcomings. The Chinese government also sought to claim that the virus might have come to China from the United States. Even though Donald Trump lost the 2021 presidential election in the midst of the crisis, such claims regarding 'the China virus' and 'Kung Flu' did strengthen support within his core electorate, so can be seen to have had some traction (it spread).

In Europe, different national governments blamed other states for making things worse and/or blamed European Union policies that were seen to be relatively slow in rolling out vaccines in 2021. The French government sought to blame the UK government for hoarding vaccine supplies, whilst the UK government sought to blame France for disrupting supply chains. That so many elite actors were seeking to project guilt onto other elite actors, raises the question of whether a moral panic requires some level of cohesion in managing a message, something that was clearly undermined when so many powerful actors were seeking to present contrary claims.

The airline industry sought to claim that travel bans between countries with relatively similar levels of infection was itself an attempt to blame foreigners for what was already rife domestically. The naming system for variants of COVID-19 did initially name variants after the country in which they had first been identified, leading to the claim that such places (and people from those places) were being turned into 'folk devils' (on a par with the infamous 'typhoid Mary'). The international naming system for COVID-19 variants rapidly shifted towards a lettering system rather than a geographical naming system. Early reports of discrimination against people of Chinese heritage generated a reaction against racism. Was this reaction a 'good moral panic'?

National elites criticising other countries is one thing. Divergence within national elites also sustained ongoing campaigns. Business lobbies claimed that government lockdown measures caused economic harm, not the virus itself. Such lobbies thus claimed that governments should compensate businesses and employees for losses sustained as (allegedly) these loses were 'caused' by the government. As such, anti-government, anti-lockdown campaigns were more sustainable as they had substantial support from commercial elites. Contra wise, government actors were also routinely condemned by health and care-sector lobbies for not extending lockdown and distancing measures further/faster. COVID-19 drew out significant competing priorities and claims on state support from competing lobbies representing distinctive sub-sets of relatively well-resourced actors. Chaz Critcher (2009) is right to note moral panics from below cannot sustain themselves over time for lack of resources. The rise of divergent lobby groups representing sub-sets within the middle and elite strata of society however mean that disputes between elites become more common. These are not simply 'from below' but sideways attacks may still draw in fuel and sustain elements of moral hostility from below. Everyone claims to be speaking for the 'underdogs' and may see themselves as such even when that is not actually the case.

Message management as good moral panic?

Much discussion has taken place since early 2020 over 'messaging'; the management of public understanding and compliance with guidance. Keeping guidance simple and consistent aids compliance, whilst the complexity of multiple factors and the changing nature of the situation, evidence, scientific understanding, and potential forms of technical intervention meant advice was prone to change. Does 'simplified' messaging constitute inaccuracy and hence deception, or did more complex and changing messaging suggest error?

Presenting the whole population as being at risk may be said to exaggerate the risk posed by COVID-19 to the majority. However, if generic risk perception was diluted by focusing attention only on groups at higher risk, that might limit take-up of precautionary distancing and mask wearing. The same is true for vaccination take-up amongst groups that might themselves be less likely to die if infected but might, if unconcerned, be more likely to pass the virus on to someone at higher risk. Is fostering a general concern in the whole population a 'good moral panic' (Cohen 2001)? If the young were being required to make sacrifices on behalf of older people, was this on the basis of a call for moral responsibility for others? Was the claim that many young people evaded restrictions placed on them to protect older generations, a moral panic about young people, or were attempts to persuade young people that they were also at risk from COVID-19 itself an exaggeration to foster greater conformity in their 'moral duty' to the old?

Differential infection and death rates amongst poorer populations and amongst some minority ethnic groups was used to raise concerns over structural inequalities and in particular structural racism. Were these campaigns 'good moral panics'? Women were much less likely to die of COVID-19 but lockdown measures saw domestic violence campaigners highlight and encourage increased reporting of gender-based violence in the home, again something that might fit Cohen's conception of a 'good moral panic'. The requirement to stay at home then made relations in the home a public responsibility and hence something that campaigners could argue was the government's responsibility to make safe. Private troubles became public issues (Mills 1959).

Disputes over the relative merits of macro-level distancing regulation on foreign travel (over whether restrictions scapegoated international travellers even after infection was spreading domestically) and at the micro-level of distancing regulations (in terms of whether one or two metres was 'correct' and when/where such measurements were useful or irrelevant) are non-reducible to simply 'following the science'. Any such decision making always involves an element of judgement over what would be socially acceptable and what groups/actions would it be socially acceptable to prohibit. This inevitably involves judgement about good people and bad people, and good actions and bad (unnecessary) actions. Disputes over whether or not to require certain key workers to get vaccinated saw all sides construct their opponents as engaging in moral panic mongering, whilst each group sought to neutralise claims of their own 'immorality' (whether in terms of spreading infection or being draconian).

Risk, reality, and/or moral panic?

Stan Cohen's (1972) study of media coverage of 'mods and rockers' fighting on 1960s English beaches examined local residents' reactions. He found no panic amongst local residents nor evidence of substantial panic in the general population. Panic was something fabricated in media coverage to warrant additional police powers. This is in contrast to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (1994) approach to moral panics, which focused attention on lynch mobs, riots, and mass hysteria – where moral panics do involve substantial public action. More recent sociological approaches to risk consciousness, risk and blame, governmentality, and regulation have extended our understanding of how perceived threats do or do not engender reactions within the general population. Such approaches not only challenge but also supplement the moral panic approach.

Half of Ulrich Beck's (1992[1986]) book *Risk Society* addresses the increasingly fractured nature of societal systems and sub-systems (work, family, education, and politics). The increasing disconnection between such sub-systems, Beck argues, explains today's heightened 'risk consciousness'. For Beck, the consequences of a society increasingly able to mass-produce *goods*, in terms of its parallel production of *bads* (ecological depletion and destruction) are substantial. The ecological crisis is real. However, it is internal contradictions and insecurities within the lives of people in 'second-order modernity' that mean ecological risks will be more readily recognised. This approach to risk consciousness offers a significant supplement to approaching moral panics. Where the reality of the threat may be real, the question still arises, who worries about it and why?

In contrast to Beck, Mary Douglas's approach to risk and blame (1990, 1992) asks not only who worries and who does not but also who gets blamed. Her high and low levels of grid and group (regulation and integration) model not only seeks to explain how hierarchalists, individualists, fatalists, and egalitarians see risks in different ways but also explains their divergent dispositions to blame or commend social systems or individual actions for the consequences of organic 'real' but socially mediated risks. In COVID-19 related moral panics, who is identified as the 'folk devil' illustrates divisions within elites (such as between conservative hierarchalists and market-oriented individualists), as it does divisions within non-elites between socialistic egalitarians and politically alienated fatalists.

Theories of governmentality in relation to risk (Castel 1992) draw attention to forms of regulative action that extend beyond enclosed disciplinary spaces and draw attention to various 'folk devils' as tools in the manufacture of active self-management in accordance with various regimes of order, fear, and desire. Today, 'the virus' joins the criminal, the hysteric, the madman, and the diseased amongst the 'figures in the discourse' by which 'we' are required to discipline ourselves. Even when the threat is real, the constitutive effects of its representation still function to command new forms of compliance that are themselves not entirely reducible to external reality.

Are today's panics about morality?

Is 'fear' of an objective threat to human health a 'moral' question around which a panic might be generated? A range of health-related fields link risk to human behaviours around 'lifestyle': sex, diet, and drug/alcohol consumption. 'Harm reduction' strategies detach moral evaluation of risky behaviours from intervention strategies. However, 'harm reduction' approaches face resistance from those who see blame as an essential regulative force in reducing the incidence of risky behaviour. The case of COVID-19 has manifested this tension in extreme form.

Framing various practices as either safety or sacrifice allows risk and blame to be moralised in specific ways. In the United Kingdom, attempts to target young people socialising in parks, gardens, and in private homes in breach of lockdown rules were quickly undone by revelations of senior politicians and civil servants breeching travel bans and visiting second homes. When it emerged that drinks parties had been held at Number 10 Downing Street, the home of the UK prime minister, during various periods of lockdown, this was framed as 'them' floating the rules 'they' had created, whilst 'we' (the rest of the population) were making the sacrifices asked of 'us'. That the queen sat alone during her husband's funeral was framed as her making 'sacrifice'. It might better be seen as a very appropriate 'safety' measure undertaken in her own best interests, as distinct from the way civil servants and advices put themselves at risk by having a drinks party. By not attending parties, were most people making 'sacrifices' or were they simply staying safe? The desire to 'blame' perceived rule breakers, combined with the desire to see a 'them' in some ways harming 'us' by their recklessness. This highlights a powerful urge to find a moral dimension and to find someone to scapegoat. Blaming the virus was not enough. 'The government' formally 'Imposed' limits and yet at the same time, any perceived lack of such action could be 'blamed' for any losses arising from not imposing limits earlier. With well-resourced public sector health-related lobbies 'blaming' the government for being too limited and too slow in imposing limits and equally well-resourced private sector business lobbies 'blaming' the government for being too quick/'draconian', a consensus could be established that the government was to blame but no consensus on why. Everyone demanded compensation for their loss but nobody felt they should be the ones to pay for others' losses. Who will pay stores up tensions for future generations. Currently debt is tempering disputes over blame but such debt imbalances between countries and within them create instabilities that will in time no doubt summon up new strategies of blame (and hence the call for others to pay).

Disproportionate reaction?

In Cohen's early work (1972), one key defining feature of what makes a panic a panic is exaggeration of events and the claim that events represent a deeper threat to society than simply what specific harm the designated 'folk devil' is said to have caused. In his *States of Denial*, Stan Cohen (2001) sought to examine how some forms of systemic harms are deliberately hidden, such that it requires moral

enterprise to bring such realities to light. These he would refer to as 'good moral panics' even as many (including himself, 2011) had misgivings over the seemingly contradictory nature of such a terminology when applied to 'true' harm. Cohen himself (2011: 238) cites Peter Jenkins' question: 'Whoever heard of a *legitimate* panic or of *well-founded* hysteria?' In his use of the term 'good moral panic', Cohen shifted attention from the question of exaggeration to those elements of his original theory that focused upon moral entrepreneurship and the process of selection, framing, and calling for action. It is these factors, not the truth of otherwise of what is being claimed, that means some things get addressed whilst others do not.

Whether or not climate change sceptics are the same as those that engage in, or are accused of, denying the Holocaust, and whether or not such scepticism has any legitimacy, the sociological process of generating/defusing concern is what sociologists have some legitimate authority to study. Cohen takes sides and suggests this is unavoidable. Yet, irrespective of their fundamental truth, COVID-19 saw the rise of modelling as a 'panic engine', a technical mechanism used to generate social effects on politicians, populations, and on policy. Based on Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London's estimates about COVID-19's relative under-reporting the month before, the publication in March 2020 of a statistical model of the disease's transmission in the United Kingdom estimated that many hundreds of thousands of Britons would die of COVID-19 if stringent physical distancing measures were not immediately adopted. Until then, the idea of achieving 'herd immunity' through rapid transmission of the disease through the population was widely held to be the most appropriate response, at least within the UK government. Professor Ferguson's modelling acted as a powerful 'panic engine' in switching government policy to strict lockdown and physical distancing measures on March 23 of that year. Models are not 'real' but can be very real in their consequences – if believed. Of course, being believed is central to preventing what models predict from actually coming about. Models express the conditions that are built into them. Simulations are not maps of reality. Models present scenarios about possible futures and hence make certain possible futures graphically manifest when of course the future itself has not yet happened. As instruments in the tool kit of the moral entrepreneur keen to foster concern, the statistical model came of age during COVID-19 as a new 'panic engine'.

Moral panics in an age of new media?

Today, the rise of new media has allowed for new moral panics from below to maintain themselves in a way that would not have been possible in an era when elite control over mass communications (in television, radio, and newspapers) was more complete. However, Critcher (2009) argues the term 'moral panic' should not be used to refer to non-establishment reactions to misdeeds by elites. He gives the example of the 2007/8 financial crisis and 'banker bashing'. Whilst a significant hostility was aired in relation to bankers and whilst bankers were extensively blamed for the financial crash of 2007/8, Critcher argues that such a wave of anger and hostility soon fizzled out and did not lead to any fundamental punishment for

those momentary 'scapegoats'. Banks were bailed out and soon returned to their positions of protected anonymity.

At the birth of the Internet age, Angela McRobbie and Sara Thornton (1995) argued that moral panics were increasingly unlikely to be sustained because the pluralisation of media meant those scapegoated by mass media were increasingly able to speak out and back through alternative/new media. Initially, this was achieved through niche channels and magazines enabled by both digital broadcasting and small print run digital publishing. In contrast to this anticipation, that moral panics would decline in an age of media plurality, and in contrast to Critcher's observation, that 'banker bashing' was not sustained, COVID-19 has witnessed a sustained 'moral panic' over vaccination both from above (in the style akin to Cohen and Young's model of a moral panic) and from below (in the style more akin to those documented by Goode and Ben-Yehuda). Sustained moral panic over physical distancing and lockdown measures was maintained by significant lobbying resources afforded by businesses seeking either to lift restrictions or to emphasise the government's responsibility for such constraints (to warrant compensation). Contra panics over the laxity of government restrictions orchestrated by well-resourced health and welfare professional lobbies, the sustained capacity of anti-vaccination campaigners to get their message heard in the face of mainstream media and political opposition is best explained in reference to their ongoing ability to use new media platforms to spread their views. Where traditional media sustained a moral panic about 'anti-vaxxers' by means very similar to those described by Cohen, Young, Hall, and others by controlling the mainstream narrative, the rise of alternative media channels have sustained panics from below akin to those described by Goode and Ben-Yehuda. Each set of media channels represents the other media channels as a folk devil, supposedly responsible for significant harm. Where top-down moral panic theories always framed 'the media' as one of the 'villains' in the production of harmful moral panics, today's moral entrepreneurs too frame 'the media' as their 'folk devil' of choice, whether it be mainstream media 'blaming' new media for spreading fake news or new media anti-vaxxers claiming traditional media are the ones peddling a supposedly false 'mainstream narrative'. Some populist politicians use and manipulate anti-vaxxer discourse because such discourses are successful in recruiting and sustaining an audience. That both mainstream and alternative moral panics over COVID-19 vaccination have been sustained over time and in the face of each other's sustained critique of them raises the question of 'success'.

What counts for 'success'?

In the works of Cohen, Young, Hall, and others, there is a clear sense that a moral panic represents an attempt by moral entrepreneurs to raise concerns in such a way as to warrant and achieve an increase in various forms of social control and to thereby shore up an established order and hierarchy in the face of challenges. If a moral panic requires this 'agenda' for increased regulation, has this been manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In line with top down theories of moral panic, anti-vaccination campaigners express concern about pro-vaccination moral entrepreneurs seeking greater state control, fostering further erosion of bodily autonomy and personal liberty. Campaigners who oppose what they see as anti-vaxxer fake news see the contagion model of a moral panic unfolding as populations with high levels of vaccine hesitancy have higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death. This interpretation is akin to the bottom up conception of moral panics. Panic is seen as a contagion that inhabits a significant section of the population leading them to engage in irrational and harmful activities. Fear of bottom-up panics induce top down moral panic type actions and vice versa. Mainstream media, politicians, and policy makers/regulative agencies identify anti-vaxxers as a threat to public health and social order and thereafter set about regulating public discourse and political/policy messaging, whilst also blaming off-message misinformation and false disinformation for causing higher rates of infection and death. COVID-19 sceptics see such message control as confirming their fears.

Both sides see the success of the other as failure on their own part. Anti-vaxxers see widespread take-up of COVID-19 vaccination as evidence of failure, whilst those in favour of mass vaccination see failure to secure universal take-up as evidence of failure. However, as many societies reach herd immunity, fear about anti-vaxxers helping to sustain pockets of risk is useful in encouraging others to get vaccinated, even as fears about government controls help maintain an audience for anti-vaxxer political populism. Both sides can claim some success in preventing the other side, even as each side draws strength from the continued existence of a supposed opponent to resist. Success does not require overcoming, but rather in warranting certain moral enterprises to be maintained precisely because the other remains or at least must be constantly said to remain. 'Success' no longer requires 'winning', only the ability to claim that one is always at risk of 'losing' if more is not done.

Amplification cycles: intent or ignorance?

On a wall near the river Wear in Durham, somebody had written:

Hiroshima 45
Chernobyl 86
Windows 95
Covid 19

The idea that these four pairings were in some sense connected was left to the reader to fathom. That Microsoft Windows software is more prone to viruses than its rival Apple, that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has funded research into human-animal virus transmissions, and that COVID-19 is a virus, is enough for some people to 'see' a connection. This sort of connection is akin to pareidolia (the perception of meaningful patterns in random visual information – such as seeing a face in a cloud).

Moral entrepreneurship in moral panic manufacture implies something more akin to deliberate dis-information, falsehoods designed to have a particular outcome, relative to the kind of mis-information that simply makes and circulates erroneous connections. Where politically motivated actors have spread fears about COVID-19, it is also the case that the kind of deviancy amplification spirals identified by moral panic theories can work even in the absence of such deliberate manipulation: and in relation to the chemical process of amplification itself.

Kary Mullis won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1993 for his contribution to the development of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) viral testing. Mullis died in 2019. Vaccine manufacture amplifies (increases) the volume of certain strands of genetic material in order to mass produce such material that can then be administered to patients to induce immunity in them. The PCR test for a virus involves a similar process of amplification to raise the level of viral material in the test sample so as to be more readily detectable. Many viruses are endemic in the population such that most people have traces of viral material in their bodies. In relation to some such viruses, too many amplification cycles might create the impression that a person was infected when the tiniest trace of that genetic material in their bodies would not warrant that claim. Mullis had pointed to this fact, prior to his death (obviously). In 2020, his comments were taken up to suggest that he had claimed that PCR testing could be used to show that everyone had COVID-19 if 'too many' amplification cycles were undertaken in the test process. On October 14, 2020, an Irish Facebook post claimed: 'The people behind this pandemic knew that to maintain the constant fear they got to keep the cases high, so they decided to use the PRC test' (theJournal.ie, 2020: online). Mullis' observation that for some endemic conditions it would be possible with sufficient amplification cycles to 'find almost anything in anybody' was taken to evidence the claim that using PCRs was a tool to exaggerate COVID-19 infection rates. That Mullis died before COVID-19 began to spread worldwide, that his comments related to endemic viruses not a new virus like COVID-19, and the fact that 'amplification' in the chemical sense is not intrinsically 'exaggeration' in the sense that might warrant the claim that 'amplifying' a claim is a moral panic, were all ignored, and the assertion that PRC tests were 'fake' circulated widely online. Disputes over which PCR tests were more accurate, disputes which did see some tests replace others that were deemed less accurate, were also then taken as further evidence that withdrawn tests evidenced that they were fake, though the fact that they were then being replaced rather begged the question of why such fakery, if such it was, was being replaced. Such logical inconsistences did not limit the capacity of anti-vaxxers to amplify concerns. However, for most people, such disputes were never even known about, let alone worried about. Dispute is always rife within science and such disputes are easy to misinterpret when even experts within specialised sub-fields do not agree. That such disputes were largely kept out of the public discussion of COVID-19 policy might be called positive message management to avoid moral panic, even as such management would itself be taken as evidence of what needs to be worried about by a small but committed minority.

Can microbes have morals?

For Cohen (2011), the theory of moral panics always already had a sense of morality in the identification of that which was said to be disproportionate and those aiming at using exaggeration to promote unjust policies. His later suggestion of the possibility of 'good moral panics' reinforces this sense of moral judgement in terms of defining the 'good' even if removing the criticism when applying the term 'moral panic' to the mechanisms of raising concern.

Folk devils are supposed agents of immorality and harm, so can a virus be a moral agent in this sense? One view is to say no, even when supposed 'natural disasters' and non-human conditions more widely are said to be the consequence of some human failure that has induced, exacerbated, or simply failed to prevent hazardous non-human processes or phenomenon. The case of man-made climate change is an example of where moral attribution can be made to humans for their failure to prevent and for their contributions to sea and air temperatures rising globally. However, perhaps non-human organisms, technical artefacts, and systems should be given a greater sense of agency as actors themselves within human and non-human assemblages – as suggested by actor network theorists (Latour 2005). Actor-network theory (ANT)'s attention to the agentic quality of non-human entities and networks can act to de-moralise accounts of action and outcomes as humans are removed from the centre of the account of how outcomes come about (so humans no longer carry the sole capacity for responsibility). On the other hand, if agency is the foundation of moral responsibility, then perhaps the ANT approach requires that we do extend the notion of *blame* beyond human beings to both technical assemblages and non-human entities. Perhaps we should wage war on microbes, denounce networks of factory farms, human and animal population concentration, interaction, and transportation.

Conclusions

Moral panics can emerge from above or below, and may do so in symmetrical and reinforcing tandem. National elites criticising elites in other countries is one form of sustainable moral panic, whilst disputes within national elites is another. Simplified messages increase compliance but simplification can be seen as exaggeration and hence 'panic', even as contradicting clear messaging reduces reassurance and may also therefore induce 'panic'. Studies of risk consciousness, blame, and new modes of governmentality allow a more detailed approach to the meaning, extent, and direction of 'panics' today. The significance of 'morality' has not diminished in today's disputes, even if its construction has altered and even as debt pushes into the future the question of how those blamed will be made to pay. The rise of statistical modelling as a new form of 'panic engine' illustrates a new mode of moral entrepreneurship and highlights the tension between 'exaggeration' and practical techniques for raising concern. Where once anti-elite-oriented campaigns could not be sustained, during the pandemic, new media combined with new forms of populist political action/actors and new forms of intra-elite conflict

saw anti-'establishment' panics sustained over two years (and beyond). 'Success' in today's moral panics may lie in sustaining the idea that opponents remain to be overcome, not in overcoming them. Symmetrical campaigns succeed in bolstering their core only insofar as each can claim its opponent is doing likewise. Ultimate success would be failure, so the idea of success itself comes into question. If modelling is a new tool in the manufacture of moral panics, metaphor is a staple, even if the metaphors deployed, such as that between computer and biological virus, and between chemical and social amplification, change. If things are agents in the determination of outcomes, perhaps it is right to blame them and so extend the concept of moral panic to microbes and the natural and technical networks through which they flow.

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2 COVID-19 in social problems marketplaces

Joel Best, Brian Monahan, and Clara S. Mey

A key insight in constructionist social problems theory is that claimsmaking is a competitive enterprise. That is, claimsmakers must compete for the attention of the press, the public, and policymakers; at any given moment, there are many claims trying to be noticed (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Competition occurs, not only between advocates for different causes, but among actors within the same social movement, who seek to frame the same issue in very different ways (Benford 1993; Lofland 1993).

In Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) model, competition occurs in arenas. Arenas are social settings where claims can be presented, such as a newspaper's coverage or a congressional committee's hearings. Arenas differ in the size and composition of their audiences. Some are narrowly focused, admitting only particular kinds of claims and attracting attention from the relatively few people interested in claims of that sort (e.g., congressional committees focus on particular institutions or issues). Other arenas deal with a greater range of issues but limit access to a select few claimsmakers (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court). Many arenas, such as traditional mass media and social media, present much broader arrays of claims and claimsmakers. Sociologists of social problems often focus on these more prominent arenas because of their ability to connect claims to mass public audiences and because of their accessibility to researchers through content analyses of media coverage, studies of public opinion, and the like. This tendency encourages social problems scholars to assume that social problems emerge from a national competition among claimsmakers.

Some analysts describe this competition using the metaphor of the social problems marketplace (akin to the familiar notion of the "marketplace of ideas") (Best 2021b). This envisions claimsmakers as vendors hawking their wares, trying to attract attention to and on behalf of their particular causes. Just as discussions of arenas invite images of a national competition among claims, so does the marketplace metaphor encourage us to imagine a single, large marketplace. The marketplace metaphor has been criticized for prioritizing the views of institutional agenda-setters, such as politicians and media officials (Kim and Gil de Zúñiga 2021), and for being inapplicable to authoritarian societies where those in power can dictate what is recognized as a social problem (Adorjan 2019), but the idea remains useful when thinking about societies where there is more freedom of discourse.

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One important feature of the marketplace concept is that it acknowledges the role of the audience in shaping whether, how, and for how long claims circulate through various public arenas. Just as a marketplace requires space to shop (arenas) and vendors offering goods or services (claimsmakers/claims), it also requires customers who are willing and able to spend time in the marketplace and consider what is available therein (audiences for claims). Of course, this kind of audience engagement is inherently limited – public arenas have a finite carrying capacity and can only accommodate so many topics at one time, audiences can only pay attention to a fixed amount of content, individuals have limits on how much compassion and empathy they can give to claims, and so on. Nonetheless, the marketplace concept has proven useful as an orienting device for thinking about the communication processes and competitive dynamics that help determine which claims about troubling conditions find their way to audiences and have an opportunity to be transformed into social problems. However, a collection of shifts in technology, mass media, politics, and other areas of social life – many of which were laid bare or amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic – raise new questions about the marketplace concept in constructionist theorizing.

Claimsmaking arenas have proliferated and taken new forms. The number of public forums available for the circulation of problem claims has expanded significantly in the last few decades, owing most notably to the massive growth of cable television, the emergence and evolution of the Internet, advances in smart phone technology, increases in access to digital communications, and countless new media forums (blogs, subreddits, podcasts, messaging applications, and so on).

The media landscape is constantly changing. For instance, some once-influential public arenas – such as print newspapers and magazines – have seen precipitous declines in their reach and influence in the public sphere. There is also frequent reshuffling of the various arenas in terms of their influence and reach relative to one another. Consider the prominence of print media and television network news as information sources in the 1970s and 1980s in contrast to their much less central role in the media landscape today. The 1990s and 2000s saw substantial growth in the role of cable news; this period also was marked by a growing movement toward digital news media, social media forums, and other nontraditional information sources. Since 2010, American audiences have shown greater preferences for online news sources, with a corresponding decline in overall television news consumption (Gottfried and Shearer 2017), although cable news has enjoyed audience growth in recent years, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pew Research Center 2021). A more recent shift has seen news audiences increasingly turning to podcasts for information, with nearly a quarter of Americans reporting that they get news from podcasts (Walker 2022).

As the media landscape has shifted, so too have the ways that audiences find and consume news. As the information ecosystem greatly expanded in scope and access points in the 21st century, audiences generally drew from a wide array of traditional and new media for information, preferring to "graze" (Morris and Forgette 2007) across media forms rather than relying on a single news source or media format. At the same time, both media producers and consumers have shown

a preference for audience segmentation, which involves targeting content and delivery toward the narrower preferences of demographic categories (i.e., by age, gender, race, income, occupation, and so on). Such segmentation can have adverse effects by creating "information silos" or "filter bubbles" where different segments of the population may gain news and other information from sources that offer different content or vastly divergent frames than other sources. Further, research has shown these trends to be associated with increases in political polarization and ideological entrenchment (Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray 2020; Stroud 2010). This in part explains why sizeable segments of the news audience have become polarized along political and ideological dimensions; for these individuals, there is great reliance on a select few information sources that align with their politics and ideologies (Bishop 2008; Broockman and Ryan 2016; Mitchell et al. 2021).

Changes in the number, range, and relative importance of public arenas in modern life – along with shifts in how audiences find and engage in these arenas – raise questions about the generally accepted role of the marketplace concept in constructionist studies of social problems. Anyone with a smartphone and a social media app has tools with the potential to – at least in theory – reach a global audience. In practice, of course, most claimsmaking reaches vastly smaller, much more homogeneous audiences. This means that there are diffuse, parallel, often independent arenas or marketplaces for claimsmaking. While sociologists sometimes seem to suggest that social constructions are very widely shared, and that they emerge through a sort of society-wide conversation, it may be the case that most claims are promoted in arenas dominated by their proponents, that counterclaims flourish in largely separate arenas, even as large segments of the population may remain oblivious or indifferent to the issue. These homogeneous arenas often have claimsmakers and audience members who share age, ethnicity, gender, religious orientations, political ideologies, and other characteristics; in these silos, people "preach to the choir," and often define themselves in opposition to others (Bishop 2008; Broockman and Ryan 2016).

Claimsmaking and the COVID-19 pandemic

Claimsmakers must manage ambiguities and contingencies throughout the processes of constructing social problems. Claimsmaking about COVID-19 offers an interesting case for analyzing these dynamics. Almost by definition, a highly infectious epidemic disease might seem to pose a general, broad-based challenge to society as a whole. More than most troubling conditions, it would seem to encourage shared assessments of the nature of the problem and the policies for addressing it. And, in practice, we know that concerns about epidemics often lead to a great deal of claimsmaking and media coverage in the United States; these warnings – think of the alarms over avian flu (2005–06) or Ebola (2014–15) – often turn out to have been exaggerated. In sharp contrast, the threat of COVID-19 would prove to be very serious.

And yet this pandemic led to considerable competition among claimsmakers. It proved to be remarkably contentious, with a bewildering variety of claims and

counterclaims being advanced in many different arenas. There were some debates, but there were also instances of people taking past one another, or simply ignoring what others were saying. This chapter examines COVID-19's place in the social problems marketplaces by offering a chronology of the evolution of COVID-19 claimsmaking. It then concludes by examining the lessons this case offers for social problems theorists.

Initial period (February–May 2020)

At least in the United States, COVID-19 dominated the social problems marketplace during the spring of 2020. Initial reports of a new epidemic disease in China received modest press coverage, but attention grew more intense as it became apparent that COVID-19 was becoming widespread around the world. U.S. cases began being reported in February (although later analysis would suggest that some early cases had gone undetected in January), and by mid-March, COVID-19 cases had been reported in all 50 states. COVID-19's prominence as a social problem benefited from the fact that the most severe early effects were experienced in New York City, which of course is both the nation's largest population center and the headquarters for many major news organizations (e.g., *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, ABC News, Fox News, NBC News), which could treat the pandemic as a local, as well as a national and international story. Just as the 9/11 terrorist attacks virtually monopolized news coverage for about a week (Monahan 2010), COVID-19 shoved most other news to one side for much of the spring.

As might have been expected, the public health experts at the Centers for Disease Control became active claimsmakers. They called for policies intended to slow and minimize the spread of COVID-19, including extensive testing, the adoption of physical distancing policies, and closing stores, restaurants, bars, and other places where people mingled. Because these policies had to be implemented at the direction of elected officials – such as the president, state governors, and local mayors and school boards – those figures found themselves engaging in claimsmaking as well. The claims of elected officials were well publicized, and this enabled all manner of other commentators, ranging from cable news personalities with millions of viewers to ordinary individuals posting their reactions to their contacts on social media, to become COVID-19 claimsmakers in their own right. What emerged was a relentless swirl of COVID-19-related claims that circulated within and across numerous arenas and reached varied constituencies within a larger mass public audience.

It is important to appreciate that COVID-19 had a distinctive set of qualities. To begin, it was a new problem: while human history is filled with accounts of epidemics, this was a novel disease. In a globalized world, diseases can spread very widely in remarkably little time, and COVID-19 proved to be both contagious and lethal. It is of course no wonder that a disease with these qualities would seem newsworthy and receive considerable attention.

Moreover, the disease affected virtually everyone. Some people got sick, of course, but far more found their routines disrupted: their workplaces might be

closed; services they counted on might be unavailable; customary behavior (e.g., shaking hands) might suddenly be regarded as deviant. The pandemic seemed to have changed social life in myriad ways.

And this invited individuals to construct claims about different aspects of COVID-19. For constructionists, it is a mistake to imagine that COVID-19 was ***a*** social problem; rather, claimsmakers were constructing ***many*** COVID-19 social problems, often simultaneously. Try cataloging the pandemic's many aspects. Obviously, as a disease it poses *medical problems:* identifying and treating the infected, devising vaccines, and so on. But it also created *economic problems*, such as widespread unemployment and reduced productivity. Other commentators pointed to its *structural dimensions*, such as the ways that the pandemic was differentially experienced depending on people's race, class, and gender. Still others commented on its *cultural consequences*, and so on (Best 2020b). From the very beginning, all manner of commentators tried to imagine a future with – or perhaps after – COVID-19 (Best 2020a). No wonder COVID-19 dominated the social problems marketplace: it was a big, multi-faceted problem that could be discussed or worried about in a seemingly endless number of ways.

In addition, the pandemic's timing – emerging early in a year featuring a U.S. presidential election – proved to be important. Donald Trump had had negative approval ratings throughout his presidency and planned to base his campaign for re-election on the strong economy. While his administration was warned about the threat posed by COVID-19 (Gottlieb 2021) and Trump himself understood the seriousness of the threat (Woodward 2021), he was reluctant to promote public health measures that might damage the economy. Other Republican state and federal officials followed the president's lead, worrying about the risks of introducing public health measures. The first few months of the pandemic produced a vast pool of COVID-19 claims – many built upon deeply conflicting frames and policy positions – that reached different audiences, whose members processed them in different ways.

Waiting for vaccines (June–December 2020)

By June 2020, President Trump and his adherents pursued a multi-pronged claims-making strategy, with interwoven claims that sought to downplay the threat of COVID-19 and explain the origins and effects of the virus in ways that aligned with their political goals, while touting the promise of vaccines for slowing the epidemic's spread and effects. Trump and others in his administration repeatedly downplayed the threat posed by COVID-19 by challenging public health officials' claims about the numbers of infections, hospitalization and deaths (Best 2021a). These claims argued that COVID-19 was not as widespread or as severe as was being reported, that various public health measures were excessive and should be retracted, that effective treatments such as hydroxychloroquine were available, that deaths attributed to COVID-19 actually had other causes, and so on.

Public opinion polls conducted in the first few months of the pandemic offer evidence suggesting that COVID-19 claims were circulating differentially, gaining

prominence in some arenas – thus becoming central to the perceptions and narratives of the pandemic for those audiences – but barely drawing attention from others. For instance, when asked if they were worried about societal effects of the epidemic, almost twice as many Democrats reported being worried than Republicans (59% vs 39%) (Deane, Parker, and Gramlich 2021). This split grew wider for questions relating to one's individual risk, as 73% of Democratic respondents in a March 2020 Gallup poll reported being very worried or somewhat worried about exposure to COVID-19, compared to just 42% of Republicans (McCarthy 2020). (Some of this reflects normal patterns for political attitudes during epidemics. Thus, in late October 2014 [i.e., during the Obama administration], 49% of Republicans and only 36% of Democrats described themselves as worried about Ebola, while 67% of Democrats and only 42% of Republicans said they had confidence that the federal government could prevent an outbreak [Pew Research Center 2014]. However, in the case of COVID-19, these divisions would only grow.)

In addition to political views, researchers identified other socio-demographic factors that shaped early perceptions of the pandemic and likelihood of adopting self-protective measures (e.g., mask wearing, hand washing, physical distancing). Kim and Crimmins (2020) found that females, members of racial/ethnic minority groups, and people of higher socioeconomic status reported more often adopting mitigating behaviors related to COVID-19. Age was found to be a significant influence on perceptions of the seriousness of the pandemic, as well as views regarding how the associated disruptions in social life were affecting their own well-being and that of their families, communities, and society at large (Schaeffer and Rainie 2020).

The availability of parallel marketplaces was vital to the spread and acceptance of these claims. During the pandemic, surveys showed that more than half of U.S. adults regularly got news and information from social media sites, with variations rooted in age, race/ethnicity, and gender in terms of which social media applications were used and belief in the accuracy of the content (Shearer and Mitchell 2021; Walker 2022; Walker and Matsa 2021). Mainstream media outlets reported but also offered critical evaluations of these claims, and polls showed that most people were following public health officials' recommendations about physical distancing. However, the administration's claims received far more supportive coverage on more conservative news outlets (e.g., Fox News), while the algorithms used by social media steered ideologically predisposed people to content that reinforced their predispositions, so that it was possible to consume very different news reports. Not surprisingly, surveys showed that Democrats and Republicans had substantial (and generally increasing) gaps in opinions about the threats posed by COVID-19, the quality of media coverage about the epidemic, and the policies that ought to be adopted to address the pandemic (Deane, Parker, and Gramlich 2021; Mitchell, et al, 2021; Rothwell and Desai 2020). As the November election approached, opposition to masking, school closures, and other public health measures increased, and some Republication candidates insisted that COVID-19 issue had been overblown. Again, polls showed that Republican audience members who sought out information sources aligned with their political leanings were

greatly influenced by such claims. Those who self-reported as relying on Trump for COVID-19 news were found to echo his claims in their own beliefs, such as viewing the pandemic as "fake news" (Mitchell et al. 2021) or expressing deep distrust in scientists (Kennedy, Tyson, and Funk 2022).

Throughout 2020, virtually all claimsmakers promoted optimism about a soon-to-be-available vaccine, thanks to the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed (which sped up the vaccine approval process, primarily by making federal funds available to support vaccine development and testing by multiple manufacturers). Even though these hopes were fulfilled by vaccines becoming available surprisingly quickly, the mass of competing claims about vaccines and other intervention measures fostered the spread of suspicions about the safety of the vaccines that were moving toward approval. In early May 2020, a Pew poll found that 72% of Americans said that they would get a COVID-19 vaccine if one were available (although even at that early date, 79% of Democrats, but only 65% of Republicans expressed a willingness to be vaccinated) (Thigpen and Funk 2020). A series of Gallup Polls showed overall vaccine willingness dropping through the summer, reaching a low of 50% in late September, then rising to 63% in late November; when the partisan gap was 75–50% (Brenan 2020). Pew Polls showed that higher percentage of Republicans than Democrats expressed little or no confidence in scientists in general, and medical scientists in particular, and that these doubts grew between April 2020 and December 2021 (Kennedy, Tyson, and Funk 2022). In other words, vaccine skepticism increased, particularly among Republicans.

Vaccines first became available in December 2020. President Trump – who deserved credit for speeding the vaccine development process – was photographed being vaccinated, but his attention was focused on promoting a new, different set of claims that the election had been "stolen." As a result, the prospect that vaccines would soon be widely available received far less attention than might have been expected.

Vaccine rollout (January–June 2021)

Once approved vaccines were available, the initial challenge was to distribute them. At first, demand exceeded supply, and vaccines were made available to those judged to be at greatest risk (e.g., the elderly and health care workers). However, by April or May the initial demand had been largely met, and it was becoming apparent that a disappointing percentage of people were refusing to be vaccinated. There had been a growing "anti-vax" movement in recent decades (Reich 2016), but there were also suspicions about the COVID-19 vaccines in particular: that they had not been adequately tested or fully approved; that it was impossible to know whether they might turn out to have damaging effects; as well as a variety of more exotic claims (e.g., vaccine recipients became magnetic, vaccines contained nanobots or demonic DNA). Not surprisingly, vaccine refusal was most common among those segments of the population that had become most suspicious of public health recommendations. As a result, the proportion of the population that had been vaccinated started to level off.

In response, policymakers sought to further increase the numbers of vaccinated. They made younger people – first adolescents, then schoolchildren, and eventually in 2022 preschoolers – eligible for vaccinations, and they began approving booster shots. States devised various incentive programs (ranging from a free beer to entry in a million-dollar lottery) to encourage vaccination. The federal government introduced mandatory vaccination requirements for members of the armed forces and workers in various industries (some of these requirements would be struck down by the courts). Public health authorities began emphasizing evidence that vaccinations dramatically reduced the risks of death or infections serious enough to require hospitalization, while also helping to mitigate the risks of infection from new variants of the disease that had begun to spread.

Polling from this period of the pandemic offers considerable evidence to support the notion that the sources of the claims that one was routinely exposed to had effects on both beliefs and behaviors related to the pandemic. A Pew Research Center survey conducted in April 2020 asked individuals about their primary source for news, with subsequent surveys asking those respondents questions about perceptions of the pandemic and various self-protection measures. With respect to vaccination status, an August 2021 survey found that those who cited Trump and his task force as a primary news source had significantly lower rates of vaccination (38% said they had not received a vaccine) than those who said they relied primarily on public health officials for COVID-19 news (82% reported receiving at least one dose of the vaccine) (Jurkowitz and Mitchell 2021).

A new normal (July 2021–May 2022)

The summer of 2021 found the United States in a "new normal" condition: most people who could do so had received vaccines, and most people tried to follow public health recommendations regarding masking, while a minority remained unvaccinated, and some people actively ignored recommendations about masking. To be sure, the number of vaccinations administered continued to grow, but much of this increase reflected new forms of vaccine eligibility for younger persons, and booster shots for those already vaccinated. Schools and other institutions began to reopen, although they were periods of concern when new variants of the disease began to spread. It became increasingly apparent that the vaccines were effective: Vaccination did not ensure that individuals would not be infected, but it significantly reduced the chance of being hospitalized or dying; while COVID-19 death toll continued to increase, the rate of new deaths was roughly nine times higher among the unvaccinated.

Still, the proportion of vaccinated individuals was not high enough to keep new variants of spreading. By March 2022, about three-quarters of the adult population reported being fully vaccinated (Gramlich 2022). Still, opposition to vaccinations continued: misinformation remained common (Hamel et al. 2021), and was more common among Republicans and those who consumed news from largely conservative sources (Mitchell et al. 2021). Recent polls reveal continued divergence by political orientation when it comes to vaccinations (Tyson and Funk 2022), mask

wearing on airplanes (Younis 2022), and general beliefs about the severity of the ongoing pandemic (Brenan 2022; Bump 2022).

Implications for social problems theory

There has been an understandable temptation for constructionist analysts to depict social problems as emerging from a society-wide social problems marketplace. Constructionists often lean on national-level sources because they usually offer the richest sources of data, such as opinion polls, carefully indexed publications, and transcriptions of news programming. What seem to be the best data sources are also the easiest to access. Using these sources invites analysts to imagine a great societal conversation about social problems claims.

The United States' experience with COVID-19 exposes the limitations of this approach (Best and Monahan 2022). Claimsmaking about COVID-19 epidemic involved:

- *Multiple Claims*: Countless aspects of COVID-19 (e.g., how it impacted nurses of a particular ethnicities in a particular specialties) became the subjects of claims; from
- *Multiple Claimsmakers*: Because COVID-19 had so many aspects, affecting so many people, claimsmakers emerged within many different sectors of society, and ranged from figures of great prominence to ordinary individuals making and sharing comments with their social media networks; within
- *Multiple Arenas or Marketplaces*: Claims emerged, not only in purposefully specialized arenas (e.g., scholarly or professional journals aimed at narrowly focused audiences), but also in parallel arenas designed to attract targeted segments of the general audience.

All of this meant, not just that no person could hope to stay on top of all the claims being made about COVID-19, but that it was easy for substantial numbers of people to occupy information bubbles or silos where they were exposed only to particular points of view. To be sure, a majority of the population seem to have heard and accepted claims from "mainstream" claimsmakers (e.g., public health experts), so that they generally followed "mainstream" recommendations (e.g., regarding physical distancing, masking, and receiving vaccinations). However, a substantial minority – perhaps a quarter or a fifth – of the population was reluctant to comply with that mainstream advice. While this chapter has highlighted resistance grounded in partisan politics (i.e., Republicans who, encouraged by the Trump administration and conservative news media, resisted various public health recommendations), it is important not to exaggerate the uniformity among those who resisted. There were, for example, a host of claims about various reasons to worry about the safety and effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines; a person might easily discount some of these claims, while finding others persuasive.

In short, it is impossible to ignore the fact that reactions to the COVID-19 epidemic were far more complex than conventional constructionist interpretations

might suggest. This case offers an opportunity to develop a more nuanced framework that can not only help us better understand what happened in this case but can encourage better analyses of future cases of social problems construction.

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3 The 'crazies' are panicking

High-vis folk devils and the co-opting of moral panic in Australia

Milica Stilinovic, Zainul Swaleh, and Catharine Lumby

Introduction

In late September 2021, the Premier of Victoria, Hon. Dan Andrews announced a snap two-week construction shut down in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia. The measures were implemented to curb the transmission of COVID-19, with construction sites indicated as a hotbed for geographical spread (Premiere of Victoria, 2021). Except for skeleton staff permitted to close existing sites safely, a mandatory requirement for reopening included workers obtaining evidence of being single dose vaccinated (Premiere of Victoria, 2021).

The very next day, *they* came in the thousands to protest. *They* made their way to the steps of The Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), whose boss, John Setka, was accused of betraying the industry after revoking a previous announcement that he would not support mandatory vaccinations (Carabetta, 2021). *They* wore hoodies and high-vis gear, many purchased from a department store the same day (Day & Vincent, 2021). Some were donned in Nazi paraphernalia (Molloy, 2021). *They* were violent and 'ambushed riot cops and smashed up police cars', threw flares and bottles (Coe & Flower, 2021), and doused a journalist in urine (Funnell, 2021). *They* destroyed property, halted traffic with 'tearoom' gatherings, and blocked bridges while chanting 'f*** the jab', singing the national anthem, along with Australia's unofficial anthem, Daryl Braithwaite's, The Horses (Rachwani, Doherty & Boseley, 2021).

We are referring to the protestors as *they* because no one agreed on quite who *they* were or what *they* were doing. Through various institutional discourses – including, political actors, the news media, and commentators – *they* were described as 'tradies' or an Australian colloquialism for tradesmen (Triple M Newsroom, 2021). *They* were also denounced as 'fake tradies', according to CFMEU spokespeople and Setka, who was promptly met with a flurry of boos, bottles, and insults when he attempted to address the crowd outside the Union headquarters (Coe & Flower, 2021). Others claimed that the far-right had hijacked the minority of genuine tradespeople present (Kolovos & Godde, 2021). An illustrative account was delivered by former Labor leader Bill Shorten, who described protestors as 'a network of hard-right, man-baby Nazis [who] deserve to have the book thrown at them' (Shorten, 2021).

Factions of the news media, locally and abroad, equally described the actions of protestors as 'marching' (ABC, 2021), other times as 'descending' (Jepsen, 2021),

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'ambushing' (Coe & Flower, 2021), and 'rioting' (Gillespie, 2021). Most understood the protest as being motivated by work restrictions and mandatory vaccinations. However, some additionally attributed motivation to the gathering as related to the death of a construction worker who took their own life over hardship (Stevens, 2021). Others reached the conclusion that the protestors were as an orchestrated motley crew of former fringe dwellers, indoctrinated by the far-right, to dismantle democracy (Hilakari, 2021).

Riot police were called in and fired tear gas or rubber pellets into the crowd, and several dozen were arrested (ABC, 2021). To the backdrop of the 'Freedom Rally' protests – orchestrated globally during the height of COVID-19 restrictive measures by a loosely-organised chain of conspiracy groups, with a smattering of far-right groups mixed in (Knaus & McGowan, 2021) – the construction worker protests appeared to become yet another symbol of the anti-vaccine, far-right spiked, unrest that was a sign of 'things to come' (Molloy, 2021). More specifically, an amalgamation of violent protests sparked a fear that the construction workers posed a 'clear danger to democracy' (Hirst, 2021).

In this chapter, we will propose that some of the mainstream media and political responses bear all the hallmarks of a modern-day moral panic, albeit one in which, due to the affordances of the internet, the formerly silent folk devil can also co-opt and generate panic. It is an age in which elites can still trigger moral panic to justify reactive responses, both punitive and policy driven. However, the power to ignite panic is no longer distributed unilaterally.

This chapter argues that we need to liberate the concept of moral panic away from the classic top-down understanding of power – power to speak and power to be heard (see Cohen, 1972, 2002). It equally seeks to move beyond extant debates about the utility of the concept of moral panic, by both broadening our understanding of that term while also agreeing that societies do, in fact, 'appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic' (Cohen, 2002: 1). It does so by addressing the manifestation of panic during the Construction Worker Protests (CWP), the dichotomous role of the news media as both the guardian of societal values and, at times, complicit in the co-option of folk-devil-derived panic, and the affordances of the digital era in providing the folk devil with a voice to not only shape their narratives but to employ panic to mobilise.

Literature

On moral panics

According to Cohen's classic account, moral panic is understood as 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons [emerging] to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 2002: 1). A threat narrative, or deviance – developed in a stylised, stereotypical, and exaggerated fashion by mass media – is disseminated to a passive audience (Critcher, 2008: 1137). This narrative-building exercise results in deviance amplification, thus triggering a bout of reactionary and often hyperbolic responses (Cohen, 2002: 1; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 22).

Both the classical school and orthodox approaches to conceptualising moral panics have been scrutinised over the past five decades. Critique ranges from the validity of the theory itself (Critcher, 2008; Watney, 1987), its overuse (Mcrobbie & Thornton, 1995; Miller & Kitzinger, 1998: 221), its outdated assumptions about media, agency, and social structures (Critcher, 2006, Walsh 2020), the parameters by which to define panics (Critcher, 2006: 20), and the need to look beyond moral panics (Albert, 2014; Hier, 2008;). Garland (2008: 22) further observes that sceptical realists such as Simon Watney (1987) criticise the inherently subjective approach of moral panic theory whereby the sociologist uses their personal value system to assert the disproportionality of a reaction. Horsely (2017: 84) has even critiqued the origins of the moral panic concept, citing that 'the moral panic thesis was founded on a very brief and opportunistic piece of research'.

It is worth exploring these critiques as they provide a means to develop the concept beyond its impressionistic, often idealistic, inception. For example, it is important to address the ubiquity and, by extension, the overuse of the term 'moral panic'. McRobbie and Thornton (1995: 572) urge for critical interventions into moral panic scholarship, 'precisely because of its success'. They argue that the concept, birthed in radical sociology, has found its way into the lexicon of the very institutions and actors which it sought to critique. Moral panic has, equally, become a term used by 'right-thinking people' (Cohen, 2002: 1), whether editors, journalists, politicians, or law enforcement, as a means of dismissing or devaluing perhaps what is a genuine issue of concern (Hier, 2008). This problematic is further addressed by Lumby and Funnell (2011), similarly arguing that moral panic theory risks losing its poignancy and scholarly rigor if it is mobilised as a means of engaging in polemic rather than opening a space for evidence-based interventions into the issues concerning the alleged moral panic. Rather than utilising the theory as a means of merely identifying its prevalence in media representation, Lumby and Funnell (2011: 279) argue that scholarship should be 'asking how the theory might be used to frame strategic interventions into public debate and policy'.

While helpful, critiques can also hinder the development of moral panic theory by denouncing the existence or validity of moral panics entirely, such as in the case of Critcher (2008) and Watney (1987). It is important to note that moral panic theory continues to offer scholarship a lens through which to evaluate moments in time when heightened concern over the supposed fragility of a society's moral underpinnings results in the belief that 'something must be done'. That is, whether that panic manifests as a full-blown 'war on terror', amplified reactions to infanticide (such as the panic that coincided with the murder of Jamie Bulger in the United Kingdom), or punitive measures administered towards a congregation of high-vis adorned protestors. In every case, it is critical to establish and evaluate each element of the moral panic concept. In this chapter, it is the agency of actors and their roles in triggering a moral panic that will be revisited as well as the current role of the mainstream media as the igniter of moral panic and its role as defender of the status quo, along with the assumed silence of the previously downtrodden folk devil.

On the media

In Cohen's original work (1972: 9), the news media (with a heavy-handed penchant for dramatic flair) are seen as central to amplifying wider threat narratives, with enormous power to influence audience perception. This premise is indicative of a time when media effects theorists took cues from journalist Walter Lippmann (1922), whose war-time exploration of propaganda was centred on an understanding of public opinion premised on the idea that the 'masses' were easily manipulated. This account of the power of the mass media's influence produced a procession of hypodermic needle (or magic bullet) theories assuming a direct, immediate, and influential cause-and-effect relationship between media narratives and audience responses (see Lasswell, 1927). Media effect theories experienced a renaissance with the rise of television (McQuail, 2010). It was in this era that Cohen (2002), experiencing sub-cultural violence in Brighton, asserted that media was 'the primary source of the public's knowledge about deviance and social problems' (pg. xxviii). Cohen (2002) has since widened that claim, articulating the role of mass media in moral panic as agenda-setters, claim-makers, and transmitters (pg. xxviii–xxix), rather than as the sole architects of panic. Other theorists have followed suit in examining the role of news media in deviance reporting, resulting in moral panic. For example, Barak (2013: 13) considers the relationship media has with power, with crime reporting often following trends in economic and societal development. Fox (2013: 161) looks towards public concern being shaped by mass media, whose content production is often guided by moral entrepreneurs. Lumby and Funnell (2011) examine the role of the conservative media commentator in hijacking the term moral panic to prove that they are actively engaged in the fight for morality while devaluing scholarly work. We delve further into these claims, asserting that, while the news media no longer works alone in amplifying or perpetuating moral panics, they still play a vital role by narrating deviance. Their capacity to amplify and narrate deviance has, however, been impacted by several factors, including the decline of traditional revenue streams and the erosion of traditional news functions. In this climate, we argue, news media have a greater incentive to endorse or condone panic, support or vilify the folk devil in a bid to entertain and maintain audiences. We will argue and demonstrate through our analysis of a media archive in the era of the commentator, where opinion supersedes conventional reportage in news coverage.

Many factors have amplified the coverage of subjects interesting to the public as opposed to subject of conventional public 'interest' (Reuning & Dietrich, 2019). Among them are the disruptive capabilities of digital technologies (Ahlers, 2006: 30), which have decentralised content production, fragmented homogenised audiences, and provided them with an ability to produce their own narratives (Poster, 1995). These disruptive capabilities have offered opportunities for news houses in terms of audience engagement, commentary, and the use of user-generated content as a means to attract audiences (Newman, 2009: 8–9). Equally, they have provided a source for news, and a means to gauge public opinion (McGregor, 2019: 1). However, these technologies have, in equal measure, challenged news media, resulting in the decline of

public interest journalism (Barnett, 2099: 4; Witschge, 2018) and contributed to the rise in opinion-based commentary.

As traditional media and new media technologies converge, social network sites have become platforms where many commentators, activists and extremists compete for attention (Lichtenstein, Herbers & Bause, 2021: 73). These new influencers, while offering commentary on the day's events, feed the public's interest in the personal and the private (the 'what is interesting' as opposed to 'public interest') by often sharing candid moments (Perreault & Hanusch, 2022: 2). Challenged by these news actors, at a time when 'violence and sex are exploited in the competitive struggle for audiences' (Ahlers, 2006: 43), the journalist is encouraged to engage in deviance reporting. That is, to assert their opinion on matters as opposed to reporting on them. A moral panic provides an outlet for commentary, for journalists to express their views on the news, either as a champion of the status quo, or as its staunch opponent.

On the folk devil

Since Cohen and Hall's seminal texts, there have been a number of significant developments in the media landscape that scholars argue have given the folk devil greater agency (deYoung, 2013; Young, 2011). One of these, referenced by Young (2011), is the capacity of the folk devil to access niche and alternative media formats to represent themselves and contest the dominant media narrative. Another, which DeYoung (2013) identifies, is where the folk devil is found in a group outside of their traditional socio-cultural archetype. Such was the case in the moral panic surrounding child abuse and satanic rituals at childcare centres in the United States. In this instance, middle-class women of prominent social standing were cast as the folk devil and leveraged their social capital to mount counter-narratives, gain constituencies and exercise agencies. DeYoung (2013) names this new subject the 'feisty folk devil'.

The advent of new media, particularly social media, has also prompted further revision of Cohen's original theory. Such developments have, to a degree, fractured the agenda-setting monopoly of legacy media and prompted greater pluralism which can, in turn, inhibit the ability to stoke collective moral indignation (Hampton & Wellman, 2018; Walsh, 2020). This, however, would be an oversimplification of the influence of the multi-mediated contemporary landscape. Several factors, highlighted by Walsh (2020), point to the role social media can play in facilitating accelerated levels of moral indignation and panic. The speed of information, the effect of content-filtering algorithms, and the design of such platforms to prioritise divisive content all contribute to the ground swelling of fear, risk perception, and moral panic.

Namely, with social media's usages and affordances comes the spatial fracturing of the folk devil. They are no longer clustered in specific geographic locales: poor neighbourhoods, migrant communities, or the Global South, initially perceived as stomping grounds for the down-trodden folk devil. The ability of digital media to draw together geographically distanced subjects and restructure the folk devil along more amorphous lines, such as in the case of the 'Freedom Rally',

the 'anti-vaxxer', 'extremist', 'alt-right' or 'neo-Nazi'. Moreover, according to Walsh (2020: 850), social media platforms enable manufacturers of a moral panic, 'to cleave populations into demographic and affective types, moral guardians can precisely 'hail' subjectivities, allowing them to combine mass transmission with individual connection and overcome what has traditionally been a Hobson's choice between maximal exposure and intimate resonance'. The outcome of such developments may amplify feelings of anxiety, hostility, and hysteria.

As early as *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen, 1972), the virality analogy was present. Cohen states, 'one of the most misleading and misconceived analogies in regard to explaining delinquency is the attempt to compare it to a disease' (2002: 62–63). Misconceived as it may be, this analogy offers an insight into understandings of how both delinquency and moral panic is thought to spread throughout society. Situating a cluster of moral panics within an actual viral pandemic offers a series of complications that have been explored in moral panic scholarship. Gilman (2010) notes that disease outbreaks can often cause moral panic. Such was the case with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and SARS in the early 2000s. In both cases, folk devils emerged from familiar archetypes. In the case of HIV/AIDS, it was homosexuality, and for SARS, it was China (Gilman 2010) – one that would be reinvigorated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ungar (2009) traces the intersections between modern epidemiology and moral panics. He argues that the way in which modern epidemiology surveys, tracks, models, and communicates viral outbreaks are conducive to moral panic reporting. He states, 'our perceived vulnerability to a runaway pandemic is stoked by constant disease surveillance coupled with revealing new technologies and theoretical understandings, the encampment with the 1918 Spanish flu exploits a worst-case scenario that is certainly sensational, inflammatory and spectacular' (Ungar, 2013: 355). The conditions created by a viral outbreak, or the possibilities thereof are fertile conditions for moral panic reporting. These conditions are exacerbated when a viral outbreak is classified as a global pandemic. The worst-case scenario predictions of health officials and epidemiologists, allusions to the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak as well as the ubiquity of social media lead to 'a deep chasm of distrust, lending credence to opposing moral panics conjuring a world of conspiracies wrought by governments, business, scientists, and international organizations' (Ungar, 2013: 361). In this context, the cluster of moral panics concerning COVID-19 emerges. Where disease prevention and management are linked to compliance with certain health behaviours such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, lockdowns, and inoculation – such behaviours are cast as forms of civic duty (Capurro et al., 2022). Those who flout these rules are cast as threats to public health and the moral order itself.

Case study

The men in high vis

When broaching the CWP, the first apparent element is the representation of the protestors and their likeness to the original folk devils embraced by Cohen (1972).

Sensitisation, or elements of a generalised belief system (Cohen, 2002: 81), were diffused through articles and accompanying images produced by a subset of mainstream news media, or, more specifically, those who condemned the protestors gathering outside of the CFMEU headquarters. In this instance, much like in the case of the Mods and Rockers, the protestors were the embodiment of the 'working class yob', or 'the most enduring of suitable enemies' (Cohen, 2002: vii). Their apparel of choice, the high-vis working vest, became the prevalent symbol of their working-class status, even if it was claimed by Setka that many were not 'union members' or 'construction workers' but 'far-right activists and professional protesters' (in Carabetta, 2021). However, other elements embedded into their representation further tied links between protestors and the archetypal working-class yob. These parallels were fuelled via the long-standing demonisation of the working class; a group notably represented nowadays by sub-group labels such as 'chavs' in the United Kingdom, 'white trash' in the United States, and 'bogans' in Australia (Vázquez & Lois, 2020: 993). These groups are often portrayed by 'stereotypes of apes and other animals…primitive, brutal, and not completely human' (Vázquez & Lois, 2020: 993). They have equally been perceived as uneducated, incompetent, with obsolete skills and a penchant for drug taking (Smith et al., 2019: 193). The latter, the working class as substance abusers, is important to note in terms how the CWP was constructed. Visual depictions of the protestors were spiked with images of individuals partaking in substance abuse (see Barnsley, 2021). These images, along with video footage, were accompanied by straps suggesting that attendees 'were protesting over a vaccine for a deadly disease but apparently had no hesitation self-administering an unknown substance' (Barnsley, 2021). Such presentation of the footage could be perceived as an indication of the protestors as not only being hypocritical, but ignorant enough (or 'uneducated' enough) to subject their bodies to harmful substances while not partaking in behaviour that would benefit them and the wider public, such as being vaccinated. As such, stereotypical tropes from the classic era of moral panics still prevail, are reborn, and take on forms that suit both time, context, and the environment of heightened concern.

The second element that ties the CWP protestors to the archetypal folk devil is a lack of ethnicity. While most moral panics, according to Cohen (2002: vii), are organised on ethnic lines, with football hooliganism being the exception, the high-vis protestors were essentially 'race-less', much like the Mods and Rockers. That is, there was an inherent lack of racial profiling of the protestors; something of a status quo within the sub-genres of moral panic reporting, such as crime (see Glover, 2009; Pritchard & Stonbely, 2007: 3). The lack of racial profiling alludes to 'whiteness' being treated as a given in societies perceived as 'white' (Ramirez, McDevitt & Farrell, 2000: 651), such as in the case of colonial Australia. Thus, placing the CWP protestors into another category, the *white working class*. In the representation of the CWP, a participant's 'whiteness' was not only represented in the absence of racial profiling but was also visually represented in images accompanying articles about the protests. While footage from Avi Yemini (2021), the so-called Bureau Chief of Australia for

Rebel News, displayed a more multicultural representation of the protestors, frames selected by prominent news media were predominantly 'white'. In our belief, these linkages to 'whiteness' position the folk devil differently to, say, typical *outsider* groups, such as asylum seekers or those labelled terrorists. That is, the white working-class folk devil is constructed as part of the 'threatened' society while also being its prevalent concern. This almost inclusive element frames the threat derived from the folk devil in an ideological scope. That is, the threat from within, eroding the safety of society at large. Analogically, it could be perceived as the equivalent of being locked in with a zombie after barricading the house from the apocalypse. 'Whiteness' and 'classness' can be evidenced in cases such as the murder of Jamie Bulger, in which the incident of infanticide was elevated to levels of self-questioning *within* a 'sick society' (Cohen, 2011: ix). The unprecedented crime – two 10-year-old children murdering a toddler – not only had the moral panic targeting youths in general, but struck at their parents, as members of UK's constructed 'white' society who became symbols of 'absent fathers, feckless mothers and dysfunctional underclass families' (Cohen, 2002: ix) betraying its moral fabric from within.

During the CWP, the moment of elevation occurred when several hundred protestors made their way to Melbourne's shrine of remembrance, a war memorial in Victoria. Coverage of this particular moment saw the repositioning of the folk devil as not only an immediate threat to the health and wellbeing of a society but its greatest scourge. For example, RSL Australia President Greg Melick referred to the protestors as a 'disgrace to the nation' (RSL NSW, 2021). The choice of words within Melick's quote inadvertently places the folk devil as part of the nation, albeit its greatest shame. Via the media (see Tuffield, 2021), Setka claimed that 'extremists' had manipulated union members into violence, thus positioning the proverbial white working-class as a victim, threatened by an embedded outsider, the right-wing neo-Nazi. As such, the CWP embodies the traditional hallmarks of the working-class yob folk devil. Through elements of 'whiteness' and 'classness', condemnation aimed at protestors is framed ideologically, questioning the health and wellbeing of a society impacted by COVID-19 (and the threat of congregating under such circumstances), along with the threat to Australia's moral values by neon-adorned folk devils. However, one element separates them from the conventional parameters of folk devildom. That is, they were anything but the polarised and solely discriminated against individuals (Cohen, 2002: 200). In fact, they were anything but voiceless.

As mentioned, the voice provided to the previously 'polarised' individual (Cohen, 2002: 74) through the advent of digital technologies, provided 'passive' audiences with affordances to produce their own content, and develop audiences of interest (Poster, 1995). In the case of the CWP, protestors could share details, propaganda, and other information on Telegram and a variety of closed group platforms (Wilson, 2021). However, amplification of the event occurred via the public accounts of right-wing agitators whose posts regarding the CWP provided counter-narratives. Their posts reframed the original panic – the fear of geographical spread from uncaring construction workers – which resulted in shut-down

mandates. Through these counter-narratives, protestors were not simply accepting public scrutiny. They were able to claim the moral panic for themselves. For example, Avi Yemini (also known as 'proudOzraeli') has a following of over 700 000 on YouTube. A gym owner from Melbourne and self-proclaimed 'citizen journalist' whose ideology is steeped in nationalism, Zionism, and Islamophobia (Lynch, 2021). Yemini's presence at the CWP provided amplification through his large social media following and legitimacy forged through appearances on conservative news channels, such as Sky News (see Yemini, 2022). Yemini took to *Rebel News* to provide an immersive experience of the CWP. His post, titled 'CFMEU accuses its own MEMBERS of being 'far-right Nazis' (2021), displayed the events leading up to the violence outside the CFMEU headquarters. During the report, Yemini attempts to counter the 'far-right Nazi' mantra bestowed on protestors by interviewing several of them, focusing on claims that the protestors were union members who had the concerns of 'normal Victorians' at the fore (Yemini, 2021). That is, the CWP was predominantly attended by union members, outraged by Setka and the Victorian government for 'selling us out' (in Yemini, 2021). Protestors who were interviewed further urged viewers to 'let them work to feed their families', to not lose 'everything', and to maintain the 'rights that they've fought for years' to obtain (in Yemini, 2021). Further, that hope would be maintained 'if we all stand up together' (in Yemini, 2021). Through these interviews and Yemini's framing of the events, a counternarrative was framed, through which a folk devil-derived panic was developed, one that claimed the rights of Australian citizens were being eroded by authoritarian measures.

Another right-wing agitator with a high social impact is 'Real Rukshan', or Rukshan Fernando, a former wedding photographer turned self-proclaimed 'independent journalist' whose social media accounts swelled after providing fly-on-the-wall-footage-of lock-down-related protests (O'Neil, 2021). Much like Yemini, Fernando boasts a large following on social media and receives a dose of legitimacy via conservative news media who call on him for interviews (see Fernando, 2021a). On his public Facebook profile, Fernando (2021b) shared a live cross from the CWP. In this particular video, he captured scenes of protestors walking, some thanking him for sharing their video about Australia being 'one country' on his Facebook wall. In other scenes the police are retreating after they, according to Fernando (2021b), 'wasted a lot of taxpayer's money on their poor intelligence' (Fernando, 2021b), insinuating that the violence that was promised was a farse. The protests, according to Fernando (2021b), were 'peaceful' and orchestrated by 'protestors with reasonable demands.'

While these two examples may not provide the entire scope, they do offer insight into how the proverbial moral panic playing field has been levelled out, removing the sole authority of triggering a moral panic from the elites and providing the previously silent folk devil with an opportunity to create their own. However, they are not the lone executors of moral panic. In today's contemporary and digitised media spaces, these antagonists share airtime with the more traditional moral panic arbiters. That is, the media, who, due to commercial pressures, have become both the condemners and the supporters of folk devildom.

A divided media

Cohen (2002: 76), traditionally considers the role of 'mass media' in a moral panic to be the deviance 'labeller'. Equally, as the dominant vehicle for diffusion (Cohen, 2002: 87). Cohen's (2002: 87) descriptions also include the 'exaggerator' and 'distorter'. These media functions act to paint the picture of an amplified threat of youth gone wild, of drug taking, violence and vandalism in Cohen's (1972) original work. Nowadays, however, these acts go beyond merely illustration, or framing, in contemporary media environments.

News media framing an agenda, or deviance, is not a new phenomenon. Countless examples throughout history demonstrate that the news media are prone to influence from the political system in which they are embedded (see Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956: 1). Nor is it novel to consider the influence of media ownership shaping the narrative to suit the interests of a powerful media mogul (though, it has been acknowledged that the influence of the media baron is not absolute, nor are news houses truly absolved from it [see Tiffen, 2006]). Social backgrounds, levels of editorial independence and company etiquette play a role in shaping narratives (Albæk, Skovsgaard & de Vreese, 2017: 4–11). Equally, the response from audiences can be varied (see Hall, 2005). The power of media is not absolute in terms of influence. However, news media are still influential. In the context of moral panics, there are still elements of the news media that sustain their position as the moral watchdog, amplifier, and exaggerator of threats. On the other hand, news media are still able to leverage their platform to counter condemnation for their own commercial interests.

Many examples of the news media acting as the defender of society's moral values that were threatened by the construction worker protestors were introduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, a few more examples assist with illustrating this claim.

While most articles provided insight into the events outside of the CFMEU headquarters in, what could be referred to as, a presentation of facts and expert opinion, an article titled 'Inside the Insurrection: why construction workers took to the street' by Ben Schneiders (2021), an author and investigative journalist at *The Age*, who focuses on industrial relations takes a different direction. The article seemingly creates pejorative parallels between the CWP and the events leading to the falsely motivated, right-wing-spiked, violence at Capitol Hill in January 2021. Importantly, it is riddled with opinion but is not labelled as an 'opinion piece'. For example, the article contains comments such as 'the CFMEU was treading a fine line' by supporting the choice of individuals to get vaccinated (Schneiders, 2021). Further, the 'union had left behind its strong class-based stance of its former leaders' under Setka, and the union boss had surrounded himself with Croatian nationalist adorers, a group 'rife' with anti-vax sentiment (Schneiders, 2021). Whether true or not, there was no evidence to support these claims. Thus, while painting the CWP with a broad brush of historic right-wing-isms, the journalist's opinion sets its sights firmly on amplifying potential corruption in union ranks.

On *The Project*, a mainstream news commentary shows on Australia's Channel 10, Waleed Aly, a broadcaster, author and academic, interviewed Australian Council of Trade Unions Secretary Sally McManus. Far from engaging in a segment of question/answer, Aly interjected that the protestor's attitudes towards the mandate were 'weird', and that the protest came 'out of nowhere because tearooms are being shut down…which kind of doesn't acknowledge that there's a huge amount of privilege that construction has enjoyed just by being allowed to stay open' (Aly in *The Project*, 2021).

On the other hand, conservative pundits have equally chosen to co-opt and amplify the spread of counter-narratives and folk devil-derived panic. Andrew Bolt, a well-known conservative commentator, took to his column Murdoch press-based column to accuse 'Labor leaders and union bosses like Setka' of bringing down 'civil disorder to Melbourne through their bullying, threats and lies' (Bolt, 2021). Bolt (2021) deftly co-opted the counternarrative to attack the 'establishment' and the CFMEU's 'menacing culture of up-yours' to his advantage. Pieta Credlin, the ex-Chief of Staff to former conservative Liberal leader Tony Abbott, turned Sky News host, took to her chair in defence of the protestors, on the basis that the public service broadcaster, the ABC, and the Andrews Government 'made excuses for' Black Lives Matter protests, defending the latter and condemning the former (Sky News, 2021). However, she equally placed the construction workers left of the political spectrum, asserting that because of their union affiliation, the protestors were primarily left alone (Credlin in Sky News, 2021), an opinion that is in stark contrast to the scenes depicting police utilising tear gas and rubber bullets on the CWP.

New digital environments have shifted the role of news media in moral panics. No longer the sole architect, the news media takes on the role of both the defender of the moral status quo, and the co-opter of folk-devil-derived panic as a means to maintain commercial viability, among other interests.

Conclusion

Violence did occur on the steps of the CFMEU in late September 2021. Scenes of the events depict a picture of construction workers gone rogue over a shutdown mandate issued by the State of Victoria, halting a billion-dollar industry that had, till then, experienced exceptions that the hospitality, entertainment, and retail industries, along with everyday citizens, did not. That is, freedom of movement.

As part of a deep swell of global anti-vax protesting, the violence sparked fear over the threat of the white working class, right-wing, yobs tearing down Australia's democratic values. This particular incident provides insight into the mechanisms of a modern-day moral panic, where the roles of key players have been altered, and the parameters of who gets to trigger panic are redefined. Societies still appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic (Cohen, 2002: 1). However, panic is no longer solely in the hands of the elites who previously enjoyed the privileges of agenda-setting to the voiceless 'masses'. While the representation of folk devils remains consistent with age-old stereotypes developed for groups who seemingly subject societies to threats remain the same, digital technologies provide

the previously voiceless folk devil with a platform to provide a counternarrative and to develop their own moral panic against the mainstream status quo. These counternarratives are amplified through individuals with a broad reach and legitimacy forged through news media and are employed to challenge preconceptions of particular groups while mobilising 'masses' into protest.

Nonetheless, moral panics cannot be manifested by the folk devil alone. News media still play a prominent role in shaping the narrative, providing audiences with a reason to panic. However, due to industry pressures, the decline of traditional revenue streams and challenges from other opinion leaders made possible through digitisation, the era of commentary, where a journalist's opinion of events, has cast news media into the role of moral defender, or deviance supporter, as opposed to the moral panic architect.

We argue that it is time to reframe the concept of moral panic by engaging with the complexities of the convergent and fragmented media landscape and acknowledging that moral panics can manifest in and be sustained across multiple groups with different agendas and opportunities for distributing media content. We also contend that moral panics can be triggered and mobilised simultaneously in the service of a contradictory and conflicting array of interests seeking to reframe notions of freedom and democracy.

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4 Understanding the protest movements against the COVID-19 public policy in France as a moral panic

Zakaria Bendali, Alexandre Dafflon, and Olivier Fillieule

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic. In France, a public health emergency was declared on March 23, 2020, and a general lockdown was imposed, severely restricting the activities that used to fill daily routines. The situation in France was not very different from that observed elsewhere in Europe, but in this case the measure was part of a sequence characterized by a permanent state of emergency since 2015. This included a series of measures that were supposed to remain exceptional, such as the ban on assemblies, extrajudicial house arrests, and searches and seizures. These harsh provisions have also been used to repress social movements, such as the Zadists, the Yellow Vests (YV), and the movement against the 2019 pension reform bill. In this context, it is not surprising that all forms of social and political protests, including meetings, occupations, rallies, and street demonstrations, came to a sudden halt in the spring of 2020.

Admittedly, after an initial moment of shock, the lockdown and the masks gave rise to protests, but these remained limited and isolated. It should be noted, however, that the final months of 2020 in France were dominated by protests against a series of reforms designed to increase police powers, bringing together different groups and demands: left-wing groups protesting against police brutality, human rights groups, the YV, and protesters against the lockdowns and masks. The demonstrations, often referred to as the "March for Freedom", helped to frame a coherent picture in which issues of police brutality, restrictions on freedom of expression and repressive policies were described as different manifestations of the same authoritarian rule.

It was only after Emmanuel Macron's 12 July statement announcing the "health pass" policy that the first significant protests against the COVID-19-related measures began. The QR code-enabled document would be required for access to many public places. In addition, health workers were required to be vaccinated or face dismissal. This led to a strong wave of loosely organized dissent, mostly labeled "anti-pass", particularly in the Paris region and on the southeastern Mediterranean coast.

To understand the sudden and widespread emergence of these protests, we must first consider the unique circumstances in which the COVID-19 crisis came to shake up existing social arrangements. First, the state's haphazard management of the crisis only fed and amplified the divisions that existed before the epidemic. The

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appearance of unpreparedness and dithering helped to fuel the current mistrust, while the lockdowns introduced the notion that essential workers who continued to expose themselves were forced to bear the brunt of the pandemic, while more privileged executive workers remained safely at home. This helped to magnify the issue of a growing divide between "the elite" and "the people", rekindling ordinary people's resentment of the political class. Second, this mistrust is linked to the perceived betrayal of experts, scientists and intellectuals, in the context of a strong skepticism toward science, fed by the ever-closer relationship between research and the market, the commodification of medical science and the unethical behavior of pharmaceutical companies.

If such a context undoubtedly facilitated the wave of anti-pass protests, it remains to be explained what factors sparked the prairie fire. According to many analysts, the growing distrust of the French was amplified and channeled by moral entrepreneurs who remobilized existing conspiracy theories (Thomas and Zhang 2020), mainly propagated by the QAnon movement and the American alt-right. Indeed, from April 2020, a massive flow of fake data and news generated around the pandemic spread on social media, claiming that the virus had been created in a laboratory and deliberately released by a geopolitical enemy, by George Soros, Bill Gates, or both. Gates was said to have planned the crisis in conjunction with the WHO, while others claimed that the virus was being spread through the 5G mobile network.

This explanatory scheme fits directly into a classic analysis according to which ill-intentioned moral entrepreneurs, relying on the formidable echo chamber of social media, have succeeded in increasing psychological disorders, anxiety, depression, and a sense of panic in the population (Rocha et al. 2021), which in turn, when combined with anger and a sense of collective identity, have been conducive to collective delusion and irrational collective action (Van Zomeren et al. 2004).

However, the anti-pass protests shared characteristics with other movements that have developed dramatically in recent years, commonly referred to as "street-level", "leaderless," or "multicentric" movements (Tüfekçi 2017). These protests often originate from calls circulated on social media and involve episodic occupations of public spaces. They are also loosely organized and have no central leadership. Above all, these protest movements tend to bring together a wide range of people with few prior links to existing political organizations, and emerge in contexts of crisis and a climate of distrust toward the political elite.

This suggests that a phenomenon of "self-recruitment" (Goodwin and Jasper 2009) may have been at play in the anti-pass movement, with people mobilizing themselves on the basis of a "moral shock" (Jasper and Poulsen 1995) that (while recognizing the accelerating role of the rhetorical work of organizers using condensed symbols) would have provoked physical responses (such as disgust, fear, anger) and led people to reflect on the value conflicts that led to their involvement. While recognizing the agency of protesters and the role of mobilizing agents, as well as emphasizing the moral dimension of the motivations to engage, these approaches tend to result in empirical studies that focus on the strategic work of mobilization, leaving largely unexplored the dispositions and mechanisms that lead

some people to experience moral shock rather than others. This is why, in this chapter, we use a different set of tools, that of moral panics.[1] More precisely, we follow the proposals formulated by Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (2009), who offer to study the complex processes that govern the emergence and development of moral panics by combining a "grassroots model" with a "middle-level model". Such an approach allows us to explain how the protests involved a wide range of individuals with different sociological and ideological backgrounds, rather than just a small group of radical extremists.

First, by looking at the dynamics of the anti-pass protests, their modus operandi and the types of concerns they raised, we show how various moral entrepreneurs as well as grassroots activists were able to attract a broad audience by using moral boundaries to expose threats to society's values and well-being, often in a more or less disproportionate way.

Second, we show how the YV movement, which was in abeyance (Taylor 1989) at the end of 2019, functioned as a mobilizing network. The YV provided a successful mobilization model and served as a home base for many protesters, allowing them to have a significant impact on the anti-pass mobilization. They also facilitated the rapid spread of fear and outrage through their extensive use of Facebook.

We used a mix of methods to test our two main hypotheses. Our data include repeated interviews with participants as well as ethnographic accounts of four anti-pass protests in which we participated. To document online activities, we used a longitudinal study of a sample of personal Facebook pages. Finally, we conducted a systematic review of the local newspapers Le Parisien and Var-Matin to build a dataset covering the wave of anti-pass protests from July 2021 to February 2022.

A mobilization from below

On July 14, 2021, the first protests broke out in many French cities. Toulon, the capital of the Var département, saw unusually large demonstrations, making it the second most mobilized city in the country after Paris, according to Var-Matin and Le Monde. If the level of mobilization in Paris is not surprising, its strength in the south is more remarkable, due to a number of historical and sociological factors (Fillieule et al. 2022).

In order to capture the dynamics of the anti-pass mobilizations, we used two competing sources. The first is the Ministry of the Interior's attendance figures, as reported in the local press, based on police counts. As a point of comparison, we used the figures from the Nombre Jaune (Yellow Number), a collective of activists born within the YV movement. To produce the figures for Var, we aggregated the participation in the demonstrations documented in Toulon, Fréjus, Draguignan and St-Raphael, the main cities of mobilization in the département. The gaps in the graph represent cases where no demonstrations were reported, either by the local media or by the yellow number.

The figures show a rapid increase in participation over a very short period of less than a month, peaking around mid-August and then declining just as quickly, so that by mid-September the movement was in the low thousands. In Var, for

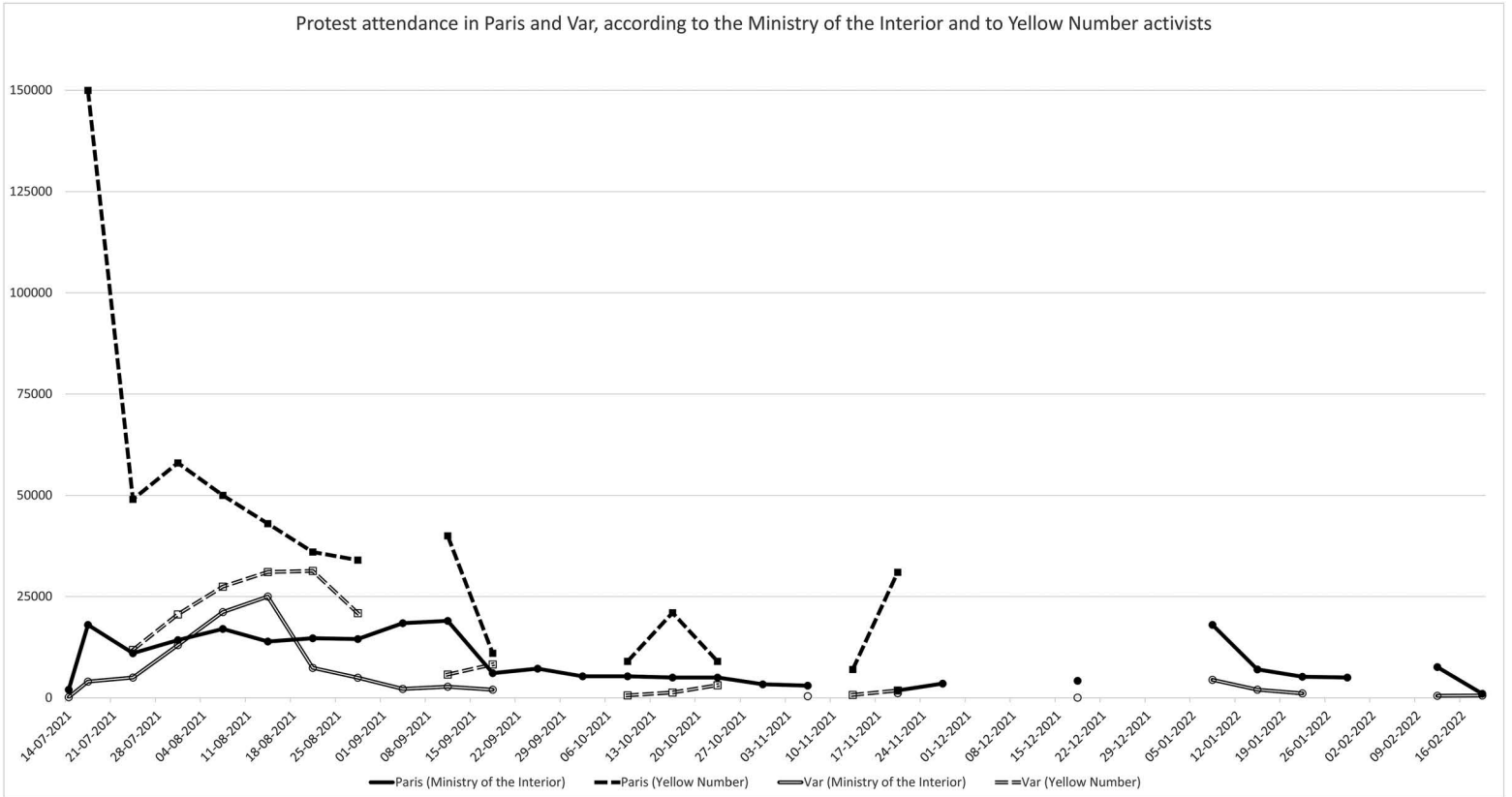

Figure 4.1 Protest attendance in anti-pass demonstrations in Paris region and Var between July 2021 and February 2022. Figure by the chapter's authors.

example, the number of participants rose dramatically to 4,000 on July 17, 13,000 on July 31, 21,160 on August 7, and 25,000 on August 14. Note the difference in scale between the two regions, which testifies to the exceptionally high number of demonstrators in Var. It reached a higher level compared to Paris, despite the massive difference in population density. While the introduction of the vaccination card pass to replace the health pass in January 2022 fueled a resurgence in mobilization, the demonstrations came to a complete end with the abolition of the vaccination card in March 2022. The ephemeral and volatile nature of the protests is our first clue to identifying the anti-pass movement as a moral panic (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 42).

A grassroots movement

Who are the people taking to the streets? We argue that the demonstrations against the health pass are "more or less spontaneous outbursts of fear and concern on the part of large numbers of people" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 55), typical of the grassroots model of moral panics.

First, they are supported by a large number of people across the socio-economic scale. A survey conducted in July 2021 (Ifop 2021a) on a representative sample of the population showed that of the 35% of respondents who declared their support for the movement, 25% belonged to higher management, 35% to middle-class professions, and 46% to working class groups. The movement received more support from entrepreneurs (61%) and tradesmen and shopkeepers (50%) than from white-collar workers (41%) or the unemployed (44%). Despite this heterogeneity, the movement appealed more to the poorest sections of the population: it was supported by 21% of those with high incomes and 44% of the poorest.

Politically, the movement was very divided, with the political ideology of its supporters ranging from the radical left to the far right, and many refusing to position themselves on the political axis. Among the different party positions expressed by respondents, all were below a third of support for the movement, except for France Insoumise (radical left) (57%), the National Rally (far right) (49%), and those who declared no party sympathies (42%).

Third, many demonstrators were newcomers to politics and very few of them belonged to a political party. A study (Pion and Wenckowski 2021) based on individual interviews (n=349) in two anti-pass protests found that a third of demonstrators were taking part in a protest for the first time in their lives. On the other hand, anti-pass protesters had a significantly higher turnout than the average, regardless of age group. The protests thus seemed to attract a civic-minded crowd rather than the individualistic, reckless, and irrational people portrayed by many analysts.

The results of these studies show that support for the movement did not come from a well-defined social base, suggesting that the mobilization was not focused on categorical interests, but rather arose from a widespread sense of outrage. The ethnographic observations we made during the marches in Toulon and in Paris, as well as local press reports, all point in the same direction.

The health pass as a threat to citizens' rights

Moral panics arise from claims made by sectors of society in an attempt to establish moral boundaries between "us", the good and respectable people, and "them", the "folk devils" who supposedly threaten the values and well-being of society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009: 31). It is then necessary to focus on the claims made by the movement and its ability to mobilize a plurality of individuals by politicizing widespread anxieties about real or imagined threats.

A poll conducted in August 2021 (Ifop 2021b) confirmed the moral reading of the health pass policy. Among those who supported the protests, 56% opposed the health pass for "moral" reasons, compared to only 12% for "political" reasons. Among those who declared the highest level of support for the movement, 22% said they had already been vaccinated against COVID-19, while 48% supported "vaccination but not the health pass". Conversely, of those who said they were in favor of the vaccination campaign, 38% supported the movement against the policy. These figures suggest a possible disconnect between support for vaccination and support for the introduction of the health pass. Jeremy Ward and Patrick Peretti-Watel have stressed the importance of distinguishing between opposition to the general principle of vaccination, which is quite rare, and distrust of specific controversial vaccines, which is much more common among the general public. In doing so, they argue for a departure from the dominant approach of Public Understanding of Science (Bauer 2012), which tends to reduce the explanation of unorthodox public attitudes to "disturbances in the optimal exercise of reason" (Ward and Peretti-Watel 2020: 263). The survey data presented here support this assertion, showing that mistrust of the COVID-19 vaccine is widespread in the French population beyond the movement's supporters, while also indicating that a significant number of anti-pass supporters have been vaccinated, suggesting that the movement cannot simply be described as "anti-vaxxer".

If the demands of the opponents of the health pass were diverse, they all had in common the use of moral principles to expose threats to the fundamental values of society and to identify victims and perpetrators. The demonstrators saw themselves as opposing a villain: the French government, personified by the figure of President Macron. Indeed, during our observations at various demonstrations in Paris and Toulon, the dominant symbols referred to various forms of resistance to a highly centralized government rooted in an authoritarian past. Many of the French flags displayed bore symbols of the Second World War Resistance. Protesters also displayed regional flags. What these symbols have in common is their consensual nature and their reference to various forms of popular resistance to centralized authoritarian power. Most of the slogans were directed against Macron himself. Through songs, mottos, the waving of the tricolor and the national anthem, the demonstrators called for his impoverishment, his resignation or his imprisonment. People chanted "Macron, assassin!" and "Macron, we don't want your pass!" These slogans echoed two specific sets of demands.

The first demand focused on fears that the health pass would promote a kind of caste society. On August 28, demonstrators in Toulon chanted "No to discrimination,

save our republic". One sign, referring to apartheid, said that the health pass would break the equality of all citizens before the law and lead to a system of institutionalized segregation. Other signs highlighted the willingness of politicians to stigmatize citizens who "ask questions" and do not follow orders like "sheep", referring to the need to "wake up" and "resist". Several other claims compared the COVID-19 restrictions to Nazi-era policies, such as the pun on the health pass (pass sanitaire) as a "pass nazitaire".

The second claim revolved around a legalistic tone. At the July 31 demonstration in Paris, many signs used established legal terms such as "crimes against humanity", "right of resistance", "treason", and "right to self-determination". During the demonstrations, speeches by organizers referred to the Constitution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and broader notions of fundamental rights. In one speech, a man extensively read aloud articles from the Civil Code related to the right to control over one's body. In Toulon, a sign read: "A dose of vaccine injected without my consent is rape".

In line with this legalistic terminology, the health pass was associated with the violation of civil liberties such as freedom of belief, freedom of movement, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. In the survey of August 2021 (Ifop 2021b), 89% of those who supported the anti-pass protests saw the policy as "an infringement of freedom" and 82% thought, "France is becoming a dictatorship". People chanted "Liberty! Freedom!" and many slogans referred to the violation of fundamental freedoms. In Toulon, on August 28, various signs were observed that read: "Health pass, a violation of our freedoms"; "Down with tyranny". These violations of "natural rights" were linked to a particular form of political power: dictatorship. The introduction of the health pass was seen as unilateral decision-making without proper consultation of citizen. In Toulon, various slogans referred to this theme: "Presenting a QR code is an act of submission to the health dictatorship" and "From democracy to dictatorship there is only one PaSS", again referring to the Nazi regime. The health pass has also been compared to the social credit system, drawing parallels between France and China, with both policies presented as equivalent technologies for monitoring the population.

The fears raised during the anti-pass protests are not new. They reflect latent fears in the general public, starting with various health scandals from the country's past, such as the contaminated blood scandal from the 1990s.[2] This is not only indicative of the level of concern expressed in the protests, but also lends credence to the moral panic explanation and its "folk devil" element, where the perceived threat is diabolized to the extreme.

An unstructured and loosely organized mobilization

The final dimension that allows us to consider the anti-pass mobilizations as the result of a moral panic at grassroots level is their mode of organization. The protests were characterized by their unstructured and loosely organized nature. In Paris, several separate demonstrations competed with each other on each day of mobilization. In Toulon, each protest was the result of calls from several groups or

individuals claiming authorship of the organization. This lack of unity seemed to increase over time.

According to our systematic review of Le Parisien and Var-Matin, 30 protests were recorded in Paris between July 2021 and February 2022. In the first event, two separate demonstrations merged halfway through. In the following two weeks, three events with two or three demonstrations each were recorded, but they did not merge. From August 7, there were four separate marches on each day of mobilization, a configuration that remained stable until the end of the wave of protests in early 2022. During the same period, 48 protests were registered in Var and 22 in Toulon. The first demonstration was the result of an appeal on Facebook by a local YV figure calling for a civic awakening. The following weekend, several small groups (a far-right fringe party, citizens' collectives, anti-vaccination collectives, COVID-19 sceptic collectives and a collective of parents' associations) joined the demonstration and launched separate calls on Facebook. This resulted in sparse marches and different routes. Moreover, at the main meeting point, each group occupied a separate corner of the square and organized its own speeches and events, demonstrating the weak cooperation between the demonstrators.

These loosely coordinated practices allowed the movement to quickly attract large numbers of protesters who had not previously belonged to any protest organization. However, they also led to interpersonal conflicts and factionalism within the protests. In Toulon, for example, YV clashed with members of a far-right group over the routes and destinations of the demonstrations, who would lead the way and who would be allowed to make public speeches during the events.

The Yellow Vest movement as a mobilizing structure

As Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009: 69) suggest, the emergence of mobilization cannot be attributed solely to the latent fears of ordinary individuals. Indeed, the link between rumor spreading, emotional stimulation, and mobilization typically depends on the presence of moral entrepreneurs who seek to influence and persuade society to develop or enforce rules that are consistent with their own moral beliefs. In the anti-pass protests, various actors initiated a libertarian campaign against the imposition of a "Corona diktatur". Some demonstrations featured guest stars from COVID-19 sceptic advocacy groups such as RéinfoCovid.[3] Other demonstrations were organized by far-right fringe parties such as Les Patriotes or the smaller Comité de Salut Public (CSP). Despite their efforts, these groups were hampered by a lack of organization and resources. Therefore, their efforts alone cannot fully explain the emergence of the anti-pass mobilizations. To understand the rise of these movements, it is crucial to take into account another underlying structure: the YV movement.

The role played by the YVs in the anti-pass protests can be explained first of all by the strong objective affinities between the two movements, starting with the social and professional positions common to both. Despite their different socio-economic positions, a large number of YV, especially women, were employed in the health and social sectors as unskilled workers in personal services such as home

help, childcare, housekeeping and, more generally, as workers in bars, restaurants, and other entertainment establishments (Fillieule et al. 2022). As a result, many YVs were directly affected by the vaccination mandate, with some refusing to be vaccinated and subsequently losing their jobs. Moreover, they experienced the same contempt from the elites and the mainstream media as the anti-Health Pass protests, which made it easier for them to identify with this new movement. Most importantly, the YV mobilizations also emerged from calls on social media, rejected any form of leadership or support from political parties, and were joined by politically inexperienced people willing to occupy public spaces every weekend.

Beyond objective affinities, the YV movement maintained more subjective affinities with the anti-pass protests, the latter allowing for the connection of framings developed within the YV movement and even their amplification or extension to other causes. Indeed, the YV interpreted the COVID-19 crisis as another sign of a recurring pattern in which ordinary people faced arbitrary and seemingly senseless repression while the elite enjoyed impunity. But at a moment of diminishing momentum, and in a desire to keep the movement alive, the COVID-19 crisis also led the YV to intensify the expression of their dissent, and to increasingly draw on fringe and radical discourses, as they began to compare the government not just to a servant of the rich, but to an outright Nazi regime, or even to a secret cabal of vampires. In this way, their discourse was clearly in line with the particular forms of moral panic: demonization and disproportion. In the following pages, we turn to the various ways in which the YV movement provided more concrete and material support to the anti-pass movement.

The Yellow Vest movement: an effective mobilization model for the anti-pass uprising

From the beginning of the anti-pass protests, many YVs joined the demonstrations, seeing the situation as a unique opportunity to continue the struggle by other means. As Fabrice, a YV protester in Var, told us in an interview: "We were waiting for a moment like this: a crowd that wakes up and becomes aware of the problems with the government". The anti-pass demonstrations also aroused the interest of people who had previously been involved in the YV movement but had gradually disengaged as COVID-19 became the main focus of the roundabouts in a context of decline. These individuals perceived the anti-pass mobilizations as more in line with the social grievances and demands for equality that were central to the YV movement. Consequently, their return to activism, along with the strong participation of other YVs, played an important role in shaping the demands of the movement.

First, in the face of a variety of claims and concerns, the YV attempted to link claims about vaccination mandates and civil liberties to the broader themes of the YV movement. One example is how they framed the "civil liberties claims" to suggest that the government's COVID-19 measures were being used to stifle social protest and produce docile and deferential citizens who are seen as trusting the government, experts, and elites to always do what is best for the common good.

This was illustrated in the demonstrations, where face masks were likened to a "muzzle". The health pass was also seen as an opportunity to highlight another essential aspect of the YV movement's demands, namely for greater justice, consideration, and protection from the government-corrupted "elites". This sense of injustice and mistrust had been deeply rooted since the beginning of the YV movement and was applied to the health pass in order to broaden the concerns and appeal to a wider range of people.

Second, faced with a diverse crowd of mostly first-time protesters, YV mobilized their expertise in activism to promote their preferred modes of action. During an interview, YV first obtained protest permits in the name of one of their members and then disseminated information through YV Facebook groups. They benefited from a robust pre-existing social media network, which facilitated the rapid spread of information. They were also able to replicate the cycle of mobilization adopted by their previous movement by organizing weekly demonstrations in the form of protest "acts".

Third, they adopted the YV repertoire of actions. In an interview, Fabrice stressed the importance of breaking out of the routine of organized and ritualized marches in order to make the mobilizations more visible and effective, drawing on his previous experience with the YV movement. In Toulon, for example, they blocked the entrance to the A50 motorway and carried out several "free toll" actions. When the momentum began to wane at the end of August, they increased their presence by vandalizing equipment and setting fire to containers during the demonstrations. They also occupied the Toulon hospital and targeted the headquarters of the Var-Matin newspaper, complaining of its lack of impartiality.

During its period of abeyance (Taylor 1989), the YV movement acted as a home base for the YV and as a mobilizing structure for many newcomers to the anti-pass protests, providing social media information networks, with some YV groups even rebranding themselves as anti-pass groups on Facebook (Dafflon 2022; Fillieule and Dafflon 2022). Fabrice confirmed in an interview that he had met many new faces at the demonstrations, who ended up spontaneously joining his YV group. He suggested that the COVID-19 crisis had allowed individuals to become more aware of the achievements of the YV and had profoundly changed their opinions about the movement. This is the case of René. He initially attended the first demonstrations in Toulon alone, but quickly sympathized with the YV. When we met him in April 2022 at an active roundabout in Var, he explained that he had not joined the YV earlier because he did not see the point. But the COVID-19 crisis changed his perspective. He felt deceived by the government and trapped by arbitrary and dangerous decisions that he felt threatened fundamental freedoms. René spent a lot of time on social media looking for alternative information and came across YouTube videos disputing the danger of the virus, the death toll and the effectiveness of the lockdown. He then turned to websites such as RéinfoCovid in the hope of gaining technical knowledge about the pandemic. When the vaccination campaign began in 2021, his online activity intensified. Although he was not against vaccines, he was against "this vaccine" and shared his doubts in Facebook groups of "citizens" dedicated to challenging sanitary measures. He met online with some of the YVs

who were part of these groups. When he took to the streets in July 2021, René experienced a sense of comfort when he joined the YV, feeling that he had found his community. After being invited by regular participants, René joined them in the roundabouts, where he sympathized with other YVs, exchanged information over convivial meals and reinforced his opinions on government policies. As a regular attendee of the meetings, he became involved in causes that went beyond COVID-19-related issues, such as initiatives for constitutional reform or mobilizations against the rising cost of living. In a later meeting with him in May 2022, René identified himself as a YV and expressed his support for a "citizens' list" formed by current and former YVs to run in the upcoming parliamentary elections. René is one of the people who recognized the importance of being part of organized groups during the anti-pass protests. This phenomenon led to the emergence of latent structures in the organization of anger, which gradually shifted the moral panic from the grassroots to the meso level.

Grassroots agitation, facilitated by the widespread use of Facebook

Finally, the YV movement supported the anti-pass movement through the online spaces it left behind. YV Facebook groups were a very effective way of spreading the anti-pass discourse and re-mobilizing former activists into the new wave of protest. We observed that most people who join groups on the social network tend never to leave. Once they are no longer interested in a particular issue, they stop posting in the group, but very few make the effort to actually remove themselves from it. As a result, the messages posted in the group denouncing the management of the pandemic were able to reach YVs who had been demobilized for a long time.

Research has shown that Facebook can provide an alternative form of organization and a sense of shared identity for social movements such as the YVs that lack formal, centralized protest groups (Morselli et al. 2023). We argue that this particular form is highly conducive to the emergence of moral panic. First, social media platforms provide a favorable environment for movements that rely on personalized expressions of social problems based on individual experiences and perceptions. This allows for the expression of negative emotions such as outrage, anger, and hostility, which in turn tend to generate more engaging content and are thus favored by Facebook's sorting algorithms. Second, Pasquier's ethnography of French working-class Facebook users (2018) shows that users tend to share memes and jokes that express consensual opinions, thereby strengthening the bonds of their social group through the reinforcement of a shared moral common ground, often relying on appeals to common sense. Third, research has shown that while Facebook can efficiently reach a large number of individuals, it generally fails to create sustained long-term engagement with social movements (Tüfekçi 2017). As a result, it is well suited to ephemeral movements and short-lived outbursts of indignation. These three characteristics arguably make Facebook the ideal place for a moral panic to emerge, as it provides a suitable environment for the various elements that Goode and Ben-Yehuda argue make it up: the expression of

disproportionate concern and hostility, a high degree of consensus, and volatility (2009: 37–43).

This online moral panic was fueled by protesters who set themselves up as moral entrepreneurs, producing their own media to counter what they perceived as biased mainstream news. To understand this process, we conducted a longitudinal study of a sample of personal Facebook pages that spread anti-pass discourse in the groups studied. Here we present an in-depth look at the profile of one of our main respondents during the height of the protests. Antonio is a 54-year-old quality control engineer in an industrial factory. He was a very active protester both online and offline during the YV movement and the anti-pass protests. He was one of the main providers of online content in the YV group we studied in Paris. In 2018, he joined the YV in the context of financial difficulties and the loss of his job. This episode triggered a long-lasting sense of indignation in him, which set in motion his enduring commitment to the YV movement and the subsequent anti-pass protests. During interviews, Antonio would sometimes choke up and shed tears of anger when describing the living conditions of the working class or the discrimination faced by the unvaccinated. He saw himself as acutely sensitive to injustice and harbored intense resentment toward the ruling class, but also toward individuals who claimed to represent the interests of the people, especially left-wing politicians and trade union leaders. Since the founding of the YV movement, he has been a consistent participant in protests, attending at least once a month. During the COVID-19 outbreak, he became very skeptical and suspected government manipulation. He believed that the lockdowns were used to suppress protests rather than to protect the public. He thought the danger of the disease was being exaggerated to create fear and motivate people to get vaccinated. He saw the vaccination campaign as a large-scale experiment in "social engineering", aimed at conditioning the population to comply with major violations of their rights. Although he did not necessarily believe that the vaccine itself was dangerous, he deplored the acquiescence of the "sheep" who accepted it.

Antonio ran his own Facebook page with a following of around 3,000 people. He often livestreamed himself, speaking into his mobile phone, whether in his car, at home, or in the middle of a protest. On occasion, he sought out pro-vaccination public figures, such as journalists or politicians, and confronted them while streaming the encounter. He also shared numerous memes from a variety of Facebook groups, including those associated with the YV movement and those supporting vaccine sceptic public figures. He also directly shared content from his fellow activists, including his wife, who was also active in promoting anti-pass discourse.

The memes he posted in July and August 2021, which marked the peak of the mobilization period, served two purposes: informing – that is, arguments claiming scientific or factual legitimacy that supposedly countered the official discourse on the pandemic – and/or shaming public officials and people who followed COVID-19 protocols. Public shaming was often based on a consensual theme: the defense of children. As Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009: 30) point out, a moral panic requires "a particularly vulnerable segment of the population" to be portrayed as the victim. "Children make eminently suitable victims," they add. In one post, Antonio shared

a TV report of young women claiming that the vaccine had disrupted their menstrual cycles. He captioned it: "And now they want to vaccinate children! Your job is to protect your families! Shame on you!". In another, he shared a photo taken at an anti-pass protest in Paris of a woman holding a sign that read: "For a meal in a restaurant, you sold our children to the laboratories! Which one of us is selfish?"

The striking fact here is that, contrary to the common perception of conspiratorial environments, there is no clear division between manipulative strategists or conspiracy entrepreneurs who deceive the masses, and passive and gullible recipients who are indoctrinated. Instead, it is a dynamic environment of active recipients who select and mix messages, often adding their own commentary. This example prompts us to reconsider the sharp boundary between producers and recipients, drawing on previous research on health protest movements, such as patient movements, which challenge expert knowledge by drawing on their own experience (Brown et al., 2004).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have drawn from the toolbox of the sociology of moral panics, as theorized by Goode and Ben-Yehuda, to conduct an analysis of the claims and worldviews of participants in the anti-pass mobilization, as well as their links to the YV movement. We uncovered an underlying phenomenon that provides a more nuanced explanation for the scale of the protests and the diversity of those involved. The broad participation of diverse and often not deeply ideologically committed individuals in these protests is made possible by the consensual and fundamental nature of the values and fears being mobilized. Resistance to perceived attacks on civil liberties, bodily autonomy and the health of the most vulnerable, especially children, is a naturalized and conventional stance. By mobilizing around these concerns, the anti-pass protesters have managed to unite large sections of the population without demonstrating any specific ideological stance. Another feature of this wave of protests is the frequent reference to the sometimes-traumatic memory of the authoritarian management of social movements in France since 2018, as well as to previous violations of fundamental rights and health scandals involving public authorities in the more distant past.

Our study also contributes to the current debate about the value of a moral panic approach to the study of a certain type of contemporary movement, usually described as "street-level", "leaderless," and "multicentric". In fact, contrary to what some researchers (e.g. Ungar 2001) argue, the moral panic toolbox seems well suited to the study of movements aroused by new kinds of anxieties about biopolitical issues, such as health scares, that are characteristic of risk societies. Here we agree with Hier's (2008) observation that the emergence of a risk society is likely to generate more rather than fewer moral panics.

Our research also supports the idea that the morality of highly differentiated societies is constantly contested and negotiated. Moral consensus is not a given in such societies, and moral panics can be generated by different competing moral entrepreneurs in different social arenas. Similarly, we have argued that audiences

do not simply believe and act on the messages they receive from the media. The active role of an inherently heterogeneous public, both as media audiences and as active participants in protest movements, needs to be placed at the center of analysis (Cornwell and Linders 2002; McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

Notes

1 Let us be clear from the outset that our aim is not to characterize the anti-pass movement as a moral panic per se, but rather to use the tools provided by this tradition to analyze it. Moreover, the notion of panic is used here in a metaphorical sense.
2 In the 1990s, the distribution of contaminated blood products to mainly hemophiliac patients in France resulted in thousands becoming infected with HIV and hepatitis C, leading to hundreds of deaths. This scandal sparked public outrage and legal action against government officials and pharmaceutical companies.
3 RéinfoCovid is an anti-masking and anti-vaccination collective created in the autumn of 2020. Its main animators are linked to the ultra-traditionalist Catholic movement of the far right and have links with the American alt-right.

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5 Moral panics and health-related misinformation

When the audience becomes co-producer

Anita Lavorgna and Ester Massa

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, being a time of pervasive crisis and insecurity, has raised important societal reactions, which could be interpreted through the moral panic lens. Indeed, this approach has the merit of allowing us to see collective responses and people's perceptions, which – beyond 'science' – are pivotal in public health decisions, whose socio-political and emotional dimensions can lead to major medical consequences (Gilman 2010). The moral panic approach has been already applied to show, for instance, how the media coverage of the pandemic had a role in promoting stigma and blaming, at the point of hindering effective interventions (Silva 2020), or to analyse the use of political and cultural prisms by journalists in media framing, leading to the harmful 'othering' of certain social groups (DeVore et al. 2021), similarly to what was observed in previous health crises (e.g., Muzzatti 2005) and to what was found in ideology-driven political communication (Prasad 2020; Lucchesi 2021). Some 'others', in other words, were made into recognisable symbols and defined as threats to social norms, raising public concerns and garnering hostile and volatile public support against such threats (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; Cohen 2011). After all, to borrow Gilman (2010)'s words, 'it is easier to generate panic than to disseminate real information' (p. 1866).

In the context of the pandemic there have been contested narratives, often depending on different political views or social sensitivities, and opposing for instance those not complying with preventive measures or opposing public health interventions (generally depicted as the 'folk devils' in traditional media) to those promoting them (Lavorgna 2021; Capurro et al. 2022; Skog and Lundström 2022). Especially is cyberspace, however, previous research has noted how a number of social media groups and networks have been actively creating, propagating, and supporting health-related misinformation (here broadly defined as information created or distributed as true, but that is in fact in disregard of scientific standards of modern medicine, or of scientific consensus) by relying on oppositive narrative frames accusing a range of different, reverse 'folk devils' (in this case, e.g., researchers, doctors, politicians) of criminal and deviant acts (Lavorgna 2021; Lavorgna and Myles 2021). This turnabout has important implications for the hold of the concept of moral panic, as it questions the societal consensus that is

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(yet implicitly) at its basis, and evidences the emergence of new moral entrepreneurs, whose voice is enabled and amplified online.

This contribution furthers this line of inquiry, discussing how the notion of moral panic is challenged in the digital context, where the relationships between the moral entrepreneurs and the folk devils can become much more complex and fluid as digital affordances create shifts in the distribution of mediatic power. By relying on a digital passive ethnography carried out on Italian-speaking digital fields, we discuss how the notion of moral panic can still be useful as a critical tool and organising framework, confirming its continuing practical and heuristic value once we widen and tighten the focus of analysis, redefining moral panics' traditional parameters in light of the increasingly complex and contradictory nature of powers in society.

Moral panics and shifting dynamics in the digital field

As explained eloquently by Young (2009), moral panic is a product of its time, the late 1960s, and of the huge social and cultural changes that characterised those years, both in the community and in the evolution of the sociology of deviance. Socially, the various events characterising the late 1960s and the start of the 1970s – e.g., the birth of the hippy culture and the development of countercultures, the free speech and equality movement, the anti-war movement and the second wave of feminism, together with the rising of a properly developed concept of youth and youth culture – originated a proper rise of indignation and outrage from that part of society that was strongly opposed to changing the status quo, led and inspired by those influential figures (the 'moral entrepreneurs', see Becker 1963). This indignation, as famously described by Cohen (1973), could be easily picked up, transformed, and amplified by the work of media outlets.

These elements concur to define the classic definition of moral panic, based on the assumption of a common moral background characterising the whole of society, an element that almost immediately has been pointed out as a limitation of this approach. Many scholars, in fact, were highlighting how the modern world is more and more diversified, allowing for a pluralist society where different groups follow their own values and moral codes, making the traditional definition of moral panic not up to date (e.g., Drotner 1992; Ungar 2001; Jewkes 2015; Horsley 2017). This diversification is reflected also in the increasing diversification of media outlets in many western societies (e.g., Nerone and Barnhurst 2001; Rössler 2007). The once (relatively) unique and united voice of the powerful elites became more and more fragmented due to the multiplications of channels targeted and dedicated to specific sectors of the population (McRobbie and Thornton 1995).

While the effects on moral panics of the diversification of conventional media space were at the core of earlier sociological analyses, only in recent years academic scholarship started to pay more attention to how sociotechnical transformation, and, first and foremost, the use of social media platforms, has had a transformative impact on moral panics (Hier 2019; Falkof 2020; Walsh 2020). This is relatively surprising, as media – all types of media – are at the very basis of moral

panics (e.g., Critcher 2003). The advent and popularisation of social media has revolutionised the media landscape in many aspects, ranging from how information is sought after (Bergström and Jervelycke Belfrage 2018; Pearson 2021) to the transformation of (some of) the audience into a co-producer, 'prosumer' (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010) or 'produser' (Bruns 2008) of content, decoding and encoding information.

In this digital arena, through new and enhanced sociotechnical possibilities, different voices are now heard (Critcher 2017; Walsh 2020; Ugwudike and Fleming 2021), operating in a space where they can (try to) create a different type of power, dislocated from its traditional sites, and linked to a new type of mediatic and digital capital, enabling them to become moral entrepreneurs. As already discussed in Lavorgna and colleagues (2022), these digitally enabled developments transcend Foucauldian accounts of the power dynamics of knowledge production, such as the ability of the powerful to produce or shape the prevailing 'regime of truth' (Foucault 1980). Online, the power to do so no longer resides solely in traditionally powerful elites and institutions. As such, it is important to recognise how the relationship between social media platforms and moral panic is multi-layered and complex, as these platforms can respectively be targets, facilitators, and even instruments of moral panics (Walsh 2020), for instance promoting communications and at times deliberately sensationalised contents in light of their predicted popularity, or otherwise informing manufactured uncertainty (e.g., Yardi and boyd 2010; Prasad 2020; Walsh 2020). These sociotechnical possibilities derive from the 'architecture of amplification' of social media's networked and digital configuration as discussed by Walsh (2020), but – as we will see – are also linked to the actions and reactions of ordinary citizens utilising social media sites to influence the representation of important social issues, often developing counter-narratives and oppositional discourses (e.g., Dahlberg 2011; Gallagher et al. 2018; Lavorgna 2021). A major consequence of these dynamics is that moral panics are now more blurred and can be part of competing narratives (le Grand 2016; Walsh 2020).

Our study

In digital spaces, competing narratives are very common in a broad range of polarised debates, many of which are somehow linked to the general themes of health and wellbeing (e.g., Johnson et al. 2020; Lavorgna and Carr 2021; Righetti 2021). As such, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not surprising to observe, in the digital field as in the physical one, heated debates on issues including health risks related to the virus, the use of masks, or vaccinations.

As part of a wider research agenda on the social harms linked to medical misinformation, data informing some preliminary reflections developed in this contribution were initially gathered in digital Italian-speaking fields trough an interpretative, qualitative approach based on a digital ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008; Blevins and Holt 2009) throughout 2020, in the unfolding of the 'first' and 'second' waves of COVID-19 in Italy (and in many other countries), the lockdowns, and the attempts to return to 'normal' pushed mainly by economic

considerations, while witnessing the resurgence of several new hotspots, and new closures (for a detailed discussion, see Lavorgna 2021: 17ff). Also in Italy, the first European country hit by the virus and where several restrictive measures were put in place starting from March 2020, there have been harsh debates in the offline political, mediatic, and even scientific arenas (Pattuglia 2020; Merzagora 2021), which reverberated online, making digital networks a very fertile source of social data. This 2020 ethnography was then complemented, by both the authors of the study here presented, with new digital ethnographic data collected in the first half of 2022, a time where new waves, led by emerging COVID-19 variants, drove large spikes across the world, but many restrictions were eased in Italy as a consequence of the overall relatively improved public health situation.

In brief, we started by observing 10 (in total) predetermined open pages and groups on Facebook (ranging from about 2,000 to almost 200,000 members or followers, with a good level of group interaction), pivoting around alternative health, alternative lifestyle, or more broadly counterinformation. In all these digital fields, people could easily post and comment news and opinions, thus becoming co-producers of relevant content (Fuchs et al. 2010).

Although the above-mentioned fields were our starting point, we also analysed the content of textual material (e.g., blogs, newspaper articles) and visual material (e.g., pictures, videos) referred to in our initial pages up to one additional click (which often led us, for instance, to other open Facebook pages, YouTube pages, or other websites). Consistently with the previous ethnographic work (Lavorgna 2021; Lavorgna and Myles 2021), our practical strategy was guided by the need to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of the participants in the online communities observed in our study, while ensuring respect for existing guidelines for online research on social media and the policies of the platform accessed (e.g., Zimmer and Kinder-Kurlanda 2017; Social Data Science Lab 2019). For instance, as regards concerns related to users' anonymity, the reader will not find personal identifiers, or the full name of the groups and pages observed. When using quotes, we slightly changed them in the translation to make them not directly identifiable (in line with Williams et al. 2017). Also, to minimise the ethical risks (e.g., storage of identifying or sensitive information that is not needed for the scope of this research), we collected our data (here defined as all material publicly available, such as words, images/memes, and videos) manually and/or through research notes. The research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Southampton (ERGO2 55870 and 55870.A1).

While the focus of the earlier studies was respectively to observe the unfolding of online narratives and behavioural intentions of criminological and psychological interest as linked to potentially harmful science denial (Lavorgna and Myles 2021), and to investigate social learning and sociocultural processes enabling and sustaining the propagation of potentially harmful (mis)information (Lavorgna 2021), in this new contribution the aim is to evidence how traditionally less-powerful actors can become moral entrepreneurs in the digital field, creating '*moral panics in reverse*' (i.e., disproportionally underreacting to objective threats, see Hier 2021) or even '*inverse moral panics*' through the identification of different folk devils. Of

course, actions stemming from power shifts can be, or be interpreted, as acts of empowerment and resistance, and lead to positive outcomes. By using the example of health-related misinformation, however, we are focusing on a case in which, on the contrary, a new class of digital moral entrepreneurs is creating, yet involuntarily, serious social harms by providing misinformation that may cause financial, physical, and psychological/emotional harms to the primary victims, as well as public health problems, and loss of confidence in the professional scientific and medical norms (Lavorgna 2021). These new digital moral entrepreneurs, as we will see, are the initiators and active participants of (self-identifying) alternative lifestyle and counterinformation online communities that, in the context of the pandemic, have proactively used social media to promote non-science-based health-related misinformation and conspiratorial ideas.

Moral panic in reverse: COVID-19 denialism and minimisation

If we look at the groups observed from a moral panic perspective, in line with Hier's (2021) notion of moral panics in reverse, we could observe a number of posts and discussions disproportionally underreacting to what were indeed objective (health) threats, leading to practical implications ranging from severe vaccine hesitancy to ignoring public health indications (regarding, for instance, encouragement to attend large gatherings without masks during some risky stages of the pandemic).

In this context, the themes observed all refer to different forms of COVID-19 denialism or gross minimisation. Some were linked to fully fledged conspiracy theories (e.g., the pandemic would be linked to a '*big reset project*' meant to change our social habits; a '*criminal project by the New World Order*'; '*a fake pandemic, with a fake war [Ukraine], led by our complicit governments*'). Some too dangerous 'alternative medicine' schools of thought (e.g., the posts and comments denying any existence of COVID-19, but also of other diseases discussed in the groups, such as monkeypox or even cancer, which would only be a manifestation of '*a special physiology*'; viruses would be nothing else than *a superstition*', and virology '*a fraud*'; '*Hamerians are right!*').

Other less extreme views were rather linked to a general disbelief towards institutionalised forms of knowledge and governance (hence, the formal statistics are '*false*'; '*it is all a lie*', '*it's just a flu*'), or to the belief that public health rules to contrast the effects and the diffusion of the virus were ineffective and pointless. From this perspective, there was a common belief that if the general medical practitioners (in Italy named 'family doctors') were left free to do their job as usual, they would have faced the pandemic easily and with better results (*If they had left the family doctors treating the sick with the existing low-cost medicines, we wouldn't have had all those deaths, but they wanted to sell the vaccines*). There were also reported fears related to the potential suspension of the right to self-determination, with the rules applied to prevent the contagion (e.g., vaccinations, the use of masks, curfews, COVID-19 certificates) becoming a way to impose public health over the individual right to decide over one's own body, and to move freely. The supporters

of this thesis are also particularly scared of the side-effects of the vaccines, which they cannot escape because the government indirectly imposed their inoculation (*It is true that all drugs have side-effects, but no one takes away my job, my dignity and my freedom in order to make me swallow an Aspirin*).

In this context, moral entrepreneurs are those who have been categorised as providers (those actively involved in offering misinformation, e.g., non-science-based health approaches) or supporters/propagators (those who proactively support one or more providers, becoming an important source of misinformation) in the typology offered in Lavorgna (2021). More specifically, if we look at their social status, moral entrepreneurs mostly are professionals ('independent' doctors or researchers, lawyers, or judges), ordinary citizens whose role/expertise is not linked to a professional identity, or promoters with a political ambition or willing to be part of the political debate.

Information is constantly reinforced within the group through social learning mechanisms (Akers 2009; Lavorgna 2021) among the moral entrepreneurs themselves and towards the receivers/utilisers present in the social media community (i.e., those who belong to a certain online group but mainly as bystanders or participate in a very limited role – see Lavorgna 2021). However, rather than the 'filter bubbles' (e.g., Pariser 2011) and 'information silos' (e.g., Jowore and Turpin 2022) referred to also by Walsh (2020), it is worth noting that the groups observed were relatively porous and permeable, with users bringing (mis)information in (especially information on different topics but with narratives compatible with those prevalent in the group) and out (hence further spreading misinformation) (in line with Jones-Jang and Chung 2022).

Through denialism and minimisation, the moral entrepreneurs offer a safe venue ('*an ark to escape disinformation flooding*' – the reader can note how the signifier is used with a reverse signified if compared with science-based approaches). While other means of information are accused of pursuing a '*strategy of terror*', creating COVID-19 waves by instigating panic and fear, the new moral entrepreneurs claim to divulge '*healthy information*', even when they negate the role that the diffusion of COVID-19 vaccines had on managing and deflating the danger of the pandemic, instead reversing the logic by affirming that non vaccinated people are the healthy ones that are passing through the pandemic without infecting others (while vaccinated people are those getting ill and spreading the virus around). Consider, for instance, the following snippet:

> *My friends, you need to wake up […] The ones not vaccinated are feeling very well and they got though the virus easily, while the vaccinated ones are continuously getting ill, and they feel awful!!! Side effects…in thousands […]!!! Wake up!!!*

In their narratives, symbolism is pivotal and has a core role in supporting the formation of both individual and in-group identities (see also Lavorgna 2021). For instance, we found references to the symbology of the 'white rabbit' – a symbol of the quest for knowledge, the spark of curiosity that activates spiritual awakening.

Also, moral entrepreneurs consider themselves '*rebels*', '*heretics*' (for the parallelism they draw with heresy in history and their perception of being the 'new Galileos', see Lavorgna 2021), or '*gladiators*' fighting a just war (for instance, parallels with Spartacus, the former gladiator leading a major slave uprising against the Roman Republic, were drawn).

The relationship with Science, as suggested also from the Galileo's symbolism, is twofold. If from the one side science-based information is rejected, on the other side the 'good science' is sought after. For instance, in the search for credibility, some moral entrepreneurs emphasise the prizes and honours they received from institutions whose names sound academic or 'sciency', even if, from a quick search, it is clear they have no formal accreditation or are predatory institutions, with no scientific or academic credibility ('*Physicians of life*'; '*Global Organisation for Life*'). Also, they refer to a limited number of doctors or 'independent researchers' they trust and admire, and with whom some even collaborate. Some moral entrepreneurs define the approaches they follow as '*evidence-based medicine*', again using a signifier with a reverse signified. The evidence they propose is, in fact, not science-based, but rooted in few personal anecdotes, rigidly interpreted with an anti-vaxxer logic, and perceived as genuine against the corrupted and fake information and statistics provided by the official institutions (e.g., *The honest physicians have said that most of the patients in Intensive Care were those with three vaccinations*'; '*Information received from medical staff and vaccinated patients. Directly, without any filter, pure and normal truth!*). In their reverse, alternative view of science-based evidence, the production of dedicated books, blogs, and videos is noteworthy. There is also a whole parallel circuit of conferences, seminars, and other events, organised and participated by like-minded people.

To give weight to their claims, moral entrepreneurs also rely on mis-quotes of famous people from the arts, the cinema, the literature, or sports. An indicative example is provided by the online discussions about the world known tennis player Novak Djokovic, whose stellar career has been suspended in the second half of 2022 because of his impossibility to enter some international competitions due to not having provided evidence, at the time of writing, of having been vaccinated against COVID-19. Djokovic, for many years the number one tennis player at world level, has released statements and interviews declaring his willingness to sacrifice some of the most coveted titles to keep consistent with his life philosophy of not permitting his body to be contaminated by any kind of 'poisons' – a directive he follows strictly also for what regards his diet and general lifestyle. The champion's fans had split over this position, but in turn he gained a consistent group of new followers among those resisting the vaccine inoculation. They are now considering him as a sort of famous representative of their movement, whose exemplary conduct should be followed by everyone opposing the '*sanitary dictatorship'* (e.g., *It is precisely because he's not bending that he's a champion even in his life. We are more numerous that what you think'; 'I didn't like him […], but now I admire him and I will always follow him'; 'You did right, don't give up. Soon divine justice will come and who needs to pay… will pay. Justice and truth are a bit slow… but they will arrive sooner or later. Good will triumph over evil*).

Inverse moral panics: the rise of the alternative folk devils

Beside creating moral panic in reverse, the moral entrepreneurs in the digital field can also create and propagate inverse moral panics through the identification of different folk devils, hence further redefining the classic concept of moral panic. This can occur in different ways.

First, conspiratorial thinking can be used to suggest the existence of malicious schemes behind the pandemic run by sinister and powerful groups (e.g., the '*Zionist-Freemasonry*') and operating in the shadows to experiment dangerous substances on unaware guinea pigs ('*The [by Italian Government] response to the pandemic makes them [the ruling politicians] responsible for a massacre, they forced on us experimental, ineffective, and even lethal pharmaceuticals [i.e., vaccines]*', or even to further extreme dimensions of societal control on both people's body and mind (e.g., '*Vaccines modify human DNA*'), comparing these impositions to crimes against the humanity ('*This is a form of Nazi eugenics, […] a new Nuremberg Trial is needed'*). Even the idea of a hideous plan of extermination aimed at diminishing the number of humans living on the planet was present, as evidenced in the following quote:

> The Wuhan lab in China has created the Sars-cov2 virus […]. They used to do experiments with biological weapons funded by the US government with Antony Fauci as its chief. Obviously, the reason was to kill the elderly population with the wrong therapies suggested by the OMS, funded by Bill Gates. there is a whole conspiracy with the agenda of depopulate the world by 50% within 2030.

Second, also in the case of inverse moral panics, we can find less extreme views, which are generally linked to a wide-ranging culture of suspicion permeating a certain worldview with regards to sensitive social themes. We can find discussions of distinct themes that somehow converge into narratives allowing a certain socio-political identification (e.g., they oppose the '*ultra-liberal*' and '*globalist*' stances, many are anti-immigration, pro-Republicans with reference to the United States when discussing international politics, pro-Putinism when discussing the 2022 Ukrainian conflict). Among the many examples, of particular interest was a website whose information was continuously reported on one of the communities observed; the website, who looked like a traditional news outlet, had webpages organised around hot topics (ranging from euthanasia and in-vitro fertilisation to international and national politics), linked in the editorial design by a religious (conservative Catholic) afflatus. In discussing national politics, populist parties are explicitly preferred, and even considered as political allies (in line with recent political research, see e.g. Eberl et al. 2021). In turn, these parties capitalise on this situation adapting their communicative strategies accordingly (Giardiello 2021; Marzi and Sessa 2021). Here, we could find explicit support towards three of the main right-wing parties – League for Salvini Premier, Brothers of Italy, and Forza Nuova (New Force) – and towards a series of 14 minor political groups (from both

the far-left and the far-right) that were trying to participate to the latest Italian 2022 political election and were identified as '*against the system*'.

In inverse moral panics, individual and in-group identities are mostly constructed and fostered using oppositional (us vs them) narratives (Lavorgna 2021). Those aligned with in-group views and with a public role are considered allies. Some notable examples are a well-known judge who published a book imbued with COVID-19 denialism, or a former (because disbarred) doctor with pseudo-scientific views that notoriously extended beyond the pandemic, and that included attacks towards the Islamic and the LGBTQA communities. On the contrary, anything considered outgroup is harshly judged. In this context, folk devils are those considered to be part of the traditional elites, the mainstream media, and institutionalised Science, who are considered to '*abusively occupy the palaces of power*'. They are framed as incompetents, and enabling, with their work, a '*model of total preventive medicalizatio*n' derived from '*political and financial hallucination*'.

In particular, institutionalised scientists and doctors (especially those who gained media visibility during the pandemic, and those with expertise in virology), seen as '*protectors of financial interests*, are generally considered '*unworthy technicians*' rather than proper scientists or experts ('*This is not Science!*'), and described with derogative terms (e.g., '*inoculated jerks*'; '*presumptuous*'; '*know-it-all*'; '*overestimated idiots*', '*corrupt parasites*', and '*sold-outs*' with '*expertise is in fake news*'). Similarly, journalists from the mainstream ('*aligned*') media outlets are seen as '*suffering from infodemia*'; they are considered '*serial liars*' that are '*fomenting hate and discrimination*'.

The reasonable citizen is urged to avoid the passive following of the advice of the so-called experts ('*more stupid than normal people*'), in favour of a self-made scientific knowledge cultivated online and, at times, through a series of alternative publications and conferences proposing new interpretations for the natural world that are obviously not accepted by the scientific communities of reference. The following snippets are particularly indicative in this respect:

> The assertion 'the opinion of the expert needs to be taken as a fact: the expert knows what he says, and you don't' is false and misleading. It is instead important, especially regarding health, that, once the expert has been consulted, everyone collects sufficient information to form an opinion.

> Now more than ever it is important not to believe experts. Everyone should have their opinion, formed by gathering information in a way that is honest towards yourself. Nowadays, 'believing in science' is a dangerous belief.

Conclusions

Digital spaces and particularly social media platforms – as non-traditional media with the potential to subvert some of the features characterising moral panics – offer a new challenge to the concept of moral panic as traditionally intended. On the one hand, they might reinforce the longstanding criticism that this concept would

be an academic cliché based on the idea of a consensus society (Thompston and Williams 2013), too limited to capture the threats and conditions associated with the complexity of our societies (Waddington 1986; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Horsley 2017), and hence of scarce practical use in our modern and pluralistic societies. On the other hand, however, even the notion itself of consensus might have to be reconceptualised: online, because of algorithmic and psychological dynamics, the pluralistic view of our societies we should be exposed to becomes limited, as the information and the networks we can access (or we decide to access) are inherently selected according to pre-existing connections, attitudes, and preferences. Consequently, even if we move beyond the filter bubble metaphor as discussed above, most social media users remain bounded to relatively homogeneous and like-minded communities – entangled in an artificial perception of consensus.

In our opinion, as already stressed by Walsh (2020), in this complex scenario the conceptual adeptness and flexibility of the moral panic concept should be seen as an asset rather than as a liability (in line with, e.g. Critcher 2008; Jewkes 2015; Lavorgna 2019; Falkof 2020). As such, the moral panic framework, once we recognise the major shifts in power and capital dynamics occurring in new media spaces, is still useful to help us understand 'how fear and transgression are mobilized for various purposes' (Walsh 2020: 582).

For instance, both in the case of moral panic in reverse and of inverse moral panic, adapting the traditional version of the moral panic approach to meet the features and challenges of the digital field proved useful to shed light on socially relevant dynamics.

We could observe the identification of moral entrepreneurs with sectors of the general public that have increased their mediatic and digital power through the presence of new and emerging sociotechnical affordances (boyd 2010) able to redesign the relationships between actors, hence enabling the spread of harmful courses of action. In most cases, these new moral entrepreneurs are not representative of the traditionally powerful political, economic and intellectual elites, as imagined by the original approach, but, on the contrary, they belong to a public opinion demonstrating limited understanding of the scientific world. Many social media users – contrary to most recipients of traditional media – have an increased ability to choose which contents to share (or not) with their personal networks, hence co-defining what is a newsworthy story, and might even become co-producers of information (e.g., Bruns 2008; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010; Thalmann 2019), creating a 'viral reality' (Postill 2014) in a way that provokes both their engagement and agency (Stano 2020). When users have the capacity and willingness to create and propagate content, traditional power relationships can change, and members of the general populations that have been traditionally considered the 'victims' of moral panics are now themselves in the position to construct claims that frame deviance in a distorted manner, shaping events and attitudes, and hence becoming moral entrepreneurs.

Interestingly, these new moral entrepreneurs become opinion-setters for parts of the traditional elites, which tend to follow, and to take advantage of, the new moral panics to define their agendas (and, in the case of political elites, to further their

consensus). This partial reversal of the definition of who is the moral entrepreneur in the context of polarised social debates, especially online, is evidenced also by the fact that some members of the traditional elites seeking the popular consensus (especially right-wing populist politicians) gave a nod to forms of misinformation throughout the pandemic, and relied on anti-elite rhetorics (Bertero and Seddone 2021; Marzi and Sessa 2021).

Also, new folk devils were identified in categories of people that are not 'deviants', outsiders, people at the margin threatening to overturn the moral and cultural *status quo*, but they are rather, on the very opposite, members of that intellectual or economic elite accused of imposing the 'old rules' to a group of '*awaken*' citizens.

To sum up, we agree with the view that moral panic should be seen as a start, not an end point (Critcher 2008; Falkof 2020): regardless of whether we prove that an event is a moral panic or not, the concept itself of moral panic retains its heuristic and analytical power to help us increase our understanding of certain social events, once we consider – to borrow Falkof's words (2020: 234–235) – whether the event of interest 'includes the element of morality (the thing that is feared poses a threat to an established order or a group identity that is seen as 'good') and panic (the thing that is feared is amplified via an affect-driven collective responses that increases in intensity as it spreads)'. In our contribution, we evidenced how this is true both in cases of moral panic in reverse (e.g., the downplayed risks to public health) and in cases of inverse moral panic (with the identification of new folk devils and the rely on conspiratorial thinking).

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6 Framing social drama

Panic, protest, and the Canadian trucker convoy

Graham Knight

Introduction

On January 23, 2022 about a dozen trucks left a truck stop in Delta, B.C., Canada's westernmost province, to travel to Ottawa, the nation's capital. The Freedom Convoy, as it called itself, was precipitated by opposition to the federal government's introduction of a vaccine mandate for all truckers moving back and forth across the Canada-U.S. border, but its broader goals grew to encompass an end to all COVID-19-related public health measures or "restrictions" and, for some, what amounted to the overthrow of the government. The convoy continued to grow as it moved eastwards across Canada, meeting up with truckers from the Atlantic provinces, Ontario and Québec as it began to reach Ottawa on Friday, January 28. The convoy was the focal point of a mass protest of about 8000 people—truckers and their supporters—in front of the Parliament Buildings that weekend. Although most of the supporters and some truckers dispersed after the protest, a core of over 400 truckers and trucks (including some other vehicles) remained in downtown Ottawa, setting up an encampment on Parliament Hill and blocking streets, including residential neighbourhoods, in the downtown area. The resulting occupation—or as some critics called it, a siege—lasted about three weeks until the Ottawa police, with reinforcements from other police forces, began a concerted effort to clear protesters from Parliament Hill and nearby areas of the city.

What took place in downtown Ottawa was a major political and social drama with a cast of characters that comprised truckers and their supporters, police, residents of downtown neighbourhoods most affected by the protest, and politicians from all three levels of government—national, provincial, and municipal. Dramas are precipitated when a breach in the normal routines and norms of everyday life create a crisis whose resolution may well be fraught and contentious (Turner, 1980). The trucker protest was a breach resulting from and within the larger, continuing breach represented by the COVID-19 pandemic itself, and the various measures used to manage it. It was also a drama in which moral protest intersected and blended with aspects of moral panic, and this chapter analyses how the two became commutable, cause and effect of one another in a way that shaped the trajectory of the drama. Panics and protests are not necessarily self-contained, discrete phenomena so much as processes or forces feeding into and off one another, and the convoy

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drama provides a rich example of this. Panics and protests are forceful precisely in their capacity to produce something other than themselves, a capacity that extends beyond mere self-reproduction.

The significance of the events in downtown Ottawa is underscored by the fact that this was a drama that also played out at the national and international as well as local levels. There were parallel protests in other major cities as well as blockades at border crossings to the United States including a major commercial transit point between Ontario and Michigan. The protest was also politically contentious—a classic "hot potato" (Beck, 1992)—and precipitated the ousting of the leader of the main opposition Conservative party, Erin O'Toole, and resignation of the Ottawa police chief. Internationally, the convoy engendered copycat protests in France, New Zealand and the United States. The convoy received foreign funding, especially from the United States, given to two online funding campaigns that became part of the protest's contentiousness. The convoy also attracted supportive news coverage from right-wing American media such as Breitbart and Fox News, as well as on social media. The convoy drama, in other words, played out both on the ground, as a kind of Gramscian war of position, and in the public sphere, as a struggle over representation.

Panic and protest: convergence and divergence

Moral panics and protests are forms of social drama that involve breaches of the normal and the normative. The ways that they overlap is evident in the theoretical and empirical literature in both fields. Since its inception, the study of moral panic has recognized social movements and social activism as an effect and/or source of the moralization of social problems and the generation of collective reaction (*inter alia* Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Hier, 2020). Conversely, the study of social movement activism, particularly moral protests whose cause extends beyond narrow self-interest, has acknowledged moral panics as a feature of social problem formation (Jasper, 1997). Protests and panics overlap in several ways that are pertinent to understanding the trucker protest and its trajectory. Firstly, panics and protests are events in themselves that are precipitated by other events. Events are problematic inasmuch as they represent what Foucault (2000) called "eventalization," moments when the meaning of a situation is no longer self-evident. This creates both an opportunity and a pressure for meaning-making to become more explicit and deliberate. The sematic uncertainty that eventalization creates is conducive to moralization as a particular, uncompromising form of normative meaning—assertion of the distinction between right and wrong (Habermas, 1998). Because of its rigidity, however, moralization easily becomes contentious, as evident, for example, in the way that the folk devils targeted by moral panics "fight back" (McRobbie, 1994).

The intensification of meaning-making also highlights the importance of media and framing. In panic analysis mainstream media have been assigned several functions, contributing to the instigation and reproduction of societal reaction as well as to the representation and amplification of the underlying problem and its folk

devils (Critcher, 2003). Although protest analysis has viewed the role of the media in more narrowly representational terms, it converges with panic analysis in this respect. What McLeod and Hertog (1999) termed the "protest paradigm" bears a strong resemblance to media framing of panics: an emphasis on norm violation resulting in confrontation, violence, and disorder; heavy reliance on official and authoritative sources as "primary definers" (Hall et al., 1978) of reality; use of public opinion to confirm negative consequences; and the stigmatization of protesters as marginal or deviant. Media framing serves four semantic functions—defining, explaining, evaluating, and offering resolution to what is at stake (Entman, 1993). When these functions become contentious the distinction between panics and protests begins to blur, and they become commutable. All four functions entail cognitive, normative, and emotional elements that combine to create an overall sense of meaning and understanding comparable to what Raymond Williams (1977) termed a "structure of feeling." Normative breaches create an overall structure of feeling defined in terms of concern, disquiet or alarm. As the term moral panic implies, this reaction has two dimensions: the moral dimension in which disquiet and alarm are manifested through outrage, anger and antagonism, and the panic dimension where they are represented by anxiety, agitation, and fear. When the moral dimension begins to predominate, panic is more likely to give rise to protest.

Protest and panics also diverge in important respects. Most significantly, relations of problem attribution are reversed. In panics it is those with authority who condemn and vilify those without, whereas in protests it is those without institutional power who challenge and denounce the powerful—the state, corporations, or other major institutions. Lacking institutional power, protesters may nonetheless wield symbolic, moral power and have support from elite allies such as opposition politicians or professional experts. Power relations remain asymmetrical, but less so than in the case of folk devils and their denouncers. Protest relations are adversarial, and for activists this means that framing entails not only making the cause legitimate, visible, and resonant (Koopmans, 2004), but also discrediting an opponent by questioning their sincerity, motives, claims-making competence, and social associations (Knight & Greenberg, 2011). The rapid growth of Internet media has reduced the dependence of activists on mainstream media to communicate their cause. This raises the question of whether the discrediting of protesters characteristic of the protest paradigm is still as applicable, especially in light of the growing prevalence of conservative and right-wing activism such as the trucker convoy, challenging the state for violating individual rights and freedoms.

The adversarial structure of protest relations has two implications that distinguish protest from panic. Panics are typically seen as an example of collective behaviour (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Even in what Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2011) call the "vertical" model where elite interests are critical, the contingent if not spontaneous character of panic formation remains salient: panics are reactive. Protests, on the other hand, entail a more strategic response to social problems. Protests are forms of collective action rather than collective behaviour, and entail a more purposive understanding and framing of adversaries, bystanders, and potential allies, the development of a tactical repertoire, the mobilization of resources

such as funding, personnel and equipment, and an orientation to developing and exploiting opportunities to make gains. As a result, secondly, protests recast the structure of feeling that they share with panics in terms of specific grievances and demands that are targeted at those with the power to act. Because protests transform the often nebulous sense of risk associated with panics into particular, focused grievances, remedial framing becomes more salient—protests translate the "something-should-be-done" aspect of panics into a demand for what more exactly should be done, how and by whom. The adversarial nature of protest relations makes protests more transactional.

The analysis of the trucker protest that follows examines how the protest was represented in English-language website coverage of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). The CBC is a public broadcaster that relies to some extent on commercial as well as public funding. As a public broadcaster its remit is to adhere to conventional journalistic norms of impartiality and balance. Unlike the press, it does not have, nor is expected to have, a partisan editorial line. Though primarily a broadcaster, the CBC also carries written news reports on its website, including some identified as "Analysis" articles that are more interpretive rather than documentary in orientation. The analysis relies chiefly on these written website reports from January 24 to February 19, 2022.

Act one: the truckers arrive and the virus disappears

The motives behind the protest convoy were framed in terms of its goals and the identities of those involved, particularly its leadership. The definition of goals varied from the outset. The precipitating factor behind the protest was the federal government's introduction of a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for all drivers travelling across the border between Canada and the United States, a policy matched on the American side. Abrogation of this policy was the specific, immediate goal of the protest and support for this extended beyond truckers and included many in the broader industry. Opposition to the vaccine mandate was framed in instrumental terms: it was a flawed policy, poorly implemented. There were two main objections. Firstly, the policy was unnecessary because the vast majority of truckers were already vaccinated, and for the most part worked alone and came into contact with others on a brief, intermittent basis. They were, in other words, unlikely to acquire or transmit the virus at work. Secondly, implementation of the mandate allowed for insufficient preparation time, and would likely cause disruption in supply chains—by reducing driver availability—at a time when the transportation system was stressed because of the pandemic and prices already on the rise. The economic consequences, in other words, would only compound an already difficult situation. These arguments were made by organizations representing truckers, the trucking industry, and the official opposition Conservative Party of Canada.

At the same time, the goals of the convoy were also defined much more broadly, and it was in this regard that the convoy was framed in more controversial terms. From the outset, the protesters referred to themselves as the Freedom Convoy, and

the goals included not only the abolition of all COVID-19-related public health measures but also the replacement of the current, legally elected government with a body comprising the appointed members of the Senate and the Governor General, the Crown's representative as head of state. The latter goal was outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding (later withdrawn) issued by Canada Unity, the group that had organized the convoy. Canada Unity, which was involved in the earlier United We Roll truck convoy in 2019 opposing the government's carbon tax policy and promoting the oil, gas, and pipeline industries in western Canada, was closely associated with people espousing more radical right-wing views on other issues such as immigration. The group represented a Canadian version of the kind of radicalization of right-wing politics that has been occurring in the United States where disparate issues such as climate change, immigration and race relations, sexuality and abortion, gun ownership and, with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccination and other public health measures have become ideologically aligned along political partisan lines, and associated with more intense forms of affective polarization and division. American interest and involvement in the convoy, financial and rhetorical, reinforced a sense of the convoy drama as not simply political—challenging the state to concede to instrumental demands—but also politicized, viz. an emotionally charged, divisive moment of antagonism over primary values. It was not accidental that CBC's coverage made reference more than once to the possibility that the protest and occupation could turn out to be Canada's January 6th moment.

Despite identifying the various, shifting goals of the convoy, what was most striking is that the goals themselves were never seriously interrogated.[1] Just before the convoy reached its destination, January 27, Canada registered the single highest number of daily deaths from COVID-19 during a two-month period when registered COVID-19 cases also set a record (Worldometer, 2023). Despite the fact that COVID-19 was still inflicting serious harm, the news framing did not subject the convoy's aim of removing pandemic measures to a response from a public health perspective. The coverage included an academic and a former political refugee from Chile who took issue with the protesters' claims about the threat to and struggle for freedom, but it did not directly address the question of what the likely consequences would be if the protesters' demands were actually met. The heavy reliance on experts for various kinds of commentary (see Table 6.1) did not include public health scientists offering opinions about the feasibility or implications of the protesters' goals. There was considerable contemporaneous coverage of pandemic conditions, but not in direct reference to the trucker protest. The closest the coverage came was an opinion article that referred to a leading Conservative MP who defined his support for the convoy as a matter of "freedom" over "fear." In critiquing this, the article made a brief reference to "the medically vulnerable and immunocompromised" as well as many others who would doubtless prefer to live without fear, but also recognized that vaccination and restrictions on the unvaccinated were the only way to do so (CBC February 1a). While the pandemic as a social and political reference point remained central to the protest and news coverage, COVID-19 itself went missing.

Table 6.1 CBC news reports with main quoted sources by source identity. Table by the author.

	January 23–31	*February 1–19*
Politicians—Federal		
Prime Minister	9	20
Cabinet Minister	12	33
Conservative leader	6	16
Conservative MP	21	15
Politicians—Provincial and Municipal		
Provincial	5	31
Ottawa municipal	6	58
Law Enforcement		
Ottawa Police Chief	12	33
Other police	6	31
Convoy		
Leadership	9	14
Trucker	3	12
Other supporter	12	22
Other		
Business	15	21
Academics/Experts	9	53
NGOs/Activists	5	16
Ottawa Residents	—	28

Convoy participants, leaders and supporters did not have an especially prominent voice in the CBC's coverage (Table 6.1). Although they remained the focal point of the drama, they were mostly spoken about by others rather than speaking for themselves. With the exception of Ottawa residents, whose relationship to the protesters will be discussed in the following section, the principal sources who talked about the protesters were politicians, police and (usually academic) experts. Their remarks had a double focus: the protesters' political affinity and identity, at least of the protest leadership if not the rank-and-file, and their motivation as evident in the structure of feeling on display. There was a strong consensus with respect to political affinity and identity, especially after Conservative MPs who had initially expressed sympathy if not support for the protesters, and had criticized the government for sowing division, also began to call for an end to the protest and the disruption it was causing. In the case of the emotions and feelings, however, there was a noticeable contrast between how the protesters were described by others, particularly police leadership and experts, and how the protesters described themselves.

What became the principal identity attributed to the protesters was established early on by the Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, leader of the Liberal Party of Canada. While the convoy was still on the road, he denounced the participants as

a "small fringe minority… who are holding unacceptable views that they're expressing do not represent the views of Canadians who've been there for each other, who know that following the science… stepping up to protect each other (sic) is the best way to continue to ensure our freedoms, our rights, our values as a country" (Global News January 26). Trudeau's statement is significant in two respects. Firstly, he used contrastive framing to marginalize the convoy participants by setting them apart from and in opposition to Canadians who were "there for each other." The implication of this was that convoy participants were self-interested and indifferent to the well-being of others. Secondly, notwithstanding the reference to following the science, Trudeau relied primarily on moral framing—the language of freedom, rights, and values—that the convoy itself was laying claim to. This implied that the meaning not only of the protest but also of the whole societal response to and management of the pandemic was at issue; it was a struggle between those who cared about others and those who cared only about themselves.

Trudeau's comments were subsequently denounced by Conservative politicians for being insulting and divisive, and the comments likely added to the animosity that some protesters showed towards him. Nonetheless, the comments served to establish the dominant framing of the protesters' identity as politically extreme and unrepresentative. As the convoy neared Ottawa this identity was made more specific: it was right-wing. The right-wing designation was initially established by a news source, a former trucker, Mike Millian, now head of the Private Motor Truck Council of Canada, who was also critical of the mandate policy as unnecessary and counter-productive. He criticized protesters who likened the government to Nazis and mandates to the Holocaust, and argued that the convoy's original message, which had echoed instrumental objections to the mandate policy, had been "hijacked by far right or extreme rhetoric" (CBC January 27). Millian's comments had two important implications for the subsequent news framing. The first was that the convoy and its supporters were themselves divided: the more extreme rhetoric, particularly online, was a minority view, albeit one that was beginning to dominate. All the participants were being defined by the more radical company they were keeping. The second was that, as a result, the ideational stakes of the mandate struggle were increasingly being defined in politically moralized rather than instrumental terms.

As the protesters began to dig in their moral-political identity became defined more specifically in terms of racism. This was evident in a number of ways, most notably through repeated references to the presence of Confederate flags and a flag bearing a swastika at the protest. The head of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network decried the protest as the "worst display of Nazi propaganda in this country," and the federal Black parliamentary caucus stated that it had become a venue for "white supremacists and others with extreme and disturbing views to parade their odious views in public" (CBC February 5, February 4). News reports also revealed past associations of some of the convoy leadership with denunciation of "political Islam" and advocacy of "white replacement" conspiracy theory (CBC January 30). Leading politicians also continued to weigh in: Trudeau referred to "hateful rhetoric and

violence," and New Democratic Party leader, Jagmeet Singh, accused the convoy organizers of "inflammatory, divisive and hateful comments," and of actions that were "unacceptable" (CBC January 26). Even Conservatives began to walk back some of their previous support for the protesters, particularly after news reports of the desecration of national monuments, one of which, the National War Memorial, also symbolized Canada's role in the struggle against right-wing extremism in Europe. While continuing to criticize the Trudeau government for its vaccine mandate and for stoking divisiveness, the Conservative leadership also began to tell the protesters that it was time to go home.

The objectification of the protesters' identity in terms of right-wing extremism and racism went hand-in-hand with their subjectification on the basis of the structure of feeling their actions represented. Both components of the structure of feeling—the moral and the panic—appeared in the news but differed in emphasis depending on the source. Emotions attributed to the protesters by experts, downtown residents, and journalists themselves tended to foreground anger, outrage, and even hate. These are emotions that clarify the immediate reaction to perceived violations into a more coherent sense of grievance and demand for redress. They are instrumental in transforming panic into protest, but are also confrontational, adversarial, even aggressive in their implications. The protesters' anger was interpreted as indicative of an individualistic view of rights and freedoms that took precedence over collective well-being. After the police had cleared the last remaining protesters from Parliament Hill, an analysis article put this aspect of the structure of feeling into a wider context, viz. the growing need for governments and society in general to address "populist rage" (CBC February 23).

A quite different representation of the structure of feeling was given by the protesters and supporters themselves who saw their actions as the result of frustration and fear rather than anger and rage. Describing the participants as "average," Tamara Lich, the most prominent of the convoy's leadership, explained that the aims of the protest movement had grown because "common people are tired of the mandates and restrictions in their own lives," and tired too of "being disrespected and bullied by our government" (CBC February 3). These comments, made a few days after the occupation began, spoke to weariness as well as frustration, and echoed opinions reported earlier. Even before the convoy reached Ottawa, the coverage featured comments from both truckers and supporters expressing fear and concern over victimization. One trucker, who was vaccinated, supported the convoy because other truckers who weren't "sit there in fear" of losing work and being unable to provide for their families (CBC January 25a). Some comments from supporters emphasized that the convoy was bringing people together, and that support showed appreciation for what the truckers did—"It's not an easy life." Other comments spoke to personal experience: a nurse whose anti-vaccination, anti-mandate stance put her job at risk—"We need to have our livelihoods and our dreams and everything that Canada was founded on;" a single mother who had lost her job because she refused to declare her

vaccination status and was out showing support "(t)o make sure they know not everybody on this side is a bad person. I'm a good person" (CBC January 27). While these were voices that felt unfairly treated or victimized, they fell short of exemplifying "populist rage."

Act two: protest and panic as local drama

As it became clear that some protesters intended to remain encamped in downtown Ottawa following the initial weekend rally, the drama began to enter its second act in which the news framing changed. Firstly, the *dramatis personae* began to change as federal politicians receded in the frame while municipal politicians, local residents, community organizations, businesses and their employees moved into the foreground to join the police and protesters as the main source and topic of news coverage. The protest became a struggle between the temporary and permanent occupants of downtown. Secondly, the attributed identity of the protest and protesters began to incorporate not only reference to extremist rhetoric and symbols, but also the concrete effects of protest tactics that made life for local residents, in the words of one city councillor, "hell" (CBC February 2a). Thirdly, as Conservative MPs' support for ending "freedom-curbing" pandemic restrictions began to wane, and the party leadership called for an end to the protest, the framing contest between the protesters and their new adversaries—local residents et al.—became much more asymmetrical: the voices of aggrieved local residents went largely unopposed (CBC January 25b). The drama did not entirely lose its political framing, but contention became framed in more social terms—more akin to the classic, law-and-order model of moral panic defined through the lens of deviance and (lack of) control.

The overarching frame of the news coverage at this stage was the disruptive impact of the protest occupation whose victims were put front and centre of the framing. There were three main groups of victims. The first were local businesses and other workplaces, particularly those that had closed or curtailed their operations because of the protest. A downtown shopping centre closed after being swarmed by unmasked protesters; an ice cream shop suspended operations after one of its employees had been racially abused and assaulted on the way to work; a homeless shelter had been subject to an altercation during which a security guard was also racially abused by protesters. For businesses in particular, the disruptions caused by the protest "couldn't (have) come at a worst (sic) time" as economic recovery from the pandemic was just underway (CBC February 10). The second group comprised health care workers and their patients: a child whose cancer treatments had been disrupted, leading his mother to claim that the protesters did not care about their impact on others; a disabled senior whose treatments were reliant on transportation that had been disrupted; paramedics whose ambulance had had rocks thrown at it; and other health care workers who were feeling greater stress as they became collateral targets of the protesters' attack on pandemic measures.

The most prominent and consistent group of protest victims, however, were local residents, but the focus here was less on specific incidents than on the more general structure of feeling that had developed among them. There were repeated references to how residents felt fearful, anxious, intimidated, harassed—especially for wearing masks—bullied, terrified, and terrorized. There was one reference to anger, but this concerned less the actions of the protesters *per se* than which actions were being given greater attention, viz. the desecration of national monuments rather than the presence of hate symbols. In addition to the physical, confrontational presence of the protesters—who had by this point established an occupation infrastructure that included a base camp on the city's outskirts, a bouncy castle for children, at least one stall selling goods, a designated area for speeches and religious worship, a fuel supply chain to allow truck engines to keep running, and even a hot tub—the coverage pointed to two particular sources of aggravation for residents: the constant blaring of truck horns and the deterioration of air quality from diesel fumes. The response of the protest leadership to the impact on residents was minimal. One of the leaders released a public statement offering residents "empathy" and understanding "for your frustration," but insisting that "responsibility for your inconvenience lies squarely on the shoulders of politicians" (CBC February 2b).

If the protesters were beginning to acquire the dubious status of folk devils, this did not mean that residents were passive bystanders lacking agency of their own. The convoy statement had been right in one sense: for all the fear, anxiety, and intimidation they experienced, residents were also frustrated, and this frustration transformed a panic-like reaction into collective action and counter-protest. Resistance began early in the occupation with a small-scale, spontaneous act by three women who expressed their frustration by blocking the path of a protest truck and giving the driver a thumbs down sign every time he honked his horn as he drove down a residential side street. Their action was brief—one of the women reported that the driver became increasingly "belligerent"—but they acquired a moment of fame as an amateur video of their action went viral (CBC February 1b). Another resident also became a local hero for fronting a successful class action lawsuit resulting in a court injunction to stop the horn blaring. There were also roadside counter-protests by residents aimed at truckers and convoy supporters—at one point a major entry highway into the city was blocked—culminating in a public protest on February 14 after "residents reach(ed) protest boiling point" (CBC February 14). Other major cities also saw counter-protests challenging the views of convoy supporters or giving public support to health care workers now in the line of fire from those wanting an end to pandemic measures.

The target of the counter-protests, however, was not confined to the convoy and their supporters, but also extended to the police and politicians who were criticized and condemned for failing to resolve a situation that was disrupting their lives. As was the case with the trucker convoy, a panic-related structure of feeling was made actionable by focusing the direction of problem attribution at those with the power to do something. For the residents, however, this meant separating the two aspects of explanatory framing, causal and preventive responsibility.

While the convoy protesters were clearly the source of their problem, it was the authorities who were to blame for failing to prevent the situation and not acting sooner and more decisively to contain and resolve it once it began to develop. In an ironic twist, the residents were accusing the authorities, particularly the police, of a disproportionate response, but disproportionate in the sense of an underreaction rather than overreaction. It was the actions of the convoy protesters that caused the residents' problem, and the inaction of the authorities that allowed it to persist.

The Ottawa police chief was the main voice representing the police in the news coverage (including the interim chief after the former's resignation). Rather than set out to reassure, he characterized the protest from the outset as atypical and dangerous: "massive in scale," "polarizing in nature," "unique, fluid, risky and significant," requiring a large scale response to "ensure safety" in the face of "online threats, nationally and internationally, inciting violence, hate and criminal acts" (CBC January 28). While acknowledging that most protesters were peaceful—something the convoy leadership had explicitly called for—he affirmed that the police were especially concerned about "lone wolf" individuals who might exploit the situation for their own ends. On the basis of this assessment, he continued to call for more resources; claim that the police did not have a specific mandate to end the protest and that there may not in fact be a policing solution; and justify the lack of a more forceful response by citing the risk of escalation. Peripheral actions were taken—there were media reports of specific investigations underway, a handful of arrests, some tickets issued for by-law infractions, a raid on the base camp to halt fuel deliveries to the protesters downtown, and a dedicated phone line to report incidents of hate—but the overall police response was restrained.

Despite the chief's insistence that the police lacked the requisite resources, police inaction contributed to a sense of uncertainty, and this fed criticism, not only from residents who bore the immediate brunt of the noise, fumes, harassment and worse, but also politicians, experts, and other activists. The federal Emergencies Preparedness Minister, himself the former police chief of Toronto, said he found the absence of greater police enforcement "inexplicable" (CBC February 13). Academic experts criticized the police for poor decision-making and a lack of leadership and preparedness, despite the fact that the convoy leadership had made its intention to stay in Ottawa clear from the outset. And activists accused the Ottawa police of a double standard, claiming that protests and occupations associated with environmental, Black and Indigenous struggles were typically met with a swifter and more coercive response than the truckers had been. These criticisms also touched on a sense not only of uncertainty but also of doubt. A couple of news reports referred to instances where police officers acted in a very friendly manner towards protesters—in one case telling them that they agreed with the cause—though it was also noted that individual officers had the discretion to manage tense situations in a way that would lower the temperature. More significantly, what emerged in the coverage was that three people involved in organizing the convoy had ties to the police or military, and that a group of active and retired police officers opposed to public health measures called Police on

Guard had members present at the protest. This, according to one quoted expert, helped to account for the unusual "sophistication" of the protest's organizational structure (CBC February 8).

The restrained police response meant that the political framing of the event was never fully displaced by a law-and-order frame. Arguably, police inaction not only re-politicized the situation but also extended its scope by making the implementation of social control dependent on decision-making outside police ranks. As long as the occupation continued, pressure mounted for someone to take ownership of this "hot potato," and as the actor with the clearest sense of public accountability—as well as the prime target of the protest—this role fell to the federal government. The same day that resident counter-protests peaked, the federal government took the unprecedented step of invoking the Emergencies Act, giving it sweeping powers to coordinate different levels of police, enhance the police's law enforcement capacity, and freeze protesters' bank accounts. Contention promptly shifted back to the political arena as the Conservative opposition accused the government of overreaction and warned that invoking the Act would only inflame tensions and worsen polarization. The legislation was only in force for nine days, but during that period the protest drama moved into its third and final act as a coordinated police action gradually cleared the downtown area of remaining protesters, and the Freedom Convoy finally dispersed.

Conclusion

What transpired in Ottawa in early 2022 was a protest that was not simply or exclusively a protest. It was a drama that played out on the national (even international) and local levels as a political crisis and a crisis of law-and-order whose trajectory incorporated aspects of moral panic. The drama of the trucker convoy was one in which panic and protest fostered and reinforced one another. This was most evident in news framing of the various participants. The protesters and their supporters were defined in disparate ways by different sources, including themselves. The government sought to identify the protesters associatively through their links to racism and right-wing extremism, to portray them as akin to conventional folk devils whose opinions and actions were dangerous and unacceptable, and who were acting out of anger and rage. This meant that the demands of the protesters were ignored from the perspective of their claims-making competence: at no point did public health experts speak on the likely consequences of meeting the protesters' demands and removing all pandemic measures at a stroke. At the same time, the structure of feeling conveyed by protest supporters was less one of anger and rage, more one of concern and fear that personal freedoms were under threat from those in power. As initial support that protesters received from Conservative politicians faded when the protest became an occupation and its disruptive impact felt locally, the folk devil identity hardened through the suffering—intimidation and harassment, incessant noise and fumes, racial and homophobic abuse—residents experienced. What was implied in the voice of residents was that the protesters did not seem to care about the consequences

of their actions, and in this respect the drama came back full circle to the Prime Minister's initial attempt to paint them as concerned only for themselves and, unlike the vast majority of Canadians, not for others. The voice of the residents was decisive for the news framing. Unlike all the other actors in the drama—protesters and supporters, government and opposition, and the police—the residents' voice went unopposed. No-one disputed their claims about the impact and indifference of the protesters, the inaction of the police, and their disaffection with the politicians. Their only identity was the one they gave themselves. Journalists may have seen the trucker convoy as an expression of populism; it would seem, however, that in the battle over representation it was the voice of a different populace that prevailed.

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Note

1 This lack of interrogation, particularly from a public health perspective, had implications for the terminology used to refer to government responses to the pandemic, such as vaccine, mask, and other mandates. The most common terms used in the coverage were pandemic measures (also used in this analysis because of its general neutrality) and pandemic restrictions, a term that aligns more explicitly with the protesters' perspective. From a public health perspective, these responses constituted pandemic protections, but the term public health protections appeared only once in the coverage.

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7 Mutuality vs freedom

Competing moral panics in the UK debate over the wearing of masks during the pandemic

Jeremy Collins

Masks: the 'stark divide'

On 18 August 2021, after over a year of different measures to combat and contain the COVID -19 pandemic in England,[1] the vast majority of COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted and members of parliament (MPs) were recalled to the House of Commons to debate the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.[2] Since the beginning of the pandemic, MPs had been attending the chamber either in a physically distanced way, or via proxy or video link and these 'temporary' arrangements had continually been extended until the recess in July 2021.

This first post-(supposedly) pandemic meeting of MPs was notable for the way in which opposition MPs were almost entirely wearing masks, while the government benches were largely mask-free. One *Daily Telegraph* columnist suggested that this illustrated a 'stark divide' in wider society which represented not just personal decisions about health matters, but a political gulf in perspective on the efficacy and social meaning of masks (Melanie Mcdonagh, 19 August 2021). The Telegraph illustrated the article with an image of blue-tinged MPs sitting largely unmasked, contrasted (across a 'torn paper' graphic) with red-filtered opposition MPs all wearing masks.

This chapter will investigate this 'stark divide' via analysis of the mediated construction of two alternative moral discourses which can be understood as competing moral panics.

Introduction

The emergence of COVID-19 led to different kinds of social restrictions being imposed in different parts of the world at different times. In the UK, the lockdown of March 2020 was not initially accompanied by demands for the public (as opposed to health care professionals) to wear masks, but following pressure from some expert groups such as the British Medical Association (Patterson, 2020) masks were mandated in shops and supermarkets on 24 July 2020 (*GOV.UK*, 2020a).[3] The rules were relaxed in July 2021, but reinstated on 30 Nov 2021 in response to the emerging omicron variant (Reuters, 2021). As part of the lifting of 'Plan B' restrictions, the general mask mandate was removed on 27 January 2022, with a

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final (somewhat reluctant) removal of the mask mandate on London Transport on 24 February 2022 (Transport for London, 2022).

Throughout these changes of policy, a debate developed in which mask-wearing became, in part at least, linked to issues of moral and social responsibility. It has been argued that the face mask "is at once such a shared cultural symbol and yet so physically intimate [which] allows its wearer to channel, materialize and signal co-operation, fear, anger or dissent". (Barratt, 2020). In this chapter, this debate will be analyzed as an illustration of the possibility of competing moral panics, in which the language choices made in public discourse (largely in samples of newspaper articles) shape the issue of the moral risk of (not) wearing a mask during the pandemic.

Establishing the possibility of competing moral discourses

As one of the founding theorists of moral panic theory, Stan Cohen has come to reassess some aspects of his work by acknowledging in his later work the objection to the concept of the moral panic that it is "judgmental, normative and biased". This bias occurs when, for instance, cases are chosen "because of their suitability for debunking by liberals"(Cohen, 2011b: 237–8). This critique suggests that the concept has often been applied only to those issues where liberal academics wish to condemn a section of the public (or media) for what they see as an irrational response to a marginalized group worth defending.

Jenkins suggests that as an alternative to the value laden assumptions of the 'original' moral panic model, a constructionist approach "makes no initial assumptions about the legitimacy of the subject matter such as are implied by the word 'panic'" and can interrogate the processes by which certain issues become salient in public discourse without presupposing that the resulting debates are founded in irrationality. (Jenkins, 2009: 36) This removes the normative assumptions in the 'classical' moral panic and allows a wider range of public concerns to be addressed.

Cohen therefore suggests that, traditionally, the academics engaged in the analysis of moral panics are closer ideologically, educationally and in class terms to certain new kinds of 'moral entrepreneurs' (e.g. those promoting a green agenda and denouncing climate denialists) who therefore can be seen as generating 'positive' moral panics that can be approved of. Compared to those studied in traditional approaches, such 'new' panics offer space to victims and non-elite social movements; they can be seen as 'good' moral panics. Cohen suggests that these might take the form of 'anti-denial' movements that challenge the covering up or tolerance of unacceptable social conditions (e.g. anthropogenic climate change) and denounce the immorality of such attitudes and behaviors (Cohen, 2011b: 241).

This opens up the possibility that academics (and others) may identify discourses of moral regulation approaching the same (or linked) issues from different and contradictory perspectives, without an assessment (implied or stated) by the researcher that either is necessarily objectively socially regressive. It is therefore from this perspective that this chapter considers the competing moral discourses on facemasks in UK public debate.

Before providing specific examples, we need to briefly set out the broad shape of these discursive positions, which I have tentatively labelled 'mutuality' (moral panic 1) and 'freedom' (moral panic 2). While these positions can also be mapped more broadly onto issues around COVID-19 such as self-isolation and vaccines, they are here applied specifically to the issue of facemasks.

Mutuality: moral panic #1

The concept of mutual aid, as developed by Kropotkin, has been enlisted to discuss the role of NGOs providing support to various vulnerable groups in the UK during the pandemic (Mould et al., 2022). In a similar context, many liberal and left commentators, health officials and medical practitioners asserted the importance of wearing masks in public settings in terms of a moral social responsibility, framing anti-maskers as deviant 'other'. In particular, this moral discourse emphasized the needs of the vulnerable, the marginalized, and characterized those who refused to wear a mask as selfish. The wearing of a mask from this perspective is seen as part of a 'social order' which overrides the personal preferences of individuals and must be defended from the immorality of the self-centered refuser.

Freedom: moral panic #2

Alternatively, a libertarian discourse involving both 'experts' and media personalities focused on individual freedoms, constructing masks as 'muzzles' and (in some cases) a form of tyrannical social control, alongside arguments concerning the ineffectiveness of masks to control infection, a broader minimizing of the health risks of COVID-19 and the risk of unintended consequences (such as those, as we shall see, borne by schoolchildren).

Methodology

This chapter adopts an analytical approach broadly derived from critical discourse analysis (CDA) which aims to "draw out and describe the practices and conventions in and behind texts that reveal political and ideological investment" (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 4). One aspect of this, as we will see, is the 'lexical field' which is created within a particular text to set the territory and limits of a discursive (ideological) position (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 221). The relationship between social structures and discourse is seen as dialectical, whereby each affects the other; individuals have discursive agency within social and ideological conventions and constraints, while at the same time "discourse(s) actually (re)create social worlds and relations" (Flowerdew and Richardson, 2018: 2). It is this latter process which can be linked to the social construction of moral panics through public discourses.

The examples discussed below were derived from a Lexis/Nexis search of UK National newspapers using key search terms (mask*, covid, coronavirus, freedom*, libert*) over a period of 23 months between the first lockdown

(26 March 2020) and the end of mask wearing restrictions following the lifting of compulsory masks on London Transport (24 February 2022). This produced 2470 resulting news items, which were then filtered for relevance.

Case study: Freedom Day 19 July 2021

The UK government initially proposed to 'unlock' on 21 June 2021 in England, but with cases of the Delta variant rising and government scientists advising delay to allow more people to be vaccinated, a delay of four weeks was announced on 14 June 2021.

This delay was politically awkward for the government, which had already been urged by backbench MPs and conservative newspapers to push ahead with lifting restrictions:

Don't wobble now, ministers!

> Tory MPs reacted with fury last night after Matt Hancock said he was 'absolutely open' to delaying Freedom Day. The Health Secretary refused to rule out keeping face masks and home working beyond June 21, when the Government had hope to remove all legal limits on social contact.
>
> (Harriet Line, *Daily Mail*, 7 June 2021)

The above front page 'warning' is indicative of the pressures the government was facing and by beginning of July it became clear that it would be politically difficult for any further delays to occur. Commentators railed against any further extension of lockdown regulations including mask-wearing.

One *Telegraph* columnist noted that the British response to such rules demonstrated a "commitment to the law that is bred-in-the-bone", but reflected on the limits of this commitment and raised the possibility that there might soon be a "moral case for breaking an unjust law" (Philip Johnston, *Telegraph*, 29 June 2021). In support of this, the writer referred to Harry Willcock, the liberal activist who was prosecuted and eventually convicted, of refusing to produce an identity card five years after the end of WWII (Egan, n.d.).

The link to Willcock (who was the last person to be fined for this offence and later campaigned for the abolition of the war-time identity cards, which were eventually scrapped in 1952) emphasizes the connection made by anti-mask advocates to moral positions. Johnston here is a moral entrepreneur, 'manning the barricades' as a righteous objector to an imposition by the state and rejecting a slippery slope towards authoritarian government. The headline for Johnston's article refers to "pointless and unjust lockdown laws", a pre-emptive defense against the suggestion that, in terms of public health, laws to enforce mask-wearing (like those insisting on ID cards in postwar Britain) may be *necessary*.

The rejection of government restrictions was also advocated more implicitly in articles which suggested 'Freedom Day' represented "a return to common sense and personal responsibility." (David Maddox, *Daily Express*, 4 July 2021).

Telegraph columnist Kate Andrews saw it as ushering in "the return of something old and treasured: our basic freedoms, to see whom we like and do what we please" (Kate Andrews, *Telegraph*, 6 July 2021). The following week, Andrews suggested that the Prime Minister's post-'Freedom Day' recommendation to continue to wear a mask in crowded or enclosed spaces is vague and should be simplified by focusing on personal choice: "With every intervention that comes, for or against mask-wearing, it seems more obvious that the only solution is to hand this choice back to individuals." (Kate Andrews, *Telegraph*, 13 July 2021).

With a slightly more ambivalent tone, Janice Turner in the *Times* looked forward to 'Freedom Day' by suggesting that the rules around mask-wearing in public were, among all other restrictions, "…the most visible, divisive, and loathed". While acknowledging the possible reasons for continued mask wearing, she sought to imply the wider social damages that this might impose:

> But there is nothing more creepily dystopian than a tide of silent faceless figures wandering a shopping mall. We will never feel our happy, connected, normal selves until we let the mask slip.
>
> (Janice Turner, *The Times*, 3 July 2021)

A *Sun on Sunday* article was similarly headlined "Smiles all round: masks go, July 19 Freedom Day exclusive – Face coverings to be personal choice" (David Wooding, *the Sun*, 4 July 2021), emphasizing the return of public smiles as a social good.

In this construction, masks disconnect, isolate, and immiserate must therefore be rejected.

The theme of freedom from state impositions is stated more directly in a column by Douglas Murray:

> ***Britain is sleepwalking into a state of perpetual COVID-19 tyranny***
>
> […] In the UK, ever since the start of the coronavirus, the political class has demanded ever more of our freedoms.
>
> […] Everyone up to and including the Prime Minister seems to be caught up in this ultra-cautious national mood.
>
> […] to advocate the path of greater risk and greater freedom – is still presented as though it is somehow irresponsible or otherwise risky.
>
> (Douglas Murray, *Telegraph*, 14 July 2021)

The article seems to ignore what others describe as 'Freedom Day' to suggest that the public are sleepwalking into the 'tyranny' of an authoritarian state.

The *Telegraph's* 'Chief City commentator' made similar comments in an article headlined "This isn't 'Freedom Day' – it's sinister lockdown by stealth" to suggest that the government's confused messaging has led to people facing the 'public shame of being a mask refusenik' as part of a wider, sinister authoritarianism.

(Ben Marlow, *Telegraph*, 19 July 2021). This is the 'folk devil' of this strand of anti-mask moralized discourse.

While such discursive positions were set out in the run-up to 19 June 2021, the alternative perspective on 'Freedom Day' was also set out in newspaper articles.

The *Guardian* reported the concerns of the Blood Cancer UK charity and the National Pensioner's Convention, that the lifting of restrictions such as mandatory mask-wearing in public places would lead to additional COVID-19-related deaths due to the vulnerability of the old and immunocompromised. The charity argued that the removal of regulations would mean "'that it feels like freedoms are being taken away from' many people" (Amelia Hill, *Guardian*, 6 July 2021). This provides a useful contrast to the use of the term 'freedom' in the early examples above. Here, freedoms are not inherently universal; they are plural, contingent, and in this case conflicting. This offers a challenge to the notion of a 'Freedom Day' for all and replaces this with a suggestion that the coming "free-for-all" will reduce the mobility and increase the anxieties of vulnerable sections of society. As one interviewee puts it in the article, "…I'm rendered housebound by those who choose not to wear masks […] The so-called Freedom Day is, for us, the exact opposite." It is notable that the Guardian puts 'Freedom Day' in inverted commas, or what might in this context be described as 'scare quotes'. The Independent also reported this intervention by charities, also mentioning the MS Society (multiple sclerosis) and quoting head of policy Philip Anderson, who emphasized that those with suppressed immune systems were defined by government as 'clinically extremely vulnerable' to COVID-19, as well as being less well protected by the vaccine (Tim Wyatt, *Independent*, 6 July 2021).

On the same day the *Independent* also reported the Health Secretary Sajid Javid's comments that he would continue to carry and wear a face mask in crowded spaces after 'Freedom Day'. This was presented as an acknowledgement of the concerns mentioned above and, in this sense can be seen as accepting the idea of mutuality in the use of masks – that they should be seen as a communal response to risk. Nevertheless, Javid is later quoted as saying that his intention to wear a mask in enclosed spaces or if someone was uncomfortable reflects "what I mean by personal responsibility". (Sajid Javid, quoted in Ashley Cowburn, *Independent*, 6 July 2021). This seems ambiguous (perhaps intentionally so); the invocation of personal choice seems to imply a version of individualism and this often accompanies a discourse of 'freedom' and (personal) liberty in terms of mask-wearing. But in this context, the phrase instead implies an intention to consider the needs of others and in the article, this is reinforced by this quote's juxtaposition with a comment immediately following by another Conservative MP who asserted that she would not wear a mask on public transport, saying "Freedom is very important. I think showing our faces is part of being human" (Miriam Coates, quoted in Ashley Cowburn, *Independent*, 6 July 2021). This juxtaposition in the article works to position Javid as 'reasonable' relative to his more hard-line colleague and implicitly endorses the discourse of mutuality by adopting him as a kind of honorary moral entrepreneur against the maskless threat.

A *Guardian* editorial set out the argument against abandoning "compulsory masking" and other "mitigation measures" by quoting Spinoza on the state as a guarantor of freedom for all and suggesting the plan for 'Freedom Day' is a "political wager" rather than a scientifically justified decision:

> The government is freeing some to return to aspects of life that they have sorely missed. But in doing so, those people risk serious harm to themselves and others.
>
> (Editorial, *Guardian*, 8 July 2021).

The *Guardian* enlisted a number of experts (in addition to Spinoza) by referring to a letter published in the Lancet from "over 100 global scientists" which criticized the 'reopening' plan for 19 July. It is then suggested that many of those who may be vulnerable (such as unvaccinated transport and retail workers, children, health workers and immunocompromised people) do not have a choice whether to accept the risks which will be imposed on them by those who choose not to wear a mask. The scientists here (as with Sajid Javid above, but perhaps less ambiguously) are enlisted in the moral work of 'diagnoses and solutions' to this 'threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen, 2011a: 9) which, from this perspective, 'Freedom Day' represents.

On 'Freedom Day' itself, the *Independent* published short interviews with a range of people who were presented as under threat from the lifting of restrictions, beginning with this introduction:

Freedom Day: from nurses to shop staff, the people not looking forward to restrictions lifting today

> While many of us will be eagerly anticipating the lifting of almost all coronavirus restrictions on so-called "freedom day", for others 19 July is a date that has been filling them with dread.
>
> England will move to step four of the government's roadmap out of lockdown today, when physical distancing and mandatory mask wearing will come to an end, although people will be advised to continue wearing face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces such as public transport.
>
> But the clinically vulnerable and those working in customer-facing roles such as retail, hospitality and healthcare have grave concerns about the "confusing" new guidance.[4]
>
> (Chiara Giordano, *Independent*, 19 July 2021)

Again, workers in particular sectors (health, transport, retail, and others) considered medically vulnerable were foregrounded and in this case given the opportunity to set out their concerns. A similar article on the same day (but published in the 'Health and Families' lifestyle section) offers the views of a number of clinically vulnerable people, headlined "We're collateral damage" (Saman Javed, *Independent*, 19 July 2021); in the Daily Mirror, the vulnerable and elderly are being

"sacrificed on the altar of herd immunity" (Fiona Parker, *Mirror*, 20 July 2021). In these articles then it is their expertise as situated actors with specific contextual knowledges which allow these interviewees to be positioned in the debate as moral entrepreneurs demanding regulatory solutions.

To summarize briefly, charities and liberal commentators are moral entrepreneurs here promoting the 'mutuality' moral panic, establishing the maskless as careless, if not reckless individualists who ignore communal needs. They are selfish, a folk devil to be shunned if not quite demonized. They also position the 'victims' as 'collateral damage' to be 'sacrificed' and redefine 'freedom' as contingent (it must apply to all, not just the healthy) in an attempt to reorient the discourse. Alternatively, from the 'freedom' perspective, journalistic moralists assert that restrictive laws such as those mandating the wearing of sinister, divisive, dystopian masks must be challenged and if necessary broken, as a threat to everyone's liberty and a slippery slope to tyranny.

Case study: Freedom Day (redux) 24 February 2022

While masks restrictions were relaxed after 29 July 2021, they were imposed in some school settings towards the end of 2021 and the emergence of the Omicron variant led to 'Plan B' restrictions being imposed from 8 December 2021; these included extending compulsory mask wearing in public places such as cinemas and theatres (Gillett and Lee, 2021). This led to further pressure to lift restrictions and on 22 February 2022, commentator Quentin Letts described in his political sketch the 'good news' (to be contrasted with the bad news of impending war between Russia and Ukraine): "liberty was back, and masks could be scissored for the cat litter. Boris Johnson announced that 'personal responsibility' (his forte) would henceforth help us live with COVID-19." (Quentin Letts, The *Times*, 22 February 2022).

While this is initially presented as reporting the attitude of the prime minister in a statement to the house of commons, Letts is clear that this is indeed good news; the casting aside of masks is an expression of freedom and individual choice in mask use is a restoration of personal liberty.

The prime minister's announcement lifted a number of restrictions:

Freedom Day arrives! England finally scraps all its remaining emergency Covid laws after nearly two years of economically-crippling on-off lockdowns - with self-isolation rules now officially over

> England woke up to freedom this morning after nearly two years of crippling on-off lockdowns as all emergency Covid laws introduced to tackle the pandemic ended at midnight. Self-isolation rules for the infected are now officially over, masks are no longer necessary on public transport in London and NHS hospitals are finally being told to lift visiting restrictions. Boris Johnson said England was exiting the 'grimmest years in our peacetime' when the PM unveiled his 'Living With Covid' strategy on Monday, with its high

> vaccination rates and life-saving new drugs allowing it to become the freest country in Europe. Health Secretary Sajid Javid branded 'Freedom Day' – how February 24, 2022, will go down in the history books – as an 'important' next step in a new phase of the pandemic.
>
> (Stephen Matthews and Connor Boyd, *Daily Mail*, 24 February 2022)

The emphasis here on 'freedom' – with a specific mention of the lifting of the mask mandate on London transport – reinforces the threat that such restrictions represent here, linked to the financial pressures they are argued to have imposed and compared to the less free nations of Europe. The final quoted paragraph underlines the *historic* aspect of this change.

In this period at the beginning of 2022, the moral discourse challenging the imposition of masks adopted an additional rhetorical strand, focusing on the effects on children. Moral panic scholars have noted the ways in which children are often the focus for such concerns (Critcher, 2003; Staksrud and Kirksaether, 2013; Thompson, 1998). In his discussion of Critcher's emphasis on the role of media in moral panics, Rowe suggests that "[t]he corruption and victimization of children is a particularly powerful theme, […] their assumed loss of innocence both revealed in, and in some ways caused by, the media." (Rowe, 2009: 32). As Critcher himself has argued, "…moral panics are irresistible when they present threats to children." (Critcher, 2003: 155).

In the weeks prior to this new Freedom Day and as the new year began, a number of articles reiterated an anti-mask discourse with a particular inflection centered around children. These examples enlisted a threat to the mental health of children as a key element in the struggle against the tyranny of mask imposition.

Fears masks could damage mental health as COVID-19 curbs tightened in schools

> A senior Conservative has said he fears mask-wearing in schools could damage children's mental health as the Government insisted the extra precaution would help keep pupils learning.
>
> Robert Halfon chair of the Commons education select committee, said the risks from Covid-19 need to be balanced against the risks to children's wellbeing.
>
> (Amy Gibbons, *Independent*, 2 January 2022)

Halfon is quoted in the article arguing that masks are "really inhibitory to the natural expressions of learning in children involving speech and facial expression" and compared the school environment with working offices where adults were not required to wear them.

In the *Telegraph*, a comment article by Tim Stanley began with a suggestion that the Omicron variant was no worse than "a mild cold" and that as children are

in any case least susceptible to the virus, their health cannot be the reason for the mask requirement. "My suspicion is that the teaching unions have insisted upon this as a novel method of keeping the little blighters quiet." This is presented in a light-hearted tone which allows a defense of exaggeration for humorous effect. Headlined "Masks in schools are as pointless as they are cruel", the article goes on in a more obviously earnest tone: "But it is cruel, wickedly – and injurious to mental health." This is then linked to the wider threat such rule and regulations present: "The justification – always – is that in order to preserve our freedom we must give up a bit more freedom: one last heave! […] By reinforcing hysteria, Covid restrictions only build the case for more Covid restrictions" (Tim Stanley, *Telegraph*, 3 January 2022).

A more carefully argued example of this discourse can be found in an article ("Masking children is illogical and irrational") by Sunetra Gupta, Professor of theoretical epidemiology at the University of Oxford,[5] in which she argues that the school mask policy is ethically irrational because the interests of children in avoiding such restrictions outweigh the interests of the older people – primarily teachers – who (she suggests) are intended to be protected the policy. In any case, she suggests this does not arise given that "mask mandates do not work and the few formal trials that have been conducted show no credible effect". This, in her view, provides an even stronger logical argument against masks in schools (Sunetra Gupta, *Telegraph*, 10 January 2022).

The Tim Stanley *Telegraph* example above is perhaps one of the few presented here which get close to constructing their own moral panic to which they are reacting explicitly, in that it sets out key aspects such as a folk devil manufacturing the panic (unions), victims under threat (schoolchildren) and a ratcheting up of state power via a 'hysterical' (that is, *disproportionate*) response.[6] 'Think of the kids' becomes a new front in the struggle and allows the attack to be more focused not on a general folk devil of the tyrannical state, but the specific (and traditional) right-wing target of the educational establishment, including the teaching trade unions.[7]

As with the previous 'Freedom Day' of July 2021, there was also an alternative discourse around masks as offering mutuality.

An *Observer* article reported charities' concerns about the lifting of rules on the public wearing of masks ("Keep wearing masks, charities urge as COVID-19 measures are lifted in England"), quoting the policy director of Kidney Care UK who suggested that kidney patients are 'understandably anxious' and that they 'feel abandoned' (Fiona Loud, quoted by James Tapper, *Observer*, 22 January 2022). Another campaigner called for continued mask-wearing 'because there is no way of knowing if the person behind you in the queue is immunocompromised'. Professor Stephen Reicher, a behavioral scientist at the University of St Andrews, argues that the government is 'refusing to protect us'. This particular rhetorical manoeuvre puts the reader together with the anxious and the immunocompromised – 'us' includes everyone here – and avoids the implicit othering that many of the examples presented here offer the public.

Some articles allowed those impacted to speak more directly:

My mask is staying on – despite Boris Johnson's disregard for the vulnerable

> One person's restriction is another's protection. So as the sibling of someone who has a learning disability, I will keep wearing a mask. Boris Johnson's decision to ditch masks shows blatant disregard for people with learning disabilities like my sister Raana.
>
> (Saba Salman, Independent, 22 January 2022)

This first-person article emphasized the heightened risk which those with learning disabilities face from COVID-19 and, again, underlines how the "lifting of restrictions to benefit the majority simply limits options for the minority".

It is worth noting that these latter two articles do not directly address the 'think of the children' aspect of those immediately above; instead, they exchange the threat to children (as a moral risk) with the threat to a particular minority – those who are particularly clinically vulnerable, implying a moral risk to the social order in terms of an unstated assumption of mutuality and co-operation.

Case study: COP26 – masks and the climate change conference

In the autumn of 2021, COVID-19 infections had begun to rise from around 28,000 in mid-September to 47,000 by mid-October (Cases in the UK | Coronavirus in the UK, n.d.). At the same time, there was some concern about the safety of the COP26 UN conference on climate change which was due to be held in Glasgow between 31 October and 13 November. An *Independent* article just before the conference noted that while some activists travelling to the conference were concerned about the risks, the conference could be held safely "as long as COVID-19 security measures such as physical distancing, proper ventilation and masks are employed. But those rules must apply to everyone, unlike in Britain's House of Commons where staff members and journalists are required to wear masks, but lawmakers aren't…" (AP newswire, *Independent*, 30 October 2021). The implication here being not just that (as evidenced in the initial House of Commons example above) those working in the parliamentary estate were not working in a safe environment, but that MPs saw themselves as somehow separate from, or above, the rules imposed on others.

At the opening ceremony on 1 November, Boris Johnson was photographed unmasked while sitting next to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and environmentalist David Attenborough, both of whom (along with almost all other delegates) were wearing masks. One article suggested that the British public would want to protect Attenborough (often referred to as a 'national treasure' (e.g. Nast, 2016) primarily due to his long career writing producing and presenting natural history documentaries for the BBC) from the carelessness of Johnson's actions:

Britain to Boris: please just wear a mask around David Attenborough

> It is genuinely quite difficult to imagine a less appropriate occasion for the prime minister not to wear a mask.
>
> […]

> By not doing the really very simple thing of hooking a bit of cloth over his mouth and nose, Johnson has, as is his wont, reduced the very serious to the faintly absurd. Don't take umbrage with the response; examine the cause. If we just had a prime minister who could behave responsibly, we would indeed all be talking about the climate crisis.
>
> (Rupert Hawksley, *Independent*, 3 November 2021)

The article discusses CNN reporter Christiane Amanpour's interview with Johnson and focuses on Johnson's irresponsibility in order to imply his unsuitability as a national leader (especially on a global stage). For our purposes though, we can find in this episode another example of mask-wearing as a reasonable response to the COVID-19 risk.

Another article at the time referred to "our prime minister recklessly endangering the man who, to many, embodies the fragile Earth we live on", "reluctant to modify his behavior even the tiniest amount" (Caitlin Moran, The *Times*, 4 November 2021). Others quoted celebrities suggesting that the Prime Minister is demonstrating that he does not "actually care about other people" as a mask "shows you care for others" and that if you "can't be asked to wear a mask" then you "should be ashamed" (Louis Chilton, *Independent*, 2 November 2021).

Not wearing a mask in such circumstances is therefore not just a technical, practical issue, but a moral failing; a lack of empathy illustrating a moral risk to the UK both in terms of the potential loss of Attenborough and the wider risk to social solidarity that the mask represents.[8]

Conclusion

Critcher's three dimensions of discursive construction were summarized by Cohen thus:

> Imagine ranking (high/medium/low) each of the following dimensions: (1) the perceived threat to moral order posed by an issue; (2) the extent to which it is seen to be amenable to social control; and (3) how far it invites ethical self-formation.
>
> (Cohen, 2011b: 242)

From a slightly different perspective, the archetypal moral panic has been described as "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" (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009: 2). These approaches can help us situate the preceding discussion as moral panics.

The moral panic surrounding the lifting of mask mandates (Moral panic #1: mutuality) can be summarized as projecting a demand for empathy and mutuality as a core element of the moral order susceptible to control via state regulation. Its entrepreneurs come to see themselves as defending the vulnerable against individualists whose behaviors are antithetical to the coherence of liberal society. We

might also acknowledge that Cohen's suggestion of 'anti-denial' moral discourses fits here; the scientific consensus around the benefits to others of mask wearing is asserted against the dangerous denials by the irrational folk devils of the anti-mask movement.

Moral panic #2 (Freedom) alternatively sees the social order eroded by these new restrictions on personal liberty, which limit our ability to communicate via facial expressions and also damage the health and well-being of children. The deviants in this discursive construction are those who, maliciously or through ignorance, invite and welcome authoritarianism; that is, various medical and epidemiological 'experts', politicians, and public commentators. The people therefore must force the government to control this threat by lifting all regulations, with the moral entrepreneurs from this side constructing themselves as protectors of long-held individual freedoms.

In the case studies discussed here, these two competing discourses emerged within the British press, involving moral positions, asserted to varying degrees by authoritative actors in order to influence the public perception of a risk issue via media constructions and amplify the 'deviancy' of those they seek to present as folk devils.

Notes

1 This chapter will focus on England rather than the UK due to the extent to which devolved powers in Scotland, Wales and other parts of the UK meant that they were to some extent able to set their own paths in terms of public health responses.
2 Following a February agreement to withdraw US and allied forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban took immediate control of the country and there was concern that the UK's evacuation had been poorly organized, leaving behind many Afghans who had been supporting the UK's role in the country (Nevett, 2022).
3 Government communications used the term 'face covering' to make a technical distinction between the items used by members of the public (which are not officially designated as personal protective equipment – PPE – or regulated as medical devices) and those masks used in professional contexts (*GOV.UK*, 2020b).
4 The reference here to 'confusion' is a little disingenuous. None of the interviewees are confused; while one trade union representative calls for mask-wearing guidance to be given legal force "to avoid confusion", it is assumed that those who choose not to wear masks "would not wear a mask if I asked them to" and that workers are "at risk of verbal abuse and physical abuse" (interviewees quoted in Chiara Giordano, *Independent*, 19 July 2021) when requesting others wear a mask. Implicitly then, it is suggested that 'others' are reckless in their lack of concern for the vulnerable.
5 Professor Gupta was one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, a controversial open letter in which a group of academic scientists rejected lockdown approaches to public health in favor of 'herd immunity' (Kulldorff et al., 2020). The declaration was criticized by others in the international public health community (Sample and Syal, 2020).
6 The issue of disproportionality has become a contentious issue in the theory of moral panics (Lashmar, 2013: 63; McCready, 2020; Rohloff et al., 2013: 21) and it is not in the scope of this chapter to address this in any detail. Nevertheless, in terms of COVID-19 and facemasks, disproportion in either direction is difficult to assess. The response to the lifting of mask restrictions for instance, that suggests the marginalized

and vulnerable would suffer substantial limitations in mobility and ultimately a threat to their lives, was certainly at the time difficult to measure objectively. On the other hand, the risks of allowing government restrictions to continue down the road to tyranny are in one sense moot given the lifting of restrictions, but also arguable misplaced in the sense that various recent policy developments (e.g. the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the possibility of the UK leaving the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (Amnesty UK, 2022; Boycott-Owen, 2022)) already suggest the government is intent on an authoritarian stance irrespective of COVID-19 and facemasks.

7 This is the 'blob' which former Education Secretary Michael Gove established in his anti-elite populist rhetoric from 2010 onwards (Craske, 2021).

8 It should be noted that other photographs taken at the same time seem to show periods in which both Johnson and Attenborough are unmasked and in which Johnson wears a mask while Attenborough does not (BBC Newsbeat, 2021); (Nicholson, 2021). The photograph made the *Telegraph's* end-of-year 'Iconic Pictures of 2021'.

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8 Voices of reason, voices of moralization

Analyzing moralizing discourse in scientific claims in news media in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden, 2020–2022

Frida Skog and Ragnar Lundström

Background and aim

The first Swedish case of COVID-19 was confirmed on January 31, 2020, and the disease was classified constituting a danger to society on February 1 (Regeringen, 2020). The Public Health Agency of Sweden ([Folkhälsomyndigheten], FHM) reported local transmission a couple of weeks later, and on March 11 – when WHO (2020) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic – the first Swedish causality was confirmed. Significantly, the Swedish response came to represent that of an outlier by international comparison. The commonly applied strategies of closing down and issuing curfews were largely avoided here, FHM instead employed a strategy primarily relying on voluntary reduction of interpersonal contacts, i.e. "physical distancing". Guided by the aim to "flatten the curve", recommendations for working from home, avoiding public transport and travelling, and that individuals over the age of 70 should stay at home as much as possible, were also issued in conjunction with the banning of larger public events. Further differentiating and conditioning the Swedish response is the fact that it was controlled by an expert Government agency with little political interference as Swedish law mandates responsibilities for the prevention and control of infectious diseases to the FHM. As the Swedish constitution prohibits ministerial rule, it is very uncommon for politicians to act against agency advice. During these early stages of the pandemic, State and Government representatives – including televised speeches by both the prime minister and head of state – took part in signaling support for the strategies employed by FHM, appealing to the "common sense" and "individual responsibility" of all Swedes. Compared to many other countries, and perhaps especially to its Nordic neighbors, Sweden was hit hard in the early stages of the pandemic, confirming 4395 casualties in a population of 10 million by the end of June 2022. Following these developments, the emergence of calls for increased action came to rise, and responsibilities for pandemic action were shifted in the autumn of 2020 when a special pandemic law, giving the Government authority to introduce infection control measures, was taken up by the Swedish Parliament.

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While the Swedish response to the COVID-19 pandemic stands out as extraordinary, the analysis presented here directs attention to the ways in which these developments came to be debated in public discourse. It has been argued (Calmfors, 2021) that traditional political actors have been rather invisible in debates about the pandemic and its response in Sweden. Instead, the critical voices gaining space and traction in the public arena during these times – alleging that the FHM downplayed the seriousness of the situation and responded too softly to the pandemic and making calls for stricter action – were not primarily representing political parties, but rather researchers. Primarily constituted by virologists and epidemiologists, this group was represented in public debates by individual actors as well as collectively organized groups, commenting and criticizing the responsible authorities, primarily FHM and its representatives. As we have observed elsewhere (Skog & Lundström, 2022) these claims for increased action were in part drawing on moralizing discourse, targeting the inefficiencies of the current strategies as well as the inadequacies of authorities and their representatives. While researchers have been identified as a prominent group of claims-makers (Ungar, 1992, 2011), the relationship between scientific truth claims and moralization is complicated by the fact that the categories of science and morals are commonly understood as oppositional. Nevertheless, calls for action regulating public behavior and morality often draw on scientific statements. It is also a fact that panic reactions are intimately related to scientific matters, for example genetic modification of food (Howarth, 2013), climate change (Rohloff, 2011; Ungar, 2011), medical hazards (Mannion & Small, 2019), and of key importance for this context in response to pandemic outbreaks (Gilman, 2010), including the COVID-19 developments emerging in 2019 (Hier, 2021a, 2021b; Prasad, 2020; Skog & Lundström, 2022; Vieten, 2020). As moral claims can become enduring discourses, engraved in collective consciousness as "knowledge" (Ungar (2011), it is of key importance to provide further understanding for the ways in which the discourses of science and moralization are related and deployed in the public arena.

More specifically, this chapter explores in further detail how representations of scholar and expert identities, and scientific truth claims, are employed in moralizing discourse emerging in Swedish news media regarding the government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is informed first by the concepts of "folk devils" and "moral entrepreneurs", commonly associated with the "classic" moral panic framework (Cohen, 2002). It is informed also by understanding panic reactions, i.e. overreactions, as emerging on the one hand dialectically in relation to implicatory denial, i.e. under reactions (Hier, 2021b), and on the other as a form of "medical populism" (Lasco, 2020). In other words, the collected media content has been analyzed focusing on the ways in which moralizing discourse is employed in ways that contribute to constructing "folk devils" and/or "moral entrepreneurs". Such observations are then contextualized in order to provide an understanding of their relationship to implicatory denial and populism. In relation to the growing literature about medical populism (Lasco & Curato, 2019), the analysis aims to make a contribution to the research field by providing empirical grounds for further understanding the relationships between moralizing discourse, science

and populism currently emerging in the public arena globally in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. With these arguments in mind, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

a How are scholar and expert identities, and scientific truth claims, employed in moralizing discourse?
b How do such constructions contribute to constructions of "folk devils" and/or "moral entrepreneurs"?
c How can this be understood in relation to "implicatory denial" and "populism"?

Empirically, this study is based on a sample of newspaper articles collected using the Retriever database (www.retriever.se), including majority of all Swedish print media publications. The sample includes articles about COVID-19 published between March 2020 and June 2022. Reporting was intense in the first one and a half year of the pandemic and later fading significantly in volume during the spring winter of 2022. Collected using the search terms "corona", "covid", "pandemic" and then manually selecting articles in which researchers are portrayed in detail or are provided space to express themselves in relation to the pandemic, the analyzed data set includes articles published by all nationally distributed daily broadsheets.

Analysis

By and large, news media narratives emerging in Sweden during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the logic of moral panic (Skog & Lundström, 2022). While marked by traits traditionally associated with panic reactions – highlighting risks and flaws among particular folk devils, as well as depictions of the victims and heroes of medical experts and health care workers – they ultimately aim to regulate behaviors among the general public. In the wake of the pandemic, the autonomy of citizens is framed as a key risk, as self-management and self-surveillance appears insufficient for protecting citizens and the welfare state. However, emerging in Sweden during the spring of 2020, and gaining significant attention throughout the pandemic, is also another form of critique, voiced primarily by scholars, targeting the Swedish COVID-19 response in different ways. In the sections below, we will first describe and discuss the problems these claims target, looking primarily at the social constructions of folk-devils. Secondly, we will direct attention to the ways in which scholar identities are portrayed in news media content.

Reckless superspreaders and coldhearted bureaucrats

It is not entirely easy to accurately date the outbreak of the moral panic, especially as the panic was also spread on social media by researchers and others. In the spring of 2020, many articles, opinion pieces and chronicles were written with researchers, active and emeritus, as interviewees or signatories. However, the first major outbreak by scientists in the printed press took place in mid-April 2020, i.e. 2.5 months after COVID-19 was initially established in Sweden. It is an opinion piece that bears all the characteristics of moral panic and is signed by a group that

will gain the nickname "the 22 researchers" and will return in the reporting through the period with a message that characterizes the debate, namely that the Swedish strategy of dealing with the infection through voluntary physical distancing puts the population in great danger and should be replaced with mandatory lockdowns. The seriousness of the matter is underlined, if nothing else, by the dramatic tone, including gloomy predictions of death and the use of war metaphors:

> There is a state of war in families too here, as many would prefer to keep their children at home, but authorities tell them they must go to school. While many teenagers live in quarantine, others are having barbecues and going to cafés. How will we win the fight against COVID-19 under such circumstances? How will we win the fight when there is no trust? How will we win the fight, when death rates are only going up, and those who are in charge keep insisting the opposite? How will we win the fight, when elected politicians hide behind Government officials, officials who are completely in charge. Officials who so far have exhibited no talent neither for predicting nor limiting the developments we are now facing.
>
> (*Dagens Nyheter*, April 14, 2020)

Describing decisions made by Swedish officials and government bureaucracy as both insufficient and inhumane, researchers express alarm over a scientifically ignorant system indifferent to human suffering, they legitimize their claims using their scientific expertise, and they also make use of dramatization and moralizing discourse. Calling for the need to "inculcate in society that "anyone can be contagious" the countermeasures they suggest the state should implement include school closures, bans on restaurant activities, mandatory use of protective equipment, mass testing and quarantine. These claims are rearticulated throughout the pandemic until the panic subsides in late winter and spring 2022.

In these claims, we find that researcher identities and scientific truth claims are employed in moralizing discourse by which two kinds of folk devils are highlighted: first, it points out risks associated with the careless citizens, opting to go about their daily lives as usual, without taking proper consideration of the risks involved with the spreading of the virus. This is a previously well-documented folk devil, being observed in moralizing discourse about COVID-19 in Sweden (Skog & Lundström, 2022). Primarily located among the elite classes, the partying, decadent and careless superspreaders are used as targets in discourses in which they allegedly allow their frivolous and cosmopolitan lifestyle preferences to take precedence over the health and lives of others. While explicitly pointing its disciplinary attention to the wrong-doers, its aim is directed more importantly towards the morals of the general population. Contrasting the quarantined teenagers in the quote above, by force sent to school against morally correct parental guidance, emerges the questionable risk-averse barbecuing and café-going teens and citizens. By implication, the moral behavior here is to not become a burden for the public health apparatus, and to keep your children at home. While these kinds of narratives reproduce notions of health and citizenship in terms of individual responsibility and construct the moral high ground in terms of self-disciplinary

management, they also draw heavily on a discourse by which the general population is constructed rather as morally incapable; either inherently untrustworthy on the one hand or marred by fear and distrust on the other. In a situation when anyone can be contagious, knowingly, or not, there is no space left for agency.

Further strengthening these kinds of moralizing discursive strategies, by which public health is constructed as being contingent on the individual capacity for self-discipline, are public discussions about vaccinations, rising during the summer of 2021 focusing on questions regarding vaccine passes and compulsory vaccination. A key target in these discussions are those questioning the benefits of vaccines, and the anti-vaxxer movement. While the anti-vaxxer movement has aroused fear elsewhere, for example in the United States (Capurro et al., 2018), it has up until this point been a rather invisible folk-devil in the Swedish context, being a country with internationally very high levels of public vaccination. Drawing on the notion that fighting the virus constitutes a battle, this kind of narrative can be exemplified by a longer interview piece in which a professor of virology is presented as someone who "fights corona day and night" and has dedicated his life to fighting "the most dangerous viruses in the world", and is pictured in karate uniform, in fighting position (*Dagens Nyheter*, March 5, 2021). Here, the uneducated populace emerges as an argument for the importance of having researchers appearing in the media, "teaching people about vaccines and contributing facts". In the text, the anti-vaxxer movement embodies anti-science and is framed as a threat to society and the public health fight against COVID-19. The notion that the researcher, being in possession of scientific knowledge, is the weapon that can win this battle is thus reproduced. In other similar narratives about vaccination, voices representing the academic expertise take part in employing moralizing discourse to construct and promote their arguments. In *Dagens Nyheter*, on September 24, 2021, for example, two virologists refer to singing and screaming in overcrowded arenas, in conjunction with poor vaccination coverage, to explain why it is risky to allow public events and not require vaccine passes. On January 5, 2022, one of them develops the argument in *Sydsvenskan*:

> Imagine a scenario where we have airborne transmission of a virus with a 20% mortality. Fortunately, there is a vaccine, protecting 95% against death. AT the same time, we also know that the unvaccinated are spreading the virus much more than the vaccinated do. Would it be morally justified to require vaccine passes for situations when many people are gathering? […] If the answer is no, there are those who feel that one person's right to participate always trumps others' right to live and be healthy […] My impression (confirmed anecdotally by colleagues working clinically) is that there is a large group of young people between 16 and 40, who have refrained from getting the vaccine because they can't be bothered, not for ideological reasons.

Secondly, marking this panic reaction is a focus on another kind of folk devil, also previously identified in the moral panic literature, namely the cold-hearted bureaucrat (Cohen, 2002), observed for example as a culprit in the killing of Baby P criminal case (Warner, 2013). In Cohen's words, a "storm-trooper of the nanny state" who also constitutes a "soft target with little power and little access to the battlefields of cultural politics", the bureaucrat folk devil is not only uncaring, but

incompetent and driven by an ambition to protect his own position and prestige. A commonly advanced criticism is that FHM's "contemptuous attitude" and "soft recommendations" are dangerously passive. In the middle of the summer 2020, the previously mentioned 22 researchers publish a second opinion piece under the heading "What is the Public Health Agency really looking for?", concluding that the responsible officials at the FHM are "highly dangerous" (*Göteborgs-Posten*, July 20, 2020). Two speculative reasons are given for FHM's unwillingness to intervene with stricter regulations. The first is prestige at FHM, the second is that FHM has a hidden agenda for herd immunity even if it is denied: "It is a strange double game, a kind of stealth strategy, which is denied and confirmed at the same time."

Further questioning the function of the bureaucratic management of the pandemic, scholars also attack FHM's dry and technical bureaucratic language as being too moderate to convey the emergency of the current situation. Rather, a more dramatizing and moralizing tone is called for, a tone that makes it clear that it is people's lives and sufferings that are at stake, not technical issues that concern the working environment in healthcare. The matter-of-factly, and even non-moralizing, tone of the FHM is criticized, and their refraining from more emotionally charged communication is framed as too cold, and for downplaying the threats at hand. For example, in an opinion piece published in *Dagens Nyheter* on April 6, 2021, a sociologist claims that the Swedish way of requiring State bureaucrats to express emotions subtly and distantly can obscure danger and undermine conditions for making moral judgments. More tears from those in power could have given a stronger behavioral response from the citizens, she says:

> In Sweden, we normally take comfort in having formalized procedures that all agree on that we can follow when the next crisis happens. The problem is that crises seldom repeat themselves. Maybe we should start thinking about how our feelings can help us to both communicate and make decisions, and how our emotional culture can support a more rational course of action.

What would have happened if the Government, having been so close to the experts at FHM, had included practitioners and care staff continuously reporting about the concrete consequences of the pandemic? If decisions and information campaigns had been grounded not only in numbers but in ward floor experiences maybe the public would have not only trusted authorities, but also changed their behaviors.

Emerging here is the idea that the dispassionate language of the bureaucrat, abstaining from dramatic and moral resonance, is unethical and fails to protect citizens under these extreme circumstances. Taken together, these observations show how academic scholar and expert identities are employed in moralizing discourse, in part contrasting the morally superior citizens to portrayals of the careless superspreaders, and in part drawing on the notion of the cold-hearted bureaucrat – soft, detached, and self-serving – in their calls for stricter action.

The omniscient tellers of truth

Turning now to focus on the ways in which researcher identities are constructed, we have discussed above how researchers occupy the role of claims-makers – or

"moral entrepreneurs" employing the classic moral panic conceptual framework – in the panic reaction rising in the spring and summer of 2020. Scholars take part in making calls for action, criticizing poor policies, and suggesting good policies and good governance. Largely, these claims are drawing on references to scientific knowledge and findings, and they draw also on the notion that political decision-making should be guided by scientific knowledge, and that the dangers at hand are linked to the compromising of this logic. Commonly in the material, sharply contrasting the cold-hearted bureaucrat, unintelligent and lacking moral compass, the researcher appears as someone who not only possesses nearly omniscient expertise. In these narratives, researchers are constructed having special abilities for interpreting scientific evidence, and for outlining rational and sound solutions, contrasting the sluggish and politicized top-down governance as exemplified by the FHM and its representatives. But researchers are not only marked by their scientific expertise, they are also framed as by trade occupying innate moral judgement. That it is not exclusively their scientific expertise that separates researchers from laymen, but also and perhaps most significantly their moral judgement, is illustrated in the quote below in which a philosopher defines the capacities and characteristics of experts:

> Of course, experts have access to the cumulative body of knowledge in the area, but that's not the only reason they are experts, but because they know where knowledge ends. They know what it is that we don't know. Hopefully, they also have one more important thing, namely judgement. This is what we are putting our trust in. Judgement comes from knowing all the facts, and their limits, but also the capacity for seeing the whole picture. It is about taking previous experiences into consideration in new unique situations, that hasn't happened before in this exact way.
>
> (*Dagens Nyheter*, April 2, 2020)

As the quote illustrates, there are primarily two components grounding the legitimacy of scholar experts: first their insights and overview of scientific knowledge, and secondly their capacity for translating this body of experience into judgement. These two notions are often reproduced in various ways in public discourse during this time.

First, and often recurring throughout the material are narratives by which the scientific excellence of scholar experts is used in order to legitimize their claims as well as to, by implication, undermine the legitimacy of the FHM. When scholar experts are presented, their academic titles and area of expertise are almost always mentioned. Being established in the research community and being in a position from which you can evaluate scientific knowledge claims is crucial for scholarly legitimacy. During this time, knowledge claims with references to scientific articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals become highly publicized news items, and the capacity to evaluate them the gold standard for status and legitimacy in the public arena. While this is not surprising, especially not at this point in time, it is also interesting to note that as panic reactions about the pandemic and its management are surging, researcher identities and their knowledge and legitimacy claims also become taken up in the public arena and in political conflicts regarding the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. A crucial characteristic emerging here

is how conflicts between scholar experts and the Government officials at FHM are constructed. One commonly occurring claim reproducing this is how researchers report how the FHM are not responding to their calls for change, often described in terms of unanswered mails. In line with the targeting of government bureaucracy discussed above, this is sometimes explained as an expression of using bureaucracy to delegitimize scientific voices. By appealing to sentiments of powerlessness and to exclusion from the executive process, and to resentment against the prevailing system, scientists are presented at times, this can also be framed as a conflict between the international researcher community, and local Swedish Government officials. That the researchers who attack FHM are at the frontline of science, and are world-leading, is often highlighted in the reporting with formulations such as "some of the country's best researchers" (*Expressen*, May 4, 2021), and "local group thinking versus an international perspective" is conversely used to legitimize their claims and undermine strategies of the FHM. This way, the attacks of some scholar experts against the FHM also reproduce the way in which Swedish strategies differ from the more strict strategies employed in many other countries.

Secondly, regarding the more subjective component of the two primary capacities of researchers, the ability to translate experience into judgement, this is also commonly reproduced in the material. In describing morally sound decision making, researchers are reported to incorporate skills such as attention to scientific detail, and knowledge of the scientific processes. In line with the notion that researchers have extraordinary abilities for making judgement, expert scholars are commonly allowed to exercise moral judgement in areas that are only weakly linked to their area of expertise, as well as in relation to decisions that are simultaneously labelled as "balancing acts" or a matter of individual conscience. Asked to explain the behavioral mechanism behind why people do not wear face masks, a virologist proposes that a strict recommendation can turn "fearful cowards into responsible citizens" (*Sydsvenskan*, August 18, 2020). In the same text, invited to guide citizens in determining legitimate travelling, he also says that while it is risky to travel, it can be "valuable" if you "felt bad for a long time and look forward to a long trip". Answering the same question, a philosopher says she thinks it should be up to the individual to decide, but while she says that travelling for pleasure to Germany is not smart, you should of course be allowed to travel to bury your mother.

In addition, and in line with the conflict between scientists and Government officials, the capacity for making judgements can also be constructed in ways that strengthen this conflict further. An illustrative example of this, making use of the parent-child metaphor to illustrate the difference between researchers and the FHM, is presented in an interview with a researcher in *Dagens Nyheter* on March 26, 2022. In this text, a virologist describes a situation in which his child broke his cell phone charging cord and then failed to adjust his behavior to this new knowledge about how power cords break from being stretched too hard. The story about the unwise child, not listening to his father's good advice, serves as an analogy for the FHM's handling of the pandemic, and its refusal of adjusting its strategies to researchers' requests that they should have more direct influence over the authorities' work. In a previous piece, the same researcher ironizes over laymen with delusions

of grandeur who lack the humility and scientific judgement required to be able to analyze information competently. Here, he relates to the ideal of "old doctors who can quickly distinguish between seriously and not-so-seriously ill patients" (*Dagens Nyheter*, March 9, 2022). Another conception about "understanding pandemics" emerges as "fantasy" (*Svenska Dagbladet*, September 13, 2020).

As this can be described in terms of an attempt to discursively construct Government officials with limited experience in the field of scientific research, and that the capacity for making judgement is linked to time spent in the trenches, it should be noted that the expert officials working at the FHM, i.e. the actors commonly targeted in the attacks against the strategies organized by Government bureaucrats, are experienced in terms of clinical as well as scientific achievements. Complicating these observations further is the fact that in the Swedish context, researchers employed at Government universities are technically Government officials too. In researcher attacks on the FHM, the role of the folk devil is played by an expert civil servant with research competence, while the role as the moral entrepreneur is played by expert civil servants with research competence. Nevertheless, the research competence and moral judgement of the bureaucracy is commonly described as low, and the solution presented is to provide outside researchers more power to control government interventions and to allow the state to intervene very quickly in line with new research that is published.

In retrospect, it cannot be denied that the media debate did have impact on Swedish policy. Sweden saw a change in COVID-19 legislation with clearer political control, and the Corona Commission was created, which consists of external researchers who are provided some insights into bureaucratic decision-making processes, concessions in line with the demands that many scientists articulated during the pandemic. But at the same time, it should also be pointed out that no major changes in the "voluntary" strategic response organized by the FHM during the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented.

Conclusions: technocratic populism

In the panic reaction following the COVID-19 pandemic and its management in Sweden, researcher identities and scientific knowledge claims are employed in moralizing discourse, promoting apocalyptic predictions, and calling for interventions in the form of more rigorous restrictions and tighter regulation of people's lives, and questioning the Government's reliance on voluntary physical distancing, to avoid a catastrophe. While further self-discipline will be needed, behaviors can no longer be understood as a matter of private morale exclusively. According to Hier (2021b) panic reactions, i.e. overreactions, are produced dialectically in relation to the social organization of denial or "implicatory denial" (Cohen, 2013), i.e. underreactions. Following this line of reasoning, the forms of moralizing discourse we have observed in the Swedish context could be described as emerging dialectically, in relation to official attempts at downplaying risks and soft response strategies. While these claims and attacks are primarily articulated by and linked to scientific experts in public discourse, and as mentioned in the introduction,

traditional political parties have appeared relatively invisible in debates about COVID-19 in Sweden during the pandemic (Calmfors, 2021). In Sweden however, parties representing the right-wing and nationalist-populist opposition have also voiced support for stricter measures and increased lockdown. In comparison to other countries, such as the United States and Brazil where right-wing populist governments conversely have opposed stricter measures (Lasco, 2020), the situation in Sweden could be argued to be the opposite (Baldwin, 2021), something that could perhaps also be understood in dialectical terms.

What we find is that researchers' moralizing arguments are not aimed at increasing democratic government by involving citizens more in decision processes, but to change the system to one that is responsive to researchers' opinions, i.e. a technocratic society. While it has been proposed that panic reactions may be understood as grassroots movements attacking elite groups, the one described here is formulated in more classic ways, as an elite reaction against the ignorant masses and a paralyzed political establishment. They are in Cohen's terms "anti-denial", claiming that society must denounce normalization and tolerance. Disagreement about the reasonableness of regulations is described as silence, indifference, and cover-ups. The observations described above show how researcher identities and scientific truth claims are employed in moralizing discourse, and how attacks targeting the Swedish COVID-19 strategy, and its FHM organizers target Government bureaucracy as self-serving, unintelligent, and coldhearted. We have also shown how researchers become constructed as omniscient tellers of truth, with crucial capacities also for making moral judgements. At the heart of the attacks drawing on these forms of moralizing discourse, commonly associated with previous observations of panic reactions, is the claim that the strategies for managing public health response should be guided more directly by scientific expertise rather than politically appointed Government officials. Previous literature has shown how expert influence on public policy implementation, how professional knowledge in the scientific field routinely gets translated as moral authority, and that expert claims can move public discourse even in issues when citizens are directly affected (Memmi, 2003; Vassy, 2006). Highlighting the efficacy of scientific investigation, and the competence of scientists, proponents of scientism seek legitimacy by appealing to technocratic competence which distinguishes the proponents of the establishment. Earlier research has shown that such sentiments transcend the left-right-divide, shows populist features and has previously been observed in Europe (Havlík, 2019, Buštíková & Guasti, 2019; Perottino & Guasti, 2020) and Latin America (De la Torre, 2013). As mentioned above, the concept of "medical populism" (Lasco & Curato, 2019) describes how health emergencies are used in performances of populist politics. Its key logic consists in drawing on health emergencies in articulating antagonisms between "the people" and "the establishment", often through simplifying and spectacularizing rhetorics in order to forge divisions and drive political agendas.

The observations discussed here analyzes COVID-19 as being socially constructed, in part in relation to a dialectic relationship between panic and denial, and in part in relation to the rising influence of populist discourse. We have observed

how scholar expert identities become voices for sharp and highly publicized attacks on the Swedish COVID-19 strategy that share characteristics commonly associated with populism. Claiming to speak on behalf of the people, framing the people as threatened both by external threats as well as the establishment. As argued by Brubaker (2020a), populism is commonly also associated with majoritarianism, anti-institutionalism, protectionism, and aims for re-politicization of depoliticized domains of life. Drawing on these observations and the moral panic framework, Lasco and Curato (2019) presents "medical populism" as taking place when health emergencies are used in performances of populist politics. At its heart, medical populism articulates an antagonism between "the people" and "the establishment". Using this framework for analyzing the ways in which politicians in Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro) and the United States (Donald Trump) have responded to the pandemic, Lasco (2020) identifies how their use of simplifying and spectacular discourse forges precisely such divisions. Similar observations have been made by Prasad (2020) in India, and Vieten (2020) in Germany. Brubaker (2020b) correspondingly observes responses to the pandemic as being marked by hostility to experts, commonly found in populist politics, but that they uncharacteristically downplay the crisis and are anti-protectionist. As we have shown above, developments emerging in Sweden by contrast mirror those observed elsewhere. Moralizing discourse is not only a tool of populist politicians and sensationalistic journalists, but entering into the public domain, and engaging in political deliberation, they too become embedded in contexts marked by the discourses of, for example, moralization and populism. It is of key importance for future developments that voices representing science translate into public and political discourse in ways that promote democratic deliberation. It is of relevance for future researchers to investigate the ways in which the language of science and scientists intersect with other actors and interests in the public domain.

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9 Neo-liberal background of pandemic-related moral panic in Polish press discourse

Jacek Burski

Introduction

In this chapter,[1] I would like to focus on the narratives present in the Polish press discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat it posed to the Polish economy and society at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in Poland. My initial scope of interest was the period between March and May 2020. The first three months of the pandemic were a key phase in Polish media debate from the perspective of the emerging interpretations of what the COVID-19 would eventually bring to Polish society. However, while working on the material, I decided to focus on selected articles published only in March 2020 as I found they contained enough data for my analysis.

Despite the small number of confirmed cases of the virus in March 2020, the media were already highly alert, and the debate was focused on the anticipation of the growing number of infections and a likely crisis in the healthcare system. The second axis of debate (and central to my work) was concentrated around the expected economic crisis and its consequences for the Polish economy. My main objective was to reconstruct the dominant frames of argumentation relating to the diagnosis of the socio-economic situation, including the visions of the coming crisis, the main social actors engaged in the debate and the expected reaction of the authorities. The following goal was to outline the hidden structures that permeated the debate and have their roots in the neo-liberal doxa referring to the domination of private over public property and entrepreneurs over workers.

Assuming that the Polish public debate has been framed by the neo-liberal economic paradigm (i.e. the domination of the free market logic, a focus on the entrepreneurs' perspective, and the marginalisation of workers' voices), I would like to trace how the main press dailies created an atmosphere of fear around the expected economic crisis, thus strengthening the voice of one of the groups involved in the debate (business elites) and weakening the perspective of the others (e.g. workers). I am interested in how the accents were distributed in the analysed media content in the relations between the state, the private sector (entrepreneurs and their organisations) and employees (including trade unions).

I would like to combine the concept of a moral panic (Critcher, 2008; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Cohen, 2011) with a perspective embedded in the methodology

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of critical discourse analysis (CDA), primarily using tools and methods of the discursive-historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). At this point in time, there are not many examples of the use of the moral panic concept in literature to analyse COVID-19 pandemics (Bastian & Berry, 2022; Capurro et al., 2022; Skog & Lundström, 2022). Therefore, it seems promising to combine it within a study based on press discourse analysis.

The analysed material is based on articles from three main Polish newspaper dailies characterised by a centre-left (Gazeta Wyborcza), centre-right (Rzeczpospolita), and right-wing political profile (Gazeta Polska Codziennie). All three titles are among the most prominent and opinion-forming media in the country, and they could be treated as crucial for forming collective interpretations of social phenomena.

The structure of the text is as follows: firstly, I will briefly characterise Polish public discourse in the context of the hegemony of neoliberal assumptions, particularly in relation to the dominance of the social role of an entrepreneur. This role becomes a central category not only in the sense of analytical reflection but also in the context of real political action in a pandemic crisis. ISecondly, I will introduce a theoretical and methodological framework and link it to the concept of moral panic. In the empirical part, I will point out the key features of the discourse of the analysed newspapers and refer to the main arguments related to the assumption of the use of moral panic mechanisms to build political positioning and influence by business elites on the direction of political actions taken by the government in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In search of a neoliberal doxy – Polish discourse on entrepreneurship

The Polish economy underwent a drastic transformation after 1989, shifting from a centrally planned economy to a neo-liberal version of a capitalist market operating in a democratic political system. However, I am not interested in exploring the categorisation of the Polish version of capitalism. I will only point out that the concept of patchwork capitalism closely aligns with my understanding (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2019), where a combination of a market economy and weak development of public and state organisations appears.

I am aware of the broad debate on different aspects of neoliberalism (Burgin, 2012; Slobodian, 2018; Biebricher, 2019; Brown, 2019) as well. However, I would like to focus on the relationship between the state and the market, referring to David Harvey's statement:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.
>
> (Harvey 2005: 2)

The 1990s brought a shift in the political, economic and social framework allowing neoliberal capitalism to emerge and become a hegemonic discursive structure (Gramsci, 1971). As the socio-political context changed, so did the main social actors. Entrepreneurs took centre stage in social life and public debate, replacing the working class, which was receding into the shadows. Entrepreneurs became one of the main subjects of socio-political debate in the new regime and played a crucial role in stabilising the Polish version of capitalism during the first three decades of the new system.

However, with the Law and Justice party coming to power in 2015 (and even earlier (Shields, 2012)), there was a noticeable shift both in social policy (introduction of the social programme "500 plus"[2]) and public debate. After eight years of the rule of the neoliberal Civic Platform, a greater emphasis was placed on social issues and redistribution (the aforementioned "500 plus" programme and the announced but never implemented changes in the tax system to introduce tax progressivity called the "New Deal"). Additionally, the new government put significant pressure on strengthening the conservative profile of Polish society (e.g. tightening of the abortion law which led to the biggest protests in Poland after 1989) and promoted nationalist propaganda (resulting in, among other things, the election of the far-right parties into parliament).

At the same time, it is difficult to prove that the above changes have fundamentally altered the main framework of the discourse on the economy from neoliberal to more social-oriented. This was particularly evident at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which, like most crises, demystified the hidden structures of social discourse. One of the main topics present in the Polish public debate during the analysed period was the condition of Polish enterprises and entrepreneurs There was also a significant shift in referring to the figure of the state, which ceased to be seen as a threat to economic freedom (a popular opinion among neoliberal commentators before the pandemic) and started to be seen as the only possible rescuer from the coming wave of crisis. In this change, moral panic-building mechanisms related to the state of the economy play a key role.

I would like to briefly outline the state of research on Polish discourse, particularly in the context of the role played by the figure of the entrepreneur. Research on public debate in Poland after 1989 has been conducted in the spirit of broadly defined CDA and covers a range of topics (Czyżewski, Dunin, et al., 2010; Czyżewski, Kowalski, et al., 2010). However, there are not many initiatives among them that focus on the thread of the neoliberal framework and its consequences for industrial relations in Poland. In what one can find in the available research, references to the topic of collective labour relations and the unequal description of employers and employees play a dominant role (Kozek, 2003; Czapliński, 2007; Kubisa & Ostrowski, 2011; Figiel & Ostrowski, 2015). I would like to highlight this imbalance between social actors in the labour-related field. The employees, their needs and expectations were mostly described with negative references, including trade unions as representative organisations of the workers, which were pushed to the margins of the debate

as groups of interests with illegitimate demands. On the contrary, the entrepreneurs were described positively:

> The representation of the Polish entrepreneurs in the analysed material is unquestionably positive. They are portrayed as able and intelligent people who are willing to innovate and create the wealth.
>
> (Figiel & Ostrowski, 2015: 77)

This relentlessly positive opinion of entrepreneurs maintained over the years in Polish press and political discourse is one of the pillars of the discursive image of Polish capitalism. They have been the leaders of social change in the last three decades and part of the construction of a structural triad between entrepreneurs, employees, and the state, in which the former have a central function in the economy, the state is seen as an obstacle to business, and employees are absent or marginalised.

Poland and pandemic crisis: health, economy, and work

Due to the limited space, I would like to briefly characterise the main aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis that manifested in Poland from 2020 to 2022, with a particular focus on the first three months after the introduction of the pandemic state in the country. I will add an essential economic summary of the period between 2020 and 2022 as an appropriate context for debates that emerged in the first months of the pandemic crisis as well. The main aim of the text is to reconstruct the narrative of the pandemic crisis in its beginnings and its links with the concept of moral panic. I aim to show the scale of the social, economic, and political challenges faced by Polish society and its institutions in early 2022 and how the country coped with them.

In the Polish case, the first infected patient was confirmed on 4 March 2020. On 16 March, a state of epidemic emergency was introduced in the country and on 20 March, the state of an epidemic. After 16 March, some of industries switched to remote working (including the educational system where online learning was initially introduced until 10 April). Some industries experienced a lockdown (gastronomy and tourism), while others saw a significant increase in workload (logistics, e-commerce). The pandemic caused significant ambivalence in different branches and manifested differently in the public and private sectors.

In the following months, in the public sector, one could observe a deep institutional crisis related to, inter alia, the need for radical reorganisation of the labour process (in healthcare, social care, and public administration). This was also connected to the lack of knowledge about safety procedures and protective measures, as well as disturbances in power relations (the "freezing" of power structures in institutions – managers did not know what to do or tried to impose extreme control on employees). The situation in the private sector was much more diversified: gastronomy, tourism, and fitness branches were closed, but in the logistics or e-commerce drastic increases in orders and workload were observed, and that situation changed several times due to fluctuations in government policy.

Information on the number of COVID-19 positive cases and later in the pandemic the number of deaths, which eventually exceeded 110,000 by early 2022, was crucial in public debates between 2020 and 2022. The death toll was exceptionally high, with Poland being the fourth EU country in the number of deaths from COVID-19. What is important for this text, however, is how Poland coped economically. Looking at the economic macro-indicators from the 2020–2022 perspective, it is essential to emphasise that after an initial decline in employment in the months of March–May 2020, there was an upward trend in the sector of enterprises employing more than ten people by the end of 2020 and thereafter until April 2022. Moreover, the labour market macro-indicators (unemployment level, average wage, minimum wage) after deteriorating for several months between early 2020 and early 2022 consistently improved (according to official data from Eurostat and Statistics Poland). I do not include in this summary the period after 24 February 2022, i.e. Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine or the rising inflation but I am aware that after that date, the economic situation in Poland (as well as globally) has deteriorated concerning the period analysed in this chapter.

Going back to the first months of the pandemic and the economic-related debate it caused in Poland, it mostly triggered the economic fears of lockdowns and turbulences in everyday business. It rapidly impacted the discussion in the media on remedies for the incoming crisis. My argumentation is that these solutions were (at least to some extent) driven by mechanisms like those recognised in moral panic concepts and research. The logic of the proposed counter-crisis strategies was based on the exaggeration of coming difficulties and the rapidly growing expectations of state-origin support for the economy. The discussed scripts of help were concentrated on a specific group in society and were mostly focused on its interests, fears, and opinions – entrepreneurs, who were eventually able to influence political decisions on anti-crisis shields, which would finally aim at protecting the economy through a distribution channel focused on companies and employers. In the following parts, I will try to explain the role of the main Polish newspapers in building an atmosphere of crisis-related panic and becoming an important channel of indirect communication between business elites and political authorities.

The DHA perspective (the discourse-historical approach) and the moral panic

The choice of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) as a theoretical and methodological perspective was dictated primarily by the desire to combine, on the one hand, the interdisciplinarity inherent in this approach with the possibility of indicating how the mechanisms of moral panic used in the service of the economic interests of a particular social group operate. Secondly, I was interested in the function of the DHA theory to uncover the hidden structures of discourse, which seems to me particularly important in the context of the pandemic crisis facing Polish society. The DHA and its critical potential (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Reisigl & Wodak, 2017) can be useful in accomplishing such research goals,

especially one of their aims which "is to 'demystify' the hegemony of specific discourses by deciphering the ideologies that establish, perpetuate or fight dominance" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017).

Nonetheless, the chapter is limited and, as such, does not pursue the aims of constructing a macro-theoretical level of reflection. Its aim is focused on identifying the elements of a broader discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic and its social impact, for which the DHA seems well suited. Among other things, this particular approach opens up the possibility to go beyond text analysis itself and makes it feasible to uncover the connections between different elements of social reality (discourse, fields of action, and texts including genres) (Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Reisigl & Wodak, 2017). The combination of the DHA and the concept of moral panic can be used in an uncovering and critique of mechanisms of power within public discourse structures. This is the function in which they are used in the chapter.

Moral panic in defence of entrepreneurs. Polish press discourse at the beginning of the pandemic

The number of articles considered as the initial database was 414 texts collected by querying three newspapers' editions between March and May 2020: Gazeta Polska Codziennie, Rzeczpospolita and Gazeta Wyborcza. The keywords used in the search were related to the pandemic and work issues. Considering that the moral panic mechanism was not included in the primary scope of research – the query was part of a broader methodological effort related to the COV-WORK project – the initiative focused on the consequences of the pandemic on the realm of work in Poland. However, after finalising the collection of material, the moral panic perspective emerged as a promising further analytical path.

The analysis was of mixed character: the quantitative stage allowed us to build a selection of texts for qualitative analysis. In addition, I decided to limit the time of the analysis to March 2020 only. The collection finally covered 223 texts published in the three aforementioned titles. There were two main reasons behind this decision: the first, substantive one, referred to the recognition (after studying the collection built on texts from March to May 2020) that the first month of the pandemic in Poland was crucial for the formation of the main narrative lines on the pandemic crisis and should be substantive enough to proceed with a reliable analysis. Secondly, I have decided to limit the scope of interest due to the time and workload limitations.

As supporting material, I have included 21 expert interviews conducted with representatives of trade unions, entrepreneurs' organisations and representatives of central authorities, which are part of a broader collection of pandemic-related materials (biographical narrative interviews, FGI interviews, and CATI research). I have used them to enhance the conclusions on the manipulative function of creating a panic atmosphere in the media around the expected crisis and support this atmosphere by levelling up the economic interests of the Polish business elites at the beginning of 2020.

As the text is going to be received by a non-Polish audience, it seems important to briefly describe the three newspapers' profiles:

- Gazeta Polska Codziennie is a right-oriented, conservative, and nationalist title which, regarding its socio-economic outlook, could be categorised as a voice of national capitalism with an active role of the state. The newspaper is politically engaged being close to the Law and Justice media.
- Rzeczpospolita is centre-right oriented, presenting an expert voice with a strong focus on middle and higher segments of Polish society constituting the target groups of readers. It can be considered as being close to business elites. Regarding the socio-economic outlook, the title's profile can be seen as neoliberal with a strong focus on promoting the free market economy.
- Gazeta Wyborcza can be classified as a politically centred newspaper. It is still the most influential title of post-transformation Poland. The content covers a variety of economic voices with a tendency to assert the role of neoliberal experts and ideas. Politically, it presents a strong anti-Law and Justice Government position in public debate.

Gazeta Polska Codziennie – national capitalism and its discursive appearance

National capitalism is understood here not as a structural variant of capitalism (Gough, 2014; Lane, 2008), but rather as an effect of an approach that focuses on the socio-economic consciousness of citizens (including the media), primarily based on the belief in the primacy and necessity of protecting national companies in favour of organisations from abroad. It can be seen as a correction of neoliberal dogma which concentrates on the idea of no barriers for every business, regardless of its origin. From the perspective of national capitalism, the expectation is that the government (and the state more broadly) should focus on supporting the crisis-affected Polish entrepreneurs. In the background, we can observe the tension between the symbolic "we", under which certain economic interests are hidden, and the external, foreign "they" who want to take advantage of the situation.

When describing this part of the sample, it is also important to point out the dynamics of attitudes presented during the analysed period. I focused on March 2020 because this month saw the main reinterpretations in the attitudes presented in the GPC. The cut-off date is the period from 13 to 16 March, when an epidemic state was announced and introduced in Poland, and the process of closing down the economy, ipso facto, began – switching to a remote mode in some enterprises, restricting access to healthcare in the areas that did not concern the most urgent therapies and switching to a pandemic mode in this context, switching to remote teaching.

By 16 March, we can see an attitude focused on reassuring the public by pointing to the government's preparation for the expected crisis. Even during this period, the emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on the global supply chain is treated primarily as an opportunity rather than a threat. There are regular statements from the Minister of Development at that time, Jadwiga Emilewicz, who speaks directly about the positive aspects of the pandemic for the Polish economy.

A cut-off date is 13–16 March, and after this date, there is a turnaround in the discourse on this topic, although it is not connected with the implementation of any anti-government rhetoric. The basic slogan that appears both in the titles and in the articles in the GPC becomes "helping Polish entrepreneurs". They become the main social group which the texts refer to.

On the other hand, there is a shift in the audience to which the newspaper's message is directed to. Before 13 March, it was the ordinary reader of the newspaper (one can assume that this is a person with right-wing conservative convictions). After that date, some of the appeal-like texts are already addressed to those in power, to whom the key problems and demands are pointed out. Another important temporal context is the fate of the anti-crisis shields prepared by the Polish government and addressing them primarily to Polish companies and entrepreneurs which is at stake at this point.

Rzeczpospolita – business elite voice

In the case of Rzeczpospolita, it is important to note the general profile of the daily beyond the pandemic period. It is a newspaper aimed at the middle and upper classes focusing on economic and political topics and primarily representing the corporate and business community, although it is much less focused on the discourse of national capitalism characteristic of GPC. Moreover, it can hardly be considered openly pro-Law and Justice government, but it is not an opposition medium on the same scale as the third daily included in the analysis, Gazeta Wyborcza.

In the analysed period, there is no clear time caesura in Rzeczpospolita after which there was a clear turn in the views presented. From 1 March to the end of the month (as well as beyond, which is not covered in the detailed analysis), we can see a consistent building of an atmosphere of fear of a deep and fast-approaching economic crisis. It is expected to hit businesses and entrepreneurs first, and in the longer term, affect the economic level of society. Central to this perspective is the loss of financial liquidity for companies and the expected rise in unemployment because of mass redundancies in sectors of the economy that are not working.

A characteristic feature of how the situation is presented in this newspaper is the style of statements which displays features of expert jargon with references to surveys (although these are mainly opinion polls without specifying the methodology, often carried out not by scientific institutions, but by companies and organisations without scientific affiliation) and interviews with experts (economists or representatives of business organisations, sometimes former politicians such as Leszek Balcerowicz, who was one of the main figures of the transformation in Poland after 1989 and still preaches neoliberal socio-economic policy). This quasi-scientific discourse is a façade for presenting and promoting the economic interests of part of Polish business elites concentrated in employers' organisations.

It is also interesting to compare the way of presenting discursive figures of entrepreneurs and employees. The latter are never presented as specific individuals, do not have their own representatives (trade union representatives are absent) and

appear in the context of the consequences of the problems faced by business owners and managers. It is also interesting to note that workers as a figure do appear in the titles, but when analysing those texts, it becomes apparent that they are no longer present in the core content. Here, only entrepreneurs are in the foreground. Entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are individuals who anticipate, worry, and are compelled to act. Often, we find in the articles their statements in the form of opinions, comments, or demands expressed to the government. In some issues, there are articles written by representatives of employers' organisations, which can be regarded as manifestos, intended to diagnose and at the same time create visions for solving problems, i.e. for getting out of the crisis.

The crisis itself is described in terms of a socio-economic drama: it is supposed to crush, destroy, and lead to the collapse, liquidation, and redundancies of Polish companies. In contrast to the GPC, it is not an opportunity, but a threat, to which it is necessary to respond as quickly and as fully as possible. Here again, it is worth focusing on the details of the proposals, which appear earlier in the chapter to the less economically oriented discourse of the GPC, i.e. as early as 5 March. These are centred around the expansion of the government's planned solutions, particularly in the context of facilitating access to finance, the exemption from tax tributes (rather than their suspension), the assumption by the state budget of some of the obligations towards workers, or the possibility of increasing control over workers' health. Regarding all the above, the Rzeczpospolita case presents the most moral panic-related discourse concentrated on intensifying threats to social and economic order and stability of the Polish economy.

Gazeta Wyborcza – Façade pluralism

Compared to Gazeta Polska Codziennie and Rzeczpospolita, the discourse presented in Gazeta Wyborcza appears to be much more multidimensional. Firstly, in response to the question about the actors appearing in the texts, we must note that their variety is much broader than in the last two dailies. One will find statements by politicians representing various parties (although the representatives of Civic Platform dominated the political side of debate in Gazeta Wyborcza), entrepreneurs (both the representatives of employers' organisations and the owners of companies from various levels, from large corporations to small businesses, e.g. hairdressers), or employees themselves (mainly dealing with accounts of remote working and its consequences for everyday life, which started to become one of symbolic changes of working in the COVID-19 pandemic time). The style of the articles can be described as neutral in comparison to Rzeczpospolita, which uses more sensationalist language and Gazeta Polska Codziennie, which is the most emotional of all three titles. The style of the articles can be described as reporting. There are few evaluations and emotional statements in the articles and their tone can be considered neutral.

Surprisingly, when compared to the first two newspapers, in the collection of articles from Gazeta Wyborcza, we will find references to trade unions not just by name but indicating specific actions taken by these organisations. In one text, the

trade union struggle for personal protective equipment for workers is described. However, this is the only article in which trade unions play a more prominent role than a background to the actions of other social actors: the government, workers as unorganised individuals and, above all, entrepreneurs and their organisations.

The entrepreneurs and their organisations, moreover, become not only the protagonists of press coverage but, as in the case of Rzeczpospolita, the authors of appeals with concrete proposals for those in power. Moreover, the newspaper notes the effectiveness of these appeals, which find recognition in the eyes of the government and become part of the package of solutions protecting the economy. This situation, moreover, shows that the consistent building of media presence and behind-the-scenes relations with politicians, even in the case of a government that is not necessarily willing to cooperate with social partners, can bring certain benefits.

In Gazeta Wyborcza, we find several references to supra-local discourses: European or global. The Polish perspective is presented in the context of what is happening in Western Europe (particularly in the context of the health situation) and more broadly in China and the USA (here in the context of the economic situation, particularly regarding breaks in supply chains). Economic issues play a much smaller role than in the other two titles. The focal point is the political discourse characterised by criticism of the government and the Law and Justice party.

In fact, it is the criticism of those in power that is the element of Gazeta Wyborcza's discourse in which the mechanisms for creating an atmosphere of fear are revealed. However, these mechanisms are directed not at economic issues or the ineptitude of the ruling party in dealing with the growing number of cases of the COVID-19 disease (it should be remembered that this is the very beginning of the pandemic and, paradoxically, with its further development in mind, the healthcare crisis is still undeveloped) but at potential political threats (the removal of systemic safeguards against authoritarian rule concerning the crisis).

Conclusions

In the approach proposed in the chapter, the concept of moral panic is adapted to the phenomenon that is observed in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland and deepened by expert interviews with representatives of employers' organisations and trade unions. The latter derived knowledge of negotiation practices undertaken by the Polish government during the pandemic crisis.

The moral panic concept is limited in the presented analysis in the context of indicating a group or social category responsible for a situation that leads to a disruption of social order since in the collected discursive material such practices have not taken place. However, it should be stated that in other than the Polish cases, the COVID-19 pandemic was linked to a specific ethnicity (Asian or more particularly Chinese). Together with the development of the pandemic, social blaming started to occur in the Polish context as well, but it was generally limited and concentrated on specific professional groups – mostly healthcare workers (doctors and nurses) who referred to this kind of phenomenon in collecting in the project biographical narrative interviews and focus groups interviews.

The main axis of the phenomenon I observe is the creation of an atmosphere of threat to the economic (and in the longer perspective, social) order, partly based on the assumptions characteristic of dominant in Polish public discourse neoliberal paradigm that could be described as the primacy of private property over public property and the crucial role of the entrepreneurial social group confirmed in public discourse in Poland after 1989. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic triggers mechanisms that can be considered defensive on the part of the business community. The exaggeration of the crisis symbolically places the state in the position of the only social institution that not only can but, more importantly, should help entrepreneurs.

Interestingly, this is not just about the mere denunciation of demands and expectations. It is also about which social groups are present in the debate and to which our attention should be directed to, and which ones are not visible in the debate. It is the entrepreneurs (although not all of them either, as discussed further on) who become the primary category of people facing the impending crisis. It is their companies that must face the spectre of lockdowns, downtime, lack of customers or collapse. The voice of workers is marginalised, and their representatives appear sporadically.

However, once again, the closer we got into details, the more vividly the contradictions appeared. Not all employers' and entrepreneurs' needs and demands were covered by the analysed media in a balanced way. Mostly, the employers' organisations that bring together major companies and particular individuals like the owners of thriving Polish corporations participated in the press debates as representatives of the whole Polish economy. This was most evident in the case of GPC and Rzeczpospolita while Gazeta Wyborcza's articles covered reports based on the critical situation of the micro and small business owners (hairdressers or beauticians) as well.

In the material collected, we see some differences between the titles. We find the most coverage of workers' experiences in the Gazeta Wyborcza. However, this is an account that can be criticised from a class perspective as an approach focused on middle-class workers' experience, especially regarding remote work-related reports which were quite frequently published in that title. We have dramatic descriptions of hairdressing, beauty, or fitness industries that either closed overnight or faced a complete lack of customers. However, it is difficult to see this as a common experience for all industries in the economy, especially when including frontline workers' perspective which is simply absent in the whole database.

What is more, when we compare these accounts with expert interviews conducted in the COV-WORK project with trade union representatives in logistics (warehouse workers or drivers), it becomes apparent that working during the COVID-19 pandemic was, in their case, associated with an increased workload (logistics centres were working at a similar load to that of festive periods) and a drastic decrease in working conditions (drivers on long journeys across Europe had no access to catering facilities or places to ensure personal hygiene due to COVID-19 restrictions). These kinds of reports were not included in any of the three analysed titles.

The combination of the DHA and moral panic theory used in the chapter must be treated as a tentative analysis and introduction that certainly needs to be deepened. What seems important is to indicate how certain discourses (in this case, the neoliberal discourse promoting the social role of the entrepreneur) are activated in the process of constructing a narrative of the pandemic crisis as a threat to the economic and social order, to create pressure on the government preparing anti-crisis tools. Thus, we see how the triad postulated in the texts of the DHA analysts (Reisigl & Wodak, 2017): discourse – text(s) – fields of (political) action operates through mechanisms familiar with the moral panic framework.

Notes

1 The chapter is based on the Project NCN OPUS 19: "COV-WORK: socio-economic consciousness, work experiences and coping strategies of Poles in the context of the post-pandemic crisis", funded by the National Science Centre in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2020/37/B/HS6/00479.
2 The programme "500 plus" is a flagship reform implemented by the Law and Justice party after coming to power in 2015. It consists of paying a fixed allowance of PLN 500 for each child in the country. The programme was developed (initially it had been planned for the second and subsequent children in the family) and is considered one of the milestones during the Law and Justice rule.

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10 “Infected migrants”

The Italian political discourse about immigration during the pandemic: a renewed moral panic?

Dario Lucchesi

Introduction

In the last 30 years, the notion of moral panic has resulted in one of the main outputs of research that investigate the relationship between immigration and media in Italy (see e.g. Maneri, 2001; Dal Lago, 2012; Binotto et al., 2016; Combei & Giannetti, 2020). Traditionally, the issue of “security” related to crime represents the dimension with which moral panic has found its greatest expression and in which the representations of migrants as “folk devils” take root (Maneri, 2001; Pogliano, 2016, 2018). At the same time, during the pandemic, the references to an emergency and alarmist representation of migration seem to find new impetus in the alleged association between migration flows and the spread of the virus (Triandafyllidou, 2020; Genova & Lello, 2021). Indeed, during the first months of the outbreak, we witnessed the closure of Italian ports declared “unsafe”, legitimizing discriminatory practices against migrants (Milani, 2021; Pastore, 2021), reinforcing scapegoats and strengthening the so-called “politics of fear” in many EU countries (Wodak, 2015). In other words, the pandemic has come to constitute a dissonant, polarizing, and politicized symbolic field capable of fueling a growing “pandemic sovereignism”, especially in social media, (Boccia Artieri, 2020) that has given new life to the articulation of moral panic about immigration. This chapter focuses on this articulation analyzing the discourse (re)produced by Italian politicians who play the role of moral entrepreneurs driving narratives about immigration. Precisely, the research analyzes the discursive strategies produced on Facebook by politicians of the major parties during the first year of the pandemic: an analysis to identify which political actors spoke about migration exploring differences and convergences in terms of lexicon and discursive strategies, which allows structuring and developing the articulation of moral panic. The main aim is to understand how discursive practices are intertwined with past discursive patterns about migration and the theme of security. Specifically, the research moves from the hypothesis by which politicians have constructed their immigration discourse by linking it with the threat of infectious diseases, using de-humanizing metaphors that assign to migrants the role of a health threat to population (Hart, 2010; Musolff, 2012). In other words, during the pandemic, were migrants labeled as vehicles for contagion, assuming the role of folk devils?

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The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I introduce some basic elements of the literature concerning moral panic, media, and discourse. Section called "Moral panic and immigration: the main frame in news and political discourse" briefly introduces the major findings of researches interested in the relationship between media, politics, migration, and pandemic. In "Case study and methodology", I present the procedure adopted in the construction of the case study and I introduce the field of Critical Discourse Studies and some of tools adopted for the analysis. Section called "Findings. Immigration discourse of Italian politicians during the pandemic" focuses on the main results of the linguistic and argumentative analysis. In the conclusion, I summarize the main results stating that the moral panic around immigration during COVID-19 was not successful: the strategy of identification of the threats by Italian politicians was not limited to migrants as a vehicle for spreading the virus, but it was articulated toward political actors. The centrality of political confrontation has moved the attention from an explicit de-humanized rhetoric against migrants to the field of political conflict.

Moral panic, media, and discourse: a brief introduction

In his widely acclaimed "Folk Devils and Moral Panics" (1972), Stan Cohen described moral panic as a situation in which "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 1972: 1). Since its inception, the term has been closely related to the role of mass media in creating stereotypes and distortions with respect to the phenomenon of deviance (Mcrobbie & Thornton, 1995). Indeed, news media and politicians are conceived as "moral entrepreneurs", namely social actors able to define people or things as "folk devils" or the "other" (Cohen, 1972; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994). In this sense, moral panic allows creating a link between politicians, social control, media and "the people" establishing a new framework for making sense of something that concerns a given community (Maneri, 2018).

For this chapter, I am interested in mentioning the discursive dimension of moral panic, which "establish[es] the terms in which the issue has to be debated now and for the foreseeable future. Recurrent episodes will be mapped onto the established discursive framework, often connoted by a phrase" (Critcher, 2006: 12). Within the Critical Discourse Studies approach (see Section 3), the longevity of moral panic through long-term stigmatization of targeting individuals and social groups has been emphasized (Krzyżanowski, 2020). Cohen himself argued that moral panic is not a short-term process but can have more serious and long-lasting repercussions. As stated by Krzyżanowski (2020), these features and their applicability in different contexts are possible due to their largely discursive character that allows moral panic to be based on a peculiar "spiral effect" (Thompson, 1998), facilitating the normalization of negative attitudes against the "other".

Moral panic and immigration: the main frame in news and political discourse

A vast and heterogeneous literature agrees that media coverage of immigration over the past decades has been characterized by a negative view of migrants

and refugees (see e.g. Van Gorp, 2005; Baker et al., 2008; Binotto et al., 2016; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). Media play a key role in setting the agenda of asylum and border policies. Their negative framing of human mobility has enabled a growing criminalization of migration (Mitsilegas, 2014), turning migrants into objects of moral panic. Specifically, Critcher claims that immigration represents a "serial" moral panic (opposed to an "individual" one) that can start and end more than once in cyclical ways and is supported by a script that, once activated, works as a prototype. Moreover, it is possible to distinguish between serial moral panic linked to migrant arrivals and those concerning crime panic, which are more frequent and typically built around local events and protests (Maneri, 2001; Pogliano, 2016, 2018). Generally, it has been noted that moral panic around immigration is more frequent in southern European countries, especially in Italy, Greece, and Spain (ter Wal, 2002). Since the early 1990s, immigration has been the favored object of moral panic in Italy and migrants have assumed the unenviable role of the salient folk devils (Maneri, 2001; Pogliano, 2016, 2018). One of the first and most well-known works concerning moral panic and immigration in the Italian context is the research published in 2001 by Marcello Maneri and those following (see e.g. Maneri, 2018). Precisely, the author highlighted how the moral panic on immigration is constructed in terms of discourse and practices on urban security, which «became a discursive formation and instituted a regime of truth in Italy» (Maneri, 2018: 51). Especially in proximity to national elections, «politicians, media, grass-roots groups, and public officials formed a short circuit of reciprocal pressures that identified immigration and associated phenomena, as the principal threat to security and tranquility» (Maneri, 2018: 50). Indeed, for Maneri, the notion of "insecurity" has been increasingly associated with immigration during the 90s: "security" or "insecurity" is able to link criminality and immigration as a dominant frame within which various social phenomena are addressed in political debate. Moreover, crime and immigration show a similar pattern constructed on a "them" carrier of threat against "us". In this sense, moral panic around immigration often implicates the well-known Manichean dichotomy "us vs. them" typical of populist discourse (see e.g. Mudde, 2004; Wodak, 2015). In other words, decades of immigration discourses have produced a legacy that has been objectified in language (Maneri, 2009) through which certain narratives recur as fixed patterns.

From the "Refugee crisis" to the pandemic

The literature about the representation of migration in Italian journalism identifies three prevalent frames: security, crisis, and pietistic (Binotto, 2020). This idea is also true for political communication, which takes advantage of the security frame as a symbolic resource of political storytelling (Nicolosi, 2019). Parties and politicians act as "entrepreneurs of fear" able to capitalize on the emergency and translate it into a request for extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998). Between 2014 and 2019, the attention on the role played by European media in framing immigrants and migration widely increased,

especially in relation to the so-called refugee crisis, a humanitarian and political issue which has strengthened polarization, radicalization, and politicization across the EU (van der Brug et al., 2015; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). In conjunction with the spread of the pandemic in the early 2020s, there has been a sharp decline in attention to the issue of immigration and migratory flows affecting the Mediterranean Sea by the Italian and European media. This downsizing of the visibility of migration in media (Associazione Carta di Roma 2021, 2022) and political discourse (Lucchesi & Romania, 2023) is accompanied by an attenuation of the "concern" that Italians show about migration and immigrants (Demos and Pi, 2020).

Generally, migration phenomena and pandemics share a pattern that is specific to the "crisis" as one of the most widely debated concepts in Critical Discourse Studies (Krzyżanowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2022). Both crises are characterized by the "emergency frame" and the "securitarization frame" (Buzan et al., 1998), which allow politicians to frame events into a coherent narration based on the centrality of "us" that implies positive self and negative "other" presentations (Wodak, 2021). These crises also share different metaphors; unquestionably, the most popular is the war metaphor associated with migration and viruses (Battistelli & Galantino, 2020; Wodak, 2021). As noted by the seminal work of Sontag (1989), AIDS (as well as COVID-19) personified the role of the enemy who comes from "outside", nurturing of a sense of common belonging that is presented as the crucial reason for adopting defensive and bordering measures (Casaglia & Coletti, 2021). In other words, the discourses around pandemics have nurtured Western-centric racism with the need to make a dreaded disease foreign (Sontag, 1989).

Case study and methodology

Moral panic is a complex phenomenon that involves the co-participation of various actors, including the media, political powers, and public opinion. In the case study, I focus on political communication conveyed through social media platforms. The complexity and the hybrid nature of contemporary media systems pose new challenges in moral panic in order to maintain and (re)affirm the relevance of the field (Hier, 2019).

The research fits into the field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), which traditionally has focused on powerful texts produced by elites and institutions, such as journalism and political speeches, with a lens to reveal the kinds of discourses used to maintain power and sustain existing social relations (see e.g. van Dijk, 1987; Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The CDS approach enables a de-constructing of the surface of rhetoric that is taken for granted, revealing meanings that politicians left in the texts which might influence the reader's interpretation.

In the last decade, social media have been re-configuring the relationship between discourse and power, establishing new challenges to theories in CDS: topics such as nationalism, racism, and right-wing populism are revealing a

mix of powerful-institutional and ordinary-individuals texts (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015) that are rising a "borderline discourse" which is "normalizing" the anti-pluralist views across many European public spheres (Krzyżanowski & Ledin, 2017).

As mentioned, the case study considers the discourse about immigration produced by Italian politicians during the pandemic by analyzing a corpus of Facebook posts through a combination of lexicon analysis and argumentative strategies derived from CDS. It is recognized that Facebook represents the social media platform preferred by politicians, more able than others to foster "likes" and "shares" among their followers (Ceccobelli et al., 2020; Bracciale et al., 2021). For the definition of the corpus, I focused on 100 Italian politicians with the largest number of followers who posted content concerning immigration during the first year of pandemic, 1/3/2020 – 31/03/2021. In order to scrape contents from the platform, I used the online software owned by Facebook, *CrowdTangle*,[1] which made it possible to use keywords related to immigration[2] in order to identify posts, download them in a CSV file, and analyze them.

Out of the 100 politicians, 85 published posts containing the keywords selected, producing a total of 5,610 posts regarding the topic. Then, I distinguished the politicians into two groups: parties supporting the government in office during the first year of the pandemic[3] and exponents of then-opposition parties. The first group is composed of the anti-establishment *Five Star Movement* (Movimento Cinque Stelle) and center and center-left parties. *Democratic Party* (Partito Democratico), *Italy Alive* (Italia Viva), and others. In contrast, the second group is mainly composed of right-wing parties: *League* (Lega)*, Brothers of Italy* (Fratelli d'Italia)*, Go Italy* (Forza Italia), and others. Out of the 85 politicians, 61% belong to the parties that make up the majority, while 39% are from the opposition. However, the latter published the vast majority of posts concerning immigration (82%), while politicians from the majority published only 18% of the overall posts.

The first step of the analysis focuses on the identification of statistically frequent linguistic units. The corpus of 5,610 posts was processed through #LancsBox[4] software able to quantify the relative frequency of main words in order to identify patterns within a given discourse type (Baker et al., 2008). For what concerns the analysis of the political discourse, I identified a small corpus of posts that received the highest volume of user interactions and I focused on the argumentative structures of politicians' discourse. Precisely, I adopted the topoi scheme (Table 10.1) presented by Wodak and Meyer (2001) and updated by Hart (2010) which has been used in different studies concerning the immigration discourse (see e.g. Hart, 2010; Wodak, 2015; Lucchesi & Romania, 2023). Topoi refer to argumentative schemes employed to persuade the audience with respect to the validity of the views presented. They could be more or less intentional and provide an opportunity for a systematic analysis of the strategies that ensure the transition from argument to conclusion (Wodak, 2015). As described by Wodak and Mayer, each topos can be characterized by a conditional scheme, or a conclusion rule as reported in Table 10.1.

Table 10.1 Lists of recurring *topoi* based on Wodak and Meyer (2001) and Hart (2010).

Topos	*Description*
Usefulness	if an action under a specific relevant point of view will be useful, then one should perform it.
Disadvantage	if the out-group offer no advantage to the in-group, then their presence within the group is pointless and should be prevented
Definition, name-interpretation	if an action, a thing, or a person (group of persons) is named/ designated (as) X, the action, thing, or person (group of persons) carries or should carry the qualities/traits/attributes contained in the (literal) meaning of X.
Danger and threats	if there are specific dangers and threats, one should do something against them.
Humanitarism	if a political action or decision does or does not conform with human rights or humanitarian convictions and values, one should or should not perform or make it.
Justice	is based on the principle and claim of 'equal rights for all': if persons/actions/situations are equal in specific respects, they should be treated/ dealt with in the same way.
Responsibility	because a state or a group of persons is responsible for the emergence of specific problems, it or they should act in order to find solutions of these problems.
Burdening	if a person, an institution, or a 'country' is burdened by specific problems, one should act in order to diminish these burdens.
Crime	It involves ascribing criminal qualities to the outgroup. This is most obviously achieved by referring to the out-group as 'criminals', 'illegal immigrants' as well as with the nominalization 'illegals'
Finances	if a specific situation or action costs too much money or causes a loss of revenue, one should perform actions that diminish the costs or help to avoid the loss.
Numbers	if the numbers prove a specific topos, a specific action should be performed/not be carried out.
Law and right	if a law or an otherwise codified norm prescribes or forbids a specific politico-administrative action, the action has to be performed or omitted.
History	because history teaches that specific actions have specific consequences, one should perform or omit a specific action in a specific situation (allegedly) comparable with the historical example referred to.
Culture	because the culture of a specific group of people is as it is, specific problems arise in specific situations.
Abuse	if a right or an offer for help is abused, the right should be changed or the help should be withdrawn or measures against the abuse should be taken.
Displacement	the out-group will eventually outnumber and/or dominate the in-group and they get privileged access to limited socio-economic resources over and above the in-group
Disease	the out-group is dirty and carry infectious diseases
Reality	because reality is as it is, a specific action/decision should be performed/made.
Authority	X is right or X has to be done or X has to be omitted because A (= an authority) says that it is right or that is has to be done or that it has to be omitted.

Findings. Immigration discourse of Italian politicians during the pandemic

Starting from the traditional classification proposed by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), the contribution adopts the "grassroots model" whereby moral panics originate with the general public. As seen in the previous sections, the issue of immigration as a threat is well rooted in the Italian context and is made up of attitudes and beliefs deeply felt by a large sector of society, according to which a given phenomenon represents a real threat to their values and security. Although politicians or the media seem to give rise to or 'stir up' concern about a particular issue, in reality the concern must be latent and entrenched. Therefore, moral panic may require to be catalyzed, assisted, guided or triggered by elites, media, or interest groups in order to manifest itself (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994).

It is by adopting this approach that we can interpret the analyses. The latter show that politicians through their discourse did not systematically produced or orchestrated the moral panic around immigration during the pandemic. Precisely, the argument of "infected migrants" has failed to be translate into the typical continuous expansion of perceived threats (Maneri, 2018). Indeed, as it happened in the field of journalism (Associazione Carta di Roma 2021, 2022), there is a substantial absence of narrative related to the construction of the migrant as a "criminal threat", which marks a downsizing of the well-known frame of "criminality" as a constant theme in the media representation of immigration (Binotto et al., 2016; Combei & Giannetti, 2020). Nonetheless, the analysis of argumentative structures identified recontextualization strategies (Krzyzanowski, 2016) through which the "topos of danger" which was declined in the context of the pandemic. Such a topos is not only used for the correlation between immigration and virus, but it allows for the recontextualization of anti-immigration discourse such as "us vs. them" dichotomy, the illegalization of refugees and asylum seekers, the blocking of departures, repatriations, and the militarization of borders. In other words, as will see in next sections, politicians did not attempt to construct a concern that did not initially exist, but they drew on available resources in order to reactivate a pre-existing and widespread public concern.

After presenting the list of the most frequent words used by the two groups, I focused on posts that received higher engagement from users exploring discursive strategies and the links with moral panic.

Right-wing discourse about immigration during the pandemic

Among the 22 words most used by right-wing politicians (Table 10.2), there emerges a lexicon marked by the centrality of the political dimension with terms such as "*government*", "*left*", and names of politicians and parties (mainly "*Salvini*" leader of the party "*League*" and the Prime Minister "*Conte*"). These terms form a semantic set that highlights the centrality of political actors. Also worth noting is the frequency of the words "*Italians*" and "*clandestine*", which relates to in-group and out-group naming strategies. The latter is represented by the terms "*migrants*", "*immigrants*", and in particular, "*clandestine*", which confirms the well-known

Table 10.2 List of the 22 most frequent words used by politicians of right-wing parties at the opposition.

Word	*Frequency*	*%*
Government	1912	42
Migrants	1828	40
Clandestine	1811	39
Immigrants	1574	34
Italians	1441	31
Salvini	1423	31
Landings	1124	24
Lampedusa	728	16
Security	663	14
Harbors	544	12
NGO	541	12
Conte	535	12
League	522	11
Decrees	508	11
Positive	449	10
While	431	9
Left	410	9
Against	407	9
Quarantine	390	8
Lamorgese	386	8
Minister	367	8
COVID	364	8

semantic overlap capable of attributing negative valence in the construction of otherness by Italian media and politicians (Binotto et al., 2016; Maneri, 2018). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the single word "*security*", as the central theme of moral panic around immigration, is present in only 14% of the lexicon of this group and is often linked to the appeal of the Security Decrees[5] issued in 2018 by the former Government "Conte I". In other words, when the opposition mentioned "*security*", it was talking about a past decree, while the relationship with the virus is less direct. Finally, the lexicon that explicitly connects migrants to the spread of the virus ("*positive*", "*infected*", "*quarantine*", "*Covid*") was not particularly frequent. These outputs suggest a substantial absence of a language developed *ad hoc* in the context of the emergency and based on the systematic use of dehumanizing metaphors capable of focusing on the migration-contagion correlation.

Posts by right-wing politicians that received the high number of reactions share a recurring argumentative pattern. First of all, such posts dealt with the issue of migrant landings and arrivals. This pattern allows for the development of a twofold argumentative plan in which the "us vs. them" dichotomy serves to delegitimize the political opponents by criticizing their management of landings during the pandemic. On one hand, the imbalance between "privileged migrants" and "Italian-victimized" was highlighted; on the other hand, the government represented the

only one responsible for this disparity. This "scheme" is visually represented in many posts selected from the corpus that share a similar layout composed by text and visual division in order to emphasize the dichotomy "us vs. them" as the main argumentative/discourse about immigration. Specifically, I selected three posts by *League* politicians: Matteo Salvini, Silvia Sardone, and Roberta Ferrero.

Interestingly, none of these posts present any visual representations of immigrants, landings, boats, or other visual devices able to construct migrants' representations. In Salvini's posts, under a red background, we read, "*Italians blocked*" and "*districts closed*", while under a green background, "*clandestine free and open ports*". At the bottom of the image, there is the caption "*Thanks Conte*". Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was also the core of a Sardone's post, which presented two pictures of him, accompanied by a text that reads "you cannot dance, but you can disembark". The post is introduced by a short sentence "the #government's attitude is indecent: severe with #italians, soft with #clandestines". Also, the three hashtags chosen coincided with the main actors, namely, *government*, *Italians,* and *clandestine*. Also, in the post by Roberta Ferrero, the image is composed of three sections. The first one shows a small picture of an old woman picking up food from the ground with the text "elderly do not know what to do for food"; a second image shows a desperate man with his hands to his face, accompanied by the phrase "3,7 millions of Italians lose their job"; a final photo is of Giuseppe Conte smiling and a sentence that reads "and this men thinks about regularizing 600,000 clandestines".

These posts share argumentative strategies based on the Italians who "suffer" or who are "prevented" from moving due to the state of emergency. At the same time, the "privileged them" is represented by "*clandestines*" for whom the ports remain open, or they are the beneficiaries of ad hoc policies.

From an argumentative point of view, we can find the topos of "(in)justice" and "displacement" built on the same principle of (in)equality that legitimizes the narrative of Italians as victims of a reverse prejudice (Hart, 2010). Moreover, we also find the topos of "responsibility" that denotes the government as the actor responsible for the imbalance and, therefore, de-legitimized given its inability to manage the phenomenon. The use of such strategies facilitates the construction of outrage. The image of Italians being "abandoned" or forced to make sacrifices is bound to arouse greater indignation in the context of the pandemic by maximizing the sense of inequality and the demand for defensive action. In these posts, we find a discursive construction of the community of "us" that was victimized and deprived of freedom, while the migrants (as "them") were not effectively cast as the figures of folk devils or a personified threat that carries the virus. Instead, the focus seems to have been partially shifted to politicians' part of the government, which plays the role of visible public enemies (Maneri, 2001).

Although scarcely present in the corpus, the topos of "disease" gathers a considerable volume of interactions by inserting itself into discursive constructions of the security threat through strategies of emergency legitimization. Indeed, these posts that allude to "disease" adopted alarmist and emotive tones to convey a sense of danger and insecurity caused by the presence of migrants who were defined

as "infected". These contents were particularly recurring in Daniela Santaché (*Brothers of Italy*) and Alessandro Morelli (*League*) posts. However, in her post, Daniela Santaché firstly reproduces the "us vs. them" argumentation, "While we were segregated at home, the government keeps bringing in immigrants" and then introduces the risk of contagions, "Brothers of Italy had been saying for a long time that the risk of contagion in the refugee centers was high; now that it has happened, does Conte intend to continue pretending nothing happened?". The post image shows the headline of an article from a right-wing national newspaper, "100 immigrants infected. They get infected in a refugee center and go to work in coops". Similarly, Alessandro Morelli's (*League*) post introduces the "us vs. them" argumentation and connects it with the danger of the virus, "While the Italians are forced to comply with the measures to contain the virus, on our coasts the landings of infected immigrants continue. They are transferred, in defiance of all common sense, around the country, sowing not a few worries among the communities called to welcome them. #Governmentofshame". The visual content crosses discursive elements. In the background of an image depicting black people with their masks down, a text reads, "the Ministry of the Interior distributes the infected, displacing immigrants throughout Italy".

In both cases, posts refer to "objectively recorded" cases of migrants as vehicles for the virus by appealing to a fact-producing apparatus (Maneri, 2018). Through an explicit de-humanizing narration, this legitimized the appeals to innate fears of physical harm and infection from transmittable diseases (Hart, 2010). From an argumentative point of view, these posts suggest a syllogism: if there were health threats or dangers derived from migrants that undermined the health of the population, then action must be taken to prevent their arrival (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). With these posts, we were facing the most explicit attempt of moral panic connected to migration during the pandemic that used a declination of the "topos of danger" and linked migration with fear of infection.

However with this attempt, right-wing politicians were not able to completely direct the public attention toward the issues of infection. Indeed, politicians exploited the migration-pandemic connection in order to target, attack, and deligitimize their opponents, blaming them for the insecurity condition they have caused. What needs to be highlighted is the constant intersection of two rhetorics that seem to be unable to be separated: migrants as "others", albeit at the center of discursive campaigns of exclusion, are always flanked by the role of the government as the real perpetrators of the threat.

Government discourse about immigration during the pandemic

The discourse of the group of politicians in the government is much less far-reaching than that of the opposition. The vocabulary and the discourse of center and center-left politicians are less recognizable and more incoherent, preventing the hegemonization of the debate (Maneri & Quassoli, 2020) and making it not only less effective in terms of salience and diffusion but even in line with the discursive patterns of the opposition. This is confirmed by looking at the words more

Table 10.3 List of the 22 most frequent words used by politicians of the government.

Word	*Frequency*	*%*	*Word*	*Frequency*	*%*
Migrants	533	53	Citizens	225	22
Salvini	464	46	Against	218	22
Government	395	39	Our	216	22
Persons	369	37	Italians	215	21
Country	312	31	Decrees	192	19
Job	292	29	Our	167	17
Security	276	27	Proprio	163	16
Us	271	27	Immigrants	161	16
Politics	256	25	Life	160	16
Before	248	24	League	157	16
Italy	227	23	Conte	150	15

used by politicians in these parties. On one hand, there are no disparaging terms toward refugees and asylum seekers. The most frequent word is "*migrants*", but also "*people*" is used often as an attempt to humanize the outgroup; on the other hand, the dimension of politics remains central, especially with the words "*government*" and "*Salvini*" the leader of the *League*, promoter, until then, of major anti-immigration campaigns (Table 10.3).

As mentioned, leaders in this group with the largest followings rarely discussed immigration during the pandemic. However, it is worth highlighting a few posts that got the highest volume of interactions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio, from the *5-Star Movement,* that summarized the party's position on immigration during the pandemic. In order to counter the right-wing's hegemonic position on the issue, Di Maio tried to distance his communication from the more typical tones and speeches placed within the populist style of communication. In one of his posted selected from the corpus, we read, "Italians already know how things are and are demanding answers, they do not need someone to shout louder than them. They rightly expect answers from a representative of the institutions. And we must give them". If there is an attempt to show a distance from the right-wing politicians in tone and communicative style when migration policies are described, they are presented as political "solutions" in line with securitarian policies: the blocking of departures ("*to stop the landings we have to stop the departures*"), the centrality of the border ("*our southern border overlooks an area where the risk of migratory flows is enormous*"), the role of the EU ("*but our border is also a European border*"), and the repatriation of migrants ("*faster repatriations also via boat*"). In other words, the discourse on immigration is treated in terms of a "problem that the state must address" closely to the anti-immigration policies (Wodak, 2015). Moreover, similarly to right-wing politicians, Di Maio discourse uses the "us vs. them" dichotomy markedly unbalanced toward the "Italians" who were constructed as a visible, humanized and valorized "us" ("*the Italians already know how things are and are demanding answers*"), while "them" is invisible, silenced or de-humanized (Maneri & Quassoli, 2020). Indeed, Di Maio also addressed the

relationship between immigration and the pandemic in terms of a public health problem, re-proposing the "topos of disease" as an articulation of the "topos of danger", *What has happened in the last few days is not acceptable. Anyone who arrives in our country and then escapes without respecting quarantine is putting public health, including his own health, at risk*".[6]

The health emergency allowed the government to exploit that social automatism that tends to strengthen those in power by counting on a wealth of consensus (Battistelli & Galantino, 2020), which, from a discursive point of view, has allowed them to reinforce securitarian migration policies and the externalization of borders. In other words, the recontextualization of migration in the health emergency (re)legitimizes blocking people close to arrival and expulsing those who have landed through externalization policies.

Conclusion

Maneri (2001) argued that the juxtaposition "immigration-security" reaches a particular level of effectiveness in terms of moral panic when the media system is activated on events that seem to possess a character of exceptionality. The pandemic certainly represented an exceptional, however it failed to reproduce, consolidate, or innovate the immigration-security binomial specifically for the figures of migrants as folk devils. From the analysis, it emerges that Italian politicians discussed immigration during the pandemic without using a narrative *systematically* constructed on the danger of migrants as carriers of the virus. If the attempt by politicians to activate the moral panic was not successful, which moral panics criteria have not been met? Starting from Critcher's (2006) six points that decree the failure of moral panic, I highlight that politicians failed to establish the issue of immigration as sufficiently threatening to provoke the formulation of a new label. "Infected migrants" has not become a formula to sum up the discourse on immigration during the pandemic nor influence the public's perception. From a CDS perspective, migrant naming strategies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001) do not appear to be systematically built on the figures of migrants as spreading the virus through a dehumanizing lexicon. Indeed, as confirmed by other Italian studies (Genova & Lello, 2021; Milani, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has not pushed forward the process of anti-immigration radicalization of ideas: as evidenced by lexicon analysis presented above and elsewhere (Associazione Carta di Roma, 2020, 2021) during the COVID-19, we see a decrease in the common sense immigration-crime binomial always present in past years. Then, the correlation between immigration and virus failed to become the one with which to frame the migration-pandemic relationship. Moreover and most importantly, legacy media showed little interest in the immigration topic during 2020 and 2021 (Associazione Carta di Roma, 2021, 2022), failing to systematically direct public attention toward this alleged threat.

Although the moral panic about "infected migrants" was not successfully established, right-wing politicians tried to construct a discourse that drew on available resources "triggering" certain characteristics of moral panic. Referring to Goode

and Ben-Yehuda's set of empirical attributes to operationalize episodes of moral panic (e.g. concern, consensus, hostility, disproportionality, and volatility), the analysis shows the attempt by politicians to build a high degree of concern about the behavior of a certain group. However, this concern was not only directed at the behavior of the migrants but more systematically at the government's handling of the pandemic, which represented the real target in the discourse on immigration. Then, the level of hostility toward the group that is considered a threat (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 1994) seems to change from immigrants to political opponents. The traditional immigration-crime binomial and the supposedly immigrant-infected binomial were not strong enough to establish them as characteristics for the main discourse. Consequently, another inseparable binomial, namely the immigration-government-responsibility, prevailed. Indeed, the centrality of political confrontation in dealing with the issue of immigration has moved the attention from an explicit de-humanized rhetoric against migrants to the field of political conflict: those responsible for community threats seem to converge on the political opponents rather than migrants.

Finally, the analysis highlighted how the immigration discourse has undergone certain changes and shifts in the context of a pandemic emergency. What does this shift tell us about the moral panic over immigration in the Italian context? I see this discourse shift that occurred during the COVID-19 period as a reflection of a broader shift in political and public discourse on immigration. This shift, part of conscious well-designed, opportunistic political communication strategies (Krzyżanowski, 2020), is primarily based on a negative campaign against political opponents. Still, it allows normalizing discriminatory anti-immigration discourse across the wider public domain. Indeed, the political discourse about immigration resurfaced pre-existing and familiar social anxieties concerning the opposition between the in-group and out-group during the pandemic, placing at the core of the discourse different types of "othering" and discursive construction of "enemies".

To conclude, it is necessary to consider some limitations of the study which must be considered valid in relation to the time period selected and the relatively small sample of politicians' posts analyzed. Indeed, it cannot be ruled out that there may have been more specific instances of moral panic at the local level in relation to the quarantine ships or migrant escape events. In those cases, the local media may have treated the news with more coverage facilitating a more concrete spread of moral panic among locals. Moreover, this study framed moral panic analyzing the discursive construction of main Italian politicians not taking into account reactions from public/citizens. However, the chapter wanted to explore the discursive component and in particular the argumentative structures that make it possible to highlight the ability of politicians and the media to reactivate and trigger well-rooted threats about immigration which have evolved over the past decades. In this sense, CDS can integrate with the "grassroots model" whereby moral panics originate with the general public. If moral panics require to be guided and triggered by politicians and media in order to manifest itself, the field of CDS can contribute to deepening the discursive strategies implicated in this process.

Notes

1 For information and software limitations: https://www.crowdtangle.com/.
2 For their identification of the keywords, we referred to both existing literature and the results of an exploratory analysis of the corpus (Sloan, Quan-Haase, 2016; Associazione Carta di Roma, 2020, 2021).
3 The Italian government in office in the first part of the pandemic is called "Conte II" and it refers to Giuseppe Conte, the Prime Minister and the leader of Five Star Movement. The government has been in office from September 2019 to February 2021.
4 #LancsBox is a new-generation software package for the analysis of language data and corpora developed at Lancaster University.
5 Otherwise known as "decreto Salvini", it modified the international protection profoundly affecting the guarantees safeguarding the right of asylum. It was approved in 2018 and replaced in 2020.
6 The events refer to the escape of a hundred migrants hosted in a reception center in the south of Italy.

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Folk devils and moral panics in the COVID-19 pandemic

Final remarks

Morena Tartari

This book's scope is to offer a new understanding of moral panics ignited during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ideas that brought into light the project of this book delineate, at the beginning, a twofold aim: to analyze the fear and anxieties related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which, after the analysis, might have been categorized as moral panics, thus challenging the common assumptions that underline a weak link between health panics and moral panics; and, to better understand the construction of folk devils during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the cases in which such construction worked as a consequence of regulatory medical advice and restrictions.

Authors included in this book conducted in-depth analyses of the construction of folk devils and moral panics during the COVID-19 pandemic and, thanks to such contributions, the book developed a threefold aim. The first was an empirical aim and stressed how the moral panic concept and its models can be relevant to analyze the social crises of our contemporaneity, and to thus suggest new perspectives to policymakers. The second aim was to explore theoretical challenges of the concept of moral panic and to improve its models with new concepts and ideas emerging from the authors' analyses. The third aim was to explore the range of methods used by the authors to investigate moral panics and offer insights about novel methods.

In this concluding chapter, I discuss the relevance of the moral panic concept for the empirical studies presented in this volume and I take forward Hier's analysis proposed in the foreword, the theoretical challenges and suggestions showed by the chapters, and the methodological novelties and improvements in the study of moral panics in the particular conjuncture of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The empirical contribution and the relevance of moral panic as a concept

Let me start with the characteristics of the empirical contributions that this book offers as a whole while drawing on the relevance of the moral panic concept.

First, it is to be noted that the chapters collected in this volume concern studies conducted only in the Global North, i.e., the UK, Canada, the USA, France, Italy, Poland, Sweden, and Australia. This means that both the empirical application of the concept and its theoretical development is here limited to societal contexts and

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authors working in the Global North. Therefore, its relevance seems to be limited, at the moment, mainly to certain sociocultural and academic contexts.

However, through the moral panic lens, the chapters show some common aspects concerning the exceptional conjunctural situation determined by the COVID-19 pandemic and the role played by the state, by politicians and experts, by old and new media, and the dynamics of construction of folk devils. It is exactly the moral panic lens that allows grasping the complexity of the construction of social problems, the role of multiple claims-makers and marketplaces, and the transformation of such problems into societal conflagrations. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic can be added to other historical conjunctures that marked the history of the moral panic concept: the "empirical moment" of the mods and rockers analyzed by Cohen (1972; 2002), the "empirical moment" of the mugger analyzed by Hall et al. (1978), and so on. These moments are characterized by the tensions and contradictions of a specific society and by their intersections with simultaneous economic, structural, and cultural crises. So, this is the "empirical moment" of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the difference between the "moments" analyzed by Cohen and Hall et al. and the moment of the COVID-19 pandemic resides in the presence of a "third" entity – the virus – that plays an additional role in these societal dynamics in comparison with other historical moral panics. Thus, the virus can be seen as both an immanent and material driver of change and an accelerator that stretches the social tensions, highlights the contradictions, and speeds up the crises. The nature of the virus in itself is both moral and immoral as the meanings attributed to it in different social situations. Furthermore, the difference between the "empirical moments" analyzed by Cohen and Hall et al. and the "empirical moment" of the COVID-19 pandemic resides also in a level of complexity much more expanded and developed than that of the classical studies on moral panics (see for instance Chapter 2).

Several chapters of this volume grasp the exceptional complexity of the empirical "moment" offered by the COVID-19 pandemic, but they also capture, with interesting insights, the practices of resistance of some social actors. From the resistance against State's policies aiming to harm reduction to the resistance towards politicians' and experts' definitions of the threat, the moral panic concept becomes a lens that allows analyzing not only the process of definition of a folk devil but also the processes of resistance against it, the heterogeneity of the resistants' (see for instance Chapter 2 and Chapter 1), the moral legitimation of these acts and the symbolic tools that support resistance practices such as those presented (e.g., Chapter 4). Even if the concept of resistance in relation with moral panics has been mentioned several times in the moral panic literature (e.g., Young 2009), more specific empirical analyses are still largely missing. However, resistance should be more clearly included in the category of the responses to panic that contribute to create, or to oppose, the creation of a folk devil.

Furthermore, the relevance of the moral panic lens can be traced also in grasping some contemporary material and institutional issues. For instance, some authors put aside the classical analysis of old, traditional media and have paid attention to the role of social media in igniting panics and defining folk devils within the

complexity of the pandemic in a globalized world. For instance, Lavorgna and Massa (see Chapter 5) direct their attention toward the actions of digital moral entrepreneurs who spread misinformation and cause social harms in and out of cyberspace. And Bendali, Dafflon and Fillieule (Chapter 4), stress the central role of the extensive use of Facebook in protest and resistance awakening.

Once more these analyses remind us of the always-not-sufficiently explored field of digital media in relation to moral panics, and the often-underestimated speed of spread of a claim or a threat.

The empirical relevance of the moral panic concept is shown also through the processes of definition and redefinition of the deviant in the specific situation of this pandemic. For instance, by analyzing opposing narratives, the study conducted by Collins (Chapter 7) highlights how the deviants became those who invite and welcome authoritarian governmental prescriptions. These dynamics of redefinition of the folk devils in alliance with, and in opposition to, the dominant and ruling discourse from various institutions are signs of the "spirit of the age" in which individual instances about "personal liberties" and "freedom of choice" conflict with the collective and public interest and express a libertarian view of the individual's rights. Therefore, this can be seen as an expression of neoliberal forms of moralization – a longer moralization process not limited to the pandemic situation – in which individuals are called to enact responsible forms of individual risk management (see also Hier 2011: 9–10).

For example, Skog and Lundstrom (Chapter 8) stress the role of the neoliberal interpretation of individual responsibilities in creating folk devils and competing discourses while showing the increasing power of the scientific field against the political field and how scientific experts become "omniscient tellers of truth" and thus establish a moral order.

To conclude, moral panic analyses included in this book allow depicting the "spirit of the age", such dominant values, beliefs, and ideas of the COVID-19 pandemic time in history, and this contributes to confirm the ongoing relevance of the concept.

The theoretical and methodological contribution

The second dimension considered in this conclusive chapter concerns the theoretical contribution offered by this book to moral panic studies.

Moral panic studies have shown periodical interest toward or against revisionist and conventional approaches. This book does not have revisionist intents but, at the same time, it doesn't exclusively support conventional approaches. The focus has always been kept open towards different approaches and methods. The book aimed to collect not only analyses of short-term dynamics of episodes of deviance amplification, but also to include more complex analyses of long-term sociocultural tensions or moral regulation processes within which moral panics can emerge as acute expressions of such long-term processes (Hier, ib). At the same time, the book aimed to keep the debate on moral panic fluid and open, and move it forward, beyond old and crystallized debates.

The unique conjunctural situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has offered novel and unusual perspectives from which to build up an analysis of moral panics. Because of this peculiar historical and societal conjuncture, the contribution of this book has been to develop theoretical discussions in relation to the construction of social problems, the social problems marketplace, and its changes in our contemporary world. The work of David (Chapter 1), Best et al. (Chapter 2), Stilinovic, Swaleh, and Lumby (Chapter 3), Bendali, Dafflon and Fillieule (Chapter 4), Lavorgna and Massa (Chapter 5) and Knight (Chapter 6) represent attempts to go beyond the classical analysis and widen the discussion about moral panic concept.

The specific empirical moment of the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the classical and conventional constructionist interpretations (e.g., Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994) due to the wider amount and presence of claims, claims-makers, arenas, and marketplaces (see Best, Mohanan and Mey, Chapter 2). Furthermore, the COVID-19 situation has highlighted how a more specific analysis of the meaning, extent and directions of panics can be supported by studying the risk consciousness, blame and new modes of governmentality, as argued in Chapter 1. Moreover, scientific devices to show evidence – like statistical modeling – can be seen as panic engines supporting new forms of moral entrepreneurship (see David, Chapter 1).

The specific situation of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to suggest that more attention is required towards the materiality in the everyday life and its role in the creation and maintenance of panics. From the issue of the digital affordances analyzed by Lavorgna and Massa to the reconceptualization of the virus as a moral agent suggested by David, a step forward toward a more-aware approach to the material component of the panics has been done. Even if the interpretation of the virus as a moral agent seems more a provocative attempt than actually a path to follow, the materiality of the virus in the COVID-19 pandemic has to be considered as an additional element in comparison to other previous panics, as I have mentioned in the previous section. While the virus in itself is *a-moral* – without moral attributes – and without agency, the representations of the virus circulating in the public sphere make it moral and/or immoral, and also "active" in contributing to the construction of moral panics.

In addition to the materiality of the digital affordances, the changes of the media landscape and the increasing digitalization of today's world for many suggest that traditional moral panic models insufficiently take into account how amplification works. This brings us once more to consider the matter of the time and speed in the moral panic theoretical models and how social media have changed and sped up the processes of spreading claims, counterclaims, and concerns. While social media allow a more horizontal and "democratic" distributions of roles in the claims-making and counter-claims-making processes (both claims-makers and previously-voiceless folk devils now have an easier and more personalized access to the medium), the media landscape appears as more fragmented even when it is convergent about claims and counterclaims. These complexity and fragmentation – as stated by Stilinovic and colleagues (Chapter 3), but also, even if with a different approach, by Best and colleagues (Chapter 2) – need to be taken into consideration more properly in the reconceptualization of moral panic.

A final theoretical contribution concerns the links between moral panics and protests suggested by Knight (Chapter 6). Panics and protests have several commonalities and differences which are reciprocally recognized by both social movements and moral panic studies.

Both moral panics and protests can be seen as the apex of moral crises with differences concerning collective behavior and collective action, the latter being a prerogative of social movements and protests. The challenge is to theoretically connect moral panics and protests and to show how collective action comes into play to support moral panics as well as how moral panics urge collective action through protests. Well-grounded in the constructionist paradigm for what concerns the moral panic and its elite-engineered model analysis, the work by Knight (Chapter 6) however raises some doubts about the imbalance of power and agency argued between protesters, audiences, and elites. In fact, other studies point out the more equal access to claims-making for the folk devils offered by social media and its role in moral panics creation and maintenance. Nevertheless, the moral dimension that connects panics and protests is unequivocally worthy to explore and the commonalities and differences between the elements of actions and vitality of each of them need further investigation and discussion as well.

The importance of connecting theoretically moral panic and social movements studies is shown also by Bendali, Dafflon and Fillieule (Chapter 4) that proposes the combination of two models that come from these approaches to explain the diversity of claims-makers involved in protest events and also the importance of already-existing social movements as mobilizing structures in relation to new threats and panics.

Moreover, many of the studies discussed in this book suggest – explicitly or implicitly – a reconsideration of the folk devils' characteristics such as, for instance, agency, morality, feelings, and activism.

Finally, this book largely contributes to the discussion of health moral panics and in doing so it tracks the distinctions between health panics and health moral panics. In fact, many of the studies presented in this volume do not debate the theoretical relevance or irrelevance of health moral panics as a category of research (about the specific diatribe in the moral panic literature, see for instance Béland 2011; Cohen 2002; Critcher 2003; Hunt 2011). Instead, they contribute to discuss empirically such category even in conjunction with the concept of risk society (e.g., Beck 2000; Ungar 2001).

Along with these stimulating theoretical considerations and challenges, new methodological questions arise. While the studies presented in this book widely share discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis as predominant approaches for the analysis of panics, some contributions do not. This partial homogeneity of these studies' methodology indicates the need to stick with methods already explored or of consolidated use in the moral panic studies. The classical example is provided by the analysis of newspapers that puts aside the challenging but worthy exploration of new methods to investigate how panics are created and consolidate through social media platforms. To this regard, specific methods like passive

digital ethnography become essential to explore new dimensions of claims-making and moral panic ignition while posing some ethical concerns in specific situations.

Finally, once more, studies that utilized mixed methods for investigating moral panics provide richer analysis and insightful research which connect the everyday life dimension, the participants' experience and activism, and the discursive level used by institutions and social movements.

Limits, future paths and challenges

To conclude, I will share some final remarks and reflections on the limits of the studies presented in this book.

First, as already mentioned, unfortunately this book doesn't include studies concerning the Global South and this is a result that invites us to reflect about the geographical limits of the application of the moral concept, but also about the manifest or hidden reasons that under certain circumstances lead scholars to not choosing moral panic as a concept to apply for the analysis of specific societal, political, and historical conjunctures. This last theme would need more empirical investigation and discussion to adjust the trajectories of moral panic studies.

Second, a variety of methodological approaches would have allowed a more fruitful discussion about the methods that could improve moral panic research.

Nevertheless, this book offers suggestions concerning new paths for future research on moral panics. The uniqueness of the COVID-19 pandemic situation – and its (desirable) non-replicability – invites to develop studies that aim to compare this recent pandemic's panics with less recent and historical pandemic or epidemic situations, as historical studies are valuable for the analysis of moral panics and its theoretical refinements.

Moreover, the theoretical remarks previously discussed indicate the need to explore the connections between social movements, protests, and moral panics and to develop model(s) that might consider differences and similarities concerning activism and agency and other elements.

Yet, the complexity proposed by the pandemic suggests the need to go beyond the classical conventional approach to moral panic to investigate and understand the roles of the multitude of actors, arenas and social problems marketplaces, their convergence and fragmentation in the creation and maintenance of a moral panic. Nevertheless, such complexity invites a reconsideration of the folk devil concept. Furthermore, a wider methodological toolbox would allow more in-depth and extensive analyses that, in the end, would provide a more consistent theoretical and empirical contribution to the moral panic studies.

To conclude, while this book offers new perspectives of the COVID-19 pandemic and understandings of the moral panic concept, it also suggests new paths for research and invites policy makers to consider the contribution of the moral panic studies and social problems theory. As this book confirms, the seminal work of Stanley Cohen and other pioneers of the moral panic studies is still relevant after more than 50 years.

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